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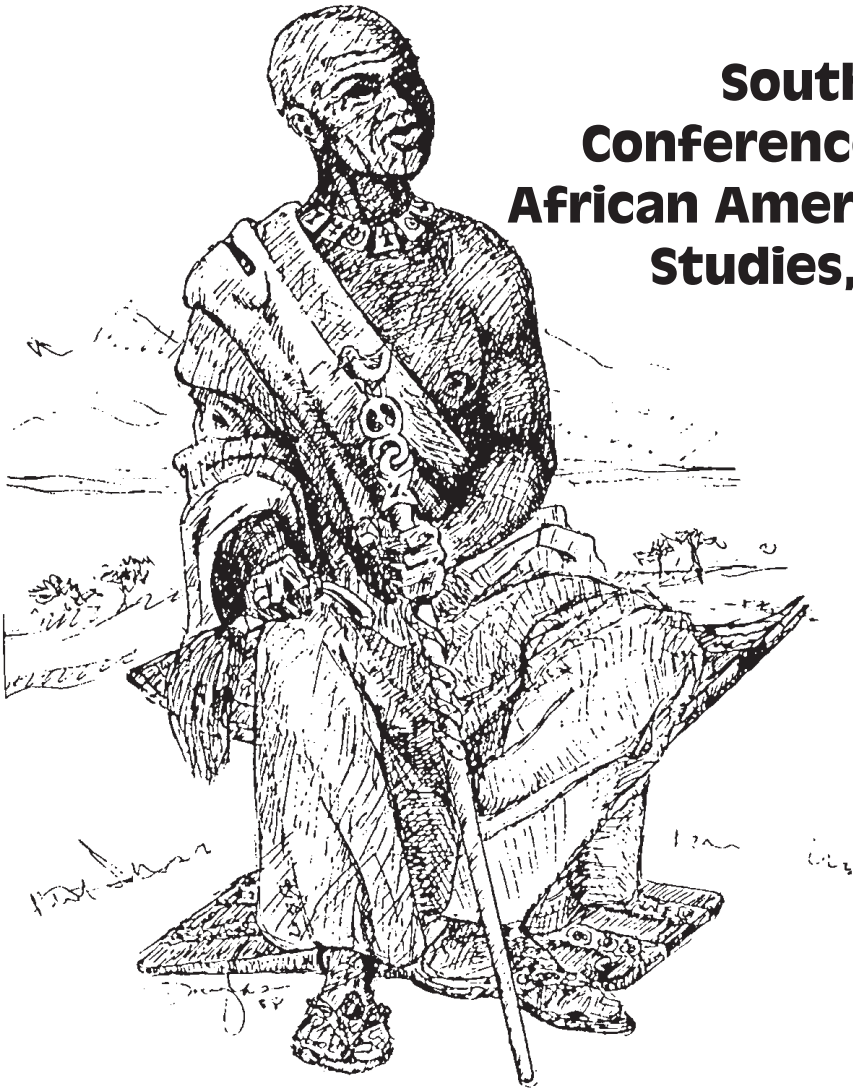
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**Southern  
Conference on  
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**THE GRIOT: The Journal of African American Studies**

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**CONTENTS**

	<b>Page</b>
I. "Harlem is Nowhere:" Blues Spaces in Ralph Ellison's <i>Invisible Man</i> Donald J. Shaffer	1
II. Frederick Douglass's Journey from Slave to Freeman: An Acquisition and Mastery of Language, Rhetoric, and Power via the <i>Narrative</i> John Hansen	14
III. In Her Own Image: Literary and Visual Representations of Girlhood in Toni Morrison's <i>The Bluest Eye</i> and Jamaica Kincaid's <i>Annie John</i> Shalene A. M. Vasquez	24
IV. POETRY	40
A. Leonard Slade, Jr.	also pp. 13, 23, 75
B. Christian Motley	
C. Ron Samples (the grandson)	
V. I'm Trying to Get You Free: Na'im Akbar, African Psychology and the Reconstruction of the Collective Black Mind DeReef Jamison	57
VI. Narrating the Gaze in Nella Larsen's <i>Quicksand</i> Marybeth Davis Baggett	68
VII. BOOK REVIEWS	74
A. Kaplan, Alice. <i>Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Reviewer: Cleophus Thomas Jr.	
B. Slade, Leonard A. Jr. <i>Sweet Solitude: New and Selected Poems</i> . Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 2010. Reviwer: Jacqueline Trimble	

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IN ANCIENT AFRICA...  
'GRIOT' WERE THE COUNSELORS OF KINGS, THEY CONSERVED THE CONSTITUTIONS OF KINGDOMS BY MEMORY ALONE... IT WAS FROM AMONG THE GRIOTS THAT KINGS USED TO CHOOSE THE TUTORS FOR YOUNG PRINCES... FOR WANT OF ARCHIVES (THEY) RECORDED THE CUSTOMS, TRADITIONS AND GOVERNMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF KINGS...  
SUNDIATA, DJIBRIL T. NAINÉ  
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# **"Harlem is Nowhere." Blues Spaces in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man***

**Donald J. Shaffer**

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged gain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.

Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*

And so I play the invisible music of my isolation...Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

From the opening pages of *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's singular literary masterpiece, the symbolic meanings that black people often ascribe to urban spaces in the city is revealed. Ellison's unnamed protagonist inhabits what he ironically describes as a space of "infinite possibilities" in what is actually a coal cellar beneath the streets of New York City. It is from this underground vantage point that he becomes the fictional author of his story. "Full of light," this space beneath the bustling city above ground denotes possibility and prophesy, as his last words in the novel reveal: "who knows but on the lower frequencies I speak for you." Like so many other scholars of Ellison's masterpiece, I have attempted to decipher the meaning of this potent spatial symbol, at times with the certainty of having interpreted once and for all its cryptic messages, for example, reconsidering the exactly 1,369 lights that fill it with light or the multiple recordings of Louis Armstrong that fill it with music. My present effort at interpretation rests on an examination of the blues perspective that Ellison's protagonist

creates within this liminal space. While critics of the novel have emphasized the symbolic role of jazz in the novel, it will be my contention that the novel frames black lived experience in a way that is analogous to the unique perspective of the blues performer. Thus, I argue that Ellison's symbolic mapping of black experience in the novel rests on a blues perspective that imagines black folk as always already standing at the proverbial cross-roads of cultural meaning—between a traditional folk sensibility and a nascent urban consciousness. Within the various blues spaces figured in the novel (i.e. the underground cellar, Jim Trueblood's cabin, "Pete Wheatstraw's" corner, and Mary Rambo's apartment), Ellison maps the experience of his protagonist and by extension African American lived experience by calling forth a blues perspective that can adequately frame the contradictory lives of the dispossessed and displaced.

The central complication in the novel is the conflict produced by the cultural and geographic displacement of migration. The story that Ellison tells through his "invisible man" reflects the larger historical narrative of black migration in the first half of the twentieth century. When the novel was published in 1952, the Great Migration had forever reshaped black culture and lived experience making it synonymous with urban culture and society. But this historical narrative was also shaped by cultural displacement and deracination. It is against this historical backdrop of black migration that Ellison's "invisible man" struggles to gain recognition in a society that refuses to see him. As a black migrant character, his struggle in the novel also parallels the struggle of black migrants forced to leave the South in the early part of the twentieth century in hopes of gaining a greater degree of social recognition in the North.

In his essay "Harlem is Nowhere," Ellison describes the "psychological

character" of the urban scene in Harlem as one that "arises from the impact between urban slum conditions and folk sensibilities."<sup>1</sup> Ellison's essay anticipates the theme of cultural displacement that frames his novel. This problem, according to Ellison, adversely affects the psyche of black Harlemites, placing them "out of synch" with their urban environment. Ellison, writing in the late 1940's, was witnessing the effects of almost two decades of steady urban decline and "ghettoization" in northern cities. By this time, the reality of urban slum conditions and pervasive black unemployment had supplanted the myth that the Great Migration would create economically viable spaces in the North.<sup>2</sup> For Ellison, the way in which blacks experienced life in the city seemed devoid of the recognizable patterns of experience and social institutions that pointed up to a whole way of life. Regarding these necessary structures of everyday lived experience, Ellison notes the failure of the urban scene to yield suitable alternatives for northern black folk:

But without institutions to give [the black individual] direction, and lacking a clear explanation of his predicament—the religious ones being inadequate and opportunistic—the individual feels that his world and his personality are *out of key* [emphasis mine].<sup>3</sup>

Ellison's use of a musical metaphor—the condition of being "out of key"—to express the urban displacement of black folk in the northern city underscores the important relationship between black vernacular forms (such as blues, jazz, and spirituals) and the function of communal spaces to provide comfort and belonging for a displaced people.<sup>4</sup> For Ellison, if black people felt culturally displaced in northern cities after the Great Migration, it was (at least in part) because they had lost contact with their music. Ellison goes on to describe the changes to black musical forms—most notably folk jazz—that shaped the culture of 1940's Harlem:

The lyrical ritual elements of folk jazz—that artistic projection of the only real individuality possible for him in the South, that embodiment of a superior democracy in which each individual cultivated his uniqueness and yet did not clash with his neighbors—have given way to the near-themeless technical virtuosity of bebop a further triumph of technology over humanism.<sup>5</sup>

For Ellison, the spontaneity and intimacy associated with the culture of the South generally, and with black folk musical forms particularly, were not normative features of urban life in Harlem. He writes of the typical black Harlemite, "his speech hardens; his movements are geared to the time clock; his diet changes; his sensibilities quicken and his intelligence expands."<sup>6</sup> In short, the detached routine of urban life had supplanted the sensuousness of everyday lived experience rooted in southern folk culture—an experience that had been for black folk profoundly shaped by their musical expression. It is not surprising then that *Invisible Man* opens with a scene that reveals the central importance of music in black culture. When Ellison's "invisible man" listens to multiple recordings of Armstrong, he clearly expresses an affinity with the famous trumpeter turned blues singer. What is less clear is the novel's investment in the blues as a form of musical expression and as a narrative trope. The repetition of the blues in this scene symbolizes its function as a capacious signifier of black culture and lived experience. The polyphonic composition of discordant and repetitive voices allegorizes the suffering of a displaced people even as it provides Ellison's protagonist with a means of apprehending his own negative identity as an "invisible man."

Criticism of the novel has frequently emphasized its symbolic relationship to musical expression, more often as it relates to jazz rather than the blues.<sup>7</sup> For example, Horace A. Porter's reading of *Invisible Man* as a "jazz text" centers on the formal structure of the novel. Porter writes "[the novel] consciously

riffs upon or plays countless variations on familiar literary and cultural themes.”<sup>8</sup> Porter views this formal structure as indicative of the protagonist’s oscillating perspective that flitters from one cultural form to the next. For Porter, this “jazz perspective” represents the protagonist attempt to ascribe meaning and substance to his otherwise marginalized existence. He does so through a kind of symbolic improvisation, thereby creating a coherent self identity out of disparate fragments of his past and the disordered events of his present circumstances. In other words, jazz as a narrative form becomes a basis for establishing a sense of place and identity for Ellison’s displaced and “invisible” black migrant character. For Porter, the so-called “music of invisibility” is a reference to jazz and its ability to make sense and structure out of chaos.

While the episodic structure of the novel reflects jazz expression, its overarching perspective is better understood in relation to the blues. Porter rightly emphasizes the improvisational form of the novel as analogous to the structure of jazz. But the way in which the novel conveys meaning centers on a blues perspective. I want argue that the blues perspective in the novel is analogous to the way in which musical expressions of the blues attempt to make meaning out of human suffering. Indeed, the musical expression of the blues punctuates the disconnection between the painful murmurings of the blues singer and the lyrical mastery achieved by the performance itself. Thus, the blues presents itself as a contradiction, what Ellison once referred to as the “near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” of human experience. It is precisely this construction of black experience that Ellison’s protagonist embodies as an “invisible man.”

