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# Callaloo

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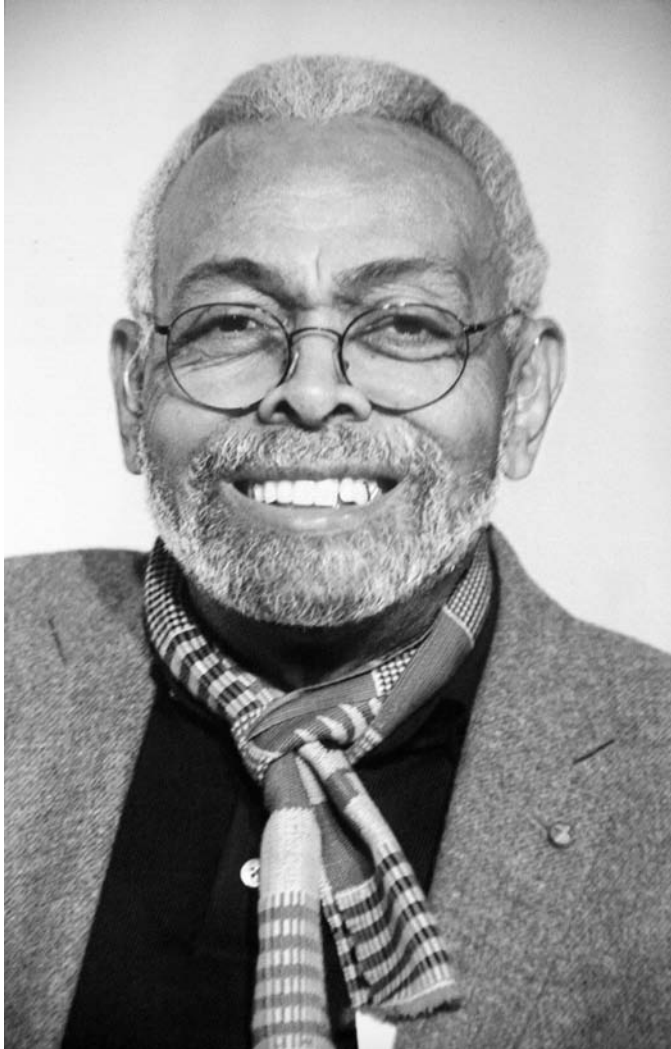
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# In Memoriam



**Amiri Baraka**  
**October 7, 1934–January 9, 2014**

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## BARAKA'S TRUTH

by Marlon B. Ross

I am consistently trying to hold on to the truth, and the truth ought to be valuable to anybody, regardless of race or nationality. . . . The truth is concrete and it can be used; it *must* be used by everybody.  
—Amiri Baraka, *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*

When I first came across these words in Maya Angelou's 1993 interview with Baraka, I was puzzled because this version of *the* truth did not match my own version of *the* truth about Amiri Baraka, who he is (still can't put him in the past tense yet) and who he had become. I expected Baraka's approach to a notion of truth to be less familiar, less routine even. I expected him to blast *the* truth as a phantasm of the Western empire. Instead, he proceeds to connect the truth with a demand for objectivity and the real. These words come in response to Angelou's question about how Baraka handles "the multi-racial classroom" as "a professor at a university." In the ellipsis above, Baraka says, "If there are people in my classrooms who don't understand that, that's part of why they need educating. They need to understand the truth is exactly that: what is objective? what is real?" (*Conversations* 261). When I say "my version of *the* truth about Baraka," I mean that relatively fixed set of expectations that you tend to establish about an author whom you re-read attentively; whom you teach year in and year out; whom you read about in various media; whom your students, after returning from a poetry reading or lecture with him at your university, report back as being "just like he seems when you read about him in books." It is a truism of traditional literary criticism that great writers not only demand constant re-reading, that they also compel constant re-interpretation. The giants of literature, I was taught as a student, transform us and, as we encounter them in texts, track our own intellectual and emotional evolution as moral persons engaged with the world around us. Not knowing whether that truism holds true or not, I do think that Baraka—like most literary giants—is usually not interpreted or taught according to this narrative of the reader's developmental transformation. When I think of Baraka, the canonical Baraka, which is after all the only true Baraka we *now* have, I think of a writer fixed within a narrative of his own unwavering development to become who he had set out to be. With much embarrassment, I must admit that I have taught Baraka as a settled truth—not so much that I could deliver the final truth about what he means when he writes, but that his person, his identity, promises such a final truth deliverable by intentioned study. Baraka's response to the multicultural classroom in the Angelou interview unsettled me a bit because I had imagined Baraka as a teacher verbally throttling his students into conscious alarm the same way he had throttled me into something like alarmed consciousness as a reader. Who is/was this other Baraka—the one asking for or after *the* truth, followed up with "what is objective? what



is real?"? Baraka the teacher is/was, no doubt, not quite the same Baraka who showed up in my books and over my t.v. and computer screens.

I think that the more a writer develops or is cast through a larger-than-life public persona, and certainly Baraka from early on acquired such, the more the truth about him or her is assumed to be settled, answerable. Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Angela Davis immediately come to mind. (That such a list would no doubt render more men than women bespeaks the nature of what historically has been deemed "larger-than-life" and the gendered condition of what has constituted the public.) We come to know them as much on the public stage of the world as through the texts that they produce. The over-settlement of Baraka's truth derives also from a certain declaratory and declamatory swagger not only in much of his poetry and prose but also in the way he presented (I guess I must relent to past tense) and represented himself to us off the page, in the everyday "real." Baraka seemed to interact with his readers and with the world as though he could be certain of the fundamentals that motivated his writing and his activism. Even as our collective narrative about him has enfolded a deep capacity for changing his mind about the truth of those fundamentals, we have needed to entrench that development in a fixed structure of natural becoming. After all, how else could we even begin to approach the prolific, fiery, protean, ranging genius that we call Amiri Baraka?

Like many other literary scholars, I was at the Modern Language Association when I heard about his passing. I was thrown off-guard, because I expected him to outlive his gathering years—to become as immortally fixed as my version of him that I read into texts and projected into his media appearances. I was scheduled to start my spring term course in "Critical Race Theory" with some Baraka readings, but his passing, his failure to be corporeally immortal, threw me for a loop. Do you talk about the dead in the same way you talk about the living? Do you forgo a certain irreverence—a tendency to pontificate and speculate—about his words fixed in print? Do you treat the one who has so recently, so freshly, been a contemporary—even if a giant contemporary—now like an ancestor, with deep reverence, summoning a more ghostly presence? I found myself speaking in hushed tones—as though the classroom were haunted—rather than in my usual interrogative, even devilish mode, taking whatever stand required to nudge my students toward clarification and decidedness where they are befuddled and, contrarily, toward puzzlement and undecidedness where they think they've arrived at intellectual or moral certainty. If my teaching now had turned so precipitously reverent, perhaps my teaching *before* had been too precipitously knowing about Baraka's truth. Perhaps I needed to summon Baraka afresh, bracketing the encrusted narratives and projections about the truth he delivers, the truth he needed to become. Being unsettled by Baraka's passing, I began to consider how essential a voice he had already been, how his writing had helped to fix my own sense of development, and how I, perhaps too facilely, had needed to make him an ancestor—a larger-than-living legend—even while he was still breathing fire, and changing his mind, and writing the future out of the past.

Like another cluster of male writers whose legacy Baraka inherited and revised—Hughes, Wright, Baldwin—the extraordinary literary success of his youth encouraged his readers and critics to assume a fixed decline in the later work. This is another of those narratives of genius that we install to keep our literary giants closely at bay. Because Baraka calls them as he sees them—shoots at long-range from the shoulder rather than merely with a pistol

from the hip, so to speak—we are even more predisposed to enforce a fixed narrative of his natural development into necessary decline. Our insistence on fixing Baraka through the public persona of his declamatory swagger is certainly understandable. Despite the exhilarating array of forms, modes, and techniques Baraka practices in his poetry, for instance, there is an astonishing consistency of address and style across his career. We can hear in his in/famous poem on the 9/11 terrorist attacks the same relentless, accusatory voice that we heard in his celebrated 1965 manifesto, “Black Art”:

Who do Tom Ass Clarence Work for  
 Who doo doo come out the Colon’s mouth  
 Who know what kind of Skeeza is a Condoleeza  
 Who pay Connelly to be a wooden negro  
 Who give Genius Awards to Homo Locus  
 Subsidere  
 (“Somebody Blew Up America”)

The same use of ad hominem (or more precisely, the street Dozens which he says influenced him deeply); the same use of apposition, asyndeton, and anaphora; the same kind of vulgar punning; the same racially-riven humorous invective; the same embattled relation to the reader through a satirized target; the same boleka address; all capped by a phrase that throttles us into another linguistic dimension, in this case “Homo Locus / Subsidere.” Just in case we forgot that Latin is one of the black arts. Baraka’s mojo did not rely so much on seduction as on coercion, exclamatory denunciations, and yet extraordinarily aesthetically gratifying. And yet he could be grippingly tender at the same time. “We are beautiful people,” he writes in “Ka ‘Ba”:

with african imaginations  
 full of masks and dances and swelling chants  
 with african eyes, and noses, and arms  
 though we sprawl in grey chains in a place  
 full of winters, when what we want is sun.  
 (“Ka ‘Ba”)

He often shifts from mean accusation to incantatory intonations in a single breath. “Ka ‘Ba” maneuvers us toward a bewitching closure: “We need magic / now we need the spells, to raise up / return, destroy, and create.” The poetic script of “Somebody Blew Up,” and Baraka’s breathtaking oral performance of it, is not the same in 1965 as in 2001. Like a professional ice-skater who has so crafted his moves over decades that he no longer fears leaping into a fall but instead falling into a leap, the frustrated anger of “Somebody Blew Up” is practiced rather than tested, but is no less “real” for all that. In fact, reading the 2001 poem against the 1965 ones is like visiting the scene of a crime—or in the case of “Somebody Blew Up” the scene of an interminable catalogue of racist crimes. Even more than the groundbreaking manifesto “Black Art” he wrote fifty years ago, in the 2001 poem we are assured that the leaps will land safely, even though the bones seem a bit more brittle, the gestures a bit more predictable. Knowing the past Baraka causes us to read him into

the present Baraka, even when there are subtle or salient differences between the two. Despite the familiarity of his moves in 2001, we fear that the ice will break as he skates so skillfully across it with inflammatory words.

We often attribute Baraka's idea of the weaponry of words—what William J. Harris in his essay here calls his “beautiful defiance”—to his Black Nationalist agenda, but in the interview with Angelou, he complicates this notion by reference to an earlier Baraka, a young boy on the Newark streets. “Where I grew up, there were a lot of people who would walk all over you, and I discovered that, if you could give them a simple expository sentence, you could keep them away from you for at least a minute” (*Conversations* 260). Perhaps we too often fail to see that skinny boy scrambling for words to stave off a fight in the master of cutting invective. The vulnerable kid resides in the forceful man of words, as Kimberly Benston observes in his reflection here: “That is perhaps why I sensed in his work from first to last something of the child, though a child with a very old soul, a specter of his best self, striving ever to will us with him into a liberated future, to begin again by coming back to that place of beginning that still haunts us . . .” One truth about Baraka that could stand more probing concerns our emphasis on *word* mastery—what other skill would a poet have?—as though words were an end in themselves. “All those things you just referred to existed before the word. The rhythms existed, the colors existed, even the feeling, the sound, the syllable, the vowel, the utterance. The word is the last thing to emerge,” Baraka observes in the Angelou interview. His poetry is a search for the truth—objectivity, reality—beyond and before the word. “You can feel the emotion before you even know what that emotion is going to make you say” (*Conversations* 261). What makes Baraka say what he does is most surely emotion at work in, as well as before, the word, and the impact of that word reverberates with the emotion that first commanded the desire to speak.

We have gathered here some of the most prominent interpreters of Baraka's many truths to offer up not so much parting words as words of departure, words of dis/embarcation. For our acknowledging of Baraka's passing into the ancestral must also be words of his continual return to us through his art. We have an interview with Ntozake Shange, whose drama, poetry, fiction, and criticism have engaged a long, fruitful dialogue with Baraka's, and whose creative work continues to speak to us like a virtuosic solo against the chorus of the ancestors, now including especially ancestor Baraka. We have William J. Harris—certainly one of the preeminent scholars on Baraka, editor of *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, and a poet in his own right—meditating on Baraka's out and gone. We have Kimberly Benston, one of the first scholars to write a book on Baraka, whose ongoing engagement with Baraka has borne stunning and influential insights for every reader; Benston's poignant reflection on his own first encounters with Baraka's work elicits for us now the exhilaration of such first sightings and captures how, in Bentson's words, “reality could be transfused with rich cultural implication only if pressed forward by art.” We have Margo Crawford, a leading young scholar of this generation offering exciting new ideas about Baraka and fulfilling the promise of Baraka's assured futurity as an ancestor. In her eloquent tribute here, she joins that unending jam session that Baraka's work sustains, and she observes how “Baraka teaches us how to hear whispers and hums” even as he wakens us with alarm. Obviously, these are not intended to be the last words on Baraka. In the time-honored practice of our foreparents, these tributary reflections are merely intended

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## C A L L A L O O

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to mark a particular passage, from the flesh to something yet to be known, a home-going over the River Jordan. In the pages of *Callaloo* and its sibling journals, Baraka's name is sure to be hailed for decades to come, the traces of his voice invoked, his utterances re-read and re-interpreted, and his truth revisited and revised, untethered, and retethered for succeeding generations. From a singular voice, his many truths will continue to be spoken.

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## BARAKA'S JAM SESSION

### On the Limits of Any Attempt to Collect *Black Aesthetics Unbound*

by Margo Natalie Crawford

He was our jam session.

—Eleanor Traylor, *Howard University Tribute to Amiri Baraka*

Amiri Baraka knew that black art and culture is often framed and collected by forces that crush the people who produce the art and culture. He hated that theft and warned about the future “dis/imaging.” In his short story “Heathen Technology at the End of the Twentieth Century,” in *Tales of the Out & the Gone* (2007), Baraka predicts that the appropriation and distortion of black aesthetics will become even more heightened as time passes. In this science fiction story, Baraka imagines a certain apocalypse that includes the “dis/imaging” of people, a type of mind control that makes people disappear by stealing and collecting their image making. The first person narrator is a witness linked to other survivors who resist the mind control by listening, “eight times a day,” to Coltrane’s jazz, and looking, “eight times a day,” at Aaron Douglas’s images. This counter-hypnotism harkens back to Black Arts Movement images of black collective resistance to dominant image making. The short story’s call for continued belief in collective resistance emerges most clearly when the narrator asks his apocalypse-era listeners to “remember” and then realizes that “remembering” is no longer possible in the era of the “brain switch,” but nonetheless continues to remember the power of “bound metaphor.” This bound metaphor is described in the following manner: “If the metaphors of a heavy group were rendered collective and focused on whatever, energy and power could be produced” (*Tales* 158). This language captures Baraka’s recognition that the power of the Black Arts Movement’s mobilization of blackness as a unifying concept was the power of people realizing that blackness was such a productive collective metaphor.

Some of what is now said about Amiri Baraka will help those who resist the *dis/imaging* come to understand the cultural work of this visionary. In the midst of all of the tributes, certain words linger. “He was our black on purpose,” Ras Baraka said. “He was our jam session,” Eleanor Traylor sang.

For me, the quietest parts of this jam session have always been the most electrifying. Baraka teaches us how to hear whispers and hums in the *BangClash*, his vibrating word in “Return of the Native.” Although, as Eugene Redmond counsels, “You couldn’t be asleep around him,” you could learn how to hush and be soothed into waking up. Some of the heaviest, quietest moments in his jam session are *In Our Terribleness*, the beginning of *The Slave*, and “Wise 1.” “I cant say more than that except all the visions and thoughts you’ve had actually exist,” he writes in *In Our Terribleness*, as if he would ever stop saying

more and doing more. In these words, we hear the fatigue of the visionary who knows he can't stop moving. He wanted us to see the freedom that actually could exist if only we let it. The revolution was always, as they dreamed and believed in the 1960s, "right around the corner."

The Black Arts Movement was a turned corner and a cornerstone of his life work. His work became a conscious jam session during the Black Arts Movement. *Thank you, Eleanor Traylor, for teaching us to remember him as this jam session.* He leaned into the power of the collective and all of the soloist work became his desire for a meta-language. Just like the speaker at the beginning of *The Slave*, Baraka kept telling us "As your brown is not my brown, that is, we need, ahem, a meta-language" (45).

"Sometimes you are afraid to listen to this [man]." His tribute to Billie Holiday ("The Dark Lady of the Sonnets") echoes back to him (25). He kept leaving his own solos and throwing us in a jam session that makes "Black Dada Nihilismus" meet *Black Power*. What is the Power of Dada and what is the Dada of Power? How do we *sound* as we now try to *sound out* this visionary who gave us, in *In Our Terribleness*, the very insight "ideology and style are the same thing." Zora Neale Hurston wrote, "Folk-lore is not as easy to collect as it *sounds*" (18, emphasis added). Let us hope that the collectors who don't care about us but love the culture that our oppression produced will feel their hands burn as they even try to touch Baraka's jam session as it continues to *sound*. Hands off. Up against the wall. As Baraka wrote in "An Agony. As Now." "I am inside someone / who hates me. . . . It burns the thing / inside it. And that thing/ screams" (52-53). Of all the questions Baraka asked, the litany of "Who Who Who Who?" in "Somebody Blew Up America" continues to sound. The collectors want to collect the questions without confronting the simple, ugly answers. Baraka's question "How do you sound?" was (like Hurston's warning of the limits of the collection impulse when faced with folklore's impulse to keep on moving and sounding) a call for black aesthetics unbound, a black aesthetics that is as uncontainable as Baraka's stretching out of "It's nation time eye ime/ It's nation ti eye ime" ("It's Nation Time" 242).

The entire jam session of the Black Arts Movement was a *love supreme*. In the poem "Numbers, Letters," Baraka writes, "There is no guilt in love" (214). The Black Arts Movement was a collective love affair with blackness. Love can be revolutionary. Baraka hailed the black gaze (reminding black people that we have our own eyes) throughout the waves of his art. The black interior, for Baraka, was the black *mysterious* that produced a certain enchantment, a certain spell. When his love enchants the most, it is the heavy love that wants the beloved to do something. He counsels, in *In Our Terribleness*:

Pray that we are not part of the Western  
Empire, in soul.  
We know we are not.  
In Our Terribleness  
We know exactly  
Who We Are.

The lover clutches the hand of the beloved and wants something—a collective prayer.

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## PREFACE TO A TWENTY VOLUME CRITICAL NOTE For Amiri, Ghost of the Future

by Kimberly W. Benston

Amiri Baraka will for me be forever entwined with Larry Neal. I had read much of Baraka's work by the time I enrolled in Larry's class "Black Power and the Black Arts" in 1972, but Larry made vivid the living context in which so much of Baraka's most stirring work had its dramatic effect. In that class, the work wasn't embalmed as historical artifact or made precious as an accomplishment of literary tradition; it was burning with prescience, presence, and potency. It seemed, if anything, more urgent in its implications and possibilities than when it spilled into the Black Arts Movement from Baraka's fervid imagination. Paradoxically, Larry made us feel this powerful sense of immediacy by disclosing the intellectual fiber of Baraka's vision, the gritty awareness of modern Western culture subtending the incendiary pronouncements that startled us to attention: through Larry's insight and eloquence, we understood that Baraka wasn't just throwing homemade bombs at the cultural establishment; he was unraveling its dilapidated structure, porous intellectual brick by brittle sentimental brick, exposing its inner contradictions through that distinctive Barakan blend of verbal wizardry, sardonic repudiation, and (this being the part so easily overlooked, by celebrants as much as detractors) sturdy and knowing craft. Through Larry's learning, at once streetwise and book-smart, we grasped that Baraka's work was a kind of explosive kenning, as canny as it was uncanny.

In preparation for writing a chapter of my college senior thesis in the spring of 1974, I traveled to Detroit to see *Slave Ship* in Concept East's church-based community theater. When I arrived, I found that the entire church meeting hall had been transformed into a scene of horror, a vessel transporting an angry, bewildered, suffering, but ultimately resistant remnant of African society to what Baraka called "the grey hideous west," embodied in a single White Figure (played in white face by an African American actor). Throughout the play, the black cast brilliantly directed its vituperative critique and rebellious energies toward me, the lone white audience member, until the play crescendoed toward its ritual triumph as the black nation rose up in revolutionary triumph over the oppressor by dropping the White Figure's body at my feet. As I left the theater near midnight to walk Detroit's streets toward the train station for my trip back to Connecticut, I realized I had left the sanctuary of performance, the citadel of metaphor, for the hard authenticity of the real. Of such ironic dis-figurations were Baraka's works consistently composed: "revolution" could become real only if first rehearsed and thereby internalized and believed; reality could be transfused with rich cultural implication only if pressed forward by art, which melted into air once inscribed. "Performance" was for Baraka a trope for the real *within* the aesthetic, asserting its purchase on authenticity over and against the



written; but performance remained—in reality—yet another modality of imagination and desire. For Baraka, desire longed for its dissolution in action, a yearning that reflected the urge to transform the narratives of history into the Event of liberation: early he had written, “what is tomorrow / that it cannot come / today?” (“Valéry as Dictator,” *Dead Lecturer* 78).

From its first emanations, Baraka’s voice was pertinacious, demanding, insistently provocative, yet tinged with a note of untimely angst, as if slightly behind or ahead of the historical beat to which he relentlessly addressed himself. He spoke as an apostle of change and movement, but with a blend of impatience and tenderness that suggested a voice struggling to redeem the specters of inherited injustice without losing the present in lamentation and doubt: “A political art, let it be / tenderness . . . / Let the combination of morality / and inhumanity / begin” (“Short Speech to My Friends,” *Dead Lecturer* 29). At times, his writing seems entangled in the phantasmagoria and anxiety, the fear and obsession that come from looking without blinking at our history of national brutality and mendacity, risks he accepted as a requirement of his charge to iterate a promise of responsibility for the future. Baraka aimed always to “move with history,” but the underlining of this intention was an intuition of history’s disjuncture with time, which layered past, present, and future such that revolution could become its own specter, and the past could, it turns out, be where revolution lay waiting for us *in the tradition*: “The soul’s / warmth / is how / shall I say / it, / It’s own. A place / of warmth, for children wd dance there, / if they cd. If they / left their brittle selves behind” (“From An Almanac [3],” *Preface* 44). Baraka seemed ever ready to shed himself, to leave himself behind on his way to a fuller, less brittle mode of embodiment. That is perhaps why I sensed in his work from first to last something of the child, though a child with a very old soul, a specter of his best self, striving ever to will us with him into a liberated future, to begin again by coming back to that place of beginning that still haunts us, in the village from which ancestors were uprooted, in the slave ship, in every crevice of a shared history of cruelty and survival, and in the neighborhood where as children we learned the first steps of our tender, moral, and fiercely unyielding struggle for freedom:

*Back-at-You*

Bronze buckaroos  
and wild loop-garoos  
we all clatter-chatter  
in the wine-dark hours  
of a Village haunt  
a Southside joint  
our evol howls settling  
against the hard lawngreen  
native freewayscape

we all despise  
the frogeyed sirens  
beckoning, beckoning  
toward the triumph of our anger or abjection;  
we all reach,

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ironists and mimics at the core,  
for the canon  
as we herald some still deferred  
blowup of america's last empiric days

but I'm sure I copped a sight—  
in a furtive moment between  
the brilliant gestures and their exegetical recording—  
I'm certain that I saw  
shimmering in our mutual speculum  
two scared and exhilarated kids  
patched-kneed, knobby-headed  
clutching the b-ball  
darting frantically  
jerky rhythms—  
say, jackson, slap me five—  
terror-stricken and over-joyed  
head-faking in imitative style  
through the Chaos  
we called  
The Life

You turned inside-out  
making the histrionics of insurgence  
a bloodpulse of self-fashioning  
I inward  
to map your shifts and jukes

*Hey* brother—  
wanna go down  
to the yard  
and  
play a little  
one  
on  
one?

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## AMIRI BARAKA'S ADVENTURES WITH THE OUT & THE GONE

by William J. Harris

I want to explore Amiri Baraka's idea of the Out and the Gone which he articulates in "The Author's Introduction" to his 2007 short story collection, *Tales of the Out & the Gone*. The Out is "out of the ordinary" because the artists are "just not where most other people" are, and the Gone is "even farther 'Out,' crazier, wilder, deeper, a 'heavier' metaphor, a deeper parable" (10, 12). In essence, Baraka is striving to create an art which is as invocative and as original as bebop or free jazz: he wants to inhabit the same world where a great cutting-edge work can be called "Out to Lunch" (1964), a simple title declaring a radical aesthetic by the great alto saxophonist, Eric Dolphy. Amiri Baraka's aesthetic has always demanded the extreme, the outrageous, both in art and life. From boyhood on, in every art form he sought the Out and the Gone. Later these pleasures helped him shape his own art. Even though he loved the Out and the Gone for itself, he always felt the extreme was the best way to the real.

Therefore it is not surprising he ended up an avant-garde artist, a member of the Beat, Black Mountain, and New York Schools, collectively called the New American Poetry, a post-World War II predominately white innovative literary movement. He was close friends with the poets Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, Ed Dorn, and the grand old man of the group, Charles Olson. They provided examples of the out and the gone. However, before he sought the out and the gone in the post-war American avant-garde and such European writers as Kafka and Artaud, he found it in 1940s radio, science fiction, rhythm & blues, and 1950s commercial fantasy movies. In Newark in his teen years, this was the only avant-garde available.

In "In Memory of Radio" from *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961) the poet asks, "Who had ever thought of the divinity of Lamont Cranston? / Only Jack Kerouac, that I know of & me," (12). Lamont Cranston is The Shadow, radio crime fighter with hypnotic powers and a double identity. Only the Beat novelist Jack Kerouac and he understood the importance of this character for suggesting different possibilities. Radio taught him to pretend but didn't let him be a prophet poet, someone who could change the world with words. It is not until later when he is an adult reflecting back on the radio programs he says: "They taught us that evil needed to be destroyed . . . And I believed that—impressionable as I was at those young ages—but the trick is that I still believe it!" (*Autobiography* 21). He will have to move beyond this Beat vision to become a political poet, make a trip to Castro's Cuba to learn alternatives. Science fiction also provided an alternative world, an alternative way to look at the world. He read Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, A. E. van Vogt, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and the annual sci-fi anthologies. Baraka has

written sci-fi stories such as “Answers in Progress” where spacemen come looking for Art Blakey records, from the 1967 short story collection *Tales*, and “Heathen Technology at the End of the Twentieth Century” where people are “dismetaphored” by the powers that be so they can’t think. The antidote is “Trane and Aaron Douglas eight times a day” (*Tales of the Out & the Gone* 158). He has transported science fiction into the world of black culture.

In the short story “Screamers” from *Tales* he finds the out and the gone in rhythm and blues. In Newark the young Roi attends concerts featuring honkers, far out saxophonists, more interested in screeching, moaning, and honking than making beautiful music. In this story the representatives of this sound are Jay McNeely and Lynn Hope. “Jay had set a social form for the poor, just as Bird and Dizzy proposed for the middle class. On his back screaming was the Mona Lisa with the mustache, as crude and simple” (*Tales* 77). So McNeely created dada art out of rhythm and blues but more importantly Lynn Hope created revolt. Hope “playing that one scary note” leads “five or six hundred hopped-up” young blacks into the street where they confront the police (78, 79). “We screamed and screamed at the clear image of ourselves . . . Ecstatic, completed, involved in a secret communal expression. It would be the form of the sweetest revolution, to hucklebuck into the fallen capital, and let the oppressors lindy hop out” (79). The music is the instrument of extreme art and revolt, features Baraka incorporated into his own art.

1950s commercial fantasy movies, mostly Hollywood, provided Baraka with examples of nonrealistic symbolic art. Baraka’s 1964 play, “Dutchman,” his best known play, was inspired by Albert Lewin’s 1951 Hollywood movie, “Pandora and the Flying Dutchman,” starring James Mason and Ava Gardner, not by Richard Wagner’s opera. In *Conversations with Amiri Baraka* (1994) Baraka observes, “I know that film, as much as anything else, caused the idea of the ghost ship, the demon ship doomed to circle the world forever, to stick in my mind” (255). And the relatively recent short story “Conrad Loomis & the Clothes Ray” (1998) was influenced by “The Man in the White Suit,” also 1951, starring Alec Guinness. Both focus on the theme of capitalist greed getting in the way of cheap clothing. In the Baraka story the main character Loomis creates a Clothes Ray which “makes clothes, any kind of clothes out of light,” but his friend warns him capital won’t let him develop it (*Tales of the Out & the Gone* 188). Fantasy movies provide an ongoing vehicle for Baraka’s ideas.

In advanced bebop and free jazz he found the out and the gone around the same time he discovered the post war avant-garde. In *Black Music* (1968) Baraka said of John Coltrane, the great free jazz saxophonist: “he . . . shows us how to murder the popular song. To do away with weak Western forms. He is a beautiful philosopher” (174). Coltrane taught him to destroy Western forms, to destroy old forms and create new ones. But at that moment he was more interested in destruction than creation. However, with Monk he was more interested in creating new black ones. Baraka studied Thelonious Monk, the advanced Bebop pianist, at the Five Spot in the East Village in the summer and fall of 1957 and connected him with the new black music. Moreover, Monk was part of the black tradition, both new and old. As Robin Kelley in “What Amiri Baraka Taught Me About Thelonious Monk” says, Monk heard things in swing that sounded avant-garde to him. “Monk embraced these elements in his own playing and exaggerated them” (4). Monk could let Baraka be both black and avant-garde at the same time. In such stories as “A Monk Story” from *Tales of the Out & the Gone* where the protagonist talks with Monk

after Monk's death, Baraka transforms Monk's angular melodies and rhythms into his own phrasing, syntax, and metaphor. What Baraka said in *Black Music* about Monk's influence on Coltrane could be said about Monk's influence on Baraka: he brought "deepness and musical completeness" to his work (39). Yes, I mean "musical completeness." Monk helped Baraka to a richer music of words.

Part of outness is saying "no" to the mainstream. I will conclude with another quote from "The Author's Introduction." Returning to an old hero, Baraka states: "Sartre sd if you say something's wrong in the world and you don't know what it is, that's art. On the other hand, if you say something's wrong in the world and you do know what it is, that's social protest. At least that's what our enemies say. Fuck them!" (*Tales of the Out & the Gone* 13). Ending with "Fuck them" is classic Baraka: it is obscene vernacular, brilliant timing. Beautiful defiance. What has always been attractive about Baraka, right or wrong, is his beautiful defiance, that superiority to the man and/or capital, that saying No! in thunder.

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## AN INTERVIEW WITH NTOZAKE SHANGE

by Marlon B. Ross

*The interview was conducted on March 25, 2014, by phone between Charlottesville, VA, and Cheverly, MD.*

**ROSS:** What do you see as the lasting legacy of Baraka?

**SHANGE:** The lasting legacy of Baraka. Cullud brilliance! Let's see . . . one of the most important, I think, is his . . . his fifty-year dialogue with African American history. Even in the poetry there are references to historical characters and historical dates that are significant to us as a people. Once he mentions these dates and these people, it's up to us to go research and find out who they are. I know I've found out a lot about Black people just by looking up references in his poetry like Black Dada Nihilimus.<sup>1</sup> Oh yes. And his persistent engagement in vernacular art, his bringing doo wop and jazz and billboard posters and Negrophilia artifacts into his work allows us to have a relationship to our outside world that we are confronted with all the time and have no frame of reference for. He gives us a frame of reference for that which we call modern culture, modern vernacular world.

And the other part of his legacy is his . . . his *absolute* mastery of lyricism. There is such lyricism in Amiri Baraka's work that it makes one swoon. Even when he's talking about the ugliness of the ugly, or he's talking about vampires and Superman around them.<sup>2</sup> There is lyricism in the work that is unavoidable and *absolutely* possessive. To approach that would be a gift any poet to come should cherish.

**ROSS:** You said, it makes one "full"?

**SHANGE:** *Swoon.*

**ROSS:** That's so beautifully expressed. Is there a specific work or passage that you especially value or that comes to mind immediately when you think of Amiri Baraka?

**SHANGE:** Well, ahhh . . . "Beautiful Black Women" . . . [She cites some passages from the following 1969 poem:]

Beautiful black women, fail, they act. Stop them, raining.  
They are so beautiful, we want them with us. Stop them, raining.  
Beautiful, stop raining, they fail. We fail them and their lips

stick out perpetually, at our weakness. Raining. Stop them. Black queens. Ruby Dee weeps at the window, raining, being lost in her life, being what we all will be, sentimental bitter frustrated deprived of her fullest light. Beautiful black women, it is still raining in this terrible land. We need you. We flex our muscles, turn to stare at our tormentor, we need you. Raining. We need you, reigning, Black queen.

That's beautiful. When he does this with the Spirit House Movers singing doo wop . . . it is like an Ave Maria. It is just holy.<sup>3</sup>

**ROSS:** Ok, I'll have to look it up. It's about looking . . . the experience of seeing?

**SHANGE:** The experience of seeing is really black women in the world as a historical and metaphorical reality.

**ROSS:** It's not a passage that I've seen cited frequently and it's probably one that we need to begin to cite.

**SHANGE:** I hope you will, yes.

**ROSS:** Is there . . . I know there is . . . but I will ask the question. Is there a dialogue between your own celebrated work and that of Baraka's?

**SHANGE:** I would hope so. I hope so because Amiri Baraka is essential to understanding me. I hope. That's one of my hopes. I've built my work on my understanding of his work. And one of the requirements, one of the things I'm adamant about is representing history through my work, so that I make references to seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century realities in works that are about twenty-first-century characters. And even in *Sassafrass* [her 1982 first novel *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*] there are those slaves who are ourselves, who accompany Indigo on her adolescent journey. And *Sassafrass* and *Cypress* are visited by blues characters in full regalia, characters who become reality for them, even though they are visions. They are as real to them as their mother is to them through her letters. So I try to use the techniques that Amiri used in different ways. For instance, in *Liliane* [Shange's 1995 third novel *Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter*], there is a chapter about Roxie, when Roxie's parents' house is under siege by the nightriders. And instead of being victims of the nightriders, Roxie's father has gathered up all these rifles and all these black men to defend the house—and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund who are having an event at the house that evening. The scene has the men at the parapets in the house ready to fire on the nightriders.

**ROSS:** That goes back to what you said earlier about his reference to the historical reality because that represents a very realistic historical scene that happened many, many times. And also that you see them as blues prose characters, as blues people in prose in that novel.

**SHANGE:** *Blues People* [Baraka's groundbreaking 1963 study that traces the history and culture of African Americans through the history of the music they create] is a wonderful work. Everybody should read that.

**ROSS:** It's one of my favorite texts; it's so foundational.

**SHANGE:** It's built from air. It's constructed from the vibrations that make sound. It's an absolute tribute and embodiment of black music.

**ROSS:** Let's see . . . Do you have any personal anecdotes or experiences with his work—as we know you have—or with Baraka himself that you would like to speak about?

**SHANGE:** Hmmm . . . Well, I always tried to talk to him about the poems in *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note* [1961, his first volume of poems]. I always tried to talk to him about some poems in there because I found some poems in there and in *The Dead Lecturer* [1964, his second poetry volume] that are fundamental to my understanding of the romantic poem.

**ROSS:** Ahhh . . . that's interesting. That's before what people like to characterize as his Black Power period though I'm not sure that there was ever a period that was before Black Power. [Laughter]

**SHANGE:** Exactly.

**ROSS:** And you talked with him about the nature of how he composed romantic lyrics.

**SHANGE:** Right, and then he would blush.

**ROSS:** [Laughter] That is great! Anything else that you want to add to that?

**SHANGE:** Well, I always feel very connected to him when I review the chapters about Hyacinth and Liliane. Hyacinth has post-traumatic stress because of racism and national oppression Amiri talks about. And she's in a quiet room in a mental institution. And she sees nineteen million angry slaves coming after somebody she's hallucinating about. It always reminds me . . . it feels to me that's something Amiri would approve of. There are nineteen million angry slaves chasing after evildoers.

**ROSS:** That's a very powerful image. The reawakening of the ancestors in a way. Very powerful. I just want to give you an opportunity if there are any last comments you want to make about Baraka or his work.



**SHANGE:** I know Amiri would say we need to read Du Bois and Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown. But I would say any student of the twentieth century from any angle from any genre or discipline would have to read Amiri Baraka to have a sense of the depth of character and the depth of struggle of the African American in North America.<sup>4</sup>

**ROSS:** Wow! And in putting it that way it also reminds me of a similarity I would make between your work and his, and that is the incredible range across genres: drama, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction—all of them there together.

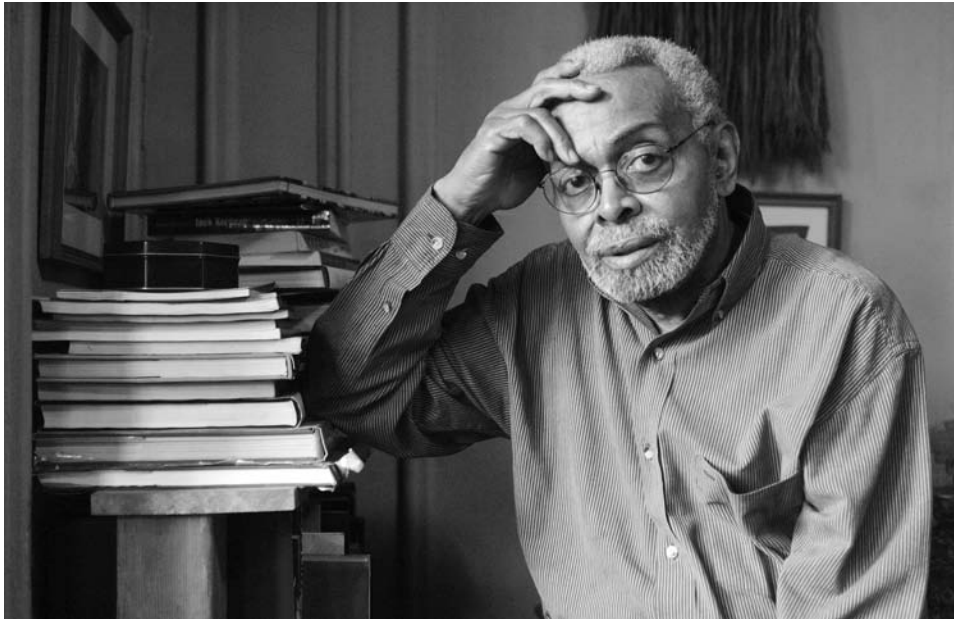
**SHANGE:** Right, well, I try to be as broad a writer as he is, and to make myself work hard. That's one thing he really, really believed in; he believed in hard work and study. And I believe in hard work and study. What I don't know, I'm always trying to find out. And I'm always trying to use it somehow or another in the work I do.

**ROSS:** They say 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration.

**SHANGE:** Right, right.

#### NOTES

1. "Black Dada Nihilimus" is a poem published in Baraka's second volume of verse, *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), when he was known as LeRoi Jones. Baraka also recited the poem to instrumentals on the 1964 debut album of the New York Art Quartet, an avant-garde jazz group of which he was a semi-member.
2. The vampire is an image that Baraka uses especially in his later work, as in his 2008 essay, "Forward Is Where We Have To Go," where he, in outlining a progressive agenda for a Barack Obama administration, refers to Newark Mayor Cory Booker as one who "comes on like he thinks he is Will Smith in *I Am Legend*, a single human scientist trapped in a city full of vampires."
3. This is a reference to the studio recording, "Black & Beautiful, Soul & Madness," by Amiri Baraka and the Spirit House Movers, released in 1968 on Baraka's Jihad label. In the opening track, Baraka recites "Beautiful Black Women" over the Spirit House Movers' rendition of the chorus to "Ooo Baby, Baby," the 1965 Motown hit single by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles.
4. After the interview, Shange mentioned two further texts, which she considers "the most exquisite volumes he every published": *Home: Social Essays* (1965) and *Tales* (1967) short story collection.



*Photo by Ruth Fremson / The New York Times / Redux*

**Amiri Baraka at his home in Newark, N.J., Jan. 4, 2007. Baraka, a poet and playwright of pulsating rage, whose long illumination of the black experience in America was called incandescent in some quarters and incendiary in others, died Jan. 9, 2014. He was 79.**

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*from* CAMPTOWN

*by C. S. Giscombe*

The shape of this creature's head somewhat resembled a Negro's. The head was higher at the back than at the front. The nose was broad and flat. The lips and chin protruded farther than its nose. But the hair that covered it, leaving bare only the parts of its face around the mouth, nose and ears, made it resemble an animal as much as a human.

—from William Roe's Affidavit,  
*his description of an encounter in the woods near*  
*Tete Jaune Cache, British Columbia, in 1955*

1.

Flesh or fable, either one, far be it from me. Please yourself. Hardheaded, we came along from the lowest point or field—imperceptible now—and I imagined, as we drew closer, that perhaps another monster could walk over, similarly. But Camptown's almost untenable, it's barely even haunted. Whose fault is that? *Form's* harsh, *form's just* the noise. A real monster could slip across a bridge in the wee hours, when traffic's not heavy, from one place or another to Camptown. Please yourself. I was a ship on the stormy ocean—stay off me, brother, I might *be* a monster. But neither will I judge you.

2.

Camptown's just dichotomy, no accident, sister—no argument, either, at the core or anywhere. Dogs know what dogs want. Camptown's noisy—parts are all out of proportion—but that that makes it "dangerous" is just a claim or just denial. What's loose in such? The smart money's on a walking ambush—bare,

divergent—and no part of that high comedy being less pronounced  
 than others. But a gentleman's definite in his passage, his  
 gait knowledgeable, if obvious.  
 The devil's in the bushes.  
 Have all the parts speak then because  
 I can't be the stated ha'nt of boulevards.  
 (I will level with you, Camptown Lady, I *think* this could dwarf us both.)

3.

The corporate limit's  
 a *real* deal and Camptown's  
 "different"—camp is a project and town's just impatient, a supply-  
 chain bottle-neck, only public. The press  
 of the public is the sharpest incline. I'm trying to *re*-think  
 the curse. Intimacy? The "backwards" intimacy of the hills. In town,  
 the boys were jumping. One  
 terrain, two terrains.

4.

If you're listening for it,  
 you'll hear the ass-end everywhere in town—the hue  
 and cry having crossed over and "now" crossing back.  
 You can take freely from your own garden, if you see  
 what I mean—"borrow," double-up, trade on the truth. Remember it out  
 loud and tell them, if they ask you. It's just  
 vocalization, some sort of restatement—the idea's  
*always* been that noise itself passes  
 just as much as it carries.

5.

Bet on contingency. I would *be* the low haunt, or  
 I'd be a door that survives the house—that is, I'd sizzle between  
 the alliances. Camptown begs  
 the question—almost what or like what?—of having to rise  
 above it as though it were not there to need to be risen above. A monster  
 comes to loathe her “poet” lover. She might ask,  
 What foolishness is this opposite me?

6.

*What again is a monster?*  
 The story's navigable up to a point. All day,  
 —and all night long—one can't help but coincide  
 with the territory, or with how  
 you're “characterized.”  
 We raced all day,  
 and a day is full of parts.  
 Nighttime came  
 and here came doom over  
 the bridge to please you. Is  
 there *another* hell? Difference carries  
 the price of humor (in the story of any encounter). Similar,  
 I thought—development was everywhere, burgeoning town creeping  
 out into the desert, up the hill. Camptown's still low.

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## HER LOT

*by Camille Dungy*

After the long winter, the gray and white  
geese did not return. The compost  
turned around its tunnels and their worms.  
There were snowdrops and, soon enough,  
yolk-eyed daffodil. She hadn't expected  
the lot to be this lonely. The swing still  
swung where he hung it on the sturdiest  
branch of the hybridized elm. No disease  
threatened this arbor. No, everything  
in the yard looked just as healthy  
as before. Except, groping for koi, raccoons  
had done too much damage. She'd loved  
the pond. Loved it since he dug it  
and brought her out of the house to see  
the lotus and the splashing little fall  
of his own design. But all those,  
too, she'd had to cover up with sod.

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## MEDITATION

*by Camille Dungy*

Sit quietly long enough and the river  
I hear will be the course  
of my own blood. Everything I know  
I have to forget: the champ of lichen  
chewing down boulder and the unsustainable  
thrill of the spectrum  
at magenta and lapis, those  
and air's heft, the oppression  
of fluorescence. Marrow,  
proximity, its loss: the world  
gives us too much, truly, to bear.  
Science says everything  
must quiet so we can continue. Rather, we must  
quiet everything. I hardly feel  
the cords I've worn so often  
I don't notice anymore the stain from the time  
when my uncle swiveled from sink  
to cupboard as he'd done daily  
seven decades, and failed  
to see me standing with a full cup.  
*Forget it. It's fine,* I said. Distracted  
by the heat of surprise, practically  
dancing, I reached around what I now remember  
was the heart and lung part of his body.  
I am remembering the muscles  
that built his body, but not  
what he said, not the texture  
of the towel I must have needed.  
I remember everyone laughing, even  
Mother, the sound of whose approaching  
steps I can't recall. Mother chose  
maple for her brother's coffin and,  
because she did not want us

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## C A L L A L O O

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to have to think about it, for her own. These things  
are true, but I don't let them vex me  
most of the time. Let me be  
more specific. The maple floorboards  
of that old house, their vibrancy  
protected by a nearly impenetrable finish:  
I never thought about that floor.



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## EPITAPH: FRAGMENT

*by Phillip B. Williams*

I made myself into a map for you  
to find yourself. My body a destination a-swell  
with topographies that, with strategy, could be  
placed anywhere. Look at the back of my knees  
for gorges, at a tooth's edge for danger.  
After rearranging me, try to teach me  
my self again. Even my face is foreign  
with a language I never knew.  
Falling to you. What belonged to my spine's  
porcelain cups stacked on their shelves of sinew  
belongs to your hand and your hand, belongs.  
It only so briefly feels like war  
then later like routine. Fold me. I am yet irreparable.

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## IGNIS FATUUS

*by Phillip B. Williams*

He is one of many points of light  
that seem, at first, distant enough  
to lead me away from my loneliness, and toward  
the flourish-stillness-flourish of the heart  
when told *imitate the varied stars that*  
*have failed to guide us; now imitate everything*  
*beneath the stars.*

~

But who is he? Phantom, filament at its brightest  
before blowing out, pattern made pattern  
because it was broken like a heart  
can never be but say it anyway?  
None of those. Deceit had a simpler face: violet  
all around, every hemisphere familiar until turned.

~

The stars and what lied beneath them have fled, spectral. What little  
light poked through the branches has led you here. Lie down. I've  
tried to be kind to you by keeping the sharpest instrument to myself.

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## TRUTH IN FICTION, UNTRUTHS IN MEMOIR

by Elizabeth Nunez

For the epigraph of my memoir *Not for Everyday Use*, I quote a poem by one of the finest poets and essayists in the English-speaking Caribbean, the late Wayne Brown. The poem is entitled "A Letter from Elizabeth." I was fortunate to have had a long, close friendship with Wayne, so I assumed the poem was meant for me and referred to a letter I had written to him, though I must add a caveat. Wayne always called me by my childhood nickname Betty and often addressed his letters, and, later, emails to me with "Dear Bets." Still, the poem seemed totally suited to me, the words in the letter very much what I would have said, or at least thought. The poem begins with a quote from the letter: "Would you believe that I don't like to think / back on those times, primarily / because then I feel really sad / really feel it deep down?"

If the letter was mine, if I had written it, why then did I decide to write a memoir? Why was I willing to look back on those times when I knew remembering would make me feel "sad, really feel it deep down"?

I am a novelist. I have written eight novels and am well on my way to a final draft of a ninth. So why that detour to a memoir?

Perhaps I should begin by explaining my process. I write straddling that nerve-wracking, but exhilarating, line between knowing and unknowing. I may have some sense of my story but no idea how it will turn out. I begin with a group of words that tells me everything and yet nothing. It is always a phrase or a sentence that has been rolling around in my head and when I put it to paper I know it is just right, I know it is the beginning of a novel. It tells me from whose point of view I will tell my story; it tells me tense, tone, mood, and I am both liberated and trapped. I have made my stroke on my canvas and it commits me to a design, to a creation, that I must follow, directed by every other stroke I make.

*Prospero's Daughter* begins with the first line of a letter by Ariana, a character inspired by Shakespeare's Ariel. She writes: "He tell a lie if he say those two don't love one another." I knew right away that "He" would be my Prospero, and that "those two" would be Caliban and Virginia, and that somehow I was on my way to creating a romantic story between them. I could tell that the novel would have multiple points of view, each character giving his/her version of what happened. What I did not know was what the characters would do or say, or what would happen to them in the end. I began *Not for Everyday Use* with these three sentences: "The phone rings. It is two in the afternoon. I am at home, in my house in New York." I knew with this beginning that I would be writing a present tense story and would face the challenge of balancing a back story with the trajectory of a narrative set in the present. Because that first line established a first person point of view that was not a narrative persona, but actually me, I knew I was about to write a true story about

my life. What I did not know, as I did not know when I wrote that first line of *Prospero's Daughter*, was what I would discover.

The thrill of discovery is one of the main reasons I write. Of course, in order to discover something, some place, some idea, one has to be willing to travel in uncharted waters, sometimes without a guide, and to rely on faith—call it the Muses—that you will find your way to the end and to the truth. For, after all, isn't that why writers write? They want to know the truth, the truth about our human condition, the truth about the meaning of our lives.

*You don't know what you think until you write what you think you think.* This has been my mantra. I once heard Norman Mailer say that he writes to find the answer to a question that has been hounding him. The same is true for me. It is always a question about something I feel passionate about or an idea that I do not fully understand. After that first line, I surrender myself to characters I place in a world I create—a setting of time and place—and release them to chart their own way through the maze of a plot that their actions more or less dictate. Essential to my story is the character's desire; I suppose my equivalent of Mailer's question. My characters desire something—it may be material gain or enlightenment—and their search for that something leads them to a certain place and me to a certain discovery.

I place much trust in the power of fiction to reveal truths not only to the reader, but also to the unsuspecting writer. The question that was troubling me when I wrote my first novel, *When Rocks Dance*, was why my family, like many others who lived in the south of Trinidad at the turn of the twentieth century, had not held on to their land where oil was eventually discovered? I was unprepared for the truths I discovered in the process of writing this novel. These truths were not about the cocoa economy nor about the beginnings of the oil industry, but, rather, the truths about the effect of colonialism on the psyche of the colonized that resulted in the denigration of an aesthetic that devalued African cultures and left the colonized unsure of their identity and history. For my second novel, *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, I thought I was writing a fictionalized version of my early years in Wisconsin on scholarship at a Catholic College; my characters led me to another truth. It was to the discovery that letting go of attachments can lead to freedom.

I can give more examples from my novels, from *Bruised Hibiscus*, for example, that was the most emotionally difficult story for me to write, but which took me to a clearer understanding of the human capacity for cruelty and the ways in which emotional scars can cause us to inflict pain on others. It's a novel about the dark centers of human sexual relationships, anodyne as they sometimes appear to be.

True, memoir can provide the reader with facts, but do we discover more truths and learn more about a writer's ideas and her artistic vision from her memoir than we do from her fiction? At the end of her most recent collection of short stories, *Dear Life*, Nobel Laureate Alice Munro gives us four snippets which she says are "autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact" (255). Munro's insertion of "sometimes" suggests a cautionary note about the reliability of memoir or autobiography. But does the reader need this autobiographical information to appreciate or understand the stories Munro creates? Munro's stories are rich with characters who, like her, were raised in rural Ontario. What interests us is what Munro has to say about these ordinary characters whose lives are upended by seemingly ordinary events in this ordinary setting. The thirteen fic-

tive stories in *Dear Life* tell us more about the human condition, about our flaws and our triumphs, our human capacity for generosity, unkindness, love, despair, and hope than the autobiographical pieces that follow them.

So if I believed in the power of fiction to reveal the fundamental truths about our human condition, why turn to memoir? Have not all my novels more or less already made use of incidents in my life? The answer, of course, is yes and no. Yes, because what drives me to spend those long hours alone in my room, in front of a heartless blank computer screen, a demanding computer screen that will grow dark if I do not feed it with words, is some experience deeply felt, either my own or the experience of others with whom I have empathized. I create a world with players who I hope will bring me greater clarity, who will lead me to the truth. But no to the question about the autobiographical nature of my fiction because the contrivances of the art of fiction allow me distance from my personal experiences. It is the necessary aesthetic distance the writer needs in order to transform the ordinary, the mundane, into a work of art, offering at the same time cover for the writer, the veil of illusion behind which she can safely hide herself from the glare of the public eye, and—this is more personal—from the glare of perhaps disturbing introspection.

Critics tell me that at the heart of my fiction about the immigrant experience is the constant tension between the mother and the daughter, the mother who remained in the homeland and the daughter who emigrated. Well, of course, that is my story. But what exactly is the truth about that story? My fiction ends with the resolution that is palatable to my reading audience and to me: There may have been losses but there have always been gains. The daughter may have been separated from her mother, but she has landed in America, the country of opportunities where the rags to riches story can be realized. Then I write a memoir and I am hurled to a more distant past. I am five years old, one of my parents' five children. (My parents will eventually have eleven children). The eldest, my sister Yolande, is nine; the youngest, my brother Wally, is two. My father has gone to London on a fellowship. He has gone by ship, the way one travelled in those days. It takes him three weeks to get to London. My mother misses him. She is so unhappy she hardly touches her food; she pays little or no attention to us. Eventually, unable to withstand the pain of her separation from her husband, she decides to go to London to be with my father. My mother is terrified of the sea; she is terrified of being in a cabin alone, and yet she takes that trip in the worst of the seasons when the Atlantic is an interminable expanse of roiling waves.

Is this where my deep-seated feelings of abandonment took root? Were all my stories about the daughter's resentment of her mother who had happily sent her to America and not asked her to return actually a cover for the true source of the tension between my mother and me? Would I have made this discovery of such a painful truth had I continued to camouflage my pain behind the fictive characters I created? And yet I ended that chapter in my memoir uncomfortable with the truth. I write: "I look back and realize how young [my parents] were. My mother was thirty-one, my father thirty-five. They were in love, having the time of their lives. Life is short. I'm glad they had this time together." But is that how I really felt "deep down," really feel now? Do writers still dissimulate when they write memoir? Is the truth more accurately revealed when, paradoxically, it is camouflaged in fiction?

But there are the interests of the publishing industry, which can often limit the writer's portrayal of truth in fiction. Most writers at one time or another have received the sort of letter from an editor that says something along the lines of: "We loved your story. You certainly have talent, but I'm afraid this is not the best house for your work." Translation: "We can't see a market for your novel and don't think we will be able to make a profit from it." If you are a writer who is black, the true translation is: "We can't see a market for your work because black people don't read or buy books. The readers of fiction are white women who are interested only in stories that reflect the experiences of white people. They are uninterested, or, perhaps, more likely, uncomfortable, with stories about the black experience."

In my novel *Boundaries*, the fictive publisher decides to take the chance of publishing a literary novel by a black writer, but she will do so, she tells her idealist editor, with a cover jacket that she believes will attract the reader, that is, the black reader. On the jacket is a picture of a black couple locked in passionate embrace. The man is handsome, "with smoldering eyes, moist full lips shadowed by a thick mustache. His shirt and pants cling to his muscular frame outlining chiseled pecs and taut buttocks. The woman in his arms is equally chiseled. Full, firm breasts strain against the buttons on her tight shirt and spill out in perfectly shaped orbs . . ." The idealistic editor is offended but the publisher reassures her that the book will be a bestseller, for the cover is simply a poster to attract "the right" audience. The experience was mine, though not as brazen. A cover was put on one of my novels that I considered inappropriate and deceptive. True, the main character in my novel is a married man, who, in spite of his intentions, falls in love with another woman. But the question I had been pursuing was larger than the complexities of adultery. It was the lesson contained in Genesis: We cannot have the Apple *and* the Garden. We must choose.

So the pursuit of truth in fiction can sometimes be compromised by the financial interests and biases of the publishing industry. Originally my novel *Bruised Hibiscus* ended with the murder of Rosa, an ostensibly white woman. It was the appropriate conclusion of the novel, both in terms of its narrative arc and the truth of the point I wanted to make: for racism to flourish, one needs to create a barrier between the self and the Other. The man who murders Rosa does so because she represents all the white people who have oppressed him. He does not need to know her. Indeed, if he knew her, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for him to kill her the way he did.

My editor was unhappy with this ending. She could not sell my novel with such a grim conclusion, she said. (Actually, that word "grim" also became the reason another editor gave me for rejecting my second novel *Beyond the Limbo Silence*.) Eventually, my editor and I came to a compromise. I could keep my chapter about Rosa's brutal murder, but I had to add another chapter that offered hope and redemption so that the reader could remain in the safe cocoon where there is justice in the world, where the good are always rewarded and the bad punished.

Still, even given these limitations, I am convinced of the extraordinary power of the story to reveal fundamental truths to the writer and the reader. I have written scholarly articles about Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but it was only in writing the novel *Prospero's Daughter*, following fictive characters through plot lines their thoughts and actions dictated, that I released all the negative associations I had been taught to make between Caliban and a person like me from a former British colony who was expected to be grateful for the systems of law, education, and government the British had established.

No one doubts the importance of point of view to determine the reliability of the narrator and the truth of the story. Few, too, doubt that Shakespeare generally puts his most lyrical lines in the mouths of the characters he most admires, but though it turns out that some of the most lyrical lines in *The Tempest* are said by Caliban, scholars continue to portray Caliban as Prospero presents him to us, a creature “Which any print of goodness wilt not take.” Perhaps this is why I find Adam Kirsch’s praise of Derek Walcott so deliberately intellectually disingenuous. Praising Walcott as a Prospero-like magician for the magic Walcott weaves in his poetry about the beauties of the sea, Kirsch cites Caliban’s lyrical lines without attribution: “[Be not afeard: the] isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not” (75). He leaves the unsuspecting reader to conclude that it is Prospero, not Caliban, who says these lines. He does not reveal that it is Caliban who calms the fears of the Europeans Trinculo and Stephano from whose perspective the island is a place of black clouds, loud thunder, and smelly fish. That it is Caliban who is the poet.

Yet in spite of the power of fiction, it seems to me that there are some truths that can best be told in memoir, though, admittedly, there may be similar constraints on the memoirist. It is not the publisher who is guilty here; it is often the memoirist who wittingly or unwittingly still continues to reframe the truth. Many of my novels, for example, tell stories about the effect of systemic racism, but I found that depictions of incidents of systemic racism were more compelling when they were based on actual facts. In my memoir *Not for Everyday Use* I question the assertions made by Malcolm Gladwell in his wildly popular book *Outliers*. Gladwell declares: “We pretend that success is exclusively a matter of individual merit. But there’s nothing in any of the histories we’ve looked at so far to suggest things are that simple. These are stories, instead, about people who were given a special opportunity to work really hard and seized it . . .” (67). I take on Gladwell’s contention, arguing that I doubt very much whether the parents of a black Steve Jobs would have had the option of the “special opportunity,” which white Steve Jobs had, of moving from an area where the school district was troubling to an area where he could go to a better school. I give the real life comparison between the possibilities available to my ex, an African American who can trace his family back to three hundred years in America, and my colleague’s father who was a fairly recent arrival from Eastern Europe and spoke a heavily accented English. Both my ex and my friend’s father wanted a house near the water in Long Island. The realtor took my ex to a house on Long Beach Road, prettily named, but forty minutes from the first hint of water. My friend’s father was able to purchase a house in Merrick, not on the beach, but on a canal that led to the open water. Both men paid \$34,000 for their houses and sold them at approximately the same time, twenty-five years later. My ex got \$138,000 for his house, my friend’s father close to one million dollars. I think these hard facts more persuasively counter such prevailing mistruths that this generation of white Americans, even recent arrivals from Europe, do not continue to gain economic advantages from America’s history of slavery and Jim Crow racism.

I do not know if I will write another memoir. Though I am committed to the pursuit of truth, I realize too that the facts the memoirist records are those she remembers and how she remembers them, which may not necessarily be what actually occurred. Fiction allows more freedom of exploration and interpretation for both writer and reader, and if one is as fortunate as I am to be published by an intrepid publisher, then one is liberated to search for truth through story, no matter how grim the ending may turn out to be. It is the small publisher who is taking this sort of risk today, the one who indeed needs the financial



returns but is prepared to delay these gains in the hope of encouraging literary talent and the public's taste for well-written stories. Johnny Temple, the publisher of Akashic Books, and his brilliant senior editor Ibrahim Ahmad are two such guardians of the truth in fiction, believing as I do in the integrity of the story well told, characters well drawn, and prose that delivers an artistic vision that entertains, even startles, but always illuminates.

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## ASK WHERE I'VE BEEN

*by Jamaal May*

Let fingers roam  
the busy angles  
of my shoulders.  
Ask why skin dries  
in rime-white patches, cracks  
like a puddle stepped on. Ask  
about the scars that interrupt  
blacktop—the keloid on my bicep,  
a fogged window. Ask how many  
days passed before the eyebrow healed  
after a metal spike was torn out,  
uprooted lamppost in a tornado.  
Ask about the tornado  
of fists. The blows landed. If you can  
watch it all—the spit and blood frozen  
against snow, you can probably tell  
I am the too-narrow road winding out  
of a crooked city built of laughter,  
asphalt, and abandon.  
Ask only if you can watch streetlights bow,  
bridges arc, and power lines sag,  
and still believe what matters most  
is not where I bend  
but where I am growing.

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## IT SHAKES US STILL

*by Jamaal May*

After the Baptist retreat cartoons  
and health class slideshow insisted  
sex was only good for courting AIDS  
and babies and pustules, a fingernail  
traced across chest earthquakes us still,  
and the gods still build hearts  
like hearths in homeless shelters,  
a permanent place for the temporary  
to gather and liquefy the frost on their hands.  
An ungloved hand in winter slid under shirt  
shakes the ice free. No one believes me  
when I say his ten fingers, together,  
are the smallest cult or choir gathered  
to worship the smallest demon or deity  
except for the pastor. This makes sense to him  
the way animation always will to me,  
even at an age when time has hurled  
all its hand grenades at the imagination.  
And because this is where I learned  
the incorrect color of hearts  
and that giving a hug means taking one back,  
I'll always believe the bodily destruction  
that waits at the bottom of a gorge  
for those of us stupid enough to look down  
isn't stupid enough to try to kill  
the coyote in our blood that made us leap.

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## THE RISK

*by Myronn Hardy*

You ponder grass.  
Blades which aren't weapons    green  
through process    natural

though without corrosion.  
Is this a reaction to my sight    something  
wild in pupils    shadow too pitch?

The car I'm in is fast    silver.  
The other two inside    I don't care  
talking about snow in a few weeks.

The first snow a daughter  
will see on Christmas    no bikinis this year.  
Violet sky    copper

fingers are clouds fading to ice.  
Look up. Look at me    the danger  
this tranquil man has become.

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## REPORTS OF THE SAINTS

*by Toi Derricotte*

Every messenger from the other side  
says first:  
(getting us ready like a good lover):  
Do not be afraid.

They drowse over us  
Like spaceships;  
Or they float up  
like orange jellyfish.

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## TRUTH IS FORM

*by Toi Derricotte*

Her mother wouldn't let her touch  
The classics. Wrapped in plastic,  
She kept the family treasures clean.  
Our mothers teach us what we want.  
Our bodies refuse to stay thin.

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## THE RETURN

*by Toi Derricotte*

The abused child is always back there  
Steering the bus. I want to write  
As if there's nothing between us,  
A membrane that can be pulled  
Away like a magician's scarf.

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## WRITE

*by Toi Derricotte*

Writing is the same  
As living: Do it breathing  
In and out fully.  
Each second you can begin  
Again to know who you are.

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## SNOWED-IN IN BOSTON

*by Toi Derricotte*

Changes the idea of Kore:  
Ever want to disappear  
Underground for a winter  
Without being knocked in the head by a demon?



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## ESCAPE

*by Toi Derricotte*

We live in  
Difficult zones.  
You can let yourself out  
Of hell. You can burn  
Any old place.

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## ADVANCE

*by Toi Derricotte*

They process away,  
Lucille, Ruth, Maxine—the light  
Through glass through water,  
The news with the wall on top of it  
Or to the left of the rungs of the chair.

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## DIALOGUE

*by Toi Derricotte*

I'm not a purist, the President claims  
As he chews a Nicorette. A soldier  
Is stationed in a small room  
To guard his suit, which hangs  
On a bathroom door on Air Force One.

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## AN OLD CHERRY TREE

*by Toi Derricotte*

Cracked straight through the middle,  
A crocodile with grey-black warts.  
A few delicate pink skins  
Float, nearly bodiless.

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## HOTEL ROOM

*by Toi Derricotte*

Hotel room:  
Curtains buried like a seed  
Snow melts soft nightlight  
Invisible drawn pillows  
On the other side writing

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## SNOWED-IN IN BOSTON

*by Toi Derricotte*

Snowed-in in Boston:  
A bright self-sufficiency,  
A flamingo, a  
Contentment in shockingly  
Iridescent blue-green plumes.

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## REVOLUTION

*by Martha Southgate*

Sometimes I can still feel the gun in my hand. The smoothness of the oiled stock, the surprising heaviness of it, the startling force as it fired, the smell of gunpowder in my nose. I always thought it would be easy to squeeze the trigger. But it wasn't. The resistance, in fact, was fierce.

What I miss most is my name. I lie awake at night and sigh it out into the air like a song—Retha, Retha, Retha. I can hear my mother calling me home on those August firefly nights when I'd stay out late racing the boys—and winning usually. "Retha, time to come in now." When I came in, whining and groaning that I never got to do anything, she'd say, "You know I can't have you running the streets at all hours. Just 'ause these little knuckleheads do doesn't mean I'm going to let you." Then she'd brush my face roughly with her hand. "Lord, child, you look like who-shot-John-and-don't-do-it-again. Get upstairs to that tub." That's when I knew that she wasn't really angry. That's when I knew she loved me. Her hand on my face, my name in her mouth. The sound of my name. I still listen for it. But there is only silence.

\* \* \*

My mother was twenty-one when I was born. It was a difficult birth and she couldn't have any more children after me. She always said she didn't mind—"You more than enough work, child"—she would say to me, laughing, but I wondered sometimes. I'd see her giving babies long, considering looks in the grocery store, like she'd rather buy them than a can of tuna. My father died when I was ten. Hit by a car crossing the street on his way to work. The clearest memory I have of him was the way he'd swing me up in the air when I was little. I remember the blue sky pressed against my eyes and the deep rumble way that he'd laugh as he tossed me. I know they loved each other. I know that my mother poured everything she had into the house once he was gone. She filled it with knickknacks; awful little brown-skinned china dolls ordered from the backs of magazines; plastic slipcovers on the furniture; small, scratchy hand-loomed rugs everywhere. They choked me. They only made me want to get away, to be someplace airy, to live in a house with one chair, sand on the floor. Someplace clean. Now I live almost this way, like a monk or a hermit. But I think of her cluttered house so often. I think she'd be pleased.

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It takes a long time for news to get here. I didn't hear about Huey being killed until sometime after it happened. I got a copy of *USA Today* at the Novotel—three days afterward. It had that picture of him in the rattan chair with the beret and the gun. It was like a knife in my flesh. I killed for him, for what he stood for. When I close my eyes, I can still see the surprise in the eyes of the man I shot—so blue!—growing wide with shock, then flat as the life went out of him. Seconds before he died, he knew it was going to happen. He was resigned to it, ready. There was no more fear. I could see it. I could see right into his heart, into his spirit. It was the only time I've ever really felt close to a white person.

Deciding to run didn't come right away. In those days, it was so hard to think. There was only one person I could trust. Do you know what that means? People say it all the time—"Can I trust you?"—but they don't know what it means not to trust. It means the ground under your feet is flying over your head half the time. It means your heart beating crazy to come out of your chest every time the phone rings. It means hearing the doorbell and fully expecting to look into the endless darkness of a shotgun barrel when you open the door. It means the man who is moving inside you one minute, telling you how good it feels and making you gasp with joy, could take your head in his hands and break your neck with one swift snap the next.

\* \* \*

I trusted Jesse. Only Jesse. When I first laid eyes on him at Howard, I thought, "Well, now if God was a black man, that's what he'd look like." Blaspheming thoughts, my mother would have said. But Jesse made you think of things like that. He was six feet tall, with another two inches in height from his afro. He was the color of black coffee and he had a beautiful mouth; I used to love the salty warm taste of his skin. He worked construction the summer before school started so his hands were strong and roughened and his back muscles were visible even through his shirt. I loved to lie with him in his dorm room running my hands over his body, nibbling and kissing and licking him. "Girl, you crazy," he'd laugh and make like he was going to push me off. But he never did. "Crazy about you. That's all," I'd say, grinning. That's all we did then, was laugh. Laugh and make love until we couldn't move.

Coming back to school our junior year, things were different. Jesse grew his hair out even longer. He read Mao's *Little Red Book* and carried it around with him all the time. He stopped paying attention in class; he was rejecting bourgeois ideals, he said. So did I. I grew my hair out, a defiant crown around my head. Jesse said I looked like an African queen. He said that revolution was coming, that power only came from the barrel of a gun. He said we could only be nonviolent with those who were nonviolent with us. He said he was going to die for the people because he was going to live for the people. I didn't know until we left school and moved to Chicago that he didn't make up all this stuff himself; that those words weren't his. I didn't feel cheated when I found out though. I felt sure then, that we were part of something bigger than us. Something we all had to use the same words for.

When I told my mother I was dropping out of Howard to work with the Panthers and fight for the people, her face went ragged with pain. She yelled, she hectored, she begged.



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## C A L L A L O O

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I was stoic, implacable. The people needed my work, my arms. Finally she said, her voice low and agonized, "What people? What people are making you give up everything I've worked so hard to give you, everything your father died trying to give you, everything you could have if you just stayed in that school?" We stood at opposite sides of the living room like battered fighters in the last round. I could hear kids playing red rover outside, see out of the corner of my eye the doilies that my mother placed on every surface that would hold still long enough.

"I can't make you see, Mama. I can't."

"No, you can't. So get out of my house." Her eyes were glass. She didn't touch me, didn't say my name. I left. I don't know what I would have done then if I'd known I'd never hear her say my name again.

Running the breakfast program in Chicago was my favorite thing. We had to get up at five in the morning but I didn't even mind that. I'd wake up, shove Jesse's leg off of me—he always slept like that, tangled around me—and pad to the drafty bathroom of the old, beat-up house that we shared with other party members. I'd shower, pick out my hair and dress. By that time, Jesse would be banging on the bathroom door. "I'm almost done, baby," I'd call. "Hold your horses." We went through the same thing every day. It's like he thought someday I wouldn't need to shower. Or that I'd develop a faster way to do it. I'd stand on tiptoe to kiss him as I came out of the bathroom. "See you tonight, baby," he'd say. "Stay strong."

"You too. See you tonight." I'd say.

I loved working with the kids. They tried to be so serious, even the little ones. We talked to them of revolution, told them that they were beautiful and valuable, that we'd need them all as soldiers. They'd look at us barely even blinking until we said they could eat. Then they turned into kids again, laughing and shoving each other, saving each other seats and giggling. It felt good to feed them. There was so much that they needed.

Jesse was never one to talk things over. The times demanded action, not discussion. He said to me one night, "I think it's time we tried to bring another little soldier into the world."

"What?" I said.

"I want you to have my baby. It's time."

I was silent, looking down, eyes stinging. He took my chin in his strong hand. He smelled of gun oil and soap. "Don't cry, baby. This is a good thing."

"I know it is. I know."

\* \* \*

In the end, it was over very quickly. All that we worked for turned to ash just like that. We kept a gun beside the bed. Everyone did. Huey had been imprisoned and the phones, the walls, everything was tapped. Sometimes when I picked up the phone, I imagined I could hear a white man's breath, garlicky and stale. Everything felt desperate, crashing. The war in Vietnam was worse, the war at home was worse, we were running out of money to keep the breakfast program going. We never laughed anymore. The night it happened, it was freezing. I remember that. I thought I'd never be warm again. The house had gotten so bad it was near condemned; we had no central heat, just dangerous space heaters

that we huddled around. Jesse and I went to bed and curled around each other just to get warm, not out of love. It was rare to even have Jesse home—there was always another meeting to go to, another battle to be fought. The two of us fought a lot too. I'd begun to wonder if he knew everything I once thought he did. But when he touched me, I was still moved. I still wanted to have his child. His eyes were tired but I could still feel them on me sometimes, gentle and loving, like they always used to be. This night was one of our rare good nights. My nose was pressed to his back.

I never heard them until they were in the room. Crashing, lights, the splintering of boards then the shots. Jesse rolled on top of me to protect me, I guess, I know, and they kept shooting. I felt something warm and wet on my sides, flashes of light in the air, Jesse's weight on top of me. I was screaming, I must have been screaming because my mouth was open and I shoved him off of me and grabbed the gun from beside the bed, there it was in my hand, so heavy. Jesse had taught me to shoot and even in my terror, with his dying body beside me, I felt the gentle way he rested his hand over mine when he showed me what to do. "Aim for the pig's heart. That's the only way to stop them," he said.

I pulled slow, in slow motion, and the man who'd burst through the door fell forward slow, in slow motion, his eyes wide with surprise, then calm. I couldn't hear anything. I remember that so clearly, the silence.

\* \* \*

Cuba is a very beautiful country. The people are kind and generous and so proud, even with all the suffering now. When I first got here, I felt like a tourist, in spite of my fear. Everything was like a postcard. But it was hard too—so many people were dark-skinned like Jesse. I thought I saw him a thousand times a day. I speak Spanish now, but I miss English. The way Jesse used to say "Girl, you crazy." The way he used to pull me toward him, smiling. There's no one like that here. It's the sound I miss, the spice smell of him. Nothing familiar even after all this time.

