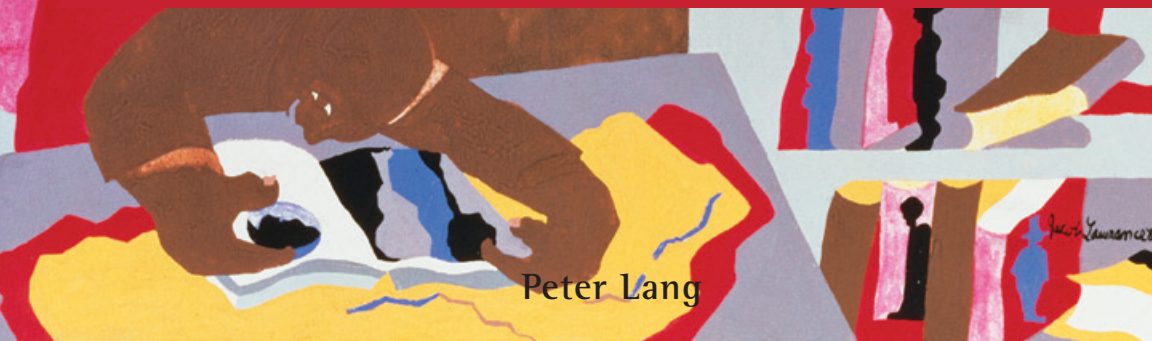




A. Robert Lee

Designs of Blackness

Mappings in the Literature and Culture of
Afro-America, 25th Anniversary Edition



Peter Lang

Across more than two centuries Afro-America has created a huge and dazzling variety of literary self-expression. *Designs of Blackness* provides less a narrative literary history than, precisely, a series of mappings—each literary-critical and comparative while at the same time offering cultural and historical context. This carefully re-edited version of the 1998 publication opens with an estimation of earliest African American voice in the names of Phillis Wheatley and her contemporaries. It then takes up the huge span of autobiography from Frederick Douglass through to Maya Angelou. “Harlem on My Mind,” which follows, sets out the literary contours of America’s premier black city. Womanism, Alice Walker’s presiding term, is given full due in an analysis of fiction from Harriet E. Wilson to Toni Morrison. Richard Wright is approached not as some regulation “realist” but as a more inward, at times near-surreal, author. Decadology has its risks but the 1940s has rarely been approached as a unique era of war and peace and especially in African American texts. Beat Generation work usually adheres to Ginsberg and Kerouac, but black Beat writing invites its own chapter in the names of Amiri Baraka, Ted Joans and Bob Kaufman. The 1960s has long become a mythic change-decade, and in few greater respects than as a black theatre both of the stage and politics. In Leon Forrest African America had a figure of the postmodern turn; his work is explored in its own right and for how it takes its place in the context of other reflexive black fiction. “African American Fictions of Passing” unpacks the whole deceptive trope of “race” in writing from Williams Wells Brown through to Charles Johnson. The two newly added chapters pursue African American literary achievement into the Obama-Trump century, fiction from Octavia Butler to Darryl Pinkney, poetry from Rita Dove to Kevin Young.

“A. Robert Lee dazzles us once again with his knowledge of many different literatures. He has set a high standard for those who are bound to one tradition. *Designs of Blackness* is a very cogent examination of African American literature.”

—Ishmael Reed

“A. Robert Lee is remarkable writer, erudite and readable at once. Not only are we given a scholarly, comprehensive account of African American literature, we are given it in language that reveals a passionate commitment to the subject.”

—David Dabydeen, University of Warwick



A. Robert Lee, a Britisher with degrees from the University of London who taught for three decades at the University of Kent UK, was Professor in the English Department at Nihon University, Tokyo (1997-2011). His publications include *Multicultural American Literature: Comparative Black, Native, Latino/a and Asian American Fictions* (2003), which won the American Book Award in 2004, *Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics* (2010) and *The Beats: Authorships, Legacies* (2019).

PRAISE FOR
Designs of Blackness

“Lee’s latest scholarly endeavor exhibit his uncanny acumen for literary and cultural critique, *Designs of Blackness* is not only highly readable, but also impeccably researched . . . Lee adds his passionate voice to others such as Houston A. Baker, Jr., Henry Louis Gates, Paul Gilroy and Toni Morrison in plotting the complexity of Afro-American literature and culture.”

—Sharon L. Moore, *Yearbook of English Studies*

“This erudite compilation sets out to cover no less than the whole of what could be called the African American literary canon.”

—*European Association for American Studies Newsletter*

“All of the chapters benefit from Lee’s sweeping bibliographic range and generosity of response. Only a critic with so much attentive reading to draw on could make his central case regarding the variousness of African American writing, its complexity, its refusal to be reduced to simplicities of pattern or form.”

—Kate Fulbrook, *Journal of American Studies*

Designs of Blackness

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A. Robert Lee

Designs of Blackness

Mappings in the Literature
and Culture of Afro-America

25th Anniversary Edition



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Para Pepa, murciana, huertana

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My obligation to students in Europe, America and Japan deserves its own paragraph; I offer it unreservedly

Above all, I owed at the time a debt of life, and Spain, to Josefa Vivancos Hernández. I still do.

Introduction: 25th Anniversary Edition

Perspective and Memoir

Readers coming to African American authorship in the Obama-Trump century well might be moved to re-consider the vast literary genealogy that has led to its emergence. The contemporary generation of, say, Jasmyn Ward and Colson Whitehead in fiction, or Natasha Trethewey and Kevin Young in poetry, gives ready evidence of new departures. At the same time light understandably continues to focus on the litany of names who make up the prior literary canon, nineteenth-century slave texts to the work of 1920s New Negro and Harlem literati, Richard Wright to Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston to Ralph Ellison. Critique and scholarship, especially in the wake of the 1960s as the decade of black cultural nationalism, has given matching show and tell. Both the original and 25th anniversary editions of *Designs of Blackness: Mappings in the Literature and Culture of Afro-America* belong in the evolution of these reckonings.

A study begun in the mid-1990s, published in 1998 in London, and several years out of print and prepared for re-issue in 2020 by Peter Lang just before the Black Lives Matter movement, might risk looking rather too much of its time of writing. But the accounts on offer of African American literary voice, and its successive periodizations, I hope continue to stand. Certainly the ambition, maybe the over-ambition, of the original book was not only to recognize the timeline of African American writing but the huge creative variety of its “designs

of blackness.” As half-title, moreover, “mappings” was meant to indicate interpretation not only of comparative eras but genres, a willingness to cross-refer where necessary, thereby differentiating the book from existent single-focus histories of fiction, poetry, theatre, autobiography, or individual author-portraits.

It now takes its place, with later chapters as due updates, alongside quite subsequent literary-critical developments. These, serendipity perhaps, connect back into the approach taken in *Designs of Blackness*. In this respect Lawrence P. Jackson offers a situating retrospect in *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics 1934–1960* (2010).¹ Since 1960, and its decade, studies have gone on to speak of neo-formalism, a return to aesthetics. Two recent accounts give pointers.

Kenneth W. Warren in *What Was African American Literature?* (2011) seeks to free the black text from being held inside the pre-emptive loop of combating Jim Crow and giving vent only to dissent.² Aida Levy-Hussen in *How To Read African American Literature: Post-Civil Rights Fiction and the Task of Interpretation* (2016) examines black texts for how “therapeutically” they mediate past trauma or conversely have been put at one or another distance for exactly that reason.³ Both these accounts re-draw attention to *literary* dynamics, the need for a return to reading practices that precisely value “design,” the tactics of imagination by which Afro-America has voiced community and self-story.

Race and the vexations it arouses for life in America has never stayed quiet, whether politics, culture, class, sexuality, education, sport, or to immediate purpose, literary authorship. In the Obama to Trump succession it has found latest momentum. A black liberal president, a maverick white nationalist president: the contrast could not be starker. Mention, ironically, gets made of “post-race” America, as though the presence of a black middle-class signals duty done. Yet that has happened as stop-and-search arrests and police killings disproportionately persist for the African American community. Much has changed, but much has not as Black Lives Matter at this time of writing has dramatically given evidence.

Change of historical context there evidently has been, whether in the wake of the 1960s of Selma and King’s “I Have a Dream,” or the 1990s of the L.A. police arrest and beating of Rodney King, or the white power march through Charlottesville in 2017. What has not changed is the sheer inventive power, the myriad forms and range of focus in African American authorship. Across the gamut of texts available, furthermore, it has not always been an obligation to remain America-centered. James Baldwin sets the blighted love-story of *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) in France. Rita Dove puts a range of international geographies into view in a poetry collection like *Mother Love* (1995).⁴ These different points of imaginative

compass acknowledged, however, it again needs to be said that the black-written text continues to enter an American national context in which the historic levers of race and with it caste and “colorism” still weigh, the ever persisting current.

Designs of Blackness so gives its emphasis to the literary-creative *imagining* of black experience. In no way is this to downplay the reality, the very memory, of offense and defense by which African Americans have been obliged to negotiate the hand given by the nation’s Atlantic and continental history. An attentive eye and ear to the different idioms, literature’s articulation of the lives lived within, often enough against, and just occasionally beyond, that history, remains as pertinent as ever.

What led to the writing of *Designs of Blackness* and why, two and a half decades later, is this re-issue to be thought timely? In one sense, the answer might be obvious: here was, and remains, the literary record of one of the most profound human experiences in American history, from Dixie to Harlem, slavery to the modern city, a vast unfolding concourse of people, migration, region, event, self-expression and remembrance. Throughout, there have arisen galleries of oral and written text, story and poem, song and sermon, inerasable and compelling acts of literary creation.

Yet at the time of first undertaking *Designs of Blackness* much of the critique, black or white written, often seemed to underplay the specific *imaginative* fashioning of a given individual work. For my own part, the more I read in the tradition, the more it seemed that African American literature for all that it inevitably drew from historic racial fault-lines, or the damage done by each reductive binary and stereotype, actually constituted a vast, unfolding *imaginarium*.⁵

Black community calls for redress, however important, or the resort to the one or another ideology during successive epochs, could not impose the only touchstones in taking on the literature. Yet emphasis upon imagining itself as pivot and sway was to risk the charge, however imperfect, that formalism trumped centering on the history actually lived and breathed and from which each page was taken. Remembrance of the inherited context from the 1960s, and in whose immediate aftermath *Designs of Blackness* written, requires due opening note.

Addison Gayle, Jr., in the Introduction to his essay-collection, *The Black Aesthetic* (1971) had issued a symptomatic call to arms.

The Black Aesthetic . . . is a corrective—a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism, and offering logical, reasoned arguments as to why [the black writer] should not desire to join the ranks of a Norman Mailer or a William Styron.⁶

The legacy of Black Power so entered literary discourse. The tone, the imagery, had origins in a broad litany of change: from, say, the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock in 1957 to LBJ's signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, and from the Selma demonstrations of January-March 1965 to the Poor People's Campaign of 1968. In the interim there had been the Civil Rights court battles, and a landmark March on Washington in 1963, the Long Hot Summers for which Watts in August 1965 acted as a flashpoint (in all over 150 cities burned), and the rise to prominence of SNCC, the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam. Black, as a consequence, transposed into something close to an ideology, a politics, in its own working right.⁷

"Blackness of the word" was to be heard on all hands, impatient for redress, full of anger, and frequently enough, given to millennial threat. This clenched-fist oratory, whether delivered by Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown or Eldridge Cleaver, would also break with the gradualism of the NAACP, the Urban League and CORE, and more immediately, the Christian non-violence of the SCLC as preached in Martin Luther King's sermons and addresses. If, too, Malcolm's ethos of "by any means necessary" alarmed, it also thrilled, symbolic notice to quit, as it seemed, both to the white supremacist Dixie of George Wallace and Bull Connor and to the ghettoed North of tenement and the Projects.

The impetus readily extended to black popular culture and literary-cultural ranks. For however much America gave the impression of living on racial nerve ends—each lunch-counter sit-in and Klan-led Mississippi burning, each Oakland and Chicago shoot-out, each killing from Medgar Evers and J.F.K. in 1963 to Malcolm in 1965 and King in 1968 (with Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman mid-way in 1964)—Black, contradictorily, had at the same time also become Beautiful. Gayle, then a Professor at Bernard Baruch College, New York, certainly found himself far from alone in looking not just to a new politics but a new Black Arts Movement.

This 1960-centered Second Black Renaissance, so-called, like its "New Negro" predecessor in the 1920s, showed no shortage of polemic. But it also led to better recognition of everyday black self-expression. Attention turned anew to the sumptuous resources of black musicianship from Jazz to Gospel, Blues to Soul, and out of which a tag like Nina Simone's "And everybody knows about

Mississippi, Goddam” gave its own timely slap of rebuke. Rap, too, though it would have a later, fuller life, had moved out of the black inner-city to be taken up by a whole American student generation (“Right On” and “Cool!” being symptomatic watchwords). Black foodways, dance styles and body-language, together with the ubiquitous spray-can graffiti, won increasing favor.

“Black” TV became another arena. For in moving beyond the congenial minstrelsy of the *Nat King Cole Show* (1956–1957) or the tokenism of *I Spy*, *Mission Impossible* and early *Star Trek* and into PBS’s *Black Journal* (later *Tony Brown’s Journal* or CBS’s seven-part *Of Black America* (both first aired in 1968), it also continued to exclude a supposed Communist Party fellow-traveler like Paul Robeson as well as Malcolm X and other radicals. Safety for the networks lay in the un-political (and massively popular) *Soul Train*, or middle-America black comedy like the *Bill Cosby Show* (1969–1971) and the *Flip Wilson Show* (1970–1974). But however little conducted on-screen, debate took on fever proportions elsewhere, circling repeatedly around separatism as against integration, change seized in the short as against the long haul.⁸

A black warrior-king was to be found in boxing’s Muhammad Ali replete with Muslim name and faith to replace the parody slave name and earlier Christianity of Cassius Clay. Wearing dashikis and Afros gave yet other insignia, a sign of the “roots” Alex Haley would make over into the title of his best-seller of 1976 and its spectacular TV offspin (*Roots*, January 1977, and *Roots: The Next Generations*, 1979). The growing use, too, of Black or Afro-American for the supposedly deferential Negro (African-American, actually an older term, would await recall) signaled a change not just of nomenclature but of inner awareness and resolve.

As to literature, Hoyt Fuller supplied another marker when, on assuming editorship of *Negro Digest*, he re-titled it *Black World*.⁹ His “Towards a Black Aesthetic” (1968) gave Gayle just the note he sought with which to open proceedings:

Conscious and unconscious white racism is everywhere infecting all the vital areas of national life. But the revolutionary black writer, like the new breed of militant activist, has decided that white racism will no longer exercise its insidious control over his work. If the tag of “racist” is one the white critic will hang on him in dismissing him, then he is more than willing to bear that. He is not going to separate literature from life.¹⁰

Ron (Maulana) Karenga, radical West Coast founder of the Afrocentric *US*, further underlined this combatancy. In his greatly influential “Black Cultural Nationalism,” re-published by Gayle from *Negro Digest* for January 1968, he laid

down as criteria for literary-cultural judgment “commitment to the revolutionary struggle,” a belief in nothing less than “permanent revolution.”¹¹ Black was to mean consciously racialized writing, with all black writers and artists held to appropriate account.

White-written commentary, on this measure, for the most part could be dismissed as irrelevant if not pernicious. A fake universalism had been deemed to prevail, a white Euro-American canon and working touchstones which routinely situated black and Third World texts at the margins.¹² New Criticism, it was alleged, especially had done damage. There the de-historicization which shaped the textbooks of Brooks and Warren (and the essays and poetry of John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate) linked, and anything but obliquely, to the Fugitive/Agrarian racism of *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930).¹³ Nor did Robert Bone’s *The Negro Novel in America* (1952, 1965), however workmanlike, fare much better.¹⁴ Bone came under the hammer for “liberalism,” his well-meant but finally too condescending outsider’s terms of reference. Nor, for Gayle, was Bone the only culprit. A sweep of other white critics came under his gavel:

One does not waste time on the likes of Selden Rodman, Irving Howe, Theodore Gross, Louis Simpson, Herbert Hill or Robert Bone.¹⁵

Black Cultural Nationalism was rather to set the standard, at once black community-based and community-judged.¹⁶ Affrays flared up on all sides, not least through a roster which besides Gayle and Fuller looked to names like LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Don Lee, Ron Wellburn, Stephen Henderson, George Kent and Mercer Cook. In the colleges and schools Black Studies became one of the key arenas which, even as it led to the massive recovery—and sudden commercial availability—of black literary work from Frederick Douglass to Richard Wright, Harriet Jacobs to Zora Neale Hurston, also awoke accusations of academic separatisms. No matter that the shoe had long been on quite the other foot.¹⁷

Above all, a momentous new body of black literary work had announced itself.¹⁸ There had indeed been Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks and Lorraine Hansberry, but no two names more gave early notice of a changing literary regime than James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. In Baldwin’s case his “power of revelation,” to borrow a phrase from “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” found expression in the Bible-driven witness of the essays eventually to make up *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963).¹⁹ Ellison, for his part, contributed *Invisible Man* (1952), the dazzling, mythopoeic transformation of the black on white of writing as itself a trope for Afro-America’s emergence into enduring visibility.²⁰

Of a then younger generation LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka perhaps most signifies. His energies, prodigious from the start, would underwrite both his Newark and Harlem activism and a roll-call of creative work which included *Dutchman* (1964), his one-acter “set in the underbelly of the city,” poetry as uncompromising as “BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS,” essay-work of the range and awareness of *Home: Social Essays* (1966), and his adaptation of the Divine Comedy to a parable of the modern black metropolis like *The System of Dante’s Hell* (1965).²¹

Black fiction notably embarked on new turns and directions. If Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) as the saga of Bigger Thomas’s brute, immuring Chicago, and James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on The Mountain* (1953), with its memories of turn-of-the-century Dixie woven into a 1930s of Pentecostal Harlem, had once seemed to embody the going rate for black realism, the writ was changing. Subsequent styles took the form of John A. Williams’s existential-political thriller, *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), John. O. Killens’s Civil Rights historical fiction, *Sippi* (1967), Hal Bennett’s irrealist and often hallucinatory *Lord of The Dark Places* (1970), Robert Deane Pharr’s Harlem and drug-centered *S.R.O.* (1971), and Ernest Gaines’s memory-fiction of black Louisiana, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971).

Black womanism, in Alice Walker’s historic phrase, likewise pushed into different reaches, challenging at one and the same time both white feminism and the masculinist bias of 1960s Black Power. That, as resonantly as anywhere, was to be met in two axial first novels: Walker’s own dense, intimate story of black Georgia dynasty, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), with its portrait of sexual trauma and breakdown in the girlhood of Pecola Breedlove as an indictment of the tyranny of white stereotype.

Whether chauvinist reflex or not (only two women were included in the thirty or so contributors to *The Black Aesthetic*), little or no measure had been accorded the kind of “womanist” imagination inaugurated in the story-telling and folklore of Zora Neal Hurston, carried forward in Ann Petry and Paule Marshall, and which, besides Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, found still newer voice in Gayl Jones, Carlene Hatcher Polite, Rosa Guy, Toni Bambara and Kristin Hunter. Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), moreover, the first of her eventual five volumes, gave notice of a self-chronicle begun in, and then redeemed from, the silence of a childhood rape in Stamps, Arkansas, and quite as different in style as gender from the resolutely male Black Power autobiographies of the 1960s.²² Each, and the wider body of woman-authored black fiction, is addressed in Chapter 4.

An experimental, risingly postmodern, gallery of fiction for which *Invisible Man* always acted as the beacon, equally made its bow, notably William Demby's cubist *The Catacombs* (1965), William Melvin Kelley's fantasist picture of white suburbia and Harlem, *dem* (1967), John Wideman's peregrinatory *Hurry Home* (1970) and Leon Forrest's dream-memoir of black Chicago, *There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden* (1973). If, however, a School of Ellison, in Forrest's phrase, had come into being, its presiding spirit looked always to be Ishmael Reed, whose cannily reflexive satires, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967), *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969) and *Mumbo-Jumbo* (1972), together with his anthology *19 Necromancers From Now* (1970), proclaimed a new realm of wit, a new black "black comedy" which subjected America's very modernity—and whiteness—to the highly inventive (and often wickedly funny) regimens of vodoun and conjure. The black short-story showed a matching verve, whether James Baldwin's *Going To Meet The Man* (1965), with its jazz classic "Sonny's Blues," James Alan McPherson's locally nuanced *Hue and Cry* (1969) or Toni Cade Bambara's wry, ironic *Gorilla, My Love* (1972).²³ Chapter 9 brings most of these writings into fuller regard.

Black poetry yielded collections as diverse as Bob Kaufman's Beat-influenced *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness* (1959), Jones/Baraka's fiercely nationalist *The Dead Lecturer* (1964) in which "BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS" first appeared, Don Lee's street-wise *Think Black* (1969), Nikki Giovanni's black-confessional *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgement* (1970), Michael Harper's jazz verse in *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* (1970), and Audre Lorde's lesbian-feminist *Cables To Rage* (1970).²⁴ Each added to the will for renewal, a continuity of black idiom and invention. Black drama drew on shared impulses, whether in productions associated with Jones/Baraka's Black Arts Theater of Harlem and Douglas Turner Ward's Negro Ensemble Company or in the stagecraft of Ed Bullins, Lonne Elder, Ron Milner or Adrienne Kennedy.

Most of all a heady black discursive literature issued its challenge, with pride of place assigned to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964). Its frisson became the greater for Malcolm's prophecy to his amanuensis, Alex Haley, that "It has always been my belief that I, too, will die by violence." This sense of watershed, of first and last things, equally underwrites Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), the insistence that "We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it." Nor did it lessen in intensity in Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton's self-designated "framework" discussion, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967), H. Rap Brown's would-be latterday slave-narrative, *Die Nigger Die!* (1969), Bobby Seale's Black Panther

chronicle, *Seize The Time* (1970), or, memorably, George Jackson's autodidact's triumph of prison letter-writing, *Soledad Brother* (1970).²⁵

In *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), to take another bearing, Styron as white Southern novelist could be taken to task by John Henrik Clarke for "distortion" and "reducing Nat Turner to impotence" thereby denying the Virginia slave-insurrectionist "a literary interpreter worthy of his sacrifice."²⁶ Jones/Baraka and Larry Neal in *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968), in the shorthand of their 1969 soft-cover edition, in like spirit publicly deplored "the frustration of working thru these bullshit white people."²⁷ Eldridge Cleaver, again in *Soul On Ice* (1968), could excoriate James Baldwin for a homosexuality which went all too revealingly in tandem with his "liberalism," his "grueling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of whites that one can find in the writings of any black American writer of note in our time."²⁸ Angela Davis, from her Marxist vantage-point, could insist in *If They Come in The Morning* (1971) on the "issue of self-representation" as a subtle interlock of both political and literary action.²⁹

Magazines like *Umbra* (1963–1973), *Soulbook* (1964–1976), *Black Dialogue* (1964–1970), *Journal of Black Poetry* (1966–1973), *Nommo* (1969–1972), and *Black Creation* (1970–1975), equally served, each an outlet for the new blackness, each like *Black World* pledged to rewriting the terms by which Afro-America was to be articulated.³⁰ The edict laid down by Jones/Baraka in "The Myth of a Negro Literature" (1962) that "A Negro literature, to be a legitimate product of Negro experience in America must get at that experience . . . in its most ruthless identity" could not, thus, have seemed other than desideratum, the required state of things to come.³¹

But how, in fact, was "ruthless identity" to be construed? Could literature be so readily coralled into just the one racial-cultural program? Certainly, as America stepped beyond the 1970s, "The Black Aesthetic" as defined by Gayle or Fuller (if not Jones/Baraka himself) had begun to look embattled, doctrinal High Command. The very plurality of the literary American renaissance they themselves had called for, and undoubtedly helped nourish, looked to have outrun any single ideological stipulation. Further, not only the political but the cultural priority of "race" had begun to wane. Other business beckoned, Vietnam and Watergate, Gay and Women's Rights, and in their wake, the Carter and Reagan presidencies (1977–1981, 1981–1989), each with its own appeal to Christian-revivalist conservatism.

The literary generation which inherited the Black Aesthetic, in consequence, found itself ambiguously placed. On the one hand, the gains, the awakenings, were manifest; on the other, less rule-book perspectives beckoned. Clarence Major, for instance, whose *The New Black Poetry* (1969)³² erroneously had been taken up by a number of cultural nationalists as grist to their mill, found himself writing in *The Dark & Feeling: Reflections on Black American Writers and Their Works* (1974):

The racial identity of a group of writers is not grounds for a critical formula to which all may be subjected for analysis. Furthermore artistic values, red, blue, white, green, black or gold, do not have to give way to socio-political concerns. These concerns are not the sole function of art . . . In the Introduction to *The New Black Poetry* I speak of a “radical black aesthetic.” I am not referring there to some sort of jive, rigid formula . . . I do not mean “black aesthetic” as an extension of Black Nationalism.³³

Major could virtually have been pointing to the Ralph Ellison of “The World and The Jug” (1963), namely that the durability of art rests upon “human richness” rather than “revolutionary posture,” dimensionality rather than silhouette.³⁴

Houston Baker’s estimate of the Black Aesthetic movement in *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (1980) would similarly express his debt to “prerogatives gained,” as he calls them, and at the same time a remembrance of the need soon thereafter to opt for other directions:

Scarcely more than a decade ago, a number of black spokesmen including literary critics—assumed it was our turn to speak. The debate, indeed the larger conversation comprising American culture, had gone on too long without acknowledging black American voices. Our stance was nationalistic; our mode was frequently ahistorical; and our results were sometimes dreary. The familiar terms were “Black Aesthetic,” “Black Power,” “Nation Time,” and so on . . . An obsessively nationalistic approach is probably not the most fruitful approach to the black literary text. At the same time, I have neither ignored nor relinquished prerogatives gained—at great cost—during the past few years.³⁵

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the then emerging doyen of black literary theory, looked back to the Black Aesthetic more as a point of departure than closure. In *Figures in Black, Words, Signs and the “Racial” Self* (1987), he commended the Black Aesthetic debate as “energetic and compelling,” “an infectious movement of letters.” He saw, too, the bonus of attracting “a broad community of black readers.”³⁶ Limits, nonetheless, he insisted, were not to be denied, above

all the notion of the black (or any) text as subject only to the one interpretative ownership.³⁷

Gates had company. Robert B. Stepto's *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979) explored generic patterns of black popular culture and religious myth. Elliott Butler-Evans's *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker* (1988) veered towards intimations of postmodern turn in his three chosen authors.³⁸ In *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (2000) Kimberly A. Benston extended this kind of remit by locating black authorship within a performative spectrum of theatre, jazz, sermon and autobiography.³⁹

Gender and feminism in African American culture and writing justly made their insistence, whether bell hooks's *Aint I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) or Alice Walker's celebrated "womanism" in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983).⁴⁰ Other mapping followed, notably by Barbara Christian in *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* (1980) and *From the Inside Out: Afro-American Women's Literary Tradition* (1987) and by Hazel V. Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Experience of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987).⁴¹ Karla F.C. Holloway's *Moorings & Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Writing* (1992), added a raft of insights into the textual strategies through which the experiences of African American women have found their locution. These different route-ways or chartings, nothing if not beneficial, were to be gained from and deployed. They are reflected in Chapter 4.⁴²

Other moving-on also became clearer. Typically came better recognition of a novel like *Invisible Man*, its fusing of Blues with T. S. Eliot, Tar Baby with Dante. Ellison conspicuously had proved resistant to the templates of most Black Aesthetic critics. Gayle himself gave as his opinion that "the central flaw . . . which mars an otherwise superb novel is to be attributable [sic] more to Ellison's political beliefs than to artistic deficiency."⁴³ The Black Aesthetic also posed an issue for black writers who, like Willard Motley in *Knock on Any Door* (1947) with its Chicago courtroom drama, had opted for a non-black (in this case Italian American) protagonist.⁴⁴ Commentary likened Motley's choice to Joseph Heller's John Yossarian in *Catch-22* (1961), a Jewish author using an Armenian American as presiding figure in his absurdist World War II novel.⁴⁵ The case of Anatole Brodyard, long-time *New York Times* reviewer and storyteller, would also come into the reckoning. A Louisiana Creole who had long passed as "white," and whose life bears a remarkable similarity to that of Philip Roth's Coleman Silk in *The Human*

Stain (2000), it raised the question of when is white black or black white. These intricacies of “passing” receive focus in Chapter 10.⁴⁶

The Black Aesthetic, as in the case of Ellison, notably had also found it hard to cope with the satiric ventriloquy or syncretism of Ishmael Reed who (though Gayle included his “Neo-HooDoo” manifesto “Can a Metronome Know The Thunder or Summon a God” in *The Black Aesthetic*) emerges with Jones/Baraka and Toni Morrison as one of the key figures of transition from the 1960s to the 1990s. His deflationary censure of Gayle *et al* as “black sheriffs” and “neo-realist gangs” (not that he lets off patronizing or inattentive white critics and readers) in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969) especially would point to a subsequent and still wider imaginative dispensation.⁴⁷ That, in a manner infinitely beyond the clichés of melting pots and mixing bowls, speaks out of, and to, the broadband of American ethnicity. This time the context, with all its prompts to either celebration or fearfulness, meant multiculturalism, or in the phrase the journalist Ben Wattenberg took for his 1992 PBS documentary, “the first universal nation.”

By the 1980s–90s yet more of the temperature had lowered. It was hardly to be doubted that racism in a myriad of ways persisted, whether die-hard bigotry in the Deep South or job discrimination and residential zoning in the northern cities, along with the more coded “liberal racism” of workplace or campus. But allowing that there could be no compromise with these color-lines, other criteria for African American writing and culture had begun to emerge. One trajectory involved writers themselves, another a generation of scholar-critics.

Creative text and visual art cadres to have anticipated the change notably included Black Arts Movement (BAM) which ran to the mid-1970s or a post-*Umbra* movement on the West Coast like Ishmael Reed’s Before Columbus Foundation launched in 1976. Clay Ellis, the novelist of the metafictional *Platitudes* (1988) and the essay “The New Black Aesthetic” (1989), gave emphasis to cultural hybridity, change again was under way.⁴⁸ Post-Black Aesthetic criticism found more expression in the continuing work of Henry Louis Gates Jr., with his emphasis on black “signifying” and Houston Baker with his interest in the literary uses of African American vernacular and blues. These are summoned in the opening chapter not only for how they afford new engagement with better-known texts but help reclaim those left at the margins or simply overlooked.

The emergence of new black anthologies and reference scholarship added to a fuller sense of the African American record, whether the Schomburg library of

Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (1988), *The Norton Anthology of African American literature* (1997), or *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (1997).⁴⁹ All of these represented new consolidation, new scale and context, re-estimations to reprimand onetime neglect as undeserved as it had been complacent or patronizing. There has since been little slow-down, to include an enlarged literary dispensation from Essex Hemphill's *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991) to Paul Beatty's *Hokum: An Anthology of African American Humor* (2006).⁵⁰

How, it might well be asked, did a white Britisher writing in the 1990s and an Atlantic away as it seemed from the African American cross-genre texts at hand, come to take on the challenge of "mapping" each different latitude and longitude? A sense of subject-position, the Britain in which *Designs of Blackness* was written albeit amid frequent visits to the United States, is much apropos.

The UK of the 1980s-90s, having shed empire, had still to face complex footfalls: immigration, second generation settlement, indeed Britishness itself. The Afro-Caribbean aftermath of the Windrush Generation, begun in 1948, had brought families, cultures, styles and language from Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados and the other islands.⁵¹ The African independence that had been fought for and won in Ghana (1957), Nigeria (1960), Tanganyika (1961) and Zambia (1964), as in the French and other European colonies, was leading to ever greater black and mixed populations.⁵² Augmenting Asian dynasties from India and Pakistan, and in 1968 the Kenya of Idi Amin, however usually associated with commerce or foodways, meant also the voice of writers whose work challenged and diversified a largely white-only literary canon.⁵³

New authorship, for instance, supplied novels like the Barbados-raised George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), with its portrait of racial encounter in postwar London, Sam Sevlon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), with its contrast of island and metropolis and uses of creole styling, and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as a fictive memoir of pre-colonial Nigeria and its fortunes under English and white-missionary colonialism.⁵⁴ In V.S. Naipaul, from the launch of his fiction with *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) to the Nobel laureate in 2001, and Salman Rushdie, Booker prizewinner in 1981 for *Midnight's Children*, as in authors like George Lamming, Wole Soyinka and Buchi Emecha, the change towards a more plural British literary vista was unmistakable, variously (if often contentiously) postcolonial or transnational.

By the 1990s the shelves were already carrying the subsequent generational span of Hanif Kureishi, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Caryl Phillips, Jackie Kay or Mike Phillips. Ethnicities of color in fiction, poetry, theatre and public discourse, along with Jewish and Irish-British writing, had helped transform Britain from Anglo-Saxon literary redoubt, some fortress island of cultural whiteness. It was in response to the emerging change of regime that I found myself editing *Other Britain, Other British: Contemporary Multicultural Fiction* (1995). In its wake, with an eye to the yet wider continental perspective, there followed the comparative essay “Multicultural Europe: Odds, Bets, Chances” for Ishmael’s Reed’s *MultiAmerica: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace* (1997).⁵⁵

Other European colleagues from the 1960s-1970s and with whom I exchanged views were also engaged in looking across the Atlantic to Afro-America and its cultural traditions, among others, France’s Michel Fabre, Italy’s Mario Maffi, Germany’s Werner Sollors and Günter H. Lenz, Switzerland’s Fritz Gysin, Norway’s Ole Moen, and Paul Breman, London-based Dutch publisher-bookseller.⁵⁶ Far later there would be exchange of notes and views with Hisao Kishimoto, pioneer Japanese scholar of African American literature.⁵⁷ In addition, the thesis I had completed on Herman Melville at the University of London in 1965 meant not just *Moby-Dick*, with its multicultural world-crew aboard the *Pequod*, but visionary portraits of racial knot like “Benito Cereno” and *The Confidence-Man*. If it was unusual at a British university at that time to have taken to American as against British literature, it opened up perspectives that meant full engagement with the tradition of authorship of Afro-America.

The times, to be sure, made it impossible to ignore the televised reportage of an altogether fiercer racial-cultural regimen in the USA. The litany meant Civil Rights rallies, lunch-counter sit-ins, police charges, marchers being hosed, city fires, the brimstone of a George Wallace or Malcolm X speech, and not least the sight of black military returnees from Vietnam. It was in this context that Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and James Baldwin’s essays (few more compelling than “Stranger in the Village”) became necessary reading. There was also a huge liking for the antic Coffin Ed Jones/Grave Digger Johnson Harlem thrillers of Chester Himes. Following Himes’s move in 1969 to Moraira, Spain and the publication of two essays I wrote on his work in the 1970s, there would be a short correspondence.⁵⁸

My first-ever step into America in 1965, amid a decade still to mythify into the change-era of the “The Sixties,” involved a two-year university stay. Across an ensuing professorial career to be centered over time in three distinct countries, the UK, the USA and Japan, it proved the first in a long sequence of American

full-year and summer appointments in both English and Ethnic Studies departments. It was undoubtedly symptomatic, and not a little prophetic, that in 1966, at a SNNC fundraiser event in New Jersey I met and talked with John Lewis, the first black southerner I met in my life who would become Congressman John Lewis of Georgia's 5th congressional district in 1987. How not to have admired the bravery, the heroic determination, of that Civil Rights legend even in his twenties and now, 2020, deceased?

In the years to follow, 1970s-1990s, and during my thirty university years in the medieval city of Canterbury and the more than a decade in a Tokyo also ancient yet exhilaratingly modern, I had the privilege of American close encounters and guidance from a range of African American writers. John A. Williams gave me gateways into Harlem and Newark. Leon Forrest guided me through Chicago's black South Side. Harold Cruse offered memories of the interwar American Left and cross-racial radical history. Clarence Major, whom I got to know in Paris, offered the witness of the mixed Native and African American heritage behind his writing. Correspondence with Addison Gayle helped locate the impetus behind black cultural nationalism. I learned hugely from personal exchanges as to the African American past-into-present, be it slavery, the Great Migration or black urban communities, from the historians Barbara Fields and Nell Irvin Painter. For BBC radio I was able to interview John Wideman and Ishmael Reed for their respective writing careers together with broadcast reviews of work by Chester Himes, Rosa Guy, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin and a broad shelf of further African American writers.

Then, too, there was always music, listening to Ellington concerts at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. or Mingus in Greenwich Village, and whether vinyl, tape or CD, historic black performance in jazz and blues. I also found my way into the black visual arts, the collage of Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, the sculpture of Elizabeth Catlett, and the photography of James Van der Zee, Gordon Parks, and Coreen Simpson. Watching off-Broadway theatre performances of Jones/Baraka's *Dutchman* and the British-directed Al Freeman/Shirley Knight screen version (1966) added its own kind of respect for the dare and fire. Cinema meant the aching awkward interracial liberalism of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) and *In The Heat of the Night* (1967) but that, subsequently, would yield to the emergence of black film under the dexterity of black directors, typically Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1989), John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) and Julie Dash's *Daughter of the Dust* (1991), and in their wake, the likes of Lee Daniels's *Precious* (2009) or Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* (2016). Cumulatively these and like achievements of word and visual art have taken yet newer hold.

The die was cast and has continued. African American writing, at the same time, segues readily into the broader multicultural spectrum. Alongside black tradition there indeed beckoned the arenas of Native American, Latino/a, Asian American, Jewish, and white “ethnic” writing whether Irish, Italian or German. At the same time I still find no incompatibility in continuing to work on the canonical names, Melville foremost but typically Poe, Twain, Henry James, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, or a line from Scott Fitzgerald to Flannery O’ Connor, Hemingway to Sylvia Plath. Gender inflections, ecology, the post-modern, have all entered into consideration, but in no way as the exclusive terrain of white authorship. American literature, in truth, was not and could never have been the one prescribed canon, the selective one lineage.

In consequence the volumes that followed *Designs of Blackness* aimed for wider trajectories, especially *Multicultural American Literature: Comparative Black, Native, Latinola and Asian American Fictions* (2003) which had the good fortune to win a 2004 American Book Award. As for subsequent studies, *Gothic to Multicultural: Idioms of Imagining in American Literary Fiction* (2008), *United States: Re-Viewing American Multicultural Literature* (2009) and *Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics* (2010), the issue was not to throw more polemic into the fire but to recognize spectrum, the more encompassing American literary field.

This 25th anniversary edition was never meant simply to rewrite the original. The chapters as originally conceived remain largely self-standing, albeit that I have amplified lines of argument and sharpened points of style. I have also kept true to the notion of cross-referencing as against linear critical narrative. *Designs of Blackness* is not, and actually could not be, a kind of palimpsest, the one book simply superimposed upon its predecessor. It has been important to retain the historic integrity of the original but with the indications of continuity given in the final two chapters. That Pluto Press, an independent radical press based in London since 1969, and which had a backlist of Third World and postcolonial publications, took on the manuscript was fitting. What better authorial backdrop from outside the United States to connect with African American history and literary culture than a list to include Frantz Fanon, bell hooks and C.L R. James?

The challenge to interpretation was to create both coverage and particularization. The account in Chapter 1 of the black literary Birth of the Nation is meant to be indicative: 1776, and the paradox of slaveholding at American Independence, as written and bequeathed by a founding black authorship with the Augustan

New England poet, Phillis Wheatley, at the center. This first concourse of African American literary voice is re-invoked through the filter of the “black nationalist” 1960s and the kinds of ideological critique both at the time and in its wake. The focus is then sharpened through four primary texts, Wheatley’s *Poems* (1773), Jupiter Hammon’s hymnological “An Evening Thought” (1760), Olaudah Equiano/Gustavus Vassa’s slave-autobiographical *Narrative* (1789), and David Walker’s fierce, rallying abolitionist pamphlet *Walker’s Appeal* (1829).⁵⁹

The subsequent chapters work in kind. Chapter 2, an analysis of African American “first-person singular” (in Emerson’s historic phrase), takes its orientation from Frederick Douglass’s slave-written *Narrative* (1845) before widening into a shared circle of Booker T. Washington, 1920s “New Negro” autobiography, and Richard Wright, James Baldwin as essayist-autobiographer, Chester Himes, Malcolm X and Maya Angelou. The emphasis, throughout, falls upon scriptural self-owning, en-lettering as a dialectic of recognition, recovery, the very making and remaking of identity.⁶⁰

Chapter 3 pursues Harlem as a city of words. Whether hub, magnet, triumph or pit, a 1920s Jazz Age clubland, a 1940s “race riot” gathering point, a postwar home for Langston Hughes or Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin before them, or a postwar mixed-fare of Sugar Hill and tenement, churchly respectability and drugs, this has been Afro-America’s premier metropolis. Its literary, as well as musical and visual conspectus has shown an energy in kind with the varieties of its citizenry, cultures high and popular. Alain Locke’s imagined “race capital” of the 1920s links to LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka’s Black Arts Theater of the 1960s, Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928) to Rosa Guy’s *A Measure of Time* (1983) with the Harlem of Langston Hughes, Chester Himes, James Baldwin and Darryl Pinckney positioned along the way.⁶¹

“Womanisms,” Chapter 4, takes Alice Walker’s historic formulation in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983) as a working gloss for the genealogy of a dozen woman-authored novels from Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), with Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) as a key touchstone.⁶² An Afro-America of women “authoring,” “authored,” and they, in turn, “authoring,” serves as a frame. The literary womanism in view, its politics, gender concerns, lineages, sorority, is taken for a shared, yet resolutely individual gallery of signatures.

In the account of Richard Wright, Chapter 5 argues for a reading beyond the received figure of “Negro protest” or “black realism.” Rather, he is taken as a writer whose fiction turns upon rarer, other, landscapes, with an “inside” storytelling to match, of the psyche, of *cauchemar* and yet also wonder, and whereby Wright can

look to literary kin as much in Kafka, Dostoevsky or Poe as, say, Dreiser. On this account, with a story like “The Man Who Lived Underground” and his novel *Native Son* (1940) as centerpieces, he invites rethinking as naturalist-realist. Wright, runs the suggestion, can as well be thought his own kind of putative modernist.⁶³

“War and Peace,” Chapter 6, takes off from Wright into the 1940s as a decade both of, and itself the complex subject of, black writing, and throughout possessed of its own discrete play of paradox. In working through a span of literary texts from John O. Killens’s *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1963) to Gwendolyn Brooks’s *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), the issue becomes one of how each refracts the contradictory equation of a black soldiery at war abroad in the name of a cause, a peace, denied them and their families at home.⁶⁴

Chapter 7 considers how to account for, in the aftermath of World War II, however countercultural the Beat movement of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Corso and full of allusions to, say, Charlie Parker or the blues, it has passed into history as overwhelmingly the white (and white male) writer-cadre. In tackling the poetry of black Beatdom by the early LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka, and by Ted Joans and Bob Kaufman, the hope was to offer an amends, a making-good in terms of the counterculture both East and West Coast.

No other era since Emancipation has more carried the “racial” smack, the frisson, of an America required to deliver its equalitarian promises than the 1960s. Chapter 8 explores the overlapping force of political and literary drama, “blackness” of both theatre and life. Black Power, Civil Rights, the politics, militant or gradualist, respectively, of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, amounted to one kind of staging.⁶⁵ Jones/Baraka’s *Dutchman* (1964), a play of the black, mythic, ever-circling underground, amounted to another. It would still not be out of keeping to juxtapose the powerfully iconic boxing theatre of, say, Muhammad Ali, with that of the age’s playwrights from Lorraine Hansberry to Douglas Turner Ward and James Baldwin to Ed Bullins.

Black literary writ in the novel, especially given the long shadow of Richard Wright, almost by ideological and critical rote has been taken to be neo-realist. A voice like that of Leon Forrest, the subject of Chapter 9 suggest otherwise. His trilogy of “Forest County,” and the Witherspoon Bloodworth Chicago dynasty, *There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden* (1973), *The Bloodworth Orphans* (1977) and *Two Wings to Veil My Face* (1984), takes its place as a modernist feat both in its own right and as contributing to a larger black literary modernist and postmodern turn. Those sharing imaginative billing with Forrest run from Ishmael Reed as the metafictional wit who bowed in with spoof science fiction and Westerns like *The Freelance Pallbearers* (1967) and *Yellow Black Radio Broke-Down* (1969) to the

generation of John Wideman, Carlene Hatcher Polite and the story-writer James Alan McPherson and, by shared consent, with the Ralph Ellison of *Invisible Man* as tutelary spirit.⁶⁶

Chapter 10 takes on the vexed helix of “race” itself, and along with it color, Afro-America’s fictions of passing as a pathway into the altogether more knotted domains of American cultural identity. “Who’s Passing for Who?” was Langston Hughes’s title for a 1945 story. It acts as a gloss, a point of entry, to the way the pluralities of self have throughout been both reduced, and traduced, by the usual racial taxonomies. Given a context of the opening of the American literary canon, and in texts from the long assumed first-ever African American novel, William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853), through to Charles Johnson’s picaresque *Oxherding Tale* (1982), the suggestion is that race, as color, has long been shown infinitely to deceive. This involves, on Afro-America’s own abundant evidence of novel writing, and beyond, a near Melvillian *trompe l’oeil*, the specific outward show, itself often in doubt, all too readily taken for the always more plural inner human whole.⁶⁷

Before coming on to the texts explored in the newly written Chapters 11 and 12, and their quintets of fiction and poetry, it has made sense to give each through a number of bridging texts. These imply continuity but also sequel, antecedents but also the promise of innovation. In fiction it means alighting briefly upon the Ellison of *Juneteenth* (post.1999), Morrison after *Beloved*, and Reed beyond his first novels, and in poetry upon the fierce presence of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka through to late work like the prose-poetry of *The Book of Monk* (2005).⁶⁸ Each, accordingly, is to be seen both for their own careers but also the linkage they give both to their coevals and successors.

The novels taken on in Chapter 11 display symptomatic diversity, a huge flexibility of disclosing voice. Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), pitched close to science-fiction, gives ingenious bearings on the double-mirror of plantation slavery and contemporary California through a series of speculative black time-jumps. The Katrina storm of 2005 acts as centrifuge, meteorological metaphor, for a portrait of black Mississippi kin at the edge of poverty in Jessica Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011). Wit, ventriloquy? Paul Beatty’s *The Sell-Out* (2015), Man Booker prizewinner in 2016, puts black Los Angeles under antic purview, a triumph of encompassing and in-house irony. In Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016) neo-slave narrative finds more new energy, a ply of historical escape and magic-realist design. African American Europe, and a protagonist’s journey from Chicago to Berlin before the fall of the wall, straight and gay creative life, give working dimensions to Darryl Pinkney’s richly styled *Black Deutschland* (2016). The devising of new story, and its dispatch, is hardly to be denied.⁶⁹

Poetry, in Chapter 12, likewise, exhibits a latest multiplicity of show and tell. Rita Dove, national laureate in the 1990s, has left no doubt of the rarest agility in a range of work to span black locale, family, Europe and America. For Michael Harper, jazz presides, the musical soul and pattern of black creativity and for which his verse abundantly gives evidence of having found matching word or stanza. Mix or *mestizaje* has long occupied Natasha Trethewey, but in *Thrall* (2012) she turns, ekphrastically, to painting as a source for the implications of how hue of skin and interracial features have found their imaging. A single text, “Testimony” (2013), invites exploration not only for Yusef Komunyakaa’s abiding tribute to Charlie Parker but as confirmation of his own powers of jazz-seamed idiom. Careful idiosyncrasy marks out Kevin Young’s verse, a singular accent to span black history and place, gangsterdom and foodways, and always echoes of the spoken. Once more, the diversity could not be more pronounced.⁷⁰

The Introduction initially written for *Designs of Blackness* took points of departure from Toni Morrison. The lecture she offered on receiving the Nobel Prize in 1993, the more prescient in the light of her death in 2019 and the current global turn to the political right, has lost none of its purchase:

But who does not know of literature banned because it is interrogative; discredited because it is critical; erased because alternate?⁷¹

These queries continue to become studies of African American writing and *Designs of Blackness* in particular. They carry Morrison’s typical acuity and toughness, the kind of edge behind a life time’s storytelling which, in addition to a Pulitzer Prize and other awards, rightly won her the Nobel Prize. They also call attention to how her own writing managed to reinterpret the narratives of Afro-America, a world, more accurately worlds, initially turned upside down by slavery, by the Middle Passage, by every subsequent American color-line meanness, and yet always creative resilience over victimry.

For Morrison was able always to invoke endurance, the stored ironic wisdom to have come out of setback and oppression and maintained inside a historic black creativity of self and word and music. That the award, however much a crowning of both Morrison herself and African American writing in general, aroused cavils was oddly symptomatic. They gave a reminder that racism can as readily snake its way into literary circles as elsewhere, and that, for some, black authorship (especially by a black woman) still must play petitioner in matters of

canon. Despite the Nobel Committee's own conviction otherwise, the sniping implied that Morrison's prize was more a gesture to Civil Rights America, Third Worldism, anti-coloniality, or women of color, than an earned tribute to a writer of quite singular inventive power. Not a few cheap shots spoke of some kind of international "affirmative action."

Morrison's formulations in her Nobel lecture as to the "banning," "discrediting" or even "erasure" of "alternate" literature included herself in answering this kind of attempted putdown. Who better, then, from this quite personal bearing, to have gone on to reflect upon how African American written voice—illegality under slave edict for its transgression of ownership of the word as much as the body—has so often fared in America? Has not, in this sense, all America's black writing been an answering-back, the seizing of its own rights to word, poem, novel, play, text, literature?

Morrison, moreover, brought to bear the credential not only of an accomplished fiction writer but of a case-hardened editor, first with W. Singer Publishing Company (1964–1967), then with Random House (1967–1984), along with her academic appointments at Barnard, Yale, SUNY and Princeton. Toni Cade Bambara, James Alan McPherson, Angela Davis and Leon Forrest were but a few to have come under her editorial purview. As an African American woman writer she herself comes out of an "alternate" culture even if, in a Stockholm far removed in time and place from her own original Lorain, Ohio, her achievement eventually would be celebrated at the international center of things.

For all of her encompassing vision, her fiction bespeaks a wholly singular sense of America's many black and interracial histories. The Morrison texts written before publication of *Designs of Blackness*, together with those that have followed which are given attention in Chapter 11, deliver witness. The trajectory had its auspicious beginning in the portrait of fissured black womanhood of Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). To follow, in *Sula* (1973), came the fraught, embattled story of two black girlhood mirror selves joined yet broken. *Song of Solomon* (1977) takes a new tracing of African diaspora through the black-mythic life of Macon Dead III ("Milkman"). *Tar Baby* (1981), with its love-hate friendship of beauteous Jadine Childs raised on white Caribbean money with dreadlocked Son Green from the poorer back-channels of Florida, yields a narrative not just of black class or gender but psyche.

In *Beloved* (1987) Morrison creates what will likely stand as her masterpiece, the stunning memorial story of the "haint" of slavery as infanticide and replete in dream as much as history. Thereafter come *Jazz* (1992) with its compelling Great

Migration story-ballad of love gained and lost in the Harlem of the 1920s, and *Paradise* (1997) with its setting in all-black Ruby, Oklahoma, the densely plotted story of a community of gender as much as race.

In reach of story, as in her pronouncements, Morrison gifts a vantage point for the kind of critical direction undertaken in *Designs of Blackness*. Her work rightly earns its own luster but it also reminds of the long, winding company of African American writers who before, alongside, and subsequently, have contributed to the continuum that has been literary Afro-America. So dramatic a story, even so, has indeed at times suffered ban, discrediting, and at worst erasure, by a mainstream variously uninterested or fearful of just what it might say.

No doubt, in part, this remembrance of once enjoined silence has played its role in the exuberant variety of black written idiom a, point also emphasized, and famously embodied, in both the Prologue and Epilogue to *Invisible Man* (1952), Ralph Ellison's landmark novel.⁷² The voices have been many, vernacular and high, downhome and mainstream, Dixie-rural and citted, and, axially, every community style of the spoken made over into the scriptural.

As, again, the half-title emphasizes, *Designs of Blackness: Mappings in the Literature and Culture of Afro-America* was seeking to develop a species of literary cartography more one of cross-reference than narrative history. The local analysis of text plays into the range of ongoing collateral weights and measures. This is to emphasize "the word" as inscription in its own invitational right yet inevitably shaped by, and drawn from a larger African American continuity of word, and that, beyond supposed literary mainstreams and peripheries, linked into America's overall and ever more expansive multicultural word.

People ask me why I'm always writing about the past. I don't know. I think it's probably because there's more of it. It seems infinite and inexhaustible to me, and it can bear a lot of re-imagining. Especially black American life, because it has been usurped by some people and it needs to be re-imagined.⁷³

This, again to invoke Morrison and an interview given in 1992, yet further pulls together many of the threads explored in *Designs of Blackness*. Re-imagining Afro-America's past, as indeed its present and future, has of necessity been a call to word for all its writers. The study at hand, both in its revised original form and in the chapters that give sight to ongoing African American literature, continues recognition of just how compelling has been the upshot.

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Reclamations: The Early Afro-America of Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, Olaudah Equiano and David Walker

Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say.

Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942)¹

... what is commonly assumed to be past history is actually as much a part of the living present as William Faulkner insisted. Furtive, Implacable and tricky, it inspires both the observer and the scene observed, artifacts, manners and atmosphere and it speaks when no one wills to listen.

Ralph Ellison, "Introduction," *Invisible Man*, 30th Anniversary Edition (1952, 1982)²

"We Shall overcome." "Freedom Now." "I Have A Dream." In a profile of America's earliest black writers, the great clarion phrases of the 1960s could at first look anachronistic, a vantage point appropriated from too recent an era. Yet if the Kennedy-Johnson years (with good reason they have also been called the Martin Luther King-Malcolm X years) signified the immediacy of Civil Rights and Black Power, the effect, at the same time, was to open Afro-America, indeed all America, to retrospection, the excavation of almost every past formation of the nation's demographic heritage.

This, in literary-cultural terms, was to include not only black but the diverse multicultural bandwidths within white America and the spectrum of Native

American, Latino/a (now often Latinx), and Asian American authorship. These so-called identity literatures, moreover, have given expanded and for many overdue focus on gender, class and region. The upshot has been one of a long process of reclamation, challenges to established canons, new orders of judgment and critique.

For the African American literature of the nineteenth century it has meant re-addressing folklore, spirituals, and the singular body of slave narrative. The novel that first came into view in early names like those of William Wells Brown, Charles Chesnutt and Paul Dunbar takes on increasing width in each subsequent New Negro and Harlem Renaissance landmark and, stirringly, the epochal Depression-era figure of Richard Wright. Poetry finds its line from Phillis Wheatley onward just as theater has its beginnings in the *African Company* established by William Alexander Brown in the 1820s. “Womanist” voice, to re-invoke Alice Walker’s term, increasingly finds lineage not only in the albeit late-Augustan voice of Phillis Wheatley but in Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) through to the end of the century and New Woman fiction of Frances E.W Harper and Pauline Hopkins.

Yet for the writers who constitute Afro-America’s very earliest tier of the 1770s through to the 1820s, and in particular Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, Olaudah Equiano/Gustavus Vassa and David Walker, matters can hardly be said to have availed. To explore why, and with what implications, a number of connected steps back and forth in time need to enter the reckoning. For as the 1960s brought about the historic Second Renaissance of black politics and the arts and reopened avenues into prior legacy it did so only rarely with a view to the America of New Republic of 1776 as perceived and written by Afro-America.

Usually, and understandably, it has been with the great slave texts, the *Narrative* of Frederick Douglass in 1845 above all, that reclamation is thought to have its beginning. The Age of Wheatley, however, rarely becomes more than prelude, a literary antechamber. Yet to revisit the black writings of these earliest years is to be faced with both an individual complexity of imagining and case studies of how Afro-America managed its own literary-cultural formation.

The call of the Malcolm X/Martin Luther King era for an ideologically committed black arts would prove to be exhilarating yet often as vexatious as the age’s politics. Who had best written, and to what end, the black lives of America? Which touchstones best held in the judgment of black art and literature? What, of yet more immediate relevance, was to make for an African American usable past? Can a linkage truly be discerned between Phillis Wheatley as the author in 1773 of the first ever black-written book to be published in America and, say, Ralph

Ellison as the landmark novelist of *Invisible Man* (1952) or Jones/Baraka as the apocalyptic dramatist of *Dutchman* (1964)?

In all these regards LeRoi Jones—poet, dramatist, storywriter, essayist, community activist, Black Nationalist and, thereafter, Marxist, and the Islam follower who becomes Amiri Baraka, especially serves. Never one to pull punches he called for a renewing “black fire” in the title-phrase of the anthology he co-edited with Larry Neal in 1968.³ An earlier taking of aim was to be found in his “The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature’” published in 1962:

The mediocrity of what has been called “Negro Literature” is one of the most loosely held secrets of American culture. From Phylis [sic] Wheatley to Charles Chesnutt, to the present generation of American Negro writers, the only responsible accretion of tradition readily attributable to the black producer of a formal literature in this country, with a few notable exceptions, has been of an almost agonizing mediocrity.⁴

The sense of letdown, even anger, at the apparent non-emergence of a truly *black* literature was patent. Whatever the claims to be advanced for Phillis Wheatley as Enlightenment America’s inaugural black poet, or for Charles Chesnutt as the Reconstruction author of the Uncle Julius McAdoo stories of *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and a classic novel of “passing” like *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), so much of “Negro Literature” had apparently failed to deliver. The accusation of “agonizing mediocrity” spoke volumes.⁵

The view, seen from a still later perspective, might well look more 1960s cultural reflex than judgment for the ages. Nor could Baraka, or anyone else, quite have anticipated the subsequent and massive recovery of past African American writing or the impact of black literary theory and scholarship with its reordering of the critical rules of engagement for black texts. Yet in the flurry of scholarly editions, histories and their trade spinoffs, the least fully reinstated writings have remained those embracing Wheatley, Hammond, Equiano and Walker.

The issue persists of how best to free Wheatley and her literary contemporaries from routine charges of flaws both ideological and expressive. Can they, as others of Afro-America’s first literary age, be summoned on grounds other than merest duty, a kind of piety? Meeting the issue lies not only in a better sense of their respective imaginative claims but also in establishing their link to quite subsequent

black continuities of word and context. In these interconnecting respects the four names at hand offers at once particular and wholly symptomatic cases.

In Phillis Wheatley one looks to the hidden liberationist idiom of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral by Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, in New England* (1773). In the case of Jupiter Hammon's "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential [sic] Cries" (1760), the challenge lies in inferring the figure of the versifier within the verse, the personal accent within the general devotional voice. *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789) works similarly, the "own memoirs" of an ex-slave Ibo, American and British, whose plain style as often as not flatters to deceive. As for David Walker's *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles, together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to Those of The United States of America* (1829), it can be seen to put *The Declaration of Independence* as America's self-inaugurating charter of 1776 under quite the most accusatory of black wording.⁶

Under these evolving protocols, African American literature, above all slave narrative, has attracted an ever greater pluralization of theory and analysis.⁷ Even critics given to the rarer attitudes of deconstruction have found grounds for interest. What, it is proposed, could be more artfully artless than slave narrative, coded, and with its inlaid allusions and double meanings? Nor has all been high solemnity. It was perhaps only a matter of time before even slaveholding would be opened to postmodern irreverence—Ishmael Reed, again, in his novel, *Flight to Canada* (1976)—"the peculiar institution" subjected to comic but always seriously purposive daring, and replete with an "African" (or as Reed terms it HooDoo or Vodoun) rendering of the symbols, the time and space, of slave history.⁸

Writers and critics alike began to see, moreover, that the taste for experiment, each different style of fable or image, in fact belongs to a considerable literary continuum. The 1920s, for which Alain Locke's *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925) acts as manifesto-anthology, was symptomatic. If its writers almost vaunted their varieties of genre and voice, they were mindful of the ancestral "texts" of slavery, whether stories of survival and coping within a context of auction-block and plantation or ironic shies at slaveholding itself. This spoken black community word, its invention and folklore, passes into written format as an essential ingredient in the emergence of 1920s black writing.

The footfalls run through Locke's *New Negro* selections. Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921) provides a deft alluvial metaphor of

black diaspora and blues. Countee Cullen's "Heritage," first published in his collection *Color* (1925), has its luxuriant, Keatsian imagery turns on a query about the meaning of "back to Africa" as mother continent of "copper sun" and "nakedness." Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), with its symbolist mosaics and portraiture of different women within a landscape of "race," locates each within southern heat and fever. Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) gives pioneer voice to Harlem as historic and emigrant metropole. In Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), and Jessie R. Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929), gender as much as the dramas of "passing" with their roots in slavery's white-male use of the black female body, comes into play. Memorialization of black slave history and its consequences press into the dazzling polemical essays of W. E. B. DuBois. An anti-lynch novel like Walter White's *The Fire in the Flint* (1924) makes its weight felt, the work of an NAACP stalwart with its invocation of the ancestral and yet ongoing threat against America's black population (between 1889 and World War I alone a proven 2,522 lynchings took place). Alain Locke's own contributions, as his other pamphlets and essays, have their own role to contribute, his forward-looking vista informed by intimacy with the historic black past.⁹

So shared a sediment of memory, of passed-down image, binds the black past into the black present. Arthur A. Schomburg, the Afro-Puerto Rican founder of the Negro Society for Historical Research in 1911, book collector and archivist for whom the 135th Street branch of the New York Library with its huge and indispensable black archives is named, had every reason to say in his "The Negro Digs Up His Past" (1925) that "already, the Negro sees himself against a reclaimed background."¹⁰

Richard Wright, successor voice to the Harlem Renaissance, offers his own kind of working retrospect. If *Native Son* (1940) signified Depression-era naturalism, did it not also imply an ancestral black psyche shaped by slave pursuit and haunting? Is not the autobiography of *Black Boy* (1945) and the posthumous *American Hunger* (1977) both the history of a Dixie childhood and migration to Chicago and of Wright as a writer compelled to discover and then add his own voice to whole past congregations of black word?¹¹

A same continuity of "the word" finds its echo in James Baldwin's fiction and essays. Whether in his novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), or in his debut essay-collection, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), he explores "white" and "black" less in terms of color than as a historic American power relationship. The very language of race, for Baldwin, becomes a refractive history, burdened in codes of superiority and inferiority from slavery times to modern Harlem.¹²

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, along with the major essay work of *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986), however much triumphs of written style, invoke full use of the oral iconography of Stagolee, Brer Rabbit, goopher, haints and signifying, along with every kind of borrowing from Afro-America's music. In these respects, Ellison insists on how black culture, especially its spoken arts, have been woven into not just his own work but both the black and white American mainstream.¹³

The process of memorialization in no way abates. In Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Time, the Timeless People* (1969) the echoes are those of the Middle Passage and the Caribbean landfall. Toni Morrison evokes an Ethiopia borne to America through spoken myth and child song in *Song of Solomon* (1977). Great-Momma Sweetie Reed looks back to slavery-time from the Chicago of a later century in Leon Forrest's *Two Wings to Veil My Face* (1984). Black migration from the Carolinas to Pittsburgh, and its family markers of place and memory, likewise press into the stories told in John Wideman's "Homewood" trilogy of *Hiding Place* (1981), *Damballah* (1981) and *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983).¹⁴

Ntozake Shange choreographs *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), her novel of three South Carolinian sisters, as a latter-day "spell" of music, letter and diary. Charles Johnson, reflecting a training in philosophy, subjects slave narrative to a phenomenological slant in *Oxherding Tale* (1982), and gives a science fiction or doppelganger update to conjure and spirit talk in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1986). Even Clay Ellis's *Platitudes* (1988), a montage of computer letter writing, photography and menus set in New York, although it issues from a writer who dubs himself a "New Cultural Mulatto" and so borrows freely from black and white literary tradition, turns upon an older blues-like love in its two young black writers.¹⁵

Not to associate this black "tradition of the new" with its antecedents, the early texts taken up in the present study, would be to fall short on the massive cross-reference, the links of time and memory, within African American literary tradition.

A consequence of all these developments has been the opportunity to see in Afro-America's first authors not only the inauguration but also the anticipation of later black literary writing. Wheatley, African yet New Englander, slave girl yet black woman, can thus be situated inside a continuum of black womanist writing. This indeed includes Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig; or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, her posthumously recovered novel of New England mulattoism and domestic service. It also anticipates Zora Neale Hurston's vernacular blues novel,

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), Gwendolyn Brooks's portrait of held-back black womanhood in *Annie Allen* (1949), and Rita Dove's intimate verse chronicle of black family in *Thomas and Beulah* (1986).¹⁶

Jupiter Hammon as evangelizer bequeaths a fervor, however much of its own time and place, to be heard down the timeline. Paul Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" (1895) abounds in shared accusation. A keenly first-hand essay like Richard Wright's "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (1937, 1940) take the knife to segregation. The same intensity echoes in far later texts like Malcolm X's *Autobiography* (1965) and the liberationist self-writing in George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* (1970).¹⁷

Equiano/Vassa can credibly be placed inside a continuity of quite other black "first person singular." That has a departure-point in Briton Hammon and his 14-page *A Narrative of the uncommon suffering and surprising deliverance of Briton Hammon . . .* (1760) as the first-known American slave writer and extends forward through to James Baldwin's celebrated declaration that that "This World Is White No Longer" in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) or Maya Angelou's break from Dixie racial and sexual silence in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970).¹⁸

The rhetorical militancy of David Walker likewise casts a long shadow. It finds one kind of echo in back-to-Africa stalwarts like Martin Delany and Marcus Garvey. It also gives ancestry to the sermons of contemporary minister-politicians from Martin Luther King Jr. to Jesse Jackson, Malcolm X to Louis Farrakhan. Each, like Walker, give boldest nay-saying to white ascendancy of divide and rule.

Taken together, Wheatley, Hammon, Equiano/Vassa and Walker can no longer remain peripheral secret sharers in the making of black literary history. They deserve better. For as voices in their own time, however little heard or read, and as foreshadowers of the kinds of black authorship to follow, their powers of word incite better recognition in its own imaginative right.

It is fitting, too, that a fuller sense of the immediate black literary context of their own time for Wheatley and her peers has won degrees of recognition. This, notably, includes Benjamin Banneker's *A Plan of a Peace-Office for the United States* (1793), first published in the pages of his voluminous Enlightenment-era almanacs. The pamphlet *A Narrative of the Black People during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia* offers an account of black fortitude in time of yellow fever by the ex-slave co-authors Bishop Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. If Jupiter Hammon's view of slavery as God's will finds expression in *An Address to the Negroes of the State of New York* (1806), as rousing a cry as any for freedom is to be met in George Moses Horton's verse appeal, *The Hope of Liberty* (1829).¹⁹ Yet whatever the extension of the early African American canon, Wheatley and

her literary generation still rarely win through other than on narrow antiquarian grounds.

With Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784) an oblique angle might well be thought all, given her practice of figuring imaginative freedom within formula eighteenth-century poetics as the silhouette of literal freedom from slave ownership. The life has become familiar. Born the likely Gambia-Fulani, Islamic and/or animist and sun worshipping child, she is first sold at auction in Boston in 1761 to John and Susanna Wheatley and named Phillis for the slave ship which transported her. The slave turned maidservant she is educated by the Wheatleys into both letters and Congregationalism whose manumission occurs in 1773 (the same year she accompanied the Wheatley son, Nathaniel, on a six-week visit to England). As the wife of John Peters whom she married in 1778 she bears three children all of whom die before she does. At the age of thirty-one her own days end in poverty and isolation.

Wheatley's poetry, however, offers altogether less familiar challenge. Her Augustan verse forms, the elegy, panegyric, epic or Christian homily together with her great themes of Nature, Belief, Death, and The Muse are customarily noted. But even as she emulates these forms, she also, implicitly, contests them. The imaginative will to write freely within a closed literary form serves as the very analogy of her historic will to freedom from within (in her phrase) the "Afric" slave barrier.

As much as she inherits the designation of Boston's slave belletrist brought out of pagan darkness (John Wheatley's "LETTER sent by the Author's Master to the Publisher" speaks of her "astonishing" ability to read "the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings"), she time and again insinuates a perceptible counter life. "Attested" as her poetry was by Governor Thomas Hutchinson and his fellow Massachusetts worthies ("To the Publick"), is not the better clue to be found in the portrait which acts as a frontispiece with its encircling legend of "PHILLIS WHEATLEY, NEGRO SERVANT to MR. JOHN WHEATLEY, of BOSTON"? There, eyes resolutely focused, quill in hand, book, ink and parchment before her, she appears to be quite certain about her own freedom of "the word," her own self-subscription.

"On Imagination" offers a starting point. In one sense this is conventional neoclassic rhapsody ("imagination" as "imperial queen" and "the sceptre o'er the realms of thought"). But Wheatley's hints go further. This is "imagination" with its subordinate "fancy" (a nice anticipation of Coleridge's distinction in

Biographia Literaria) which serves as a means of release from the “soft captivity” of “the mind.” “Imagination” sponsors “swiftness,” the freeing of “the mental optics.” Above, it gives access to the “measure” of the skies and “the realms above,” enabling those so possessed to “grasp the mighty whole,/Or with new words amaze th’ unbounded soul.”

The pivotal phrase here is “unbounded.” Its echo of shackles lost, fights undertaken, freedom won, tacitly implies the one slavery within the other. If, in the poem’s last line, Nature’s glories make for an “unequal lay” between writer and subject, is there not the further hint of another order, that of owner and owned in which freedom to imagine goes unmatched with freedom to become one’s own self-author in life?

This same parallel of freedom in imagination and freedom in life underwrites “To S. M. a young *African Painter*, on seeing his works.” As an encomium the terms again come over conventionally enough in the deployment of a visual imagery of “breathing figures” or “balmy wings.” But the more consequential note lies in the implied fuller self-creation, namely the juncture of “the painter’s and the poet’s fire” and of their shared creative “free” spirits. The two of them are to be seen as once more pledged to freedom in life as much as to the freedom of “fair creation.” Is not this the true “seraphic theme” of the poem, its “purer language”? Whatever their efforts with canvas or verse, and whatever New England Christianization, the transcending attainment for them (and, paradoxically, for their one-time captors) lies in a call to being beyond slavery’s own “solemn gloom of night.”

This imagining of freedom of self in Wheatley, actually more urgent than the genteel Augustanism so often attributed to her, runs right through her poetry. It even takes form in her juvenilia. “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” an early poem, smacks hard at binaries of black and white, pagan and Christian. Her closing lines so offer a terse injunction:

Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin’d, and join th’angelic train. (18)

This ongoing play of freedom in expression and freedom in life shows itself again in her careful adaptations from the classics and the Bible. “To Maecenas,” for instance, her ode to the Roman statesman whom she associates with the sun as “tow’ring Helicon” and to the New England “worthy” whom she thinks inherits his spirit, along with her passing allusion to the *African* “Terence,” carries the same note of hope for liberation. The one kind of self-fulfillment points to that

of the author herself. “Goliath of Gath,” her paraphrase of 1 Samuel XVII, recasts the account of David and Goliath as an overthrow of tyranny in terms whose register of “martial powers,” “Jehovah’s name” and “th’ Almighty’s hand,” creates liberationist resonances later to be thought almost routine. These analogize Israel with Afro-America, the Jewish with the African diaspora.

Wheatley’s “nationalist” poetry in no way works to lesser shared purpose. “To His Excellency General Washington,” whose upshot of life imitating art took the form of her own one-time meeting with the commander in chief, offers a panegyric (and African praise poem?) whose anti-Britannia sentiment culminates in the lines:

Ah cruel blindness to Columbia’s state!
Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late. (146)

The one vocabulary again implies the other. “Boundless” contrasts with terms like “bondage,” “bound,” “binding.” Each calls up, however implicitly, the denials of her own people’s un-bounding from *American* enslavement.

In like manner “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield. 1770” moves beyond classic lamentation, not least in the implication that *his* “music” (“We hear no more the music of thy tongue”) has passed to her. A deliberately cross-racial salvationism is sounded in how she thinks of God’s reality being made available at one and the same time to both white America (“Take him my dear *Americans*, he said . . .”) and to black America (“Take him, ye *Africans*, he longs for you . . .”). How has an all-inclusive Christianity, to which as convert and true believer she is committed, come to be so racially marked, two bifurcated theologies, a white and black God?

That Wheatley’s poetry possesses its general historical dimension can hardly be in doubt given verse like “On The Capture of General Lee,” with its praising of the American revolutionary cause, or “America,” with its allusion to the “Iron chain” of colonial rule, or “To the King’s Most Excellent Majesty on His repealing of the Stamp Act” with its “When kings do smile it sets their subjects free.” But here, too, is not her language for this history (“liberty,” “chain,” “subjects”) seamed with its own not so implicit racialization, the black signifying carried inside the white play of allusion?

An explicit “Afric” dimension to this historicity can be found in two key Wheatley references. In February 1774 she writes to Samsom Occom, cross-blood African-Mohegan Presbyterian minister, hymn writer and fellow New Englander: “God grant Deliverances in his own way and Time,” insisting upon a

“Vindication of . . . Natural Rights” and of “the Land of Africa” the discharge of its “Cry for Liberty.” The rich irony of a Christian and recently manumitted Wheatley writing to a converted Native American Occom on the issue of western, God sanctioned “Deliverance” hardly needs emphasis.

“On The Death of General Wooster,” a poem posthumously recovered, the call to liberation, is even more explicit, albeit yoked to her own form of providential Christianity:

But how, presumptuous shall we hope to find
 Divine acceptance with th’ Almighty mind—
 While yet (O deed Ungenerous!) they disgrace
 And hold in bondage Afric’s blameless race? (149)

In these lines, as in fact throughout her verse, Phillis Wheatley not only refracts but actually intervenes in the Atlantic slave history which “made” her. Imagined freedom is so itself defiantly imagined. Robert Hayden’s verse monologue, “A Letter from Phillis Wheatley,” has good cause to imagine her at the time of her visit to England relishing “signatures affirming me/True Poetess, albeit once a slave.”

Evangelical hymn-writing will likely never be at the forefront of literary preference, no more so than in the case of Jupiter Hammon (1720?–1800?) as against better-known practitioners like the English-born Charles Wesley and William Cowper. His enslavement, Long Island upbringing, Wesleyan conversion, probable un-letteredness, and in contrast with the anti-slavery stances of Richard Allen or David Walker “political” moderation, make for a context. His image has long been that of one of Early America’s true believers walking humbly within his appointed station.

“An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penetential [sic] Cries: Composed by Jupiter Hammon, a Negro belonging to Mr. Lloyd, of Queen’s Village, on Long Island, the 25th of December, 1760,” however, suggests a more restless temperament. This first ever black publication in America (a full-length book would await Wheatley) conveys an apparently quite un-racial religious sensibility, full of “universal” devotion and mission. But is *nothing* to be heard of black religious experience, the would-be godly salvation of body and spirit as also relief from literal enslavement and in the form of a readily imaginable call and response elicited from pulpit or lectern?²⁰

It is this ingredient that invites attention, each repetition and stress pattern, each calling-up of a personal Jesus, and each sureness of heavenly freedom after earthly servitude. Piety, self-evidently, knows no racial origin and the poem bears not a single explicit black reference. Yet it adds immeasurably to its reading when not only the subtext of slavery is brought to bear but also Toni Morrison's notion in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) of "representing one's own race to . . . a race of readers that understands itself to be 'universal' or 'race-free.'"²¹ The very first stanza points the way:

Salvation comes by Christ alone,
The only Son of God;
Redemption now to every one,
That love his holy Word. (23)

The word, specifically God's "holy Word," can be part of a spiritual exhortation as race-free as any. But it takes on added force when Hammon's versifying is also remembered as having been composed under African American auspices with all the habits, the community sound and nuance, of black "signifying."

These resonances make for a continuum throughout. "Dear Jesus, we would fly to Thee" reads the succeeding stanza, flight from an imperfect worldly slavery to a perfect heavenly slavery. "Dear Jesus, give thy Spirit now, Thy Grace to every Nation," in the fourth stanza, adds its own double note. The notion of selves, indeed nations, possessed of "the spirit," bears added implication for captive people who find themselves drawn to the death and resurrection of the martyred Christ as himself the slave.

The links of "redemption," "salvation," "awakening," "hunger" and above all, "freedom," which follow, take on further ironic weight when read mindful that the verse is being offered in the voice of "a Negro belonging to Mr. Lloyd." How "universal," that is shared and cross-racial, a transformation of spirit might be so entertained? How inclusive is the "we" so urged to "depart from Sin," to "accept the Word," and to "magnify thy Name"? Which meaning, finally, can be attached to the closing stanza, with its mention of "Repentance here" as the prelude to Jesus's "tender love"?

Come, Blessed Jesus, Heavenly Dove,
Accept Repentance here;
Salvation give, with tender Love;
Let us with Angels share. (25)

Is this a “repentance” simply universal or one to embrace in equal kind black slave author and white free reader?

Speaking of his “extremely chequered” and “various life and adventures” at the end of his *Interesting Narrative*, Olaudah Equiano (1745–1801), slave-named not after a Roman emperor but the Scandinavian monarch Gustavus Vassa, offers a disclaimer worth some pondering. With a Christian convert’s eye to the vainglory of self-history, he writes:

I am far from the vanity of thinking there is any merit in this narrative; I hope censure will be suspended, when it is considered that it was written by one who was as unwilling as unable to adorn the plainness of truth by the colouring of imagination. (178)

But whatever his own professed intention, and quite as much as Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* or Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, which he cites as antecedents, can Equiano’s “plainness of truth” be taken simply at face value? Is his fear of “the colouring of imagination” anything like the snare and delusion he implies, unacceptable falsification?

For whatever the would-be “humble” facts of his account, it offers at virtually every turn evidence of an often luminous imagination. The effect is to enhance the sheer historical eventfulness of the account, whether Equiano’s moves in and out of African slave capture, progress from Ibo-Benin royal sibling to human chattel to manumitted freeman merchant, or transition from stasis as property to movement as mariner and North Pole explorer. It holds, too, for the un-abating sea traveler who voyages from coastal Nigeria to the “plantation” Antilles, from America to England and back, and from England to the Mediterranean of the Anglo-French Napoleonic Wars.

This imagination is evident in the gloss of the name Olaudah as “one favoured, and having a loud voice and well-spoken.” It lies within the calculated likening of his “Igbo” origins to “that pastoral state which is described in Genesis.” It continues in his description of the slave ship that takes him to America and in the freedom of the flying fish as against the “multitude of black people, of every description, chained together.” In the latter instance, the fish as free energy (not to say sustenance denied Equiano and his fellow captives) contrasts perfectly with the stasis of the ship’s hold, a black prisoner caste immobilized and starved.