The power of the blues to mitigate the suffering of black people stems in part from its popular mass appeal. Although the blues performer stands at the proverbial crossroads amidst endless possibilities, s/he does not stand alone but rather appeals to a larger black experience. Farah Griffin argues that this communal ideal registered in the blues parallels a central theme of

black migration fiction—a genre to which Ellison’s novel belongs. Griffin describes the communal ideal that blues singers such as Bessie Smith were able to create through their charged and intimate performances. She writes of Smith;

While the blues performance did not serve as a worship ritual, Smith’s performance was more than mere entertainment. It acted as a means of convening community, of invoking common experiences and values. Though not necessarily a resistant space, it was a space where migrants could let their hair down, be themselves, and have a good time. As such, it was healing space.<sup>9</sup>

Griffin’s description of the blues as constituting a “healing space” is instructive in gauging its function in Ellison’s migration novel. The moments in the novel when Ellison’s “invisible man” encounters the blues are therapeutic in terms of mitigating his initial sense of displacement in the city. However, responding to Griffin’s interpretation, I would add that the blues also foregrounds conflict and unresolved pain. So while blues expression may represent a “healing space,” it also represents a site of psychological struggle and painful introspection. The bi-vocal quality of the blues is central to its function as evidence by the blues spaces represented in the novel. The symbolic spaces in the novel formed around the trope of the blues (i.e. the underground cellar, Jim Trueblood’s cabin, “Pete Wheatstraw’s” corner, and Mary Rambo’s apartment) foreground the conflict of rural and urban (past and present) experience that is at the center of black migrant experience. It is this conflict that defines the expression of the blues performer who must simultaneously register joy in the midst of pain.

Ellison’s artistic vision acknowledged such a blues perspective. In his famous essay, “The World and the Jug,” Ellison describes black lived experience as circumscribed by social segregation but also charged with symbolic poten-



tial. Ellison asserts that black folk occupy marginalized spaces in American society from which they have had to cultivate a unique blues perspective—a perspective that effectively enables them to manage psychological pain and social frustration. Ellison is worth quoting at length:

For even as his life toughens the Negro, even as it brutalizes him, sensitizes him, dulls him, goads him to anger, moves him to irony, sometimes fracturing and sometimes affirming his hopes; even as it shapes his attitudes toward family, sex, love, religion; even as it modulates his humor, tempers his joy—it *conditions* him to deal with his life and with himself. He must live it and try consciously to grasp its complexity until he can change it; must live it as he changes it. He is no mere product of his socio-political predicament. He is a product of the interaction between his racial predicament, his individual will and the broader American cultural freedom in which finds his ambiguous existence. Thus he, too, in a limited way, is his own creation.<sup>10</sup>

It is precisely this sort of blues perspective that enables Ellison's "invisible man" to ascribe meaning to himself and to the environment around him. He is "invisible" only because a racist society refuses to see him. The fictional frame narrative that structures the novel is his attempt to write himself into existence and it is from the liminal/blues space of his underground cellar that he sets out to do this. Ellison's symbolic treatment of this urban space is especially important, and parallels also Baldwin's treatment of a similar space, the "threshing floor" of the store-front church, in his novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. Both spatial representations foreground the competing terms of black migrant experience, combining symbolic forms of musical expression (i.e. jazz, blues, gospel, etc.) in a unique

place of cultural mediation and urban initiation. These spaces are sites of rural and urban conflict, but they are also places in which cultural forms and practices are brought to bear in reconciling the competing terms of black lived experience—an experience formed at the confluence of southern folk culture and urban spaces in the city. These are not idyllic spaces, but are rather sites of physical and psychological struggle. From this perspective, these urban spaces are more dialectical than didactical—they reflect the harsh wilderness instead of the proverbial Promised Land.

### "The Music of Invisibility"

In his commentary on LeRoi Jones' *Blues People*, Ralph Ellison writes of the vivid complexity of the blues form in depicting the triumph and tragedy of black life. Ellison describes the "aesthetic nature" of the blues—its formal aspect as art rather than a political (as Jones would have it) category of cultural expression. Ellison's account of the blues—which one may very well read as a thematic epilogue to his novel *Invisible Man*—is worth quoting at length here:

The blues speak to us simultaneously of the tragic and the comic aspects of the human condition and they express a profound sense of life shared by many Negro Americans precisely because their lives have combined these modes. This has been the heritage of a people who for hundreds of years could not celebrate birth or dignify death and whose need to live despite the dehumanizing pressures of slavery developed an endless capacity for laughing at their painful experiences.<sup>11</sup>

Ellison's marshalling of the blues form in *Invisible Man* reflects his understanding of the role of musical culture in the symbolic formation of "place." Indeed, for the dispossessed black folk who were not able to "celebrate birth or death," the blues was a means of

expressing through music a sense of shared experience. It becomes for Ellison's black migrant protagonist a means of articulating identity and place in an urban environment that denies him both—indeed, an environment that renders him virtually invisible. Similar to Lefebvre's conception of the urban as a place of "simultaneity," Ellison figures the blues as a capacious signifier of black lived experience, encompassing within its symbolic structure the contradictory terms of black lived experience. Indeed, the figure of the blues in the novel signifies the paradoxical quality of black migrant experience, as it invokes an ideal of collective experience as both a source of conflict and affinity. In this sense, Ellison figures his protagonist as a blues man at the proverbial "crossroads," permanently displaced from home and community, but ever creating a sense of place(ness) from the fragments of his discarded past.

In this sense, Ellison appropriates the blues form as signifying both the promise of the city—registered in the ideal of establishing a sense of place and belonging—as well as the rural and urban conflict that complicates the fulfillment of that promise for his black migrant protagonist. The "invisible man" stands at the crossroads of black migrant lived experience between Harlem, the brutal city of fact, and an elusive vision of the "promised land." He occupies a symbolic space that is the product of both things—a liminal space of "infinite possibilities." Ellison's nameless protagonist sets out to write the story of his life from his underground cellar, where he has fashioned a surreal existence that symbolically underscores his liminal status in a society that refuses to see him. Ironically, his "hole" becomes a symbolic figure of the enduring quality of black urban life inasmuch as it represents black folk's ability to overcome oppressive structures in order to create a whole way of life. Indeed, the underground existence he has forged for himself can be understood as representing a blues sensibility. Just as the blues musician makes art out of the *everyday*, he discovers in Louis Armstrong's blues song "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue"

an articulation of his own place and identity in the city, an evocation of the absurdity of his existence, and the means to make sense of it all. Thus, in what he calls the "music of invisibility," the protagonist sees a reflection of his own condition as a black migrant, exiled and displaced beneath the streets of New York City.

Ellison's protagonist migrates to the North, although not by choice. He is forced to leave school when he makes the mistake of driving a white trustee of the college, Mr. Norton, into the old slave quarters where he hears Jim Trueblood's tale of incest. As punishment for his transgression, Mr. Bledsoe, the president of the college, asks him to leave school "temporarily." He sets out for New York City in hopes of earning enough money to eventually return to school. In wandering the streets of Harlem in search of work, Ellison protagonist resembles the classical black migrant character—displaced from home and community, betwixt and between rural and urban modes of experience.<sup>12</sup> He eventually falls prey to a series of misadventures in the city; he searches for work only to find that the "recommendation letters" given to him by Bledsoe are actually warnings to potential employers. He becomes involved with the Brotherhood, a quasi-communist organization, only to find that their commitment to the so-called "Negro Problem" is disingenuous. Indeed, the central complication of the novel is figured in the haunting phrase Ellison's protagonist hears in a dream: "Keep this nigger boy running." This ominous warning foreshadows the permanent displacement that Ellison's protagonist experiences in the city.

Even before his migration to the City, the traditional scene of displacement in the black migration novel, Ellison's protagonist is displaced from the outset in a southern society that has not evolved an adequate place for him. His first realization of this occurs when he is asked to give a speech before the town's influential white men. Before he can give his speech, however, he is forced to participate in the "Battle Royal," a boxing free-for-all pitting the town's black boys against

one another. Having fought and paid the proverbial "price of ticket" in the form of a violent beating, he is allowed to give his speech in which he extols the virtues of black humility. But when he mistakenly utters the phrase "social equality" instead of his intended phrase, "social responsibility," he is immediately forced to retract his words. Reminded in this instance of his proscribed place in southern society, he humbly accepts the gifts the white men bestow upon him—a leather brief case that "will someday contain important documents pertaining to his people" and a scholarship to the local "Negro college." Both items, ironically, will eventually underscore his displaced status in the City.

The southern section of the novel begins with this violent scene of initiation and figures Ellison's protagonist as a displaced black migrant par excellence.<sup>13</sup> For not only is he displaced within a society dominated by powerful white men, he is also without a sense of home and belonging among black folk as well. His sense of belonging within a well-defined cultural context and social order is immediately shot-through by the figure of his grandfather, whose deathbed confession calls into question everything to which Ellison's protagonist has thought to be true of his existence:

Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open (16).<sup>14</sup>

The narrator's predicament is embodied in the central figure of his grandfather. The figure of the grandfather, with whom "the trouble all began," calls attention to a contrived social order that assigns arbitrary racial

value to people. His haunting words reveal for the protagonist—in what is for him an initial moment of recognition—the nature of a society that has failed to provide an adequate place for him and, indeed, for all blacks. Thus, the grandfather's perspective gestures toward the social recognition that Wright's "native son" lacks, and the social consciousness that eventually drives Ellison's "invisible man" underground. His deathbed confession becomes in this sense a "great commission," to which Ellison's apostolic protagonist is compelled to fulfill. Yet, it is with a great deal of reluctance that he does so. In this sense, the grandfather's confession becomes for the protagonist a "curse," as it constantly challenges him to look beyond the appearance of things in order to forge a new reality.