When I first got here, there were others, but now I'm all alone. I saw Assata sometimes at first, after she ran, but now I can't bear to. I don't even know where she is anymore. She still believes. I don't. I work at a factory, but often we're idle. There's nothing to make anymore. I go home by myself. I clean. I clean the house a lot, there's so much dust here and so little else to do. I hear my mother's voice in my head over and over again. "Retha, come in here, child. You're gonna catch your death." I still have my mother's old phone number. I go to the post office sometimes and call it, from many thousand miles away. It rings and rings, then a voice: "This number has been disconnected. No further information is available." I dial it again, let it ring again, listen again. I keep thinking that someday she'll have to answer.



Hew Locke

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## AN INTERVIEW WITH HEW LOCKE

*by Charles Henry Rowell*

*This interview was conducted on the afternoon of April 18, 2013, in Hew Locke's atelier in the district of Brixton in London, England.*

**ROWELL:** I first met you some time ago. I don't remember whether it was in the 1990s, late 1990s maybe. It's been quite some time ago.

**LOCKE:** Yes. Some time. It may have been the early 1990s because I hadn't received the Master of Arts degree yet, I don't think. I think this was the early 1990s, and I was in a squat studio at the time. I'm not sure whether you came to the studio, but I remember meeting you at your place. You were staying in a place called Mayfair or something like that. I think you came to the studio space; you must have come to the squat studio.

**ROWELL:** Or Bedford Square.

**LOCKE:** Bedford Square? I don't . . .

**ROWELL:** It might have been my first trip here, I think. I remember that I purchased two pieces of art from you then. They both are now hanging on the walls of my home.

**LOCKE:** I don't know. It was such a long time ago.

**ROWELL:** Yes, and I'm curious as to how you moved from that stage in painting or making art to where you are now. Will you talk about what happened along the way, because you are totally different as a painter today. As an artist, let's put it that way, because your work is not only paintings; you make various forms of art, sculpture for example. Your many different forms of art now defy quick and easy categories of art. I like that.

**LOCKE:** What you saw was mono-prints mainly, but I had a background of painting. I had a background of making sculptural objects in boats; making strange figures, horse and rider figures and this was a lot of stuff taken from looking at African festivals or mixing that up with looking at lots of art from Mayan culture. So it's a strange mix up of stuff that I suppose I picked up from growing up in Guyana—just the interest I had. What else to say? How did this happen? You know something I sat down the other day and looked at my practice and went through the whole thing and I just felt tired. I thought, "My god all this stuff you've done boy." I just felt tired, because I suddenly realized this is what a

career is. A career, for me, has been loads of work of various different media and various different things. Some people are comfortable being a painter or a straight sculptor. For me it has been necessary to move and weave between the media and keep all of it going at the same time. Works for me but it's also a bit tiring as well.

**ROWELL:** How would you describe the work that I am looking at now on the wall here? Is this your newest work?

**LOCKE:** This is the most recent stuff. I did a series of painted photographs about ten years ago. What happened was that was I applying to an art organization in London with the idea of decorating a public sculpture and making it into a votive object. All of these ignored Victorian statues you walk past on your way to work. So I put in a written proposal and included photographs of the statues onto which I painted the visualized installation. And these guys told me, "You know what? We are not interested." But what I realized was that the proposal itself was the work. So these painted photographs, impossible proposals, things I will never be allowed to do in London—I'd love to do them, but I will never be allowed to do them. So the painted photographs became the work. I made a series of them. I'll show you them now. These are already images and the series is called *Natives and Colonials*. It's called that for lots of reasons, but it was originally the fancy dress theme for a party attended by Prince William and Prince Harry who got into trouble because he came dressed as a Nazi soldier. You know he was a young kid then, and you got to make allowance for that. But rumor has it that some other guests blacked-up. So it's what one calls the folly of youth, and there were times back in the day when I would get very upset about stuff like that, but I'm a lot older now and I'm more relaxed about certain things. So I came up with this title, but the body of work developed beyond that. I started making the work not just about the figure and the statue, but about putting the statue, the painted photograph of the statue, in a contemporary and historical context. So the image you're looking at is an image of David Livingstone as in "Dr. Livingstone, I presume" when Henry Stanley went to find him. So Livingstone's the guy who went all over Africa, a missionary, not an evil man. Anti-slavery, even though he had to get help from a slave trader once because he was lost and nearly dying, and those were the guys who rescued him. But then it's about what he brought on and what came after him. Cecil Rhodes and all sorts of other people came after him. It depicts him with images of soldiers in the Congo, a region of desirable natural wealth in the heart of Africa. You had problems there in colonial times, and you have problems there today. And it's sort of about that but it's a lot more than that. It's not simply that. Below his feet there are Benin bronzes depicting Portuguese soldiers, basically shooting at each other. So it's everybody fighting everybody. And Livingstone is a central catalyst for the current situation in certain parts of Africa, the past and the present meeting.

**ROWELL:** Actually, I never knew your work being as political as it is and yet the viewer may not realize how political it is upon first looking at it, and death rides overall in this particular piece as well as the one with Queen Victoria.

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**LOCKE:** Yes, for me, I want to make work that is beautiful. Make myself feel happy, good, but at the same time there is a darker side to the work. You can go in deeper—it's not a simple literal depiction—what you are looking at. It is much more than that. I'm interested in color. I'm interested in shiny objects. So I've made work with earrings, and I've made work with jewelry, with plastic toys. It's about making something attractive so that you draw the viewer in, and then he or she starts to look deeper and question, "Well what is this guy really talking about here?" The work is political, but it's personal-political. I am not stating any dogma.

**ROWELL:** Yes, I don't see you standing on a soapbox.

**LOCKE:** Exactly, because you fall off.

**ROWELL:** Will you talk about Queen Victoria?

**LOCKE:** Yes, well it's quite significant. I've been planning to do this image for years, and this piece is still in progress. Okay, this particular statue of Queen Victoria is the basis for all my statue works. If you look at the original photograph you can see she's got a broken hand, scepter, and her left hand that's broken as well and her dress in the front, that's broken. This statue stands right now in front of the Guyana Law Courts, in colonial times it was called the Victoria Law Courts. You gain independence, and then you rename everything. Some years after independence, Guyana becomes a Socialist Republic. The leader then decides he's going to be President for Life, usual clichés sadly of postcolonial society. Power corrupts absolutely. So the President decided that he has enough of Queen Victoria so he hauls the statue off to the back of the Botanical Gardens and it's dumped there. A bit like what happened after the fall of communism. This statue is dumped on its side and broken. I've talked to my father, sadly dead now, and we've had conversations about the shock he felt when, promenading along the back of the Botanical Gardens, he came across the statue there leaning on its side. After a while someone took pity on the woman and stood her upright, and she stayed there for about, I don't know, sixteen or seventeen years. So the then President for Life dies, everyone can breathe a sigh of relief, we can move on now; we don't have this whole socialist republic nonsense anymore. And I'm guessing, I could be wrong but who knows, I imagine that Guyana needs help, needs aid. So Great Britain is giving Guyana aid. I am imagining the British Ambassador calling the then Prime Minister for a word, having a drink and saying, "You know what? It would be kind of nice, you don't have to, but it would be kind of nice if you would put the statue back . . ." Anyway, she's back where she was, battered and bruised, broken nose and a broken arm.

**ROWELL:** And a useless scepter.

**LOCKE:** And a useless scepter. But I in a way agree with leaving that as it is, because it is a part of history—it has history written all over it. I'd been trying to get back to Guyana to photograph this statue for years. And now I look at it, and there she is, and somebody



has dropped some nasty clothing on her pedestal. So she's not perfect, but she is back where she was after some rough times in the back of the garden, because that was a dark place you know.

**ROWELL:** And you comment on the imagery of death in the background.

**LOCKE:** Yeah, well I use *memento mori* in my imagery a lot. So, in this piece, and in my images of the current Queen, I use *memento mori*. It's about the idea of no matter how powerful you are we all end up in the same place basically. You know what I mean? So, it's about . . . remember that . . . It's a bit like . . .

**ROWELL:** Percy Shelley's poem "Ozymandias."

**LOCKE:** Exactly, that poem is a big thing in the back of my mind all the time. It is a great poem. No matter how big your Empire things have a natural cycle, and I find that fascinating. I was going to be a historian if I wasn't going to be an artist, and I've ended up as an artist with an interest in history.

**ROWELL:** I'm trying to figure out how you arrived at this without shouting or screaming. How did you maintain your discipline? How did you discipline the self and the imagination so as not to shout about this or to shout about the other figure or to scream at them or to curse them and have others cursing them also? Because history is more complex—that is, the past is more complex—than what has been given to us by the historian.

**LOCKE:** Exactly, it is more complex than it was twenty years ago. That's how I feel. I made different work in the 1980s, and I was more angry about some things. Now older, I wouldn't say wiser necessarily at this age, but I see things differently. There are gray areas. I start to see that you can attack Livingstone quite rightly, you can attack, but then . . . I get into a weird area here. I can't make work of a certain sort. I can't make work about slavery because slavery is a straight forward thing in one way. Okay, white people bought slaves. They enslaved people. But then the slave traders that Livingstone was meeting were Arabic. The slave traders he met and was against were also dealing with black slavers. Black people—their own people or a tribe next door—and that is a very, very, very hard thing to take. This is what I mean by the complexity of history. This piece was also inspired by another thing . . . it's a good thing that I talk actually . . . I saw a great documentary by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. he did a long time ago of him and his wife and two daughters doing a trip through East Africa. He was inspired by Livingstone, in a way. He was going on the Livingstone trail. But it was more interesting than that. He was on his track to the past but his daughters were on a different path, in the present, into the future. The daughters were making very pertinent comments about what they were seeing. Like, the Gates would sit down in a hut with this chief and everybody is being respectful, but the daughters were saying, "Oh, his wife is so *young*" and so you understand what I mean. I just thought it was a great documentary. It's about somebody retracing his past, and it's sentimental, and then there's this clash of youth and age, and of their eyes opening to

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something, and they are seeing things differently. I'm talking about the older I get the more complex, the more difficult, I find history, and the more irritated I get with this difficulty. I want things to be dead clear and straight forward and "this is *it*." This guy's evil one hundred percent, and this guy's good one hundred percent. And that's where I find I get myself caught on tangles. This guy here, Livingstone, wasn't evil one hundred percent, but what followed him was pretty evil, that's for damn sure. Because what followed him into the Congo was the heart of darkness, evil beyond comparison. As I said before he was strongly anti-slavery, but then he catches himself in the middle of nowhere and he relies on the very people he hates to save his life. I don't know what point I'm trying to make. The point I am trying to make is that the more we get to a revisionist history, and a revision of the revision, then the more difficult it gets. People criticize. I heard people back in Guyana years ago say, "Man, why they don't bring back the white people, man?" I'm like, "I can understand your feeling that because things are chaotic and difficult here at the moment, but don't you remember what it was like to be a second-class citizen? You should kind of think back to what that was like, dude, because that wasn't good."

**ROWELL:** In the making of art do you sometimes discover after you've finished when you think you've finished a piece that you've done more than you knew?

**LOCKE:** Absolutely. There is a piece I did called *For Those in Peril on the Sea*, quite an important piece for me, a recent piece. It is loads of votive boats hanging in a working church in Folkestone. I finished this installation and I sort of thought "okay, fine" and I put it up there and all of a sudden it became a local phenomenon. People would walk in and be enchanted. There's a natural inherent human love of model boats, small boats. It's something we are drawn to, but then, to see a whole fleet of them heading down the nave of the church, and there are oil tankers and there are Arab Dhows, and boats based on those refugees get in to cross the Atlantic from Senegal to the Canary Islands, and there are rafts, and Japanese boats based loosely on the tsunami images . . . It became a real thing, it became a human drama and personal for the audience. People got married underneath this thing. It was quite an event.

**ROWELL:** And where was this?

**LOCKE:** It was in Folkestone, an hour and a half out of London on the south coast, and was commissioned for the Folkestone Triennial. It has been purchased by the Perez Art Museum, Miami. So I am re-installing this in the entrance way to the new museum building for when it opens in December 2013.

**ROWELL:** Wow! It is permanent.

**LOCKE:** Well, it's not permanent, but it is a part of their permanent collection.

**ROWELL:** Yes, that's what I meant.



**LOCKE:** And the piece has taken on a life of its own and for me—that is, some pieces I do. When I finish a piece, it becomes something more than I imagined. Because what’s weird is that, even if I paint every single dot myself, when I’m finished it has nothing to do with me anymore. Something happens so that when I’m finished, I’m wondering, “Were you involved in this at all?”

**ROWELL:** That’s why I asked the question.

**LOCKE:** Yeah, it’s a very strange feeling.

**ROWELL:** Do you discover more in it than when you look at it ten years, twenty years from the time?

**LOCKE:** Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Sometimes I look at it, and I see the person I was then. Or I look at it and I think that I could do that better now. I mean Matisse said he was haunted by his old work. For me that is tricky, speaking as somebody who is about to unveil a bronze woman, *Selene*, on the façade of a London hotel this Saturday. I’m thinking, “I’ll have to walk past this bronze for the rest of my life, as I live in London, unless I always take a detour.” So, yes, I will feel differently about it in the future.

**ROWELL:** Which hotel is this?

**LOCKE:** The Nadler Soho hotel on Carlisle Street in Central London.

**ROWELL:** Oh, okay. I thought we could just waltz in there tomorrow and see it.

**LOCKE:** No, you may not see it because we are putting it up on Saturday.

**ROWELL:** I was saying to someone, because this kind of work was what I saw mainly online and that is why when I walked in here the images of these statues startled me because this harkens back to what I saw you doing before. Not the images so much, but you are doing it on flat paper, it’s on a flat surface, and this is totally different. I didn’t know how to describe it. Someone asked me this about you, “What kind of work does he do?” This might come as a shock to you: I said that I didn’t know what you are doing at this time, so I could not describe your work. I thought about what I had said, and I thought maybe he is actually defying the boundaries of what we are calling art. I could have said that you are defying the traditional: “This is a sculpture, this is a painting. A painting should have this, a painting should have that.” I think you are working outside those strictures.

**LOCKE:** Exactly, exactly. I’m working on the borders between the two. Where the two meet, that’s where I sit. So my relief pieces are on the boundary between painting and sculpture, because the plastic objects I utilize actually function as color and as identifiable objects at the same time. They provide my color palette. The painted photographs, they were on the

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boundary of photography and painting. The bead drawings, stuck to the wall, they are on the boundary between tapestry and drawing. So I am always working just outside, just on the edges of these practices. I've been living on that for quite a while actually.

**ROWELL:** That's transgressive in the face of the history of art.

**LOCKE:** Yeah!

**ROWELL:** Please, react to the statement. Please assault what I just said.

**LOCKE:** I don't know whether it is transgressive or not; it's just what I do. Kobena Mercer described it as postcolonial, Caribbean, Baroque.

**ROWELL:** It is Baroque in a kind of way.

**LOCKE:** Yeah, yeah, it is that. That's where I'm coming from in a sort of way.

**ROWELL:** And the postcolonial is a critique, I suppose.

**LOCKE:** Yes, it's a critique. I think we've reached the stage where we are post-postcolonial, because it's very easy to get stuck in the past whereas things have actually moved on and things are more complex. Now, I talk about the past, but I talk about the present. The biggest power in Africa right now is China, and China's going in there with a very different approach. The British way was with guns and the Chinese way is with wallets. That's a very different approach and a palatable approach.

**ROWELL:** And with a little bit of technology, enough to build roads.

**LOCKE:** Exactly.

**ROWELL:** It's seductive, to the people there.

**LOCKE:** It's totally seductive, basically, and it's understandable. See, you have this interesting dynamic right now where you have situations like, "Well, if you want this road built we'll come and build it" (this is the European Union, being crude about it). "What's your human rights record? You want your road built—that's fine—but can we have so many tons of ore? OK, here's your money, guy." China's way has less checks and balances, but it's less patronizing; it's a different operation. I am very mindful not to be stuck in the past and so my work has evolved in complexity. When I started doing images of the current Queen they were about ideas of Britishness. Later they evolved into ideas around Britain's global position, or recently Britain's position in Afghanistan or Iraq. So it's more about now, bits of past and present, the two together to make some sort of whole, some sort of fragmented whole.

**ROWELL:** I'm going to say something now that, just riding on what you mentioned then, that I hope will be provocative. I see England or the United Kingdom as a cultural colony of the United States.

**LOCKE:** [*Laughter*]

**ROWELL:** Not that I would like the United States to impose itself on any country, but it appears to me that the UK is a kind of cultural colony, because everything the United States does, the Brits seem to suck it up, and they can't resist doing it. What do the British do today that goes far past what is done in the United States? I don't see it?

**LOCKE:** That's not strictly true, though there is a saying that what happens in America today happens here tomorrow. That is true for certain aspects. If you visit here and you're an American say, and say you're a cultural thinker or intellectual, you will be picking up on things. Perhaps you go to a delicatessen here and you say, "Hang on this looks very American." There are so many echoes here from a lifestyle point of view. The whole loft-living thing we have over here is straight from New York. But culturally speaking there are very distinct differences. America unfortunately has a complete love for anything "period British." There's a love for *Downton Abbey* and TV shows like that, which, I understand.

**ROWELL:** Not in Texas. In the United States in general, we are fascinated by such British acts as representative of a quaint British past. Then, too, some of us see in a *Downton Abbey* the past British violence of class distinctions. We might watch such TV series with amusement but not will to imitate such willful violence. And I am talking about the main of the US, Texas included. In Texas, for example, I am laughed at because I love drinking hot tea, which I have done most of my life. Tea is cheap; coffee is expensive. That is, good coffee.

**LOCKE:** Not in Texas?

**ROWELL:** Texas won't bow to Britain, but Virginia and the East Coast in general, yes. Texas is very proud. I am not a Texan by birth. I have lived there for only the last twelve years. The moneyed classes on the American Atlantic Coast might try to imitate some social or cultural features of the British ruling classes, but very few Americans today (in the late-twentieth-century or the twenty-first century) in the United States see any virtue in adapting any features of life or culture. But everywhere I move about in the UK I see the mark of home, the USA.

**LOCKE:** It's huge.

**ROWELL:** The accents, British speech—in the United States we love the British accent on the television. I mean a dumb Brit as well as an intelligent Brit—we stick them on television. We are fascinated by how the British speak, but we will never imitate it. Our American English works very well for us. Our English in the USA is as legitimate as that

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in England—maybe even more. It's ultimately all of power. The USA, not England, is now the world's power. Yes, we are amused—and fascinated—by British English.

**LOCKE:** I find that completely fascinating and it has to do with how the ear works, because that's the same way we react to Italians or the French, who sound amazing to us. It's a nice accent. Wonder whether to get into this—this is complicating things too much. There are interesting things between the United States and Britain. You're talking about *Downton Abbey*, that's a cultural export.

**ROWELL:** I'm guilty of taking us off the track. Yes, "a cultural export"—but definitely not a "cultural absorption or appropriation" on which we can build something in the USA. Not as the Beatles musical group did with African American music.

**LOCKE:** No, that's fine. But what is interesting here is that if you happen to be a black British actor you better sure as hell get yourself a good American accent, a good voice coach, because that's where your career lies, guy.

**ROWELL:** If you're here?

**LOCKE:** Yeah, I mean *Homeland*, David Harewood, the CIA guy, he's British. Idris Elba, *The Wire*, he's British. Marianne Jean-Baptiste, she's British, she was in *Gone Without a Trace*. All these black Brits are in America because you guys love bloody *Downton Abbey*. And black people don't exist in British period, that's an issue. There was a recent TV series *Dancing on the Edge* about a black jazz band in Britain trying to redress the balance. I'm drifting slightly off the track, so going back to what you said about us being a cultural colony of America . . . I mean the whole YBA (Young British Artists) thing was originally influenced by America, but then it became its own thing, and now it's been and gone and it's history. Britain is just a weird place, and Britain is not London. London is a country itself, an entity all to itself, but I would have to think about that. I am not convinced that what you said is true. There is truth and untruth in it.

**ROWELL:** I'm going to shift in another direction.

**LOCKE:** Sure.

**ROWELL:** But you've probably answered this already. What do you think your art, or art itself in a general sense, should do or be? Or I could ask the question another way: What do you think may be the effect of art—that is, when you place images in an exhibition or someone comes in contact with just a single image of yours? In a general sense, what do you want your art to do? What do you want viewers to experience when they come in contact with your work? Of course, I mean this in a general sense, because each aesthetic creation has its own *raison d'être*.

**LOCKE:** I am trying to intrigue and excite people visually. I'm trying to move people basically. I'm trying to create something that moves them in the same way I am moved when I go to a cathedral or a temple or a mosque—to all those religious places. I'm not religious at all, but the feeling I get from seeing an incredible altar piece, or going to India to a temple and seeing an extraordinary carving, the aura that such works can give off, that's what I'm trying to evoke. Or even on a secular level going to a gallery and suddenly seeing a beautiful object, some bit of stuff that some unknown guy did in the eighteenth century—that's what I'm after. I was in Atlanta in November last year and looking around in the High Museum, and I didn't know about slave pots before. These are urns for water.

**ROWELL:** Pottery?

**LOCKE:** Yes, pottery. And there's one enslaved potter who put writing on his pots, and there's something about his pot . . . Before I knew what it was, or who made it, I was drawn to it. It had a certain quality. It had a mystique. It was touching, and I couldn't put my finger on it. "Why," I thought, "am I sentimentalizing this because this guy was a slave?" I always watch myself for that kind of sentimental viewpoint. But I thought, "No, it's not that. Something makes this pot different from the pots next to it. There is something about this guy. He has a limited situation in his life, and he's put something into this pot that is quite magical, and I can't explain why or what." The Unexplainable, that's what I'm trying to get. I'm trying to get to a point in my work where I could tell you exactly what I have done to make a piece, exactly what the piece is about, exactly what every single aspect is about, break it down completely, and it would still be mysterious. That's what I'm trying to do—to create this magical mystery thing. "Hew's Magical Mystery Tour." It's really about trying to make something, which, if I'm very, very lucky, gets under people's skin and they remember it.

**ROWELL:** It may be political or spiritual or just an act of beauty also?

**LOCKE:** Exactly. It may be political. It may be spiritual.

**ROWELL:** It may also be aesthetic?

**LOCKE:** It may be aesthetic, you know? But leaving the High Museum, and still that's the work which has stuck with me over the years. Right now there is one painting that I'm obsessed with, and it was made by Titian towards the end of his life, *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*. It's in the church of I Gesuiti in Venice. Basically this guy is being barbequed at night so the scene is lit by braziers. You can see the people pushing St. Lawrence onto the fire, and some are bending down blowing on the coals. It's all shade and shadow so you can't see their faces, just a few hints of armor glinting and the fire is blown by the wind. You can hear this damn wind. How the hell am I hearing this wind? I ain't taking drugs so what's going on here?

**ROWELL:** That's power. Aesthetic power!

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**LOCKE:** Yeah, it's really wild. It's a great painting by a man at the end of his life. He spent all of his life painting, and by the end he was even painting with his fingers because the painting is all blurry. I look at it and I think, "Boy, that's a hell of a thing." I don't feel intimidated by this work. Some people are so totally intimidated by it. They're like, "Oh, the Old Masters!" No. Forget that nonsense, man. I'm not intimidated by them, but that's a good piece of work, boy. That's the kind of thing to imitate in your own way. If I could get to that level then great, if not . . . well the thing is I will never get to that level because that's not what I am trying to produce. I am trying to produce work that will cause people to say, "Yeah, that's got something, I don't know what, but that's got something."

**ROWELL:** What is the value of the contemporary painter going back and either studying or looking at or prying through the older painters in as many cultures as possible?

**LOCKE:** Well, there's a lot of value in that. I mean, again going back to Venice. I've revisited paintings there recently, like Tintoretto's painting of Joseph and Mary on *The Flight into Egypt*. So, he's painted something quite realistic. And then, he came to do the background of some peasants, and he thought, "I don't have time for this . . . let's just do a quick little sketch of some men," and it's the way it was done, and it's Impressionism three hundred years before the thing was ever thought of. Or other images I've seen, realizing that we have this idea that we've invented so many things recently, when a lot of it is already there in early work. Whatever culture is already there you want to learn from it. I don't know how else to put it. We think that we invented abstraction, but still I can look at old paintings and see that that section is totally abstract. It's a figurative painting but the artist is producing abstract painting. I mean there's a wall of a house I saw in Pompeii, made of rectangles of different colors, one after the other. Still to this day, I'm talking to you about this now. Could I have seen that? I can't have seen that! This is a 2,000 year old abstract painting. Hard-edged abstraction produced as decoration. It was just blocks of color. Now, I got to go back home after we've talked and hit *Google* to check, "Well, did I really see that?" But it was amazing. Think about traditional African carving, which has had a big influence on me. Every time you see diamond patterns in my work, it's taken from Kuba masks from the Congo. I look at an old mask like that, viewing it as if it is a contemporary object. Probably it could be viewed as that, because it could still be used as a ritual object I suppose, though it is one hundred years old.

**ROWELL:** Well, I see the Benin Bronzes.

**LOCKE:** Yes.

**ROWELL:** Will you talk about how you've incorporated those bronzes here?

**LOCKE:** Yes, the paintings of Benin Bronzes I have included in this image of Livingstone are talking about the fact that Africa's resources have been fought over by different peoples for centuries. I liked the fact that the people of Benin saw these strange looking white newcomers and translated them into their own style of artwork. These guys have muskets and

the muskets presented a radical shift in technology that transformed everything. The Bible and the gun. There is something about antique guns that I've always found fascinating in purely an aesthetic way. They're beautiful objects, but they're objects which talk about a violent past. I'm talking about a violent past and a violent present, but in the context of trying to make work that is aesthetically attractive, which is a contradiction in terms if you see what I mean.

**ROWELL:** I'm certainly looking at the dress, the clothing, and the patterns and designs in the clothing and I certainly see masks, skulls. I see also there is one by the king I thought almost of Goya. Who did *The Scream*? That's Edvard Munch.

**LOCKE:** Yes, that's Munch.

**ROWELL:** Munch. Yes, that's who I meant. And then down low, there is almost photography of a person in glasses, but maybe paint. War paint, let's say.

**LOCKE:** Yes.

**ROWELL:** There's a lot going on. Would you talk about how you designed the piece?

**LOCKE:** Okay. The top right hand image is a child soldier. I have done a lot of work on child soldiers. The most recent piece is *Pan*. The Peter Pan statue in Kensington Garden is a much beloved London landmark, and I have depicted him surrounded by child soldiers. He is calling up his army of lost boys. I'm like a magpie; I grab things from everywhere. There's an exhibition on right now at the National Portrait Gallery by George Catlin. Back in the early-nineteenth century he was one of the first people to go out West to document Native Americans. And he created a touring exhibition called "The Indian Gallery." One of his portraits is of a warrior called Fast Dancer, who has a hand print painted on his face, and I really liked that so I put my variation of it in here. I always like camouflaging, decorating, or disguising the faces of the characters in my drama. It takes it into the realms of the fantastical. I think back to strange photos which had an impact on me years ago of the war in Liberia. These guys were dressing in very strange outfits, a fighter with a Kalashnikov, but wearing a bride's dress or a woman's wig and a baby-doll nightie. It's all about protection and fetishism. I was interested in that image, but it's more complex than just the image. I'm interested in newspaper interest in that image. War in Africa: "Get the cameras, boys; you're going to get some good shots! Man, look at these people running, look how they dress," and stuff like that. It is stuff like that which I find interesting. So I am fascinated with the voyeurism, but I am a voyeur as well. So it's [laughter] complicated, as I keep saying.

**ROWELL:** You've just demonstrated how a past art enters your contemporary work.

**LOCKE:** Exactly.



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**ROWELL:** That's why I was saying that it's important to understand what the artists long ago were doing.

**LOCKE:** I should say, obviously, that the work is inspired by cubism. So it's a neo form of cubism.

**ROWELL:** Interesting!

**LOCKE:** That's obvious. Yeah. But then I was looking at a guy called Franz Marc today. He was a German expressionist painter inspired by cubism. He painted lots of animal images, but very fragmented. I suppose the fragmentation of that time shows in those images that came out of cubism. I was in New York recently, and there was a show at the MOMA that I recommend called *Inventing Abstraction 1911-1925*. Very early stuff, some people you have never heard of at all, and some people with work you have never seen before. It's really, really interesting the take these guys had. I just find that style very interesting because that is what I grew up surrounded by in Guyana. Both my parents were artists. I was surrounded by artists experimenting with cubism, by color field painting, by Guyanese outsider art. I sort of took it in, as if by osmosis, without realizing. And so now it comes out all these years later.

**ROWELL:** Did I ask a question that gave you a chance to represent your aesthetic or your poetics of art? I might have, but I don't recall. If you would just restate it.

**LOCKE:** You did ask about what I am trying to get across.

**ROWELL:** Yes.

**LOCKE:** What I am trying to get across is difficult. I am just trying to excite people, move people, intrigue them. When they walk down the road, they may have forgotten about it, but maybe the next day and five days later they say that was an interesting piece of work. That's what I am kind of hoping for. When I am lucky is when I meet people after a few years and they say, "Hew, that piece of yours that was a good piece." Do you know what I mean?

**ROWELL:** Oh, yes, I do.

**LOCKE:** And that's when you sort of feel like, okay, fine, I have hit something here or if they say, "You know what, I remember that piece!" not praising me and saying I love these things just that they remember. That's kind of all you can ask for, really, is to be remembered. [*Laughter*]

**ROWELL:** It's so amazing you can remember that piece, but you don't remember the ones with the puppets, where someone is manipulating these figures. It's so amazing. I am speaking of one of the two pieces of yours I bought on one of my earliest visits to the UK.



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## C A L L A L O O

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**LOCKE:** No. I am sort of remembering in a way, but I am not sure where . . .

**ROWELL:** It's charcoal drawing, I think. A drawing with carnival-like puppet figures.

**LOCKE:** I'm confused now because I start to wonder if it was a puppet I drew from life in a museum. No it's not that.

**ROWELL:** You don't recall?

**LOCKE:** I don't recall this. No.

**ROWELL:** Okay.

**LOCKE:** Send me an image, man.

**ROWELL:** Okay, I will.

**LOCKE:** I'll be curious, because with me I get an interest to see these things.

**ROWELL:** Yes.

**LOCKE:** But one thing I should say though, is that behind all this work is Guyana. That's the one thing I haven't talked about.

**ROWELL:** So explain how it's Guyana.

**LOCKE:** Well, the Queen Victoria is literally that, but my color palette is Guyana.

**ROWELL:** That's what I wanted to ask you: what is color for you?

**LOCKE:** Yeah. Color palette. When I look at certain artists like Frank Bowling, straight away I'm there—in Guyana, with the Guyana color palette, because I understand, on a fundamental gut level, what this is about, where this color is coming from. There are shades of oranges and reds, which for me are creek water. It's nostalgia, but it's more than that. It's a longing for the past, but not really because you know the past is gone. So it's really memories. The reliefs of the Queen (Elizabeth II) are formed from a mess of seething ecosystem. When you are walking in the bush in Guyana and you look down to your feet there are leaf cutter ants and beetles running around, all kinds of chaos going on. It's about what's going on just out of the corner of your eye. If I am very lucky when I am working sometimes, suddenly for about twenty seconds I will remember when I was fifteen in Guyana. I'll remember something. It's the color of a particular bathroom, or it's sitting down in a cake shop eating *dhal puri*. Then it's just gone. All these reliefs of the Queen are dripping. All these beads hanging down, they're dripping, they're oozing, and they're

rotting. It's a tropical situation, but also it can refer to Kaieteur Falls, which is an iconic image in Guyanese art, seen also in the work of Frank Bowling. And it's interesting to me how integral this whole Guyana thing is, and without me even having to think about it, to the point where we have come to the end of the interview and I only now bring it up. Because it is so much a part of me that I don't think about it. I don't even think about it to myself. So I could be working on some ideas using an image from Brazil or some African country, but it all gets filtered through this guy who grew up in Guyana, sitting down on a seawall dreaming, imagining a far off world. This is all filtered through that kid from a long time ago, and I go back to that time and again. And as I am talking to you, I am looking behind you. Since I have come back from my recent trip to Guyana, I have put up some images of it on the wall just to remind myself of home in a weird way, but then London is home as well. I often go to America. What's interesting about being in America is that I come and I hang with you American guys, but I'm a Guyanese in America and I'm also a Briton in America. It's kind of weird that if I hear someone speaking with a British accent in New York I instantly connect with them. But I also instantly connect when I get off the plane at JFK and get through customs and everybody working at the airport is Guyanese.

**ROWELL:** *[Laughter]*

**LOCKE:** And I'm like, yeah boy. Because in London I feel like it's just me and a small bunch of us, not plenty, holding up the side you know. Anyway . . .

**ROWELL:** Are you aware, as a foreigner to Guyana is aware, that the natural world is overwhelming in Guyana. A leaf that you see in the United States is small, but a leaf from the same kind of plant grows or develops to be a giant thing in Guyana. The natural world in Guyana is for me, the foreigner, a very extraordinary thing.

**LOCKE:** Yes, I agree with you.

**ROWELL:** Do you witness the wonder of the natural world when you return for visits in Guyana?

**LOCKE:** Oh, yeah, totally. When I go back I look at my misspent youth and think, "How could you catch and kill these lizards when you were a little boy. Look at this thing, man. This thing is beautiful." I am stunned at all the creatures I took for granted as a kid, like the Kiskadees. It's a bird, the Great Kiskadee. And I look at the bird and say, "Boy, look at this bird now. This thing is amazing and you took it for granted." You know. Or you look at the chicken hawk. I used to think it was just brown in color, but it is not brown. It's this glowing deep red-brown. It's quite extraordinary. Or I'll look at the weeds and say "Boy, these weeds are amazing." *[Laughter]* You know all the things I played with as kid. And what's even more fascinating in London, which if you are at a loose end and you want to do something completely different, is to go to the Palm Houses in Kew Gardens, all these massive Victorian green houses. Inside are all these plants that are being tended and studied very carefully. And I walk in but I say, "Those leaves, man, grow like weeds back in Guyana." I find it very difficult to see them in a precious light, as they are.

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## C A L L A L O O

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**ROWELL:** [*Laughter*]

**LOCKE:** The brain doesn't compute it, you know. People in New York complaining about cockroaches, and I'm like, That's not real cockroaches. You haven't seen real cockroaches. Go to Guyana, man.

**ROWELL:** Thank you, Hew. I have enjoyed chatting with you.

**LOCKE:** It's been an absolute pleasure to be honest.

**Editor's Note:** For Hew Locke's online lectures about his art, see the following:

"Artist Talk: Hew Locke," published by the Miami Art Museum

"Twenty Years of Survival: Hew Locke 1," published by the Moray House Trust

"Strange Images of the Queen: Hew Locke 2," published by the Moray House Trust

"How Power Shifts: Hew Locke 3," published by the Moray House Trust

"Art and Garbage in Georgetown: Hew Locke 4," published by the Moray House Trust

all available on *YouTube.com*



*Victoria* (2013) by Hew Locke. Acrylic paint and gold marker pen on c-type photograph (h: 72" x 48"). Private collection, USA.  
Photograph by Charles Robinson, courtesy of Hales Gallery, London, 2013.





*Saturn*, from the series *How Do You Want Me?* (2007) by Hew Locke. C-type photograph (h: 91" x 71.5"). Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City.



*Eldorado* (2005) by Hew Locke. Wood base, glue gun, screws, mixed media (h: 114" x 69" x 23.6"). West Collection, Philadelphia. Photograph by FXP Photography, courtesy of Hales Gallery, London, 2005.





*Selene* (2013) by Hew Locke. Bronze (h: 122" x 101" x 35.5"). The Nadler Soho Hotel, 10 Carlisle Street, London, W1D 3BR. Photograph by Indra Khanna © 2013.



*Sikandar* (2010) by Hew Locke. Mixed media maquette (h: 31.5" x 5" x 14" including plinth). Zang collection, London. Photograph by Stuart Morrison, courtesy of Hales Gallery, London, 2010.





*Pan* (2012) by Hew Locke. Acrylic paint and ink on c-type photograph (h: 74" x 50"). Private collection, Switzerland. Photograph by FXP Photography, courtesy of Hales Gallery, London, 2012.





*Livingstone* (2013) by Hew Locke. Acrylic paint and gold marker pen on c-type photograph (h: 72" x 48"). Private collection, United Kingdom.  
Photograph by Charles Robinson, courtesy of Hales Gallery, London, 2013.



*Hemmed in Two* (2000) by Hew Locke. Cardboard, acrylic paint, marker pen, found objects, wood, rope, papier maché (h: 158" x 473" x 315"). Collection of Eileen Harris Norton and Peter Norton, Santa Monica. Photographed in the Luckman Fine Arts Complex, Los Angeles, California, by Joshua White / JWPictures.com © 2004.



*Jerriod Avant © 2013*

Courtyard, Bodleian Library,  
University of Oxford

# 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE

## Oxford University United Kingdom

### A REPORT



*Jerriod Avant © 2013*

Oxford University Museum of  
Natural History



*Jerrid Avant © 2013*

The conference begins.



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*from the Editor's Desk*

## **CALLALOO IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

### **The 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE at Oxford University**

After a grueling year's work of thinking through, planning, organizing, and coordinating the annual CALLALOO CONFERENCE, I usually step aside during the events and quietly coordinate the program and its different activities from behind the curtains, as the phrase goes. That is, I stand down out of sight, as much as possible. But for the last two conferences, I have made myself more visible by at least introducing the proceedings for the four-day gatherings. As a self-assigned project for the opening session of the 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE hosted by the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, Pembroke College of Oxford University, the task I reserved for myself was simply this: to give a brief explanation of what previous concerns brought us to that site at that moment, along with brief comments on the significance of the central topic of the conference as it relates to the locus of the gathering and to our exploring the subject at this moment in our common Transatlantic past. As I stood before that audience of about two to three hundred people from the UK, Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and North America, I suddenly realized that what I had set for myself was no simple task at all, and that if I wanted to do justice to the subject or subjects at hand, I needed more than the five or so minutes I had allotted myself. First of all, as the directing agent of the conference, I needed to thank our host, Stephen Tuck and his staff, who afforded us the use of their relatively new Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities to stage the proceedings of the conference. I also needed to acknowledge the invaluable work a number of people contributed to making this conference possible—for example, Carole Boyce Davies, GerShun Avilez, Marlon Ross, and Dagmawi Woubshet—all of whom, in various ways, were instrumental, like the conference committee members and the tireless and devoted *Callaloo* staff, in helping to mount this conference at Oxford University.

I must confess that I panicked when I heard a loud applause rise from the audience and float down to our dais. Were they telling me sit down, I wondered, or what? Why were they applauding? I glanced at my watch, and I realized that I had already spent more than five minutes on the necessary acknowledgements. After all, my Southern-ness would never allow me to walk through a person's front door without thanking them for inviting me in, for hosting a dinner for my friends and me, or just simply welcoming me inside. Manners matter.

Etiquette aside, my sudden recognition of the rapid passing of time and the realization that Professor Salamishah Tillet needed to follow me with comments and that Mukoma wa Ngugi would follow her with an introduction of his father, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who would deliver the keynote address—all on the heels of the unexpected loud applause that caused me much panic indeed. And yet I suddenly realized that I had to improvise from there to the end of my little performance—what for the short time left and the shocking

fact that I could not find my place in my prepared script for the occasion. To confess the truth of it, I cannot recall what I spoke during the very short time I had left. I do not remember: it was not scripted; it was improvised. A much shorter text than the following is what I had written to present on the occasion. The version that follows is much more expansive and argumentative—that is, much longer and more challenging in its answers to two central questions: What is the CALLALOO CONFERENCE? Why assemble the 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE at Oxford University?

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What is the CALLALOO CONFERENCE? It is literally a one-of-a kind annual gathering, to which a select group of academics, creative writers, and other interested parties come together in the USA, Africa, and now Western Europe to discuss different issues that concern each of us as thinkers and creators in the twenty-first century. If you wish to know more about how and why this annual gathering began, I will, of course, tell you. Bear with me.

The origins of the CALLALOO CONFERENCE are, for me, an inspirational and wish-filled narrative. At the close of the Thirtieth Anniversary Celebration of *Callaloo* in Baltimore, Maryland (October 24-27, 2007), two prize-winning poets—A. Van Jordan and Terrance Hayes—spoke with me at breakfast saying, in the main, that they did not understand a word the academics delivered as critical texts from the stage during the proceedings of the celebration. As these two distinguished poets complained about the “pretentious and pompous” lexicon and the “arcane subjects” of the academics’ presentations, I recalled the words that so many academics had made to me over the years when I confessed my passion for contemporary poetry. “I don’t understand a word of what our poets of today are talking about,” some would lament. “Their poems are impenetrable,” others would complain. “Obscure! Obscure!” another one whined, and when my cup ran over with his ejaculations, I shouted, “Absurd! Absurd! Absurd!” I gave him an issue of *Callaloo*, and added that my office hours are over and that I must go home. I gave him a copy of the journal, because in it he would find poems adjacent to critical articles, the only form of prose he thought worthy of his time and patience. I tell you this because, as Editor of *Callaloo*, I had published—and still do—creative work, especially poetry, alongside critical texts in almost every issue of the journal. I had thought that my efforts to do so had begun to help solve what I witnessed long ago as a growing problem: the contemporary artists producing creative works and the academics producing critical texts spoke past each other or not to each other at all. As my colleague Michael Collins, poet and literary critic, has so aptly described, there is a rift between academics on the one hand and creative writers on the other:

In recent decades, literary theory under the influence of French theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault has incorporated and elaborated upon a specialized vocabulary that non-initiates sometimes find impenetrable. At the same time, many within the academic critical community find the productions of literary theory to be more profound and more exciting than creative works. Creative writers, on the other hand, sometimes view literary criticism

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## CALLALOO

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as parasitic at best, badly written and pretentious at worst. There are often, in other words, built-in misunderstandings between the communities. (*Callaloo* 32.2, Spring 2009)

That very autumn morning 2007, after our October celebration of *Callaloo*'s thirty years of existence, the annual CALLALOO CONFERENCE was conceived, as I listened to two of our most engaging poets express their disappointments about the work of our fellow critical thinkers. However, it was not until about five months later that the conference was born, kicking its way into the world as The *Callaloo* Retreat.

Shortly after the spring academic term commenced in January 2008, I invited thirty or more new and emerging creative writers, and literary and cultural critics from across the United States and Canada to meet with me in New Orleans, Louisiana, some seventy or eighty miles southeast of Baton Rouge, the site where, in 1976, I, with invaluable help from some few of my colleagues at Southern University, had quietly published the first issue of *Callaloo*. Not all of the invitees accepted my invitation, but the twenty or so who did gather in New Orleans for four days (March 5-8, 2008) found the meeting illuminating, as their critical and creative testimonials attest in *Callaloo* (32.2 Spring 2009). The focus of our first meeting, "Literature, Culture, & Critique," was simple: What we do. How we do it. Why we do it. And what a new and engaging way of viewing our collective—yet obviously divided—selves that Shona N. Jackson gave us in her thoughtful, challenging, and provocative keynote, a presentation she prepared after a request I made of her only a few days before our meeting in New Orleans. "Our subject," Professor Jackson argued,

... is not only our language or style of discourse, the aesthetics of content ... but about ... "intellectual division of labour" ... that produces seemingly incommensurate forms (the critical/scholarly essay or book, for example, versus the short story, novel, poem, vignette, etc.), produces different strategies of reading ... different spaces of articulation (such as the annual conference of the Modern Language Association, a public reading at a coffee shop, or a reading sponsored by Cave Canem), different publication venues, and finally different forms of financial and social support. Most scholarly journals such as *PMLA* do not print creative work. In its commitment to producing both scholarly and creative work, *Callaloo*, of course, is one of the exceptions, which the writer Nelly Rosario has referred to as "our very own Babel." (*Callaloo* 32.2, Spring 2009)

Since that first New Orleans meeting, each year we have gathered in different sites and seasons in the USA and Africa and now here in the United Kingdom for our fifth conference in late November 2013, during our Thanksgiving week back in the United States.

Since our second annual meeting, which was held at Washington University in St. Louis (March 25-28, 2009) on the subject "The Intellectual's Dilemma: Production and Praxis in the Twenty-First Century," when we became a formal conference rather than a retreat, the focus of our gatherings has changed. "(Black) Movements: Poetics and Praxis," Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia (July 5-9, 2010), "Translations" at Texas A&M University (College Station) and The Menil Collection (Houston) October 12-15, 2011, and "LOVE" at Princeton University, October 11-13, 2012—these are the concerns we transitioned to as



conference themes. Instead of concentrating on internal issues dealing with our respective personal forms of production, we, artists and critics together, now collectively engage our auditors, specialists and the general public, on more distanced or self-detached subjects, a subtle and effective strategy which, I think, allows each of us quietly to peer into each of our internal acts of creating texts, as well as how those texts illicit critical and emotional responses from our audiences. These collective subjects for panel discussions also allow each of us the opportunity to join together in praxis that ultimately becomes discovery that we never before witnessed. In other words, the creative writers and literary and cultural critics in the CALLALOO CONFERENCE group now work together on a variety of subjects.

This year at Oxford University we are addressing the rapidly developing discourse on “the Transatlantic” by focusing on a specific subject that should unquestionably be a vital and defining component of that discourse. That is, the theme of the 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE is “The Transatlantic, Africa, and Its Diaspora,” a subject which we should begin reading as central not only to the making of the Caribbean and the Americas but also especially to the building of modern Britain and Europe, as we know and experience them now. This conference, therefore, is largely about the Transatlantic from the fifteenth century through the twenty-first century, with implications about how Britain and other European nations advanced their national projects at the expense of people of color. Why this subject, and why do we mount a conference on it here at Oxford University? It is essentially the shock of recognition that here in the twenty-first century not a small number of institutions of higher education in Europe and in the Americas are once again attempting to marginalize or ignore altogether Africa and the descendants of Africans in Europe and the Americas in matters academic that deal with the White World—in this instance, for nefarious reasons, their attempts to exclude the Black World from the developing discourse on the Transatlantic. What does it mean for British and continental European institutions to continue to ignore, dismiss, marginalize, or distort the centrality of Africa and its Diaspora to Britain’s and Europe’s advancements of their capitalist project(s) at home and westward across the Atlantic from the fifteenth century to the present?

It is our collective will that *Callaloo* and the CALLALOO CONFERENCE group must at this time intervene and declare to the world, however directly or indirectly, that to construct a Transatlantic discourse at the exclusion or distortion of Africans and their descendants is to continue white supremacist propaganda, and through it maintain and further develop its hegemonic position of domination and exploitation of peoples of African descent, as well as other peoples of color, the world over. It is also our collective will to pronounce to all who can hear and read these words that those educational institutions and individuals that persist in ignoring, excluding, marginalizing, or misrepresenting people of color who were instrumental in the creation and development of the Americas and in the building and sustaining of a powerful and modern Britain, for example, are willfully racist in their intellectual dishonesty. They should and will eventually be directly challenged, as we did and continue to confront white supremacists in the United States, and as we did the apartheid project of the dominating white minority government of South Africa. Unfortunately, apartheid in intellectual or academic affairs in the United Kingdom and continental Europe lives and thrives quietly in its masked towers, and in so doing it continues to produce effects similar to the social, psychological, political, economic, and cultural impacts we witnessed in Jim Crow America and Apartheid South Africa. Neither

the United Kingdom as a polity nor its academic communities as intellectual centers—with their various instruments of racial politics mis-educating British citizens about what the United Kingdom did and continues to do in Africa and the Americas—will be able to avoid domestic and international challenges to their educational institutions or their nation state.

I suddenly remember, at an institution where I taught previously, what the chairman of my department said to me when I told him that I had been granted a paid leave to travel, introduce, and promote *Callaloo* throughout the Caribbean and in England, France, the Netherlands, and other European nations that once held substantial colonies in the Americas. He politely complimented me, but he immediately asked me, “Are there any black writers in England?” “Yes, of course,” I answered. “Really?” he asked, and then added, “I always wondered why the people from the Caribbean islands always flocked to England after we gave them their independence.” “They followed the money; they knew where the money went,” I said—perhaps with an ironic smile. Let me add that my chair was a “highly educated” Englishman, who had not cut his travel and visiting ties with the United Kingdom, but he did not know how mis-educated he was about his native land. I wanted to tell him that black citizens in England had been writing and publishing since the eighteenth century—Ignatius Sancho and Olaudah Equiano, for example—Olaudah Equiano being one of the most engaging, what for his transnational travels. I did not dare to inform my department chairman about the presence of black people in England as early as the Roman settlements, because he apparently did not know that it was not until the Tudor period, the sixteenth century, that British records reveal a substantial presence of blacks in Britain. I was especially shocked that the chairman of the English Department of such a prestigious American university did not know the writers of his home nation. I wanted to speak with him about such contemporaries as Beryl Gilroy, Wilson Harris, and Caryl Phillips, but I did not think of a value in doing so. My white British chairman’s ignorance was willful, arrogant, and insensitive; these writers, I rightly assumed, were widely known among intellectuals throughout the United Kingdom. I knew that their books were in bookstores and libraries in the UK and in the United States. As a specialist in twentieth-century-literature in English, was he not conversant with the living writers of his own nation or the literary historical past of his native land, England? When he teaches courses in contemporary British writers, does he not offer a single text by a writer of African descent who lives and writes and publishes in the United Kingdom? Had he ever heard of the meanings and reasons for and the extraordinary impact of the two waves of the twentieth-century Windrush from the Caribbean to England? He was mis-educated, and one wonders to how many young Americans he had done what was done to him—not to mention his erasing from English literature, history, life, and culture vital the work that Africans and their descendants have performed for hundreds of years to help build England and its educational institutions.

This leads me to wonder what historians in the schools and the institutions of higher education are telling the citizens of the United Kingdom. Have they not been informing the people of the realm of the contributions the peoples of former British colonies have made and continue to make to the life and blood of the United Kingdom as a nation state? Yes, the Transatlantic is rife with important examples of such contributions so as to make the people and their history and culture a central or vital part of the Transatlantic discourse. The example of white British planter Christopher Codrington and the unknown and un-

named black people whose minds and labor were the sources of his wealth is only one story of similar narratives about how African descendants helped to build the United Kingdom from the sixteenth century to the present. Apparently, the enslaved black people, through their unpaid labor, must have been and continue be erased from the history of Britain. Otherwise, why would my chairman wonder why the West Indians came to the UK in great numbers after their nations' independence?

The story of Christopher Codrington and his family, and how they came to their extraordinary wealth, is a history worth revisiting, for it sheds much light on why the past and present of African Diaspora are of essential importance to the Transatlantic discourse. As you might know, Christopher Codrington was a seventeenth-century British plantation owner in Barbados, a graduate of Christ Church, Oxford University, and former fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. As a small but very significant part of his story goes, he willed a small, but very significant, portion of his extensive inheritance to All Souls College, Oxford: £10,000 and an extraordinary collection of books of over 11,000 volumes—all of which were used to create a great institution of gothic architectural splendor, the world renowned Codrington Library, which remains an enduring symbolic monument to the contribution that plantation slavery made toward the building, refinement, and expansion of Oxford University. Whose unremunerated labor in the cane fields and sugar refineries, for example, supplied slave master Codrington the money for such an important gift to Oxford University? How many buildings at Oxford University and in other locations in the United Kingdom are the results, for example, of African slavery, African slave trade, and British colonialism in Africa and its diaspora in the Americas? The Codrington wealth is the result of the labor of enslaved Africans, which is only one of many thousands of examples that demonstrate the centrality of the African Diaspora to the Transatlantic discourse. Yes, we the people of the English-speaking African Diaspora have come here to Oxford University to make a declaration to all of Europe—and the rest of the world, for that matter—to hear and read: that no attempt should be made to create a Transatlantic discourse that is constructed without significant particulars defined in part by the African Diaspora as it evolved from the fifteenth century to the present in the Americas and Europe.

If the 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE can achieve the goal of helping academics and institutions across Britain and Europe to understand the true meaning of the honesty of and the justification in inclusion, then, and only then, will the mission of our gathering here at Oxford University have been complete in current humanistic intentions. But we, the members of the CALLALOO CONFERENCE group, want finally to remind each of you listening here tonight, along others coming to attend the next three days of the conference, to carry this healing and necessary message forward: we all are standing together in advancing the idea of the African Diaspora as a defining component of the Transatlantic discourse. If we all do that here in Britain and Europe and in the Americas, we will not only help transform, in positive ways, a discourse but also—and more importantly—our respective societies, our own body politic.

*—Charles Henry Rowell*



**Salamishah Tillet**

*Michael K. Taylor © 2013*

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## MOTHER TONGUES & MASTERS OF WORDS *Callaloo Across the Atlantic*

by Salamishah Tillet

For whom are we doing what we do when we do literary criticism? I  
can only speak for myself. But how I write and what I write is done  
in order to save my own life.

—Barbara Christian, “Race for Theory”

When the late Barbara Christian penned this famous essay, she did so with the urgency of the moment. In the late 1980s, the canon wars were raging; multiculturalism was seen either as a belated gift or imminent threat; and African American literary studies had the growing pains that came with its legitimacy in the American academy. Even our beloved *Callaloo* was only a mere decade old. But, I always read Christian’s words as not just for her time, but also as a harbinger for things to come. It reveals the long-standing concern, even angst, amongst those of my generation who continue to *do* African American literary criticism.

Though there is certain circularity to this tension between formal politics and literary criticism, it is also inescapable. For whom are we speaking? In what languages do we write? And to what end? Those questions stayed with me after I left last year’s CALLALOO CONFERENCE titled “The Transatlantic, Africa, and Its Diaspora” at Oxford University and Goldsmiths, University of London. A sentiment I do not share lightly because it was sparked as much by the insights of the conference participants as it was by the interruption of a single audience member.

Perhaps, I should not use this space to think about his disruption. For those who attended the conference and experienced the successive series of his verbal assaults firsthand, we left feeling that this one person—whose name I sadly never learned—took up too much of our time and intellectual energy. But, I think his comments, our responses, and the eventual outcome of our exchange reveal the limits and the power of African American literary criticism itself.

Language is the battlefield. It can be the tool of conquest and the sword.

—Ngugi wa Thiong’o

It did not have to be a strained moment. The panel, “Europe and the UK: Transatlantic Studies” featured a conversation about imagining new cartographies, or as geographer Pat Noxolo noted, new ways of seeing and recognizing creolizations, the in-between-space, that pushes us beyond the Atlantic. Likewise, literary critic Jean-Paul Rocchi posited the African Diaspora as “the possible space of recreation and reinvention,” always contingent

on “multiple identifications and multiple points of intersections.” Within this context of thinking through new circuits and the context of black diaspora studies, it was strange when a graduate student in the audience (from the United States but now studying in Paris) asked the panel about a debate that seems to plague some of us in the American academy: what is the role, if any, of the critic as public intellectual?

The lines were quickly drawn. And the African Americanists primarily gave the responses: one panelist said the critic is the interpreter and disseminator of ideas to the outside world; another senior critic proffered that we should differentiate the public intellectual from publicity intellectual, the scholar from the pundit. In both cases, the emphasis was on the performance of translation—that delicate dance between the critic and our various publics. So, when the next question came up, it did not belie the contentiousness that would later take us off course. It started off innocuous enough, but it landed with a punch: “I am not sure why you all speak the way you do. Without passion. Without love.”

Upon first blush, this audience member’s move is not so unfamiliar. Joyce Ann Joyce’s postulation that “Black creative art is an act of love” in 1987 was so bold that Sharon Holland would later call the ensuing debate between Joyce, Houston Baker, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. about the role of post-structuralism within African American literary criticism as so heated and important that it was “a revolution that should have been televised” (Joyce 343; Holland 327). And Joyce was right in so many ways. Love has always had a place in African American literary criticism. It is the feeling (the *love* for literature, the *love* of word play, the *love* for intellectual friendship) that gets most of us up in the morning. It sustains us as we wade through student papers and sit on committees. It keeps us sane as we follow a single archival line, continuously revise the same sentence, and hope that we can bring alive our analysis of characters, themes, and ideas on the page as much our cousins, the poets and fiction writers do.

But I digress. His inquiry had little to do with that sort of passion. He wanted to know why we use a language that could be alienating, that to an outside listener might sound devoid of love. But when I hear this question, I also listen for the false choice upon which it is built. That there is a discourse of the academia and then there is a language of accessibility. It does not reveal the greater injury—that we have all lost our way; we have all forgotten to speak in our mother tongue.

At least, this is the lesson I learned when playwright and novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o gave one of the most moving keynote addresses that I have heard in a long time. He revealed to us that the crisis is when we refuse to *translate*. What is lost, not in the slip-pages and gaps between language, but when the critic and creative writer is rewarded for only using the language of the empire to write about the myriad of peoples and cultures on the African continent. Differently put, he told us, “If someone applied for a job as a professor in a French department, but did not know French, we would laugh and rightly guess that he would not get the job.” He went on, “Why is it that when someone claims to study Ghanaian or Kenyan literature, we don’t require that they know Twi, Ga, Swahili, or Kikuyu. Language is the battlefield.”

We have to be the masters of many words.

—Ben Okri



The next day, the same audience member stood up again. This time, he responded to the panel “Caribbean Studies, African American Studies, and Transatlantic Studies” featuring presentations by literary critics Joan Anim-Addo and Carole Boyce Davies and political theorist Anthony Bogues. In many ways, their conversation picked up on the threads and tensions of Thiongo’s talk: Anim-Addo historicized the place of the “Caribbean” within the “African” imaginary in the Négritude movement as one that strove for reciprocity and translation.

Bogues moved us across the black Atlantic in his reminder that in the twentieth-century “recovering the African presence” was constitutive to the emergence of Caribbean cultural and literary studies. But, it was Davies who took up the notion of lost tongues and more specifically lost texts most clearly. Speaking on the twentieth-anniversary of Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*, Davies discussed the notable textual absence of Caribbean in general, and Gilroy’s Guyanese educator-activist mother, Beryl. “I would be remiss,” Davies told us, “to be sitting next to Joan Anim-Addo, to think about the Caribbean feminist organizing done here in England, and not mention how many of us see Beryl Gilroy, as one of our mother-texts.”

This shift to activism might have been the spark. When the man stood up again, he decried the affect of the panel—their apathy as a symptom of non-activism. In some ways, he was right to call into question our staging a conference like this at Oxford with its own grotesque racial history and in England, a country in which he was born but as a black man, is routinely policed and asked to produce his proof of citizenship. He, not knowing the political persuasion of his audience, assumed we did not know the politics of the day. That white supremacy had a long reach and that it most recently landed in Sanford, Florida, in which a teenage African American boy named Trayvon Martin was brutally murdered. He wanted to know why we were busy using such big words when so many people were being killed.

It is a curious conundrum to have to explain doing what one loves to those we claim to deeply love. But the panelists responded kindly by stating that their work is deeply political and that their activism exists inside and outside academia. Anim-Addo spoke to the fact that there are so few senior black scholars in the entire British academy that attending the CALLALOO CONFERENCE was in and of itself a political act for her, the building blocks for her community building. But it was novelist Ben Okri who rejected the proposition altogether. He told all of us, “You can’t tell black people what language they should speak and think in, because you come dangerously close to telling us that we cannot be intellectuals.” The room fell silent and I longed to know what prescription came next. “Instead,” he demanded, “we have to be the masters of many words.”

Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence.

—Toni Morrison

I was naïve to believe that Okri’s call for an intellectual multilingualism not only responded to Thiongo’s and Davies’s desires to rediscover mother languages and texts, but could also speak to this question of the critic’s passions and voice. But, of course, I was wrong. This all came to a head when literary scholar Dagmawi Woubshet opened his presentation on the “Africa in African Diaspora Studies & Transatlantic Studies”

session with a revelation. An hour before, the interview he gave last summer in Addis Ababa on James Baldwin was now on the Ethiopian social media site, *Sodere.com*. One of the comments underneath the video asked, “Is Dagmawi Woubshet the first openly gay Ethiopian?” Since same-sex sexual activity is illegal in Ethiopia, the question was not of pride but of shaming and, of course, discipline. Within an hour, over one hundred comments had been posted: two were positive, the rest disowned him, and a few threatened to kill him. Woubshet then said to us, “The work we do is *political*. It can put our lives at risk every day.”

The content of his talk only furthered that sense of the social justice found in literary criticism. Highlighting the epistles written by Ethiopian children orphaned by their parents who died of AIDS-related illnesses, Woubshet also revealed how they were simultaneously abandoned and stigmatized by the communities into which they were born. Letter after letter began “Dear Mother,” and a sense of betrayal hovered in the air, for we all knew, the child writer and now audience alike, that the correspondence was one-sided. There could never be a parental reply. Hearing these in both their original Amharic and in English, we had to listen to their language of mourning and their own theory of disenfranchisement, state betrayal, and lost love.

At first, I was silent. Grieving for those children and for the too many African American men, like my own uncle, who died of AIDS in the early 1990s. So when that same chastising audience member stood up again, this time accusing Woubshet (and perhaps all of us) of romanticizing “homosexuality” and the “AIDS plague that it has caused in places like Haiti,” I lost it. The room seemed to start spinning. One poet in the audience got up and told him, “Stop it. Stop inflicting this violence.” The moderator then interrupted him because it was becoming increasingly unsafe. It was a tense moment, but it was also one of startling clarity. Woubshet opened his computer and started reading the following excerpt from Toni Morrison’s 1993 Nobel Lecture:

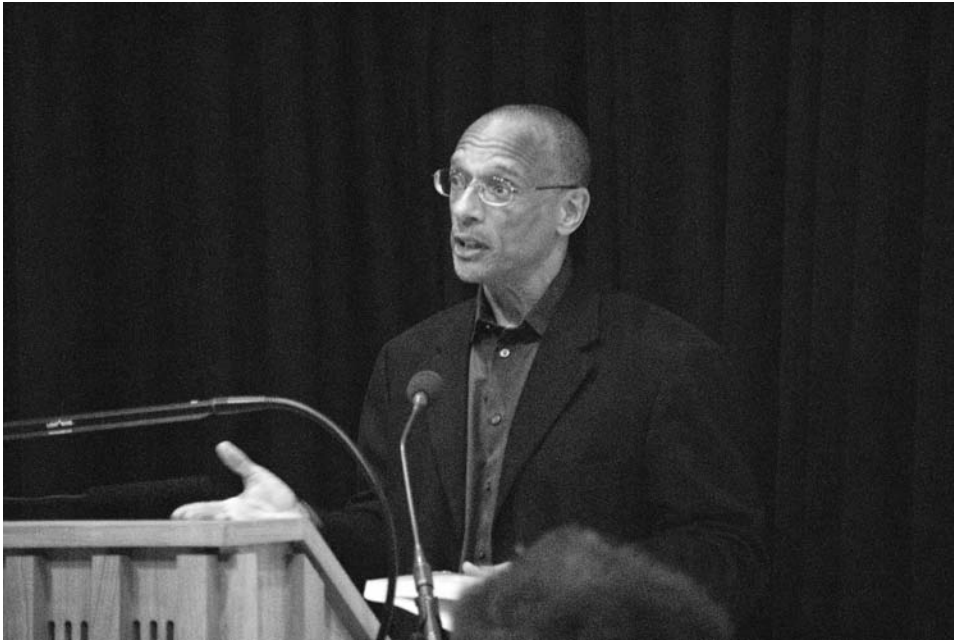
Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. . . . Sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas. (9)

Woubshet updated Morrison’s prose with “I might add homophobic language, too” as a severe reminder of the battles that we were fighting in that very room on that very day. Strangely, I have never had that kind of debate at a literary conference. That back and forth tension between a longing for an anti-racist organizing and Diasporic solidarity *and* the vicious aggression of a homophobic utopia felt like time travel to those political conversations I had in undergrad and when I first realized I wanted to become a literary critic. Language always has its limits, but is often all we had. And that exchange and eventual folding into and standing up for each other and our language sometimes has to be enough—because to do what we *do* can be contentious, hazardous, and on that day, I remember, hurts, but more often can save.



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*Michael K. Taylor © 2013*

Fred D'Aguiar

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## CALLALOO'S OXFORD STEW

by Fred D'Aguiar

"The novel has nothing to do with language," Nurrudin Farah intoned in the hotel bar around midnight, in a conference crowd which included Ngugi wa Thiong'o, his son Mukoma (also a writer), and Booker Prize winner Ben Okri. We had left a successful reading earlier that evening as part of the line-up for the CALLALOO CONFERENCE staged in Oxford. After the reading (one kind of sustenance) we were famished (the need for the more obvious kind). Farah's remark was food not found on any menu, but the kind of intrigue cooked up among writers still on a high from reading and responding to a vigorous Q&A from an engaged audience. Farah meant that the novel was an emotional construct before it declared itself in spoken language (or was heard aloud in some pristine interior of the mind). The novel's independence from language left the writer in a drawing room of recollections indebted to a primary source where the novel resided in a complete shape and form and where it waited patiently for yet another manifestation of it, this time as a language construct.

We took turns arguing against Farah's notion while he leaned back in his chair and thinned his eyes and gazed down each of us with his rebuttal. To his mind the language that we know and venerate invariably came after the emotion (though he admitted that the language frequently arrived enshrined in emotion). There was no way to disprove his thesis. Intuitively, we knew it to be true. Looking around the table it occurred to me that this conversation could only happen at a *Callaloo* gathering.

Charles Rowell and his team had shepherded a format for unbridled intellectual ferment and cross-fertilization of disciplines that would have made the original gathering of twenty-five nations at the *Bandung* conference of 1955 proud. *Bandung* firmly opposed colonialism's continuity by other means among newly independent nations. *Callaloo* heard Ngugi's theory of linguistic colonialism among Africa's nations whose native languages were being eroded by a political, commercial, and creative preference for English. To reverse the process he advocated a flowering of creativity in those African languages first, with an English (or other language) translation second. I first came across this theory in Ngugi's "decolonization of the mind" activism in his 1970s collection of essays, but hearing it again in Oxford the theory had lost none of its appeal. As an opening salvo for the conference there could have been no better reminder of a creative approach to the big cultural questions affecting us all.

Carol Boyce Davies announced the launch of her new essay collection, and her paper united Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and the United States in a newly feminized body of resistance narratives. Professor Davies is famous for at least two things, one, her retrieval of women elided from the male-narrative histories and, two, for her grassroots activism

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(See her work on Claudia Jones). Davies thinks like a poet—accustomed to chronology and linearity she peppers her scholarship with quantum and lateral thinking.

The poets won the day at the closing reading at Goldsmiths where US poets shared the stage with UK poets. The range of voices accounted for all the trends of current poetry: autobiography transmuted into fictions amendable to scansion; songbirds of the post-colonial apocalypse heralding a new day of the performance body in unparaphraseable display; the local, in David mode, aiming a slingshot loaded with a rhetoric of poetics at the Goliath of globalization.

If you don't believe me, ask anyone about the poet who, after a splendid reading by his peers at the Oxford venue, got up to comment on the event, stood before the podium, hesitated as if lost for words (as we, the audience, surely were having just witnessed some spellbinding presentations), and pulled out a mouth organ and gave us all a rendition of the blues that brought the house down. Nuff said.



*Jerriod Avant © 2013*

**Hermine D. Pinson and Marlon B. Ross**

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## THREE FOR ONE

by *Hermine D. Pinson*

I want to tell you a story that takes the scenic route to a report on “The Trans-Atlantic, Africa, and Its Diaspora,” the CALLALOO CONFERENCE held over the 2013 Thanksgiving holiday at the Oxford Research Centre for the Humanities. I’m going to elaborate, shortly, on a night-spun thread of monologue that took place at Oxford’s Cotswold Lodge during one of our late-night conversations. Some folks reading this narrative know exactly the place and conversations to which I refer, if not necessarily the shaggy dog story I told one night. Ben Okri would know, but more about him later. Check with Cotswold Bar habitués for errors and omissions.

In the evenings after dinner, we’d migrate from the dining room to sit in comfortably stuffed chintz chairs in the cozy bar that smelled of wool, scented wood, good whiskey, and the faint aroma of pine. We’d sit there and swap stories. I’m sure Charles Rowell, our fearless leader, told Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o that I was a singing poet, and from then until the penultimate night of the conference, singing was a part of our ritual gathering. Nothing prepared me for this spirited and gregarious man who laughs easily in the company of his son, *Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ*, his friends and accomplished colleagues Ben Okri, Nuruddin Farrah, Tyehimba Jess, Hortense Spillers, Fred D’Aguiar, Maaza Mengiste, Robert Reid-Pharr, Corey Walker, Jerriod Avant, writer and photographer Michael Taylor, and, of course, Charles Rowell. I could outline the literary achievements of this illustrious company, but it would take too long to list their novels, scholarly works, plays, poems, and edited works that fathomed the world’s atrocities and joys, the invention, courage, endurance of African peoples in a range of languages from English to Kikuyu to Amharic to French and beyond. During the day we sat on panels and formally considered the discourse of the African diaspora, though not without levity, spontaneity, and unexpected challenges from “outside” the academy. The final panel of the conference nourished our spirits as well as our intellects with poetry from some of the best the world can offer.

The first night of our stay I sang a blues poem by poet Estella Conwill Majozo, “Malcolm Calling Blues,” then Tyehimba Jess played a mean harmonica blues and recited poems from his *Leadbelly* collection. Here’s a bit of Estella’s poem, which I consider one of my standards, if you will:

A note low and guttural in the hollow of the horn  
A note low and guttural in the hollow of the horn  
Breath over brass changes how we mourn.

The song is admittedly an elegiac blues, sung not in the usual first-person singular, but in the communal “we,” first as a tribute to the martyrdom of Malcolm X but in a larger

symbolic sense in honor of our cyclical rise and fall, our endurance and transcendence of evil; thus, “Hum of the earth knows that truth don’t lie. / Hum of the earth gonna make the devil cry, / Saying martyred flesh can multiply.”

The song’s prescience, that is, its anticipation of tribulation, comforts, while it also astonishes, because not long after our meeting in Oxford, Nelson Mandela, beloved ANC leader, freedom fighter, and former president of South Africa passed and, not long after that, Amiri Baraka passed. The song, in its own way, compliments a conversation Maaaza Mengiste was having with Ngugi about Jean Amery’s *At the Mind’s Limits*, a profound philosophical meditation on the lessons of Auschwitz.

The night before we travelled to London and on to Goldsmiths, University of London, for a night of poetry, we sat together in the bar before the pungent wood stove fireplace. Although I think Tyehimba was just getting started, I was approaching the end of my blues repertoire, so I resorted to a spiritual that has survived slavery and been rendered by Fred McDowell, Sam Cooke, the Blind Boys of Alabama, Cassandra Wilson, Aerosmith, Rolling Stone, and a passel of other jazz and blues musicians. It goes like this:

You may be black, you may be white,  
You may be wrong, you may be right,  
But when the Lord gets ready, you gotta move.

You gotta move, you gotta move,  
you gotta move, child, you gotta move.  
‘Cause when the Lord gets ready, you gotta move.

Imagine swinging this song after a little sweetening at the bar, plus a little bit extra from a thoughtful poet-scholar who came prepared to enliven the already inspirited conversation. At one point, I opened my eyes (I’d been concentrating on getting the notes just right) and spied Jackie Kay singing along in her lilting Scottish accent. So there we all were, in the embrace of each other’s laughter, intellectual forays and good feeling, talking and listening, teaching and learning. There we were dipping into a living African diasporic aural river fed by streams from Chicago, Edinburgh, Nigeria, Longtown, Mississippi, Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Virginia, Texas, and I could go on ‘round the world and back again, really.

\* \* \*

Bear with me, while I tell a version of a tale I told on our second night at Cotswold Lodge Hotel bar, the one Ben Okri liked and said, “You should write that down.” Mind you, I was so taken by the compassion, intellectual energy, and imagination of *Famished Road* and later by his personal jollity and keen ear for a story that I took his advice. So here it is, Ben.

### The Proper Name for It\*

I was working on a short story about Myrtha Gilmore, a six-year-old girl in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1963, who stood on the sidelines and watched the motorcade of President John F. Kennedy *sitting tall and smiling and waving on down the street in a 1962 Lincoln Continental convertible, waving to the crowds of people standing on both sides of the street, waiting for the opportunity to see this handsome man, the chief executive with windblown hair and slight gap in his front teeth, the man who'd beaten Richard Nixon, Vice-President who looked on tv as if he had a five o'clock shadow.* My character, Myrth, knew nothing about Nixon, because that's not who her parents had voted for. They'd voted for Kennedy of the thick forelock, crinkling eyes, and sparkling wit. Five months later, following the arc of the story, Myrth would sit in her grandmother's parlor with the over-stuffed sofas and fluffy armchairs and stove-fireplace to watch the same president's funeral on black&white tv and for the first time hear the funeral march outside the magical world of cartoons. *Myrth heard the entire refrain, not just the first notes that summoned the image of a stiffened Disney character with a flower growing out of his stomach, carried like a board by his friends, until he woke up and the chase continued.*

I was thinking about how to describe the televised funeral that bleak day *when the rambunctious riderless horse, with the boots hung backward on his back, was led by a young man down the street and the beautiful widow in her veil and black dress, called Jackie now the world over, strode behind the cortege.* Including the name of the Funeral March was the key to setting the somber mood for this scene.

I had never known the real name of this "song" or its composer, and I was residing in a writer's colony, my second one in six months, with artists, painters, and composers. At dinner, by way of getting to know each other, we explained our projects to each other. When it was my turn, I tried to explain the parade scene and the funeral scene to Ari, a novelist from Indiana, Jack, a photographer, Stephanie, a biographer, and Juneau, a painter, who happened to be off that day from working part-time in the kitchen.