Equiano's play of image and pattern almost mocks any "censure" of the "colouring of imagination."

This show of himself as story-teller, however much Equiano pretends it to be a lapse, in fact gives the *Narrative* its best effect. The opening scenes invoke detailed remembrance of African sights and sounds. He offers careful descriptions of kinship systems, foodways, dress, poetry, shamanism (holy men as "magicians"), the role of language and ceremony, and black Islamic as against white Christian slavery. Envisaging the likely fate of his sister he calls up "the pestilential stench of a Guinea ship," with its hint of brute sexual as well as racial enslavement. In so writing each capture and fight, first in Africa and thereafter in slave America and the West Indies, Equiano's fashioning indicates the instinctive fabulist or poet.

The geography of his life, accordingly, takes on iconographic as well as literal force (Equiano, as often observed, became one of the most traveled personalities of his time). In Virginia, he finds himself named Jacob, having been called Michael aboard the slave ship. Gustavus Vassa soon follows. In Virginia, too, he sees a slave serving woman bound in an "iron muzzle . . . which locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak." These two experiences he makes into the very fable, as well as the history, of slavery. The first witnesses to slave naming as one kind of ownership over another, the second as a means to speech literally prevented. In writing his own text he can repudiate both, just as he can concede his one-time fear of whites as cannibals or his alarm at their clocks and apparent control of space and time.

For he cannot but see himself as having entered precisely a kind of alien space-time. This amounts to a "west" of "extraordinary escape(s)" and "signal deliverance" whose eventfulness includes the Canada of the Seven Years War, Georgia as the worst of slaveholding Dixie, "Musquito" Central America, the Mediterranean of Gibraltar, Tenerife, Cadiz and Smyrna, and the "uninhabited extremity of the word" as he terms the North Pole. As much as he avows "the interposition of Providence," the "divine hand," in his different rites of passage, his *Life* also reads for him, and is written by him, as quite wholly actual. Which is not to overlook the hints of Gulliverism, literal voyage yet the semblance of dream or fantastical voyage.

Each detail in fact implies, knowingly or not, a career full of itinerary chance, mishap. Equiano's life, or at least his life's telling, unfolds as much discontinuously as continuously—from warships at anchor in the Nore to a sea battle off Gibraltar, from the story of John Mondle's *delirium tremens* to Monserrat's haunted Brimstone Hill, from Philadelphia Quakerism to the purchase of his own freedom, and from his association with Dr. Charles Irving and their desalination

experiments to his final Bible conversion and work in abolitionism. Overall, these zigzags and reversals, shifts and discontinuities, make the perfect contradiction, that of the unforeseen as norm.

Notwithstanding assertions of Calvinist predestination, or invokings of guidebooks like Foxe's *Martyrology* and the *Guide to the Indians*, nothing, not even the Bible, will wholly account for the strangeness of a career at different times so dramatically poised between freedom and capture. The vaunted modesty of his authorship, or his proclaimed role as God's instrument, belies the life he tells. Whatever his disclaimers and self-modesty, he has been led to "author" himself. Though "from early years a predestinarian" Olaudah/Vassa relishes history as random, in fact wholly un-predestinarian. His plain style, another would-be modesty in keeping with his turn to Christianity, likewise is nothing if not deceptive. For it both reveals and conceals, the one-time slave whose un-owned memorialist its creator has become in the process of writing *The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vavas, the African*.

In the most immediate sense the *Appeal* of David Walker (1785–1830), born in Wilmington, North Carolina but who made a Brattle Street clothing-store in abolitionist Boston his workplace and center of operations, belongs fully in the early African American gallery as both activist and literary figure. The terms in play throughout his 76-page octavo pamphlet, understandably banned in the South, at first seem the very spirit of explicitness, polemic given uninhibitedly to the show of its begetter's anger. Rita Dove's poem, "David Walker," calls up the response it elicited at the time as "Outrage, Incredulity. Uproar in state legislatures." For throughout the Preamble, Four Articles and Conclusion, the indictment is unbounded.

"We (coloured people of these United States)," Walker's opening page declares, "are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began . . ." The call for divine forgiveness of enemy rings no less uncompromisingly—"O, my God, have mercy on Christian Americans!!" Whether on account of thinking his work done, or of the well-taken premonition of an early death by foul play, Walker would put all of his bow into this one pamphlet, a no-holds voice of black reckoning.

As he builds his "Appeal"—Article 1 on "our wretchedness," Article 2 on enforced "ignorance . . . and abject submission to the lash," Article 3 on America's double standard of Christianity, and Article 4, on slave colonization "in a far country"—the urgency runs at one with writing known to have been done at

speed. The italicizations and exclamation points keep the pressure wholly unyielding. Walker likewise know how to shock, whether the appeals to Biblical typology (especially the analogy of American slaves with “the children of Israel”), the historical inserts (“Bartholomew Las Casas,” for all his anti-*encomienda*, anti-Indian slavery, as a founding proponent of “our wretchedness” as black slaves), or each reproachful irony of the kind he directs at the Whig Kentuckian, Henry Clay (“Is not Mr. Clay a white man, and too delicate to work in the hot sun!!”). This is discourse at heat and velocity, the raised voice transferred to the page.

Not quite all, however, is apocalypse. A vital other mediating frame intervenes, that of America’s own Declaration of Independence. He closes on the lines:

I also ask the attention of the world of mankind to the declaration of these very people of the United States. (74)

The aim is unmistakable. He seeks to expose the lie of slaveholding America’s claim to a unique “universal” equality and shared access to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Despite the secular cast of the Declaration, Walker’s *Appeal* both notes and sees the irony in its conviction of Godly exceptionalism. This careful shadowing of the “reason” of American constitutionality contradicted by the “unreason” of American slavery, deepens and interiorizes the text, an achievement altogether shrewder than any first appearance might indicate.

Walker’s tactics situate his *Appeal* within the larger gallery of work created by Wheatley, Hammon, Olaudah/Vassa and their contemporaries. Reclamation in name and detail, and with fuller estimation of the imagining in play, has indeed been owed to all of them. For by their writings this first literary generation bequeaths an Afro-America, an America, indeed not only in the word of a given time and place but in so much of its own future word.

Notes

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2. Ralph Ellison, “Introduction,” *Invisible Man*, 30th Anniversary Edition, New York: Random House, [1952] 1982, xiii.

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The Stance of Self-Representation: African American Life Writing, 1850s–1990s

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A,B,C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, 'If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger the world. 'Now,' said he, 'if you would teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave . . . ' These words sank deep into my heart, stirring sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing mystery—to wit, the white man's, power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.

Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (1845)¹

When, under the imprint of the American Anti-Slavery Society of Boston, Frederick Douglass published his landmark *Narrative*, he clearly hoped it would

serve a number of related ends. First, it would be an act of memorialization—of birth to his slave mother Harriet Bailey and the unknown white slave master who was his father, of a Maryland plantation upbringing, and of work skills, hirings-out, and eventual clandestine escape by land and sea to New England.

At the same time, it would be his rallying-cry against the whole unconscionable edifice of slavery, a call to moral if not physical arms in the name of abolition. His resolve lay in showing America's white, and ostensibly Christian, citizenry the profound travesty of having a slave population in whose ranks he, himself, had so recently been entrapped. The slim volume with which he made his entrance, a mere 50 cents a copy on appearance, thereby bore the larger purpose: the closing down, forever, of America's "peculiar institution."

Little wonder the *Narrative* holds its place in the nation's slave history, a best-seller by the standards of the day which quickly ran to more than a half-dozen editions, which was translated into Dutch and French, and which yielded two later and considerably longer versions as *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, expanded 1892).² Yet along with the life it chronicles, and the high crusading purpose, another more oblique dimension also requires acknowledgement.

The words *Written by Himself* assume primary significance. A form of credential, that is, not written by an abolitionist helper and defiant of required slave illiteracy, it also gives a pointer to the *Narrative* as scripted drama in its own imaginative right. For the *Narrative* not only reports Douglass's act of escape, it also gives unique imaginative embodiment of that process. In this respect it marks the taking of black textual possession of history as against, say, John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832), with its magnolia plantation South, or New England abolitionist writing with its high point in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

Douglass's evidentiary manner at once reveals and conceals. On the one hand the *Narrative* reads as a transcript from life, with an additional frisson. It had been written by an author still open to re-enslavement under the 1793 and other Fugitive Slave legislation, un-repealed until 1864 late in the Civil War. Douglass would seek to escape precisely these provisions on publication of the *Narrative* when he took up anti-slavery lecture invitations in England. The immediacy becomes even sharper when Douglass refuses to name those who have helped him, or to give details of the flight across the Chesapeake Bay, or to reveal his own whereabouts in Boston. In its own time, and not a little headily, most readers recognized a species of outlaw writing by an outlaw slave author.

Yet the matter does not end there. Douglass knew how his very manner of writing the escape amounts to its own constitutive act of freedom. All the components which have made the *Narrative* a canonical text come into play: the confessional first-person format, the iconography of journey from dark to light and, always, the memorial use not only of history but of black speech and cadence. The effect of each is not only to report, but to actualize, a self, the “text” of Douglass’s own self now made over into a literal or scriptural “text.”

If it is little surprise that Douglass’s *Narrative* lays down track for nearly all subsequent African American autobiography, this does not for a moment detract from its own uniqueness. Douglass clearly calls upon a special ingenuity (and personality) in the plotting and implementation of his escape. His rendering of scenes like the whipping of Aunt Hester, the Covey fight, or the Sabbath school he runs at Mr. Freeland’s plantation, all bespeak an instinctive narrative stylist. Nor can it be overlooked that Douglass finds himself enslaved within the less typical tobacco-crop Maryland setting rather than a down-river cotton and chattel slave state like Georgia or Mississippi.

But the uniqueness also lies in the very manner of Douglass’s telling. For in remembering the acquisition of his ABCs and his three- and four-letter words, he does infinitely more than invoke the “kind” tutelage of his slave master’s wife. He actually enacts the “new and special revelation,” the “deep and mysterious things,” of literacy. He performs, as it were, his access to “the word” as if almost to vaunt his scriptural conquest over previously denied powers of defining self and reality.

This process of gaining, and then in his *Narrative* giving vent to, an illegally-won enletterment, finds a long echo in black memory. Although herself born a “Free Negro” in Maryland, and spending her young adulthood in Ohio, Frances E. W. Harper is typical. Her novel *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) offers a byway to its main plot in the story of Tom Anderson, a slave, who is threatened with “five hundred lashes” if his master catches him pursuing “the key to forbidden knowledge . . . in the ABC’s.” Anderson goes on to fashion a cloth for his head in which he hides cut-outs of the alphabet and practices his first writing on a river beach. Enletterment again denotes transgression, risk, but above all escape from non-ownership of word as much as body.³

Is there not, in this respect, a truly defiant irony in the title-phrase display of Douglass’s own status under law as *An American Slave*? What more accusing paradox or synopsis could there be than a “slave” freely writing his own supposed status as property? Whether or not he writes from abolitionist Boston, and

however eloquently or affectingly he does so, he would have all know that within an America of constitutionally sanctified property-rights he has been not only slavery's bodily possession or stolen goods, but also its supposed verbal thing, its object in words.

As a slave he has been forced to exist within the definitional orbit of "nigger," "property," "coon," "boy," or "hand," together no doubt with others of which propriety did not allow him to print, terms always outside his own choosing and calculated only to de-individuate and possess. Even as an ex-slave, if, precariously, he can so regard himself at the time of writing, he remains within a category, however welcome, still not wholly of his own making. His *Written by Himself* challenges both, be it servitude into freedom or wordlessness into word. In the latter respect his "own" signature implies escape from any or all nomenclature not of his own determining.

This double textuality operates throughout. When Douglass declares "my father was a white man" he raises the issue not only of his own parentage (evidence now gathers of Native American forbears), but of the whole arbitrariness of "race." Who ordained these rules of miscegenation and racial genetics? When is white black, black white, and where, implies Douglass, does that leave him?

In the Edward Covey fight, "the turning point in my career as a slave," Douglass achieves far more than some local set-to with his overseer. The pugilism possesses the prose itself, each feint, grip, release or hit taken into and made the very rhythm of the telling. In this, too, Douglass anticipates a later history of black-white pugilism through names like Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali in which white oppression, whiteness as the historic code of ownership, albeit for the moment or subliminally, is fought into dispossession and defeat. In the encounter with the two dockside Irish laborers, the text once more takes the drama into its own being. Will they, won't they, reveal him as runaway? In fact, as the account shifts and turns, as it gives mimetic body to Douglass's fears they . . . wish him well, and with just the hint that under other auspices a white-black worker alliance might have been possible.

"I subscribe myself . . . FREDERICK DOUGLASS." So he takes his bow at the close. In fact, Douglass is playing counterfeiter, *auteur*, a name whose very composition, and compositeness, he has every reason to emphasize. "Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey," "Frederick Johnson," plain "Frederick," "Frederick Douglass" and "FREDERICK DOUGLASS": in each of his previous namings he implies slavery's power as much to un-author as to author. In his own eventual formulation, however, he insists upon his own newly acquired and countervailing power to shadow and reverse the process. Is not the capitalization as FREDERICK

DOUGLASS a kind of printerly answering-back, a name now self-owned and defiantly pitched in majuscule? That “Douglass” as surname, he explains, came about in consequence of a borrowing from Scott’s “The Lady of the Lake” by his abolitionist host in Boston, adds a perfect irony, realism overlaid by romance.

Slaves, under the so-called Black or Slave laws, were forbidden to read and write, an upshot of the 1739 Stono Rebellion in South Carolina. They might finagle their own “passes,” bear witness to the iniquities of slavery, compose (or fake) their own names, and then use each of these to advance slave revolution. These become some of the means used in the plot by Gabriel Prosser in Richmond in 1800 and which are taken up in Arna Bontemps’s unsparing but always lyric novel *Black Thunder: Gabriel’s Revolt: Virginia 1800* (1936). In Prosser’s wake the list includes Toussaint de l’Ouverture in Haiti 1802, Charles Deslandres in Louisiana in 1811, Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831, Denmark Vesey in Charleston, South Carolina in 1832, and Cinqué aboard the Spanish slave ship *Amistad* in 1839. Madison Washington who led the mutiny on the slave ship, *Creole*, in 1841, on its journey from Hampton, Virginia to New Orleans with 134 slaves for sale, supplied Douglass with his own admired protagonist and fiction-of-fact narrative in *The Heroic Slave* (1853).

The slave nomenclature given by owners gives a further twist, the slave as human palimpsest upon whom the slaveholder inscribes himself. Leading slave insurrectionists like Prosser, Turner and Vesey all bear their masters’ names. Douglass also knew well enough slaveholding’s related bad-faith naming, the mock family kinship of “Uncle” Tom or “Aunt” Dinah or the undermining glorification of a “Cleopatra,” “Pompey” or “Caesar” (the latter explicitly echoed in a later age’s science fiction movies like *Planet of the Apes* (1969) and its sequels.

The display of Douglass’s own name and accompanying text offers a counter, a writing-back. On account of Mrs. Auld’s teaching of the alphabet, so alarming to her husband, there will indeed be “no keeping” Douglass as a slave. Under his new-made signature the *Narrative* at once reports a life and Douglass’s own inscribing of that life, and as much for his readers as himself. It serves him as a genesis, a freeing into word to act upon and take possession of his freeing into history.⁴

His is the recognition of the abiding connection between literacy and liberation. The appropriation of “the word” back from those who hitherto have done the defining exactly complements the appropriation of his physical body from South to North in 1838 as “the pathway from slavery to freedom.” For as he aptly cites Mr. Auld in words which would not have amiss had they found voice in Mark Twain’s Pap Finn: “If you teach that slave to read . . . It would forever

unfit him to be a slave.” The *Narrative*, in other words, represents a transgressive text (“unlawful,” “unsafe”) not simply because it violates slave laws or even slaveholding bans on black literacy. Rather, it lives out that very transgression as word, image, rhythm, story, an inaugural slave narrative equally as liberating in its qualities of telling as tale. The implications for a subsequent black self-chronicle are unmistakable.

Certainly these implications are not lost on the writer-narrator of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as he contemplates his own call to word:

Sometimes I sat watching the watery play of light upon Douglass’ portrait, thinking how magical it was that he had talked his way from slavery to a government ministry, and so swiftly. Perhaps, I thought, something of the kind is happening to me. Douglass came north to escape and find work in the shipyards; a big fellow in a sailor’s suit who, like me, had taken another name. What had his true name been? Whatever it was, it was as *Douglass* that he became himself, defined himself. And not as a boatwright as he’d expected, but as an orator. Perhaps the sense of magic lay in the unexpected transformations. “You start Saul, and end up Paul,” my grandfather had often said. “When you’re a youngun, you Saul, but let life whup your head a bit and you starts to trying to be Paul—though you still Sauls around on the side.”⁵

Nor is the impact of Douglass, and his acquisition of the written word, lost on a successor like Darry Pinckney in *High Cotton* (1992). The narrator invokes his grandfather seated at a New York Upper East Side Library reading about Douglass:

He said that what fascinated him most about the “back years” was the story of how young Frederick Douglass, driven by the sound of his master reading from the Book of Job, stole a primer and copied the letters on pieces of pine plank . . . Douglass made impudent progress in secret, he said, and, lo, one day literacy, like the feet waters of the earth, swept him to freedom.⁶

The step from Frederick Douglass to Angela Davis, 1840s Maryland slave to 1960s West Coast member of the American Communist Party and the author of *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974), crosses gender as well as time and space.⁷ Even so, the linkages are intimate and many, and in one respect more than most. In *If They Come in the Morning*, a political anthology of her writings and published in 1971, Davis reprints her address to the California court when, amid the drama of

Black Power, she was charged with “murder, kidnapping and conspiracy.” “Only in the stance of self-representation,” she responded, “will I be able to properly and thoroughly confront my accusers.”⁸

Davis’s “stance of self-representation” and Douglass’s “written by himself” mirror one another almost to perfection, each steeped in transgression, legalism, an insistence upon respective kinds of self-authoring. Davis’s formulation, however, perhaps more exactly supplies a working template for the line of autobiographical narrative from slave writing to New Negro autobiography, and, thereafter, from the modernity of Richard Wright, Zora Neal Hurston, Chester Himes, James Baldwin, Malcolm X and Maya Angelou to contrasting 1990s names like Lorene Cary and Ray Shell. Down this chronology a concourse of shared concerns and indeed pattern shows through, the ongoing insistence on the “text” of self as it is recreated upon the written page.

How, then, best to have textualized the individual self within the “exemplary” autobiography? What gets put in or left out? How agreeable, after all, or husbandly, or short-tempered, or witty, in fact was Douglass? Where is the balance best struck between the one black life and that of the larger community with its shaping and memorial play of codes, whether Southern or city, church or street, barbershop or kitchen, menfolk or women?⁹ The challenge becomes one of negotiating the exact register in the face of the pre-emptive lexicon of “race” and its binaries of “black” and “white” together with all the embroiling language of ownership, eugenics, sexuality and gaze.

To take up these considerations in black autobiography’s founding phase, a number of related tiers come into play. At the outset there is all the rest of American slave narrative, be it full-length or fragment, collected or not, in all an estimated five thousand texts or more. They tell a generic story: African encapturement, Atlantic transportation, field or house servitude, brutalism as not only labor but sexual property, belief whether Christian or animist. Despite the Supreme Court’s *Dred Scott* decision of 1857, which confirmed black Americans to be “not included under the word ‘citizens’ in the Constitution” there also of necessity persists the dream of liberation. There is acknowledgment of having to live always on one’s wits by double-talk and “puttin’ on massa,” together with the sustaining dips into the folklore of Brer Rabbit, Jack the Bear, “flying” Africans, and High John. Could any one writer tell “all” without, in fact or imagination, soliciting the aid of the spirits, God, conjure or hoodoo?¹⁰ Olaudah Equiano/Gustavus Vassa speaks in his *Narrative* (1789) of reading and writing as though the near magic

process by which “to talk to the books . . . in hopes [they] would answer me.” *William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (1847) alleges a “loss for language to express my feeling”—a deficiency hardly true of Afro America’s first literary a-rounder, especially given the eloquence of his Kentucky to Canada “Life and Escape,” which he published as a preface to his founding novel *Clotel*, or, the *President’s Daughter* (1853). J. W. C. Pennington in his *The Fugitive Blacksmith* (1849) deploys another overlap of written and spoken word in recalling the effort to capture the brute equations of slavery “with pen or tongue.”¹¹

In more or less every slave narrative this same regard for words as alchemy, an answering means to unknot in speech or script the sheer abiding abnormality of a life forbidden choice, shows its hold. The *Life* of Father Josiah Henson, another Maryland escapee to Canada, Methodist Minister, and life-long Underground Railroad worker, so bequeaths an escape story soon to become the source for Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Henry “Box” Bibb’s *Narrative* (1849) offers the unsparing memory of Kentucky slave abuse, including the bizarre would-be escape in a box by the eventual founder of Canada’s abolitionist journal, *The Voice of the Fugitive*. Solomon Northrup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), albeit a dictated text, speaks of the near phantasmagoria in being highjacked and sold several times over in Louisiana. William (and Ellen) Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) turns upon a legendary cross-representation, a chronicle of escape from Georgia violating racial, sexual and class lines with Ellen in the transvestite guise of invalid white owner (“my *master* as I now call my wife”) and William, the first-person voice of the text, as black nurse-cum-slave.¹²

Two black abolitionist women bequeath yet other styles of autobiographical narrative, the one passed down and held in black oral memory, the other remembered through her own *Narrative* and legendary addresses. Harriet Tubman, slave escapee turned Underground Railway veteran, Union spy, military strategist, a woman whose “word” was involved in rescuing more than 400 other slaves, has a name which recurs as much in the oral as the written lore of anti-slavery. Sojourner Truth belongs with her in spirit, an ex-slave (she was also known as Isabella), a physically imposing presence, a boundless black feminist. Her “Ar’n’t I a Woman?,” the fierce equalitarian speech she made to the overwhelmingly white “Women’s Rights Convention” in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, together with each of the seven versions of her *Narrative*, gives live meaning to her self-freeing as an African American woman in both fact and language. When she delivered her celebrated biblical riposte to a policeman who asked for her “identity” after an anti-slavery address, “I am that I am” (God’s words to Moses on Mount Sinai), self-representation could not have been more succinct or magical.¹³

Alongside, and equally a history to match any fiction, stands Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).¹⁴ Her seven years hiding out in the 1840s, or "loophole," in all its resonances of confined, airless cargo-hold slavery and the Middle Passage, serves as both the mark of slave wordlessness (she cannot speak to, or write to, but only glimpse, her children) and of gendered wordlessness (she cannot protest to any immediate effect the ongoing sexual threat of her owner, Dr. Flint). Silence again becomes worded, a name of her own choosing operates, and literally enclosing darkness is made typographically visible. If, at its time of writing twenty years on from incarceration her "dark and troubled" sense of things persists, "Harriet Jacobs" as newly fledged author perfectly recognizes the further liberation of her own text's making over of her enslavement. In one sense an obituary to her past, in common with other major slave narratives, *Incidents* co-exists as a certificate of birth for her future.

A second tier involves three turn of the century classics.¹⁵ Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901) moves on from slave narrative *per se* into what he himself explicitly terms "autobiography." Given his uncertainty of exact date or place of birth ("I was born a slave on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia"), virtual family anonymity ("Of my ancestry I know almost nothing"), and eventual arbitrary self-naming as "Booker Taliaferro Washington" ("I think there are not many men in our country who have had the privilege of naming themselves in the way I have"), the self he shows to emerge is that of the destined race leader, the presiding spirit of Tuskegee Institute and postbellum Great Conciliator.

The irony of this has become well known. Washington is judged too ready in his deference to the color line, a compromiser and time-server, an Uncle Tom at worst. An added implication, however, arises. The evidence gathers that, in fact, he was always worldlier, more tough willed and psychologically complex and divided. How far, then, does it matter that the Washington of *Up from Slavery* belongs less to history than myth, a version duly massaged with self-favoring extracts and correspondence? If the aim is one of inspiration, uplift, a "public" story, how far can the "my life" on offer be allowed to indulge various kinds of latitude in local detail or confirmation? How can truth be disengaged from fiction in a self-custodial leader who fashions himself as both tale and teller?

Undoubtedly more to later taste has long been W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). DuBois speaks and writes from outside the legacy of slavery. Massachusetts born, a black Yankee of Huguenot name, educated at Fisk, Harvard and Berlin, mover in the Niagara movement, editor of *The Crisis*, and a founder of

the NAACP, his becomes another kind of black autobiographical voice, that of the professional social scientist. Being *Dr. DuBois*, the first black holder of an earned Ivy League Harvard Ph.D., cannot but impart itself into the text. Although he professes himself “moved” by slave songs and blues, he writes from a kind of anthropological distance, be it in the analysis of the failures of Reconstruction, the acclaimed “twoness” of Afro-America, or the musicology of Southern black voice. A better clue to the man within the public figure lies in the less-read trilogy of *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1920), *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Towards an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940) and *The Autobiography: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of its First Century* (1968).¹⁶ Each reflects DuBois given to more first-person inflection and speaking far more of and for himself rather than delivering case study or lecture.

James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912, 1927), with its shift of genre into fictional autobiography, sets a mixed-race narrator who “passes” to negotiate a world itself full of racial code, harlequinry, double-standards in matters of color.¹⁷ If, eventually, the narrator opts for a permanent white over black identity, it adds to the novel’s play of first-person voice. How ironic *is* the text and in which direction?

Johnson’s text anticipates a considerable body of subsequent eponymous black novel writing whose outstanding example is to be found in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). Each throws an intriguing comparative light on black life-writings, analogies or textual mirrors as it were. As engaging as most, in the wake of Ellison, would be John A. Williams’s *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), a fast-moving European-based thriller with its Richard Wright figure who has paid with his life for having discovered a genocidal white fascist conspiracy, the King Alfred plan of the Alliance Blanc, and which is remembered by a dying fellow black exile author, Max Reddick. George Cain’s *Blueschild Baby* (1970), told through the alter ego of “Georgie,” works as a modern Harlem and Brooklyn narrative of its black addict-hero’s enslavement to heroin (or “horse”) and in which the needle becomes a virtual savior-devil instrument. Ernest Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) amounts to a small masterpiece of black memoir in the form of taped interviews with a former plantation survivor and extending from Civil War to Civil Rights, a “slave narrative” updated to contemporary High Tech.¹⁸ It makes sense to read these, fiction as may be, in a shared spectrum.

“New Negro” autobiography, the black 1920s in first-person voice, amounts to a near plenitude, though few possess more inviting ease than Langston Hughes’s *The*

Big Sea: An Autobiography (1940) and *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (1956). Hughes pitched himself as flâneur, a kind of international black stroller player. His account of “the years of Manhattan’s black Renaissance” is both full and compelling—portraits of fellow literati, magazines like W. E. B. Du-Bois’s *The Crisis* launched in 1910 and which in 1921 publishes Hughes’s landmark poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Other magazines include *The Urban League’s Opportunity* (1923–1949), the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters’s *The Messenger* (1917–1928), and the short-lived but lively *Fire!!* (1926) under Wallace Thurman’s editorship. Hughes gives vivid remembrance to the “social whist parties,” the showtime, the jazz. It was amid all this that he wrote his enduring “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” for *The Nation* (1926), with its pride in black accomplishment from “the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith” to the poetry, story-work and graphics of Jean Toomer, Rudolf Fisher and Aaron Douglass. He speaks, too, of a future prospect in which to express “our individual dark-skinned selves without shame.”

Even so, the laureateship behind his poems, plays, stories and columns as conducted from his one permanent home at 20 East 127 Street in Harlem, which he bought in 1948 and from which he managed continuing forays to Haiti, West Africa, France and Russia, brought its reservations. “Fake simplicity” James Baldwin once notably called it. To admirers, on the other hand, the two volumes of autobiography bear all his best colloquiality. The story brims in event, from his birth in Joplin, Missouri, through the passed-around boyhood in Kansas, Illinois and Ohio, the stints with his ill-spirited father in Mexico, the seamanship, the education at Lincoln University and Columbia, the long friendships (notably with Arna Bontemps, the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén and, in all their on and off collaboration, Zora Neale Hurston), and on to the doses of McCarthyite investigation on account of his leftish, anti-colonial and Russian sympathies which, even so, many thought he cannily kept the right side of political danger. Both in substance and manner the autobiographies have rightly played their part in a reputation destined to reach well beyond not only Harlem but America.¹⁹

James Weldon Johnson’s *Along this Way* (1933) bears witness to another 1920s key presence, even if, occasionally, a certain formality enters as though the author wanted only his public self-best known. That still yields plenty. It is a life which begins in the mixed stock of his birth, his father a freeborn man of color from Virginia, his mother French-Haitian from the Bahamas. He becomes the first black to be called to the Florida bar since Reconstruction. There are the musical collaborations with his brother John Rosamond and the American consulships in Venezuela and Nicaragua. He explains the circumstances which led to the writing

of his deceptively titled novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* and of the memorable verse addresses in *God's Trombones. Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927). He recalls the literary turn of his other poetry, lyrics and translations which also include *The Book of Negro American Poetry* (1922, 1931). It is a life of achievement that further embraces the two decades he served as Field Secretary for the NAACP and the eventual Visiting Professorships at Fisk and New York University.²⁰

Contrastingly, Claude McKay's *A Long Way from Home* (1937), in offering "the distilled poetry of my experience" from Jamaica to America with Harlem as a center point, does so as a story full of self-division. It registers an itinerant, often angry and volatile writer's life. First, however, is the light it throws on his fiction and poetry. It so throws light on *Home to Harlem* (1928) as given over to city "ragtime and blues," *Banjo* (1929) with its sailor ports-of-call and odysseys, *Banana Bottom* (1933) whose speech and peasant life came out of his own Jamaica, and *Gingertown* (1932) whose stories include "Brownstone Blue" as the perfect vignette of 1920s cabaret Harlem. That extends to verse like *Harlem Shadows* (1922) which, however lyric, at the same time catches the tougher idiom of street and tenement. As to McKay's vision of himself the story he tells is one of radicalism, class war and the color line, with smacks at some of the Talented Tenth elitist implications of Locke's movement (he once took aim at *The New Negro* anthology as "chocolate soufflé of art and politics"). He shows no quarter at the frequent political and literary warring within black circles. His own disillusioned break with Marxism and conversion to Catholicism makes for a suitably ambiguous coda.²¹

Although written in a later age, George Schuyler's *Black and Conservative* (1966) gives yet another autobiographical version of the Harlem Renaissance. As befits the iconoclast of "The Negro-Art Hokum," the essay he contributed to *The Nation* (1926)—Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" was a riposte—or the irascible satirist of the novel *Black No More* (1931) with its fantasy send-up of assimilationism, his autobiography takes few prisoners. It takes aim at the feuds, the grandstanding, the sexual spats and styles, the sentimental harking back to Africa, and certainly for him the whole question of a separate Black Arts movement. *Black and Conservative* makes a virtue of dissent, the "one man's opinion" of a tough, lifetime journalist who at different times was socialist, capitalist, and then freewheeling critic of both.²²

Divergent as they are in pattern and voice, the autobiographies of Hughes, Johnson, McKay and Schuyler each enletter the black 1920s as an awakening, a black (and indeed cross-racial) time of revived literary spirit. The Wall Street Crash, and the Depression in its wake, changes matters utterly. Optimism wanes.

Other politics intervene, those of unemployment, food-lines, shared privation. To focus selectively on blackness, or black art, was to risk missing the larger picture. It was a turn-about, too, which would find its own suitably uncompromising autobiographical register, first out of the black sharecropper South and then out of Chicago's South Side, that of Richard Wright.

Towards the close of *Black Boy* (1945) Wright sounds a note which again recalls Douglass and his fellow writers of slave narrative: "Not only had the southern whites not known me, but, more important still, as I had lived in the South I had not had the chance to learn who I was."²³ "To learn who I was," patently, does not implicate Wright in an actual slave escape. But it does argue a similar shedding of imposed terms of reference along the lines in play throughout Douglass's *Narrative*. Both *Black Boy*, and the posthumous *American Hunger* (1977)²⁴ bespeak the resolve to name for himself his place within the world's plenty however contradictory or disposed to racial habit.

As much as the family moves through Mississippi, Arkansas and Tennessee, and then Wright's own eventual migration north to Chicago, give off a quite extraordinary eventfulness, the emphasis coevally falls upon coming authorship. In speaking time and again of his "hunger," Wright speaks to an artist's hunger, the compulsion to "learn who I was" as by a process of self-inscription. Effectively the black boy of earlier Southern provenance is written into being by the black adult of later Chicago South Side experience.

Nor is event only of the one kind in *Black Boy*. The volume opens with a scene of arson, the boy's not so visceral will to burn down the family house. It is this "Richard," too, who strangles the kitten to spite the father who will eventually abscond and mockingly display his new woman, and whom Wright will recall as a spectral, uncomprehending black fieldhand. He remembers himself as child alcoholic, intimidated witness of his mother's stroke, victim of his Aunt Addie in all her Pentecostal fury and of an equally vengeful Adventist grandmother, and duped deliverer of (of all things) Klan newspapers. In none of this eventfulness, however, does "Richard" operate from his own center, rather in roles which signify margin, his own displacement.

Indications of another kind of self, however, also begin early in childhood and adolescence. He recalls the "Richard" who sleepwalks, strikes back at his adult persecutors with an open knife, and who lies, cheats and hustles too much ahead of his time. His early employment, both at the optical company (from which he draws sight imagery to anticipate that of Ellison's *Invisible Man*) and at the faded

Memphis hotel with its clients and sex services, bring him ever more implacably up against the double-standards of color line. Words, in this immediate way, become experiential vocabulary, markers of fact.

The counter current, however, lies in Wright's reference-back to his own nascent creativity, the literary self in waiting. A catalogue of sense impressions (among them "the yearning for identification loosed in me by the sight of a solitary ant carrying a burden upon a mysterious journey") follows his beating for setting the house on fire. The text recalls the storybook magic "Richard" associates as a child with the riverboat *Kate Adams*. There is a harking back to the vernacular talk of black boyhood, from conjure to black slang to games of competitive insult like "the dozens." The insistence on reading his own class address rather than that supplied by the Tom-like High School principal carries its own prophetic charge.

The "redemption" derived from reading H. L. Mencken follows, the allures, horizons, of a self-won book education. The subterfuge of using the forged card to gain entry to a segregated local library especially applies, black reading and writing as a kind of scriptural outlawry. But it is subterfuge which works. The literary prospect so long denied him becomes his for the taking. The South graduates from actual geography to a site in imagination, a South which his fiction from *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) to *The Long Dream* (1958) will confirm he "can never really leave."

This double current holds for *American Hunger*. For all the reality of its wind-swept shoreline and stockyards, and even its black South Side, Chicago strikes him as equally unreality, citted miasma. His jobs, whether with the Hoffman couple, the Post Office, the John Reed Club, or at the fringes of the Communist Party, confirm a "No Man's Land into which the Negro mind in America has been shunted." He refers, insistently, to "my excessive reading," to "stabs of writing . . . full of tension, frantic poverty and death." He ponders the "language" of his own difference, whether from the white shop girls with whom he works, the white medical researchers at the laboratory, his Communist Party brethren or, strikingly, his fellow blacks.

In this he avails himself of one of the volume's most haunting tableaux, that of the laboratory dogs whose vocal chords have been cut and "who would lift their heads to the ceiling and gape in a soundless wail." The devocalization, fact and image, grips and pursues him. *American Hunger*, word for word, acts as perfect rejoinder, the making vocal in himself of that which previously has itself been cut from voice. Both parts of the autobiography (it was conceived as the one sequence) yield, finally, Wright's own *Portrait of the Artist*, "Richard" as the begetter

of Richard Wright as surely as “Stephen Daedalus” can be said to have begotten James Joyce.

I was born in a Negro town. I do not mean by that the black back-side of an average town. Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town—charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all. It was not the first Negro community in America, but it was the first to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America.²⁵

On this down-home, typically beckoning note Zora Neale Hurston opens *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). But although it has rightly come to be regarded as among the most engaging of all pre-1960s autobiography it has also been snared in controversy. Did she anaesthetize much of the crueler racism she suffered, or as one of her main biographers, Robert Hemenway, alleges, “camouflage” matters of “racial segregation”? If, indeed, Hurston massages facts, omits, holds black on certain white malpractice and patronage knowing her readership would be largely white, even (as recent editions have confirmed) left out certain more “political” passages, is that simply to close the account?²⁶ Hardly, it has to be said. For *Dust Tracks on a Road* exhibits interests and subtleties in plenty, not least its own voice as an inspired doubling-up of the folk idiom of Eatonville (with assistance from her field trips in Haiti and the Caribbean) and of the lightly worn anthropological earning acquired at Barnard College and Columbia University under the tutelage of Franz Boas.

The immediate ease of her writing (“I have been in Sorrow’s kitchen and licked out all the pots”) shows through at every turn. That is not to say she tells a life more sweet than sour but rather a blend of both while at the same time paying her dues to the texturing intimacies of the black world that bred her. However easeful of her white readership that may have much to do with a genuine cross-racial generosity, the readiness to give access not only to black but to non-black readers.

She sustains this stance with every adroitness. She could, and did, infuriate a number of black contemporaries (and later nationalists) with her coolness to “race solidarity” (“And how can Race solidarity be possible in a nation made up of so many elements in the United States? . . . why should Negroes be united? Nobody else in America is”). She could inveigh against negritude (“This Negro business”) and black as well as white “race clichés” (“There is no *The Negro* here”). But how could the warmth she feels for her black origins be doubted? When, typically, she recalls with a mix of pleasure and pain her father’s attitude towards her in

childhood, she does so in terms to match. Her gloss runs “A little of my sugar used to sweeten his coffee right now. That is a Negro way of saying his patience was short with me.” This stylish vernacularity holds throughout.

Of her creative visions in childhood she says expressively: “A cosmic loneliness was my shadow.” She recalls her Eatonville poeticizing in a suitable paradox: “My phantasies were still fighting against the facts.” Her furious grappling match with her stepmother she encapsulates in kitchentalk, an apt alimentary metaphor: “This was the very corn I wanted to grind.” Her “for ever shifting,” as she calls it, summons up a sense of home as stored speech or talk: “I was a Southerner and the map of Dixie was on my tongue.” Even her academic research into black folklore yields its homelier turn when she describes herself as “delving into Hoodoo, a sympathetic magic.” For the closeness of her alliance with Ethel Waters, blues queen, she uses a suitably oral and same-sex metaphor, that of a French kiss: “I am her friend and her tongue is in my mouth.” In remembering the first publication of her stories and books like *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Mules & Men* (1935), she observes with, again, just the right touch of sexual intimacy: “You know that feeling when you found your first pubic hair.”²⁷

These, and a tissue of sayings in shared style, particularize her recollections in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Cudjo Lewis, for instance, as the last former slave born in Africa and alive in her time (“I lonely for my folks” she has him say, down-home and idiomatically, of his original West African family). Eatonville she speaks of as a place of near-mythic kin (“Papa said he didn’t have to do but two things—die and stay black”). Her own love affairs become theatre (“I did not just fall in love, I made a parachute jump”). Similarity, her willingness to tackle sexual materials produces a laconicism the equal of Dorothy Parker (“I may be thinking of turnip greens with dumplings, or more royalty checks, and here is a man who visualizes me on a divan sending the world up in smoke”).

Robert Hemenway calls attention to the “paradox of the public and private Zora Neale Hurston,”²⁸ which is not to doubt his own clear sense of her achievement. An otherwise fervidly admiring Alice Walker can likewise discern “oddly false-sounding” elements in *Dust Tracks*.²⁹ Even so, Hurston’s triumph continues to lie precisely in her own affirmations and sayings, the inventive spiritedness of her self-telling.

The pre-eminent motifs of Chester Himes’s two volumes of autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt* (1972) and *My Life of Absurdity* (1976), are projected in his own

title phrases: hurt and absurdity.³⁰ Himes's stance, throughout, is to tell, stably, a life of marked instability, that of a personality on his own autobiographical reckoning "argumentative, bad-tempered, and unsympathetic." His first volume speaks freely of "the eccentricities of my creativity" and "blind fits of rage," its successor of "my sensitivity towards race" and "the [endeavor] to find a life into which I could fit." It would be a mistake, however, to think Himes wrote out of mere nerves, temper, whim. He shows himself at once far too self-aware and, as his Coffin Ed/Grave Digger thrillers give street-level yet surreal witness, too aware of the ways of the world, for that.

The Quality of Hurt covers the years from his birth in 1909 in Jefferson City, Missouri, to his young, handsome mulatto manhood in Ohio, through to his European exile in the early 1950s. The stopping-off places en route read like pages from his own fiction: the cruel decay of his parents' marriage which he uses in *The Third Generation* (1954); the freak blinding in a gun-powder accident of his brother Joseph which haunted Himes throughout his life (Joseph Himes went on to a distinguished career in sociology at the University of North Carolina); his own back injury in a lift shaft for which he was cheated of due compensation; and the Cleveland delinquency where he hung about with a hoodlum named Bunch Boy, his part in a jewel theft in 1929, and his seven year jail sentence which he would put to account in *Cast the First Stone* (1952). On release in 1936 he wrote poems for the *Cleveland Daily News*, worked on an FPA history of Cleveland, continued with crime and prison stories, spent time on Louis Bromfield's community farm at Pleasant Valley, Ohio, and saw the publication of his war industry based first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945). Himes's life, it could be said, was already long scripted; it merely awaited its literary making-over.³¹

The Quality of Hurt takes Himes on to his meetings in Paris with Richard Wright and James Baldwin, to Spain (he describes a tetchy encounter with Robert Graves in Mallorca), and to London where he found the petty racism especially depressing not least on account of being with a white woman. During his time with Alva Trent, the source of "Elizabeth Hancock" in the novel *Une Affaire de viol* (1963),³² which long remained available only in French, another kind of fugitive self-chronicle came into play: he helped write her (still unpublished) autobiography, *The Golden Chalice*.

Two observations in particular pick up on slave legacy and self-scripting. In the course of describing the circumstances of his intimately autobiographical novel, *The Primitive* (1955),³³ he gives an unexpected and bittersweet twist to Crève-coeur:

The American black is a new race of man; the only new race of man to come into being in modern time. And for those hackneyed, outdated, slavery time racists to keep thinking of him as primitive is an insult to the intelligence. In fact intelligence isn't required to know the black is a new man—complex, intriguing, and not particularly likeable. I find it very difficult to like American blacks myself; but there's nothing primitive about us, as there is about the most sophisticated African. (285–6)

This kind of contrariety, hurt and absurdity entwined, does not sit easily in any camp.

The other observation concerns Himes's stance as a writer:

No matter what I did, or where I was, or how I lived, I had considered myself a writer ever since I'd published my first story in *Esquire* when I was still in prison in 1934. Foremost a writer. Above all a writer. It was my salvation, and is. The world can deny me as an ex-convict, as a nigger, as a disagreeable and unpleasant person. But as long as I write, whether it is published or not, I'm a writer, and no one can take that away. "A fighter fights, a writer writes," so I must have done my writing. (117)

Writing as pugilism, its own compelled call to arms, looks both back (to Douglass's *Narrative* and the Covey fight) and forward (to Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), for example, which speaks of his penitentiary wrestle with words as a means to "save myself").³⁴ Ishmael Reed's essay-collection, *Writin' Is Figh-tin': Thirty-Seven Years of Boxing on Paper* (1988), continues the tradition, the first half of its title a borrowed rap throwaway from Muhammad Ali.³⁵

This embattled contrariety of blackness and word continues in *My Life of Absurdity*. He moves back and forth across Europe and America. There are the edgy literary friendships in Paris and elsewhere with Richard Wright, the white 1920s veteran and photographer Carl Van Vechten, the Caribbean born George Laming, Europeans like Jean Giono and Marcel Duhamel, and African Americans from Malcolm X to John A. Williams, Melvin Van Peebles, and Nikki Giovanni. His belated rise to fame arrives with the *Serie Noire* thrillers. The continuing travels and amours and lead to eventual second marriage to Lesley Packard, the white Englishwoman and journalist with whom in his last years he made his home in Jávea on Spain's Valencia coast. The upshot is autobiography holding within itself a kind of unfinished colloquium or jousting ground, the weighing of self and race, truth and paradox.

“The root function of language is to control the universe by describing it.”³⁶ So, in “Stranger in the Village” (1953), written while recuperating from a nervous breakdown in the birthplace of his Swiss lover, the unnamed Lucien Happersberger, and published first in *Harper’s*, then, in 1955, in *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin turns his temporary sojourn to a more inclusive purpose. As the unprecedented sole black visitor (“no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came”), not to say foreigner by speech, his own exile becomes the very *figura* of the larger African, and African American, diaspora behind him.

He sees refracted in himself a people initially dispossessed of their languages, then banned from writing the European tongues (English in the immediate case) of their enslavers, and further silenced by “segregation” and “terrorization” and the persistences of sexual myth. Where, more graphically, than in a snow-clad Alpine outpost (“this white wilderness”), should Baldwin write back into being his own black signifying, the descendant of those same first Africans illegally shipped to the Americas and now the “Neger!” as the village children call him (loadedly? innocently?) in *Schweizerdeutsch*.

Yet, he proposes, neither he nor those from whom he arose in Harlem or the black Dixie of an Atlantic Ocean away can be thought true “strangers in the village.” Rather, he, like them, belongs, however ambiguously, in “the interracial drama acted out on the American continent.” Nor for Baldwin, can “the Negro in America” be understood in terms that deny contradiction, even riddle, being neither wholly African nor European (“The most illiterate among them is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo . . .”), but rather, again in an echo of Crèvecoeur, another kind of American “new man.” “No road whatever,” he insists, “will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking at me as a stranger.” Inscribing that complexity (“I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive”) becomes a governing cause for him, a call to moral as much as the writer’s imagination.

Given, as he sees it, the refusal of western culture to speak or write “truthfully” across the color line, Baldwin’s “self-representation” becomes also the representation of the historic blackness which has made him—and determinedly erased record of an African past in the processes of colonialism and slavery. If he can wonder “what on earth the first slave found to say to the first black child he bore,” “Stranger in the Village” offers the key “saying” of his own answer. It also points the way to the overall witness, a favored Baldwin term, which constitutes *Notes of a Native Son* together with *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963).³⁷

The analogy between the implantation of black selfhood into white history and vice versa (“This word is white no longer, and it never will be white again,” he concludes), and black script into the white page must have struck him as forcefully as it did the Ellison of *Invisible Man*. The insistence, at least, on making “language” a means of “controlling the universe” (“making it my own” he calls it in “Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare”) lies behind each essay in *Notes of a Native Son* as they range from Harlem to Paris, Mississippi to Sweden, Atlanta to Turkey, or from praise to censure of progenitors who include Harriet Beecher Stowe, Richard Wright, Henry James and William Faulkner.

In “Autobiographical Notes” he speaks of “appropriating these white centuries,” of ending his “racial bastardy” (his own illegitimacy no doubt an animus behind the image), and of “unlocking” his “being a Negro” in order “to write about anything else.” In “Everyone’s Protest Novel,” then “Many Thousands Gone,” he famously argues the limits of, respectively, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Native Son*. His criterion, itself revealing, is “the power of revelation.”

In arguing that it has been “only in his music . . . that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story,” Baldwin personalizes his own matching literary sense of mission. “Notes of a Native Son” recalls his Harlem deacon stepfather reluctantly conceding to the then boy preacher, “You’d rather write than preach, wouldn’t you?” And in “A Question of Identity,” with, as so often, Henry James most in mind, he calls up the imaginative returns of expatriation for an American writer: “From the vantage point of Europe he discovers his own country.”

Nobody Knows My Name extends the process, the very title a working brief for the inscription of “self and the world” as he calls it in the “Introduction.” From “The Discovery of What It Means to be an American,” in which he gives his rueful admiration of the European against American status of the writer’s “vocation” (“A European writer considers himself to be part of an old honorable profession . . . the tradition does not exist in America”) through to his closing thoughts on authorship in the Baldwin-Mailer skirmish (“His [the writer’s] work, after all, is all that will be left when the newspapers are yellowed”), the same impetus holds, black self-authoring as repossession and memorialization.

The time, thus, can be early 1960s Afro America as in “East River, Downtown” (“the American Negro can no longer, nor will he ever again, be controlled by white America’s image of him”). The place can be color-line Mississippi as in “Faulkner and Desegregation” (“It is apparently very difficult to be at once a Southerner and an American”). On a different tack it can turn, as in “The Male Prison,” to Gide and homosexuality with all the implications for his own sexual preference (“it was clear to me that he had not come to terms with his nature”).

Yet each essay carries a shared impress: the word as both an urging of revelation and, in Baldwin's making over, itself a revelation.

Something of an autobiographical summary lies in "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region of My Mind," from *The Fire Next Time*, where he again considers the private and public racial fissures of language both in the world and as the world:

For the horrors of the American Negro's life there has been almost no language. The privacy of his experience which is only beginning to be recognized in language, and hence is denied or ignored in official and popular speech—hence the Negro idiom—lends credibility to any system that pretends to clarify it. And, in fact, the truth about the black man, as a historical entity and as a human being, has been hidden from him, deliberately and cruelly; the power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world's definitions. (83)

Doubts, often enough, have arisen about Baldwin's later discursive powers (as they have about the fiction after *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 1953), from *A Rap on Race* (1971), his colloquy on black and white as American iconographies with Margaret Mead, through to *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), his "state of the union" rumination on the Atlanta black child murders—for which Wayne Bertram Williams was indicted in 1981—and on Atlanta itself as one-time slave world and eventual Civil Rights arena.³⁸ But the unique and vindicating contribution of *Notes of a Native Son*, *Nobody Knows My Name* and *The Fire Next Time* remains. As essays cum autobiography they themselves both rebuke "the white world's definitions" and yield a repository of necessary counter definitions. They do so, too, with the bonus of rare, exhilarating fluency.

As they contemplated "Jimmy" with cigarette in hand, the breathy deliverer of "the word," moralist yet sexual adventurer with his warm, gap-toothed smile (in childhood he was tagged "Frog Eyes" on account of his protrusive stare) and capacity to dip into raciest Harlem idiom, there were always those who thought him overexposed and thereby tamed by the very media which once lionized him. Yet when the news of his death from cancer at 63 went out from the farmhouse in the Riviera's St-Paul-de-Vence where he had made his home since the 1970s, it gave a dramatic reminder of just how singular and bold of spirit he had been all along. Harlem to the South of France might have been thought an unlikely journey for one of his origins. But as confirmed in his omnibus *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction 1948–1985* (1985) it produced a landmark African American, a landmark body of first-person African American writing.³⁹

Few black autobiographies make the “stance of self-representation” more historic than *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965).⁴⁰ Full of dire if accurate prophecy (“If I’m alive when this book comes out, it will be a miracle”), made in political *media res*, its voicing is shot through with challenge, combat, an ideological blackness (“‘The white man is a devil’ is a perfect echo of the black convict’s experience”). To his amanuensis, Alex Haley, still to write *Roots* and the long-time journalist and contributor to *Atlantic*, *Harper’s*, *Saturday Evening Post* (for whom he did a series on Elijah Muhammad) and who first interviewed Malcolm for *Playboy*, he stresses the language of race as a species of anti-language:

I’m telling it like it is! You never have to worry about me biting my tongue if something I know as truth is on my mind. Raw, naked truth exchanged between the black man and the white man is what a whole lot more of is needed in this country—to clear the air of the racial mirages, clichés, and lies that this country’s very atmosphere has been filled with for four hundred years. (276)

His own passage into self-elucidation in the face of these “mirages,” “clichés,” and “lies,” he locates, like Douglass and others before him, in yet one more paradigm of names. “Malcolm Little” represents the self who leaves for Detroit from Omaha, Nebraska. There he becomes “Red,” zoot suited, conked, a restless hustler of drugs and street crime. In Boston, with his stepsister Ella, he becomes “Homeboy.” In Harlem he graduates even more into the full-time pimp, numbers man, drug pusher and thief (“I had seen a lot, but never such a dense concentration of stumblebums, pushers, hookers, public crap shooters, even little kids running around at midnight begging for pennies”) and on account of his “marinny” hair acquires the moniker of “Detroit Red.” The “robberies and stick-ups” (“I can’t remember all the hustles I had during the next two years in Harlem”) land him, at not yet twenty-one, with a ten year sentence, seven of which he serves under the name “Satan” as conferred upon him by his cellmates for his blasphemy.

His transforming encounter with the Nation of Islam gives him the name by which he will be known in history. Correspondence with Elijah Muhammad, a ready belief that Christianity has “taught the ‘negro’ that black was a curse,” a convert’s remorse at “the very enormity of my previous life’s guilt,” and an education won from the prison library leads on to release and his Black Muslim incarnation first as “Brother Malcolm,” then “Malcolm X,” and eventually, “Minister Malcolm X.”

His rupture with Elijah Muhammad has become the stuff of legend. Having preached black separatism, black nationalism, and the whole devil counter-genesis

of Yacoub and satanic whiteness, he discovers in his hajj to Mecca a more “orthodox Islam” of tolerance, inclusivity. Prince Faisal tells him “The Black Muslims have the wrong Islam.” Reborn into a new Islamic identity he becomes El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, though also, and finally, after his journeys through Beirut, Cairo, Ghana, Liberia, Senegal, Morocco and Algeria, the “Omowole” of Nigeria’s Yoruba, “the son who has come home.”

“I hope the book is proceeding rapidly, for events concerning my life happen so quickly” Haley witnesses Malcolm as saying, as if he somehow always knew the assassin’s bullet awaited him at the Audubon Ballroom in 1965. But the comment also throws light on the textual disposition of the *Autobiography* itself, a “life” always dictated on the move, compositionally unfixing and fixing its contours (if not its very meaning) even as it was being filtered through Alex Haley on to the page. This is black self-representation as both an act of map-making and map, an improvisation both in life and in its literary register to match the volatility, and yet the resoluteness, of the self which became Malcolm X.

With the 1960s, Civil Rights to Black Power, a near flood of black autobiography emerges, as often as not self-telling as manifesto. In the first instance emerges Malcolm’s legacy, a considerable body of politically militant, convict or ghetto autobiography. None could have been more unaccommodating than Eldridge Cleaver in the Black Panther and West Coast prison essays of *Soul on Ice* (1968), *Post-Prison Writings and Speeches* (1969) and *Conversation with Eldridge Cleaver, Algiers* (1970).⁴¹ But if this was the Cleaver who, on hearing of Malcolm’s assassination, thundered from his Folsom, California, cell “We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it,” it was also the Cleaver who comes to see writing the word as the means to “save myself, to slough off the self who came to prison.”

Cleaver had no want of autobiographical company. Bobby Seale in *Seize the Time* (1970) and *A Lonely Rage* (1968) and Huey Newton in *To Die for the People* (1972) would tell the Black Panther story as one of existential thrust against margin and periphery. H. Rap Brown would offer a self-vaunting latterday “slave narrative” in *Die Nigger Die!* (1969). Hoyt Fuller anticipated the black “roots” phenomenon in *Journey to Africa* (1971). Angela Davis, one of the few women-writers to feature, has her *An Autobiography* (1974) construe her life under Marxist-historicist terms as shaped by Herbert Marcuse and her membership of the Communist Party. In George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* (1970) there arises an

autodidact's triumph of Gramsci-influenced prison letter writing, autobiography as "black revolutionary" self-authoring.⁴²

Immediate post-1960s black autobiography equally looks to a plenitude. Nikki Giovanni's *Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-Five Years of Being a Black Poet* (1971) offers her imagistic account of womanism *avant la letter*.⁴³ She invokes an upbringing in Cincinnati, Ohio, education at Fisk, and a black gynocracy centered in Knoxville, Tennessee tougher with a vision of back family extending into the wider South. At quite another reach *Beneath the Underdog: His Word as Composed by Mingus* (1971) takes the form of a talked life, episodic and full of the kind of controlled dissonance to be heard in Mingus's jazz.⁴⁴ Less performative, though no less determined a writing-in, Vincent O. Carter's *The Bern Book: A Record of a Voyage of the Mind* (1973), echoing Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village," tells the rite of passage of a Kansas City expatriate who becomes "the only black man" in the Swiss capital.⁴⁵

Other writer self-representations pursue the nature of black shifts, even fissures, in allegiance. Julius Lester's *All Is Well* (1976), a life which reaches adulthood in the ferment of Black Power, even so finds its balance in the Catholic quietism of Thomas Merton much as Lester subsequently moves on to Judaism.⁴⁶

Early on, the scriptural concept that "in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the word was God"—the idea that the word could represent and then deliver into reality what the word symbolizes—this possibility of language, of writing, seemed to me magical and irresistible.⁴⁷

John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers & Keepers* (1984) tells a two-track sibling narrative: Wideman himself, the University of Pennsylvania basketball star and Oxford Rhodes Scholar, as against Robbie Wideman, his street raised, vernacular brother currently serving life for murder in Pennsylvania's Western Penitentiary. Wideman's *Fatherlong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society* (1995), with its story told as father-son journeyings from Pittsburgh to Amherst Massachusetts, and to South Carolina, supplies a coda, an essay-history on the historic issues of the black father role model, nurturer or, for whatever complex of reasons, absentee.⁴⁸

Audre Lorde's "biomythography," *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) broke further new ground, black lesbian autobiography constructed as collage, perhaps a novel, in kind with her own cross-boundary sexual and literary identity.⁴⁹ It contrasts utterly with Lorene Cary's *Black Ice* (1991) which explores a kind of black privilege, a young black woman's entrance into a formerly all-white,

all-male, New Hampshire private school and the self-awakenings it engenders. *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka* (1984) pursues a Newark and then Harlem “growing up” within an American “maze of light and darkness,” each phase from Beat to Black Nationalist to Marxist a stage of unfolding in the will to an overall or totalizing meaning of self and world.⁵⁰

“In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn’t really, absolutely, know what whites looked like.”⁵¹ Such is just one of several opening strikes in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), the first of five volumes of self-portraiture told from her beginnings in Stamps, Arkansas, carried forward into her life in California and elsewhere in the States, and eventually to Europe, the Caribbean and, most of all, Egypt and postcolonial Africa.

Her inaugural memories are those of dreaming she is a white child, a contradictory fantasy all her subsequent history will confirm to be a bitter illusion. At eight, a child as woman, she is raped by her mother’s black fancyman, Mr. Freeman (“A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart . . . I thought I had died”). The trauma itself, and the belief that her voodooed word has led her uncles to kill Freeman, causes her to will her own speechlessness for years, voluntary or not yet another self-enclosing black silence. The writer within is eased in part by her grandmother’s love and that of her brother Bailey, and yet also by the will of self-invention which lies behind the Douglass-like proliferation of names, whether Margaret, Marguerite, Marguerite Johnson, Ritie, My, or eventually, Maya. She moves out to her mother in California, “foggy days of unknowing for Bailey and me” yet also a time of “newly awakening sexual appetite.” The birth of a son, Guy, as she recognizes, also marks the end of her own childhood. If the “tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power” has done its best, or worst, to create silence, *Caged Bird* enacts Angelou’s own un-silencing, a representation of self and community as black volubility, energy, history, speech, text.

Gather Together in My Name (1974) opens with her un-euphoria amid the euphoria of America’s World War II victory (“I was seventeen, very old, embarrassingly young, with a son of two months”).⁵² Job-hunting up and down the West Coast, at one point seeking entry to the Army, she embarks upon a series of near gothic adventures, among them Madam of a heterosexual brothel serviced by two lesbian women. None of her men, or different employments (cook and waitress serving Creole food, singer and actor at the edges of show business), gives her stability. “My life had no center” she acknowledges. Sexuality becomes the only

commodity left; she takes to tricking for mainly Hispanic clients, the property of an exotic pimp named L.D. Her gloss again carries its own rueful epilogue: “Survival was all around me but it didn’t take hold.”

The succeeding volumes witness to the increasing repossession of her life. *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry like Christmas* (1976) depicts her love affair with a Greek American, her subsequent career as shake dancer in San Francisco, her theatre success in *Porgy and Bess*, and her picaresque tour of Europe. If still “an assembly of strivings” motherhood supplies a still center, a fulcrum. *The Heart of a Woman* (1981) equally calls up this zigzag of motion and repose. On the other hand there is her life amid Harlem literary circles, stage appearances at the Apollo, participation in King’s SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), a role in Genet’s *The Blacks*, and marriage and life in London and Cairo with the South African freedom politician Vusumzi Make. On the other, and despite his near fatal car crash, there is Guy’s enrolment at the University of Ghana, a mother contemplative in her pride and for the moment at rest.⁵³

All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes (1986) brings her African odyssey up to date, an affectionate memoir of Ghanaian culture and landscape, of the literary circle headed by the expatriate black novelist Julian Mayfield, and of Malcolm X’s visit.⁵⁴ Above all it offers her a profound sense of continuity with the African and African American women in whose lineage she places herself (“despite the murders, rapes and suicides we had survived.”). She equally acknowledges that, in line with all other African autobiography, hers, too, signifies a transcending black survival of life and word: self-representation lived for real and then, as it were, imagined for real.

Notes

1. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, Boston: The American Anti-Slavery Society, 1845. Standard edition: *Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960. For ease of access present page references are to Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed. *The Classic Slave Narratives: The Life of Olaudah Equiano, The History of Mary Prince, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, New York: New American Library/Mentor, 1987, 274–5.
2. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom. Part I—Life as a Slave. Part II—Life as a Freeman*. With an Introduction, by Dr. James M’Cune Smith, New York and Auburn: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855; *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.

Written by Himself: His Early Life As a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time, Including His Connection With the Anti-Slavery Movement. With an Introduction by Mr. George L. Ruffin, Hartford, CT: Park Publishing Co., 1881; *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass Written By Himself His Early Life As a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time, Including His Connection With the Anti-Slavery Movement, With an Introduction by Mr. George L. Ruffin*, new revised edition, Boston: DeWolfe. Fiske & Co., 1892.

3. Frances E. W. Harper, *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted*, Boston: James H. Earle, 1892. All citations here and in Chapter 4 are to the following reprint: Hazel V. Carby, ed. *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplift*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1987. This episode appears on page 45.
4. This consciously “double” liberation runs through almost all African American autobiography, not only in Douglass but, among others, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison.
5. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 30th Anniversary Edition, New York: Random House, [1952] 1982, 372.
6. Darryl Pinckney, *High Cotton*, New York and Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1992, 212–13.
7. Angela Davis, *An Autobiography*, New York: Random House, 1974.
8. Angela Y. Davis, *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, New York: The Third Press, 1971. Reprinted New York: New American Library, Signet, 1971.
9. The following scholarship has been particularly relevant: Rebecca Chambers, *Witnesses for Freedom: Negro Americans in Autobiography*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948; Russell C. Brignano, *Black Americans in Autobiography: An Annotated Bibliography of Autobiography and Autobiographical Books Written Since the Civil War*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1974; Sidonie Smith, *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974; Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America*, Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974; Elizabeth Schultz, “To Be Black and Blue: The Blues Genre in Black American Autobiography,” *Kansas Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Summer 1975, reprinted in Albert E. Stone, ed. *The American Autobiography*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1981; Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1979; C. W. E. Bigsby, *The Second Black Renaissance: Essays in Black Literature*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982, especially Chapter 7, “The Public Self: Black Autobiography”; Albert E. Stone, *From Henry Adams to Nate Shaw*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982; Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, New York and London: Methuen, 1984; Carl Plasa and Betty J. Ring, eds. *The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
10. Comprehensive overviews of slave narrative include William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865*,

- Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986, and Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds. *The Slave's Narrative*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
11. For editions of Olaudah/Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa*, see Chapter 1 Note 6; William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself*, Boston: The Anti-Slavery Office, 1847; *Clotel, or The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*, London: Partridge and Oakey, 1853; the novel was then twice revised as *Clotelle: A Tale of the Southern States*, J. Redpath, 1864 and *Clotelle: Or, The Colored Heroine. A Tale of The Southern States*, Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1867; James William Charles Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the history of James W.C. Pennington, pastor of a Presbyterian church, New York, formerly a slave in the state of Maryland, United States*, London: C. Gilpin, 1849. Among the available anthologies and editions of slave narratives are Julius Lester, ed. *To Be a Slave*, New York: Dial Press, 1968; Arna Bontemps, ed. *Great Slave Narratives*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969; Gilbert Osofsky, ed., *Puttin' on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibbs, William Wells Brown and Solomon Northrup*, New York: Harper, 1969; Norman R. Yetman, ed. *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970; John F. Bayliss, ed. *Black Slave Narratives*, New York: Collier Books, 1970; William L. Andrews, ed. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986; Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed. *The Classic Slave Narratives* New York: Penguin / Mentor, 1987. For overall coverage see George R. Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 41 Vols., Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972, 1978, 1979.
 12. Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself*, Boston: A.O. Phelps, 1849; Josiah Henson, *Truth Stranger than Fiction. Father Henson's Story of His Own Life. With an Introduction by Mrs. H.B. Stowe*, Boston: J.P. Jewett and Co., 1858; Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American slave, Written by Himself With an Introduction by Lucius C. Matlack*, New York: The Author, 1849; Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northrup, a citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington in 1841, and rescued in 1853, from a cotton plantation near the Red River, in Louisiana*, Auburn, NY: Derby and Miller, Buffalo, New York: Derby, Orton and Mulligan, 1853; William and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery. (With a portrait of Ellen Craft)*, London: William Tweedie, 1860.
 13. See Sarah Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, Auburn, NY: W.J. Moses, Printer, 1869; Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*, Boston: The Author, 1850; Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" (1851) is reprinted in Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.

14. The definitive edition is now Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. by Jean Fagan Yellin, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.
15. All three are collected in John Hope Franklin, ed. *Three Negro Classics: Up from Slavery; The Souls of Black Folk; The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, New York: Avon Books, 1965.
16. W. E. B. DuBois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1920; *Dusk at Dawn: An Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940), in Nathan Huggins, ed. *DuBois: Writings*, New York: Library of America, 1986; and *The Autobiography: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*, n.p.: International Publishers, 1968.
17. James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Boston: Sherman French, 1912, reissued, with American spelling, as *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, New York: Knopf, 1927.
18. John A. Williams, *The Man Who Cried I*, New York: Doubleday, 1967; George Cain, *Blueschild Baby*, New York: Dell, 1970; and Ernest Gaines, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, New York: The Dial Press, 1971.
19. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940; reprinted New York: Hill & Wang, 1963; *I Wonder as I Wander*, New York: Rinehart, 1956; reprinted New York: Hill & Wang, 1964, I offer a fuller account in A. Robert Lee, “‘Ask Your Mama’; Langston Hughes, the Blues and Recent Afro-American Studies,” *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 24, 1990, 199–209.
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Harlem on My Mind: Fictions of a Black Metropolis from *The New Negro* to Darryl Pinckney

Here in Manhattan is not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life. It has attracted the African, the West Indian, the Negro American; it has brought together the Negro of the city and the man from the town and village; the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast. Each group has come with its own separate motives and for its own special ends, but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another. Proscription and prejudice have thrown these dissimilar elements into a common area of contact and interaction. Within this area, race sympathy and unity have determined a further fusing of sentiment and experience . . . In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is—or promises to be—a race capital.

Alain Locke, "Introduction," *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925)¹

There are, I suppose, contained within the central mythology of Harlem, almost as many versions of its glamour and its despair as there are places with people to make them up. (In one meaning of the name, Harlem is simply a place where white cab drivers will not go.) And Harlem means not only Negroes, but of course whatever other associations one might connect with them. So in one breath Harlem will be the pleasure-happy center of the universe, full of large, hippy mamas in electric colors and their fast, slick-head papas, all of them twisting and grinning in the streets in a kind of existential joyousness that never permits of sadness or responsibility. But in another

breath, this same place will be the gathering place for every crippling human vice, and the black men there simply victims of their own peculiar kind of sloth and childishness. But perhaps these are not such different versions after all: chances are both these stereotypes come from the same kinds of mind.

But Harlem as it is, as it exists for its people, as an actual place where actual human live—that is a very different thing. Though, to be sure, Harlem is a place—a city really—where almost anything any person could think of to say goes on, probably does go on, or has gone on, but like any other city, it must escape any blank generalization simply because it is alive, and changing each second with each breath any of its citizens take.

LeRoi Jones, “City of Harlem” (1962), *Home: Social Essays* (1966)²

Historically, Harlem begins with the very settlement of America itself, the village enclave founded just north of New Amsterdam in 1658 by the tough-willed, often maverick, Dutch ex-Governor of Curaçao, Peter Stuyvesant, and given the name of Nieuw Haarlem. But overwhelmingly, black Harlem has been a child of the present century, the indisputable First City of Afro-America whose six or so crowded square miles lie between the East and Harlem Rivers to the one side and Morningside and St. Nicholas Avenues to the other with 125th Street as the great arterial thoroughfare. It is this Harlem, iconic yet always sharply local in human nuance, that has so installed itself in the world’s imagination, its very mention a prompt to interest if not fascination.

In the immediate, visual sense, Harlem from the 1920s onward has never been less than tangibly “there,” an internationally acknowledged city of black life and memory. It supplies a mirror, too, for interconnecting American racial and urban politics at large. The vintage Jazz Age years give one reflection. The wrack of the Depression follows. The swirling “race riot” era of the 1940s remain in memory (Harlem, like Detroit, blew up in 1943). The 1960s yield the dramas of Black Power and the calls to militancy by leadership like that of Malcolm X. For all the individual human resilience and style there has been ghettoization and poverty albeit that beyond the 1990s Harlem has made economic gains.

Simple chronology, narrative history, could not possibly give the whole account. For more than Chicago’s South Side, or Los Angeles’s Watts and South Central, or black Atlanta, Harlem has carried the banner of black urban America, the American “race capital” as Locke called it. In this respect it eludes the unitary definition, as unique yet at the same time as utterly symptomatic as any city in America. Commentary from Alain Locke in the 1920s of *The New Negro* to a novel like Darryl Pinkney’s *High Cotton* (1992) reaffirms both. Harlem rightly has been judged hardworking, respectable, indubitably religious, a community keen to state and maintain its own respectability. It has also been edged with crime

and violence, whether from racketeering, narcotics, gangs and hustle in general, or the everyday abrasion of a people often made to feel pressured and boxed in to the point of implosion. Nor would it ever be denied that Harlem has been a world of showtime, whether the supposed “doorstep Bohemia” of visiting white night clubbers in the 1920s, or the music, entertainment and fashion capital both created and then sought out by generations of black Americans.

A further paradox for a Northern city within a city lies in how Harlem has always been a Southern place in its talk, churches and music. So, at least, would be the testimony of any black elder with roots in Delta Mississippi, sharecropper Georgia, cotton Alabama or the tobacco Carolinas, and with memories variously of intimate family kin and yet also of the insults and ravages of Jim Crow. The process extends to an eclectically Caribbean Harlem, one of Jamaican/Rastafarians, Trinidadians, Barbadians (“Bajans”), St. Lucians and Guyanese; or to an African Harlem whether Yoruba or Ibo from Nigeria, Kenyan, Ghanaian, Liberian, or pre-Independence South Africa with its ANC (African National Congress) and other exiles in flight from Johannesburg’s apartheid and speaking languages from Xhosa to Zulu; or even to Black-Jewish Harlem in the form of its several Ethiopian Hebrew Congregations. No one signature prevails. The multifaceted fact of Harlem lies in its immense cultural widths and depths, the un-diminishing play of its different peoples and histories.

So insistent a mix has shaped and energized historic black Harlem. Beginnings lie in the initial move uptown from the West Side of black families in the years immediately prior to World War I and into homes once owned by Irish, Italian and Jewish residents. Another announcement of Harlem’s coming of age takes place with the sight of the heroic, all-black Fifteenth Regiment back from Europe and marching in deserved triumph up Fifth Avenue in February 1919.³

Who could doubt Harlem’s astonishing gallery of personalities? The 1920s vaunt the Jamaica-born Marcus Garvey with his heady, if financially disastrous, “Back to Africa” movement, the UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) and its Black Star Line ships destined for Liberia. Josephine Baker, whose vaudeville genius for song and dance in Jazz Age shows like *Shuffle Along*, and onstage sexual daring, transfers “Renaissance” Harlem to Paris in 1925, where she continues to hold sway at the *Folies Bergères* and other *boîtes de nuit* and to work in anti-racist causes and UNICEF. She has a vaudeville and Broadway equivalent in Bill “Bojangles” Robinson whose genius for tap-dance and performance passes down to Sammy Davis Jr. among others and who relished his moniker as honorary “Mayor of Harlem.” A’leia Walker, heiress to a hair-care empire and known as The Great Black Empress, becomes the leading celebrity hostess. In

the post-World War II years Adam Clayton Powell Jr. holds sway as Harlem's own flamboyant Congressman. Paul Robeson, in whom the spirituals found new voice and concert performance and whose roles as O'Neill's Emperor Jones and Shakespeare's Othello launch him into serious mainstream theatre, maintains a lifetime's radicalism which brought down on him ongoing FBI and other government persecution. To these might be added each athlete celebrity from Joe Louis to Willie Mays, Muhammad Ali to Carl Lewis, who, even if they did not originate in Harlem gave its citizenry meaning and pride.

Harlem's physical ecology, likewise, has become a necessary source of identification, whether the characteristic brownstones, the tenements, the storefront and AME (African Methodist Episcopal) churches, or affluent neighborhoods like Sugar Hill and the Stanford White-designed Striver's Row, early on used as a Harlem place reference in *Plum Bun*, Jessie Fauset's 1929 novel of "passing."⁴ To these have to be added the subsequent barrios of Spanish or Puerto Rican (and now other Latino) Harlem dwellers, each with their own difference of language religion, family, dress and foodways. The shared conviction continues among nearly all Harlemites that against the odds, whether poverty, racism or the calamity of drugs, America's first and self-availing black city can still survive and thrive.⁵

Harlem has also long established its identity in every kind of music, from choirs and gospellers to the jazz and blues played in a myriad of clubs, cellars or lofts. Duke Ellington's "Take the A Train" or "Drop Me Off in Harlem" typically serve as musical signings-in as much to be heard in some "round midnight" watering hole as concert hall. Harlem musicianship yields a simply dazzling roster of names, besides a vintage Harlemite like Ellington who made Sugar Hill his home. The galley includes Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Ethel Mills, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Dizzie Gillespie, Thelonius Monk, Ella Fitzgerald, John Coltrane, Dexter Gordon, James Brown or Aretha Franklin and a luminous trumpeter and "race man" like Miles Davis. Harlem may not have been their place or origin or the only stopover in their lives, but it ranks among the most important, especially in venues like the Cotton Club, the Lafayette Theater, and the Apollo Theater.

In the visual arts a similar virtuosity holds. One early instance would be the woodcuts, prints and graphics of Aaron Douglas, some of which Alain Locke included in *The New Negro*. Harlem also becomes the organizing reference in James Van Der Zee's Talented Tenth family and social photographic portraiture, the shrewd, versatile, Bootsie cartoons of Ollie Harrington, and the latter-day portfolios of camera work by John Taylor and Gordon Parks. The Harlem Renaissance era into the 1930s would see a gallery of female artistic talent, whether the sculpture of Augusta Savage, the Afrocentric artwork of Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, or

the vivid Africa-themed canvases of Lois Maillou Jones. The achievement equally extends to Romare Bearden, whose brilliant collage frequently has also served in book covers for black-authored texts, and Beauford Delaney in whom James Baldwin found an early Village mentor, friend and sexual ally.⁶ Ballet has its best-known names in Katherine Dunham whose School of Dance, founded in 1944, has made her a decisive force in the modern American arts and Arthur Mitchell's subsequent Dance Theater of Harlem. Sport enters the reckoning in the swerve and slam dunk of entertainment basketball as performed by the Harlem Globetrotters, however much they, as other black players and teams, began in an era when the NBA (Nation Basketball Association) operated a white-only regime.

Popular culture has long made Harlem a by-word.⁷ It is virtually written into America's music and dance, whether 1920s cabaret (with Ellington, Basie and Calloway in the line of succession) or a 1950s and after tuned in to Ray Charles, The Platters, Lena Horne, Etta Jones, Sarah Vaughn or Nancy Wilson. Later music, CD or video, has its bow in Michael Jackson, Lionel Richie or Whitney Houston and each best-known exponent of rap. Film contributes its own archive: early WPA (Works Progress Administration) "shorts" and then PBS and other network documentaries to follow; screen adaptations of Chester Himes's Coffin Ed/Gravedigger Jones detective stories filmed on location and directed by Ossie Davis such as *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), with a follow-up, based on Himes's *The Heat's On*, and re-titled *Come Back Charleston Blue* (1972); 1970s blaxploitation movies like the immensely popular Richard Roundtree's John Shaft series—*Shaft* (1971), *Shaft's Big Score* (1972) and *Shaft in Africa* (1973); and, thereafter, full length bio-pics like Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992) with Denzel Washington in the title role. These, in their different manner, contribute to the mythology of Harlem as a world both actual and confected.

Harlem, in consequence, has properly come to be seen as a kind of life theatre in its own right, a working arena of street culture, churches, eateries, dress, shoe stands, barbershops and clubs, even of graffiti and turf markings and, as always, the vital seams of talk from preaching to kitchen talk to youth slang. Neighborhoods, to be sure, were never just the one register. Class differences come into play, working class to affluent, their residents a variety based on income and education. Much of Harlem's historic culture and nuance, as other related African American material is held in archives like those of the Schomburg Library. For some populist Harlem should be even more emphasized. Not only is Harlem held to have been the occasion of an extraordinary mix and range of art, its dynamic amounts to a kind of social or urban art form, a black, citted tableau vivant. By the 1990s Harlem would even feature in advertisements for tourist walking tours.

The re-gentrification of Harlem through into the Obama years, with Bill Clinton's setting up of a post-presidential office, marks latest shift and transformation. The arrival of national chain stores after years of not being there (with the downside of pushing out long-term business) equally suggest a changing Harlem social order.