The grandfather's passive resistance to the racial status quo functions as both a model of racial subversion and as a rhetorical basis for establishing a sense of place and identity. For the perspective he reveals calls upon "invisible man" to make sense of the contradictory aims and values that define his place (or lack thereof) in American society. It is a perspective that acknowledges the contradictions that underscore the experience of black folk, and in doing so, ascribes its own meaning to that experience despite the veritable absurdity that perpetually attends it. It is, in short, a kind of "blues perspective," reflecting both the incongruities of black experience as well as the meaning(s) embedded in that experience. Yet, it is only at this final moment of death that the subterfuge is revealed and the meaning behind the grandfather's "blues sensibility" can be expressed. Like a "spy in the enemy's country," he has had to pretend to be something that he is not. Although the grandfather embodies a "blues perspective," it is a perspective that can find only limited expression in the social context of the South. He and other blacks can only speak to whites in the language of "yeses and grins," a fact that Ellison's protagonist attests to after the ordeal of the "Battle Royal." Thus, the blues form functions in the social context of the South as a kind of

racial performance designed to assuage whites and to comfort blacks.<sup>15</sup>

Houston Baker's reading of the novel describes this function of the blues in the context of the South. His view of the novel as expressive of a blues aesthetic stems in part from his reading of the "Trueblood episode," a story related in the southern section of the novel of a black sharecropper who commits incest by sleeping with his daughter. After impregnating both his wife and daughter, Trueblood is ostracized by the local black community, but finds favor among the white folk who give him money in exchange for his lurid tale. Trueblood's tale of incest conveys an almost triumphant tone as he affirms his stark resolve in the face of seeming disaster: "I make up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothing' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen" (62). Baker reads Trueblood's statement of self-affirmation as expressive of a blues aesthetic. He writes,

The farmer's statement is not an expression of transcendence. It is, instead, an affirmation of a still recognizable humanity by a singer who has incorporated his personal disaster into a code of blues meanings emanating from an unpredictably chaotic world. In translating his tragedy into the vocabulary and semantics of the blues and, subsequently, into the electrifying expression of his narrative, Trueblood realizes that he is not so changed by catastrophe that he must condemn, mortify, or redefine his essential self. This self, as the preceding discussion indicates, is in many ways the obverse of the stable, predictable, puritanical, productive, law abiding ideal self of the American industrial-capitalist society.<sup>16</sup>

Baker's reading notwithstanding, one must make the important distinction between Trueblood's marshaling of the blues form in a rural-southern context, and the narrator's subsequent

encounter with the blues form in an urban-northern context. It is within this urban context that the narrator relates his story. It is also within the context of the city that his blues expression assumes a particular form that I would argue distinguishes it from its rural-southern iteration in the novel. The "self" that Trueblood's blues constructs is one that has "survived" the disaster of incest, a self that speaks the "unspeakable" in order to avoid its own destruction. But it is also an expression of the "self" that is privileged (and, indeed, made possible) by the racist values of a southern society. Trueblood is able to trade on his tragic circumstances precisely because his degradation confirms the social norms and expectations of the South where race is concerned. He is made a symbol by whites who, like the white men in the novel that constantly remind the "invisible man" of his place, seek to uphold the racial hierarchy that posits "whiteness" over and against "blackness." In this sense, Trueblood's "singing of the blues" imagines a self that is certainly "the obverse of the stable, predictable, puritanical, productive, law abiding ideal self of the American industrial-capitalist society," but it is also one that is obverse to any positive ideal of "blackness."

Ellison's portrayal of Trueblood—as well as his portrayal of the protagonist's grandfather—functions as a thematic point of departure for his "invisible man," who must necessarily move beyond the proscribed modes of existence (and expression) in the South. For this reason, I would argue that the expression of the blues as means of accessing both place and identity assumes a unique form in the northern section of the novel, where the protagonist must affirm a positive identity for himself despite an urban environment that renders him "invisible." Baker's reading obscures this thematic progression in the novel along with the rural and urban conflict that produces it. The urban variant of the blues, and its function as a symbolic means of establishing place and identity in the city, is shaped in part by migration and the rural-urban conflict associated with it.

In contrast to Trueblood's self-negating expression of the blues, the protagonist's encounter with a man named "Pete Wheatstraw"—a blues singing, homeless wanderer on the streets of Harlem—reveals the self-affirming function of the blues in the urban context of the northern city. The protagonist's hearing of the blues in the streets of Harlem becomes a Proustian reminder of the southern culture from which he is displaced:

Close to the curb ahead I saw a man pushing a cart piled high with rolls of blue paper and heard him singing in a clear ringing voice. It was a blues, and I walked along behind him remembering the times I had heard such singing at home. It seemed that here some memories slipped around my life at the campus and went far back to things I had long ago shut out of my mind. There was no escaping such reminders (173).

The performance of the blues functions as a signifier of collective experience and as a symbolic means of establishing a sense of place and belonging in the city. The name "Pete Wheatstraw" was a common pseudonym used by blues performers in early 1930's.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the man in the street is representative of an entire tradition of blues performers as he marshals past lived experience. Exemplifying both critic and connoisseur of such tradition, "Pete Wheatstraw" implores his interlocutor to drop his pretensions and engage in a verbal game of signifying. His constant refrain of "who got the dog" is meant to illicit from the protagonist a codified response that utilizes the language of the vernacular. When the protagonist refuses to do this, the man on the corner appeals to shared experience: "Now I know you from down home, how come you trying to act like you never heard that before! Hell, ain't nobody out here this morning but us colored—why you trying to deny me?" (173). What, indeed, the protagonist denies him is a symbolic exchange that posits an ideal of collective experience—in other words, a cod-

ified form of expression—what the protagonist refers to at the outset as the "music of invisibility"—that can mitigate the culturally displaced status of black folk in the city. Despite his misgivings about the past, and his reluctance to acknowledge the vernacular forms embodied in the figure of "Jack Wheatstraw," Ellison's protagonist locates in this "blues man" an ideal of "home" and "belonging": "I wanted to leave him, and yet I found a certain comfort in walking along beside him, as though we'd walked this way before through other mornings, in other places" (175).

Ellison's urban "blues man" signifies both the enduring ideal of place that black folk established in the city as well as the perpetual sense of displacement that undercut such ideals. In the context of the city, the blues signifies a sense of place (and collective experience) even as it also acknowledges the urban displacement of blacks in the city and the failed promise of the North. Pete Wheatstraw's description of Harlem figures it simultaneously as a dangerous place and as the "only place" for black folk: "Man, this Harlem ain't nothing but a bear's den. But I tell you one thing...it's the best place in the world for you and me, and if times don't get better soon I'm going to grab that bear and turn him every way but loose!" (174). The description of Harlem as a "bear's den" recalls the protagonist's description of himself as "jack the bear," as well as his description of living in an underground cellar as a "hibernation." If Harlem is a veritable "bear's den" emblematic of the failed promise of black migration, within the expression of the blues (and the 'blues narrative' of the protagonist that frames the novel) is a symbolic means of negotiating the contradictory terms that define urban spaces in the city.

In this sense, the blues as an urban form is represented in the novel as a symbolic means of negotiating place and identity in the city.

For Ellison's invisible man, it is this symbolic expression of place and identity that holds the key to fulfillment of the promise of black migration. To put it another way, the expression of the



blues signifies a symbolic mediation (if not a complete transcendence) of the absurd and contradictory circumstances that define the experience of black migrants in the City. As to this possibility, the narrator ruminates on the old man's blues expression as he watches him disappear into the city:

"So long," I said and watched him going. I watched him push around the corner to the top of the hill, leaning sharp against the cart handle, and heard his voice arise, muffled now, as he started down.

*She's got feet like a monkeee  
Legs  
Legs, Legs like a maaad  
Bulldog...*

What does it mean, I thought. I'd heard it all my life but suddenly the strangeness of it came through to me. Was it about a man of about some strange sphinxlike animal? ...I strode along, hearing the cartman's song become a lonesome, broad-toned whistle now that flowered at the end of each phrase into a tremulous, blue-toned chord. And in its flutter and swoop I heard the sound of a railroad train high-balling it, lonely across the lonely night. He was the Devil's son-in-law, all right, and he was a man who could whistle a three-toned chord...God damn, I thought, they're a hell of a people! And I didn't know whether it was pride or disgust that suddenly flashed over me (177).

The protagonist's initial rush of pride and nostalgia is undercut by his last expression of ambivalence. This and other similar moments in the novel represent the incessant conflict of rural and urban meanings that define his experience as a black migrant. The invocation of the blues foregrounds this conflict even as it also provides a brief respite from his feeling of displacement in the city. Thus, the invoca-

tion of the blues, while providing the protagonist with a symbolic space of memory and self-recognition, also forces him to recognize his displaced status as a black migrant in the city.

His encounter with a man selling hot candied yams becomes another instance in which the cultural materials (and forms) of a displaced rural past rub against the environment and circumstances of the City. Another Proustian reminder of his displaced cultural status as a black migrant, the odor of the yams evokes in him "a stab of nostalgia." This description suggests the pain of memory registered in his eating of the yam, an otherwise mundane act in the social and cultural context of the South, although now transformed into an expression of "freedom" in the urban environment of the City. The pain of remembering stems from the negative racial value assigned to such things as "yams," "chitterlings," and "pork chops." Where Ellison's protagonist had once shunned these things, he now views them with new eyes in the City. For this reason, his eating of the yam evokes in him a sense of newfound freedom: "I walked along, munching the yam, just as suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of *freedom*—simply because I was eating while walking along the street" (emphasis mine) (264).

His experience in the streets of Harlem generates a wistful nostalgia for life "down home." Yet the terms of that nostalgia are immediately undercut by the immediate recognition that such comforting reminders cannot entirely mitigate his profound sense of displacement in the city:

Continue on the yam level and life would be sweet—though somewhat yellowish. Yet the freedom to eat yams on the street was far less than I had expected upon coming to the city. An unpleasant taste bloomed in my mouth now as I bit the end of the yam and threw it into the street; it had been frost-bitten (267).

The "frost-bitten" yam becomes a symbol of rural and urban conflict; the

"unpleasant taste" blooming his mouth is an indication of his growing disillusionment in the city. The brutal cold that ruins his yam symbolizes the physical forces he faces as a black migrant in the city, while the yam itself symbolizes a sense of wistful nostalgia for home and place. Thus, the ideal of home and place—symbolized in food, music (the blues) and folk identity—is complicated in the novel by the urban realities of the city.

Ellison's protagonist finds a brief respite from his feelings of displacement in the apartment of Mary Rambo. Mary's apartment is representative of the ideal domestic spaces that were so important in the black migration novels of the 1920's.<sup>18</sup> Mary herself comes to represent an ideal of collective experience that is expressed once again in the form of the blues. It is the perspective of the blues that enables her to making a place for herself despite the transient quality of her existence and the ever-present threat of eviction. The protagonist describes her demeanor as he listens to her sing the blues: "Then from down the hall I could hear Mary singing, her voice clear and untroubled, though she sang a troubled song. It was the "Back Water Blues." I lay listening as the sound flowed to and around me, bringing me a calm sense of my indebtedness (297).

Her ability to maintain an "untroubled" demeanor while singing a "troubled song" is a testament to the enduring quality of her blues perspective. Ironically, "Back Water Blues" is a song that tells the story of a devastating flood in 1927 that made more than 700,000 people homeless.<sup>19</sup> Mary's singing of this particular "blues" signifies her enduring sense of home and belonging despite the constant threat of her displacement. She may well be displaced (evicted) from her physical place of belonging—a reality that the song laments—but she cannot be displaced from her sense of symbolic belonging. She has made a place for herself in an urban environment that has not evolved a permanent place for her. Hearing her "blues" evokes in Ellison's protagonist a "calm sense of [his] indebtedness," a description that suggests a reconciliation (although

momentary) of the rural and urban conflict that defines his experience as a black migrant. What he feels "indebted" to is the collective experience that Mary's "blues" signifies, an experience he unconsciously rejected while growing up in the South, but now finds greater connection to in the North. And yet, this moment of recognition, initiated by another symbolic invocation of the blues, is undercut by his compelling desire to go back out into the city. Ellison's protagonist is torn, as it were, between a longing for home (and community) and the irresistible allure of the city.<sup>20</sup>

In this sense, the domestic space of Mary's apartment is represented here as a dialectical space signifying both an ideal of place and belonging—the proverbial promise of the North—as well as the incessant conflict of rural and urban meanings that defines black migrant spaces in the city. Drawing on this episode in the novel, Laurence Rodgers argues "the principal imperative of the African-American migration novel can be viewed as a century-long attempt to reconvene the family mealtime gathering in the heart of the modern city."<sup>21</sup> Rodgers is right to assert the central task of "place making" in Ellison's novel; but he is only partly right on this point. The trope of "place making" in black migration novels, the "attempt to reconvene that family mealtime gathering in the heart of the modern city," must also necessarily involve the reconciling of rural-urban conflict. Ellison's protagonist must first attend to this conflict before he can figure a place for himself in the City. In a heightened moment of introspection, he resembles a black Hamlet in his attempt to reconcile the contradictory terms of his existence:

One moment I believed, I was dedicated, willing to lie on the blazing coals, do anything to attain a position on the campus—then snap! It was done with, finished, through. Now there was only problem of forgetting it. If only all the contradictory voices shouting inside my head would calm down and sing a song in uni-

son, whatever it was I wouldn't care as long as they sang without dissonance; yes, and avoided the uncertain extremes of the scale. But there was no relief. I was wild with resentment but too much under "self control," that frozen virtue, that freezing vice (259).