"I want to juxtapose Myrth's excitement and wonder at the parade to her response to the televised funeral. I wanna somehow show the surreality of both scenes in retrospect, you know, but I need the real title of the Funeral March and a little of its history." Everyone agreed on the potential of my proposed story, but they were stumped for an answer.

"You should ask Lane Faulconer over there," Ari said. "She would know the name of that song," said Ari, this novelist who would go on a year later to win a substantial prize for her first novel. I recognized Faulconer's name immediately, because I had seen it earlier in the spring when I had spent time at another retreat.

I happened to be staying in the Windemere cottage, one of the composer's cottages where they often housed writers. On the walls of the cottage were several boat-shaped ledgers containing a list of signatures. I later discovered that the signatures and respective dates of signing belonged to artists who had occupied the cottage during their stay. It was the usual practice on the last day for occupants to sign the ledger before leaving the cottage and ending their residence for that year. When it was time for me to leave, I

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\* Editor's note: The following selections have been taken from Hermine Pinson's longer story, which is a part of her hybrid memoir-in-progress, "Promise to be Water." Ellipses indicate where sections of the story have been omitted.



signed my name and, out of curiosity, checked to see who had occupied the cottage before me. It turns out her neat, almost block-print signature, not at all extravagant like the one that preceded it or excessively cramped like my own that followed, belonged to Lane Falconer, the composer of many classical pieces, including “Nocturne in Pink” and “Swans’ Lyrics,” both well-known concertos for piano and both in the spirit of a European group she associated with, among them Ben Patterson. Unlike her neat script, her concertos, were abstract and cryptic. When I studied the other tombstones, I discovered that Lane had occupied this very cottage every summer for the past forty-five years.

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Over the next week, I occasionally sat with Lane and her group when I wasn’t sitting with Ari, Jack, and Stephanie, and occasionally a videographer working on a documentary about a chair. At night, we played crazy eights to relax or I’d play solitaire in the evenings. Back in my cottage, I wrestled with the problem of linking Kennedy’s death with Myrth’s loss of trust in the idea of an all-powerful, all-knowing God and a realization of evil in the world, without over-simplifying her inherited interpretation of the Calvinist principles she was brought up with. *When the stranger turned around, Myrth recognized Mrs. Ingram’s face from Old Zion Sunday school, but Mrs. Ingram had not seen her, because she was too busy puffing on a cigarette. She almost choked when she looked down to see her little Sunday school charge staring up at her.* No, that’s too easy, but something dramatic happens to the stranger. Delete. Some afternoons I was impressed with my own smart writing. This was one of those days when I thought it was a miracle that I was here at all, and maybe I should leave quietly before they discovered I really didn’t come here to write but to kill sentences, one at a time.

One afternoon, when I was staring into my computer, again with my hand over the delete button, I glanced at the time in the upper-screen and realized it was time to go to dinner, so instead of deleting a day’s work, I saved it and hurried down the grass path that led to the main house. Starting at midday, the weather had grown devilishly hot, and it didn’t help that it had been raining every morning for the past three days. Carol, a residency associate, had underlined the written instructions for every resident to bring mosquito repellent, and I had obeyed. When I rose for the morning and every time I left the cottage, I sprayed all over with Skin So Soft. Feeling fortified for the walk down the winding path to the main house, I locked the door to my cottage and started out, when I saw Lane a little ahead of me, making her way to the main building. She took slow, careful steps in her mary janes and elegant shirtwaist dress that made her look as if she had swept out of 1955 and into the early-twenty-first century.

“Hi Lane, how’s your work coming,” I asked. When Lane looked up, her eyes seemed to widen or perhaps their turquoise color always startled me, and her long fingers adjusted and patted the scarf at her throat. She managed a smile that barely stretched the corners of her lips, but her eyes danced with amusement and perhaps a dare, as if we were parrying in a contest, although our conversation was banal.

“Oh, brilliantly, my dear! I think I’m close to finishing it.”

“I’m so glad to hear it. I mean I’d like to hear it. Well, actually, I mean, I’m glad to know that you’re nearly finished with it. What is it, by the way?”

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"I'm working on a sonata that's . . ."

Just as Lane began to describe her work, I heard a buzzing coming from somewhere below, and looked down in time to see a small troop of mosquitoes that seem to have floated from the nearby bushes and dampening grass, eager to sabotage any unsuspecting passerby. They floated, trance-like through the air to fasten themselves on Lane's unprotected calves and ankles.

"Mozzies, bloodsuckers! Lane, did you remember to spray with mosquito repellant? I'm sorry to interrupt." I bent toward Lane and swiped at the mosquitoes that seemed to hover in the air, their legs dragging around my hands and dancing around their meal like the hesitation blues. Lane continued to walk haltingly toward the main building and the dining hall, so occasionally, I swatted at her legs, leaving an unsightly red streak where I had successfully crushed two at a time. We must have looked like an odd pair of curlers on grass with no stone in sight. Lane suddenly stopped in her tracks.

"Well, my dear, apparently not today . . ." Lane stared at her legs and the mosquitoes floating near them as if they were someone else's legs. Then, she looked over at my jeans, then my boots, square-toed in the western style.

"Oh, dear. They're eating me alive."

I paused as well, then recovered and replied, "I'll run back to my cabin and get some. Be right back," and I sprinted away without looking back. I don't know why I expected Lane to be standing there in the weedy path, waiting for me to bring back the Skin So Soft. She walked so haltingly that I thought she wouldn't have gotten far by the time I returned to spray her legs. Lane had increased her pace enough to outrun the mosquitoes for one evening, and me as well. I finally caught up with her in the dining room and set the spray bottle on the dining table, near her green salad.

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The next morning, when I opened the door to go to breakfast, there was my bottle of mosquito spray with a note in Lane's neat script.

Dearest Delphina, thanks for the spray. You've been great, and I won't forget your kindness to me. Come to my cottage tomorrow to hear my finished sonata.

Yours,  
Lane

I didn't see Lane at breakfast, although the rest her group sat at their regular table by the windows overlooking the incline and a path littered with wildflowers that led to the river. I'd already changed the Sunday school teacher back to a stranger standing next to Myrth at the parade. She wasn't smoking a cigarette. Instead, she wore a sun hat, and underneath was Lane's white wispy hair and jewel eyes. *She smiled at little Myrth and asked her if she wanted to get closer to the front, the better to see the marching bands that were smartly stepping in the street. "Mama, can I get up front? The lady said I could . . ."* I was deep in story, setting up the conflict that would inevitably come. I'll change the scene to present tense. No. I'll leave it in past. *Leaning forward to get a better glimpse of what was coming, now that*

*she had a better perch up front, Myrth waved her little American flag with such enthusiasm that one of them flew out of her hand and landed in the street a few feet away. Before the parade, people had come around handing them out, especially to the children, and Myrth, in her pretty sun dress and sandals, sitting on her father's shoulders, had somehow gotten two of them. She was back on the ground now, and a float strewn with flowers and young women dressed like sunflowers was approaching. In her excitement, Myrth had waved her flag, and now it was in the street. She hurriedly bent down to retrieve it, just as the wide float approached. Does Myrth get in the way of the float? Does the stranger save her? Or does the Lane stranger, a great-grandmother, faint from being over-heated? I wrote notes in the margin, to consider when I returned to this spot in the story. By the time I finished writing it, my own heart was beating rapidly, as if I were Myrth standing among the forest of legs and fearful of the fainting stranger. I couldn't see the ending for the trees of narrative possibility that blocked it from view. I had worked past dinner. Now famished, I flew down the darkening path to get to the kitchen before it closed. Thursday was Juneau's shift, so he let me sneak into the kitchen and make a quick sandwich and grab a few more goodies to carry back to my cottage.*

"What's the hurry, Delphine?"

"I'm chasing story," I told him and jumped back on the communal bicycle and rode back to my cottage where I proceeded to type gleefully, a sandwich in one hand, feeling as if the muse were sitting right on my shoulder. I wondered if she were my carping grandmother, then dismissed the thought, not because my grandmother would think it unlike me (she would), but because I didn't want to dwell too deeply on the source of my inspiration. After I'd turned off my computer and put on my pajamas, I went back into the document once more to add a bit of dialogue to the Lane character, who advises Myrth to stand farther back from the street and not to "*inhale too deeply the fumes from the cars*" as they went by. I also decided that someone had to faint, frightening Myrth, who'd never seen anyone faint "dead away," as one of the character put it. Here was my way to link near-death to real death.

The next morning, having completed the first draft, I stepped outside my cabin to a gorgeous day. The breeze played with the windchimes outside my door and bobbled a gentle song. I knew breakfast had started forty-five minutes before, but I had been too tired to answer the bell. When I strolled into the dining room with my tray, I found my group sitting in their usual spot near the piano, which every now and then during dinner, someone played. I compulsorily checked to see if Lane and her group were in their places. There were Tina, Barry, and Eric, and another painter who rarely showed up for meals. When I sat down Ari was uncharacteristically quiet. I looked at Barry. No ribbing. In fact, the whole room was subdued, as if things were taking place underwater, everything slower and more deliberate than usual.

"What's up?" I said. "You look like you're at a funeral."

"Actually, you're close. Lane died in her sleep."

"Oh!"

"You know how I sometimes walk over to Lane's cabin to check on her, get the old girl up and going for the day. Well, I went this morning and she didn't answer, and she wasn't at breakfast yesterday morning, but she came late to lunch and said she'd been working through a compositional problem with changing the time signature, I think that's what she said. So when she didn't come to dinner, we all figured she was still working. When

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## C A L L A L O O

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she didn't answer the door this morning, I called Carol, the residency associate, and she came right away and unlocked the door and found Lane in her bed still in her pajamas. She probably went to bed last night and never woke up. Last night, I saw her standing at her front door talking to herself. 'It's just as well,' she said, before she went in and closed the door behind her. Huh!"

...

Back in my room, I thought about Lane's "last" words, "It's just as well." Did she recognize that her journey had come to an end here in this place? And what was my own role, swatting away potential distractions? Better stick to my own stories, rather than fall prey to the superstition of second sight? I was no seventh son or daughter! Was I? I switched on my computer. Back to Myrth. *"It's just as well." Step back and give her some air. Is there a doctor or nurse here? A woman has fainted! Move back now! Myrth had turned in time to see the stranger go limp, her jewel eyes rolling back in her head, as if surprised at her own failing body. Someone caught her and let her gently down to the ground, where she now lay, unconscious. Myrth's father, who happened to be an intern, shouldered his way through the crowd to get his little girl who stood there in the forest of bodies, squeezing the remaining tiny flag to the point of breaking. Just as he reached his daughter, from the other side of the street, a roar of anticipation rose. "It's the President! Here he comes!"* I tried to write past the fainting stranger with Lane's white hair and jewel eyes, closed now, the living president, soon to be shot down in a car similar to the one he road in on that fateful day, and the algorithms of motives and narrative choices that prolonged the inevitable moment when the street narrowed to a path and the path narrowed to its end.



*Michael K. Taylor © 2013*

**Koritha Mitchell**

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## DEBATE, MOURNING, AFFIRMATION

by Koritha Mitchell

Since Charles Rowell added an annual conference to the work that *Callaloo* makes possible, I have been calling my colleagues “*Callaloo*-ers.” Those involved in these gatherings have various levels of attachment to the journal, but by agreeing to enter the intellectual community in person, they each contribute to one of the most dynamic dimensions of Dr. Rowell’s vision. Because *Callaloo*’s overall project has never been based on a simplistic approach to culture, the conference cannot be passively observed. One must engage!

What I most treasured about the 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE in Oxford and London can be characterized as moments of debate and mourning.

Debate became prominent partly because one audience member made a point of saying, during the question and answer period following each panel, that the presentations disappointed him. He was a local Black British man who had seen announcements about the gathering and was eager to join us. He often stood to articulate that, in his view, the panelists’ remarks did not match the quality he expected, given the visitors’ credentials and impressive institutional affiliations. He was consistently alone in this assessment, but that did not keep him from continuing to register his disappointment, and his words certainly inspired response. That is, he was not ignored or disregarded. His main charge was that we were out of touch with reality; we used “big words,” but what we said was meaningless in light of the suffering currently taking place outside the Ivory Tower.<sup>1</sup> His commentary, and the reactions to it, confirmed that debate is an *embodied practice of belonging*.<sup>2</sup> Because one debates only those whose opinions one values enough to engage (and attempt to influence), the fact that he was not ignored constituted a kind of affirmation.

For me, then, this stranger’s statements underscored the importance of the environment *Callaloo* provides. I waited until I was scheduled to speak on the program to say as much: “*Callaloo* offers a space in which we don’t pretend to be in agreement. And I think that is powerful and important. Thank you, Charles Rowell, for cultivating that kind of space for so many people, for all these years.” Dr. Rowell has made the pages of *Callaloo* home to invigorating exchange for almost four decades, and he has recently expanded its capacity by sponsoring annual conferences.

Though less combative, another audience member said he was disappointed that the Hispanophone Caribbean had not been engaged. Professor Carole Boyce Davies therefore reminded everyone of all the scholars and artists from the Hispanophone Caribbean whom she had just cited in her presentation. She wondered aloud as she responded, “Maybe we only hear what confirms what we think we know.” It was important that Davies marked this moment in exactly this way. We needed to pause and consider the possibility that, at least sometimes, our challenges do not arise so much from omissions as from mis-recognitions.

Whenever *Callaloo*-ers come together, “black modern expression takes form . . . through the often uneasy encounters of peoples of African descent with each other” (Edwards 5). That is, as much as our interactions “allow new and unforeseen alliances and interventions . . . they also are characterized by unavoidable misapprehensions and misreadings . . . a failure to translate even a basic grammar of blackness” (Edwards 5). In other words, since the conference became an annual event in New Orleans in 2008, we have participated in what Brent Hayes Edwards calls *The Practice of Diaspora*. Accordingly, these moments of debate in Oxford reminded me of my initial impression of the collective: “These critics and creators have positioned themselves in perfect cooperation with me by offering productive opposition. . . . [O]ur conversations stayed with me precisely because *Callaloo* once again did what it does best. It put the complexity and diversity of the African Diaspora center stage so that its thinkers could challenge each other to discover and extend our potential. Such rigorous intellectual engagement is possible precisely because we offer each other *no easy conflation, no hallucination of unanimity*” (“Generative Challenges” 614).

That is what I saw happening in Oxford: productive opposition. After all, it is the *Callaloo* way. We challenged each other to come to greater clarity about what we value, and we pushed each other to articulate those values. Whenever we do that, we end up facing enduring questions—about the relationship between the activist and the intellectual and whether they can be one and the same; about whether scholars and artists are politically and socially relevant; about whether we have abandoned the movements that made our presence in the academy possible.<sup>3</sup> The fact that we consistently return to these questions indicates that, as a community and as individuals, we do not simply answer those questions and then coast. We must often recalibrate.

Still, it is important to note: we are willing to return to those issues because we each struggle with those questions every time we do our work! I consistently ask myself: How much of an impact am I making? Does my work make *the right kind* of impact? Is what I’m doing worthwhile? Is it meaningful? To whom? Does it make anyone’s life better? Does it make a difference for the various communities I cherish? I know I am not alone in asking myself those questions. Indeed, I am always suspicious of people who seem to think they are the only ones who care about such matters, while everyone else has lost their way. Clearly, *Callaloo* attracts people who are willing to articulate where they are *at any given moment* in relationship to those enduring questions.

\* \* \*

When communities are acknowledged only through denigration or distortion, affirmation is important. Remembering this allows me to answer the recurring questions about my work’s value in ways that keep me from giving up on it. Perhaps similarly motivated, Ethiopian art historian Elizabeth Wolde Giorgis made her contribution to the 2013 conference.

Giorgis exposed the misconceptions that result from scholarly uses of the concept *Diaspora* that erase the Continent. When artists on the Continent are not overlooked altogether, they are placed in narrow contexts that sometimes ignore basic facts. For example, a 2003 exhibition at the Museum of African Art in Washington, DC, conceived of “Diaspora” as if it were equivalent to “exile” and “trauma.” Curators imagined *Diaspora* to be so



synonymous with *exile* that artists' well-documented, ongoing, healthy, and affirming ties to the Continent were ignored. Even artists who constantly travel back and forth to their communities of origin were understood as having a traumatic, exiled relationship to their home countries.

Giorgis therefore called for critical analyses that are grounded in the art itself and the contexts appropriate to it, and that is exactly what Dagmawi Woubshet offers in his examination of the work produced by Sudden Flowers, the first AIDS art collective in Ethiopia. Woubshet engages the art that "AIDS orphans" produce in collaboration with Sudden Flowers, which takes many forms, including photographs, live performances, and films. When focusing on a collection of the children's handwritten letters to their deceased parents, Woubshet highlights the strategies they use to survive, to develop a sense of self, and to mourn those whom society says are better forgotten. Highlighting the children's investment in these three practices proves to be crucial work because, as Woubshet points out, self-determination is never the lens through which we are encouraged to see children who have been orphaned not only by AIDS but also by "the world around them." While most representations cast them as objects of pity and charity, the Sudden Flowers art collective (and Woubshet) actually see and hear the children's representation of *themselves*.

I am struck by four aspects of Woubshet's examinations. First, I admire the care with which he guides us to appreciate the children's letters as "epistles." This helps readers recognize the archive that he examines as both intimate and literary. He guides readers to see the deliberate choices made and to appreciate how those choices impact the cultural work these texts achieve.

In the process, the performative nature of language becomes undeniable, and this fact brings me to the second aspect of the work that I appreciate, which is also what I appreciate most: Woubshet teaches us to see the epistles as "proxies for burial." These children did not participate in their parents' funerals, if they had funerals at all; Woubshet explains that this is the context through which we should see the epistles' focus on the body. In Woubshet's words, "the children of Sudden Flowers also commit themselves to archiving the dead, entering them into narratives that otherwise would not exist." As I have learned from studying lynching, this is a major strategy of targeted families and communities. In James Baldwin's controversial play *Blues for Mister Charlie*, the opening action is the unceremonious dumping of Richard's body by the white supremacist who murders him for not knowing his "proper" place. As the play proceeds, Richard is dead, but each Black character is seen on stage with him because each mourns his death. I read this pattern in ways that resonate with Woubshet's work. In my essay "James Baldwin, Performance Theorist, Sings the *Blues for Mister Charlie*," I argue that characters *re-member* the dismembered body of Richard. They mourn someone whom society says should simply be forgotten. In doing so, these characters, like the children Woubshet highlights, "authorize themselves, using narrative to reclaim their inheritance and perpetuate their survival."

Third, I am struck by how faithfully Woubshet models the approach he says will do the most justice to the people and texts under consideration. Besides focusing on the children's self-representations, he mentions statistics only once. Woubshet reports, "while true that when Sudden Flowers was founded in 1999, HIV / AIDS had killed the parents of an estimated 903,000 Ethiopian children, these numbers alone could never capture the complex, individual, and collective experiences of people impacted." By acknowledging—but also



responsibly placing these figures in the background—Woubshet gives readers a sense of the complexity that he insists numbers cannot capture. As he does so, what emerges is not a simple story of triumph. We learn not only how these children authorize themselves and cope, but also we are led to recognize the forces that they must navigate in order to survive and have an opportunity to thrive.

Violence is one of the forces the children of Sudden Flowers must navigate, which brings me to the fourth feature of Woubshet's work that I most appreciate. He acknowledges the violence of a number of practices, including "evictions, firings, imprisonment, and other legal and extra-legal violence inflicted on men and women living with the disease." The variety of this list is important because scholars and readers too often acknowledge aggression only in gruesome, corporeal terms and ignore the violence of everyday life. By avoiding this common mistake, Woubshet's methodology resonates with the approach that structures an essay in which I am particularly invested. After the 2012 *Callaloo* conference, where I moderated the panel featuring Sharon Holland and Marlon Ross, I published "Love in Action." This piece traces similarities between lynching at the last turn of the century and anti-LGBT violence today. One of its investments is to mark the mundane quality of both forms of aggression, which is exactly what Woubshet's work does by recognizing eviction as violence.<sup>4</sup> As he shines a light on what comes into these children's lives, Woubshet reminds readers that the purpose of all bias-based violence is to define who is acknowledged as a citizen and who is not, who "belongs" and who does not.

For those bombarded with the message that someone they loved got what they deserved and should not be mourned, to highlight grief—and affirm the validity of it—is also to make a bold statement. I am grateful to be in conversation with Dagmawi Woubshet and others who refuse to underestimate the importance of such statements. I am honored to be in the company of scholars who understand the life-giving power of *The Practice of Diaspora* and the practices of affirmation.

## NOTES

1. This comment inspired particularly powerful responses. Joan Anim-Addo reminded everyone that she is the only Black woman in the room who is professor at a British institution. That fact is not at all unrelated to the suffering "outside the Ivory Tower," she explained. The forces shaping her experiences as *an only* in British higher education are the same forces that ensure the suffering that is more visible to the public. Just as powerfully, Ben Okri made an impassioned speech about the fact that people of African descent cannot be content with mastering only certain kinds of words. We must know *all* the words, he insisted.
2. See Mitchell, *Living with Lynching* 14–15, 48, 103–04, 179, 188.
3. The 2009 gathering at Washington University in St. Louis addressed this most directly with the theme "The Intellectual's Dilemma," but these questions animate many of our conversations.
4. Importantly, the U.S.-based National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) began highlighting practices such as eviction in their 2012 report on violence against LGBT communities. See Mitchell, "Love in Action" and [ncavp.org](http://ncavp.org).

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**Edwin C. Hill, Jr.**

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## CALLALOO CONFERENCE REFLECTIONS

### "Black Thought at Oxford: Oh Dear!"

by Edwin C. Hill, Jr.

"Oh dear!" she exclaimed, shaking her head in disbelief. Whenever my Oxford host Catherine S., who hails from St. Vincent, learned the limits of my tastes and familiarity with Caribbean cuisine and drink (black wine specifically), she threw an "Oh dear!" in the air, where it would hang for a moment like a question mark caught by surprise. The CALLALOO CONFERENCE in Oxford was the occasion for meeting black scholars and writers from around the world, but also for meeting local black folks dealing with the manifestations of racism, migration, and transnationality in their own lives and languages. As explosively illuminating as the conference sessions were—and there were *many* enlightening fireworks at this conference, *many* emotional and intellectual outbursts—when I reflect back on the conference I find myself first thinking about the time between sessions and after the day's events when I was able to spend an hour or two with my quick-witted and charming host. Whether it was pulling up a chair to watch her cook (she's been catering for small events since retiring from the nursing field), or looking through a PowerPoint presentation on Caribbean culture that she put together (for her mostly white local church), or simply watching a late night rerun of the British version of *Dancing with the Stars* (she flung a few "Oh dear!"s their way too), I learned a lot from Catherine. One evening, as she flipped through the pages of the official conference program that I had shown her, she recounted the trip a few years back that she had taken to see her sister in New York (a place she found so dark and depressing that she abruptly left to see friends in Canada instead), then she talked about a difficult trip back to St. Vincent to arrange for her mother's funeral, but then also about the routine drives to London she took to check in on her daughter and grandchildren, or their trips up to Oxford to see her, which she preferred. And she told me what it was like the night of Barack Obama's first election ("I don't think a single black person in all of England slept that night") and what it was like the morning after (when she danced and sang on the bus to work and *dared* anyone to tell her not to). So it was that as we got to talk a little bit each evening, it was as if we reworked all the day's conference themes over and over again, in a different register and affective tone.

The 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE at Oxford beautifully brought together many brilliant writers and pioneering scholars, what Charles Rowell terms "the creative and the critical"; but it also brought together "local and the itinerant" as well as "the activist and the academic," providing opportunities for mutually informing dialogue and intense debate, creating the conditions of possibility for forging alliances but also for marking lines of disagreement and discontent. Along the way, we noted that many of the lines drawn between the creative and the critical, the local and the itinerant, and the activist and the academic, have been artificially marked by histories of power, the latter which more

often than not benefits from their separation. I suspect that all of those who attended the conference at Oxford will remember for a long time the series of fiery exchanges between panelists and a local black activist who passionately (and at times quite aggressively) challenged speakers in nearly every session to articulate in plain words the importance of the presented research, and the utility of black academic work more generally for black activist work in the local community. The interrogation was as valid as it was urgent; but scholars pushed back against a certain anti-intellectualism within these heated critical salvos, as well as against the assumption that scholars don't do activist work, or that they don't put their lives on the line when taking on volatile issues in institutional and local climates of race- and gender-based violence and hate. In response to the charge that we need to speak in simple, plain words, Ben Okri beautifully responded: "We need to be masters of *all* the words," not just the big or small ones; and later, with a smile, "I think you've got this wonderful steamroller of emotion pointed in the wrong direction." In short, the challenges and compromises were met, in panels, intense Q&A sessions, and heated private discussions in between, but always with love and in solidarity—when possible.

I was extremely pleased to be invited to offer a formal response to the presentations of Carole Boyce Davies, Anthony Bogues, and Joan Anim-Addo. My response to the panel centered on the ways in which each panelist engaged with questions of place, time, memory, and im/mobility, as navigated through intellect and affect, creolization and transnationalism. Drawing from their talks as well as from some of their most recent publications, specifically Joan Anim-Addo's essay "Gendering Creolisation: Creolising Affect" and Anthony Bogues's "Writing Caribbean Intellectual History," my response queried the ways in which the transnational flows of affect and ideas in the black African diaspora encounter one another in the nation-state's institutional spaces, especially the institutional space of the university. While my reflections below focus on my response to this panel especially, I would be remiss if I failed to evoke along the way a few of the many other papers that particularly inspired me, and the ways in which they sparked connections for me in my own research in the French and Francophone contexts.

Carole Boyce Davies's paper, "Schizophrenic Seas and the Caribbean Trans-Nation," worked through a theoretical mapping of the Caribbean and its waterways inspired by Guyanese writer Wilson Harris's collection of essays *The Womb of Space*, as well as by Derek Walcott's "The Sea is History" and Antonio Benítez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island*. Carole Boyce Davies generates the hermeneutics of circum-Caribbean waterways to appose them against the trends of black Atlantic studies that tend to obscure the Caribbean, and she apposes the notion "trans-nation" against the overreach of "postcoloniality," a discursive and conceptual paradigm that has come to erase the ways in which local and regional histories and voices frame the Caribbean. In Davies's remapping of Caribbean space, the "schizophrenic sea" refers to the multiplicity of voices and unsettled boundaries that form a moving repository of histories of transnational flow of Caribbean people, ideas, capital, and culture in many different directions. Impacted by the major gravitational forces of history, from slavery to globalization to climate change, the flow of the Caribbean trans-nation also redefines seascapes and landscapes. Thus the schizophrenic sea and the Caribbean trans-nation are mutually informing; together they redefine Caribbean spaces and the relations between them. This reworking of sea and river crossings made me think about Joseph Roach's work on "the circum-Atlantic" and Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies*

of *Crossing*. But Carole Boyce Davies's lecture, especially her pointed return to the work of Guyanese writer Wilson Harris, and her note that Guyana means "land of waters" in indigenous languages, sent me back to French Guyanese negritude poet and critic Léon-Gontran Damas. Harris's Guyanese background and his training as a government surveyor parallels in many respects Damas's academic formation in anthropology, and both men are the products of *métissage*, Amerindian as well as African ancestry. Further, Damas accepted a mission to document French Guiana which resulted in the understudied work *Retour de Guyanne*. Considering the "schizophrenic seas" and transnational dynamics that Carole Boyce Davies theorizes, I wondered how Damas understood and documented the flows of culture and people through the "tidalectics" of Guyanese waterways.

Anthony Bogues's paper, "Reframing the Diaspora in Caribbean Studies," was a masterful history of the rise and institutionalization of Caribbean studies in the Caribbean, especially with respect to social science debates within the field of colonial anthropology (especially the theories of cultural contact retention between Africa and the West debated in the works of Meville Kerskovitz and Franklin Frazier), and with respect to the rise of black nationalist discourses in the Caribbean after independence. Professor Bogues traced the ways in which discourse on Caribbean culture shifted from focusing on concepts in black internationalism with its questions about the nature of exile and belonging, to focusing on the Caribbean nation-state and the demand to identify (and venerate) what could be considered national culture and local tradition. The shift to the nation-state set in motion a modulation in the ways in which "diaspora" was conceptualized, and in what disciplines it was conceptualized. With the nation-state instantiated as "home," Africa becomes supplanted in the conceptualization of diaspora, and the notion of blackness thus can only also be displaced as well, constituted as an *additive* rather than *constitutive* dimension of Caribbean identity and intellectual study. In the process, each island's culture gets "branded" for global consumption. Throughout his lecture, Anthony Bogues paid close attention to the institutional sites that marked this emergence and shift in Caribbean studies. As Bogues shows, the intellectual history of the Caribbean has a lot to do with the geopolitical and physical sites of knowledge formation, intellectual dialogue, and cultural exchange. His essay resonated in some respects with Hortense Spiller's evocative paper on commemorative sites of black expression around the world. Her example of an exposition of black art that took place at the Pompidou Center in Paris in 2005 had me thinking about the *décalage* between black and brown voices and bodies at the museum in the summer of 2005, and black and brown voices and bodies protesting in the streets in Paris in the fall and winter that same year. In another way, Bogues's paper also resonated very much with Jean-Paul Rocchi's fearsome critique of knowledge formation and the highly policed disciplinary boundary lines of the French university. Adopting work by Frantz Fanon he generates a psychoanalytic reading of the ways in which French university "discipline" secures a fantasy space where black bodies, cultures, and ideas can be compartmentalized and contained at acceptable (low) levels. Rocchi seems to suggest that the university plays a key role in enacting disciplinary measures for blackness, and for maintaining the stability of the national mirror image, which has been recently troubled by the aforementioned social uprisings in France, and by former president Nicholas Sarkozy's mobilization of a reactionary program of national identity.

Joan Anim-Addo shared an amazing, semi-autobiographical critique of the name/language of the father in her paper “The Entangled Caribbean African Imaginary: Writing Affect and the Diasporic Encounter.” In her moving presentation, Anim-Addo retraces a personal and affective trip through the routes of the black diaspora in a process one might call “losing your father.” While Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* does not really tackle dynamics of gender in a fundamental way, Joan Anim-Addo’s work pointedly explored the dynamics of gender and family that provided the impetus for her journey. The paper opened with an anecdote about asking questions about the absent father, then it moved on to carefully unpack the notion of encounters within the diaspora and the ways in which such encounters shape the dynamics of imagining Africa. One key intra-diasporic encounter that she returned to in particular in developing her notion was the meeting between Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor in Paris during the interwar years. What is the nature of this encounter in France? What sorts of translations of culture and difference made this encounter meaningful for both Césaire and Senghor? How might we unpack the affective structures and flows functioning in moments of encounter within the diaspora? There were many links for me between Joan Anim-Addo’s moving paper and Marlon Ross’s fascinating piece critiquing Richard Wright’s encounter with Africa. Ross’s deconstruction of the class and gender dynamics as well as the colonial cosmopolitanism circulating within Wright’s anti-colonial critique was illuminating, and it had me comparing Wright’s “first encounter” with the classic “first encounters” and contact zones narrated in imperial ethnographies.

Professor Anim-Addo’s paper served, at least for me, as an interesting notion for tying together several of the themes of the panelists’ papers, specifically around her concept of the affect of self-control, or *discipline*. What are the affective economies of the trans-Caribbean (Davies), and how does the gendering of these affective economies impact the organization of intellectual labor (Bogues)? How do the epistemological and affective demands and interrogations of *self-discipline* refract or rework the ways in which we conceptualize and live relationships between place, culture, and belonging? How might these affective modes of self-understanding cut under or through European frameworks of knowledge or remain unthinkable in such frameworks? Or put differently, what sorts of translations take place, or fail to do so, across paradigms of knowing and feeling the African diaspora? Similarly, if we reject an essentialization of affect then we must excavate the words that make pedagogies of affect possible and distinct from other types of pedagogy and knowledge formation.

The question of the importance of language resonated throughout the conference, from Ngugui wa Thiong’o’s opening keynote Wednesday night on the ways in which “Language has been a battlefield of ideas . . . a war zone” key to imperial conquest, to Dagmawi Woubshet’s timely interjection, when the discussion reached its most heated point Friday evening, with a quote from Toni Morrison’s 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature acceptance speech: “Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux-language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek—it must be



rejected, altered and exposed.” The valuable work of the *Callaloo* journal and conference has specifically to do with the ways in which it provides scholars, writers, activists, and local practitioners, whatever their geopolitical or institutional position of intervention, to participate in the work of rejecting, altering, and exposing words, big and small, and opening them up for a capacious imagination of the future.



Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford University

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## MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

by Imaobong D. Umoren

In September 2012, I left London for Oxford. A few days after my arrival I emailed my new supervisor to arrange that all-important, but nerve-wracking, first meeting. In our email exchange Stephen Tuck broke the news: "Am showing the editors of *Callaloo* journal round Oxford tomorrow ahead of a conference of theirs, here, next year—which should be timely for you." Delighted and slightly surprised, within minutes I replied, "Great news to hear about a *Callaloo* conference in Oxford—I am already excited and looking forward to it." My excitement stemmed not just from the presence of *Callaloo*, for the first time in Europe in the imperial city I now called home, but the possibilities and promise of discussions about the transatlantic, Africa, and its diaspora between and among students, scholars, and the local community. Over a year later *Callaloo* arrived. What transpired between the 27th to the 30th of November was nothing short of stimulating and challenging intellectual exchanges that left my body and mind feeling tired, enthused, and fulfilled, all at the same time.

The 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE commenced with a postgraduate and early career workshop organized by members of the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities Race and Resistance Across Borders in the Long Twentieth Century Network, including myself. The topic of the workshop was centered on "Britain, Europe, and the African Diaspora." Its aim was to assess the related fields of diasporic, global, and transnational African and African American studies by focusing on the multivalent roles of Britain and Europe. Consciously aware that most recent developments in the field have taken the United States or Africa as the starting point and/or key frame of reference, the workshop sought to explore how the story of any given transnational topic changes when Europe, including Britain, becomes a central focus of the story.

The call for papers sparked a flurry of proposals from both the continent and diaspora, and the chosen speakers came from South Africa, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Topics discussed included re-thinking definitions of empire, nation, and diaspora; border crossing women like Paulette Nardal, Eslanda Robeson, and Una Marson and their fight against fascism in the 1930s; black female internationalism; *The Ovid* and Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*; the transnational connections between New York and Europe as seen through Claude McKay's writings; the cadre of African Americans living in interwar Paris and the figure of Rosey Pool. Additionally and appropriately given the location, other papers examined the multiple expressions of Black Britishness as evidenced through the experiences of post-war Commonwealth subjects, the fiction of black British female writers, the women's liberation movement, and Rap music. What I found most interesting about the workshop was the courage and confidence displayed by speakers willing to offer

novel ideas about old and new stories, concerning travel, mobility, migration, and identity. The workshop was a lively launchpad for the CALLALOO CONFERENCE, so much so that it finished half an hour later than scheduled. The group was encouraged to continue our numerous conversations beyond the workshop and conference. These conversations had already begun and developed as the group left the Radcliffe Humanities Building for the keynote given by acclaimed Kenyan novelist, essayist, playwright, editor, academic, and social activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o at the main venue for the conference, Pembroke College.

The power of language was at the heart of the headline lecture. Already familiar with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's ambivalence towards the English language, I was not surprised to hear his talk on the ways in which people of African descent were perfecting their European accent to gain access to money, oil, wealth, and education. His lecture was fascinating and as a historian trained in imperial and world history, I am aware of the colonial legacies that inform the hierarchies between African and European languages. However, I left the lecture thinking about the other complexities of imperialism and its relationship to other languages. For many children with African Empire-loving parents who routinely stressed the importance of English, French, and German for educational purposes and future career prospects, it does not necessarily or neatly translate that their perfection of European accents meant they were to believe there was something inherently inferior about African languages. Indeed, for many West African parents living in the diaspora who belong to minority ethnic groups in countries like Ghana and Nigeria, they may prefer that their offspring learn European languages in fear of replicating the superiority of larger groups and languages like Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, or Akan. While many of the delegates I spoke with after the lecture were inspired to learn an African language, predominantly Zulu and Swahili, I was left pondering the hierarchies within African languages. Why are some African languages more popular and even exotic than others? Does this have to do with the dominance of some African countries and ethnic groups over others? How does this affect contemporary internal and external African migration?

The following day, more questions came to my mind as I listened to the first panel on the topic "Rethinking 'Transatlantic' and Its Discourse." Marlon B. Ross opened with a discussion about Richard Wright's essay "Black Power" and the different definitions of cosmopolitanism. The talk was thought-provoking for my own research on the travels of Nardal, Marson, and Robeson, and I began to think about the gendered implications of the term and the way in which "women of the sea" have been written out of travel history and the Black (male) Atlantic. The symbol of the ship and its associated connotations remain masculine. But this image is only sustained when women are erased. What about black cosmopolitan women? Following Ross, Hortense Spillers raised insightful thoughts on the need to discover discontinuities in the heterogeneous nature of black cultures. In response, Nicole Brittingham Furlonge stressed the importance of listening for sonic difference across the diaspora.

In the next session, discussion turned to the place of Europe and the United Kingdom in Transatlantic studies and Jean-Paul Rocchi, Elleke Boehmer, and Pat Noxolo touched upon a range of issues, including the role of European institutions within the field of African diaspora studies and the related legacies of imperialism. The evening session united the academic with the creative with readings from Fred D'Aguiar, Nuruddin Farah, and Ben Okri. A major highlight, the readings were humorous, deep, and at times tragic. The ums,

ahs, and laughter from the audience that ricocheted throughout the Pichette auditorium were a reminder, for those who may have forgotten, the genius gift of these writers.

Friday morning brought with it three prominent scholars in the field of Caribbean, African American, and Transatlantic studies. Joan Anim-Addo, Carole Boyce Davies, and Anthony Bogues riffed on the complexities and challenges of the transnational. In particular, Davies offered some serious food for thought in her discussion about the idea of the multi-lingual Caribbean trans-nation as detailed in her recent book *Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from the Twilight Zones* (2013). In the final session of the day Dagmawi Woubshet spoke eloquently about the response of Ethiopian children to the loss of their parents from AIDS and the creative ways in which social and community groups in Addis Ababa are dealing with these issues. The evening session saw another joyous occasion with poetry and prose readings from U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey, Ed Roberson, and Yusef Komunyakaa. Trethewey's readings brought to bear the legacy of slavery and scientific racism through the bodies of black women, and provided space for a fruitful question and answer session on the relationship between medical ethics and the arts and humanities. On the final day of the conference, Sarah Lewis offered a most engaging talk on blackness, beauty, women, the Afro, and Russia, and challenged us to re-think the contours of the Black Atlantic by considering the importance of the Black Sea. Robert Reid-Pharr's paper was a fruitful addition to the remarks made by Ross and explored further the limits of cosmopolitanism through Wright's travels to Spain. In an unrehearsed talk, Spillers spoke personally about the intra-mural subjects of the diaspora and the politics of location. All three speakers brought to light in profound ways the complexity of diaspora that complemented earlier panels, yet also posed original ideas. The finale took place in London. Although I was unable to attend, I am confident that the readings from other British and American poets were equally enjoyable.

In the end, it seemed that the University of Oxford was a fitting location for the 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE. The ivory tower of ivory towers has a long history central to slavery and colonialism that casts a towering shadow over its present day changes—changes that will (perhaps very slowly) create lasting transformations. The 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE coincided with the birth of the Race and Resistance Network. The network is a new forum that brings together researchers in the history, literature, and culture of anti-racist movements in the Caribbean, United States, Europe, Africa, and beyond. It is led by postgraduates, early career researchers, lecturers, and professors from a range of interdisciplinary backgrounds and reveals how Oxford is following in the footsteps of other institutions like the University of Warwick and Leeds in driving forward research in this area and hopes to develop connections with US universities to expand conversations across the Atlantic. People of African descent have shaped the University of Oxford in ways that scholars still have yet to fully comprehend, and there is no better way of continuing this tradition than as Lloyd Pratt urged in the closing remarks, by encouraging students of African descent from around the world to apply to study here through the Rhodes, Clarendon, and Egerton scholarships. In sum, I walked out of the warm (at long last!) auditorium on Saturday morning, buoyed to have met and spoken with leaders in the field I hope to join and with more questions than answers. A sure sign of a successful conference.



*Photographs by Jerriod Avant and Michael K. Taylor © 2013*

**Top (left to right): Anthony Bogues, Benedicte Ledent. Middle: Audience.  
Bottom (left to right): Brett Gadsden, Anthony Joseph.**





*Photographs by Jerriod Avant and Michael K. Taylor © 2013*

**Top (left to right): Jacob Sam-La Rose, Carole Boyce Davies.**

**Middle (left to right): Ben Okri, Ivy Wilson.**

**Bottom (left to right): Charles Henry Rowell, Vievee Francis, and Salamishah Tillet.**



*Photographs by Jerriod Avant and Michael K. Taylor © 2013*

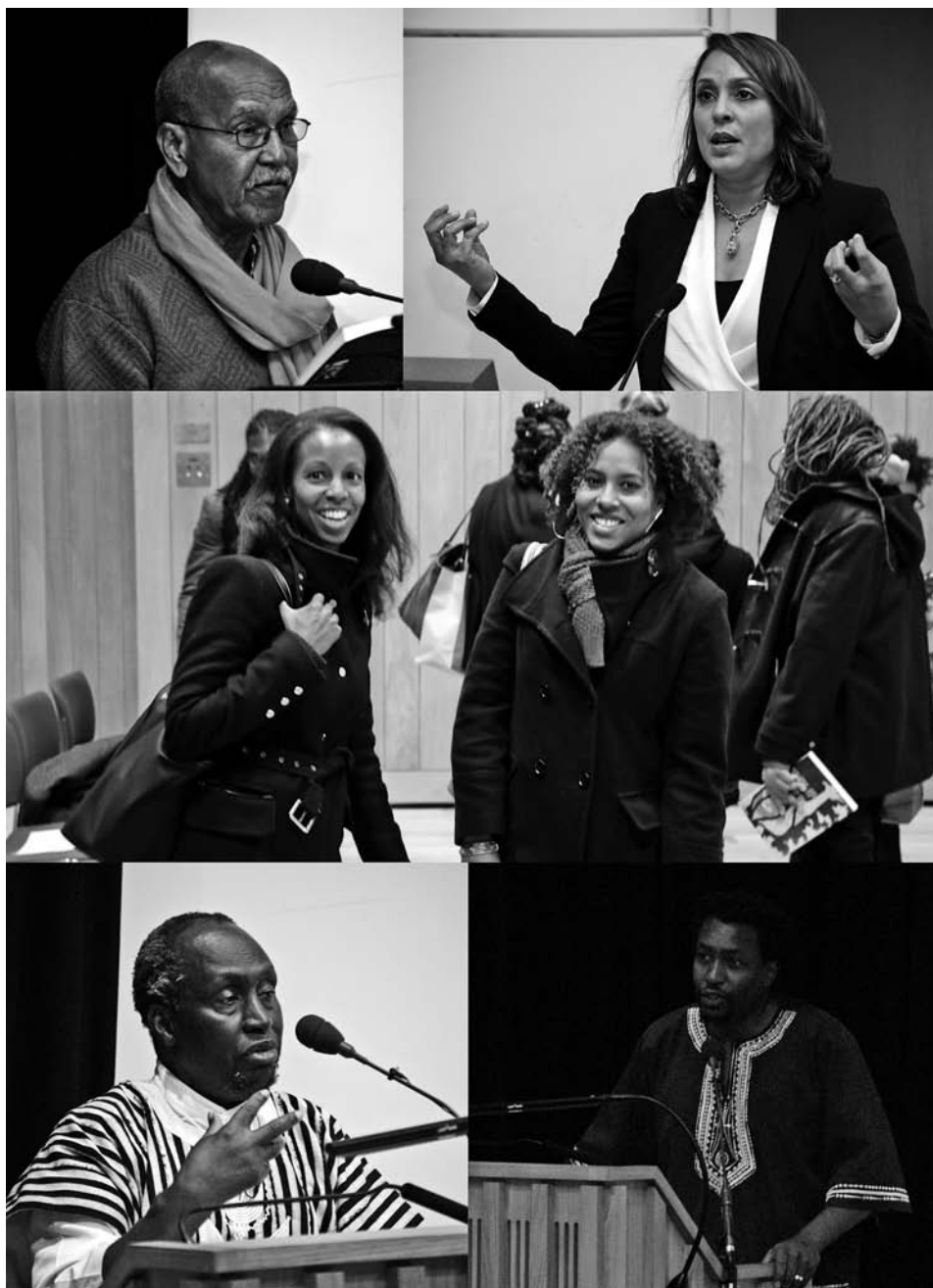
**Top (left to right): Jerriod Avant and Ed Roberson. Middle (left to right): Dagmawi Woubshet, Elleke Boehmer. Bottom (left to right): Gregory Pardlo, Hortense Spillers.**





*Photographs by Jerriod Avant and Michael K. Taylor © 2013*

**Top (left to right): Joan Anim-Addo, Jarvis McInnis and Julius Fleming Jr.  
 Middle (left to right): Nicole Furlonge, Lloyd Pratt. Bottom (left to right):  
 Jean-Paul Rocchi, Justine McConnell.**



*Photographs by Jerriod Avant and Michael K. Taylor © 2013*

**Top (left to right): Nuruddin Farah, Natasha Trethewey. Middle (left to right): Sarah Lewis and Salamishah Tillet. Bottom (left to right): Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Mukoma Wa Ngugi.**



*Photographs by Jerriod Avant and Michael K. Taylor © 2013*

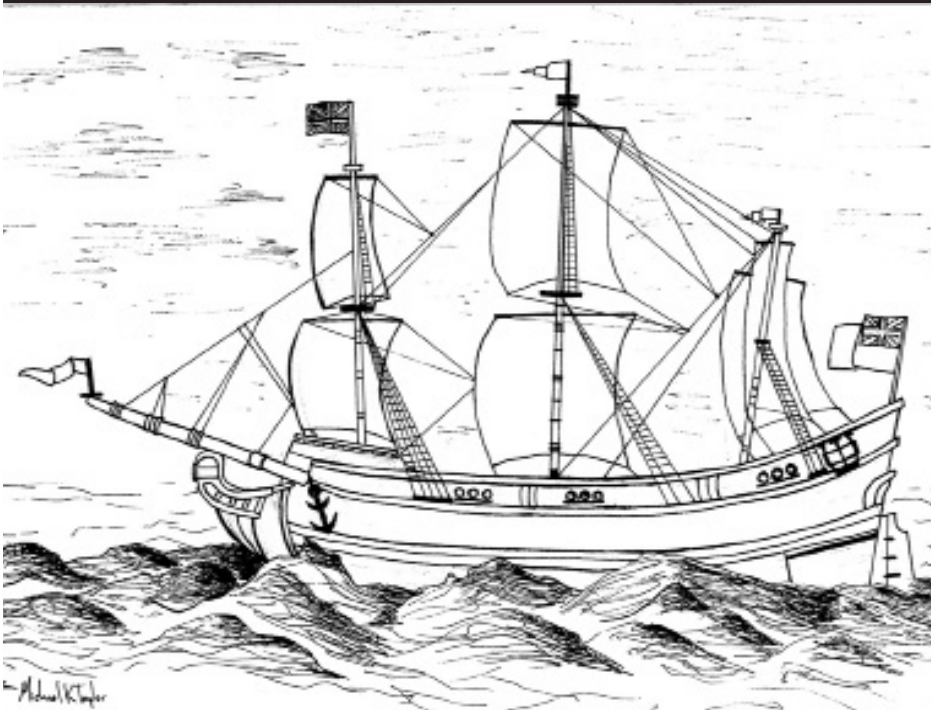
**Top (left to right): Zerihun Birehanu, Stephen Tuck. Middle (left to right): Pat Noxolo, Sarah Lewis and Robert F. Reid-Pharr. Bottom (left to right): Pascale Ratovonony, Z'étoile Imma.**

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# CALLALOO

**“The Transatlantic, Africa & Its Diaspora”**



**November 27-30, 2013**

**Oxford University & Goldsmiths, University of London**

# CALLALOO

*Texas A&M University  
College Station, Texas  
United States of America*

&

*The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities  
Oxford University  
United Kingdom*

present

**“The Transatlantic, Africa & Its Diaspora”  
THE 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE**

**November 27-30, 2013**

*Pembroke College, Oxford University*

## A Letter from the Editor of *Callaloo*

Dear Colleagues & Friends,

Welcome to the 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE, our sixth annual gathering, which focuses on “The Transatlantic, Africa & Its Diaspora” and the implications of this topic for the developing discourse called Transatlantic studies.

For the 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE, we have invited distinguished intellectuals and artists, whose backgrounds, along with their artistic and academic interests, signal our investments in the evolving discourse which will inform not only our presence in our respective institutions but also our lives and the work we perform as artists and academics. We are inviting you to visit the panel presentations and join in the discussions, which are offered for your benefit as well as ours. The conference program that follows indicates that we have also organized evenings of poetry and fiction readings at both our Oxford and London venues. In fact, the poetry readings at Goldsmiths, University of London, are the conference finale, which we also invite you to attend. Each CALLALOO CONFERENCE offers a mixture of the creative and the critical.

By bringing together the creative and the critical, we are following a long-standing principle of the literary and cultural quarterly *Callaloo*, which, during its thirty-six years of existence, has published the work of creative writers alongside that of academics and other intellectuals. Our aim has been to encourage, however indirectly, literary critics and creative writers to stay abreast of and to read—and study and critique—each other’s productions. However, in 2007, it became markedly clear at the Thirtieth Anniversary Celebration of *Callaloo* at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore that our publication strategy had only made a minimal impact, if any; the divide between the two groups of cultural workers—the creative and the critical—was continuing to widen, thus causing the one not to understand the important productions of the other. This startling discovery is the origin of what is now simply called the CALLALOO CONFERENCE.

To address the widening gap between creative writers and literary and cultural critics, a select group of about twenty-five poets, novelists, and professors of literature and culture met in New Orleans (March 2008) for a retreat under the general theme of “Literature, Culture & Critique.” Our first engagements were heated, closed-door discussions that focused on the specific topic “What We Do, and How and Why We Do It.” We later engaged the public in discussions on the problem, and we also offered literary readings at Tulane University (New Orleans) and other sites, including jazz and blues clubs, in the Crescent City. In March 2009, when we met at Washington University in St. Louis, we approached the problem of the divide from the angle of “The Intellectual’s Dilemma: Production and Praxis in the Twenty-First Century.” In July 2010, at the invitation of the Director of the Institute for Ethiopian Studies, we met at Addis

Ababa University. With mutual exchange and cooperation among intellectuals and artists from Africa and North America on the theme of “(Black) Movement(s): Poetics and Praxis,” the 2010 three-day gathering in Ethiopia was both national and international in scope and purpose. We held our fourth annual gathering in October 2011, at Texas A&M University (College Station), the home site of *Callaloo*, where we focused on “Translations” as it relates to critical and creative writing and to visual culture. In October 2012, we met at Princeton University to offer “Love,” another encompassing subject, through which artists and academics engaged each other in public discussions and performances of various kinds. In other words, the previous conferences, and this year’s gathering, are a continuum: we are mindful of our original gathering in New Orleans, where creative writers demonstrated what they do, and literary and cultural critics explained in full measure how and why they do what they do.

As you join in the discussions of the 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE here at Oxford University and Goldsmiths, University of London, we sincerely hope that the different activities of the conference will provide you a variety of glimpses into each artist’s and academic’s thoughts on “The Transatlantic, Africa & Its Diaspora.” We also hope that each speaker and performer will add other dimensions to your understanding of the arts and the critical discourse attending them, and that your participation in this conference will help illuminate for you what we do as artists and intellectuals, and why we do it.

Please join the *Callaloo* staff and me in expressing our deep gratitude to Professor Stephen Tuck, Clare Oxenbury, and Heather Earwicker of the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, Oxford University, and to Professor Joan Anim-Addo and Marl’ene Edwin of the Centre for Caribbean Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, for graciously hosting the 2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE.

Sincerely,



Charles Henry Rowell  
 Editor of *Callaloo*  
 Professor of English  
 Texas A&M University



**WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2013**

7:00 PM - 8:30 PM

**The Transatlantic, Africa & Its Diaspora**

The Pichette Auditorium, The Henderson Building

Pembroke College

**Welcome**

Stephen Tuck

*University Lecturer in American History*

*Oxford University*

**The Conference: History & Purpose**

Charles Henry Rowell

*Editor of Callaloo & Professor of English*

*Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas*

**Significance of the Occasion**

Salamishah Tillet

*Associate Professor of English & Africana Studies*

*University of Pennsylvania*

**Introduction to Keynote Speaker**

Mukoma Wa Ngugi

*Assistant Professor of English*

*Cornell University*

**Keynote Address**

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

*Distinguished Professor, Comparative Literature & English*

*University of California, Irvine*

**Moderator**

Vieve Francis

*Visiting Professor of Creative Writing*

*Warren Wilson College*

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2013

10:00 AM - 12:00 PM

## Rethinking “Transatlantic” & Its Discourse

The Pichette Auditorium, The Henderson Building

Pembroke College

### Speakers

Marlon B. Ross

*Professor of English  
& Africana Studies  
University of Virginia*

Hortense Spillers

*Gertrude Conaway  
Vanderbilt Professor  
Vanderbilt University*

Corey D. B. Walker

*Dean, College of Arts & Sciences  
John W. & Anna Hodgin Hanes  
Professor of the Humanities  
Winston-Salem State University*

### Respondents

Nicole Brittingham Furlonge

*English Department Chair  
Princeton Day School, NJ*

Scott Heath

*Assistant Professor of English  
Georgia State University*

Hermine Pinson

*Associate Professor of English  
The College of William & Mary*

Ivy Wilson

*Associate Professor of English &  
Director of American Studies  
Northwestern University*

### Moderator

Lloyd Pratt

*University Lecturer in  
American Literature  
Oxford University*

~6~

2:00 PM - 4:00 PM, Thursday, November 28

## **Europe & the UK on Transatlantic Studies**

The Pichette Auditorium, The Henderson Building

Pembroke College

### **Speakers**

Amzat Boukari-Yabara

*Associate Doctor  
Center of African Studies  
École des Hautes Études en  
Sciences Sociales*

Jean-Paul Rocchi

*Professor of Literature &  
American Culture Studies  
Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée*

### **Respondents**

Ifa Bayeza

*Distinguished Artist in Residence  
& Senior Visiting Artist Lecturer  
Brown University*

Elleke Boehmer

*Professor of World  
Literature in English  
Oxford University*

Pat Noxolo

*Lecturer in Human Geography  
The University of Sheffield*

Elizabeth Williams

*Historian/Librarian  
Goldsmiths, University of London*

### **Moderator**

Gregory Pardlo

*Instructor of Creative Writing  
City University of New York*

~7~

7:00 PM, Thursday, November 28

## Readings

The Pichette Auditorium, The Henderson Building

Pembroke College

### Authors Reading

Fred D'Aguiar

*Gloria D. Smith Professor  
of Africana Studies  
Virginia Tech University*

Nuruddin Farah

*Independent Writer  
Cape Town, South Africa*

Ben Okri

*Independent Writer  
London, UK*

### Respondents

Ifa Bayeza

*Distinguished Artist in Residence  
& Senior Visiting Artist Lecturer  
Brown University*

Thierno I. Dia

*Film Lecturer  
PhD Candidate in Arts  
Université de Bordeaux 3, France*

Maaza Mengiste

*Writer/Professor  
Queens College  
City University of New York*

### Moderator

Vievee Francis

*Visiting Professor of Creative Writing  
Warren Wilson College*

~8~

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2013

10:00 AM - 12:00 PM

**Caribbean Studies, African American Studies  
& Transatlantic Studies**

The Pichette Auditorium, The Henderson Building  
Pembroke College

**Speakers**

Joan Anim-Addo	<i>Professor of Caribbean Literature &amp; Culture, Director of Center for Caribbean Studies Goldsmiths, University of London</i>
Anthony Bogue	<i>Lyn Crost Professor of Social Sciences &amp; Critical Theory Brown University Honorary Professor, Centre for African Studies University of Cape Town</i>
Carole Boyce Davies	<i>Professor of English &amp; Africana Studies Cornell University</i>

**Respondents**

Brett Gadsden	<i>Associate Professor of African American Studies Emory University</i>
Edwin C. Hill	<i>Assistant Professor of French &amp; Italian University of Southern California</i>
Bénédicte Ledent	<i>Professor of English University of Liège, Belgium</i>

~9~

Justine McConnell

*Leverhulme Postdoctoral  
Researcher in Classics  
Oxford University*

Pascale Ratovonony

*Professor of Art History  
Biarritz School of Art  
PhD Candidate  
Université Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne*

### **Moderator**

Claudrena N. Harold

*Associate Professor of History  
University of Virginia*

2:00 PM - 4:00 PM, Friday, November 29

## **Africa in African Diaspora Studies & Transatlantic Studies**

The Pichette Auditorium, The Henderson Building  
Pembroke College

### **Speakers**

Elizabeth Wolde Giorgis

*Director of the Institute for  
Ethiopian Studies  
Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia*

Dagmawi Woubshet

*Associate Professor of English  
Cornell University*

### **Respondents**

Julius B. Fleming Jr.

*Graduate Student  
University of Pennsylvania*

Yussuf Hamad

*Senior Lecturer in Swahili  
SOAS, University of London*

~10~

Carter Mathes

*Assistant Professor of English  
Rutgers University, New Brunswick*

Koritha Mitchell

*Associate Professor of English  
Ohio State University*

Mukoma Wa Ngugi

*Assistant Professor of English  
Cornell University*

**Moderator**

Z'étoile Imma

*Assistant Professor of English  
University of Notre Dame*

7:00 PM, Friday, November 29

**Readings**

The Pichette Auditorium, The Henderson Building

Pembroke College

**Authors Reading**

Yusef Komunyakaa

*Global Distinguished  
Professor of English  
New York University*

Ed Roberson

*Distinguished Artist in Residence  
Northwestern University*

Natasha Trethewey

*United States Poet Laureate  
Consultant in Poetry, Robert W.  
Woodruff Professor of English &  
Creative Writing  
Director of Creative Writing Program  
Emory University*



**Respondents**

Margo Crawford	<i>Associate Professor of English Cornell University</i>
Tyehimba Jess	<i>Assistant Professor of English City University of New York</i>
Maaza Mengiste	<i>Writer/Professor Queens College City University of New York</i>
Clarissa Pabi	<i>Independent Writer London, UK</i>
Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon	<i>Associate Professor of English Cornell University</i>

**Moderator**

Gregory Pardlo	<i>Instructor of Creative Writing City University of New York</i>
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□

Jarvis C. McInnis

*Graduate Student  
Department of English &  
Comparative Literature  
Cornell University*

Salamishah Tillet

*Associate Professor of English &  
Africana Studies  
University of Pennsylvania*

**Moderator**

Scott Heath

*Assistant Professor of English  
Georgia State University*

**Comments**

Stephen Tuck

*University Lecturer in  
American History  
Oxford University*

**Closing Remarks**

Charles Henry Rowell

*Editor of Callaloo &  
Professor of English  
Texas A&M University*

**Return to London at 12:00 Noon  
for the Finale**

**2013 CALLALOO CONFERENCE FINALE**

**Goldsmiths, University of London**

**Ian Gulland Lecture Theatre**

**New Cross, London, SE14 6NW, UK**

6:00 PM - 8:00 PM, Saturday, November 30, 2013

**Readings by British & U.S. American Poets**

**Welcome**

Joan Anim-Addo

*Professor of Caribbean Literature & Culture, Director of Centre for Caribbean Studies  
Goldsmiths, University of London*

**The Occasion**

Charles Henry Rowell

*Editor of Callaloo & Professor of English  
Texas A&M University*

**American Poets Reading**

Tyehimba Jess

*Assistant Professor of English  
City University of New York*

Yusef Komunyakaa

*Global Distinguished Professor of English  
New York University*

Natasha Trethewey

*United States Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry  
Robert W. Woodruff Professor of English & Creative Writing  
Director of Creative Writing Program  
Emory University*

~15~

Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon  
*Associate Professor of English*  
*Cornell University*

**Moderator**

Vieve Francis  
*Visiting Professor of Creative Writing*  
*Warren Wilson College*

**Intermission / 10 Minutes**

**British Poets Reading**

Anthony Joseph  
*Lecturer in Creative Writing, Birbeck College*  
*PhD Candidate, Goldsmiths, University of London*

Jackie Kay  
*Professor of Creative Writing*  
*Newcastle University*

Clarissa Pabi  
*Independent Writer*  
*London, UK*

Jacob Sam-La Rose  
*Independent Writer*  
*London, UK*

**Moderator**

Ellah Wakatama Allfrey  
*Independent Editor and Critic*  
*London, UK*

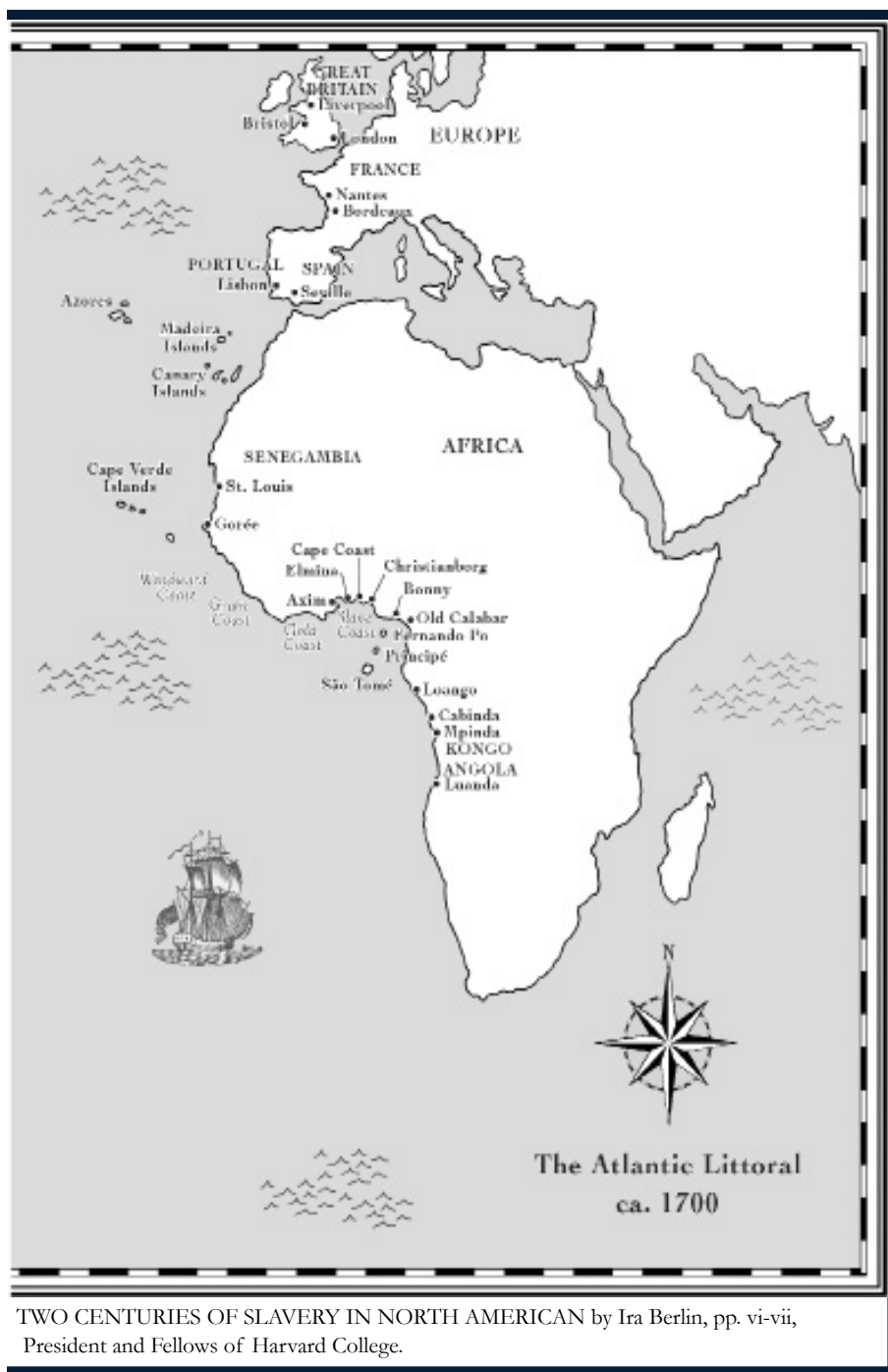
**Closing Comments**

Charles Henry Rowell  
*Editor of Callaloo & Professor of English*  
*Texas A&M University*

~16~



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TWO CENTURIES OF SLAVERY IN NORTH AMERICAN by Ira Berlin, pp. vi-vii,  
President and Fellows of Harvard College.

## Speakers & Readers



**JOAN ANIM-ADDO**, who was born in Grenada in the Caribbean, is a professor of Caribbean literature and culture and Director of the Centre for Caribbean Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, where she also teaches courses in other African Diaspora literatures and cultures. She is founding editor of *Mango Season*, the journal of Caribbean women's writing. Her recent publications include *Touching the Body: History, Language, & African Caribbean Women's Writing*, *Framing the Word: Gender and Genre*, and other critical books in the field, as well as volumes of her creative writing, *Imoinda*, *Haunted by History*, and *Janie Cricketing Lady*. She is co-editor of *I Am Black, White, Yellow: An Introduction to the Black Body in Europe, Interculturality and Gender*, and "Affects and Creolisation," a special issue of *The Feminist Review* 104:1-4.

**ANTHONY BOGUES** is the Lyn Crost Professor of Social Sciences and Critical Theory at Brown University, where he is also a professor of Africana studies and the Director of the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice. He is a curator and a founding associate director of the Center for Caribbean Thought at the University of the West Indies, Mona, and the author and editor of numerous books and articles, including *The George Lamming Reader: The Aesthetics of Decolonization*, *Caliban's Freedom: The Early Political Thought of C.L.R. James*, *After Man Towards the Human: Critical Essays on the Thought of Sylvia Wynter*, *Black Heretics and Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals*, and *Empire of Liberty: Power, Freedom, and Desire*. He is currently a Mellon Visiting Professor at the University of Cape Town, SA. As a curator, he sits on the scientific committee of the Grand Palais in Paris, where he is working on the planned exhibition *Haiti*.



**AMZAT BOUKARI-YABARA** received the PhD degree in African history and civilizations from *Ecole des Hautes Études* in 2010 and, in 2011, a Diploma in Latin American studies from the Sorbonne, University of Paris. He is currently a lecturer at the Africa Center at Ben-Gurion University of Negev in Israel. After he served as a junior official executive in the ranks of the French Conseil d'État from 2006 to 2011, he did postdoctoral research at the University of Montreal, Canada.





**FRED D'AGUIAR**, a native of London who grew up in Guyana, is a novelist, poet, playwright, and essayist. His recent books include *The Longest Memory*, *Dear Future*, *British Subjects*, *Bill of Rights*, *English Sampler: New and Selected Poems*, *Bethany Bettany*, and *Continental Shelf* (shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize 2009, and a U.K. Poetry Book Society Choice). *A Jamaican Airman Foresees His Death*, a play, was produced at Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 1991. In June 2013, his new collection of poems, *The Rose of Toulouse*, was published, and his sixth novel, *Children of Paradise*, inspired by the tragedy of Jonestown, Guyana, is scheduled for publication in 2014 by Granta (UK) and HarperCollins (USA). He has published nonfiction prose in such periodicals as *Harper's Magazine*, *Wasafiri*, *Callaloo*, and *Best American Essays*. He teaches courses in creative writing at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, where he is Professor of English.

**CAROLE BOYCE DAVIES** is Professor of Africana studies and English at Cornell University. Her publications include *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* and *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. She is also editor of *Moving Beyond Boundaries: Black Women, Decolonizing the Academy*, *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora*, *African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*, and Claudia Jones's *Beyond Containment: Autobiography, Essays, Poetry*.



**NURUDDIN FARAH**, a novelist born in Baidia, Somalia, lives in Cape Town, South Africa. He is author of more than twelve books, most recently *Territories* and a trilogy: *Links*, *Knots*, and *Crossbones*. *Maps*, *Gifts*, and *Secrets*—his earlier “Blood in the Sun” trilogy—also garnered for him world-wide attention. *A Stone Thrown at the Guilty* is his most recent play, which was first performed at Raring Center's Stoll Thrust Theatre at the University of Minnesota, where each autumn he teaches as the Winton Professor in the College of Liberal Arts. For his work, he has received a number of international awards, including Premio Cavour (Italy), the St. Malo Literature Festival prize (France), the Kurt Tucholsky Prize (Germany), English-Speaking Union Literary Prize (UK), Neustadt International Prize for Literature (USA), and Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage (Germany). He has frequently been nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

**ELIZABETH WOLDE GIORGIS** is the former Dean of the Skunder Boghossian College of Performing and Visual Arts and the former Director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University, where she teaches courses in art theory criticism. She is author of *Charting Ethiopian Modernity and Modernism*, co-editor of the special issue of *Callaloo* devoted to Ethiopian art and literature, and editor of the only catalogue to date of contemporary art published in Ethiopia, *Gebre Kristos Desta: The Painter Poet*. She is currently the Director of the Modern Art Museum: Gebre Kristos Desta Center of Addis Ababa University.



**TYEHIMBA JESS**, a Detroit native who is both a poet and fiction writer, is author of *leadbelly*, which won for him the 2004 National Poetry Series. He is an assistant professor of English at the College of Staten Island in New York. His poetry has appeared in such anthologies and periodicals as *Angles of Ascent*, *Beyond the Frontier*, *Roll Call*, *Bum Rush the Page*, *Complex Slam*, *American Poetry Review*, *Mosaic*, *Indiana Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Callaloo*. He has received a number of honors for his work—e. g., a Winter Fellow (2004-2005) at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, a 2004 Literature Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a 2006 Whiting Fellowship. A graduate of the University of Chicago, he received his MFA from New York University.



**ANTHONY JOSEPH**, who was born in Trinidad, lectures in creative and life writing at Birkbeck, University of London. He is author of a novel, *The African Origins of UFOs*, and four collections of poems: *Desafinado*, *Teragaton*, *Bird Head Son*, and *Rubber Orchestras*. In his music group, The Spasm Band, he performs internationally as the leader and vocalist—with three critically acclaimed albums to date: *Leggo de Lion*, *Bird Head Son*, and *Rubber Orchestras*. He is completing the PhD in creative writing at Goldsmiths, University of London.





**JACKIE KAY**, a poet and novelist, was born Jacqueline Margaret Kay in Edinburgh, Scotland, to a Nigerian father and a Scottish mother. In 1991, she published her first book of poems, *Adoption Paper*, which won for her the Saltire Society Scottish First Book Award. She is also author of fifteen other books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction prose, including *Reality, Reality, Darling: New and Selected Poems*, *Red Dust Road: An Autobiographical Journey* (memoir), *Fiere* and *Trumpet* (novels), *The Lamplighter* (drama), *Other Lovers*, *Why Don't You Stop Talking* (short stories), and *Off Color* and *Maw Broon Monologues* (poetry). The Somerset Maugham Award, the *Guardian* First Book Award Fiction Prize, British Book Award, International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, and Scottish First Book of the Year are but a few of the awards and prizes she has received for her art. In 2006, she was elected Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE). This Manchester resident teaches creative writing at Newcastle University.

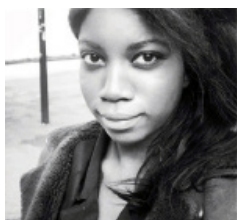
**YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA**, a native of Bogalusa, Louisiana, is Distinguished Senior Poet and Global Professor at New York University. After he served as a USA Army correspondent in Vietnam 1969 to 1970, he studied at the University of Colorado and later received his MFA degree in creative writing from the University of California in Irvine. He is author of nineteen books, some of which are *Dien Cai Dan*, *Neon Vernacular*, *Thieves of Paradise*, *Talking Dirty to the Gods*, *Taboo*, *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems*, *Warhorses*, *Scandalize My Name: Selected Poems*, *Gilgamesh (A Verse Play)*, *The Chameleon Couch*, and *Testimony: A Tribute to Charlie Parker*. For his poetry he has been awarded the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, the Wallace Stevens Award, and the Pulitzer Prize.



**SARAH LEWIS** received her BA from Harvard University and an M.Phil from Oxford University. She is a candidate for the PhD at Yale University, where she teaches in the MFA program of Photography and Painting Departments of the School of Art. She serves on many boards, including The Andy Warhol for the Visual Arts, the CUNY Graduate Center, and the Brearley School. Her critical commentaries on contemporary art have been published widely in journals, such as *Callaloo*, *Artforum*, and *Art in America*, and in other publications, such as those issued by Rizzoli, the Smithsonian, the Museum of

Modern Art, and the Studio Museum of Harlem. Two of her book manuscripts are under publication contracts: “Frederick Douglass, the Circassian Beauties, and American Racial Formation” (Harvard University Press, fall 2014) and “The Rise: Creativity, Mastery, and the Gift of Failure” (Simon & Schuster, March 2014). She lives in New York City.

**BEN OKRI**—novelist, short story writer, poet, playwright, and essayist—was born in Minna, Nigeria, but spent his early years in London, while his father studied law. Ben Okri later returned to the UK to study at the University of Essex. He is author of more than twelve books, including *The Famished Road* (winner of the Booker Prize), *Incidents at the Shrine*, *An African Elegy*, *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political*, *In Exilus*, *Tales of Freedom*, and *In Arcadia*. He has received such literary prizes and awards as the Commonwealth Writers Prize, Premio Grinzane Cavour, Booker Prize for Fiction, Chianti Ruffino-Antico Fattore International Literary Prize, Premio Palmi, and Paris Review/Aga Khan Prize for Fiction. From 1991 to 1993, he was Fellow Commoner in Creative Arts at Trinity College, Cambridge University, in 1987 he became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and he was, in 2001, awarded an OBE (Order of the British Empire). In addition to being a member of the board of the Royal National Theatre, he is also a Vice President of the English Centre of International PEN. He lives in London.