From its beginnings onward Harlem has rarely been other than a written city, a city made over into a plurality of literary forms. Its poets run from Countee Cul- len and Claude McKay in the Harlem Renaissance through Melvin Tolson (whose consciously modernist *Harlem Gallery*, published in 1965, offers a landmark) to the voices found in black nationalist collections like the LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal anthology *Black Fire* (1968).⁸ Harlem journalism and essay work equally enter the reckoning, especially that of key black newspapers like the *Amsterdam News* and of which LeRoi Jones's "City of Harlem" marks one symptomatic instance. James Baldwin, too, plays his part in this company, as vividly as anywhere in his early, compelling, "The Harlem Ghetto" (1948), Harlem again as "conges- tion," an "insistent, claustrophobic pounding in the skull."⁹ Harlem's drama has been both early vaudeville and modern community-centered pieces like the musi- cal gospel satire adapted from his own novel of Langston Hughes's *Tambourines to Glory* (1958) and the later church fable of word and flesh of James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* (1968).¹⁰ Then there has been the Harlem imagined and carried in the short story, whether Hughes's everyman Jesse Simple pieces or Baldwin's lyric, jazz-like "Sonny's Blues."

To these might be added Chester Himes's still unused screenplay *Baby Sis- ter* (1961), a kind of Brechtian cartoon-strip which points forward to his later thrillers.¹¹ The iconography includes poverty, switchblades, dilapidated houses, numbers, black matrons, street brothers, bars, the Apollo Theater, shiny big cars, in all, Harlem as cannibal territory wired with hustle. Himes builds the glittery vulnerability into the script's idiom:

This is Harlem, U.S.A., a city of contradictions. A city of Negroes isolated in the middle of New York City. A city of incredible poverty and huge sums of cash. A city of the meek and the violent. A city of brothels, bars and churches. Here is the part called Sugar Hill, where the prosperous live—the leaders, the profession- als, the numbers barons. Here is the part they call the Valley, where the hungry eke out an existence and prey upon one another. The Valley is like a sea filled with cannibal fish. Put in your hand, and pull out a stub. This is the story of a good-looking, healthy, voluptuous, seventeen-year old black girl, called BABY SISTER LOUIS, who lives in the Valley. She lives with her family; her mother

MAMA LOUIS, and her three brothers: SUSIE, twenty-two years old, BUDDY, twenty years old, and PIGMEAT, fourteen years old. Her elder sister, LIL, a blues singer, lives with her man on Sugar Hill. BABY SISTER is a juicy, tasty lamb in a jungle of hungry wolves. And in the Valley there is no good shepherd. Only the will of the inhabitants of this community, restricted, violated and violent, timid and vicious, living in their rat-ridden, hotbox, stinking flats, are either the hungry wolves themselves, or are struggling desperately to save themselves from the hungry wolves. And it is perfectly reasonable and natural that these people should be hungry, the wolves and the sheep alike. If your own food—food for the soul and food for the spirit as well as food for the stomach—has been held just out of your reach for three hundred years, or longer, you would be hungry too. And one way to keep from starving in this land of plenty when you have no food is to eat your baby sister.¹²

Not for Himes any dewy eyed or nostalgic picture. Rather, as though in the style of an adult nursery story, this is Harlem as war ground, preyed upon and yet always self-preying.

If the focus overall falls mainly upon fiction by African American authorship, however, that, in large part reflects elasticity and length. For fiction has been especially hospitable to the telling of Harlem's complex singularity. At the same time, novel or short story, that is not to un-connect the arising narratives from other cultural forms to have attempted the transposition of Harlem on the Mind into enduring idiom.

Alain Locke's insistence upon Harlem as "the largest Negro community in the world," a coming "race capital," is a reminder that despite poverty and the color line the 1920s were indeed its best, or at least its best celebrated, years. It was then, probably more than at any time since, that Harlem was in vogue. *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), born of *Survey Graphic's* special Harlem number in 1924, helped to underline how Harlem had come to express much of Afro-America itself—an international black city of art, spirit, memory music and word. So, at least, was the literary witness of its ministry of all, or nearly all, the talents.¹³ And so, too, from a later age, would be the witness of Ishmael Reed in his *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) with its fantasy-history of the Jazz Age, using Dionysian-Greek and Pharaonic-Egyptian myths, as caught up in the liberating fever called "Jes Grew." By this phrase Reed intends black dance, food, talk, honkytonk, showtime, sex, the whole free play of the senses as against the puritanism which led to Prohibition and Hooverism, the writ of white masonic and Main Street America.¹⁴

Harlem would also have its own early literary chroniclers. James Weldon Johnson, in his *Black Manhattan* (1930) speaks of “the recognized Negro capital,” “the Negro metropolis.” But his emphasis, as maybe befitted a life-long Republican, falls less upon black migration and the struggles and costs than the high-cultural story, Harlem as a literary and theatre tradition recorded as through a personal memoir.¹⁵ For Claude McKay, in his *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940) albeit by then the ex-Marxist and Catholic convert with old scores to settle, even the retrospect of the Depression does nothing to dim Harlem’s importance. He insists upon its role as a “magnet,” a first, true gathering place of the varieties of black modernity. If, then, the 1920s offer a place to begin, they do so precisely because they indicate a Harlem from the outset resistant to the kind of “blank generalization” excoriated by LeRoi Jones.¹⁶

Of all the Jazz Age fiction which takes on Harlem, no two novels captured its perceived style more than Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928), the former a source of enormous controversy on publication and written by Harlem’s probably best-known white patron of the arts who would also bequeath an important photographic archive of its writers and people, and the latter, whatever the author’s Jamaican origins, a lyric, on the pulse and “down home” salute.¹⁷ Earlier novels point the way, whether Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) with its portraits of black life and rooming on 27th Street and a drinks and clubland gathering-place like The Banner club, or James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex Coloured Man* (1912, 1927) whose “passing” drama also takes on “Sixth Avenue from Twenty-third to Thirty-third streets” as a black enclave with its own ragtime “Negro Bohemia.”¹⁸

Even if it does not deal exclusively with Harlem, one would also invoke Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) which explores black Manhattan through the eyes of its almost white Danish-American and deeply self-divided heroine. On her arrival from the South, and then Chicago, Helga Crane finds herself seized by “the continually gorgeous panorama of Harlem.” In Rudolph Fisher’s two novels, *The Walls of Jericho* (1928) and *The Conjure Man Dies: A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem* (1932), the note turns more laconic—the former a witty, cryptic satire of Harlem “society” manners, and the latter a modern-day “conjure” replete with a wondrous, self-purporting African con man and a detective pair to anticipate Chester Himes’s *Grave Digger and Coffin Ed*.¹⁹

Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) offers the Harlem portrait of Emma Lou Morgan, a black woman in revolt against her own color and whose

life borders on a pathology of self-hate. George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) takes an attractively scabrous tilt at the workings of color hierarchy and the urge to whiteness not only in Harlem but in Afro-America at large. Countee Cullen's only novel, *One Way to Heaven* (1932), the doomed love story of Sam Lucas and Mattie Johnson and at the same time a panorama of Harlem religiosity, shows a flair for painterly image wholly befitting Harlem's then best poet.²⁰

It was, however, the novels of Van Vechten and McKay that set the standard, relative best sellers and required reading for anyone in the 1920s and early 1930s with an eye to matters uptown. It may seem odd that Harlem's first chronicler in fiction should have been white but Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* can be located within a context in which other white writings had turned to black America with a quite new kind of relish, whether in O'Neill plays like *The Emperor Jones* (1920), a Sherwood Anderson novel of race like *Dark Laughter* (1925), or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha cycle of mixed Southern dynasties begun with *Sartoris* (1929).²¹ In 1934 so grand a patron as Nancy Cunard made a considerable splash with *Negro: Anthology*, her wide-ranging compendium of black writing, art and photography.²² Van Vechten, thereby, in a sense was doing no more than extending this general upsurge of white literary interest in both black America generally and Harlem in particular.

But what writer, especially a white one, could use "nigger" in his title without arousing profoundest offense? No matter that "Nigger Heaven," a phrase which refers to the topmost gallery of "mixed" theatres where blacks were assigned seats, and often to be heard as shorthand for Harlem itself or at least for its clubs, was fairly common parlance. No matter that the novel would be endorsed by James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes and, most importantly, Claude McKay (who thought it the work of an author "not a bit patronizing" and indeed would use the phrase in *Home to Harlem*). W. E. B. DuBois spoke for the majority when he gave it a drubbing as "an affront to the hospitality of black folk," a "caricature."²³

The truth is that, well meant or otherwise, *Nigger Heaven* offers too slight an achievement to have other than representative significance. Its plot borders on the mawkish, a formula love story and murder with touches of yet other melodrama as embellishment. It renders Harlem itself as a kind of terra incognita, not quite exotica but something near. Van Vechten does better, however, in situating some of the action in the *Black Venus*, a typical nightclub catering to white patrons and an instance of cabaret Harlem. He is also highly germane in the depiction of the workings of racism both at street level and in publishing. He tries, not without success, to emulate something of Harlem speech, its vernacular ease and invention. This he takes to the length of actually including a glossary of then everyday

terms like “ofay,” “daddy” and “snow.” It is also perhaps to his credit that he recognized his own ambiguous position in writing black Harlem fiction. He has one of his characters, a white magazine editor, say:

I have visited Harlem in two capacities, as a customer in the cabarets and as a guest in my friends' homes. The whole place, contrary to the general impression, is overrun with fresh, unused material. Nobody has yet written a good gambling story; nobody has touched the outskirts of cabaret life; nobody has yet gone into the diverse tribes of the region . . . Well, if you young Negro intellectuals don't get busy, a new crop of Nordics is going to spring up who will take the trouble to become better informed and will exploit this material before the Negro gets round to it. (222)

Locke himself could not have put things better, a call to arms from a perhaps unexpected quarter. Although *Nigger Heaven* belongs in the most minor league as fiction, it does have importance as a clue to the Harlem in the minds of outsiders, an image of Harlem which undoubtedly played to, and re-enforced, what white America wanted (or even needed) to believe about its emerging premier black city.

Far closer to Harlem's feel, its heat and energy, though with its own form of exoticizing, is Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* published two years later. Jamaican by birth and upbringing McKay may have been, but as his poetry collection, *Harlem Shadows* (1922), and his history, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940), confirmed, he could call upon a long intimacy with Harlem as black community life.²⁴ He had no hesitation in acknowledging his debt to the example of Carl Van Vechten. *Home to Harlem* seemed instantly a taking-up of Van Vechten's and Locke's shared call, a black-insider witness to the sight and sound, the ease and jazz, of 1920s Harlem. At last, said admirers, Harlem had found its laureate, even if certain self-appointed black guardians of respectability deplored the scenes of sex and drink. This admiration, however, trod lightly round the issue of whether the ostensible protagonist, Jake, gets eclipsed by his Haitian friend Ray, or whether the plot reads too segmentally, or whether McKay had allowed his lyricism to risk turning lush or indulgent.

The Harlem which most caught the attention is established early in the novel as Jake, a longshoreman, deserts his regiment in Europe and works his passage back to Harlem via Marseilles. He ponders, blues-like: “Jest take me ‘long to Harlem is all I pray.” The note is taken up in self-musings, the vision of Harlem as a world warmed by affection and memory:

Oh, to be in Harlem again after two years away. The deep-dyed color, the thickness, the closeness of it. The noises of Harlem. The sugared laughter. The honey-talk

on its streets. And all night long, ragtime and “blues” playing somewhere [...] singing somewhere, dancing somewhere! Oh, the contagious fever of Harlem. Burning everywhere in dark-eyed Harlem [...] Burning now in Jake’s sweet blood [...] (15)

Within this “familiar Harlem,” McKay acknowledges that Harlem can also be violent, abrasive, even murderous. Jake moves through Harlem’s “thickness” and “honey” as to the manner born, relishing its license and especially its women. But during stopovers from working on a Pullman with Ray he also gets embroiled in its dangers, eventually after a fight leaving for Chicago with his new-found “brown-sugar,” the appropriately named Felice. Who would deny that this is a male Harlem, the women either endlessly compliant and decorative or hard edged madams? Even so, it is Jake himself as one of Harlem’s own who embodies the novel’s true spirit. A passage like the following unfolds a near impressionistic Harlem, an irresistible black city of appetite and the senses:

Dusk gathered in blue patches over the Black Belt. Lenox Avenue was vivid. The saloons were bright, crowded with drinking men jammed right around the bars, treating one another and telling the incidents of the day. Longshoremen in overalls with hooks, Pullman porters holding their bags, waiters, elevator boys. Liquor-rich porters, banana-ripe laughter [...] The pavement was a dim warm bustle. Women hurrying home from day’s work to get dinner ready for husbands who worked at night. On their arms brown bags and black containing a bit of meat, a head of lettuce, butter. Young men who were staggering through life, passing along with brown-paper packages, containing a small steak, a pork chop, to do their own frying. From out of saloons came the savory smell of corned beef and cabbage, spare-ribs, hamburger steaks. Out of little cook-joints wedged in side streets, tripe, pigs’ feet, hogs’ ears and snouts. Out of apartments, steak smothered with onions, liver and bacon, fried chicken. (205)

If this is blue collar and after work Harlem, warm-heartedly given to the evening meal, a more genteel “New Negro” version can be found in Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1928).²⁵ Its middle-class “race story” of the Philadelphia born Angela Murray which ends in her move from New York to Paris delivers the more standard 1920s version, Harlem as almost anthropological surprise:

On an exquisite afternoon she went to Harlem . . . she was amazed and impressed at this bustling, frolicking, busy, laughing great city within a greater one. She had never seen colored life so thick, so varied, so complete . . . Unquestionably there was something very fascinating, even terrible, about this stream of life . . . Harlem was a great city. (97–8)

Fauset's view of Harlem as "a great city" falls into synch with each the era's companion texts, black urban life pressed into textual imagining.

1929 and its economic aftermath burst the bubble. Just as the Depression gripped America at large, so in Harlem and other black communities the poverty which had always threatened grew especially brutal. Harlem, in particular, edged increasingly towards slum, a ghetto. As quickly as it had come into vogue so Harlem went out of vogue. The image became one of cided un-affluence, a black urban people under duress and a far cry from the trumpeted gaiety of the preceding decade. Fiction, like all the arts, reflected the process.

Social realism became the rallying cry, usually associated with Richard Wright in the guise of "Negro Protest." Yet Wright's black city world was to be not Harlem but South Side Chicago, at least as depicted in his landmark novel *Native Son* and in the driven, divided figure of Bigger Thomas. Of the literary school attributed to Wright, principally Chester Himes, Willard Motley and Ann Petry, it would be the last who bequeaths a Depression and Harlem period novel of great importance.

Published in 1946, and set against a World War II background, Petry's *The Street* carries the mark of the Depression at every turn, a tough, deterministic story as far away as imaginable from the brave optimism of Alain Locke and his contemporaries of a generation earlier.²⁶ It also depicts Harlem through the viewpoint of a woman, Lutie Johnson, forced to shift for herself and her son Bub within a web of circumstance which leads her to an almost inevitable and fatal act of violence. Harlem, as it were, narrows down precisely to a street, and within it the commodifying reduction of its people and their lives.

This threat-laden Harlem gains especial edge in Petry's focusing of things through Lutie. Caught out by a bad marriage, struggling to stay respectable given her looks and relative youth, surrounded by offers to hustle, she finds herself at first drawn to a smalltime musician, Boots Smith, who promises to help her into a singing career. But he, too, reveals himself as yet another sexual threat, the would-be rapist. In him, and in all the pressure of the street, 1944 and 116th Street Harlem closes in on her, incarcerating, dangerous, the opposite of communal. One hears just the right echo of urban blues in this sample of how she is made to react:

She glanced up at the gloomy flats where the heads had been. There were row after row of narrow windows—floor after floor packed tight with people. She looked at

the street itself. It was bordered by dust bins. Half-starved cats prowled through the bins—rustling paper, gnawing on bones. Again she thought that it wasn't just this one block, this particular street. It was like this all over Harlem wherever the rents were low. (230)

Although the novel uses precisely “this particular street” to locate all the “rustle” and “gnaw” of an impoverished Harlem, Petry offers more than mere diagram. She develops a full, various fictional cast. Mrs. Hedges, the tough, fire-injured madam, operates to her own well-intended standard of morality. The furtive and near pathological tenement supervisor Jones provokes Mrs. Hedges to say of him “You done lived in basements so long, you ain't hardly human no more.” Jones's intimidated mistress, Min, resorts to a Harlem roots doctor in the hope of making Jones desire her. Bub's white teacher Miss Rinner, always frightened by Harlem, thinks teaching there amounts to a stigma. Boots Smith, scarred with a knife wound from one of his past women, is dangled by the club owner Mr. Junto (a name which obliquely refers back to the white slavocracy elites), made to serve as his general runner and pimp, and never able to rise above low-grade musical jobs. Outside Harlem the affluent white Connecticut family who first employ Lutie as a maid are so embroiled in their own money and domestic violence that they fail to see in her no more than one more unremarkable black serving woman.

Around this street, too, Petry implies a further lattice of other similar streets and tenements each with its boxed-in humanity to match. She also successfully evokes the ambiguous glitter of Harlem club life, especially the Casino where Lutie works and the Junto Bar and Grill where she hopes to establish a singing career. But it is, inexorably, to the street, 116th Street, that Lutie returns, Harlem as determining ghetto and menace. Within its world Bub eventually is sent to Reform School for theft, and Lutie, like Claude McKay's Jake before her, heads out to Chicago after the killing of Boots. Harlem's implacable urban geometry and the behavior and state of mind it engenders is captured graphically in Lutie's reaction to a young girl she sees in hospital:

She felt she knew the steps by which that girl landed on the stretcher in the hospital. She could trace them easily. It could be that Bub might follow the same path.

The girl probably went to high school for a few months and then got tired to it. She had no place to study at night because the house was full of lodgers and she had no incentive anyway, because she didn't have a real home . . . She found out that boys liked her and she started bringing them to the apartment. The mother wasn't there to know what was going on.

They didn't have real homes, no base, no family life. So at sixteen or seventeen the girl was fooling around with two or three different boys. One of them found out about the others. Like all the rest of them, he had only a curious supersensitive kind of pride that kept him going, so he had to have revenge and knives are cheap.

It happened again and again all through Harlem. (204)

Petry's vision of Harlem here as throughout *The Street* reads clear-eyed and unsentimentally, a community both injured and self-injuring.

During the 1930s, Harlem under economic siege also lies behind the vision of Louise Meriwether's retrospective juvenile novel *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (1970).²⁷ Written as the first person story of twelve year old Frances Coffin, it tells a Harlem coming of age, the self-awakening forced ahead of its time on a burgeoning black adolescent girl. Replete with period Depression references to Father Divine, Dutch Schultz, Roosevelt's fireside broadcasts, it locates in Francie a Harlem which finds itself obliged to sell itself short of its own evident best promise. Francie bears witness to her father's hustle as a numbers man, to her peers who have taken to prostitution and pimping, to a catalogue of petty crime, welfare and street culture, and yet, throughout, also to the warmth and extraordinary human color of her family and neighborhood. Meriwether's achievement rests upon her ability to take up this Harlem paradox. In the very ingenuousness of Francie's idiom she measures the contradiction of Harlem's vital richness forced to exist—in the Depression as rarely at any other time in American history—within a devitalizing poverty.

The Harlem fiction by which Langston Hughes has come to be best-known cannot in any strict sense be thought of as a body of novel writing. Yet the Jesse B. Semple or Simple stories begun in 1943 in the *Chicago Defender* give precisely that impression. Eventually to run to five collections, in turn *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950), *Simple Takes a Wife* (1953), *Simple Stakes a Claim* (1957), *The Best of Simple* (1961) and *Simple's Uncle Sam* (1965), these immensely subtle, ingenuous seeming pieces of black folk narrative turn upon the figure of Simple as the voice of street corner and domestic Harlem, its own immediate postwar *griot*.²⁸

Spoken as if to the often incredulous Hughes himself, they touch on American race issues as read in the paper, heard on the radio, carried by word of mouth, and mulled over in the work place and bar. A man of many apparent foibles,

Simple especially features as the put-upon Harlem family man, by his ex-wife Isabel, his current glamour girl Zarita, his country cousin Minnie, and his kinsman F. D. (for Franklin Delano). A one-time Virginian who in time-honored fashion has stepped North to Harlem, his puzzlement and general sense of being always caught on the wrong foot act as Hughes's wry, ingenious mode of taking bearings on an America shot through with racial double standards. Not that he ever allows Simple to become too much the sermonizer, rather the genial, often self-contradicting man of the Harlem average.

Harlem itself features characteristically for Simple in outbursts like the following from "A Toast to Harlem":

No, I would not go back down South, not even to Baltimore. I am in Harlem to stay! You say the houses ain't mine. Well, the sidewalk is—and don't nobody push me off. The cops don't even say, 'Move on,' hardly no more . . . Here I ain't scared to vote—that's another thing I like about Harlem. I also like it because we've got subways and it does not take all day to get downtown, neither are you Jim Crowed on the way. Why, Negroes is running some of these subway trains. This morning I rode the A Train down to 34th Street. There were a Negro driving it, making ninety miles a hour. The cat *were really driving* that train! Every time he flew by one of them local stations looks like he was saying, 'Look at me! This train is mine!' That cat were gone, ole man. Which is another reason I like Harlem! Sometimes I run into Duke Ellington on 125th Street and I say, 'What you know there, Duke?' Duke says, 'solid, ole man.' He does not know me from Adam, but he speaks. One day I saw Lena Horne coming out of the Hotel Theresa and I said, 'Hubba! Hubba!' Lena smiled. Folks is friendly in Harlem. I feel like I got the world in a jug and the stopper in my hand! So drink a toast to Harlem!²⁹

Simple's mix of standard American and down-home black idiom, his assumed community oneness with Duke Ellington and Lena Horne, his relish at the thought of a black brother "flying home" at the controls of the A train, and his folk reference to "the world in a jug" add up to a community voice, a voice at once itself and yet that of a larger Harlem.

Hughes, however, always knew better than to make Simple some uncritical laureate of Harlem. Simple speaks as perfectly familiar with its poverty and dangerous crowdedness ("A Million—and One"), its sheer daily threat ("Enter Cousin Minnie"), its ambiguous religiosity ("Simple Prays a Prayer"), its case-hardened experience of white America ("There Ought to be a Law"), its own recent riots, violence and police harassment ("Name in Print"), and even its extremes of weather ("Letting Off Steam"). But throughout he comes over as yet another type

of Harlem insider, un-Jim Crowed as he says, and at ease with the customs and talk of his people. Hughes's own posture of the liberal fall guy, seemingly taken unawares by Simple's prejudices and values, makes for a perfect counter and point of access. He can be amused, put out, frequently astounded by his Harlem crony, but he also finds himself, as indeed do we, obliged to learn from Simple. Their colloquies, thereby, become a kind of Harlem speaking, a community in dialogue with itself, yet never too inward or hermetic. Harlem, immediate postwar Harlem at least, can rarely have been more congenially voiced or overheard.

“How do you get to Harlem?’ ‘that’s easy,’ he said, ‘You just keep heading north.’”³⁰ That, precisely, is what the unnamed narrator of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) does, a journey which takes him from Dixie to black Manhattan’s Promised Land, from darkness to light, and from unseeing to vision.³¹ Two of Ellison’s essays give bearings on the point.

In “Harlem Is Nowhere” (1948) he writes:

The most surreal fantasies are acted out upon the streets of Harlem; a man ducks in and out of traffic shouting and throwing imaginary grenades that actually exploded during World War I; a boy participates in the rape-robbery of his mother; a man beating his wife in a park observes Marquess of Queensberry rules . . . Life becomes a masquerade, exotic costumes are worn every day . . . For this is a world in which the major energy of the imagination goes not into creating works of art, but to overcome the frustrations of social discrimination.³²

In “Harlem’s America” (1966), however, Ellison indicates how these Harlem rites of surrealism and transformation at the same time point to, and complement, the writer’s art:

Harlem is a place where our folklore is preserved and transformed. It is the place where the body of our Negro myth and legend thrives. It is a place where our styles, musical styles, the many styles of Negro life, find continuity and metamorphosis.³³

As he speaks out of his border cellar, illegally irradiated by light siphoned from the Monopolated Light & Power Company, the narrator of *Invisible Man* calls up not only his own journey but that of nearly all Afro-America, the history of slavery into freedom, South into North, the erasure into the finding of identity. Harlem becomes a focal expression of Ellison’s deft play of folklore, jazz and blues, a whole register of light and darkness, tease and counter-tease, within the workings of racial vision. As his narrator very quickly recognizes:

This really was Harlem, and now all the stories which I had heard of the city-within-a-city leaped alive in my mind . . . For me this was not a city of realities, but of dreams; perhaps because I had always thought of my life as being confined to the South. And now as I struggled through the lines of people a new world of possibility suggested itself to me faintly, like a small voice that was barely audible in the roar of city sounds. I moved wide-eyed trying to take in the bombardment of impressions. (142)

Harlem as dream, a black American dream which vacillates between euphoria and nightmare, touches base with history clearly enough: in the Garveyite figure of Ras, in the reference to the 1940s riots, in the ambiguous contribution of the American Communist Party (“the Brotherhood”) to black politics, and in the fraught sexual agenda between white women and black men. But the Harlem which Ellison most insists upon is that eventually carried in the mind of the narrator, one simultaneously on the defensive and the attack, full of tricks and pitfalls and doubletakes. As the narrator says, here is a “Heart of Darkness” Harlem, made surreal by American history and in which strange, hallucinatory identities like those of Ras, Tod Clifton, Brother Jack, the looter Dupre and, above all, those visited on or adopted by the narrator himself, exist as if by some strangely ordained trans-historical writ.

Like Harlem itself, the narrator exists in and across time, a voice of “now” yet which comprises all the increments of black time to have gone into that “now.” For whether as the bearer of false promissory notes (his college scroll, the letters from Bledsoe), or as an apparatchik in the Brotherhood, or as the confidence man B.P. Rinehart, or as the voice of the Prologue and Epilogue, the narrator speaks at once to, of and from behind Harlem, one bound up in all the prodigal contradictions of American history. Emerging, as he says, from a hole in which he and his black ancestors found themselves brutally deposited “sometime in the nineteenth-century,” he assumes the almost custodial voice of Harlem, witness perforce to its historic evolution and mysteries. For him, and the readership he seeks to win over, Harlem exists as America’s black *cit  fourmillante*, an urban fact located in actual time and place, yet also a place lodged deep and challengingly within the American racial psyche.

So multifarious a Harlem could hardly have found a more attuned chronicler than Ellison, or at least than his narrator persona. The latter, meeting up with the Boston philanthropist Mr. Norton to whom, as a student in his Tuskegee-like college, he has shown the Trueblood family and taken to the Golden Day, tells him he has “made” him. That is, by becoming a writer, a mythologer, a man of “underground” creativity, he has come to serve as the surrogate of all Americans,

black, white and in-between, who in effect dream American reality, and Harlem as one of its essential loadstones. So that whether heaven or hell, history or myth, Harlem in Ellison's assured fashioning becomes an archive of localized life yet the metaphor of an Afro-America at the edges of fantasy.

A companion Harlem is to be found in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), the Harlem of Pentecostal rites, coming of age, and the ever immediate past of black Southern dynasty.³⁴ John Grimes, still young during the Depression, provides the human link to three black generations, a Harlem remembrance of things past. In part, this frame calls up the Great Migration, the Northward shift of black families out of Klan-fed hate and Dixie injustice. More emblematically, it calls up the Old Testament: John's preacher-stepfather, Gabriel, as a flawed Abraham, with Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael re-enacted in the lives of the unloved first wife Deborah, the alluring homegirl Esther, and the wayward prodigal son Roy. The Harlem interwar years with Gabriel's second wife Elizabeth, and John as her own illegitimate son by the murdered Richard, then take up and echo this earlier tier, the Northern story as an implied retelling of the Southern story.

Rarely thereafter, whether in his too amorphous *Another Country* (1962), or his Harlem-Puerto Rico novella *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), or his broad-canvassed *Just Above My Head* (1979), which contains a number of key Harlem scenes, did Baldwin's fiction—again "Sonny's Blues" offers the exception—quite catch the fervor and cadence of embattled ghetto life. In part, this is due to the tightness of design in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, its counterpoint of 1930s time-present and memory and of boy and adult.³⁵

It is also due to Baldwin's sureness about the particular Harlem he is dramatizing, the Harlem of his best essay work marked by the authority of personal experience. This is a Harlem which, for John, has itself become his stepfather's Temple of the Fire Baptized, apocalyptic, ablaze in visions of the Fall and the Redemption, and which leaves his own already uncertain sexuality caught midways. The Grimes family, and the Temple's church people, like Praying Mother Washington and the lithesome, androgynous Elisha, personify Harlem as of this world yet with the promise of the next, and amid whose competing human frailties John must negotiate flesh and spirit.

Baldwin, even so, keeps his novel firmly tied into history. "The Prayers of the Saints," the three memory pieces of Gabriel as flawed patriarch, of Florence, his embittered, literally cancer-afflicted sister, and of Elizabeth as guardian mother, are eventful in their own right. But they also play Depression-era Harlem against

an earlier Dixie while showing the threads of hope and despair which bind both into the same story. The Harlem of the novel, thereby, takes on a personal yet historic signification, as John's own immediate place of becoming and at the same time that of the larger community whose journeying across time and family has been the making of him.

To move from Ellison and Baldwin to Chester Himes, one-time jewel thief, Ohio State student, California war-worker, jailbird, European literary exile, autobiographer and novelist, is to engage in another postwar register of Harlem, one quite sumptuously audacious in its bizarrerie.³⁶ Throughout Himes's prior fiction—the considerable output of prison and street stories begun in the 1930s and the five principal novels he wrote between 1945 and 1955 and which culminate in *The Primitive* (1955)—the hints were always there, especially in *Pinktoes* (1961) as a comic sexual spoof of Harlem interracial revels), of the paired detective storytelling to follow.

Begun in 1957, Himes's eight Coffin Ed Jones/Grave Digger Johnson novels (only *Run Man Run* in 1966, the story of a psychotic and racist cop, does not use the pair) were first translated from English into French as *romans policiers* in Gallimard's celebrated *Série Noire*. These "Harlem domestic tales," as he termed them, were the upshot of Himes's expatriation to Paris and his friendship with the French writer Marcel Duhamel, and when subsequently issued in America in their original English they took a while to overcome initial disfavor if not hostility.

But given the shifts of racial consciousness in the America of Civil Rights and Black Power, Malcolm and Stokely Carmichael, the process then reversed itself. Himes, suddenly, was judged to have caught the pathology of the times. Not only had he written plots, with idiom to match, of genuine inventiveness, he had written Harlem as no one before him. Here was Harlem as surreal and violent urban box, a counter-order of drugs and crime, a black city of the absurd. Increasingly likened by admirers to Dickens's "other" London, Himes's Harlem was seen to serve as a locale in which literally almost anything could happen.

Each of the books offers a milling population of preachers and politicians, sober matriarchs and mock religious prophets, pimps and their chippies, drug pushers and wheel thieves, transvestites, con men and shysters of every kind and sex. Grave Digger and Coffin Ed feature as adepts, unravellers, of a territory prone to the wildest species of plot or caper whose violence frequently includes knifings, acid throwing, throat cutting and torture. At once Harlem's familiars and yet hard

put to fathom its every human knot and spiral, theirs is a spiraling, often about-face world, a black (and sometimes white) hall of mirrors.

Almost invariably each novel derives from an act of macabre violence, an event outrageous to at least one of the senses. In an early magazine profile Philip Oakes offered the following sampling of Himes's imaginative wares:

A hit-and-run victim, jammed against a wall, and frozen stiff on a subzero night, is stripped of her finery and revealed as a transvestite. Dr. Mubutu, inventor of an elixir distilled from the mating organs of baboons, rabbits, eagles and shellfish, is butchered while arguing the true cost of rejuvenation. A white homosexual, whose jugular has been severed, expires on the sidewalk remarkably only because he's not wearing trousers.³⁷

To these choice items, which describe in turn *All Shot Up* (1960) and *Blind Man with a Pistol* (1969), can be added the corpse of a headless tire thief riding the Harlem streets on a motorcycle and crashing into a pawnbroker's shop bearing the motto "We Will Give Credit To The Dead" (also *All Shot Up*); a white King Cola salesman, the flagellant of teenage black girls, impossibly killed by the zip gun belonging to the doped-out leader of a Harlem Muslim gang (*The Real Cool Killers*, 1959); the death by "religious ecstasy" of Alberta Brown, a follower of one Sweet Prophet Brown, which puts in train the murderous search for a Numbers fortune hidden in an armchair (*The Big Gold Dream*, 1960); and a bale of cotton dumped in a Harlem street around which Himes weaves an astonishing spiral of drugs, politics and sexual adventure (*Cotton Comes to Harlem*, 1966).

In engaging with these, and kindred mysteries, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger unveil a Harlem as labyrinthine, equivocal and direly comic as any so far made over into literary fiction.

Himes's *Blind Man with a Pistol*, perhaps appropriately the last novel published in his own lifetime, ends on a note of apocalypse, a berserk blind man spraying bullets in every direction on the New York subway. His is the virtually inevitable and absurd gesture within a Harlem tense to breaking-point. *Plan B* (1993) adds the posthumous finale, Coffin Ed killed by Grave Digger from within a Harlem wired in graft, paranoia, power-politics both black and white, and as though by destiny turned cruelly against both itself and its own.³⁸

Nor in this respect has Harlem been only the preserve of black writers. A kind of literary as well as historic co-habitation and overlap invites mention, inaugurally

with Carl Van Vechten in the 1920s. Warren Miller's *The Cool World* (1959), told in the first person voice of Richard "Duke" Custis, a gang leader adult before his time, dramatizes a Harlem of territorial divides and inevitable group violence. It compares illuminatingly with Shane Stevens's *Go Down Dead* (1967), also centered around a gang and black adolescent Harlem, a 1960s revolt novel told as a week-long episode in the life of Adam Clayton "King" Henry. More consequentially, Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* (1961) envisages in the image of Sol Nazerman's pawnshop the Harlem itself the repository of sold-out lives and property. Sol survives, reluctantly, as the witness both to his own Jewish and European catastrophe and to that unfolding in the Harlem about him. For him, whether the past of Belsen or the present of the ghetto, both make for hell.³⁹

The Nuyorican Movement, founded in 1973 and based more or less downtown at the Nuyorican Poets Café in the Lower East Side, gives another body of Harlem authorship to include names like Pedro Pietri, Felipe Luciano, Jesús Papoleto with a best-known forerunner in Piri Thomas's autofiction *Down These Mean Streets* (1967). This is El Barrio in East Harlem is told as a Puerto Rican life, a cycle of gang violence, prison, drugs and the struggle for manhood pressured by an "anglo" color line and language. It also pulls no punches in delineating the color caste system that exists across black and brown communities.⁴⁰

Harlem's contradiction of stasis and vitality, at once urban enclosure yet a site of immense wellsprings of life, loses no momentum in the further black written page. Charles Wright's *The Messenger* (1963), centered on the wayward life of its writer-protagonist within a Manhattan of midnight-cowboy sexual hustle and drugs, might be a diary novel—as episodic, as full of cuts and fades, as the city in which it is set.⁴¹ The confessional style provides just the right thread and edge to its world of queens and johns, "street" neighborhood, bars, a remembered black boyhood in Missouri, and Charlie's life as a message-deliverer across the five boroughs. Above all it tells a writer's life, the will to subdue the city to the word. Within this Wright manages a perfect cameo of Harlem as at once many cities in one:

Tonight I caught the A train, went up to Harlem. Kenya, the Iron Curtain . . . As I walk down 125th Street, I see young men, sharp as diamonds in suits they can't afford, leaning against flashy cars that don't belong to them, or stepping smartly as if on their way to a very high class hell. 125th Street is Forty-Second Street, Broadway, Times Square, Fifth Avenue all combined into a jungle of buildings. It is a prayer meeting with a hand-clapping, tambourine "Yes Lawd." It's Blumstein's

Department store, the Harlemites Macy's. It's the Apollo, with the only live stage show in Manhattan. It's the smart bars catering to Big Time wheeling and dealing Negroes and downtown whites, who want a swinging Harlem night. (141)

William Melvin Kelley's *dem* (1967), a title which means "them" or white folks, takes on Harlem through a complex mesh of dark, inventive satire.⁴² Kelley sets up white suburbia and black Harlem as two zany, mirror worlds, each run to its own confounding play of rituals and language. Mitchell J. Pierce, a white advertising executive fixated by TV soap-opera and fast losing the ability to differentiate between media and reality, finds himself faced with his wife's having given birth to twins, one black, one white. Setting out to discover his black co-father, an Ellisonian trickster named Cooley, he finds himself drawn deeper and deeper into a Harlem wholly beyond his imagining. Kelley, in other words, offers yet another species of "black" black comedy, Harlem as still terra incognita to most of white America, a great enclave of life unseen, un-encountered.

Robert Deane Pharr's *S.R.O.* (1971) drives realism to yet another kind of reach.⁴³ Harlem becomes ghetto vortex, a self-circling tenancy of drugs, need, and relief. Presided over by the supplier Sinman, it is a Harlem which "fixes" itself at every turn, its ravages held only momentarily in abeyance by the needle. Claude Brown's *The Children of Ham* (1976), the follow-up to his best-selling *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), depicts Harlem through the den life of a group of young black drop-outs, a story of literal survival under the rules of Harlem ghetto culture.⁴⁴

Whether Harlem comes over as violent-absurdist as in Himes, a species of terra incognita as in Kelley, predatory in body and spirit as in Pharr, or sociological as in Brown, there can be no doubting the continuing variety of its novels. This continues in Toni Morrison's adroitly memorial novel *Jazz* (1992), set in 1926, and told against a backdrop of the Great Migration.⁴⁵ The lyric, doomed love of middle-aged Joe Trace, salesman of Cleopatra Beauty products, for eighteen year old Dorcas who refuses to name him even as she lies dying when he shoots her after discovering her affair with a younger man, and his wife Violet's violent reaction and eventual calm, makes their Harlem world into a ballad, the stuff of black urban legend. Morrison's feats of multiple narration give enormous resonance to the remembrances of coming North, setting up home, becoming Harlemites.

A conspectus of these different, if frequently overlapping, fictions of place is also engagingly developed in Rosa Guy's *A Measure of Time* (1983), the life and times of "sassy" Dorine Davis, who steps from the Jim Crow South of her youth in the 1920s to become a survivor in the Harlem of the 1960s.⁴⁶ At successive phases in the novel she is one of the Jazz Age's black glitterati, a "booster" pulling off

spectacular store heists, a Depression era hustler, and a prison inmate who emerges to a world where Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. offer the touchstones. Throughout her life bears the insignia of Harlem at its ambiguous best and worst.

Certainly Harlem's ambiguities are not lost on Darryl Pinckney writing in the 1990s in *High Cotton*. His narrator, Columbia University student and "Also Chosen" black middle-class witness, allows himself to ponder:

The Negro Capital of the World, the old-timers' Seventh Avenue, which boasted "fifty-two Easters a year," I knew had moved, long before, to the rare-books desk of the Schomburg library. The Hotel Theresa was dead, the Apollo was in a coma, and the lush exchanges between neighbors in the pretty town houses of Stanford White had to wait in a nourishing obscurity, like a piece of music whose neglect makes its revival all the more rapturous. The voyeuristic possibilities of the remains, the bad corners, were more animating to me than the dissertation-giving ardor for the ruins of melanophilia.⁴⁷

For Pinckney, as for Rosa Guy, and down the timeline of Harlem authorship, the *rumor* of Harlem in Garcia Lorca's well-chosen word from his *Poeta en Nueva York* (1940), continues to press for literary expression.⁴⁸ Reflections can be both positive and less so. The only *fact* about Harlem in this respect may indeed be its dense, necessary irreducibility, an un-diminishing refusal to be accommodated by the single account. This, one supposes, helps to identify why there have been so many varieties of "Harlem on My Mind"—be they expressed in the novel or in any of the abundant literary, visual, popular culture and other forms inspired by the enduring black First City of America.

Notes

1. Alain Locke, ed. *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925.
2. LeRoi Jones, "City of Harlem," *Home: Social Essays*, New York: William Morrow, 1968.
3. See, for instance, George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996. An early anthology of Harlem writing and photography would be John Henrik Clarke, ed. *Harlem U.S.A.*, Berlin: Seven Seas Books, 1964.
4. Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*, New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1929.
5. For period reference see John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, New York: Knopf, 1947; 3rd edn, 1967; James Egert Allan, *The Negro in New York*, New York: Exposition Press, 1964; and Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The*

Making of a Ghetto, Negro New York, 1890–1930, New York: Harper, 1966; also the pictorial compilation, Allon Schoener, ed. *Harlem on my Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America*, New York: Dell Publishing, 1968, 1979. Since the publication of this chapter there has been much evidence that Harlem has been undergoing latest change in its ethnic and racial make-up. White, Latino/a and Asian populations have come increasingly to the fore, so that the vista is one of ever greater residential mix and inter-raciality. This process has raised issues to do with gentrification, money over community.

6. This important artist has long been due a full biography. Fortunately one has recently appeared by a friend and biographer of Baldwin. See David Leeming, *Amazing Grace: A Life of Beauford Delaney*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
7. Two excellent cultural histories covering the period of this chapter of Harlem are: David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, New York: Knopf, 1981, and Jarvis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900–1950*, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982. See also Amritjit Singh, *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976; Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph, eds. *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers, 1900–1945*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990; George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995; and Cary D. Wirtz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1996.
8. Countee Cullen, *Color*, New York: Harper, 1925, *Copper Sun*, New York: Harper, 1927, *The Ballad of the Brown Girl: An Old Ballad Retold*, New York: Harper, 1927, and *The Black Christ and Other Poems*, New York: Harper, 1929; Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922; Melvin B. Tolson, *Harlem Gallery, Book 1*, New York: Twayne, 1965; and LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, eds. *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, New York: William Morrow & Co., 1968.
9. First published in *Commentary*, February 1948, and subsequently in *Notes of a Native Son*, New York: Dial. 1955.
10. Langston Hughes, *Tambourines to Glory*, New York: John Day, 1958. This was the novel from which Hughes made his adaptation. The play was published as Langston Hughes, *Tambourines to Glory*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1958, 1963. James Baldwin, *The Amen Corner*, New York: Dial, 1968.
11. “Baby Sister” was published for the first time in Chester Himes, *Black on Black: Baby Sister and Selected Writings*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1973. 11–121. “Voice,”
12. *Baby Sister*, “Voice.” 11–12.
13. Scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance had been increasingly prolific. See, especially, Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971;

- Nathan Irvin Huggins, ed. *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976; Arna Bontemps, ed. *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered: Essays Edited with a Memoir*, New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972; Bruce Kelner, ed. *The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary of an Era*, New York: Methuen, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.
14. Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, New York: Doubleday, 1972.
 15. James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, New York: Knopf, 1930.
 16. Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1940.
 17. Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, New York: Knopf, 1926; Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem*, New York: Harper, 1928.
 18. Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods*, New York: Dodd, Mead, 1902; James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Boston: Sherman French, 1912; New York: Knopf, 1927.
 19. Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*, New York and London: Knopf, 1928, reprinted New York: Macmillan / Collier Books, 1971. References here and in Chapter 4 are to this edition. Rudolph Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho*, New York and London: Knopf, 1928, and *The Conjure-Man Dies: A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem*, New York: Corvici, Friede, 1932.
 20. Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life*, New York: Macaulay, 1929; George Schuyler, *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free, A. O. 1933–1940*, New York: Macaulay Co., 1931; and Countee Cullen, *One Way to Heaven*, New York and London: Harper, 1932.
 21. For a full listing of Van Vechten's writing and photography, see Bruce Kellner, ed. *A Bibliography of the Work of Carl Van Vechten*, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980.
 22. Nancy Cunard, ed. *Negro: Anthology*, 1934; reissued, New York: Frederick Ungar, 1970.
 23. See, respectively, James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way*, New York: Viking, 1933; Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, New York: Knopf, 1940; Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home*, New York: Lee Fruman, 1937; and W.E.B. DuBois, "Review of *Nigger Heaven*," *Crisis*, December 1926.
 24. Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928.
 25. Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun*, New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1929.
 26. Ann Petry, *The Street*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946.
 27. Louise Meriwether, *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970.
 28. Langston Hughes, *Simple Speaks His Mind*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950; *Simple Takes a Wife*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953; *Simple Stakes a Claim*, New York: Rinehart, 1957; *The Best of Simple*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1961; *Simple's Uncle Sam*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1965. For discussions of Hughes's Simple stories, see James A. Emanuel, *Langston Hughes*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967, and Therman O'Daniel, *Langston Hughes, Black Genius: A Critical Evaluation*, New York: Morrow, 1971. Also, A. Robert Lee, "'Ask Your Mama': Langston Hughes,

- the Blues and Recent Afro-American Literary Studies,” *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 1990, 199–209.
29. Langston Hughes, “A Toast to Harlem,” *The Best of Simple*, 20–1.
 30. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random House, 1952, 140.
 31. A necessary retrospect is to be found in *Invisible Man*, 30th Anniversary Edition, New York: Random House, 1982. Speaking of a novel largely written in, as well as about, Harlem, Ellison observes, “this has always been a most willful, most self-generating novel, and the proof of that statement is witnessed by the fact that here, thirty astounding years later, it has me writing about it again.”
 32. Ralph Ellison, “Harlem Is Nowhere,” written originally for (but unpublished by) *Magazine of the Year*, 1948. The piece is included in *Shadow and Act*, New York: Random House, 1964, 294–317.
 33. Ralph Ellison, “Harlem’s America,” *New Leader*, Vol. 48, 26 September 1966, 22–35.
 34. James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, New York: Knopf, 1953.
 35. James Baldwin, *Another Country*, New York: Dial Press, 1962, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, New York: Dial Press, 1974, and *Just Above My Head*, New York: Dial Press, 1979.
 36. The detective fiction (and *Run Man Run*) have had a complicated history. Titles (and publishers) have changed, and several appeared in French translation before American or British publication. In this listing American editions are given first, then the French and British: 1. For *Love of Imabelle*, Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1957. Title changed to *A Rage in Harlem*, New York: Avon Books, 1965. *La Reine des pommes*, Paris: Gallimard, Série Noire, 1969, which won the *Grand Prix de Littérature Policière*. *A Rage in Harlem*, London: Panther Books, 1969. 2. *The Real Cool Killers*, New York: Avon Books, 1959. *Il Pleut des coups durs*, Paris: Gallimard, Série Noire, 1958. *The Real Cool Killers*, London: Panther Books, 1969. Himes’s original title was *If Trouble Was Money*. 3. *The Crazy Kill*, New York: Avon Books, 1959. *Couché dans le pain*, Paris: Gallimard, Série Noire, 1958. 3. *Crazy Kill*, London: Panther Books, 1969. Himes’s original title was *A Jealous Man Can’t Win*. 4. *Run Man Run*, New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1966. *Dare-Dare*, Paris: Gallimard, Série Noire, 1959. *Run Man Run*, London: Frederick Muller, 1967; London: Panther Books, 1969. 5. *The Big Gold Dream*, New York: Avon Books, 1960. *Tout pour plaire*, Paris: Gallimard, Série Noire, 1959. *The Big Gold Dream*, London: Panther Books, 1968. 6. *All Shot Up*, New York: Avon Books, 1960. *Imbroglia Negro*, Paris: Gallimard, Série Noire, 1960. *All Shot Up*, London: Panther Books, 1969. Himes’s original title was *Don’t Play with Death*. 7. *The Heat’s On*, New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1966. Title changed to *Come Back Charleston Blue*, New York: Berkeley Paperback, 1972. *Ne nous enervons pas*, Paris: Gallimard, Série Noire, 1961, *The Heat’s On*, London: Frederick Muller, 1966; London: Panther Books, 1968. 8. *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1965. *Retoure Afrique*, Paris: Editions Plon, 1964. *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, London: Frederick Muller, 1966; London: Panther Books, 1968. 9. *Blind Man with*

- a Pistol*, New York: William Morrow, 1969; New York: Dell Paperback, retitled *Hot Day, Hot Night*, 1970). *L'Aveugle au pistolet* (Paris: Gallimard, Série Noire, 1969). *Blind Man with a Pistol*, London: Hodder and Staunton, 1969; London: Panther Books, 1971. The detective stories are admirably studied in Stephen F. Milliken, *Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal*, Columbia, Missouri: The Missouri University Press, 1976. See also A. Robert Lee. "Hurts, Absurdities and Violence: The Contrary Dimensions of Chester Himes." *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 12. No. 1, April 1978, 99–114.
37. *Sunday Times*, London, November 9, 1969, 69.
 38. Chester Himes, *Plan B*, Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1993.
 39. Warren Miller, *The Cool World*, New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1959; Shane Stevens, *Go Down Dead*, New York: William Morrow & Company, 1967; Edward Lewis Wallant, *The Pawnbroker*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961.
 40. Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967.
 41. Charles Wright, *The Messenger*, New York: Farrar, Straus, 1963.
 42. William Melvin Kelley, *dem*, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967.
 43. Robert Deane Pharr, *S.R.O.*, New York; Doubleday & Company, 1971. The title refers to a single room occupancy hotel in Harlem.
 44. Claude Brown, *The Children of Ham*, New York: Stein and Day, 1976, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, New York: Macmillan Company, 1965.
 45. Toni Morrison, *Jazz*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.
 46. Rosa Guy, *A Measure of Time*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983.
 47. Darryl Pinckney, *High Cotton*, New York and Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1992, 132–3.
 48. I take the term rumor from Lorca's poem "El Rey de Harlem." The full line reads "Harlem . . . Me llega tu rumor." Most translations read something like "Harlem . . . your murmur comes to me." But rumor in this context conveys a great deal more. It incorporates the notion of energy, vitality, the sweep of human feeling and activity. In this sense it denotes perfectly why Harlem has so appealed to the creative imagination. Darryl Pinckney also makes use of this allusion in *High Cotton*, 132.

Womanisms: The Novel 1860s–1990s

Fiction is of great value to any people as a preserver of manners and customs—religious, political and social. It is a record of growth and development from generation to generation. *No one will do this for us; we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which is dormant in our history.*

Pauline Hopkins, “Preface,” *Contending Forces* (1900)¹

Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression within me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said “On the line!” The Reconstruction said “Get set!”; and the generation before said “Go!” I am on to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it. No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think—to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep.

Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (1928)²

Womanist 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of

mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983)³

The publication of *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*, first issued in 1988 and running to thirty volumes and nearly fifty texts in all, gave timely emphasis to how the variety of woman-authored black literary voice had showed itself from the outset. Proof positive lies in volumes as diverse as Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), the slave-centered *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850), each spirited Civil War and abolitionist entry in the *Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimke* (1838–1914), or an 1890s Woman’s Era egalitarian classic like *A Voice from the South* (1892) by Anna Julia Cooper.⁴

As to novelists the founding tier republished in the library notably includes Frances E. W. Harper (1825–1911), author of *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), who was early to use the phrase “Woman’s Era” in an address to the World’s Congress of Representative Women in Chicago in 1893, and Pauline Hopkins (1859–1930), the prolific Boston-raised author of a formidable output. She not only writes *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900), with its anatomy of internecine black and white family, but of the highly inventive serial fiction she wrote for *Colored Magazine* (1900–1909) like *Hagar’s Daughter* with its webs of racial conspiracy and impersonation in Washington D.C. In *Winona* she portrays anti-slavery black heroism and in *Of One Blood* the near science fiction adventure fantasy of a woman-ruled underground African Lost Empire.⁵

Along with the long unrecovered *Our Nig* (1859) by Harriet E. Wilson (1825–1900), autobiography-as-novel as seems, and the narratives of girlhood and family by Amelia E. Johnson in *Clarence and Corinne; or, God’s Way* (1890) and Emma Dunham Kelley in *Megda* (1891), this body of fiction deservedly earns for their authors the soubriquet of “literary foremothers.”⁶ All of these texts, moreover, in their new availability, add to the succession of African American women’s writing begun as early as the brief but historic “Bars Fight” (1746), by Lucy Terry, slave girl to the Wells family of Deerfield, Massachusetts. Her poem of the “Indian Wars,” a brief memorial piece, remains the first ever known writing by a black American.

Authorship of this vintage supply a missing prologue. As the accounts of each selected novel in this chapter confirms the lineage is un-ignorable. The 1920s New Negro voices of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen give confirmation. Zora Neale Hurston adds her genius for vernacular fable. Subsequent storytelling spans Zora Neale Hurston to Paule Marshall, Dorothy West to Gayl Jones, with Alice Walker and Toni Morrison latterly in front view. “Womanism” has had both a wide lead-in as well as latter-day embrace.

The term invites reflection. For Alice Walker’s way of historicizing the gendered toughness and passed-down wisdom which, from slavery onwards, has underwritten the survival of African American women against the double odds of racism and sexism, has been consequential. The term implies womanhood at once individual yet mutual (the second entry to *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* defines it as “A woman who loves other women sexually and/or non-sexually”). Most relevantly it implies refusal of patriarchal exclusion first from literacy and then from literature itself. One 1960s usage was “Afra-American” to be used as a term for vast experiential savvy accompanied by due sass and wit.

All of these elements play into Walker’s warm, daughterly affiliation with Zora Neale Hurston whose bold spirit has served her as inspiration and model. This holds for Walker’s essay work as much as her fiction. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* serves as manifesto, a working set of definitions, and also an act of affiliation. In “Looking for Zora” (1975), which she reprints, she famously lays claim to being Hurston’s niece. *Warrior Marks* (1993) bears yet further traces of Hurston as an anthropological excursion through African female circumcision into the more inclusive forms of power over black female lives. *The Same River Twice* (1996) exhibits quite Hurston-like feistiness in Walker’s riposte to past criticism of her work, especially the accusation of being “unloyally” negative about black men.⁷

None of this sidesteps black women’s shared experience with black men, or with other women of color. Nor does it evade how American history has worked in matters of class politics or widespread misogyny. But, insistently, there has been the effort to express life idioms unique to black women’s experience. Whether backcountry Dixie or tenement North or even a rising black suburbia, and whether churchwoman, professional, domestic worker, wife-mother or single-mother, Civil Rights veteran or public official, black female life has long found literary voice for its undeniable and unique complexity.

Inevitably there has also been a degree of overlap with the lives of American white women as with other women of color. Given issues of equal rights, work equality and opportunity, homemaking, health or law, could it have been

otherwise? Interracial friendship likewise can in no way be discounted. Al Young's *Who Is Angelina?* (1975), to use a male-authored text, with its black-white companionship of Angelina with Margo Tanaka, and Alice Walker's own *Meridian* (1976), with its Civil Rights-era triangle of black Meridian Hill, white Lynn Rabinovitch and black Truman Held, offer two versions. Walker's personal intimacy with Gloria Steinem, and their important editorial collaborations in *Ms* magazine, adds a further confirmation from life.⁸

Other kinds of overlap, paradoxically as disconnect, rankle. They come about in the remembrance of the power relations from slavery carried down through years of domestic service, through segregated Woman's Era feminism, and through pre-Civil Rights separate but equal practices. American black women have, and have had, every cause to look to their own styles of mothering, daughterdom and sisterhood in a slave shadowed America. Alice Childress's novella, *Rainbow Jordan* (1981), for instance, affectionately explores the black-womanly nurture of a girl abandoned by her own mother yet given enablement by surrogate community mothers. Rosa Guy's lively trilogy of black girlhood, *The Friends* (1973), *Ruby* (1976) and *Edith Jackson* (1978), takes on the complex intergenerational transition from Caribbean motherhood to African American young womanhood. Kristin Hunter's *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (1968), *Boss Cat* (1971) and *Guests in the Promised Land* (1973) offer reminders of black woman-written fiction not only about, but in detail and with obvious affectionate relish for, children.⁹

Jamaica Kinkaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), pitched at the interface of family history and fiction, sensitively excavates an Antiguan American mother and daughter love from "the islands" to the New York mainland. Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1974), on the other hand, the story of a friendship of "two throats and one eye" between Sula Peace and Nel Wright, dramatizes the odd, paired contrast of young womanly disorder and order, a bond of sharing yet disjuncture.¹⁰

If black women have evolved their own recognizable styles of relationship, whether with men or, as siblings, friends or lovers, with other women, that has had its reflection in their literary fiction. Carlene Hatcher Polite's *The Flagellants* (1967) tells one version, a novel configured as the "reeling" colloquy of Ideal and Jimson as a black couple in 1960s Greenwich Village put to examine their own relationship against a backdrop of Civil Rights, Black Power and a changing perception of women's rights. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), with its redemptive same-sex love of Celie and Shug Avery, tells another. Similarly, there are traditions both actual and symbolic of midwifery and womanly herbal and "root" medicine. A virtuoso memory novel like Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988)

echoes *The Tempest* while at the same time delving into these woman-centered rites of conjure and healing as imagined on Willow Springs, an un-owned and half-magical barrier island between South Carolina and Georgia.¹¹

Likewise, the politics of black female identity, whether out of choice or necessity, has for the most part pitched itself at a distance from its white counterpart. That has held from Sojourner Truth's address to the 1851 Akron convention on Women's Rights with its call for equality of black with white women, through the founding of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) in 1894, through each AME, Baptist and other African American women's church group, and on into 1960s and 1970s womanism and black lesbian activism and beyond.

The latter finds its rallying points and beacons in fiction like Audre Lorde's autobiography-novel *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and Ann Allen Shockley's same-sex writing like *Loving Her* (1974), with its portrait of two styles of marriage—Renay's for Terry as one woman for another in the aftermath of her earlier heterosexual liaison with Jerome Lee and which has produced a daughter, Denise, and *Say Jesus and Come to Me* (1982), with its portrait of a gay black woman evangelist.¹²

A more traditional politicized novel, however, is to be met in Kristin Hunter's *The Lakestown Rebellion* (1978). Not only does it redeploy the satiric skills that went into *The Landlord* (1966), Hunter's comedy of zany, racial misunderstanding with its figures of the well intending white landlord Elgar Enders, sexually obsessive Madam Margarita and black con man Eldridge DuBois, but it puts a strong black woman at its very center. Bella Lakes leads a black community's effort to sabotage a highway scheme which will destroy the town. Hunter's novel thereby retraces all the past ways black Americans have tricked, duped and out-talked both their past and present white overseers.¹³

This historic nuance calls into play a special custodianship of "the word," the spectrum of black woman-to-woman spoken intimacy, styles of address ("hey, girl," notably, both in speech or letter writing), slang, namings, story, kitchen talk, stored wisdom, and each show and turn of humor. "Woman's word" finds any number of its own stylings in the novel, rarely more so than in the vibrant folk vernacular of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The competing idioms of Barbadian mother and African American daughter are to be heard in the Brooklyn-based Boyce family saga told in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). Africanist "spirit talk" underwrites the story of Velma Henry's would-be suicide and eventual recovery through a politics of sisterhood and community against a polluting chemical corporation in Toni Cade Bambara's

The Salt Eaters (1980). Even the mobile phone and lunch club gossip features in Terry McMillan's middlebrow "buddy" bestseller of four black women each with their own kind of man trouble in *Waiting to Exhale* (1992).¹⁴

It is a complexity which both shapes and has itself been shaped by a dense black-feminine popular culture of family, religious work, foodways, quilting, choir and other music (spirituals, blues, soul through to pop), and dress styles from dashikis and turbans to the wearing of kente cloth.¹⁵ One expression lies in hair styling as visible self-presentation in the form of Afros, braids, cornrows and, sometimes controversially, wigs and straightened hair. Around Afro-hair, in fact, there has grown a voluminous body of folk and literary imagery. Zora Neale Hurston's figure of the longtressed and lavishly sexual Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) offers one instance. Ntozake Shange's celebration of "your hair" as "the tell-tale sign of living" in her verse-collection *nappy edges* (1972) offers another. Many African American women will speak of talk circles in which one woman family member or friend will groom the hair of another, a sign of mutual affection and sorority.¹⁶

How, then, has this legacy found its imagining in a select dozen or so of the novels, beginning with Harriet Wilson and working through to Toni Morrison? Is not each story distinctive yet, however fugitively, bound into a shared provenance of the literary telling of black women's lives and memory?

The re-finding, and reissue, of *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Everywhere* (1859), to give Harriet E. Wilson's title in its challenging entirety, has aroused a revisionist flurry. By its title alone it calls up a revealing play of signification. "Our Nig" jostles uneasily as mock family affection yet real enough ownership. "Free Black," given the heroine Frado's work life, might be thought bitter parody. Even the "two-story white house" as the symbol of congenial clapboarded Massachusetts, hides cruelty not out of place in any down-South slave plantation.

The text also pushes back by over thirty years the date of the first ever known novel by an African American woman, long taken to be Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), itself then superseded by the re-found Emma Dunham Kelley's *Megda* (1891). It tackles not so much Dixie slavery but, whatever its status as the citadel of abolition, New England's own racial double standards. It invokes racially binaried Christianity, the supposed specter of interracial marriage, child abandonment, black domestic indenture and the generally unwritten capacity of

women for physical violence towards other women. Little wonder the rediscovery caused a stir, a posthumous literary debut as eventful as almost any in American literature.

If *Our Nig* has its admixtures of sentimentality, even tearfulness, that is not to underplay the full nuance of Frado as heroine. First, there is the question of voice. Frado appears to disclose her life in the first person (“by ‘*Our Nig*’”), but folded into the third person (“Enough has been unrolled to enlist your sympathy and aid”), and the whole glossed by Harriet Wilson as author and appellant (“I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life” she says in the Preface).

Is *Our Nig*, accordingly, novel or autobiography, even a Northern “slave narrative”? Whose “own” story is it? It can be Frado’s in first and third person voice. It can be Wilson’s. Even more it can be a kind of simultaneous co-authorship made the more ambiguous by the volume’s designation as “sketches.”

Frado, “beautiful mulatto,” “wild frolicking thing,” an outlaw child on account of her white mother, Mag Smith, and her briefly-known but fond black father, Jim (who subjects “race” to Twainian pastiche in his opposition of “black heart in a white skin” and “white heart in a black skin”), serves throughout as Wilson’s one-off and yet representative black woman’s story. Her identities merge even as they contrast. She has been born a foundling mulatto child. She becomes the New Hampshire bondservant driven to physical depletion in the white Bellmont family and at the hands of the ogre Mrs. Bellmont. She might have been the lover of the dying, religious James Bellmont. In time she becomes the twice over abandoned wife and mother and, eventually, the subsistence bonnet-maker.

As importantly, however, she is obliged to become her own creative alter ego and to fulfill the will to invention expressed in girlhood and school high spirits, games, reading and love of her dog Fido. This author self-typically reveals itself in her observation to the kindly Aunt Abby on the death of the cruel Bellmont daughter, Mary. In a line worthy of a Flannery O’Connor story like “Revelation,” Frado speculates: “Wouldn’t mistress be mad to see her a nigger!” The touch is exquisite, an imagined reversal of skin, womanhood, anticipated religious destiny and, above all, word.

Wilson’s feat, allowing for stock plot devices like orphaning and fever, along with the limits of her plain style, is to put in view a heroine caught to her cost within an American confusion of realms. Class becomes implicated in race as white Yankeeism exploits black domestic servitude. White religion, for all its prompt to abolitionism, also sanctions race contempt as Mrs. Bellmont bears out in her “religion was not meant for niggers.” Black religion speaks to escape from

this world to the next. As Frado's child servitude gives way to her arriving black womanhood, the life she has lived in fear raises its own fear and accusation in Mrs. Belmont and her daughter. Mr. Belmont similarly doubles as head of household yet absentee, his white Christian fatherliness for black Frado always shadow not substance.

Frado, herself, suffers an aloneness which, paradoxically, becomes the very grounds of her own rise to voice. The upshot is that *Our Nig* writes, and in its newfound recovery rewrites, unique portraiture in the form of Wilson's double (even triple) self-authoring. It gives a more faceted literary start than ever might have been anticipated to the novel's ensuing gallery of, and by, African American women.

For all the recent greeting given *Our Nig* it has also been taken to confirm mulattodom as one of the staples of early black women's writing. That arouses old controversies. Tragic or not the mulatto (sometimes given as mulatta) first of all gets rebuked as a sop by black genteel authorship to a largely white readership. The deeper sexual-racial implications of birth, concubinage, flesh, sexual transgression, the "othering" of the biracial female body, are so thought to have remained largely unwritten. Did not most darker-skinned black women face more immediate concerns than those of a narrow and often far from unprivileged caste? Three novels, written in the wake of *Our Nig* between the Woman's Era and the New Negro 1920s century supply grounds for a reconsideration.

"A woman as white as she is a slave?" So Dr. Gresham, white New England abolitionist, doctor, and would-be husband of Iola, speaks of Frances E. W. Harper's beauteous heroine in *Iola Leroy*. His query goes to the core of Iola's history as a life lived within racial contradiction. She is the Creole quadroon daughter who loses her white privilege and is sold as a black slave. In becoming the nurse to Civil War black "Lincoln soldiers" she gives up sexual for religious intensity and the uplift of "the race" in her marriage to the similarly light-black Dr. Latimer. As the seeming "tragic mulatto" she in fact reverses type and enjoys a last, harmonious coming-together with her grandmother, mother, brother and uncle (the valiant soldier ex-slave Robert Jackson) as "the once severed-branches of our family."

Harper sets herself a number of tasks around Iola. Slavery gets its indictments, along with white re-assumption of racial power during Reconstruction. She attacks denial of suffrage to women. Her advocacy of temperance is clear. She also clearly is seeking a route forward for the Talented Tenth elite, hence also Harry Leroy's eventual work with his wife Lucille as a black teacher of black

children in the South. None of this, however, has freed Harper of charges of piety, dismaying earnestness. How, too, now to regard her belief in assimilation? But if idealized, the portrait of Iola does not entirely give in to formula; she is shown to be caught at a turning point of freedom and bondage as much in gender as race. She refuses, throughout, to disguise her mixed-race origins and “live under a shadow of concealment.” If she embodies black gentility, that is not at the expense of her connection back into vernacular and the dialect of field and house ex-slave women like Aunt Linda. Harper can assume more than a touch of the preacher. But in *Iola Leroy* she poses a genuine issue. What role, or as much to the point, what autonomy, is most relevant to African American women of education in America after slavery?

Sappho Clark, around whose life Pauline Hopkins weaves an even more complicated white-black dynastic story in *Contending Forces*, might well be kin to Iola Leroy. In an immediate sense she also personifies ideality, another beautiful Creole made victim of interracial rape and who serves to link antebellum North Carolina into postbellum reformist Boston. In marrying Will Smith, a DuBois-like black philosopher and activist, and through a tangled circuit of disguise and false trails, she finally helps bring together the two family lines of the white Montforts and the black Smiths. Like *Iola Leroy* Hopkins’s novel has taken its knocks as contrivance, supposedly “race” melodrama.

Contending Forces, however, can also be seen to have achieved more. The implications of American slavery as both sexual and cross-racial proving ground are tackled with some boldness (not least the persuasively mean view of the original Mrs. Montfort as “half white nigger” by the family’s plantation neighbor). Black urban and middle-class life as schooling, home, church, “rights” debate and meetings, together with female etiquette and courtship, gets its full rendering in Hopkins’s account of the New England Smith family. But so, too, does sexual assault, rape, the prostitution of black women by white men in Sappho’s “dire hell” of New Orleans and Dixie. All these genuinely entwine as “contending forces.”

Sappho herself may well veer close to angel-like victim, the exemplary mulatto. Yet she also suggests a more richly embodied ambiguity. For in working through each turn of *Contending Forces*, and although Harper ends her novel in a set-piece marriage, Sappho is confronted with a double challenge. She seeks a life both beyond her brute sexual disempowerment and then, having chosen against appearance to be black, beyond the limits of her own racial marking.

Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) takes the mulatto/a paradigm beyond the nineteenth-century. In the figure of Helga Crane, born like her progenitor to a black father and Danish mother, she interiorizes and problematizes this female

experience of mulattodom.¹⁷ The novel has not had an easy passage. Critics regularly condemn it as the not-so-camouflaged racial self-hate of Larsen herself with sexual phobia thrown into the mix. This betrays superficiality, something close to a cartoon of the book. For Larsen's narrative in fact utterly takes charge of Helga's psychological zigzags, each current of exhilaration and depression.

Helga from the outset seeks to appropriate "color" for her own ends. Her fondness for stylishness of dress and decor so obviously at odds with the black-puritan etiquette of Naxos—the Deep-South school where she is located at the start of the novel—gives the clue. The step North into borderline bohemia, both in "teeming black Harlem" and white Manhattan, adds weight. Larsen then faces more profound vacillation between becoming the exotic plaything of her blanched, utterly Scandinavian-white relatives, the Daals, in Copenhagen, and her eventual destiny as wife and acquiescent breedmare to the Rev. Pleasant Green in his fundamentalist and deepest Dixie-black outpost.

Helga's story is far from merely plaintive. Rather, Larsen manages a portrait of credible hysteria, both in Helga's contrasting would-be love affairs with the black James Vayle at Naxos and the white portrait painter Axel Olsen in Denmark. She finds herself caught at the still larger endzones of both black and white worlds. Pursued to her own destructive cost by the inability to be psychologically or emotionally at ease, a state anticipated in her childhood parentlessness and rejection by her Nilssen relatives, Helga collapses into a last and desperate "religious" episode.

Quicksand speaks persuasively of Helga's "bruised spirit," her "suffocation," harlequinry always as equally sexual as racial and the source of a destiny she believes renders her if in appearance beauty then also beast. Larsen, through her, develops headier portraiture than she has been granted. Helga Crane embodies a woman turned inward against herself by a color system which literally has been the making of her yet which she can neither embrace nor escape.

With Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), a wholly changed dispensation enters the reckoning. Oral story become written story. Use of the black folk idiom of Gullah and other Africanisms, Bible phrase, the portrait of free sexuality, and a setting within Florida-Georgia landscapes all help make the novel the equal of Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923).¹⁸ Even more to the point, no black novel better anticipates, nor better confirms, Alice Walker's womanist ethos, as much through its feats of voice as story. The text, and the chronicle it unfolds, meets precisely the life it tells.

“Ah wants to utilize mahself all over.” So Janie, whose history this is, tells Pheoby, her friend in the all-black township Hurston created in the image of her own Eatonville, Florida. The history of Janie’s taking of autonomy assumes a parallel, a rich human ply, of self and saying. In the one circuit she becomes the seasoned veteran of her liaisons with, in turn, the dour, older sharecropper Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, the patriarchal Mayor of “Eatonville,” and finally, the loving gambler-poet Vergible Woods or Tea Cake. In the other she turns her own tongue into a sustained treat of vernacular phrase and image (“she got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to others”).

These interwoven rites of passage Hurston uses to often compelling effect. If her Grandmother thinks “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world,” Janie herself will counter that to perfection. She looks to “the words of the trees and the wind” as poetry to compensate for lovelessness with Killicks. She fights back “with her tongue” against Starks’s requirement of wifely submission (“You’re getting too moufy, Janie”), telling him “we ain’t natural wid one ‘nother” and speaking of their marriage bed as “no longer a daisy-field . . . to play in.”

Above all she thinks of her oneness with Tea Cake (“so you aims tuh partake wid eveything, hunh?” he asks her at the outset). Life with him means bean-picking by the shores of the Seminole-named Lake Okechobee, the blues and dancing to the jukes, the worker community talk and josh, their sheer togetherness (“We ain’t got nothin’ tuh do but do our work “nd come home and love” Tea Cake tells her), even her jealousy of the girl Nunkie. The note bespeaks idyll, a warm, un-coerced and down-home love. She remembers Tea Cake, having caused his death after his rabies-induced dementia, as a figure of imagination and poetry:

Of course he wasn’t dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see. (286)

In all these respects, as again Pheoby observes, “You looks like youse yo’ own daughter.” If once herself destined to be mule, then, emphatically, Janie has become mule owner, mule storyteller.

Janie serves as a gathering point. Her sayings draw from and affirm a diverse, ongoing community of blackness as word (not least in the names of the fellow workers she meets with Tea Cake—Stew Beef. Sop-de-Bottom, Bootyny, Motor Boat). She can witness almost at will to voodoo or legend (“Nature and salt. Dat’s whut makes up strong man lak Big John de Conquer”). She tells her own folk

stories (“sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule”). She becomes a kind of performance poetry in herself (for Joe’s funeral she “starched and ironed her face”). She speaks anthropomorphically of the advent of the Everglades hurricane as “the monstropolous beast,” “HIM-WITH-THE-SQUARE-TOES.” With a nod towards fetish, she adds “Havoc was there with her mouth wide open.” Most of all she reflects Hurston’s own refusal simply to perpetuate piety when Janie hears her new acquaintance, Mrs. Turner, for all her preferred light-over-dark color hierarchy, say of Booker T. Washington “All he ever done was cut de monkey for white folks.”

The “hungry listening” that Janie arouses in Pheoby makes every kind of sense. Hurston’s heroine is feistiness, warmth, ease. Once “back home again” she serves as the very custodian and embodier of the story—*Their Eyes Were Watching God* as at once her own story and that of the local Afro-America about her. Hers, in truth, has been the final rise to her own custodianship, to her own easeful womanism, of both life and word.

Dorothy West holds an important cross-generational place in black literary history. A Boston-raised veteran of the Harlem Renaissance (she was close to Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Paul and Eslanda Robeson, Zora Neale Hurston and, especially, Countee Cullen), and founder of the journal *Challenge* (later *New Challenge*), she continued to write into the 1990s. Her novel, *The Wedding*, and story collection, *The Richer, the Poorer*, though both largely completed earlier, saw publication in 1995. *The Living Is Easy* (1948) thus stands midway between the 1920s and post-World War II authorship, the portrait of the redoubtable Cleo Jericho Judson yet, at the same time, a detailed geography of caste and class and sited where Boston’s black South End reaches into white Brookline.¹⁹ The frequent charge against West has been that her vaunted “Old Colored Families” scenario in *The Living Is Easy* offers too rarefied, or partial, an aspect of African American life. Yet there has always remained more to be said.

In Cleo she tells the dynastic story of a black South Carolinian childhood, a Boston wifedom to Bart Judson—the self-made fruit importer twenty years her senior—and the life of a woman among a woman’s clan. Her challenge also is to negotiate the fierce, manipulative route into would-be class quality with white Boston matriarchy. West opens her story to a spectrum which embraces WASP, Irish and Scandinavian as well as “colored” New England.

“Nobody can’t never catch me” says Cleo in childhood, and, for the most part, so at first it proves. But if her finagling initially wins through, it also costs her sisters their happiness and her husband (“Mister Nigger” as she calls him) his “King of Bananas” business. West invests Cleo with ambiguity, the black woman

of strength pledged to outmaneuver or match white privilege yet the climber who wins only to lose. Cleo's also story acts as a center for others.

A subplot of "white" upper-crust Boston marriage is shown to be shadowed by unacknowledged hidden families of color and of abortion. The pauper death of her father and her brother-in-law's rigged trial and escape from a white Dixie conspiracy add a dynastic thread. Given the eventual household of children, the story points, again ambiguously, to the prospects for a next Boston generation of mixed black and white lineage. West's best feat, however, lies in having embodied in Cleo black caste as at once a war for, and yet always against, itself.

Gwendolyn Brooks's title figure in *Maud Martha* (1953) inhabits a wholly opposite social order, that of 1930s and immediate postwar black working class Chicago, the South Side as "Bronzeville."²⁰ Though not short on length, this imagistic telling of girlhood to womanhood gives an impression of miniaturism, a cycle of vignettes each pitched to intersect and contrast. In this, Brooks's novel does justice to Maud Martha's life as everyday yet singular, full of other people's voice yet also, almost quizzically, her own.

It is unmistakably a poet's novel, seamed in images ("What she liked was candy buttons, and books, and painted music (deep blue, or delicate silver) and the west sky," reads the opening). Inner sensation plays against an outwardly moribund life of marriage, domestic work and motherhood. Brooks conveys Maud Martha's early aspirations, appropriately, as a kind of prose lyric:

What she wanted was to donate to the world a good Maud Martha. That was the offering, the bit of art, that could not come from any other.

She would polish and hone that.²¹

The novel assumes virtually all its bearings in this manner. In childhood Maud Martha gives herself to fantasy over fact at the sight of an escaped gorilla, relish of food like sweet potato pie, and reaction to the abrupt, incomprehensible hospital death of her grandmother Ernestine. Girlhood becomes an excitement of boys, the Chicago *Defender* newspaper, fashion, her own as against her sister Helen's hair, her first beaux, and "New York" as advertised in the razzamatazz of a Michigan Avenue store. She reaches eighteen awaiting the world to "caress her." Marriage to Paul leads into a spare Depression-era kitchenette, dreamed-of happiness veering into dismay. Each venture into white Chicago emphasizes the contrast. But she does manage to relish hearing Ellington on the radio, an occasional ballroom night out, and even the fraught birth of her daughter Paulette.

As in the poetry of *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), Brooks catches memorably the pitch of Maud Martha's fellow kitchenette tenants. She alights with a deft touch on the world of hair and manicure. Domestic service on the North Side comes over in detail. There are the subsequent children, black press reports of Georgia and Mississippi lynchings, and the sense of an era closing with the return from World War II of her brother Harry. Maud Martha's own commitment to creativity and life ensures the novel does not end on a mere downward turn. Maud Martha, Maud, Maudie, ponders and celebrates with an unself-aware poet's touch the still active call of her own powers of imagining ("the weather was bidding her bon voyage").

In *Jubilee* (1966), Margaret Walker's black counter-story to *Gone with the Wind*, the mode becomes popular history romance.²² A would-be slave epic, it has its center in the life and survival of Vyry, offspring of Dixiecrat white owner and bonded black mother. House servant until the end of the Civil War, eventual matriarch replete in spoken Christian faith and family, and, depending on how a slave marriage is construed, she becomes unwitting bigamist with Randall Ware, her "Free Negro" blacksmith husband, and Innis Brown, her loyal black homesteader. Each of these incarnations give the novel its momentum.

For all its canvas of antebellum to Reconstruction, or its slaveholding detail, *Jubilee* runs awkwardly close to formula. That involves the Gothic, ghostly decline into madness of the white Dutton plantation family in the form of "Big Missie" and "Miss Lillian." The poor-white overseer, Grimes, re-enacts Harriet Beecher Stowe's Simon Legree. The magnolia myth of the Confederacy contrasts with the wearing trek through small town and rural Dixie of Vyry and her clan in the aftermath of the Fall of Atlanta. Vyry herself, however, invites inspection.

Walker has been eloquent about how Margaret Duggans Ware Brown, her own great-grandmother, served as a model, and in this aspect, undoubtedly, there presides a truth to history.²³ This is evident in the clannish, black-womanly protection of Vyry. She is kept safe from sexual vulnerability in girlhood, as well as in her domestic servitude. Her life in the quarters and Big House and her paradoxical loyalty to Miss Lillian in part depends on having older black women there to help her. She learns from others how best to mother her own offspring Jim, Minna and Harry. Old time bible Christianity becomes her calling, not least when she becomes the appalled witness to the hanging of two alleged women murderers.