His desire to reconcile this conflict—to establish a harmonious lived experience in the city—is the principal imperative of the novel. Ellison again expresses the problem of urban displacement in musical terms. The "self control" that inhibits his ability to appropriate the cultural materials of the past (of the South) recalls Ellison's description of the cultural attitudes of black people in Harlem. Like the permanently displaced Harlemites Ellison describes in "Harlem is Nowhere," his protagonist finds himself "out of sync" with the humanistic forms of expression (such as the blues) that could provide a basis for home and belonging in the City. Similarly, Ellison's protagonist refers to the innumerable masses of black migrants in Harlem as "men of transition whose faces were immobile" (440), seeing in them a reflection of his own condition. For they too are cut off from the cultural forms that would enable them to express a sense of self and place in an urban environment that has denied them both. Witnessing the black masses of Harlem, he evokes what becomes the central question in the novel:

I moved with the crowd, the sweat pouring off me, listening to the grinding roar of traffic, the growing sound of a record shop loudspeaker blar-

ing a languid blues. I stopped. *Was this all that would be recorded? Was this the only true history of the times, a mood blared by trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid, inadequate words?* [My emphasis] (443).

The blues, with its "turgid, inadequate words," becomes in this instance a language of the displaced and dispossessed. In this sense, the blues provides a kind of sound track for the teeming masses of Harlem, recording in "inadequate words" a sense (and an ideal) of Place. Ellison's protagonist, however, questions its lasting effect. His ambivalence again underscores the precariousness of his existence and the perpetual displacement he experiences as a black migrant. Ultimately, Ellison's invisible man appeals to a broader sense of place and identity; his last words—"who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you"—gesturers toward an ideal of universal lived experience. This becomes the real "moment of arrival" for Ellison displaced protagonist who resolves to quit his underground cellar because "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (581). However, his decision to end his "hibernation" does not foreclose the conflict and contradiction that have defined his experience as a displaced, black migrant in the city. He concedes this fact when he admits, "I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless" (581). Ever the blues man, he presses forward despite the incongruity of his existence.



## Endnotes

1. Ralph Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage International, 1964), 296.
2. See Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem; The Making of a Ghetto; Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 127-148. Also see Monique M. Taylor, *Harlem between Heaven and Hell*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 17-26.
3. Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere," *Shadow and Act*, 300.
4. The overarching theme of black migration novels is the importance of imagining spaces that can reflect both the past cultural experience of the South, as well as the unique urban experience of the North. These spaces are necessarily dialectical in that they do not privilege rural or urban meanings, but rather foreground an urban-pastoral experience that becomes the basis for the post-migration, urban identity of black migrant characters. Black musical forms, particularly the blues, constitute one of the important cultural elements at work in these urban spaces. Therefore, the blues functions as a mediational cultural form that reflects the past and the present—the rural experience of the South and urban experience of the North. In this sense, the blues most closely reflects the urban-pastoral ideal that is the thematic basis for the central complication posed by black migrant characters struggling to establish a sense of belonging in northern cities.
5. Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere," *Shadow and Act*, 300.
6. *Ibid*, 300.
7. See Kenneth Warren, *So Black, So Blue* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 26. Also see Lawrence Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 152-154.
8. Horace A. Porter, *Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 74.
9. Farah Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 55.
10. Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," *Shadow and Act*, 112.
11. Ralph Ellison, "Blues People," *Shadow and Act*, 256.
12. I define the "trope of displacement" as the central thematic feature of early black migration novels and a defining aspect of black migrant characters who are represented as permanently displaced in an urban environment that has evolved not adequate place for them.
13. The "Battle Royal" was published separately in 1946 and became the basis for the longer manuscript of the novel by then a work in progress.
14. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Second Vintage International Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 16.
15. Clyde Woods writes: "The blues emerge immediately after the overthrow of Reconstruction. During this period, unmediated African American voices were routinely silenced through the imposition of a new regime of censorship based on exile, assassination and massacre. The blues became an alternative form of communication, analysis, moral intervention, observation, celebration for a new generation that had witnessed slavery, freedom, and unfreedom in rapid succession between 1860 and 1875" (Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: Race, Power, and the Blues in the Mississippi Delta* [New York and London: Verso, 1998] 36).
16. Huston Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 190.
17. LeRoi Jones describes the "Peatie Wheatstraw blues" in *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963), 67.
18. Mary's apartment reflects the representations of "domestic spaces" in two black migration novels of the 1920's, Walter White's *Flight* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. Larsen's protagonist, Helga Crane, strives for an elusive ideal of domesticity, seeing in the black middle class homes a Harlem a potential model of her own future. Like other black migrant characters in this tradition, she seeks a place to call home in the city. Similarly, White's novel centers on the experience of a black female migrant, Mimi Daquin, whose "flight" to the city has its goal the establishment

of domestic place of belonging in the city. Ellison riffs on this important thematic goal of the migration novel by introducing his protagonist to a domestic space in the city replete with the conflict and contradictions that mark his existence as an "invisible man." In other words, this domestic space of belonging is also a blues space located at the proverbial crossroads of racial meaning and cultural understanding.

19. In 1927, a record company offered a 500 hundred-dollar prize to any singer who could devise the best "blues" about the Great Flood that made scores of people homeless in the Mississippi valley region of the South. Bessie Smith won the prize with her "Back Water Blues." ("Back Water Blues," in *Blues*

*Lyrics Online* by Vital [database on-line]; available from [www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/Delta/2541/blbbroon.htm](http://www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/Delta/2541/blbbroon.htm); Internet; accessed 24 April 2005.)

20. This passage wonderfully recalls a similar passage in *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), in which Paul Laurence Dunbar comments on the dilemma of the city dweller who must chose between the domestic values of home and the allure of the city streets in (Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods* in *Three Negro Classics* [New York: Avon Books 1965], 507-508).

21. Lawrence R. Rodgers, *Canaan Bound: The African American Great Migration Novel* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

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## Leonard Slade, Jr.

### Death Wish

After I left her womb  
 To enter the cold world  
 Where I learned to play  
 And work for survival,  
 Eighty-eight years passed  
 When her blood vessels burst.  
 My heart wanted to stop beating,  
 Tears refused to flow,  
 I wanted to re-enter her womb  
 And be buried with her in the grave.

# Frederick Douglass's Journey from Slave to Freeman: An Acquisition and Mastery of Language, Rhetoric, and Power via the *Narrative*

John Hansen

As scholars began to give slave narratives more attention, a uniform agreement developed amongst them which catapulted Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* to a canonical literary model for assessing not simply antebellum narrations but every form of the genre. Charles Heglar argues that "critics defined Douglass's narrative strategy, which details his irreversible transformation from slave to freedman, as the [locus classicus] of the slave narrative and [identified] specific elements which Douglass used to delineate his transformation as conventions of the 'classic' subgenre."<sup>1</sup> One of the more significant conventions is literacy and how an individual is able to attain such skills in captivity. For Douglass, attaining literacy is an important stage in the process of his dramatic transformation. Robert B. Stepto declares that Douglass's self-construction or his ability to write himself within the *Narrative* is an important moment in African-American writing because it stands as a source that shapes later African-American literature.<sup>2</sup> While much scholarship has been done on the topic of slavery and attainment of literacy within Douglass's *Narrative*, Stepto and other scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston Baker, and John Stauffer, to name a few, seem to have shown little interest in doing a close reading of Douglass's actual language, and how he is able to establish himself within the *Narrative*. Rather, these scholars argue that Douglass's literary skills allow him to overcome the slaveholders attempt to deny slaves the knowledge that may lead them to discovering their own identity. According to Aimable Twagillimana, being in command "of the means of communication allows the colonizer (the slaveholder in the African-American case) to imagine the myths and categories of difference."<sup>3</sup> The capacity to exert command over the set of rules will allow for con-

trol over both "the social and cultural environment," and any endeavor to alter social aspects will not be effective unless it bears directly on the basic principles of the syntax itself.<sup>4</sup> It is important to be mindful of this approach when looking at the language of Douglass's *Narrative* if we want to see his expansion of knowledge and control of language. Language allows Douglass to redefine himself vis-à-vis society and culture, the slaveholders, and his fellow slaves. In this paper, I will argue that Douglass's identity emerges as he masters language throughout each subsequent chapter of the *Narrative*, where Douglass both defines himself as he writes about himself within the *Narrative*, and simultaneously, establishes a sense of authority and power through the use of language and rhetorical strategies.

In the *Narrative's* opening paragraph, Douglass introduces the reader to his inability to gain access to information. He specifies that he was forcibly placed into a position of being an outsider with respect to the realm of knowledge. Douglass begins with an attempt to gain access to this field of knowledge partly through literary method, where he writes the *Narrative* out, but mostly through personal recollections and remembrances in addition to his own life experiences. His attempt to situate himself within the realm of knowledge is presented as follows:

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep

their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit.<sup>5</sup>

The first paragraph of chapter one contains numerous negative expressions, such as “no,” “not,” and “never,” all illustrating Douglass’s lack of knowledge. Lisa Lee argues that Douglass “reveals the gaps in knowledge that contribute to his marginality,”<sup>6</sup> which prevents him from colonizing the text as narrator at this time. Douglass reveals his simple way of reasoning as well as his child-like inexperience by the constant use of words that show him in a position of limitation. Douglass is unable to acquire even the most basic knowledge about his own personal life. Since Douglass’s cognitive abilities are of little value to him at this point, he is unable to question why the slaveholder “deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Douglass lacks an identity. He is unable to think for himself because of his deficiency in literacy, which keeps him from being able to access the realm of knowledge. Power and authority are beyond Frederick Douglass’s reach.

A repetitive quality is also seen in the opening paragraph, which uses similar verb forms such as “to know,” and other expressions that are of similar meaning. The line of “never having seen any authentic record containing it”<sup>8</sup> is a reference to the notion of the legality (legal rights) of Douglass’s existence. That is, he has no documenta-

tion in regards to his birth or his family’s lineage. Consequently, Douglass’s disconnect from society is a result of his inability to control his own life. An absence of Douglass’s family history further reveals his lack of a legal personal identity and the powerlessness he has over his own life. Since slaves cannot read or write, the only references they can formulate are in relation to the different seasons (spring-time) and agricultural procedures (planting-time). Douglass introduces the parallel of slaves and animals to show how the only difference between a slave and animal is the slave’s ability to achieve the skills of literacy. While it is evident that Douglass does not know much information, he appears to be certain of two pieces of knowledge: his birth place and his master’s desire to maintain the slave’s ignorance of information that may eventually give them a sense of identity. However, Douglass appears discontent with the ability of only being able to remember two distinct pieces of knowledge from his life, which was the main source of his unhappiness since childhood.<sup>9</sup>

In the third and fourth paragraphs of chapter one, Douglass begins to discuss his limited knowledge of information about both of his parents. Douglass incorporates the rhetorical device of repetition to highlight the mental hardships he struggles with for much of the *Narrative*. He describes the memories of his mother:

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew anything about it.<sup>10</sup>

The continuous use of the word “night” in this passage exemplifies the

kind of relationship that Douglass had with his mother. That is, the word "night" describes the relationship as nonexistent (or dead) from the time he was an infant. By contrast, the word "light" in this passage might stand as a metaphor and represent the concept of knowledge or understanding. However, Douglass only saw his mother at night and never in the day (light), which did not allow him to "know" his mother or find out more about his family's history. While this further displays Douglass's inability to establish a relationship with his mother, as a narrator, Douglass continues to repeat and focus on his obsession with a lack of knowledge. The concept of "knowledge" acts as a thread throughout the rest of the *Narrative*; however, in this particular passage, Douglass establishes himself as someone who does not have a personal connection with parental figures.