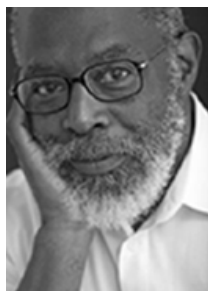


**CLARISSA PABI**, a north Londoner, recently received the BA degree in English at Oxford University. While there, she was resident poet for the Oxford COMMA club and she was elected President of the Oxford Poetry Society, which was founded in 1946 and serves as “the centre of poetic life within the University.” Her interest in the arts also extends to Hip-Hop music, which she has also written about. She is currently employed as an editor at the London office of Random House.

**ROBERT F. REID-PHARR** is Distinguished and Presidential Professor of English and American studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. This Brooklyn resident has also taught at a number of other institutions, including the University of Chicago, Johns Hopkins University, American University of Beirut, and Oxford University. He is author of *Conjugal Union: The*

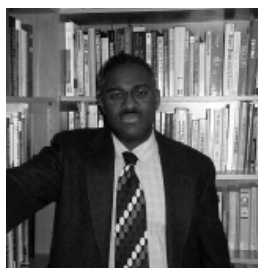


*Body, the House, and the Black American, Black, Gay, Man: Essays, and Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual.*



**ED ROBERSON** is Distinguished Artist-in-Residence at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. He is author of eight books of poetry: *The New Wing of the Labyrinth* (Singing Horse Press, 2009), *City Eclogue* (Atelos, 2006), *Atmosphere Conditions* (Sun & Moon Press, 2000; winner of the 2000 National Poetry Award), *Just In / Word of Navigational Challenges: New and Selected Poems* (Talisman House, 1998), *Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In*, 1995 winner of the 1994 Iowa Poetry Prize, *Lucid Interval as Integral Music*, 1995 winner of the Iowa Poetry Prize, *Etai-Eken*, and *When Thy King Is a Boy*. In 2008, he received the Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America.

**JEAN-PAUL ROCCHI** is a professor at the Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée and a member of several research groups including IMAGER (Paris-Est), the Caribbean Philosophical Association, and the Collegium for African American Research (CAAR). He teaches courses in American studies, African American literature, and queer studies. A DuBois Institute Fellow (Harvard University, 2007), he is editor of *L'objet identité: épistémologie et transversalité*, *Dissidence et identités*, and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman de Ernest Gaines: perspectives récentes de la recherche afro-américaniste*.



**MARLON B. ROSS**, a 1992-1993 Guggenheim Fellow, is Professor of English at the University of Virginia. He is author of *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* and *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry*. He has also published numerous essays and articles in anthologies and periodicals, including *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, *James Baldwin Now*, *Romanticism and Feminism*, *Out of Bounds: Male Writers and Gender(ed) Criticism*, *Transatlantica: revues d'études américaines*, *The Wordsworth Circle*, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, *English Literary History*, *Genre*, and *Callaloo*.



**JACOB SAM-LA ROSE** is author of *Communion* (2006, a Poetry Book Society Pamphlet Choice) and his collection *Breaking Silence* (2012, shortlisted for a Forward Foundation Felix Dennis Award and a Fenton Aldeburgh award). His work has also been published in a number of journals and anthologies, including *Out of Bounds: British Black and Asian Poets*, *Identity Parade: New British and Irish Poets*, *Penguin's Poems for Love*, and Michael Rosen's *A-Z: The Best Children's Poetry from Agard to Zephaniah*. As a leader in the UK youth slam poetry movement, he serves as the Artistic Director for such initiatives as the London Teenage Poetry SLAM, Apples & Snakes Word Cup, and Shake the Dust—the UK's largest national youth slam.

**DENISE FERREIRA DA SILVA** is Director of the Centre for Ethics & Politics at Queen Mary, University of London, where she is also a professor in the School of Business and Management. She is author of *Toward a Global Idea of Race* and *Race, Empire, and the Crisis of the Subprime*. *Atlantic Quarterly*, *Theory, Culture & Society*, *Revista Estudos Feministas*, *Social Identities*, *The Realization of Living: Sylvia Winter and Being Human*, *Critical Legal Theory*, *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in the Americas*, and *Black Brazil, Culture, Identity, and Social Mobilization* are some of the publications in which her work has also appeared.



**HORTENSE SPILLERS** is the author of *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003) and editor of *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text* (Routledge, 1991) and, with Marjorie Pryse, *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Indiana University Press, 1985). Her recent essays have appeared in such journals as *das argument*, *boundary 2*, and *The New Centennial Review*. Grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation, and fellowships at the National Humanities Center (Research Triangle, NC) and the Center for the Study of the Behavioral Sciences (Palo Alto, CA) are but a few honors she has received for her sterling contributions to literary and cultural studies. Spillers has taught at a number of institutions, including Wellesley College, Emory University, and



Cornell University. She has served as a visiting professor at Duke University in Durham, NC, and at the John F. Kennedy Center for North American Studies at the Free University in Berlin, Germany. Currently, she is the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of English at Vanderbilt University in Nashville.

**NGŪGĪ WA THIONG'O**, a native of Kenya, is Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California in Irvine. This novelist, essayist, playwright, journalist, editor, and academic and social activist is author of numerous books—*Weep Not Child*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *The River Between*, *Petals of Blood*, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir*, *In the House of the Interpreter*, *Decolonizing the Mind*, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*, *Writers in Politics*, and *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*. This recipient of the 2001 Nonino International Prize for Literature has given such



distinguished lectures as the MacMillan Stewart Lectures at Harvard, the Ashby Lecture at Cambridge, the Robb Lectures at Auckland University in New Zealand, and the Clarendon Lectures in English at Oxford University.



**NATASHA TRETHEWEY**, Robert W. Woodruff Professor of English and Creative Writing at Emory University in Atlanta, is Poet Laureate of the United States of America (2012-2014). She is author of a book of prose, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2010, winner of the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Book Prize) and four volumes of poetry—*Thrall* (2012), *Native Guard* (2006, winner of the Pulitzer Prize), *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2003, ALA Notable Book Award, The American Library Association), and *Domestic Work* (2000, Lillian Smith Book Award, Southern Regional Council). She has also received numerous other awards and honors for her poetry, including the Mississippi State Poet Laureate (2012-2016), Induction to the Georgia Writers' Hall of Fame (University of Georgia Libraries), Induction to Membership in the Fellowship of Southern Writers, Bellagio Fellowship (The Rockefeller Foundation), and Guggenheim Fellowship (The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation).



**LYRAE VAN CLIEF-STEFANON**, an associate professor at Cornell University, is author of two books of poems, *Black Swan* (winner of 2001 Cave Canem Prize) and *Open Interval* (a finalist for the 2009 National Book Award); and co-author, with Elizabeth Alexander, of *Poems in Conversation and a Conversation*. Her poems have also appeared in a number of periodicals and anthologies, including *African American Review*, *Callaloo*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Rattapallax*, *Shenandoah*, *Roll Call*, *Gathering Ground*, *The Ringing Ear*, and *Angles of Ascent*.



**COREY D. B. WALKER** is Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and John W. and Anna Hodgkin Hanes Professor of the Social Sciences at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina. He is author of *A Noble Fight: African American Freemasonry and the Struggle for Democracy in America* and a number of articles in such periodicals as *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *Political Theology*, and *boundary 2*. He is also editor of a special issue of *Political Theology*, devoted to "Theology and Democratic Futures," associate editor of *SAGE Encyclopedia of Identity*, and associate editor of *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.



**DAGMAWI WOUBSHET**, a native of Ethiopia, is Associate Professor of English at Cornell University. He is author of *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* (forthcoming from the Johns Hopkins University Press), and co-editor (with Salamishah Tillet and Elizabeth Wolde Giorgis) *Ethiopia: Literature, Art, and Culture*, a special issue of *Callaloo* 33.1 (2010). His work has also appeared in *Transition*, *Nka*, *Art South Africa*, *African Lives: An Anthology of Memoirs and Autobiographies*, and *Callaloo*. He divides his time among three cities, Ithaca, New York City, and Addis Ababa.



### Members on the CALLALOO CONFERENCE—and the Journal

“The *Callaloo* retreat [first meeting of the conference] in New Orleans forced me to examine my own history as a scholar, to address what one younger scholar persistently noted as a weakness in my presentations and responses at the intellectually enjoyable death chamber.”

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“The CALLALOO CONFERENCE group is a motley crew, more diverse than Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims. The retreat continually searches for universities that will host our activities. The two previous sites—Tulane University and Washington University [at St. Louis]—feted participants, inspired us, and provided faculty to participate on panels. One of the more important aspects of the retreat is that we scholars and writers enjoy visiting universities and spending quality time with faculty we may not meet otherwise. Rather than seeing the CALLALOO CONFERENCES as disruptions to my overwhelming number of commitments, they are a vortex that extends what I see as my creative possibilities. At the center of this vortex are colleagues from Africa, the Caribbean, Canada, and, of course, the United States, who riff and wail as we attempt to re-create ourselves at the same time that the Western academy questions the very notion of what it means to be human.”

**Joyce Ann Joyce**

“[One] issue that, for me, the *Callaloo* retreat helped clarify was the idea of a necessarily vexed relation between black Canadian and African American scholarship. Some black critics based in Canada have gone so far as to liken African America to an imperial power able to suffocate debates emerging from other parts of the diaspora. There is a small measure of truth to this. . . . When my novel *Soucouyant* first came out, and well before it began receiving some encouraging attention at home and abroad, it had already been selected to be prominently featured in *Callaloo*, an elite American-based journal that was willing to profile extensively the work of a new black writer when no Canadian-based literary or scholarly journal at the time would ever have dared of doing likewise. . . . In the midst of a nation that has a reputation for reacting to crises by closing ranks and proclaiming its exceptionalism, *Callaloo* has opted to move in a different direction and actively sought connections with other lands and spaces—an act of reaching out that was matched by each of the delegates whom I encountered at the retreat [in New Orleans].”

**David Chariandy**

“For me, the 2010 CALLALOO CONFERENCE [meeting at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia] offered up yet another definition of Black Movement: it is the ability to move between poetics and praxis, between generations, between traditions tenaciously and with seamless virtuosity and without being bound by preconceived conventional boundaries. Black movement is about constant motion—creative and intellectual dynamism that embodies the flow of ideas and knows no bounds.”

**Régine Michelle Jean-Charles**

“One of the principle aims of the CALLALOO CONFERENCE is to provide opportunities for exchange between scholars and creative writers, and this intention was decidedly met at the 2011 CALLALOO CONFERENCE. I was invited as a creative writer, with an interest in criticism and commentary concerning poetics at large. . . . The things I discovered at the 2011 CALLALOO CONFERENCE have changed the way I look at scholars, creative writers, and the possibilities between us.”

**Vievee Francis**

“The 2011 *Translations* Conference [at Texas A&M University, College Station] was a brilliant collaboration [among] writers, poets, and scholars. What further emerged was a kaleidoscope of interpretations, response papers, poetry, and Energy. More importantly, what we learned was, indeed, that we were One and had begun a dialogue that was passionately spun from our singular contributions, but manifested [itself], as a whole, into an incredibly sharp, brilliantly diverse setting that opened doors upon doors of fascinating, enthralling conversation.”

**Olympia Vernon**

I for one left the retreat [conference] in New Orleans knowing that each of the colleagues in attendance had given me a tremendous gift by encouraging me to push myself toward greater clarity. As I interact with them in the coming years—whether in person, by phone, or by simply reading their work—I know that my thinking will evolve and sharpen as a result. These critics and creators have positioned themselves in perfect cooperation with me by offering productive opposition. Put another way, our conversations stayed with me precisely because *Callaloo* once again did what it does best. It put the complexity and diversity of the African Diaspora center stage so that its thinkers could challenge each other to discover and extend our potential. Such rigorous intellectual engagement is possible precisely because we offer each other *no easy conflation, no hallucination of unanimity*.”

**Koritha Mitchell**

“If I learned anything at this conference it is that we, as women, should trespass on each other’s lives with more frequency. Trespass into each others homes and lives when we know the other is in need of help, and trespass when we ourselves need more help. This is how a true community can be built.”

**Angie Cruz**

“It was at the CALLALOO CONFERENCE that I began to understand more clearly the power of stories and ideas to provide us small moments of clarity in a spinning, changing world.”

**Maaza Mengiste**

“I emerge from New Orleans [site of the first CALLALOO CONFERENCE] happy and quite calm, having reached a brand new conclusion: literary analyst and writer? We’re both bastards, really, both ridiculously human and both sites for inspiration and comic relief. I know we’ve only scratched the surface; Charles [Rowell] won’t be happy until there is a little bit of blood on the dance floor, but for this first engagement we leave still talking, and that is all that is required.”

**Michelle Wright**

“... the St. Louis retreat [conference] was my first time being invited and it was actually an absolutely unique experience for me. But I would argue this in two ways: one, both in interacting with and connecting with junior and with senior scholars, as well as interacting with and connecting directly with artists. And I would say that as someone who attends and presents at a fair amount of conferences year in and year out, no other experience has been as successful or as productive along those lines, and I mean that sincerely, and also in these two ways, both socially and academically. So the ability to see senior scholars’ work and junior scholars’ work, to hear poets and to hear artists, but also the ability to break bread with them and connect with them was a fairly unique experience for me personally, and it is part of the reason why I’m even more committed to work on the process of making sure that we can continue to do it.”

**James Peterson**

“Since *Callaloo* is a major institution in our field, I am wondering how conferences like these enable us to make broader interventions in literary studies. . . . I know personally this community of scholars and artists has become indispensable to me. These conferences have enabled me to develop relationships and intellectual networks outside of my home institution, so that I am not solely dependent on my university for intellectual sustenance. To put it more plainly, as a junior scholar, I feel more empowered that I have the backing of *Callaloo* and access to senior scholars and artists in the field on whom I can draw for advice about a range of issues—how, particularly as a black scholar, one navigates white institutions; how one remains politically committed; how one advocates for the work that we do . . . “

**Dagmawi Woubshet**

## Five Years of CALLALOO CONFERENCES

“Literature, Culture & Critique: A *Callaloo* Retreat,” *Callaloo*, 32.2  
(Spring 2009): 551-644.

“The Intellectual’s Dilemma: Production and Praxis in the Twenty-First Century,”  
*Callaloo*, 33.1 (Winter 2010): 327-349.

“Notes from the 2010 CALLALOO CONFERENCE,” *Callaloo*, 34.3  
(Summer 2011): 811-876.

“Voices from Translations: The 2011 CALLALOO CONFERENCE,” *Callaloo* 35.4  
(Fall 2012): 915-1054.

“LOVE: A Report on the 2012 CALLALOO CONFERENCE,” *Callaloo* 36.3  
(Summer 2013): 559-748.

## Recent & Forthcoming Book Publications by CALLALOO CONFERENCE Participants

**Boehmer, Elleke,** and Sarah de Mul, eds. *The Postcolonial Low Countries*.  
Lexington, MA: Lexington Press, 2012.

**D'Aguiar, Fred.** *The Rose of Toulouse*. London: Carcanet, 2013.

**Davies, Carole Boyce.** *Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from Twilight Zones*.  
Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013.

**Francis, Vievee.** *Horse in the Dark*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University  
Press, 2012. Her second collection of poems, winner of the Cave  
Canem/Northwestern University Press Prize.

**Harold, Claudrena N.,** Juan Battle, and Deborah McDowell, eds. *The Punitive  
Turn: New Essays on Race and Incarceration*. Charlottesville: University Press  
of Virginia. Forthcoming.

**Hill, Edwin C., Jr.** *Black Soundscapes/White Stages: The Meaning of Francophone  
Sound in the Black Atlantic*. Baltimore: The Callaloo African Diaspora  
Series, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.

**Jackson, Shona.** *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean*.  
Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

**Jaji, Tsitsi.** *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity*. New York: Oxford  
University Press. Forthcoming 2013.

**Jean-Charles, Régine Michelle.** *Conflict Bodies: The Politics of Rape Representation in  
the Francophone Imaginary*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.  
Forthcoming 2014.

**Kay, Jackie.** *Bystander*. London: Picador. Forthcoming.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Reality, Reality*. London: Picador, 2012.

**Komunyakaa, Yusef.** *Testimony: A Tribute to Charlie Parker*. Middletown, CT:  
Wesleyan University Press, 2013.

**McConnell, Justine.** *Black Odysseys: The Homeric Odyssey in the African Diaspora since 1939.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

**Okri, Ben.** *Wild.* London: Rider Books/Random, 2012.

**Pardlo, Gregory.** *Digest.* New York: Four Way Books. Forthcoming 2014.

**Reed, Anthony.** *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing.* Baltimore: The Callaloo African Diaspora Series, Johns Hopkins University Press. Forthcoming 2014.

**Rocchi, Jean-Paul,** and Monica Michilin, eds. *Black Intersectionalities – A Critique for the 21st Century.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013.

\_\_\_\_\_, co-editor with Anne Cremieux and Xavier Lemoine.  
*Understanding Blackness through Performance—Contemporary Arts and the Representation of Identity.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

**Rowell, Charles Henry,** ed. *Angles of Ascent: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry.* New York: W. W. Norton, 2013.

\_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Callaloo African Diaspora Series.* Critical book-length volumes by various authors, published by Johns Hopkins University Press. By submissions by invitation only. Inagural issue, spring 2014.

\_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Callaloo Art.* An annual published by Johns Hopkins University Press.

**Royster, Francesca.** *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

**Tillet, Salamishah.** *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

**Wa Ngugi, Mukoma.** *Finding Sabara.* Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2013.

**Williams, E. M.** *The Politics of Race in Britain and South Africa: Black British Solidarity and the Anti-apartheid Struggle.* London: I.B.Tauris, 2013.

**Woubshet, Dagmawi.** *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Forthcoming 2014.

## ***Callaloo*: Its History and Projects**

Founded in 1976 by its editor, Charles Henry Rowell, *Callaloo* is a quarterly journal sponsored by Texas A&M University (College Station, TX) and published by the Johns Hopkins University Press (Baltimore, MD). It began as a small journal devoted to the literature of the Black South, but during its thirty-plus years of continuous publication, *Callaloo* has become the premiere journal focusing on the literature and culture of the African Diaspora. Although the journal publishes poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, visual art, interviews, and literary and cultural criticism, *Callaloo* is, says its editor, “more than a literary journal. It is a de facto literary and cultural center, organizing and coordinating a variety of activities that serve to exhibit, preserve, critique, and promote African Diaspora literary and visual culture.”

As a literary journal, *Callaloo* has received positive national attention, including a commendation from *Every Writer's Resource*, which recently ranked *Callaloo* as one of the top fifteen literary magazines published in the United States. The journal has long been—and continues to be referred to as—“the premiere literary and cultural journal of the African Diaspora.” With that commendation and others has come, says its editor, “*Callaloo's* continuing responsibility of identifying, recording, and promoting the literature and visual culture of the Diaspora, as well as publishing the engaging and provocative commentaries on its myriad artistic and other cultural forms.”

Although it is a literary and cultural journal, *Callaloo* has, for a number of years, offered annual creative writing workshops and hosted retreats, readings, symposia, performances, conferences, and other gatherings that bring scholars and creative writers together at various institutions and in the communities where the office of the journal is housed. *Callaloo* has also sponsored lectures, literary readings, and conferences across the United States and in such countries as Brazil, England, Cuba, Mexico, and Ethiopia.

In 1997, the Editor of *Callaloo* founded the CALLALOO CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP as an outreach program to historically black colleges and universities—for example, to Morehouse College, Morgan State University, North Carolina Central University, Spelman College, Fisk University, Xavier University of New Orleans, and others. And as the national need for creative writing workshops increased, the editor expanded and opened the CALLALOO CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP to a number of new and emerging writers from across the United States. Offering sessions in poetry writing and in fiction writing, the workshop



now admits, on a competitive basis, participants from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Caribbean. A number of distinguished poets and fiction writers have led sessions of the workshop on the craft of poetry and fiction—e. g., John Edgar Wideman, Mat Johnson, Thomas Glave, Tayari Jones, Lucille Clifton, Terrance Hayes, Percival Everett, Toi Derricotte, A. Van Jordan, Yusef Komunyakaa, Edwidge Danticat, Natasha Trethewey, and Tracy K. Smith.

When the Editor of *Callaloo* founded the CALLALOO CONFERENCE in 2007, he stated its purpose as a contemporary necessity: to bring together creative writers and academics to discuss issues about the work they produce and the environs in and concerns under which they work. Since then, the scope of the conference has expanded to consider a variety of issues from Pan-Africanism (at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, in 2010) to “Translations,” the theme of the 2011 CALLALOO CONFERENCE held at Texas A&M University (College Station) and at the Menil Collection in Houston. The 2012 CALLALOO CONFERENCE, which focused on “Love” (sacred, profane, etc.), convened at Princeton University in New Jersey.

The Editor of *Callaloo* has also initiated two other publication projects with the Johns Hopkins University Press: an annual publication, called *Callaloo Art*, that will be devoted to African Diaspora visual art and culture; and an academic series of books, *The Callaloo African Diaspora Series*, which publishes critical commentaries by a variety of scholars rigorously addressing significant facets of the literature and culture of the Diaspora.

The “literary and cultural center” called *Callaloo* attempts to provide a number of services to marginalized communities—services that include not only identifying and encouraging new writers and scholars, but also nurturing and promoting them. While extending and expanding the scope of African American literary and cultural studies, *Callaloo* is a recorder, arbiter, and enabler of the literary culture of the African Diaspora.

## What They Say About *Callaloo*

“Over the years *Callaloo* has remained among the most interesting magazines in the country, publishing established and emerging writers—many for the first time. Founder and editor Charles Rowell has a gift for recognizing writers early in their careers and continuing to publish them as they go on to prominence. I have benefited from the support of *Callaloo* my entire career—beginning with the first poem I ever published!”

**Natasha Trethewey**, *Poet Laureate (of the USA 2012-2014)*, *Emory University*

“*Callaloo* has been an indispensable force in my life ever since its editor, Charles Rowell, published my first book of fiction in 1985. The embracing vision of *Callaloo* has encouraged me to stretch my literary muscles, so that I have continued to explore other genres besides poetry in the quest to plumb the ever unfolding complexities of the human soul.”

**Rita Dove**, *Poet Laureate (of the USA 1993-1995)*, *University of Virginia*

“*Callaloo* has created and preserved the finest tradition of intellectual work over a quarter of a century. Rarely has a journal had more integrity in keeping to its profound cultural and political agenda. A generation of humanistic scholars owe *Callaloo* an uncountable debt, and, in this time of national struggle, wherever we can find Americans, they owe *Callaloo* the debts of enlightenment, knowledge, and understanding. We know that *Callaloo*’s next quarter of a century will be even more important than its first.”

**Paul A. Bové**, *University of Pittsburgh*, *Editor of boundary 2*

“Charles Rowell has made *Callaloo* into an intellectual and artistic achievement. Devoted primarily to post-colonial and African American literature and the arts, it has added considerably to our knowledge of these fields. Each number of *Callaloo* is in its own right designed as a work of art. *Callaloo* deserves our congratulations and our admiration.”

**Ralph Cohen**, *University of Virginia*, *Founding Editor of New Literary History*

“[*Callaloo*] is where young writers find support and a place to begin and where older writers return for comfort and a serious audience. And *Callaloo* has actively sought work from the Caribbean, South America, and Africa, seeking voices that have no place to sound, serving writers who might otherwise have been forever silenced by circumstance.”

**Percival Everett**, *fiction writer*, *University of Southern California*

“In an age where literary journals increasingly resemble stables that the same horses never leave, *Callaloo* makes clear that contemporary African American poetry has as much range as does—and should—poetry of any kind; and that, if there is a single responsibility for a literary journal, it’s surely to showcase, as best it can, all that it can. Rather than a record of what has been done, *Callaloo* continues to be a gauge of what is being done and—just as inspiring—of what *can* be done.”

**Carl Phillips**, *poet & essayist*, *Washington University at St. Louis*

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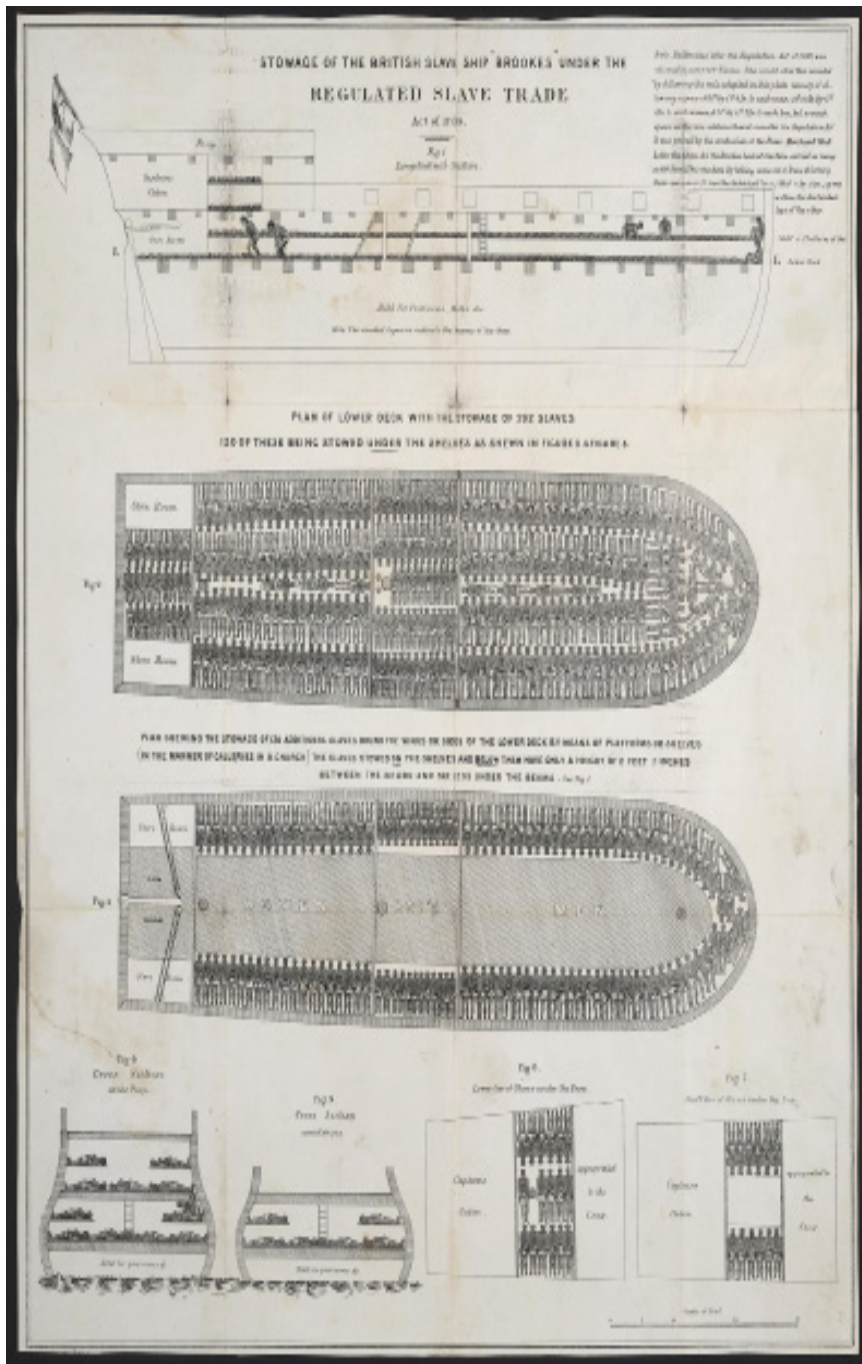
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Stowage of the British slave ship *Brookes* under the regulated slave trade act of 1788. Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Washington, DC.

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## LANGUAGE SHOULD NOT KEEP US APART!

### Reflections towards a Black Transnational Praxis of Translation

by Geri Augusto

Imploro-te Exu  
Plantares na minha boca  
O teu axé verbal  
Restituindo-me a língua  
Que era minha  
E ma roubaram . . .  
Laroiê!

—Abdias do Nascimento, “*Padê do Exu Libertador*”  
Buffalo, New York, 1981

There is no world of thought which is not a world of language, and  
one sees of the world only what is provided for by language.  
—Walter Benjamin, “*Translation – For and Against*”

I want to begin this paper by going back to the genesis of a few ideas, ideas prompted, in the first instance, by a visit that Professors Conceição Evaristo and Eduardo de Assis Duarte paid to Brown University almost exactly a year ago, and the conversations that ensued.<sup>1</sup> Those ideas fell into my mind and took up company with some others which had been there longer, and were prompted by black transnational lives—my own and that of others who inspired me—and the need to think more deeply about what it means not just to write theoretically about diaspora, but rather also to *practice* diaspora.<sup>2</sup> Or as I think of it more and more, to *live* diaspora, in all its contradictions and crossings with other ways to live and be and think. In a manner of speaking, such lives *are* a translation, sometimes a productive one—but not always. I will try to demonstrate how reading Professor Evaristo’s work opens up possibilities for thinking about, and exploring, the idea of a black transnational praxis of translation. In a sense, I am thinking about how Pan African decolonial liberation and human rights struggles, and my participation in some of them over decades, engendered and influenced my experience as an interpreter. But because I am what someone once called a “community feminist,” and also I believe in the emancipatory projects of other peoples and provocative notions no matter their provenance, other concepts have also shaped how I think about and cross language borders in work and personal life. So my reflections are not limited to the distinctive political activity and body of ideas called Pan Africanism. *More went into the pot*, as my grandmother would say.

In this text I want to tease out some of the ways in which the historical experiences and the creative expressiveness which mark diasporan lives conjure up companion ideas and expressions, and hence may fruitfully bring particular inflections and enriched meanings to translation and interpretation. To do so, I will give a certain reading of Conceição Evaristo's work, in particular *Becos da Memória*—but I warn you that it won't be the close reading of literary scholars, or professional translators of poetry and fiction, because I am neither!<sup>3</sup> Rather, my discussion will make more apparent the thought processes of a once-upon-a-time interpreter who comes out of a certain black radical and feminist tradition, when faced with the linguistic joys and conundrums that Evaristo's work invokes. We might think of this as following Walter Benjamin's injunction to add the practice of commentary to translation, if we want it to work well, and not just be a technical exercise to try to produce a duplicate ("Task"). I will along the way make some provisional assertions, not conclusions—provisional because I am still thinking deeply, while here in Brazil, about all this. I need to listen and observe a lot more, and converse more with some other black folks whose paths to translation and interpretation have been somewhat parallel to mine. We aren't that many, as you will understand from some of the things I will shortly relate.

In brief, I want to suggest four points, not necessarily with any linearity or didactic explicitness. The arguments come from the spaces I inhabit and the crossroads at which life has placed me, of course, but that by no means implies that they are limited to people who look like me, or even to the languages of Portuguese and English. Rather, they might also serve as a springboard to wider discussions about translation, and about constructing and crossing that bridge between less-widely read Brazilian literature and the global readership it should have. First, I want to suggest that translation, or at least the brand I and others have practiced and that I now want to reflect upon, is an ontological act. Second, that a feeling for certain realities of diaspora—slavery, racism in its multiple facets and manifestations, the triple load of many black women, and struggle against all these—is important for translation of African and diasporic literatures. Third, that the enduring, if continuously reconfigured, importance of orality and visuality in the speech, liturgical practices, writing, and other expressive and performative acts of Africans and Afro-descendent peoples make those dimensions critical resources for translation and interpretation. And finally, since racism has worked so hard to make us all think that, for black people in the Americas, crossing language borders is something inherently impossible, or else an extraordinary and surprising fluke, supposedly due to our innate intellectual inferiority and relative lack of opportunities for travel, I want to assert that translating can be a radical, transgressive black practice, with multiple reverberations.<sup>4</sup>

I will incorporate here initially some of the comments I made a year ago when moderating the panel on The Literary Voice in Black Brazilian Politics, in the Africana Studies Department at Brown University, since that is where the conversation started.<sup>5</sup>

### Translation, Counter-Symbolic Expression, and Ontological Beings

I read with deep joy *Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres*, Prof. Evaristo's recent collection of stories. Each woman, and her story, was evocative—I could conjure them up physi-



cally, how they talked, how they walked, how they must have looked at the Narrator, as she collected their stories. They were strong. They were beautiful. They were cruel. They were kind. And you, the reader, had to think about which of these traits was foremost in any given person. They were sexual beings and determined dreamers. Their very names roll around on the tongue, creating intrigue and provoking thoughts . . . Líbia Moira, Natalina Soledade . . .

As Stuart Hall would say, we are related, in the African Diaspora, as much through our differences as through our similarities. So I could not help thinking: if I were to teach the soon-to-come (or at least so I hope) English version that I would entitle *Defiant Women's Tears*, I would want to do it side-by-side with Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, and Brenda Marie Osbey's poem, in *All Saints*, "Faubourg Study No. 3: The Seven Sisters of New Orleans." And maybe have Nina Simone's "Four Women" playing in the background.<sup>6</sup> I think all these could be read, listened to, and appreciated, fully together, challenging us with their differences and provoking us with their similarities. And then we could really explore Prof. Evaristo's notion of *escrevivencia*, which I want to give an English rendition, pulling a little from Jamaican nation-language, as *livature*, that notion of a particular relation between writing and living.<sup>7</sup>

In an influential essay on "The Politics of Translation," the postcolonial theorist and feminist translator Gayatri Spivak argued that "the person who is translating must have a tough sense of the specific terrain of the original," and she added that "If you want to make the translated text accessible, try doing it for the person who wrote it" (qtd. in Venuti 322). Well, Professor Evaristo liked my translation of her concept. Let me pause here to interject what I did not add at the time: Rastafari have been one of the most important constructors of what the poet and cultural theorist Kamau Brathwaite calls "nation-languages" in the English-speaking Caribbean.<sup>8</sup> All of these diasporic constructions are full of creative counter-symbolism. The Jamaican linguistic scholar Velma Pollard notes that the language Rastas speak, *dread-talk*, is now widely used in Caribbean literature—not to mention in Brazilian conscious rap and reggae. It has become, as the Jamaican cultural theorist and historian Rex Nettleford once put it, an element of the "New World *culturesphere*" (Pollard 3). But more to my point here, those counter-symbolic expressions and counter stories, those other phonics, common throughout black communities in the Americas, have also furnished us with something more. Andre Lefevere argues that translating, or mediating between "at least two code systems," involves an activity not merely about "fidelity" but rather a double move: translating both the textual and the conceptual, both of which are the "result of a socialization process" (75–76). I think what Lefevere is in part saying here is that the translator may also compose, or at least provide an accessible rendition of, ontological beings—things and realities—for the reader, depending on her own socialization. If this is true, then black counter-speech and orature are also an epistemological tool, a way to construct or reconfigure objects of knowledge—ontological entities and beings. That makes them a potentially rich resource in translation.

Let me be a bit more precise. Translators have found what one scholar calls "culturally marked" words to be particularly problematic (Santoyo 14). They often have to settle, it is said, for a definition, rather than a good equivalent. But diasporic cultures and histories, I think, can sometimes provide just the right way out of the dilemma. *Livity* is what Pollard classifies as a "Category IV" dread talk word, a "new item."<sup>9</sup> I found it the perfect bridge

to a translation of Evaristo's *escrevivencia* as livy literature: *livature*. To take another example: how else would I have found the nicely apt translation of *negros de ideias avançadas*, the truculent description that a Portuguese state secret police agent in colonial-era Lisbon gave of the young students Agostinho Neto, Mario de Andrade, Marcelino dos Santos, and others already sharpening their resistance to colonial racism and exploitation?<sup>10</sup> "Uppity negroes" was how white policemen in the US South described black women and men protesting Jim Crow . . . and so "uppity negroes" became my translation of *negros de ideias avançadas*. It is a category many of us understand!

### Accidental Interpreters and "Language in actu"

The first literature that I read in the Portuguese language was MPLA literacy manuals in the movement's rear-base camp in Dar es Salaam, followed by the first few volumes of Angolan short novels and poetry that the new Union of Angolan Writers had begun in the mid-1970s to put out. But the qualitative leap for me was Jorge Amado. For months in a family member's home in Luanda, I read through all three volumes of *Os Subterrâneos da Liberdade* [*Freedom's Undergrounds*], dictionary in hand, until my third son was born.<sup>11</sup> You can imagine the Portuguese it taught me, and the ideas about Brazil that it gave to someone who had never been there. My quiet reading time was alternated by frequent visits to some of my Angolan relatives-by-marriage, who lived in the famous *musseque* of Sambizanga. I did not know it at the time, but those "remembered alleys" were to come back to me—the red dust dissolving in puddles during rainy season, the sociality of the community standpipe, the easy sharing of tasty food, good luck and sorrows, the birthing of resistance to exploitation—as one of the prisms for my understanding of Evaristo's unnamed *favela* in *Becos da Memória*. It did not need a name for me. The experience of an African American woman living in Luanda made this vibrant, beautiful-ugly<sup>12</sup> space an ontological entity I could see, feel, smell, and translate in my mind's eye. It gave me that "tough sense of the terrain," to which Spivak referred.

In the long, hard war decades of the 1980s and 1990s in Angola, I went on to become an "accidental interpreter" of Portuguese to English, when the needs for this skill were grave and multiple, but competent bilingual interpreters who were native speakers of English were scarce. It was, in the felicitous term of Homi Bhaba, translation of "language in actu," rather than *in situ*. As I progressed from translating documents to interpreting meetings with varying levels of intensity but always about things that mattered, and finally to simultaneous interpretation, I entered into those small enclosed bubbles called "booths." There I met often with the surprised, confused gratitude of European speakers who came round to the interpreters' area after international meetings in Luanda, in Brussels and Lisbon, and throughout Southern Africa, to express their appreciation for a job well-done—only to meet with a black face.<sup>13</sup> "How on earth do you do it?" a South African engineer once blurted out to me at a meeting in Namibia, just after Nelson Mandela's release from prison. "Well, I listen to one language, it passes through my brain, and the other comes out of my mouth . . . just like the other interpreters," I told him.

It would be a few more years before I would find myself in Pretoria, interviewing former apartheid education officials who would tell me, with utmost seriousness, in explanation of the bare trickle of black South Africans into certain fields of study: "You blacks in the USA are not like our blacks here. They can't master English. Or maths." This was uttered in the country where I was subsequently often embarrassed by the easy prowess of seven-year-old black children who understood many languages already—the mother tongue and father tongue at home, say isiZulu and seTswana, the *tsotsi-taal* from "bad boys" on the corner, and whatever other languages the actors in the soap operas on South African broadcasting stations were speaking. Still language constitutes a barrier for many of these children, as they struggle to translate the rich linguistics of home cultures into the sometimes dry English of the textbook, and some of their teachers struggle to overcome their own training under apartheid-era "bantu education," when they were obliged to study in Afrikaans only.<sup>14</sup>

But that is another language story, much like some of the topsy-turvy explanations I have been hearing lately about why there are not more Afro-Brazilian students sent to the United States for graduate study opportunities. Or the surprise that still greets the multiple-language speaking African American from New Orleans or Chicago or Washington, DC. It seems that we are doing something that we are not supposed to be able to do, at least in the United States, South Africa, or Brazil. "Translation is not a neutral site in the Americas," one critical scholar of translation studies has declared, and I agree (Genzler 3). Our thinking about translation, whether as public actors or scholars, cannot ignore this imbrication of race, opportunity, and languages. We should not ignore the impact of colonial slavery, Jim Crow, apartheid, or scientific racism-inflected theories of learning and knowledge on how translation is practiced or studied, or what gets selected for translation. We have to talk about it, and transgress those artificial borders, in publication, in the classroom . . . and at international book fairs.<sup>15</sup> Language should not keep us apart!

### Sound-Images, Linguistic Charge, Walking Orality

I want to say more, at this point, about the role of visuality and orality in how I am trying to think through the practice of translation. Here I will refer primarily to some pertinent ideas from novelist and social critic John Edgar Wideman. Wideman turns our attention very deliberately to something humanities scholars often seem to take for granted, if not ignore: the tremendous creative feat that was the acquisition of imposed languages, and the forging of new ones, the renaming of a world and its attributes and features, the very reinvention of existence by the just-landed black captives in the Americas.<sup>16</sup> Those first expressions of the new were oral, and that has been one of our legacies to ourselves, and to the world. Wideman explores, in particular, the varieties of speech which have emerged from the different worlds of blacks and whites in the United States. For speech-acts, Wideman argues, "key provides the tone, manner or spirit of the words spoken." The key may be "serious or mocking, painstaking or perfunctory," depending on signals verbal and physical, which also comprise the speech-act. These subtle, often almost imperceptible (to the outsider) cues are what allow for "density of meaning" in the utterances of a speech

community or group. In written works, these keys allow the writer to address multiple, diverse audiences. This is achieved, Wideman asserts, “by appealing to pools of knowledge only segments of his readers share with him.” “Rather than being an instrument of power in the hands of the enemy,” Wideman says of Negro dialect in the fiction of some of the best early African American writers, “it is turned against the oppressor” and permits the “point of view of the slave” to be understood. The stories of the former slaves, and the values embodied in them, Wideman insists, reveal the fundamental “inner sense of purpose and worth, the integrity and resiliency” which enabled black people to survive slavery in America (66–69). I think Evaristo relays something of this same “integrity and resilience” of the *favelad@s*, who are living in a late-twentieth-century *senzala/favela*.<sup>17</sup>

Wideman makes much of particular elements of African American orature such as verbal interplay, verbal overtones, spontaneity of performance, the audience itself, the setting, and nonverbal effects. The audience has a critical role in African American orature, chiefly creative participation and responsiveness, including “echoing and amening,” as Wideman puts it. Wideman expounds the concept of the “sound image,” or “Words that sound like the thing they describe” (66–69). Such onomatopoeic phrases may be voiced or performed. Objects may be personified in these narratives—they do, talk, see, hear, change position. The narrator in an oral performance may move back and forth between aural and visual effects, creating a language that Afro-Brazilian cultural historian and playwright Prof. Leda Maria Martins suggests “comes into pulsing being in the conjugation of the sound of drums, singing and dancing which interact in the articulation of speech and voice” (56). I would argue that, in *Becos da Memória*, many of these notions are intensely present. Anyone attempting to translate the novel might do well to have sound images as well as objects which come alive in the mind. Just think, for example, of that big, devouring, expanding hole . . . the *Buracão*.

The translator of French classic literature, Edith Grossman, provides another useful perspective on orality, from the standpoint of practice, when she writes of “struggling to discover the linguistic charge, the structural rhythms, the subtle implications, the complexities of meaning and suggestion in vocabulary and phrasing, and the ambient, cultural inferences and conclusions these tonalities allow us to extrapolate” (8–9). That linguistic charge sometimes has to have a walk, a style, a way of appearing and being in space. How to do this for African diasporic cultures, when one is distant from them?

One European film translator offers a vivid picture of this conundrum. Drawing on her own experience translating African American English into German, Robin Queen argues that the transferability of sociolinguistic variation is important to issues related to cross-cultural communication, as well as to linguistic creativity. She notes that in translating films, “if the character being dubbed is young, male and tied to the street cultures of the urban inner city, then the work is dubbed using a form of German that has links to the urban youth cultures of north-central Germany” (515). I found this wrestling with social location and class, but swerving around race, to be fascinating and thought-provoking, especially since major German cities have had for some time their own populations of African (and Turkish) immigrants. It pushed me to think more carefully about some of my past interpreting experiences, one of which I would like to share here.

I recall particularly being in the booth in Luanda, sometime in the early 1980s, paired with a young Portuguese colleague, a member of the Portuguese Communist Party and a

brilliantly able interpreter of Portuguese to English. (He told me that he was one of twins, and that both he and his brother were interpreters.) Our task was to interpret at an MPLA Youth Congress for the international delegates, many from what were then known as “the socialist countries.” English was the lingua franca for all. Midway through my colleague’s turn, he switched off his microphone and said, “*Camarada* Geri, you have to take this. I can’t understand what some of the provincial delegates are saying.” I turned my own microphone on swiftly, and looked down into the audience as the next young Angolan speaker positioned himself in the auditorium aisle, in a characteristic stance, and began to reel off the problems his province was facing. Knowing the Portuguese of Coimbra and the English of London, or even the vocabulary of Marxism-Leninism, was not enough to interpret this Angolan speaker. His intervention was filled with gestures, cadences, and words which I had learned from the streets and social occasions of Luanda, but also recognized from other parts of Africa and from the diaspora, though not necessarily in the same words: *candongueira*, *maka*, *milongo*, *o esquemático*, and of course, “*ai, cooperante!*”<sup>18</sup>

I have just recently begun to seek out how scholars of Brazilian translation have also been thinking through questions of orality and visibility. One such translation theorist, Else Ribeiro Pires Vieira, revisits the ideas of Haroldo de Campos and other Brazilian thinkers (notably Oswald de Andrade, in his influential “Manifesto Antropófago” of the 1920s) around the metaphor of *anthropofagia*. On this account, it is “a sign of the polyphonic identity of Brazil . . . a way of conceiving spiritual force as inseparable from matter,” of combining another’s recognized and appreciated strength with one’s own (96). Intriguing as this notion is, it seems to me to leave out the majority of Brazil, contemplating only Portuguese and Tupi (and the latter in terms with which I am not sure that thinkers from contemporary indigenous communities in the country would agree), and its focus is very much on translation of European texts, and a Brazil-Europe nexus, despite the premise of refuting Eurocentrism. Still I think we can find productive her argument that the translation of creative texts is “an operation in which it is not only the meaning that is translated but the sign itself in all its corporeality—*sound properties, visual imageries*, all that makes up the iconicity of the aesthetic sign” (Else Ribeiro Pires Vieira 104, emphasis added). Perhaps the search for ways to theorize translation in Brazil might productively be widened to encompass the vast, living, creative legacy of orality in the religions, music, and everyday walk and talk of Afro-Brazilian communities—those expressions, as Cutí puts it, capable of “translating certain feelings, certain attitudes towards life, that the Portuguese language does not have” (732). But that is not for me to say, at a stage where I am still learning.

### The Uneasy Translatability of Gender and Race

I do not mean to suggest, I must stress at this point, that there is something essential to black translators that suits them automatically for translating black literatures, or women to translating women. I found instructive and thought-provoking Alexandra Perisic’s recent discussion of the translation processes and outcomes, and the notion of a “politics of transfiguration” in the bilingual anthology of Afro-Brazilian women’s writings, *Finally Us*, co-edited by the Afro-Brazilian poet and literary critic, and Conceição Evaristo’s col-

league in Quilombohoje, Miriam Alves.<sup>19</sup> Noting that *Finally Us* “rethinks gender not as a subset of race and colonial history but as a site from which the relation between the national and the transnational is imagined,” Perisic recounts that the book also brought “into play the question of translation and translatability” (282). Alves, she discloses, had somewhat conflicted feelings about the outcome. That *axé* which the poet communicated through her work simply got lost, at some points, in translation. Highly nuanced, polyvalent words such as *resgate*, *cigana*, and even *negra* became slippery slopes, it would seem, for the translation of *Finally Us*.<sup>20</sup> I can sympathize here with both the frustrated writer and the translator, whose task of translating gendered race and racialized gender is, as they say in Jamaica, *nuh’ easy*. But I would also agree with Perisic’s argument that “the only way to think race and gender in a transnational context is to precisely attempt to write the untranslatable in translation” (282).

### Ancestors and the Trance

There is another aspect of the practice of interpretation, as I have experienced it, which I do not yet know how to adequately express. It is simply this: when communication is a matter of life-and-death, or of opening paths where they are really needed among us humans, of moving concepts from one side to another, and back, with extreme care (bending more towards the other Latin meaning of *trans-late*), this interpreter literally goes into a *trance*. This is the only word I can find to describe it—divested of individual self, insensitive to anything else in the physical environment but the two sides who need to understand each other, a rhythm of almost instantaneous, simultaneous thinking along with the speakers, becoming the voice they have in common, a human medium of communication. I think this dimension of the practice comes from a logic that some of us have yet to grasp, and others—who work on a different plane, and with a different kind of revelatory knowledge—may understand very well. Suffice it to say that, just before and after this work, I thank the Ancestors. Perhaps if I were Brazilian, I might invoke an *orixá*.

I will use the rest of this paper to demonstrate how I would approach translating *Becos da Memória*. No, not a translation—but rather *thinking through* and *with* such a translation, in the very act of practice. I will use some audio-visual images and quotes from the book, translating them into English as we go, to better materialize some of the points I have been trying to make, in six “moments” or examples. I feel comfortable with this somewhat unorthodox approach, since Evaristo has urged us to attempt to theorize more by using “our own cultural products.”<sup>21</sup> Then I will end with a modest proposal, though I have a hunch that it may be one that Prof. Eduardo Duarte and the *galera* of Literafro have already voiced.



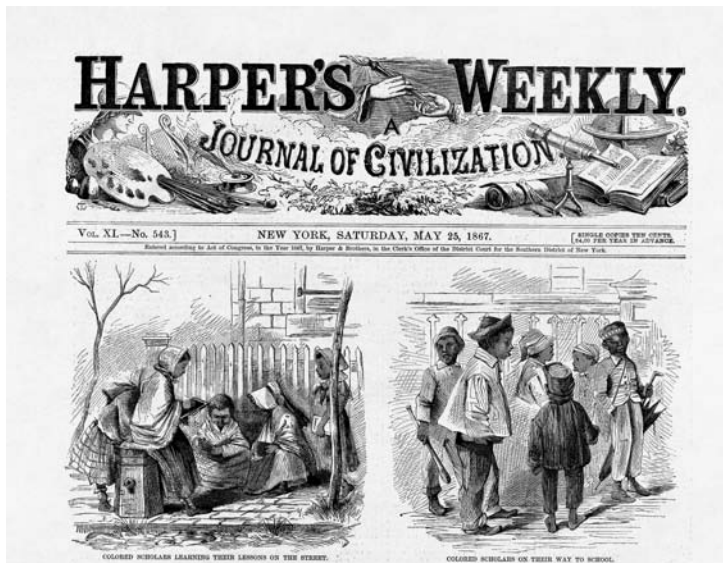
***Becos da Memória—Some Images and Sounds Evoked for the Would-Be Translator***

*First moment—* Maria-Nova, the unforgettable girl-child:

Ela gostava de aprender, de ir à escola, não. Tinha medo e vergonha de tudo, dos colegas, dos professores. Despistava, transformava o medo e a vergonha em coragem. Tinha uma vantagem sobre os colegas: lia muito. Lia e comparava as coisas. Comparava tudo e sempre chegava a algum ponto. Para ele, a leitura havia concorrido para a compreensão do mundo. Ele acreditava que, quando um sujeito sabia ler o que estava escrito e o que não estava, dava um passo muito importante para sua libertação. A vida exigia sim! Era preciso caminhar, era preciso ir – era o que ele repetia sempre. E lá estava ele junto de todos. Sempre atento. Dentro dele cabia tudo. A força do pensar, do criar, do mudar, do lutar, do construir. (Evaristo, *Becos da Memória* 154–55)

She liked to learn, but not to go to school. She was afraid and ashamed of everything, of her classmates, of the teachers. So, sidetracking, she turned fear and shame into courage. She had one advantage over her classmates: she read a lot. She read and compared things. She compared everything, and always came to some point.

*In my mind's eye, I see generations of black women and girls, struggling to learn, even when school is unfriendly, hostile, or deficient. And I imagine Maria-Nova, narrating forward into her own future, like the little girl not-yet-born who narrates Julie Dash's groundbreaking, lyrical film, "Daughters of the Dust."*<sup>22</sup>



***Black children struggling to read on the street, 1867. From the cover of Harper's Weekly Vol. XI, No. 543. Provided courtesy HarpWeek.***



*Second moment*—Negro Alírio, determined, indomitable, a leader with a soft heart but determined head:

Para ele, a leitura havia concorrido para a compreensão do mundo. Ele acreditava que, quando um sujeito sabia ler o que estava escrito e o que não estava, dava um passo muito importante para sua libertação. A vida exigia sim! Era preciso caminhar, era preciso ir—era o que ele repetia sempre. E lá estava ele junto de todos. Sempre atento. Dentro dele cabia tudo. A força do pensar, do criar, do mudar, do lutar, do construir. (Evaristo, *Becos da Memória* 205)

For him, reading stood for understanding the world. He believed that, once a person knew how to read what was written and what wasn't, he was taking a very important step for his liberation. Yes, life was demanding! You needed to set off on a path, you needed to get going—that was what he always repeated. And he was right there, along with all the others. Always alert. There was room inside him for everything. The strength to think, to create, to change, to struggle, to build . . .

*In my mind, I picture Negro Alírio like the best of the liberation movement leaders in Africa, and the work done to create, against all odds, schools in the liberated zones of Guinea-Bissau, and Angola and Mozambique at the time. And thinking about how to transmit Negro Alírio's view of creating under the most arduous of conditions, I suddenly recall Agostinho Neto's poem, and the image of him writing in prisons and in the bush:*

Create create  
 create in mind create in muscle create in nerve  
 create in man create in masses  
 create  
 create with dry eyes  
 .....  
 create create  
 bursts of laughter over the derision of the palmatoria  
 courage in the tips of the planters boots  
 strength in the splintering of battered-in doors  
 firmness in the red blood of insecurity  
 create  
 create with dry eyes  
 create create  
 .....  
 peace over children's weeping  
 peace over sweat  
 over the tears of contract labour  
 .....  
 create create  
 create freedom in the slave stars

manacles of love on the paganized paths of love  
festive sounds over the swinging bodies on the simulated gallows

Create

create love with dry eyes.  
(Neto 69)<sup>23</sup>

*Third moment*—Tio Totó and his precious Congado regalia, indispensable to his other self as “chefe do Congo”.<sup>24</sup>

A caixa de Congada de Tio Totó pendurada no caibro do telhado dava a sensação de ruído. Ela deveria ser devolvida ao chefe do Congo. Ele, porém, morrerá uns meses antes. Tio Totó, que seria então o novo chefe, estava também a despedir-se de todos e da vida. . . . A “Coroa de Rei” que ele usava nas festas de Congada brilhava pelo efeito do Kaol sobre a cômoda de madeira. Era bom brincar de rei. Ele vestia roupas vistosas, bonitas. Todas as festas acabavam sempre na capelinha que os participantes do Congo haviam construído em honra de Nossa Senhora do Rosário. (Evaristo, *Becos da Memória* 244)

Tio Totó’s Congado box hanging from a hook in the ceiling gave the sensation of sound. The box should have been given back to the Chief of the Congo. But he had passed away a few months ago. Tio Totó, who would have become the new chief, was also saying farewell to everyone, and to life . . . The “King’s Crown” that he used in the Congado festival sat shining with Kaol polish on the wooden dresser. It was nice to play the king. He wore showy, beautiful regalia. All the festivals always ended up in the small chapel that the participants from Congo had built in honor of Our Lady of the Rosary . . .

*Here I see and hear at once a flood of visual and aural images of another ritual of dance with re-crowned African kings and queens and “caboclos” of a sort,<sup>25</sup> beautifully danced by the descendants of slaves . . . in New Orleans, the city built on their labor, manual and creative, and where disaster inflected with racism has made the tradition of Carnival/Mardi Gras difficult for its real, largely working-class back progenitors to carry on . . . but they do.<sup>26</sup>*

*Fourth moment*—And back to Maria-Nova: “Maria-Nova um dia escreveria a fala de seu povo” (247) ‘One day, Maria-Nova would write the speech of her people.’ *The very Brazilian-Portuguese, polyvalent expression “fala” lends itself to many understandings of palaver in the African sense, and so I hesitate between speech and words as the right translation. But then I remember one of my favorite films by the Guinea-Bissau film-maker Flora Gomes, and its meaning in the creole language of that country: voice. nha fala is “my voice,” and that is what Flora laughingly calls me when I interpret for him. For Evaristo’s favela, Maria-Nova—or is it the author herself?—will become Nha Fala.*<sup>27</sup>

*Fifth moment*—The many passages in *Becos da Memória* where expressions for determined, decisive walking, for courageous movement forward, are uttered, or just forcefully thought, by one or the other of the residents of the *favela*: “A vida parecia uma brincadeira de mau gosto. Um esconde-esconde de um tesouro invisível, mas era preciso tocar para frente . .

." (246) 'Life seemed to be a joke in poor taste. A game of hide-and-seek for some invisible treasure, but it was necessary to keep on moving ahead . . .' *And that imagined path is often paved with sound: "O vozeirão de Vó Rita marcava e embalava o nosso caminhar"* (240) 'Granny Rita's big voice traced the path, and caressed us as we walked.' *I had no doubts: the best expression in English of this notion of walking, of a black path arduously followed, was in song, the songs of the US Southern Freedom Struggle (some call it the Civil Rights Movement), and one of the best interpreters of that is my sister from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee-SNCC, Dr. Bernice Reagon, the musicologist/songtalker/historian/freedom singer who tells us that Movement protesters "sang to announce their presence" as they walked in the face of violence.<sup>28</sup> One such well-known "traditional" song sung by the SNCC Freedom Singers, who later evolved into the group Sweet Honey in the Rock, goes like this:*

Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round,  
Turn me round, turn me 'round.  
Ain't gonna let nobody, turn me 'round.  
I'm gonna keep on a-walkin'; keep on a-talkin',  
Walkin' into Freedom Land <sup>29</sup>

*Sixth moment*—The *favela* itself, an ontological entity created by slavery and race-based exploitation, but also recreated ingeniously every day by its mostly-black inhabitants: There are too many scenes in *Becos da Memória* to translate here in this respect, so I will just invoke images from the *musseques* of Luanda, such as Sambizanga and Bairro Operário,<sup>30</sup> which always appeared in my mind, alongside those of the *favela* which is its own vivid character in the book. Actually for me these neighborhoods are at once image/sound/feel, a very distinctive built environment, a "tough terrain" of enjoyment and sorrow, solidarity and violence, where people are the only real infrastructure,<sup>31</sup> and oppositional freedom struggles, old and new, are born and nurtured against all odds.



**Bairro Operario in Luanda. Photograph by Geri Augusto © 2012.**

### Final Thoughts

From the 1960s to the 1980s, many of us in Africa and the diaspora found a new window onto writings that we otherwise might never have encountered: the Heinemann African Writers Series.<sup>32</sup> The late Chinua Achebe was the trailblazer in this decades-long enterprise, with his *Things Fall Apart*, introducing African writing and cultures on their own terms to the rest of the world—or at least those who read English. In many cases, that meant translating—over time, *paulatinamente*, as you say in that lovely Portuguese expression—works from French, Portuguese, or Arabic. I want to end this presentation by suggesting, with all due humility, that it may be high time for an Afro-Brazilian Writers Series—selecting, translating, and publishing in an accessible format the best of that wealth of Afro-Brazilian literature which the rest of the world deserves, and needs, to know.<sup>33</sup> Even better might be to pair that with a program-in-reverse: systematic selection, translation into Portuguese, and publishing of the best of African and diasporic literature written in English and French.

Having learned that one of the purposes of the web portal Literafro, supported by the Federal University of Minas Gerais-UFGM, is to “overcome the historical erasure of Afro-descendence in our [Brazilian] literature,” I wonder if this is something the collective already has in mind? (*literafro*). If such a series is in the works, or comes about, I would like to think that there would be an especially important role for the particular ideas, practice, and perspective of black transnational translation—not because it is black, but because it can be generative and beautiful and effective.

Language should not keep us apart!

### NOTES

1. This text is an expanded version of an invited talk given on October 25, 2013, at the Faculty of Letters, Federal University of Minas Gerais-UFGM, in Belo Horizonte, at the launch of a new edition of Conceição Evaristo's *Becos da Memória*. The talk was published in the original Portuguese in November 2013 at <<http://www.letras.ufmg.br/literafro/data1/artigos/geri.pdf>>. All translations from Portuguese to English here are the author's.
2. Brent Edwards's elegant formulation, in his *The Practice of Diaspora*. Here I am also influenced by a notion of diaspora expounded by Robin Kelley and Tiffany Patterson, who suggest that it is both process and condition, situated within global race and gender hierarchies.
3. Among the best-known and most influential theories of black literary criticism is, of course, that of Henry Louis Gates, elaborated in his masterpiece on black figurative language use and literary interpretation, *The Signifying Monkey*. My intention here is different, as I wish to reflect from the space of two imbricated *practices*—language interpretation and black transnationalism.
4. Of course the actual history of Afro-descendants' engagement with literature and translation gives the lie to any notions of an innate black “foreign language” handicap. To take just Northern examples, we might consider the Paris-based Nardal sisters, Afro-Martinican intellectuals meticulously discussed for their contribution to the idea of *negritude* in Edwards; or the importance of translating French (Leon Damas, Jacques Romain) and Spanish (Féderico García Lorca) to the poetry and social consciousness of Langston Hughes, as well as the “translational friendships” which marked the great African American poet's life. For more on Hughes and translation, see Scott.
5. The panel may be seen in video at <<http://vimeo.com/54322727>> accessed November 13, 2013.
6. A 1969 Antibes concert version of the song may be heard at <<http://youtu.be/OSU5n7MEIkw>> accessed May 7, 2014.
7. I coined this term at the time of Prof. Evaristo's visit to Brown in 2012; as far as I know, it did not exist before.

8. As Brathwaite puts it in *History of the Voice*, where he further elaborates on this ground-breaking concept: "We have also what is called *nation language*, which is the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of slaves and labourers, the servants who were brought in" (5–6).
9. The Online Urban Dictionary—why not?—defines *livity* thusly: "from the Rastafari / patois translation of Life & Freedom. A lifestyle, a way of living." Popular definitions in Jamaica put it as the energy or life force flowing through all things (*axé*, one might translate it).
10. The term is used in one of the reports contained in an archive of PIDE colonial documents recently published in Luanda by the Agostinho Neto Foundation. For a compelling historical contextualization of the concept of "uppity negroes," see the early 1960s document "Mississippi: Subversion of the Right to Vote," archived by the site Civil Rights Movement Veterans at <<http://www.crmvet.org/docs/msrv64.pdf>>. The document is strangely redolent of 2013, with its registering of the threats to imperiled black citizenship and the shooting down of unarmed black men with impunity.
11. For an elucidating discussion of Amado's *Os ásperos tempos*, *Agonia da noite* and *A luz no tunnel*, see Eduardo Duarte's 1996 definitive volume.
12. The expression is taken from Sarah Nuttall's edited volume with this title.
13. My primary "day job" in Angola was as a project economist and technical editor for the Southern African Development Conference-SADC's Energy Sector Technical Unit in Luanda, but my "night job" and many extraordinary days and weekends became interpretation. The distinction should be noted between translation (written documents and writings) and interpretation (in the moment of speech, whether consecutive or simultaneous). Mostly I did the latter, for more than a decade.
14. As is well-known, one of the impulses for the rebellion in Soweto and other black townships in the 1970s was the education policies encapsulated in "bantu education," wherein the questions of language and by inference translation were key. The Dutch-derived language of the white minority in power (but also of millions of mixed-race South Africans) was imposed as the language of instruction for black South Africans, and in schools trans-regional African languages were "fossilized," all to help attain the objective of educating blacks for a permanently inferior place in the South African economy. Today Afrikaans is being resignified, among others, by cultural workers and young blacks in the Western Cape.
15. For commentary on the dearth of Afro-Brazilian authors at the 2013 globally important Frankfurt Book Fair, see "140 tons de marrom e os 'critérios técnicos' da escolha de autores brasileiros, etc." by blogger Rafaela Vipper, posted on October 6, 2013, at <<http://correionago.ning.com/profiles/blogs/140-tons-de-marrom-e-os-crit-rios-t-cnicos-da-escolha-de-autores>>. For a countervailing view, suggesting that the selection of a single black author from majority-black Brazil was a matter of literary criteria only, see <<http://revistacult.uol.com.br/home/2013/10/o-criterio-e-literario-e-a-literatura-inclui-questoes-sociais-e-nao-a-questao-da-origem-do-autor>>. Both accessed November 13, 2013.
16. In the after-discussion for the talk on which this article expands, one participant eloquently argued for more work on this notion in the Brazilian case, with its rich reconfiguration and reinvention, under duress, of differing African cultures resulting in new religions and a host of unique cultural expressions, as well as a foundational contribution to Brazilian language—a feat which scholarly emphasis on European / African hybridization and creolization in the Americas may in a sense elide. I am grateful to Anthony Bogues for reminding me that a similar argument was made by Sylvia Wynter in her notion of *indigenization* in the Caribbean.
17. The meaning-shifting of *senzala* or *sanzala* from Angola (in kiMbundu, a village), to slavocratic Brazil (slave quarters) is a transition and translation story which must occlude a whole set of brutal encounters and constrained communications. When and where did the slave-owners first adopt the term from their bondspersons—on the Angolan coast, or in Brazil?
18. This latter was the title of a popular song in Luanda at the time, a biting critique of money-making, privilege-seeking expatriates from many quarters. Hence the use of the phrase by conference delegates was indeed "linguistically charged" and involved "verbal interplay."
19. Quilombohoje, of course, is the Afro-Brazilian literary movement of collective resistance and creativity, which has for three decades produced the periodical *Cadernos Negros*.
20. I attempt no multivalent translation here of these words, but simply provide very rough univalents: rescue, redeem (*resgate*), gypsy, roma (*cigana*), Black woman, Negro woman (*negra*). African American literary theorist and philologist R. A. Judy and I have maintained for years a dialogue around the paradoxes and usefulness of that word, that distinctive ontological being, *the Negro*. It is a discussion that begs for a diasporic platform on translation and meanings.
21. In a private conversation, she also confided to Eduardo Duarte and me that she finds herself torn between the irresistible call to write creatively and the urgent need for more Afro-Brazilian theoriza-

- tion of literature. This is the broader context, I believe, of her concern for finding a different set of intellectual resources to complement those of mainstream literary criticism.
22. For a discussion of visual language and oral history in this film, see Foluke Ogunleye (2007). The official film trailer can be seen at <<http://youtu.be/skuX-TwflDs>> accessed November 13, 2013.
  23. See images of a liberated zone school in Guinea-Bissau <[http://www.liberationafrica.se/audiovisual/photos/guinea\\_bissau/2007/02/22/012/12.jpg](http://www.liberationafrica.se/audiovisual/photos/guinea_bissau/2007/02/22/012/12.jpg)> and the image gallery of the Antonio Agostinho Neto Foundation-FAAN in Luanda <[http://www.agostinhoneto.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=64&Itemid=210](http://www.agostinhoneto.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=64&Itemid=210)> both accessed May 6, 2014.
  24. A veritable explosion of Afro-Brazilian scholarship too prolific to cite here is mining the rich centuries-old cultural histories of the *congadeiros* and their kingdoms (*reinos*), among which is Leda Maria Martins's pathbreaking work on what she calls "texts in movement" in the black *reinos* of Minas Gerais. The *congados*, Martins argues, "perennially reinscribe African letters on the Brazilian textual palimpsest" (41). For a vivid "lay" description of the *congadas* that Evaristo would have witnessed in her Belo Horizonte childhood, see the website *Favela e isso aí* at <<http://www.favelaeissoai.com.br/noticias.php?cod=81>>, accessed November 13, 2013, which mentions, among others which coursed through the city's favelas danced by "guards," the group from the Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary Appeared [Guarda de Congado Nossa Senhora do Rosário Aparecida], which adopted the sub-title "Uncle Tom's Cabin."
  25. "Caboclo" is another polysemic, slippery Brazilian term, to which the univalent definition "Indian" can hardly do justice. See Carvalho and Carvalho for one of the best treatments of the contexts and history of the terms "Indian" and "Caboclo" in Brazil, suggestive as well for thinking about how to interpret the meanings of "Indian" in African American carnivals in New Orleans and parts of the Caribbean.
  26. A recent sound image would be that of Big Chief Lambreaux from the HBO television series "Treme" seen and heard here <<http://youtu.be/eu4gZs9Ci0>> accessed May 6, 2014.
  27. Sound-images from Gomes's serious musical comedy can be found at the official trailer <<http://youtu.be/kCh1u5LH9dA>> accessed May 6, 2014.
  28. For more on Dr. Reagon's ideas and work, see her website at <<http://www.bernicejohnsonreagon.com/>>.
  29. A version of the song can be heard at <[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/resources/aud/05\\_audio\\_riders\\_ra.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/resources/aud/05_audio_riders_ra.html)> and an image of the SNCC Freedom Singers seen at <<http://www.npr.org/2013/07/09/199105070/the-mix-songs-inspired-by-the-civil-rights-movement>> accessed May 7, 2014.
  30. For a review and images of Sarah Maldoror's 1972 film *Sambizanga* about the famous musseque of the same name, see <<http://voicethrower.wordpress.com/2011/12/11/sambizanga/>> published on the blog "Night in the Lens" December 11, 2011, accessed May 7, 2014. The film was inspired by Luandino Vieira's earlier liberation struggle novel, *A Verdadeira Vida do Domingos Xavier*.
  31. The expression is borrowed from an incisive, provocative article by AdbulMaliq Simone on Johannesburg.
  32. There was as well a more limited, later Heinemann Caribbean Writers Series, but I am unsure of its impact in comparison with the African one.
  33. A fundamental sign-post towards this course of action was the publication, more than a decade ago, of a special issue of the journal *Callaloo* on the theme of Afro-Brazilian Literature, edited by Durham, Martins, and Peres.

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## HISPANIOLA'S ENVIRONMENTAL STORY

### Challenging an Iconic Image

by Sherrie Baver

One of the sad aftermaths of Haiti's devastating 2010 earthquake, which left over 300,000 dead and initially 1.5 million homeless, was a widespread perception in the media and the collective imaginary that the country somehow had deserved it. Amid vivid reminders that Haiti is "the poorest country in the Western hemisphere," it has long been portrayed as the "bad" side of the two-nation island of Hispaniola, with the Dominican Republic portrayed as the "good" side, even if the detractors are not always fully conscious of their biases. Challenging these long-held stereotypes is especially important as the international community has raised hopes for a comprehensive, sustainable rebuilding effort in Haiti.<sup>1</sup>

This binary is evident in the iconic 1987 *National Geographic* photo of the Haitian-Dominican border, in environmental pleas such as Al Gore's 2006 film *An Inconvenient Truth*, and, most especially, in Jared Diamond's 2005 bestseller *Collapse*.<sup>2</sup> Days after the earthquake, columnist David Brooks added himself to the list of Haiti detractors, saying that the Haitian-Dominican border "offers one of the starkest contrasts on earth" and Haiti suffers from "a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences" (A27). Once again Brooks perpetuates the image of Hispaniola as a territory shared by the environment-degrading Haitians and the environment-supporting Dominicans. This article's intent is not to dispute the grim statistical comparisons between the two countries evidenced recently, for example, in the 2010 Environmental Performance Index (<<http://epi.yale.edu>>); on this index, the Dominican Republic ranks 36th for overall sustainability while Haiti ranks 155th out of 163 countries. Rather, the point is to provide a significantly more nuanced understanding of the ecology, history, politics, and culture of the island to explain what set the two nations on divergent paths centuries ago. "One Island, Two Peoples, Two Histories," the chapter on Hispaniola in *Collapse*, is useful as a loose guide for this discussion because of the undeniable and widespread success of Diamond's books, at least in the United States. He can distill simple points from complex issues and his work is used extensively in high schools and colleges throughout the country (McAnany & Yoffee 2–5). *Collapse*'s broad thesis is that societies either fail or succeed in rising to the challenges of their environments. If they fail, it is due to collective self-delusion; leaders and followers "'choose' . . . courses of action leading to collapse or resilient adaptation" (Woodson 276–77). For many educators and researchers, *Collapse* has become a guide for a general understanding of the consequences of environmental degradation generally and for the Haitian-Dominican comparison more specifically.<sup>3</sup>

Not being an area specialist before embarking on his Hispaniola research, Diamond concludes in *Collapse* that the Dominican Republic has apparently achieved a relatively

positive developmental trajectory while Haiti has suffered the catastrophic opposite. A more nuanced analysis, however, would suggest that Dominicans are not environmental paragons, nor are Haitians the victims of collective self-delusion. In fairness, Diamond has presented a slightly more subtle Haiti-Dominican Republic comparison, emphasizing the long-term consequences of Haiti's colonial and postcolonial history in a 2010 essay, "Intra-Island and Inter-Island Comparisons" (Diamond and Robinson 120–41).

As a collective response to *Collapse*, the contributors to the volume *Questioning Collapse* have already characterized Diamond's facts as "decontextualized," arguing that he has not acknowledged that the inequities of colonialism remain an ongoing process both domestically and internationally. This volume also contains a chapter specifically focusing on Haiti (Woodson 269–98). Our discussion, however, will add to the critique primarily by examining the Dominican case more fully and thus further contextualizing the Haitian-Dominican comparison.

### Problems with the Dominican-Haitian Comparison

#### *Misplaced Historical Emphases*

In his discussion of the Dominican Republic and Haiti in *Collapse*, Diamond provides essentially accurate facts, but specialists would regard his emphases as misplaced or, at the least, simplistic. He chooses to emphasize similarities between the two societies while most area specialists would be likely to focus on the colonial historical differences and their lasting consequences. For example:

... the two countries share the same island. They also share histories of European colonialism and American occupation, overwhelmingly Catholic religion coexisting with a voodoo pantheon (more notably in Haiti) and mixed African-European ancestry (with a higher proportion of African ancestry in Haiti). (332–33)

The colonial differences, however, are more significant than these superficial similarities, as seen, for example, in Caribbean historian Franklin Knight's discussion of the processes that led to independence in both nations:

In both states, some sharply contrasting circumstances of the period deeply affected the manner in which the symbols of nationalism thrived, or failed to thrive. . . . In the process of creating the new state, Haiti destroyed its white elite and promoted its African heritage as the proud, homogenizing symbol of the new state, a beacon for all black Americans. The colony of Santo Domingo, on the other hand, constituted a peripheral part of the Spanish empire that was falling apart in the early nineteenth century. Its small population was about equally divided between Spanish and Creoles, mestizos and blacks.