On occasion a nicely complicating vernacular snap of anger adds its weight, as when the hardworking Innis Brown criticizes Vyry for seeking to take Jim,

her son by Ware, off the land and into college—"I knows your kind of dicty Big House Miss Ann's nigger servants." Whatever the flatness of *Jubilee's* general telling, here, as occasionally elsewhere in the novel, life underwrites fiction. A figure from actual slave time is to be glimpsed, albeit fugitively, behind the page's imagined Georgia former slave-woman who presides at the close of the novel.

Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) both tells, and itself assumes the design of, a blues. Few woman-authored black novels have been more willing to portray the black female body under historic male ownership as slave thing, reduction to a fleshly orifice. This history finds its embodiment in Ursa Corregidora, singer of Bracktown, Kentucky, who as much carries about her as narrates an ancestry bequeathed from the original Corregidora, the Brazilian-Portuguese *mestizo* slaver whose monstrous sexual rule is at once deadly yet also for his descendant a near masochistic bewitchment.²⁴

Ursa's sexual damage—she has her womb removed after a stairway fall at the hands of her husband Mutt Johnson—casts a dire, ironic shadow over the inherited slave injunction to "make generations" and so give continuing witness. Even the brief love affair with Tadpole, owner of Happy's, the cafe-club in which she sings, leads to his betrayal with a younger woman. That Ursa realizes, finally, how Great Gram acted in revenge for all four generations by orally dismembering Corregidora. First that has been Great Gram herself, then Grandmother and Mama, each prostituted by, and the latter two fathered by, Corregidora. Her return to Mutt, un-wombed yet still sexually alive, brings the novel to a bittersweet point of rest.

It is this story that Jones has Ursa, a woman in her forties writing from the 1960s, embody within the accusing riffs and cadence of the blues she sings, a shrewdly well-aimed and darkly reflexive touch. In its dialogues of memory *Corregidora* offers a portrait of black womanhood given to hurt, and with it to anger, yet also, in Ursa's slow, reluctant healing, and however provisionally, to self-repossession.

Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) links the Afro-America of Dixie, Harlem, Brooklyn and suburban North White Plains into an "African" Caribbean.²⁵ It might as much be thought meditation as chronicle, the life of Avey Johnson, its black matronly heroine, as a past and yet a rebirth through her encounter with the Africanist remembrance, patois and worship-ritual of tropical Carriacou

island. Marshall tells essentially an odyssey in kind with Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," a reference to whose lines of imagery Avey calls up from childhood. The "Carriacou Excursion" becomes a route into her necessary re-centering. The novel's feats are several, not least its assured, engagingly paced telling of Avey's history as a blend of memory and ongoing event. The middleclass widowhood which takes her with her friends, Thomasina Moore and Clarice, on their annual Caribbean cruise nicely captures a life, its accoutrements of dress, pearls, luggage and cabin all in place, at rest, and yet not. Her suburban gentrification becomes, first, a source of vague inward, alimentary discontent, and then, physical bodily rejection and disgorgement ("her entire insides erupted").

Avey's remembrance of life with her husband Jay, Jerome Johnson, and Jay's dire, heroic struggle into self-sufficiency as accountant, can call up fond sexual intimacy—the two of them dancing at home to "Flying Home" or "Cotton Tail" and their sexual talk and lovemaking—yet also a marriage's deadening compromise. Similarly, Avey's mothering of her daughters, Sis, Annawilda and Marion, carries love yet also discontent at a body gnawed by childbirth and childrearing. In thinking back, lyrically, to her aged kinswoman, Great Aunt Cuney, of Tatem Island, South Carolina, however, she acquires a first inkling of the larger history which has gone into her dynastic making. She gets another glimmering through the black church community's "ring shouts" and the island's "Ibo Landing" where enchained slave ancestors were brought ashore. These increasingly resonate for Avey, her full name Avatara, in her role as child, wife, mother and widow, each, as Marshall renders them, stations for the older, fuller understanding of her identity.

This realization is achieved for Avey at the "out-island" of Carriacou, under the guidance of the Grenada grog-shop owner Lebert Joseph and his daughter Rosalie Parvay. First she experiences a cleansing and rest, then a night-time journey into the island, and, finally, a summoned black history in the names ("euphoni-ous" and "lyrical") and the "nation dances" of peoples known as Temne, Banda, Arada, Moko, Congo or Cromanti. She finds herself invited back into her own history, its languages, dances, echoes, beliefs, dreams, in all the freeing rebuttal of any anonymous past Africa.

As she takes part in the circle of the "Beg Pardon" and "Juba" (in the novel's phrase "sublime memories"), she comes to see this past as having lain within and tacitly shaped, every Harlem ragtime of her girlhood, every fiber of her own "educated" black speech. In Avey's quest for a forgotten axis to her black womanhood, *Praisesong for the Widow* does justice to her passage back, as her passage forward, a life story in all senses told as Paule Marshall's close-spun fable of awakening.

To the Spirit:

Without whose assistance
Neither this book
Nor I Would have been
Written.

I thank everybody in this book for coming.
A.W., author and medium.

Both Alice Walker's dedication, and her brief epilogue of thanks (wry, a writer-hostess's politeness), do precise service in *The Color Purple* (1982). Celie's story gives every reason to be thought the summoning of spirits, unanswered petitions finally answered. Each of the letters, Celie's to God, then to her sister Nettie, and Nettie's in return from her missionary life in West Africa, serve as story vignettes and life-panels. They reveal a kind of modern African American rescue narrative, Celie's restoration from the shadow of child rape and unremitting domestic abuse, into the visible evidence of her own un-silencing.

The letters, first hidden by Celie's husband, Albert, then recovered with the aid of the magical, generously sexual singer and artist Shug Avery (typically, in her red dress, Albert's "Queen Honeybee") become, across the thirty year separation of the sisters, messages both from, and into, history. Celie embodies, at one and the same time, a first ancestry of African diaspora, a past of almost un-gendering sexual ravage (to which she responds with "Most times mens look pretty much alike to me"), and, eventually, a "present" of her own homemaking, and power of word, inside the Georgia which once allowed her no more than a life at the margins.

That the novel gives drama, a vernacular human nuance, to womanism, lies behind the 1983 Pulitzer Prize and the Whoopie Goldberg/Spielberg screen triumph. For Walker's storytelling shows its verve at every turn. The easeful, mutual sexuality which binds Celie to Shug not only through their bodies, but through their shared quilting, makes a perfect restorative. The very genitalia which once signified to Celie only pain, and all too early motherhood, she is encouraged by Shug to re-see as the source of health and pleasure. Albert's hate, in succession to Celie's stepfather's, so meets an opposite and enhancing order of sexuality ("Shug says, 'Us each other's peoples now', and kiss me").

The startling letter-declaration from Nettie, "I love you I am not dead," plays directly to Celie's own eventual "I'm pore. I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook . . . but I'm here." Backcountry Georgia, once only grief to Celie, in turn becomes a refuge. Those involved include Harpo and his pugilistic wife, Sophia,

and their tavernish, blues and dance “jook” world, Jack and Odessa who raise Sophia’s children, the singer Mary Agnes (“Squeak”), and Shug back from adventuring with beaux like Grady and Germaine. It acts, too, as an Afro-America finally twinned with Nettie’s African-Olinka village, the one connecting culture for which Celie’s children, Adam and Olivia, act as living Atlantic linkage.

When Celie speaks back to Albert, with the assurance of her own clothes design business with its Penelope association of tapestry and weave and the house soon to follow, she might well call up a voice from Zora Neale Hurston: “You a lowdown dog is what’s wrong . . . It’s time to leave and enter Creation. And your body just the welcome mat I need.” Only in her self-restitution and voicing, and amid women who love her, will Celie also be able to say of a penitent Albert, “He ain’t Shug, but he begin to be somebody I can talk to.”

Her last letter, with its embrace of “God, trees, skies, peoples, everything,” confirms a Celie far from un-forgetting of inherited pain yet, at last, the maker of her life. She has evolved into the subject not object of each verb which once enclosed her. Walker has her ponder in this enhancing new black womanhood, her own, and that of the women about her, the prospect of a returned “family” of equals. In a perfect about-face image of time, Celie sees all of them as “old,” and yet, “the youngest us ever felt.”

The sheer gravitas of Toni Morrison’s subject in *Beloved* (1987)—Sethe’s throat-cutting of her infant child “Beloved” to save her from a life of Kentucky enslavement—might have run all kinds of narrative risk. Would not this be too plaintive, Gothicism? In the event, this far from becomes the case, as tact is but one part in the spectacular virtuosity of the novel.²⁶ “Ohio 1873,” and the haunted “124” of Bluestone Road just outside Cincinnati, serve to perfection as local time and setting for a story full and vivid, in actual-seeming, yet also visionary, given to the signs and wonders of the slavery encrypted on the novel’s post-title page as “Sixty Million and more.”

Through the dense narrative of the lives of Sethe, her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, her daughter Denver, and the implacable Beloved, at once incubus and succubus, *Beloved* unravels women caught in a slave web so murderous and ravening that it threatens any sense of quiet or balance for all subsequent black history. Nor does this underplay Beloved’s vampirism of the returnee figure of Paul D., slave friend of Sethe’s husband Halle from the Granger plantation and Sethe’s eventual lover. This is slavery told as “ghost company,” “red baby blood,” Sethe’s “serious work of beating back the past.” Her own back bears whip scars resembling

a chokeberry tree as though to imply a slave past at risk always of overwhelming the present.

“Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” says the “holy” Baby Suggs at the outset. Nowhere is this truer than in “124.” First it draws to itself Beloved, martyred lost child and chimera. She exists as daughter legatee of Sethe’s body (despite Sethe’s belief that “what she had done was right because it came from true love”), the drainer of Paul’s semen, the exploiter of Denver’s will to sisterhood, and above all, the playful yet ever hungered claimant to life. As Sethe becomes “worn down, speckled, dying, spinning” Beloved demands mothering (although at one point she herself appears as mother to Sethe), a sexual destiny (she so taunts Paul), even a large, swollen pregnancy, and ever her own inerasable right of presence.

In her lies the still larger haunting. How else can we construe Baby Suggs’s refusal to risk loving her children in the knowledge of their pending sale? How else can we imagine Sethe’s own feeling as “mossytoothed” white boys drain her of her breast milk in a barn and all of it witnessed by Halle and the cause of his unhingement? Is not “rape” given a more inclusive resonance than its usual gendering in Paul D.’s memory of how he, and fellow black male prisoners, have been required each morning to fellate their white guards? Is not, above all, the handsaw killing of Beloved, Sethe’s traumatic act of love to avoid a daughter’s “dirtying,” an impossible remembrance, a “haint”? Even the exorcism of Beloved, as led by Ella and the townswomen, calls up Ella’s own haunting father-and-son rape. “The lowest yet” she calls it.

As *Beloved* closes, so, in a quite necessary way, it leaves its many implications open. Beloved has moved on from Sethe, from Denver, from Ella, from Paul D., as though she embodies too great a burden for any single consciousness. Yet she remains, communally, in history, as “footprints,” “water,” “winds in the leaves,” and “spring ice.” In Morrison’s inspired fashioning she signifies slavery’s ghost-child, its unresting anima.

Wilson to Walker, Hurston to Morrison. “Womanism” throughout has found its own stirring litany of voice in the novel. Still later signatures arise as in stylish Haitian American storytelling like Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1995) and *Krik? Krak!* (1996) or A. J. Verdelle’s *The Good Negress* (1995) with its intimate play of two black dispensations of inner city Detroit and rural Virginia.²⁷ They, and the literary company they keep, give continuity, ongoing energy and sweep of implication, to the phrase “written by herself.” For in them womanist authorship and authorings looks from a shared past into a shared future.

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Richard Wright's Inside Narratives

All my life had shaped me for realism, the naturalism of the modern novel, and I could not read enough of them.

Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (1945)¹

I picked up a pencil and held it over a sheet of white paper, but my feelings stood in the way of my words. Well, I would wait, day and night, until I knew what I wanted to say. Humbly now, with no vaulting dream of achieving a vast unity, I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and the world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal.

Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (1977)²

If something of a high flourish with which to round out each of his two volumes of autobiography, neither of these observations should detract from Richard Wright's more consequential purpose: the momentousness, as he saw it, of his call to a literary career. A life "shaped for realism," and then itself resolved "to build a bridge of words between me and the world outside," invokes both an authorial past and its still to be unfolded future, a sense of personal history and yet as he looks back also a working credo. But it is the term "unreal" which most of all carries import, a crucial, often overlooked, index to the writer he would actually become.

Wright's first observation, easily misconstrued, points less to the kind of fiction he himself would eventually write than to the liberating shock of recognition he experienced on reading the likes of Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, William Dean Howells and the busy, inaugural current of American literary realism. For in their different anatomies of America he saw not exactly the mirror of his own life. How could any of them have written with authority of a black Southern boyhood lived hard against the color line and under permanent threat of white racist violence? Rather his existence had been that of a racial power web likely to damage, if not actually consume, the individual.

The second observation arises out of Wright's 1930s Depression and Chicago years, the era of his brief membership of and departure from the American Communist Party which (together with his increasing disenchantment with America and subsequent FBI and State Department harassment) led to his permanent European exile in 1947. His sense of elation on opting out of the Party's *dicta*, even though it had helped him towards what then seemed a credible ideology of racelessness and anti-capitalism, almost exactly parallels the sense of self-possibility he reports in *Black Boy* on leaving the Dixie South for his own migration northwards.

To "build a bridge of words" between himself and America, and then worlds beyond, for a veteran of Mississippi-style racial custom and, if briefly, a former CPUSA (Communist Party USA) sympathizer, in the light of that background must indeed have seemed an "unreal" notion. For in claiming the right to use words to his own design Wright not only gave notice of his chosen path as a writer, he also affirmed that he intended nothing less than to take on, and to beat at its own literary game, a white-run proprietary world accustomed as if by right to doing most of the defining of reality.

To emphasize Wright's passage into authorship, his belief in writing as a crucial liberating and existential rite, moreover, is to imply a great deal about his fiction itself. Although he was held to be a "committed" writer, he never in fact wrote to any single protocol, assuredly influenced by Marxism and later Sartreanism and Freudianism but keeping always his own imaginative distance. The praise for *Native Son* (1940), the novel which most established his name, however welcome to him in a general sense must also have been inadequate. Were not review comments pronouncing him America's first "Negro protest writer," its "black Dreiser," the custodial voice of "black anger" always far too reductive?³

For though Wright frequently assumed a departure point of deep abiding dissent, a personally endured bitter intimacy with American racial hypocrisies, this kind of phraseology, well intended or not, ultimately proves diversionary,

even unhelpful. Among other deficits, it has locked a whole tradition of African American writing into too diagrammatic a series of oppositions, namely black protest against white oppression, ethnic against mainstream. He especially saw that “protest” could give validation, intended or not, to the very terms of the racial ascendancy and subordination it sought to challenge.

In all these respects, and like Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin after him, Wright can be found insisting that binary versions of race would not take him or his reader very far. Some anger might get ventilated. Black grievances might or might not win a sympathetic hearing, especially where white liberal guilt was involved. But more elusive racial complexities, the sexual and psychological components, built-in taboos, alternations of offense and defense, the utter constructedness of “race” (as against culture) would in almost all respects get bypassed. Fiction especially risked being rendered down into sociology, documentary or treatise rather than worlds taken from life and then given their own imagining.

Wright's grasp of complexity, his own as much as the world's, has still rarely won sufficient notice. Throughout the Depression years and even into the 1940s he was almost by rote taken to reflect the Communist Party view that Marxism pointed a way supposedly beyond race and towards the holistic view of history he calls the “vast unity” in *American Hunger*. Then, during the Eisenhower 1950s, and as an expatriate in Paris, he frequently found himself castigated as some kind of ungrateful anti-American voice in league with an intellectual class still enamored of Soviet Russia and unacceptably out of sorts with America's predilection for domestic-suburban consensus at home and the Cold War abroad. In the 1960s, even as he held sway as dean of Paris's expatriate African American colony, the generation raised on Civil Rights, Selma, Watts, or the rhetoric of Malcolm X or the Panthers, seized on him as a standard bearer of either-or black militancy. In this he was to be set off against assumedly acquiescent “native sons” like a “conservative” Ellison, a gay Baldwin or a non-violent Martin Luther King who had sometimes meanly been jibed at as Martin Luther Queen.

None of these versions, however vivid or summary, in fact gives anything like Wright's overall measure. But, to one degree or another, they have persisted. His “bridge of words,” for instance, is taken to imply some kind of generic or at least Dreiserian standard of realism-naturalism. Marxist interpretation, taking a cue from *New Masses*, with Adorno and Gramsci increasingly brought into the reckoning, continues to see Wright as a proponent of materialist history and, thereby, Afro-America's equivalent of Mike Gold or John Reed. There has been Freudian Wright, not least under French auspices like that of his most assiduous

biographer, Michel Fabre, who considers Wright, whatever his creative self-command also shadowed by split, sexual demons, regressive hates and compensations.

The 1960s delivered yet another version, that of the Black Aesthetic view of Wright. The author of *Native Son* and volumes like *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) and *The Color Curtain* (1956) was to be heard as the voice of a separatist black consciousness and value bent upon resistance to prying or appropriative white eyes.⁴ Wright himself, in fact, nowhere argues for an exclusionist ideology of this or any other kind, which is not to fail to acknowledge that this ideological blackness did not play its key part in repositioning Wright at the forefront of African American literary achievement.

Few in the Black Aesthetic camp can be said to have taken on Wright's own considerable eclecticism. Could the southern-born "Black Boy," for instance, so utterly possessed of black cultural legacy, not also be considered an existentialist author whose imaginative cues equally derive from Heidegger, Dostoevsky and Kafka or, in American literature, from Poe, Hawthorne and Melville? Wright's ambivalences about pan-Africanism and global notions of blackness equally remain to be sifted, not to mention his estimate of his own partly welcome, partly unwelcome, position as a black exile in still-colonialist France under the patronage of Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and the circle of *Les Temps Modernes*.

These factors yield no single settled picture, rather a Wright of competing shifts and turns and in which to take one or another part for the whole is simply to sponsor, and then perpetuate, distortion. The same holds true for each of the writings. There is a paradox in the deceptive clarity of Wright's work, the ease of access tempting the incautious into too ready a final version both of the man and his word. For an author on occasion taken to lack the finish of, say, Hemingway or Fitzgerald, or, among black authors, of Ellison, Herman Melville's drily sage observation in *Moby-Dick* offers just the right cautionary note: "I have ever found your plain things the knottiest of all."⁵

Loosening Wright and his fiction from these interconnecting biographical, ideological and literary-critical myths becomes even more difficult in the light of the role he was called upon to play for other African American writers. First, there is the question of his vaunted school, novels like Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) with its wartime ship industry of California as scenario for a race and sex episode, or Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), with its Harlem rules of female sexual survival and odds, or Alden Bland's *Behold a Cry* (1947), which looks back to the World War I Chicago race riots, or Willard Motley's *Knock On Any Door*

(1947), the supposedly “raceless” novel of cided vice, drugs, murder and state execution.⁶

At a slightly later remove the line extends, notably, into the fiction of John A. Williams, above all his early work like *The Angry Ones* (1960), based largely on Williams’s experience of the publishing world and its besetting codes of racism, *Night Song* (1961), loosely a version of the life and musical genius of “Bird,” Charlie Parker, and *Sissie* (1963), the story of two black siblings, the sister a singer based in Europe, the brother a playwright, and their sense of black family and kin. John O. Killens was frequently came into the frame, whether in *Youngblood* (1954), a pre-Civil Rights, liberal-accommodationist story set in the Georgia of his origins, or in *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1963), the 1940s wartime story of a black Georgia regiment drawn into a vicious race fight with white GIs in allied Australia.⁷

Other fiction, each at its chosen angle, enters this kind of list. William Gardner Smith’s *Last of the Conquerors* (1948) gives ironic titling to his story of black army experience in Occupied Germany. Lloyd L. Brown’s *Iron City* (1951) makes consciously Marxist fare of proletarian prison drama. Julian Mayfield’s *The Hit* (1957) depicts the world of Harlem numbers told as the black community dream of a once in a lifetime gambling success. Herbert Simmons’s *Corner Boy* (1957) has its locale in St. Louis, Missouri, a ghetto and drugs nether world which traps its hero into a wrongful prison conviction. In *Man Walking on Eggshells* (1962) he explores the life of a street-wise jazzman who forgoes his music for political militancy.⁸

However markedly different in interests and manner, all of these writers have been gathered into the fold of Wrightian realism, of “Negro protest,” worn as is the phrase. Nor can theirs be thought the only kind of eventual Wright legacy. There may be yet another, to be seen in the writing of Ralph Ellison, then Ishmael Reed, Leon Forrest and their contemporaries, and which puts black fiction under modernist and even postmodern auspices in circling its own procedures in kind with, say, that of John Barth or Donald Barthelme.

That Wright, whether during the Chicago and *New Masses* 1930s, or as the presiding resident of the Paris black literary colony, or as the eventual student of the pan-African black Third World, did exert an extraordinary influence is not doubted. “Wrightian,” if it proposed no one single program, was taken justifiably to signify a militancy of consciousness, theme, image. But to credit him with exerting a custodial influence over writers as conspicuously individual as Chester Himes or Ann Petry, James Baldwin or Ralph Ellison, amounts to yet another misreading, a skewering of the imaginative facts.

Himes's relationship with Wright, for example, especially as set out in *The Quality of Hurt* (1972) and *My Life of Absurdity* (1976), pays a far more complicated tribute to his fellow-exile than that of the disciple.⁹ He loved, yet found himself frequently warring against, Wright, drawn to his apparent ease inside French intellectual life yet as often suspicious of the black spokesman status, the egotism. As to influence, the gallows humor and laconicism of his thrillers if nothing else bespeaks a massively different creative temperament.

James Baldwin represents a similar subtlety of influence and response. The two Baldwin essays which most apply, "Many Thousands Gone" (1951) and "Alas, Poor Richard" (1961), in all their stylish self-disaffiliation from Wright, need to be decoded also as acts of the most especial intimacy, a freedom sought as much from Wright's hold on the white world's version of American blackness as from Baldwin himself.¹⁰ Ralph Ellison, for his part, gives equally contrary witness. In "Richard Wright's Blues" (1945) and his subsequent "The World and the Jug" (1964), he speaks of simply "stepping round" Wright, perhaps understandably the remark of the creator of a novel so eclectic and inventively multivocal as *Invisible Man* (1952).¹¹

Yet just as *Invisible Man* transforms for its own purposes the many backward glances to Dostoevsky, Melville, Poe, Joyce, Malraux and the other figures Ellison mentions as influences in *Shadow and Act* (1964) and in several interviews, so it calls up Richard Wright as the author of the adroitly subterranean narrative of identity and revelation "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1945). In "Remembering Richard Wright" (1971) he offers a still later bead, Wright as "sometimes too passionate," too message-laden at the expense of more textured narrative. That is not to say he fails to recognize a role-model of unyielding black ambition. Ellison's terms aptly cite another kind of black fighter and long-time breaker of barriers: "In him we had for the first time a Negro American writer as randy, as courageous, and as irrepressible as Jack Johnson."¹²

The saga of Wright as assumed black literary touchstone continues most dramatically into the 1960s in Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968). In "Notes of a Native Son" he uses the begetter of *Native Son*—"the Richard Wright [who] reigns supreme for his profound political, economic, and social reference"—to berate James Baldwin as the incarnation not only of sexual but political feminization, ever willingly knee-bent to the white man in a damning two-way sense.¹³ But Cleaver's admiration of Wright as the tough heterosexual black warrior, and condemnation of Baldwin as the castratus and hater of his own blackness, however eye-catching, again gives far less than the whole case. With understandable cause Cleaver might have been seeking a mythology suited to the polemical needs of the

Black Panther challenge to America—the call to African Americans to cease being the compliant and all too literal prisoners of a history begun in slavery and continued in the nation's ghettos and penitentiaries. But a mythology is what it was, and remains, and far from encompasses the full resonance of *either* Wright or Baldwin.

From another angle there has been the Wright of John A. Williams. In his fast moving political-existentialist thriller, *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), Wright exists clearly as the begetting presence behind the protagonist, Harry Ames, whose canny yet sacrificial black legacy is offered as one of necessary vigilance against destruction by white power interests. Williams's depiction of Ames as the victim of FBI and CIA machinations working in some kind of harness with various white supremacist groups in turn points forward to the Richard Wright revealed in Addison Gayle's *Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son* (1980), a piece of excavation (however dully written) to complement Michel Fabre's standard biography, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (1973).¹⁴

By gaining access to most of Wright's government files under the Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts of 1966 and 1974 Gayle shows how Wright suffered both McCarthyist redbaiting and, thereafter, continued government surveillance. The rumor still persists in some Paris and black circles that his death of a heart attack did not come about by natural causes. Gayle's account, in line with his prior Black Aesthetic ethos, assumes a stance that only a black biographer and critic with the right blackness of outlook (however sympathetic a white Parisian biographer like Michel Fabre) could understand Wright's place within an America "racial" to its historical core. In John A. Williams's *The Most Native of Sons* (1970), however, a biography for children, Wright becomes a figure of tenderness, a writer against the odds but, throughout, a caring father and husband.¹⁵

A later entry into Wright biography came with Margaret Walker's *Richard Wright: Daemoniac Genius* (1988), depicting a fellow Southerner, Depression-era Chicagoan and novelist.¹⁶ From her early meeting with Wright at the South Side Writers Group in the mid-1930s, she both drew inspiration from him and helped in supplying material from the Robert Nixon case on which he based parts of *Native Son*. The Wright she portrays is one who carried at no small cost the psychic freight of Dixie into adulthood yet, at the same time, was able to use it as the wellspring for his best writing.

Realist, naturalist, black protest writer. These have been repeated terms in the critical lexicon for Wright as literary figure. Not the least part of their inadequacy lies in the fact that Wright, in a quite different way, does link to his successors, but, to put things minimally, as the "realist" of quite another styling. Ellison again features in this respect, *Invisible Man* as Wrightian in its ostensible underground

theme but a text in which hallucination, the reflexive, become equally main levers. Nor does Ellison hold back on the trope whereby the inscriptive black on white of writing interfolds with how Afro-America has “written” its presence upon America’s historical page.

Chester Himes can be brought to bear in similar terms, the Harlem of a novel like *The Primitive* (1955) seen through a weekend miasma of drink and exhaustion or the Coffin Ed/Grave Digger Jones *romans policiers* as quite magical shadow-territory. Hyper-realism, the real teetering over an edge into the unreal, holds for Hal Bennett’s violent, drug-centered *Lord of the High Places* (1971).¹⁷ These and like dispensations, not customarily granted to Wright, especially add perspective: realism, if such it be, given to covering, even subverting, its own traces. In this the half-title of Melville’s *Billy Budd* does relevant service, that of “inside narrative.”¹⁸

For in line with the myths and counter-myths which have enclosed Wright’s fiction, so, too, they have enclosed the man. This can be the “Richard” he himself invents in *Black Boy* and *American Hunger* and deftly perpetuates in reportage like *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956) and *Pagan Spain* (1957). Similarly, and on the evidence of his contribution to *The God that Failed* (1949) he can be the half-in, half-out, Chicago Marxist. In Greenwich Village he assumes the reputation of New York personality and author of *Native Son*. Still later there is the Paris expatriate and observer of post-coloniality and the Third World.¹⁹

It may well be that Wright, man and oeuvre, have become irrecoverably fixed inside one or another of the customary versions. From the 1940s through to the Civil Rights era, Wright is taken to operate as the simply inveterate, and so heroic, bequeather of black militant testament untainted by the siren calls of modernism. But however congenial the brevity or politics of this view, it amounts to no more than the easy option, a reduction of the Wright always and from the outset altogether more elusive in racial and every other kind of complication. Fortunately, as a first counter step, one can again profitably turn to Wright’s account of things, his own working terms of reference.

The kind of writer Wright believed himself to be is nowhere better signaled than in his celebrated Preface to *Native Son*, “How Bigger Was Born.”²⁰ He insists on his inclination to see in black history not only a literal past scarred by oppression and survival, defeat and gain, but an inward drama remembered within the collective African American psyche and echoed in blues and black oral tradition. The last paragraph of “How Bigger Was Born” especially insists on this kind of inheritance:

we have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough to appease the spiritual hunger of even a James; and we have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him. (xxxiv)

In so claiming James, Hawthorne and Poe as fellow spirits (an essay like “The Literature of the Negro in the United States” which avers that “the Negro is America’s metaphor” shows how conscious he was of *black* literary tradition)²¹, he points precisely to his own species of inside narrative. Wright as realist may have become the received wisdom, but again rarely has it said anything like enough.

In this respect, the stories collected in *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938) and *Eight Men* (1961) especially offer bearings, each on the surface circumstantial but at the same time subtly parabolic, glimpses into both the white and black collective psyche.²² This dual-purpose telling is encountered at the outset of “Big Boy Leaves Home,” the first of the tales in *Uncle Tom’s Children*. Contemplating the events which have left his friends Lester, Buck and Bobo dead and himself a terrified northwards-bound fugitive from Dixie lynch law, Big Boy observes, “It all seemed unreal now.” On the surface the story appears to offer a straightforward episode of Southern racist violence, the account of four black boys whose swim at a summer water hole leads on to death and flight. But the story’s virtual every detail activates far more ancestral resonances from deep within Southern racial history. These signal the rites whereby black manhood is killed or at least mutilated for its stereotypic desiring of white womanhood and in which the South, as in William Faulkner’s mythical kingdom of Yoknapatawpha, becomes both a bucolic domain of river and pinewood and a brute inferno of lynch and castration.

Told as a classical five act sequence the story opens with the boys’ banter, their snatches of black bawdy and “the dozens” and general rough-housing all the marks of time as adolescence. The landscape of the woods, the “cleared pasture” and the “tangled vines” initially serve as nature’s apparent stamp of approval. But at the swimming hole, they encounter the first discord within this summer-time boyhood harmony, the sign put up by Ol’ Man Harvey, “NO TRESPASSIN.” Its frank illiteracy implies the intrusion of white property ownership into natural free space. Then, with the arrival of the white woman and her soldier lover, the story calls into play the South’s darker if familiar racial equation. The components envision Big Boy, “black and naked,” a screaming belle, and the avenging white manfolk with blood on his lips after the first tussle, gun in hand, and his vow of death to “you black sonofabitch.”

Paradise thereby turns to nightmare. Fecklessness gives way to a new burden of consciousness. As Big Boy flees after the death of Harvey's soldier son back to family and community (to the bluesy chorus of his mother "this is mo trouble, mo trouble"), and then away again into hiding at the kilns to await his escape in a truck owned by the emblematic "Magnolia Express Company," so a latest underground comes into play. "Six foot of snake," serpentine racism given biological shape, greets his entry into the hell-like kiln. Big Boy kills the snake with a stick even as he imagines "whole nests of them," each "waiting tensely in coil." His underground hole, like Fred Daniels's sewer in "The Man Who Lived Underground" or the narrator's manhole in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, tacitly memorializes the still larger enclave—that brought on by the color line hate which has pursued not only Big Boy and his three friends but their ancestors in the earlier slaveholding South.

Even so Big Boy thinks back to a more benign black order of home, school, train, songs and "long hot Summer days," in all, memory as a shared terrain of twelve-bar blues, guitar and briar patch. At the same time he plays out in imagination his fantasy revenge on the white race, would-be heroism of the kind he thinks will make headlines like "NIGGER KILLS DOZENS OF MOB BEFO LYNCHED." Meanwhile the posse hunts down and captures Bobo to the refrain of "We'll hang ever nigger t'a sour apple tree." He burns to the chorus of "LES GET SOURVINEERS" and "HURRY UP N BURN THE NIGGER FO IT RAINS!" As he dies, another black boy martyred to white hate, Big Boy chokes the cerberian dog belonging to his white pursuers, displaced redress for the butchery of his friend and yet also the necessary killing of all residual innocence.

Wright's language throughout carries its own historic iconography. Big Boy's insides are drawn "into a tight knot." He rightly senses that the home he is leaving is a South both his and not his. The overall rite of passage has been one of the same kind of "horror" and "shadow" which will pursue his near namesake Bigger Thomas. Big Boy, as it were, has been forced to learn and internalize the far older configuration within the white American South of blackness as "norm" and yet under Dixie rules also sexual phantom.

Wright's story, accordingly, tells an escape or flight to match. Black and white exist as literal, visible pigmentation, even culture, yet also terms which have come to exist internally within the psyche—ancient, phobic, polarized. Wright makes Big Boy into the very embodiment of black manhood as so often that of the fugitive. Whatever Big Boy's own inner sense of self in the eyes of the white South he figures as threat. The story, in this respect, also tacitly echoes Cain's fratricide against Abel, the first, most archetypal killing replayed as white against black.

"Big Boy Leaves Home" acts to frame these implications, at once dramatic yet speculative, specific yet emblematic. The outward show holds the inside counters-how, whether the black boy-white man contrast, the day into night transition, or the depiction of nature as alternately heaven and hell. Given the sum of these considerations to call a story like "Big Boy Leaves Home" simply naturalistic overlooks Wright's better claim, the virtuosity of pattern, cadence, image, memory, masquerade, and subversion of typology.

Each of the other pieces in *Uncle Tom's Children*, even if not equally successful, operates in kindred manner. In "Down by the River," true to the classic blues from which Wright borrows his title, the ostensible story of a black drowning and white ingratitude for help given during a Southern flood yields another inside parable. Its black main figure, perhaps too obviously called Brother Mann, is in every sense "sold down the river" by unfair racial odds. As Mann drowns, the story describes his body as "encased in a tight vase in a narrow black coffin that moved with him." This flood might be the flood of history itself, Southern-style, a murderous white stream of time in which black skin has been made into the garment of death.

Similarly, in "Long Black Song," again a blues reference, the actual terrain becomes as languidly Southern-mythic in texture as the Georgia fashioned by Jean Toomer in *Cane* (1923). A black woman gets tricked into giving sexual favors to a white salesman. Her husband, Silas, finally chooses to burn to death rather than be hanged cravenly for the revenge he enacts against the white use of sexual privilege which has so cheated him and his spouse. He follows "the long river of blood," but more a black martyr hero of his own choosing than the devil villain of the system which both literally and figuratively has denied him (and black men before him) their manhood.

"Fire and Cloud," a story equally mythic though perhaps sentimentalized in Wright's wish to envisage a cross-racial resistance to racism. Its story is one of transformation, that of the Reverend Taylor, from acquiescent black Christianity to implacable opposition to arbitrary white authority in his Southern small town. His vicious beating which Wright summons as Klan-style sadism takes on ironic resonances of Biblical conversion, or rather, un-conversion. Likely the story also reflects Wright's own move from nominal Christianity to a more secular view of salvation, change through historic consciousness and solidarity.

In "Bright and Morning Star," another of Wright's stories with a Marxist and cross-racial element (which appropriately was published as a separate piece in *New Masses* in May 1938), he sets the warm maternal presence of Aunt Sue, the black mother of two activist sons, against law-and-order thuggery. An' Sue, to give her

black name, represents a Faulknerian Dilsey figure no longer available as black servant to the white Compson dynasty. Rather, she incarnates the black woman as protectress, warrior, avenger. In shooting the stoolpigeon who has brought on the torture and death of her son, Johnny Boy, she passes into legend, the exemplar. In her own death she becomes “the dead that never dies.” Wright’s prose is again pitched to call up Bible cadence and a past racial history told and retold to the point where it becomes parable. Typical is the following: “But as she had grown older, a cold white mountain, the white folks and their laws, had swum into her vision and shattered her songs and their spells of peace.” The inside narrative of “Bright and Morning Star” resides perfectly in the collocation of “cold white mountain,” “songs” and “spells of peace,” a black pictographic community speech to tell of life snatched from death and which derives from the blues music of the heart.

In this respect, Wright wrote no better story than “The Man Who Lived Underground,” the centerpiece to *Eight Men*. Its journey form has won praise for how it shadows Dante’s *Inferno* or Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, yet also cannily anticipates *Invisible Man* and Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman*. For in Fred Daniels’s underground odyssey, Wright develops both a literal drama of escape, a man-hunt, and the parable of a black American hidden yet able to see all, invisible yet visible. In descending via the manhole cover into his underground existence, Daniels perceives the paradox of an America of both plenty and waste and which withholds even as it tantalizes with its bounty.

Each glimpse of this America Daniels experiences as one previously denied access, a kind of black underworld trespasser or scavenger forced to live at the margins of or underneath the white mainstream of the nation’s history. Little wonder that his first sight is that of a glistening sewer rat, anticipating that which Bigger Thomas kills at the beginning of *Native Son* and which prefigures his own rodent fate in the final police chase. Everything Daniels sees, and on occasion steals, Wright sets against the spirituals being sung by the black congregation, America’s black history as carried in the historic touchstone of its music.

Fleeing down into the sewer, he appears to step free of time itself and to become a traveler through all single versions of time. The story’s questions properly include: “How long had he been down here? He did not know.” He sees the dead abandoned baby’s “snagged by debris and half submerged in water,” a Blakean innocent, eyes closed, fists clenched “as though in protest,” its mouth “gaped black in soundless cry.” Such mute human frailty links directly to Fred Daniels’s own fate, his self also essentially stillborn and an object of repudiation. As he “tramps on,” one particular black figure in history yet also the personification of all past

black “tramping,” he next sees an embalmer at work, his “establishment” ice cold, white and diabolic. The embalmer’s own “throaty chuckle” underlines the point trenchantly, whiteness as Hell.

Each subsequent encounter confirms this coded, quite literally visionary, landscape. The coal-bin conjures up not only real fuel but the underground fire of black life itself. The movie house, and its flickering screen, offers visual movement in kind with Daniels’s own miasmic perceptions of the world seen from his black underground. Life flickers like a moving image, a cinema reel. The fruit and vegetables he steals might also be thought painterly, food transposed into surrealist nourishment as on a Dalí canvas. Similarly, the jewels he takes glisten hypnotically in the dark, real plunder yet also Gatsbyesque fantasy wealth. Even the newspaper heading, “HUNT NEGRO FOR MURDER,” assumes an air of disjunction, language as some foreign cryptogram which encodes reality within its own system. The same note applies to the Aladdin’s Cave Fred makes of the stolen banknotes, and his tentative first efforts to write out his name. In writing *freddaniels* and other words he becomes like the first cave dwellers, a human presence, a newly literate slave, obliged by past history to begin again the finding and inscription of his own signature.

Daniels himself resembles Melville’s *Bartleby*, another prisoner of walls: “What was the matter with him? Yes, he knew it . . . it was these walls; these crazy walls were filling him with a wild urge out into the dark sunshine above ground.” He is finally shot because the story he resurfaces momentarily to tell cannot be credited by the police, any more than that of Ralph Ellison’s narrator in *Invisible Man* or Jones/Baraka’s Clay in *Dutchman*. Wright’s supposed naturalism once more secretes inside narrative, the visceral underground sediment of black American history. “The Man Who Lived Underground” undoubtedly offers the best of the *Eight Men* stories, yet each of the others (especially “The Man Who Was Almost a Man” and “Man of All Work”) invites similar decipherment. For as so often in Wright’s storytelling, surfaces equivocate brilliantly, an outward show, an inside meaning.

This inside dynamic applies equally to the longer works. All five of Wright’s novels—*Lawd Today* (1963), *Native Son* (1940), *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1954) and *The Long Dream* (1958)—yield their respective inlaid skeins, never less than covert.²³ *Lawd Today*, to take Wright’s probable first novel and which, ironically, was not given publication for want of a clearly discernible Marxist orientation, outwardly tells a twenty-four hour day in the life of Jake Jackson, black

Chicago postal worker. Its surface abounds in the detail of a Lincoln Day Holiday, Wright's informed sense of Chicago's South Side street and bar life. It exhibits community dreams of a magical Numbers fortune. Black vernacular runs through the pages. Detail accumulates, bar, meals of grits and sweet potato, sexual opportunism. In other words it seeks to recreate the pace, the crowdedness, the ready and always overlapping contingency, of everyday black city life.

At the same time, however, *Lawd Today* explores more inward terrain, Jake Jackson as a man close to psychological split and eruption. The increasing hatred he shows his wife, the valetudinarian Lil, and his inability to control his temper, mark a man near the edge. At every turn he comes over spooked by ill chance. A sense of odds festers. He sees himself increasingly in terms of entrapment. In fact Jake is veering towards murder the violence of the internal ghetto Chester Himes once strikingly termed "the prison of my mind." The brighter side of reality is conveyed in the Lincoln Day Holiday, Roosevelt Firesides on the radio, 1930s popular songs and a busy scenario of commercial hustle. But for Jake, fissured, inwardly as much as outwardly ghettoed, reality also resides in his beleaguered psyche. *Lawd Today's* documentary format cannily disassembles. Jake's history is one of disjunction, the stream of normal event set against abnormal consciousness.

Whatever its status as naturalist classic the same holds even more for *Native Son*. For all its crime and punishment drama, it tells an "inside" story as "dense and heavy" and full of "shadow" as Wright hoped it might in the Preface, "How Bigger Was Born." At the immediate plot level *Native Son* offers the drama of Bigger Thomas's tenement upbringing, the half-witting murder of his white patron's daughter, the subsequent disposal in the furnace of Mary Dalton's body and in turn the flight, murder of his girl Bessie, and the trial and defense as developed through the dialectics of Mr. Max, his Jewish and Marxist lawyer. This, however, is to leave the fuller achievement of *Native Son* seriously unmet. Yet ironically, *Native Son* sometimes attracted criticism for not being naturalist enough. James Baldwin, notably, spoke of the novel's attenuation, Bigger and the others as figures more charade than three-dimensional portraiture.²⁴ This begs the question of the kind of novel Wright in fact writes. For is not *Native Son*, against the usual assumption, more Dostoevskian than Dreiserian, *Notes from Underground* rather than *An American Tragedy*? Wright aims to convey a condition of mind, a self, a black self, made quite irretrievably alien.

Bigger's violence, from the opening episode with the rat and his bullying of his pool hall friends through to the murder and incineration of Mary and his

flight, unfolds at one with the cracks and splits deep within his own consciousness. *Native Son* virtually asks to be read as an exploration of personality in the mould of Dostoevsky, or indeed Céline or Kafka. For the true Chicago of the novel resides more in the splintered city or tenement pent up inside Bigger's feelings and psyche than in the Windy City of The Projects or Hyde Park. In arguing for this more iconic reading of *Native Son*, three supporting kinds of allusion give duty. They have to do with sight, with the image of Bigger as rat, and with exactly the kind of city depicted in *Native Son*.

Native Son, like "The Man Who Lived Underground," anticipates *Invisible Man* in its handling of sight as paradigm. The point is born home especially in a passage like the following in which Bigger considers the implication of having killed Mary:

No, he did not have to hide behind a wall or a curtain now; he had a safe way of being safe, an easier way. What he had done last night had proved that Jan was blind. Mary had been blind. Mr. Dalton had been blind. And Mrs. Dalton was blind; yes, blind in more ways than one . . . Bigger felt that a lot of people were like Mrs. Dalton, blind. (102)

Bigger's black world sees him one way, merely wayward if his hard pressed mother is to be believed, a tough street companion according to his pool hall buddies, or a lover in Bessie's eyes. For the white world he is seen even more intensely through the one part of his identity. He can be some preferred invention like the recipient of Mr. Dalton's self-serving largesse, or the proletarian black worker imagined by Mary and her lover Jan, or Mr. Max's embodiment of how "scientific" history shapes the individual consciousness.

Even the final chase scenes across city-wasteland Chicago against which he is silhouetted by the police cross-lights show him only in part, the formulaic rapist murderer. Bigger's full human self, even at the end probably ungrasped by himself, lies locked inside "the faint, wry bitter smile" he wears to his execution.²⁵ Perhaps, too, it lies teasingly present in the white cat that watches him burn Mary's body (a maybe inversion of Poe's "The Black Cat"), the emissary of the white world which has hitherto so objectified Bigger but, just as plausibly, the rarest glimpse of his own ghost identity.

The rat killed by Bigger in the opening chapter also sets up a motif which resonates throughout the novel. Its belly "pulsed with fear," its "black beady eyes glittering," at once a creature of offense and defense, it might be the very *anima* of Bigger himself. Will not he become a kind of Darwinian reverse? His own life,

its strike or be struck alternations, its would-be wish for love yet eventual deadly impact on both Mary and Bessie, acts as the pendulum swings of hunter and prey. Within Chicago's urban race-maze Bigger doubles, or rather self-divides, his own familiar and yet his own stranger.

These inside meanings also lie behind Wright's three-part division of "Fear," "Flight" and "Fate," as much notations of *Native Son's* parabolic meanings as the apparent drama at the surface. Bigger's extended last colloquy with Mr. Max implies that he has glimmerings of how this triangular rite has made him into en-captured human rodent (Wright's version of Kafka's beetle?). This, again, is the predator himself trapped by predatory laws of survival. Wright cannily images Bigger's life as not one but a series of enclosures, variously tenement, basement, hideout, prison cell, and his own psyche, each, in the novel's haunting last phrase, "steel against steel."

In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright speaks of Chicago as "huge, roaring, dirty, noisy, raw, stark, brutal," that is as the city of the historic stockyards, oppressive summer humidity and the chill polar winds of a Lake Michigan winter. But he also speaks of Chicago as a city which has created "centuries long chasm[s] of emptiness" in figures like Bigger Thomas. *Native Son* internalizes this same city, one of feelings half-understood, of incarceration and the need to strike and maim. To discern in *Native Son* only an urban-realist drama again evades the dimensions of the novel Wright himself knowingly calls "the whole dark inner landscape of Bigger's mind."

Though in no sense outright failures, both *The Outsider* and *Savage Holiday* go adrift and for connected reasons. In the former, Wright cannot resist loading his story of Cross Damon as the black twentieth-century man of alienation, with an accompanying (and intrusive) set of explanations about outsider-ness. Not only does he repeatedly invoke founding figures like Heidegger and Kierkegaard, he also glosses Damon's different murders and assumptions of identity with allusions to Dread, Will, the Absurd. To this end he imports into the novel another ranking and suitably articulate outsider, the hunch-backed District Attorney, Eli Houston, to whom it falls as it does to Mr. Max in *Native Son* to analyze the processes which have made Damon what he is: death-in-life.

In *Savage Holiday*, Wright's touchstone becomes Freud, human personality in the form of Erskine Fowler, an ex-insurance man eased out of his job to make way for the boss's son and the victim of an almost absurd turn of events which results in the death of a neighbor's young boy. His glaring sexual repression culminates in

murder, the stabbing of the boy's voluptuous mother whose easy sexual style causes him torment. As in *The Outsider*, Wright manages a range of strong local effects, but more often he sounds tutorly, essayistic. The relative weakness of both books lies in the fact that he simply will not trust his own tale to do the work. Whether the keystone is existentialism or Freudianism, the inside narrative is made damagingly explicit. Wright's philosophical interests tilt the novels too much towards idea or thesis over design, their inside workings all too readily available.

Fortunately, Wright's last novel *The Long Dream* (a sequel *Island of Hallucination* remains unpublished) shows no radical fault of this kind. In part this has to do with Wright's return to the materials he drew from so convincingly in *Black Boy*, the Deep South as memory, first origins. For Wright organizes the story of *The Long Dream*, that of Fishbelly Tucker's childhood and passage into adult identity, without the over-intrusion which flaws *The Outsider* and *Savage Holiday*. A major part of the novel's success lies in Wright's meticulous recreation of Fishbelly's childhood. The portrait, however, much as it inscribes the individual childhood of a black boy in the South also captures how his undertaker father takes care to educate him as best he knows into the wiles needed to survive in the treacherous world of small town Dixie. Childhood there may be but to be black and curious is to be permanently at risk from white authority.

From the first acquiring of his folk name through to his first sexual awakenings, Fishbelly in fact most learns about the world from Tyree, his father. But he also comes to know that his father's business exists on deals struck with the Chief of Police, Cantley, and that the town's tacit and demeaning lines of agreement have been arranged on the basis of white power and black deference. Further, Fishbelly perceives that his father, by running a Numbers racket and brothel, is also "embalming" his people in life just as he embalms them literally in his undertaking business. The chain of events which finally leads to Tyree's death and Fishbelly's jailing on a trumped-up sex charge involving a white woman again assumes an interplay of meanings. Fishbelly's story, in all its twists and detail, offers the chronicle of the one life but also of the ritual of black coming of age, the perception of himself as man yet in the eyes of the racial order about him also shadow.

Fishbelly's story undoubtedly plays off Richard Wright's own. For, like the portrait Wright creates in *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*, it refracts in the one life the more collective story of black community in the American South. "Black" transposes into the marker of intimacy, language, family, and of the inside counter-tactic against each untiring spiral of Dixie racism. Thus the impression of the

South that Fishbelly carries away with him (once again, in Wright's own footsteps, to Europe) signifies a history, a geography, of outward experience and inner consciousness which, to good imaginative purpose, Wright locates in "the locked regions" of Fishbelly's heart. *The Long Dream* returns to Wright's best equipoise of outer and inner narration. Both exist, competing, as a memorial interplay within Fishbelly's mind: a literal South of black survival against white Dixie phobia, the South as memory, echo, home yet un-home.

In his Introduction to George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), Wright revealingly calls attention to the human layerings to have marked out black experience in the west. He also implies how impossible it would be to render that experience to any single measure, be it protest, a version of naturalism, or Marxism, Freudianism, or even existentialism. One observation in particular throws light on the multiple reaches of his own best storytelling:

the Negro of the Western world lives in *one* life, many lifetimes . . . The Negro, though born in the Western world, is not quite of it; due to policies of racial exclusion his is the story of two cultures: the dying culture in which he happens to be born, and the culture into which he is trying to enter—a culture which has, for him, not quite yet come into being . . . Such a story is, above all, a record of shifting, troubled feelings groping their way towards a future that frightens as much as it beckons.²⁶

Such a story, one story intricately drawn from many, amounts exactly to the nature of the inside narrative on offer throughout Richard Wright's fiction.

Notes

1. Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, New York: Harper and Brothers. 1945, 274.
2. Richard Wright, *American Hunger*, New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 135.
3. The reviews from which these phrases are taken are reprinted in Richard Abcarian, ed. Richard Wright's "*Native Son*": *A Critical Handbook*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1970. Richard Wright, *Native Son*, New York: Harper, 1940.
4. Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro United States*, New York: Viking, 1941, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1956. See, as in previous chapters, Addison Gayle Jr., ed. *Black Expression*, New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969, ed. *The Black Aesthetic*, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1971, *The Way of the World: The Black Novel in America*, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday and Company, 1971; Mercer Cook and Stephen E. Henderson, *The Militant Black*

- Writer in Africa and the United States*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969; George Kent, *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture*, Chicago: Third World Press, 1971; Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973; Hoyt Fuller's articles in *Black World*, formerly *Negro Digest*; and *MidContinent American Studies Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Fall, 1972.
5. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1851, Chapter 85.
 6. Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1945; Ann Petry, *The Street*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1946; Alden Bland, *Behold a Cry*, New York: Scribner, 1947; and Willard Motley, *Knock on Any Door*, New York: Appleton-Century, 1947.
 7. John A. Williams, *The Angry Ones*, New York: Ace Books, 1960, *Night Song*, New York: Farrar, Straus, 1961, and *Sissie*, New York: Farrar, Straus, 1963; John O. Killens, *Youngblood*, New York: Dial, 1954 and *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, New York: Knopf, 1963.
 8. William Gardner Smith, *The Last of the Conquerors*, New York: Farrar, Straus, 1948; Lloyd L. Brown, *Iron City*, New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1951; Julian Mayfield, *The Hit*, New York: Vanguard, 1957; and Herbert Simmons, *Corner Boy*, Boston: Houghton, 1957 and *Man Walking Eggshells*, Boston: Houghton, 1962.
 9. Chester Himes, *The Quality of Hurt*, New York: Doubleday, 1972 and *My Life of Absurdity*, New York: Doubleday, 1976.
 10. "Many Thousands Gone" first appeared in *Partisan Review*, Vol. 18, November-December 1951, and is reprinted in *Notes of a Native Son*, New York: Dial, 1955. "Alas, Poor Richard," which incorporates "Eight Men," originally published as "The Survival of Richard Wright," *The Reporter*, March 1961, and "The Exile," *Le Preuve*, February 1961, is reprinted in *Nobody Knows My Name*, New York: Dial, 1961.
 11. "Richard Wright's Blues" first appeared in *Antioch Review*, Vol. 5, Summer 1945, and is reprinted in *Shadow and Act*, New York: Random House, 1964. "The World and the Jug," based on an exchange with Irving Howe in "The Writer and the Critic," *The New Leader*, February 1964, and "A Rejoinder," *The New Leader*, December 1964, also appears in *Shadow and Act*. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 30th Anniversary Edition, New York: Random House, 1952, 1982.
 12. "The Man Who Lived Underground" was first published in *Cross-Section*, 1945, and republished in *Eight Men*, Cleveland: World, 1961. "Remembering Richard Wright," *Delta*, Vol. 18, April 1984, was initially the transcript of a lecture given at the University of Iowa, 18 July 1971. Republished in Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, New York: Random House, 1986.
 13. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1968.
 14. Addison Gayle, *Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son*, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980. Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1973.

15. John A. Williams, *The Man Who Cried I Am*, New York: Doubleday, 1967 and *The Most Native of Sons: A Biography of Richard Wright*, New York: Doubleday, 1970.
16. Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius*, New York: Warner, 1988.
17. Chester Himes, *The Primitive*, New York: New American Library, 1955; Hal Bennett, *Lord of the High Places*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971.
18. Herman Melville, *Billy Budd Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, first published posthumously in 1924. The authoritative edition (and thereby the authoritative title of the work) is: Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, eds. *Billy Budd Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
19. Richard Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, New York: Harper, 1954, *Pagan Spain*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957.
20. "How Bigger Was Born" first appeared in *Saturday Review*, June 1, 1940, 3–4, 17–20.
21. "The Literature of the Negro in the United States" became Chapter 3 in *White Man, Listen!*, New York: Doubleday, 1957.
22. *Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas*, New York and London: Harper and Bros., 1938, *Eight Men*, Cleveland, OH: World Publishing, 1961.
23. *Lawd Today*, New York: Walker, 1963, *The Outsider*, New York: Harper, 1953, *Savage Holiday*, New York: Avon, 1954, and *The Long Dream*, New York: Doubleday, 1958.
24. See "Many Thousands Gone."
25. For a useful gloss on this, see Graham Clarke, "Beyond Realism: Recent Black Fiction and the Language of 'The Real Thing,'" in A. Robert Lee, ed. *Black Fiction: New Studies in the Afro-American Novel since 1945*, London: Vision Press, 1980, 220.
26. George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1953, vi.

War and Peace: Writing the Black 1940s

The treatment accorded the Negro during the Second World War marks, for me, a turning point in the Negro's relation to America. To put it briefly, and somewhat too simply, a certain hope died, a certain respect for white Americans faded . . . You must put yourself in the skin of a man who is wearing the uniform of his country, is a candidate for death in its self-defense, and who is called "nigger" by his comrades-in-arms and his officers; who is always almost given the hardest, ugliest, most menial work to do; who knows that the white G.I. has informed the European that he is subhuman (so much for the American male's sexual security); who does not dance at the U.S.O. the night white soldiers dance there, and does not drink in the same bars white soldiers drink in; and who watches German prisoners of war being treated with more human dignity than he has ever received at their hands . . . You must consider what happens to this citizen, after all he has endured, when he returns—home: search, in his shoes, for a job, for a place to live; ride, in his skin, on segregated buses; see, with his eyes, the signs saying "White" and "Colored" and especially the signs that say "White Ladies" and "Colored Women"; look into the eyes of his wife; look into the eyes of his son; listen, with his ears, to political speeches North and South; imagine yourself being told to "wait." And all this is happening in the richest and freest country in the world, and in the middle of the twentieth century.

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963)¹

The risks in mapping by decades have long grown familiar. History, and the cultural styles of expression it gives rise to, rarely falls into place by some ready-made

symmetry of arithmetic or calendar. This is not to imply that American periodizations like the 1890s or the 1920s, along with terms like interwar or postwar, do not have their uses as shorthand. One decade, however, that of the America of the 1940s, more than usually challenges: a single period yet seemingly separated into two parts, a single place yet for many Americans abroad on war duty also an America carried into Europe and Asia. Within it, and even more beset with contradiction, lie the black 1940s.

At first sight nothing could look clearer than a period in which war literally alternates with peace. The attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and in its immediate wake Hitler's declaration of war on the United States, inaugurates America's entry into the Atlantic and Pacific Wars. The conflict ends with GIs entering Berlin, the Pacific campaign, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japanese surrender to General MacArthur. On the American home front, the presidential baton passes from Roosevelt to Truman in April 1945, the troops return, and war production and Lend Lease continue to drive the economy. The order becomes one of ever greater boom and recovery.

So spare an account, however, revealingly falls short in what it fails to say about the era's complex racial spirals and dispositions. War talk readily applied a domestic lexicon of stereotypes to the enemy—Japs and Nips, Huns and Krauts, Wops and Dagos. In mirror fashion it equally did so to Americans born of these origins. Executive Order 9066 of 1942, drawing on a long history of anti-Asianism, leads to the internment in the wake of Pearl Harbor of 120,000 West Coast Japanese Americans with matching action taken in Canada and Peru (Chinese and Korean Americans took to wearing badges saying "Not Japanese"). The fact that not a single case of Japanese treason was proven, or that the all-nisei 442nd Regimental Combat team would become the most decorated American unit of World War II, or that Japanese American army units would be responsible for the liberation of villages in northern France, bears its own irony.² For many German and Italian Americans, though there was no internment, there were "enemy alien" labels, curfews and hounding.³

Other American ethnicities, Chicanos most notably, also found themselves drawn into this circle of suspicion. In 1942–1943 the Zoot Suit riots in El Barrio Los Angeles erupted, partly the upshot of the Sleepy Lagoon murders but, equally, of the would-be ascendancy of one kind of America (Anglo, Navy, largely rural-Southern, English speaking, Protestant) over another (Latino, civilian, urban-barrio, Spanish speaking, Catholic). Each fought as uniformed opponents, white servicemen in regular military cut against brown-skinned Chicano youth, *pachucos*, in their baroque cutaway coats, long watch chains, pegged trousers and

broad brimmed hats. “Symbolic” as these skirmishes have been called, they convey yet another contest of wartime American racial will.⁴

Nor did the 1940s do better by America’s longest standing peoples, Native Americans. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 and after it the Dawes Allotment Act and related legislation bequeath their dire legacy of de-territorialization. The massacre of nearly 300 peaceably encamped Minneconjou Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890 is subsumed into the Last Indian War and the Winning of the West (for Native America, however, it becomes the My Lai of its time, a memorial to white-settler frontier paranoia). That process takes on ironic form during the World War II era in the person of Tonto in *The Lone Ranger* as “good Indian.” Begun on Detroit’s station WXYZ in February 1933, it aired throughout the 1940s for no less than 3,500 episodes (the comic book series also began in 1940), and eventually was made into ABC’s massively successful 1949–1958 TV series. As the ever unswerving and silent or at best monosyllabic shadow to his white lawman master, Tonto re-enforced a belief that “Indians,” whatever their diversity as Plains or Pueblo, Woodland or Coastal, on or off Reservation, were ever subtly unsuited to modernity, a kind of leftover wisechild. That Tonto aids and abets in the return of land, gold and other mineral acquisitions to their “rightful” white owners, a frequent plotline, underscores the point. “Indians” become no longer main players but retainers. The program did its share, too, in eclipsing Native wartime service, whether those in regular enlistment or “special service” trackers and Navajo users of code.⁵

For black Americans, however, World War II meant an explicitly segregated Army, black units, even whole black regiments, each invariably under a white officer class. The extent of racial abuse in wartime bases, and the frequent insurrections it provoked, to this day awaits its full airing. By early 1943 more than 500,000 blacks were in the Army but less than 80,000 overseas and, even then, usually in support or labor battalions on the racist-stereotypic grounds of being thought unreliable for frontline duty.

Navy enlistment overwhelmingly meant serving as mess attendants (“in the best interests of general ship efficiency” argued Admiral Nimitz) while the Air Force, after many shows of reluctance, gave the go-ahead to “the Tuskegee Airmen” of the all-black 332 Fighter Corps which saw action over North Africa but whose officers were refused entrance into segregated base clubs. These practices extended, in kind, to separate nursing and billeting.⁶ The American Red Cross even established a segregated blood bank in order, as a vintage segregationist like

Congressman Rankin of Mississippi said, to prevent the “mongrelization” of “our wounded white boys.”⁷ The grounds for provocation and resentment were extensive. A 1940s column in the black-run *Pittsburgh Courier* put matters succinctly—“Our war is not to defend democracy, but to get a democracy we have never had.”⁸

That Thurgood Marshall, the long-serving NAACP lawyer who had been Chief Counsel in *Brown v. Board of Education* and who in 1967 became the Supreme Court’s first black Justice, would look back to discrimination cases he first conducted during the war even as he conducted others after it, confirms how the one conflict always bore the embryo of the other. None of this is to deny wartime black-white, and especially black-Jewish, alliances as in the NAACP, or in the more progressive Unions, or governmentally through a liberal force like Eleanor Roosevelt. But it suggests how the war resulted in a considerably different experience for its black compared to its white GIs and officers, an ongoing domestic conflict within the larger foreign conflict. Walter White’s *A Rising Wind* (1945) as an account of World War II black soldiering confirms precisely the turnings of bias and double-standard.⁹

The Armistice signed, and Truman’s Fair Deal installed as successor to Roosevelt’s New Deal, America’s citizenry, black as much as white, had reason to anticipate just reward and a step into the future for battles fought bravely and well. Yet the signs, economic and consumerist, again overwhelmingly favored white America. The state of play meant full or near full employment, suburbanization, tract homes, cars, TVs, phones, washing machines, and cheap abundant food and clothing. For black America, the return from the fight for democracy, for Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” as they became known, meant largely a continuance of the *status quo ante*, a nation still reluctant to dismantle its own ingrained habits of segregation.

However often denied at the time, race in fact features throughout most of the immediate postwar upbeat. Market capitalism as freedom involved both bravura and fear, the Cold War (with the bomb as last resort) pledged to outrun both Stalin’s Russia and the China of Mao, the Soviet Army and the People’s Republic of China. The latter arouses yet more yellow peril phobia. It could not but remind Chinese Americans of the 1882 and other Exclusion Acts. Asian Americans in general were to be thought members of a conspiratorial ideology pledged to subvert the American Way. Korea did surrogate duty for an attack on China, a racially loaded Asian communism held back at the 38th Parallel and only dimly guessed at as the beacon of wars to come, whether Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos.

Korean Americans, often made heirs to Jewish pawnbroker or storeowner myth, were to become the later targets in the wake of the Rodney King beating during the 1992 South Central riots in which they and their stores were attacked and looted. Despite abundant white misbehavior a lot of the reporting selectively suggested that it was only a black versus Korean flair-up, more trouble among “ethnics.” Martin Luther King was said to have most courted danger when, having publicly declared himself against the Vietnam War in 1967, he connected racial abuse of African Americans with racial abuse of the Vietnamese.

If America had become the standard bearer of the Free World through the relaunch of the League of Nations as the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945 or Marshall Aid to Europe in 1947, that little included most black populations. The State Department was no more effective in its stance against apartheid in South Africa, or Europe’s continuing African empires (be it “British” Nigeria, “French” Chad, the “Belgian” Congo or “Portuguese” Angola), than Congress was for Jim Crow in Alabama and Mississippi or segregation in housing in New York and Chicago.

At home other anxieties had begun to show. If the icons of white Middle America were the Corporation, Main Street, the PTA, The Elks, a comforting diet of Bing Crosby or *Reader’s Digest* (tellingly the first phase of *Negro Digest*, 1942–1951, would be made in its image), doubts had begun to arise about conformism. Had not social gendering meant simply the white businessman or housewife? Did the Babbitry of the grey flannel suit or the nice girl image of Shirley Temple cover all bases? The Kinsey Reports (*Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948 and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953) invoked regimes far from the innocent American family image. They spoke of inhibition, premarital sex, deviance, a realm far from genteel desire. Nowhere, however, was it assumed that black sexual behavior, other than as white fantasy, came into the reckoning.

Alongside all of these rose the gathering, and increasingly impatient, energies for a change in the racial order. The word had gone up for integration and full voter registration. Separate schooling was to end. Hiring, restaurants, buses, toilet facilities with all its loaded biological implication, was to be challenged. America’s best-loved sport, baseball, with its notorious white-only major baseball leagues, also came under new scrutiny. The latter took its most memorable turn in Jackie Robinson’s lonely, and often fiercely resented, triumph in being signed for the Brooklyn Dodgers at Ebbet’s Field in 1947. A popular tune like “Baseball Boogie” bears out the change. Even so, Robinson had to endure willful in-game spiking and racist name callings. Another turn of the screw, however, lay in

Robinson's HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) condemnation of Paul Robeson.

The specter of racial intermarriage also loomed. It would take a Supreme Court Decision in 1967 formally to overturn state and local laws against it. Hollywood, whether from "liberal" conviction or simply an eye to the main chance, in the same year delivered Stanley Kramer's film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* Sydney Poitier plays the highly eligible, middle-class doctor, a model of overwhelming suitor etiquette. The widespread fear of "alien" takeover carried yet another kind of racial frisson begun in the 1940s: the blurring of ideological (meaning, for the most part, communist) with biological miscegenation, reflected, eventually, in films like Don Spiegel's science fiction classic, *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* (1956), with its space-born pods and doublings, or *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), with its Cold War warning of communism as China-manipulated fifth column.

Women, that is white and especially college-educated women, had bridled at returning from war work to the role of mother and homemaker. Their generational discontents would lead in due course to Betty Friedan's very naming of "the problem that has no name" in her *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).¹⁰ However, the sexual politics of black women, high school or college graduate, fieldworker or domestic, not to mention warworker, would await both a later telling and more audible hearing from the 1980s onward. In 1940, 60 percent of all employed black women were domestic servants (in 1997, by contrast, 60 percent of all employed black women are white-collar workers). It was, symptomatically, to that world that Zora Neale Hurston would be obliged to return after the commercial failure of her literary career. The 1940s and 1950s experiments with the contraceptive pill which, at serious cost to health and fertility, used women of color in Puerto Rico and Mississippi as guinea pigs, provides another kind of benchmark.¹¹

Yet the 1940s did not lack its own considerable line of literary witness by black women. Zora Neale Hurston belatedly has emerged as the age's doyenne. Novelist, folk teller, poet, historian, she gives voice to a range of feisty, personable women for whom Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) supplies the best-known embodiment.¹² Similarly, there can no overlooking women figures like Ann Petry's Lutie Johnson in *The Street* (1946), Dorothy West's Cleo Judson in *The Living Is Easy* (1948) or, from a novelist like Margaret Walker who came of age in the 1940s, Vvry in *Jubilee* (1966). This "neo-slave" novel as its author called it, written as a riposte to Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) anticipates another African American "genealogical" bestseller in Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976).¹³

American youth overwhelmingly meant a white image, Mickey Rooney as bow-tied Junior or Judy Garland as bobbysoxer with James Dean as "rebel

without a cause” soon to follow. The process for their black compeers would take far longer. In the 1940s, for the most part, were not “seen” except in black Indie films. Exceptions there were but under limited conditions as in the case of Dorothy Dandridge. Her route to becoming “the black Marilyn” in *Carmen Jones* (1954), Hollywood’s first siren of color (the code word was “tan”) meant crossing all kinds of previously closed screen color-and-sexuality lines. She made her 1940s debut as the 18 year old singer of “Chattanooga Choo Choo.”¹⁴

Historical events and role models have been no less ambiguous since the 1940s, from the mutilation and drowning of fourteen year old Emmett Till in the Tallahatchie River in 1955 and the televised jeering at the Little Rock Nine in 1957. The elegant sprinting of Wilma Rudolph first in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, then, triumphantly, in 1960 in Rome, did not stop the abuse she continued to receive. The four children killed in the Birmingham church bombing of 1963 would await decades before the perpetrators were found and tried. Teenage “bloods” on frontline war service in 1960s Vietnam would return to a home country reluctant to recognize their service. Other developments would be equally contrary, whether teenage single mothers in the tenements or male gang worlds as, say, portrayed in John Singleton’s 1991 South Central L.A. movie, *Boyz N the Hood*. Black popular music has spanned Motown to rock to rap whether performed, from the 1960s on, by a young Diana Ross or the Michael Jackson once all black baby cuteness in the Jackson Five, or (to the selective indignation and actual campaigning against rapper “violence” of Tipper Gore, wife of Clinton’s Vice President) the young Sister Souljah.

However much Afro-America inevitably shared the overall currents of the 1940s, it was always as deepened by the sourer workings of evasion or discrimination. In war, the American military had permitted, and often actually required, every kind of black-white divide in duties and rank, until formal desegregation of the Armed Forces was enforced in 1948 under an Executive Order from President Truman. In peace, the same double standard applied. Despite a margin of increase in black political and economic leverage (some of it payback by Truman for NAACP and other black electoral support), or the various 1940s and 1950s Civil Rights Acts including the pivotal ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, it would take the activism of the 1960s to achieve a genuinely radical breakthrough. In or out of uniform, wartime or peacetime, the 1940s for Afro-America in virtually all its dealings with the mainstream meant largely unrelieved and continuing color segregation.

One literary response lay in so-called raceless fiction. Frank Yerby opened a long pulp fiction career (he spoke of himself as a writer of “costume novels”) with *The Foxes of Harrow* (1946), formula derring-do with heiresses, rakes and villainy.

Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* (1947), with its Italian-American saga of murder in the figure of Nick Romano and its use of courtroom addresses, does a reprise of Bigger Thomas and *Native Son*. Ann Petry's *Country Place* (1947), though not without a black maid figure in Neola, essentially concerns a white New England turned inward and provincial. Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), to the dismay and reproof of many black followers, substituted rural poor-white for black life, a supposedly misguided attempt at "universalizing." The process occasionally worked the other way, nowhere more visibly than in Paul Robeson's 300 performances in the 1943 production of *Othello* and Canada Lee's admired role (in whiteface) of John Webster's Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* in 1945.¹⁵

Few black soldiers or their families, however, failed to see the overall contradiction of fighting the tyranny of Nazism or Japanese imperialism on behalf of an America itself the source of continuing racial oppression. Homecoming merely underlined the point, one racism for another. Ralph Ellison, recalling his own short story of a downed black airman, offers the following summary:

historically most of this nation's conflicts of arms have been—at least for Afro-Americans—wars-within-wars. Such was true of the Civil War, the last of the Indian Wars, of the Spanish American War, and of World Wars I and II. And in order for the Negro to fulfill his duty as a citizen it was often necessary that he fight for his self-affirmed right to fight.¹⁶

Albert Murray, Ellison's friend, former Major in the U.S. Air Force, novelist, and the tough, sharp essayist of both *The Omni-Americans* (1970) and *South to a Very Old Place* (1971), the former given over to the endemic Americanness of black experience and the latter to a "state of the nation" conceived as an itinerary from New York to Mobile, Alabama, makes the link in terms as graphically as any.¹⁷ In *The Omni-Americans*, he, too, invokes the experience of the Tuskegee Airmen:

It is a . . . fact that Negro pilots for the 332nd Fighter Group who were captured during World War II preferred the treatment they received from the Nazis to that which they received from their fellow countrymen in Alabama, whose solicitude of German internees was beyond reproach! Qualified citizens of no other democratic nation in the world encounter more deviousness or nearly as much outright antagonism in the routine process of local, state, and federal government. (23)

How, then, within these vexed equations of war and peace, did Afro-America seek to write the 1940s? One of the most encompassing canvases of the war itself lies in John O. Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1963).¹⁸ Eventful, pacily naturalist in style, the portrait it develops of Sol Saunders, newly married and intending law school student, takes him through enlistment, red clay Georgia bootcamp training, a cadre of black buddies, Monterey's Fort Ord, soldiering in the Philippines, and on to eventual involvement in a race fight in Bainbridge, Australia, where he has been hospitalized. This is the American Army as Pacific fighting force yet also "cracker army," with Solly's own story as vantage point and center (his love of three women, his relations with different white officers from Dixie General through to the Jewish Lieutenant Samuels, and Pacific frontline service).

"You ain't on a Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street now" a black sergeant tells Sol on entering the Army. It serves as both reproach and prophecy. Harlem becomes a kind of sustaining mnemonic for the world of the Apollo Theater, Hotel Theresa, The Ink Spots, Josh White, Lena Horne, Paul Robeson and, always, the blues. Killens plays this bulwark of black memory against both the "wilderness of hostility and un-democracy" (as Sol describes the U.S. Military in a controversial letter to the newspapers) and island combat and death in the Philippines.

The imagery of the war itself may well be neither "black" nor "white," more in kind with the classic writing of Bierce, Crane or Hemingway (planes hover "like ghostly buzzards," platoons and regiments are seen "awaiting Death's convenience"). But Killens nevertheless also assiduously gives the war its own black "text." That involves down-home argot, the dozens, the remembered sass and updates of putting on massa, even Sol's black-Jewish exchanges on race and power with Samuels.

In Sol, Bookworm, Scottie and the rest, whatever their in-group contrariety, the fellowship is one of offense and defense against two "enemy" armies, Japanese but also American. The matter reaches its closing focus in the Australian race shoot-out "turning Bainbridge into Georgia." The novel's rendering of this key event provocatively confirms World War II, Afro-America's World War II at least, as foreign war inverted into civil war. It makes for an added twist that the events of the novel are situated in the allied Antipodes. As Sol and comrades engage in the messy and murderous fight with white GIs ("Bloody Yankees fighting Yankees" observes an Australian townsman), "enemy" extends to fellow Americans as much as Germans or Japanese.

The novel no doubt opens itself to cavils. The running black-Jewish debate about gradualism as against militancy tends to intrude. Sol's love affairs with

Millie, Fannie May and the white Australian, Celia, can seem paradigmatic, in turn homegirl, NAACP activist, and (across the racial divide) nurse. Is there not also a certain wishful thinking in setting up Australia as free of racism? But the novel earns its plaudits. World War II as a refraction of America's racial double standard, "Mr. Charlie's Army" as against Sol's "No peace till freedom," is given drama, pace. For what *And Then We Heard the Thunder* manages to enact, the title phrase aptly made over from Harriet Tubman, is a 1940s Afro-America "at war" on quite anything but the single front.

World War II's black soldiering has its distant reflection in prime American war texts like Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* (1951).¹⁹ But John A. Williams's *Captain Blackman* (1972) explores a far longer chronicle of black war experience. Told as though the serial hallucination of the wounded Abraham Blackman it works as a time-narrative from Independence era to Vietnam to the imagined "black" nuclear take-over of America. Within this span black war service in the 1940s takes its place as a species of illustrative cameo.²⁰

In section "Five," Blackman remembers his own World War II black unit and the enclosing race malpractice across America's military bases. He thinks back on segregated barracks life just outside Chicago, embarkation from Ford Ord, and action in the South Pacific. Above all he thinks of "the smell of death" at Tombolo in Italy with its needless sacrifice of black soldiers. These each are told in stream of consciousness form, memory and feeling as much event.

The stopping-off points do imaginative good service on connected fronts. The mythic "Joadie Grinder" recurs as the expression of every black soldier's feared replacement lover man. A rendering of *The Signifyin' Monkey* serves as black colloquial parable of survival in war and peace. Blackman's top grade in the army's placement test loses its importance for him as his girl betrays him and he becomes involved in a race fight at the base. Even his despairing final bid to fight in the Battle of the Bulge as volunteer, the only means of entering racially mixed ranks, is denied on grounds of race, the military's final, discriminatory turn of the screw.

At a supposed staff conference he overhears a white officer say: "If we don't integrate, the Europeans'll think we don't have anything but a black army." Set within the weave of black talk and commentary which, in echoes of Whitman, Williams calls *drum-taps* and *cadence*, this presiding paradox is held up for how it jars and rankles. Blackman is serving in an American Army hardly more amenable to the interests of its own black ranks than of those they have been sent to fight.

William Gardner Smith's *Last of the Conquerors* (1948) moves on to late 1940s Occupied Germany, black soldiery in the very homeland of Aryanism. Yet for its protagonist, Hayes Dawkins, this is a Germany still more cross-racially open than his own Philadelphia.²¹ Having moved with sidekicks in his truck detachment ("the only colored company in Berlin") to an eventual base in Bremburg, he embarks on a love affair with the German-born Ilse. If the relationship is taboo to white American troops, in contrast it proceeds un-forbidden by Ilse's family. The novel occasionally risks flatness, a first effort after all, but it casts a shrewd eye over the racial double standard as norm.

"Odd . . . that here, in the land of hate, I should find this one all-important phase of democracy" muses Hayes. The writ extends in a number of directions. An accepted "mixed" German child, Sonny, of black father and white mother, and the discovery of a long-standing expatriate black community, intrigues and beckons him. A white captain, sympathetic to black needs, suddenly launches into virulent anti-Semitism. Given the much expressed moral high resolve of the American war cause, officers and ranks catch VD with telling regularity. These contradictions become design, the novel's working shape.

Ilse, for her part, negotiates a sector of Germany to be with Hayes. Hayes, however, has another kind of sector to negotiate to be with her, that of the American racial dispensation brought from America to Germany. The situation is compounded when he catches out a racist and corrupt army officer but is finagled back to America ostensibly to pursue his education under the G.I. Bill. His mind, dividedly, fills with images of Southern lynching and Northern black job layoffs, as against Ilse and the post-racial Germany she embodies. Where race enters, for him, as for the rest of his black company, peace has not ceased to be war.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) was quick to become one of the presiding black texts of the 1940s. Its brute, tenement Chicago of the Depression countered the hoped-for metropolitan Harlem of Alain Locke's "New Negro" generation. Here was a black city of the psyche as much as body and for which Wright deservedly won recognition. He could look to notable literary company, whether Zora Neale Hurston as self-chronicler in *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), James Baldwin as the passionate, rising essayist of the 1940s pieces contributed to *The Nation*, *Commentary* or *Partisan Review*, or the Ralph Ellison of mythic, allusive stories like "King of the Bingo Game" (1944) and "Flying Home" (1944). They, and others, help fill out, indeed create, a more inclusive sense of era.²²

Chester Himes's first novels, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) and *Lonely Crusade* (1947), bear home the point as well as any.²³ Told against a backdrop of the 1940s California defense industry, shipbuilding in the one, aircraft in the other, both were considered "black realism," hard-edged and urgent. Within the rape and run frame-up of the first, and West Coast labor and Unionism in its successor, they both give further perspective on America at war.