Douglass further accentuates the absence of his knowledge, which prevents him from being able to obtain any awareness of his personal identity. Yet, later on in chapter six of the *Narrative*, Douglass begins to acquire the knowledge and is able to comprehend the power of literacy. He proceeds to master both the language and its rhetorical strategies, and this allows him to establish an identity and authority as he writes himself into the *Narrative*.

Douglass's realization in chapter six of the importance of literacy represents a transitional phase where his ability to process information and to access the world of knowledge is drastically altered. That is, Douglass becomes conscious of his desire to learn how to read when he overhears Hugh Auld scold his wife, Sophia Auld, about the dangers a slave can pose when equipped with the ability to read and write:

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to

read. To use [Mr. Auld's] own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master."

As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy. These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I least expected it. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of

my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.<sup>11</sup>

Here, Douglass begins to make a personal connection between his identity and language. Lee asserts that Douglass begins to emerge as a central figure that generates his own identity as it relates to his increased acts of writing.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the beginning of the *Narrative*, in which Douglass is unable to display any form of intellectual knowledge and is in a position of being continuously controlled, he begins to show more of an authoritative identity within the language of chapter six. Douglass uses clever rhetorical strategies to represent his newfound identity that allows him to resist the power of slavery.

Three characters in this particular scene of instruction reveal a three-part structure. Sophia Auld, who is Douglass's instructor, is only given two sentences dedicated to letters and elementary words. Hugh Auld then appears and succeeds her. Hugh Auld first instructs his wife in laws about slavery and literacy ("it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read") and, "to use his own words," Mr. Auld personally instructs Douglass. Douglass then does a similar imitation of Mr. Auld's speech, where Douglass reiterates the word "nigger" four times and appears to call for equality. Douglass allocates three-fourths of the entire paragraph to the many lessons he has received from Hugh Auld. Mr. Auld's words usher in "a new and special revelation" inside Douglass, "who 'from that moment' understands 'the white man's power to enslave the black man' as well as 'the pathway from slavery to freedom.'"<sup>13</sup> Here, reading becomes that avenue since it "would *spoil* the best nigger in the world" and make him "unfit to be a slave."<sup>14</sup> The surreptitious "white man's power" results in Mr. Auld's denial of African-American men the privilege to read. Moreover, Douglass' states, "these words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought," which represents a rebellious sentiment that is drawn out of Douglass as a result of Mr. Auld's words. Houston Baker declares that

Douglass attempts to separate himself from the white culture around him.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, Douglass defines himself and associates his ability to acquire literacy with his own identity as a black man.<sup>16</sup>

This three-part arrangement uncovers three versions of dominance and control within the language. Sophia Auld appears voiceless and is depicted as a simple individual ("she assisted me in learning"), and her power is severely limited by Douglass. Hugh Auld embodies the typical "white man's power" in a basic form, an authority that attempts to silence both Sophia Auld and Douglass. Yet, James Warren argues that there is a significant difference in Douglass's approach in this scene because he exerts an antagonistic attitude towards the language itself by forming several contrapositions between Mr. Auld and himself.<sup>17</sup> That is, Douglass restricts Hugh Auld's role and identity and amplifies his own. As a literate narrator, Douglass stands for the Douglass who is seen by Mr. Auld as a nigger. It is plausible that the narrator, Douglass, is able to see this "nigger" only because of Mr. Auld, who is a representation of the "other." This "otherness" of Mr. Auld is renounced and controlled by Douglass's impartial antithesis. Hence, the ability to convert the "otherness" of Mr. Auld, or his "nigger" into discourse, Douglass attains sovereignty of his own circumstances.<sup>18</sup> Mr. Auld uses the term "nigger" to represent his ideal slave in a state of silence while in labor, however, Douglass takes control of the word "nigger," and gives the term an ironic definition. Douglass associates "nigger" with the slave's ability to possess the power of literacy and how the consciousness of language can propel slaves to new facets of enlightenment.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Douglass is shown in control of this moment rather than controlled by someone else. According to Lisa Sisco, Douglass has now become aware of how Mr. Auld uses literacy as an avenue to emphasize superiority over the slaves he owns, and Douglass decides to alter his own position by the implementation of literacy to claim authority over the master figure.<sup>20</sup> In the last sentence of the passage Douglass states, "I acknowledge the



benefit of both," which is the most authoritative sentence of the passage because it substitutes the paternal rhetoric of the master with a straightforward rhetoric of a courteous person. Since Douglass states that he has made a "grand achievement" he "prized" so "highly," he is able to pay homage to his former proprietors, since the reverence by Douglass promotes the strength of language and the power to which language serves as a guide.

While Douglass has now begun to form a sense of authority and identity through the language of the *Narrative*, it is crucial to examine chapter seven because it reveals how Douglass continues to actively pursue his passion and acquisition of literacy. Michele Henkel argues that Douglass begins to exert the same kind of power that white culture has used over him.<sup>21</sup> More importantly, chapter seven shows that Douglass's identity formation coincides with his increased acts of writing:

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

After Douglass attains basic grammar from Mrs. Auld, he begins to for-

mulate a plan that will further his skills in literacy. In this passage, Douglass devises a plan that will allow him to achieve the knowledge of how to read. To implement this plan, Douglass befriends white children and attempts to acquire their advanced skills of reading. While Douglass does not specifically use the word "manipulate" within the passage, Douglass is, in fact, manipulative in his actions. Douglass invokes irony within the language because he masks his plan in an innocent tone without any use of negative language, which is similar to what he has been told by slaveholders and others who were in the institution of slavery. Moreover, Douglass uses the word "littles" before white boys and "urchins" in the last sentence to describe the children who taught him to read. He thus writes himself into a position of power; he is able to exert authority over future white society.

After Douglass has attained the necessary skills to read from his white "friends," he immediately devises a method that will allow him to acquire the knowledge of how to write in the latter half of chapter seven:

The idea as to how I might learn to write was suggested to me by being in Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard, and frequently seeing the ship carpenters, after hewing, and getting a piece of timber ready for use, write on the timber the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended. When a piece of timber was intended for the larboard side, it would be marked thus—"L." When a piece was for the starboard side, it would be marked thus—"S." A piece for the larboard side forward, would be marked thus—"L. F." When a piece was for starboard side forward, it would be marked thus—"S. F." For larboard aft, it would be marked thus—"L. A." For starboard aft, it would be marked thus—"S. A." I soon learned the names of these letters, and for what they were intended

when placed upon a piece of timber in the ship-yard. I immediately commenced copying them, and in a short time was able to make the four letters named. After that, when I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be, "I don't believe you. Let me see you try it." I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that. In this way I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible I should never have gotten in any other way.<sup>23</sup>

Douglass is aware of the fact that when whites use literacy for a specific purpose, they do not fully realize the other functions that it could possibly serve. The awareness to closely examine the uses of literacy has not been seen in previous chapters of the *Narrative*, and may be a direct result of Douglass's ability to read and draw upon language. The white workers in this shipyard use the letters written on the pieces of wooden boards for the sole purpose of identification. Douglass transforms this use of literacy into a political act of resistance. He recognizes that literacy "is a technology by which one group asserts control or status over another,"<sup>24</sup> and utilizes this against the whites in the shipyard and becomes successful in acquiring knowledge from them. Thus, Douglass transforms "literacy's potential oppression into moments of control and self-education."<sup>25</sup> When Douglass challenges these whites, he does it in such a manner that they are entirely oblivious to their role as teacher to Douglass. Sisco argues that "Douglass is successful because he has the ability to identify white control of literacy as oppressive and to simultaneously use that desire for control as the white boy's Achilles' heel."<sup>26</sup> Douglass further shows his power and identity by being an active speaker rather than just a passive spectator in previous chapters of the *Narrative*. That is, Douglass quotes himself for the first time within the

*Narrative* in this passage when he states, "I don't believe you. Let me see you try it." This reveals the connection between his acquisition of literacy and emergence of a personal identity, where he begins to become equal to those around him, and according to Henkel, equal to anyone who reads the *Narrative*.<sup>27</sup>

Douglass's ability to become equal to others in society is not fully achieved until chapter ten of the *Narrative*. That is, for him to experience the same kind of freedom that whites possess, he needs to be free of psychological bondage. Once Douglass is able to overcome this bondage, he will be able to fully realize his own identity. Consequently, his only method to obtain psychological freedom is for him to fight the most violent slaveholder, Edward Covey. Douglass became unmanageable in the eyes of Master Thomas and was sent to Covey because he was known as a "nigger-breaker."<sup>28</sup> After Douglass collapses from heat exhaustion and receives a severe beating for not being able to work, he flees to his old master for redress, only to be forced back to Covey's plantation. The next day, Covey attempts to tie Douglass up so he could be whipped. However, Douglass unexpectedly resists and resolves to fight Covey. James Matlack argues "if literacy and self-awareness represent the crucial first step in Douglass's liberation, then active resistance was the next stage in securing his freedom."<sup>29</sup> As a result of resistance, Douglass experiences an "internalized liberation" because Covey never disciplines Douglass after their confrontation.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, this chapter reveals Douglass's vast knowledge of the Bible, which elevates him to the level of Covey, a supposedly righteous Christian. However, Douglass portrays Covey as a hypocritical Christian who is the epitome of slavery. Lastly, towards the end of chapter ten, Douglass forges a document not only for himself but for other slaves that had planned to escape to Baltimore with him. This particular scene is the first time the reader witnesses Douglass in an act of writing.

After the struggle between Douglass and Covey concludes, Douglass remarks:



This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact.<sup>31</sup>

Douglass's use of the words "freedom" and "manhood" seem to intertwine and mirror one another. According to Vince Brewton, Douglass sets up a symbolic structure where he "reacquires his 'manhood' not to endure slavery but precisely in order that he might resist his captors and ultimately escape to freedom."<sup>32</sup> This shows that as Douglass's identity continues to mature, his acts of writing parallel this. Moreover, Douglass incorporates self-reflection into this passage, which is another effective rhetorical strategy: "It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free." Sterling Lecater Bland declares that Douglass alludes to the notion of freedom as an intricate part of his own personal identity.<sup>33</sup> In the latter half of this passage, Douglass states, "My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had

passed forever when I could be a slave in fact." This sentence references several positive sentiments and may stand for Douglass's psychological freedom. The word "spirit" is something innate and pertains to the psyche of the mind, while "cowardice departed" is similar to the concept of fear, which usually is a cognitive perception as well. Thus, many of the words that Douglass chooses here stem from the mind itself. Accordingly, Douglass has ended the psychological power of slavery over his life.