The miscegenated Creoles controlled political leadership, promoted Hispanic ideals, and pretended theirs was a “white” society threatened by a “black” neighbor. (159)

Because Diamond does not draw attention to the effects of colonial and early postcolonial history, he deems it “a paradox” that the Haitian side of Hispaniola was less well endowed environmentally but nonetheless developed a rich agricultural economy before the Dominican side (339). There is nothing paradoxical, however, about the result of historical contingencies on Hispaniola and the lasting negative effects on Haiti. In short, throughout the eighteenth century, Saint Domingue was a French colony with a slave-based, export-intensive plantation economy. About 85% of the French colony’s population was enslaved; and because these slaves spoke different languages, they were forced to create a new language to communicate. Furthermore, the world’s racist reaction to its slave-led independence in 1804 kept Haiti internationally isolated for decades, and the debt imposed by France for international recognition starting in 1825 also was catastrophic for national development (Woodson 281; Dubois 7–8).

#### *Downplaying Ecological and Demographic Differences*

A second problem in Diamond’s (and other writers’) Hispaniola comparison is the downplaying of the effects of ecology and population density. The centerpiece of the Haitian-Dominican comparison is the previously mentioned *National Geographic* photograph of the border area that shows barren Haiti to the west and the verdant Dominican Republic to the east. It illustrates with graphic clarity the relative levels of deforestation in the two nations; the Dominican Republic has an impressive amount of forest cover (41%) while Haiti has only 4% of its land forested (*Global Forest Resource Assessment*).

While Diamond asserts his key argument is that ecology is not destiny and his primary focus is on human choices and institutions, he nonetheless admits that the inherent fragility of habitat is a key variable in determining a society’s success or failure. Haiti’s ecology has always been decidedly more fragile than that of the Dominican Republic. Frank Moya Pons, a leading Dominican historian and first Secretary of the country’s Ministry Environment and Natural Resources, notes in his comprehensive Dominican history the role of “the rugged topography responsible for the extreme ecological variations within the island,” namely that the Dominican side gets much more rainfall than Haiti (*The Dominican Republic* 14–15). Haiti suffers from the well-documented “rainfall effect,” which leaves it with less rain than the nearby Dominican Republic (McGregor 193). Haiti is also significantly more mountainous than its neighbor and contains fewer of Hispaniola’s alluvial plains (Woodson 282). In fact, Haiti is 85% mountainous so that its deforestation and farming are taking place on steep, nutrient-poor, highly erodable slopes.

As early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, observers were well aware of the deleterious ecological consequences of intensive export agriculture in the French colony. For example, in his 1808 work on Haiti, Martinican historian Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry offers a comprehensive account of the impact of the intensification of sugar production on a Caribbean island. With impressive foresight, he chronicled the colonists’ indifference to the impact of the colony’s too-rapid deforestation, especially on the extinc-

tion of local animal species, the intensification of soil erosion, and the reduction in rain levels" (20).

The role of population density is also noteworthy in the Dominican Haitian comparison. In Diamond's 2010 essay, he places somewhat more importance on this variable than in his 2005 chapter in *Collapse*; still, it remains a rather minor part of his overall recapitulation of Haiti's problems. In fact, Saint Domingue's slave-based economic system had a much higher population density than the Spanish side of the island. Importations of African slaves—which at the peak of sugar production in the French colony numbered approximately 40,000 per year—resulted in greater pressure on natural resources than anything known at the time in the neighboring Spanish colony. In Santo Domingo, which experienced only moderate growth in sugar production, the large majority of the population was engaged in subsistence agriculture. In 1794, out of a total Dominican population of 103,000, only 30,000 were slaves and 38,000 were freed former slaves. The number of slaves remained relatively low in relation to Spanish settlers (Hoetink 82). As both proto-nations headed for independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Haitian population grew rapidly. In 1800, Haiti had five to six times the population of the colony of Santo Domingo (Stinchcombe 248), and Haiti's inhabitants had only one-third of the island. Remarkably, this is a fact Diamond misstates even in his 2010 revised essay, incorrectly maintaining that each nation comprises one-half of the island (138).

In 1820, for example, the population of Haiti was 647,000 compared to a population of 120,000 in Santo Domingo, while in 1880, the Haitian population was 1,238,000 compared to the Dominican population of 240,000 (Bushnell and Macaulay 303). In 2000 and 2008, Haiti had an annual population growth rate of 1.7%, while in the same period, the Dominican rate had declined from 1.7% in 2000 to 1.3% in 2008. In 2010, Haiti's population of approximately 9.9 million had been projected to grow by 20% by 2020 (United Nations Environment Program 1). In fact, population growth actually declined in 2010 due to the earthquake, but it is too early to predict long-term trends. The 2010 Dominican figure was, roughly, 10.2 million. Perhaps more dramatic, the Dominican Republic has a population density of 172.9 people per km<sup>2</sup>, while Haiti has a 293.4 people per km<sup>2</sup>; in terms of land pressure, 66% of the Haitian labor force still works in agriculture while the comparative figure in the Dominican Republic is 14.6%.

### *Discounting Mid-Twentieth-Century History*

Finally, with only a superficial grasp of recent economic history on both sides of Hispaniola, Diamond praises Dominican leaders Trujillo and Balaguer, who supported export industries, foreign trade, and tourism; and he points out the lack of economic planning under Papa Doc Duvalier in Haiti (128). In fact, in the 1950s and 1960s, the Haitian tourism industry was one of the strongest in the Caribbean; and in the 1970s and early 1980s, the administration of Jean Claude Duvalier began to develop light industry and continued developing tourism. These efforts, however, were virtually wiped-out in the early 1980s by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's unfounded designation of Haiti as the source of the AIDS crisis. This negative publicity put a swift end to tourism in Haiti, and the Dominican Republic heartily benefitted from its neighbor's misfortune. As if this were not enough, the Haitian economy suffered a simultaneous second blow with

the U.S.-led Creole pig eradication program. The Creole pig was a hearty, locally adapted breed that was replaced by more vulnerable breeds in response to fears of a swine-flu epidemic (McAdoo and Paravisini-Gebert).

The larger problem, however, was the attempt by international financial institutions and donor nations to implement an incipient neoliberal economic strategy starting in the 1970s, which emphasized export assembly plants and opening domestic agriculture to foreign competition. Political Scientist Robert Fatton Jr. notes that such a strategy was highly flawed in that it presumed that the small Haitian bourgeoisie might “become the engine of [economic] takeoff” (124). Sociologist Alex Dupuy considers the 1970s as the “major [negative] turning point in creating conditions that existed on the eve of the earthquake and contributed to its devastating impact” (“Disaster Capitalism” 15–17; also “Neoliberal Legacy” 23–27). Dupuy regards the opening of the Haitian economy to food imports and cutting subsidies to agriculture as especially damaging. In the 1970s, Haiti imported 19% of its food needs; by 2010, it imported 51%. In the 1970s, farmers produced enough rice, sugar, poultry, and pork to meet all domestic needs, but by 2010, it was the fourth largest importer of U.S. subsidized rice in the world and the largest importer of U.S. food exports in the Caribbean. Unfortunately, the international community has come up with little that is new since the earthquake to build a sustainable economy; an alternative vision from Haitian grassroots groups has gotten little traction.

### **A Flawed Understanding of Dominican Environmental Policies, Politics, and Governance**

Diamond seems to have spoken to a narrow segment of Dominican environmentalists and to only a few or none of their Haitian counterparts.<sup>4</sup> This coupled with the previously discussed superficial grasp of Hispaniola’s history results in his: 1) blaming the victim (Haiti), 2) lionizing the authoritarians (former Dominican leaders Rafael Leonidas Trujillo and especially Joaquín Balaguer), and 3) focusing on only one environmental policy area. We will now systematically address these misinterpretations of the “top down” policy-making style of Balaguer, the “bottom up” initiatives of the Dominican environmental movement, and the sole focus on protected areas.

Readers are given a long history of the Dominican Republic’s “top-down” forest protection policies throughout much of the twentieth century. In fact, the Republic has a long history of direct state intervention in forest management and regulation from even the colonial period (Betances). Diamond, however, begins his discussion with the “top-down” environmental initiatives started under Trujillo in the 1930s which continued until his assassination in 1961. The dictator was especially interested in creating protected areas to preserve the Río Yaque del Norte watershed both for agricultural purposes and for hydroelectric power generation.

Balaguer served the dictator Trujillo for three decades and then served as president himself running on his own party, the PRSC (1966–1978; 1986–1996). Not surprisingly, as president, Balaguer not only continued the authoritarian approach to environmental policymaking he had inherited from his political mentor but also greatly expanded top

down initiatives during his own presidential terms. Even when not in office, he remained a dominant player in the country's political arena including environmental politics.

Diamond devotes some of his chapter to exploring the wellspring of Balaguer's environmental concerns. Some interest may have come from Balaguer's family, but this is only speculation. However, much evidence exists of Balaguer's decades of racist writings and actions toward Haiti, including his associating Haitians with environmentally-degrading agriculture and deforestation. Balaguer, as Trujillo's chief ideologue, is at least partly responsible for Trujillo's racism throughout the dictator's regime, perhaps most brutally seen in the Haitian massacre of 1937 (Moya Pons, *Dominican* 367–70; Danticat; Howard 30–31). Later, Balaguer oversaw various mass Haitian deportations, and his anti-Haitianism is clear in his 1993 work, *La isla al revés: Haití y el destino dominicano*. Even in the post-Balaguer years, the discourse of "Haitians as a threat to the Dominican forests" masks Dominicans' deep historical prejudices and resentments and continues to fuel popular support for recent environmental campaigns such as "Operation against the Axe." In October 2009, for example, Dominican Army troops announced with great fanfare the dismantling of dozens of furnaces to make charcoal in forests near the Haiti-Dominican border and the arrest of undocumented Haitians found cutting down different species of trees, especially mesquite (Groenwold).

During his years in office, Balaguer expanded forest protection, generally, and the entire natural reserve system, more specifically. Balaguer's directives were dramatic and in some cases environmentally beneficial, but not infrequently at a great cost:

Soon after becoming president, he took drastic action by banning all commercial logging in the country, and by closing down all of the country's sawmills. . . . Balaguer [proceeded] with the even more drastic step of taking responsibility for enforcing forest protection away from the Department of Agriculture, turning it over to the armed forces, and declaring illegal logging to be a crime against state security. To stop the logging, the Armed Forces initiated a program of survey flights and military operations, which climaxed in 1967 in one of the landmark events in Dominican environmental history, a night raid by the military on a clandestine large logging camp. In the ensuing gunfight, a dozen loggers were killed. (Diamond 343)

Specifically in 1967, the Balaguer regime created a Forestry Act (Law 206), which effectively placed not only forests but also all trees under the protection and regulation of the state. It prohibited the cutting of any tree without the permission of the newly formed, militarized forestry service, *Dirección General Forestal* (DGF) or simply FORESTA. These policy moves were enforced through military operations; one especially notable one occurred in 1967 when twelve illegal loggers were killed. A second major incident occurred in 1992 in the *desalojo* in Los Haitises National Park when thousands of peasant squatters were expelled. A third widely-reported incident took place in 1994 when FORESTA destroyed many illegally constructed luxury homes in Juan B. Pérez National Park.

It is true that Dominican forest protection has been impressive. Diamond notes that Haiti has just four national parks and they are seriously threatened by encroachment from peasants felling trees. In contrast, the Dominican Republic has seventy-four parks



or reserves encompassing 32% of the country's land area. The Republic's protected areas system "is relatively the most comprehensive and largest in the Americas" (332).<sup>5</sup>

In sum, Diamond himself is somewhat ambivalent about his praise for Balaguer, having difficulty reconciling Balaguer's far-sighted commitment to the environment with his other repellent qualities (345). Still, this authoritarian, "caudillo conservationist" remains the hero of Diamond's discussion, because unlike his counterparts in Haiti, Balaguer was able to anticipate environmental problems before they became explosive crises (539–40). Diamond's second misunderstanding of Dominican history and politics is that the success in protecting forested areas comes from bottom-up initiatives from a well-organized and active environmental movement that is "almost unprecedented in the developing world" (352) and is unburdened by ties to first world donors and priorities. While it is true that in recent years the Dominican environmental movement has demonstrated vigor in addressing the nation's environmental ills and anti-democratic barriers (Mitchell 1), Diamond's assertion rests somewhere between hyperbole and nonsense. The idea that Dominican activism is "unprecedented" would be startling to environmental activists in India, South Africa, Mexico, or Brazil (Agyeman et al.; Carruthers). Civil society organizational membership in "The Access Initiative," for example, can serve as an indirect measure of environmental activism in the developing world. This initiative, started in 2001 with help from the World Resources Institute, is a global coalition of civil society organizations interested in promoting modern approaches to environmental management, including access to public information, public participation in decision making, and justice. As of 2009, groups from close to seventy countries participated, including groups from twelve Latin American countries. The Dominican Republic only joined the coalition in 2009 (*The Access Initiative*).

Furthermore, Diamond characterizes the modern Dominican environmental movement that appeared in the 1970s and 1980s as "indigenous" (he means domestic). His point is to emphasize that many NGOs are staffed by Dominicans themselves rather than being led by foreign advisors, as has been the case in Haiti. While the Republic has a number of well-trained scientists interested in conservation issues, and many have started their own NGOs, few Dominican environmental NGOs (or any other type of Dominican NGO) could exist without foreign funding and foreign guidelines. The website of the Dominican Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources, for example, reveals a long list of international governmental and non-governmental donors, each with its own agenda. Foreign government donors include Spain, Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and Japan; The Nature Conservancy is only one of several global NGOs with an active presence in the country.

Sociologist Light Carruyo, who did extensive fieldwork in the Dominican Republic near José Armando Bermúdez National Park, provides a more nuanced picture of NGOs in that country. She documents the oft-repeated clash of priorities between local communities, local NGOs, and foreign funders. In short, Dominican groups involved in environment and development projects often have concerns that differ from their foreign funders but simply cannot function without external assistance.

Furthermore, after glancing at Diamond's list of Dominican environmentalists in his Acknowledgements, it is clear that at least some of these environmentalists might best be characterized as "preservationists" who would be likely to support Balaguer's preservationist approach to protected areas. Preservationists typically emphasize ecosystem



conservation, practically ignoring its relation to social concerns and propose only remedial and technical fixes for environmental degradation. “For this reason, this approach is generally considered conservative and traditional within today’s environmental movements” (Jàcome 18–19). In fact, the Dominican environmental movement may well be split in two camps—preservationists vs. conservationists—similar to the split in the early years of environmentalism in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the US case, the preservationists, led by John Muir, essentially wanted to preserve wilderness intact. The conservationists, led by Gifford Pinchot, founder of the Yale School of Forestry (1900) and the United States Forest Service (1905), supported the idea of sustainable use of natural resources, and Pinchot’s position remains the dominant approach to resource use in the United States and many other countries. These Dominican preservationists, who support natural areas set aside from human use, offer a vision that is the antithesis of twenty-first century notions of resource management.

Without a framework of contemporary approaches to protected area management and blinded by Balaguer’s devotion to nature preservation, Diamond naively blunders into the midst of the Dominican Republic’s partisan politics and cleavages within the Dominican environmental community. He is unaware that he is defending only one view of the country’s nature protection debate. *Collapse’s* author notes disapprovingly that after Balaguer’s 1978 electoral defeat to the PRD, other presidents allowed for some logging, sawmill operations, and charcoal production. Immediately on Balaguer’s return to office in 1986, he ended these activities in the forest and remilitarized forest protection between 1986 and 1996 (Diamond 344).

When Balaguer left office in 1996, as part of a compromise after the country’s deeply flawed 1994 elections (Hartlyn; Mitchell), the new President, Leonel Fernández (1996–2000, 2004–2012) of the PLD, was seen as unusual in giving environmentalists a relatively prominent voice in his administration. Among Fernández’s various policy initiatives, one was an attempt to reduce and redesign the Dominican system of protected areas. Many respected Dominican environmentalists supported the president in this endeavor. The pro-Fernández environmentalists argued that: 1) the country’s protected areas system had been determined on an *ad hoc*, unscientific basis, and 2) the president’s attempt to diversify the economy by allowing investment in some protected areas was reasonable.

Remaining clueless to the complexity of Dominican politics, an indignant Diamond tells readers that as a final act in 2000, Balaguer teamed up with newly-elected President Hipólito Mejía (PRD), arguably one of the Dominican Republic’s most incompetent executives in recent history, to block Fernández’s initiative on protected areas. Diamond highlights what he calls “Balaguer’s last decisive intervention into Dominican [preservation] politics, his rescue of the country’s natural reserve system” (345). Balaguer and Mejía supported and passed legislation that changed regulation of protected areas from executive order to legislative enactment, which stopped Fernández’s proposed changes. Once again, one suspects that in the 2000 case, Diamond speaks mainly to preservationists in the Dominican environmental community who would most likely support the Balaguer-Mejía single-minded approach to protected areas. Notably, by the end of Mejía’s term in 2004, he too supported some reduction of the protected areas system (“Parks Law”).

The third problem with Diamond’s analysis is his narrow focus on the Republic’s relative success with its protected areas. This leads him to gloss over Balaguer’s many

environmental catastrophes in other policy areas, simply saying that the President's approach to the environment was "selective, sometimes ineffective, and exhibited blind spots" (347–48). It is unfortunate that Diamond says virtually nothing about the long-term negative environmental consequences of Balaguer's preference for prominent infrastructure projects in Santo Domingo rather than attention to less visible projects such as water and sewer supply or municipal garbage collection. Nor does he mention Balaguer's push for intensive tourism development in the coastal zones, and chemical-intensive, export-oriented agricultural policies (Moya Pons 400; Lynch, "Seeking" 91–93).

Finally, Diamond also gives us the impression that due to Trujillo and Balaguer's watershed protection efforts, the Dominican nation is rich in hydropower (332). While the country does have more hydropower than Haiti, observers of the Dominican Republic would never emphasize plentiful energy as one of the country's strengths. On the contrary, observers of the Dominican Republic would note that most of its electricity generation is based on oil and natural gas and would stress that electricity crises are the norm (Romero; *Dominican Republic CDCS*).

### Misleading Lessons / Anti-Democratic Solutions

After reading the chapter, "One Island, Two Peoples, Two Histories: The Dominican Republic and Haiti," the problem of what to do with his information remains. Since Diamond supposedly wrote *Collapse* to provide lessons for future policymakers, what lessons do we learn especially from his discussion of Joaquín Balaguer?

At the most general level, Diamond does not understand that a democratic approach is the only solution that will provide a long-term solution to natural resource protection; that is why he is ambivalent about endorsing such a tarnished politician as Balaguer. One way he gets around his dilemma is by positing that Balaguer is not a true authoritarian since the Dominican Republic has been a democracy since 1966 (Diamond 330). This assertion of democracy since 1966, however, contradicts the majority of in-depth analyses of Dominican politics over the last two decades. Most scholars agree that the Dominican Republic's democratic transition did not occur until 1978 (Hartlyn 134–59; Betances 124).

Diamond continues in his blunder by noting the obvious point that, in the short run, it is easier to protect the environment under authoritarianism than under democracy. He cites his own fieldwork experiences in Indonesia between 1979 and 1996 and notes his surprise that the military government had

. . . set up a comprehensive and effective national park system in Indonesian New Guinea. I arrived in Indonesian New Guinea after years of experience of the democracy in Papua New Guinea, and I expected to find environmental policies much more advanced under the virtuous democracy than under the evil dictatorship. Instead, I had to acknowledge that the reverse was true. (349)

Thus, Diamond the physiologist seems unaware that he has returned to the discredited discourse of the authoritarian survivalists such as Paul Erlich or Garrett Hardin in arguing

that an authoritarian approach may be needed to protect natural resources on Hispaniola and throughout developing world. Survivalists see no use for social mobilization or political participation in environmental decision making (Dryzek 37–51). It is essential to challenge Diamond’s assertions, particularly about the putative success of Balaguer’s approach, because after the 2010 Haitian earthquake, more than a few Haitians have opined that the scale of the disaster calls for an authoritarian leader like Balaguer (Wah).

Diamond has no understanding of the effects of Balaguer’s authoritarian, militarized preservation policies on the country’s rural poor. However, other scholars having conducted extensive fieldwork, such as Diane Rocheleau in Zambrana-Chacuey, Barbara Lynch in Los Haitises, and Light Carruyo near José Armádo Bermúdez National Park, and have documented in detail the negative human effects of his approach to nature protection. Carruyo provides the most recent discussion of the effects of Balaguer’s policies in her ethnography of the town of La Ciénaga. The Dominican villagers note that while Balaguer’s government pushed reforestation, the military also freely burned pines in its hunt for guerrillas after the 1965 Civil War (Carruyo 4). More generally, Carruyo documents the caudillo president’s many strategies for “rescuing nature from the peasants,” including strict militarized forest protection, peasant relocation, and criminalization of subsistence practices (14). Thus Carruyo along with Rocheleau and Lynch confirm the assertions of Nancy Peluso, working in Kenya, that “coercing conservation” is not a sustainable approach to natural resource protection.

*Collapse’s* author, therefore, ends up supporting the notion of parks devoid of people, a notion completely at odds with the concept of democratic environmental governance in general, and modern protected areas management in particular (Larsen and Ribot 199–202). Environmental democracy is an emerging international norm enunciated in Principle 10 of Agenda 21 and signed by 178 nations at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio (Foti et al.). The norm was later adopted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe in the 1998 Aarhus Convention, and now applies to the entire European Union. Nor does Diamond understand that the National Research Council has concluded, after twenty years of studies since the 1987 Brundtland Report, that “simple solutions to resource use imposed from the outside can make things worse rather than better. The task of designing sustainable, complex, coupled human-resource systems is indeed always a struggle” (qtd. in Ostrom 17). President Balaguer may have saved protected areas in his country, but environmental management predicated on the idiosyncratic whims of individual leaders is not a basis for sustainable development. Notably in the Dominican case, since the demise of President Balaguer in 2002, Dominicans have been capable of protecting their forests without an authoritarian leader. In January 2008, for example, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources announced that the Dominican Republic had increased its overall forest cover by 7% between the years 1997 and 2007 through Plan Quisqueya Verde (“Bringing Back”). In October 2009, the government announced a year-long reforestation program whose target was the planting of two million native trees, especially along the Haiti-Dominican border.

### Conclusion

Can environmental planners, especially in Haiti, garner some useful lessons from the Balaguer era, without embracing Balaguer's overall militarized, authoritarian practices? There is no doubt that Haiti is in extreme ecological trouble. Although it is worth noting that some Haitians, for example Chavannes Jean Baptiste, founder of the *Papaye* Peasant Movement, have overseen the planting of twenty million trees since the 1970s (Ventre). Still, given its largely degraded ecosystem, Haiti typically fares worse in natural disasters such as hurricanes than its more protected/forested Dominican neighbor. The murderous mudslides in Haiti during Hurricane Jeanne in 2004 or again in 2008 are recent, dramatic examples of the human cost of deforestation. Deforestation also indirectly contributed to the human catastrophe in the January 2010 earthquake. Geologists maintain that decades of deforestation allowed sediment to drain from the mountains and form a flood plain that people built on along the coastline. The loose soil liquefied during the earthquake contributing to numerous deaths.

Perhaps the only positive consequence from the 2010 earthquake is that it might be seen as a critical juncture, a possible way "to wipe the slate clean" and build Haiti anew (Collier and Warnholz; Sontag). Given the vast amount of long-term aid promised from governments, international organizations, and NGOs to rethinking Haiti's multifaceted needs, it is essential that analyses include an in-depth understanding of the historical as well as the geological reasons the earthquake caused such tremendous damage in Haiti in the first place (McAdoo and Paravisini-Gebert; Oliver-Smith).

The goal is not to offer technical solutions for the massive efforts that need to take place now to transform Haiti. Rather, the intent is to point out that the rather superficial understanding of the histories of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, along with the iconic image of the border separating the two countries, has led to flawed comparisons that cannot help Haiti or the entire island to move forward. One flawed notion from *Collapse* is that only an authoritarian leader, such as Joaquin Balaguer, can help stem the environmental degradation and human misery on the Haitian side of the island. Diamond's misunderstanding is unfortunate because it undercuts his fundamentally important argument that ecology is not destiny.

A second problem with a "decontextualized" comparison of Haiti and the Dominican Republic is that it reinforces Dominicans' and others' negative stereotypes about Haiti; this is unhelpful since, ultimately, the two nations must work together to solve numerous social and environmental problems. Haiti and the Dominican Republic have been affected differently by their colonial and postcolonial trajectories; but by telling the story narrowly, Diamond's chapter serves as yet another caveat that social scientists wittingly or unwittingly may become part of the ideological work of reinforcing stereotypes (Briggs).

The two nations need to cooperate on restoring Hispaniola's environment, and Diamond thought he was witnessing the first joint Haitian-Dominican effort in the mid-2000s (356). Such collaboration, however, has been proceeding, albeit intermittently, since the late-1990s with funding from the European Union. By the late-1990s, both Haiti and the Dominican Republic had created Integrated Development Institutes and had acknowledged the need for a bi-national approach to reforestation, especially in the border area. In 2009, both countries along with Cuba signed the Barahona Plan of Action to establish the Caribbean

Biological Corridor. Furthermore, the Dominican government won international praise for its generous relief efforts toward Haiti in the first weeks after the 2010 earthquake.

What both countries of Hispaniola require to promote a more sustainable future is a system of modern environmental governance with a solid commitment to citizen participation in decision making, not authoritarianism. They also must develop a deeper, bi-national commitment to project development. In short, reinforcing misunderstandings and stereotypes through “iconic images” does little to help solve the entire island’s serious environmental problems.

#### NOTES

1. Anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse has also noted the abundant, negative representations of Haiti and the “mechanics of Othering” (41) after the earthquake.
2. The photo was taken by James Blair for a 1987 magazine article. For this article, see Cobb.
3. In the 2008 UNDP *Dominican Republic Human Development Report* authors based their discussion of Haiti-Dominican environmental differences on *Collapse* (302); and when one of the authors interviewed a spokesman for UNEP and Columbia University’s “Haiti Regeneration Initiative” in January 2010, *Collapse* was again cited.
4. See acknowledgements for Chapter 11 in *Collapse* (527).
5. Another measurement category sometimes used is “land under protection.” In 2003, the figure for Haiti was 0.3% while the Dominican figure was 24.5% (World Resources Institute, *Earthtrends* 2003 <<http://www.wri.org>>).

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## THE COLOR OF PRISON

### Shared Legacies in Walter Mosley's *The Man in My Basement* and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*

by Devika Sharma

No general consensus seems to exist on the precise meaning of *neo-slave narrative*. On the one hand, the term is applied—often mockingly so—to an African American writer's description of his or her successful fight against discrimination, ghettoization, and poverty *en route* to becoming a full member of the respectable middle class. It is in this sense that John Edgar Wideman used the term when characterizing the autobiographies of Oprah Winfrey and O. J. Simpson. These seemed to Wideman cliché-ridden up-from-the-depths biographies, "merely repeating one of the master plots Americans have found acceptable for black lives" (xxix). On the other hand, the term is also frequently invoked when characterizing literary works of fiction dealing thematically with the historical institution of slavery in America, or comparing in one way or another contemporary African American lives to life in slavery. It is in this more inclusive and subtle sense that a novel such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is often described as a neo-slave narrative.<sup>1</sup> However, Brian Jarvis uses the term altogether differently in his book *Cruel and Unusual: Punishment and US Culture*, when describing narratives written by African American inmates as a neo-slave literature of sorts. Here Jarvis points to prison narratives written by authors and activists such as Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson, in which the prison itself figures as a kind of slavery. For instance Cleaver, in his 1968 classic *Soul on Ice*, described prison as "a continuation of slavery on a higher plane" (qtd. in Jarvis 107).

From these various suggestions, however different they are, we may conclude that the term *neo-slave narrative* designates a literature concerned with isolation and confinement as racialized experiences in contemporary American society. More precisely, neo-slave literature seems to be a literature exploring at least one of two cultural templates for imagining and understanding imprisonment central also to the historical slave narratives. According to the first of these templates, racial markers such as skin color themselves amount to a form of prison. Thus, racial "passing" may figure as a strategy to escape the prison of color so pointedly described by James Weldon Johnson when relating a black man's experience of being let down by the white woman he loves after confiding his passing: "My situation made me feel weak and powerless, like a man trying with his bare hands to break the iron bars of his prison cell" (140). According to the second of these two cultural templates, incarceration correlates, at least to some extent, with skin color. While this aspect of incarceration is of course central to the historical institution of slavery and its narratives, it is also central to today's criminal justice system. As a recent report found, thirty-eight percent of prison and jail inmates are African American, compared to their

thirteen percent share of the overall population (“Reducing Racial Disparity” 2). These rates imply that a black male born in 2001 has a thirty-two percent chance of spending time in prison at some point in his life, a Hispanic male has a seventeen percent chance, and a white male has a six percent chance.

One pertinent way of understanding this racial disparity within the criminal justice system is to look at it as an example of structural racism—that is, the longstanding differential treatment of people of color. In this vein, sociologist Loïc Wacquant suggests we understand the contemporary American prison system to be the latest in a sequence of institutions whose purpose it has been to define, confine, and control black Americans. Wacquant lists four such institutions, namely slavery, Jim Crow, the urban ghetto, and finally the contemporary United States prison system. The institutional nexus in this fourth arrangement of racial dominance is a combination of material and symbolic containment of people of color, Wacquant notes. Materially, black offenders are contained by draconian penalty laws.<sup>2</sup> Symbolically, Wacquant argues, the current paradigm of law and order has succeeded in strengthening the old American association of blackness with criminality. Thus, criminal offenders currently figure culturally not merely as some sort of monster, but more specifically as a black monster: “Throughout the urban criminal justice system, the formula ‘Young + Black + Male’ is now openly equated with ‘probable cause’ justifying the arrest, questioning, bodily search and detention of millions of African-American males every year” (Wacquant 104). In this light, Wacquant indicts the current mass imprisonment for its symbolical production of race. He posits that prison has become a “preeminent institution for signifying and enforcing blackness, much as slavery was during the first three centuries of US history” (106).

In this article I examine the configuration of prison and race in two contemporary American novels: Walter Mosley’s *The Man in My Basement* and Jonathan Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude*. The reason for the detour, by way of introduction, to the various meanings of the term neo-slave narrative is to suggest that the imaginary of imprisonment presented by these novels has a significant history in African American literature. In my engagement with the ramifications of the prison motif in the novels, I use the terms *color prison* and *colored prison* in order to summarize the two frameworks alluded to above: firstly, the notion of color being a form of confinement, and secondly, the notion of confinement being racially conditioned. Both novels investigate racial themes by exploring the motif of prison. A complex relation between a black and a white man is central to both *The Man in My Basement* and *The Fortress of Solitude*—these relations unfolding across real and imaginary prison walls. In their interpretation of the intersections of prison and race, Mosley and Lethem make use of several tropes central to the literatures of neo-slavery and to the black American literary canon in general, tropes such as flight, escape, invisibility, and passing. Furthermore, the novels share the setting of an urban, segregated New York City, depicted in both *The Man in My Basement* and *The Fortress of Solitude* as a city under the spell of rigid social and ethnic divisions.

In his collection of essays *Workin’ on The Chain Gang*, Walter Mosley suggests that white America is currently and increasingly becoming familiar with experiences of isolation, alienation, emptiness, and unfreedom, in ways that have traditionally characterized primarily minorities in the United States. Thus, the chains restraining the contemporary American “might be more recognizable in the black experience, but they restrain us all,”

Mosley writes (*Workin'* 15). What we may think of as African American conditions can no longer be isolated from white American experience, and we ought therefore to refrain from marginalizing the history of blacks: "Blacks are too often shown as anomalous victims in an otherwise brilliant and positive pageant of democracy and Yankee know-how," but, according to Mosley, black American history *is* American history, and it cannot be separated from a supposedly general white American history (46).

In what follows, my suggestion will be that such shared experience of unfreedom is what is at stake in both *The Man in My Basement* and *The Fortress of Solitude*. What I am offering is not exactly an interpretation of these two novels as literary artworks, but rather an exploration of the ways in which the novels themselves interpret this shared restraint pointed out by Mosley. In their depiction of contemporary United States society, the color line made tangible by W. E. B. Du Bois still cuts through the nation at all levels of the social, insofar as both novels are explicitly concerned with the real differences marking the lives of white Americans and people of color. Yet, both novels are also engaged in interpreting a certain spillover effect from real and imaginary prisons. More precisely, I will suggest, Walter Mosley and Jonathan Lethem make use of the prison motif in order to draw our attention to the social impossibility of containing the racialized experience of containment—or in the words of Mosley, the impossibility of extricating "the black experience in America from the larger American experience" (*Workin'* 10). The first part of my article examines two prominent themes of *The Man in My Basement*, namely that of racialized spectatorship and a certain figurative combination of two types of slavery. In the final part, I examine the ways in which *The Fortress of Solitude* can be said to "appropriate" the cultural templates *color prison* and *colored prison*, making them relevant in a "white" literary frame work.

### Prison in the Expanded Field

On the face of it, Walter Mosley's *The Man in My Basement* has very little to do with the US prison system as such. The main character in the novel and its narrator, Charles Dodd-Blakey, lives alone in his childhood home in the village of Sag Harbor, Long Island. He leads a quiet, slow life working as a cashier in a local bank, a job from which he is at some point laid off for pocketing small change. One day Anniston Bennet, a white, wealthy man, knocks on Charles's door offering him an awful lot of money in return for renting his basement for a few months. When Charles finally accepts, Bennet sees to it that a cell is installed in the basement of Charles's house and demands that Charles be his private prison guard for a couple of months. What Bennet wants is to pay for what he describes as "crimes against humanity." The claustrophobic narrative unfolds primarily in the basement of Charles's house, where the prisoner and his guard discuss the meaning of notions such as crime, punishment, and responsibility. The circumstances of this instance of confinement are entirely unlike the conditions of real life prisons. Here, the prisoner is a very wealthy man whose punishment is self-imposed and thus just as extra-legal as the misdeeds he wishes to atone for. Clearly, then, Mosley has not attempted a realistic depiction of the contemporary US prison system. Rather, the novel interprets aspects of

imprisonment not readily visible or comprehensible, when facing the prison in its common form. What seems to have caught Mosley's attention is some dark, subterranean quality of prison life in America. In a sense, the prison in the basement is a phantasmatic prison, not because something in the narrative suggests it to be a product of Charles's fantasy alone, but rather because it lends itself, by way of multiple associations, to a portrait of the US prison in a phantasmatically expanded version.

The basement prison clearly serves as a means of restricting something that—in the world of the novel—does not otherwise meet restrictions, namely a global finance capitalism based on slave-like labor and corruption. In his confessions to Charles, Bennet paints a gloomy picture of a world order in which raw capitalism and exploitation is subject to no rule of law. He has, Bennet confesses, "reclaimed" everything from diamonds to political prisoners, human organs, and newborn babies:

I once gave a nine-month-old infant as a present to a man's dog. The man wanted to see if the myth of wolves raising men could be true. I walked through a city of the dead, in Rwanda, guarded by soldiers who were paid in dollars. . . . I retrieved enough money in diamonds to rebuild a nation, but instead I took those jewels and put them in a titanium box in the Alps. (Mosley, *The Man* 215)

The figure of the global poor symbolized by the suffering of African people looms large in the novel as a means of contrasting and relating affluent living to lives not recognized as worth living. Bennet knows a man doing the same kind of reclamation work as Bennet himself: "He says he won't kill in this country or Europe," Bennet says of this acquaintance of his, "but life down south is open season for him" (214). Apparently, Bennet's services are in great demand by governments all over the world, but they are, simultaneously, absolutely private to the extent that they are beyond any notion of a public sphere. As Bennet says of his ghostly yet consequential movements on this back stage of global politics:

With a word from me, your life could end. Maybe just with a gesture. A sentence could level a city block or blow a jetliner out of the sky. A dream could destroy Philadelphia. A disagreement could throw western Africa into famine for five years. You see it every day on TV, but no one listens. People like me move around, but no one knows our names. (233)

On this dark side of politics, systems of rewarding and punishing differ dramatically from the ones in Charles's world, in which you are laid off for having your fingers in the till. The provisional prison in the basement is thus Bennet's attempt to subject himself to some sort of moral and social control, since no ordinary juridical arrangements recognize his crimes *as* crimes. According to this logic, Bennet's prison is a basement prison, or private prison as it is referred to by both prisoner and guard, because the crimes atoned here are themselves publicly invisible and subterranean.

The historical institution of slavery in America is an important context for the basement prison and thus for the novel's condemning portrayal of the cultural logic of global capitalism and the neo-slavery it reportedly depends upon. In order to make room for the

modern cell construction, Charles must rid the basement of stuff from before the Civil War, handed down in his family for generations, and it turns out that the furniture, clothes, and paintings have great value as collectibles. Through this intervention of old stuff in his life Charles becomes interested in the history of his ancestors, and by the end of the novel Charles runs a museum for African American local history in his childhood home. As far as Charles knows, none of his ancestors were slaves, but clearing out the dusty basement makes him reflect on his own history in an unprecedented way. The imagined freedom of his forefathers had been a source of pride to his parents, Charles remembers: "The only time I had ever seen my father get angry was when Clarence's father once asked him, 'How can you be sure that one'a them Blakeys you so proud of wasn't a slave at one time or other?'" (Mosley, *The Man* 17). Likewise, Charles remembers that his relatives preferred comparing themselves to the British and Irish immigrants rather than to "the mass of blacks in this country" (125). Nevertheless, his late uncle Brent kept calling the roots of the family into question:

He said that we were like all other American blacks, that we came from "slave-caliber Negroes who were defeated in war and sold into slavery because they didn't have the guts to die in battle." He said that there was no such thing as free Africans who had "chosen to come over and sell their labor in indentured servitude" and that American Negro citizens never existed before 1865, as my father claimed. (30)

No matter how things were, Charles laconically notes, racism has little if anything to do with pedigree and everything to do with skin color (125).

The basement prison is linked by association to the time preceding the Civil War not only because Bennet and his cell take possession of the space in which Charles's antecedents used to reside and in which the past shall again resume its prominent and museological position by the end of the novel. The private prison is also linked to African American history, because Bennet brings with him an original metal lock used to restrain slaves on the old slave ships, fastening the lock to the new cell construction. Upon opening and closing the cell door in order to feed his prisoner, Charles has to maneuver the old slave lock. To Bennet it was important to find a suitable basement in the house of a black American, and the extra-legal atonement he has planned seems in several ways to be dependent on the presence of an African American, specifically: "I'm supposed to be down here. Trapped by a Negro, a black man, until the bubble in my brain passes. Until the itch in my heart goes away" (Mosley, *The Man* 237). When Charles wants to know the reason why Bennet chose *his* home for a prison, the following exchange unfolds between the two:

"There's lots of reclamations in Africa, Charles. Diamonds and oil, slave labor to cobble tennis shoes and assemble fancy lamps. They have armies over there who will strip down to the waist and go hand to hand with bayonets and clubs. They have tribal factions and colonizers. The streets, in short, are paved with gold."

"My house isn't Africa."

"But you are a black man. You come from over there. I need a black face to look in on me. No white man has the right." (174)

According to this peculiar logic, Bennet deserves to be confined in the basement of an African American because he has exploited the rich opportunities on the African continent to hire mercenaries and “slave labor.” Bennet’s way of paying back his debts to humanity is thus based on a conception of geographically and historically stretched out collective systems of guilt and reconciliation, according to which it makes sense to be punished by someone whose ancestors arrived from Africa several generations prior to the crimes in question committed in contemporary Africa.

In Charles’s basement in Sag Harbor, two versions of slavery, or *colored prison*, thus intersect: The historical institution of slavery in America *and* a neo-slavery driven by a deadly economic order Charles knew nothing about prior to Bennet’s self-imposed confinement. The basement prison is thus a literary vehicle for connecting Bennet’s “crimes against humanity” to a time in which a systematic exploitation of people of color took place not on a far continent but within the confines of the nation. The figure of the slave and the figure of the global poor are intertwined in a way that likens slavery to the type of exchange between north and south, between affluent societies and worthless human lives, which Bennet now wants to punish himself for serving all these years. In other words, the private, cellarly prison in Sag Harbor operates as a literary stapling of a new and an old slavery, and it is in light of this stitching together of past and present modes of exploitation that we are to understand Charles’s description of Bennet as “a slaver of souls in the twentieth century” and a “a torturer of black people” (Mosley, *The Man* 234). Although Charles now and then punishes Bennet by not turning on the light in the basement or not serving his prisoner food for several days, he does not hate Bennet, nor does he want to add to the punishment of the imprisonment itself. Rather, what Charles wants is to disturb a certain power relation: “I didn’t want to be another one of his slaves,” as Charles thinks to himself (235).

As an institutional model for this analogy between the exploitative capitalism described by Bennet and the historical institution of slavery alluded to repeatedly, Mosley has chosen the prison. Looking in on his prisoner through the bars of the cell, Charles even associates Bennet with the imprisoned martyrs of the real world: “He was like one of those death-row inmates that they interview just before the sentence is executed. You see all the evil that they caused, but you still feel like death is not the answer—that killing this man would in some strange way take away his victims’ last hope” (Mosley, *The Man* 173). At one point Charles looks at the cell and decides that “the structure might bear more than a resemblance to a prison cell” (119). The cell in the basement does not merely look like a prison cell, it *more than looks like* a prison cell. It is exactly this peculiar more-than-resemblance that forms the novel’s interpretation of the American prison system and its intangible qualities. The basement prison is a prison within the United States and thus an American prison. However, it is an expanded and amplified version of the American prison, since the novel interprets the subterranean quality of the prison to be a function of stitching together new and old forms of slavery. In this sense, the basement prison is a displacement of the US prison system onto a phantasmatic terrain, in which an otherwise disavowed quality of this system is made available for reflection.

As I mentioned earlier, Brian Jarvis has described prison literature by black Americans as neo-slave narratives. According to Jarvis, this prison literature shares with the original slave narratives an ambivalent idea of captivity. “Despite the aspirations of their guardians,



neither the plantation nor the prison-industrial complex has functioned as total institutions. In fact, these punitive zones have often been the site of self-empowerment by their captives through political education and expression," Jarvis writes (122). In *The Man in My Basement* Walter Mosley has made use of this tradition for representing a colored prison as an occasion for consciousness-raising and education. Thus, for Charles the prison in his basement brings about exactly such a sense of "self-empowerment" and "political education" described by Jarvis. The basement prison, and the political reality it silently comments on, impart to Charles an entirely new understanding of the world and the life he inhabits: "I believed that Bennet knew the truth that lay under the newspaper stories and the hypocrisy of politics. He made me question what was, when for a whole lifetime up till that moment, I accepted the world's excuses" (Mosley, *The Man* 154). The encounter with this powerful underground man awakens a new political interest in Charles, and in this sense Bennet becomes his tutor. From being a rather lethargic escapist at the outset of the novel, Charles changes, through the relation to his prisoner, into a historically and politically aware museum inspector.

Somewhat at odds with the typical distribution of roles in the African American tradition for transforming prisons into zones of possibilities, Charles's education does not, however, stem from being imprisoned himself, but rather from being, as he says, a tool for Bennet's penance. Compared to the tradition sketched by Jarvis, the roles are switched and this is, in fact, characteristic for the way the novel adapts and rearranges notions of both color prisons and colored prisons. In the world of *The Man in My Basement*, being black in contemporary America is not the same as being innocent in relation to the conditions of neo-slavery, the rough contours of which are sketched out in the novel. Significantly, Charles's heightened political awareness has not primarily to do with the marginalization of blacks in America today. Rather, what Charles realizes is a certain form of human worthlessness showing its signs across time and space. So when Charles condemns Bennet and his cruel actions, Bennet returns the critique saying things like: "You think that you can have the easy life of TV and gasoline without someone suffering and dying somewhere?" (240). Bennet repeatedly points to the question of the possible responsibility of Americans for the suffering of others: "Did you kill the Kurds in Iraq? Was Roosevelt guilty of the gassing of the Jews because he refused to bomb the camps or the rails leading to them?" (151). Charles's political recognitions are based primarily on this type of discussion about the global scopes of responsibility. In this way, the human worthlessness found by the narrative to be a common denominator of two versions of slavery is made pertinent to Charles and his way of life.

### Radical Resignation

As Gayle Wald has shown, literary and other narratives of passing typically involve an equivocal idea of the import of race and ethnicity. On the one hand, narratives of passing suggest that whites enjoy all sorts of exclusive privileges in society, not least the privilege of neutrality. On the other hand, a successful passing also indicates that whiteness and its privileges can be appropriated by people otherwise considered non-whites. Thus, in nar-



ratives of passing race figures as something having the authority to define an individual and assign to him or her a particular position in the racialized social order of things, yet this racial definition simultaneously figures as something available for appropriation. In *The Man in My Basement*, Mosley tells a story of passing in a rather unfamiliar framing. Bennet, the underground man, is in a sense discolored. As he confesses to Charles, his mother being Greek and his father probably Turkish, Bennet himself merely *passes* for white by wearing ice blue lenses and by erasing his black hair entirely with electrolysis: "When I grew up I named myself. I didn't know a thing about either parent or their cultures," Bennet says. "I was here and I meant to thrive. I created a whole history based on the name Bennet" (Mosley, *The Man* 195). Passing, we would think, is attractive only to the extent that skin color still connotes either freedom or confinement, and in this peculiar story about neo-slavery freedom is still an attribute of whiteness as it was the case in the classical narratives of passing told by writers such as Frederick Douglass, James Weldon Johnson, and Nella Larsen. Charles reacts with dismay at Bennet's testimony of passing revealing precisely this idea of skin color connoting either freedom or prison, either human worth or worthlessness: "You're passing as blue blood," Charles exclaims. "But you're really nothing. You don't even know if your father was Turkish. He could have been Arab or even African" (195). Being black in America today is not the same as being innocent in relation to ideologies of racism, the novel seems to suggest.

Charles's own way of dealing with racial markers such as skin color is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, Charles *is* trying to open up the rigid racial category of blackness. As the first-person narrator of the novel Charles is particularly careful in his classification of other black characters who are identified without exception according to a finely tuned color scale going from "tan-colored," "auburn," "coffee-and-cream," "dark brown," "dark amber," to "black as tar." On the other hand, representing the experience of racialized spectatorship, Mosley has simultaneously radicalized a literary tradition of resignation with prominent representatives such as Ralph Ellison and Frantz Fanon. Especially noteworthy in this regard is Charles's careless or depressed acceptance of an apparently abysmal chasm between black and white folks. "I knew that many white people didn't like me because of my dark skin," Charles notes at one point. "I wasn't stupid" (Mosley, *The Man* 125). Frantz Fanon's classical and oft-cited description in *Black Skin, White Masks* of a black man's traumatizing experience of a white boy being frightened by the sight of him and his blackness shall here serve as an example of altogether different levels of agitation and sorrow than what Charles can muster. "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" the black man in *Black Skin, White Masks* overhears the boy crying out, "the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up" (Fanon 114). To the main character in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the experience of being fixated by the white gaze is so claustrophobic that he perceives white people in general as: "the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me" (112). In contrast to this intensity of feeling in the voice of the narrator of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Charles's parallel experience of causing fear among white people is represented as something he is indifferent to, as a matter of course. In general, Charles just shruggingly notes that he probably seems ominous to the white people in the community of Sag Harbor. Upon meeting a white neighbor in the dark on the station, Charles reflects:

Trudy, the mother, looked at me nervously, a black man at midnight and the train not in yet. "Hello, Mrs. Benoit," I hailed. "You meeting Raoul?" I said it to put her at ease. It worked too. She smiled and nodded. She didn't remember my name. Maybe she couldn't distinguish between black men. But it didn't matter what white people saw when they looked at me. Why would I care? (Mosley, *The Man* 144)

In the literary works by Fanon and Ellison black people also resign when confronted with appearing, in the eyes of their white surroundings, alternately invisible, hyper-visible, and just plain threatening. But whereas resignation in this tradition is always a disappointed, despairing, and desperate countermove to a deeply felt expectation of and claim to racial justice, Charles's resignation is of the politically depressed kind. In this light, *The Man in My Basement* presents us with a historically intensified resignation regarding American color lines.

### Escaping Whiteness

As we have seen, an original slave lock fastened to a new cell made tangible the analogy between old and new systems of slavery and incarceration established in *The Man in My Basement*. In *The Fortress of Solitude* Jonathan Lethem does not in a similar way draw analogies across history, but the novel emphasizes the ways in which discrimination, ghettoization, and incarceration give rise to limitations for both black and white Americans. A couple of years prior to *The Fortress of Solitude* becoming a bestseller, Lethem wrote a preface to the 1967 classical prison novel by Malcolm Braly, *On the Yard*. Here, Lethem praised Braly for not simplifying prison life and for moving between the particular and the universal by using life in prison as "a model for understanding aspects of our self-wardened lives." Contrary to other prison novels, Lethem wrote, Braly avoids depicting life in prison as "cartoons of black-and-white morality, having nothing to do with the rest of us—we who live in the modulated, ambivalent, civilized world 'the novel' was born to depict" (Lethem, Introduction vii). In this vein, Lethem's own novel also reads as an interpretation of what prison has to do with "the rest of us."

In *The Fortress of Solitude* Lethem has displaced the common notion of skin color as a form of prison to the perspective of a white boy. In the first, long part of the novel we are made familiar, by the third-person narrator, with life in 1970s Brooklyn as it is led by the boy Dylan Ebdus. Dylan is a thoughtfully observant kid, who like all kids longs to be just like the others, which in Dylan's world means being black—his best friend Mingus being a black boy his age. The Ebdus family is one of the few white families in their neighborhood, and Dylan thus grows up as an odd, white minority in a black community. In Brooklyn, Dylan is a poor *whiteboy* and an easy target for friendly blackmailing and ordinary bullying. When attempting to sneak unnoticed past a group of boys Dylan lets the hood of his parka cover his white face and buries his white hands deep in his pocket grateful for winter at least providing an occasion for masking all that whiteness. We may think of Dylan's thorough masking as an instance of passing: in the Brooklyn of the novel, Dylan

is off-color trying to pass not exactly as black but as socially invisible. When Dylan does not succeed in being either invisible or ignored, and a couple of boys ever so discretely *yoke* him, kindly asking for a dollar or two, Dylan accepts his destiny without a word and pays up. He frequently ends up “caged on street corners, stranded anywhere. A pair of kids made a human jail” (Lethem, *Fortress* 84). In this particular sense, the slave lock and the yoke around Dylan’s neck are elements in a highly asymmetrical, yet shared, history of color and prisons.

As a teenager, Dylan thinks of Brooklyn itself as a prison with a black prison population, in which he is mistakenly held captive. While saving up for his escape to the fine, white Cambden College, Dylan repeats his mantra: “Not In Jail, Just Visiting” (Lethem, *Fortress* 239). With this theme of escaping a colored prison (and a color prison), Lethem makes use of a central feature of the African American literary canon. In the historical slave narratives as well as in the various versions of a neo-slave literature, escape from colored prisons is a theme so common that literary scholar Elisabeth Ford has aptly coined the term “escapee tradition” for central works in black American literary history.<sup>3</sup> As representative of this tradition Ford mentions among other novels Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, and *Song of Solomon* is worth considering also in this context, since the fleeing persons in both Morrison’s and Lethem’s novels use the same means of transport, namely flying. In Morrison’s novel the ability to fly is one of few possibilities for the African American characters to escape. With this specific motif, Morrison establishes a relation between, on the one hand, an emancipated slave of whom we learn that he one day simply took off from the roof of a church and flew back to Africa, and on the other hand the main character, Milkman, who by the end of the novel finally realizes that he also has the ability to fly. In the last sentence of the novel Milkman realizes that if “you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it” (Morrison 337).

In the literary arrangement of *Song of Solomon*, the motif of flying is a magic countermove to the long history of material and symbolic incarceration shared by the black characters. Likewise, flying amounts to more than leisure for Dylan and Mingus in *The Fortress of Solitude*. Upon being given a magic ring by a homeless black man, Dylan and Mingus regularly transform into a flying team that they call Aeroman, flying providing a means for the two of them to assault their respective prisons. For Dylan, Aeroman provides an escape from his color prison by hunting down the boys yoking him—that is, the black kids regularly making up the “human jails” of Dylan’s life as a *whiteboy* in Brooklyn. Conversely, as ring bearer Mingus uses the ability of flight to make visible a local landmark, Brooklyn House of Detention, sketching his tag, Dose, at the top of the 26-floor tower of the jail: “The Tag was a cry, a claim, an undeniable thing. The looming jail which no one mentioned or looked at and the trail of dripping paint that covered the city’s every public surface and which no one mentioned or looked at: two invisible things had rendered one another visible, at least for one day” (Lethem, *Fortress* 272). Thus, unlike the flying Solomon in Morrison’s novel, Mingus does not take off for Africa, but instead points out the most significant institutional threat to his freedom. His signature on the detention house constitutes a solemn demand for his surroundings to recognize this place through which the boys of the neighborhood in a near future shall pass in large numbers on their way to other destinations within the prison system. Aeroman and the magic ring are in other words means by which Dylan and Mingus confront the real and imagined prisons in their lives.

However, the novel does not merely represent the ghetto as an imagined prison, because in *The Fortress of Solitude* the American prison at the end of the twentieth century is also a kind of transplanted ghetto. More precisely, what the novel explores and unfolds is a transition between ghetto and prison akin to the one analyzed by sociologist Loïc Wacquant. According to Wacquant's analysis, during the 1970s the US prison system assumed the workings that had for years been assigned to the ghetto, namely a combined material and symbolic containment of African Americans. In the second half of the twentieth century, prisons were transformed in the image of the ghetto, Wacquant argues, and thus, insofar as today's prison mirrors the black ghettos of the 1950s and 1960s, it is partly because entire communities are moved back and forth between prison and ghetto: "An overwhelming majority of its [the prison's] occupants originate from the racialized core of the country's major cities, and returns [sic] there upon release, only to be soon caught again in the police dragnet to be sent away for another, longer sojourn behind bars in a self-perpetuating cycle of escalating, socioeconomic marginality and legal incapacitation" (101). In *The Fortress of Solitude* Mingus embodies this movement between prison and Brooklyn, and through the portrait of Mingus's nomadic and addict life, the reader gets a rough sense of the developments in the prison system in New York during the 1980s and 1990s. While Mingus is doing time, he has the odd experience of his old neighborhood joining him on the inside, "as though the system was inadvertently reassembling the city and its factions here" (Lethem, *Fortress* 482). As kids Dylan and Mingus think of Brooklyn as their prison, but this metaphor is realized in the novel as lived experience in so far as the prison itself is turned into a displaced ghetto. In other words, the connection drawn by the novel between ghetto and prison is not merely figurative, but also conceptual.

### The Literary Color Prison

Throughout *The Fortress of Solitude* Lethem works with the theme of representation and appropriation, a theme that is, however, particularly conspicuous in the last two parts of the novel, "Liner Notes" and "Prisonaires." Since the early 1980s, when Dylan finally managed to escape Brooklyn and Mingus received his first prison sentence, Dylan has grown up to become a music critic specializing in soul music from the 1960s and 1970s, an expert nerd constantly referring to bits and pieces of an African American canon of songs. Thus, the novel here portrays a white critic and his work on black music culture. At one point, Dylan writes a sample of liner notes for a distinct re-release, the notes in his own mind close to being the best piece he's ever written. His editor, however, is not impressed. He thinks the text amounts to an assertion of black history of music and predicts that Dylan will win a Grammy for "best hot air" (Lethem, *Fortress* 337). Through this criticism the novel self-referentially names its own representational challenges: how to represent black cultural history in a "white narrative"; how to avoid making assertions of "the other"; how to depict the conditions of black Americans today without creating simplistic and sentimental stereotypes. By having his editor doubting Dylan's ability to represent African American culture, *The Fortress of Solitude* raises the question of cultural appropriation.

In his book *Neo-slave Narratives*, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy discusses the ways in which William Styron, in his controversial neo-slave narrative *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), at once mobilized the neo-slave narrative as literary genre and caused much debate among African American intellectuals about white America's appropriation and possible abuse of the social position and voice of slaves. This debate, Rushdy points out, was about "the voice of the novelist who would represent the slave; not only what the representation of slavery would be like, but who would do the representing. The issue was cultural appropriation" (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 92). According to Rushdy, one of the aspects of Styron's literary representation of Nat Turner that seemed problematic to the debaters was the ostensible stereotypical depiction of the rebel as a rather infantile and compliant character. By making Turner himself subject to literary paternalism Styron reproduced, according to his critics, the racial ideology of the South. Unintentionally, his literary project could be said to be in keeping with "a social project in which African American culture is both appropriated and denied its history," Rushdy writes (55).

On the one hand, the African American characters in *The Fortress of Solitude* are rather stereotypical. They appear both romanticized and tragic in their manifestation of fascinating beauty and misery, and Lethem has not made the task any easier for himself by writing about young black men at odds with the law. On the other hand, Lethem seems to be fully aware of the type of critique launched at William Styron and his literary descendants. In the final part of the novel, "Prisonaires," there is yet another example of the novel's explicit framing of the question of appropriation. Prisonaires is the name of a historical vocal group popular in the 1950s during a time in which all of them happened to be doing time. Hoping to get funding for a film project about this particular group, Dylan relates their incredible story to some big shot producer in Hollywood. As Dylan tells it, it's a tragic story about purely innocent black men, "victims of prejudice and economic injustice in the Jim Crow South" (325), and so when finally grasping the huge melodramatic potential of the story, the producer is all for securing the rights to the story. Through Dylan's pitch *The Fortress of Solitude* characterizes a film industry according to which every narrative of racism must be told as a melodrama revolving around innocent and tragic black men and women. But the scene in the producer's office is also a means for Lethem to thematically put his own representational challenges on the novel's agenda.

This theme of representation and appropriation has a formal side to it in *The Fortress of Solitude*. By switching narrators now and then, the novel reads like a literary test site for various ways of representing African American characters that are not merely occasions for reflecting sweeping moral dilemmas. It thus seems as if Lethem explicitly tests his own way of representing black and white while simultaneously allowing his reader to recognize the challenges. In most of this last part of the novel Dylan is narrating in the first-person, but the narrative makes it clear that although it means the world to him, Dylan is not necessarily a well-qualified mediator of African American culture. Accordingly, Dylan is replaced by another narrator in some parts of "Prisonaires," and so instead of Dylan narrating in first-person, we suddenly listen to a third-person narrator who is able to slide in and out of Mingus's point of view. With this switch of narrators, the layout of the text also changes. Now, shorter passages are given headings pointing to the content of the specific passage, and frequently the heading simply states the name of the prison in which Mingus is serving his most recent sentence. This formal rearrangement gives this part of the novel,



which is about the long prison odyssey of Mingus, an altogether different feel of historical report than the rather oversensitive narration of Dylan. Furthermore, in this report-like part of the novel, Mingus is not even called Mingus, but appears under his tag name, Dose. In this way, the narrative itself suggests that a responsive representation of Mingus's life and encounter with the prison system is dependent upon a deterritorialization, so to speak, of the formal premises of the novel. Another voice, another style, another format.

As I have been using the term, *colored prison* designates the common notion of certain forms of imprisonment being racially organized. Conversely, by *color prison* I have wished to name the idea of race and skin color itself amounting to a form of imprisonment. In *The Fortress of Solitude* Lethem has these complementary frameworks complicating each other by making visible the novel's own color prison. The various examples of colored prisons are central to the novel: the Brooklyn ghetto referred to as a prison; Mingus's long prison life among black brothers; and the incarcerated vocal group, The Prisonaires. And in its way of thematically and formally framing these instances of colored prisons, *The Fortress of Solitude* points to its own representational restraints. The notion of color amounting to a form of confinement is in this way realized as a formal model for the novel, which at the same time volunteers as a literary test site for ways of escaping this particular literary prison. When Dylan finally, after twenty years without any contact between the two of them, pays Mingus a visit in a correctional facility in Watertown, he plans to give Mingus the magic ring in order to use its magic gifts to escape the facility. Since they last met the ring has changed its powers, no longer giving the ring bearer the ability to fly, but to be invisible. However, Mingus refuses to accept the ring and the plans for flight. When Dylan insists, saying "[y]ou could use it to break out of this place," Mingus spurns his offer: "You couldn't even use that thing to break into this place" (Lethem, *Fortress* 444). After this encounter with Mingus in Watertown, Dylan realizes that the real challenge of prison is not so much breaking out, but, on the contrary, breaking in: "I needed to go behind the walls. My first pass at the prison had been too cursory, a tourist's, as ever. I had to earn Mingus's escape with my own willingness to go inside, to show how it could be done (447).

That, I would suggest, is the principal recognition in Lethem's novel, that confinement not only keeps "them" on the inside, but also keeps "us" on the outside. In my understanding of *The Man in My Basement* and *The Fortress of Solitude* both Mosley and Lethem use the particular configurations of the prison motif within the African American literary tradition in order to broaden the imagination of the affective, social, and material implications of incarceration in America. In these novels there is no undamaged outside to the prison system, just as racism and discrimination in general seem to leave no communities unaffected. In both novels the prison motif is remarkable, precisely to the extent that prison here constitutes a space with damning effects on all of its sides. The prisons rub off on their exterior, so to speak, and both *The Man in My Basement* and *The Fortress of Solitude* express this rubbing-off, this social sharedness of prison existence, by reconfiguring the prison imagery they employ. By renewing and expanding the cultural imaginary of prison and race, they contribute to making new aspects of American prison reality accessible for reflection.

## NOTES

1. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy thus defines the genre like this: "Having fictional slave characters as narrators, subjects, or ancestral presences, the neo-slave narratives' major unifying feature is that they represent slavery as a historical phenomenon that has lasting cultural meaning and enduring social consequences" ("Neo-Slave Narrative" 533). Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu uses the term much the same way, as does Sterling Lecater Bland when describing novels such as Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1989) as neo-slave narratives (Bland 20).
2. In their report, Marc Mauer and Ryan S. King state that "African Americans serve almost as much time in federal prison for a drug offense (58.7 months) as whites do for a violent offense (61.7 months), largely due to racially disparate sentencing laws such as the 100-to-1 crack-powder cocaine disparity" (2).
3. Ford elaborates the notion of an *escapee tradition* in her essay, in which she writes:

If white America had the frontier, with its promise of open space and untrammelled freedom, black American literature defined its own frontier, across which lay a promised land of available jobs, safe neighborhoods, and decent housing. The impulse to "get away" in slave narratives, and their descendants has thus consistently been linked to an ethic of self-improvement and community betterment. (1077)

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## THE DE(CON)STRUCTION OF BLACK/WHITE BINARIES

### Critiques of Passing in Charles Waddell Chesnutt's *"The Wife of His Youth" and Other Stories of the Color Line*

by Tanfer Emin Tunc

When asked to elaborate on the "Negro Problem," or the co-existence of racial inequality and democracy in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, African American historian W. E. B. Du Bois conveyed that the "'Negro problem' of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." Kelly Miller, his contemporary and fellow National Association for the Advancement of Colored People activist, proposed a radical solution to this American dilemma: the "Negro must get along, get white, or get out" (qtd. in Brown 275). Thus the official word that African Americans received from the NAACP, arguably the most influential civil rights organization of the early-twentieth century, was that the color line, or the divide along racial lines (usually black and white), would dominate the lives of African Americans for the next hundred years. Moreover, only three solutions existed: "get along" (accommodate); "get white" (assimilate); or "get out" (leave the United States), which many individuals, including artists such as Josephine Baker, eventually did. Miller's second solution to the Negro problem—"get white"—caused the greatest controversy within the black intellectual community for obvious reasons. Many activists, including Marcus Garvey and his supporters, believed that the future of African Americans lay not in their ability to disappear into the white race, but in their *blackness*—that is, their ability to resist "miscegenation" and the dominant racial hegemony of the United States.

The battle that emerged along the color line during the turn of the twentieth century was chronicled in American literature, specifically through the works of writer Charles Waddell Chesnutt who devoted his entire career to the "Negro problem" (See Wright and Glass). Born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1858, but raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Euro-American in appearance but of African American heritage, Chesnutt straddled multiple worlds: North, South, black, and white. Early on in his life, he developed a double consciousness which shaped his career as a fiction writer, essayist, pedagogue, political commentator, lawyer, and legal stenographer at a time when African Americans could not even serve on juries or testify on their own behalf. This double consciousness also influenced his personal life, which he spent in the interstices of the black and white worlds (Ferguson, Introduction 2–3). Chesnutt maintained that because of the intractable racism of American society, the solution to the "Negro problem" lay not in one of Miller's three solutions, but in the hands of middle class, educated, progressive "color line" blacks such as himself—individuals who transcended categorization by straddling the racial and cultural divide, especially between urban whites and rural blacks (Ferguson, Introduction 5; Ferguson, "Chesnutt's Genuine Blacks" 113). Moreover, "Chesnutt's recognition of, and

emphasis on, these interstices, the in-between-ness of race, disturb[ed] turn-of-the-century race science; they exposed the color line as flexible and mutable, a barrier with real social consequences, but nevertheless a biological fiction" (Toth 77).

In essays such as "What Is a White Man?" and "The Future American," Chesnutt describes race as "a modern invention of white people to perpetuate the color line." He believed that racial fusion or "amalgamation" would eventually (when racist legal restrictions on interracial marriage were revoked) bring an end to race as a category of identity by creating a mestizo, all-inclusive, "future American ethnic type" who defied boundaries: "there would be no inferior race to domineer over; there would be no superior race to oppress those who differed from them in racial externals" (qtd. in McElrath, Leitz, and Crisler 125, 232). Because, as he argued, whiteness was a cultural fiction ("black and Indian blood" already flowed in the veins of many Southern whites), Chesnutt's utopic vision of American race relations, and plan for the elimination of prejudice and "racial discord," hinged not on peoples of color assimilating into the dominant white race, which he believed was already "impure," but in the flexibility and adaptability of hybridity (McElrath, Leitz, and Crisler 125, 232; Fleischmann 466). For Chesnutt, the "future American" would be an "admixture" of races, ethnicities, and consciousnesses.

Although Chesnutt was proud of his black heritage, he understood why some individuals who lived along the color line perceived passing to be an "unfortunate but not unreasonable" social response to institutionalized racism; in other words, a "matter of circumstance" or "principle" (Callahan, "The Confounding Problem of Race" 318). Chesnutt himself had even experimented with part-time or "convenience" passing during his youth. Because he was a light-skinned African American—in fact, almost white in appearance—he was able to "periodically 'pass' across racial lines to seek both stenographic business and intellectual diversity from white bigots" (Ferguson, Introduction 3; Gatewood 10). However, despite his own attempts at crossing the racial divide and his sympathy for "paler shade" blacks who were trapped between two worlds, he ultimately rejected passing as a racial strategy and refused to disappear into the white community (Andrews 331; Meer 5; Glass 71–73). Instead, he devoted his energies to deconstructing racism by critiquing the social, cultural, and biological fallacies of passing.

As Chesnutt's short story collection *"The Wife of His Youth" and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899) illuminates, "white face masquerades" or "passing performances" often accentuate the artificiality of race by perpetuating a system of conscious deception and denial that devalues multiracial identities and re-inscribes racial boundaries. The "tragic mulattoes" in his realist race tales are not those who perish because of white prejudice, but those characters who base their lives on a non-existent racial simulacrum or a "self-contained, entirely unified original," mythic "whiteness" "which [cannot] be seamlessly reproduced" (Jay 505). As stories such as "The Wife of His Youth," "A Matter of Principle," "Her Virginia Mammy" and "Cicely's Dream" convey, flawless mimicry (i.e., attempts at "getting white" or assimilating through racial, social, and cultural passing) can never be achieved because the white race, and its biological supremacy, is a social construction with shifting, unstable, and negotiable boundaries—one which, above all else, devalues the multitude of *blacknesses* (both visible and invisible) that exist in the United States. Chesnutt critiques and satirizes passing or "getting white" as a false solution to the "Negro problem" because it prevented the full integration of blacks into society, and the acquisition of equality for

African Americans as a whole, by granting those who could pass undeserved privileges and social superiority over darker-skinned members of their own race (Hardwig 5–6). As his color line characters illustrate, passing was an “unethical” strategy that not only reaffirmed categorical oppositions between African Americans and reinforced the social binaries, class hierarchies, and “white values” he attempted to deconstruct through his racial melting pot theory, but also perpetuated an internalized racism in the black community which created *intraracial* conflict and marginalized the inclusiveness of hybridity.

### Aristocrats of Color: Critiquing Passing in “The Wife of His Youth”

Chesnutt’s “*The Wife of His Youth*” and *Other Stories of the Color Line* was published three years after *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) and critiques many of the legal and social boundaries which were constructed by the infamous United States Supreme Court decision. *Plessy* not only legalized segregation through the “separate but equal” dictum, but also officially sanctioned the “one-drop rule” that existed *de facto* throughout the South. Many of those who lived along the color line seized the moment of racial confusion over who was “black” and who was “white” that followed the decision, forever disappearing into the white community as a self-protection mechanism (Sharfstein 1478–79, 1486, 1489).<sup>1</sup> Some light-skinned blacks who could not, or did not want to, pass as white established their own social networks as a means of destroying the stigma associated with interraciality. Through these elite networks, they were able to carve a niche for themselves in American society, preserve their tenuous whiteness (inclusion), and reinforce their cultural superiority (exclusion). These organizations also negated the assumption that all African Americans were alike “in lineage, education, inspiration and character” and questioned the “sentimental notion of black solidarity” (Gatewood 3).

Chesnutt agreed that the black community was diverse, and that its members should not be conflated into one homogenous group that denied the existence of numerous blacknesses. However, he was also quick to express that the social strategies of such elite groups were not enacted out of a need to express diversity, but rather the result of an oppressive internalized racism that was only amplified by *Plessy*. He critically deconstructs the premises of such snobbish networks in “The Wife of His Youth,” which provides a satiric account of the fictional Blue Vein Society—an organization of “interracial royalty” whose members were more “white than black”—that attempted to distinguish itself from the rest of the black community by imitating the values of the white antebellum Southern aristocracy. Such societies gave meaning to the lives of elite professional color line blacks by recreating the white hierarchy and social gradations of the Old South from which they were, as interracial individuals, excluded.<sup>2</sup> These social structures allowed this “talented tenth,” as they were called by Du Bois, to relive or perform their “lost past” not as slaves, but now as masters. As historian Willard Gatewood describes,

Forming a tightly closed group that outsiders found difficult but not impossible to penetrate, aristocrats of color attached extraordinary importance to family name and heritage. They showed great pride in

the status and achievements of ancestors, especially those who [were white] or well-to-do free people of color . . . Enamored of royalty and nobility, as were white Americans of the era, many black aristocrats were experts in genealogy and drew up family trees whose roots and branches included an assortment of African princes, European royalty, Caucasian statesmen, Madagascan noblemen, and Indian chieftains. A chronicler of "black society," whose family had been a part of the aristocracy of color for several generations, maintained: "The aristocracy of which I write is based on birth. It is a club whose passwords are 'Who are your people?'" (8–9)

However, as Chesnutt conveys in "The Wife of His Youth" and other color line stories, mimicking the white hierarchy through black class and color consciousness is particularly problematic because it not only creates a "veil of forgetfulness" that obscures the brutality that African Americans faced on the plantation, but also creates a new and artificial black social pyramid which is sustained by the oppression of darker-skinned individuals by their lighter-skinned counterparts (Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* 263). As one of the characters in Sutton E. Griggs's novel *The Overshadowed* (1901) states, "What makes blue veiners so aristocratic is that we blacks like them, the white folks like them, and they like themselves; leaving nobody to like us blacks" (qtd. in Gatewood 9). Those who could easily pass for white—both racially and culturally—were positioned at the top of this new social pyramid, followed by the entire range of African American phenotypes (with the "darkest blacks" at the bottom). Thus, entrance into Chesnutt's pretentious Blue Vein Society was, not surprisingly, based on two of the markers of "successful passing": racial elitism (skin color was used as an inclusionary measure; though members would not admit it, "no one was eligible for membership who was not white enough to show blue veins") and class superiority or, as members claimed, "character and culture" (e.g., free birth with no links to slavery, and mastery of the white intellectual canon) (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 199). Every shade and class of African American had their own special "place" in this racial order, and the superiority of those on top was reassured through comparison with those on the bottom.

According to literary critic Nancy Bentley, "Chesnutt recognized that the chief harm in the *Plessy* decision's separate-but-equal principle came not from racial separation *per se*, nor even from civil restrictions, but from the injury of racial stigma, the effect of *marking out* black people—[or] as Chesnutt puts it, the harm of being 'branded and tagged.' The injury lies in the racial sign itself, in the power of a form to devalue through demarcation" (463). "The Wife of His Youth" directly addresses the tension created by passing and the stigmatization of blackness within the African American caste system that emerged during the late-nineteenth century. The protagonist of the short story, Mr. Ryder, is a light-skinned African American and a well-respected "conservative" member of the color line community in a "certain Northern city"—Groveland (a thinly masked version of Chesnutt's Cleveland). Possessing a gift for social leadership, he is appointed Dean of the Blue Veins and is a model citizen in many respects: he is a staunch preserver of the tradition and social policy of the organization—he defends the attributes that allows its members to live on, and perhaps even pass over, the color line—and endeavors for the upward mobility (whitening) of his fellow society members. Although he is not as

white as some other members of this elite social circle, as a self-made, self-educated man he is able to acquire favor through his performance of “whiteness”: “His features were of a refined type, his hair was almost straight; he was always neatly dressed; his manners were irreproachable, and his morals above suspicion” (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 200). Moreover, he recites poetry (his favorite poet is Tennyson), engages in literary criticism, and owns a “rich library,” handsome piano, and “choice engravings.”