In this respect Himes's style works to immediate good purpose. He shows an early hand at cryptic narrative, full of seriousness yet as often as not abruptly dark and funny. This same regime holds for all of the ensuing full length fiction. *Cast the First Stone* (1952) offers his claustrophobic, "raceless" prison novel. *The Third Generation* (1954) fictionalizes his troubled early family life in the South and prison sentence for jewel theft in Cleveland. *The Primitive* (1955) unravels a contest of sexual and racial will fought through to murder during a near-hallucinatory Manhattan lost weekend. *Pinktoes* (1961), first issued by Olympia Press, engages in an amorous and interracial *jeu d'esprit*. *Une Affaire de viol* (1963)/*A Case of Rape*, involving an apparent sex murder, with a complicated court case gives bearings on expatriate black literary Paris. *Plan B* (1993), his unsentimental, darkly conspiratorial, serves to bring to an end the Coffin Ed/Grave Digger Harlem detective fiction.²⁴

The range of Himes's writing career is not to overlook his short story prowess as borne out in 1940s pieces like "Marihuana and a Pistol" (1940), a violence and drugs episode told as haze-like dream and first published in *Esquire*. "Cotton Gonna Kill Me Yet" (1944) manages a snappily pitched "jive" story of hustle and lost love. "Mama's Missionary Money" (1949), with its rich eddies of black argot, offers a comic blend of theft and religious signifying. Ishmael Reed dedicated his anthology of "conjah" writing, *19 Necromancers from Now* (1970), to Himes as "the Great Mojo Bojo," which refers, playfully, to a kingly maker of magic, an African trickster. He did so not least in recognition of the Himes far from any casebook realist.²⁵

In the case of Bob Jones in *If He Hollers Let Him Go* his life virtually personifies race as war and peace, conflict lived feverishly on the nerves. In a number of quarters, and despite the wit, Himes was criticized for writing with too solemn an emphasis on pathology. But when Frantz Fanon cited *If He Hollers* in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) as a pointer to how any black male, under racism, might indeed be driven to hit back at the icons of a white world, to violate sexually if need be, he did so in full recognition that this was a text that set its concerns with careful design.²⁶ Richard Wright was shrewd enough to emphasize the carefully turned play of oppositions in the novel when he reviewed it for *PM* in 1945:

He sees too clearly to be fooled by the symbolic guises in which Negro behavior tries to hide, and he traces the transformations by which sex is expressed in equations of race pride, murder in the language of personal redemption and love in terms of hate.²⁷

The storyline supplies a wholly persuasive frame. Bob Jones, black shipyard leaderman, already frayed by wartime racist hostility and taunt, is caught out, eventually, in the spurious rape charge of a peroxide blonde migrant, Madge Perkins (“she was pure white Texas. And I was black . . .”). Beaten to near coma by her white male co-workers, hauled off by the police, he accepts a judge’s summary and wholly cynical offer of the Army rather than prison. The novel’s true edge, however, derives from Himes’s altogether more inward portrait of a man coping with his own unmaning.

To this end dreams, especially, proliferate, jolting him from “absolute impotence” to euphoria. Three open the novel. In turn they fantasize a wiry but unloved black terrier, a police ruse to catch out a black murder suspect as “coon,” and a black jobseeker jeered at mercilessly by two white workers for not having tools. In other dreams he is endlessly beaten by “the president of the shipyard corporation dressed in the uniform of an Army general.” He imagines himself stampered by swine and mistakenly shooting with a .45 revolver his girl Alice whose light-skinned gentility has her playing down race and urging him to college and the middle class. To the “sympathetic smiles . . . of millions of white women” he dreams of watching a white boy laughingly knife a black boy to death. Finally, in “crazy exultation,” and in the guise of a Western Union employee, he guns down a white shipyard worker who has made him the subject of racist taunt. Each dream acts as a displacement or shadow of his conscious life, a warring “racial” sleep as much as a “racial” wakefulness.

In this respect there is an overlap with experiences which might themselves be dream, whether going to the Lincoln Theater with Alice and watching “a black audience clapping its hands for a blind white acrobat.” He is recommended to read the liberal, caring Mrs. Roosevelt in *Negro Digest* even as his own life implodes. He is caught in a sexual “death embrace” with the love-hate icon of Madge. Inner and outer man meet, too, when he has to struggle to wake from sleep to consciousness, or finds himself “getting ready to die before I left the house,” or confronting “all that tight, crazy feeling of race as thick in the street as gas fumes.”

Under these conditions, for Bob, even commonplace reference, be it to the Joe Louis-Max Schmeling fight, the music of Art Tatum or Nat King Cole, L.A.’s Central Avenue, or the Zoot Suit riots, takes on the world to hand and yet not.

Pearl Harbor is said to have led to a racially underwritten “crazy, wild-eyed unleashed hatred.” The shipyard suggests a madhouse, its heavy duty cranes “one-legged, one-armed spiders.” “Bile,” “electric shock,” “fever” and other motor responses well up in Bob, not least when, so unmanned, he is eventually charged under the rape statutes with brute mannishness.

Despite first-hand experience of race lived, as it were, always as inwardly as not, he hears Herbie Frieberger of the Union explain it as merest footnote to Marxist laws of history and class. A restaurant “filled with solid white America” gives him a note which reads “*We served you this time but we do not want your patronage in the future.*” Conscripted, “G.I. Blues” as Peaches, one of the shipyard’s women, calls it, promises more of the same, a war in the name of freedoms denied at home. Towards the close of *If He Hollers* Himes has one of the Atlas’s black workers observe: “As long as the Army is Jim Crowed a Negro who fights in it is fighting against himself.” Bob’s own arbitrary, not to say abrupt, entry into the ranks could not underline the point more. His remains a war of self-esteem against the American codes and counter-codes of black and white, to be carried into the wars of Europe and the Pacific.

Lonely Crusade, longer, fuller, pursues the more political canvas, but not without Lee Gordon as a man also pushed to the edge. “Fear was the price for living” the novel observes at the outset. When, after a run of unemployment, he becomes a union organizer, his elation yet the apprehension to which it gives way, again reverse into a fear which in turn then feeds on itself:

when he boarded the street car crowded with white Southern war workers that war spring of 1943, being a Negro imposed a sense of handicap that Lee Gordon could not overcome. He lost his brief happiness in the sea of white faces . . . he had once again crossed into the competitive white world where he would be subjected to every abuse concocted by the white mind to harass and intimidate Negroes . . . And be afraid, and hate his fear, and hate himself for feeling it . . . The fear in him was something a dog could smell . . . he could see the hostile faces of the white workers, their hot, hating stares; he could feel their antagonisms hard as a physical blow; hear their vile asides and abusive epithets with a reality that cut like a knife. (4–5)

This concourse of “handicap” and “brief happiness,” “fear” and “hate,” he allows to become sexual aggression towards his wife Ruth. But it also invades Lee’s whole experience of the wartime 1940s.

At Comstock he is set to decipher the true face from the false. Is Louis Foster the well-meaning capitalist boss? How far will Luther McGregor go as black

Communist Party stooge and psychopath? What is Jackie, the alluring white woman decoy, actually after? Can he absolutely trust Joe Ptak, Marvin Todd and Smitty as stalwarts of the Union? At each Hollywood venue he struggles to separate substance from shadow, especially when Rosie, Jewish-Marxist theoretician in the mould of Wright's Mr. Max, argues a materialist view of race. He meets, contrastingly, both a black political confidence man like Bart and a black would-be revenge killer like McKinley. Each cross-racial marriage beguiles yet confuses him. Which is show, fashion, which not? Then there is Los Angeles itself, mundanely a network of freeways and neighborhoods with Central Avenue as its main artery, yet also a "bloated, hysterical, frantic, rushing city" (131).

Caught out one way, then another, Lee opts, finally, for the flag of Unionism. Yet the novel leaves little doubt of each continuing war within the larger war against Germany and Japan. White Southern workers resent a Union urging them to transfer their hate from blacks to the white rich. Black workers find themselves sold out by a supposedly raceless Communist Party leadership and by its black as much as white apparatchiks. Comstock's owner-management unhesitatingly plays each against the other, capitalist divide and rule against an already divided workforce. In a review full of admiration for the panorama of viewpoint at work, Ishmael Reed shrewdly observes that, in *Lonely Crusade*, "Himes is on no one's team."²⁸

The novel has been said to risk *longueurs*, especially Himes's pronouncements on communism and capitalism, the Party and the Union, and the on and off alliances between Jews and blacks (even though his views on black anti-Semitism and Jewish racism have a discomfiting sharpness).²⁹ However, this overlooks his continuing turns of speed and ability to take more than one shot across the bow at any one time. Most of all, it fails to recognize how *Lonely Crusade* extends and energizes the very genre of war fiction. For Lee Gordon's own interior warring operates at one with the larger "racial hell" (Himes's term in *The Quality of Hurt*) within America's own World War II industries.

A related pathway into the black 1940s is to be found in the remembering of an immediate past and, from a 1990s perspective, in how the 1940s themselves become remembrance. In the former respect William Attaway as memoirist of the Great Migration in *Blood on the Forge* (1941) and Owen Dodson as the child-biography novelist of *Boy at the Window* (written in the 1940s, published in 1951) and the considerable poet of *Powerful Long Ladder* (1946) supply bearings.³⁰ In Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), the first of his Easy Rawlins crime series, with its mainly black 1940s as against, say, Raymond Chandler's mainly white Los Angeles, one can look to a contrasting retrospect.³¹

Blood on the Forge understandably won immediate favor with an American Left yet further radicalized by both the 1929 Crash and the Depression. Its portrait of black Southern migration from sharecropper Kentucky to the Pennsylvania steel mills of the Monongahela Valley in the first decades of the twentieth century, seemed the very instance of ideological history. The three Moss brothers, the stentorian Big Mat, gold-toothed Chinatown and guitar-playing Melody, whose interlinked lives it tells, surely confirmed class over race as the necessary forward path in American politics.

In fact the novel draws quite as much upon racial seams, a five-act pageant whose black folk stylings transform the story itself into the “hungry blues” played by Melody at the outset. An opening scene suggests a despoiled pastoral. Topsoil has blown away. Mat’s woman Hattie suffers miscarriages. There is a cheat over mules by the white Kentucky “bossman” which Mat glosses as “Jest as well I was a nigger. Got more misery than a white man could stand.” The “sealed boxcar,” “a solid thing of darkness,” which takes them North, calls up the Middle Passage, a new inland slave ship. The steel foundries where they find employment give off satanic resonance, as threatening as the cancer which has invaded the black girl they first meet, or the prior life of Anna, the Mexican girl-whore who Mat takes as a lover.

The subsequent events Attaway tells with a black southern inflection. The effect is indeed one of blues, the vicious dog fights, the drinking, the explosion which blinds Chinatown, Melody’s self-inflicted wound to his playing-hand, the strike, and Mat’s destructive final enlistment against the Union in the name of the owners. Each brother becomes both actor and chorus. In this sense, and however much a period “history” of black migration North and the heat and fire of industrial mill life, *Blood on the Forge* can equally be thought a vernacular (and highly original) narrative ballad.

Boy at the Window turns upon “growing up black,” the coming of age of Coin Foreman in a 1920s mixed Brooklyn neighborhood, with a coda set in Washington D.C. after he is taken on by his alcoholic and blind itinerant Uncle Troy. For the most part it manages lyricism without sentimentality, a linking world of remembered siblings, religiosity, school, the lacerating death of Coin’s mother and his father’s hard-fought but failing efforts to keep the family above subsistence. The immigrant melee of voices, Irish, Italian and Jewish as well as black, gives special density to the novel.

Coin’s epiphany lies in his unfathoming of the word “nigger,” a human *reduction* all his surrounding life contests. Whether his own inner imaginings, school and street play, his growing dissent at bible-driven millennialism, or the bar and

show-time crowd he glimpses in D.C., he comes to recognize the force of his dream of the writer's life. In this he has company in Ferris, the worldly, Huck-like friend he meets from Kentucky. In its best moments the portraiture suggests the Joyce of *Dubliners*, a religion-laden black childhood yet toughly secular in its revelations of gain and loss. In the same sweep Coin's story implies the very silhouette of a 1940s coming to adulthood, the boy's intimate fathering of the man.

That same 1940s, for Afro-America always a "war" fought on multiple fronts, also has its voice in Dodson's *Powerful Long Ladder*, five verse sequences of which few read more poignantly than "Black Mother Praying."³² Intoned as though a spiritual, and duly buttressed with references to Babylon, Zion and Jesus as sacrificed son, it moves from the mother's absent soldier offspring ("Last month, Lord, I bid my last boy away to fight") to "war" at home as much as abroad ("they's draggin us outa cars/in Texas and California, in Newark, Detroit"). The effect is one of a churchwoman's spiritual, her dirge for black youth "fightin in lands as far as the wind can go" yet also "in the city streets and on country roads." Whether "sisters stitching airplane canvas" or "a black boy lyin with his arms huggin the pavement in pain," American war and peace again prove competing terms. This paradox Dodson carefully localizes in the mother's "I'm gonna scream before I hope."

Half a century on, and in the stirring debut of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Walter Mosley situates his gumshoe, Easy (for Ezekiel) Rawlins—raised in Houston, a 28 year old war veteran recently fired from Champion Aircraft—in the summer-time Los Angeles of 1948. When Easy meets the deathly DeWitt Albright, Texan lawyer turned psychopathic fixer with eyes of the "undead," white-suited with white Cadillac to match, it puts in train a cross-plot of searches for the blue-dressed Daphne Monet and a \$30,000 treasure trove.

Well-paced mystery, the novel affords a full and inventive recipe of false trails, sleaze, murder and sex. Each *film noir* surface works to deceive, above all Daphne Monet herself in her role as French accented white New Orleans belle. Double dealers, black and white, make appropriately shadow-laden entrances and exits. The cast includes the ex-bruiser barman Joppy, Easy's zoot suiter Houston sidekick Mouse, the liquor black marketeer "Knifehand" Frank Green, the pedophile politico Matthew Teran, and the mean-spirited white cops Miller and Mason. In respect of the latter pair Easy observes "the police have white slavery on the brain when it comes to colored men and white women." Not since Himes has black detective fiction had a keener human cast or showing.

Mosley's triumph lies equally in his attentive recreation of place and time. Los Angeles means Watts, Compton, Central Avenue ("a giant black alley and I felt like a small rat, hugging the corners and looking out for cats"), 103rd Street,

89th Place, bars which have evolved out of an earlier time's speakeasies, a "Mexican" East L.A. remembered as once also Jewish, together with an outlying Japanese American farm world. Santa Monica and Malibu carry the insignia of white, monied California, suburbia, however, always for Easy as inlaid with racial threat and danger as affluence.

The 1940s are, throughout, deftly signaled. Billie Holiday and jazz and horn men are referenced. Easy's own immediate war memories, typically, come into play. "I had spent five years," he recalls, "with white men, and women, from Africa to Italy, through Paris, and into the fatherland itself" and "I volunteered for the invasion of Normandy and then I signed on with Patton at the Battle of the Bulge." Not least are the characteristic bars, drink, smokes, music and restaurants ("Chow's Chow was a kind of Chinese diner that was common back in L.A. in the forties and fifties"). Mosley keeps this sense of black period, and of its white and California-ethnic counterpart, firmly in view, the first of his Easy Rawlins novels made over into yet another American time of peace as war.

If black poetry in the 1940s supplies a matching register its key anthology has to be *The Negro Caravan*, 1941.³³ Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage," initially published in *Phylon* in 1945 and, after several revisions, given final form in *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962), holds a special place.³⁴ The "voyage through death" of the Atlantic slave ships ("shuttles in the rocking loom of history"), and the "life" of the *Amistad* rebellion as led by Cinquez at sea and then "upon these shores," Hayden encloses in an intricate mosaic design. To a later 1960s generation, especially at the Black Writers' Conference at Fisk in 1966, this little endeared him, imagism over ideology. Allegedly the poetry was too "high," too white-influenced. His revival, deservedly, has come again. Each of his poem's congregated voices of "traders" and "deponents," of the memories of "a charnel stench, effluvium of living death"), and even the underpinning mysticism (he writes as a Baha'i), brilliantly suggests enslavement's shadow, the American racial armistice still to be attained.

Melvin Tolson's *Rendezvous with America* (1944), *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953) and *Harlem Gallery* (1965) pitch for an even more conscious modernism.³⁵ Whether T.S. Eliot, or Harlem Renaissance luminaries like Cullen and Toomer on whom he once did graduate work at Columbia, the footfalls are deliberate. A "New Negro poetry for the New Negro" would be his formulation in 1948. Only an aesthetic as adept in voice as "the Waste Land," Tolson argued, could offer a right and complete counter-tongue to misrepresentation and even

erasure. “Dark Symphony,” the centerpiece of *Rendezvous with America*, makes the point uncompromisingly:

The New Negro
Breaks the icons of his detractors,
Wipes out the conspiracy of silence,
Speaks to *his* America: . . .³⁶

Margaret Walker’s *For My People* (1942) signals another kind of accent, that of matrilineage both as the sign of black women’s enduring and as the issue of a challenge. A poem like “Lineage” ponders disjuncture yet a next generation of womanly continuity and word:

My grandmothers are full of memories
Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay
With veins rolling roughly over quick hands
They have many clean words to say.
My grandmothers were strong. Why am I not as they?³⁷

It had taken war service, paradoxically, to give many white and black Americans their first “equal” close encounters, a major spur to the emerging novel of “race relations.” George Wylie Henderson’s *Jule* (1946) can be thought typical, however slight a work when compared, say, with an earlier story of black family (and mid-western) upbringing like Langston Hughes’s *Not Without Laughter* (1930).³⁸ But it does explore options beyond any all-one or all-another racial binary.

Jule opens as Southern pastoral, a black child’s intimate memory of corn pone, sorghum, salted possum, roasted sweet potato, hogs skillfully butchered and smoked. But just as a series of black vignettes play into the portrait of Jule’s boyhood, whether the visit of his cantankerous Aunt Kate, the doings of the diminutive but tough fieldworker “Dr. Mootry,” the kindnesses of the black landowners Alex and Caroline, or the relationship with Jule’s first and eventually last love Bertha Mae, so, too, and against Dixie writ, does his relationship with a white boyhood hunting friend, Rollo.

A similar racial-ethnic mix of regime holds for Jule’s life in the North, to which he flees after a fight over Bertha Mae with the white landowner Boykin Keye. “You’re in Harlem now” the club owner, Jake Simmons, tells him. Yet as he progresses from dishwasher to headwaiter to printer with his own union card won in spite of the racial line, he again opts for middle ground. He has the black

worlds of Sugar Hill and Harlem (“always their laughter rose in thick swells, like homemade thunder”), but also white friendships in Long Island. Even a blonde girl’s exoticized perspective on black clubland (“this is fun! This is Harlem!”) does not daunt him. His sexual progress, from Maisie to the older, married Anne, who, unbeknown to him, carries his child, to the cheating Lou Davies, adds its own pace and variety of focus. Whatever the dips of style or pace *Jule* portrays an America of racial pluses and minuses.³⁹

William Demby’s *Beetlecreek* (1950) turns upon an altogether darker note, the deepening self-distance of a boy caught out by racial closure.⁴⁰ “Everything he had done since he arrived in Beetlecreek had the feeling of being an episode in a dream.” So the novel describes Johnny Johnson, adolescent son of his dying, consumptive mother in Pittsburgh and sent to his aunt and uncle, David and Mary Diggs, in their race-divided West Virginia township.

The boy’s encounter with Bill Trapp, former carnival performer, magus of sorts, loner, amounts to a bold use of *volte face* on Demby’s part. He reverses Twain’s Huck and Jim in which black boy (“Pittsburgh Kid” to the town’s black boy gang) pairs with, and then betrays, a kindly older white man. That, together with David Biggs’s dead marriage and false dream of love with Edith Johnson, the tarnished street girl back for her adoptive mother’s funeral, closes the circle. Each image of entrapment, coffin and stasis contributes to the shared effect. The point is emphasized in David Biggs’s reaction to a picnic proposed by Trapp to mark his breaking free of past isolation:

There was no way to explain to the old man how complicated this story was, how Negro life was a fishnet, a mosquito net, lace, wrapped round and round, each little thread a pain [. . .] too complicated. (86)

Johnny’s coming of age takes its own place as a thread within this fishnet. His mother’s hemorrhaging becomes fact yet also fantasy for him, her consumption quite prophetic. The gang leader’s act of throwing a baby pigeon against a wall startles and then haunts him, a brute denial of beginning life. The Biggs’s earlier stillborn child positions another death against his Johnny’s need to break free and survive. His aunt’s relish of the church festival he perceives as spiritual trifle over substance.

It is, however, the false rumor of child molestation against Bill Trapp, and the township’s cowardly black-white agreement to let things stand, which further perpetuates the deathly status quo. The final burning of Trapp’s house, the outcome of Johnny’s required gang initiation, dramatically inverts a momentary cross-racial

garden into burnt wasteland. If *Beetlecreek* has sometimes been thought too unrelenting, this, and Demby's command of image in the novel, confirms the verve behind his envisioning of race division as endgame.

Ann Petry's *The Narrows* (1953), almost Jamesian in size and variety of cast, and full of ancillary incident, turns on one of the oldest racial staples. The equation is that of the supposed rape by a black man of a white woman.⁴¹ Yet the events which join Link (for Lincoln) Williams with Camilo Williams (for Camilla Sheffield), respectively, Dartmouth College educated, Phi Beta Kappa and Navy veteran, and genteel Treadway munitions heiress and fashion reporter, belong far from Dixie melodrama.

Theirs becomes a love turned sour, begun by accident one midnight in the Monmouth fog, continued in white Manhattan and black Harlem, and brought to bitterest recrimination as Link discovers Camilla's "secret" married and monied identity. Where Link sees himself as "bought and sold," latterday silver-collar boy, blackamoor or stud, Camilla, in her own hurt, and as the white Treadway dynasty closes ranks, falls back on the ritual, and unfounded, charge of rape. The one story contains the other, a continuing gyre of bias and taboo as Link recognizes. "'Objective about race?'" he thinks, "'Hell, no. Nobody was. Not in the USA.'" Petry's achievement is to make Monmouth a source of both present and serial history as "told" from 1951–1952. References back become serial, beginning from slavery and the Salem and Caribbean magic of Tituba, then through to Abolition, interwar New England and the 1940s race riots, and finally World War II and Korea.

The novel's different lives give embodiment to this trajectory. The genteel and churchgoing Abbie Crunch ("Miss Abbie"), who adopted Link, counters Bill Hodd, owner of The Last Chance Saloon, who teaches Link to refuse black gentility. Malcolm Prowther, fastidious black butler to the white Treadways, devotes himself to a wife whose sexy, blues-like Big Mama fecklessness will always betray him. Weak Knees, Hodd's kindly short-order cook, lives in a world as haunted as real (his tag of "stay away Eddie" is born of the belief that he had killed a one-time friend). Frances K. Johnson, black mortician, even so gives her life and friendship to Abbie. Others live at once in both Link's world, and yet below it, like the legless, rodent-like Cat Jimmie, the "writing man" Cesar with his obsessive sidewalk bible warnings, or the religious quack Rev. Dr. H. H. Franklin Longworth. None, in turn, escapes the unsentimental recording eye, the lens, of the photographer Jubine.

Dumble Street, for its part, serves as center and symbol:

It was now . . . a street so famous, or so infamous, that the people who live in Monmouth rarely ever referred to it, or the streets near it, by name; it had become

an area, a section, known variously as The Narrows, Eye of The Needle, The Bottom, Little Harlem, Dark Town, Niggertown—because Negroes had replaced those earlier immigrants, the Irish, the Italians and the Poles. (5)

Its accoutrements serve a dual purpose, especially the giant maple-tree known as “the Hangman,” named by a remembering slave escapee, and the presage of Link’s eventual destiny as he is accused and then summarily shot dead by Camilla’s philandering husband and his Air Corp accomplices. The river works to supporting effect, an actual run of water yet the ongoing time and tide of the township, an eventual burial pool for Link yet a moonlit winter photograph for Jubine. The fog which opens the novel implies the larger be-foggedness, the inability to see beyond racial stereotype or myth.

At the close of the novel Peter Bullock, the combustible, yet finally craven, editor of *The Monmouth Chronicle* (he sells out to Camilla’s mother Mrs. Treadway), speculates on what he terms “truth lie, lie truth.” The hybrid phrasing points exactly to Link’s life, variously the gifted black child whose white schoolmates once shouted “look at the coon.” The pattern has him the adopted child pulled between Abbie and Bill and their opposing black class manners. The would-be college historian of slavery he continues to write during service in a segregated Navy. The black lover he is transposed into alleged black rapist. For it is these contrary markings of race as “truth lie” and “lie truth” that underwrite, and are then written into, the story Ann Petry most seeks to tell in *The Narrows*.

When Langston Hughes entered the 1940s with *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), his status as admired veteran of the “New Negro” years did not allay a number of misgivings.⁴² How could he have opted for ballads given the hurt of the Depression or the continuing shadow of Jim Crow both civilian and military? Nor did his Introduction help:

A book of light verse. Afro-Americana in the blues mood. Poems syncopated and variegated in the colors of Harlem, Beale Street, West Dallas, and Chicago’s South Side. Blues, ballads, and reels to be read aloud, crooned, shouted, recited and sung. Some with gestures, some not—as you like. None with a far-away voice.

For those who demanded sterner black fare Hughes had taken a downward turn into sentimentality, a charge that continued despite the evident anti-segregation tenor of the verse pamphlet he published a year later as *Jim Crow’s Last Stand* (1943).⁴³

Shakespeare in Harlem, however, offers a wholly richer achievement than this suggests, a graph of intimate, everyday, but always highly various black feeling. The form can be ironic self-musing like “Daybreak”:

You know I believe I’ll change my name,
Change my color, change my ways,
And be a white man the rest of my days . . .

It can become a two-liner like “Little Lyric”:

I wish the rent
Was heaven sent.

“Southern Mammy Sings,” one of a grouping of “mammy songs,” can issue its own version of war and peace as it contrasts “the nations they is fightin’” with:

Last week they lynched a colored boy.
They hung him to a tree.
That colored boy ain’t said a thing
But we all should be free

A poem like “Ku Klux” offers the tyranny of a robed clansman over his black victim:

“Nigger,
Look me in the face -
And tell me you believe in
The great white race.”

“Death in Harlem” gives new idiom to the Frankie and Johnny fable, full of high-energy riff:

Arabella Johnson and the Texas Kid
Went bustin into Dixie’s about one a.m.
The night was young.

“Evenin’ Air Blues,” contrastingly, works to a wry, self-sorry note:

if you was to ask me
How de blues they come to be,
Says if you was to ask me

How de blues they come to be –
 You wouldn't need to ask me:
 Just look at me and see!

These, and each of the collection's other love snippets, "out-of-work poems," quarrels, partings, brags and regrets make for a galleried yet diverse whole. Each carries a sense of location, personnel, and period, whether Lenox Avenue or the Harlem River, Count Basie, or the WPA. But the true unifying factor lies in Hughes's command of voice, from the spry lover-man ("Letter") to the wearied, all-hours worker ("Mississippi Levee") and from a poet-onlooker's admiration for the sheer color variety of Sugar Hill women ("Harlem's Sweeties") to the voice of the street girl ("Midnight Chippie's Lament").

Rarely, however, does he manage better than the question-form child register of "Merry-Go-Round" with its challenge to not only the mean-spiritedness but the farce of Jim Crow:

Where is the Jim Crow section
 On this merry-go-round
 Mister, cause I want to ride?
 Down South where I come from
 White and colored
 Can't sit side by side.
 Down South on the train
 There's a Jim Crow car.
 On the bus we're put on the back --
 But there ain't no back
 To a merry-go-round!
 Where's the horse
 For a kid that's black?

Hughes's short stories of the 1940s invite similar recognition. Each carries savvy, and with it sting, beyond the apparent lightness of touch. The effect is one of turn-about, ironic challenge to expectation. In "Breakfast in Virginia" (1944), typically, an older white passenger aboard the Florida to Washington Express, his own son an overseas soldier in North Africa, offers breakfast to two black corporals. But he, like them, is caught out by the refusal to serve black servicemen as the Pullman journeys through a segregated state like Virginia. Hughes tells the episode as the perfect silhouette of the larger war-time double standard. In "Who's Passing for Who?" (1945), set in Harlem as "literary bohemia," Hughes targets the impersonations of identity according to the darks and lights of skin color. The

story works as a hall of mirrors, epidermal “black” and “white” as a kind of spoof race-semiotics. The touch, again, may be light, easeful. But it hits the target unerringly. Hughes quite understood the racial contra-flows of the age.⁴⁴

However the canon of African American poetry is to be construed, from Phillis Wheatley to Rita Dove, Paul Dunbar to Michael Harper, there can be no diminishing, or sidelining, the contribution of Gwendolyn Brooks. She emerged in the 1940s with *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), written out of, and about, “Bronzeville,” or black Chicago, whose wars, as ever, are as much being fought at home as abroad.⁴⁵ To this end she brings the stamp of her own language and measure, whether off-rime and elliptical in the manner of early T. S. Eliot and the English Metaphysical poets, or imagist in the manner of Countee Cullen or Jean Toomer. Equally, she shares with Langston Hughes a facility for blues and talk-poems. Whichever the vein, however, her poetry is full of slant, life caught at an unsettling angle.

Annie Allen (1949), its central verse-sequence “The Anniad,” gives a typical linguistic density to the life of an everyday brown-skinned girl whose dreams of romance die in the tenement South Side:

Harried sods dilate, divide,
Suck her marrowfully inside.⁴⁶

Maud Martha (1953), Brooks’s only novel, tells a black Chicago life from girlhood to motherhood and domestic service as linking vignettes of inner feeling and dream.⁴⁷

The Bean Eaters (1960) strikes a memorial and again T.S. Eliot-like note, especially in “In Honor of David Anderson Brooks, My Father”:

A dryness is upon the house
My father loved and tended.⁴⁸

In the Mecca (1968) delineates Chicago as both white and black multiverse, whether “the Chicago Picasso,” with its “Art hurts, Art urges voyages” or “the Blackstone Rangers,” with its:

There they are.
Thirty at the corner.
Black, raw, ready.
Sores in the city
that do not want to heal.⁴⁹

Report from Part I: An Autobiography (1972), written in the light of her Black Nationalist “awakening” and Black Arts friendships with Don Lee (later Haki Madhubuti) and Amiri Baraka, has her speaking wryly and as imagistically as ever of “a surprised queenhood in the new black sun.”⁵⁰

Primer for Blacks (1980), one in a round of post-1960s later work, suggests exhortingly:

Blackness
is a title,
is a preoccupation,
is a commitment Blacks
are to comprehend –
and in which you are
to perceive your glory.⁵¹

Each of these has a beginning in *A Street in Bronzeville*, her gallery of verse portraiture inspired by black Chicago.⁵² In “the old-marrieds” (Brooks often favors lowercase titles) long-time intimacy finds perfect measure in a line like “But in the crowding darkness not a word did they say.” In “the mother,” with its opening line of “abortions will not let you forget,” she imagines a woman haunted by the accusing spirits of lost, if at the time unaffordable, progeny as “voices in the wind.” In “when Mrs. Martin’s Booker T.” she writes a species of gossip poetry, a Bronzeville neighbor’s remembrance of the mortified Mrs. Martin whose son “ruined Rosa Brown” and whose only wish was for him to

take that gal
And get her decently wed.

In “the date” the note is lighter, a half-comic vignette of resentment and sexual impatience as a housemaid with “somethin’ interestin’ on my mind” is kept working late by her employer. “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith,” one of the volume’s baroquely-wrought poems, portrays a zoot-suited Romeo whose dandyism masks an irredeemable emptiness of spirit. By contrast “Queen of the Blues,” reflexively a blues in itself, gives voice to the shake-dancing “Mame” who seeks her own kind of dignity even as she plays out cheapest burlesque.

Two poems offer an especially apt finale to the black 1940s as war and peace. “Negro Hero,” spoken in the first person of a black Army veteran, remembers war’s physical, acoustic horror:

my first swallow of the liquor of battle bleeding
 black air dying and demon noise
 made me wild.

The poem does not flatter a peace in which “white gowned democracy” honors the speaker even as it denies him:

it was hardly The Enemy
 my fight was against
 but them.

A run of ensuing questions takes up this double-seam, the undead racial shadow in the face of war’s killing:

am I good enough to die for them, is my blood bright enough to be spilled,
 Was my constant back-question—are they clear
 On this? Or do I intrude even now?
 Am I clean enough to kill for them, do they wish me to kill
 For them or is my place while death licks his lips and strides to them
 In the galley still?

“Gay Chaps at the Bar,” *A Street in Bronzeville’s* twelve-sonnet sequence, resorts to even more abridged irony. The seventh sonnet, “the white troops had their orders but the Negroes looked like men,” is written in what Brooks herself calls “off-rhyme,” and its parodying of the formal order of the sonnet catches at, and mimics, the time’s own break-down into war. It offers a further cryptic comment on the relative trivia of race as difference in the face of war’s own indifference:

They had supposed their formula was fixed.
 They had obeyed instructions to devise
 A type of cold, a type of hooded gaze.
 But when the Negroes came they were perplexed.
 These Negroes looked like men. Besides, it taxed
 Time and the temper to remember those
 Congenital iniquities that cause
 Disfavor of the darkness. Such as boxed
 Their feelings properly, complete to tags –
 A box for dark men and a box for Other --
 Would often find the contents had been scrambled.

Or even switched. Who really gave two figs?
 Neither the earth nor heaven ever trembled.
 And there was nothing startling in the weather.

Encoffined, interchangeable, what ultimate meaning attaches to the color of one or another dead soldier? Brooks's sonnet offers her own synoptic, challenging version of life over death, peace over war, a poet's recognition from out of the black 1940s, not to say out of all America's 1940s, of necessary priorities.

Notes

1. James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind," *The Fire Next Time*, New York: Dial Press, 1963, 68–9.
2. Relevant histories include Michi Weglyn, *Years of Infamy: The Untold History of America's Concentration Camps*, New York: Quill, 1976; Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988; and Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Distant Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1989.
3. See, symptomatically, in this connection: Salvatore LaGumina, ed. *WOP!: A Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination in the United States*, San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973; and Fred L. Gardaphé, *Dagoes Read: Tradition and the Italian/American Writer*, Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1996.
4. The term "symbolic" in this context I borrow from Mauricio Mazon, *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1984.
5. As good an account as most of the iconography of Native Americans is to be found in Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978. See also Angie Debo, *A History of the Indians in the United States*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970, and Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*, Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994. For an excellent account of the Lone Ranger-Tonto story, see Chadwick Allen, "Hero with Two Faces: The Lone Ranger as Treaty Discourse," *American Literature*, Vol. 68, No. 3, September 1996, 609–38.
6. A footnote to these refusals occurred at Seymour, Indiana, in August 1997, when a group of former Tuskegee Airmen, meeting in Indianapolis, returned to the Army Air Corps Training Facility where, in April 1945, a number of them had been arrested for entering a segregated club. One of their number, retired Lt. Col. James C. Warwick, spoke of their action as follows: "We stood up before Rosa Parks sat down."

7. Quoted in Sterling A. Brown, "Count Us In," reprinted in Sterling A. Brown, *A Son's Return: Selected Essays of Sterling A. Brown*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996, 70.
8. Quoted in Harvey Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue, the Depression Decade*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, 301.
9. Walter White, *A Rising Wind*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Doran, 1945. A best history is to be found in Nat Brandt, *Harlem at War: The Black Experience in WWII*, Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996.
10. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, New York: Dell, 1963.
11. This can be compared with the government-sponsored Tuskegee Experiment, begun in the 1930s and continued through the next decade and long after, in which syphilis was left untreated in black male sharecroppers from Macon County, Alabama, and which would wait until 1997 and the Clinton presidency for anything in the way of public apology.
12. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Philadelphia and London: Lippincott, 1937.
13. Ann Petry, *The Street*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1946; Dorothy West, *The Living Is Easy*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1948; Margaret Walker, *Jubilee*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966; Alex Haley, *Roots*, New York: Doubleday, 1976) Accounts of *The Street* are to be found in Chapter 3 and *The Living is Easy* and *Jubilee* in Chapter 4.
14. For a full account see Donald Bogle, *Dorothy Dandridge*, New York: Amistad Press, 1994.
15. Frank Yerby, *The Foxes of Harrow*, New York: Dial Press, 1946. See "How and Why I Write the Costume Novel," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 219, 1959, 145–50; Willard Motley, *Knock on Any Door*, New York: Appleton-Century, 1947; Ann Petry, *Country Place*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1947; and Zora Neale Hurston, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, New York: Scribner's, 1948.
16. Ralph Ellison, "Introduction," *Invisible Man*, 30th Anniversary Edition, New York: Random House, 1952, 1982, x.
17. Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfey, 1970, *South to a Very Old Place*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971.
18. John O. Killens, *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963.
19. Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead*, New York: Rinehart, 1948, and James Jones, *From Here to Eternity*, New York: Scribner, 1951.
20. John A. Williams, *Captain Blackman*, New York: Doubleday, 1972.
21. William Gardner Smith, *Last of the Conquerors*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1948.
22. Richard Wright, *Native Son*, New York: Harper, 1940; Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road, an Autobiography*, Philadelphia and London: Lippincott, 1942; Ralph Ellison, "King of the Bingo Game," *Tomorrow*, Vol. 4, November 1944, 29–33, and "Flying Home," in Edwin Seaver, ed. *Cross-section*, New York: L.B.

- Fischer, 1944. Both are reprinted in Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home and other Stories*, New York: Random House, 1996.
23. Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1945, and *Lonely Crusade*, New York: Knopf, 1947.
 24. Chester Himes, *Cast the First Stone*, New York: Coward-McCann, 1952; *The Third Generation*, Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1954; *The Primitive*, New York: New American Library, 1955; Pinktoe, Paris: Olympia Press, 1961; *Une affaire de viol*, Paris: Editions Les Yeux Ouverts, 1963; and *Plan B*, Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1993.
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 27. Richard Wright, "Two Novels of the Crushing of Men, One White, the Other Black," *PM*, Spring 1945.
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 29. For a helpful, spirited synopsis of the historic black-Jewish relationship see Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Black Demagogues and Pseudo-Scholars," *The New York Times*, July 20, 1992, A13.
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 31. Walter Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990.
 32. Owen Dodson, *Powerful Long Ladder*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1946.
 33. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur Davis and Ulysses Lee, eds. *The Negro Caravan*, New York: Dryden, 1941.
 34. Robert E. Hayden, *A Ballad of Remembrance*, London: Paul Breen, 1962.
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43. Langston Hughes, *Jim Crow's Last Stand*, Atlanta: Negro Publication Society of America, 1943.
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47. Gwendolyn Brooks, *Maud Martha*, New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
48. Gwendolyn Brooks, *The Bean Eaters*, New York: Harper, 1960.
49. Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, New York: Harper & Row, 1968.
50. Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report from Part I: An Autobiography*, Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972.
51. Gwendolyn Brooks, *Primer for Blacks*.
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Black Beats: The Signifying Poetry of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ted Joans and Bob Kaufman

Already well known and virtually revered in ultrahip literary circles, Roi had become by then a Greenwich Village luminary. Along with New York's Ted Joans and San Francisco's Bob Kaufman, he was among a handful of mid-century African American poets whose early reputations are identified with the Beat Generation. We're talking here of course about a literary movement shaped, loosely speaking, by Whitmanesque confessionalism, the modernist iconoclasm of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams, as well as by abstract expressionist painting, Eastern mysticism, drug culture, and jazz.

Al Young, "Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)," in J.J. Phillips, Ishmael Reed, Gundars Strads and Shawn Wong (eds), *The Before Columbus Foundation Poetry Anthology* (1992)¹

Williams was a common denominator because he wanted American Speech, a mixed foot, a variable measure. He knew American life had out-distanced the English rhythms and their formal meters. The language of this multi-national land, of mixed ancestry, where war dances and salsa combine with Country and Western, all framed by African rhythm-and-blues confessional.

The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka (1984)²

I cannot deny that I am Ted Joans Afro American negro colored spade spook mau mau soul-brother coon jig darkie, etc.

Ted Joans, *Tape Recording at the Five Spot* (1960)³

Let us blow African jazz in Alabama jungles and wail savage lovesongs of unchained fire.
 Bob Kaufman, "Jazz *Te Deum* for Inhaling at Mexican Bonfires,"
Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness (1965)⁴

Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956), the Grand Anthem of Beat poetry, has "the best minds of my generation . . . dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn." In *On the Road* (1957) Jack Kerouac invokes Harlem as quintessential "Jazz America" while his narrator in *The Subterraneans* (1958) recalls "wishing I were a Negro" when in Denver's "colored section." In "The Philosophy of the Beat Generation," a key manifesto first published in *Esquire* in 1958, John Clellon Holmes eulogizes Charlie Parker, Bird, as black godfather to the movement. Gregory Corso, for his part, puts him alongside Miles Davis in "For Miles" (*Gasoline*, 1958), recalling a set:

when you & bird
 wailed five in the morning some wondrous
 yet unimaginable score.

Norman Mailer, whose "The White Negro" (1957) served as apologia for Beat and hipster alike, found himself arguing that "the Negro's equality would tear a profound shift into the psychology, the sexuality, and the moral imagination of every White alive." Could it ever be doubted that in virtually all white-written Beat poetry and fiction, or associated manifestos, Afro-America supplied a touchstone, a necessary black vein of reference and inspiration?⁵ There may well be justification for thinking Mailer, as Kerouac, is not above playing out some stereotype of black masculinity. But there can be no doubt of black being on the mind of Beat and other countercultural America.

Yet black Beat writers themselves might well have been thought gone missing in action. Only LeRoi Jones, still to metamorphose into Amiri Baraka, was reported in dispatches. That, however, had as much to do with his Greenwich Village sojourn, and to an extent the small magazine publication of his early verse, as with any fuller recognition of the life begun in Newark, New Jersey, continued in the Air Force as gunner and weatherman, and given an ambiguous education in the ways of the black middle class at Howard University. Rather, he seemed a literary one-off caught in the shadow of an already senior Beat pantheon of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, Corso, Ferlinghetti, Clellon Holmes, di Prima and the rest.

But Baraka, in fact, did have company. Ted Joans, self-styled surrealist troubadour, had made his bow. Bob Kaufman, born into a large New Orleans black-Jewish family (a lineage acknowledged in his "Bagel Shop Jazz"), seaman,

Zen practitioner yet frequent rowdie, was winning fame from San Francisco for his jazz and performance verse and “Abomunist” manifestos. A.B. Spellman, the poet of *The Beautiful Days* (1965), wrote also as the jazz historian of *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (1966). Archie Shepp adds his name, jazz saxophonist and poet.⁶ Yet despite all of these, and whatever its varied borrowings from black culture, the Beat phenomenon rarely seemed to speak other than from, or to, white America.

Baraka hardly failed to acknowledge, at the time or later, this oversight towards his black fellow-writers. Thinking back on his role as founder and coeditor the journals *Yugen* (1958–1962) and *The Floating Bear* (1961–1963), which published not only Beats but Black Mountain writers like Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and John Wieners, and New York School virtuosi like Frank O’Hara and Kenneth Koch, he recalls in his *Autobiography*:

I was “open” to all schools within the circle of white poets of all faiths and flags. But what had happened to the blacks? What had happened to me? How is it that only the one colored guy?⁷

The same held not only for *Yugen* but for the host of other magazines which printed his early work, whether *Kulchur*, *Penny Poems*, *Locus Solus*, *Nomad/ New York*, *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*, *Naked Ear*, *Quicksilver*, *Combustion* or *Red Clay Reader*.⁸ It was no doubt further symptomatic, or at least some continuance of the assumed *status quo*, that he made himself the only black contributor to his own anthology of “popular modernism,” *The Moderns* (1963).⁹

This “white social focus,” as he came to term it, which also included his marriage in 1958 to Hettie Cohen, white, Jewish, his editorial collaborator on *Yugen*, and the affecting, un-recriminatory memoirist of *How I Became Hettie Jones* (1990), would bring on a major turnabout in both his life and art.¹⁰ The process notably gained impetus from his transforming visit to Cuba out of which, and against America’s usual Cold War stance, he found himself inveighing in “Cuba Libre.” “The Cubans and the other new peoples (in Asia, Africa, South America),” he wrote, “don’t need us, and we had better stay out of their way.”¹¹ Then, as Watts exploded in 1962, Harlem, Chicago and Bedford-Stuyvesant in 1964 (and all the cities in their wake), and as Dixie racism led to the Birmingham school-bombing in 1963 and newly emboldened Klan and White Citizens Councils activity (the latter first begun in Mississippi in 1954), so Baraka himself increasingly took to black nationalism.

His poem “BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS” bore the mark of this new African-centricity, millennial black resolve and threat:

may a lost god damballah, rest or save us
 against the murders we intend
 against his lost white children
 black dada nihilismus.¹²

Dutchman (1964), his iconic one-act play, would further explore the myth of white and black America locked in circling and unending subterranean contest.¹³ This transformation had been much foreshadowed in his voluminous essay work, whether *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963) and *Black Music* (1967), which paid homage to Afro-America’s unique jazz and blues, or *Home: Social Essays*, his wide-ranging, activist expressions of social and ideological critique.¹⁴

His personal life took its own symbolic turn when he moved from Greenwich Village to Harlem, breaking not only with white bohemia but with Hettie Jones (née Cohen) and their daughters. Suddenly and as black nationalist he became a figure of political controversy. The media typecast him as the voice of terrorism, race hatred, and the politics of accusation and threatened violence. By 1965 the proof seemed conclusive. The FBI were called in to investigate his Harlem theatre work and its funding through the HARYOU-ACT (Harlem Youth Act), arrested him and, among other things, accused him of building a gun arsenal. The Black Arts Movement was deemed to be cause for alarm, his own leadership a danger.

Ginsberg, Kerouac and their fellow Beats may well have aroused shock by their language, their sexual and other mores, for the Middle America which twice had voted Eisenhower into office (in 1952 and 1956) and had become gridlocked in consumerism and Cold War ideology. But even they did not anticipate the sheer headiness and impact of Black Power. Not without cause, Robert Lowell, in his WASP confessional poem, “Memories of West Street Lepke,” had called the 1950s “tranquillized,”¹⁵ and J. D. Salinger, in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), supplied Holden Caulfield’s “phony” as the *mot clé* for generational ennui.¹⁶

Afro-America had not lacked markers through the 1950s. Baldwin, Ellison, Brooks, Hayden, Hansberry and a young LeRoi Jones himself all counted. But the kind of politics and affiliation which caused him to Africanize (and Islamize) his name to Baraka, become a founder of the Black Arts Movement, take up the cause of Black Power first through community activism (initially in Harlem, then his home city of Newark) and, from 1974 onwards, through Third World Marxism, had yet to be fully embarked upon. Black, at this stage, conveyed more a style of

consciousness, a source of being cool. There was a while to go before a piece like Ted Joans's "TWO POEMS" could assume widespread assent when it spoke of:

those TWO
beautiful words BLACKPOWER.

Joans, in common with Jones/Baraka and Kaufman, and in whatever different degree, took up the Beat interest in counterculture and Zen and Eastern transcendental spirituality, though often enough linking these interests to blues and to Africa as a primary source of reference. Similarly, if their poetry could be celebratory and playful, in the style of Ginsberg, it could also broach the racial taboos of sex, a Beat articulation of purported singular black sensation. Given a heritage derived from slavery and formed as much by jazz, spirituals and rap as by Blake, Whitman, Williams and Pound, who was culturally better placed to have adapted Beat to a black dispensation, or in that honored African American usage, to have made it signify?¹⁷

A number of links help situate Baraka as Beat poet. First, in the *LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (1991), he himself (or his editor William J. Harris) supplies precise dates for his Beat phase, namely 1957–1962. [18]¹⁸ These, in the *Reader's* words constituted, "bohemian" years before "ethnic consciousness" gave way to "political consciousness." The *Autobiography*, however, gives the circumstances and flavor of his relationship to the movement:

I'd come into the Village looking, trying to "check," being open to all flags. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* was the first thing to open my nose, as opposed to, say, instructions I was given, directions, guidance. I dug *Howl* myself, in fact many of the people I'd known at the time warned me off it and thought the whole Beat phenomenon a passing fad of little relevance. I'd investigated further because I was looking for something. I was precisely open to its force as the statement of a new generation. As a line of demarcation from "the silent generation" and the man with the . . . grey flannel skin, half-brother to the one with the grey flannel suit. I took up with the Beats because that's what I saw taking off and flying somewhere resembling myself. The open and implied rebellion—of form and content. Aesthetic as well as social and political. But I saw most of it as Art, and the social statement as merely our lives as dropouts from the mainstream. I could see the young white boys and girls in their pronouncements of disillusion with and "removal" from society as related to the black experience. That made us colleagues of the spirit.¹⁹

A 1980s interview sets these remembrances within the yet wider historical perspective:

Beat came out of the whole dead Eisenhower period, the whole of the McCarthy Era, the Eisenhower blandness, the whole reactionary period of the 50s. The Beat Generation was a distinct reaction to that, a reaction not only to reactionary politics, reactionary life style of American ruling class and sections of the middle class, reaction to conservatism and McCarthyism of that period. Also reaction to the kind of academic poetry and academic literature that was being pushed as great works by the American establishment. So it was a complete reaction: socially, politically, and of course artistically to what the 50s represented. That whole opening and transformation of course had its fullest kind of expression in the 60s in the Black Liberation Movement.²⁰

There also remains the Beat aesthetic as Baraka fashioned it in the late 1950s, published under the rubric “How Do You Sound?” in “The Statements on Poetics” section of Donald Allen’s landmark anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960).²¹ Revealingly, Black Power, black cultural nationalism at least, nowhere features in an explicit way. Rather, Baraka takes aim at “New Critical” academicism, with its emphasis on formal design. He makes clear his own preference for open forms and fields of expression. The formulation, right down to the abbreviations and punctuation, shows the residual mark of Charles Olson as the architect of Projective Verse, together with a Ginsbergian, and behind that a Whitmanesque, will to inclusiveness:

“HOW DO YOU SOUND??” is what we recent fellows are up to. How we sound; our peculiar grasp on, say: a. Melican speech, b. Poetries of the world, c. Our selves (which is attitudes, logics, theories, jumbles of our lives, & all that), d. And the final . . . The Totality of Mind: Spiritual . . . God?? (or you name it): Social (zeitgeist): or Heideggerian *umwelt*.

MY POETRY is anything I think I am. (Can I be light & weightless as a sail?? Heavy & clunking like 8 black boots.) I CAN BE ANYTHING I CAN. I make a poetry with what I feel is useful & can be saved out of all the garbage of our lives. What I see, am touched by (CAN HEAR) . . . wives, gardens, jobs, cement yards where cats pee, all my interminable artifacts . . . ALL are a poetry, & nothing moves (with any grace) pried apart from all these things. There cannot be closet poetry. Unless the closet be wide as God’s eye.

And all that means that I *must* be completely free to do just what I want, in the poem.²²

Given Baraka's wish to write as openly as possible, and his lightly worn but considerable learning, this might be thought virtually a Beat poem in its own imaginative right. Certainly it links directly to the poems which make up his *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961), the volume which taken in retrospect has most become associated with his part in the Beat movement.²³

Baraka has his speaker confess in "Notes for a Speech," the collection's closing poem which ruefully echoes Countee Cullen's 1920s written "Heritage," any suggestion of active African influence:

What is Africa to me: . . .
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
 What is Africa to me?

However much drawn to bohemia the speaker would seem to have lost touch not only with Africa but with African American life and roots. Yet even as he considers this double deracination, the measure of his lament sounds blues-like and drawn from the most intimate repertoire of his own blackness. This also applies in "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note" as the title poem, which opens proceedings on a note of generalized alienation ("Nobody sings anymore") only to have that same alienation challenged by the sight of his young, cross-racial daughter, Kellie Jones, at prayer.²⁴

Other poems in *Preface* do a similar about-turn. In "For Hettie," his affectionate, roistering mock complaint at his pregnant wife's "lefthandedness" obliquely suggests the different pushes and pulls of his love for her. In "For Hettie in Her Fifth Month" he attempts, with a hint of William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheel Barrow," to catch both the otherness of pregnancy itself and of their unborn child. The latter he imagines as:

one of Kafka's hipsters,
 parked there
 with a wheelbarrow.

A related kind of otherness, that of interracial sexual life with all its supposed mystique and taboos, shows through in blues vignettes like "Symphony Sid" ("A man, a woman shaking the night apart") or "Theory of Art" ("blackness, strange, mocked"). But there was still a way to go before he took on Black Nationalist affiliation.

At a different level are the poems dedicated to his co-Beats. “One Night Stand,” for Ginsberg, teases the triumphalist fervor of the New Bohemia (“We entered the city at noon! The radio on . . .”), a funny-wry vision of Beat’s legions dressed in motley fashion and full of pose:

We *are* foreign seeming persons. Hats flopped so the sun can’t scald our beards;
 odd shoes, bags of books & chicken.
 We have come a long way, & are uncertain which of the masks is cool.

“Way Out West,” for Gary Snyder, explores perceptual process with a Zen tinge. He writes almost transcendently of the transition from:

As simple an act
 as opening the eyes

to:

Closing the eyes. As
 simple an act. You float . . .

Whether the America of Sheridan Square or the Greece of Tiresias in the poem’s span of reference, the poet’s vision doubles as always outer and inward. Snyder’s Zen affinities undoubtedly had aroused an answering note in Jones.

The most Beat cum “projective verse ” composition in Preface, however, is to be found in “Look for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today,” its title taken from an old blues, as if to give added emphasis to the memories of an American childhood fast giving way to a meaner adult human order. The note is nostalgic yet nostalgia chastised and mocked. The speaker, duly bearded, confides:

I have to trim my beard in solitude.
 I try to hum lines from “The Poet in New York”

Similarly, he acknowledges that his own pose can hardly keep up with an undermining diversity of experience:

It’s so diffuse
 being alive.

“Terrible poems come in the mail” it is said. A dark feeling comes over him at his wife’s pregnancy. Frank O’Hara, the poem reports, prefers the importance of his

own silence to “Jack’s incessant yatter.” The poet’s own thoughts, echoing Baudelaire, in turn become:

Flowers of Evil
cold & lifeless
as subway rails.

Only “dopey mythic worlds hold,” a childhood pop culture arcade which includes Tom Mix:

dead in a Boston Nightclub
before I realized what happened

Other heroes from Dickie Dare to Captain Midnight, Superman to the Lone Ranger add their weight of memory. “THERE *MUST* BE A LONE RANGER!!” runs the poem’s insistence. These stalwarts have company in other poems, whether the Dashiell Hammett hero in “The Death of Nick Charles” or Lamont Cranston as The Shadow in “In Memory of Radio.” They each embody the time and place of a lost, simpler, altogether more secure childhood order. The nostalgia is palpable:

My silver bullets all gone
My black mask trampled in the dust
& Tonto way off in the hills
moaning like Bessie Smith.

One just about hears a Jones ready to move on from Beat sell-absorption into politicization, with Bessie Smith, blues, and *black* popular heritage, as the route towards more committed ends and purposes.

In this respect few poems in *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* assume a blacker animus than “Hymn for Lanie Poo” (the nickname for his sister, Sandra Elaine). Freely associative in range, it develops a montage of skillfully parodic, and at times acerbic, slaps at white social norms and their emulation by America’s black middle class. Citation of Rimbaud’s *Vous êtes de faux Nègres* offers the point of departure, with sequences to follow guying, in turn, white America’s taste for primitivizing superstitions about sunburnt black skin. “Lanie,” in turn, the poem views as having given in to Gatsby-style partying and more drawn to pastime than anything else. Typically, in exaggerated image, she engages in a:

coming-out party
with 3000 guests
from all parts of the country

Baraka's ending takes especial aim at black bourgeois assimilation and, as he sees it, the inevitable outcome of so obviously wrong a cultural turning:

Smiling & glad/in
the huge & loveless
white-anglo sun/of
benevolent step
mother America.

If the form (and tone) can be said to be Beat, it rests in the poem's spontaneous voices and transitions. Certainly the playful iconoclasm can scarcely be missed in:

The god I pray to
got black boobies
got steatopygia . . .

Similarly the poem's "I" vaunts a touch of self-irony in:

it's impossible
to be an artist and bread
winner at the same time.

With a perhaps irreverent eye, or ear, to Ginsberg and Snyder, there is also a show of Melvilleian or mock-oceanic feeling:

Each morning I go down
to Gansevoort St.
and stand on the docks.
I stare out
at the horizon until it get up
and comes to embrace
me. I make believe
it is my father.
This is known
as genealogy.

“Hymn for Lanie Poo” yields a kind of flyting, at once regretful and angrily comic, at how black America has begun to buy into and imitate white middle-class American life. The phantasmagoria is not only plentiful but apt:

A white hunter, very unkempt,
with long hair,
whizzed in on the end of a vine.
(spoke perfect english too.)

From the start, and some time ahead of his Black Nationalist and Marxist phases, Baraka’s poetry clearly involved a subtle overlap of both personal and a more inclusive racial feeling. As brief an affiliation as it may have been for the then LeRoi Jones, Beat or at least Beat poetry, had assumed its own mediating black textures. That would change once he moved on into Harlem and the full 1960s.

Black Beat writing yields no more companionable a presence than Ted Joans. “Afro-surrealist,” jazz adept, trumpeter, painter by early training, and lifelong performance poet, even into his later career he continued to maintain the role of international stroller player with alternating bases in Manhattan, Paris and Mali. His insistence has always been upon an oral poetry, a talking blues or jazz, by his own count one of “funk” and “afrodisia.”

The connection to the Beat Movement begins with his arrival in New York City in 1951, from Indiana, and an early link-up with Jack Kerouac. Their friendship, evidently full of warmth and unhampered by racial lines, Joans recalls in “The Wild Spirit of Kicks,” written to commemorate Kerouac’s death in October 1969:

JACK IN RED AND BLACK MAC
RUSHING THROUGH DERELICT STREWN
STREETS OF NORTH AMERICA
JACK IN WELLWORN BLUE JEANS AND
DROOPYSWEATER OF SMILES
RUNNING ACROSS THE COUNTRY LIKE A
RAZOR BLADE GONE MAD
JACK IN FLOPPY SHIRT AND JACKET
LOADED WITH JOKES
OLE ANGEL MIDNIGHT SINGING MEXICO
CITY BLUES

IN THE MIDST OF BLACK HIPSTERS AND
 MUSICIANS
 FOLLOWED BY A WHITE LEGION OF COOL
 KICK SEEKERS
 POETRY LIVERS AND POEM GIVERS
 PALE FACED CHIEFTAIN TEARING PAST
 THE FUEL OF A GENERATION
 AT REST AT LAST
 JK SAYS HELLO TO JC
 JOHN COLTRANE, THAT IS²⁵

Joans's prolific output, almost thirty titles beginning from *Jazz Poems* (1959), *All of Ted Joans and No More* (1961), *Black Pow-Wow: Jazz Poems* (1969) and *Afrodisia* (1970), and running through to *Teducation: Selected Poems 1949–1999* (1999), has still met insufficient success.²⁶ Each exhibits Joans's quickfire wit and wordplay, a largely free-form poetry in which blues, jazz, sex, Black Power, Africa and surrealist motif (his debt to André Breton acknowledged in "Nadja Rendez-vous") plait one into another.²⁷

His own working credo especially shows through in "Passed on Blues: Homage to a Poet," a celebration of Langston Hughes as mentor, which opens on the following mellow note:

the sound of black music
 the sad soft low moan of jazz ROUND ABOUT MIDNIGHT
 the glad heavy fat screaming song of happy blues
 That was the world of Langston Hughes.

The poem works its way through a montage of references to Harlem nights. Allusions include Jesse Simple bars, and albeit that Joans himself was vegetarian never least downhome food whether "pinto beans," "hamhocks in the dark," "grits" or "spareribs." He builds a whole collage to include "the A-Train," "the dozens," "the rumping blues," "migrated Dixieland," "the jitterbug," "rent parties," Fats Waller's "Ain't Misbehavin'" and "sweaty, hard-working muscle." These, in sum, he says constitute:

THE WORLD OF THE POET LANGSTON HUGHES
 BLACK DUES!
 BLACK NEWS!

This is a homage both to Hughes's lyric genius and to Afro-America's first city, a "sonata of Harlem." It also bespeaks Joans's own considerable inventive talent, his ventriloquist fusion of Beat and jazz.

The fusion extends throughout most of *Black Pow-Wow* and *Afrodisia*. In the former, "O Great Black Masque" he invokes a negritude embracing locations from Bouaké to Alabama, Mali to Manhattan, its cadences of those of black spiritual as of Whitman. In "For the Viet Congo," an indictment of black Third World exploitation set out in upper-case typescript, he simulates what might be a newspaper "Report from the Front" made over into verse form. The comic, teasing side to Joans comes through in his "No Mo' Kneegrow," written while flying over Dixie ("I'M FLYING OVER ALABAMA . . . WITH BLACK POWER IN MY LAP"). According to his own gloss it "can be sung to the tune of 'Oh Susannah,'" apposite and not a little sardonic perspective on the price of racial deference. In "Uh Huh," he lines up seemingly muttered banalities which take aim at "THE COLORED WAITING ROOM." In "Santa Claws," which opens with "IF THAT WHITE MOTHER HUBBARD COMES DOWN MY BLACK CHIMNEY . . ." he goes on to lampoon Santa as some white patriarchal "CON MAN."

Nor can there be any mistaking the yet angrier Joans in his well-known "The Nice Colored Man," which offers a column of therapeutic, detoxifying variations on the word "nigger," beginning from "Nice Nigger Educated Nigger Never Nigger Southern Nigger" and working through to:

Eeny Meeny Minee Mo
Catch Whitey by His Throat
If He Says—Nigger CUT IT!

This gathers yet greater force from the fact that Joans's own father was killed by whites in a 1943 Detroit race riot. If a schoolyard race ditty it sardonically has turned that ditty about face, inside out.

The poems that invoke jazz likewise become the very thing they memorialize, both benignly and out of deepest familiarity and affection. "They Forget Too Fast" gives memory of Charlie Parker. "Jazz Is My Religion" ("it alone do I dig") and "Jazz Must Be a Woman" offer sound poems made up of the accumulating and run-on names of jazz's greats. One hears a near perfect blues sense of pitch in the carefully interspaced "True Blues for Dues Payer," Joans's elegy to Malcolm X:

As I blew the second chorus of Old Man River (on an old gold trumpet loaded with blackass jazz) a shy world traveling white Englishman pushed a French-Moroccan newspaper under my Afroamerican eyes there it said that you were dead killed by a

group of black assassins in black Harlem in the black of night As I read the second page of bluesgiving news (with wet eyes and trembling cold hands) I stood facing east under quiet & bright African sky I didn't cry but inside said goodbye to you whom I confess I loved Malcolm X

Afrodisia reflects more of Joans's African sojourns and his resolve to link Afro-America back to the mother continent. The opening poem, "Africa," so envisions Africa as:

Land of my mothers, where a black god made me.
My Africa, your Africa, a free continent to be.

"Afrique Accidentale," another Hughes-like montage which parallels the Mississippi with the Niger, Greenwich Village with the Sudan, re-enacts his own African journeying, that of a "jiving AfroAmerican" in search of the half-mythic and many times over cleverly multispelt Timbuctoo. He says teasingly, yet pointedly, of his visitation:

I have traveled a long way on the Beat bread
I made now I'm deep in the heart of Africa,
the only Afroamerican spade

The concluding lines make the point even more emphatic:

so now lay me down to sleep
to count black rhinos, not white sheep
Timbukto, Timbucktoo, Thymbaktou!
I do dig you!
Timbuctu, Timboubctou
I finally made you
Timbuctoo
Yeah!!

Throughout, Joans's fusion of Beat and surrealism shows its paces. In "No Mo Space for Toms" he takes an absurdist tilt at colonialism. In "The Night of the Shark," he concocts a priapic mock creation parable. In "Harlem to Picasso" he lowers a satiric eye on Euro-American artistic borrowings from Africa with all the accompanying talk of primitivism:

Hey PICASSO why'd you drop Greco-Roman &
other academic slop then picked up on my
black ancestors sculptural bebop?

In “Jazz Anatomy,” the poem itself becomes surreal while invoking surrealism in painting and music. The body, Magritte-like, turns into a combo, a line-up:

my head is a trumpet
 my heart is a drum
 both arms are pianos
 both legs are bass viols
 my stomach the trombone
 my nose the saxophone
 both lungs are flutes
 both ears are clarinets
 my penis is a violin
 my chest is a guitar
 vibes are my ribs
 my mouth is the score
 and my soul is where the music lies . . .

Taken with the plentiful erotica, at its best in poems like “I Am the Lover” and “Sweet Potato Pie” (and at its quasi-sexist, dated worst in a poem like “Cuntinent”), Joans has long deserved his reputation. “Whenever I read a poem of my own creation,” he would write, “I intentionally lift it off the page and “blow it” just as I would when I was a jazz trumpeter.” Veteran of both Beat and blues, Beat and surrealism, friend to Kerouac and Ginsberg as to “Bird,” “Dizzy” and “Monk,” and long-time European and Africa sojourner, his continued to the end to be a truly ongoing and live performance.

Though born in New Orleans of a Catholic-Martinique black mother and though there has been some doubt of a German-Jewish American white father, raised in the Lower East Side whose human variety he warms to while condemning the squalor and poverty in pieces like “East Fifth St. (N.Y.)” and “TeeVee People,” and with several years in the Merchant Marine and union activity, Bob Kaufman long won notoriety as one of the drugs and poetry doyens of San Francisco. Despite several jail terms, and the self-denying and Buddhist ten year vow of silence from 1963 to 1973 taken to memorialize John Kennedy’s assassination, his adopted city on his death in January 1986 appointed April 18 “Bob Kaufman Day” as well as naming a street after him. It was also Kaufman who helped coin the term “Beat” when editing the magazine *Beatitude* (the journalist Herb Caen claims “Beatnik”), no doubt appropriately so for the voice which once told America in “Benediction”:

Everyday your people get more and more
 Cars, television, sickness death dreams.
 You must have been great
 alive.

A degree of fame came in the 1950s and early West Coast 1960s with his work on *Beatitude*, and City Lights Books and New Directions publications. More, however, resulted from his jazz accompanied and Dadaist poetry readings, not to mention legendary street and bar misbehavior. At his death he was usually to be thought of as San Francisco's own one-off bohemian, its Beat irregular. His different "Abomunist" papers (*Abomunist Manifesto* (1959), *Second April* (1959) and *Does the Secret Mind Whisper?*, 1960),²⁸ each an anarcho-surreal parody of all "isms" and issued under the name Bomkauf, argued for a Beat-derived "rejectionary philosophy." The synthesis of terms like bomb, anarchist, communist, and his name Bob, went into the making of the term "abomunism." In *Abomunist Manifesto*, telegram style, he lays out its implications as follows:

ABOMUNIST POETS CONFIDENT THAT THE NEW LITERARY FORM "FOOTPRINTISM" HAS FREED THE ARTIST OF OUTMODED RESTRICTIONS SUCH AS: THE ABILITY TO READ AND WRITE, OR THE DESIRE TO COMMUNICATE, MUST BE PREPARED TO READ THEIR WORK AT DENTAL COLLEGES, EMBALMING SCHOOLS, HOMES FOR UNWED MOTHERS, HOMES FOR WED MOTHERS, INSANE ASYLUMS, USO CANTEENS, KINDERGARTENS, AND COUNTY JAILS. ABOMUNISTS NEVER COMPROMISE THEIR REJECTIONARY PHILOSOPHY.

Whatever the noise, the heat, the often dire turns in his life, which went with "abomunism," Kaufman managed also poetry of genuine distinction as borne out in his three principal collections, *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness* (1965), *Golden Sardine* (1967) and *The Ancient Rain: Poems 1956–1978* (1981), with a recapitulation in *Cranial Guitar: Selected Poems by Bob Kaufman* (1996).²⁹

In *Solitudes* Kaufman strikes his own Beat affinity in the poem "Afterwards, They Shall Dance," claiming imaginative kin with Dylan Thomas ("Wales-bird"), Billie Holiday ("lost on the subway and stayed there . . . forever"), Poe ("died translated, in unpressed pants"), and the *symboliste* master, Charles Baudelaire. Only a dues-paying black Beat, however, would end in terms which resemble both Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra" and a dreamy blues-like allusion to "cool beatitudes":

Whether I am a poet or not, I use fifty dollars's worth of air every day, cool.

In order to exist I hide behind stacks of red and blue poems And open little sensuous parasols, singing the nail-in-the-foot-song, drinking cool beatitudes.

Nor can the Beat connection be missed in “West Coast Sounds—1956,” one of his best-known San Francisco compositions, in which he identifies Ginsberg, Corso, Rexroth, Ferlinghetti, Kerouac, Cassady and himself as co-spirits for a changed America, even to the point of crowding the West Coast. The insider Beat reference, playful throughout, is unmistakable, whether to hipsters or squares, jazz or being high:

San Fran, hipster land,
Jazz sounds, wig sounds,
Earthquake sounds, others,
Allen on Chesnutt Street,
Giving poetry to squares
Corso on knees, pleading,
God eyes.
Rexroth, Ferlinghetti,
Swinging, in cellars,
Kerouac at Locke's,
Writing Neal
On high typewriter,
Neal, booting a choo-choo,
On zigzag tracks.
Now, many cats Falling in,
New York cats,
Too many cats,
Monterey scene cooler,
San Franers, falling down.
Canneries closing.
Sardines splitting,
For Mexico.
Me too.

This has to be put alongside poems like “Ginsberg (for Allen),” his larky homage to the author of “Howl” (“I have proof that he was Gertrude Stein's medicine chest” or “I love him because his eyes leak”). In “*Jazz Te Deum* for Inhaling at Mexican Bonfires” he offers a hymn to the human need for exuberance (“Let

us walk naked in radiant glacial rains and cool morphic thunderstorms.”) His “A Remembered Beat” sets up opposites, to the one side Charlie Parker as “a poet in jazz,” Mexico and the “hidden Pacific,” and to the other, coercive “organization men” and “television love.” In “War Memoir,” Hiroshima-haunted, he laments nuclear folly. “Jail Poems” extending to 34 parts, can be both self-inquisitorial and outward-looking:

I sit here writing, not daring to stop,
For fear of seeing what’s outside my head.

Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness, not to be doubted, made for an auspicious debut.

Though far less even (a suspicion arises that a number of the poems were unfinished), *Golden Sardine* has its own discrete triumphs. The untitled opening poem, a sequence of “reels” as Kaufman calls them, portrays Caryl Chessman on death row awaiting the electric chair. Norman Mailer’s telling of the execution of Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner’s Song* (1979) might well have been anticipated. Kaufman opens his poem in images which deliberately jar, as though writing a kind of deliberately fractured and discontinuous death chant:

This is a poem about a nobody.
Charlie Chaplin & Sitting Bull walk hand in hand through the World Series.
The scene opens with Dim Pictures of Animal Sadness, the Deathbed of the last
Buffalo in Nebraska . . . CARYL
CHESSMAN WAS AN AMERICAN BUFFALO.

Chessman’s own voice weaves into the voices about him, a killer but also a sacrificial killing. A mix of verse and prose, its typeface variously in italics or capitalized, the whole exudes fierce compassion, a gallery of witness and indictment.

Poems like “Round About Midnight,” “Tequila Jazz,” “His Horn,” or “Blue O’Clock” give testimony to Kaufman’s belief in jazz as healing intimacy, its power to subdue chaos. His poem “On,” a sequence of one-line imagist scenes, envisages an America of further disjuncture, beginning “On yardbird corners of embryonic hopes, drowned in a heroin tear” and moving through to “On lonely poet corners of low lying leaves & moist prophet eyes.” The view is one from the Beat or hipster margins, appalled at American conformity, “comic-book seduction” and the “motion picture corners of lassie & other symbols.”

Kaufman as Beat, however, is perhaps most to be heard in “Night Sung Sailor’s Prayer” in which America’s “born losers, decaying in sorry jails” become some

of humanity's holiest (as they do in Ginsberg's "Footnote to Howl"). The note is indeed beatific, Kaufman as poet of spirit over materiality:

Sing love and life and life and love
 All that lives is Holy,
 The unholyest, most holy of all.

In his Introduction to *The Ancient Rains: Poems 1956–1978*, Kaufman's editor, Raymond Foye, rightly characterizes the later work as "some of the finest . . . of his career—simple, lofty, resplendent." Two poems especially do service. In "War Memoir: Jazz, Don't Listen to at Your Own Risk," he makes jazz a counterweight, a moral balance, to war and rapacity:

While Jazz blew in the night
 Suddenly we were too busy to hear a sound.

He again focuses on the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

busy humans were
 Busy burning Japanese in atomiccolorcinescope
 With stereophonic screams,
 What one-hundred-percent red-blooded savage would waste precious time
 Listening to Jazz, with so many important things going on.

For Kaufman, jazz, "living sound," restores and harmonizes, an act of life over death. Or as he himself puts it:

Jazz, scratching, digging, bluing, swinging jazz,
 And we listen
 And we feel
 And live.

In "Like Father, Like Sun," with Lorca as tutelary spirit, he invokes the engendering hope of the Mississippi and the "Apache, Kiowa, and Sioux ranges" as against a "rainless," "fungus" America. The ending looks to a plural, uncoercive, universal nation, America the "poem" or "ample geography" as might have been derived from Emerson's visionary essay "The Poet":³⁰

The poem comes
 Across centuries of holy lies, and weeping heaven's eyes,
 Africa's black handkerchief, washed clean by her children's honor,

As cruelly designed anniversaries spin in my mind,
 Airy voice of all those fires of love I burn in memory of.
 America is a promised land, a garden torn from naked stone,
 A place where the losers in earth's conflicts can enjoy their triumph.
 All losers, brown, red, black, and white; the colors from the Master Palette.

Kaufman's "Like Father, Like Sun" no doubt bespeaks his own pains, his own losses and, throughout, his own will to redemption. But it also brings to bear a quite specific cultural credential, namely "Africa's black handkerchief" as progenitor and cornerstone. In shared spirit with Baraka in his Beat phase, Joans throughout the course of his writing, this would signify America made subject to a black beatitude and to be reminded of its own best promise as the multicultural apotheosis of all "colors."

Notes

1. J. J. Phillips, Ishmael Reed, Gundars Strads and Shawn Wong, eds. *The Before Columbus Foundation Poetry*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1992.
2. Imamu Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka*, New York: Freundlich Books, 1984, 159.
3. Ted Joans, Tape Recording at the Five Spot, reprinted in Seymour Krim, ed. *The Beats*, Greenwich, CT: Fawcett World Library, 1960, 211–13.
4. Bob Kaufman, *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness*, New York: New Directions, 1965.
5. Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956; Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, New York: Viking, 1957, and *The Subterraneans*, New York: Grove, 1958; John Clellon Holmes, "The Philosophy of the Beat Generation," reprinted together with his two other Beat essays, "This is the Beat Generation" and "The Game of the Name" in *Nothing More to Declare*, New York: Dutton, 1967; Gregory Corso, *Gasoline*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1958; and Norman Mailer, *The White Negro*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1957.
6. Bob Kaufman, "Bagel Shop Jazz," reprinted *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness*, 77–86; A. B. Spellman, *The Beautiful Days*, New York: Poets Press, 1965 and *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*, New York: Schocken, 1966, later retitled *Black Music: Four Lives*, New York: Schocken, 1970.
7. *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, 157.
8. A full list of these early magazine publications is to be found in Werner Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism,"* New York: Columbia University Press, 1978, 301–28.

9. LeRoi Jones, ed. *The Moderns: An Anthology of New Writing in America*, New York: Corinth Books, 1963.
10. *How I Became Hettie Jones*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1990. The first two chapters, especially, touch on these early years.
11. "Cuba Libre" first appeared in *Evergreen Review* and was republished in *Home: Social Essays*, New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966.
12. "BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS," *The Dead Lecturer*, New York: Grove Press, 1964.
13. *Dutchman* was published in *Dutchman and The Slave*, New York: William Morrow & Co., 1964.
14. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, New York: William Morrow & Co., 1963, *Black Music*, New York: William Morrow & Co., 1967.
15. Robert Lowell, "Memories of West Street and Lepke," in *Life Studies*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959.
16. J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1951.
17. Full-length contextual anthologies, studies and memoirs include Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg, eds. *The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men*, New York: Citadel, 1958; Lawrence Lipton, *The Holy Barbarians*, New York: Julian Messner, 1959; Seymour Krim, ed. *The Beats*, Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1960; Donald M. Allen, ed. *The New American Poetry: 1945–60*, New York: Grove Press, 1960; Elias Wilentz, ed. *The Beat Scene*, New York: Corinth, 1961; Thomas A. Parkinson, ed. *A Casebook on the Beat*, New York: Crowell, 1961; LeRoi Jones, ed. *The Moderns*; Richard Weaver, Terry Southern and Alexander Trocchi, eds. *Writers in Revolt*, New York: Frederick Fells, 1963; *Wholly Communion*, London: Lorrimer Films, 1965; *Astronauts of Inner Space: An International Anthology of Avant-Garde Activity*, San Francisco: Stolen Paper Review, 1966; Leslie Garrett, *The Beats*, New York: Scribner's, 1966; John Clellon Holmes, *Nothing More to Declare*, New York: Dutton, 1967; Tina Morris and Dave Cunliffe, eds. *Thunderbolts of Peace and Liberation*, Blackburn, England: BB Books, 1967; M. L. Rosenthal, *The New Modern Poetry*, New York: Macmillan, 1967; David Kherdian, *Six Poets of the San Francisco Renaissance*, Fresno, California: Giligia Press, 1967; Diane di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, New York: Olympia Press, 1969; David Metzger, ed. *The San Francisco Poets*, New York: Ballantine, 1971; Nick Harvey, ed. *Mark in Time: Portraits & Poetry/San Francisco*, San Francisco: Glide, 1971; Bruce Cook, *The Beat Generation*, New York: Scribner's, 1971; Laurence James, ed. *Electric Underground: A City Lights Reader*, London: New English Library, 1973; Yves LePellec, ed. *Beat Generation*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1976; Ed Sanders, *Tales of Beatnik Glory*, New York: Stonehill, 1975; David S. Wirshup, ed. *The Beat Generation & Other Avant-Garde Writers*, Santa Barbara, California: Anacapa Books, 1977; Lee Bartlett, ed. *The Beats: Essays in Criticism Oefferson*, North Carolina: McFarland, 1981; Arthur and

- Kit Knight, eds. *The Beat Vision: A Primary Sourcebook*, New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987.
18. Amiri Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris, New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991.
 19. *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka*, 156.
 20. Arthur and Kit Knight, eds. *The Beat Vision: A Primary Sourcebook*, 131.
 21. Donald M. Allen, ed. *The New American Poetry*.
 22. Donald M. Allen, ed. *The New American Poetry*, 424.
 23. LeRoi Jones, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, New York: Totem Press/Corinth, 1961.
 24. For bibliography see Donald B. Gibson, ed. *Five Black Writers*, New York: New York University Press, 1970; Letitia Dace, *LeRoi Jones: A Checklist of Works By and About Him*, London: Nether Press, 1971; Theodore Hudson, *From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka: The Literary Works*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1973; Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References*, New York: Morrow, 1973; Donald B. Gibson, ed. *Modern Black Poets: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973; Esther M. Jackson, "LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka): Form and Progression of Consciousness," *College Language Association Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, September 1973; Kimberley Benston, *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976; Kimberley Benston, ed. *Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): A Collection of Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1978; Thomas M. Inge et al., eds. *Black American Writers: Bibliographical Essays*, Volume 2: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978; Henry C. Lacey, *To Raise, Destroy, and Create: The Poetry, Drama and Fiction of Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)*, Troy, NY: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1981; William J. Harris, *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic*, Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1985.
 25. Reprinted in Arthur and Kit Knight, eds. *The Beat Vision*, 289. His connection with Kerouac and other Beats is chronicled in the interview which follows with Gerald Nicosia, 270–83.
 26. Ted Joans, *Jazz Poems*, New York: Rhino Review, 1959, *All of Ted Joans and No More: Poems and Collages*, New York: Excelsior Press, 1961, *Black Pow-Wow: Jazz Poems*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1969, *Afrodisia*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1970, and *Teducation: Selected Poems 1949–1999*, Saint Paul: Coffee House Press, 1999.
 27. Ted Joans, "The Beat Generation and Afro-American Culture," *Beat Scene Magazine*, No. 13, December 1991, 22–3. The same issue contains a brief profile, "Ted Joans in Paris," by Jim Burns, 13.
 28. All three of these manifestos, the originals now collector's items, are republished in Kaufman, *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness*.