When Douglass describes Covey, he makes several references to biblical scriptures:

His work went on in his absence almost as well as in his presence; and he had the faculty of making us feel that he was ever present with us. This he did by surprising us. He seldom approached the spot where we were at work openly, if he could do it secretly. He always aimed at taking us by surprise. Such was his cunning, that we used to call him, among ourselves, "the snake." When we were at work in the cornfield, he would sometimes crawl on his hands and knees to avoid detection, and all at once he would rise nearly in our midst, and scream out, "Ha, ha! Come, come! Dash on, dash on!" Mr. Covey's *forte* consisted in his power to deceive. His life was devoted to planning and perpetrating the grossest deceptions. Every thing he possessed in the shape of learning or religion, he made conform to his disposition to deceive. He seemed to think himself equal to deceiving the Almighty.<sup>34</sup>

Douglass portrays Covey as a snake because he is "cunning" like Satan and always appears in secret, much like "a thief in the night" which is a reference to a phrase used in the Bible from 2 Peter 3:10 and 1 Thessalonians 5:2 (*King James Version*). Douglass goes on to discuss deception and again references Satan, most likely from the book of Genesis

where Satan deceives both Adam and Eve. Douglass uses biblical metaphors and abolitionist language because he wants to show his readers the vast knowledge he has of the Bible.<sup>35</sup> Douglass's ability to describe Covey in a metaphorical sense further shows his witty use of rhetorical strategies that allows him to write himself into the *Narrative* and establish an identity.<sup>36</sup> Much like Covey and other slaveholders who made it known that they were in prayer or on their way to a Sunday church service, Douglass wants to prove that he is of equal status to them. That is, he wants his readers to know that he is just as familiar with the Bible and can also make references to biblical allusions.

While Douglass attempts to be equally knowledgeable as slaveholders are on the Bible, Douglass also wants to reveal how he overcame the power they used to prevent him and other slaves from being able to read and write. As a result, in the latter half of chapter ten, Douglass is seen as writing a pass to help him and other slaves escape to Baltimore:

The week before our intended start, I wrote several protections, one for each of us. As well as I can remember, they were in the following words, to wit:—

This is to certify that I, the undersigned, have given the bearer, my servant, full liberty to go to Baltimore, and spend the Easter holidays.

Written with mine own hand, &c., 1835.

WILLIAM HAMILTON,  
Near St. Michael's, in Talbot  
county, Maryland.<sup>37</sup>

When he defeats Covey in chapter ten, he realizes that freedom is an intricate part of his personal identity. Thus, the pass that he forges is a representation of that desire to have an identity that is free from the bondage of slavery. Since Douglass has a previous taste of freedom from his successful fight against Covey, Douglass writes himself into the *Narrative* with this pass, which was to assist in his achievement of freedom. Thus, Douglass has attempted to generate his own identity in the form of a pass that he signs with his master's name, which further shows the reversal of power where Douglass now becomes the master.

The *Narrative* of Frederick Douglass represents his ability to overcome the oppression of slavery, attain literacy, and to write and master language. However, once Douglass is able to acquire the necessary skills to read and write, he immediately begins to display this unused power through language. Douglass's identity transforms from the opening of chapter one to the end of chapter ten. He begins to realize the potential both language and writing can have on one's life and how it can lead to the acquisition of authority and identity. Moreover, the language within Douglass's *Narrative* reveals the role reversal Douglass constructs with his slave masters and how this places him in a position of power. Douglass's rhetorical strategies continue to become more complex as the *Narrative* moves forward, which parallel his journey of literacy and self-identity. In the end, Douglass successfully defines himself as he writes about himself within the *Narrative* and establishes authority over individuals who once had control over him.

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## Endnotes

1. *Slave Narrative* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2001), 17.
2. Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 5-6.
3. Aimable Twagilimana, *Race and Gender in the Making of an African-American Literary Tradition* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 37.
4. *Ibid.*, 37-38.
5. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, eds. William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely (New York and London: Norton, 1997), 12.
6. Lisa Lee, "The Politics of Language in Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of an American Slave." *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 17, no. 2 (1992), 54.
7. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 12.
8. *Ibid.*, 12.
9. Twagilimana, *Race and Gender in the Making of an African-American Literary Tradition*, 71.
10. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 12-13.
11. *Ibid.*, 29-30.
12. Lee, "The Politics of Language in Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of an American Slave." 55.
13. James Warren, *Culture of Eloquence: Oratory and Reform in Antebellum America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 126.
14. *Ibid.*, 126.
15. Houston Baker, Jr., "Autobiographical Acts and the Voice of the Southern Slave," in *The Slave's Narrative*, eds. Charles Davis and Henry Louis Gates (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 246.
16. Christine Levecq, *Slavery and Sentiment: The Politics of Feeling in Black Atlantic Antislavery Writing, 1770-*

1850 (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2008), 229.

17. Warren, *Culture of Eloquence: Oratory and Reform in Antebellum America*, 126.

18. Baker, "Autobiographical Acts and the Voice of the Southern Slave," 247.

19. *Ibid.*, 247.

20. Lisa Sisco, "Writing in the Spaces Left: Literacy as a Process of Becoming in the Narratives of Frederick Douglass," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1995): 195-196.

21. Michele Henkel, "Forging Identity through Literary Reinterpellation: The Ideological Project of Frederick Douglass's Narrative," *Literature and Psychology* 48 (2002): 93.

22. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 32.

23. *Ibid.*, 34.

24. Sisco, "Writing in the Spaces Left: Literacy as a Process of Becoming in the Narratives of Frederick Douglass," 198-199.

25. *Ibid.*, 200.

26. *Ibid.*, 198.

27. Henkel, "Forging Identity through Literary Reinterpellation: The Ideological Project of Frederick Douglass's Narrative," 90.

28. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 42.

29. James Matlack, "The Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass." *Phylon* 40, no. 1 (1979): 22.

30. *Ibid.*, 22.

31. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 50-51.

32. Vince Brewton, "Bold Defiance

Took its Place—Respect and Self-Making in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2005): 712.

33. Sterling Lecater Bland, Jr., *Voices of the Fugitives* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 92.

34. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 44.

35. For more information on how Douglass uses biblical language to establish his own identity, please refer to Sterling Lecater Bland's, "Behold a Man Transformed": Sacred Language and the Secular Self in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*. Douglass uses religion and the "sermonic tradition" to utilize Christian rhetoric and relate to his readership. Douglass embraces language and transforms it in a manner that allows him to attain a place in the culture around him and assists in the construction of an identity that stems from "the entitling power of biblical precedent" quoted in Bland, *Voices of the Fugitives*, 67.

36. Sharon Carson, "Shaking the Foundation: Liberation Theology in the 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,'" *Religion & Literature* 24, no. 2 (1992): 25-26. Carson argues that Douglass may also view Covey as a metaphor for the "white church," where white slaveholders use religion as a means to justify their own actions towards slaves, quoted in Carson, "Shaking the Foundation: Liberation Theology in the 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,'" 25.

37. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 58.

## Leonard Slade, Jr.

### Color

Whatever it is, it must be  
A sin to be so beautiful Charcoal, caramel, copper, ebony, poetry.

Like lyrical prose, it contains a song  
It can be heard in the dark  
Voices crying for love and respect.

# In Her Own Image: Literary and Visual Representations of Girlhood in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*

Shalene A. M. Vasquez

## Abstract

Despite striking similarities in their work and increased attention to the transnational Americas, there are few detailed comparisons between writers such as Toni Morrison (the most lauded African American female author of the twentieth century), and Jamaica Kincaid (the most critically and commercially successful female Caribbean writer). For example, the common approach to examining Morrison's groundbreaking novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is to foreground its national significance, or less frequently to apply its discourses quite broadly and loosely to other cultural contexts like Latin America. However, building on relatively recent attempts to locate Morrison in broader transnational spaces, in this discussion, I propose closely examining a text from another Anglophone, African diasporic context, which I argue is directly in conversation with *Bluest*—Kincaid's *Annie John* (1985). By engaging the larger English-speaking Americas, such an approach highlights the transnational implications of the race and gender paradigms Morrison deploys; also, although *Annie John* is commonly categorized as primarily Caribbean (a precursor to Kincaid's "American" sequel *Lucy* (1990)), this comparison elucidates the Western and transnational leanings of this foundational "Caribbean" work and the ways in which it expands on Morrison's representation of female autonomy and visibility. Kincaid's interventions offer new perspectives from black diasporic communities with marked colonial experiences, and both authors demonstrate how black women in different cultural contexts write themselves into visual and historical records. Contributing to burgeoning interest in examining the Americas as a transnational space, I argue that Kincaid appropriates Morrison's treatment of visibility, gender and identity,

presenting similar dynamics in another African diasporic community and depicting even more autonomous Caribbean girls.

Picture books were full of little girls sleeping with their dolls. Raggedy Ann dolls usually, but they were out of the question ... When I took it to bed, its hard unyielding limbs resisted my flesh ... It was a most uncomfortable, patently aggressive sleeping companion ... Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured ... I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me.

Claudia, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

In the above excerpt, Claudia, the young protagonist in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) sarcastically describes "discovering the dearness" in a white doll, alluding to the critical process of interrogating or "dismembering" representations of whiteness that Western society privileges (Morrison 1970, 20).<sup>1</sup> This complex and often cited depiction of black girlhood has become a foundational and well-researched moment in studies of visibility and blackness in twentieth-century African American literature.<sup>2</sup> However, perhaps owing to the seeming specificity of Morrison's cultural references, most of these responses tend to situate *Bluest* within the continental United States.<sup>3</sup> Yet not surprisingly, these

young black girls' experiences are mirrored in various marginalized communities and echoed in the work of other black women writers. In numerous interviews Morrison acknowledges her interest in an international array of artists, and she specifically identifies her engagement with diverse authors throughout the Americas, including writers like Jamaica Kincaid.<sup>4</sup> Despite striking thematic similarities in their works, there are few detailed comparisons between authors such as Morrison (the most lauded African American female writer of the twentieth century), and Kincaid (the most critically and commercially successful female Caribbean author). The common approach to *Bluest* is to examine its national significance, or less frequently to apply its discourses quite broadly and loosely to other cultural contexts like Latin America.<sup>5</sup> However, building on relatively recent attempts to locate Morrison in broader transnational spaces, in this discussion, I propose closely examining a text from another Anglophone, African diasporic context, which I argue is directly in conversation with *Bluest*—Kincaid's *Annie John* (1985).<sup>6</sup> By engaging the larger English-speaking Americas, such an approach highlights the transnational implications of the race and gender paradigms Morrison deploys; also, although *Annie John* is commonly categorized as primarily Caribbean (as a precursor to Kincaid's "American" sequel *Lucy* (1990)), this comparison elucidates the Western and transnational leanings of this foundational "Caribbean" work and the ways in which it expands on Morrison's representation of female autonomy and visuality. Kincaid's interventions offer new perspectives from black diasporic communities with marked colonial experiences, and both authors demonstrate how black women in different cultural contexts write themselves into visual and historical records. Contributing to burgeoning interest in examining the Americas as a transnational space, I argue that Kincaid appropriates Morrison's treatment of visuality, gender and identity, presenting similar dynamics in another African diasporic community and depicting even more autonomous Caribbean girls.