The plot of “The Wife of His Youth” centers on a would-be engagement party organized by Ryder. At some point during the ball, Ryder plans on offering “his heart and his hand” (i.e., to propose marriage) to Mrs. Molly Dixon, a young widow of twenty-five who managed to change the mind of the resolute bachelor (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 201). As Chesnutt elucidates, “she possessed many attractive qualities. She was much younger than he . . . She was whiter than he, and better educated. She had moved in the best colored society of the country . . . Such a superior person had been eagerly welcomed into the Blue Vein Society, and had taken a leading part in its activities” (201). Thus for Ryder, marrying Mrs. Dixon would be a major step up the social pyramid: not only would he secure his cultural legitimacy and place in Groveland society with all of its “aristocratic instincts . . . good manners, and conservative tastes,” but he would also whiten himself vicariously through marriage to Molly, thereby bringing him (or at least his children) one step closer to the possibility of permanently crossing the color line (Gatewood 12). In Ryder’s opinion, the ball itself had to “set an example for the future . . . he had observed of late a growing liberality . . . among members of his own set, and had several times been forced to meet in a social way persons whose complexions and callings in life were hardly up to the standard which he considered proper for the society to maintain” (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 201). Even as Ryder almost tongue-in-cheek confesses “I have no race prejudice,” he knows that for his own self-preservation (i.e., whitening) he could not, as a member of the social climbing “interracial elite,” afford to commit any *faux pas* which could result in a racially “backward step” (201).

During the evening of the ball Ryder, like an antebellum plantation master, sits “on his front porch, which . . . a wire netting made a cool and pleasant lounging place” (202). While reading Tennyson’s “A Dream of Fair Women,” and, presumably, dreaming about his own fair woman, he is approached by a stranger who is in every way, shape, and form the complete opposite of Molly Dixon: “She was a little woman, not five feet tall . . . she seemed quite old . . . her face was crossed and recrossed with a hundred wrinkles, and around the edges of her bonnet [were] tufts of short gray [hair]. She wore a blue calico gown of ancient cut, a little red shawl fastened around her shoulders with an old-fashioned brass brooch, and . . . She looked like a bit of the old plantation life, summoned up from the past” (203). Moreover, “she was very black—so black that her toothless gums . . . were not red, but blue” (203), which, as Zoe Trodd maintains, clearly parodies and denigrates the Blue Vein’s claims to elitism (128). In her black Southern dialect, which contrasts markedly with Ryder’s own sophisticated timbre, the “mammy-like” Liza Jane tells him about the cross-country quest in which she has been engaged since the end of the war. She is searching for her husband, Sam Taylor, a free-born biracial man who, in order to avoid being sold into slavery, escaped up North. Although he promised to return and rescue her from the tortures of slavery, they lost contact after the war. She had sacrificed twenty-five years of her life (precisely Mrs. Dixon’s age), and any semblance of stability



and security, looking for Sam, living on handouts and odd jobs wherever she could find them, never losing hope that her husband was still alive and searching for her and the life they had before the war.

At the end of the tale, Ryder plays devil's advocate and foreshadowingly assumes the role of Sam Taylor in an attempt to assess 'Liza Jane's devotion and determination: "He may have married another woman . . . Your slave marriage would not have prevented him, for you never lived with him after the war, and without that your marriage doesn't count . . . Perhaps he's outgrown you, and climbed up in the world where he wouldn't care to have you find him . . . You may have passed him on the street a hundred times during the twenty-five years, and not have known him; time works great changes" (205). Yet, 'Liza Jane is resolute: Sam Taylor is a moral man who could not even look at another woman before knowing what had become of his plantation wife. Moreover, she would "know 'im 'mongs' a hund'ed men," and to prove her fidelity shows Ryder the worn out daguerreotype of Taylor that she has been carrying in her pocket for the past twenty-five years. Although "it was faded with time, the features were still distinct," and to Ryder "it was easy to see what manner of man it had represented" (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 205). Content with the promise that Ryder would "give the matter some attention," 'Liza Jane leaves, garnering the amused stares of elite light-skinned blacks as she exits the premises. Ryder witnesses the subtle, yet visible, racism that their stares represent, and engages in a period of introspection, looking into his bedroom mirror and considering who he once was, and who he had become. As John Sheehy expresses, as a man attempting to pass into the white world, Ryder's "view of himself must remain fragmented, must deny some part of what he sees in the mirror," the Other. This racial double consciousness culminates in the "unresolvable choice between living either as a physically 'white' black man or as a secretly 'black' white man" (Sheehy 404).

The ball, which has all the markings of an aristocratic plantation cotillion, begins as the members of Ryder's elite social circle assemble: "The occasion was long memorable among the colored people of the city; not alone for the dress and display, but for the high average of intelligence and culture that distinguished the gathering as a whole . . . they were colored, though most of them would not have attracted even a casual glance because of any marked difference from white people" (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 206). As Ryder holds up his glass to toast (and presumably propose to) Mrs. Dixon, he begins to relate 'Liza Jane's story to the partygoers. As he speaks, he praises her courage, fidelity, and determination. Consequently, "the story awakened a responsive thrill in many hearts. There were some present who had seen, and others who had heard, their fathers and grandfathers tell the wrongs and sufferings of this past generation, and all of them still felt, in their darker moments," of conscience and perhaps race, "the shadow hanging over them" (207). Ryder then assumes the role of Sam Taylor and reconfigures 'Liza Jane's tale as a moral dilemma which plays on the racial guilt and deception that serves as the foundation of the Blue Vein Society. Adding to the hypothetical situation the story of his own escape from poverty and bondage, his rise in the elite interracial world, and the refashioning of his past, Ryder asks the ball attendees to decide: "What ought [a man] do, in such a crisis of a lifetime? . . . Should he acknowledge her?" (208)

As the partygoers listen to him, presumably understanding that this was not an imaginary situation but rather a personal appeal for them to accept his, as well as their own, family

history, Mrs. Dixon, teary-eyed—most likely due to her understanding of the situation and her inevitable rejection—speaks for the group: “He should acknowledge her” (209). As a man of honor, Ryder has no recourse but to pursue the “ethically correct” course of action and sacrifice his own aspirations at passing in order to claim, via ‘Liza Jane, a “lost blackness” which he had long ago forsaken. He retrieves ‘Liza Jane from the adjacent room and voluntarily reveals his true identity—Sam Taylor—even though he knows that “the wife of his youth” will permanently eliminate his chances of passing as a member of the black aristocracy. His declaration—“Ladies and gentlemen . . . this is the woman, and I am the man, whose story I have told you. Permit me to introduce to you the wife of my youth”—will forever socially ostracize him, for his slave past automatically destroys his self-constructed “noble” identity, which was an illusion predicated on false credentials and a counterfeit pedigree (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 209). Moreover, the irony of the situation is that for all his conceited claims to whiteness, Ryder, the “snobbish” Dean of the Blue Veins, “ends up with the darkest and most unrefined of wives” (Wachtell 161).

While Ryder could have lived the rest of his life benefiting from the comforts and privileges of near-white existence, he fulfills his moral duty and honorably acknowledges the wife of his youth. Thus Ryder’s “black self,” nearly extinguished or absorbed through marriage to Mrs. Dixon, is at the last moment resurrected and (re)claimed (Fleischmann 463). While his decision is admirable in that it represents a sacrifice of his white identity for his black, and his future for his past, it reveals the deception and deceit that often accompanies passing: his identity is not only self-constructed (he was free-born but intimately connected to slavery) but also relies on a series of performances which are based on “theatrical” staging or masking (e.g., imitation and repetition through the recitation of poetry and the organization of elaborate courtly events) (Kondo 5; Delmar 364–66). His passing fantasy is thus predicated on erasing or annihilating his past—he becomes a “racial *Other* masquerading as a racial *Other*”—and maintaining the social and racial boundaries which distinguish him from the “inferior” *black* ‘Liza Jane—all of which, as Chesnutt illustrates, are ultimately impossible *and* undesirable (Hershfield 46; Cooke 32).

Even though ‘Liza Jane is too old to have children, by reclaiming his lost wife and disavowing his fractured hypocritical identity, Ryder is in effect embracing Chesnutt’s multiethnic and multiracial vision of the future America(n) and re-inscribing the value of blackness(es). As Ryan Friedman conveys, “Ryder’s decision [reconfirms] his ties to the historical past of the African American struggle . . . By appearing alongside his wife of ‘a slave marriage,’ [he] very publicly asserts his own ‘servile origin,’ his experience of near-bondage and flight—not to mention his kinship with a woman whose appearance signifies, in the context of the story’s physiological metaphors, extreme social abjection” (54–55). This defense of equality, however, like Ryder’s new and improved identity, is to a certain extent the product of duress: it is the result of the “shadow of guilt” which hung over the heads of these interracial people, including Mrs. Dixon who, in tears at the end of the short story, seems as if she is moments away from making a “passing confession” of her own (Fleischmann 470). As Chesnutt illustrates, by taking a step backwards socially, Ryder takes one ahead morally: he is able to transcend his own internalized racism and prejudice to prove that despite all of his pretenses he has not “outgrown” ‘Liza Jane. Clearly, Ryder’s actions suggest that racial and class divides can be healed within the African American community with self-sacrifice, transparency, acceptance, and the mutual respect of difference.



### The Mockery of Marriage: Satirizing the Blue Veins in "A Matter of Principle"

As illustrated through "The Wife of His Youth," Chesnutt uses the possibility of social mobility through marriage to critique, question, and even satirize the ethics of light-skinned blacks who attempt to imitate or pass into white society (Soken 52). Chesnutt also employs this technique in other color line stories, most noticeably in "A Matter of Principle," in which Chesnutt critiques the notion of biracial social mobility through marriage and questions the ethics of passing by presenting a sarcastic parody of the self-conscious classism and internalized racism of elite light-skinned blacks. "A Matter of Principle" focuses on Cicero Clayton's attempts to marry his daughter Alice to a suitable—read wealthy, socially-distinguished, and almost white—partner. Clayton is, like all "respectable" interracial people in Groveland, a member of the Blue Vein Society and concerned with the "race problem." While he calls for "a clearer conception of the brotherhood of man," his vision of this brotherhood does not include African Americans, for he, as Chesnutt conveys, considers himself "white": "The white people lump us all together as negroes, and condemn us all to the same social ostracism. But I don't accept this classification . . . People who belong by half or more of their blood to the most virile and progressive race of modern times have as much right to call themselves white as others have to call them negroes" (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 238). Not only is Cicero Clayton (named after the famous Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero) pretentious enough to believe that he can redefine the racial categories established by the white legal system, but he also naively maintains that such behavior is his natural birthright and prerogative—a "matter of principle" as it were. As Clayton conveys, "If we are not accepted as white, we can at any rate make it clear that we object to being called black. Our protest cannot fail in time to impress itself upon the better class of white people; for the Anglo-Saxon race loves justice" (238).

Clayton maintains his principles by disassociating himself from anyone who is phenotypically black. Not only does he avoid them in all social situations, but he also makes it a point to attend an almost all-white church and involve himself in activities of "better class" whites. Like Ryder, Clayton is a self-made man who depends on artificial social and racial constructions to obscure his ambiguous roots and distinguish himself from the masses. He thus exemplifies the way in which Chesnutt deployed, through his characters, "a cluster of interrelated visual," or phenotypic strategies, "passing, masquerade, performance, imitation, and theatricality," that "detach[ed] race from the body, exposing race as artifice, a social construct" (Toth 72). Clayton erroneously believes that by engaging in such behaviors he is protecting himself and his family from the "dangers" of being on the "wrong" side of the color line. However, in reality, his efforts towards maintaining artificial racial boundaries only expose the fragility of, and deceit involved in, identity construction. Alice Clayton, as her father's daughter, also uses such strategies, which hinge on a mixture of internalized racism and treachery: she "was queen of her social set. She was young, she was handsome. She was nearly white; she frankly confessed her sorrow that she was not entirely so" (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 239). This compulsion to pass as white at any cost is particularly detrimental to the solidarity of the African American community—Alice revels in competing with young ladies in her social set, especially Miss Lura Watkins, who are not as young, or as white, as she is—and the Claytons' hubris proves to be their downfall.

As elucidated in “The Wife of His Youth,” in the world of the Blue Veins, marriage not only determines social status but also the extent to which one can pass into white society. As Chesnutt explains,

Miss Clayton and her friends, by reason of their assumed superiority to black people would not marry black men, and except in rare instances white men would not marry them. They were therefore restricted . . . to the young men of their own complexion. But they, unfortunately for the girls, had a wider choice. In any State where the laws permit freedom of the marriage contract, a man, by virtue of his sex, can find a wife of whatever complexion he prefers . . . To the number thus lost by “going to the other side,” as the phrase went, add the worthless contingent whom no self-respecting woman would marry, and the choice was still further restricted. (*Selected Writings* 239)

Although Alice has been courted by many respected, but poorly-connected, light-skinned black men, her condescending father, like many of his social rank, openly expresses “contempt toward those below them on the social scale; they viewed the social pretensions of upstart nobodies from the middle class as a triumph of vulgarity . . . of the submerged masses” (Gatewood 6–7). Thus, Alice remains single until the age of twenty-three. However, all the while Jack, a poor relation who lives with the Claytons and assumes the role of servant, secretly pines away for Alice. Although he has the same skin tone as Alice when she is not powdered and masquerading as white, is the same age, and is “passably good looking,” he is socially removed from their circle and is therefore never considered a serious suitor. In fact, “Alice marrying Jack” is the running joke in the Clayton household (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 240). However, Jack is intent on marrying the object of his desire and vows to put her, and her haughty fantasies of white grandeur, in their place.

After attending a “colored” inaugural ball in Washington, DC (members of the “interracial elite” often emulated white society by organizing parallel “separate but equal” organizations and events), Alice receives a letter from one of her dancing partners, Congressman Hamilton M. Brown, who is enamored by her beauty, and presumably, whiteness—both of which would be assets to an African American man seeking to advance in politics. The letter, which expresses his wishes to visit her during his upcoming trip to Groveland, excites both Alice and her mother, who perceive it as a declaration of marriage. Before granting his approval, however, Clayton asks the pivotal question: “What color is he?” (243). Because Alice danced with so many men that evening, she cannot recall the appropriately-named Brown, let alone his color. Clayton begins to investigate the Congressman, declaring “If this man is black, we don’t want to encourage him. If he’s the right sort, [read light-skinned] we’ll invite him to the house” (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 243).

Clayton consults with Solomon Sadler, who claims to have known two Browns with the initials H. M. B. at Oberlin College: “Hamilton M. Brown and a Henry M. Brown. One was stout and dark and the other was slim and quite light; you could scarcely tell him from a dark white man. They used to call them ‘light Brown’ and ‘dark Brown’ . . . As I remember them, Hamilton was the fair one—a very good-looking, gentlemanly fellow, and, as I heard, a good student and a fine speaker” (244). The latter piece of information does not

interest Clayton, who is fixated on Brown's hair texture, which in his elite social circle is a marker of whiteness and therefore desirability. He is pleased to hear that Brown's hair is "very good indeed; straight . . . something like a Spaniard or a Portuguese," because it describes his own hair texture and grants the Congressman instant entitlement to court his daughter. He concludes that "he evidently means business, and we must treat him white" (a pun on "right") and resolves to host him at his own house since there are no *appropriate* hotels for elite color line blacks in Groveland (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 244).

The Claytons spend the next few days preparing the house, organizing an elaborate reception for their acquaintances, and planning entertainment for Alice's "future husband," who was essentially "a white man" according to Mr. Clayton's racial theory. At the train station, however, Clayton and Jack are confronted by a "palpably, aggressively black [man] with pronounced African features and woolly hair, without apparently a single drop of redeeming white blood" (247). Clayton assumes the man is Congressman Brown because he is standing next to a suitcase with "H. M. Brown" and "Washington, DC" written on it. After Jack confirms the man's identity, they leave the train station. As Clayton rationalizes, "if the Congressman had turned out to be brown, even dark brown, with fairly good hair, though [I] might not have desired him as a son-in-law, [I] could have welcomed him as a guest. [However] . . . in the face of [my] well-known principles, [my] lifelong rule of conduct, [I cannot] take this negro into [my] home and introduce him to [my] friends" (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 247).

Because of his social position, Clayton is nevertheless obliged to treat the visitor like a gentleman. In other words, he has to formulate an excuse to avoid any sort of social interaction. Clayton and Jack create the impression that Groveland's diphtheria epidemic has also struck their home, and that the entire family is under quarantine, thus eliminating the possibility of a meeting between Alice and the Congressman. Even though Clayton is aware of the deception involved in his whiteface performance he, like Ryder, attempts to deflect accusations of internalized racism by framing it as a "matter of principle": "No sacrifice is too great to escape having to entertain him; of course I have no prejudice against his color—he can't help that—but it is the *principle* of the thing. If we received him it would be a concession fatal to all my views and theories" (249).

Alice and her mother are disappointed, but agree to create a façade of illness in order to prevent that "nigger," as Mrs. Clayton calls him, from entering their home (249). After cancelling the reception and bribing the family physician to corroborate their lies, the Claytons breathe a collective sigh of relief thinking that they have survived the fiasco without damaging their reputations. However, their grave error, which is the result of their haste, hubris, and racist principles, is revealed when Clayton, by mere coincidence, reads an article in the newspaper on "A Colored Congressman." Described as "a tall and shapely man, about thirty-five years old, with an olive complexion not noticeably darker than many a white man's, straight hair, and eyes as black as sloes . . . this son of South Carolina reveals the polished manners of the Southern gentleman, and neither from his appearance nor his conversation would one suspect that the white blood which flows in his veins in such preponderating measure had ever been crossed by that of a darker race" (250). At that moment, Clayton realizes that he has ironically been outwitted by his own internalized racism: he mistook the Congressman for his traveling partner, Bishop Jones of the African Methodist Jerusalem Church, or, as the article describes him, "a splendid

type of the pure Negro" (251). Fate deals Clayton a further blow when he discovers that his daughter's archrival, Lula Watkins, has caught the fancy of the Congressman, and that they are to be married. Not only is his daughter a "victim of circumstance and principle," but the entire family has also been duped by their trusted servant. Jack knowingly deceives the Claytons when asked to confirm the Congressman's identity at the train station so he can win Alice's affections, which, to Cicero Clayton's chagrin, he does.

As Chesnutt illustrates in "A Matter of Principle," those living on the color line are doomed, both morally and socially, when they attempt to marginalize other African Americans by promoting the values of white society. As this tale conveys, engaging in passing—either by maintaining rigid racial and class principles or by contriving to marry "whiteness"—can often come at great personal cost. Not only are the Claytons victims of their own hypocrisy, but they are the subject of Chesnutt's, and presumably his black and white audience's, ridicule. Ryder and Clayton associate passing with material wealth and social status, and in the end, do not achieve either: Ryder reunites with the wife of his youth and rejects Mrs. Dixon; Clayton's daughter marries Jack, and both are ostracized by the Blue Vein Society—the group of individuals they attempted to impress in the first place. Their desire to distinguish themselves from "dark and undesirable" African Americans turns them into racists who recreate the oppressive binaries of white society. Clayton preaches the gospel of brotherhood, yet possesses a very limited notion of who could, or could not be, a "brother." He restricts himself to his very narrow social circle and becomes a victim of the oppression that he creates, thus reinforcing Chesnutt's "awareness that enslavement may be both socially- and self-imposed" (Fienberg 230; Bryant 73–74, 78–79). His unethical and exclusionary behavior prevents his family from numerous social pleasures with darker-skinned blacks, and his internalized racism unintentionally ruins his daughter's chances of finding a "suitable" husband. At the end of "A Matter of Principle," it is Jack, the "wily trickster" and least racist character in the entire tale, who is able to mock and manipulate Clayton's repulsive principles for his own benefit (Fienberg 230; Delmar 365).

### Adoption and Amnesia in "Her Virginia Mammy" and "Cicely's Dream"

Like "The Wife of His Youth" and "A Matter of Principle," "Her Virginia Mammy" also involves the deception and erasure of identity that accompanies passing. "Her Virginia Mammy" focuses on the racial identity of Clara Hohlfelder, a dance teacher who is on the verge of marriage to John Winthrop, "a tall, broad-shouldered, fair-haired young [doctor], with a frank and kindly countenance . . . twenty-six or twenty-seven years old. His face was of the type one instinctively associates with intellect and character" (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 210). A Boston Brahmin with a "whiter than white" Mayflower pedigree (we are to presume he is a descendant of John Winthrop, one of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the author of the "City upon a Hill" sermon), Winthrop is deeply in love with Clara and is eager to marry and make her part of his noble lineage. However, as an orphan who was adopted by German immigrants, Clara, a "nameless" woman whose own pedigree is a mystery, resists Winthrop's desire to "give her his name" and asks him to wait until she solves the dilemma of her "true parentage" (read racial identity) before they wed.

Throughout the short story, Chesnutt makes numerous suggestions about Clara's dubious background, which is shrouded in secrecy and "darkness." The anxiety surrounding her race is only heightened by the "unknown"—that is, the fact that she is adopted. Even though she loves her German parents deeply, she has always felt that there was something "different"—something not quite "right" (or white)—about herself: "I feel that there is warmer, richer blood coursing in my veins than the placid stream that crept through theirs" (211). This warmer, richer blood, we are meant to deduce, represents Clara's African heritage, a part of her racial identity she suspects exists, but is, due to her internalized racism, afraid to acknowledge: "I feel that even if I had but simply to turn my hand to learn who I am and whence I came, I should shrink from taking the step, for fear that what I might learn would leave me forever unhappy" (212). Winthrop assures her that even though her "past is shrouded in mystery," he does not care about her ancestry, for, as he states, what are "musty, moldy old grandfathers compared with life and love and happiness?" (212) Alluding to Chesnutt's own vision of the interracial, and therefore vigorous and superior "future American ethnic type" who would transform the United States into a new "City upon a Hill," John also conveys, "For the past we can claim no credit, for those who made it died with it. Our destiny lies in the future" (212). Nevertheless, Clara believes that her status as a "Miss Nobody" with questionable ancestry has the potential of "darkening" their lives: there exists the chance that her "origins [are] the worst [they] could be—that [she] not only [has] no name, but [that she is] not entitled to one" (i.e., she is the descendant of slaves) (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 213).

Even though Clara maintains that such a revelation would ruin Winthrop's social standing, he insists that her background holds no meaning for him, and that he would "marry [her] just the same—even if [she] were one of [the interracial students in her] dancing-class to-night" (213). In fact, John probably suspects that Clara is "not quite white" all along, as his numerous puns and double-entendres suggest: "It is a great thing to have faith in one's self . . . It is a fine thing, too, to be able to enjoy the *passing* moment. One of your greatest charms in my eyes, Clara, is that in your *lighter* moods you have this faculty" (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 215, emphasis added). Chesnutt and Winthrop "play" with passing not because it is trivial, but rather because to them, it is irrelevant—in other words, it should not even be of concern to interracial individuals, who should embrace their heritage and not try to erase it. Based on this dialogue, Chesnutt clearly suggests that "virtue resides not in the rigid, exclusive social forms of old-world hierarchy but rather in the more flexible, inclusive atmosphere of post-bellum democracy" (Chandler 12).

Mrs. Harper, a light-skinned black woman who accompanies one of Clara's interracial students, detects the grief in her face, as well as her need for sympathy and comfort, and inquires about her dilemma. Clara tells her tale and without words, the "motherly" Mrs. Harper comprehends the "circumstances" which are preventing the couple from marrying. Clara also conveys details about her adoptive parents—"I knew they were fair and I was dark; they were stout and I was slender; they were slow and I was quick"—and the fact that she had been found among the wreckage of "The Pride of St. Louis," a steamboat that had exploded twenty three years ago (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 217). Although Clara does not notice it, the expression on Mrs. Harper's face changes to instant recognition, which is confirmed when she sees Clara's baby clothing monogrammed with the initials M.S. and her coral necklace. Mrs. Harper explains—with great hesitation, which suggests



the withholding of information (Callahan, *Kin of Another Kind* 49)—how she was also on the boat that day with Clara's parents, who were descendents of the Staffords and Fairfaxes, two of the first families of Virginia, and how her mother was a Southern lady and her father an abolitionist. However, before Mrs. Harper can reveal her identity as Clara's mother, Clara embraces her assuming that, as a black woman, she had to be her Virginia mammy.<sup>3</sup> Clara's action is critical because as Laura Dawkins conveys, "it is the acquisition of a mammy that makes Clara truly white. By placing herself and [Mrs. Harper] on separate sides of an oppositional social structure—mistress and mammy—Clara does not merely validate, but actually constructs, her racial privilege . . . Clara's 'whiteness' becomes visible only in juxtaposition to the 'blackness' of a mammy" (par. 14). Thus by recreating the hierarchal mistress/slave relationship in a post-Civil War context, Clara is able to elide her suspicions regarding her lineage by "confirming" her white, aristocratic blue-blooded power. She can now enter Winthrop's world on "solid footing" and also include Mrs. Harper in her life as a surrogate mother, all without arousing any suspicion (at least beyond this mother/daughter/fiancé triangle) about her racial identity.

Although Clara's racial anxieties dissolve by the end of the tale and she is finally "restored to her own (and Winthrop's) people," Chesnutt's narrative makes it clear that Clara and Mrs. Harper are not mammy and child but rather mother and daughter, and that Clara is in fact a racial *poseur*—a color line black passing in the white world (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 222). Without revealing anything to Clara, Mrs. Harper and Winthrop silently acknowledge the "points of resemblance between them . . . the same oval face, and in Clara's hair a faint suggestion of the wave in the older woman's; and though Clara was fairer of complexion, and her eyes were gray and the other's black, there was visible . . . one of those indefinable likenesses . . . marking blood relationship" (219). Mrs. Harper thus willingly, and consciously, erases Clara's racial history and sacrifices a relationship with her daughter in order to allow Clara to masquerade as white. Moreover, Winthrop does nothing to intervene in this process, and allows Clara to believe that she is descended from old, white, aristocratic families in order to complete her process of racial closure.

While on the surface this may seem like a noble gesture that not only grants Clara psychological peace but also permits her to assume a role in elite white society, Chesnutt frames the climax of "Her Virginia Mammy" as a portrait of the secrecy, deception, denial, and erasure involved in passing.<sup>4</sup> Clara is denied the experience of bonding with white relatives who may reveal the truth because, as she is informed by her mammy/mother, they all died or were scattered after the war. Moreover, she is also deprived of her black heritage, and deeper and more meaningful interactions with the African American community, when Mrs. Harper erases all traces of her interracial background and when Winthrop artificially "bleaches" her white through marriage—a goal that Ryder could not attain. Instead of conveying the truth to Clara, Mrs. Harper fictionalizes her family history, thereby perpetuating the vicious cycle of lies and "forgetting" that has separated her from her daughter and contributing to the internalized racism and identity fragmentation that, in Chesnutt's opinion, plague the black community. In return for making this "unethical" choice, Chesnutt has destined both Mrs. Harper and Clara for a lifetime of alienation and loss. Even though Clara promises to include her mammy in her future life with Winthrop, the short story ultimately "depicts a black mother who finds her lost child and then loses her again; indeed, the scene of reunion between mother and daughter is also the moment

of final and irrevocable parting, since the mother relinquishes her recovered child into a world of racial privilege from which she herself will always be excluded" (Dawkins par. 8).

Like "The Wife of His Youth," "A Matter of Principle," and "Her Virginia Mammy," "Cicely's Dream" also confronts the deception and denial that accompanies racial passing. This short story focuses on Cicely Green, a young black girl who imagines that she is loved by and married to "a young man whiter than she and yet not all white"—the same dream that Cicero Clayton had for his own daughter (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 256). When she discovers a "swarthy" man with amnesia in the cornfields of North Carolina, she brings him home, nurses his wounds, and "adopts" him. As a man with no past and a murky racial history, he is like Adam, a *tabula rasa* which Cicely "Green," as Eve, fills with her own dreams and desires (Duncan 122). She tries to make him "pass for black" by pulling him, at least psychologically, into her world and teaching him "negro English" (his speech becomes an "echo" of Cicely's own) and African American culture (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 259). Through this project of racial construction, "John" becomes "hers—hers alone. She had found him, as the Pharaoh's daughter had found Moses in the bulrushes; she had taught him to speak, to think, to love. [However], she had not taught him to remember; she would not have wished him to" (260).

Like Mr. Ryder, "John" or Arthur Carey, a Union soldier who had been wounded and left for dead, eventually remembers and recovers his past when his fiancée, Mayflower descendent Martha Chandler, appears to teach the newly-emancipated ex-slaves (Ramsey 36). Although Cicely attempts to mimic Martha's style and white mannerisms, Arthur chooses to marry Martha over Cicely, or as she calls herself, the "other woman" (Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* 268). When the two lovers reunite, Arthur is suddenly "restored to reason and to his world," and abandons his black "mistress." Like Clara Hohlfelder, he chooses to pass into the white world rather than remain in the African American community that had saved him from the threshold of death. As Cicely rationalizes, "if the wounded man were of her own race, her dream would thus far have been realized, and having met the young man, the other joys might be expected to follow. If he should turn out to be a white man, then her dream was clearly one of the kind that go by contraries, and she could expect only sorrow and trouble and pain as the proper sequences of this fateful discovery" (256). Cicely simply concludes that Arthur must be a white man since he chooses Martha. However, as Chesnutt illustrates through his color line works, race is often socially constructed and personally selected. Passing involves conscious choice, erasure, and denial, and it is far easier to slip into the white world of privilege than persevere in the black world of racial prejudice. Thus, there is a very strong possibility that like Clara, Arthur—and perhaps even Martha—are also color line African Americans suffering from internalized racism who have chosen to forget their racial history through amnesia and instead wear the white mask of passing. For, as a "pretty quadroon" remarks about Arthur's fiancée, "I don't b'liebe she's natch'ly ez white ez dat. I 'spec' she's be'n powd'rin'! An' I know all dat hair can't be her'n; she's got on a switch, sho's you bawn" (264).

In essence, "Cicely's Dream" represents Chesnutt's edenic, utopian vision of what a raceless "future America" could resemble if passing did not exist—the possibilities that would flourish if only love could overcome race. As Chesnutt illustrates in "The Wife of His Youth" anthology, all attempts to deny or erase blackness(es) through white performance are destructive in that they perpetuate both internal/external racism and artificial racial



categories into which one “should” pass. Moreover, they also damage the black community by marginalizing the richness of hybrid identities. Collectively, his works provide a window into a color line world in which blacknesses should be celebrated, not elided. “Amalgamation, he hoped, would someday create a mono-racial, mono-ethnic society in which racial difference would be a moot issue” (Ramsey 41–42). By conveying this message through his short stories, Chesnutt “rescues the mixed-race character from his residence in a racial no man’s land and replaces him in both the social and literary worlds, not as a tragic figure emblematic of racial strife, but as a testimony to the possibility of racial hybridity” (Fleischmann 466). By exposing the high cost of passing, Chesnutt’s characters not only convey the need for racially fluid worlds in which all shades are possible and equally valuable, but also illuminate the presence and power of the black family, the need for unity in the African American community, and the important role played by peoples of color in the formation of a democratic America (Ramsey 41). As Chesnutt suggests, it is only when racial boundaries are deconstructed and passing strategies, which value whiteness over blackness, are resisted and subverted that racial prejudice can be fully challenged.

#### NOTES

1. States had to redraw the color line by legally determining who was and was not “white,” and criteria varied from state to state. Some states based whiteness on physical appearance; others on heritage, often tracing one’s family tree back to great-grandparents. For more information, see Sharfstein.
2. While an “interracial elite” composed of mostly “quadroons” and “octoroons” did exist and exert some power in the antebellum South (a few, in fact, became quite wealthy and influential), they were not included in the social structure of the white aristocracy. They had their own social structure, with limited access to white elite society, which was usually a function of their ability to ingratiate themselves or pass. Many were exploited economically, physically, and often sexually by aristocratic white men, some of whom endowed them with increased social status. For more information, see Gatewood.
3. Given the frequency of interracial mixing in the plantation South, Mrs. Harper could have had the “blood of the Fairfax family” coursing through her veins. Another explanation of the Fairfax connection is that Mrs. Harper was Mr. Stafford’s mistress, and that he was actually married to a white Fairfax woman. Yet another possible scenario is that Mr. Stafford (an abolitionist who freed his slaves before the war and sold his lands) and Mrs. Harper were traveling up north not because he had business that required attending, but because he wanted to find a more tolerant location to reside with his lover (Mrs. Harper), and their interracial child, Clara. Chesnutt obscures the details of Mrs. Harper’s and Mr. Fairfax’s relationship because legally and socially, their relationship would have been, at best, problematic. Thus, he leaves the specifics up to the reader’s imagination. What is clear from the short story, however, is that Mrs. Harper was Clara’s caretaker and wet nurse. The latter confirms the fact that she had just given birth—in this case probably to Clara. For more in-depth analysis, see Callahan, *Kin of Another Kind* chapter 2.
4. Since this short story transpires in Ohio, where interracial marriage was legal, Clara’s race has no official bearing on her marriage. It is a personal issue she must resolve before marrying Winthrop.

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**THE VISCERAL ALLEGORY OF WAITING FOR  
THE BARBARIANS**  
**A Postmodern Re-reading of J. M. Coetzee's Apartheid Novels**

*by Shadi Neimneh*

Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm  
of things.

—Walter Benjamin

Allegory, then, is the doubling—indeed, the multiplication—of “texts”  
within and around a work of literature or art.

—David Joselit

**Coetzee and Allegory**

Nowadays, in the midst of a wave of protests and uprisings in the Arab world, the body re-emerges as a historical site of oppression and resistance. The killing of protesters that took or is taking place at the hands of security forces in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria testifies to the materiality of historical oppression. Apartheid should never be considered away from other contexts of bodily violations and loss of human rights like the Nazi death camps or the current Arab uprisings or even the Israeli-Palestinian situation. The use of sniper bullets, arrests, and torture against demonstrators in the Arab world is similar, for example, to the Sharpeville shootings in 1960 in South Africa when many protesters against the pass laws were killed and injured, with many demonstrators shot in the back as they fled the police. The same applies to the Soweto uprising of 1976 which resulted in the death of hundreds of black students protesting against apartheid and teaching in Afrikaans. Even the protesters' goal of attaining civil liberties in South Africa under apartheid is similar to the causes of the current turmoil in many Arab states. Political rights and socioeconomic reform—as the current success of revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya shows/promises—are achieved at a price of bodily sacrifice.

Traditionally, allegory rhetorically speaks other than what it says. It becomes visible “when a progression of events or images suggests a translation of them into conceptual language” (Frye et al. 12). As Brenda Machosky reminds us, allegory is “to say one thing and mean another” and it “has always demanded that we think otherwise” (7). It is a way of writing and interpreting literature highlighting a contrast between an apparent mean-

ing and an intended one that often gets privileged. J. A. Cuddon defines it as “a story in verse or prose with a double meaning: a primary or surface meaning; and a secondary or under-the-surface meaning” (22). Allegory, besides being a narrative in which something is spoken “otherwise,” is a narrative that displaces and ambiguates reference. As a symbolic means of representation that disguises true meaning, it is not typically viewed as a visceral form of art.

By nature, allegory highlights the difficulties of articulating what is not, or cannot be, said. It hints at an “other” difficult to articulate and is implicated in the problematic of representation, which accounts for its relevance in a postmodern critique of Coetzee’s apartheid works.<sup>1</sup> It is not simply, Benjamin argues, “a playful illustrative technique,” but “a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is” (162). Traditionally, the literal meaning in allegory is overshadowed by the figurative one. Because this surface meaning is doubled by the figurative one external to the text and because allegory refers us to distant origins of meaning suggested by Benjamin’s metaphor of “ruins” (178), a good deal of allegorical interpretation becomes abstractly intellectual, trying to establish links between what is stated and what is implied. In *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man highlights levels of reading ranging between the literal and the figural and treats readings as allegorical, acting according to what we bring to texts from the world: “By reading we get, as we say, *inside* a text that was first something alien to us and which we now make our own by an act of understanding. But this understanding becomes at once the representation of an extra-textual meaning” (12–13). De Man further argues that “Allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading—a sentence in which the genitive ‘of’ has itself to be ‘read’ as a metaphor” (205). And this metaphorical dimension is only one level of allegorical interpretation we can use in Coetzee. But since this traditional approach is inadequate and problematic for critics of Coetzee because allegory is deemed in this sense as the evasive representation of abstract ideas or moral principles, I articulate another level of allegorical interpretation, a “visceral” one.<sup>2</sup>

Coetzee’s apartheid novels problematize our understanding of allegory (the interpretive act) in that allegory in them functions at intellectually distant and more literal levels. In Coetzee’s revision of received notions of allegory, the narrative is as important as, if not more important than, the external sphere of conceptual meanings. This is Coetzee’s diversion from simple allegories in which the surface meaning is overwhelmed by a deeper one of commentary. In traditional allegories, characters are abstractions and the plot communicates a moral doctrine. In Coetzee, concrete and material narrative facts are not overwhelmed by abstract meanings. Coetzee defamiliarizes allegory and allegorizes, in the process, the non-allegorical, i.e. the literal. The first-order level of overt meaning foregrounds referentiality and complicates it. It is more important than the covert parallels. The literal level of meaning that is traditionally submerged under the symbolic one is foregrounded, which reverses allegory’s interest in intellectual otherness. Bodily suffering that happens at the literal level of Coetzee’s apartheid novels, in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as I exemplify here, cannot be eclipsed by interpretive meanings or external referents.<sup>3</sup>

While the received notion of allegory relates narrative events to conceptual or moral levels, Coetzee in “The Novel Today” resists simple allegorization when he claims that “a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering” (4). Aware of

criticisms that allegory is abstractly rational and mechanical, he seeks to revise this notion of allegory as dissociated, to dramatize allegory's political and historical investment via a literality that overwhelms any figurative constructions of meaning, without necessarily negating allegory's connection to abstraction. The literal and the metaphorical interact, but the literal is not jettisoned once it is launched at meaning. If traditional allegory transforms political realities into narrative and tackles them abstractly, Coetzee makes narrative events strongly present. Revising allegory in a postmodern fashion, Coetzee deconstructs the logic through which it works. Each novel, as I explicate in my analysis of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, performs a visceral materiality of its own, but the general effect on us is still allegorical, which is why a visceral allegory is intertwined with allegorical viscosity since the materiality of the suffering body becomes a new order for the allegorical. In Coetzee we never get past the body but he, as a postmodernist, problematizes the representation of the material body, which is why his early work received hostile reviews within South Africa.<sup>4</sup>

### The Undeniable Body

Coetzee's is a preoccupation with the undeniable authority of suffering and oppression to which the body is subjected in material history. In an interview with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point* when asked to comment on the importance of the body in his works, especially with relation to his novel *Foe*, Coetzee talks about power relations and the undeniable authority / alterity of the suffering body: "Friday is mute, but Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body" (248).<sup>5</sup> Coetzee adds by way of asserting the ontological existence of the body: "Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt" (248). The suffering body in pain is beyond doubt in that material suffering—bodily mutilation and slavery in the case of Friday—is viscerally real to the victim of oppression, happening as a consequence of the power exercised on the victim. Similarly, Elaine Scarry writes that "The physical pain is so incontestably real that it seems to confer its quality of 'incontestable reality' on that power that has brought it into being. It is, of course, precisely because the reality of that power is so highly contestable, the regime so unstable, that torture is being used" (27). The suffering body has an undeniable power for the writer who is implicated in historical guilt. Suffering in South Africa wields an authority on the white writer and is not to be dismissed. It even assumes its authority over the writer and overwhelms him. As Coetzee writes in *Doubling the Point*, "it is not that one grants the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable" (248). Coetzee adds that suffering overwhelms him, that his thinking "is thrown into confusion and helplessness by the fact of suffering in the world" (248). He articulates the postmodern difficulty of representing the reality of material suffering taking place in the world. He is aware that bodily suffering happens around us and constitutes material history, but he is also aware that such events are estranged and complicated when we represent them in fiction and translate historical materiality into the discourse of the novel. He grants non- or pre-discursive reality to the suffering body and simultaneously interrogates the body's discursive production.

The body acts discursively as a trope for oppression within a postcolonial context, in and outside South Africa. At another level, the viscosity of suffering and pain existing at a novel's literal level negotiates the distant analogies we might make and forms another visceral level of allegorical significance. The metaphorical meanings are allegorical just as the literal is allegorical in its way. While I might have conceded to Rebecca Saunders's claim that allegory "is a kind of language in which a text's literal meaning is foreign to its proper meaning," in Coetzee's case the vividness and abundance of bodily suffering are not exactly "foreign" to the novels' "proper" meaning (223). The visceral materiality that abounds in the novels appropriates any "proper" allegorical meanings and enacts/embodies them. It bridges the gap between different levels of meaning. And instead of simply making us intellectually ponder the figural context to which the novels allude, Coetzee's apartheid novels evoke a crude viscosity of pain and suffering that makes them peculiar allegories of the body. To the extent that all readings are somewhat allegorical in that modern allegory generalizes and admits the play of meaning, this article allegorizes Coetzee's novels and reads them as postmodern allegories of the body at an intellectual level and, more importantly or rather more vividly, at a visceral level.

### **Intellectual / Discursive Allegory and Postmodernism**

A negative critique of Coetzee's "dehistoricized" allegories of the colonial situation fails to acknowledge that he sought to find a way of addressing apartheid realities as part of a global history of colonialism and struggled against the difficulty of articulating material suffering in fiction because it is beyond representation or, when described, is subject to fictional construction. Meskell and Weiss write that what many critics "have found difficult to grasp is that, rather than mimetically reproducing the past's historical facticity, Coetzee's writing wrestles with the material, bodily affect of that history" (97). A postmodernist, Coetzee conveys how material suffering is mediated in language. As Richard Lehan contends, a major assumption of postmodernism "is that meaning is a human construct, the result of paradigmatic thinking, and the product of the mediated questions we choose to answer" (249). Because postmodernism questions realism, it allows us to relate to the world, not mimetically, but through discourse.

Postmodernism's problematization of representation as discursive should take us to the confluence between postmodernism and allegory because allegory is typically viewed as a means of self-reflexive, discursive representation. Like postmodernism, allegory makes us think "otherwise" about the real. Examined as allegories about the South African situation, Coetzee's apartheid novels represent that situation discursively and mediate it, which makes them, intellectually, postmodern allegories about the interplay between history and its reproduction. Craig Owens underscores allegory's alliance with the postmodern project and its celebration of problematized reference. In his two essays on "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," he admits that allegory has been long viewed as an "aesthetic aberration, the antithesis of art" (67). For Owens, however, postmodernism "neither brackets nor suspends the referent but works instead to problematize the activity of reference" ("Part 2" 80). Allegory, similarly, problematizes



the relationship between the textual and the meta-textual. It celebrates the interplay of possible meanings functioning at different levels and in different contexts. Hence, what Owens calls “the allegorical impulse,” often deconstructive, is strongly related to postmodernism. Such an impulse “that characterizes postmodernism,” Owens argues, “is a direct consequence of its preoccupation with reading” (“Part 2” 64). For Owens, allegory and postmodernism are intertwined as far as representation is concerned.

I align Coetzee’s allegories functioning at the literal level, what I call visceral allegories, with the material body and align the allegories functioning at the intellectual level, what I call traditional allegories, with the discursively constructed body. The analogy Benjamin draws between allegories and ruins in my epigraph can be understood in terms of the distance from origins ruins make us aware of and thus a mediated, intellectual meaning rather than a direct one. Allegory suggests a difference between present and distant levels of meaning. The distant level of meaning works generally, and discursively, through ideas beyond the immediate context of the work. But, importantly, Benjamin’s figure emphasizes the (historical) materiality of allegory, its “visceral” subjection to ruin, pain, or destruction. Actually, Benjamin articulates the subtle viscosity of allegory rather than its historical effacement when he writes, “In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting” (177–78). Moreover, allegory, commonly thought to destroy literal meaning, functions subversively in Coetzee by recreating visceral/literal bodies.

Frye shares De Man’s premise that all commentary is allegorical in a thematic reading when he claims that formal allegories have “a strong thematic interest, though it does not follow . . . that any thematic criticism of a work of fiction will turn it into an allegory . . . . Genuine allegory is a structural element in literature: it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical interpretation alone” (*Anatomy* 53–54). Frye adds that commentary is “allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery” and that it “looks at literature as, in its formal phase, a potential allegory of events and ideas” (*Anatomy* 89). A “naïve allegory” for Frye loses literary merit in being clear or direct; it is one that translates “ideas into images” (*Anatomy* 90). For Owens, as for De Man (but not explicitly for Frye), allegory “can no longer be condemned as something merely appended to the work of art, for it is revealed as a structural possibility inherent in every work” (“Part 2” 64). Coetzee’s allegories are far from being imposed or naïve as they are about mediating the body within self-conscious, multi-layered allegories. Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron* lives an allegory created by her symbolic cancer in an apartheid South Africa torn by township violence, and the titular protagonist Michael K poses to the medical examiner as an allegory of a resistant materiality in a future civil war South Africa. Similarly, the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* allegorizes imperial oppression. It is in their entirety and thematically that we can see Coetzee’s apartheid novels as allegories of the body. Each time we give the literal an interpretive meaning we allegorize it and make it intellectually abstract. However, the problem with allegorizing fiction at the thematic level is that we read it figurally, which often reduces its effect in flat, conventional allegories. This is why Coetzee’s allegories of the body align themselves with an empowering postcolonial rhetoric and resist subsuming the literal under the metaphorical as traditional allegories do.



### *Waiting for the Barbarians and Allegory*

*Waiting for the Barbarians* has an indeterminate setting ideal for an allegory. Moreover, its generalized treatment of oppressive systems and state-sponsored torture can discursively relate to the South Africa of the writing time in the late 1970s. Fredric Jameson offers a "sweeping hypothesis" that "All third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical" and specifically "*national allegories*" in the confluence they stage between "the private and the public" (69). Jameson's term "*national allegories*" indicates the generalizing trend we associate with allegories and our tendency to read in a particular way each time we allegorize a body of works. Jameson's label is useful if we consider how Coetzee shares with third-world writers a preoccupation with the experience of colonialism and its manifestations. This is why saying that Coetzee's apartheid novels are, to draw on Jameson, "*national allegories*" of the body can be understood at the intellectual and traditional level of ideas but within a politicized, more concrete context. In Coetzee's revision of traditional allegories, postcolonial, postmodern elements add to the novels' political and historical force. This means that even if we understand Coetzee's apartheid novels in the typical sense of ideas, the novels use allegory to voice anti-imperial, and anti-allegorical, rhetoric. Allegory is employed by Coetzee to subvert established imperial structures which are, by definition, dichotomously allegorical.<sup>6</sup>

Since Coetzee is contextualizing allegory and using it to different ends from those of abstract intellectual formations, we find that his apartheid novels are self-conscious allegories in a subversive sense. The novels remind us of their status as allegories of a resistant materiality difficult to grasp yet inaccessible to us without discursive mediation. Coetzee does not accidentally use the word "allegory" or its variants in his novels. He wants us to read the novels in a particular (that is, untraditional) way, and the novels reflect on their reading as such. Since allegory is "a mix of making and reading combined in one mode, its nature is to produce a ruminative self-reflexivity" (Fletcher 77). Allegories are aware of their self-reflexive nature and their methodologies of representing the world, which draws the reader's attention to their fictional status. "Self-reflection," Fletcher argues, "is obsessively an aspect of the allegorical method itself, that is, allegory works by defining itself in its enigmatic use" (78). Coetzee writes in an allegorical tradition and simultaneously against this tradition.

To reiterate, to read is to allegorize, and Coetzee's allegory invites yet resists interpretation. Jeremy Tambling writes that the "desire to know, which produces allegory, also engenders allegorical interpretation (allegoresis)" (167). When asked by Joll and Mandel to interpret a set of ancient wooden slips with unknown script taken to be coded messages between the magistrate and the barbarians, the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* memorably retorts that they, due to their polysemy, form an "allegory": "They can be read in many orders. Further, each slip can be read in many ways" (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 109). Allegory, we should remember, can be thought of as a "continued metaphor" (Fletcher 94). It happens, Owens says, "whenever one text is doubled by another" (68). The magistrate reads the slips as an allegory about oppression within a novel that can be allegorically read so. If we are to understand and interpret Coetzee's apartheid novels as doubling each other, we are essentially allegorizing the interpretive act, for "allegorical works do not exist except in a universe of continuing allegoresis, commentary,

and interpretation" (Melville 88). This doubling device serves to point out the limitations of a traditional allegorical approach in which the literal meaning is doubled by the metaphorical one. *Waiting for the Barbarians* defies the traditional allegorical approach it seems to invite and upon which it is organically founded.

By reading the letters on certain slips as potentially standing for "war," "vengeance," or "justice" (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 109), the magistrate relies on the conventional meaning of allegory in which something stands for another through an intellectual system of equivalents or correspondences. Moreover, he is allegorizing any allegorical reading as the contrast between the signifier and the signified. As ancient imperial relics, the slips are distant from their enunciation and receptive of interpretations. The magistrate found them among the ruins of an ancient civilization in the desert surrounding the settlement. Excavated and uprooted as they are, they lack the immediate context in which they can be "properly" understood, which is why the magistrate uses them to mock the Empire's men by giving a travesty of present rather than distant oppression. This self-conscious reference to the status of the novel and to the interpretive act as allegorical represents the intellectually, metaphorical realm we traditionally encounter in allegories. Owens argues that allegory is "consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete—an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin, which Benjamin identified as the allegorical emblem par excellence" (70). Owens adds that allegory is "an emblem of mortality, of the inevitable dissolution and decay to which everything is subject" ("Part 2" 70). Allegories engage history through the metaphor of the lost past, but in Coetzee they also evoke the strong materiality and visceral presentness of this fragmented past.

Allegory is based on a principle of openness to interpretation and a tacit understanding among writer and reader about a referential world beyond the text to which allegory refers. It constructs meaning and invites us to look for it in ruptures and fragments. Treating the world as a ruin, allegory is a way of looking at it in Benjamin's account. As Owens contends, it is the model of "all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning" (69). But this figural meaning often takes the place of the more immediate one. Owens writes that "the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement. This is why allegory is condemned, but it is also the source of its theoretical significance" (69). Allegory commonly keeps its meaning "walled off from the source or initial stage of its utterance" (Fletcher 94). The Empire's representatives want to know what the characters on the slips stand for, and the magistrate's reply highlights their openness to interpretation and subverts the Empire's attempts to dominate signification. When he attempts to "read" some slips to Joll and Mandel, the magistrate ironically reads them as an allegory of imperial oppression, which, metaphorically, reflects back on the status of the novel with relation to apartheid politics at the traditionally intellectual level. Just as we know that the magistrate cannot read barbarian script, granting that the relics carry language, we should know that a traditional allegorical reading is distant from the original meaning the text seeks to communicate / present (and even make us feel as I argue in the next section).

At the peak of his frustration with the silent barbarian girl, the magistrate—an allegorist looking for signs and hidden meanings in torture rooms, tortured bodies, burial places, the cycle of the seasons, and the sounds of the night—vents his frustration in trying to

distance himself from the girl's torturers and questions the "allegorical" constructedness of meaning:

It is I who am seducing myself, out of vanity, into these meanings and correspondences. What depravity is it that is creeping upon me? I search for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre, like an old woman reading tea-leaves. There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman's body anything but a site of joy? (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 43–44)

As an amateur archeologist, cartographer, and historian, the magistrate is a seeker of meanings and signs. No wonder, he directs his interpretive will to the barbarian girl to fathom her story of torture. However, this self-conscious allegorization employed in the novel is used to reflect on histories of imperial oppression or complicity in such oppression and significantly to problematize allegory as an intellectual system of equivalents/symbols.

The magistrate not only reiterates the distinction between literal and allegorical readings, but he also resists allegorically reading himself as a figure for the torturer. An allegorical reading in the traditionally abstract sense that Coetzee subverts, and that the magistrate questions, looks for "meanings and correspondences." Thus, one critic argues that *Waiting for the Barbarians* "allegorizes the ambivalence of white resistance in South Africa" or "the dilemma of any dissenter in oppressive regime" (Ashcroft 103–4), which means that the novel is an allegory in the general sense of the contradictions involved in the position of the liberal humanist. Allegorical writing is doubled by its interpretive counterpart. We can allegorically read the magistrate as a figure for the complicit oppressor and the girl as the oppressed other. However, the text, as evidenced by the magistrate's doubts about allegorical correspondences, questions received notions of allegory. It negotiates this traditional and intellectual allegorizing with a more visceral one.<sup>7</sup> There is a certain way of non-allegorically, but again allegorically, reading the novels as literal allegories. Coetzee might be reacting to an assertion made by Jameson that third world literature can be always intellectually read as an "allegory of the embattled situation" of that culture/society (69). If Coetzee is resisting the reduction of his novels to the label of "national allegory," then can he be writing an alternative form of allegory, visceral allegories rather than—or complementing—intellectually abstract ones? As a postmodernist concerned with the art of storytelling and representation, Coetzee seeks not to make overt political statements about apartheid realities but to make the novel transform the way we think about history; he seeks not to allow it to be "colonized" by the discourse of history, but to make us understand history as a visceral story. Although language is a medium of representation, and we cannot think of a bodily materiality that exists outside discourse, the body is subject to the way we make it signify. Coetzee might be exploiting the metaphorical dimension of allegory to highlight another visceral dimension of reading. The apartheid novels are not simply allegories of the body at the intellectual level of ideas but rather visceral allegories of the body at a present and felt level.

### *Waiting for the Barbarians: A Visceral Allegory*

Within an allegory in which the setting is a remote fort along the frontier of an unknown Empire, the first-person, present-tense narrative intensifies the experience of pain caused by torture. Allegory as symbolic, figurative representation is problematized by the literality of bodily events that happen at the surface level of meaning. Bodily suffering, it should be remembered, is at the heart of what is encountered in oppressive regimes like apartheid in South Africa of that time.<sup>8</sup> The narrator, a magistrate, gets to know that for Colonel Joll, a visitor from the capital on a mission to interrogate the barbarian prisoners, "Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt" (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 5). The old man who dies during torture following a stock-raid does not only stand for those who died in detention in the apartheid state. Allegory is made visceral by the vivid physical descriptions. For example, upon opening the shroud, the magistrate sees that "The grey beard is caked with blood. The lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled back, the other eye-socket is a bloody hole" (7). The effect of this grim sight on the magistrate and, in turn, on the reader is one of assault. The boy who came with the old man was also tortured. He is still alive, and the magistrate sees the workings of a knife on the boy's body: "His belly and both groins are pocked with little scabs and bruises and cuts, some marked by trickles of blood" (10). His hands, which were tightly tied, are "puffy and purple" (7). The magistrate, who when Joll interrogates some prisoners spends an evening trying not to hear "sounds of violence," is confronted with bodily pain inflicted on the prisoners by the Empire's torturers, by its "doctors of interrogation" (21, 8). He finds the visibly ruined bodies which were once tortured by Joll, and his senses revolt at their "sickly smell of sweat and ordure" (23). After several days of interrogation and torture, the prisoners emerge from the barracks hall "blinking, shielding their eyes. One of the women has to be helped. She shakes all the time like an old person, though she is young. There are some too sick to stand up" (23). The closeness of these bodies to him and the immediacy with which the narrating magistrate describes them support a visceral reading rather than a figural one. If Coetzee is implying a critique of apartheid realities like torture, as one would conventionally think, he shortens the distance between what is inside the text and what is outside it. Apartheid was essentially abusing and manipulating the body, which is what we abundantly find in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The language employed through the magistrate not only shows us what it means to live in a body under oppressive regimes but also how it feels to live so.

When Joll leaves, the barbarian girl left behind with broken ankles and partially-blind eyes becomes the main source of the visceral reality of pain for the magistrate. Her feet when he first sees them are "swaddled, shapeless," and when the dirty bandages are unwrapped they are "broad, the toes stubby, the nails crusted with dirt" (27, 28). He did not attend her torture, but the effects of this distant bodily event are manifested in this ruined body he finds. Massaging and washing her body, he notices in the corner of her eye "a greyish puckering," the result of the hot iron fork that touched her (30). The barbarian girl's body, with its broken ankles and half-blinded eyes, is ruined and fragmented like an allegory. It is like the ruins—"a cluster of dunes" standing out "from the flat sandy landscape" (14)—that the magistrate finds outside the settlement in the desert. But bodily ruins are visceral once they are seen and attended to. Contemplating the existence of a

previous culture physically eradicated, the magistrate thinks: "Perhaps ten feet below the floor lie the ruins of another fort, razed by the barbarians, peopled with the bones of folk who thought they would find safety behind high walls" (Coatzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 15). The sand-filled ruins are an excavation area for an old post. The bones they harbor, like torture, are a prime example of a distant yet re-surfacing viscosity beyond annihilation or effacement.

The magistrate allegorically treats the girl's body just as he treats the wooden slaps with secret characters, as an object to be "deciphered and understood" (31). During the journey to send her back, he thinks of her as a puzzle: "is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears?" (63). Her torture is distanced as a past event, but the ruined body is present for the magistrate. It is a source of fascination for him, which accounts for his interest in her story and his ritualistic expiation of his guilt by oiling and rubbing her body. When she tells him about the hot fork she was touched with on her eyes, her presence recreates such a visceral experience for this ethically tortured man (40–41). Her "alien" body remains an "obstinate, phlegmatic body," and he has to interrogate her presence in his life and his relation to the system he serves (41). It is in his frustration at his inability to move her that he articulates the viscosity/literality of allegory despite the meanings it seems to invite. He admits the seductive nature of "meanings and correspondences" and interrogates the relationship between the signifier and the signified (43–44). The girl is not only a figure for political oppression; she is a visceral embodiment of that oppression. He reflects, "While I have not ceased to see her as a body maimed, scarred, harmed, she has perhaps by now grown into and become that new deficient body" (55). The ruined state of her body with "the twisted feet, the half-blind eyes" is viscerally visible to him and a motive for speculation that moves him back to the body (Coatzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 63). His temporal and spatial distance from her torturers makes the viscosity of her body for him no less visible.

The magistrate's own pain, loneliness, and confinement highlight for him the immediacy of viscosity and foreground, in turn, the viscosity of the girl's torture. He partakes in the victim status of the girl at the hands of a ruthless regime. He is not allowed by the Empire's men to wash or shave, and hunger becomes his dominant bodily mode. However, the monotony of food he is exposed to makes a mere bowel movement "an agony" with "stabs of pain" and "tearing of tissues" (83). When he escapes his cell for a while and feels the urge to relieve himself, the visceral language narrated evokes many senses and possibly invites a certain facial expression in the reader, one of disgust: "Groaning I inch my way out and squat over the chamberpot. Again the pain, the tearing. I dab myself with a filched white handkerchief, which comes anyway bloody. The room stinks: even I, who have been living for weeks with a slop pail in the corner, am disgusted. I open the door and hobble down the passageway" (91). Once he catches a cold, his "whole being is preoccupied in sniffing and sneezing, in the misery of being simply a body that feels itself sick and wants to be well" (86). A life of degradation in confinement—where bodily functions are performed in the same cell and where cockroaches come out to explore his body at night—makes him view his body as a "mountain of flesh giving off its multifarious odours of life and decay" (78). His smelly clothes, unkempt appearance, and the moldy underwear he is not able to frequently change call up a singular, disturbing viscosity. Before we see the magistrate as a figure for the complicit oppressor, as we would do in a



traditional allegorical reading, we get to heed such strong visceral language. As a result, the magistrate makes us view him just as he views himself, as “no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy” (Coatzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 84).

The magistrate is sickened by the sight of the barbarian prisoners just as he was sickened by the tortured girl: “A simple loop of wire runs through the flesh of each man’s hands and through holes pierced in his cheeks” (101). His heart “grows sick” at the spectacle of punishment he closely observes, and the unfolding violence supplements traditional allegorizing (101). When the “black charcoal and ochre dust begin to run with sweat and blood,” the magistrate understands that the game is to beat the dusty, exhausted prisoners until “their backs are washed clean” (103). When he objects to Joll’s depraving the prisoners by a hammer, a blow catches him: “I sprawl in the dust, gasp, feel the sear of old pain in my back. A stick thuds down on me. Reaching out to ward it off, I take a withering blow on my hand” (104). He sustains a broken hand and blows on the face, head, and shoulders. A blow on the face blinds him, and he swallows blood: “something blooms across my face, starting as a rosy warmth, turning to fiery agony. I hide my face in my hands and stamp around in a circle trying not to shout, trying not to fall” (105). His nose and cheekbone are broken, and one eye is shut (Coatzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 106). This viscosity that the magistrate recounts complicates any figural meanings we might give to the text; or rather, the allegorical text communicates its own allegorical viscosity.

Subjected to the needs of his body and the pain, the magistrate reflects that his torturers wanted him to viscerally experience his embodiment; they “were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body” (113). He is subjected to “the most rudimentary needs” of his body: “to drink, to relieve itself, to find the posture in which it is least sore” (112). Aside from his public humiliation by Mandel and the tricks he is made to perform, the Empire’s men perform on him a mock execution on a tree with his hands tied behind him. When he is pulled up by his arms, his shoulders tear: “I below again and again, there is nothing I can do to stop it, the noise comes out of a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair and roars its fright” (Coatzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 119). The impossible present-tense narrative stance of narrating one’s execution as it unfolds paradoxically highlights the intensity of the experience described. While traditional allegory mediates the real, the magistrate’s narrative is an attempt at the unmediated within the larger scheme of Coetzee’s novel.

Asked by Joll and a warrant officer to interpret a set of wooden slips found in his premises and taken as coded messages between him and the barbarians, the magistrate, who does not know how to interpret the script characters on them, intentionally reads them as an allegory of imperial oppression based on torturing and killing and involving daughters and fathers (an experience he was familiar with through the girl and her father and Joll is supposed to understand). The magistrate retorts: “I have no idea what they stand for. Does each stand for a single thing, a circle for the sun, a triangle for a woman, a wave for a lake; or does a circle merely stand for ‘circle’, a triangle for ‘triangle’, a wave for ‘wave’?” (108). He reads one character as standing for “war,” or “vengeance,” or even “justice” (109). The climax of his reading comes when he ironically claims: “They form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in many ways. Together they can be read as a domestic journal, or they can be read as a plan of war, or they can be turned on their sides and read as a history of the last years of

the Empire—the old Empire, I mean” (109–10). This allegorical set found in the desert ruins is used to evoke a present reality of pain and suffering the magistrate is part of as an imperial subject. We know that the intellectual meaning, the generalized commentary on imperial oppression, is not the primary meaning here. The text actually insists on a literal level of allegorical reading by ironically mocking the Empire’s interest in coded barbarian messages and its negligence of the present reality of its interrogation and torture of its enemies. The shrouded body with stitches through the eyelids, with bruises and swollen and broken feet he alludes to in his reading of one slip is but an evocation of the viscosity the magistrate witnessed and tried to come to terms with (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 109). He does not mean the old Empire; we know that he ironically means the present one. The same applies to other instances of visceral language whereby the immediacy of language complicates allegorical abstraction.

The significance of Coetzee’s apartheid works is that the presence of the material body makes up for the specific apartheid contexts his novels allegorize.<sup>9</sup> As opposed to the intellectual tradition in which allegory is typically situated, we find in Coetzee a raw bodily presence that supplements easy allegorization. Coetzee’s dramatization of the body’s resistance to traditional allegorizing, as in the case of the barbarian girl, is a refusal to let the intellectual/figural overcome the literal, although the literal becomes allegorical in its own way. That is, visceral allegory, as the resistance to conventional allegorizing, becomes another level of allegory that questions and yet points to the shortcomings of allegorization by means of the physical reality of the body. It is a particular kind of allegory that presents us with the visceral and yet whose general effect is “allegorical viscosity.” In other apartheid novels by Coetzee, the material body rejects the allegorical signification codes imposed on it. Each work is an intense allegory in itself in that it reshapes our understanding of allegory as intellectually abstract and forces us to view it as a visceral one, despite the seeming distance between discourse and experience. If we simply see the suffering bodies in the apartheid novels as standing in an allegorical relation to materially suffering bodies within a South African apartheid context, then we are following the traditional allegorical approach criticized for its intellectualism. The allegorical reading we can give to each novel, however, is equally a literally visceral one. The body can exist at the level of ideas, as in traditional allegories, but Coetzee makes it real and specific. The visceral body is, paradoxically, the literal figuration and presentation of pain and suffering. It appropriates any allegorical meanings and embodies them. Coetzee’s apartheid writings convey an impressive sense of reality, which makes the represented body so tangible and close to us that it cannot be doubted.<sup>10</sup> The tortured magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* does not doubt the body in pain. We as readers, also due to the reality-effect that Coetzee’s language conveys, never doubt the experience of pain.<sup>11</sup> The magistrate’s marginalized position of bodily suffering relates him to the tortured barbarian girl.

Coetzee, in representing a raw physicality—the “reality-effect” I am describing—asks us not to erase the materiality of the body by abstractly and allegorically constructing it as that of the other. There is something elemental about the broken bodies of the barbarian girl and the magistrate that invites yet resists allegorization. Although the resistance of such bodies to codification and framing can still be read allegorically, the literal suffering and deformity of each body needs attention on its own, and its context is as important as any figural associations we can make about South Africa. Joll’s dictum in *Waiting for the*



*Barbarians* that pain is the truth while “all else is subject to doubt” hints at the literality and nearness of suffering the barbarian prisoners are subjected to within the magistrate’s narrative (5). Coetzee’s apartheid novels perform bodily suffering as literal events happening to the characters—or those around them—who often record their experiences via the immediacy effect of the narratives.

### Coda: Allegory and Coetzee Critics

Coetzee’s apartheid novels were characteristically criticized for being allegorical and universalized. The novels’ representation of the historical real was viewed as too allegorically intellectual or self-absorbed for the prevalent occasion of apartheid. For many critics, allegories are abstractly distant, detached from the real and dealing only in signs and concepts. They, a common criticism goes, dislocate the truth. As Bainard Cowan puts it, “Transforming things into signs is both what allegory does—its technique—and what it is about—its content” (110). Allegory can be viewed as a “convention, inauthentic, not grounded in experience, cut off from being and concerned only with manipulating its repertoire of signs” (Cowan 111). Cowan argues that “By resorting to a fictional mode literally of ‘other-discourse’ (allegoria), a mode that conceals its relation to its true objects, allegory shows a conviction that the truth resides elsewhere and is not detachable in relations between sign and signified” (113). Tambling explicates this position and argues that “allegorical representations themselves lack reality, because they exist only at the level of the signifier” (129). Such criticism captures the view that allegories are mechanical and consciously discursive. It captures the gist of the hostile reception of Coetzee’s apartheid novels for not being grounded in South African realities and remaining intellectually distant. The literally visceral level of meaning I have argued counters the conception of allegory as intellectually distant in its representation of its subject matter.

Derek Attridge, a critic who argues “against allegory” in Coetzee, objects to allegorical readings as undermining the event of reading the text at the literal level, which reduces its impact as an encounter with or staging of otherness. Attridge consistently highlights the singularity of literature and its ethical force, its need of a responsive reading. “What I am calling a literal reading,” he argues, “is one that is grounded the experience of reading as an *event*” (sic) (39). He, nonetheless, fails to acknowledge that his reading, which is supposed to counter the intellectualizing trend of allegory, is itself an allegorical reading of Coetzee’s novels as literal (and visceral) events. For Attridge, an allegorical reading turns otherness into sameness or reduces the text to the familiar; it is “a reminder of what we already know only too well,” which is why some qualities, descriptions, and details get lost when a text is read allegorically and the focus becomes extra-literal (43). Even if Coetzee takes us to distant settings and allegorically uses temporal difference, there is a strong presence for pain and suffering, and the material body is a strong presence in his allegories. Estranged in discourse, self-consciously represented, or trapped in language, the body is still there, giving Coetzee’s apartheid novels political and historical relevance. But this literal level of suffering, which Attridge emphasizes to the exclusion of cognitive comprehension (and which I also described under the category of “reality-effect”), can still

be understood allegorically in a thematically coherent body of works. It is the use of such a "literal" level of suffering to provoke an ethical response that gives Coetzee's novels their value as visceral allegories. Moreover, any reading of Coetzee that resists what Owens calls "the allegorical impulse" and systematically examines the novels in terms of their staging of the event of reading and how the otherness staged in them demands an ethical response is to some extent inevitably allegorical when it tries to argue an alternative to the allegorical way of reading.

Attridge, discussing the importance of Coetzee's texts and their "singularity," argues that their value is not in their "critique of colonialism and its various avatars" since we need no Coetzee to remind us that a colonial history "has been brutal and dehumanizing" for both victims and perpetrators (30). However, we do need a Coetzee to remind us that such a history of oppression cannot be narrated unproblematically and that the viscosity of the literal forms a specific brand of a postmodern allegory. Attridge criticizes an allegorical reading of Coetzee that ignores what happens at the text's literal level. He discusses *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K* "non-allegorically." His problem with allegorical readings is that they "encourage the reader to look for meanings beyond the literal, in a realm of significance which the novel may be said to imply without ever directly naming" (32).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the novels themselves cast doubt on the efficacy of generalized allegorical readings, but they negotiate another form of allegory. For example, the magistrate's abortive attempts to codify alterity, as embodied in the barbarian girl's body, suggest a privileging of a visceral level of allegorization over a traditionally received one.

Attridge's approach of highlighting what happens at the literal level of Coetzee's novels is what I call a visceral level of allegorizing. If each Coetzee apartheid novel dramatizes—that is, figures and presents—the pain and suffering that happen at the literal level, then we can claim that the novels can be read as allegories of the material body that rejects mere traditional allegorizing.<sup>13</sup> It is this ambivalent aspect of the allegory that shows the interplay between the literal level in which the material body is allegorically beyond allegorizing and the body as a constructed trope that needs to be highlighted, an interplay between visceral and intellectual allegorization. There is a difference between saying that the apartheid novels allegorically represent their South African context and saying that they embody and perform abundant material suffering. The latter function is what makes them visceral allegories rather than traditional ones. However, even when Coetzee seems to be pointing to a bodily reality beyond discourse, this reality is still being discursively constructed.

A useful model comes from Sam Durrant who argues that Coetzee's apartheid novels like *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* are not "an allegory of the historical events themselves but of our *relation* to these events" as apartheid history itself resists an easy relation (25). Durrant adds that Coetzee's protagonists are "unhomely figures of and for alterity, they *embody* precisely that material history of suffering that the narrative is unable to *represent*. Their bodily presence indicates an unmournable, unverbalizable history, a material history that refuses to be translated into words or conjured away by language" (26). For Durrant, the novels become allegories of trying to represent the unrepresentable.<sup>14</sup> What Durrant does not say—although he comes close when he uses the verb "embody"—is that the adamant, literal materiality of suffering, which problematizes easy relation, is itself allegorical beyond conventional allegorization. The

physicality embodied in the works and the focus on physical realities of pain, torture, and deformity—in short, their reality-effects—show that the distance from a South African context effected by the allegorical approach in terms of place or time is bridged or made shorter due to the viscosity of suffering. Allegory here gets less intellectual and calls for a visceral reading that makes us empathize with suffering. The body “bodies forth” its oppression and makes us feel it. Coetzee’s novels are traditional allegories of brutal regimes, and they evoke dislocated realities of South Africa and show the struggles of the writer to speak of them, yet this level of reading is allegorically intellectual compared with the viscosity of suffering the novels negotiate. Historical oppression does not go unnoticed or unfelt in Coetzee.

Theorists of allegory realize the paradoxical level of literal figuration allegories can engage. For example, Slemon articulates a distinction between the literal figuration and metaphorical figuration in allegories and writes that “In its simplest form, allegory . . . is a trope that in saying one thing also says some ‘other’ thing; it is the doubling of some previous or anterior code by a sign, or by a semiotic system, that also signifies a more immediate or ‘literal’ meaning” (4). In allegories, the literal can signify metaphorically or, importantly, “otherwise.” The torture pain of the barbarian girl and the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is an attempt on Coetzee’s part to literally figure material suffering and make us experience it closely, to make the body signify before and beyond the metaphorical. The direct representation of suffering never allows distant analogies to take precedence over what we find and ponder at the literal level of meaning. In trying to develop the literal over the metaphorical, Coetzee revises allegory and makes the literal signify in its own way.

Representing—or even “presenting”—the suffering body cannot evade textualization because the real is intertwined with discursive representation. The body has a power that cannot be doubted and is implicated in histories of oppression and colonization, yet all acts of rendering this suffering are mediated in language. The oppressed body is violated and tortured, and it has an ontology of its own. However, the visceral sense of suffering communicated in Coetzee is problematized within self-reflexive accounts that evoke yet cast doubt on the real as a construct. John Moore rightly argues that “No matter how exigent the demands of the spirit—and they are exigent—Coetzee never lets us forget either the appetites or the fragility of the body” (154). As opposed to the abstract intellectualism of traditional allegories, Coetzee’s allegories explore bodily suffering effected by unjust power structures. Bodily events like torture and confinement are viscally material and real, and Coetzee’s visceral allegories functioning at a literal level of meaning and conveying an experience of embodiment are also postmodern allegories of the mediated body. If the material body is vividly present, then this singular presence becomes again allegorical when conceived as a thematic link among the novels. Coetzee once said in an interview that censorship on certain topics leads to “an unnatural concentration upon them” and added that his preoccupation with themes of imprisonment and torture is but “a *pathological* response—to the ban on representing what went on in police cells” in South Africa (qtd. in McDonald 308). Coetzee traumatically grapples with raw, material suffering in his apartheid fictions. Although his political discontent can be for some critics allegorically globalized, the viscosity of suffering is indicative, which leaves the postmodern body with a political task inherent in it and beyond its discursive enactment.