29. *Golden Sardine*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1967, and *The Ancient Rain: Poems 1956–1978*, New York: New Directions, 1981. For bearings on Kaufman, see Barbara Christian, “Whatever Happened to Bob Kaufman?,” in Lee Bartlett, ed. *The Beats*, 107–14; Arthur and Kit Knight, eds. *The Beat. Vision*, and Joans, “The Beat Generation and Afro-American Culture,” 22–3.
30. As given in Emerson’s “The Poet,” in *Essays: Second Series*, 1844: “America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination.”

Acting Out: The Black Drama of the 1960s, the 1960s of Black Drama

If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn't have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the word. No metaphors. No grunts. No wiggles in the dark of her soul. Just straight two and two are four. Money. Power. Luxury. Like that. All of them. Crazy niggers turning their backs on sanity. When all it needs is that simple act. Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane.

LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman* (1964)¹

So, in terms which still rarely fail to excite, Amiri Baraka steers to a climax *Dutchman*—the play which almost single-handedly revolutionized black theater in postwar America. The speaker is Clay, hitherto a model of black middle-class composure, who finally turns in rage upon Lula, his undulant white temptress, as they travel the subway “in the flying underbelly of the city.” His belief that “Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane” bespeaks an avenging blackness, a once and for all end to white tyranny. No matter that Clay will be stabbed to death by Lula, nor that the cycle of taunt and domination will begin again as this Flying Dutchman train speeds through underground Manhattan only to drop off his corpse and pick up its next black passenger victim.

The play had spoken the unspoken, surmised, some said urged, that only unrestrained militancy would truly eradicate America's ancestral racism. Admirers saw commitment backed up by a radical force of invention. Detractors spoke of

black hatred, intransigence. Yet whichever the ideological assumption, neither viewpoint could deny that here was theater to match the decade of Black Power.

Dutchman was not to be Baraka's only Black Power play, nor would it be the only kind of black-authored play on offer by black dramatists in the 1960s.² But it represents a working touchstone, a marker, for the playwriting which flourished both within and outside this ideological mould. That it aimed to make America blacker, as Baraka himself often insisted, hardly surprises. For black American drama, in context, carries a dialectic of meanings: the inextricable crossover of stagework and politics, art and life.

Besides Baraka, there emerged a genuinely memorable generation of playwrights, whether the slightly earlier tier of Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin and Loften Mitchell, or an array of contemporaries to include Douglas Turner Ward, Ossie Davis, Lonnie Elder and Ed Bullins.³ Their playwriting mirrored the actual life drama of the 1960s and the shifting consciousness for virtually all Americans concerning issues of race and ethnicity. A mutual refraction was thereby involved: theater as history, history as theater. Put another way, the issue involved the un-staging of one kind of entrenched racial history and the staging of its successor.

First, and in keeping with the surge of new confidence in culture and politics, there arose the considerable number of black theater companies. Including all the community and campus troupes in the 1960s (notably at Howard University and other black campuses) estimates run to more than 100 black theater groups able to commission and perform new work, crucially, for the most part under the management of their own black playwright directors. No longer could the minstrelsy and set-piece showtime which had passed as black drama on Broadway be allowed to continue. Broadway had seen the frequent revivals of musicals like DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's *Porgy and Bess* (1927), not to say somewhat inadequate adaptations of Langston Hughes's otherwise richly vernacular story columns from the *Chicago Defender* in the form of *Simple Takes a Wife* (1953) as *Simply Heavenly* (1957).⁴

Nor could white-written plays concerning black life be taken to mean that duty had been done, whether in off-Broadway productions or, notably, by the historic Provincetown Players from their base in Massachusetts. The latter inevitably calls up the name of Eugene O'Neill, whether his Freudian, operatic drama of black dictatorship in *The Emperor Jones* (1920) or his portrait of recriminatory black-white marriage in *All God's Children Got Wings* (1924). Both, at one time,

starred Paul Robeson in the title roles. The North Carolina white playwright Paul Green, author of *In Abraham's Bosom* (1924) with its anatomy of early black community leadership, would co-write the stage version of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1941), an avid but finally too stilted dramatization of Bigger Thomas's pursuit and fall.

At the outset, one calls into the account the Black Arts Theater of Harlem with Baraka as its founder and presiding energy. Established independently in 1965, it sought Federal money under the Anti-Poverty Program for a summer community project of theater and other cultural events in an endeavor to defuse the tensions which had led to riots in Harlem and elsewhere in 1964. The FBI, however, insisted that the enterprise had become a Black Power recruitment drive, with funds being used, among other things, to build a gun arsenal. Before long, Black Arts in Harlem was brought to an end. Baraka, as a result, returned to his native Newark, New Jersey, re-launching as Spirit House.

But whether Harlem or Newark, both served as issuing points for black nationalist drama, together with a spate of agitprop, pamphlets, street happenings, poster and performance art. Within the briefest period, other Black Arts centers had sprung up across the country, few more notable than Black Arts West which had strong Black Panther support. Another key upshot was Oakland's Black House Theater under the cultural directorship of Ed Bullins, one of Afro-America's most prolific playwrights. On his discharge from the Navy, Bullins left his native North Philadelphia for Los Angeles, and for a while became the Panthers's Minister of Culture. He made no secret of drawing his inspiration from Jones/Baraka.

Bullins's subsequent move to Harlem, in part out of unease at the ideological rigidity of some of the Black Arts cadre, led to the creation of the Black Theater Workshop and to the staging of a considerable body both of his own work and of various protégés mainly in the New Lafayette Theater.⁵ Other leading 1960s Harlem theaters included the Afro-American Studio under Ernie McClintock and the East River Players under Roger Furman and Gertrude Jeanette. Black Arts Theater notably also encompassed Black Arts Midwest in Detroit under the direction of Ron Milner and Woodie King (Milner's role came out of his Spirit of Shango Theater). In shared spirit arose BLKARTSOUTH, in New Orleans, a development of the Free Southern Theater under Tom Dent and Kalamu ya Salaam; Sudan Arts Southwest in Houston; the Theater of Afro Art in Miami; and Barbara Ann Teer's The National Black Theater on Harlem's 125th Street. Each adhered to a view of theater as community-serving and driven, a staged politics of consciousness and call to action.

Another related grouping took shape in 1967, the New York based Negro Ensemble Company (NEC) with Douglas Turner Ward and Lonnie Elder as its leading writers, and Moses Gunn and Esther Rolle among its actors. This made for theater frequently given to Brechtian satire and the experimental use of fantasia and cartoon. Overall there could be no mistaking the shared conviction that black theater as formula entertainment was at an end.

The second implication of “black American drama” bears on how these plays and companies link into, and transpose, the larger black context of America in the 1960s. In every sense it could not have been more mutual, a whole theater of national-racial consciousness caught up in the dynamic of change. As colored or Negro became black or Afro-American, with African American still to become more usual, so, more or less, all “the definitions” as James Baldwin had taken to calling them in his essays came under new scrutiny, a reordering of perspective.

The history involved remains stirringly in memory. Rosa Park’s refusal to accept segregated seating led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. Court-ordered desegregation in September 1957 at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, elicited widespread white liberal approval, yet white-Dixie resentment. The March on Washington on August 28, 1963, organized by A. Philip Randolph, founder of the BSCP (Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids), and his deputy Bayard Rustin, gave unprecedented visibility to the Civil Rights movement. Kennedy’s meeting with black leadership in 1963, Lyndon Johnson’s signing of the Civil Rights Bill in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, and his use of “We Shall Overcome” to a joint session of Congress in March 1965, caught the pulse of the times.

The televised three Selma to Montgomery marches of January-March 1965, and the bloody repression by Alabama state troopers, became the cathartic emblem of Black Rights confronting historic Dixie racism and bullying. Headstart, Urban Renewal and CAPs (Community Action Programs) served as the watchwords of new social policy. Despite the eventual shift in focus to Vietnam, Gay and Women’s Rights, the gathering momentum of Latino, Native American and Asian American movements, and the Nixonism that would eventuate in Watergate, a campaign like the Poor People’s March of 1968 with its encampment on The Mall in Washington D.C. gave notice that Civil Rights was, even at the end of the decade, and if more diffusedly, still in business.

Political theatricalization took the immediate form of black militancy, at once reality and yet at times vogue. The groupings became increasingly familiar. SNCC

(Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) founded in 1960 had its leader in John Lewis, then Stokely Carmichael in 1966, and with James Forman in its ranks. The Black Panther Party, founded in Oakland in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, had its orator in chief in Eldridge Cleaver. The Black Muslims, the revived Nation Islam, founded in Detroit in 1930, and directed from Chicago by Elijah Muhammad, saw in Malcolm X the heir apparent until his split to found the Organization of Afro-American Unity in 1964. A “blackness of the word,” impatient, full of warning, was as readily seized upon by the media as by converts and believers. Whether apocalypse, or even, as some believed, hype it concentrated America’s mind.

As conveyed by Carmichael, Malcolm X or Panthers like Cleaver and H. Rap Brown, this clenched-fist posture broke with longstanding gradualism. Older Civil Rights campaigns continued but could look insufficiently radical, whether the NAACP led by Ralph Wilkins between 1955 and 1977, the National Urban League under Whitney Young, or CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality), founded in 1942 and led by James Farmer. The rising focus of public attention, however, became the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) first organized by black clergy in 1957 in the wake of the Montgomery and other boycotts, and to find its Gandhian leader and compelling sermonist’s voice in Martin Luther King Jr.⁶

King’s addresses run like an antistrophe to the age, black pulpistry of impassioned heat and eloquence backed by the allusive learning which earned him a University of Boston doctorate in theology. Each homily, full of biblical image and measure, and pitched for call and response, became its own oral-rhetorical drama across a dozen highly public years. The origins lay deep in black church culture, especially those of Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church, where his maternal grandfather and his father had been ministers (and his son would become SCLC president in 1997), and the pastorships King himself held in Montgomery, Alabama.⁷

King’s speech, “I Have a Dream” (1963), given from the Lincoln Memorial at the end of the Washington March, could not have been more inspirational, lyric, full of hope and communal vision, and took the public imagination by storm. His “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963) spoke biblically of love and brotherhood even as King and other SCLC activists found themselves once more in Southern custody in Alabama. “Letter from a Selma Jail,” published by the *New York Times* in the form of an advertisement on February 5, 1965, contained the timely reminder that this latest imprisonment for Civil Rights was taking place within two months of King being awarded the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize in Stockholm. “I See

the Promised land” (1968), again delivered almost messianically within sight of the White House, provided the climax to the Poor People’s Campaign. “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” the sermon King preached at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3, 1968, with its “I may not get there with you. But I want you to know we . . . will get to the promised,” held the uncanny prophecy of his own death the very next day by an assassin’s bullet. Each address bore the imprimatur of Bible, King’s Baptist faith, preachment as indeed a theater of the word.⁸

Whether King’s radical pacificism, or Malcolm’s use of Panther and other black radical phrasings like “by any means necessary” and “the ballot or the bullet” with all the implication of urban *jihad*, both had called time on America’s inherited racial order of the supremacist South and ghettoed North. Again, the evolving imprint of change was theatrical, a politics of the media age in which a whole repertoire of visual gesture (Malcolm’s Black Power fist, King’s prayerful, bowed head) alongside the spoken phrase or address, counted as never before.

CORE pursued its policy, begun in 1961, of sending “Freedom Riders” across the South to work for desegregation and black voter rights. James Meredith attempted to register at the segregated University of Mississippi in 1962 with 1,200 Federal troops dispatched to keep order. Robert Sheldon as Grand Dragon of the Klan promised a continuing regime of black death in 1963. Alabama’s Governor George Wallace blocked the entrance of the University of Alabama at the proposed entry of two black students in June 1963. Wallace would become wheelchair-bound having survived an assassination attempt in 1972, and in 1996 as he looked back on his life, ask for forgiveness. Fannie Lou Hamer helped create the MFDP (the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party) to challenge the state’s old-time segregationist Democratic Party in 1964. Sheriff Jim Clarke ordered his deputies to club black voter-registration activists in Selma in 1965. Malcolm’s Harlem and other Black Muslim demonstrations indicated a new style of black political strength. King took his campaigns North to Mayor Richard M. Daley’s Chicago in 1967 in the form of the SCLC’s Open Housing Campaign against the city’s *ipso facto* segregation and the South Side’s substandard living conditions. In 1965, Edward W. Brooke, black patrician and Republican of Massachusetts, became the third ever black Senator. In 1968 Shirley Chisholm, Brooklyn Democrat became the first black woman elected to Congress.

Television hungrily aided the drama with images of black protesters and their white allies being waterhosed or beaten and for which Commissioner of Public Safety, Bull Connor of Birmingham, Alabama, became an international symbol of institutional racism. The campaign of sit-ins began in February 1960 when four

black students sat down at a lunch counter in Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina and refused to leave after being denied service. The sense of *dramatis personae* became uncomfortably familiar: protesters, marchers, students and clergy with arms linked, jeering white supremacists, guardsmen with rifles at the ready.

Few events, however, have become more poignant in memory than the deaths on September 15, 1963, of the four African American girls, Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins and Carol Robertson, aged eleven to fourteen. Just out of Bible class and in their white dresses and shoes they fell foul of Klan segregationists and their dynamiting of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama (the city became known as "Bombingham"). Three decades later, Spike Lee returned to the episode in his screen documentary *Four Little Girls* (1997). At the time of the bombing, Nina Simone was among those who best caught the general black sense of Dixie with her angry, but always superbly cadenced blues rendering of "Mississippi Goddam."

In the North economic conditions, racist exclusion in jobs and housing, began to create ever more visible implosion. Riots took place in Harlem in 1964, to be followed in Watts in 1965, Newark and the New York of Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Detroit in 1967. Other cities burned to include Chicago, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Hammond, Tampa and Washington D.C. The cameras showed America going up in flames, most especially the night of Dr. King's assassination in 1968. Each riot bore witness to the new urban script of shoot-out, fires, both black and white looting, cars overturned and aflame. It was not difficult for Lyndon Johnson's Kerner Commission to report in 1968 that the root cause driving inner city riots was bad policing, a flawed justice system, unscrupulous consumer credit practices, poor or inadequate housing, high unemployment, voter suppression, and other culturally embedded forms of racial discrimination.

It hardly took the Kerner Commission, with its brief to examine "violence" and "civil disorder," to see a root cause in systematic exclusion, poverty, denial of access to decent housing and a sense of caged imprisonment.⁹ A trial like that of The Chicago Seven in 1969–1970, with a voluble, declamatory Bobbie Seale, among other Black Panther defendants, bound and gagged in the largely white court, added a further powerfully symbolic spectacle.

No greater ceremonial a drama, however, was to be met with than in each bullet-laden death, the funerals and mourning, and then the ensuing spirals of conspiracy theory and accusation, of the age's martyrs. The scenes include the burials of the NAACP's Medgar Evers and President John F. Kennedy at Arlington Cemetery in 1963, the search for the bodies of the student Civil Rights workers Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman in 1964, the Harlem wake for Malcolm X after

being gunned down at the Audubon Ballroom in 1965, the coffined lying-in-state Robert Kennedy in 1968, and the Memphis killing of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 and the long campaign to make his birthday, January 15, a national holiday. Each represented the “theater” of a life shared and then closed.

Nor did the death end. Its shadow continued across the South, the black inner cities, and penitentiaries like Soledad, San Quentin and Attica. Vietnam entered black consciousness as black frontline troops disproportionately returned to America in military body bags, and increasingly, the urban spectacle of gang-and-drug related killings. Yet at the same time, and contradictory as it may be, another politics, that of “Nation Time,” became the equally important prompt to black affirmation, a rising curve of hope. 1968 seemed the climactic year, energies expended in almost all political dimensions yet also a prelude to a later part of the century which would speak of having become post-Civil Rights and however dubiously even post-racial.

By the end of the 1960s, certainly, a new generation of black leaders began to emerge into the spotlight. Major players in this post-civil rights drama include Jesse Jackson, the North Carolinian-born Chicago minister and former aide to Martin Luther King Jr., who spearheaded PUSH (People United to Save Humanity). He would move from community activism to mainstream politics culminating in bids for the American presidency. Julian Bond, son of the distinguished Horace Mann Bond of Lincoln University and already a civil rights veteran in his twenties, eventually became a Georgia State Representative. Andrew Young, served as SCLC Vice President from 1967 to 1970, took a seat as Georgia Congressman, was appointed U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. under President Carter and, in due course, took office as Mayor of Atlanta. John Lewis, civil rights and SNCC veteran, and former director of the Voter Education Project in 1970, has been prominent as U.S. Representative for Georgia’s 5th congressional district since 1987.¹⁰

The times, thereby, also meant a rebirth of interest in the whole plait of Afro-America’s arts—each major literary form, and theater itself, but also church and related music, painting, dance, journalism, film and, notably, a newly visible “womanist” art from writing to design. The Black Aesthetic movement had been launched. Umbra, as black poetry group had launched in 1962–1963 in luminaries like Ishmael Reed, Tom Dent, David Henderson, Lorenzo Thomas, Steve Cannon, Askia M. Touré and Brenda Walcott, and published *Umbra Magazine* in 1963. The age also saw the increasing popularity of jazz-and-poetry, rarely

more dramatically performed than by the Black Arts figure of Gil Scott-Heron in poems like “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.” His ongoing improvisations and balladry, as those of Abiodun Oyewole (Charles Davis) and musical spieling group The Last Poets, supplied a pathway to later generations of rappers, dub and hip-hop artists. Universities, junior colleges, even high schools, developed Black Studies programs, among the best known that of San Francisco State and headed by the sociologist Nathan Hare. Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez would be among its early faculty. This new consciousness also showed itself in libraries, bookstores of previously “raceless” malls, airports and train stations. Each displayed its own black section.

Small publishing houses like Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press in Detroit and Don Lee/Haki R. Madhubuti’s Third World Press became important forums for black poetry. Anthologies proliferated, whether John A. Williams’s diagnostic essay-collection, *The Angry Black* (1962), and its successor *Beyond the Angry Black* (1967) or Abraham Chapman’s wide-ranging compendium of verse and other creative work, *Black Voices* (1968) and *New Black Voices* (1972). James A. Emanuel and Theodore Gross edited the student-oriented *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America* (1968). Most notably Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal published the rallying, ideologically nationalist *Black Fire* (1968) and Toni Cade Bambara her timely and restorative *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970).¹¹ A massive recovery and distribution of black writings also began by houses like Arno/New York Times, AMS Press, Mnemosyne, the Johnson Publishing Company, G.K. Hall, the Chatham Booksellers. University presses took up the call from Howard (launched in 1972) to those of Illinois, Indiana, Missouri and Michigan. Conglomerates like Random House got into the act through paperback reissues and editions in the form of Vintage, Dell, Signet, Penguin/NAL and Mentor. It did not escape notice that if the black word had become newly visible and newly audible, it had also become newly commercial.

In popular culture “Black is Beautiful” might have been the presiding anthem. The litany included Afros, dashikis, soul music, black food (“soul food”), wall art and graffiti, youth dance, tags like “right on” and “cool” (which quickly passed into white youth and campus parlance), and rap. A daring new vein of black comedy entered in figures like the irreverent Dick Gregory, the laconic Redd Foxx, the early, attractively offbeat Bill Cosby, and the hyper and brilliantly improvisational Richard Pryor. Black, or at least acting black, was “in.” Even Frank Yerby, the formula romance writer, returned, if briefly, to black themes in *Speak Now* (1969), the story of a black-white love affair set against the 1968 Paris

student revolt and the Gaullist backlash, and *The Dahomean* (1971), a portrait of African dynasty which foreshadows Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976).¹²

Television, however cautiously, used the 1960s to move on. If safety for the networks had lain in the ready popular appeal of *Soul Train* (1971–2006) with its “cool” hosting by Don Cornelius from 1971 to 1993 and as the youth-angled successor to the suitably low key *Nat King Cole Show* (1956–1957), further increments of change came into being. They looked to clever but within-bounds studio comedy like *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970–1974), a black sitcom series like *Sanford and Son* (1972–1977) based on the BBC's *Steptoe and Son*, and, most of all, *The Bill Cosby Show* (1969–1971) which, in turn, became *The New Bill Cosby Show* (1972–1973), the children's program *Cos* (1976), and then *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992). The latter won spectacular ratings, the Huxtable family as an affirming image of middle-class black professional life (Cosby plays a successful gynecologist) beyond the ghetto or projects. Even so, the show aroused reservation as too self-absorbed and consumerist.

The 1960s also saw more mixed-ethnic casting, notably *I Spy* (1965–1968), with Cosby paired alongside Robert Culp in the first TV series to star a black actor. *Mission Impossible* (1966–1973) shortly followed with Greg Morris as the technological brains of the outfit. *Star Trek* (1966–1969) with Michelle Nichols as the communications officer Lieutenant Uhura and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994) with LeVar Burton as the blind chief engineer, Geordi Laforge, and Michael Dorn as the Klingon warrior, Lieutenant Worf, continue to enjoy re-runs.

On the political and current-affairs front, Tony Brown, Professor of Communications at Howard, hosted PBS's *Black Journal* (1968–1978), a program which cultivated an edge of confrontation under the studio direction of the veteran black media figure William Greaves. It moved to commercial television as *Tony Brown's Journal* (1978–2018) and also back to PBS in 1982. CBS, with its seven-part documentary, *Of Black America*, aired in 1968, showed that the commercial networks were beginning to take notice of the new politics of racial change. Local programming played its part, as in the case of *The Black Experience* (1968–1973) for WTTV in Indianapolis and produced by Mari Evans, author of the poetry collections *Where Is All the Music?* (1968) and *I Am a Black Woman* (1970) and later the editor of the important period anthology, *Black Women Writers, 1950–1980: A Critical Evaluation* (1984).¹³

The way was further aided through the increasing visibility of black reporters, such as Ed Bradley and Charlayne Hunter-Gault. Bradley began as a reporter with WDAS Radio in Philadelphia in 1963, became a stringer for CBS's Paris Bureau

in 1971, and reported from Vietnam and Cambodia (1973–1975) before becoming anchorman and co-editor of CBS's prizewinning *60 Minutes* (1968–present). Hunter-Gault, who was among the first black students to integrate the University of Georgia, headed the Harlem Bureau of the *New York Times* in the 1960s, became an editorial staffer for the *New Yorker*, and eventually took a frontline role in PBS's *MacNeil Lehrer News Hour* before moving to a new life in South Africa. Both helped pave the way for a generation of black TV presenters and talk show hosts to include, pre-eminently, Oprah Winfrey, Arsenio Hall, Montel Williams, Wendy Williams, Gwen Ifill and Bryant Gumbal.

Theater so had come to mean both stage and life. There could be the challenge and pitch of a speech by King or Malcolm. Each Civil Rights march or confrontation seized the day. Increasingly black broadcasters served notice of a changing America. Black Vietnam returnees were making their presence seen and felt. Suddenly, as though a surprise, there were black as well as white teenagers. Black Panthers like Cleaver, Newton and Seale won competing attention. They headed an estimated 5,000 member organization that was seen either as a vanguard to admirers, or a vigilante force to detractors. If the Panthers were perceived to be a threat, they were also genuinely at risk from police racism and from the FBI counter-intelligence unit, COINTEL-PRO, as borne home in the gunning down of twenty year old Fred Hampton, head of the Illinois Panthers, during a raid on their Chicago headquarters in December 1969. Their rhetoric inspired followers even as it enflamed opponents. The scenario involved guns, shoot-outs, pursuits and arrests. But it also involved health clinics, literacy campaigns, food and breakfast programs. For some they were black soldier-citizens. Others thought they ran closer to revolutionary chic with their berets, black leather jackets and dark glasses.

The Panther saga, moreover, has continued down the years from the 1960s. The celebrity-supported campaign to stop the execution of Mumia Abu-Jamal, one-time radio reporter and journalist sentenced in 1982 for the alleged shooting of a Pennsylvania cop, partly focuses on how the police used his ex-Panther affiliation (and a suspicion of police informer evidence) in his conviction. Similarly, the release in 1997, after 27 years of incarceration in California, of Elmer Geronimo Pratt, another former Panther (and also a Vietnam Veteran and Amnesty International “prisoner of conscience”), came about on the grounds that his imprisonment for murder had relied on the word of a witness who, unknown at the time to the jury, both perjured himself and again was an FBI informant.

Other political drama attaches to the Nation of Islam, one of conversion, discipline, temperance and absolute fealty to the patriarchal Elijah Muhammad.

Throughout the 1960s, and since, often with *Muhammad Speaks* in hand (and at one point edited by the novelist Leon Forrest), they sought from their network of temples (Malcolm X was Minister of Harlem's Mosque No. 7) would-be converts in street and penitentiary. That Malcolm's killing came about as the likely consequence of an internal Nation of Islam schism, and in which Louis Farrakhan eventually succeeded Herbert "Wallace" Muhammad (Warith Deen Muhammad) in the fight for control, adds its own provisional final act or chapter. They have continued but as a diminished force.

Black women, inerasably, claimed their presence and respective pathways in the drama of the age. Rosa Parks, after the Montgomery boycott, helped run the Michigan office of Congressman John Conyers. Daisy Bates, the NAACP's motivating force in Arkansas's Central High School saga, became a continuing stalwart of Civil Rights. Myrlie Evers-Williams, who saw her husband, Medgar Evers gunned down in June 1963, and waited three decades and a third trial before a Jackson, Mississippi court finally convicted his killer, Byron De Le Beckwith. Evers-Williams was elected Chair of the NAACP in February 1996 to help reorganize the organization. Coretta Scott King, who participated in every SCLC march, protest and court case, has since the death of Martin Luther King Jr., remained a major presence in her own right until her death in 2006. Ella Baker pioneered much grassroots activism, long an NAACP stalwart in a career which extended from W.E.B. DuBois to mentoring Rosa Parks and Stokely Carmichael. Dorothy Height gave herself to a lifetime of activism, not least her lobbying of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson to work for black redress in the form of black public appointments and her column in the weekly *New York Amsterdam News*. Few forget the formidable oratory, and passion for Civil Rights, of Congresswoman Barbara Jordan of Texas (1936–1996).

After Malcolm X's assassination, Betty Shabazz would create her own legacy, raising a family of six girls, and returning to school to earn a Ph.D. and taught at Medgar Evers College/CUNY in Brooklyn. Later came the arrest of her daughter, Qubilah, in a would-be revenge plot against Louis Farrakhan, who many felt was complicit in Malcolm's assassination. Finally, in June 1997, she met her death from the 80 percent burns she suffered in a fire started in her Yonkers apartment by a grandson also called Malcolm. Both Shabazz and Coretta Scott King gave their name to the film *Betty & Coretta* (2013) which stirred controversy in their families as elsewhere as to the full accuracy of each portrait. Other women expressed their politics through SNCC and other Black Power groupings, despite

frequent misgivings about female lack of power, or visibility, not to mention the outright misogyny. Stokely Carmichael's riposte of "horizontal" when asked about women's position in the movement, jokingly intended or not, became a byword for chauvinism. Panther activist and wife-mothers like Kathleen Cleaver, or a Marxist (or at least Marcusean) true believer like Angela Davis, or the leading activist in the sit-in movement like SNCC's Diane Nash, gave their respective kinds of political edge to the movement.

Black Arts contributed Sonia Sanchez, author of the early call-to-arms play *The Bronx Is Next* (1968) and vernacular "black talk" poetry like *We Are a BaddDDD People* (1970), and whose role in helping start Black Studies at San Francisco State University was vital. Nikki Giovanni offered her committed voice in *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk* (1968) and *Black Judgement* (1969). Sarah Webster Fabio, although born in Nashville, Tennessee, like the Panthers became an important Oakland presence and whose *Saga of a Black Man* (1968) and *A Mirror: A Soul* (1969) carried the word of black challenge. Carolyn M. Rodgers, in early collections like *Paper Soul* (1968), *2 Love Raps* (1969) and *Songs of a Black Bird* (1969), spoke vernacularly of black and feminist revolution.¹⁴ In Jane Cortez, Afro-America looked to one of its leading jazz poets, often accompanied by her first husband, the free form composer, saxophonist and trumpeter, Ornette Coleman, and later with their son, Denardo Cortez, the drummer in the band The Firepiters. Cortez co-founded the Watts Repertory Theater in 1964 for which she wrote the uncompromising tenement and drug performance piece *Pisstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares* (1969). She also became the owner-founder of Bola Press, which was among the first to issue music and text disks. Like her peers, Cortez signified both a black feminism and black femininity, the latter further emphasized in the 1960s habit of wearing Yoruba and other African dress, turbans, sarongs and sashes, along with Afros and braids.¹⁵

Cinema plays a necessary role. For all the popularity of black action movies like the *Shaft* or *Superfly* series, or the two Godfrey Cambridge/Raymond St. Jacques adaptations of Chester Himes's detective novels, or a martial arts "amazon" films like *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), starring Tamara Dobson, the blaxpolitaion genre also had other literary sources and analogies. These films had their correlation in the black street novels of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines. As to other film Gordon Parks, photographer and writer, directed *The Learning Tree* (1969) based on his own autobiographical novel. Melvin Van Peebles offered *Watermelon Man* (1970), a raucous comic swipe at color norms in suburbia and the office. The dramatist

Lonne Elder wrote the screen adaptation of *Souder* (1972), a major film of black sharecropper life in Depression-era Louisiana, although originally the work of the white children's book writer William Armstrong. Black music, as always, supplied the acoustic sound wrap, from Motown's Four Tops and The Temptations, to soul's James Brown and Aretha Franklin, to Sly and the Family Stone, with gospel and spirituals, blues and jazz, always in place as part of the ongoing matrix.

Inevitably perhaps, it was also a media phenomenon which came to summarize the effect of the 1960s: Alex Haley's *Roots: A Family Saga* (1976), the full implications of whose subtitle needed time to be fully recognized, and whose TV spinoff (*Roots*, 1977, and *Roots: The Next Generations*, 1979) continued its phenomenal success. Viewing figures suggest it was watched in whole, or in part, by well over 100 million Americans. Even those who thought *Roots* too assuaging, a studio confection with an "Africa" which suggested a studio more than a real place, did not deny the appeal it made for revising the view of America's slave and racial legacy.¹⁶

As confrontation began to ease during the Carter administration, and in the need to lower the temperature after Vietnam and Watergate, America found itself caught up in more measured contemplation of what lay behind and within the 1960s. To the one side festered the unedifying languages of racism. On the other there was not inconsiderable will to change. Even so the hope for some co-existed for others with impatience at inadequate redress. Prime-time viewing of each life-story in *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* gave new currency to how blackness, indeed race as a whole, could be taken for genealogical drama in its own right and at the same time for America at large. The narrative entranced the nation. Kunta Kinte in the Gambia served as begetting founder-figure. Scenes of slave ship and the Middle Passage to Maryland and Virginia caused shock. Slaveholding and Reconstruction led into the new century with figures like Chicken George in North Carolina and finally the Haley family in Tennessee. Haley's text, and its TV adaptation, rode, and to an extent helped progress, historical understanding of the impetus that run through the age of King and Malcolm.

One ongoing saga from the 1960s made for a special style of cultural theater, that of Muhammad Ali. For despite the onset of Parkinson's Syndrome through to his death in 2016, Ali increasingly would ascend to become Afro-America's best-known and adored athlete king. Although there were other prominent black sports figures such as earlier boxing names like Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson, or track's Carl Lewis and Florence "Flo-Jo" Griffith-Joyner, or basketball's Magic

Johnson and Michael Jordan, Ali stole the spotlight, both politically and culturally. His flair for publicity began as early as his Olympic days when he entered the public sphere as Cassius Clay, boxing's bawling man-child, the Louisville Lip, as if his speed in the ring were as much dependent on verbal as physical adrenalin.

To Afro-America, Ali's succession of wins, together with the media hoopla, boasts, verse raps and rhymes, and especially his interviews with Howard Cosell, created a triumphalist calendar. First came the "black" fights, against the supposedly unstoppable Sonny Liston in 1964 and 1965, a serene Floyd Patterson in 1965 and 1970, the fierce, unstinting Smokin' Joe Frazier in 1971, 1974 and 1975, and the "rumble in the jungle" with George Foreman in the Congo's Kinshasha with its Conradian heart of darkness echo and stunning, high energy pugilism. However, when the opposition was the "Great White Hope" (among them Karl Mildenberger in 1966, Henry Cooper in 1965 and 1966, and Jerry Quarry in 1970 and 1972), the athleticism became more explicitly racialized, a latest or updated "battelle royal." As in Douglass's fight against Covey or the fights of Jack Johnson and James J. Jeffries, each punch and show of ringcraft bore the not so vicarious relish of hitting back at, not to say downing, white America.

Little wonder that, even in his physical decline, Ali continued to revive the spirits of the most put-upon Harlemit or black Southerner. Connectedly, the early performance rap with Drew Bundini Brown like "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee!/Yeah! Rumble, young man, rumble!," or the sass of his insults and predictions of victory, made for a talking-back no less likely to win attention than his grace of hand, or what became the Ali shuffle and his celebrated tactic of rope-a-dope. Ali's story would be one of self-recomposition, He converted from Christianity to the Nation of Islam in 1964, and accepted Elijah Muhammad as both Messenger of Allah and adoptee father. The celebrated name change transposed him from Cassius Clay with its slavery time echo to Islam's Muhammad Ali. In 1967, at a nearly four year cost of his title, which brought with it the opprobrium of Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis as well as of a number of serving black soldiers and that troubled America at large, he refused on religious grounds to be drafted into the Vietnam War. His Muslim conversion, later to be dimly shadowed by that of Mike Tyson, had turned the warrior athlete into the warrior believer.

Nor did Ali as perennial on-stage figure diminish after his best years in the ring. Television, travel, every kind of public role, massive name and face recognition, even his appearance as late as 1997 before a Congressional Committee with his views of child abuse, became ways of fêting him. Another confirmation lay in his lighting of the flame at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta even as, in full media view, he could be seen suffering the cruel spasms brought on by his disease.

It has been a sanctification full of affection, sentimental even, as borne out in the movie *When We Were Kings* (1997) with Norman Mailer and George Plimpton as white literary talking heads and a raft of hitherto unseen documentary footage. The world's one-time fastest heavyweight managed to continue, in body and voice, to bear the sign, the individual and embodied theater, of the new black dispensation born of the 1960s of his own youth.¹⁷

The Mexico Olympics of 1968 supplied another defining tableau. When Tommie Smith and John Carlos, gold medalists for sprint, gave their Black Power salutes with arms outstretched and fists clenched and gloved, was this not a protest too far for Middle America, the stars and stripes defied? Some of the older black Olympic stars, too, not the least of them Jesse Owens, believed this to be the case. A sports figure like Arthur Ashe, college educated and clean cut, surely better suited the American mainstream? Was he not the first black winner that same year of tennis's Men's U.S. Open however untypical tennis then was as a black sport? Both Ashe and his views, in fact, were far more complex, to be borne out in the long held anti-apartheid stance set out in his autobiography *Days of Grace: A Memoir* (1993) and in the insights into the historic role of the African American athlete in *A Hard Road to Glory* (1988). There would also be the intelligent dignity of his message to his children as he faced death in 1993 of AIDS after receiving an HIV-infected blood transfusion.¹⁸

Baraka's *Dutchman*, to return to theater drama *per se*, brought black politics and art together as rarely before. Foremost it excoriated the racist spiral and any black accommodation of its turnings. But it also represented a triumph of stagecraft, whose economy and handling of pace and denouement were not to be doubted. Thus, behind its resolutely contemporary scenario and its warring colloquy of Clay and Lula, a far more ancient legacy of racial division could be discerned.

First, the piece deploys a pervasive body of allusion to the Underground Railroad, Afro-America's earlier Freedom Trail. Slave narrative, inevitably, lies in the mix, be it that of Henson, Douglass or Jacobs, as, echoing, does the subterranean setting of Wright's "The Man Who lived Underground" and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (whose own narrator speaks of "Dante," "this underworld," and "hibernation"). Similarly, much as Clay and Lula embody New York moderns, they also imply biblical typology, an earth-made black Adam, hence Clay, confronting whiteness as an apple-eating bitch Eve. The "Flying Dutchman" title allusion, with not only Dante's *Inferno* (to which Baraka returns in his novel *The System of Dante's Hell* with its interplay of medieval hell and Newark ghetto) but

Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* as supporting terms of reference, gives yet further emphasis to *Dutchman* as theater parable. Its Pilgrim's Progress along the modern subway ("steaming hot," "summer on top," according to the stage directions) doubles as a journey into still darker subways within.

At issue is Clay's forced recognition of what he has become as black bourgeois stalwart, his having settled for less. Lula provokes and tempts, all to bring forth Clay's dissent, her power being to enlighten and then punish for that enlightenment. Nothing gets spared in her taunting. The allusion come heavy and fast to slavery, the sexual electricity of race, the false coupledness of partying, the deeply emblematic name calling ("Uncle Tom" and "Uncle Tom Woolly-Head" from Lula, and "You dumb bitch" and "Tullulah Bankhead" from Clay). These exchanges, full of charge and countercharge, point Clay into becoming, as he recognizes, an "ex-coon," no longer one of the "half-white trusties" (he even clubs down a white drunk). But his insight is to prove deadly. "I've heard enough," says Lula before she stabs him, another white murder or castration to pre-empt black reprisal. Clay's mouth, with its newborn words of understanding, is said to go on "working stupidly." As his young successor boards the train, in default of any reversal of the status quo, the circling, underground journey for black America reassumes its course. It makes for the perfect, if cryptic and accusing outcome. Much as the vision of *Dutchman* startled, there could be no doubt of the artistry.

Baraka's other main 1960s plays almost tirelessly extend this theater of catharsis. His only "raceless" piece, *The Baptism* (1964), launches into Christianity as essentially a massive sexual fetish, hidden beneath the veil of high spirituality. The Baptist Church in which the action takes place thus converts into a species of violent Gay Court, minister and communicants locked in sadomasochist rite and with language to match. With *The Toilet* (1964), set uncompromisingly in a high school latrine, homosexuality again becomes a key image. One boy's love for another has been hidden by the laws of adolescent gang behavior, a portrait of victimization implicitly linking sexual with racial oppression.¹⁹

The Slave, however, actually envisages race war, its principal black figure, Walker Vessels, prepared to assassinate his own children in the very house of his white ex-wife Grace and her present husband Easley. True to his name, Vessels sees himself as the vehicle of a blackness which, lacking any other option, becomes inescapably and brutally murderous. It is the same kind of impetus carried in Wright's *Bigger* Thomas, only this time made aware and articulate. To kill his two girls, then their white professor stepfather Easley, and finally Grace herself, is to

achieve a temporary, if bitter, efficacy in the face of all that hitherto has deprived him and his forerunners of self-determining power. To this end, he enters and exits from the play anachronistically as “an old field slave,” as though his incarnation as a killer were the only alternative. Easley at one point speaks reflexively of “ritual drama,” racial blight as historic American drama.

Four Black Revolutionary Plays (1969) took Baraka still further into black nationalism. Two lines from his verse Introduction assume the very persona of militancy:

i am prophesying the death of white people in this land
 i am prophesying the triumph of black life in this land,
 and over all the word.

Each of the plays, accordingly, becomes a consciously stylized acting-out. *Experimental Death Unit # 1* (1964) envisages a black warrior group which beheads two white addicts, Loco and Duff (their half-comic decadence also linking black to Beckett’s Estragon and Vladimir), as they compete for the favors of a black hooker. The play ends with the incantation of “Black,” an anthem or liturgy of reborn African community. *A Black Mass* (1965) looks to an even more pronounced African aegis by re-enacting Black Muslim myth, the creation by Jacoub, one of three Islamic god-like magicians, of a ravaging White Beast, against which *jihad* is demanded by the narrator. *Great Goodness of Life* (1967). According to its subtitle “A Coon Show” the play seeks to perform in its own phrase a similar “cleansing rite.” Given as a phantasmagorical trial Court Royal, an old-time “darkie,” is made to kill his own son on orders from the judiciary. Equally acerbic is *Madheart* (1967), a kind of masque or harlequin play in which “Black Man” and “Black Woman” recognize their mutual plight in the face of the white “Devil Lady.”²⁰

The play his publishers would not include, to Baraka’s scorn, was *Jello* (performed 1965, published 1970) his scabrous assault on the Jack Benny-Rochester comedy series. That American TV’s best-known black manservant should turn, savagely, un-comically, upon his white employer was to challenge one of the culture’s most comforting racial equations. That had long used the formula of deferential black hireling and his put-upon but still custodial white hirer. *Jello*, however, reversed the relationship, slavery in all its cooning up-ended. Given the deaths, the fires, it was perhaps inevitable that Baraka would close the decade with *The Death of Malcolm X* (1969), a one-act theatrical caricature which treats the murder of the Black Muslim leader as a species of grotesque media conspiracy.

Other Baraka plays from the 1960s need to enter the account, notably his farce, *Home on the Range* (1968), first presented at a fundraising benefit for the Black Panthers. The piece uses a zany black house break-in, and a riotous cross-racial party, to deride sought-after integration into white America as a fatal wrong turning. Much as the piece actually sidesteps simple or reductive nationalism, the cry went up that ideology had indeed won the upper hand. Yet here, as in *Dutchman*, the truth remains that Baraka has always operated more subtly, his theater a bold metamorphosis of black 1960s America.²¹ It cannot surprise that successors as different as the Pittsburgh dramatist, August Wilson, or the filmmaker, Spike Lee, would continue to insist on Jones/Baraka's drama as inspiration.²²

Alternative stylings of black theater, however, equally mark out the 1960s, even if one first needs a slight step backwards in time. For Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin and Loften Mitchell a more traditional liberalism is to be heard, that of America necessarily bound to a shared interracial destiny. The accusations, however real, come over as less severe, a belief in the humanist solubility of racial encounter and division. In this respect Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), first performed New York, understandably won plaudits as the best black play to date, with its naturalist, upbeat portrait set in Chicago's South Side, of the Younger family's hopes of betterment.²³

The plot hinges on an insurance check sent to Mama Younger and her resolve to move the family from black Chicago into a white neighborhood, so advancing the would-be bright promise of integration. Each family member in turn harbors a private aspiration. Mama, herself, dreams of upward family rise. Her son, Walter Lee, working as a chauffeur has become a long defeated man pining for business success. His wife, Ruth, craves an end to failing marriage and subsistence living. Their boy, Travis, could not be more eager to ascend young ambition's ladder. Walter's sister, Beneatha, yearns for a medical career and marriage to her African suitor. Each family member, in the event, undermines the other. Mrs. Younger does so in her need to preside as matriarch. Walter edges into self-contempt. Ruth gives in to despair. Travis finds himself incapacitated by his need to admire a failing father figure. Beneatha loses herself in sentimentalization of Africa.

Yet against the odds, they find a pathway into family self-renewal despite the scam that robs Walter Lee of his investment in a liquor store and the efforts of a white neighborhood group to prevent their purchase of the new house. Mama's "I be down directly," spoken at the end of the play as they prepare to move, gives the sign of the continued possibility of a new dawn, a black family determined (liberally, optimistically—this was during the civil rights era) upon a better black tenancy of America.

A similar “liberal” ethos marks out *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (1964), set in Greenwich Village, and a virtual symposium on the tension of private and public morality.²⁴ Sidney and Iris Brustein represent the near classic Village couple, he an ineffectual optimist, Jewish, she a “resting” actress originally from poor-white Appalachia and much taken with Freud, and both struggling to save their failing marriage. Around them lives an ensemble. Alton Scales, the play’s only black figure and an angry political radical becomes embroiled in a fatal relationship with Iris’s sister, Gloria Parodus, a former call girl who commits suicide in the Brustein’s apartment once Alton rejects her because of her past. Mavis Parodus, Iris’s other, more respectable bourgeois sister, lives true to her name. David Ragin, gay, and an aspiring writer, treads the finest line of closet and coming out. Wally O’Hara, Sidney’s friend and Greenwich Village politico, sells out to the ward bosses. In Brustein’s turnings as a man of conscience, not to say a failed restaurateur who has bought into the local newspaper, Hansberry argues for moral activism (“We shall make something strong of this sorrow,” says Sidney of Gloria’s death and her failed affair across the racial divide with Alton) and a stand against old time fixes of political power.

Thus essentially a “raceless” drama, it subsumes the black need for liberation within a wider humanist process which aspires to free every race, gender and class of oppression. Yet however authentic its ethic of cross-racial fraternity, and however well constructed, *Sign* has had an ambiguous fate. Proponents liken it to the theater of Arthur Miller as a mainstay of the American liberal imagination. But to those in quest of a black “black drama,” dutifully-militant and particular in its attention to black culture and psychology, it remains somewhere at the margin.

As far as subject-matter went, James Baldwin’s theater was to suffer something of a lesser doubt. “We are waking in terrible darkness here, and this is one man’s attempt to bear witness to the reality and the power of the light,” runs his “Notes” for *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964).²⁵ Loosely based on the Emmett Till murder in 1955, it was to be dedicated to Baldwin’s friend Medgar Evers, who in 1963 also became the victim of white racist assassination. *Blues* dramatizes the life and killing of Richard Henry, student-age black revolutionary who has returned from a drug recovery clinic in the North to his Deep South roots. His murderer is Lyle Britten, white store owner and veteran good ol’ boy supremacist. Two worlds thus collide, “Whitetown” and “Blacktown,” with only occasional intermediaries such as Juanita, Richard’s girl, herself an object of white vituperation, and Parnell James, the white liberal newspaper owner, likely to steer a forward path. Against them, Baldwin leaves no doubt, persists the white Dixie of old, at once violent, sexually fearful and given over to Klan-style phobia.

Few questioned the play's passion, but the cavils, both at the time and since, proliferated. Did not the dialogue dip into banality (Parnell says of his friend Britten "He suffers—from being in the dark")? Was not Baldwin himself uncertain of the play's moral implications, on the one hand depicting the Reverend Meridian Henry, Richard's father, as eventually abandoning Christian non-violence by taking a gun to church under his Bible ("like the pilgrims of old," he says), and on the other hand holding on, in the Juanita-Parnell connection, to a belief in liberal salvation? What of the charge of formula characterization, whether Lyle Britten as sexually reinvigorated through violence or Parnell's achingly well meant inquiry, "What is it like to be black?" Questions, in turn, arose about the play's dramaturgy, about the Whitetown/Blacktown alternation, and possible overlength. But despite misgivings, *Blues for Mister Charlie* was a drama from, and for the 1960s.

The Amen Corner, written as early as 1952 but not performed until 1965 (or published until 1968), drew directly upon Baldwin's own Harlem upbringing, especially his three years as a boy preacher in his stepfather's storefront church.²⁶ Centered on Sister Margaret Alexander, evangelical pastor to her black congregation, it explores the call of the word (first to Luke, Margaret's jazzman husband who has returned home sick and dying after ten years on the road, and then to their son David, a music student who rejects the sanctimony in which he has been raised) as against the call of the spirit which has led Margaret to her vocation. But the congregation's elders, jealous and full of bickering, reject Margaret as mother prophet, accusing her of misuse of authority and even funds, the betrayal of her vaunted commitment to faith. No single rightness, or righteousness, holds, whether family or church. Even Margaret comes to see her own complicity in her husband's drinking and desertion. In this the best of the play recalls "The Chant of Saints" in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), a fervent Bible Christianity, which for all its certitude vexed and eluded by the worlds of word and flesh quite beyond its own churchly terms of reference.

Of an age with Baldwin, Loftin Mitchell entered the 1960s with perhaps his strongest work already behind him, especially *Land Beyond the River* (1957), the reworking of a celebrated South Carolina school busing controversy. But in *Star of the Morning: Scenes in the Life of Bert Williams* (1965) he developed an impressive portrait of the great vaudeville star as documentary musical not unlike Langston Hughes's pastiche of Harlem religiosity, *Tambourines to Glory* (1963).²⁷ Williams's artistry, Mitchell recognizes, had to survive both racist managements and audiences bound upon seeing only "coon" stage acts. Yet whatever the popular persona, as songster or black actor self-travestyingly made to wear blackface, Williams is shown to have recognized the game he was playing. "Every laugh at

me and abuse,” Mitchell has him say, “is a nail in white America’s coffin.” Honoring Williams, thereby, becomes another kind of recovery of black cultural legacy to embrace tap, acrobatics, song, mimicry, banter. Each acts as a kind of black contra-dance. The play opens up to ironic scrutiny a history in which Williams subverted, even as he seemingly obeyed, the required forms of black self-staging.

African American doubling or counter representation has a long ancestry. The cakewalk in slave times offered its own mockery, black slave chattels outwitting their white owner occupiers. George Schuyler’s *Back No More* (1931) parodies, if from a deeply conservative standpoint, the race industry quite unsparingly. Chester Himes’s thrillers, from *For Love of Imabelle* (1957) to *Blind Man with a Pistol* (1969), turn Harlem into a black Vanity Fair. William Melvin Kelley’s *dem* (1967), subjects “dem,” or white folks, to the charge of understanding next to nothing about Harlem or about black culture at large. The “black” black comedies of Ishmael Reed, whether *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967), *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), *The Terrible Threes* (1989) or *Japanese by Spring* (1993) have won deserved and widespread success in how they explore Afro-America as a voodoo (or Voodoo) alternative to white, official America.²⁸ Black drama in the 1960s makes its contribution in kind, typically in the plays of Douglas Turner Ward, Ossie Davis and Lonnie Elder.

Ward’s one-act *Happy Ending* (1964), “A Satirical Fantasy,” adds especially to the roster.²⁹ Two domestics, Vi and Ellie, who work for a white couple, the Harrisons, are thrown into near despair by Mrs. Harrison’s adultery and the likelihood of a divorce. Their nephew, Junie, professes bafflement. In an age of “Pride-Race-Dignity” as he calls it, how can his two aunts revert to this *Gone with the Wind* mentality? Slowly, like the veteran troupers they are, they put him to rights about the real calamity at hand. His clothes, food, spare cash, even bedding, in common with that of the family at large, have come from the pair’s inspired finagling. Their re-appropriation of goods has made for just, not to say comic, payment for all the years of black maid service. Harrison, awoken to their mock solicitude over the Harrison marriage, relents and learns. Equilibrium is restored and the game resumes, America’s house of white employer-black employee as an ancestral yet ongoing “domestic” collusion.

Day of Absence (1968), much in the vein of William Melvin Kelley’s novel *A Different Drummer* (1962), envisages a Southern town suddenly emptied of all its blacks.³⁰ Work comes to a halt. Services, childcare, hospital work, cooking and cleaning, the whole support structure for white daily life, goes awry. The Mayor

and Governor give way to rising panic. Radio and television announce deadlines for a black return. Appeals to a supposed Dixie and magnolia past are invoked. Telephone lines jam and conspiracy theories are mooted. Ward works the changes at high speed, Feydeau or Dario Fo farce which this time mocks traditional Southern shibboleths. The Mayor, for instance, pitches his appeal in formula terms, deploring the absence of “your cheerful, grinning, happy-go-lucky faces.” The play offers stylized parody, adult pantomime which closes with Clem and Luke, two more good ol’ boys, left to puzzle upon a vision of missing “Nigras.” The satire positively exudes theatricality, but only as underwritten by dark, accusing laughter.

Ossie Davis’s *Purlie Victorious* (1961) and Lonne Elder’s *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* (1969) take alternative kinds of aim. In the former, set in southern Georgia, Davis envisages a latter-day plantation with its Ol’ Cap’n Cotchipee, Purlie, as the black minister title figure, his son Gitlin, and a caper involving the winsome Lutiebelle Gussie Mae Jenkins. Their ruse is pitched to win back threatened land on which stands Big Bethel, a black church. Davis’s good cheer, and the final appeal to an interracial future, marks the play as written in the early years of the Civil Rights movement. The touch is witty, companionably light.³¹

Elder’s irony in *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* comes over more slow-footedly, a Harlem three-act play about the Parker clan, Russell B. Parker, barbershop regular, and his equally unemployed sons Theo and Bobby. On being evicted by Adele, the hardworking daughter, Parker joins the “Harlem De-colonization Association,” an illegal whisky operation run by a con-man, Blue Haven. But the liquor scam becomes its own monster, simply another kind of oppression. The point gains force in the death of Bobby, killed while stealing from a neighborhood store. As embodied in Parker and his sons, and as understandable as may have been their temptation to seek any means available to escape tenement joblessness, this Harlem rounds upon itself like a true predator, head made to devour tail.³²

The further name to be added from the black 1960s inescapably is that of Ed Bullins, especially the collection *Five Plays* (1969) made up of *Goin’ a Buffalo*, *In The Wine Time*, *A Son Come Home*, *The Electronic Nigger* and *Clara’s Ole Man*.³³ This does not overlook the surge of other 1960s militant black drama. Wellington Mackey’s *Requiem for Brother X* (1964) depicts the ghetto as both outward and inner despoilation. Ron Milner’s *Who’s Got His Own* (1965) presents the drama of a Detroit family caught generationally between region and politics. Adrienne Kennedy’s *A Raisin Mass* (1967) echoes Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915) with blacks

cryptically imaged as rodent underclass. Ben Caldwell's *The King of Soul or the Devil and Otis Redding* (1966) offers a one-act fantasy indicting white commercial degradation of the singer. Marvin X's *The Black Bird* (1969) develops an elegy to black freedom under Muslim auspices. Sonia Sanchez's *Sister Sion/Ji* (1969), with its Caribbean-rasta title, marks an early black feminist stage work,³⁴ But throughout the decade, as often enough thereafter, Bullins's drama ranks alongside that of Baraka as setting the standard, albeit in a style more resolutely naturalist than experimental.

Bullins deservedly won the praises of a theater critic like Irving Wardle for avoiding "self-affirming racial tracts." His plays not only acknowledge, but seek to explore in depth, fissures and contradictions within the black community or as he has said "the dialectical nature" of his people. *Goin' a Buffalo*, set in rundown West Adams, Los Angeles, so delineates a tense, often divided gang family: Curt as the street-hardened leader; Rich his sidekick; Curt's wife Pandora strip dancer and high-class hooker; Mamma Too Tight, a white, Southern born drug addict and whore under the control of the dope dealer Shaky; and Art, a one-time penitentiary inmate with Curt. The play's title points to a dream, Buffalo (as though a reverse California) the mythic better realm, with Curt and Pandora to be gentrified into a respectable business couple.

The robbery, which has been meant to deliver the necessary cash, goes wrong. A probable betrayal by Art, Curt's successor both with Pandora and Mamma Too Tight, points up black criminality as a Pandora's Box, both vain promise and brutal reality. As the play particularizes the ebb and flow of the group's fare-ups, alliances and truces, with "Buffalo" as the fragile dream, Bullins develops a style to match-the "tragifantasy" of his subtitle. The play invites close ensemble playing, the more so to convey its "theater of cruelty" auspices.

The collection's shorter plays operate in similar mode. *A Son Come Home* amounts to an exercise in the presentation of memory, a sad, lost, mother-son relationship recaptured through a symposium of their own and related past voices. *The Electronic Nigger*, set in a California junior college writing class, becomes the very thing it dramatizes, a sardonic, reflexive exploration of the possible languages of black experience. *Clara's Ole Man: A Play of Lost Innocence*, ostensibly slum Philadelphia in the 1950s, involves an ex-GI., Jack, working his way through college, forced by his interest in Clara to confront a world for which none of his newly acquired academic vocabulary will account. That includes the lesbian menagerie which links Clara to Big Girl and Big Girl's retarded sister Baby Girl. It is a world which, as even tougher street-figures make their entrance, leaves him literally beaten into near unconsciousness. Bullins clearly pledged himself from

the outset to spare little, or no one, in taking by storm previous gentility or mere showtime in black theater.

The same lack of compromise shows in his Cliff Dawson trilogy, *In the Wine Time* (1967), *In New England Winter* (1967) and *The Corner* (1968), each set within a ghetto tableau of black “street” America. The first concerns Cliff’s relationship with his pregnant wife Lou, their nephew Ray, and a neighborhood that includes the one remaining white couple, the fractious Krumps, and acquaintances and relatives from The Avenue. Besotted on jug wine, Cliff fantasizes an escape from the ghetto through his under-aged nephew’s enlistment in the navy. Ray himself seeks a way out through the unnamed girl with whom he has fallen in love. But in both cases, it amounts to ironic lyricism, doomed hopefulness. In the event, the daze brought on by the drinking and the ever present likelihood of violence ends in a knife fight in which Cliff takes the rap for his nephew. A last would-be heroism or not, Cliff’s action does nothing to lessen the black inner city as the imprisoned vitality of sense and body.

Nothing in the other two plays suggests any coming alleviation. *The Corner* depicts an earlier but no less confused Cliff who allows Stella, the girl he philanthropizes with while living with Lou, to be gang raped in accord with male ghetto writ. In *In the New England Winter*, having been abandoned by Lou, he emerges from jail to plan an improbable ideal robbery with his half-brother Steve. Yet bad faith catches him again. Steve has been Lou’s secret lover. Family lines cross over, and loyalty shades into betrayal. Blackness, in Bullins’s theater, means no single or sentimental oneness. The trilogy as a whole keeps commendably to this ambiguity of motive and behavior. Cliff Dawson embodies a man caught out by the odds yet who, at the same time, imposes odds both on himself and others, a self that is endangered and endangering. Bullins thereby sidesteps any too simple either-or racial militancy. As to the 1960s itself, any hint of a drop in ambition or energy was countermanded in his heady announcement of a multipart “20th Century Cycle,” a kind of black theatrical *roman fleuve* whose opening installments would include *The Duplex: A Black Love Fable in Four Movements* (1970), *Four Dynamite Plays* (1972) and *The Theme is Blackness* (1972).³⁵

Baraka as a working center, Hansberry, Baldwin and Mitchell as forerunners, Douglas Turner Ward, Ossie Davis, Lonnie Elder and Ed Bullins as 1960s contemporaries: the era’s black theater bequeaths a full-fledged and greatly singular, achievement. If some of the theater forms are familiar enough, whether masque drama, satire, mixed-media productions, proscenium and street performance, who at the same time would have denied new pitch or vibrancy to the black cultural signature at hand? And could it be doubted that they have bequeathed a

new theater legacy as borne out in Woodie King Jr.'s *The National Black Drama Anthology: Eleven Plays from America's leading African-American Theaters* (1995):³⁶

Baraka in 1965 spoke of "the aggregate of Black spirit," Ed Bullins in 1972 of "the collective entity of Black artistic knowledge."³⁷ Whatever their individually differing achievements, they, like their contemporaries throughout the 1960s as America's most evident *black* decade, could not in all its conjoined senses have indeed been more about the staging of life and art, the spirit of the times.

Notes

1. Originally published as *Dutchman and The Slave*, New York: William Morrow & Co., 1964.
2. Representative anthologies include: William Couch, ed. *New Black Playwrights: An Anthology*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1968, republished New York: Bard Books/Avon, 1970; Ed Bullins, ed. *New Plays from the Black Theater*, New York: Bantam Books, 1969; C. W. E. Bigsby, ed. *Three Negro Plays*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969; Clayton Riley, ed. *A Black Quarter: Four New Black Plays*, New York: Signet, 1970; Darwin T. Turner, ed. *Black Drama in America: An Anthology*, Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Books, 1971; Woodie King and Ron Milner, eds. *Black Drama Anthology*, New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1971, New York: Signet Books, 1971.
3. Among general accounts are C. W. E. Bigsby, *Confrontation and Commitment: A Study of Contemporary American Drama, 1959–1966*, Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1968; Doris E. Abraham, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre, 1929–1959*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969; C. W. E. Bigsby, *The Black American Writer*, 2 Vols, Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1969; Gerald Weales, *The Jumping Off Place: American Drama in the 1960s*, New York: Macmillan, 1969; George R. Adams, "Black Militant Drama," *American Imago*, Vol. 28, No. 2, Summer 1971, 107–28; Travis Bogard, Richard Moody and Walter J. Reserve, eds. *The Revel History of Drama in English*, Vol. VIII: American Drama London: Methuen; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1977; and C. W. E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, 3 Vols, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982–85.
4. Although Hughes went on writing drama until his death in 1967, unquestionably he is mostly identified with the Harlem Renaissance. Accordingly he is given only brief mention in this chapter. See, however, the following: Webster Smalley, ed. *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1963; Donald C. Dickinson, *A Bio-bibliography of Langston Hughes, 1902–1967*. Hampden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1967; Therman O'Daniel, ed. *Langston Hughes, Black*

- Genius: A Critical Evaluation*, New York: Morrow, 1971; Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Vol. 1: 1902–1941: *I, Too, Sing America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, and Vol. 2: *Dream a World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
5. The New Lafayette Theater also sponsored the influential journal, *Black Theater*, only six issues in all, but given to the important publication of African American, Caribbean and African drama scripts.
 6. A useful summary was offered by Georgia State Representative Tyrone Brooks, a veteran SCLC member: “The NAACP mostly litigated and negotiated; the Urban League was about employment and job training; but the SCLC was the catalyst, an activist group that engaged in direct action and civil disobedience,” *The Washington Post*, November 2, 1997.
 7. An excellent analysis of this dimension of King’s role can be found in Keith D. Miller, “Composing Martin Luther King Jr.,” *PMLA*, Vol. 105, January 1990, 70–82.
 8. Martin Luther King, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, foreword by Coretta Scott King, New York: HarperCollins, 1992.
 9. Usually termed the Kerner Commission (Kerner was the then Governor of Illinois). Formally this was known as the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968.
 10. Relevant accounts of the 1960s include Thomas R. Brooks, *Walls Come Tumbling Down, 1940–1970*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974; Sar A. Levitan et al., eds. *Still a Dream: The Changing Status of Blacks since 1960s*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975; August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Along the Color Line*, Urbana, IL: Illinois University Press, 1976; Harvey Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1945–1980*, New York: Hill & Wang, 1981; and Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965*, New York: Viking Penguin, 1987.
 11. For bibliographical accounts of this process, see Darwin T. Turner, ed. *Afro-American Writers*, New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1970; Theresa Gunnels Rush, Carol Fairbanks Myers and Esther Spring Arata, eds. *Black American Writers: A Biographical and Bibliographical Dictionary*, Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975; M. Thomas Inge, Maurice Duke and Jackson R. Bryer, eds. *Black American Writers: Bibliographical Essays, Vols 1 and 2*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978. Relevant anthologies include John A. Williams, ed. *The Angry Black*, New York: Lancer, 1962, and *Beyond the Angry Black*, New York: Lancer, 1967, revised edition, New York: New American Library, 1971; Herbert Hill, ed. *Soon, One Morning: New Writing by American Negroes 1940–1962*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963, and Herbert Hill, ed. *Anger, and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966; Abraham Chapman, ed. *Black Voices*, New York: New American Library/Mentor, 1968, and *New Black Voices*, New York: New American Library/Mentor, 1972; James A. Emanuel and Theodore Gross, eds. *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America* New York; Free Press, 1968; LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, eds. *Black Fire: An Anthology*

- of *Afro-American Writing*, New York: William Morrow & Co., 1968; and Toni Cade Bambara, ed. *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, New York: Signet, 1970. A typical compilation has been John Hope Franklin, *Three Negro Classics: Up from Slavery, The Souls of Black Folks, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, New York: Avon Books, 1965.
12. Frank Yerby, *Speak Now: A Modern Novel*, New York: Dial, 1969, and *The Dahomean*, New York: Dial, 1971. Alex Haley, *Roots*, New York: Doubleday, 1976.
 13. For a detailed analysis see J. Fred Macdonald, *Blacks and White TV: Afro Americans in Television since 1948*, Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1983. Mari Evans, *Where Is All the Music?*, London: Paul Breman, 1968, *I Am a Black Woman*, New York: Morrow, 1970, and, ed. *Black Women Writers 1950–1980: A Critical Evaluation*, New York: Anchor Books, 1984.
 14. Sonia Sanchez, *The Bronx Is Next, The Drama Review*, Vol. 12, Summer 1968, *We a BaddDD People*, Detroit: Broadside, 1970; Nikki Giovanni, *Black Feeling, Black Talk* Detroit: Broadside, 1968, and *Black Judgement*, Detroit: Broadside, 1969; Sarah Webster Fabio, *Saga of a Black Man*, San Francisco: Richardson, 1968 and *A Mirror: A Soul, a Two-Part Volume of Poems*, San Francisco: Richardson, 1969; and Carolyn M. Rodgers, *Paper Soul*, Chicago: Third World, 1968, *2 Love Raps*, Chicago: Third World, 1969, and *Songs of a Black Bird*, Chicago: Third World, 1969.
 15. Jayne Cortez, *Pisstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares* was originally a chapbook self-published for the Watts Repertory Company in 1969. A number of the poems are included in *Coagulations: New and Selected Poems*, New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1994.
 16. Alex Haley, *Roots*, New York: Doubleday, 1976.
 17. The drama continued into Ali's autobiography. See Muhammad Ali, with Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story*, New York: Random House, 1975. A useful later biography is John Stravinsky, *Muhammad Ali*, New York: Park Lane Press, 1997.
 18. Arthur Ashe, with Arnold Rampersad, *Days of Grace: A Memoir*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, and Arthur Ashe, *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete*, New York: Warner, 1988, revised New York: Amistad, 1993, and distributed Penguin, USA.
 19. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, *The Baptism and The Toilet*, New York: Grove, 1964.
 20. LeRoi Jones, *Four Black Revolutionary Plays*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969.
 21. For a number of these works, see *Selected Plays and Prose of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, New York: William Morrow and Company, 1979, except *Jello*, Chicago: Third World Press, 1970.
 22. Scholarship on Jones/Baraka includes: Donald B. Gibson, ed. *Five Black Writers: Essays on Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, Hughes, LeRoi Jones*, New York: New York University Press, 1970; Theodore Hudson, *From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka: The Literary Works*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press; M. Thomas Inge, Maurice Duke and Jackson R. Bryer, eds. *Black American Writers: Biographical Essays*, Vol. 2, Richard Wright,

- Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978; Werner Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism,"* New York: Columbia University Press, 1978; and Hettie Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1990.
23. Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, New York: Random House, 1959.
 24. Lorraine Hansberry, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, New York: Random House, 1964.
 25. James Baldwin, *Blues For Mister Charlie*, New York: Dial, 1964.
 26. James Baldwin, *The Amen Corner*, New York: Dial, 1968.
 27. Loften Mitchell, *Land Beyond the River*, written 1957, first published Cody, Wyoming: Pioneer Drama Service, 1963, *Star of the Morning*, New York: Free Press, 1965. Mitchell has also written his own account of African American theatre. See Loften Mitchell, *Black Drama: The Story of the American Negro in the Theater*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1990. Langston Hughes initially wrote *Tambourines to Glory*, New York: Day, 1958, as a novel; he then adapted it for the stage under the same title. See Smalley, ed. *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*.
 28. George Schuyler, *Black No More*, New York: Macauley, 1931; Chester Himes, *For Love of Imabelle*, Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett, 1957, and *Blind Man with a Pistol*, (New York: William Morrow, 1969; William Melvin Kelley, *dem*, New York: Doubleday, 1967; Ishmael Reed, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967.
 29. Douglas Turner Ward, *Happy Ending*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1964.
 30. Douglas Turner Ward, *Day of Absence*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1968; William Melvin Kelley, *A Different Drummer*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1962.
 31. Ossie Davis, *Purlie Victorious: A Comedy in Three Acts*, New York: French, 1961.
 32. Lonne Elder, *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.
 33. Ed Bullins, *Five Plays*, Indianapolis: Bibbs-Merrill, 1969. In England, a year earlier, this became *The Electronic Nigger and Other Plays*, London: Faber and Faber, 1968.
 34. Wellington Mackey, *Requiem for Brother X*, republished in King and Milner, eds. *Black Drama Anthology*; Ron Milner, *Who's Got His Own*, republished in King and Milne, eds. *Black Drama Anthology*; Adrienne Kennedy, *A Rat's Mass*, republished in Couch, ed. *New Black Playwrights*; Ben Caldwell, *The King of Soul, or The Devil and Otis Redding*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1967; Marvin X, aka El Mujajir, as Marvin Jackman, *The Black Bird*, San Francisco: Julian Richardson, 1969; and Sonia Sanchez, *Sister Sion/Ji*, republished in Bullins, *New Plays from the Black Theater*.
 35. A play long attributed to Bullins from the 1960s, but which he has always alleged was written by a young dramatist who died, is Kingsley B. Bass Jr., *We Righteous Bombers* (1968), a vision of black revolution in America. See also Ed Bullins, *Four Dynamite Plays*, New York: William Morrow & Company, 1972, and *The Theme is Blackness: "The Corner" and Other Plays*, New York: William Morrow & Company, 1972.

36. Woodie King Jr., *The National Black Drama Anthology: Eleven Plays from America's Leading African-American Theaters*, New York and London: Applause Theater Books, 1995.
37. LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays*, New York: William Morrow, 1966, and Ed Bullins, "Introduction," in *The Theme is Blackness: "The Corner" and Other Plays*, New York: William Morrow, 1972.

Equilibrium Out of Their Chaos: Modernism, Postmodernism and Leon Forrest's Witherspoon- Bloodworth Trilogy

Descendancy: What's the score?

Leon Forrest, *Re-Creation, A Verse Play Set to Music by T.J. Anderson* (1978)¹

And what do I mean by re-creation and reinvention? I mean the powerful use of imagination to take a given form and make something that appears completely new of it—that creates within the reading or listening audience a sense of the magical meaning of life transformed.

Leon Forrest, "In the Light of the Likeness-Transformed," *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, Vol. 7, (1988)²

One of the constants of Afro-American culture is the re-invention of life-or, the cultural attribute of black Americans is to take what is left over . . . and make it work for them, as a source of personal or group survival, and then to emboss, upon the basic form revised, a highly individualistic style, always spun of grace, and fabulous rhythms . . . a kind of magic realism. The improvisational genius of jazz is what I am getting at here. This is central to the art of Ellington, Armstrong, Lady Day, Sara Vaughan, Ray Charles, Muddy Waters, Alberta Hunter; I could of course go on.

Leon Forrest: "Faulkner/Reforestation," Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Aboodie (eds): *Faulkner and Popular Culture: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha* (1990)³

"Word-possessed (and word-possessing)." Ralph Ellison's phrasing in his Foreword to Leon Forrest's *There Is a Tree More Ancient than Eden* (1973) does every

justice.⁴ For to enter Forest County, Forrest's fictional black Chicago (the one r deliberate where there are two in his own name), at once Northern and yet shaped by a South of Mississippi and New Orleans, is to enter a city also, and in T. S. Eliot's sense, "unreal." That is, recognizable as may be Cook County's South Side or black West Side, Forrest's novels at the same time call up a different kind of topography, full of shadow and hallucination and not a little of apocalypse. The novels of Forrest (1937–1997) continue to deserve their recognition.

For his "mythical kingdom," in Faulkner's phrase for Yoknapatawpha, is the black city, one of the inner psyche as much as the literal Chicago he shares with Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) or, at a different reach, Saul Bellow's teeming Jewish immigrant world of *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). A Bigger Thomas, or his girl Bessie, might likely still belong, but only as though deliberately magnified, hyper-figures as it were. Forrest's invented cast across the trilogy of *There Is a Tree More Ancient than Eden*, *The Bloodworth Orphans* (1977) and *Two Wings to Veil My Face* (1984) so edges his fiction towards black fable, hugely iconographic narrative.

Consider his very naming of the fiction's personnel. The branded ex-slave patriarch, Jericho Witherspoon, holds away in one text, James Fishbond, the supremely adaptive jack of all trades, in another. Abetting figures include the eventually suicidal club owner and abortionist, Abraham Dolphin M.D. and the genealogist, the Rev. Jonathan Bass. History is kept live in yet another way by the ledger-keeping midwife, Lucia Rivers. A con man as monstrous yet as fertile of invention as W. W. W. Ford can stalk Forrest's world. And of greatest relevance in Forest County there are hornmen like Ironwood Landlord Rumble and protectresses like Hattie Breedlove Wordlaw and Great-Momma Sweetie Reed. A similar imaginative regime holds for Forrest's delineation of the black community at large, street life, bars, churches, pool halls, the blues and jazz caught as though displacement, his non-representational mural of dream and memory. This is black Chicago also made fervid by two Christianities, the Catholicism brought North from Creole Louisiana and the Bible Protestantism from Dixie's Camp Meetings and conversions.

Forrest as a Chicago novelist, without making him in any way too local, also requires its emphasis. From a biographical perspective there was his schooling at Hyde Park School, Roosevelt University and the University of Chicago. His family's joint Catholic and Protestant legacy on the South Side was wholly influential. During and after army service he entered the journalism which saw him working for the *Woodlawn Booster*, the *Englewood Observer* and *Muhammad Speaks* of which (though never himself a Muslim) he became Editor from 1969

to 1972. His subsequent career as university teacher at Northwestern University went along with reviewing for *The Chicago Tribune* and other newspapers and his frequent role as lecturer and broadcaster.

At the same time he often enough saw himself in a line of Chicago literary affiliation which includes heirship to Nella Larsen (a Chicagoan for all her association with the Harlem Renaissance), Richard Wright, Willard Motley, Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker. Contemporaries include the poet and essayist Carolyn M. Rodgers and the novelist Ron L. Fair whose *Hog Butcher* (1966) depicts a police killing and cover-up in the South Side, and whose quasi-autobiography, *We Can't Breathe* (1972), gives account of another kind of tough black Chicago upbringing. Forrest also worked alongside his one-time fellow Professor of African American Studies at Northwestern University, Cyrus Colter, author of *The Rivers of Eros* (1972), a novel of Chicago black dynasty descended from the matriarch Clotilda Pilgrim, and of *The Hippodrome* (1973), with its fantastical ingredients of severed head, sex theatre, and for the protagonist Jackson Yeager the uncertain border between hard fact and fantasy.⁵

If, for Forrest, Chicago operates as a city of the street, of the Projects (“perpendicular segregation” was a term once applied to them), and of church or bar, and, always, of the remembrance of slavery and Northward migration, it also doubles as a city of word. For like Joyce and his Dublin Forrest and his city as consciously press to be understood in terms of the language of myth and, reciprocally, the myth of language. Whether the reference is to the El, or to the Robert Taylor and Stateway homes (the largest stretch of public housing in America), or to a white enclave like Bridgeport which has supplied Chicago with five of its mayors, Forrest adds the sheen of myth. That also applies to thoroughfares like the Dan Ryan and Roosevelt Expressways and the South Park Boulevard (now Martin Luther King Jr. Drive). Other landmarks take on shared emblematic status, be it Cook County Hospital, the 408 Club which his parents once owned, Lake Shore Drive or Lake Michigan itself. Forrest’s claim lies, finally, in his voicing, his idiom, which led Saul Bellow, in his turn, to speak of “a fiery writer . . . an original.”⁶

This reflexive bodying out of Forest County as both a historic past and present (a third of Chicago’s population is black) and, at the same time, fable-like terrain, amounts to “textual” drama in its own right. Perhaps it can be little wonder that, alongside the dream sequences, the genealogies, the folklore and the fables of slave legacy and tricksterism, it is the sermon, that acme of black signifying, which recurs as a centerpiece. Even a first-time reader of the Witherspoon-Bloodworth trilogy, or of the compendious *Divine Days* (1992), the essay-volume *Relocations of the Spirit* (1994), and *Meteor in the Madhouse* (2001) which, after his death

of cancer in November 1997, has become his posthumous novel, would be hard put not to recognize a writer for whom “the word” lies at the very center of his endeavors.⁷ Indeed “the word” might be said to be an energy in itself in all of Forrest’s work. He dwells almost consciously on words as iconic, each situated to help convey the impression of mosaic. To this end he has good reason to speak of his fiction as “re-creation and reinvention,” “individualistic style,” “grace,” “fabulous rhythms,” in all, “a kind of magic realism.”⁸

These imaginative emphases situate Forrest in the context and line of post-Ellison experiment. That is to the kind of African American novel since *Invisible Man* (1952) positioned somewhere between modernist and postmodern, and challengingly given to reflexive sleight of hand, time-shifts, the often dazzling black dialogic of speech into script.⁹ Within the era of Forrest’s trilogy Ishmael Reed offers one immediate touchstone, whether *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967), his “space satire” of Nixonian America and its racism, *Yellow Black Radio Broke-Down* (1969), his spoof Western with black cowboy hero, or *Flight to Canada* (1976), his pastiche slave narrative with its crossovers in time and place and zestful empire of textual play and fabulation (helicopters over the quarters, TV in the Big House, Abe Lincoln listening to Country and Western.)¹⁰ The roster of self-mirroring novels by black authorship has been considerable.