## Theoretical and Historical Underpinnings

In a time when "the two-way process of cultural traffic is now increasingly understood not as special or exceptional but as an ordinary and normal aspect of everyday life," it is certainly not surprising that black diasporic figures in different spaces question hierarchical literary representations in comparable ways once that reciprocal "traffic" exposes them to other ideas (Mercer 2005, 145). This "two-way process of cultural traffic" is evident in the growing transnational conversations, which increasingly engage writers of the global south, opening up spaces for previously silenced voices. Such dialogic processes move away from top-down models of previous decades, disrupting hierarchies of race, class, gender and geography—to name only a few. Of course exchanges in myriad contexts between African diasporic individuals in the continental United States and the Caribbean are centuries-old and well-established legacies of the transatlantic slave trade. In addressing a specifically literary crossing, I borrow Cheryl Wall's notion of "worrying the line" to describe intertextuality, and particularly Kincaid's engagement with Morrison's inaugural text, which models certain discursive tools in its articulation of black female selfhood. Wall provides several meanings for the "line" which is "worried" or troubled: "the line as a metaphor for lineage and the line as a metaphor for the literary traditions [Western and non-Western] in which these texts participate" (Wall 2004, 8). She describes worrying the line as invested in "literary matrilineage" and notes that "whether one perceives texts as responding to their precursors or as signifying on them, tradition constitutes a theoretical line in which texts produce and are produced by other texts. These intertextual connections may be thematic or mythic, rhetorical or figurative" (11). In exploring this gendered intertextual practice, Wall suggests that "'thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches,' noting in particular 'their



use of specifically black female language' and 'cultural experience'" (12). Wall's concept is indebted to other well-known theoretical frameworks like Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s notion of signifying. Yet even as Gates usefully accounts for the centrality of the Trans-Atlantic exchanges in ways that Wall does not, the notion of "worrying the line" focuses on gender and black women's discursive tools in ways that Gates' signifying overlooks. In this way, Wall's more recent assertions with their investment in intertextuality, their sensitivity to the literary conversations between black diasporic women writers, and their self-conscious use of other literary forms are more useful for the comparisons between Kincaid's and Morrison's works. Exploring the transnational implication of "worrying," my discussion expands on Wall's useful formulation in order to elucidate a literary tradition in the Americas that reflects ever changing national and international relationships between women. Therefore, although this discussion focuses on specific moments in which Kincaid's text worries the line with Morrison's novel, it also implicitly worries the line between black feminists ideologies and African diasporic and transnational concepts.

The visual representations the authors examine are inextricable from the history of race relations in the Western hemisphere. Elaborating on this racial history and its relationship to visibility, Kobena Mercer notes that for writers like Ralph Ellison, "when African humanity went unrecognized in American society, it created a condition of 'invisibility' in which the all-too-visible difference of blackness was perceived within the supremacist imagination as the embodiment of its antithesis—whiteness needed the Other in order to know what it is not" (my emphases, Mercer 2005, 155). Mercer also cites Frantz Fanon's assertion, via a Hegelian dialectic, that despite such interdependency, the colonizer was unable to "acknowledge his dependence on the Other."<sup>7</sup> Such formulations have been invaluable in interrogating

constructions of race through social and cultural productions. Introducing black women's perspectives, in *Bluest* Morrison complicates paradigms that sought to reinforce the "invisibility" of people of color, and she explores images that served as the litmus test for blackness and through which blackness knew "what it was not."

In the above epigraph, Claudia's plaintive assertion that the white doll's "desirability ... had escaped me, but apparently only me," alludes to the pervasive nature of a white aesthetic and the unique battleground that Western visibility represented for black women and girls (20). Although the uninformed are at peace with these golden idols, for the sensitive Claudia they literally make strange bedfellows. The protagonist also alludes to the subliminal impact of Raggedy Ann and other such representations in conceptions of black female identity. Able to corrupt dreams, the doll's influence is profound whether her subject is asleep or awake. Claudia's revulsion demonstrates both physical and psychological resistance to cooptation. The protagonist's choice of the descriptor "picture books" astutely signals the shared politics of language/literature and this visibility that depicted idyllic little white girls while excluding black children. This assertion suggests the importance of examining images in literature and other contexts. In addition to brainwashing by toys and education, the media is represented in the unholy, terrorizing trinity of magazines, newspapers and signs (read advertisements). Surreal literary representations, idealized dolls, and the media are brought into the intimate worlds of black children. That is to say, in worrying the line with Western ideologies, *Bluest* unites the commoditized images with lived experience, and introduces protagonists who embody the antithesis of the venerated representations, thereby forcing readers to confront both worlds.

Although Kincaid borrows from and mirrors Morrison's approach to visual representation, it is important to

understand the different socio-historical contexts the authors address—mid-twentieth-century racial tension in the United States in Morrison's case, and residual colonial prejudices in late-twentieth-century Antigua in Kincaid's. Set in the early 1940s, *Bluest* critiques cultural icons of this earlier period (such as the Dick and Jane characters and film star Shirley Temple) who highlight white cultural values and whose images indirectly contribute to constructions of black female identity. Yet Morrison's authorship of the work in the late 1960s also imbues *Bluest* with responses to the contemporary Black Arts and Black Power movements and implicitly acknowledges the ideologies that contested notions of "black is beautiful," the rallying cry of this era.

Racism's prominence during the early twentieth century and the Civil Rights era is evident in popular images—photographs and other memorabilia of lynchings, renderings of fourteen-year-old assault victim Emmett Till, and representations of four little black girls, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, who were killed in a Birmingham church bombing. The assumption of white superiority that inspired these crimes was also manifested in ostensibly "subtler" images in popular culture and in the children's literature Morrison critiques. Carolyn Gerald's observations about the media in 1969 help explain Morrison's interest in the visual during this pivotal historical moment. Gerald notes,

Image is a term which we are using more and more in the black community because we are discovering that the image we have of ourselves controls what we are capable of doing...the black child growing into adulthood through a series of weekend movies, seeing white protagonists constantly before [her] projecting the whole gamut of human experience, is in extreme cases, persuaded that [she

too must be white, or (what is more likely), [she experiences] womanhood by proxy and in someone else's image... Associations with black and white have conditioned us to accept white as the symbol of goodness and purity; black as the symbol of evil and impurity. (Gerald 1969, 83)

Written around the time of the publication of *Bluest*, Gerald's description of black identity being imagined "by proxy and in someone else's image" not only identifies the tensions Morrison explores, but also calls to mind the famous Clark doll studies, which attempted to measure the impact of segregation by studying black girls interacting with dolls. Overwhelmingly, the Clarks reported that these girls aligned positive attributes with white dolls. Albeit controversial, the study was instrumental in securing victory in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Supreme Court* case and in bringing national attention to the negative impact of visual technology on black children. The doll study and its connection to this groundbreaking case also establish a link between popular imagery and education's engagement with the visual. Therefore, in order to understand a range of images and forms of image production girls were forced to negotiate in their textbooks, toys and the media, this discussion utilizes a broad interpretation of visuality to understand diverse scenes in which children's sense of sight is central for interpreting representations of black identity.

Although the aesthetics foregrounded in the Black Arts and Black Power movements took root in the English-speaking Caribbean—notably in Trinidad, where afros emerged and racial riots periodically erupted alongside Black Power protests during the 1970s—the arguably less pervasive presence of media and commercialization in much of the archipelago meant the dominant Black Arts tenets tackled



other more influential institutions like the colonial educational system.<sup>8</sup> Although little black girls in Antigua were not bombarded with images of Shirley Temple and other such icons to the same extent as children in the United States, slavery's racist legacy was pronounced in the region's literature—as it was in most formerly colonized spaces. Therefore, rather than focusing on iconic women in popular culture, writing in the early 1980s around the time Antigua gains independence from England, Kincaid explores problematic ideology/infrastructures like the colonial school system. Additionally, the oil crises of the 1970s, which had a profound and visible impact on the Caribbean, resulted in households purchasing fewer luxury items, including the kinds of dolls Morrison describes in *Bluest*. Nevertheless, to a lesser extent, Kincaid also explores imported toys and their attendant Western biases.

#### **Worrying the Line: A Broader Literary Context for Morrison and Kincaid**

Numerous scholars have noted the complex literary genealogy of *The Bluest Eye* and its centrality in interrogating representations of black identity. John N. Duvall rightly cites the intertextuality between Morrison's novel and Ellison's *Invisible Man*, arguing that Pecola, Claudia's passive counterpart in *Bluest*, "is in Ellison's terms already the invisible girl, and her prayer for new eyes symbolizes a desire for perception outside the culturally iterated messages of white superiority" (Duvall 2000, 27). In an uncanny mirroring of Mercer's discussion of Ellison and the "condition of 'invisibility'" surrounding African humanity, Duvall accounts for the importance of visual representation in these authors' texts and acknowledges the shift toward gender specificity in *Bluest*. Of course as Morrison worries the line with *Invisible Man*, in engaging similar dynamics, Kincaid by extension worries the line with Ellison's masterpiece, introducing another cultural context.

Before comparing *Bluest* and *Annie John*, it is perhaps useful to provide a synopsis that establishes major and overlapping themes. Set in the Midwest

in the mid-twentieth century, Morrison's bildungsroman tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young girl who is molested by her father, constantly derided as ugly, and longs for blue eyes as a remedy for her appearance. For a time, Pecola lives with a school friend Claudia MacTeer, the partial narrator of the story, who dismisses the standards of beauty that traumatizes Pecola. Kincaid's novel is a Caribbean bildungsroman that follows the exploits of an Antiguan girl between the ages of eleven and seventeen. The novel moves from the child's mischievous school years, when she challenges her mother, colonial educational institutions and their limiting attendant imagery and aesthetic values, to Annie's departure to the United States. Volatile relationships between Annie, her mother, and teachers immersed in the colonial school system serve as metaphors for the struggles between Antigua and the British colonial center.

The compelling parallels between Morrison and Kincaid, including their treatment of young black girls, aesthetic values, and hegemonic paradigms, are also evident in similarities between their other works, which is acknowledged in comparable critical responses to these narratives. For example, there are numerous moments of overlap in Morrison's *Bluest* and *Sula* (1973) and in Jamaica Kincaid's explorations of Caribbean girls coming of age in the novels *Annie John* and *Lucy* (1990). Therefore, in thinking of the term as a synonymous with intertextuality, Kincaid's *Annie John* worries the line between both Morrison's first novel *Bluest*, and its sequel, *Sula*. Although the similarities to *Bluest* are more pronounced, striking parallels to *Sula* include depictions of male counterparts bullying little girls and explorations of homosensual relationships. In "Obvious and Ordinary" Keja Valens describes *Annie John*'s intimate friendship with the character Gwen, which is comparable to the sensuality between *Sula* and *Nel* that Barbara Smith outlines in her groundbreaking essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." Yet in order to trace the development of black female identity and examine who

Morrison's "feisty little girls [in Bluest] grow up to be" (Stepo 1993, 20) "outside the culturally iterated messages of white superiority," it is helpful to look at *Annie John*, which explicitly expands on Morrison's groundbreaking constructions in her first novel (Duvall 2000, 27).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, comparing these novels allows for an interrogation of visuality, a central trope in the black diasporic literary tradition. Also, in response to visual technologies that marginalize black female beauty—including images in Western textbooks, toys, and the media—these works highlight black female discursive strategies, including complex oral and scribal literacy that allow characters to redefine the negative depictions.

### Literary Visuality and the Impact of Western Patriarchy

Opening the novel with excerpts from one of the most popular children's readers of the early-to-late twentieth century, William Gray's *Dick and Jane* series, Morrison examines literary visuality's profound impact on young black girls' psyches.

The novel begins:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play ... The kitten will not play ... See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? (3)

In worrying the line with the *Dick and Jane* series, Morrison invokes works that were integral in teaching reading and racism to American children during the 1930s and into the 1970s. Criticism about their biases toward middle-class,

heterosexual, traditional white households continued to plague the texts, and the works' reliance on reading by sight fell out of favor in deference to a return to phonics as a primary learning strategy. Still, despite protests, it was not until 1965, the year publication of the series ceased, that African American characters were introduced into *Dick and Jane*. Since Morrison's novel is set in the 1940s, her three young female characters, Pecola, Claudia and Frieda, would not have been exposed to these later innovations. The opening epigraph uses standard language and motifs from the *Dick and Jane* texts that these young girls would have read. There is a repetition of words and images, and the sentence constructions are simple. This sentence structure and the references to bright colors evoke the graphic cartoonish images that accompanied the narratives. Since worrying the line is implicitly a process of problematizing well-known forms, Morrison's intertextuality allows her to interrogate this instance of visuality in multiple ways; she questions both the structure of words and the images they convey.