## NOTES

1. Allegory, Deborah Madsen reminds us, "assumes that it is dealing with the kinds of issues which resist expression in other forms and which resist simple statement or definition" (123). Allegory explores the difficulties we ascribe to language as an expressive medium.
2. The most famous critique of Coetzee's allegorical novels as evasive attempts shying away from naming apartheid realities and offering passive heroes is probably Nadine Gordimer's review of his novel *Life and Times of Michael K* in which she accused him of projecting the horrors of apartheid "into another time and plane," and thus a dehistoricized universalism. In this review entitled "The Idea of Gardening," Gordimer argues that Coetzee's heroes like Michael K "ignore history, not make it" and that the allegorical nature of his work thus makes implicit political statements because allegory is used by Coetzee as a distancing device. Gordimer extends her criticism of *Life and Times of Michael K* to *Waiting for the Barbarians* by claiming that he "chose allegory for his first few novels" and that he did this "out of a kind of opposing desire to hold himself clear of events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences in which, like everyone else living in South Africa, he is up to the neck, and about which he had an inner compulsion to write." Gordimer concludes that Coetzee has a "revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions" and is not an example of socially committed fiction. My goal in this article, therefore, is to historicize and politicize Coetzee's allegorical, postmodern approach by focusing on the material body as a site for political statements.
3. Due to space limitations, I cannot include in this article an elaborate discussion of other Coetzee apartheid novels. However, most of the claims I make about *Waiting for the Barbarians* apply to other novels. For example, in *Age of Iron* Coetzee intentionally makes Mrs. Curren, the novel's ailing and white protagonist, establish a relationship between her terminal bone cancer and the corrupt politics of her country. Mrs. Curren constructs the metaphorical relationship between complicity in oppression and shame for this complicity on the one hand and her cancer on the other hand when she tells a black youth: "I have cancer. I have cancer from the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life. That is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself" (145). Although the novel apparently invites a metaphorical understanding of the relationship between the body and the body politic, the bodily pain Mrs. Curren feels is beyond the metaphorical as when she claims: "There is no truth but the shock of pain that goes through me. . . . Death is the only truth left" (26). When she is in the grip of pain, her attention is turned to her body rather than to what goes on around her in the burning townships. She says, "The country smolders, yet with the best will in the world I can only half-attend. My true attention is all inward, upon the thing, the word, the word for the thing inching through my body" (*Age of Iron* 39). In this novel, Coetzee similarly dramatizes a distinction between the allegorical mode of the novel and the novel's insistence on the literality of the body in pain. The conceptual analogy we make between cancer and the political corruption that is apartheid is not to be privileged over the narrated suffering.
4. A noticeable trend in the early criticism Coetzee's novels received is a neo-Marxist one that addresses Coetzee's failure to tackle class relationships and social factors. In a sense, critics deemed Coetzee's postmodern innovation in form and technique an inadequate medium for the pressing social and political issues in South Africa. In the words of Paul Rich, postmodern writing "is probably destined to remain the vehicle for expressing the cultural and political dilemmas of a privileged class of white artists and intellectuals and at best it is likely to lead to a more general loosening of contemporary South African writing away from a slavish imitation of the English liberal novel-writing tradition" (73). This article responds to such accusations that seem valid yet do an injustice to Coetzee.
5. In Coetzee's *Foe*, Susan Barton and Foe both fail to make Friday's silence speak. Friday's symbolic mutilation is the loss of a tongue that has been cut out somehow, which immediately signifies his marginalized, oppressed status in a traditional allegorical reading. The characters' abortive attempts to teach Friday language and the meaninglessness of the stories they, like Crusoe who once owned Friday, weave around him without his own authentication of such stories due to his silence are all indicative of the limitations of traditional allegorization. Coetzee wants Friday to signify prior to and beyond allegorical parallels, which is why the narrative dwells on his utter silence and foreignness to those around him. At a significant moment at the end of the novel, we get to know that Friday's home is "not a place of words" but rather "a place where bodies are their own signs" (*Foe* 157). It is as if the body is the literal resisting the allegorical domestication of figurative meaning.
6. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a postcolonial text, allegory exposes the construction of the Other as a justification for oppression. Allegory "is employed counter-discursively in order to *expose* the investment of allegory in the colonising project and thus to identify allegorical modes of cognition as the enemy of cultural decolonisation" (Slemon 12). Teresa Dovey repeatedly argues that Coetzee's

novels are “double-sided allegories: on the one hand, they constitute allegories of prior modes of discourse, wittingly inhabiting them in order to deconstruct them and divest them of their authority” (140). Dovey’s reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians* attempts to show that allegory functions at the thematic and structural levels (140) and works to subvert “liberal humanist novelistic discourse” (141), a discourse that the novel critiques just as it is implicated in. Dovey and Slemmon point out Coetzee’s deconstructive and postcolonial revision of allegory, and I extend this revision of allegory to the representation of the body.

7. A critic like Lois Parkinson Zamora discusses Coetzee’s early novels as political “allegories of power,” as allegories resisting injustice and the abuses of political systems through their exposure of the dynamics of Hegelian power relations of masters and servants (3). Such a typical reading, however and despite its rich insights, dismisses the peculiarities of Coetzee’s employment of allegory.
8. In fact, torture is common in times of political pressure just as it was in South Africa during the apartheid years. The experiences of the tortured Iraqi prisoners in Abu-Ghraib and those of the interrogated suspected terrorists in Guantanamo Bay testify to the prevalence of this form of bodily-inflicted punishment in the wake of 9/11.
9. One specific context in this case would be the torture and death in detention of the black-consciousness leader Steve Biko.
10. Scarry established the singular and embodied nature of extreme pain in her famous study *The Body in Pain*, and in a more recent discussion of pain that engages her work Ronald Schleifer’s *Intangible Materialism* also highlights the objectless, iconic nature of pain as a pure experience of embodiment (133). Despite the complexity of both arguments, they begin with the simple premise of the corporeality of pain.
11. In a recent study of “mirror neurons”—that is, neuronal cells in the brain (up to twenty percent) which discharge not only when a person performs a particular act (say hand movements), but also discharge when that person *sees* someone else moving their hands—Marco Iacoboni argues that these cells actually allow people to “literally experience the same feelings” as others (4). Thus he argues that mirror neurons “fire both when we grasp and when we see someone else grasping, as if we were inside that person” (109). Moreover, he cites a study that demonstrates that mirror neurons “for hand movements and for mouth movements . . . were also selectively activated while subjects were reading sentences describing hand actions and mouth actions” (94). Such an argument on the physiological basis of empathy is relevant here because torture and pain of the sort described in *Waiting for the Barbarians* are viscerally communicated to the reader and our brains re-create for us what we encounter on the page before us. Pain and suffering, simply put, are literally, or viscerally, felt by the reader or viewer who shrinks or winces at the pain of the other and thus emotionally reacts through empathy. Iacoboni argues, commenting on an experimental study, that “It is as if mirror neurons help us understand what we read by internally simulating the action we just read in the sentence” (94). Interestingly, a female professor who first introduced *Waiting for the Barbarians* to me years ago in Jordan said that she could not finish it because of its depiction of torture and gave it to me to read it instead. Being moved by what we read is a proof of the process of mirroring or simulation in our minds of the felt experiences of others. Instead of making us ponder apartheid realities in his fiction, Coetzee, it can be concluded, makes us feel and experience such realities upfront. I am grateful to Dr. Schleifer for pointing out this study on neuroscience to me when he read an earlier draft of this article.
12. As Gordimer argues, evoking the abstraction and dislocation commonly attributed to allegory, “The harried homelessness of Michael K and his mother is the experience, in 1984, of hundreds of thousands of black people in South African squatter towns and ‘resettlement’ camps.”
13. Allegory is often thought of as an inferior “mode of representation—indeed, as *re*-presentation” and “had been unfavorably contrasted with the symbol’s ability to *present*” (Day 105). My argument opposes such a rigid distinction and supports a new conception of allegory as both “immediate” and effective, and thus more politicized than traditionally assumed.

Interestingly, J.F. Lyotard asserts the status of postmodern texts as events that cannot be judged by “preestablished rules” or familiar norms. In this sense, postmodern texts call attention to themselves and to what happens at the literal level. As events, the texts are preoccupied with their own “rules and categories” rather than with predetermined rules (81). This supports the idea that bodily events in Coetzee’s apartheid novels are not to be supplemented by allegorical theorizing.

14. The logic that Durrant echoes here and that I hint at in my interpretation of his assertion is Lyotard’s. Lyotard’s article in *The Postmodern Condition* “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” highlights “the unrepresentable” or the impossibility of presentation within the postmodern project. Lyotard famously defines the postmodern as “that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” and as “that which searches for new presentations, not in order to



enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (81). This definition is in line with my claim that Coetzee problematizes the way his apartheid novels stand with relation to the historical real, that referentiality and the problematic of representation are a strong postmodern theme in Coetzee's apartheid fictions.

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## REMEMBERING THE ANCESTOR'S IMAGE

### Emmett Till and Predicaments of Witnessing

by Steve Edwin

I couldn't but help think of the first time I laid eyes  
on my son. I remembered my reaction to his  
distorted little face and how I made him cry. I  
would have given anything to take back that look.  
That face seemed so adorable now. My first look  
and my last look at Emmett would be forever fused  
in my mind.

—*Mamie Till-Mobley, Death of Innocence*

A 1981 poem by the African American writer and activist Audre Lorde begins by evoking the persistent presence of a forceful and depriving vision:

However the image enters  
its force remains within  
my eyes rockstrewn caves  
where dragonfish evolve  
wild for life relentless and acquisitive  
learning to survive  
where there is no food  
my eyes are always hungry  
and remembering  
however the image enters  
its force remains.

(*Undersong* 186)

Entitled "Afterimages," Lorde's poem charts the intrusive and insistent impact of this nameless, painful image. It is by putting this visually experienced force into words that Lorde comes to understand the source of her hunger and her pain. Two scenes emerge: "A white woman stands bereft and empty / a black boy hacked into a murderous lesson." This latter image, Lorde writes, is "recalled in me forever / a lurch of earth on the edge of sleep / etched into my vision." The boy whose image is engraved upon the writer's psyche is Emmett Till, who was lynched by white men when he was fourteen years old. His is one of the "fused images beneath my pain" (186). Lorde goes on to recall that in 1955 she saw images of Till's body on "each corner's photography" and averted her eyes (188).



In the years following she did not see the images distinctly but rather felt their impact in the form of inexplicable psychic pain.

Lorde talks about carrying the painful visual traces of Till's body silently inside her for twenty-four years, until she saw another seemingly unrelated scene that spurred her to write. Watching a television news report on the flooding of the Pearl River in Mississippi in 1979, Lorde sees a white woman survivor of the flood surrounded by her frightened children, talking to a reporter about the losses she and her family had just experienced. The woman's husband suddenly breaks into the frame, grabbing her away from the camera and snarling, "She ain't got nothing more to say!" The televised scene of a "tearless" mother holding "a tattered baby's blanket in her arms" takes Lorde back to her own memories of Emmett Till (187). In the rest of her poem, Lorde examines the historical continuities of white male dominance that link the two events.

For Lorde, vision is both an active faculty and a site where violence is done to the viewer. Often the viewer cannot avoid seeing the public spectacle of racist violence. In Lorde's case the spectacle does violence to her as well. Lorde writes of Emmett Till:

His broken body is the afterimage of my 21st year  
 when I walked through a northern summer  
 eyes averted from each corner's photography  
 newspapers protest posters magazines  
*Police Story Confidential True*  
 the avid insistence of detail pretending  
 insight or information  
 the length of gash across the dead boy's loins  
 his grieving mother's lamentation  
 all over  
 the veiled warning the secret relish  
 of a Black child's mutilated body  
 fingered by street-corner eyes  
 bruise upon livid bruise.  
 (*Undersong* 188)

Writing is one way of transforming the viewer's relationship to the spectacle and the violence it enacts. In "Afterimages" Lorde intends not only to articulate her rage and pain but to critique a dominant visual economy that amplifies the terrorizing effects of racist and sexist violation. The media's pretense of "insight or information" could hardly mask the "the secret relish" with which a mass public of viewers consumed photographs of Till's body along with narratives about his murder. The journalistic cliché merely sanitized and disavowed the ways the narratives were sexualized and the images "fingered by street-corner eyes." By contrast, for numerous African American viewers the images constituted what Lorde terms a "veiled" warning. If lynching was less frequent and less visible than in earlier decades, and if young people raised in the North had been protected from some of the most egregious forms of racist assault, Emmett Till's murder made clear that African Americans, wherever they might live, were still vulnerable to racist violence. As civil rights leader and chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored

People Julian Bond has said about his experience of the Till murder: “My memories are exact—and parallel those of many others my age—I felt vulnerable for the first time in my life—Till was a year younger—and recall believing that this could easily happen to me—for no reason at all. I lived in Pennsylvania at the time.”

Lorde references in her poem a “Black child’s mutilated body.” This child has no name; the child’s experience has likewise been erased. Shamefully, “his grieving mother’s lamentation” has been converted into a spectacle for mass consumption. In their “avid insistence of detail,” newspapers, magazines, and even protest posters become sites where white spectators can “relish” in “secret” the spectacle of violence against black people.<sup>1</sup> Lorde was acutely aware of the hazards of representing anti-black violence in the public sphere. However, she insisted, with other African American activists and artists, upon the necessity of doing so. Lorde and countless others—beginning with Mamie Till-Mobley, Emmett Till’s mother—struggled with the question of precisely how witnessing Emmett Till’s murder could be made both politically effective and spiritually sustaining. As Saidiya V. Hartman asks, “how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays?” (5).<sup>2</sup>

The diverse forms of gratification that white publics derive from spectacles of black suffering may be discerned in any number of contemporary examples. Writing about Emmett Till in 2005, for example, a writer in the *New York Times Magazine* magisterially asserts: “We’ve known his story forever, it seems. Maybe that’s because it’s a tale so stark and powerful that it has assumed an air of timelessness, something almost mythical.” Abstracted from historical experience, the knowing public addressed in this article is invited to regard Till’s suffering as “stark and powerful” infotainment. The author begins this “tale” by speculating, with astounding levity and patronizing familiarity, on the exact form of the “black kid’s” alleged and titillating transgression: “Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black kid born and raised in Chicago, went down in August 1955 to visit some relatives in the hamlet of Money, Miss. One day, he walked into a country store there, Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market, and, on a dare, said something fresh to the white woman behind the counter—21-year-old Carolyn Bryant, the owner’s wife—or asked her for a date, or maybe wolf-whistled at her” (Rubin).

As media representations of Trayvon Martin have once again made clear, a key feature of contemporary spectacles of racist subjection is the endless scrutiny, aspersion, and blaming to which victims and their families are subjected. Mamie Till-Mobley’s narrative reveals the extent to which she had to contend with the public disrespect of her son’s image. For years and even decades following his murder, Till-Mobley found herself in the position of defending him. She argued that her son did not do the things the perpetrators alleged he did, and if he indeed whistled at Carolyn Bryant (as Bryant alleged) he did so in order to keep himself from stuttering (Till-Mobley and Benson 213–216). Indeed, it is nearly impossible to find an account of the murder of Emmett Till, however brief, that does not immediately inform readers that the boy allegedly whistled or otherwise “propositioned” a white woman, and that this (alleged) act precipitated the perpetrators’ violence. The trope of the boy’s whistle, the innocent’s provocation, has become a central and obligatory detail, a claim that is repeated, but rarely questioned, in every passing mention of Emmett Till.

How does such a figure of the white imagination shape legacies and understanding? And how can one most effectively respond to the perpetrators' allegations and justifications for their violence? When Sybrina Fulton declares "The verdict is not going to define who Trayvon Martin was. We will define his legacy," she is speaking about the key importance of self-definition as an empowering force at the heart of political action.<sup>3</sup>

Reading Audre Lorde's poem "Afterimages" and Mamie Till-Mobley's narrative *Death of Innocence*, this essay considers some predicaments and creative strategies in the ongoing effort to bear witness to the murder of Emmett Till and other victims of racist subjection. What are the uses and limits of deploying images of violence in struggles against violence? When do such images enable collective mourning and political action, and when (and why) do they limit or foreclose possibilities for transformation? How does one remember and honor a person whose image has been stolen and degraded?

### The Imperative of Seeing

Emmett Louis Till was kidnapped, tortured, and killed by white men in 1955, while he was visiting family in Money, Mississippi. His body was found in the Tallahatchie River. The perpetrators tried to ensure that his body would not be found or identified, and Southern authorities tried to bury him in Mississippi. Till's mother, however, demanded that her son's body be brought home to Chicago. Against the counsel of the funeral director, A. A. Rayner, she had his body removed from a box that had been sealed by Mississippi officials. Rayner and other members of the black community clearly wished to protect her from the pain of seeing her child's disfigured body. Mamie Till-Mobley insisted, however, that the lynching of her son be made public and visible. Nearly one hundred thousand mourners viewed Till's body at the church, and a photograph of his body was published in the *Chicago Defender* and *Jet* magazine (Till-Mobley and Benson 139–142).

African American visual artists, musicians, and writers have deployed numerous strategies to respond to racial violence. Some artistic works seem specifically to counter the terrorizing display of the violated body.<sup>4</sup> For example, Panel 15 of Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration of the Negro Series* depicts a lone shrouded figure with head bowed, crouched below a hanging noose at the edge of a flowing river. As Farah Jasmine Griffin comments on this work, "the most striking object, the hanging body, is striking by its absence. . . . It is though the landscape and the mourning figure embody the horror of lynching. In this sense it is not the horror of one single individual, but the horror, the shame, and the burden of the land. The viewer is familiar enough with the visual tropes of trees, noose, and black figure to read the meaning of the painting" (13–14). In visually evoking the experiences of those who witness and survive violence—including the land—Lawrence's work counters a dominant visual discourse in which viewers must see the lynched body.<sup>5</sup> Significantly too, the painting envisions the river as not only a space of death but as a source of spiritual sustenance amidst the pain of violation and loss. Alongside the painting's flat, monochrome rendering of the land, the crouched mourner, the piercing tree limb, and the empty, hanging noose, the painter has rendered a flowing river in subtly nuanced, beautifully blended blues, purples, and pinks. In this painting Lawrence seems specifically to be creating a site where viewers might work through the trauma of lynching.

Mamie Till-Mobley's strategy of witnessing built upon and departed from earlier African American representations of lynching in significant ways. The central and most immediate task of the effort to witness Till's murder was to seek justice and prevent further attacks (Till-Mobley and Benson 139, 141). This was clearly the intention of Mamie Till-Mobley when she insisted that people see what the killers had done to her son. From one angle, her decision to make the murder of her son visible responded to the particular circumstances of the crime against him: unlike other perpetrators of lynching, the men who killed Emmett Till tried to eliminate all traces of their act. In her book *Death of Innocence*, Till-Mobley talks about her decision to allow mourners to view her son's body at the funeral service as part of her resolution that the entire American nation should witness "the results of what had been done." Her commentary pointedly spells out what was at stake in the imperative to *visualize* the violence that was done to her son:

This would not be like so many other lynching cases, the hundreds, the thousands of cases where families would be forced to walk away and bury their dead and their grief and their humiliation. I was not going quietly. On no, I was not about to do that. I knew that I would talk for the rest of my life about what had happened to my baby. I could explain it in great detail, I could describe what I saw laid out there on that slab at A.A. Rayner's [the funeral director's], one piece, one inch, one body part, at a time. I could do all that and people would still not get the full impact. They would not be able to visualize what had happened, unless they were allowed to see the results of what had happened. They had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this. (139)

In making public and visible a lynching which had not been openly avowed or photographically recorded, Till-Mobley not only broke through the historical silencing of survivors but turned the genre of the lynching photograph against the perpetrators. Moreover, challenging official attempts to dissociate the crime from the broader national history of racial terror, Mamie Till-Mobley insisted that the murder be understood as an act of lynching.

The reticence of the perpetrators immediately after they killed Emmett Till contrasted with the spectacle of pleasure they performed during the trial. Indeed, it was soon apparent that the criminal trial of the perpetrators would replicate—in the officially sanctioned space of the courtroom—many of the hallmarks of lynching as a meticulously staged public celebration of racist violence. Where the white spectators at the trial were given good seats, drank ice-cold soda, and regarded the trial as a public amusement, the African Americans in attendance (including reporters, community leaders, a congressman, and Mamie Till-Mobley) were forced to stand or to sit at a splinter-covered table; they were harassed and threatened with violence throughout the trial, and after the perpetrators were acquitted. The two white male defendants in the Till case were photographed smiling with their families and filmed playing with their children. The trial was covered by an estimated 40 to 100 journalists, and reports and images were broadcast on national television and in the US and international press. Till-Mobley relates that the only protection the African Americans had at the trial was the presence of the reporters. Fortunately, many spectators mistakenly believed that the trial was being broadcast live on radio and television (163–65).

As historical investigation has confirmed, the all-white jury and the crowd of white spectators knew that Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam had killed Emmett Till but maintained that they were justified in killing him (Whitaker). The fourteen-year-old boy, it was alleged in the trial, had “wolf-whistled at” and/or grabbed Roy Bryant’s wife, Carolyn Bryant.<sup>6</sup> Although the killers wanted to eliminate potentially incriminating evidence, they gloated over the audience’s celebration of their violence.<sup>7</sup> The trial made clear that if the murder of a black boy by white men could now be prosecuted, the testimony of African American witnesses still did not count in the courts of law. While the legal proceedings had put two of the perpetrators in the unusual position of asserting their innocence, the crowds of white faces that appear in photographs of the Emmett Till trial replicate, uncannily, the white faces of the lynching photograph—only the body of the victim is missing.

On the other hand, coverage of the case by the African American press was crucial in mobilizing collective response to the murder. In addressing the complex question of how to bear witness to Till’s murder in a geographically and culturally heterogeneous African American national public (in which, for example, a generation of young people in the North had been raised—as Emmett Till had been—*not* to fear white violence<sup>8</sup>), Till-Mobley suggests again that verbal testimony was not adequate to the task of representing what had happened. While affirming that she “would talk for the rest of my life about what had happened,” words alone, she explained, could not communicate the reality of objectifying violence:

[People] would not be able to *visualize* what had happened, unless they were allowed to *see* the results of what had happened. They had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this . . . I wanted to make it as *real* and as *visible* to people as I could possibly make it. I knew that if they walked by that casket, if people opened the pages of *Jet* magazine and the *Chicago Defender*, if other people could see it with their own eyes, then together we might find a way to express what we had seen.” (Till-Mobley 139, emphasis added)

As this passage makes clear, Till-Mobley’s injunction that the nation “visualize what had happened” was at the same time a call for narrative response, a call for witnesses to “express what we had seen.” Equally important, the demand that her son’s death be made visible was inseparable from the desire that his life be made visible as well. After giving the funeral director three pictures of her son taken during the last holiday they spent together, she explained, “I wanted the photographs displayed inside the open casket. People needed to see those, too. People needed to see what they had taken away from me, what was taken away from us all” (Till-Mobley 139–40). Yet Till-Mobley faced a significant dilemma. If the nation were to witness and put an end to anti-black violence, she asserted, they needed to see Emmett Till’s body. Till’s body was shown within the carefully staged and collectively performed ritual of the funeral service. Three recent photographs were carefully arranged on the satin-covered coffin lid above his body, including a picture of her and Emmett smiling together.

Mass-reproduced images of his body, however, were another matter. Detached from the African American communities in which Till was honored and mourned, mass-circulated



**Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley (ca. 1950).**  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-ppmsca-08092.

images of Till's body could surely recall and indeed function like the perpetrators' hubristic, terrorizing display of lynched victims.

### **The Impact of Seeing**

At the funeral service, Till-Mobley relates, "every fifth person or so had to be assisted. Nurses were on hand to help. People were falling out, fainting" (142). After the trial, a key witness was hospitalized for a nervous breakdown; Mamie Till-Mobley collapsed from exhaustion and required medical care (197). Throughout her narrative, Till-Mobley emphasizes that she and others responded to the crisis of Till's death as a collectivity. Because she had the support of others, she was able to break down and recover. Shortly after, Till-Mobley embarked upon a nation-wide tour of public speaking. Unlike the people who could experience and articulate their feelings about the murder within this collectivity, Audre Lorde remembers herself walking alone in Manhattan, averting her eyes from the images of the nameless black child's body she found on every street corner.

Audre Lorde was among a probably large number of people who saw the image of Till but could not talk about what they had seen until many years, or decades, later. Her



poetry resonates with the testimonies of viewers who saw photographs of Till's body in *Jet* magazine when they were children. Writing in response to the 2004 documentary film *The Murder of Emmett Till*, viewers relate that they were overwhelmed by fear, anger, and sadness when they saw the images as children. Like Lorde, they did not talk about their reactions until many decades later.<sup>9</sup> Their testimonies attest to the pain and distress that many people (and perhaps especially children) experienced after the death of Till, and suffered in isolation and silence. While Till's death spurred the collective political response that sustained the Civil Rights Movement, it is important to observe too what remained unspeakable. For some people, the lynching of Emmett Till painfully recalled the lynchings of family members, sometimes deaths that had not been spoken about or mourned. Norma Johnson, a viewer who wrote in response to the documentary film, recalls having nightmares for weeks after seeing the picture of Till. She was eight years old, and like other children she was alone when she came across the image in *Jet* magazine. Many years later, she learned that her cousin had been lynched.

The painting by Jacob Lawrence mentioned earlier evokes the complex dynamics of collectivity and isolation which have marked the history of racial violence in America. The grief of the lone survivor / witness of lynching is visually part of the grief which saturates the atmosphere and earth in the painting. This cosmic grief is, moreover, painted—meant to be seen by a public of viewers. Audre Lorde's poetic vision also invokes a grieving nameless woman who moves, alone among the living, in a social space saturated with blood and nameless ghosts.

Within my eyes  
flickering afterimages of a nightmare rain  
a woman wrings her hands  
beneath the weight of agonies remembered  
I wade through summer ghosts  
betrayed by visions  
becoming dragonfish surviving  
the horrors we live with  
tortured lungs adapting  
to breath blood.

(*Undersong* 189–90)

The woman can survive the dangers of suffocating / drowning in this space of terror only through a radical transformation: "the terrors we live with / tortured lungs adapting / to breath blood." This process—note Lorde's sudden invocation of the plural subject "we"—is by necessity social and collective. The poem's deployment of spacing ("the horrors we live with") and enjambment ("the horrors we live with / tortured lungs adapting") allows that this collective subject both *lives* terrors and lives *with* the terrors of others, with "tortured lungs adapting / to breath blood." This process of adaptation does not entail a disavowal of racist violence. Rather, "*living with*" the knowledge of violence opens up the possibility of "*living with*" its direct victims. Hence in averting her eyes from the photographs of Till's body, Lorde is both protecting herself from their overwhelming, painful impact and showing her respect. In so doing she attests to the sacred status of the image, the image's



connection, and her connection, to the child, Emmett Till. Likewise, Mamie Mobley-Till's insistence that people needed to see pictures of the fourteen-year-old boy smiling suggests that for their own survival and to honor the child, people needed to see Emmett Till as he had been in life: to hold this image in their minds.

Responding to Mamie Till-Mobley's injunction that the nation bear witness to her son's murder, Audre Lorde examines the results of this effort. Not only were Till's individuality and name erased by the media, but images of his body were, she observes, "fingered by street corner eyes" then "crumpled up" and "discarded":

And wherever I looked that summer  
I learned to be at home with children's blood  
with savored violence  
with pictures of Black broken flesh  
used crumpled up discarded  
lying amid the sidewalk refuse  
like a raped woman's face.  
(*Undersong* 188)

Lorde's poem, like the testimonies of many others, aims to retrieve these images and return them to their rightful place.

### Remembering the Ancestor's Image

Recently, while trying to track down a reference for this essay, I did a keyword search for Emmett Till on the internet and was suddenly faced with two images of Till's mutilated body. I am angered and disgusted by this latest iteration of disrespect. Detached from any narrative context and prominently displayed at the top of the screen, the images are impossible to avoid. They appear out of nowhere and can be found anywhere, like the crumpled, discarded pictures from which Audre Lorde averted her eyes. Lorde turns away, I believe, to show respect and to make a poetic space for recollection. In creating such a space, "Afterimages" attests to the primacy of memory and the sacred within epistemologies of African American women's writing. Lorde asserts that she "learned to be at home with children's blood" (190). Like Toni Morrison (*Beloved*) and Toni Cade Bambara (*Those Bones Are Not My Child*), Lorde writes about (learns to be at home with?) the blood of children as an act of kinship, remembrance, and political resistance. In declaring that she "inherited Jackson, Mississippi" and that Emmett Till was "baptized my son," Lorde also underscores the primacy of solidarity and kinship across difference and distance (*Undersong* 187–88). In a poem entitled "The Evening News" written in the same year as her memorial to Emmett Till, Lorde addresses Winnie Mandela after hearing about the imprisonment of children who protested in the streets of Soweto. Lorde asks "what does it mean / our wars / being fought by our children?" (183).<sup>10</sup> As "inheritor" of diasporic consciousness, Lorde steps forward as public witness to anti-black violence in Jackson, Brooklyn, Boston, Berlin, and Soweto.

For Lorde as for both Morrison and Bambara, writerly recollection is essential in a world saturated with dominant representations of history. Interestingly, Lorde's poem states that the men who killed Emmett Till "flung him to the Pearl weighted with stone" (*Undersong* 189). This elision of fact (Till was actually found in the Tallahatchie River) suggests that she did not consult historical references while writing the poem. Lorde's concern is clearly not to synthesize the official historical record but rather to confront and write beyond the dominant cultural imaginary. In contrast to the confident, knowing stance of the expert witness who grasps everything essential and then narrates and interprets fact and event, Lorde writes as a reluctant witness who is overcome by what she sees. Twenty-four years after his death, she sees and hears the boy "(riding) the crest of the Pearl River whistling" (189). Placing Till's "whistle" under the lens of irony (note again the poem's use of spacing), Lorde executes a biting rewrite of the tropes that have come to define and confine him.

The subtitle of Mamie Till-Mobley's book *Death of Innocence is The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America*. Significantly, however, the book does not begin with this story. Rather, the entire first half of the manuscript is devoted to narrating the history of Till-Mobley's family, her childhood, her relationships with her mother and father, and her life with Emmett. Bobo (as family and friends called him) was more like a brother to her than a son, Till-Mobley relates. Consonant with West African cultural traditions which regard the very young and the very old to be closest to the ancestors, the small child Bobo appears early in the narrative as an ancestral presence, an old soul. Mamie Till-Mobley comes to understand Emmett's insistence upon visiting family in Mississippi to be a response to an ancestral call. While for the generations who migrated northward Mississippi was "still a place we were desperately trying to escape," Till-Mobley understood her son's longing to return. "When Emmett crossed over into Mississippi," she writes, "there surely must have been something familiar to him. Not something he recognized with his eyes, but something he felt deep within his soul" (107). This passage bespeaks the narrative presence of the ancestor described by Toni Morrison in her text "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." Till-Mobley continues, "It was like he had been programmed at birth to return to the soil of his ancestors, at this time, in this way, and for a purpose he could not possibly have recognized" (107).

Beyond the evidence of the visible, the drive to return becomes part of the ancestor's determination to remember, and re-member, a family subjected, under slavery and racial violence, to separation and death. Mamie Till-Mobley recalls the stories of her great-great-great-grandmother and her four sisters who were abducted in Africa and brought to America enslaved. The five sisters became legendary for their determination not to be separated or forget the place from which they were stolen (247). In Till-Mobley's narrative this story also marks and invokes the presence of the ancestor, whose power becomes manifest once more after Emmett Louis Till's passing. Before they learned that Emmett had been abducted by a group of white men in Mississippi, Mamie Till-Mobley had always relied on her mother to take care of everything she could not handle herself. Indeed, many people in the community looked to Alma Carthan Gaines for her leadership and wisdom. When Till-Mobley learned what had happened to her son naturally she looked to her mother for strength and guidance—only to find that her mother was even more overwhelmed than she by what had happened. As the reality of Emmett's death came over them, Till-Mobley felt a powerful force suddenly pass from her mother to herself.

Suddenly she found she could do what needed to be done in this extremely painful situation. Her mother, by contrast, retreated suddenly from a life of community leadership and action (117, 127, 235).

The dynamics of this transfer of energy resonate with the Yoruba concept of Àjé, “a spiritual force that is thought to be inherent in Africana women” (Washington 172).<sup>11</sup> Àjé commonly moves down family lines. In the opening lines of her “biomythography” *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Audre Lorde invokes the power of this force through an ancestral line that will ultimately be defined as maternal and honored: “I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the ‘I’ at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother and daughter, with the ‘I’ moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed” (7).<sup>12</sup> The presence of this spiritual force and its passage among people “as needed” bespeaks the ancestor’s crucial presence within and among us. Significantly, in Yoruba society Àjé signifies both circulating force and the “astrally-inclined human beings who enforce earthly and cosmic laws.” Àjé “keep society balanced by ensuring that human beings follow those laws or are punished for their transgressions” (Washington 172). In their lives and work, Mamie Till-Mobley, Audre Lorde, Sybrina Fulton, and so many others surely exemplify and embody these dimensions of Àjé—the crucial intelligence and power of Africana women’s spirituality in the struggle for civil rights and social justice.

#### NOTES

1. Lorde’s poem anticipates Saidiya V. Hartman’s groundbreaking study of the cultural-political symbiosis between white pleasure and violence against black subjects. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman examines the conjoining of terror and enjoyment in nineteenth-century American culture. In the popular practice of the coffle, for example, enslaved Africans were shackled and made to dance and sing for the entertainment of slave-owners. This dynamic traverses distinctions of ideology and intention. The spectacular display of black suffering for white audiences is evident as well in the texts of abolitionists who denounced slavery by rhetorically placing themselves in the body of the injured slave.
2. Hartman calls attention to the difficulty of discerning between the position of the “witness” who can “confirm the truth about what happened” and that of the “spectator” who transmutes the scene of violence into an occasion for self-gratification. Hartman’s questions are pertinent here:

Are we witnesses who confirm the truth about what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and suffering? What does the exposure of the violated body yield? Proof of black sentience or the inhumanity of the ‘peculiar institution’? Or does the pain of the other merely provide us with the opportunity for self-reflection? At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator. (3–4)

3. This essay was written in 2006 and I have had to hold back from attempting to revise as it goes to press now in 2014, two years after the murder of Trayvon Martin and shortly after the acquittal of the man who killed him. I will only echo widespread observations on the historical continuities of racist oppression and violence, including the cultural dynamics I am trying to describe here.
4. The intended effects of this display are perhaps nowhere as evident as in the lynching photograph. These images typically depict the victim surrounded by grinning murderers, sometimes accompanied by men, women, and children who showed up to watch the torture and killing. Reproduced and circulated in the form of picture postcards, the photographs obviously reiterated the terror of the victims and the pleasure of the perpetrators for a wider public that included white and black view-

ers. On the history and representation of lynching, see Harris. As Farah Jasmine Griffin emphasizes in her study of the African American migration narrative (drawing on visual, musical, and literary texts and historical research) lynching and other forms of racial terror, and not only economic reasons, motivated the decision of many subjects to migrate to the North (see chapter 1).

5. In her study of lynching and the migration narrative, Griffin complicates assumptions about the correctness of any particular approach to representing racist violence, calling attention rather to the social significance of the affects evoked by artists in the viewers, readers, and listeners of their works. Turning to Billie Holliday, Griffin writes:

What Lawrence suggests with the subtlety of his painting, Billie Holliday aggressively asserts in her haunting interpretation of "Strange Fruit." . . . No newspaper account, no graphic photograph, no literary description matches the haunting pathos with which Holliday emphasizes [in her interpretation of the song] words like "root," "pluck," and "suck." . . . Unlike Lawrence, Holliday places the black body at the very center of the pastoral. (15–16)

6. The allegations against Emmett Till repeated, of course, the longstanding pattern in which the lynching of black males was incited and justified with the accusation that the victim had raped or made sexual advances to a white female (see Whitaker). Months after they had been acquitted of the crime and were no longer in danger of criminal prosecution, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam publicly confirmed (in an interview for which they were paid approximately \$4,000 by *Look* magazine) that they had killed Emmett Till.
7. For an insightful analysis of white hubris and racist culture see Willet.
8. Till-Mobley makes this point about Emmett Till's childhood repeatedly in the first section of her book, and this is the root of her concern when Emmett decides to visit family in Mississippi (35, 78–83, 98–101).
9. Trauma theory offers one potentially useful perspective on people's responses to media representations of Till's murder. For an insightful study of the cultural politics of witnessing through the lens of trauma studies see E. Ann Kaplan's *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. Kaplan's discussion of what she terms "empty empathy" ("empathy elicited by images of suffering provided without context or background knowledge") illuminates aspects of a broader public response to media representations of Till's murder that I have not considered here (93–100).
10. "Afterimages" follows "The Evening News" in Audre Lorde's compilation of poems *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New*.
11. Washington points out that "Àjé is a woman-owned and woman-administered force but, reflecting the structure of Yoruba cosmology, Àjé is a force of balance based on complementary pairs. The male aspect is essential to Àjé; and many males have this power and exercise it" (173).
12. Such invocations of ancestral and especially maternal lines are central in African women's writing; see Cheryl A. Wall's remarkable study *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*. See also Washington's discussion of the significance of the father in Lorde's depiction of the mother-daughter Àjé relationship.

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## LOOKING AT THE OVEREXPOSED

### Visuality and Race in Harnett's *Attention Company!*

by Christopher J. Lukasik

The last twenty years has seen a number of cultural critics investigating the relationship between race and visibility.<sup>1</sup> Michelle Wallace, for example, closed the 1992 *Black Popular Culture* collection by addressing “the problem of visibility in African American culture” (335). Wallace attributes this problem—what she calls “the history of a mostly invisible black visibility” (335)—to the institutional limitations of a white-dominated art world that restrict or prohibit both the production of and discourse on black visibility. She finds it difficult, for instance, to imagine an African American’s relation to visual practice either as an artist or as a critic, if nearly all the depictions are negative. The historical legacy of negative images (African Americans as objects) plus the historical absence of positive images (African Americans as subjects), contributes to an absence of visual producers which, in turn, produces an absence of critical discourse on the visual.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the existence of a mostly invisible black visibility, ironically enough, has little to do with a lack of exposure. In fact, Wallace finds the negative image of the black to be thoroughly overexposed.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, she believes that one of the goals of contemporary cultural criticism should be to “begin to understand how regimes of visibility enforce racism, how they literally hold it in place” (Wallace, “Afterword” 344).

Like Wallace, Henry Louis Gates also discusses the problem of African American visibility in his introductions to two recent museum exhibition catalogues (“The Face” 11–14). But for Gates, the problem of African American visibility is more about the past than the present. Gates contends that “the hegemony of racist images that dominated the popular arts and infiltrated the fine arts” during the nineteenth century prompted the New Negro movement to use words, and “not the tactics of visual representation, as the tools . . . used to assert their self-image” (“The Face” xlv). Here, the negative visual representations of African Americans have not only stifled visual production, but they have literally generated textual bodies to take their place. In his introduction to the *Black Male* catalogue, Gates maintains that “tragically, every African American male who walks down any street in America carries with him the hidden heritage of this negative cultural and psychological legacy, the burden of being perceived through what . . . Barbara Johnson calls a stereotype—‘an already-read text’—the already read text of debasedness and animality” (Preface 13). Like Wallace, Gates draws virtually the same conclusion: African American visibility is problematic largely because of the historical legacy of centuries of negative images. Where Wallace locates “the problem” in the cultural institutions that regulate and maintain the production of visual practice, Gates locates “the problem” in



the historical effects of a cultural conflation between the stereotyped images and the actual people they seek to reductively display.

Yet, as both Wallace and Gates discuss the enduring legacy of the production of negative images, and the vexed status that it has subsequently created for the relationship between African American discourse and visibility, there is scarcely any attention paid to how these images themselves might actually participate in the problem outside of their status as an already-read text. In fact, it remains unclear if the representational modalities of images have any bearing whatsoever on what Wallace claims as a “vital” problem for African American discourse. While Wallace hopes to address this problem, her notion of visibility seems confined to “who produces and reproduces vision,” and oddly leaves out interrogating the very material condition for the production of vision in the first place: the image. Similarly, Gates reduces almost the entire history of the relationship between race and representation in American art (1710–1940) to the steady production of images that by and large always exist as “already-read” texts. Although the iconoclasm implicit within such criticism is understandable given the vast corpus of stereotypical images of African Americans within American culture, the implications and limitations of this iconoclasm on African American cultural criticism’s relationship to the problem it seeks to understand warrants further thought as to how African American visibility might be approached.

Both Wallace, through her concentration on the production and reproduction of images, and Gates, through his reduction of images to already-read texts, relocate the cultural power of images from their interior to their exterior.<sup>4</sup> Their insistence on the invariability of an image’s production and reception as a text minimizes the participation of the material aspects of an image in the active reception of itself in the social field and the ambivalences that might arise within such an image / text. Norman Bryson identifies a similar passivity of the image in art historical criticism more generally, and he suggests that while

it is historically true that the image is constantly subject to allocations of power elsewhere in the social formation . . . that does not entail—indeed it should highlight the reasons why it does not entail—a topological placing of power as always the image’s exterior . . . The practices of painting and viewing involve a material work upon a material surface of signs coextensive with the society, not topologically abstracted outside it. (150)

What drops out of the criticism of Wallace and Gates is attention to the specific techniques of visual production as a material practice, its representational modalities.<sup>5</sup> By this, I mean the set of practices involved in the production of an image and the iconographic details that exist coextensively with such practices. In painting, this might include the practices and histories informing a painter’s relationship to genre, to her representation of optical space, or to her management of form (such as composition, modeling, brushstroke, and color, to name but a few). Without attention to these material considerations or their own complex techniques and histories, one painting becomes indistinguishable from another, and both are largely indistinguishable from a photograph, while all three are relegated to the domain of the semantic. The results of this for criticism are severe, for they simplify the image to mere citation. As Bryson warns, “If the concrete nature of technique is overlooked, analysis of the image falls into immediate simplification: only its semantic



or iconological side is noted, and then linked to a corresponding structure of knowledge within the *habitus*" (16).

To be sure, the representational modalities of an image that I am insisting upon and the image's status as a culturally constructed text are not necessarily oppositional. Moreover, by suggesting the importance of such representational modalities to discussions of African American visuality, I am not trying to promote a strictly perceptualist account of painting, where the social formation plays little or no part; nor do I hope to advocate a retro-formalist gesture, where a subjectivist interpretation of the image's interior comprises the sole determinant for articulating its eventual cultural meaning, thereby magically waving away the negative and stereotypical history of an image as a constructed fiction; rather I would like to suggest that a consideration of representational modalities might help us understand how images themselves sustain and perhaps even unwittingly complicate the reception of racial stereotypes. Form is the location from which such types emerge. Therefore, the formal and art historical analysis of visual technique within racial representations should not be understood as opposed to their cultural histories, but as a way to analyze how the mechanics of an image's representation of race might maintain or complicate such cultural histories. That being said, I would like to take a step toward reconsidering the problem of visibility in African American cultural criticism and suggest how the tendency to accept the overexposure of the negative image of the African American as a readily legible type has allowed for its representation to become expendable, with the eventual costs amounting to a less complicated understanding of how "regimes of visibility" may or may not enforce racism through the negative images themselves.

In what follows, I would like to offer what a close reading attentive to such representational modalities might look like, and what it might suggest about the portrayal of a black male from the late-nineteenth century. That is, if the inscription of power occurs in the practice of form, then at first glance, William Harnett's 1878 painting *Attention Company!* resembles most other nineteenth-century American visual depictions of African Americans. That is, it appears to operate as a fairly straightforward stereotypical image. At best, the image might appear as a somewhat more visually intense account of a youthful "folk"-like quaintness. At worst, the painting might seem to embody the racism latent in the retrogressive drive to trivialize the effort made by African American writers to venerate the black soldiers who fought in the Civil War.<sup>6</sup> There is certainly little "Glory" in the figure of black masculinity offered by Harnett.

Presumably heeding the painting's sarcastic title, the young black boy stands rigidly at attention as a mock soldier, impotently armed with a less than menacing broom handle, and donning a parodic paper hat crowned with a tiny paper bow on the top. The painting's eviscerated representation of black masculinity appears to provide a distant ancestor to the contemporary figure of the diminutive "Webster" or Gary Coleman character type, one that Gates believes still haunts black masculinity today. So, it is hardly surprising that Guy McElroy and the organizers of the *Facing History* exhibition included this painting in their show—which hoped to document how the visual record of African Americans reinforced a number of largely restrictive stereotypes of black identity—nor is their tidy summary of it as "a moral study in the difference between the fantasy of child's play and the mundane realities of the real world" (88) altogether inappropriate or shocking. If we look no further than the semantic or iconological account of this image, this is exactly what we are likely to find: not much.



William Michael Harnett (1848–1892), *Attention, Company!*, 1878, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

Yet, upon closer inspection, this image seems odd. Why is there all this torn poster paper on the wooden green background? Why does the background appear to be so close? In fact, why does the top part of the image appear to be closer than the foreground figure who is supposedly standing in front of it? And the orange-brown fingerprints in the lower left-hand corner, they too appear to be too close, too sharply in focus, as if flattening this figure out into an impossible visual space. And most strange of all, why does the white triangular sliver of the torn piece of poster paper on the lower right-hand side of the painting appear to creep just barely over the shadow of the figure that is supposed to be in front of it? Strange, indeed.

But none of this should surprise you when you hear that the name of the artist is William Harnett and when you recognize that this portrait is not simply a portrait in the conventional pictorial sense, but a rigorous attempt to somehow integrate a figural representation into the visual space of *trompe l'oeil*.<sup>7</sup> But, before I attempt to explain exactly why *trompe l'oeil* matters so much to this painting, I would like to suggest that all of the peculiar visual questions that I just raised are precisely the same type of questions generally missing from the cultural criticism of Wallace or Gates. Furthermore, these questions, the majority of which pertain to the visual details of Harnett's image, are not only critical to understanding the complexity behind this picture, but they also reveal how this particular painting may have more to say about the relation of race to visual representation than just mere stereotypical assertion.

For what we find hovering in *Attention Company!* is a profound ambivalence that emanates from three scopic contestations which simultaneously work to both represent the stereotypical figure of the black boy, and to comment on and obfuscate the stability of that racial representation. These conflicts are: (1) between representing pictorial space visually through *trompe l'oeil* and representing it through something like traditional Cartesian perspectivalism; (2) between the genre of *trompe l'oeil* still life and the genre of portraiture; and finally, (3) between the domain of the visible and the textual, between image and text. All three of these contests contribute to the larger sense of ambivalence that permeates this painting as a result of the conflict between the portrait of the black boy as a racial stereotype and the recognition of this image as an ultimately two dimensional construction uneasily housed within the subject-less world of *trompe l'oeil*. The inevitable flattening out of the racial figure that occurs as *trompe l'oeil*'s visuality slowly muddles the space of the portrait allows this conflict to transpire over real time with the actual viewer, since a quick glance at this image will only register the stereotypical readings I had suggested initially. So it is only fitting that the direct address of Harnett's title, *Attention Company!*, should solicit our complete visual attention as well as the boy's figurative attention, since the status of the latter is being depicted as crucially dependent on the former.

Many of the questions that I asked above are created by the tension that arises from the insertion of a figural portrait of a black boy and his cast shadow into the *trompe l'oeil* world of a flat wooden board of deteriorating posters that serves as its quasi-background. A directional tug-of-war emerges from the painting, pulling back and forth perpendicular to the surface of the canvas, as the optical mechanisms of *trompe l'oeil* work to eliminate spatial depth on one side, while the portrait attempts to establish it on the other.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the background appears (particularly in the corners of the painting along the edges) to be pushing outward toward the viewer, while at the same time, the figural representation

of the black boy is trying to push backward, casting a shadow behind him and holding objects (such as the broom handle that he displays in front of him) that may lend more credence to his spatialization in three dimensions. While the integrity of the racialized figure's unstable three dimensionality serves as the contested site upon which this conflict between visualizations of "real" space plays out, the inverse effect is also true. That is, the establishment of the integrity of the "real" space also serves as the site of contestation for the status of the racial figure. As I mentioned earlier, the moments where this conflict is most intense occur along the edges, particularly where the white triangular sliver of poster paper encroaches over the space of the figure's cast shadow. Besides this sliver of poster paper, the proximity of the background edges—as evident in the scraps of paper in the upper right-hand corner and in the fingerprints on the lower left-hand side—allow the *trompe l'oeil* background to flatten out the racial stereotype depicted by the portrait. In other words, the stereotyped figure of the black boy in the foreground is literally flattened out and, to a degree, merged into the competing background space of *trompe l'oeil*, as if pointing out the black boy's figurative fiction.

In a similar manner, the ripped up poster paper in the background—particularly the ripped off corner of the cropped white poster fragment in the far upper right-hand side—also facilitates the subtle merging of the racialized figure into the space of *trompe l'oeil*, and the subsequent, but unstable generic triumph of *trompe l'oeil* over portraiture. As one of the trademarks of late-nineteenth-century American *trompe l'oeil* iconography, a ripped-off section of paper that has been fastened onto a wooden board recurs as a motif again and again in these paintings (as in Harnett's 1879 *Artist's Letter Rack* and John Peto's 1904 *The Artist's Signboard*).<sup>9</sup> Besides serving to increase the realism of the picture, Harnett's version, like those of his contemporaries, also operates iconographically by suggesting the visibility of the absence of representation. That is, the ripped off label corner often reveals a lighter tonal trace behind it in these works, evoking the presence of the missing scrap whose shape can be discerned from the remaining fragments and the lighter tonal trace that it once hid. Thus, the motif conveys the visual paradox of the depiction of absence. The status of these "present" absences, in addition to complicating the spatialization of the portrait, echo the inevitable status of the figure of the black boy in Harnett's painting. Ingeniously, Harnett offers this analogy by linking the presence of the black's boy hands, which are absent in the portrait, to the orange-brown imprints left on the wooden planks behind him. The hands missing from the portrait of the black boy return as the flat impressions on the *trompe l'oeil* space behind him, further flattening out the stereotyped image by drawing our sensation of the background plane forward, such that it appears to be coextensive with the foreground. Once more, the handprints not only point out the flatness of the stereotyped youth supposedly displayed in front of it—since the prints appear to be on the picture plane—but they actually activate the absent parts of the depicted racial figure as the agents in its own figural demise as a three dimensional fiction.

This conflict between competing systems of visual space and genres grows more intense as the figural representations left by the hand's traces in paint on the *trompe l'oeil* surface are shown to possess a representational value (in a referential sense) at least equal in value to the marks in paint that are used to construct the black boy's body in portraiture. Although the black boy's portrait looks like a person, its status as a "real" representation inevitably comes down to the suppression of its reality as marks in paint on a material

surface. Thus, Harnett's image suggests that the ontological priority of visual marks as perceptually "real" in the portrait—the same ones used to mark and enforce racial difference—is valid only so long as its ontological status as paint on a material plane (wood or canvas) is denied. To put it another way, the black boy's figural representation can only take ocular shape if his fingerprint's status as *trompe l'oeil* (as actual marks) is denied. Therefore, the claim to the figural integrity of the black boy beyond painterly marks is untenable, since that claim can only be maintained in Harnett's painting for as long as its status as an oil painting can be denied. The permanency of the visual recognition of the black boy as a figure in Harnett's *Attention Company!* comes at the expense of its status as a painting, and vice versa, which is not necessarily to say that one wins out over the other, but only to admit the intimate and irresolvable relationship between the two in the image. Thus, there exists no "real" visual racial difference to be seen in Harnett, but only the perpetual representational battle over the "real" that he creates between the competing genres of *trompe l'oeil* and portraiture, which registers the cultural marks of paint's claim to representing the black boy as either imprinting an absence of a figure or depicting its pictorial presence. Therefore, in Harnett's *Attention Company!* the contest over the function of the picture plane becomes indubitably wedded to the enigmatic representational status of the racial figure. The dubious status of the integrity of the black boy as a visual representation fluctuates with the status of the picture plane with which he is aligned. If the function of the picture plane is to be seen as mere material support, his figure is only known through its manual writing and its imprinting (on the background wood as flat surface); or if the function of the picture plane is to be seen as an illusionistic window for representing the figure of the black boy, he becomes an image for consumption (the stereotyped image).

Before I close, I would like to briefly address how the conflict between image and text in Harnett's painting also produces the same result: one in which the debate over the function of the picture plane is aligned with the representational integrity of the racial figure. Although far more can be said on the complicated relationship between image and text displayed here, one short example will have to suffice.<sup>10</sup> The newspaper text (the boy's metaphorical hat), for instance, envelopes the black boy's figure, aiding in the construction of its illusion as a racialized body in space, while the background text of the deteriorating poster scraps simultaneously exposes the flatness of this representation by trying to envelope the portrait into the flattened space of *trompe l'oeil*. What transpires here is not only a perpetuation of the representational battle described above, but a visual construction of the racial figure through text (by the newspaper that contributes to his figure's pictorial reality), followed by the subsequent recognition of that visual construction as a textual construction, as the flat space of *trompe l'oeil* blurs the integrity of the stereotypical image's three dimensionality.

If Harnett's painting has anything to offer to the analysis of African American visibility besides its complex example of why representational modalities should matter more than they do to African American cultural criticism concerned with images, it may ultimately rest less in its status as a "negative" image and more in its historical position as both a post-Reconstruction image in American culture and a relatively early modernist visual image. As such, it demonstrates how the contestation over the function of the picture plane as either a material surface or an illusionistic window is already being imagined—at least



by Harnett—as transpiring across the body of a racial figure. After 1880, the materiality of the representational surface and the body of the racial figure will become increasingly intertwined as evident in the eye dialect for representing authentically black characters within the fiction of Charles Chesnutt, Joel Chandler Harris, and Thomas Nelson Page, and perhaps culminating with the complex relationship between primitivism and modernism. Without suggesting any kind of causal relationship, one can even see its reformulation less than thirty years later in Picasso’s *Demoiselles* (1906)—a painting that has prompted at least one art critic to call it both “the first Cubist picture” and “the masterpiece of Picasso’s Negro period” (Barr 60). If the conflict over the function of the picture plane that *Attention Company!* dramatizes would be gradually decided by modernism in favor of the material surface, what remains unclear is what happens to its relationship with the site from which Harnett imagined this battle to be waged in 1878: the representation of the racial figure? Harnett’s image contains no immediate answers to this question, nor do I hope to suggest any, but it might begin to sketch out an alternative way for confronting what critics have called the “problem” of African American visuality.

#### NOTES

1. For links between racial identification and vision in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century painting, see Berger. For how nineteenth-century visual culture (especially photography) shapes and mediates the racialized formation of American identities, see Smith.
2. For a similar analysis of how “institutional preconditions” are responsible for the historical absence of female artists, see Nochlin 152.
3. As Wallace points out, “In the context of mass culture the image of the black is larger than life” and it has posed no threat to ending “an unrelenting and generally contemptuous objectification” (“Afterword” 335).
4. See also Wallace, “Modernism” and “Afterword” 119.
5. One notable exception to this reductive treatment of the visual has been the work of Kobena Mercer who has been dedicated to analyzing the conjunction of visual images and race as a material practice.
6. See Dates and Barlow, 11–12.
7. The significance and singularity of Harnett’s choice to portray an African American in the hybrid space of *trompe l’oeil* and portrait should not be overlooked. In fact, it is difficult to understand just how unusual it was for Harnett or any *trompe l’oeil* artist to paint any figural representations at all. Harnett only painted “a handful of paintings that included people” (McElroy 88) and, of those, as far as I can tell, he only attempted one in the *trompe l’oeil* style, the 1878 *Attention Company!*. For a more typical example of *trompe l’oeil*, see Harnett’s 1879 *The Artist’s Card Rack*.
8. The optical strategies of *trompe l’oeil*’s pictorial representation of space differ fundamentally from those employed by traditional Cartesian perspectivalism (monoscopic visuality) in two respects: (1) the diminishing of binocular parallax; and (2) the absence of foveal vision. The first optical difference is important because it enables *trompe l’oeil* to radically challenge Western fixed point perspective by promoting a visuality that has no implicit reliance on a fixed subject position. Since *trompe l’oeil* insists on diminishing parallax for illusionistic imitation, rather than manufacturing spatial depth, it creates a vertical surface so close to the surface of the painting that there appears to be no pictorial space at all. Hence the *trompe*. By refusing a monoscopic system of visual representation, *trompe l’oeil* addresses the stereoscopic vision of the actual human viewer as opposed to the imagined monoscopic subject of Cartesian perspectivalism. Second, *trompe l’oeil*’s denial of foveal vision creates a visual space that remains extremely focused across the entire picture plane. The broad scopic fixation of *trompe l’oeil* denies the presence of a central optical fovea which, in turn, prohibits it from discriminating and isolating a particular object to fetishize or focus in upon in its visual field. For more on optics and the physiology of vision, see Gregory 64–76 and for more recent developments see Rock 82–88, 93–96.
9. The second school of American *trompe l’oeil*, largely under the influence of William Harnett, included three major practitioners (Harnett, John Peto, and John Haberle) and two lesser known satellite circles

of artists. All told, about three dozen or so artists were engaged in producing *trompe l'oeil* paintings from about 1874 (when Harnett first began to paint) to 1910. See Frankenstein.

10. The tension between image and text in Harnett's painting might also be considered by analyzing the use of texts as clothes and the status of the figure's clothing as texts. In the portrait, the black boy's figure is capped by a newspaper text, exhibiting the use of text as play clothing (hat) for the three-dimensional figure. Here, the text aids in the construction of the fiction of the black boy's figural integrity by adding to the illusion of spatial depth by its own shaded relief and by its position both in front of and behind the boy's head. Although the newspaper on his head appears to be fairly new and somewhat durable, its status is invariably related by association to the text that is strewn across the wood behind it. Subsequently, just as the text on the boy's head is associated with the text on the wood behind it, the disintegrating conditions of the *trompe l'oeil* poster texts in the background resemble the conditions of the boy's clothes. The depiction of the slightly larger white button on the boy's vest and the ragged trim and holes on the boy's coat not only lend sympathy to the youth's impoverished economic status, but they also conjoin his tattered status with the tattered and deteriorating remnants of poster paper that comprise the *trompe l'oeil* space.

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## REVIEWS

Tillet, Salamishah. *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012.

During her monologue, the ghost child and titular character of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* recalls the Middle Passage, offering a sharp critique of the US Reconstruction project as well as the attendant consequences of transatlantic slavery and racialized violence: "all of it is now . . . it is always now . . . there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too" (248–49). The very prescience of *Beloved*'s rememory and, by extension, Morrison's authorial voice captures the political sentiment undergirding the movement toward the utilization of the speculative by Black American authors, intellectuals, and artists in the post-1965 era. Through the implementation of fantastic methodologies, they have reimagined, re-configured, and deconstructed slavery, the slave narrative, and other tales and myths set during the time of bondage as a means by which to genealogize and grapple with the continued oppression experienced by descendants of enslaved Africans. This persistent renovation of slavery's horrors remains unspeakable. The United States generally has moved on from the slavery period as if the passage of time has resolved its many traumas, effectively erasing certain pasts deemed not worthy of remembrance—those contrary to the myths that America promulgates about its founding and commitment to freedom. The cultural pushback to this grotesque, willing ignorance is precisely what Salamishah Tillet thoughtfully explores in her monograph, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*.

*Sites of Slavery* commences with Tillet's positioning of her book's argument as a corrective to Charles Johnson's claim that neo-slave narratives, including his regarded *Middle Passage*, and historical fiction are solely about the past—that they have no bearing on the present or future. Tillet maintains that the use of speculative methods to analyze and critique America's hypocrisies demands and has indeed resulted in varied works by "post-civil rights African American writers, artists, and intellectuals [who] respond to this crisis of citizenship by revisiting the antebellum past and foregrounding" what she refers to as a *democratic aesthetic* in order to attend to Black American civic estrangement (3). *Sites of Slavery* is interdisciplinary in its consideration of drama, dance, cinema, visual art, and literature. Tillet contemplates how cultural producers imagine sites of slavery to democratize traditional US historical narratives that have tended to slight, disremember, and/or erase Black Americans. Additionally, she reflects on how the re-constructions of these sites and texts are steeped in melancholic, *disillusionment mourning* and "engage in rituals of collective remembering, recuperative forms of recognition, and revisionist forms of historical representation" (4). As I will detail below, Tillet provides impressively detailed analyses about the stakes of democratizing the discourse of slavery, though her argument falters briefly regarding diasporic loss and mourning.

Chapter 1, "Freedom in a Bondsmaid's Arms: Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson, and the Persistence of African American Memory," is a consideration of the controversial relationship between President Thomas Jefferson and the enslaved woman, Sally Hemings, and the ways in which historians and authors have ignored, exploited, or embraced the relationship to various political ends. Through the analyses of texts that foreground the Black American woman's experience rather than that of this founding father, Tillet maintains that each author's recentering of the dominant perspective democratizes the historical narrative. She explores Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings*, which focuses on how the nation's multi-raciality exceeded the segregationist project demanded by antebellum America's societal structure; Annette Gordon Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*, which deconstructs the biases inherent in many scholars' protection of the Jeffersonian narrative myth by foregrounding the romantic possibilities of the union between master and slave in her historical writing about Jefferson and Hemings; and Robbie McCauley's play, *Sally's Rape*, which figures the abject citizen as most representative of the actualities regarding the status of the nation and formulates what Tillet explains as a "lineage of critical patriotism that centers black women's dissent" (50).

In chapter 2 "The Milder and More Amusing Phases of Slavery: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Black Satire," Tillet explores how several authors, including Ishmael Reed, Robert Alexander, and Bill T. Jones as well as visual artist Kara Walker utilize satire to ridicule and resist the harmful representations of Black life in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Tillet suggests that satire is "the perfect genre for black dissent and dissidence in the face of ongoing political invisibility and civic estrangement" while cautioning that in their re-imaginings of the most stereotyped characters, these Black American artists at times barely elide reinforcing the exact stereotypes that fuel their critique of Stowe's superfluous reliance on sentimentality (93). Tillet rightly points out that though Stowe's novel was a literary boon for the abolitionist cause, the narrative concludes by repatriating the formerly enslaved to Liberia; the possibility for Black American citizenship in Stowe's writerly imagination, then, is rendered unfeasible despite the lengths that Stowe had perhaps thought she had traveled in representing Black humanity. In fact, the residual effects of Stowe's limited scope redound in the post-Civil Rights moment, prompting Black American cultural producers to reframe the narrative surrounding Stowe's most controversial characters by reclaiming Uncle Tom as a more politically-aware character; placing Stowe on trial for her crimes; resurrecting Uncle Tom rather than conceding his death at the end of Stowe's narrative; and representing the under-critiqued diabolical pickaninny character, Topsy. Tillet maintains that in these reconfigurations, each artist "[produces] multiple dissenting affects and discourses of critical patriotism" (93).

In chapter 3, "A Race of Angels: (Trans)Nationalism, African American Tourism, and the Slave Forts," Tillet examines photography and film to explicate how artists "deploy a democratic aesthetic in order to subvert the racial exclusivity of American civic myths and establish new forms of diasporic solidarity through tourism" (97). Tillet's most provocative, extended argument centers on the idea that heritage tourism, the selected photography of Carrie Weems's *Slave Coast*, Chester Higgins's *Middle Passage* (1994), and Haile Gerima's film *Sankofa* (1993), while concerned with embracing alternative homelands through aesthetic means, are steeped in a relative short-sightedness that is preoccupied with diasporic rupture and loss, rendering the artists and their visual imagery decidedly Americanist in

their erasure of contemporary Africa. The premise of *Sites of Slavery* is that the slavery era continues to influence societal issues within the United States; yet, Tillet seems to modulate the ways in which slavery very much affects mythmaking about diasporan and African continent-based manifestations of “Africa.” Loss *vis à vis* transatlantic slavery no doubt affected and continues to affect African descended peoples regardless of whether they have known ancestral links to enslaved peoples in the Americas. Certainly, Tillet is correct in positing that concentrations on diasporic longing should not overshadow contemporary issues in Africa. However, the virtual silencing of Black American mourning (in particular) about slavery and their continued interest in homeland returns is problematic. Though this train of thought has become quite popular in some academic circles, I find it dangerously akin to an embrace of a presentist standpoint, which has the potential to unhinge the sort of contemporary Pan-Africanism or concern for Africa for which many scholars seem to be calling. Tillet’s central argument is solid until this point at which she, too, runs the risk of stifling an integral portion of the historical narrative about slavery.

In the fourth and final chapter, “What Have We Done to Weigh So Little on Their Scale?: Mnemonic Restitution and the Aesthetics of Racial Reparations,” Tillet situates reparations discourse into the larger discussion regarding Black American movement to “reclaim sites of slavery and reimagine democracy” (136). Utilizing the phrase *mnemonic restitution* Tillet explains how demands for reparations—in particular *Cato v. United States* (1995) and *re African- American Slave Descendants Litigation* (2004), Randall Robinson’s *The Debt*, and Mary Frances Berry’s *My Face Is Black Is True* (2005)—attempt to destabilize the nation’s willing ignorance of and silence about slavery to democratize American history and civic membership. Reparations discourse is often associated with broad monetary restitution, but as Tillet points out, activists typically have more direct demands, including apologies for and acknowledgements of the nation’s participation in slavery and perpetual forms of oppression; sincere strides to account for and eradicate the systemic disparities that disfranchise Black Americans; and the revision of historical records to include Black American experiences, all of which are petitions that are guided by “a deep, ethical commitment to creating an alternative racial framework for the future” (139–40).

Tillet concludes the text with then-Senator Barack Obama’s 2008 speech on race in America, which was prompted by a series of widely broadcasted, incendiary comments made by his pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, before and during the presidential campaign. Given across from Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell, Obama’s politically astute address celebrated the possibilities inherent in the national mythology about American liberty and equality, while it also reminded the nation that the unreconciled sins of slavery have left its founding principles unrealized. Tillet connects Obama’s strategically-located speech to the 2002 controversy surrounding how slavery would be integrated into the commemoration of President George Washington’s Philadelphia executive mansion (as memorialized in “The President’s House”) before briefly considering the implications of the United States electing its first Black American president. She maintains that the current political climate has produced a rise in extreme right-leaning political factions and New Confederate groups that aim “to keep both past and contemporary African Americans invisible within American civic culture” (176). Tillet cogently argues that the election of President Barack Obama has done little to recuperate a more expansive, nuanced, and accurate master narrative that would initiate sincere efforts that attend to

the lack of resources and economic disparities that have affected Black Americans since slavery. Without expansive reconciliatory strides, Tillet cautions, the United States will fail to achieve its democratic project.

*Sites of Slavery* is a meticulously researched, compelling addition to a growing body of literature concerning race and the post-Civil Rights moment. Salamishah Tillet effortlessly analyzes a range of interdisciplinary materials, positing riveting examinations of how writers, artists, and intellectuals critique America's hypocrisies and impact conversations about the possibilities for Black social life and a true racial democracy in the United States.

—Michelle D. Commander

#### WORK CITED

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. New York: Vintage, 2004.

Pfeiffer, Kathleen. *Brother Mine: The Correspondence of Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2010.

Jean Toomer's *Cane* remains one of the most enigmatic works that emerged during the last century. In the past three decades, critics have probed auto/biography, psychoanalysis, sociopolitical and theological discourse, gender studies, and Toomer's own critical essays for answers to questions raised by his exploration of racial and national identity and dislocation, black male and female sexuality, and the metaphorical topoi of the United States North and South in the text. Nellie McKay, Robert B. Jones, Rudolph P. Byrd, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Karen Jackson Ford, Mark Whalan, and Kathleen Pfeiffer have unearthed insightful details about the circumstances surrounding Toomer's formation of a complex racial identity, his life in the immediate years preceding *Cane*'s creation and publication, and the text's impact on his subsequent writing and the Afro-modern and postmodern canons.

Whalan's *Letters of Jean Toomer: 1919–1924*, published in 2006, and *Brother Mine: The Correspondence of Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank*, Pfeiffer's 2010 response, have been particularly important. *Letters* gives scholars access to Toomer's willingness to emphasize whatever aspects of his racial and cultural identity would appeal to black and white literati alike at any given moment during the years bookending *Cane*'s 1923 publication. Moreover, through *Letters*, Toomer's co-dependency on Waldo Frank, his closest friend and mentor at the time, comes into fuller focus *vis-à-vis* impassioned declarations of artistic allegiance and filial devotion. With *Brother Mine*, Pfeiffer complicates critical notions of their relationship, offering a chronological collation of epistles between the two men. From Frank's first letter to Toomer in October 1920, Pfeiffer implicates Frank in encouraging Toomer, who was initially reserved and professional, to open up to his input and affections and to the possibilities of publication available to him as a modernist "Negro" poet. In her introduction, Pfeiffer links the dissolution of their friendship to Toomer's affair with Frank's wife, art therapist Margaret Naumburg, and marks Toomer a turncoat. However, she discounts the betrayal Toomer expressed feeling in his autobiography of having been reduced to "a

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fraction of Negro blood" when, in fact, he desired to create "a synthesis in the matters of the mind and spirit analogous, perhaps, to the actual fact of at least six blood minglings" (qtd. in Pfeiffer 29). Ultimately, it would seem the strictures of America's "one-drop rule" on the social status of one marked black was as much to blame.

What makes *Brother Mine* compelling, then, is that which made the earliest English and American readers fond of *Pamela*, *The Power of Sympathy*, and other epistolary novels: an intimate look at a complex love story. Readers see two men finding homosocial solidarity as they manipulate the constructs of race in the poetry that would become one of the New Negro Renaissance's first critically acclaimed works. They also see Toomer offer Frank critical feedback on *Holiday*, Frank's version of their trip to Spartanburg, South Carolina, which their letters often romanticize—while offering scant details. They read some of the most honest confessions in print of a white American man's obsession with and hunger to embody blackness, and they witness Toomer deftly navigating his multiracial identity. As he and his beloved Jewish brother reach for a raceless identity neither can attain in America, readers watch them commit the ultimate crime: interracial love. Frank's gleeful interest in the black American experience is palpable as he alludes to the pleasures and challenges he and Toomer encounter as they venture into the US South. Moreover, it is clear that Frank is living vicariously through Toomer's relationships with his grandmother, best friend Ken, and on-again, off-again girlfriend Mae. What emerges from their dialogue is both men's problematic conception of a kind of Lacanian *jouissance* subsumed in blackness, which Toomer calls a "soil [that] is a good rich brown" that "should yield splendidly to our plowing" in an August 3, 1922, letter in which he makes final plans for the pair's Spartanburg excursion (59).

Central to the poetic re-envisioning of *Cane* that emerges in *Brother Mine* is the homosocial desire that permeates every page. As Pfeiffer notes, the almost daily communion intensifies after Toomer extends an invitation to Frank to come to Washington in his reply; therein, too, expressions of bromance and subtle homoerotic flirtation begin in earnest. Of the visit, Toomer writes on April 26, 1922, "well, you know just at this time what it would mean to me" (37). Subsequent signatures—"ever yours" (Frank, May 2, 1922), "my love to you" (Frank in an undated letter later that summer), "Faithfully" (Toomer, July 31, 1922)—underscore their devotion to each other's creative processes and spiritual well-being as Toomer perfects "Fern," "Karintha," "Carma," "Avey," "Kabnis" and other poetic sketches in *Cane* and as Frank completes "Murder" and other parts of his 1922 collection, *City Block*, a planned revision of his 1919 work *Our America*, and what would become *Holiday*, published the same year as *Cane*. After Naumburg gives birth to her and Frank's only child together, thwarting his plans to visit Toomer, correspondence cools, though the yen for meeting smolders on both ends. Ultimately, the trip to Spartanburg does manifest, and upon their return, Frank interestingly speaks of a descent into depression once he is no longer with Toomer. "One cant [sic] talk about what it all means: and must not ever be spoiled from meaning until the end," he explains in post-trip epistles. "We understand each other in a way that is beautifully mysterious. . . . Most of all, Spartanburg brought me You" (65, 68). More acutely evident, though, is Toomer's confidence in himself as an artist and in his ability to move his career forward with Frank or without him, though he consistently expresses his desire for Frank's presence. "It is true: Spartanburg (how curiously, painfully creative is the South!) gave us each other perhaps as no other place



could," Toomer says soon after his return to Washington. "A bond that is sealed in suffering endures" (69).

Throughout the rest of the fall and winter of 1922, however, Frank and Toomer's letters become increasingly cryptic—Toomer beset with money problems as he perfects "Kabnis," Frank with marital ones and a yearning for Toomer that begins to allude that this bond stemmed from some homoerotic experience that Frank and Toomer may have shared or that Frank at least desires. Each subsequent letter brims with metaphors that move beyond the homosocial to the homoerotic, informed by the metaphysical, Eastern ideologies about sexuality and polyamory that George Gurdjieff espoused in the Unitism faith that Toomer and Frank begin to study. In one, Frank struggles to interpret Toomer's misspelled attempt ("Crevor Vitire!") to express brotherhood in broken French. Reading it as a gibe, akin to "the dozens" in African American vernacular culture, he takes up the invitation to do the same. Pfeiffer notes that Toomer's letter and Frank's reply, written entirely in an odd amalgam of French, German, Spanish, and Latin, underscores a shift in tenor in the relationship, even as Frank helps Toomer connect with Horace Liveright of Boni & Liveright, who had brought the world T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* in 1922, and would publish the first books of Hart Crane, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and others within the decade. Moreover, Toomer's homosocial and homoerotic intimations begin to have a more transparent violence in their expression of affection, reading almost as that of a sadist father figure dominating Frank. It becomes increasingly apparent that his view of their bond is linked to his confidence in *Cane's* success, which would be shattered by its initial failure to even recoup the publisher's advance investment.