Early into the fray was William Melvin Kelley in whose fiction black surrealism takes on a new virtuosity. *A Different Drummer* (1962) envisages a Dixie state whose entire black population ups and leaves in reprise of past slave escape. *A Drop of Patience* (1965) re-envisages the creative-destructive genius of Charlie Parker in the “visionary” figure of the blind saxophonist Ludlow Washington. *dem* (1967) plays Harlem against while suburbia, an absurdist vision of America as mutually reflective yet separate “racial” realms. *Dunsfords Travels Everywheres* (1969), the vernacular title a parody of a furniture removal company, tackles imagined sequences of worlds in which apartheid, slave transport, religion and affairs of the heart both white and black are put under high-fantastical satiric rules.¹¹

Jones/Baraka’s *The System of Dante’s Hell* (1965), with assured reference to the *Divine Comedy*, probes the modern American city as encircled racial inferno. William Demby’s self-designated “cubist” novel, *The Catacombs* (1965), its sources the films of Antonioni and Rosellini and the media theory of Marshall McLuhan, explores modern consciousness in an era of global soundbite. Clarence Major’s *NO* (1973) plays one process of “detection” into the other, a murder and its un-raveling as the metaphor for reality and its un-raveling in a literary text.

If Charles Wright's novels, *The Messenger* (1963), *The Wig* (1966) and *Absolutely Nothing to Get Alarmed About* (1973) claim a forbear it would be Nathanael West. Each takes its comic sardonic tilt at "American Dream" America. *The Messenger* conjures up a phantasmagoric Manhattan of messages without meaning. *The Wig* portrays its main figure, Lester Jefferson as black Candide. *Absolutely Nothing to Get Alarmed About* plays on the contrast of 1960s New York skyscraper opulence with ground-level blight.¹²

Carlene Hatcher Polite's *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* (1975), in terms of a free-form "jazz" narrative, tells the exile Paris life (and death) of Arista Prolo, a black woman dancer whose very life-force has been murdered by mere sex show or striptease. Toni Morrison, when editor at Random House, was quick to recognize Forrest's talents. In *Song of Solomon* (1977), typically, she herself displays the surest inwardness with almost all of modernism's repertoire in how she reanimates Africanist memory inside the life searches and literal final fight of her slave-haunted Michigan hero Macon Dead III. Afro-America has one of its radical short-story innovators in James Alan McPherson, as borne out in stories like "A Matter of Vocabulary," from *Hue and Cry* (1969) with its portrait of the haunted black boyhood in Georgia of two brothers, or "The Ballad of a Dead Man," from *Elbow Room* (1977), with its circular reworking of the black ballad of feisty, folkloric Billy Renfro.¹³

"I had a real interest in experimenting, in expanding the form of the novel."¹⁴ John Wideman's ambitions were declared early. *A Glance Away* (1967), his first novel, interiorizes its story of the destructive homecoming or an ex-addict to his present day inner city roots as a modernist weave of memory and myth. *Hurry Home* (1970) parallels an Africa-journey from out of black Philadelphia as dream monologue. *The Lynchers* (1973) unfolds the fevered conspiracy of four Philadelphia black men to lynch retributively and anachronistically, a racist white cop, as polyphonic narrative of a kind Wideman acknowledges among other sources to have derived from T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land."¹⁵ By contrast, in his subsequent Pittsburgh-Homewood saga, *Hiding Pace* (1981), *Damballah* (1981) and *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983), Wideman consciously opts for a more accessible register, a kind of counter-modernist style. Even so he has not forsworn the taste for reflexivity. He casts his story "Surfiction" as a series of journal connotations under the by-line of "John Wideman" who among other autobiographical overlaps, also teaches at the University of Wyoming. In a further doubling the "author" then explores his role as the teacher of a pioneer black text like Charles Chesnutt's "Deep Sleeper" and the novelist-professor who gives creative writing classes and attends conferences on, precisely, surfiction. The underlying question so runs: whose

work bespeaks the shrewder textuality, Chesnutt's with its use of slave and other African American codes or that of the postmodern pantheon, nearly all of whom, like conspiratorial sigla and as Wideman / "Wideman" points out, appear to have names beginning with "B" (whether Beckett, Burroughs, Borges or Barthelme)? "Surfiction" not only teasingly makes itself over into the very thing it most purports to address, it opens up the more consequential issue of "black" as against "white" text.¹⁶

Responding in a 1978 interview with Maria Mootry to the question "Do you consider yourself part of a 'school of black writing'?" Forrest replied: "Well, McPherson, Morrison, Murray, Ellison, Wideman and I are all club-members you might say!"¹⁷ The answer is lightly phrased, wry, yet careful not to suggest some insiders-only literary circle. Forrest knew the diversity of all these writers. He speaks, rather, of shared affinities, of a black modernist, and implicitly postmodern, turn of imagination.

Doubters have sometimes thought Forrest prone to floridity, over-entangled or too hurried by his own rhetoric. In the concern to make text of Afro-America's dispossession and survival, with America at large as miscegenated cross-ply, he crowds his novels. The upshot leaves the reader insufficient breathing time or space. But this unflattering view gives too limited a bead. For Forrest's play of language and myth, as of his other imaginative patterns, in fact precisely orders his visions of disorder.

In this Forrest has always freely acknowledged a number of other debts. He has always drawn from the Bible, *The Odyssey* and Dante. His interview with Maria Mootry gives as touchstones "Joyce, Proust, Twain, Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner [and] Dylan Thomas."¹⁸ As to African American literary tradition, besides his admired Ellison, he has often invoked as influences the slave self-articulations of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent, the baroque of Jean Toomer in *Cane* (1923), and the urgent, finely caught clarifications of James Baldwin in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and the ensuing essay-collections.

Forrest equally insists upon his debt to "Afro-American ranges of eloquence," from street talk and the dozens through to "the pulpit" and "the platter."¹⁹ His resort to different mythic schemes likewise weighs, Judeo-Christian and Hellenic, pharaonic in terms of the Isis-Osiris-Set triad and Haitian-Vodun of Haiti and other New World Africanist. Of necessity he avails himself of Afro-America's own Brer Rabbit, Stagolee, Shine, High John the Conqueror and John Henry. In the same register he calls up "the Black Church, the Negro spiritual, gospel music, the

blues and jazz” as, in a beautifully freighted phrase, “the railroad tracks and wings for my imagination.”²⁰ Armstrong or Ellington, Billie Holiday or Mahalia Jackson as his essay “Faulkner/Reforestation” confirms, the “improvisational genius of jazz” became a standard in both his life and writing. In this he offers his own figure of the black musician, none more so than Ironwood “Landlord” Rumble, the blind jazz master and visionary so vital in the life of Nathaniel Witherspoon as the ongoing persona of all the Forest County novels.

As Nathaniel dwells, intimately, lovingly, upon the remembrance of Ironwood’s art (in *The Bloodworth Orphans*), he at the same time refracts Forrest’s own improvisational bid to make textual order of history’s disorder. “Magical meaning” takes on a dual signification. For Nathaniel’s will-to-art shadows Forrest’s own, the modernist (again even postmodern) collusion of author and character in pursuit of a language, a narrative design, to hold the sheer density and contrariety of black American experience. Seeking entrance to Refuge Hospital, in which the heroin-addicted jazzman has been incarcerated as a patient, Nathaniel calls to mind “ole Ironwood’s boss-embossing music” and his response of being:

constantly astonished by the furious, heavenly design and the wreckage-resurrecting brilliance of Rumble’s beauty blitz, his daredevil leaps, his mocking raps, his dazzling riff escapes, his one-butt constantly shuffle scats his signifying jagged tremelos, his soul chant crooning inventions. (303)

Forrest’s prose palpably re-enacts the finely contrived runs of improvisation played off a fixed rhythm inside any jazz or blues classic, be it from Armstrong, Ellington or Parker, to give three symptomatic Forrest favorites. And in the allusions to “furious . . . design,” “raps,” “dazzling riff escapes,” “scats” and “jagged tremelos,” it speaks, analogously, to Forrest’s own narrative tactics. These lie in makings-over, the sometimes near pyrotechnic, effort to retrieve order from disorder or, in his own hybrid phrase, the process of “wreckage-resurrecting.” Little wonder that Forrest was often spoken as insider to the Chicago of Mahalia Jackson, Lady Day, Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf and within a jazz and blues tradition stretching from the 1920s to the present day.

On his way to the apartment of the near-senile Bea-Lenore (still in *The Bloodworth Orphans*) Nathaniel turns his mind to Refuge Hospital:

where old Ironwood “Landlord” Rumble the blind virtuoso of nine instruments, poured out a sad musical deluge—a free-flying blitzkrieg, unleashing a grand flood of underground, storehouse figures, long-lost images, homeless visions, signs, and wonders and miracles inside the inferno. (81)

This might serve, reflexively, as a credo for Forrest's own style. His language calls up the "wonders and miracles" of African American life, most of all slavery whether as brute seizure, survival or escape—the past as both "storehouse" and "inferno."

Forrest's will to virtuosity, in other words, runs close to that which has brought on Ironwood's command of his nine instruments so admired by Nathaniel and which will so prevail in the great blues performance given at Refuge Hospital towards the close of *The Bloodworth Orphans*. The ordering of disorder might be thought the necessary remit of any writer worth his calling. But for a black American writer taken up, as Ralph Ellison's brief Foreword to *There Is a Tree* puts it, with "those dilemmas bred of Christian faith and racial conflict, of social violence . . . and dreams of a peaceful kingdom," the task takes on stirring impetus.

Such may well explain why Forrest frequently resorts to hybrids of sacramental and vernacular language, skeins of word-play and echo (particularly in the names of characters or churches), and, in *There Is a Tree*, a variety of italicized and other typographical layouts. He gives the impression of wanting to make the very language of his storytelling actually absorb and pattern as much as it can of the chaos and fissure engendered by slavery—whether color line, sexual phobia, white and black Christianity, or any of the phobic politics of division. At the same time it is pitched to particularize and celebrate the very strategies by which Afro-America *has* survived, the black word in all its multiplicity of form.

Given the initial diaspora out of Africa, the Middle Passage, slavery's ensuing ranks of illegally fathered and mothered offspring, and all the ancestral enigma, curses, and sexual bans and transgressions of color which have passed down through an American history, perhaps no literary form can ever pay complete imaginative due. Forrest can hardly be faulted for making the attempt, a fiction in which the footfalls of Joyce and Faulkner, of Douglass and Ellison, cohabit with those of Afro-America community idiom and metaphor.

It is, in fact, precisely this kind of bold eclecticism which, in Robert Frost's phrase, helps make Forrest's novels their own kind of stays against confusion.²¹ Fashioned of a rhetoric varyingly elevated and vernacular, they both call for, and themselves create, order out of America's reeling, often seemingly un-orderable racial inheritance.²² What, then, is the measure of Forrest's unfolding Wither-spoon-Bloodworth novels of Forest County, his modernism, his own "musical deluge"?²³

As “Richard” serves in relation to Richard Wright so “Nathaniel” (or “Nathan”) Turner Witherspoon serves in relation to Forrest. Nowhere is that more the case than in *There Is a Tree More Ancient than Eden*. Still the most intimate, and lyric, of the novels to date, and in common with novels like Owen Dodson’s account of his Brooklyn upbringing in *Boy at the Window* (1951), James Baldwin’s uses of his Harlem birth and youth in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and Gordon Parks’s Kansas farm beginnings in *The Learning Tree* (1963), it draws upon deeply autobiographical sources—most specificity in Nathaniel’s rite of passage as mourner of his recently dead mother.²⁴

But when, in imagination, Nathaniel contemplates black enslavement, the brandings and lynchings and, be it in the South or the Northern cities, all the residual workings of the color line, a related but quite other emerging role becomes evident. His own story, no doubt ambitiously to a fault, aspires to carry the chronicle of Afro-America itself. Language becomes alchemy for him. “I was always falling in love with the sounds and shapes of people and places” he confides at the outset, the route into both his own Portrait of the Artist and into history. This creation of Nathaniel as mulatto boy in his fifteenth year, born of both Catholic and Protestant roots, and a prism for the Witherspoon dynasty and its enclosing Afro-America, so plays through all five of the unfolding acts—“The Lives,” “The Nightmare,” “The Dream,” “The Visions” and “Wakefulness” (Forrest has added a sixth, “Transformation,” in the 1987 reissue). As in the schema Joyce had in mind for *Dubliners*, each tells its story local in space and time and yet linked into the visionary. The effect is blues-like, typological pilgrimage.

As Nathaniel follows the hearse down DuSable and then Black Bottom Street, on past “Abe Weinstein’s dog,” the Joe Louis Theater and the Salem Cup-Overflowing Tabernacle, and comforted throughout by Aunty Breedlove, his new motherlessness reflects both a self-emptying and a spur to self-plenishment. For out of his mother’s death comes his own life, that of his creative imagination. He thinks back to his ancestors (his own grandfather and missing father especially). The span embraces race, religion, and the mixed-blood South to North history which has been the making of him.

First, in “The lives,” Forrest establishes his “Chant of the Saints” as it were. These span the hideously martyred Master-of-Ceremonies Browne (beaten to death for his sexuality by his “own father”) to Maxwell “BackBall” Saltport, transformed after drugs and prison into the Black Muslim minister Maxwell 2X. They include Jamestown and Madge Ann Fishbond, both so black, so feisty and individual, as to bring on the scorn of Nathaniel’s own Dupont mulatto relatives (Nathaniel himself, in Jamestown’s words, also “a little yellow boy”). The novel also

reaches into history for Louis Armstrong (a “towering and revolutionary power”), Frederick Douglass (“The North Star”), Harriet Tubman (“Breedlove’s antecedent”), and Abraham Lincoln (“assassinated” father and “Christmyth”). Each supplies a shaping presence, a voice of memory, for Nathaniel.

It is, however, Nathaniel’s discovery of his own voice which most prevails, the agency by which to remember his “human centerless family.” This includes his defeated father Arthur Witherspoon, and now his dead mother. But beyond them, and pre-eminently, it speaks of Jericho Witherspoon (“succumbed” at 117 years of age and at one time the branded and escaped slave “Wanted Dead or Alive”), and Hattie Breedlove Wordlaw, Dilsey-like, whose life he emblemizes in the single honorific, “Honor.” Nathaniel makes no secret of his “fierce desire to mould and sculpt,” likening himself, grandly, to Lucifer as the artificer of “a word of his own within his loneliness.”

These imaginings are centrifugal, Nathaniel’s gathering focus. In “The Nightmare” he moves on and out from the “the street.” The route he itemizes as the Weinstein grocery, the House of the Soul with its ribs and pork advertised through a blood-red pig, and the House of the Brown-Skinned Goddess Salon where nappy hair is styled. He passes the Music Conservatory where Taylor “Warm-Gravy” James plays blues, the Robert E. Lee High School, the Memphis Raven Snow funeral home, and the Dupont residence. What he now “sees” is a vision of “flying,” of terror brought on by his mother’s death with her hands so tightly bound with the rosary.

The “snaking and hissing,” variously likened to a bluesy train and the Mississippi river, bespeaks guilt, terror, the boy’s self-haunting at the thought of life’s terminus. It plays, too, into “The Dream,” his Bosch-like envisioning of Heaven and Hell in which “black skeletons appeared like orbit-lost suns” and “river-deep wounds” haunt his imagination. “Light years from my home,” subject to a “land-locked lostness,” he becomes the very sounding-board of black deracination. His own loss, the register suitably one of distortion, plays into a sense of the larger community loss inaugurated by slavery. “The Vision,” its backdrop of a kind with the fanatic, inflamed Georgia of Jean Toomer (and, far from un-relatedly, of Flannery O’Connor), enacts the part for part dismemberment of a black slave Christ with “a band of blood-bruised angels” as chorus. This interplay of slavery and crucifixion, Dixie and Bethlehem, typifies Forrest at his most “word-possessing,” his truly audacious effort to locate the monstrous spiritual essence of slavery. In “Wakefulness” Nathaniel returns, literally, to the Fleetwood limousine and Breedy, but the journey home again gives way to that taking effect in his feelings and brain. As the stream of consciousness of the last pages of the novel bear out,

he has become immersed in the larger significations of all the words in his inheritance, a self now put to transpose them into *imaginative* order.

In adding to the second edition the two-part “Transition,” respectively, “The Epistle of Sweetie Reed” and “Oh Jeremiah of the Dreamers,” Forrest fuses Nathaniel’s boyhood visions into two historic later moments. Sweetie Reed’s 1967 letter to President Lyndon Johnson on her 100th birthday reads as bittersweet, half-comic preachment on the gains but also the limits of Civil Rights legislation. Nathaniel’s subsequent witness in the Crossroads Rooster Tavern to the Rev. Pompey c.j. Browne’s after-hours impromptu sermon on the twelfth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination gives added perspective.

The one highlights Sweetie’s memory of slavery and its echo in segregation, the continuing color line. The other turns upon Browne’s elision of a latest black crucifixion into the original. This is indicated by the compounding play of image and allusion in the “principal homily” he delivers, two martyrdoms and two matching sites, Jesus in Golgotha and King in Memphis. The Browne sermon offers contemporary yet older biblical reference, a preaching of the pathways which have led into, as he says, “the ruins of the New Jerusalem.” Un-ruined, however, is the black sermon as itself the very image of order replete in organizing cadence, image, design.

This name of Bloodworth is not unknown to me . . . I’ve heard of this infamous clan, all of my days, including a Hattie Breedlove Wordlaw, a dear woman, whom I always called “Aunt,” even though she was not my blood aunt, but helped raise me and was like a second mother to me . . . the story recalls to me something of my own grandfather’s saga. (341–2)

So, as *The Bloodworth Orphans* moves to its close, Nathaniel (or Spoons as he has become known) links his own family to that of Noah Ridgerook Grandberry, last of the fated Bloodworths. But this is kin as a result not of blood but through the family’s adoption of his father, Pourty Ford Bloodworth, himself doomed to kill, unknowingly, his own father, Arlington Bloodworth, and a vicious abuser of Noah’s mother, Elaine Norwood. Argumentative, accusatory, ready always to seek out each further skein in the story, Nathaniel and Noah (no doubt, intertextually, in some measure derived from Quentin and Shreve in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom*) try to extract some guiding order from the cross-racial chaos (Nathaniel’s repeated word) which has thrown them together. In the background city riot threatens, more turbulence in lives already turbulent.

“This name Bloodworth,” “this infamous clan,” “my own grandfather’s saga.” These and similar terms strike just the right note. For *The Bloodworth Orphans* marks Forrest’s move into epic, the genealogy ranging across a century-and-a-half of a line begotten of the slave-owning patriarch, Arlington Bloodworth Sr. (1817–1917), and whose members, white, black and virtually every mix of the two, have become the players in an un-abating back-white spiral. Forrest composes a story begun in antebellum plantation Mississippi, but whose racial legacy of blight, mendacity, human error and coincidence, is lived through to its conclusion in the present of Forest County’s postwar Chicago.

Given the intensely imagist styling, the word compounds, the uses of memory and time shifts and the plays on biblical and black folkloric archetypes, the novel demands much of its first-time reader. The effect, even so, is spectacular, Forrest’s own *Book of Genesis*. Not the least of the ambitions is to make the Bloodworths a kind of ranking house of America, white, black and a profound interaction of both. This is a genealogy the novel has drawn from both scriptural and oral sources. But in the gathering litany of slave legacy, miscegenation, death, and the resort to trickster tactics for survival and power, each story becomes subject to Nathaniel’s authorial making-over. He becomes as much participant as observer, identifying his own Witherspoon clan with that of the Bloodworths. Each Bloodworth story so as it were shares a kind of double-entry, the one narrative tactically implied in the other.

This layering of texts is demonstrated in the extracts from the “Clearinghouse Book” of the midwife, Lucia Rivers, which Nathaniel finds by accident with its “1000-page document-testament” of births and deaths. It serves as a kind of African American Pentateuch or archival naming of names. More comes his way through the research conducted by the Rev. Jonathan Bass. This, fatally, reveals to Amos-Otis Thigpen the incest of his sibling Bloodworths, Regal Pettibone (adopted son and baritone accompanist to “Mother” Rachel at the River Rock of Eden Baptist Church) and La Donna Scales (“possessed by a terrible premonition: that she would ultimately be abandoned—eternally”). The indications are thereby signaled of their deaths by gun and mob attack. All three of the triplets and their half-brother, Noah Ridgerook Grandberry, he learns, descend (of two mothers) from Pourty Bloodworth, just one of the many dynastic knots within the Bloodworth lineage. Even so, the Regal-La Donna relationship amounts to “a beautiful and terrible love-story” in Nathaniel’s gloss, its “beauty” that of the heart’s passion even as its “terror” lies in incest. It is his gloss, too, which links this fatal turn to the original slaveholding, the transposition of human being into human property.

Nor does Nathaniel's telling of the web, the maverick procreative will, of the Bloodworth lines end there. There is Abraham Dolphin, bastard offspring of the relationship between William Bloodworth ("Body") and his half-sister Carrie Trout Picou, whose contradictory role as successful club owner of the Basement lounge and abortionist anticipates his despairing eventual suicide ("Burdened with rivers of guilt, Dr. Dolphin thought that perhaps his sonless condition was related to the vast numbers of formless and form-filled babies he had aborted"). There is Rachel Rebecca Carpenter Flowers, mother (by Arlington Bloodworth III) of Industrious Bowman and Carl-Rae Bowman (their surname taken from the "kindly Negro minister" who adopts them), the former killed in the Santa Fe Railroad Yards and the latter dying a vagrant in Memphis. Rachel, furthermore, who is won over as Christian convert by the Rev. Packwood, marries, self-punishingly, the obese, opera-obsessed Bee-More (Money Czar) Flowers, and dies brutally of cancer, Nathaniel recognizes for yet another Bloodworth Orphan.

Non-Bloodworths, equally, stir Nathaniel's imagining. Early among them has to be Maxwell (X) Saltport, the betrayed Muslim minister. He also encounters Jamestown Fishbond, Korea veteran, linguist and friend, whose body is finally identified only by his dog-tag, having fought against the Portuguese for black African liberation in Angola. Bella-Lenore Boltwood, 89 years of age, close to senility, talks to Nathaniel of long-ago imagined loves and courtships. Master-of-Ceremonies Browne, whose singing attracts Nathaniel, dies at his reverend father's hands, his story in part also already told in *There Is a Tree*. Finally there is his creative mentor, Ironwood "Landlord" Rumble, musical prodigy at three and suicide at 47 years of age.

Yet others come to Nathaniel in hearsay and talk. He learns of, and then finds himself utterly held by, the William Body-Carrie Trout Picou liaison with its story of New Orleans prostitution. Equally he is drawn to the Body-Lavinia Materston affair with its Algerian-French offshoot in Ahmed Picon. Each, for him, becomes part of the web, the enclosing shadow of the Bloodworth patrimony. But above even these, there looms the huge presence of W. W. W. Ford, trickster supreme, "serial hermaphrodite," and a kind of superman and cynical African American warlock in whom Ellison's Rinehart has become a near metaphysical trickster god.²⁵ In his shifting guises as priest, drug dealer, pimp, adopter of orphans, rhetorician, Tiresian man-woman, Ford is summoned into being by Nathaniel as the very spirit of extravagant survival.

However necessary tricksterism may have been to black survival, Nathaniel comes to recognize that it alone will not suffice. One aspect of his own need to seek the story behind the Bloodworth spiral is the quest for some better moral

principle, a wiser, saner humanity. Even so, the dance continues, chaotically as ever, most evidently in his fight from the riot with Noah and with the black infant they encounter by chance, “its trembling little hands reaching upwards towards the two sad-faced sobbing men.”

The “House of Refuge,” the decaying, white penitentiary asylum in which Nathaniel and Noah find themselves held with Ironwood and from which they make their forays for food and drink, acts as Forrest’s image of this “Bloodworth” America. It serves as the image of the different kinds of detention center in which, historically, blacks have been held, named and renamed, and sexually and otherwise exploited. Noah, symptomatically, speaks of chaos, “madness and constant troubled confusions.” Nathaniel agrees, but, countering, invokes the music of Ironwood, the jazz and blues of the “wounded . . . blind bard warrior” as offering black spiritual harmonies amid all the disorder. He also alludes to the “beautiful but tragic people” who have suffered the blight of the Bloodworths, the epilogue of a narrator hero who even as he glimpses order finds himself obliged once again to take fight against “more chaos.”

All of Nathaniel’s commentary, in fact, applies. The Bloodworth genealogy implies not linear history, but rather a chaos encircling all American time and space. Nathaniel understands, even as he is appalled by, the evangelical wiles and trickster moves of W. W. W. Ford, with his false church, staggering rip-offs and sales-pitches, and white girl accomplice, Gay-Rail (a variation of Grail). He also knows that the charade will continue as borne out in Ford’s canny, duplicitous adoption ads which Nathaniel and Noah come across towards the end in the personals column of the newspaper.

But the better resistance for Nathaniel lies in the “re-creation and reinvention” of “what is left over.” He recognizes this not only in the heroic musicianship of Ironwood but the church singing of Rachel Flowers and Regal Pettibone, the politics of Jamestown Fishbond, and the sermons, well-meant or less so, by the likes of the Rev. Shelton Packwood and the Rev. Jonathan Bass (preaching to be compared with that of the Rev. Pompey c.j. Browne in *There Is a Tree* and *Two Wings to Veil My Face*). In their different ways, these each simultaneously resist and transform the chaos to hand. They offer truly creative re-creations of the nation’s histories within a history.

Above all, Forrest embodies this same process in Nathaniel himself. It falls to him, even as he professes himself unequal to the task, to make a narrative unity of the Bloodworth story. Once again, though on a larger scale than *There Is a Tree*, the complication of an America born in racial confusion actually gets taken into the very form of the novel. In the first instance it resides in Nathaniel’s effort against

the odds to discover and state the true, underlying “plot” of the Bloodworths. Behind that, however, lies the orchestration of Forrest’s own overall telling.

Two Wings to Veil My Face opens with Nathaniel as amanuensis for the bedridden, weakening 91-year old Great-Momma Sweetie Reed. In a room which might itself serve as the echo chamber of past remembrance, it falls to her young grandson, the rejected suitor of Candy Cummings and self-confessed dropout in his early twenties, to record upon a series of aptly hued legal yellow pads the life of his own grandmother, or at least the grandmother from whom he believes himself descended and to whom his devotion is total.

That life, of early slavery, the struggle to survive the Reconstruction years, and the move North to Chicago in the wake of her marriage to Nathaniel’s grandfather, Jericho Witherspoon, he finds himself writing into being even as he listens. He functions as Great-Momma Reed’s listener and yet writer. For Sweetie’s history in every way profoundly entwines with Nathaniel’s own, another black genealogy, that of the Reeds and the Witherspoods, again to be transposed into order out of the past’s disorder by a Nathaniel Witherspoon quite literally called upon to set down the word. Nathaniel’s assumption of the role of Sweetie Reed’s personal archivist so exactly foreshadows his own transition into the eventual presiding storyteller. Reflexively, it might be said, this “dual” Nathaniel does the even further duty of standing in for, but kept at a distance from, Forrest himself, Faulkner-like *Sole Owner & Proprietor* of yet more Forest County.

Among latter-day fictive accounts of the journey up from slavery, Sweetie Reed’s readily takes its place alongside that of the tough, enduring Jane Pittman in Ernest Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* or the ghost-haunted Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Despite a specific departure point, the antebellum Rollins plantation of Mississippi, and a specific slave parentage, the Rollins manservant I.V. Reed and his wife Angelina, Sweetie’s personal history also signals enclosing larger black history. At age seven, in 1874, she is witness to the patrollers’ brutal rape and killing of her mother. She endures the marriage by arrangement at 15, in 1882, to a former escaped slave, the then 55 year old Jericho Witherspoon. Her traumatic parting of the ways from Jericho takes place in 1905 with its epilogue in her reluctant, half-delirious attendance in 1944 at the memorial service for the 115 year old patriarch in the Memphis Raven-Snow Funeral Home. The assembly of mourners will include her diabetic, hysterical “son,” Arthur Witherspoon, Nathaniel’s father.

These, and each further contributing tier of her life, she calls to mind before her rapt, impatient grandson in the Chicago of 1958. The past is relived as the simultaneous and ongoing present. To that end her story is told in slivers of recollection, voices within voices. There are intermissions for inquiry and recapitulation. One-time frame gets held in abeyance in order to complete the events of another. Great-Momma Sweetie Reed's story profoundly plays into Nathaniel's own, her past deeded to his present as shared kinship of blood and of script.

In the latter respect, her past is indeed a gift of language. The word she bequeaths literally becomes inscribed in his, a process once again involving its own "magic meaning," its own "reinvention." Whether, thereby, as interlocutor to Sweetie or eventual narrator, Nathaniel finds himself compelled to an ordering fusion of her tale inside his telling. Her "backwater time" as he calls it, and with it her storytelling powers and recollections, reawaken his "unfolding."

"Write it a down" the almost deaf Sweetie enjoins Nathaniel, as though fearful of losing her own witness. So, in obligation, he does. The cycle starts in the nineteenth-century plantation owner voices of the "backbirding" Rollins Reed, and of his deranged wife, Mistress Sylvia, caught up in her seven-mirrored mansion and her jewels as the war turns against the South. Across, and cross-plied with them, run the words of Sweetie's parents, I.V. and Angelina, of the conjure-woman Aunt Foisty ("a-huffing and a-chanting some of them broken-down African words"), and of the slave-driver Reece Shank Haywood ("a big muscle flexing nigger" who near-strangles Rolley). These have company in the mulatta Clea who helps Sweetie bury I.V., the Rev. Stigwood Bloodworth whose name calls up a familiar other dynasty, and Wayland Woods, author of the near-illiterate but compelling letter long stored by Sweetie and written to Master Rollins demanding the return of his stolen slave daughter.

Each, in their turn, echoes down into the present century. First, Nathaniel hears Sweetie's invocations of Jericho Witherspoon, both his talk as he rises to prominence as a lawyer and politician in Chicago and his "lifelong journal" which reads "as if the very feel of history was ingrained in the texture of the pages." Nathaniel also discovers adjoining texts like the Reed-Witherspoon freedom papers and family ledgers (crucially that which contains a reference to 1905, and to Arthur Witherspoon, his name written with quotes around it). These, taken with Sweetie's "word of remembrances" as given in her "winging call-and-response manner," yield a world once theirs or hers but now also his. Early on in the novel Nathaniel becomes conscious of his role as storyteller:

But now the young man . . . wondered if all the storytelling, the loving, the harsh disciplining, the praying and the direction had been a preparation for the day, *this* day, when he would have to take over her memories. (5)

But the most overwhelming of these memories for Nathaniel, and which for him most orders all the contributing voices, lies inscribed upon Jericho Witherspoon's back: the branded initials put there by his own white father to prevent escape. Seen through Nathaniel's child eyes at the burial, they become memory itself, or as the boy comes to think them, "memory wounds on fire." This "J.W. script," the "blister-like italicized brand JW . . . vivid as a visitation," seizes him utterly. Sweetie's "Boswell," as he will at one point call himself, he discerns a composite Afro-America in this "birthmark," and in each further gathering sign, be it the "forged chain" or the "rabbit's-foot bracelet." For underlying the "multilayered collectivity of words" lies the stark, inerasable, "shadow" of slavery. It is as if Forrest insists that the one "JW" carries all. Can Nathaniel ever wholly understand, and so inscribe, the slave nightmare from which the grandfather's historical branding derives?

Nathaniel Witherspoon will go on to solve the riddle of his own paternity, the mystery of the date 1905 in the Reed-Witherspoon ledger, and Sweetie's own blood kinship with him. At Sweetie's prompting he will begin to understand the mixed bloodlines of the Reeds, the Witherspoons, and the still further outlying family to which he is heir. As the novel's last paragraphs indicate, he will even recognize the complex, larger responsibilities of his own signifying. But there remains the final challenge. How to "order" into the one resolved narrative all of these spirals of legacy for which the "JW" acts as hieroglyphic.

That, too, is the challenge for the boy who rides to his mother's funeral in *There Is a Tree*, or for the companion of Noah Grandberry who plunges into the riot of the closing chapter in *The Bloodworth Orphans*, or for Nathaniel literally with the yellow pad transcripts of Great-Momma Sweetie Reed's remembered history in his hands in *Two Wings to Veil My Face*. As with its predecessors and in whatever due complication Nathaniel's rendering of genealogical disorder in *Two Wings* in fact becomes a rare triumph of imaginative ordering, or more precisely, of Forrest's ordering.

The achievement of the Witherspoon-Bloodworth trilogy, with *Divine Days* there to further extend the reach of Forest County into huge epic, lies utterly in this overall "re-creation and reinvention." History is given momentary equilibrium and the seemingly untellable is told. Viewed in more literary terms, Leon Forrest's novels can be said to have put Afro-America under the auspices of his own uniquely modern, modernist, and beckoningly postmodern transformation. He does not offer an easiest read, but then given the view of history in the Witherspoon-Bloodworth trilogy how could he?

Notes

1. Leon Forrest, *Re-Creation: A Liturgical Music-Drama*, commissioned by Richard Hunt, music by T. J. Anderson, words by Leon Forrest, 1978.
2. Leon Forrest, "In the Light of the Likeness-Transformed," in Mark Azdronzny, ed. *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research, 1988, Vol. 7, 21–35.
3. Leon Forrest, "Faulkner/Reforestation," lecture at the annual "Yoknapatawpha Country" seminar, University of Mississippi, August 1988. Reprinted in Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abodie, eds. *Faulkner and Popular Culture: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, Jackson, MS and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990, 207–13.
4. Ralph Ellison, "Foreword," *There Is a Tree More Ancient than Eden*, New York: Random House, 1973, ii.
5. Ronald L. Fair, *Hog Butcher*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, 1966, and *We Can't Breathe*, New York: Harper and Row, 1972; Cyrus Colter, *The River of Eros*, Chicago: Swallow Press, 1972, *The Hippodrome*, Chicago: Swallow Press, 1973.
6. Saul Bellow, dustjacket comment, *There Is a Tree More Ancient than Eden*.
7. Leon Forrest, *The Bloodworth Orphans*, New York: Random House, 1977; *Two Wings to Veil My Face*, New York: Random House, 1984; *Divine Days*, Oak Park, IL: Another Chicago Press, 1992; and *Relocations of the Spirit*, Wakefield, Rhode Island and London: Asphodel Press, 1994. All page references are to these editions. Reissues of the first three novels are to be found as *There Is a Tree More Ancient than Eden*, Chicago: Another Chicago Press, 1973, 1988; *The Bloodworth Orphans*, Chicago: Another Chicago Press, 1977, 1987; and *Two Wings to Veil My Face*, Chicago: Another Chicago Press, 1983, 1988.
8. These phrases are each to be found in the extracts cited at the head of the chapter.
9. For assessment of Forrest (and in which an earlier version of this chapter appears), see John G. Cawelti, ed. *Leon Forrest: Introductions and Interpretations*, Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1997. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 30th Anniversary Edition, New York: Random House, 1952, 1982.
10. Ishmael Reed, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, New York: Doubleday, 1967, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, New York: Doubleday, 1969, and *Flight To Canada*, New York: Random House, 1976.
11. William Melvin Kelley, *A Different Drummer*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962, *A Drop of Patience*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965, *dem*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967, and *Dunsfords Travels Everywhere*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969.
12. LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka, *The System of Dante's Hell*, New York: Grove Press, 1965; William Demby, *The Catacombs*, New York: Pantheon, 1965; Clarence Major,

- NO, New York: Emerson Hall, 1973; Charles Wright, *The Messenger*, New York: Farrar, Straus, 1963, *The Wig*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966, and *Absolutely Nothing to Get Alarmed About*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973.
13. Carlene Hatcher Polite, *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play*, New York: Farrar Straus, 1975; Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, New York: Knopf, 1977; James Alan McPherson, *Hue and Cry*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1969, and *Elbow Room*, Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1977.
 14. John O'Brien, *Interviews with Black Writers*, New York: Liveright, 1973, 214. A study which tackles Wideman's modernist/postmodern interests and helpfully sets him in the wider context of black modernism is James W. Coleman, *Blackness and Modernism: The Literary Career of John Edgar Wideman*, Jackson, MI and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1989.
 15. John Edgar Wideman, *A Glance Away*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, 1967, *Hurry Home*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, 1970, and *The Lynchers*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, 1973.
 16. John Wideman, *Hiding Place*, New York: Avon Books, 1981, *Damballah*, New York: Avon Books, 1981, and *Sent for You Yesterday*, New York: Avon Books, 1983. "surfiction" is reprinted in John Wideman, *The Stories of John Edgar Wideman*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.
 17. Maria Mootry, "If He Changed My Name: An Interview," *Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 18, 1977, 631–42, republished as "If He Changed My Name: An Interview with Leon Forrest," in Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto, eds. *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art and Scholarship*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1979, 146–57.
 18. Mootry, *Chant of Saints*, 146.
 19. Mootry, *Chant of Saints*, 150.
 20. "In the Light of the Likeness-Transformed," 30.
 21. Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," in *The Complete Poems*, New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1949.
 22. This chapter follows on from two of my own brief earlier accounts of Forrest's fiction; see "Making New: Styles of Innovation in the Contemporary Black American Novel," in A. Robert Lee, ed., *Black Fiction: New Studies in the AfroAmerican Novel since 1945*, London: Vision Press, 1980, 222–50 and A. Robert Lee, *Black American Fiction since Richard Wright*, British Association of America Studies pamphlet, No. 11, 1983. Strong accounts are to be found in Keith E. Byerman, *Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black American Fiction*, Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1985; Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987; and John F. Callaghan, *In the Afro-American Grain: The Pursuit of Voice in Twentieth Century Black Fiction*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

23. "In the Light of the Likeness-Transformed," 30.
24. Owen Dodson, *Boy at the Window*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951; James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953; and Gordon Parks, *The Learning Tree*, New York: Harper & How, 1963.
25. For an excellent account of the trickster in Forrest see H. Nigel Thomas, *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988, 103–8 and 158–73.

Under Cover, Under Covers: Performing Race from William Wells Brown to Charles Johnson

Something more may come of this Masquerade.

Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man* (1857)¹

The failure of the melting pot, far from closing the great America democratic experiment, means that it has only just begun. Whatever American nationalism turns out to be, we see already that it will have a color richer and more exciting than our idea has hitherto encompassed . . . America is already the world-federation in miniature, the continent where for the first time in history has been achieved that miracle of hope, the peaceful living side by side, with character substantially preserved, of the most heterogeneous peoples under the sun . . . Here, notwithstanding our tragic failures of adjustment, the outlines are already too clear not to give us a new vision and a new orientation of the American mind in the world.

Randolph S. Bourne, "Trans-National America" (1916)²

Multiple hybrid identities, composed of crossed and recrossed boundaries, have thus become . . . the contemporary global as we as American norm.

Frederick Buell, *National Culture and the New Global System* (1994)³

Tiger Woods, 1997 U.S. Masters golf winner, announces on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that black does not summarize his ethnic make-up and teasingly designates himself "Cablinasian, a bend of Caucasian, Black, Indian and Asian." In part to allay talk of Woods's having abandoned his black birthright, Julian Bond, Civil Rights veteran, and himself of mixed ethnicity, would speak of "sharing" him.

Trey Ellis, positioning himself as New Cultural Mulatto, declares himself unbound from any residual obligation to write only about the color-line. Both of his “New Black Aesthetic” novels, *Plattitudes* (1988) and *Home Repairs* (1993), along with a canny interethnic story like “Guess Who’s Coming to Seder” (1989), provocatively draw upon a syncretic blend of black, white, and magic realist and postmodern sources. Whatever the virtuosity of his fiction Ellis’s use of phrasing like Cultural Mulatto arouses consternation. By some fiat of postmodern ethnicity had he ceased to be a “black” writer?⁴

The poet Ai (Florence Anthony), author of *Sin* (1986) and other collections of modern verse Gothic—she casts a typical soliloquy like “The Good Shepherd” in the cold, manic voice of the anonymous mass-murderer of Atlanta’s black children—has a Japanese father (“Ai” is Japanese for love) and a mother of mixed African American, Choctaw and Irish descent. She finds herself listed, often queeringly, in both African American and Asian American reference works.⁵

Alice Walker, notably in her Civil Rights novel, *Meridian* (1976), and her selection of essays, *Living by the Word* (1988), and Clarence Major, a frontline experimentalist in fiction like *Such Was the Season* (1987) and *Painted Turtle: Woman with Guitar* (1988), and the poet of *Some Observations of a Stranger at Zuni in the latter Part of the Century* (1989), both have made imaginative resort not only to African American but also to their mixed African Cherokee legacy.⁶ Accordingly, they have challenged assumed niches. Are they to remain listed as African American, cross-listed as Native, or accorded a new kind of recognition as African Native writers?

In *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), Ishmael Reed, Afro-America’s ranking wit and metafictionist, displays his pleasure in, and wonder at, a lineage which includes both extended black family and stepfamily a Cherokee great grandmother a distant Danish woman relative, and the Irish great grandfather engagingly remembered in “Black Irishman.” He could well have mentioned that Martin Luther King Jr., on his father’s side, also had an Irish grandmother. In a riff on the metaphor of American kinship he contends: “there’s no such thing as Black America or White America, two nations, with two separate bloodlines. America is a land of distant cousins.”⁷

Toni Morrison puts the argument another way in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), the luminous 1990 Massey lectures she gave at Harvard. There she traces out the “Africanist presence and personae” behind the classic American authorship of Poe, Melville, Cather and Hemingway. “American Africanism,” she suggests, inhabits “white” American discourse, explicitly or otherwise, a metaphor of both presence and absence stretching from

the Puritans through to the Declaration of Independence and, in terms of literary fiction, from Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) to Hemingway's posthumous *The Garden of Eden* (1987). Her summing-up leaves little to doubt. "Africanism," runs her observation, "is inextricable from the definition of Americanness."⁸

A decade earlier Ralph Ellison, in "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" (1977), strikes his own anticipatory note. He offers the story of witnessing, one Sunday afternoon on Riverside Drive near 151st Street, "a lightskinned, blue-eyed, Afro-American-featured individual dressed in dashiki, breech-tops, Homburg hat, huge Afro, and driving a blue Volkswagen with a Rolls Royce radiator." It leads him to ponder "the complexity of bloodlines," "our general confusion over American identity," and of most relevance, "the appropriation game."⁹

Given these related, if seemingly diverse, bearings upon ethnicity and its styles of expression, a reconsideration of the African American novel of passing, customarily defined as narratives of black impersonation of white, might well suggest some return to a parade gone by. Ethnicity, and within it the history of "passing," has been transformed under the post-1960s multicultural dispensation, and as America as it headed towards and has now passed into the twenty-first century won ever fuller acknowledgment of all its ethnicities and, within them, of each ethnic crossover and interface.¹⁰

Terms like miscegenation, in consequence, along with the dire sublexicon of "mongrel" or "half breed," look not merely dated but defunct. Slurs, outright hostility even, whether in backwoods Mississippi or suburban New England, obviously continue. But "mixed" relationships, and "mixed" offspring, no longer automatically arouse curiosity or spectatorship, or even opprobrium, as happened in the widely reported case of Richard and Mildred Loving, white husband and black wife, in their interracial marriage of 1958 which broke miscegenation laws in the state of Virginia and eventually went to the Supreme Court for resolution.¹¹

In this regard it has long been a disservice to regard the line of "passing" inaugurated with William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* (1853) as only telling the one story. The transformation whereby black plays white, with its apparent validation of a hierarchically fixed, and so even more reactionary, notion of "race" in fact serves more as point of departure than arrival. In the case of *Clotel* matters take on the added complication of the two subsequent editions of the text, both with key changes of plot and ending and respectively, published as

Clotelle: A Tale of the Southern States (1864) and *Clotelle: Or, The Colored Heroine. A Tale of the Southern States* (1867).¹²

For *Clotel*, and the subsequent novels, have always raised a greatly more consequential issue, the making, the negotiation, of virtually *all* American identity. This gives the true (if not always acknowledged) implication of how they each deploy aspect, color, voice, family, gender, tactics of survival and escape, and every manner of disguise. Most of all they give a complex dimension to faux white (and often faux black) roles. As the first African American novel of passing, *Clotel* has long invited subtler reading. It strikingly anticipates the connundra, the multiple vexes of offense and defense, that over the years has attached itself to the term “race.”

Furthermore, *Clotel* helps inaugurate the tradition which includes among its best-known landmarks a Reconstruction-era novel like Charles Chesnut’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) and James Weldon Johnson’s mixed-genre *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912, 1927). “New Negro” fiction follows like Walter White’s *Flight* (1926), Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) and Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1929). Few satires of 1920s “race fever” manage the acerbity of George Schuyler’s *Black No More* (1931). A far later picaresque like Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* (1982) takes race and its impersonation into explicitly philosophical territory.¹³ The route through these and similar texts has every reason to use the benefit of hindsight for how they give contexts and perspectives to America as “first universal nation.”¹⁴

Another kind of departure point, from the 1940s and early 1950s, lies in the shock which followed the film *Lost Boundaries* (1949), with Mel Ferrer and Beatrice Pearson in the principal roles. Its story of the “black” outing of Albert and Thyra Johnston, initially told in *Reader’s Digest* by William White in 1947, and then picked up by Hollywood, generally stunned America. The Johnstons had epitomized white New Hampshire respectability, both well known in Republican political circles, both prominent Methodists, he a doctor and she an acclaimed “family values” homemaker. Passing had long been held to belong to an earlier time. How could black be white?

Similarly the publication of John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* (1961)—it had a follow-up in Grace Halsell’s *Soul Sister* (1969)—with its Texas author’s chameleonism of hiding a white inside a black skin (so reversing Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*) gave a unique pathway into the shadowlands of Dixie racism. Griffin attracted widespread praise for exposing racist practice but also alarm and even

violent resentment. His home was attacked a number of times, his name vilified. How, this time, could white be black?¹⁵

“Who’s Passing for Who?” Langston Hughes’s memorable title from his 1945 Harlem short story, offers the relevant gloss.¹⁶ In an America where identity of all kinds, individual, collective, cultural, linguistic, gendered, national or regional, and assuredly racial, has almost by historical rote been subject to continuing (if arbitrary) processes of change and revision, could the nation ever be imagined without the interplay of these different but always subtly reciprocal and mirroring dramas? Yet matters rarely have become more charged, or more given to camouflage, than where and when race, and above all the challenge to assumed fixities of black and white, enter the fray.

An upshot of the South Central 1992 riots was the confirmation that black against white, for all its historic pedigree from anti-slavery to Civil Rights, could not continue as the exclusive paradigm for “race relations.” Black-Asian, and most especially in California black-Korean, relations have increasingly come to the fore. Black-brown issues surface over gangs, turf, dress, even language. Within *Chicanismo* from Texas to California, Colorado to Arizona, tensions arise between Chicanos and *sureños*, an old versus a newer Mexican and other Spanish-speaking immigrant America. White-Asian relations turn one way, and then another, lately in a city like Seattle, the first in the United States to have a collective Asian American majority. All of these, not to say the workings of ethnic class mobility, greatly complicate the picture and invite fresh recognition and analysis. Some observers, even so, as the twentieth has given way to a new century, detect the return to the older binary Black/White paradigm.

Ethnic Notions, Marlon Riggs’s unsparing 1987 film, offers yet another backward glance.¹⁷ Riggs shows how in the form of slave caricature, minstrelsy, foods of the Uncle Ben’s rice or Aunt Jemima’s syrup variety, or a TV show like *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (dropped in 1953 after a successful NAACP campaign against it), white America managed to image African Americans as toms, sambos, mammies, coons, brutes and pickaninnies. He throws the sharpest light on a history of two-way impersonation which runs from slave-performed cakewalk pastiche of white slave owner gentry to a white-Jewish Al Jolson in blackface in *The Jazz Singer* (1926). Equally he speculates on long-time, if muted, rumors of the white-black genealogy of at least a half dozen American presidents. Likewise the black-white physiognomy of Charles Chesnutt, Water White, A. Philip Randolph, Lena Horne, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Sterling Brown, or even the “marinny” Malcolm X (the “Red” of his Detroit years on account of his complexion and hair) has not gone un-noted. Riggs was not alone in confirming that color has long operated as more permeable, and certainly more portable, than the received versions have allowed.

In this regard Melville's *The Confidence-Man* makes its own singular contribution. The novel, throughout, ventriloquizes and impersonates black for white and vice versa. The opening chapter's mute, Christly, a white stranger, is followed by the earthy and importuning Black Guinea. Thereafter, white from out of black identities proliferate, frontier and eastern, secular and transcendental and, in a related vein, variously Native ("The Metaphysics of Indian Hating") and Asian ("The Story of China Aster"). In its resort to these feints and doublings Melville's Mississippi river-masquerade adds a powerful touchstone. Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), with its figure of Roxie, and Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) with Joe Christmas, can be said to serve alongside Afro-America's own fictions of passing. In this *The Confidence-Man* invites being thought a species of metatext, a hugely illuminating touchstone.

A more recent context arises from the shifts and awakenings of the 1960s. Debate in America since the 1960s increasingly has joined about the nation's accelerating ethnic and cultural hybridity. Even *Time*, Henry Luce's one-time journalistic flagship for WASP America long given to handing down monocultural stereotypes (African Americans as ghettoites, Asian Americans as model minority, Latinos as border migrants, Native peoples as Vanishing Americans), recognized that demographically something had changed. Since the 1980s it has run a series of cover stories on the "browning" of American Asian American achievement, and on the 1492–1992 Columbus "discovery" controversy as a way of registering America's changing nationhood. A 1991 issue, reflecting more than a hint of the challenge to old custodianship, could be entitled "Whose America?"¹⁸ A later America witnesses in Obama a mixed-race president ironically often perceived as being "blacker" on account of being married to a darker black woman. Which leaves the "racial" status of his children Malia and Natasha, for what it truly matters, to be somehow decided.

These all reflect a signal turn. If the demographers are correct, the process which in a probability will lead by the middle of the twenty-first century to less than one in two Americans being "white" Euro-American had registered in Middle America. A related question ensues. Can there ever be or has there ever been the one, agreed, canonical America, *Mayflower*-birthed, Atlantic, irrevocably shaped by a white (and patrician) Anglocentrism with its footfalls in English culture, English common law, and the English language-itself? A glance at the internet and social media, the faces that accompany the blogs and the language being used, confirms the changing dispensation.

Time, even so, has not been alone in having to catch up on an accompanying development. This hypothesizes that whiteness, all along and because of its own

massive ethnic diversity (English to German, Scandinavian to Mediterranean, Irish to Jewish) and its different class manifestations (genteel, salaried, urban blue-collar and rural poor white), has been but yet another constructed, albeit composite, American ethnicity. When did darker Italians or Greeks, or Catholic Poles and Orthodox Armenians, or Bavarian Germans and Ashkenazi Jews, all “pass” into white?¹⁹ In pop culture even *Superman*, white omnipotent man-god, in the TV series “Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman” has been played by Dean Cain, an actor who proclaims himself Japanese American.²⁰

The issues pivot around whether “race” has ever meant the same thing as culture, or whether multiculturalization with or without political correctness is to be welcomed or feared. In the footfalls of the 1960s in which not only ethnic but gender and other identity politics hold, and notwithstanding Obama to Trump, can some mythic white-nationalist America actually prevail? Rhetoric from the prior into the new century has blown hot and cold. Diverse polemical hands have been quick into action throughout the media, the academy, political forums, and perhaps most tellingly, the web. Vintage references to melting pots and mixing bowls get re-invoked, or rejected, or superseded by terms like those introduced by Werner Sollors of ethnic “consent” and “descent.”²¹ A careful analytic study like F. James Davis’s *Who Is Black? One Nation’s Definition* (1991) gives salutary estimation. Davis calls attention to:

the confusion of biological and cultural categories—“Negro” came to mean any slave or descendant of a slave no matter how much mixed . . . Most parents of black American children have themselves been racially mixed, but often the fractions get complicated because the earlier details of the mixing were obscured generations ago.²²

Members of the black intelligentsia have given the debate formidable energy. The jurisprudential scholar Patricia J. Williams in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991) attests “I am still evolving from being treated as three-fifths of a human, a subpart of the white estate.”²³ The philosopher-theologian Cornel West in *Race Matters* (1994) argues “As in the ages of Lincoln, Roosevelt and King, we must look to new frameworks and languages to understand our multilayered crisis and overcome our deep malaise.”²⁴ Movement, however, has not been all the one way. All kinds of race essentialists speak of threatened loss of identity. Segregationists, first of all, of Louisiana’s David Duke variety (with the Klan, the Aryan Brotherhood and its police and other lodges and many of the survivalists and militia groups, equally in the frame) allege the beleaguering of some unitary “white

race.” They have continued in underground cells and not so dark-matter web communication. The O.J. Simpson trial, conducted in summer 1996, whatever its implications about “the race card,” unearths the vintage prejudice of Mark Furhman as witness and LAPD long-serving detective. He, as other law-and-order authorities, have seen themselves engaged in the delegated hands-on work of preserving whiteness as ordained ascendancy, command-post white “racial” governance. That has had its latter-day expression in the rash of black men getting shot and reaction like Black Lives Matter. The Donald Trump presidency, in whatever degree, re-awakens the cause of white nationalism, the one America somehow under threat from another.

Ironically the issue has not only been that of white American ascendancy under challenge. The vaunting of whiteness as civilization can be seen to have its exact counter-image in the activities of various latter-day Afrocentrists. Few in the 1960s were more determined, or voluble, than Dr. Leonard Jeffries of the City College of New York with his Manichean opposition of black sun people and white ice people. Likewise, Nation Islam ideologues, acting on a “theology” of white (and especially anti-Semitic) master-sorcery, canvas openly for a necessary jihad against Jewish Americans in their support of Israel. Conflict grew sharper after a black child, Gavin Cato, was accidentally killed in a Hasidic parade and Lemrick Nelson, African American, was stabbed to death by the young Lubavitcher, Yankel Rosenbaum, in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in summer 1991. That, in turn, sparked anger against New York’s black mayor, David Dinkins. A similar spiral lies in the rise of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane’s Kach movement founded also in Brooklyn with the Jewish Defense League in support, which carried the demonization of all Islam and all Arabs (and Arab Americans) back to Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Asian American traditionalists, like certain Jewish counterparts, for all their experience of orientalist resentment and exclusion (the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act or Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 of 1942 interning 120,000 Japanese Americans) invoke the dangers of “marrying out” with its intermixing of family, language, religious affiliation and children. Frank Chin, Chinese American playwright, along with others, decries the tendency as voluntary self-erasure. Native America, too, can look to its own divided voices about authenticity. If, historically, a white controlled BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) has long been arbitrary about certification of who ranks as “Indian,” so there have been in-house tribal claims and counterclaims about blood quantum and rights to enrollment. That has spread to issues of land sovereignty as in the Navajo-Hopi territorial disputes in Big Mountain, Arizona, and, most of relevance, about the whole issue of mixed-blood (or Métis) status.

In the Latino/Latinx spectrum the same process applies. However shared the resentment of “Anglo” discrimination by Tex-Mex and California Chicanos, by Nuyoricans or Cuban exiles in Florida, there have also been internal splits and tensions. Which Hispanidad/Latinismo should, or can be thought in any way definitive? The landed Chicanismo of an older New Mexico rubs up against the El Barrio Chicanismo of East Los Angeles (“East Los” in local Spanish), Houston or Albuquerque. Has the *campesino* leadership of César Chávez and his United Farm Workers retreated into piety, a truly heroic but dated leadership through to his death in 1993 and especially for an urban (and often middle-class) population? Puertorriqueñidad, with Spanish Harlem and the South Bronx as centers and Puerto Rico as island origin, for all the talk of Borikén as rallying nationalism, has been faced with various kinds of disquiet. Those of more Native or Jewish Latino/a identity have reported feeling threatened. Tensions, too, have continue to arise between New Yorkers of Puerto Rican origins and Puerto Ricans who remain on the island. The fierce anti-Fidel rightism of Florida’s exile Cuban American groups, almost all fair-skinned in appearance like the Havana leadership they oppose, looks unforgivingly at a migrant-immigrant leftism brought North from yet other Latin America that of an often more “Indian” or *indigenista* Bolivia, Guatemala, Peru or Colombia. Commentary suggests some easing of these binaries, but grudges still simmer

Despite, and no doubt equally because of, the evident increase of black-white, Amerasian, cross-blood Native and *mestizola* hybridities, there also persist unquiet rankings about the color hierarchy. The scale remains, generally, light over dark, be the latter Latino, Native, Asian or African American. The ability, because of usually lighter color and aspect, to move across or between ethnic lines still arouses disquiet. For many of “settled” ethnicity these Americans of a mix-within-a-mix, however fully possessed of an identity in their own right, cause lingering doubts, the old shadow of mingling as blight. A sharply perceptive film like Spike Lee’s *School Daze* (1988) takes its bead on “colorism” in the black community.

Multiculturalism, and with it multiracialism, in demography, political and cultural voice, education gender in the form of the Women’s Movement and its gay (and gay ethnic) counterparts, even a return to old-time genetics, may well have become an item on the American agenda of public debate. But much of the work remains to be done. Bill Clinton’s greatly trumpeted speech on race at the University of California, San Diego in June 1997 added the presidential voice, yet his working terms could not have been more narrow, even redundant. For he, like others, continues to see the contending forces, actually and figuratively, as broadly of two camps: white and black. In President Obama there has been the start of

infinitely more nuanced discourse as to “race,” but the terrain still give hostage to conflicted opinion. The Trump presidency can hardly be said to have led into better terms of reference as it plays to its overwhelmingly white-fundamentalist base.

Who better, however, than the ever augmenting number of “mixed” Americans, born at the ethnic-racial seams, to step through or round the inherited paradigm? For by parentage, or memory, or culture, or by the individual face in the mirror, cannot their perspective be considered broader, more richly eclectic, even more American? “Passing” old-style, whether rued, relished or tragic, comes to be seen as a mere first step.

Another perspective arises from how a number of high-culture mandarins have viewed the supposed loss of “one nation” canonicity as a step into chaos, the foregoing of good citizenship as well as cultural literacy.²⁵ Universities, they allege, especially add to the fracture through the creation of multicultural syllabi and Departments of Ethnic Studies, and within those, of African American, Latino, Native and Asian American Studies, accompanied by Bilingual Education, Popular Culture, and Media and Film Studies, as well as Feminist and Gay ideology and writing.²⁶ Alan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), the text which began much of the controversy with a sanctioning Preface by Saul Bellow, thus could speak of “the profoundest crisis,” even the breach of a “Hobbesian” social contract.²⁷

Roger Kimball detects the 1960s as having bequeathed only an ill-given legacy, one of specious ethnic populism, in his *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (1990). Dinesh D’Souza likewise sees in the new multicultural prospect only flight from the rise of “the best” into petty empire building in his *Liberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1991). One-time Kennedy liberal like Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. darkly forecast cultural balkanization in his *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (1992). Harold Bloom, whose Introductions to over 500 Chelsea Press volumes of essays and reprints shows little apparent heed of canonicity, enters the arena with *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (1995), full of magisterial sweep and disdain for our “mimic cultural wars” and “current squalors.”²⁸

The counter case has been equally vigorous. America’s culture war of “core values” versus “cultural diversity” has been long debated as a prophetic essay like Randolph Bourne’s “Trans-National America” (1916) gives powerful evidence.²⁹ Has not “canonical” Americanness too readily, and for too long, been defined, and thereby appropriated, by the usual WASP or its successor elites? Is it not,

accordingly, merest canard to keep hearing that Alice Walker, say, has usurped Shakespeare, or Toni Morrison, say, George Eliot? Above all is there not an unspoken ethnic-racial component to high canonicity, a fear of America as more increasingly than ever a cross- and inter-ethnic multiverse, a nation of cultural pluralities?

Studies like Werner Sollors's *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1986) and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Loose Canons* (1992), furthermore, press the argument that "the canonical" (whether as national identity or literary culture), and beginning from the Enlightenment-era battle of Ancients and Moderns, has always been subject to revision and modification.³⁰ Cultural touchstones, overlappingly Graeco-Roman, Judeo-Christian and Eurocentric, had to come under question as exclusively best able to prevail in an America woven by histories hemispherically Native, African, Pacific Island and Asian as much as Atlantic.³¹ Few recent voices, however, have argued more eloquently, or with a firmer sense of the historicity to America's multicultural tradition of seeking to be "free of the weight of fixed symbols and rigid canons," than Lawrence W. Levine in *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (1996).³² A further bearing derives from long-standing postcolonial and subaltern intellectuals such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.³³ They have overlapped with the academy's Marxists, such as Frederick Jameson or E. San Juan Jr., who, though opposing the alarmism of Alan Bloom, Roger Kimball or Dinesh D'Souza (with its roots in Matthew Arnold or the Hutchins/University of Chicago "Great Books" tradition), also take aim at most notions of multiculturalism itself.³⁴

Feminist legacy, too, has met with its multiculturalization. However overdue the 1960s gender debate, both straight-feminist and gay, changes to assumed settled sexual category in the formation of (and the need simply to be accurate about) American national identity, complicate the issues yet further. Did not modern feminism's second wave, as given in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), turn on analysis not so much generic as of white (and heterosexual) professional women and their discontents?³⁵ American women of color, whether black, Native, Asian, Latina, or of one or another ethnic mix, or straight or gay, would proclaim, and relish, a gender politics of their own. Symptomatic have been collections like *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) under the editorship of Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa.³⁶

Afro-America found its own working term in "womanism," most of all in Alice Walker's 1960s and 1970s essays ("Looking for Zora" is pivotal) and later gathered as *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, Womanist Prose by Alice Walker*

(1983). More precise analysis and tactics would be developed in bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) and June Jordan's *Civil Wars* (1981) and *Technical Difficulties* (1992)—especially her essay “Wrong or White,” and state of the art “gender discourse” like Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990).³⁷ For if this kind of shared critique sees the status quo as merely one of cultural power or privilege, multiculturalism has also come under reproach from the Left. It is seen as having become part of a boutique or consumerist market culture, “symbolic ethnicity” in flight from both politics and history.

The strictures of E. San Juan Jr. as Filipino materialist critic against Jessica Hagedorn as Filipino American postmodernist for her novel *Dogeaters* (1990) would be typical.³⁸ Yet the most engaging exponents of the multicultural word have in fact been “ethnic” creative writers. For the best have long undermined, with matching cross-boundary textual verve, any rearguard nostalgia about a prior, and supposedly unethnic, Golden Age or “core” American demography and a prescribed literature to match. They have been among the first also to recognize that a Melville or Whitman, far from inviting being situated only in some one white literary pantheon, deserve being understood for their challenging plays of multicultural and sexual voice in both *Moby-Dick* or *Leaves of Grass*.

Among contemporaries few have done more to open perspective than Ishmael Reed. His essays, editorials, anthologies, and canniest revamping of “historical” novels as in *Flight to Canada* (1976) unsettle categories of single-identity as much as literary genre. Maxine Hong Kingston deploys diversities of memory in a novel like *Trickster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), with its Chinese American, San Francisco and “Gold Mountain” talkstory, to bring trickster sleights and transformations to the history of Asian America. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, border writer, Mexican, Chicano, Native, makes his own text nothing if not the very example of what he terms “cross-cultural alliances” in *Warrior for Gringostroika* (1993). Gerald Vizenor, Chippewa-Ojibway crossblood novelist, in an essay-sequence like *Manifest Manners* (1994) turns to a “postindian” idiom and iconography which can as readily invoke Jabès, Barthes, Lyotard or Foucault as bear ceremonial, ghost dance or dream-catcher.³⁹ Anthologies like the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1990) or *The Before Columbus Foundation Fiction Anthology* (1992) and *The Before Columbus Foundation Poetry Anthology* (1992) not only seek to confirm this American multicultural plenty, they enrich and diversify any supposed single American cultural canon.⁴⁰

Ishmael Reed, main editorial force and inspiration of the Before Columbus Foundation movement, suggests the following prospectus:

We hope that the reader will discover that American literature in the last decade is more than a mainstream . . . [is] not merely a dominant mother culture with an array of subcultures tagging along.⁴¹

None of this denies that there have also been “ethnic” dissenters. Richard Rodriguez, essayist, autobiographer, PBS and *Time* commentator and raised Chicano in Sacramento, in his *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982) argues the case for a “public” rather than “ethnic” self (“Bilingualists,” he insists, “simplistically scorn the value and the necessity of assimilation”).⁴² Bharati Mukherjee, Bengali Brahmin, Canadian immigrant, US citizen, novelist, speaks of getting above, or moving on from, multiculturalism to a “new, sustaining, and unifying national creed.”⁴³ Believers in “core” America again applaud. Multiculturalists counter with talk of hegemony or “uniculturalism,” the refusal to see, or be modified in their views by, America’s pluralisms of history, language, gender or ethnicity.

Whichever best holds, Rodriguez and Mukherjee, in common with a “raceless” conservative like Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas (who, under challenge of sexual harassment of Anita Hill, could not resist adding to the racialization of his Senate hearings with loaded talk of “hi-tech lynching” and the portrayal of his own sister Emma Mae Martin whom one historian interprets him calling a “deadbeat on welfare”), confirm the unabating relevance of “Who’s Passing for Who?”⁴⁴ No longer, runs the shrewder commentary, can “passing” be thought to remain an issue of skin or color or, once again, “race.”⁴⁵

In all the cities and towns of the slave states, the real negro, or clear black, does not amount to more than one in every four of the population.⁴⁶

William Wells Brown’s observation in *Clotel* gives an essential pointer. Was “negro,” and its ancillary network of “nigra” or “nigger” (whatever its vernacular permissions as a term of endearment or reprimand within black on black talk), “mulatto,” “quadroon,” “octoroon,” “high yellow,” “blue vein,” even his “clear black” (and by implication “clear white”), ever only a matter of skin pigment or meaning? For his own part, and from the outset, Brown leaves little doubt about his grasp of the constructedness of all racial category and, within it, a sub-category as it were, the embedding of “negro” in the semantics of commodity as much as of color.

Clotel has its limits not least where it edges towards formula sentimentality of a kind with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851). The bid to stir heart and tears is patent. The

beauteous, fair-skinned Clotel, having been sold in Richmond, is allowed a brief if un-licensed domestic idyll and then abandoned by Horatio Green for a white wife. Subsequent slave auction separates her from her mother Curren, her sister Althesa, and her own daughter Mary. The final flight, melodramatic plunge from the bridge and self-drowning in the Potomac, completes the pattern.

The novel also has unlikely sudden shifts and dissolves. Yellow Fever carries off first Curren, then Althesa and her abolitionist husband, Henry Morton, in New Orleans. Consumption abruptly ends the life of the benign, slave-freeing Georgiana Charleston. Coincidence gets its measure in the closing encounter, in France, when Clotel's granddaughter, Mary Devenant, by chance meets George Green, the two former slave lovers and escapees. The colloquium about liberty and enslavement, on Mr. Peck's plantation, and in the voices of his neighbor Mr. Jones and the preacher Snyder, looks nothing if not staged. Brown had not written a novel free of obvious artifice or sentimentality.

Yet *Clotel* does far more than simply indulge "the tragic mulatto" theme. The subtler veins Brown sets himself to tackle envisage slavery, and American slavery in particular, as a world turned both upside down and inside out. In a novel as radically gendered as "racial" (not one but three generations of women's lives), he shows a keen touch for the "peculiar institution" as working charade, a collusive play of concealment. Starting from Thomas Jefferson in the role of double patriarch—of American liberty and of slave family, drafter of the Declaration of Independence and yet owner of Curren, father of Clotel and Althesa, and grandparent of Mary, Ellen and Jane—Brown's text leaves no doubt of race as both life and mime, a helix of "passings."

The "pure Anglo-Saxon" Clotel is first sold at the auction block, lives a mock-marriage and divorce, then sees her daughter, Mary, become the slave servant of her no more white, but "legitimate," successor, Gertrude. The one family, and within it motherhood and wifehood, mimics the other. A "white" white woman shadows her "black" white predecessor who then in turn re-shadows her. Horatio Green doubles as husband to Clotel yet also Gertrude, father to yet owner of Mary, herself a child severed from her own childhood. Clotel again adds to the about-face, white and yet under the "one drop" rule black, when she is further racialized in being likened to Italian and Spanish gentry.

A gamut of related other doubles, and doublings, follows. The slave Pompey, mock-congratulates himself as "'no countefit . . . de genewine artekil,'" darkens and so youthens older slaves for sale. The manservant Jerry is lost and won during a steamboat card game ("I don't know who owns me dis morning"). An escaped slave who is caught by dogs, sentenced by a lynch court, shot and then burned,

passes from live presence to utter absence (“not a vestige remaining to show that such a thing ever existed”). Althesa encounters Salomé Miller, the German-born white woman mistakenly made into a slave who, despite her own restored freedom, then witnesses her daughters sold. On Althesa’s death her daughters, in turn, however similarly white of skin, in accord with slaveholding logic (or illogic) are likewise duly sold. In the house where Mary, white-black, is employed, the kitchen woman Dinah, delivers a summary all the more brutal for how it turns slavery back on itself. She excoriates “dees white niggers.”

Escape from this ongoing masquerade, in keeping, requires yet others. Clotel aids William by impersonating a young white man with his slave. William, in a striking anticipation of Babo in Melville’s “Benito Cereno” (1856) has to play, or rather re-play, himself. His disguise, moreover, transgresses not only gender but color and caste, Clotel as “white” transvestite master, William as “black” body-servant. That the episode also anticipates the William and Ellen Craft slave narrative, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), creates yet another textual overlap. Art has imitated life and that “life” in turn again imitated art.⁴⁷ William, in a further variety of disguise, rather than pay Jim Crow passenger rates on a train ships himself as human luggage for less. “This, reader, is no fiction” intervenes a wry, authorial Brown, quick to match the reflexivity of slave history in slave literature.

The portrait of a society caught up in these successive kinds of self-mask continues into the listing of slave ownership by the various churches, the allusion to the letters B.M. and B.W. for “colored” men and women church attendees in New York, and, however slavery free, the un-eradicated racism of the Free States. This contrivance of shadow over substance builds into a deft, not to say brisk, whole, every performance in “white” and “black,” and, in-between, the silhouette of yet others.

The process finds a perfect trope in Brown’s allusion to the two arriving ships in the New World of the seventeenth century, the *Mayflower* in Massachusetts and the slave vessel in Jamestown, Virginia. Together, he suggests, they embody America’s double “racial” history. Bondage yields to freedom, enslavement exists within liberty. The same, he goes on to point out, holds when the slave troops who fought with Andrew Jackson against the British at New Orleans have found themselves returned to servitude. Which, in either case, “passes” for rightful history? These, and the rest of the novel’s guises, false fronts and reversals, Brown builds into a narrative whose agility has not always won due recognition. For *Clotel* offers a drama of masks, a “slave” America whose every sign of bloodline, color and indeed race, calls up its own countersign.

“The unjust spirit of caste.” Charles Chesnutt’s diary, for 29 May 1880, specifies the essential target of all his fiction.⁴⁸ It precisely anticipates *The House Behind the Cedars*, long installed as a “passing” fable par excellence.⁴⁹ Rena Walden’s life, after all, comes accoutered in mixed-race doomed love, a backdrop of the “Old South” Carolinas, flight, suitably Gothic ending of storm and forest, and plaintive death scene. Yet once again any too hasty a rush to assign the novel merely to formula would be premature.

The story’s opening with the return of John Warwick, under assumed king-maker name, to the house of his “bright mulatto” mother, Molly Walden, and her octoroon daughter, Rena. In appearance he carries all the show of unimpeachable whiteness. He has the right skin, the confidence of the lawyer he has become, a “raceless” marriage (though his wife has died) and child. But, at exactly the same time, Chesnutt adroitly undermines the posture. As Warwick walks towards the “hidden” family house, he passes in turn a “colored policeman,” Aunt Lyddy as neighborhood conjure woman in her bandanna, a “manacled free Negro,” a cryptic black undertaker, and Aunt Zilphy, the friend of his mother. In other words, blackness always underwrites his assumed whiteness, “race” for all his “passing” far from inactive or erased. It serves as the perfect ironic preface.

Similarly, as Rena Walden becomes Rowena Warwick at the mock-Renaissance fair of the Clarence Social Club and her affair with George Tryon begins, Chesnutt uses the one costume (“South Carolina . . . not Ashbyde-la-Zouche”) to overlap with, and comment on, the other. Tryon alleges “A Negro girl had been foisted on him for a white woman.” His friend Dr. Green issues a fount of supremacist views. Warwick himself assumes a fake plantation background. Judge Straight, despite his name, out of friendship for Warwick’s white father has helped the son become a “white” lawyer. Blanche as George’s appropriately named white wife gives her full impersonation of the belle. Wain, the dissembling school owner, pursues Rena into the forest. Each engages in a masquerade of their own making. “The influence of Water Scott was strong upon the old South” rightly observes the text. For true to Dixie planter-bourbon and black-retainer custom, this indeed is masquerade yet at the same time seemingly actual and historic.

Reading the law books of the two Carolinas concerning when, and when not, blood make-up “racially” defines a person, Warwick and Judge Straight come to wonderfully opposing conclusions. North Carolina allows entry into whiteness after “four generations from the Negro.” South Carolina allows “a person to be white in whom the admixture of blood [does] not exceed one eighth.” “I am white,” says Warwick. “You are black,” says the Judge. The absurdity of the exchange of contradictions reveals the novel at its best.

In due course, and in a telling echo, Rena finds herself writing to Tryon “You are white, and you have given me to understand that I am black.” The black schoolchild, Plato, vernacularly reports to Tryon that his new teacher “looks lack she’s w’ite, but she’s black.” In her final delirium the dying Rena mistakes her loyal, artisan black admirer, Frank Fowler, for, respectively, her black suitor Wain and her white lover Tryon, a nicely angled conflation of human color. Yet in these, and each misconstruing which precedes, *The House Behind the Cedars* underlines the far deeper American history of error. That using Chesnutt’s own term, indeed lies in “caste” as “unjust,” a fatal system of racial division and mask.

James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colo(u)red Man*, understandably, has long been taken for a centerpiece of the “passing” tradition.⁵⁰ The novel could not suggest a more vintage case, the confessional portrait of a turn-of-the-century life lived as “black” inside “white,” and which seemingly ends in rueful contemplation of a “true” identity betrayed, a path mis-chosen. Discussion, in accordance, has long focused on Johnson’s treatment of his narrator as one true to this regret or of irony, the first-person voice speaking in good or bad faith.

Another interpretation, however, has none too rarely been considered. Can the narrator’s “double” life be construed as a way of being fully to be accepted in its own existential right and with modes of action and self-understanding to match. Does not his doubling, white and black, yet on occasion also Cuban and Indian, yield a “passing” beyond the orbit of previous novels? Johnson’s narrator, at the very least, is the first to hold up his own harlequinry to self-aware and ironic scrutiny. Right at the outset, having been called a “nigger” in school, he ponders his face in his bedroom looking-glass. With almost narcissistic intensity he dwells upon “the ivory whiteness of [his] skin,” the “beauty” of his mouth, his “long, black eyelashes,” the “softness and glossiness of [his] dark hair,” only to ask his mother, incredulously, “‘am I a nigger?’” Indeed is he? Will either “whiteness” or “blackness,” not to say the racist derogation implied in the latter term, anything like wholly suffice? Why simply the one, or, no less plausibly, simply the both? Why not a yet further tier or hybridity?

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man yields a whole circuit of similar displacements, intimations of an identity beyond the marker of skin. The narrator often acknowledges how he is almost taken aback at the very plurality, and volatility, of his make-up, as though cohabited by not one but several secret sharers. He so gives a Dostoevsky or Poe-like opening gloss to his account. In pondering the divulgence of “the great secret of my life,” he contemplates “a sort of savage and

diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society.” Is this not a call upon identity as though performance in kind with Melvilleian confidence-game?

He thinks back on his mixed Georgia birth as “dreamlike.” He remembers his sense of being “the only stranger in the place” at his Connecticut school. There come into his mind his alter ego friendships with the white boy “Red Head” and black boy “Shiny,” his father’s dual presence and absence and veiled ownership in the form of the drilled \$10 gold coin, and above all, his youthful musicianship as a way to subject reality to chord and harmony. Atlanta becomes, for him, “a strange city without money or friends,” a city of false friendship. He is robbed of his cash by the Pullman porter. His education goes uncompleted at Atlanta University. When he finally leaves for Florida he does so hidden in a basket of soiled linen aboard a departing train.

Jacksonville, similarly, for him blends art into life, his cigar-making at once “artistic skill” and “uproarious conversation.” He enters a new language, Spanish, and a new worker-guild community seemingly beyond race in his Cuban fellow cigar-makers. He brings his own rare white-black angle on “The Negro Question” as he passes through the tiers of “culled sassiety,” its churches, vernaculars, music and cakewalk, and even his own possible marriage to a black schoolteacher. In opting for New York he speaks of “desire like a fever,” a continuing and self-amazing impetus to live at, if not transgress, each continuing racial boundary.

Manhattan as “a great witch,” “the most fatally fascinating thing in America,” adds to this sense of the word as alien, a realm of displacement. He enters the gambling word, at once a sop to “some latent dare-devil strain in my blood” yet inhabited by black gamesters who show “a sort of Chesterfieldian politeness towards each other.” At one point, as his throws of the dice take him into and out of winning (“I felt positively giddy”), he fluctuates between euphoria and diminution. The latter especially holds when he finds himself obliged by losses to cover himself in linen dusters (a “ludicrous predicament”). The ragtime he will make his own, and win him the soubriquet “The Professor,” puts him into “a fitful sort of sleep.”

His odd, equal-unequal relationship with his white mentor, master to valet, party-giver to party-performer, together with the sight of his own true white father and assumed white sister, and his Grand Tour city to city European travels, give yet further outward form to his circling itineraries within. His millionaire taunts him with “this idea you have of making a Negro out of yourself.” Yet that, in turn, plays against “that scene of brutality and savagery” in which he witnesses, and shamefully identifies with, the burning of a black man as he travels the South.

Is he, can he be, in his own estimation as much as the world's, only the one color or the other? That, surely, amounts to the life-dialectic behind the resolve he offers towards the end of his account:

I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a moustache, and let the word take me for what it would. (499)

Playing white, he summarizes, querulously, and as if in both offense and defense, has been “a sort of practical joke.” Yet he has a white marriage, white children (“My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am and makes me from desiring otherwise”) and a “white” real estate fortune. “Sometimes,” he ponders, “it seems to me that I had never really been a Negro.” At the same time he rues not being overtly black, a Booker T. Washington, a fighter “for the cause of their race,” and dwells on whether he has “sold [his] birthright for a mess of potage.”

Is this ending, or rather double-ending, although it expresses the narrator's regret, simply another speculative excursus? He can no more wholly be black than white, white than black. For just as Johnson has the novel impersonate autobiography, so, just as reflexively, he has his narrator acknowledge his black for white and white for black impersonation in life as a matching kind of appropriation. Both the text's literary kind, and the “life” it tells, against category, have engaged in their own species of “passing.”

Walter White's *Flight* rarely attracts plaudits. A tale of four early twentieth-century cities (New Orleans, Atlanta, Philadelphia and Manhattan/Harlem) White is thought to have written of them in shared pedestrian manner with the “passing” of his bilingual Catholic-raised, Creole heroine Mimi Daquin. Yet her moves into, and out of, ethnic self-disguise, refract a larger drama. White delineates not one, but several, American hierarchies of color, each with its own competing etiquette, language and internal division.

Creole New Orleans, in which Mimi's father, Jean, flourishes, depends upon his *gens de couleur libre* ascendancy rather than the blackness of Mary Robertson as his second wife and Mimi's stepmother (“Mary's darkness of skin prevented her from eating at the old restaurants, Antoine's, Delatoire's, Mme. Begue's”). Jean, too, in his own effeteness, unhesitatingly uses one bias of color to indict another. He pronounces “colored people . . . just as full of prejudice against Catholics, Jews, and black Negroes as white people themselves.” Is this not Creolism as duplicate whiteness, the lower rung in the color-ladder mimicking the higher?

In Atlanta, to which they move as a family, the Daquins find no black Catholic church and have no access to a white one. In consequence they avail themselves of a well-heeled Protestant church. They hear the story of Mrs. Adams, black but white-skinned, who is refused access to the Opera House when reported by “some colored person.” Although Mimi’s own “cream-colored skin” allows “immunities she might not have possessed had she been more distinctly Negro,” including being apologized to during the Atlanta race riot, she only slowly begins to learn the music, warmth and ease of a black culture at once part of, and yet hidden within, her own make-up.

Black Philadelphia, and the birth of Mimi’s son by Carl Hunter, takes the process further. But Harlem (“in the flood-tide of transition to a Negro city within a city”) certifies her true awakening. There she learns the fluidity of human color, even though, as the result of a gossip sheet revealing the illegitimacy of her father “Petit Jean” she at first repudiates it. When she herself “passes” in Manhattan, she also begins to fathom a matching word of impersonation. Mme. Francine, in whose haute couture business she works, turns out to be Irish. Sylvia, her workmate as a finisher, disguises that she is Jewish. Jimmy Forrester, her eventual husband, unveils himself as the clubman racist. She hears the Chinese scholar, Wu Hseh-Chuan, offer a view of “white” America at odds with its own effortlessly assumed guise as High Civilization. She sees “Jews in blackface” in Manhattan, then a “Negro cabaret in Harlem.” A spiritual heard at a Carnegie Hall concert produces a “peculiar metempsychosis.” “Duplicity” run her musings, “all around her and she had never suspected it.” Her own last return to Harlem (“teeming, exotic”), thereby, becomes a kind of un-passing, a release, of the long-time stranger of color within herself. It also gives *Flight* its best claim, its mark.

Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, often thought a “simple” race narrative, offers a small gem in race and its deceptions. The *alter ego* portrait of two high mulatto women, Irene Redfield, New York society wife to a Sugar Hill surgeon who opts not to “pass,” and Clare Kendry, her onetime Chicago friend, who does, but now also wishes to “pass” back into the black world of Harlem, gives full play to equivocation. Are not Irene and Clare mirror figures, twin yet rival selves, drawn sexually and otherwise to each other even as they spar and divide? Both are white yet black, both moneyed, both have entered the required paths of marriage. Both, however, as if compelled, also search for their own hidden or at least undeclared self in the other.

Until roused to jealousy by Clare, Irene more or less acts out her required part as wife to her successful, if conformist, surgeon husband, and mother to their two boys. Hers has been the role of socialite, charity-figure, organizer, typically of the Negro Welfare league dance. Clare, for her part, plays another kind of wife, another kind of deception, “white” spouse to Jack Bellew as racist hearty. A one-time child-reject who still seeks family, sisterhood, she is a beguilement, dazzle, risk, nerve, as much a confidenceplayer in her marriage and extra-marital affairs as in her racial guise. Their pairing provides the energy at the center of the story.

When the two meet both are playing white in a Chicago hotel restaurant, two faces, as it were, meeting as one. Clare’s tireless phone calls to Irene, her letters, the fever of their social meetings, her wish to “come back” to Harlem as a black woman, all imply mutual circling, an intense love-hate relationship. As Clare becomes a regular in the Redfield home and social circle, their dissatisfaction as “wives” becomes an ever subtler parallel, Larsen leaves little doubt of mixed-gender as much as mixed-race identity, for both women have also assumed their own kinds of sexual “passing.”

At the Christmas party where Clare meets her fatal fall, what, exactly, is to be made of Irene’s role? She may be the appalled witness to an accident. She may, indeed be the killer. She may, however, be as equally involved in a Dorian Gray love-hate, a dual killing, of her own fear of, and yet deep attraction to, Clare’s “white” sexuality (“I’m not safe” the “beautiful and caressing” Clare tells Irene at one point). As Clare “passes” into death, Irene “passes” back into life, ironically as the now literally unrivalled and would-be comforter to her husband.

Yet who has won, who lost? Irene returns to the norms of compromised middle-class black wifehood. Clare becomes victim-martyr of “death by misadventure.” White and black have been seen to “pass” into, and to complicate, realms of public and private female sexuality. Have not, accordingly, both women been caught in, and caught out by, not one but several webs of impersonation? Passing, in other words, deals in the masks of gender and desire along with those of race, a double story in like manner doubly told.

For Jessie Fauset in *Plum Bun* a similar disequilibrium comes into play. Angela Murray, under her guise of Angèle Mori, lives two kinds of double identity. If black-white, she also doubles as paragon of turn-of-the-century female respectability yet would-be liberated 1920s “New Woman.” Fauset shows a deft hand in working each around the other, life as “more important than color” in the words

of Angela's mother, and, equally, life as free of pre-set gender roles. At its core the novel locates the issue as one of power. The text so reads "[Angela] knew that men had a better time of it than women, colored men than colored women, white men than white women."

Her rite of passage, middle-class, Talented Tenth, and ranging from birth-place Philadelphia to the New York both of Greenwich Village and Harlem, and then on to Paris, is set within this frame. Angela's "passing," in all its alternations of plus and minus, involves her in the negotiation both of one arbitrary line of color for another ("I am both white and Negro and look white"), and of a girl's dream world to a woman's actual world. Fauset's skill lies in offering suitably zigzag narrative of the pitfalls and snares, the false turns and misperceptions, involved in both.

This cross-hatch of color and gender is ingeniously worked throughout. Village-bound "white" Angela plays against her "black" sister, the Harlem-bound Virginia. Repulsed as "colored" by Mary Hastings at her all-white Philadelphia school Angela recognizes the paradox as "not because I was colored but because she didn't know I was colored." Her love affair with Roger Fielding turns doubly on his not knowing, as monied racist, that she is "black" and on her refusal to be further falsely positioned as mistress rather than wife. Her friendship with Rachel Salting throws up a parallel, Jewish daughter of Orthodox parents blighted in her marriage prospects to the Catholic John Adams. Yet Rachel also can turn wholly about-face when she suddenly also reveals a savage hatred of blacks.

Of the lecturer Van Meier, race-leader, apostle of blackness, she hears her white friend Martha observe, "It's the mix that makes him what he is." She finds herself moved to reveal her own "color" when her fellow art student, Miss Powell, is denied a prize because she is black. On the one hand she feels a "liberation." On the other the press misrepresents it as "Socially Ambitious Negress Confesses to Long Hoax." The switches in pairings which lead to Jinny's marriage to the black Matthew Henson, and to Angela's prospective marriage to the mixed-race Brazilian artist, Anthony Cross, supplies an appropriate closing irony. This is a final affirmative passing beyond "passing" in the competing plies of gender and race.

"Passing" as farce, comic-grotesque human contrivance, and with race as all-purpose axis, has few more winning exponents than George Schuyler. His *Black No More*, Menckenic satire to the letter, reduces color, the ways of American racial caste, to absurdity. The world in which Mark Disher rises to control the skin altering "Black-no-more, Incorporated" as developed by the rogue geneticist,

Dr. Junius Crookman, turns, in a boldly mischievous echo of slavery's freedom cry, on the phrase "White at last!" the supposed core longing of all (or at the very least all middle-class) Afro-America.

The results produce a wonderful zaniness, whether mock Klan and NAACP members caught up in unholy alliance. "Chromatic democracy" becomes the ruination of black prosperity from segregated real estate to haircare (as personified in Madame Sisseretta Blandish). DuBois, Garvey, Johnson and the rest of the "New Negro" leadership are put to satiric account. Mulatto children are born to formerly black "white" women. Ex-blacks, several shades whiter than "authentic" whites, reverse into the underclass. Black confidence-men playing white men are lynched in an always lynch-ready Mississippi. "Stained" skin becomes chic modishness. The novel perhaps labors at times. Yet "passing" as a mirror to American race obsession and at the same time contradiction, rarely has been more exquisitely pilloried.

If a coda, even a summa, were sought for the ways of passing in African American fiction few novels would offer more plausible, if challenging, candidature than Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*. As befits an author academically trained in philosophy, and epistemology especially, Johnson in his *Being & Race: Black Writing since 1970* (1987) positively exults in "the possibility that our art can be dangerously and wickedly diverse, enslaved to no single idea of Being."⁵¹

The gloss suits to perfection. *Oxherding Tale* comes across as updated or mock slave narrative, a baroque, frequently comic, contemplative novel of "passing" in which color is seen to act as just one kind of language in the larger workings of human bondage and freedom. It even comes replete with its own "essayist interlude" or "intermission," Chapters 8 and 11, reflections on slave narrative as form and on the ontology of the slave self. For in the story of the "black" Andrew Hawkins who becomes the "white" William Harris, sired as the result of a drunken wife-swap between slaveholder and slave on Jonathan Polkinghorne's Cripplegate plantation, a larger escape narrative emerges. Johnson's cue lies in his title, the ways towards the freed self as given in the image of the oxherd's search for his ox in the ten pictures of the twelfth-century Zen painter Kuo-an Shi-yuan.

Jonathan, educated in Latin and high philosophy from Plato to the Upanishads by his anarcho-transcendental tutor, Ezekiel Sykes-Withers, and witness to a carnivalesque American visit by the young Karl Marx, "passes" through servitude of several kinds. His learning exposes him to the contradiction of libertarian ideas so often espoused by the slaveholding class (his own image of slavery is the sight

of chains “like a pile of coiled snakes copulating”). His sexual enslavement is experienced with the slave girl Minty, later to physically come apart as she rots of pellagra (the charnel disease of slavery), and the “noisy eroticism” and drug use of Flo Hatfield, the beautiful yet aging and grotesque owner-belle of the plantation Leviathan. In Reb, the coffin-maker, he learns the African legacy of the Allmuseri tribe, possessed of a cosmology and logic utterly African and un-western. In the “soul catcher,” Horace Bannon, he encounters a kind of metaphysical patroller, death in life. In white guise, as Harris, he finds a benign domestic en-rapturement with Peggy Undercliff and the prospect of his own progeny.

As black into white, boy into man, Andrew/William learns to draw upon, and be larger than, all his “passings,” a self beyond any one servitude yet keyed always to the observation “The Negro . . . is the finest student of the White World, the one pupil in the class who watches himself watching the others” (128). In his slave escape he so “passes” infinitely beyond black and white, a de-enslavement of any one self in the name of the self’s infinite plurality.

The process, moreover, carries its shared implications back into all of Afro-America’s novels of passing, *Clotel* to *The Autobiography of an ExColored Man* to *Black No More*. Others could as readily be enlisted in a tradition from Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* to William Melvin Kelley’s *dem*. A quite monumental excavation black-white “story” like Werner Sollors’s *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial literature* (1997) gives further confirmation.⁵² It asks if race, and within it color, as marker of identity has not always been more illusion than reality, less category than category-error. For as America’s black-written fictions of “passing” have long and dramatically shown, the self beyond color, and in its resort to the varying resources of language, ethnicity, culture, mix, gender or history, was and remains a wholly more elusive quantity, the very rebuke to “race” as definition of humankind.

Notes

1. Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, New York: Dix, Edwards, 1857.
2. Randolph S. Bourne, “Trans-National America,” *Atlantic Monthly*, XCVII, July 1916. Reprinted in Randolph S. Bourne, *War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays, 1915–1919*, New York: Harper & Row, 1964.
3. Frederick Buell, *National Culture and the New Global System*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994, 71.

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5. "The Good Shepherd" appears in AI, *Sin; Poems*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1986.
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Into the Twenty-First Century: Fiction's Continuities and Variations

Bearden's meaning is identical with his method. His combination of technique is in itself eloquent of the sharp breaks, leaps in consciousness, distortions, paradoxes, reversals, telescoping of time, and surreal blending of styles, values, hopes, and dreams which characterize much of Negro Americans history.

Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden" (1968)¹

People tend to think that the whole literary thing is a kind of pyramid, that somebody is on top, which is total anathema to me. There is enormous space! I think of it in terms of the one other art form in which black people have always excelled and that is music, an art form that opens doors, rather than closes them, where there are more possibilities, not fewer. But to continue to write the way somebody believes is the prescribed way is death.

Toni Morrison, Interview (1976)²

I have taken risks. Some of the techniques I have employed have succeeded and some have fallen flat on their faces. But there have been more victories than defeats. As people of my generation used to say: It's been a gas

Ishmael Reed, Introduction, *The Reed Reader* (2000).³

The three names at the head of this chapter aptly serve as fiction's bridging names into the second decade of the twenty-first century. Ralph Ellison, beyond *Invisible Man* and his death in 1994, confirms in the posthumous *Juneteenth* (1999) the

sheer ongoing versatility of the African American novel.⁴ Toni Morrison, through to *God Help the Child* (2015) and her demise in 2019, likewise gives exemplary orchestration to narratives of black life and memory.⁵ Ishmael Reed, now in his 80s and through to *Conjugating Hindi* (2018), confirms how black fiction has resort when needed to the kind of satiric verve that subverts cultural pieties of all hues.⁶ Each, incontestably, has claim to unique imaginative standing. But they equally give their respective continuity to newer coevals

Ellison's encomium to the painter Romare Bearden, his collage and oils, readily holds for his own literary work, nothing if not precisely the "combination of technique." *Juneteenth*, its title a reference-back to June 19 1865 and slave-eman-cipation in Texas which has long passed into a national holiday, exhibits Ellison's characteristic strokes. The story centers in the white-of-appearance figure of Bliss, raised by his ex-jazzman black mentor the Reverend A.Z. Hickman, who trans-poses into the racist Senator Adam Sunraider in due course assassinated in the US Senate Chamber. Identity beyond color, chameleon-ism, runs through the text, Ellison's interrogation of "race" as ever the living tableau of power or language.

Beyond *Beloved* and *Jazz*, Morrison could not have been more ready in appetite. Her novels take on abundance. *Love* (2003) pursues in the form of a memory fiction the serial legacy of Bill Cosey, successful hotelier, through the women who follow in his dynasty. *A Mercy* (2008) steps back in time to colonial America seen through the lives of Florens, a slave, Lina, a Native woman, and Rebekkah, an English immigrant, as they overlap in their claims to history. *Home* (2012) enters another time-space, that of the Korean War and the life of the returning veteran Frank Money as he transitions from un-segregated army to color-line civilian America. Morrison's eleventh and final novel, *God Help The Child*, returns to the theme with which she began her career as novelist, the connundrum brought on by light over dark "colorism"—in this latter case that of Lula Ann Bridewell ("Bride") rejected for her hyper-black skin by her light-skinned parents but who grows into a paragon of beauty. Morrison remains estimable for the "enormous space" of her own fiction, its consequential vision and craft.⁷

Early Reed had served notice that his was rare innovative talent, rarely more so than in *Mumbo-Jumbo* with its Jazz Age setting and rich delves into western and African religio-cultural mythology and the mock-fever Jes Grew as metaphor for black music and creativity.⁸ Here, at his likely best, is Reed's "text" of blackness in white America aided by tactics of postmodern voice. The energy in no way diminishes, whether *New and Collected Poems, 1964–2006* (2006) or the discursive essay-collections from *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1978) through to *Why No Confederate Statues in Mexico* (2019).⁹ Latest fiction, *Juice!* (2011), given over to

the O.J. Simpson trial and another of Reed's "Neo-Hoodoo" shies at how corporate media projects black America, and *Conjugating Hindi*, modern "neo-slave" and trickster novel which satirizes model-minority myths when used against Afro-America, confirms not only his ongoing prestidigitation but the more inclusive ambit of black storytelling at the interface of reality and daring.

To say that African American literary fiction exhibits every manner of ongoing flourish alongside or in the wake of these lights runs close to understatement. Even a selection confirms the virtuosity at hand. Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) speculatively time-jumps between modernity and slavery-time as a pathway into race and its discontents. Jasmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) deploys Hurricane Katrina in 2005 as the actual and emblematic fissure for a black family caught within Mississippi poverty-line subsistence but full of its own kind of quirky endurance. Paul Beatty's *The Sell-Out* (2015) draws upon the wellsprings of African American wit to create a wickedly antic image of community turnings in the satellite black township of "Dickens" at the edge of greater Los Angeles.

Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) gives another re-fashioning to slave narrative told through the person of the run-away Cora and in which the "railroad" become less a trope than fantastically actual. Darryl Pinckney's *Black Deutschland* (2016) in the black-gay voice of its narrator contrast lives lived in the American and European city, the one educated middle-class Chicago and the other expatriate West Berlin before the end of the Wall in 1989. These each make for territory ahead, fresh headwaters.¹⁰

This surge of invention, five works of fiction texts from the larger burgeoning, does illustrative service, a necessary bouquet or gallery.

It takes the boldest act of ambition, not to say bravura, to keep pressing at the narrative reworking of slave narrative. Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* in this regard joins distinguished company, whether the haunt of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the comic-reflexive swerve of Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, or the memorial slave-trade drama of Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*.¹¹ Always, too, comparison arises with the earlier canon of Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, Douglass's *Narrative* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents*. But in hybridizing first-person slave narrative with Science Fiction, and thereby giving fresh impetus to history as not exactly repetition but residual echo-chamber, Butler invites genuine plaudits. Her novel sets a marker for innovation, and not just her own race-inflected the "Afrofuturist" Patternist

and *Xenogenesis* series, or those of fellow speculative SF virtuosi from Samuel Delany whose career launched with *The Jewels of Aptor* (1962) to N. K. Jemisin and her *Inheritance Trilogy* and *Broken Earth* fictions (2010–2017).¹²

Los Angeles, in 1976 and in due course the bicentennial of Sunday, July 4, then back and forth in timeline to Talbot County, Maryland, and the early 1800s, signifies a transition not simply in years but in the fissures and yet continuities of American history. For as the black and white writer-couple involved, Dana and husband Kevin Franklin, jolt back and forth in time and between their West Coast contemporary city and the antebellum Weylin plantation so they become obliged to experience first-hand the nation's brute stain, its ancestral fault-line.

Butler carefully links Dana genealogically with the Tom and Rufus Weylin father-and-son dynasty into whose unlovely slaveholding hands she finds herself placed. Tom's rape-fathering of a daughter, Hagar, on the initially free black Alice Greenwood who will hang herself at the supposed sale of her other children, yields Dana's great-grand-maternal bloodline. Rufus, obliquely, so begets Dana. A modern African American woman in a modern mixed marriage in America's most modern State, she can assume no severance from slavery's cross-racial ply, its nag of eugenics from past into present.

Each of the six time-shifts, from saving Rufus as a drowning child to the final knifing of him as grown man and his malign power to summon Dana, bespeaks history as kinetic, spiraled, and in however tacit a degree, memorial and without closure. The dizziness Dana continues to experience acts as a kind of liminal curtain, a threshold, from the pull of her own era into that of the Weylins and as potently of its reverse. "The River," June 19 1976, puts her into the seeming but false role of Egyptian princess to "Rufe" as child Moses. She saves Rufus from death, and must continue to do so into his adulthood if she herself is to come into existence. Only her eventual killing of him will release her from time-shift. Yet, virtual and actual slave-woman, she is obliged to live beyond the moment's hallucination into the successive longer-lasting increments of all too real actuality. No Wellsian time-machine is necessary, no Eloi and Morelocks; it is sufficient to situate Dana among the Weylins. There she has to survive as time-traveler at risk by race and gender under the ordained whiteness of a slaveholding South determined to reduce her to commodity. "Strange" is how she is perceived, not least in Butler's wry paradox that she can be asked in one time-frame by Kevin to help type his novel and in another to teach the Weylin slaves to read and write—not least their passes.

The subsequent visitations reveal a sub-Jeffersonian planter regime. It comprises the semi-literate Weylins, the hypochondriac wife-mother Margaret, and

the house and field slave roster of the cook-matriarch Sarah, her daughter the mute Carrie, Luke, Nigel, Sam, the slave Isaac whose ears will be cut off for attempting escape, and Tess, the Weylins's no-choice concubine who betrays Dana but is eventually sold. Owner and bonded all operate under the unyielding writ of "rights" of property. Yet Dana, at cost, and under Butler's meta-textual rules, must keep Rufus alive until the end if she herself is to exist in the ensuing century. Kevin's white privilege in turn keeps him alive, however injured in time-past and his flight to the abolitionist north. But it does not prevent him taking on traits of Rufus in manner and voice. Enslavement, raciality, with augmenting force in the novel, is seen to persist in imprint well beyond abolition, white ownership of black as lingering existential virus.

As the time-shifts succeed one another in varying lengths the double-perspective gives both depth and width to the novel. Dana and Kevin in California can speak of the casual labor they need to keep above the financial breadline as "a slave market." But in slave Maryland, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman territory Dana realizes, they see first-hand its antecedent reality. Dana learns to "play" slave while coming to recognize how wholly co-optive the role might be in the absence of other choice. In "The Fire" she aligns, and recoils at, *Gone with the Wind*, utter confection given the hell of coffle slavery, punishment, concubinage, field labor, and sale of offspring. In "The Fight" Rufus's cheating in the exchange of letters between Dana and Kevin is fully revealed, not on the scale of those between Celie and Nettie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* but searing enough. "The Storm," in the light of Dana's beatings, failed escape, victim and witness to overseer cruelty, and her own literally pivotal life and death relationship with Rufus, speaks exactly to the dual-time recognition of Maryland hell as against California's anything-goes cultural balm.

Butler's perhaps most telling shot, however, lies in "The Rope" as closing sequence. Dana's last extrication from Rufus, knife plunged into his body as he attempts rape, severs an arm held as though between worlds in her apartment. To wake up in hospital, mutilated, albeit with Kevin at her side, is also literally to embody the disfiguration of slavery. What price July 4th for her in succession to, say, the Frederick Douglass of "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July" delivered in Rochester in 1852? Have the dilations of time done sufficient to change race-lines, the sting and ache of one caste's power over another. In the "then and now" slave-paneling of *Kindred*, Octavia Butler gives challenging signature both to the workings of the peculiar institution and the unyielding persistence of its shadow.

“I am small, dark, invisible. I could be Eurydice walking through the underworld to dissolve, unseen” (28). So, in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvaging The Bones*, Esche, fifteen years old, busily sexual, staunch but vulnerable, looks back to her rite-of-passage from girlhood to pending early motherhood. A black Mississippi girl she nevertheless self-fantasizes from schoolbook reading as Orpheus’s lost bride in Hades. This fantasy is but one in Ward’s stylish coming-of-age portrait, that of the only daughter in the close-threaded Gulf of Mexico bayou family of her own mother dead seven years previously in childbirth and her beer-alcoholic but functioning father (not a little laconically called “Daddy” throughout).

The dynasty also numbers her brothers Skeet (full name Skeetah) with his prize female pit-bull China, Randall who dreams of a basketball scholarship, and the ever-needy Junior. Her youth lover Manny whose child she is carrying but who rejects her, might be proxy clan, her cousinship in parent and birthing and the will to survive. Skeet’s pit-bull and her litter likewise acts as a reflection of Esche’s own dynasty. Each needs to do so in the face of Hurricane Katrina, Category 5-modern yet in implication also ancient storm and flood. The family home in Bois Sauvage, “The Pit” as they know it, so morphs in the novel’s 12-day narrative sequence into larger theater: kinship, continuance, old and new life.

As the account evolves the line is kept taut, impressive in its connective turns and phrasings. Love for Manny stirs Esche’s lyricism (“Seeing him broke the cocoon of my rib cage, and my heart unfurled to fly,” 5). She perceives him in painterly strokes (“his teeth white knives, his face golden red,” 9). Her brother Skeet, obsessive guardian mother-father to the dog, can barely afford her time albeit that he cares for her (“His glance is a comma,” 21). Her pregnancy, and the recurrent morning sickness, she connects always to China’s birthing and suckling of her offspring which prompts her to call the dog “a weary goddess” (40). When China comes down with pirovirus the illness again implicitly reflects her own retching. The family home, full of dishevel and patchwork, is likened to “a dying skeleton, everything inside that was evidence of living salvaged over the years” (58). Bordered by detritus and the father’s dump truck and worn tractor, boarded up against storm and with water bottles filled, the effect is one of family make-do, living at the edge yet at the same time resonantly full of human center.

This impress of style persists. China and fellow pit-bulls Boss and Kilo “blur” into the single, near-phantalasmic dog, boon companions yet cerberean warriors. As they rip each other in the boys’ woodland brute joust China’s teats will be injured which arouses Esche’s empathetic dismay as her own breasts swell and grow tender. Woundings persist, bloodied skin, when Skeet gets trapped in the nearby white people’s farmhouse attempting to steal “cow wormer” (67) to treat China’s

parvo. Subsequently the father will have three fingers sliced off while fixing the truck. Mississippi heat becomes “a wet blue blanket” (117) in a climate that is said to preside as much over fleas as the hen eggs. Esche’s is the participant registering body throughout, the watcher’s eye.

Above all the hurricane, which “has a name now” (124), becomes god-like for Esche and “maybe . . . is coming for us” (227). It “enfolds me in his hand” (232) and is said to “laugh” (238). The anthropomorphic personality it takes on transposes it into “the snake” (232) and “the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered” (255). Esche’s vow becomes one of seeking to be witness-chronicler to Katrina, bearer of life amid its threat of death. In the hurricane’s wake, and as Skeetah becomes waiting sentinel for the swept-away China and her pups amid the flood wreckage, so Esche, girl mother-to-be, identifies with hope (“China will come back and call me sister,” 258). Much as the world around is black Mississippi (no white people actually enter the story) so it assumes Greek-mythic implication, the re-fashioned Deep Southern drama of destiny and escape.

Intertextual connections are handled discreetly. Esche reads and identifies with the Greek myths, not only Euridice but Psyche, Daphne and Io (whom Esche calls “trickster nymph,” 15). In her thwarted love for Manny she invokes the pairing of Medea and Jason. Skeet’s passionate attention to China, his own offspring as it were and at the same time his money-investment as fighter, shadows Faulkner’s Jewel and his horse in *As I Lay Dying*.¹³ The destructive power of the hurricane, in force and in naming, suggests an analogy with Zora Neal Hurston’s flood in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.¹⁴

Esche herself has fictional company in Hurston’s Janie or A. J. Verdelle’s Denise Palms in *The Good Negress* (1995), not to mention white figures like Frankie in Carson McCullers’s *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) or Laura McRaven in Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding* (1946).¹⁵ *Salvaging the Bones* leaves no doubt of storytelling command, Ward’s idiom of redemptive intimacy for family and place before, through, and in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

In Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016), its presiding trope one that belongs inextricably to American slave legacy, a yet further venturesomeness enters the reckoning. What if the underground railroad were actually “real,” or rather magic-real, a subterranean escape network of locomotive, conductor, station-stop and slave passenger? What if the language of historic escapes like those associated with Harriet Tubman and Quaker and other Christian abolitionists

were converted to literal fact, replete with agents, conductors, stations, and tickets? Such, to considerable effect, lies at the heart of *The Underground Railroad*.

“Ajarrry made a science of her own black body and accumulated observations” (7). This disclosure about a woman seized by Dahoney traders, slave-transported to America aboard the cryptically named *Nanny* out of Liverpool, and then sold and resold before ending up on the Randall Sea Island Cotton plantation in Georgia, merits consideration in its own right. But it does so all the more as it pertains to legacy, a grandmother’s existential awareness then passed on to the novel’s main protagonist, Cora, and in whom *The Underground Railroad* centers its story-line. Whitehead’s boldly eventful novel, for all the zig-zag of capture, escape and re-seizure, is kept well under narrative control. At the same time the ostensibly third-person authorial voice could readily be that of Cora as though she were speaking watchfully from over her own shoulder. That holds right through from the “stray” (17) girl abandoned by her mother Mabel six years earlier in the Randall cabin quarters, through to the woman within the final pastiche slave-notice headed “RAN AWAY” (356) with its accompanying comment “She has stopped running” and “SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY” (356).

The span that extends from Cora’s precarious slave-girlhood picking on the cotton row and guarding her own hardscrabble bit of land through to the last-escape wagon journey towards the west and California, amounts to sober picaresque. Within which, and each access to the railway and its hidden shunts from Georgia to the Carolinas and towards the North, Whitehead fashions the chronicle of a woman obliged by brute circumstance always to contemplation of who she is as against what the world, black and white, takes her to be. This comes about under auspices set out by the assassinated Boston orator-abolitionist Elijah Lander—“we are Africans in America. Something new in the history of the world, without models for what we will become” (342).

For Cora it means keeping focus on what it is to be owned, explicitly by the Randalls and at each attempted escape as missing property hunted by the slave-catcher Ridgeway. Her bid remains that of using her own powers of ordering time, space, gaze, and eventual access to the written word. In this regard some critics consider Cora insufficiently interior and the novel almost unimpassioned given the graphic human fare it inscribes. That, oddly, risks missing the point, Whitehead’s deliberate pitch.

For the life-passage involved is indeed harsh, often murderous. *The Underground Railroad* makes few concessions: auction, whip, rape, lynch, overseer, clock-less workday, shackles, runaway, patroller, hide-out, flight, night riders, and not just the shadow but the actuality of violent death in which Cora, too,

commits an inadvertent killing. Throughout, however, Whitehead avoids undue slips into gothic or melodrama. Each increment of event is registered un-editorially on his part while at the same time having Cora position herself speculatively as her own participant-chorus.

Instances gather, each a marker in “the ledger of slavery” (258). Given the Sabbath respite Cora “owned herself for a few hours every Sunday” (15). Connolly, sadistic poor-white overseer for the Randalls and thereby a “white nigger” (197), she sees marked by “hair a livid Irish red” (43). She will shield the boy Chester against one of Connolly’s beatings and then take hers in turn. This is the Connolly she knows “once put out a slave’s eyes for looking at words” (114). Big Anthony’s failed escape leads to his being “doused with oil and roasted” (55). Caesar, with whom she makes her first escape (“The idea of escape overwhelmed her” 60), will eventually be burned alive in a Quaker abolitionist’s house.

In South Carolina, as Bessie Anderson, she becomes part of a live tableau titled “Scenes from Darkest Africa” which implicates her in pastiche history. In North Carolina she lives a Harriet Jacobs attic incarceration in the house of Martin and Ethel Wells before they are betrayed and hanged. The slave girl Louisa, would-be escapee, she also sees having been hanged. In Tennessee, recaptured with the slave songster Jasper, she watches Ridgeway “shoot Jasper in the face” (254). Royal, her partner at the Valentine “free” farm (“the latest stop of the underground railroad,” 316) to which she makes her way in Indiana, is shot in the back and the estate destroyed in flames by white supremacists. Survival, with Ridgeway entering and exiting as nemesis (“Ridgeway gathered renown with his facility for ensuring that property remained property”, 95), involves Cora at a precarious existential edge, causing her to vary dissociatively as both subject and object.

She assumes her role in the novel as the Railroad’s most particular yet most symptomatic passenger, at once in the process of generating her unique self yet the very self of enslavement. The effect at each stop and its arising Gulliver Travels, a text Cora actually reads, could not be more persuasive. In the Railway, and its custodial workers from the early engineer figure of Lumbly onward the novel has its lodestone, varyingly literal and figurative, one meaning folded boldly into the other. It serves as freedom trail, yet to slaveholder and to Ridgeway and his black Devil’s Apprentice and amanuensis Homer as their functionaries, “a criminal conspiracy devoted to the theft of property” (97).

Whitehead keeps his railroad trope plausibly “real” while fostering its rich emblematic association with Africa-America as an underground whose comparable incarnations include Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Baraka’s *Dutchman*. Cora’s slave story yields little concession in exploring the bequeathed spirals of America’s

slaveholding race-line. It does so, however, with the kind of invention, and savvy control, to have deserved the National Book Award given Whitehead in 2016.

The narrator of *The Sell-Out*, nicknamed Bonbon or Sellout, offers nothing if not a sightline when he observes almost as an aside “Comedy is war” (206). This reflexive glimpse into the fashioning of Paul Beatty’s rare, ingeniously styled fourth novel in succession to *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), *Tuff* (2000) and *Slumberland* (2008) is apt to a fault.¹⁶ One manifestation lies in Beatty’s willingness to spill black community “family” secrets and interlace vernacular Afro-wit with slivers of erudite Latin and vulgar barrio Spanish. He riffs with defiant un-pc panache on ethnicity and sex. Slews of needle-sharp aphorism are delivered (“there’s nothing to do at the Pentagon except start a war,” 4–5). Whether one steps back to George S. Schuyler’s *Black No More* (1931) or summons later satire like William Melvin Kelley’s *dem* (1967) and Ishmael Reed’s *Japanese by Spring* (1993), to be heard at virtually every turn is the unmistakable slant of a writer with ear to the ground.¹⁷ The upshot hits home, Beatty’s page full of laugh-out-loud soar yet at the same time serious in underlying step.

In the novel’s narrative of how the narrator ends up awaiting trial at the Supreme Court for working to re-introduce reverse Dixie-style segregation, one of no-whites-allowed High School, hospital and other facilities, Beatty takes few prisoners. The aim is to create an inverse Little Rock, white folks sit-ins and counter demonstrations, each and all in the interests of righting racial disequilibrium. A full antic menu so comes into play. Has not the narrator “dragged all of black America down with me” (19), risked reversal of race-progress, and caused shame wherever the likes of Martin Luther King, Abe Lincoln, Rosa Parks or Harry Belafonte are mentioned? Is he not willing to deploy the n-word as in-house colloquial privilege or risk faux-nostalgia like “being black aint what it used to be” (230).

The start is given in the portrait of Dickens as “ghetto community on the southern outskirts of Los Angeles” (27) but in danger of being erased from the map, even the weather map, and subsumed into greater LA as supposed eyesore. Its riposte is to be heard in the city’s founding charter:

Dickens shall remain free of Chinamen, Spanish of all shades, dialects, and hats, Frenchmen, redheads, city slickers, and unskilled Jews. (27)

The upshot, a black epicenter with accompanying Latino/a residents, is the dense ten-square block in which Sellout as his father before him runs an urban farm.

Its ranking products include satsumas, mandarins, pomegranates, greens of every kind, grapes, against cliché watermelon (albeit square), and not least, quality assortments of marijuana (“Weed isn’t a cash crop, but more like a gas money one,” 64). These all are aided by Sellout’s copious horticultural research and consultation, along with an interest in selling ostrich meat. The image of a nutritional garden within a community ghettoed into poverty offers its own counter-irony.

Seated in DC at the Supreme Court alongside his canny and sharply suited lawyer Hampton Fiske (who opens by asking for a shift of venue to Nuremberg or Salem, Massachusetts), high on totes of his own lovingly-bred weed, Sellout gives himself to contemplation of the Court’s rubric of “Equal under the Law.” His flow of ideas up-ends liberal ideas of post-Civil Rights progress with Dickens under its Victorian-novelist naming as cracked mirror image of class and race in modern America.

Other feints come thick and fast. A 400-pound gorilla named Baraka lives in the DC zoo even as an undercurrent of racist monkey gibes is to be heard. Sellout’s social scientist father, later to be killed in a drive-by shooting, wins community repute as unashamedly named “nigger-whisperer” even as he promises a never finished book on Liberation Psychology. “Too many Mexicans” becomes the mantra of Charisma Molina, Chicana-raised Assistant Principal of the local High School. As to credentials for black men “Every black male thinks he can do one of three things better than anyone in the world: play basketball, rap, or tell jokes” (205).

The novel draws on stand-up, comic rap. Sellout’s “devoutly atheist” father makes an Anna Freud experiment of his son and his blackness, replete with association charts and even electric shocks. Foy Cheshire, one-time friend, markets TV blackness and writes witless self-help and up-from-slavery “popular” best-sellers. They both belong to the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, an eatery and talk club high on sugar, flour and rhetoric. In Hominy Jenkins, “bat-shit crazy” (69) and veteran child-actor of the 1920s–1930s screen series the *Little Rascals* with its coded picanniny scripts, Beatty creates the sublime would-be slave masochist. Hominy craves plantation bondage, the sheer certitude of being owned (“I’m your nigger for life,” 77). Sellout’s love interest, the tough, mouthy RTD bus driver Marpessa Delissa Dawson, gives him failing sexual grades but eventually admits him to her body even as she turns her clangorous bus into a Kesey-like Merry Pranksters vehicle. In a nice smack at gentrified interest in blue-collar life it becomes “an art project” (182).

In an echo of the Bermuda Triangle LA, the US’s second city in size (and sprawl) is said to have “racism vortexes” (129). Dickens itself “as the supposed

Murder Capital of the World . . . never got much tourist trade” (67). Under the closing chapter-sequences titled “unmitigated Blackness” Sellout does a final riff on the question “What is Black?” (287). For having painted a jagged white line round Dickens he calls time on one-note terms like ghetto. If it takes the irony of about-face re-segregation, Dixie turned upside down, to bring home the vast, often contradictory, black spectrum of class, gender, memory, and assuredly the spoken as indexing the community’s “our thing” (288) then, under Beatty’s agile voicing, so be it.

Darryl Pinckney was early to show his stride. In *High Cotton* (1992) he had exhibited real verve with fictional autobiography, the wry, stylishly ironic chronicle of the “Also Chosen” and its take on DuBois’s “Talented Tenth.”¹⁸ Its rite of passage, however, locates neither in Dixie nor the northern ghetto but suburban Indianapolis. The context of NAACP supporting parents, Columbia University, secretaryship to Djuna Barnes, and the narrator’s Southern but fiercely articulate and Harvard-educated Grandfather Eustace, bespeaks a world in which slave memory exists only as a discard. This is the black Middle America of college and suit and tie mores, education’s self-contemplation. The same accent, and fluency, marks the essays in the *New York Review of Books* and studies like his *Out There: Mavericks of Black Literature* (2002) and *Sold and Gone: African American Literature and U.S. Society* (2007).¹⁹

Underpinning *Black Deutschland*, Pinckney’s tale of two cities, lies the further chronicle of ambiguous access to the mainstream. “I’d become that person I so admired, the black American expatriate” (6) confides Jedediah Goodfinch (Jed), the update as might be of one of Henry James’s Europe-adopted Americans. Gay, long intimate with classical music, architecture and jazz, not to say recovering wine alcoholic and druggie from college in Illinois and his earlier stay in Berlin, he seeks equilibrium for an American life both home and away. The abiding factor, to be sure, is that he is a black native son raised and with family in Chicago. In Berlin, by contrast, “I wanted to live where white authority has little interest in black men” (109).

Jed’s slippage as a student becomes symptomatic (“my prospects as a Negro Achiever were narrowing every semester” 92). His new sobriety causes self put-down (“I was not drinking, yet I was an expert on everything” 67). As he bows out of Reagan’s America for a Europe he fantasizes will afford him freedom of movement, re-habilitation, his touchstones are typically literary, those of Christopher Isherwood’s *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939).²⁰ But

if he thinks back to cabaret or the play of Weimar glamour (“Like most American queers in West Berlin, I was in love with Weimar culture,” 178), he knows with the Wall and its politics that times have changed.

The arising chronicle amounts to two city worlds, each with their own peopling be it the family in Chicago or the friendships black and white in the Berlin of both the architectural round and the Chi-Chi bar. Each, too, is recognized for its historic cultural grammars of art and popular culture. It would be negligent not to recognize a feat of trans-Atlantic ambit as well as narrative organization. Whether the concert virtuosity of Jed’s cousin Cello in her imperious piano command of Bach, Liszt, Brahms and the classical repertoire or the buildings of the star German architect-impresario N.I. Rosen-Montag for whom he goes to work as PR journalist and who eventually will move into a relationship with the glamorously haired Cello, the story brims with cosmopolitan touch. These include the Goethe Jed slowly reads as he acquires German, the restaurant and high-culture conversation he finds available to him in the Berlin coterie circle of Cello and her wealthy business husband Dram, and always his notations of Berlin, West and East, as architectural proving ground both historically and in the wake of the bombing in World War II.

But it far from eschews the quotidian. Chicago has its art and suburbia but also the South Side be it the Taylor Projects, tenement basketball and work, or even the boundary-marking Dan Ryan freeway. Allusions come thick and fast, whether to Harold Washington as first black mayor, the memory of 1968 and the Democratic Convention with its street riots and police violence, not to mention history like the 1893 World’s Fair. These find their way into the otherwise middle-class black community newspaper *The Eagle* run by Jed’s Shay relatives and his Uncle Ralston as editor and wiseacre. For Jed, the effect overall becomes one of claustrophobia in which he counts himself foremost (“The Chicago I grew up in was full of people who could not get away,” 77).

In Berlin, correspondingly, the focus extend beyond and beneath the city as “the museum of Modernism” (113) and each Rosen-Montag architectural design project (the suitably named “Lessing Project” in particular). Jed’s life might well be one of design launches, Cello’s concerts and parties, the city parks and S-Bahn. But it also pitches elsewhere. Always there is the divided city. Pinckney gives astute attention to its necessary iconography, not just the graffiti or even the eventual demolition of the wall in November 1989. “It was the Wall that kept alive Berlin’s fame and pride as a dangerous city” (111). Jed’s Berlin life is conducted as though itself in division, American and European, well-heeled and miscreant. Little wonder that he can confess ironically “I was safe in the divided city” (188).

Each site give context, first Cello's house, then commune to which he gravitates, and the unrespectable black émigré bar the ChiChi ("I kept the ChiChi to myself," 56). He counts himself among those for whom a certain anonymity confers its own paradoxical identity ("A lot of people were in the city to get lost", 227).

Sexuality, Jed's quest for love, which finds its too brief fulfillment in his relationship with Duallo, Cameroons-raised, twenty years old, a student and also a French citizen, gives another kind of cosmopolitan thread to the novel. "Because of Duallo, I walked through doors chest-first" (201) serves as his declaration of heart. "He was my first real thing" (212) runs the more colloquial version. The affair supplies every contrast with the "white boys who wanted to atone for Germany's crimes by loving a black boy like me" (3). But Duallo also opens the vista to coloniality, France's Africa, Britain's India (invoked also in references to the Rushdie fatwa). Love, and then lovelessness, in Berlin has been Jed's European fate.

"I am one of the black American leftovers who sit by themselves" (290) he says. He deliberately situates himself in the shadow of Christopher Isherwood but with W.E.B. DuBois, George and Philippa Schuyler, Claude McKay, Dexter Gordon and Nina Simone equally and even more immediately in his legacy. "A kind of unexplained American" (290) offers another of the sobriquets he favors. It reflects perfectly on a novel actually full of explanation and which throughout *Black Deutschland* keeps its diverse moving parts in winning imaginative balance.

For African American fiction in the beginning latest century the touchstones continue to hold: Ellison for technique, Morrison for space, Reed for risk. Their shows of compass clearly endure, key literary accomplishments. Butler, Ward, Beatty, Whitehead and Pinckney add their resonance, fresh portals, challenges of direction. Other markers arise as in the transnational interests of Naomi Jackson in her two-sister Brooklyn to Barbados *The Star Side of Bird Hill* (2015) or Leslie Nneka Arimah's Nigeria and America story-collection *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* (2017).²¹ The terrain remains busy, the will to re-write Afro-America in novel and story un-diminished.

Notes

1. Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden," Catalogue, 1968. Reprinted. *Going to the Territory*, New York: Random House, 1986, 237.
2. "Intimate Things in Place": A Conversation with Toni Morrison," Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto, eds. *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature*,

- Art and Scholarship*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979, 228. The interview was conducted especially for this collection by Robert B. Stepto.
3. Ishmael Reed, Introduction, *The Reed Reader*, New York: Basic Books, 2000, xxx.
 4. Ralph Ellison, *Juneteenth*, New York, Random House, 1999.
 5. Toni Morrison: *God Help the Child*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015.
 6. Ishmael Reed, *Conjugating Hindi*, Victoria: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018.
 7. Toni Morrison, *Paradise*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, *Love*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, *A Mercy*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003, *A Mercy*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, *Home*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.
 8. Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, New York: Random House, 1972.
 9. Ishmael Reed, *New and Collected Poems, 1964–2006*, New York: Carroll and Graf, 2006, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978, *Why No Confederate Statues in Mexico*, Montreal: Baraka Books, 2019.
 10. Octavia Butler, *Kindred*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1979; Jasmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2011; Paul Beatty, *The Sell-Out*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015; Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, New York: Doubleday, 2016; Darryl Pinckney, *Black Deutschland*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2106.
 11. Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987; Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada*, New York: Random House, 1976; Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage*, New York: Atheneum, 1990.
 12. Octavia Butler Patternmaster series begins from *Clay's Ark*, New York: St. Martins Press, 1984, her Xenogenesis series from *Imago*, New York: Warner Books, 1989. Samuel Delany, *The Jewels of Apor*, New York: Ace Books, 1962. N. K. Jemisin's Inheritance trilogy includes *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, New York: Orbit, 2010, *The Broken Kingdoms*, New York: Orbit, 2010, and *The Kingdom of Gods*, New York: Orbit, 2011. The Broken Earth series was launched with *The Fifth Season*, New York: Orbit, 2015.
 13. William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, New York. Cape and Smith, 1930, New York: Random House, 1957.
 14. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Philadelphia and London, J.B. Lippincott, 1937.
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 16. Paul Beatty, *The White Boy Shuffle*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996, *Tuff*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 2000, *Slumberland*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2008
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18. Darryl Pinckney, *High Cotton*, New York and Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1992.
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20. Christopher Isherwood, *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, London: Hogarth Press, 1935; *Goodbye to Berlin*, London: Hogarth Press, 1939.
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Into the Twenty-First Century: Poetry's Voice and Echo

A poem is the naked advice of the heart,

Amiri Baraka, *Hard Facts* (1975)¹

It poses a risk, inevitably, to think that any poet can be the one presiding bridge from the 1960s to the more or less present. But as likely a candidate as most has to be LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka whose death in 2014 marked the close of a career which also seemed the close of an era. From his Beat interlude in which he published *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961) through to “Someone Blew up America” (2009) written in the wake of 9/11 accusing America of bad-faith complicity in the politics of the Middle East and Palestine, and in company with his career’s plethora of other poetry, essay-work, drama, film writing and recordings, he has straddled the one century into the other. Ideology, polemic, has been frequent, but so, equally, has been his poetic calling, not everyone’s black spirit of the age but unmistakably and always a reminder of working authorship. In this sense he connects with the variorum of idiom to be met in the poets given focus in this chapter.

Rita Dove’s *Collected Poems, 1974–2004* (2016), drawing from the ten or so previous volumes by the United States poet laureate 1993–1995, reminds of her rare and greatly sustained originality. Her widths range from the family Ohio of her upbringing to the sites and histories of both African American birthright and

cultures beyond.² For Michael Harper, as *Songlines in Michaeltree: New and Selected Poems* (2000) bears emphasis, key expressive axes lie in his regard for Jazz and for the role of African American historical figures.

In Natasha Trethewey's *Thrall* (2012), the footfalls those of her native Mississippi and mixed-race family, the focus broaches the often startling affects and mirrorings in art as in life of human color variation and mirroring. Yusef Komunyakaa's "Testimony" (1997), later to become the mainstay of *Testimony, A Tribute to Charlie Parker with New and Selected Jazz Poems* (2013), works as jazz-inflected life portrait. Kevin Young's *Blue Laws: Selected and Uncollected Poems, 1995–2015* (2016) fashions a cannily idiosyncratic lens of observation, both as it holds both for private and public realms of America and for the ancestries of black history.³

Rita Dove's poet laureateship, the first accorded an African American writer, affirmed the encompassment announced with her inaugural collection *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980).⁴ "Ars Poetica" in *Grace Notes* (1989), for example, adds early pointers, typically accessible yet also engagingly oblique:

What I want is this poem to be small,
 a ghost town
 on the larger map of wills.
 Then you can pencil me in as a hawk:
 a traveling-x-marks-the-spot. (200)⁵

The poem's images suggest a call to articulate the world as though in ghost-writing, the poet a swooping hawk, a traveler, an eye. The extent to which Dove has been able to bring off these ambitions can hardly be in doubt. Throughout her poetry she has managed great variety of map, truly formidable aplomb.

That holds especially for "In the Old Neighborhood" which she has open the *Collected Poems* of 2016, the return to the Ohio parental house for a sister's wedding. Her fond but unsentimental detail creates vivid memorial tapestry. The elisions are several, raccoons in the crawl space, her father's "consolation" of his roses ("year after year producing lovelier mutants"), or her return to reading the newspaper from headline to editorials to local coverage "as I had been taught/ twenty years before" and with a dip into the horoscope (3). She looks back to youthful sampling of Shakespeare and "a premature attempt at *The Iliad*" even as she ate Fig Newtons (4). Her brother's designation of honey as "Bee vomit" has her countering with her mother's slicing "the red hearts" of strawberries "into

sugar" (3–4). A remembered lawn maple and the long-ago pitching of a boy-scout tent comes into remembrance. These, and each contributing other items of attic and garden, baby-sister mishaps and accidentally lawn-mowed toads, stir her to exclaim "Let me return to the shadow/of a house moored in moonlight" (5). But then her mother speaks in seeming time-present for the wedding, the poet herself "matron of honor" and "firstborn daughter" (p.7). She holds her girlhood in mind as she wraps left-over bones and eggshells "properly,/as I had been taught to do" (7). It makes for a perfect vignette.

If one shifts from this kind of first-person singular verse to African American history, past and present, Dove manages a full table. *The Yellow House on the Corner* offers not only "David Walker (1785–1830)," with its exhilarating recreation of the outcry at his fervor for revolutionary change, but the monologue "Belinda's Petition, Boston, February 1782," expressing the hope of matching the nation's severance from the "Binds of Tyranny" with her own de-enslavement. *Museum* (1983) contains "Banneker," the Enlightenment mixed-race pamphleteer and almanac-writer portrayed as quirky night-owl, a star-gazer. *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (1999) fashions poems like "Freedom Ride" in which her own routine bus journey becomes the dream-way back into historic calamity whether "Dallas playing its mistake over and over" or "Bobby and Malcolm and Memphis,/ at every corner" (330).⁶ The name-poem "Rosa," disinterring Parks's refusal to yield her "white" bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955, construes the event as "the time right inside a place/so wrong it was ready" (334).

No sequence, however, more assiduously maps the reciprocity of family and larger American history than *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), understandably awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1987.⁷ The chronology 1900–1969 supplied by Dove sets the frame from the Great Migration to the Kennedy-Johnson decade, and within which she re-threads into double columns of verse grandparental lives from Louisiana and Georgia to Akron where in 1929 the Goodyear Zeppelin Airlock is built. These biographies join but also jar, Thomas the cocky Ohio riverboat man and mandolin player ("he was always jiving, gold hoop/ from the right ear jiggling" in "Jiving," 119), Beulah, mothering four daughters and dreaming of one day in Paris ("Every day a wilderness –no/shade in sight" in "Dusting," 144). The general un-exceptionality of their lives down the century Dove transforms, nonetheless, into strikingly resourceful imagist riffs. In "The Satisfaction Coal Company" Thomas's temporary work as office cleaner she construes as a task of necessary routine ("Started to sweep/with terrible care, like a woman/brushing shine into her hair," 136). Beulah's turn to part-time millinery in a Dress Shop in 1950, having just about weathered the Depression and World War II, "The Oriental

Ballerina” renders as unfulfilled dreams of adventure having become “walls exploding with shabby tutus [. . .] 59”). The achievement of *Thomas and Beulah* lies in the way these two lives lived in so quotidian a home-and-work measure transpose into wholly un-quotidian poetry, the magnification of family ordinariness.

Not the least part of Dove’s eclecticism lies in the international reach of her writing, aided considerably by marriage to her German husband, the novelist Fred Viebahn, and much travel. *Sonata Mulattica* (2009), the delicately imagined life of the musical prodigy George Augustus Bridgewater (1780–1860) born of African Caribbean lineage and a Polish-German Englishwoman, un-harnesses the idea of early musical genius as somehow the province only of white musicianship.⁸ Bridgewater, who played violin to Beethoven at the piano (it became Sonata No. 9) in Dove’s 5-movement poetic handling fittingly finds its location across London, Vienna and wider Austro-Hungary.

Other geographies abound in the Dove oeuvre, whether “Notes from a Tunisian Journal” in *The Yellow House on the Corner* (“The camels stand in all their vague beauty,” 51) or “Early Morning on the Tel Aviv-Haifa Freeway” in *Museum* (1983) with its painterly vista (“Reclaimed swamp sprouts citrus/and tamarisk,” 105).⁹ Afro-America’s first black city has its reference in “Eliza, Age 10, Harlem” in *American Smooth* (2004) with its vernacular stoop talk and winsome assertion “I am my grandma’s sweet pea” (209).¹⁰ But if Dove’s poetry has been “geographic” in terms of place that has been but the one aspect of the always greater plurality of observation and remembrance channeled through her uniquely single overall voice.

That Michael Harper’s first collection, *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* (1970), would be jazz-themed, and not just in the case of Coltrane or the saxophonist’s 1965 classic suite “A Love Supreme,” sets up one of the presiding frames of reference throughout his verse.¹¹ Certainly *Songlines in Michaeltree: New and Collected Poems* (2000) confirms his lifelong inwardness with the music at the very heart of historic African American creativity: polyrhythm, phrasing, improvisation, pitch, harmony, dissonance. Highly allusive, whether poems explicitly given over to the black literary tradition of James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, or to the blues of Bessie Smith and the inspirational boxing ring magic of Joe Louis, it equally can draw upon classics like the *Oresteia*. The outcome is poetry full of fresh accent, yet however shaped by improvisations learned from jazz always also highly disciplined in its prosody.

The jazz drawn from by Harper most evidently works in alliance with his panorama of historic black event and portraiture and the turns of family dynasty to include Canada, Caribbean missionaries, and the searing birth deaths of two children and of his brother in a motorcycle accident. The latter embraces Brooklyn/Bedford Stuyvesant upbringing, his parents' move to California, and after stints teaching in Oregon the eventual long-time professorship in literature and creative writing at Rhode Island's Brown University. Travel would mean not just the bi-coastal USA or Europe and Mexico but, signally, his eight-country visit to Africa in 1977. For Harper, evidently, his writing through to his death in 2016 remained steeped in vernacular pulse but also book-awareness and the classroom.

Looking back to the 1960s he writes in "Notes on Form and Fiction," his Afterword to *Songlines in Michaeltree* "I set out on a path to document those elements of contradiction most salient to my antenna" (372). A related bearing can be met in "The Writer's Desk" in which he looks to the creating self as itself always another country, a terrain of fissures to be if not resolved then held in balance through the act of poetry. He writes "the mystery to crack/is you (and so you rewrite it)," (235). In "Br'er Sterling and the Rocker," dedicated to the poet-critic Sterling Brown and his wife Daisy Brown, he speaks synoptically of poetry as "the curled line" (115). It more than fits his own writing.

The constellation of jazz poems invites first regard, none more so than the Coltrane pieces. "Dear John, Dear Coltrane" italicizes the best known of the tenor saxophonist's compositions and accompanies it with a meditative question:

a love supreme, a love supreme;
what does it all mean? (25)

The poem's reply invokes "loss," "blues," a cleansing and kiss of "blackness," itself serially designated "funky" and "sweet." Harper is out to capture Coltrane's tantric state of being, the I-am-ness in the face of race-line denial and his "diseased liver" and "inflated heart." This, says the poem, amounts to "tenor love," Coltrane's transcendent salve against each and all adversity (26). "A Narrative of the Life and Times of John Coltrane: Played by Himself" has Coltrane looking back in the form of interior monologue ("the feel of reed on my tongue/haunts me even now," 187). Black-outs, tooth pain, medical complaint remain real yet assuaged by the music as he remembers it from South Carolina of "our church choir." His music invokes "*sheets of sound* labeling me/into dissonance" and "the blues" (187). The image is of music, churchly or jazz-inflected, as a species of spirituality called to allay afflictions of body and of the setbacks brought on by heroin use. "A Coltrane

Poem: September 23, 1998” harks back to the maestro (“*father of the reed*”) playing “Autumn Leaves.” In Harper’s phrasing of “Your vigorous arc of light” the acclaim lies in a debt of illumination, Coltrane’s music the healing touch of priest or shaman (365).

Fellow jazz names fold into the poetry. In “Mr. P.C.” Charlie Mingus is nominated “monster star” (28). In “*Bird Lives: Charles Parker in St. Louis*” Parker is entreated “*blow, Bird . . . screaming for life*” (50). “Release: Kind of Blue” closes with the concentrated two lines “Miles asked/We answered” (364). Eric Dolphy in “Driving the Big Chrysler across the Country of My Birth” is said to play “love-filled offerings” (190). “Bandstand” playfully envisages “Monk’s dissonant hat/willing every change of direction” (168).

Likewise Harper has his literary and visual art pantheon. “Wizardry: The Poetic Saga in Song of Gwendolyn Brooks” celebrates the “marathon of your committal” (261), especially her *In the Mecca* (1968) with its Chicago verse mural and whom he admired from when she first championed his work. “Dear Romie: Rock Formation Epistles,” for the master collagist Romare Bearden, proffers “Thanks for your visual/ puns, blind alleys, pig Latin collage” (208). Like Ellison he was early to recognize the painter’s virtuosity.

The lasting dimensions of Harper’s poetry of necessity interweave both American and personal histories. Few reflect the nation’s race spirals more than his “Frederick Douglass Cycle,” cast among others in the voice of Douglass’s second wife, the white abolitionist and suffragette Helen Pitts Douglass (“the syllables of my name in his ear,” 295) and of Harper himself as memorialist in “Figments” (“Frederick Douglass—he created characters such as me—” 322). Loss of children and brother has obvious poignancy but Harper maintains his poet’s measure both in “Nightmare Begins Responsibility” (“say it for two sons gone,/say nightmare, say it loud/panebreaking heartmadness,” 114) and “The Drowning of the Facts of Life” (“I touch the clean nostril/of the body in his mechanical/Breathing,” 154). This power of measure, buttressed by unstinting compass of imagination, in truth sustains all of *Songlines in Michaeltree*.

“All her kind/ in thrall to word” (26). Natasha Tretheway’s last line of “The Book of Castas” in the sequence “Taxonomy” from *Thrall*, points up her working key-note: human mix. *Casta* as Nueva España’s colonial nomenclature for persons fused of Spanish, Amerindian and African legacy, reminds of New World/Old World racial hierarchy, the ladder of enslavement, caste, torque, *propiedad*. Other cognate terms thread through the poems at large, each racially freighted, whether

mestizola, *castizola*, *moriscola* or *albino*. Drawing on an eclectic round of Spanish art and texts that address slave *mestizaje*, as well as her own personal circumstance of having a white father and black mother, Tretheway creates a major interacting circle of verse.

It would be hard to doubt the degree to which *Thrall* develops the resort in her earlier collections to perceptual tropes of “color,” each value attributed to the spectrum of skin lightness to darkness. The span embraces pre-Civil Rights black labor in *Domestic Work* (2000), the imagined voice of a light-skinned New Orleans prostitute in the 1900s photography of E.J. Bellocq in *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002), and the envisioning of the Deep South through her mother's Mississippi family legacy. Her father's white lineage equally enters. She also makes summons Louisiana's all-black Civil War regiment in *Native Guard* (2006).¹² *Thrall*, however, turns most especially to ekphrastic style. Tretheway so re-enacts images from painting and historical documents of the visible power-relationship bequeathed from Euro-colonial, and in the case of women sexual, ownership of bodies of color.

The title-poem “Thrall,” pitched as the monologue of Juan de Pareja, mulatto slave art-assistant to Diego Velázquez who makes him the subject of one of his most enduring life portraits, opens on a note of no compromise (“*the mulatto son/ of a slave woman*,” 59). Tretheway has him recall mixing Velázquez's paints thereby giving a virtual color-prism in which to locate his own physical hue, hands “dusted black” and blue-flecked, nails edged in vermillion “as if my nails bled” (60). This centralization of color continues in the poem's account of their shared sojourn in Rome, the “yellow ocher” of market lemons, the “glimpse of red/like a wound opening” in the papal robes (typically Velázquez's portrait of Inocencio X). Pareja is made to remember the contrast between Velázquez's insistence on painting as the “divine language” of free men as against his own making of “secret canvases” (61). He ponders the grand illusion in seeing himself in Velázquez's portrait of him “as though I'd been *noble*” (62) and yet his recognition of “the distance between us” (63). Nor does Tretheway forget how Pareja inserts his own face and figure in the trans-historical *The Calling of Saint Matthew* with its clothing of Jesus and the tax-officials in seventeenth-century couture. She implies, thereby, riposte, Pareja's memorial birthright from his own black mother and her gentle calling as if in dream of his name “*Juan Juan Juan*” (65). The poem's use of painting, the allusions to Spanish master and apprentice while also *propietario* and *mulatto* to summon the life-and-art coloration of racialized human strata, invites due subtlety of recognition.

Each of the other artworks used throughout *Thrall* is deployed to similar use. The four-part “Taxonomy,” drawing upon a series of *casta* paintings by Juan

Rodríguez Juárez in the eighteenth-century and reflective of the cross-racial unions in colonial Mexico set out in the actual *The Book of Castas*, explores the humanity sealed within each Spanish-language category of “Mestizo” (16), “Mulato” (19), “Castiza,” and from within the book itself, “the catalog of mixed bloods,” “the typology of taint” (24). The detail comes over richly, a charge of expressive image, typically the first of the poems in which the mother “seems to say/*what we have made*” (18) or the second with a son described as a “palimpsest of paint --/layers of color, history rendering him/that precise shade of in-between” (21). Tretheway translates the inherent wholeness of person behind each arbitrary division. She so calls the interracial parental union and offspring “the triptych their bodies made/ in paint, in blood” (25–6), art and life joined in Juárez’s paintings and then as it were further monitored and reinterpreted in her poetry.

The twenty-plus poems overall work variations on this theme. One can turn to “De Español y Negra: Mulata” from the painting of Miguel Cabrera with its poignant image of a mixed-race daughter “flanked by her parents” (39) and caught in the inherited “half-light” (40) of their respective coloring. “Kitchen Maid with Supper at Emmaus; or, The Mulatta,” from Velásquez, given a setting amid cooking vessels and with a corner vignette of Jesus appearing posthumously to two disciples, brilliantly attracts Tretheway’s eye. The maid is to be thought figured in each pot, pitcher, mortar and pestle, bulb of garlic, basket and cleaning rag, but also in “the stain on the wall the size of her shadow,” the “echo of Jesus at table.” The last line (“Light falls on half her face,” 27) carries the arising implication, humanity fissured despite a messiah’s message of the one humankind.

“The Americans,” in three parts, turns the focus to North America. The first, with its invocation of the postmortem dissection of a “White Negro” by Dr. Samuel Adolphus Cartwright in 1851, gives acerbic dismissal to the arbitrariness of skin whiteness. “Blood,” from George Fuller’s “The Quadroon” in 1880, ponders the inability of its subject to be allowed transcendence of “black blood” even as she sits as “a melancholy beauty,” “intermediate” amid the darker fieldworkers behind her. “Help,” from a Robert Frank photograph of a white child “in the dark arms” of a maid, links to her Tretheway’s mother as also the figure of a maid when carrying the poet “white in her arms” (36). The two women in the poem’s envisioning reduce to “black backdrop,” “the dark foil in this American story” (36). In the collection’s opening “Elegy” (3–5) Tretheway beautifully elides her own story, daughter of black and white parentage, into the larger round of *Thrall*. The semantics of skin, hue, blood, mix, and as always race, take on new charge in these poems, the vex and challenge of human relationship within and beyond color.

To alight on Yusef Komunyakaa's *Testimony, A Tribute to Charlie Parker with New and Selected Jazz Poems* is not to downplay the larger career launched with *Dedications and Other Darkhorses* (1977).¹³ Nor is it to overshadow the differing accomplishments of collections like *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), with its first-hand remembrance of service as a military reporter in Vietnam, *Gilgamesh: a Verse Play* (2006), his adaptation of the Babylonian king-god legend, or *Neon Vernacular: New & Selected Poems 1977–1989* (1994), an accomplishment that won him the Pulitzer Prize.¹⁴

“Rhythm Method,” the opening piece in *Testimony*, sets terms, nature's own jazz syncopation as it were. It aligns the cricket's chirp, the body's heartbeat, sex, and the cadence of flute or drum as intrinsic to the human propensity for rhythm. Komunyakaa captures the process in a delicate skein of images:

The Mantra
of spring rain opens the rose
& spider lily into shadow,
& someone plays the bones
'til they rise & live
again. (4)

Not so implicitly this generative pulse, the kinetics of the natural order, points to music:

If you can see blues
in the ocean, light & dark,
can feel worms ease through
a subterranean path
beneath each footstep.
Baby, you got rhythm. (4)

Rhythm, as taken from jazz into verse, and nimbly allied with earth imagery, rightly has been considered Komunyakaa's signature idiom.

The ensuing poems in the collection add moment, each self-standing yet also a kind of prefatory context for “Testimony.” “Twilight Seduction,” ode to a woman lover, sets itself in the context of Duke Ellington and the Jazz of Big Band orchestration and Cotton Club. “Duke's voice,” says the poem's speaker as though he wished it were his own, “was smooth as new silk/edged with Victorian lace” (6). The hint of sexuality lies perfectly in the silk and lace. Ellington's grasp of black life-theatre elicits due recognition:

Duke knew how to listen
 to colors, for each sigh shaped
 out of sweat & blame,
 knew a Harlem airshaft
 could recall the whole

night in an echo: prayers,
 dogs barking, curses & blessings (6–7)

The language of jazz as color palette (“Duke/loved Toulouse Lautrec’s nightlife,” 7) and, for sure, of “seduction” (“Faces of women/woven into chords,” 7), adds its own weight. The verse tacitly emulates Ellington’s mastery of tempo, the angled indentations, the phrasal riffing. For Komunyakaa “Twilight Seduction” amounts to jazz-speak as it were.

Successive pieces eddy similarly between the erotic and jazz. “Jasmine” connects the scent worn by a woman in the “blue fantasia” of clubland to the “sticks” of the Coltrane drummer Elvin Jones and figuratively speaking with “Duke in the right hand/& Basie in the left” (10). “Pepper” speaks of himself the saxophonist being “angry/for loving your horn these years” in “Softly as in a Morning Sunrise.” But the poem also remembers Pepper’s racist outbreaks in the face of black man/white woman relationships which he calls “blood on the reed” (27–28). The ranking names all similarly win Komunyakaa’s arresting power of image. “Satchmo, USA” gives expression to how “in your horn, how it takes us/to a woman standing in a cane field/circled with peacocks” (31). “Copacetic Mingus” imagines Mingus at his double-bass “Running big hands down/the upright’s big hips” (33). “Dolphy’s Aviary” likens Dolphy’s fashioning a score as though the equal of a wild Midwestern storm and its “war of electrical wires” (42).

“Testimony,” the title poem with its two-per-page sonnet sequence, however, forms the volume’s mainstay. It bears Komunyakaa’s best concentrated esprit, a work in its radio adaptation and stage performance literally to be listened to with keenest ear. Charlie Parker’s life and jazz transposes into a “set” in its own literary-compositional right. “He’d paid his dues for years” opens the poem, Kansas City family, Chicago clubs, and then New York, Parker’s “laughter & crying/at the same time” (79). The intuitive musicianship, his saxophone’s “melodic line” (80), the poem situates in an accumulation of evocative images.” Yardbird/could blow a woman’s strut/across the room” (81) reads one line. “No wonder he lived/like a floating rib/in a howl whispered through brass” (84) reads another. The upshot is a Parker broaching the deific, fractured in much of his life yet sublime in his horn-playing:

Maybe
 there's something to all this
 talk about seeing a graven image
 of Bird in Buddha & the Sphinx. (92)

"Testimony" carries a full rota of biography. Parker's creation of classics like "What Price Love" wins recognition. An episode of pretended respectability before Max Roach's wife gets mention. The death of his two-year old daughter given in a poignant letter to his ex-wife makes its entry. Jazz partnerships not just with Miles, Gillespie, Powell and the rest but with Ted Joans as one-time housemate is memorialized. The poem does not shirk heroin and needles, the drinking, jail-time and mental dips, and the near-absurd death brought on by laughing at jugglers during a TV broadcast of the Dorsey Show. It does so, however, in situating metaphors and to a rhythm unmistakably akin to jazz action.

In common with his other poetry "Testimony" carries genuine imagist dispatch, Parker's life and music held inside a matching verse composition. It was little wonder that, living in Australia after marriage to an Australian woman, he won a commission from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to have "Testimony" performed as radio drama. That led on to its presentation in 2002 at the Sydney Opera House with music composed and played by Sandy Evans on sax. For whether the original poem, or the libretto version, Yomunyaaka's "Testimony" takes its place among quite the most consequential ranks of jazz poetry.

Blue Laws: Selected & Uncollected Poems 1995–2015, Kevin Young's two hundred verse pieces drawn from a dozen prior collections, bespeaks not only proliferation but also and however paradoxically an identifying economy of idiom.¹⁵ From the inaugural *Most Way Home* (1995) on to his most recent *Brown: Poems* (2018), with its meditation upon the role of the executed abolitionist in American iconography, he has held to a taut poetics, word and image free of encumbering baggage. Instances come readily to hand.¹⁶

To Repel Ghosts (2001), the first in what he has called his "American Trilogy," Young summarizes Jack Johnson speaking in his own voice in "Black Jack" ("Some call me spade,/stud, buck, black/That last I take as compliment—," 60). In "Shrine Outside Basquiat's Studio" the painter-prodigy's life and art is rendered elliptically as "his black skin thick, needled into song" 107–108).¹⁷ *Jelly Roll* (2003), in "Vows" looks to the blues of the kind voiced in the couplet "Through

woods echoes/my widowed voice” (141).¹⁸ *Black Maria* (2005), playing on the term for paddy-wagon or hearse, creates a first person gangster-thief sequence neatly encapsulated in “Stills” with its “Even my shadow/has me followed” (196) and in “The Heist” with its “My stethoscope cold/against the vault’s locked heart” (214).¹⁹ Young’s life has been busy, a large repertoire, his near dozen poetry collections, anthologies like *Blues Poems* (2003), the edited work of *John Berryman: Selected Poems* (2004) and *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010* (2012), and discursive critique like *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (2012) and *Bunk: The Rise of Humbug, Hoaxes, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News* (2017).²⁰ The career includes his professorships at Emory University and elsewhere, appointment as Director of the Schomburg Library, and in 2018 Poetry Editor for the *New Yorker*. Yet amid so evidently busy a trajectory his own poetry continues to hold main sway.

Something of the oneness of Young’s poems is reflected in the personae he assumes at different points. An early poem like “Whatever you want” in *Most Way Home*, reprinted in *Blue Laws*, looks to a summer’s stifling heat and how it prompts the following question and answer:

Is it the Negro in you that gets
in the car & just starts driving, keeps
the windows down, your music
bouncing off station wagons, power
windows?
Whatever you want
to call it, it makes you feel you own
everything, even the creeping heat. (29)²¹

In “Ode to the Midwest,” originally in *Dear Darkness* (2008), a series of dream-wants or poet’s fantasias to offset staidness, run from “I want to see what the sun/ sees before it tells the snow to go” to the mirroring “I want to be/ the only black person I know” (359–60).²²

A touch of Ginsberg playfulness enters “Americana,” from *For the Confederate Dead* (2007), with its opening of “America, you won’t obey./You won’t hunt/or heel or stay” and follow-up lines like “Bully, albino, my/ lopsided love --/ America, I can’t leave you/well enough alone” (271).²³ A flair for the elliptical typically shows itself in “Black Cat Blues,” from *Dear Darkness* (2008), in the form of the prisoner’s reflection (“Governor commuted my term to life/in a cell more comfortable/Than this here skin/I been living in,” 352). Young’s aptitude for aphorism likewise comes into play of which “Anthem,” (2013), yields a symptomatic

instance with “Life is a near/death experience (489). These each make for distinct pathways into the poetry at large.

Black narrative, African, Caribbean and American, or at least Young’s version of each, enters in full. Bob Marley-inspired poems like “Burial: No Woman No Cry” (292–293), part of the sequence “African Elegy (Much Things to Say)” in *For the Confederate Dead* (2007), addresses a closely felt death with the words “the reggae you loved/your brother will strum/stumbling on a guitar, and for a moment you’ll be there, here” (292). “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” one of several titles shared with Phillis Wheatley, finds a powerful memorial image in its closing quatrain to articulate the ambiguity of slave West Africa and slave New England:

Linate black girl, what
the Lord leaves us is this: —
your mother’s voice pressed
fainter each day: thick dust. (313)

Wheatley, however, serves as but one specific signature of black America for Young.

Dear Darkness takes the more vernacular turn. “Aunties” invokes the poet’s Great Aunt Toota and Aunt Tuddie, their extended-family skill and care, dolling out love or childcare:

If not them, then who
will win heaven?
holding tight

to their pocketbooks
at the pearly gates
just in case. (341)

Other collections, like *Ardency: A Chronicle of the Amistad Rebels* (2011), keeps to the more distant perspective, re-worded period correspondence and addresses connected with the iconic slave schooner revolt of 1839.²⁴ But if *Dear Darkness* creates a poetry of intimacy, of aunts and care, that makes it no less historic. The speaker’s fondness positively shines.

Blues, likewise, for Young affirm black dynasty, the shared legacy of participant witnessing. “Flash Flood Blues,” so opens on an interchange of past and present (“I’m the African American/sheep of the family./I got my master’s degree in slavery,” 355). Foodways win overlapping blues recognition, emblems of kinship,

continuity. “Ode to Pork” might almost be addressed to a lover (“you keep me all night/cursing you four-/letter name, the next begging for you again”, 365). “Ode to Grits” looks to the poet’s remembered wordplay on hominy (“for years I misheard/your name as *Harmony*,” 371). “Ode to Catfish” reaffirms alimentation as history:

No matter
 the pain it takes
 to hold you, your barbs
 & beard, you sustain me
 & I wander
 humming your hundred names –
 brother, bullhead, paperskin, slick. (495).

Be it history or jazz, family or comestibles, Young’s command of voice has been formidable. The choice of *Blue Laws* as title for his “selected” and “uncollected” poetry neatly blends the idea of prohibition and blues, his poet’s touch of beckoning fugitive license.

“A sea sits up and starts to sing to me” writes Gwendolyn Brooks in “Bessie of Bronzeville Visits Mary and Norman at Beach House in New Buffalo” (1960)²⁵ “Poetry had me” says Alice Walker in “I Said to Poetry” (1984)²⁶ Both observations, in common with those of Baraka, indicate the ongoing wider range of African American verse, from Audrey Lorde’s sisterhood poems to the performance texts of Jayne Cortez and the slam creations of Sapphire, from Robert Hayden classics like “Middle Passage” to Jay Wright’s bold history and Africanist poem-cycles and Essex Hemphill’s intimate poems of Gay black life and culture. Taken with the poetry mapped in this chapter, and however invidious the risk of listing, the show of vitality has been undeniable, a plenitude.

Notes

1. Amiri Baraka, “Literary Statement on Struggle!,” *Hard Facts*, Newark: Congress of African People, 1975, 24.
2. Rita Dove, *Collected Poems 1974–2004*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2016.
3. Michael Harper, *Songlines in Michaeltree: New and Selected Poems*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000; Natasha Tretheway, *Thrall*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt,

- 2012; Yusuf Komunyakaa, *Testimony: A Tribute to Charlie Parker: With New and Selected Jazz Poems*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013; and Kevin Young, *Blue Laws: Selected & Uncollected Poems, 1995–2015*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017.
4. Rita Dove, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1980.
 5. All page numbers are to *Collected Poems 1974–2004*. Rita Dove, *Grace Notes*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1989.
 6. Rita Dove, *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.
 7. Rita Dove, *Thomas and Beulah*, Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1986.
 8. Rita Dove, *Sonata Mulattica: A Life in Five Movements, and a Short Play*, New York: W. Norton, 2004.
 9. Rita Dove, *Museum*, Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1983.
 10. Rita Dove, *American Smooth*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2004.
 11. Michael Harper, *Dear John, Dear John Coltrane*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970.
 12. Natasha Trethewey, *Native Guard*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006; *Bellocq's Ophelia*, Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2002; and *Domestic Work*, Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2000.
 13. Yusuf Komunyakaa, *Testimony, a Tribute to Charlie Parker with New and Selected Jazz Poems*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013.
 14. Yusuf Komunyakaa, *Gilgamesh*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006; *Dien Cai Dau*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988; *Neon Vernacular: New & Selected Poems, 1997–1989*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1993.
 15. Kevin Young, *Blue Laws: Selected & Uncollected Poems 1995–2015*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016.
 16. Kevin Young, *Most Way Home*, New York: William Morrow, 1995, *Brown: Poems*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018.
 17. Kevin Young, *To Repel Ghosts*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.
 18. Kevin Young, *Jelly Roll*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.
 19. Kevin Young, *Black Maria*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.
 20. Kevin Young, ed. *Blues Poems*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003, ed. *John Berryman: Selected Poems*, New York: Library of America, 2004, ed. ed. *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010*, New York: BOA Editions, 2012, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*, Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012, and *Bunk: The Rises of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News*, Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017.
 21. Kevin A. Young “Whatever You Want,” 29. All page references are to *Blue Laws*.
 22. Kevin Young, *Dear Darkness: Poems*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.
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