The idealization of black Southerners' suffering, and of the displacement felt by those who have migrated North, would become the fault line causing Toomer and Frank's bromance to begin to rupture. Their impassioned exchange of ideas revolve around this tension between fantasy and reality, delusion and layered truth. Readers watch their fervent but fragile kinship disintegrate as Frank, the more experienced author, realizes that Toomer's superior talent, novelty, and oddity in mainstream publishing make his own patronage less integral. But for Frank, Toomer is so much more than a pathway to blackness and some sense of intrinsic good that Frank sees primarily in the African American culture Toomer's work animates. Quite simply, given Frank's abject self-loathing, Toomer is everything he feels he will never be. He knows he is losing Toomer's kinship even before it is gone. He can sense that Toomer, an attractive, charming man who can navigate the color line adeptly without him, can have his pick of the lot of literary friends and lovers. The ultimate irony, in fact, lies in Toomer choosing his closest friend's wife as his own intimate companion, replacing Frank with an attainable object of sexual desire that allows him to flout miscegenation laws.

By February 1923, consumed by the dystopia of not hearing from Toomer in several days, Frank writes in Spanish, "You still don't know how punishing it is to realize that those you love, and who simply look like brothers to you, call you old" (113). Here, Frank's psychobabble, coded in foreign language, has led him to this point of no return, and he is hopeful his brother will rescue him from his own despair as they have done for each other before. In just a year, however, what had begun as fun-loving repartee—and deepened to philosophical musing *vis-à-vis* discussions of what in Flaubert (and other "high" literature) is lost in translation to palatable English—has devolved into desperation and sheer scorn

for an inescapable otherness of being non-Teuton and non-heterosexual in America. Having transgressed the binaries of race and sexuality and taken the leap together into the abyss of desire, it becomes clear to both men, though it is only Toomer who accepts this reality, that a gulf has widened between them that is almost too vast to cross. It is fitting that again and again, what he cannot say is encoded “in tongues.”

That the two and a half years Toomer and Frank corresponded (March 1922 to October 1924) descends into malapropisms from various Romance languages speaks to Mae G. Henderson’s commentary on African American heteroglossia and her challenge to scholars to take up “the hermeneutical task of interpreting tongues” (*African American Literary Theory* 363). This lens on subtexts in African American women’s literature, though, is paramount not only for what Charles W. Mills calls “alternative epistemologies” about black ontology but a need for a re-examination of gender and sexual identities and expressions of black Americans on the whole, particularly as they manifest in the work of men of color who, like Toomer, have dared to explore the ills of patriarchy and heterosexism from the perspective of the black female-identified experience (21).<sup>1</sup> Less important than whether Toomer, Fenton Johnson, and Langston Hughes shared intimate sex with men is how Toomer’s *Carma*, Johnson’s prostitutes, and Hughes’s Jesse B. Semple and Alberta K tear asunder heteronormative notions of black male and female ontologies. The mirror Toomer turns on his own problematized gaze on the black female body and appropriation of the black female voice in *Cane* is arguably an unconscious one, but it is one that advances discourse on post-Reconstruction and early-twentieth-century conceptions of black masculinity and sexual ambiguity in powerful ways. The enigma that is *Cane* is made richer and deepened by *Brother Mine*, and it is a collection that offers scholars an unfiltered understanding of Toomer’s bromance with Frank. “*Carma*,” “*Avey*,” “*Paul and Bona*,” and most especially “*Kabnis*” begin to call for readings of a quareness<sup>2</sup> that permeates Toomer’s poetics.

—L. Lamar Wilson

#### NOTES

1. In the opening chapter of *Blackness Visible*, Charles W. Mills underscores the centrality of acknowledging the black body as a “philosophical object” to any effective critique of Western political philosophy (16). He also argues in that text that all African American critical and literary works are political articulations of what he calls “alternative epistemologies” (21), which redefine black ontology in the American imagination under a hermeneutic of presence and personhood, rather than absence and subhumanity. He notes the challenge black feminists face in exposing “the realities of racial subordination without having race loyalty automatically trump gender” (17). He later observes “that the feminist challenge to mainstream political philosophy may provide a useful model” for twenty-first-century critical race theorists to intervene in discourse on political philosophy (121). Underscoring what feminism accomplished in illuminating the pervasiveness of patriarchy, he points to the importance of that movement’s “excavation and rediscovery of oppositional political texts or fragments by women” and “mapping of the full dimensions of female subordination, what would be required to incorporate women into the body politic on a basis of real moral equality” (121). Black feminist scholars took up this cartography with aplomb in the latter half of the twentieth century.
2. In “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) *Everything* I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My *Grandmother*,” E. Patrick Johnson’s essay in his 2005 collection *Black Queer Studies*, co-edited with Mae G. Henderson, he animates the term “quare” as one that “throws shade” on queer theory’s constant affirmation of ante-/anti-phallographic whiteness vis-à-vis juxtapositions with the abjected non-heteronormative, gender-blending performance of black bodies and voices. In addition to the col-

lection's clarion call and the subsequent work of Sharon Holland, Rinaldo Walcott, Dwight McBride, and others, much work remains to bring nuance to conversations about the inherent quareness of blackness—almost always framed as the representational opposite of white heterosexuality, intellect, and supremacy—*because* of the long-standing homosexual implications of the term. This review aims to situate African American poetics as the locus for the alternative epistemes awaiting scholars who engage blackness through this lens of “the quare.”

#### WORKS CITED

- Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn. “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition.” *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York UP, 2000. 348–68.
- Johnson, E. Patrick. “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother.” *Black Queer Studies*. Ed. Johnson and Mae G. Henderson. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005. 124–157.
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- Whitfield, James M. *The Works of James M. Whitfield: America and Other Writings by a Nineteenth Century African American Poet*. Ed. Robert S. Levine and Ivy G. Wilson. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2011.

This complete collection of Whitfield’s extant writing makes a strong case for expanding the attention scholars of African American literature have so far paid him. Levine and Wilson take some worthwhile editorial risks to fill out their picture of Whitfield’s career, following recent trends in nineteenth-century American studies that emphasize the complexities of print culture and national identity. Readers of poetry will appreciate the inclusion of both Whitfield’s only complete volume of verse and his later occasional and periodical pieces, while more historicist scholars will find much of interest in his prose, which largely concerns the colonization movement.

Levine and Wilson include the entire 1854 pamphlet *Arguments, Pro and Con, on the Call for a National Emigration Convention*, which contains not only Whitfield’s letters to *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* in favor, but also short pieces by Douglass and William J. Watkins opposing. Flouting more conventional author-centric standards of textual editing, this decision thus affords a much more richly detailed picture of the debate. Whitfield’s support of this movement was not unique among his contemporaries, even the poets. George Moses Horton, for instance, fantasized of immigrating to Liberia from the late 1820s and finally managed to do so after the end of the Civil War. Whitfield entered the conversation at a later moment than Horton, and joined Martin Delany (on whom Levine has done extensive work elsewhere) in favoring the idea of emigration to the Caribbean or Latin America. Scholars working on the national limits of American studies and American identity have found colonization schemes useful sites for thinking through period attitudes towards imagined community, and these materials represent a useful repository for this kind of inquiry. For instance, the back-and-forth between Whitfield and Watkins over the “proximity” of black-nationalist thinkers and their conventions “to those of our brethren who are in bonds” illuminates perceived connections between the fates of enslaved and free blacks

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via print and oratorical culture (132). Levine and Wilson frame these issues with attentive sophistication, and fill in crucial historical details. Their decision to build the last part of the book around Whitfield's later years in California also draws on contemporary critical preoccupations with nineteenth-century US geo-political imaginaries, and their biographical researches indicate that Whitfield transferred his hopes for free black community (if not proper nationalism) to the American West.

The pamphlet largely consists of a series of bravura performances by Whitfield, and Watkins begins each of his responses by complaining about the "interminable prolixity" of the poet's prose (141). Twentieth-century critics who downgraded Whitfield for the Victorian syntactic elaborations of his verse have ignored the political dimension it takes in these debates, and one hopes that the editors' decision to include this material will complicate later assessments. Whitfield's work ably toggles between Romantic vision and political rhetoric. Partly following the lead of Edward Whitley's reading of Whitfield in *American Bards: Walt Whitman and Other Unlikely Candidates for National Poet* (2010), Levine and Wilson compare him to Whitman several times. Like the good gray poet, Whitfield aspired to a kind of bardic nationalism and absorbed the contradictions of his moment. After all, his great poetic achievement comes in the form of an account of the fate of Black people in America, even as he vociferously advocated their emigration.

The fault that Watkins finds in Whitfield's prose, its "prolixity," actually comprises the virtues of his writing throughout the volume. At its most energetic and involving, Whitfield's syntax elaborates his conceits in serial subordinate clauses. In "How Long," he surveys the crimes of the slaveholders' republic, making comparisons to other forms of historical oppression:

Here might the cunning Jesuit learn—  
 Though skilled in subtle sophistry,  
 And trained to persevere in stern,  
 Unsympathizing cruelty,  
 And call that good, which, right or wrong,  
 Will tend to make his order strong—  
 He here might learn from those who stand  
 High in the gospel ministry,  
 The very magnates of the land  
 In evangelical piety,  
 That conscience must not only bend  
 To every thing the Church decrees,  
 But it must also condescend,  
 When drunken politicians please  
 To place their own inhuman acts  
 Above the "higher law" of God,  
 And on the hunted victim's tracks  
 Cheer the malignant fiends of blood;  
 To help the man-thief bind the chain  
 Upon his Christian brother's limb,  
 And bear to Slavery's hell again

The bound and suffering child of Him  
 Who died upon the cross, to save  
 Alike, the master and the slave (59–60).

This elaborate poetic sentence mimics the casuistry of slavery's more liberal apologists, and draws both religious and political justifications into the scope of its critique. He contrasts the American ideal of a separation between church and state with the notoriously scholastic Jesuits, who helped administer Spanish and Portuguese empires in Latin America and who participated in the violence of the Inquisition. The rich paradoxes of seventeenth-century writing that F. O. Matthiessen famously located as a key influence on American Renaissance writers thus also appears in the texture of Whitfield's poetic argument.

The editors note Whitfield's use of the tetrameter from his first volume to his late periodical verse from his years in California. With this line, his work rings of hymnal meter, but in longer pieces he strikes towards more grandiose, epic tones—like Longfellow or Tennyson. This attempt to bridge the increasingly distinct modes of lyric and epic writing has specific implications for African American literature. Whitfield's verse anticipates the preoccupation with the orality that would come to characterize the tradition. His most oft-cited lines, the opening of the title poem "America" travesty Samuel Francis Smith's popular patriotic song:

America, it is to thee,  
 Thou boasted land of liberty,—  
 It is to thee I raise my song,  
 Thou land of blood, and crime, and wrong (41).

The poem's materials are resolutely public, but Whitfield's premise, that slavery perverts the ideals of the republic, needs the protections of private lyric individualism in the days of violent anti-abolitionist sentiment. In the context of John Stuart Mill's theory of lyric poetry as "overheard" and his endorsement of Wordsworth's poetic "emotion recollected in tranquility," these lines take a strange slant. Who could, after all, speak Whitfield's rich poetic sentences spontaneously? How do they correspond to a nascent Black public sphere? That Whitfield sold this sometimes deeply ironic and sharp-tongued volume from his barbershop or in his travels proves his bravery and the range of nineteenth-century public sentiment.

Whitfield never attempts to represent African American vernacular speech directly, but consistently works through figures of voice with political implications. In "Lines on the Death of John Quincy Adams," he writes:

Eloquence did his heart inspire,  
 And from his lips in glory blazed,  
 Till nations caught the glowing fire,  
 And senates trembled as they praised! (48)

Following Shelley, Whitfield figures Adams as a Romantic Prometheus, promulgating the fire of liberty for the sake of humanity. Daniel Webster plays the role opposite Adams; in



"The Arch Apostate," Whitfield depicts the great orator brought low by his endorsement of the Compromise of 1850, "now prostrate, groveling in the dust" (67). Elsewhere, the problem of language in general appears fundamental to the religious justification of the slave system: "How long, oh Lord! shall such vile deeds be acted in thy holy name[?]" (63). In a curious turn, the idea of the name projected across history also appears in Whitfield's treatment of black subjects. The ode "To Cinque," the leader of the Amistad rebellion, focuses on its subject's survival in writing: "Thy name shall stand on history's leaf, / Amid the mighty and the brave: / Thy name shall shine, a glorious light . . ." (49). In each of these cases, Whitfield works through problems at the intersection of orality and literature that would go on, later in the nineteenth century, to contextualize the emergence of the vernacular as the cardinal value in African American literature.

Whitfield's work, and its representation in this generous volume, begs an expanded conception of Black Romanticism. Whitfield's advocacy in both prose and verse adds a voice to the revolutionary period then ending that substantially broadens the historical picture. In addition to consistently measuring America of the 1850s against colonial and early republican ideals of freedom, he refers to contemporary European revolutions, connecting Webster's early work with the struggle for Greek Independence, and elsewhere compares abolition to the Hungarian Revolution. Whitfield consistently contextualizes these transformations in the language of Romantic cosmology: "boundless space" and "glittering spheres" appear as frames for his ideas of American freedom (75, 78). Like Whitman, he also several times imagines his poetic persona taking flight over vast expanses. Whitfield constructs himself as a genius in the sense held up recently by Keith Leonard: an individual whose energy and creativity enlarges the possibilities of his race. However, like Poe, this responsibility weighed heavily on him, and more than a few lyrics mention his "burning" or "throbbing brain" (91, 70). Levine and Wilson have finally given us an opportunity to survey Whitfield's accomplishments in their full and contradictory complexity.

—Matt Sandler

McDonald, Kathlene. *Feminism, the Left, and Postwar Literary Culture*. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2012.

Resurrecting the voices of the obscured and censored, and revealing the Leftist proclivities of revered authors, Kathlene McDonald's *Feminism, the Left, and Postwar Literary Culture* documents the contributions of a Left feminist perspective to "the history and culture of the American Left, the history of feminism in the United States, and US women's literary history" (8). McDonald's book exceeds the specificity of her argument: "that women writers drew on the rhetoric of antifascism to critique the cultural and ideological aspects of women's oppression," offering a comprehensive and expansive overview of "the largely neglected story" of the feminist Left and the literature it produced during the postwar period (6). McDonald's work recovers the voices erased by McCarthy-era censorship and illustrates the contributions of African American female artists and activists to Leftist debates, as early critics of intersecting axes of oppression.

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Refreshingly written in clear, vibrant prose, making it accessible to nonacademic readers, *Feminism, the Left, and Postwar Literary Culture* is an earnest and engaging exploration of the “often-reciprocal relationship” between Left feminist debates and the cultural texts that emerged amidst the hostile conservative climate of mid-twentieth-century America. In comparison to the array of work detailing Leftist feminist writing of the 1930s and 1940s, McDonald’s study probes the relatively overlooked postwar period for its contributions to Left feminist history. As McDonald makes explicit, her work contributes a literary-historical perspective to the extant studies detailing second-wave feminism’s indebtedness to the Old Left. These include Kate Weigand’s *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation* (2001), Gerda Lerner’s *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography* (2002), and in the context of black feminism, Kevin Gaines’s “From Center to Margin: Internationalism and the Origins of Black Feminism” (2002) and Dayo F. Gore’s *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (2011). Though avowedly not a work of literary criticism, the intellectual magnitude of her scholarship should not be overlooked. McDonald’s detailed historical inquiries into how female authors used literature to proliferate the possibilities available to women will likely prove useful to those examining the time period, either with or without a theoretical bent.

*Feminism, the Left, and Postwar Literary Culture* begins by contextualizing the literary works McDonald discusses, tracing the contours of Left feminist culture through debates over the “Woman Question” and the use of antifascist rhetoric within Communist party publications. The central chapters of McDonald’s book crystallize around three major figures of women’s literary history: Martha Dodd, Alice Childress, and Lorraine Hansberry. Using the stories of their radicalizations to inform her readings, McDonald carefully identifies the elements of racial, gender, and economic critique that give their oeuvres social and political gravity. She reads their works as historical documents and cultural texts, informed by and participating in the debates of the postwar period. For McDonald, these are political texts that dramatize the prejudices and injustices that their authors fought to eradicate. As McDonald makes clear, the feminist perspectives of Dodd, Childress, and Hansberry contributed to the Communist Party’s gradually increasing willingness to address women’s issues in their visions of a more just and equitable society.

This study also redresses a historical redaction: the Leftist activities of female authors during the postwar period. McDonald compiles an archive of powerful arguments and representations that challenged the racist and sexist images of women as “white, middle-class, heterosexual, married mother[s] and homemaker[s]” (21). Specifically, she focuses on female authors intimately involved in Communist party activities whose work recognizes the need for solidarity, coalitions, and intersectional analyses of oppression given what McDonald identifies as the fascist nature of racism, sexism, and class disparity.

In her first chapter, “Domestic Ideology as Containment Ideology,” McDonald charts the historical context of her analysis and elaborates upon one of her critical terms: domestic ideology. Her portrait of the historical period foregrounds the American postwar zeal for patriotism and the contentious debates over American identity. Given this intense national fervor, both the Right and the Left sought to capitalize on the momentum and demonstrate their patriotism. Whereas Senator Joseph McCarthy and the members of the House Un-American Activities Committee demonstrated their national pride by demonizing those involved in Communist politics, Leftist women writers like Martha Dodd argued that

being American meant fighting against oppression and intolerance. McDonald's attention to this period reveals how a shift to an "antifascist framework" allowed the Left to extend their analyses of oppression by including race in addition to class and gender. Unlike in earlier decades, feminist writers during this period began drawing connections between cultural representations of women and repressive ideologies.

McDonald identifies the dominant ideologies of the postwar period as containment and consensus, bolstered by the culture industry's image of the happy housewife. In reaction to domestic ideology, female Leftist authors sought to denaturalize the images of women umbilically tethered to the home by providing historical evidence of alternatives and models of women imagined otherwise. These include films that portray women's labor organizations (*Salt of the Earth*), pamphlets on women's contributions to war efforts, and publications urging the Communist party to place the "Woman Question" at the center of their platform. McDonald analyzes the impact of race-conscious organizations like the National Negro Congress and the Congress of American Women in gaining recognition for the validity of gender issues within the Party. Within these constellated efforts a common theme emerges: feminist authors aligning fascism and oppression in order to channel antifascist energies towards women's liberation. McDonald adroitly argues that women affiliated with the Old Left were pioneering analyses of oppression along class, gender, and racial lines. These early forms of intersectional analysis, detailed in later chapters through the work of Claudia Jones and Alice Childress, did not yet include critiques of sexual normativity, as McDonald explores through the life and work of Lorraine Hansberry.

Chapter 2, "Fighting Fascism at Home and Abroad: The Cold War Exile of Martha Dodd," demonstrates the importance of recovery work, without which our portrait of postwar Left feminism would be bereft of Dodd's critical voice. Dodd's work testifies to a sea-change that McDonald identifies following World War II: Communist women shifting away from models of antifascist fighters abroad, and instead championing images of American activists. Horrified by the similarities she witnessed firsthand between Nazi Germany and McCarthy-era terror, Dodd's work argues that anti-communism, racism, economic exploitation, and gender inequality are all forms of fascist control. According to McDonald, Dodd's novels and short stories illustrate the tensions and contradictions within the Communist Party's nascent debates over the "Woman Question." Not only does Dodd trace intersecting axes of oppression, her strongest models of resistance are female heroines who repeatedly take stands against injustice.

In addition to recovering the work of Martha Dodd, looking past the aura of scandal that has surrounded her persona to the significance of her writing, McDonald breathes new life into the work of Alice Childress by juxtaposing her ideas alongside the work of Claudia Jones. Although the theme of racial prejudice surfaces in Dodd's short story "Maria," McDonald explores issues of race in depth in her third chapter, "'In Her Full Courage and Dignity': Alice Childress, and the Struggle against Black Women's Triple Oppression." McDonald reads Childress's dramas and periodical columns through the political injunctions of a contemporary interlocutor, Claudia Jones. In Jones's 1949 article, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!" she issues a clarion call for the Party to pay attention to the triple oppression of African American women. By juxtaposing Jones's injunctions with Childress's characters, McDonald reads Childress's work as an effort to educate people in the "special problems of Negro women" and galvanize working-class

black women's radical activism. Though her work may have reached a broader audience, Childress's plays were intended as provocations to the Left to address their own racism and chauvinism. In addition to critiquing stereotypical representations of black women, Childress proffered examples of alternatives, most notably, through her Mildred columns published in *Freedom*. Mildred, "an outspoken and militant working-class heroine," both educated the Left about women's issues and helped black women understand their place within the Left (66). McDonald is especially attentive to Childress's sensitivity towards her readers: Childress used Mildred's companion Marge to anticipate and address readers' legitimate reservations about becoming involved in militant activities. By examining Childress's work in the context of her Leftist activity, overlooked by previous scholars, McDonald uses Childress to help illustrate the continuity of radical feminist thinking in the postwar period that predates its explosion in the 1960s and 1970s.

In her chapter on "Antiracism, Anticolonialism, and the Contradictory Left Feminism of Lorraine Hansberry," McDonald attempts, as have others before her, to explain the apparent discrepancies between Hansberry's radical politics and less-obviously Leftist dramas. Whereas scholars such as Adrienne Rich and Karen Malpede have suggested that Hansberry self-censored her radical feminism, McDonald uses Hansberry's involvement with the Left feminist community to tease out the subtle critiques rooted in her work. Unlike the previous authors McDonald analyzes, Hansberry engages with sexuality in her critique of domestic ideology. Hansberry's anonymous letters, published in the lesbian journal *The Ladder*, argued that women looking to challenge their oppression needed also to consider the pressure to conform to sexual standards (what could be considered the implicit heteronormativity of domestic ideology). Through a reading of Hansberry's last and little known play, *Les Blancs*, McDonald also demonstrates how Hansberry's analysis of black resistance movements extended to an anticolonial perspective, anticipating the intersectional analyses of oppression that would surge in popularity during the years to come.

The final chapter, "Ask Him If He's Tried It at Home: Making the Personal Political," argues that the use of antifascist rhetoric to refute domestic ideologies directly influenced second-wave feminism's insistence that the personal is political. A major concern of women who made up the postwar Left was the discrepancy between theory and practice—the Party's affirmations of equality were notably absent in their personal relationships. Both the fictional and nonfictional writings of the postwar period suggest that the very men and women committed to fighting for a more just and equitable society struggled to engage in equal relationships. Though they did not solve this uneven dynamic, female authors expressed their anger in writing and indicted Leftist racists and chauvinists for their hypocrisy. Rather than assuming that Left feminist anti-racists laid dormant during the postwar period, either silenced by McCarthy-era oppression or as yet unawakened to the injustices within liberal party politics, McDonald's scholarship highlights the heroic women engaged in the Sisyphean battles for social justice that are still being waged today.

McDonald's most significant contributions to the history and culture of the American Left, the history of feminism in the United States, and US women's literary history are her recovery of Martha Dodd and recontextualization of Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry given their Leftist activity. Though each chapter could stand alone, together they add up to a compelling case for the continuity of Left feminist thought from the postwar



period through the flourishing of second-wave feminist theory and social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. As McDonald makes explicit in her epilogue, telling the story of this continuity extends the vibrant tradition of feminist resistance to oppression in America, “a tradition that has largely been erased by the red-baiting of the McCarthy era” (109). Woven together by the stories that defined the Left feminist intellectual culture during the postwar period, Kathlene McDonald’s thoughtful study revitalizes the voices of a community of women raging against injustices amidst a stifling culture of silence and repression.

—Danica Savonick

Williams Evans, Freddie. *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*. Lafayette, LA: U of Louisiana at Lafayette P, 2011.

The site of performance of indigenous African cultural practices comes alive in Freddie Williams Evans’s book *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*. Using newspaper articles, historical records, eyewitness accounts, travel narratives, and contemporary scholarship, Evans paints a vibrant picture of Congo Square as a place of cultural expression for free and enslaved people of African descent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Orleans. Along with a chronology of the historical events and ensuing laws that impacted the weekly gatherings at Congo Square, Evans includes images and maps of the site and photographs of the performers, spectators, and other participants partaking in the festive mood the square continues to inspire.

In the foreword, Dr. J. H. Kwabena ‘Nketia sums up the importance of Evans’s work with her reference to the evolution of African cultures across the diaspora as “survivals” (xii). The inhumanity and brutality of the transatlantic slave trade failed to erase the oral histories and belief systems those that survived the tumultuous voyage carried with them. As Evans states, “such conscious and willful continuation of African culture in Congo Square conveys the agency of the gatherers in celebrating and preserving their heritage” (2). This is evident in the syncretism of Catholicism and Vodou. While the *Code Noir* decreed that all persons under French colonial rule be baptized in the Catholic or Protestant faith, Evans’s examination of the distinct cultural practices among various African ethnic groups and Haitian immigrants reveals the preservation of traditional belief systems along with the integration of Western religious practices.

Evans begins by providing an overview of the indigenous groups that occupied what is now New Orleans before French rule, the city’s reconfiguration as the population increased, and Congo Square’s significance as a historical landmark that celebrates the musical genius of Louis Armstrong, Mahalia Jackson, Sidney Bechet, and many other talented New Orleans natives. Originally part of a common route for Native Americans to access the Mississippi River to trade, fish, and hunt, as well as the area where they honored their ancestors and held celebrations, the vicinity of Congo Square was mainly an Indian portage that delineated the city limits (9).<sup>1</sup> As Evans’s research shows, it became a place where enslaved Africans congregated on Sundays for a brief reprieve from their daily toil; a space that signified cultural memory, traditional spiritual practices, and artistic expression.



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Hence, *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans* is a compilation of the various musical, dance, and spiritual forms brought to the New World by African peoples of the Fon, Bambara, Yoruba, and Congo tribes, among others in the Senegambian region, that influenced New Orleans culture. Evans took on what was no doubt an arduous research project and encapsulated the many facets of African cultural traditions into a brilliant body of scholarship. Yet, she cautions that her book is not a romanticization of the gatherings in Congo Square. While the square served as an outlet for creativity, the practice of African religious traditions, and as a way for slaves to gain a sense of agency by selling their own wares or labor, it was also utilized as a slave market and a place for executions in the early 1800s (20). Additionally, the square was regulated by rigid, ever-changing laws to tighten the reins on free and enslaved people of color in New Orleans. As Evans notes, blacks outnumbered whites in New Orleans by the nineteenth century, and the fear of insurrection came to fruition with the 1811 slave revolt right outside of New Orleans, documented as the largest in United States history (25–26).

Evans is equally cautious in terms of the language and terminology found in original documents. She prefaces her study by explaining why she has chosen to replace the derogatory term “nigger” (which she only alludes to) for the more acceptable term, *Negro*. Where *Negro* is written in lowercase, she uses the editorial notation, *sic*, to denote the original transcription, although the distinction between Evans’s writing and the quotes she references is obvious. The need to correct documents that reflect the times in which they were written (the American South in the thick of chattel slavery) overwhelms an otherwise careful, beautifully executed study. While Evans attempts to soften the blow for impressionable young readers, as she states in the introduction, the censoring of offensive words cannot erase the racial violence that is very much a part of New Orleans history.

The difficulty in finding credible, unbiased accounts of the activities that took place in Congo Square attests to this fact, as well as the appropriation of African songs and dances by white entertainers that perpetuated existing stereotypes about black people and culture. To mask these realities instead of presenting an admittedly uneasy discussion is to deny the ways in which the ruling class inscribed racial inferiority into written texts. Left in their original context, the documents would have underscored the racially-charged atmosphere in which enslaved and free people of color navigated New Orleans, thus emphasizing the strength and determination found not only in the public performances held in Congo Square but as an integral part of African heritage.

—Angela Watkins

#### NOTE

1. According to Evans, Congo Square is also historically known as Place Publique, Place des Negres, Circus Park, the Place Congo, Congo Green, Beauregard Square, and a slew of other names (20). In the epilogue, she notes that the publication of her book urged Louisiana lawmakers to officially recognize the site that is now part of Armstrong Park (named for Louis Armstrong) as “Congo Square.” On record, it is still recognized as Beauregard Park.

Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah I. *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2012.

Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman's book *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race* offers a compelling and original look at the way sexual and racial identifications and representations have been mutually constitutive in American literature. Abdur-Rahman's book "advances a new architecture of race in which race operates *as erotics*" while also advancing a tropology of "transgressive sexuality . . . [challenging] popular theories of identity, pathology, national belonging, and racial difference in American culture" (3). Finding good company with recent black queer studies texts like Sharon P. Holland's *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012) and Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection* (2010), *Against the Closet* embraces an increasingly popular epistemology wherein blackness is often regarded *as queer*.

However, Abdur-Rahman's book differs from other black queer studies texts in key ways: it does not claim to address "black" and "queer" identity values in equal measure, favoring African American literature as its point of inquiry; it offers a critical genealogy of queer racialisms rather than "simply historicizing" them (5); and, most conspicuously, Abdur-Rahman offers the word "queer" as a term synonymous with "transgressive" or "regressive" sexuality (14). Through methods drawn from "African-American studies, psychoanalysis, sociology, queer theory, and gender studies," *Against the Closet* engages with four main areas of inquiry: African American slave narratives, gang rape and lynching, the role of desire in mid-twentieth-century political fiction, and the incest trope in narratives featuring young black girls. In each, Abdur-Rahman shows change over time in the tropologies she constructs, making her areas of inquiry and their linkages purposeful in understanding something like a history of black queer representation.

In her introduction—which is direct, but sometimes overly telegraphed—Abdur-Rahman places her work with works of African American critique that, through interdisciplinarity, focus on the power of abjection (157). Much like Robert Reid-Pharr's *Once You Go Black* (2007), *Against the Closet* seeks to redefine the "agency and autonomy" of radical sexual acts and bodies (4). Abdur-Rahman, in a way consistent with a traditional mode of queer theory, locates the queer subject of her book in transgression, as well as in "social (and sometimes sexual) margins, throwing into crisis and into relief our most precious and pervasive ideations of the normative" (6). However, in much recent queer theory, queerness does not just operate as a negation or a revisionary catalyst, and sometimes it even codifies dominance, so here one has to wonder if the evocation of queer discourse is somewhat instrumental. It is easier to value Abdur-Rahman's suggestions about sexual difference's visibility in the black corpus, an underexplored topic of queer studies (9). This gives a physical and spatial dimension to her analysis as she moves between the excess and absence of race and sexuality (19).

Chapter 1, "The Strangest Freaks of Despotism," explores the way slavery as a system shaped "emergent models of sexual difference" in antebellum slave narratives, as well as in the white literary imagination (26). Through readings of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*—particularly Aunt Hester's whipping—and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Abdur-Rahman draws a distinction between the intended effects of interracial sexual abuses as subjugating practices and their revision in Jacobs's and Douglass's books

as galvanizing incidents of consciousness. Abdur-Rahman interprets transgressive sexuality in these two narratives as a rhetorical tool marking, especially for Jacobs, the perversity of slavery as an institution that destroyed families through pain and excess (50). What Rahman calls in her book queerness, although generative in certain ways for Jacobs and Douglass, was part-and-parcel of slavery's barbarism.

Chapter 2, "Iconographies of Gang Rape," explores the legacy of the miscegenation trope in reconstruction America juxtaposed with the rise of white supremacy, lynching, and gang rape. Abdur-Rahman notes that cross-racial intimacies "were so rigorously prohibited and policed in the post-slavery South, [that] any interracial contact outside of black labor and service to whites was believed to be *criminally sexual*" (63). In an imaginative reading of Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces*, Abdur-Rahman links the rape of black women with the lynching and castration of black men, both forms of "sexual terror" (70). Abdur-Rahman points out that Hopkins is not content to depict lynching and rape through sentimentality. Hopkins instead depicts "black male valor" by killing off her black male hero, thereby removing him from the equation of his wife's rape; the black man becomes masculinized by his absent heroism, no longer complicit in the rape by way of his essentialized racial femininity (75–76). Abdur-Rahman proclaims this a demonstration of "the capacity of African Americans for reason and for imagination" where gender roles are concerned, issuing a threat to white dominance rather than complying with an interpellation of blackness as perverse weakness (80).

Chapter 3, "Desire and Treason in Mid-Twentieth-Century Political Protest Fiction," explores how intimacies and desire between black and white characters become spaces for political possibility (83). Inspired by the work of bell hooks, an "ethos of love" (85)—which readers might find to be a slippery hermeneutic—becomes an important way for Abdur-Rahman to consider how the work of writers such as James Baldwin and Ann Petry used queerness as a means to disrupt the exclusionary intra-racial practices of black nationalism, not rejecting it altogether as a political paradigm, but reworking its patriarchy through sexual subversion. While Abdur-Rahman's central claims in this chapter are not wholly new, it is refreshing to see James Baldwin depicted as a "queer" writer with regard to his 1960s political literature. His queerness and his politics are often needlessly separated in critiques of his work. Further, her adept readings of *Another Country* and *The Narrows* do important work in describing desire as a means of agency where choice is limited by politics. Abdur-Rahman is consistent in extending interracial desire and intimacy as a changing form of sexual subversion across her first three chapters, from its most dehumanizing functions to its most liberating ones, a creative polychronic analysis that explores the implications of her argument from numerous satisfying angles (113).

Chapter 4 brings Abdur-Rahman's examination of transgressive sexuality and race into the present through works by Octavia Butler, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, and Sapphire. In a cunning read on the trope of incest in these black women's novels, Abdur-Rahman finds that they, like Baldwin and Petry before them, all critique nationalist and state paradigms of mutual care and sociality, this time by showing how the failures of state paradigms beget intra-racial and even intra-family sexual abuse. In one of the book's most transformative readings, Abdur-Rahman gives life back to Sapphire's *Push* by reading it not as a novel about black pathology, as it is typically read, but as one that indicts the welfare reforms of the 1990s and those reforms' systemic dehumanization of women and African Americans.

Abdur-Rahman locates in the queer Ms. Rain an “exemplar of the novel’s political vision. . . . [demonstrating] the power of self-generated and self-determined communal supports to address social crises and alleviate poverty in marginalized communities.” This in turn “opens a space for sexual and familial diversity within the African American cultural context” based on something not everyone would observe in Sapphire’s *Push*—alternative black power (141). Precious’s agency, according to Abdur-Rahman, is born out of her acknowledgement of sexual openness and sexual determinacy, particularly through her writing (142). Precious becomes not an object of the state, patriarchy, nor her parents’ sexual desires, but her own sexual, gendered being.

Being “against the closet” comes to be synonymous with being against the strictly bound spaces of a number of different dominant formations, including the state and its laws, black nationalism, politics, the traditional family, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. Yet there are times in *Against the Closet* where Abdur-Rahman’s analyses of transgressive sexuality run the risk of being sexually conservative. In particular, Abdur-Rahman sometimes loses control over the distinctions between pedophilia, incest, and homosexual desire. Perhaps she does so to embody and critique dominant perspectives on her way to exploding them through an analysis that exposes their underlying, contradicting multiplicities. Still, queerness begs not to be read only as transgressive sexuality clashing against normative sexuality, but as a rebuke of such a strict sexual dialectic altogether, as well as the cultural conditions that interpolate the bodies of those “against.” Baldwin’s “Here Be Dragons,” which Abdur-Rahman examines in her conclusion—a coda on the death of Michael Jackson—is instructive in this matter, being a text that urges the racially or sexually marginal not to believe in their own marginality; Baldwin urged us not to *react* naturalistically, but to *act* through alternate desire. While this ethos often comes through in *Against the Closet*, heteronormativity occasionally lurks in the background, defining the bounds of decency and labeling queerness as the always already other.

Although it is rooted in themes of historical resistance that sometimes require pivoting from a dominant perspective, *Against the Closet* is a fine book with many salient and imaginative readings. The best of black queer studies texts, as well as the best parts of Abdur-Rahman’s book, seem to be figuring ways out of the strict confines of identitarianism toward radical figurations of possibility, desire, and imagination. *Against the Closet* is a story worth reading and retelling, as it weaves a lively, original, and complex narrative about the progressions of race and sexuality in African American literature, unencumbered by one way of reading or thinking about the material. It is both an informative and instructive critique of its subject matter, one that should be essential reading for scholars of black sexuality in African American literature.

—Timothy M. Griffiths

González, Rigoberto. *Butterfly Boy: Memoirs of a Chicano Mariposa*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2006.

The butterfly in the title of Rigoberto González’s memoir is a loaded symbol that refers first to the fiery clouds of monarch butterflies spreading northwards from Mexico. In



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The butterfly in the title of Rigoberto González’s memoir is a loaded symbol that refers first to the fiery clouds of monarch butterflies spreading northwards from Mexico. In



this seasonal transit to the United States, they resemble the farm laborers of the author's extended, cross-border family. Born into a "culture of work," the Chicano writer declares, "What of the migratory Los González, moving from one place to another and marking every stopping place with angst?" (168). The fragile insect also alludes to the Spanish epithet *mariposa* for a gay man, an identity which González claims and embraces, and the shape of the bruising kisses that his mentally unstable boyfriend makes all over his neck and back.

Although the epithet "butterfly boy" appears initially to infantilize the autobiographical subject, the pejorative sense recedes once we understand that this coming-of-age narrative spans the period of González's birth in Bakersfield, California, in 1970, to his journey twenty years later to Zacapú (a city nestled among mountains in southwestern Mexico) with his father. Calling himself "butterfly boy" acknowledges the awkwardness of the young cipher, a child "effeminate and demure" who "wanted to do girl things" while surrounded by a culture of machismo (88, 91). Sitting years later in a cramped and ill-ventilated bus, the memoirist flutters impatiently between present and past time in order to find a place of emotional repose, no matter how fleeting.

Framed by this brief summer road trip, the narrative breaks into five short sections of self-reflection, poignant flashbacks, and imagistic vignettes of growing up in small town Mexico with numerous relatives and later, the fruit-rich Coachella Valley of California. Part of "el campo," or a large farming community of Hispanic migrant workers (officially, denizens of the Fred Young Farm Labor Camp), González was flanked by a loving (if sickly and overburdened) mother and a charismatic, irresponsible father whose affection he particularly craved. Avelina González is notable for her participation in the grape boycotts and other forms of grassroots activism during the early 1970s under the leadership of César Chávez. Searching through his mother's possessions upon arrival in his grandparents' Zacapú home, Rigoberto muses, "In one picture I'm holding a red flag with the familiar UFW [United Farm Workers] logo—a black eagle, or upside down Aztec pyramid, depending on how it is viewed" (180). Suffering from a weak heart and eventually passing away unexpectedly at age thirty-one, González's mother left behind two young sons, twelve-year-old Rigoberto and ten-year-old Alex, both of whom were subsequently abandoned by their father.

An alcoholic with a larger-than-life personality, Rigoberto, Sr. exists as a source of lifelong ambivalence, especially given his choice to marry and start a new family without fully attending to the emotional and material needs of his previous family. As the memoirist confesses bitterly, "Apá, I have called my father since I was a child. My mother was Mami. I lost both. One to death, one to fear. I have forgiven only one" (24). On the bus, clipped and moody exchanges between the eager-to-please older man and chronically depressed son contrast with sections of lyrical "ghost-whispering," or reconstructed nocturnal conversations between González and his absent lover. The recuperative search for a father figure is persistent and compelling, as the writer admits, "In Indio, I'm the son and grandson of farmworkers who have never once hugged me, but whom I miss terribly, especially when I need to run away from the man who tells me that he loves me, he loves me, he loves me" (8).

The unnamed lover, like Rigoberto, Sr., is an older man, worldly and wealthy whereas the father is small-minded and cheap. In one crushing episode near the conclusion of the text, the father presents his twenty-year-old son with a birthday gift of cologne, despite

knowing that the college student does not use any due to allergies. He asks the young man shortly thereafter to borrow money for train fare back to the United States; it is not only for himself but also his wife, their daughter, and her three children. Muttering, "You never change," the younger González empties his wallet and sends his father on his way. Before leaving, the unrepentant man shoots back, "That cologne was expensive," to which Rigoberto, Jr. replies, "Of course it was" (188). The irony is palpable.

Often accompanied by drugs, cigarettes, or alcohol, the shady "*querido*" (dear one) is another kind of toxic addiction to the narrator. His appearances seem to mark out the erotic territory of the text with a nauseously pungent musk, simultaneously attractive and repellent. A typical interaction between the man and González falls somewhere on a continuum between criminally cruel and simply thoughtless; in a telling precursor to the birthday gift debacle, the lover dons alcohol-based cologne knowing full well Rigoberto will react severely to it; unsurprisingly, a large rash ensues (5). Readers hope the memoirist will finally quit this Svengali, but even after being publicly humiliated, beaten, and raped, the writer withholds any promises of resolution. Like the butterfly he once pocketed as a child, only to find a powdery, mangled mess later, this speaker constantly teeters on the edge of personal oblivion. For readers, the risk-taking and the drama prove, at times, emotionally exhausting.

*Butterfly Boy* is the first of two memoirs by González, a professor and creative writer who won the National Book Award for this effort. The follow-up text is *Autobiography of My Hungers* (2013), whose title alone recalls life writing by at least two other notable Richards: Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* (1982) and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*) (1945). All three of these texts reconstruct the quest of the young minority male artist to circumvent diminished economic, social, and familial circumstances. For its evocation of gay coming-of-age by an awkward, overweight adolescent, *Butterfly Boy* merits comparison with Jewish American activist Elliot Tiber's memoir *Taking Woodstock* (2007). The scenario of two impoverished brothers suffering through the antics of an alcoholic single father harkens back to Gregory Howard Williams's best-selling memoir *Life on the Color Line* (2005). Like Williams's younger brother Mike, González's sibling Alex struggles with academics and ends up aligning himself with the lot of the working-class father. As such, he takes the lesser part of a life that his older, college-educated brother is able to embrace more fully. Unlike Williams's painstaking record of ascent to community leadership, González's text offers no gift of familial redemption, no scholarship boy's dream come true. At twenty, Rigoberto still wanders in a numbingly painful, metamorphic state.

Despite being a text so sensitive to failures and weaknesses, there are also moments of strength and transcendence. The memoirist's true powers are imaginative and discursive, lying in "*el don del cuento*," or a knack for oral narrative (37). This storytelling ability is something that he shares with his father; it is "the taste of language that is only spoken and never written because the speaker most likely doesn't read or write" (166). When the son concedes to Rigoberto, Sr. that "[H]e's the superior storyteller," it is a gesture of generosity, a gurgle of water in an otherwise arid and cracked terrain of continuous hurt (37).

The adult González successfully preserves his childhood grief, much like a butterfly mounted on pins behind glass. In *Butterfly Boy*, he traces the arc of a young mind borne aloft by intellectual curiosity, shattered by grief and nervous prostration, then awakened again as he explores his inchoate gay identity in a "Mexican community where it is pos-

sible to be a fag and not a fag" (151). He confesses that because of pervasive silences around same-sex coupling, both with older, seemingly straight men and his brief sexual relationship with someone his own age in high school, he was largely confused: "I doubted that I was gay myself because this identity was never talked about by any of us or ever recognized in the secrecy of the dark bedrooms" (144). Whether at age twelve or twenty, González's self-esteem ebbs low, allowing him to be jostled by his father, bullied by his peers, and exploited by his boyfriend. As a vulnerable boy, he wraps himself in a cocoon of reading and emotional eating; as a vulnerable adult, he takes refuge in an almost morbid interiority and rough sexual abandon. Of the lover, he admits, "He's my quickest ticket away from the places I came from" (197).

What is mildly disappointing about *Butterfly Boy* is its lack of emotional resolution: when Rigoberto visits his mother's grave in Zacapú, for instance, he makes but a "two-word statement: 'Aquí estoy.' I'm here. I don't talk to my mother or to my mother's spirit. She's no longer here. I no longer believe in God or in a heaven or in any fantasy afterlife. My mother is simply gone" (186). While more optimistic readers might seek the promise of supportive friends or a better romantic partner for the memoirist, no such comfort is forthcoming. Perhaps this withholding is deliberate, as *Butterfly Boy* is, above all, an elegy for a mother too soon gone and a salute to the sad, singular, solitary son she left behind.

—Nancy Kang

Leverenz, David. *Honor Bound: Race and Shame in America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2012.

You recline in the warm water of your claw foot tub. A dirty man enters the bathroom, disrobes, and joins you. Your reaction is reasonable: you leap out of the tub, afraid, demanding the man immediately leave. You refuse to get back in the tub until you calm down and the tub is drained and cleaned—preferably with bleach. Now alter two key facts: the tub is a swimming pool and the man is considered dirty because he is a different race than you. Is your reaction any less reasonable? Now reverse the roles and imagine you are the second person entering the pool. David Leverenz masterfully lays out the manner in which honor and shame are used as blunt tools to shape the American caste system in *Honor Bound: Race and Shame in America*. The Professor Emeritus from the University of Florida's Department of English explores deeply personal subjects with a refreshingly personal approach.

Leverenz constructs a haltingly simple formulation for the American mindset: No matter how bad things get, at least I'm not black. It creates a "shame" floor for whites, an "honor" ceiling for blacks, and fortifies national pride based on a fear of racial intermingling (26–27). Leverenz views this phenomena from a self-described white or "light-skinned" perspective, a point I will explore later.

Rock-n-Roll pioneer Bo Didley experienced the above pool scenario in 1959 Las Vegas. Leverenz focuses most of his analytical attention on the two types of fear that motivated the white swimmers who shamed Bo Didley that "'remained mostly unacknowledged'

sible to be a fag and not a fag" (151). He confesses that because of pervasive silences around same-sex coupling, both with older, seemingly straight men and his brief sexual relationship with someone his own age in high school, he was largely confused: "I doubted that I was gay myself because this identity was never talked about by any of us or ever recognized in the secrecy of the dark bedrooms" (144). Whether at age twelve or twenty, González's self-esteem ebbs low, allowing him to be jostled by his father, bullied by his peers, and exploited by his boyfriend. As a vulnerable boy, he wraps himself in a cocoon of reading and emotional eating; as a vulnerable adult, he takes refuge in an almost morbid interiority and rough sexual abandon. Of the lover, he admits, "He's my quickest ticket away from the places I came from" (197).

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: the fear that black men could ‘interact with white women at such intimate and erotic public spaces’ and the fear that black men’s strong bodies would undercut ‘assertions of white men’s superior manliness’” (44–45).

Sexual insecurity takes unusual thematic prominence throughout Leverenz’s retelling of American historic touchstones, like the white Mississippi gang lynching of supposedly flirtatious black teenager Emmitt Till, while applying his honor/shame lens to put a novel take on well-known and seemingly well-understood incidents (55). Lynching, probably the most recognizable manifestation of white male sexual insecurity, indeed figures largely in his writings, though Leverenz postulates the very basis of American national pride is actually a white racial pride personified by a victimized fair damsel who requires a white knight to pierce the “black beast” with his phallic spear. “Humiliating black men often enhanced their [social] standing, at least to themselves, as did their sexual exploitation of black women. As a necessary converse, slavery prevented black men from gaining honor through protecting their women or through affirming their lineage” (67).

According to Leverenz, slavery is the fulcrum, making America’s rise to international prominence historically unique with its Janus-like dichotomy: the spoils of freedom for “Us” are stockpiled through subjugation of the domestic (and oft times native!) “Other.” Slavery established an American national structure white men struggle to maintain through methodically shaming blacks in order to first, preserve economic and social status and second, alleviate fears of miscegenation. To demonstrate the pernicious efficacy of his formulation, Leverenz refers readers to how the all-white National Association of Real Estate Boards prohibited its realtors from showing property to bootleggers, madams, gangsters “or, even worse, ‘a colored man of means who was giving his children a college education and thought they were entitled to live among whites’” (44).

Leverenz goes further, quoting Alexis de Tocqueville’s assertion that “[American] Democracy joins ‘individual character’ to national honor” (76). This nationalism required the prominence of racism to establish and maintain self-respect for white men. White women “could have no honor, only—virtue” under this form of nationalism and while racism feels individual, in actuality “it’s a collective code manifested through individuals” (78, 77).

Leverenz grapples with de Tocqueville’s nexus of national honor and individual virtue while retelling an incident where Benjamin Franklin, then postmaster general, becomes involved in the release of sensitive private letters to which he gained access. As a result, the British Parliament excoriated Franklin with a public shaming, humiliation, and eventual expulsion from English high society. Leverenz, however, views Franklin’s acts as honorable on both a national and individual level in a flourish of the author’s tendency to turn directly to the reader and share his personal thoughts, feelings, and revelations on matters (69). Some may find that off-putting, but it can also compel the reader to apply Leverenz’s lessons. For instance, I found myself wondering how Leverenz may assess Edward Snowden’s similar actions in light of his view of Franklin’s.

Franklin’s experience crystalizes a social caste system America would inherit from England. America then, Leverenz proposes, inserted a racial marker through slavery, using white cohesiveness as the guiding principle governing its choices in domestic and international conflict alike (109). “From [William] McKinley to Douglas MacArthur to George W. Bush, many American leaders have presented their wars as the missionary crusades of a redeemer nation . . . [where] . . . we’re doing it for their own good, not for our markets or



our territorial expansion. Meanwhile we can continue to think of black Americans as not quite upliftable" (113). Leverenz continues, "From the eighteenth century to the twenty-first century, American honor has persisted in its most basic form, as a license for violent revenge to preserve a sense of group superiority. If darker-skinned people are the enemy, the task becomes more inviting" (141).

In cases like the Barbary Wars and the War on Terror "real and imagined humiliations mandated a drive to restore national honor by defeating people of darker skins" (123). The result is an "imperialism nostalgia." However, unlike Renato Rosaldo's definition of the term where imperialist nations long for a return of the "innocent" cultures destroyed by their imperialism, but wish to enjoy those cultures through a colonialist prism, Leverenz claims that advocates and supporters of the War on Terror, specifically the second war in Iraq, revealed an American longing for imperialism, itself (110).

Paralleling the Barbary Wars with the War on Terror provides for masterful analysis of American foreign policy evolution (141). However, Leverenz's tendency for circumspection can be troublesome as in his second chapter. In the course of eight pages, Leverenz moves from assessing the impact of historic Supreme Court decisions to parsing the machinations of contemporary political theatre to micro-reviews of a string of Niggeratti novels (a term coined by Wallace Thurman, though sadly not referenced by Leverenz) to accounts of southern American terrorism. The idea of such juxtapositions sounds intriguing, though in actual reading, feels chaotic. It also gives the unfortunate impression the author is cherry-picking. The themes of honor, shame, and humiliation, however, are strongly articulated throughout this conceptual kaleidoscope.

A different problem appears in chapters three and four. After an overly long look at other nations and cultures Leverenz teases, "ascriptions of honor and shame presume homogeneous racial identifications and fierce group loyalty," seeming like a perfect set up to examine his American honor/shame framework. However, his assertion comes after a look at Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*! (64). Quite possibly a byproduct of his background as an English professor, he then uses portions of novels to further his analyses of real world events. After references to Dante, Machiavelli, and others, he finally turns to American history. He acknowledges and justifies the twists and turns later, but the piece suffers from bad organization (71). Though Leverenz seems aware of the potential weaknesses of his approach, it could have been strengthened if he used more references to the social significance of fictional works as when he writes, "*The Scarlet Letter* begins with the most famous instance of public shaming in American literature" (88). As it stands, much of chapters three and four seem better suited for a different book. One could understand the temptation to expand the application of his simple yet elegant honor/shame rubric, as it works compellingly when applied to recent or unfolding events such as the 2008 Presidential campaign, the rise of the Tea Party, and the controversial arrest of Henry Louis Gates.

Leverenz makes good use of his honor/shame analysis while deconstructing John McCain's motivations for running for president and his criticisms of opponent Barack Obama. McCain's entire being is governed by an elusive sense of honor, claims Leverenz, which extends to his assessment of Obama as dishonorable and "a lightweight inferior who deserved to be put in his place" (151). Although he acknowledges Obama's skin color did not figure into McCain's contempt for Obama, Leverenz chastises McCain for using



the term “beyond the pale” while defending his campaign from allegations of race baiting (159). The comment feels pedantry, cheapening the rest of his analysis as one could likewise call Leverenz to task for declaring that Michelle Malkin, an Asian American critic of Obama, “slants” evidence in favor of her arguments (177).

Fear of Obama’s election “roused white voters to defend ‘our country’ with ‘tea party’ revolts against a foreign tyrant” (168). Leverenz successfully reinforces his postulate stating, “Such fears also consolidated a group called whites. As a white person in the early twenty-first century, I can say that with ease” (84). Even though Leverenz views the entire white racial subgroup as a contrivance born of light-skinned Americans swapping fearful bigotry with “sacred honor” he remarkably confesses, “It’s extraordinarily difficult to withstand the pressure of a group to which you really want to belong, especially when that group claims lordly status” (77).

During the first summer of Obama’s presidency, the duty to defend white lordly status unwittingly fell to a white police officer (and his black partner) responding to a possible burglary in upscale Cambridge, Massachusetts. He arrested Gates, a black faculty member of nearby Harvard University who was attempting to enter his home through a window after misplacing his keys. The event coincided with the nascent Tea Party’s anxiety about black encroachment and was exasperated by Obama’s decision to opine. Leverenz rightly turns his analysis of the event towards himself, a decided strength of his writing. Leverenz remembers, “as further information about the arrest emerged, I confess that my sympathies shifted to the policeman. I found more and more things to dislike in Gates’s—well, attitude. He told an interviewer that he expected the policeman to say, ‘How may I help you, sir?’ Did he think the policeman was his servant” (180–81)? To be clear, the Cambridge Police Department mission statement is “*to provide the highest quality of police service . . .*” (City of Cambridge Police Department.) While this is not to say the concept of serving implies lowliness, it does provide a context for the entanglement of fact and vengeful frustration inherent in these matters; as was the case with the deadly conflict between white neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman and black working-class teenager Trayvon Martin, which occurred the same year as the publication of *Honor Bound* and only two hours away from where Leverenz teaches.

Seeking a way forward in dealing with modern-day honor/shame conflicts, Leverenz proposes that “conversations with ourselves may be more important than conversations with each other” (184), a sentiment echoed by Obama’s reaction to the murder acquittal of Zimmerman where he stated, “I think it’s going to be important for all of us to do some soul-searching. There has been talk about should we convene a conversation on race. I haven’t seen that be particularly productive” (Obama).

“To break the inward stranglehold of race consciousness,” Leverenz continues, “race-based groups have to become just one of many self definitions” (11). Obama concurs:

Each successive generation seems to be making progress in changing attitudes when it comes to race. It doesn’t mean we’re in a post-racial society. It doesn’t mean that racism is eliminated. But when I talk to Malia and Sasha [Obama’s children], and I listen to their friends and I see them interact, they’re better than we are—they’re better than we were—on these issues. And that’s true in every community that I’ve visited all across the country.

The cover art for David Leverenz's *Honor Bound* captures the 1959 swimming pool incident at Bo Didley's moment of shame and the white swimmers' simultaneous assertion of honor (O'Brien). The artist shows the incident from almost Didley's point of view as if we were in the pool just behind him. The angle defaces both Didley with his back turned to us and the white swimmers with their images stopping at waistline, effectively cutting off their heads. Only one face is visible, that of a little white boy holding one of the adults' hands. We can imagine what the expressions are on all of the adults' faces. The child's expression appears to be of one trying to figure things out.

—Sharai Erima

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Andujar, Carlos. *The African Presence in Santo Domingo*. Trans. Rosa Maria Andujar. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2012.

There is a known body of literature in the United States examining Dominican racial identity and its negative relation to blackness. The same cannot be said of works studying African expressions in Dominican culture. This is not an issue of the lack of publications in this direction. Intellectuals in the Dominican Republic have a notable record of Spanish-written works on black history and culture and the recently translated *The African Presence in Santo Domingo* of Carlos Andujar is one example.

Published in the Dominican Republic in 1997 as *La presencia negra en Santo Domingo: un enfoque etnohistórico*, the manuscript began as a conference paper, becoming the book that is now translated into English by Rosa Maria Andujar, sister of the author. The conversion is sponsored by the Ruth Simms African Diaspora Research Project Book Series, which launched the series with this work on the African-Dominican connection "discussed from the 'inside' . . . by a Dominican scholar" (viii).

The book comes with other alterations that enhance the product's appeal to the new market of readers in the United States. The table of contents is simplified. There are changes in photos and tables. The extrication of some parts of the Spanish original writing gives the new text the weight or appearance of a light or very short read (from the original 145 pages to the new 71 pages). But not much seems lost. The publication still carries the main idea and the foreword by Carlos Esteban Deive. This is relevant to the conversation. Deive is a scholar who, like Carlos Andujar, is hardly known in the United States, but in academic circles in the Dominican Republic, Deive is distinguished as a specialist on blacks in colonial Santo Domingo.

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There is a known body of literature in the United States examining Dominican racial identity and its negative relation to blackness. The same cannot be said of works studying African expressions in Dominican culture. This is not an issue of the lack of publications in this direction. Intellectuals in the Dominican Republic have a notable record of Spanish-written works on black history and culture and the recently translated *The African Presence in Santo Domingo* of Carlos Andujar is one example.

Published in the Dominican Republic in 1997 as *La presencia negra en Santo Domingo: un enfoque etnohistórico*, the manuscript began as a conference paper, becoming the book that is now translated into English by Rosa Maria Andujar, sister of the author. The conversion is sponsored by the Ruth Simms African Diaspora Research Project Book Series, which launched the series with this work on the African-Dominican connection "discussed from the 'inside' . . . by a Dominican scholar" (viii).

The book comes with other alterations that enhance the product's appeal to the new market of readers in the United States. The table of contents is simplified. There are changes in photos and tables. The extrication of some parts of the Spanish original writing gives the new text the weight or appearance of a light or very short read (from the original 145 pages to the new 71 pages). But not much seems lost. The publication still carries the main idea and the foreword by Carlos Esteban Deive. This is relevant to the conversation. Deive is a scholar who, like Carlos Andujar, is hardly known in the United States, but in academic circles in the Dominican Republic, Deive is distinguished as a specialist on blacks in colonial Santo Domingo.

Deive has treated the subject from his profession as a historian. Andujar is a sociologist and cultural critic whose multidisciplinary approach and formulations are grounded in historical methods. *The African Presence in Santo Domingo* exhibits no lesser discipline. It is an ethnography that combines history and anthropology to show the African role in forging a modern identity on the altars of syncretism. According to Andujar, the Dominican “ethos” draws symbols and material from the West African cultural milieu. This thesis is evident in a mere glance of the book’s organization.

The first three chapters, which constitute half of the work, concern an exploration of Africa and the Middle Passage. Andujar tackles the image of Africa as uniform, indigent, sterile, or backward, providing an overview of the resources, social structures, and technological advances of the civilizations of the Sub-Sahara. In doing this, he exposes diverse sources of culture and humanity, which became part of the people and society that were cast in Santo Domingo during Spanish colonization. Having set this tone, he moves the last three chapters from slavery to the contemporary period, punctuating the conversation with topics of response, settlement, and legacy.

From very early, Africans and their mixed descendants constituted in La Española a racial majority that arguably was never reversed. With the rise and fall of the sugar industry by 1580, a process was set in motion whereby exclusion and intensive slavery became impractical in Santo Domingo. Runaways, maroons, and pirates reaffirmed in 1605 the impossibility of the Spanish to master the island, and racial purity and colonial authority became nearly abstract concepts. With the island partitioned into separate spheres in 1697—Spain losing the western part to France—the eastern side and future site of the Dominican Republic suffered the rule of a minority of “whites” who dwindled in relation to the numbers of people whose African links were discernible.

Andujar highlights dozens of names and surnames (from Ambo to Zaramo), linked to African groups and geography, of people in Santo Domingo in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (22–26). His attention to continuity and heterogeneity points to works and information overlooked in African diaspora census databases in the United States. But this is also a source that nearly overrides the task at present. How does one examine the role of each of these ethnicities in the making of a national body? Andujar barely does. Dominican blackness is a tough alloy of amalgamated groups and cultures.

In the 1840s, the ideologues of independence owned up to the inescapable reality. The Dominican Republic was born with a preponderance of blacks and mulattos as part of the Dominican citizenry. African patterns had been thus absorbed in the local culture that people participated and continue today to partake in a collective identity that shows the many imprints of the continent. According to Andujar, “Each of our gestures, our food, colors, dances, music—as well as some religious expressions, turns of phrase, names of places, burial rites, crafts, and other objects—bear witness to that past” (52).

*African Presence* is a contribution with instructional value, showing in easy language the African journey and heritage in Santo Domingo. Readers interested in knowing about African roots are better served in reading the same multi-lingual sources that informed the author to his conclusions. However, they will do so at the risk of missing out on the mark of a scholar who seems on a mission to disabuse interlocutors of preconceived negative notions of Africa. Chapters four and five are the most engaging sections of the book, even if in these sections dealing with “Slavery” and “Black Rebellions,” the author does not

connect slave resistance and marronage to the factors that made sugar production less viable. The final chapter lists some of the continuities in present-day society, although one could have expected more details to appear in this part.

Yet again, the point is not to be missed by picking the text so closely. Andujar's signature is in the intellectual exercise, which dares us to make an independent analysis, suggesting that there is much information available and that a great deal depends on our ability to interpret it critically. Initially, the rebuke was to his compatriots, and now that the publication has been given a visa of entry to United States academia, its English-speaking counterparts would do well in taking the advice.

In the United States, this publication will be attached to the singularity that identifies the works of Silvio Torres-Saillant, whose seminal paper, "Introduction to Dominican Blackness" is the obligatory text to understanding this history and development. The study of Afro-Dominican history, life, and culture is a viable course subject, perhaps necessary, and one could argue that there is enough material to incorporate this focus into Black/Latino/a Studies departments across the United States.

However, such a proposal may find practical obstacles. Much of the material for a university course is either lost in its non-translation or contained in the realm of articles buried in an academic "spam" of opposing viewpoints. Studies on Dominican anti-blackness are readily available and these dominate the interpretation. It is easier to find the audience for Michelle Wucker's *Why the Cocks Fight* than Samuel Martinez's "Not a Cockfight," or for David Howard's *Coloring the Nation* than Jim Sidanius's (et al.) "Pigmentocracy and Patriotism in the Dominican Republic." Moreover, unsuspecting readers may find a number of reasons to skip Richard Lee Turits's "A World Destroyed, A Nation Imposed" for Ernesto Saga's *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic*.

There are chapters and articles to suggest divergence and the need to reconsider the approach to Dominican blackness. But yet again, these are often short pieces with barely a presence in a market dominated by a particular point of view. At seventy-one pages, *The African Presence* is not significantly longer or more detailed than, say, Torres-Saillant's essay "The Tribulation of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity" or Cristina Sanchez-Carretero's "Santos y Misterios as Channels of Communication."

With other books in the Dominican Republic, one may assume that *La presencia negra* was chosen for publication not only because of the familial links of the translator with the author, but also because of the inclination of the Series, whose editor both confessed to a prior familiarity with Andujar's works and published a book on the subject. The conversion is nonetheless welcome and stands as a call for other institutions to embrace a similar move. There are works equally deserving of translation. A few classics come to mind, and among the most urgent are Franklin Franco's *Los negros, los mulatos y la nación dominicana*, the main and early introductory text in the Dominican Republic on the topic with more than nine editions (its translation currently under commission by the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute); Carlos Esteban Deive's *Los guerrilleros negros*, a study engrossed by primary research and analytical depth that specialists will appreciate; Celsa Albert Batista's *Mujer y esclavitud en Santo Domingo*, the arguable best work of this historian and international award winning author; Fradique Lizardo's *Cultura africana en Santo Domingo*, an annotated chronology of facts from 1492 to 1978 by the chief folklorist; Pedro Mir's *Tres leyendas de colores*, an examination on the founding elements of Dominican identity tackling the Indian

legend by the laureate national poet; and Aida Cartagena Portalatin's *Rebeldes con causa: culturas africanas*, a work by a storied writer known beyond Latin America.

*The African Presence in Santo Domingo* represents a good step in stirring the movement. The work could bring a change of pace in as much as it demonstrates that black studies are a driving engine that moves the passions of professional writers and scholars in the Dominican Republic. A number of Dominican intellectuals have staked their reputation against the dominant currents. It is time that they are recognized and given credit for being dedicated critics of the mainstream bibliography generally invested in Hispanophile narratives of the nation. What Carlos Andujar is able to accomplish with a brief list of sources is not so much in his conclusions, but in a line of inquiry that must be emulated as we reconsider the subject of blackness in Dominican history and society.

—Pedro R. Rivera

Bryant, Sherwin K., Rachel Sarah O'Toole, and Ben Vinson III, eds. *Africans to the Spanish Americas: Expanding the Diaspora*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2012. The New Black Studies Ser.

*Africans to the Spanish Americas: Expanding the Diaspora* is a collection of essays that examine the history of the African Diaspora in Latin America, taking "as its cue the need to further expand the framework by which we chart the African Diaspora, based upon a close reading of a variety of texts from the Spanish American cultures" (3). In the introduction the editors examine the different waves that constitute the study of the African experience in the Spanish Americas from its beginning in the nineteenth century when "scholars writing within Latin America, enjoyed the distinct challenge of trying to situate blackness within nascent nation-states that were trying to articulate their national character for the first time" until the present moment, in which "the emerging prominence of the concept of Diaspora as a way to evaluate the black experience has helped provide new theoretical insight and sophistication into how we should interrogate the black presence" (4, 8). Historians situated within this present fourth wave, the contributors to this volume, articulate in their research the need to transform African-descended people into the subjects of their narratives. In their essays, the scholars geographically reconfigure the concept of diaspora by "accentuating its early extension into Iberia in the fifteenth century and its reach beyond the Atlantic basin into the Pacific/ Andean territories not long thereafter" (13). The book is divided into three different sections that illustrate the diversity of the Afro-Latino experience and which ultimately "advocate a blending of viewpoints so that a more balanced synthesis can emerge from fourth-wave scholarship" (10).

Section one "Complicating Identity in the African Diaspora to Spanish America" consists of three different essays that explore the strategies employed by Afro-descendants to articulate their identity in the Spanish Americas. Leo J. Garofalo's essay "The Shape of a Diaspora: The movement of Afro-Iberians to Colonial Spanish America" points out the need to expand temporary and geographically Diasporic studies through the inclusion of the Afro-Iberian experience inside its scope: "life in southern Iberia offered enslaved and free Afro-Iberians a role as intermediaries at a time when European expansion into the



legend by the laureate national poet; and Aida Cartagena Portalatin's *Rebeldes con causa: culturas africanas*, a work by a storied writer known beyond Latin America.

*The African Presence in Santo Domingo* represents a good step in stirring the movement. The work could bring a change of pace in as much as it demonstrates that black studies are a driving engine that moves the passions of professional writers and scholars in the Dominican Republic. A number of Dominican intellectuals have staked their reputation against the dominant currents. It is time that they are recognized and given credit for being dedicated critics of the mainstream bibliography generally invested in Hispanophile narratives of the nation. What Carlos Andujar is able to accomplish with a brief list of sources is not so much in his conclusions, but in a line of inquiry that must be emulated as we reconsider the subject of blackness in Dominican history and society.

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Americas and along Africa's coast demanded many more people with skills as mediators and experience with adaptation and assimilation" (30). Employing as primary sources the lists of passengers that traveled from the Iberian Peninsula to the Americas, Garofalo examines the historical importance that Afro-Iberians had for the transmission of the Hispanic culture in the New World, and how such a role transformed them into active agents in the formation of a Transatlantic culture. As Garofalo points out the inclusion of Afro-Iberians within the concept of Diaspora further complicates its understanding. Frank "Trey" Proctor III's article "African Diasporic Ethnicity in Mexico City to 1650" explores through colonial marriage records, that dated from 1640 until 1650, the ethnic patterns established in the matrimonyes among people of African heritage. Marriages, as Proctor theorizes, "highlight the creation of African Diasporic ethnicities that were spontaneously articulated in the Diaspora and were based on the redefinition of the common linguistic and cultural traits shared by slaves who originated from within common regions in Africa" (55). Through matrimony, slaves defined their ethnic identities challenging priestly (colonial) classifications that aimed to categorize and fixate their cultural identity. Similarly, Rachel Sarah O'Toole in "To Be Free and Lucumi: Ana de la Calle and Making African Diaspora Identities in Colonial Peru" examines the ways in which African-descended people in Peru defined themselves by appropriating colonial terms to designate their identities. O'Toole centers her analysis in the figure of Ana de la Calle, a free woman of color who addresses her ethnic heritage as "Lucumi," a term employed by colonial authorities to classify slave identities. As O'Toole signals, this particular case exemplifies how men and women of African descent "constructed identities that were rooted in African meanings but were shaped in Diasporic contexts" (73). Ana de la Calle's case also shows how African descendants in the diaspora engaged multiple identities by creating communities and families within and outside colonial definitions (88). This first section not only geographically expands the concept of diaspora, but also illustrates African-descended people's power of self-definition not only as a community, but also at the individual level. As these three essays demonstrate, African-descended people actively engaged in the process of identity creation within the diasporic context.

The second section of the book, "Royal Subjects, Loyal Christians, and Saints in the Alley," explores the different ways in which Afro-descended people in Spanish America responded to Christianity. The first of its three essays, "Between the Cross and the Sword: Religious Conquest and Maroon legitimacy in Colonial Esmeraldas" by Charles Beatty-Medina, explores the development of the Esmeraldas, a maroon society in Ecuador, from 1577 until 1617, and the particular relationship that the maroons had with Christianity. According to Beatty-Medina, Christianity not only defined the ways in which the African Rebels related to the Spanish authorities, but also ultimately became "an indispensable tool for Afro-Amerindian rebels seeking legitimation and continued autonomy on the frontiers of Spain's empire and within an African Diasporic world" (110, 96). In this way, Christianity was adapted by the maroons to serve their communicative needs and functioned as a part of the political dialogue with the colonial authority. The second essay, "Afro-Mexican Sainly Devotion in a Mexico City Alley" by Joan Bristol, also examines how people of African heritage adapted Christianity to serve their spiritual needs in the Spanish Americas, concretely in Mexico. In her analysis Bristol explores an Afro-Mexican religious gathering that took place in 1699 in Mexico City to show Afro-Mexicans' level of

"involvement in colonial society and religious life and their desires to gain social power as defined by colonial authorities" (115). Bristol argues that through mimicry and imitation these African-descended people employed their own means to practice Christianity while defining their devotional atmosphere (128). Afro-Mexicans' articulation of their own spirituality through Christianity exemplifies how they elaborated their own spiritual identity. Lastly, Nancy E. Van Deusen investigates in "'The Lord Walks Among the Pots and Pans': Religious Servants of Colonial Lima" the figure of the *donada*, the religious servant who took informal vows, in Lima. In her analysis, Van Deusen contends that "for many people of African descent, Christianity was a deeply lived experience, both in the world and in the cloister" (139). Van Deusen shows how in embracing Christianization, people of African descent also articulated their transcultural identity. Thus, these three essays provide an accurate picture of the complex and diverse ways in which African descended people in the Spanish America responded to Christianity.

The third part of the book, "Comparisons and Whitening Revisited: Race and Gender in Colonial Cuba," consists of two essays that examine the whitening politics in Cuba and a third essay that concludes the book. "Whitening Revisited: Nineteenth-Century Cuban Counterpoints" by Karen Y Morrison analyzes the whitening phenomenon in Cuba through Fanon's concept of the sexual economy of race to illustrate how the whitening process in Cuba has not been a linear process. Employing the family as the unit of analysis to interrogate "the conjunction between reproductive behavior and the social construction of race" (167), the author examines the family-formation practices in Cuba and determines how "in choosing alternate family forms, a number of nineteenth-century Cubans initiated changes in how race was lived and perceived" (180). In this way, racial meaning was redefined in Colonial Cuba according to the different familiar structures. Similarly, Michele Reid-Vazquez's essay "Tensions of Race, Gender, and Midwifery in Colonial Cuba" explores "how Cuba's medical establishment and free women of African descent deciphered conflicting interpretations of midwifery as an occupational avenue" (187). Employing a newspaper article that denounced in 1828 how the "honorable" profession of midwifery had become "disgraced" in Cuba due to the shortage of white women in this profession, Reid-Vazquez analyzes how women of African descent became targets of the colonial power that attempted to reduce their number in this profession. Comparing the history of midwifery in Europe and Africa Reid-Vazquez demonstrates how this vocation was traditionally a marker of identity and honor for free women of color. Cuba's colonial effort to "whiten the midwife profession" had a limited impact because these women "sought to modify elite notions of respectability and credibility to suit their particular context" (201). Reid-Vazquez's essay successfully explores how Cuba's colonial whitening politics attempted to control the access that free women of color had to this career and how, through adapting to the new circumstances, free women of color resisted and continued being midwives. The last essay "Comparative Perspectives" by Herbert S. Klein returns to a theme often excluded from the diasporic discourse: the differences and similarities between slave regimes in North and South America, and how they affected the post-manumission integration of Africans. Klein compares the similarities and differences between North American and Latin American slave regimes in order to discern the important "social, economic and political consequences for the Afro-American populations" (208). Thorough his exploration Klein determines how slavery systems influenced the

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## C A L L A L O O

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evolution of African-descent identities across the Americas. This essay ends up pointing out the possible directions of future Diasporic research.

*Africans to Spanish America* fulfills its goal of illustrating how people of African descent were subjects and active agents in the history of Latin America. The essays that compose the book provide a critical understanding of Diasporic studies by illustrating their history and signaling their future. This volume is a must have resource for scholars and students interested in this growing field.

—Patricia Coloma-Penate

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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## C A L L A L O O

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