Reminding readers that typography is the first image one confronts in the texts, Morrison not only problematizes the images from *Dick and Jane*, but plays with the quotations she borrows for her epigraphs. Michael Awkward argues that she sets up the epigraphs as the white authenticating voice of literature historically, to "demonstrate her refusal to allow white standards to arbitrate the success or failure of the black experience" (Awkward 1988, 59). As Awkward indicates, Morrison appropriates this form in order to call attention to and ask questions about this Western literary standard. This is most apparent as she repeats and changes this scene three times. The first iteration is the standard paragraph cited above. In the second version, she does away with most capitalization and other punctuation. Finally in a third rendering, the entire paragraph is condensed into a single long utterance devoid of separations. Even the spaces between lines become increasingly smaller. The author's attention to typesetting forces a recognition

of the literal and ideological machines that produce such literature/literacy, and by extension, readers are compelled to contend with the impressive industrialized era and the attendant politics that influence representation. In this way, Morrison's attention to print culture introduces modern technological forms into black women's discursive arsenal, which complement well-known cultural tools such as "oral forms...folktales, sermons, spirituals, and blues" (Wall 2004, 13). Wall argues that "writing in and across diverse genres, contemporary black women writers revise and subvert the conventions of the genres they appropriate" (13). Morrison's play with the Dick and Jane narrative makes it apparent that this revising and subverting is a complex multilayered process. In this instance, Morrison enters the Dick and Jane text to highlight its failures in representing black women's realities, and uses a combination of technological and African diasporic discursive strategies to depict African diasporic women's experiences.

Odette Parry's observations in a Caribbean context are relevant for understanding the socio-cultural influence of education in the lives of the children Morrison represents. Parry argues that it is important to examine "what happens in classrooms in the context of schools, cultural expectations, and wider societal structures, which operate as mediators of power and social control" (Parry 2002, 93). It is precisely this "social control" that Morrison disrupts. The author's epigraphs gradually take the reader on a journey that forces her to question the shifting orthography. One travels from the predictable organized world, so typical of Dick and Jane, to a frenetic compact utterance. In addition, the piece moves from an ostensibly singular, authoritarian position to the confused and confusing expression of multiple/diverse voices. Might these articulations represent a different experience of the same text? The strategy calls to mind the New Orleans tradition, largely a female practice—called *gumbo ya ya*, in which several individuals speak at the same time. Yet similar to a musical production, the simultaneity of voices is

not unintelligible. Instead, a coherent narrative emerges, which acknowledges individual and communal contributions. In this process one moves from a dominant white perspective to the point of view of Morrison's African American children and to the author herself questioning, appropriating and "worrying the line" of the Western text as well as the African diasporic female tradition. As language breaks down, Morrison encourages the reader to be critical of Western narratives, much like the young Claudia questions representations of white beauty in *Bluest*. The choice of transcription and the foregrounding of oral strategies dramatically make the case for infinite possible readings of this passage. As with the figurative images from Dick and Jane explored above, the author engages and problematizes the literal Western patriarchal text as she foregrounds black cultural forms.

Allusions to a communal blend of voices remind readers of the traditions that are often silenced in favor of literature. Notably, oral forms—Claudia's mother's stories and blues songs—become indiscernible to many of the young girl's generation who are no longer exposed to these forms. Additionally, the force of the third version of the epigraph (the compressed paragraph) lies in its refusal of easy translation and its creation of a new idiom. This new language might reflect the practice Mae Henderson refers to as "speaking in tongues...a practice associated with black women in the Pentecostal Holiness church." Henderson describes two connotations for "speaking in tongues." One is *glossolalia*, "which suggests private, non-mediated, nondifferentiated, univocality." The other is *heteroglossia*, which "connotes public, differentiated, social, mediated, dialogic discourse" (Henderson 1989, 22). To the extent that the representation of a compressed block of letters is indecipherable, the third version suggests a new esoteric/private idiom, with the heightened emotions of one speaking in tongues—*glossolalia*. Morrison's text, though markedly different, retains the original letters, with the ghost of some informing ideas remaining. Yet the

extent to which the author worries the line of the Dick and Jane text becomes most apparent as recognizable letter patterns become transformed into new word and sentence constructions. Heteroglossia is evident when this condensed narrative communicates with a larger audience. For example, "see the" explodes into "seethe" later in the text, hissing its new meaning at readers and dramatizing its dissatisfaction with the "original" narrative and Westerner's insistence on "seeing" according to problematic standards. . Wall's description of "African American oral forms, such as folktales, sermons, spirituals, and blues, which worry the line of Anglo-American literary tradition" is dramatized in such moments (13). Morrison's use of these oral and spiritual strategies through a reimagined typography reminds readers to be open to cultural forms outside the dominant and that the "other" who appropriates "Western" and "non-Western" discourses is not readily decipherable or "seeable."

In this passage the girl's red dress links her semiotically to the pretty red door. The kitten and the red dress allude to sexual organs. The door serves as an entry way into the green and white house. In this literary context, its colors convey an ironic symbol of hope and purity. Conversely, the green and white house also symbolizes the American dollar/establishment—the commoditized black female body having served historically as unwilling gateway to American economic success. These disturbing signifiers show the "unrelenting tyranny that [male discourses] exert upon [black women's] physical and mental selves" and the "material oppression of individuals" in these discourses (Whittig cited in Henderson 1989, 26). The moment also dramatizes a simultaneity of discourses—the inseparability of race, gender, and economics that leaves the multiply marginalized black woman at a distinct disadvantage in contexts like the above.

This passage involving the dog foreshadows the most dramatic moment in the text—the rape of the young Pecola Breedlove by her father Cholly.<sup>10</sup> Wall's discussion of the con-

cept of worrying the line as "more concerned with looking at family metaphors within texts than in adopting familial metaphors to represent relationships between texts" is applicable here (13). After all, black women writers' key disruptive strategies include a problematization of hegemonic representations of race and gender relationships within kinships groups. As Wall states, "they invoke metaphors of family to revise the meaning of family" (13). Morrison changes what is meant to be a neutral Western storyline representing a white nuclear family to include the African American experience in the United States and pays particular attention to the legacy of abuse and rape in communities descended from slaves. This "unrelenting male tyranny" is multifaceted; in addition to alluding to cross-gender exchanges, the scene also suggests Cholly's suffering in his youth at the hands of white men, which he extends to his daughter. Morrison pushes the socio-historical implications of the images even further: Cholly is an obvious play on words indicating one of the most popular mid-twentieth-century breeds—the collie. In this ever-vacillating field of signifiers, the dog is conflated with the father who returns to "play" with the child/kitten. This allusion is reflected in references to "that old dog Breedlove" who "crawl[s] on all fours" before raping his daughter and who, in putting his family outdoors, "had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog" (16-17, 162, 18). The metaphor introduces the father into the text, and it contrasts the idealized nuclear white family that owns a pet with the marginalized black family whose patriarchal figure is equated with, or arguably more debased than, this animal. Well-known stereotypes foregrounding the antipathy between cats and dogs increase the cynicism of the image of the "big and strong" Cholly/collie playing with a kitten. Notably, Pecola's distaste for her father's actions is signaled in the line "the kitten will not play" (3). Cholly's rape of his daughter is especially barbaric because the violence implied here is the incestuous abuse of a child. As Wall suggests, in describing the centrality of family dynamics in

black women's narrative strategies: "contemporary black women writers focus ... on those intimate relationships in which the most painful consequences of racism are played out. Racism corrodes love between black men and women, fractures families, and destroys mothers' dreams for their children" (Wall 2005, 6). The idealized world of a "very happy" white family in the "green and white house" is vastly different from the perpetually depressed Breedloves the narrator describes and the dangers this scenario poses to the child/Kitten. In gesturing toward limiting implications for the "fractured" American family whose "dreams" are destroyed (to use Wall's terms), Morrison reveals two seemingly incommensurate Americas: the mythical world that white authenticating documents/doctrines create and the lived experience of blacks during the mid-twentieth century.

Scholars like Ágnes Surányi argue that Morrison identifies the "white hegemonic discourse that has nothing to do with the realities of black life and refuses to accept the definition of the African American experience according to white standards" (Surányi 2007,13). Although the latter observation—the recognition that Morrison refuses white standards—is accurate, the assertion that "white hegemonic discourse has nothing to do with the realities of black life" is problematic. Morrison does not merely dismiss Western hegemony out of hand. Instead, she explores the often disturbing interdependency between blacks and whites in the United States, and in worrying the line with the Dick and Jane narrative, she highlights the fact that "white hegemonic discourse has [everything] to do with the realities of black life" (Surányi 2007, 13). In fact, she represents and co-opts an idealized mid-twentieth-century Western space in order to call attention to the less than idyllic African American world it overshadows. As Wall observes, "in the 1970s and 1980s, black women confronted an Anglo-American tradition to which they could lay claim—it was the tradition they had studied in school—but one that was not eager to claim them" (Wall 2005, 11).

Kincaid similarly attacks the institutions in which children were most frequently exposed to hierarchical Western images. Utilizing a different historical perspective, she alludes to the insidious presence of Western iconography and questions the images idealized in invaluable instruments of brainwashing—the colonial school system and its literature. Although both authors critique the images to which young girls were exposed in school, instead of deploying contemporary ideals of a nuclear family, Kincaid depicts antiquated patriarchal and matriarchal figureheads (Christopher Columbus and Queen Victoria) who are responsible for advancing racist ideologies in the Caribbean.

The author uses her young female protagonist, Annie John, to question these images. One of Kincaid's most salient critiques of colonial visuality in children's literature emerges in her protagonist's play with a textbook image of Columbus. Having read ahead in her history book, Annie arrives at a chapter where "there was a picture of Columbus that took up a whole page, and it was in color—one of only five color pictures in the book" (Kincaid 1985, 77).<sup>11</sup> Kincaid worries the line, that is, exhibits intertextual play with the strategies in *Bluest* in numerous ways. For example, reminiscent of Morrison's use of the Dick and Jane narrative, whiteness here is represented in a patriarchal image in a primary children's reader. Annie states,

In this picture, Columbus was seated in the bottom of a ship. He was wearing the usual three-quarter trousers and a shirt with enormous sleeves both the trousers and shirt made of maroon-colored velvet...His hands and feet were bound up in chains, and he was sitting there...looking quite dejected...What just deserts, I thought, for I did not like Columbus. How I loved this picture..." (77)

Although many in the school acknowledge this figure as a founding father, without recognition of his annihilation



of native people and his numerous other ills, Annie mockingly echoes the group's reverence, but ultimately responds on her own terms. Her bold assertion: "What just deserts, I thought, for I did not like Columbus" echoes Claudia's irreverent sentiments in *Bluest* (which I explore later): "I hated Shirley [Temple]" (19). Like Morrison, Kincaid plays in complex ways with the figurative and literal images of male patriarchy. For example, having heard her mother at an earlier period disparagingly respond to her father's illness with the words "The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go," Annie appropriates the phrase and writes it under an image of Columbus in her history book (78). She, therefore, aligns Columbus with and recognizes him as a male ancestor. However, the allusions to a chained, dejected figure, as well as the sarcasm and irony implicit in the capitalized terms "Great Man" conjure up the ultimate subordinated individual, a male slave. Such scenes elucidate black women writers' unique contributions to the literary tradition as they "explore how gender and class differences within black America complicate the color line" (6). In very different ways, this characteristic of worrying the line with Western master narratives, allows Kincaid and Morrison to align black and white men with each other in order to suggest the simultaneous gendered and racialized subordination of women of color.

In this instance, Columbus' decrepitude and his old-fashioned attire dramatize the incongruity of this outdated symbol and his attendant ideologies in modern-day Antigua. Yet Wall argues that images in literature "conjure memory and produce the storytelling that both recollects and reimagines the past" (Wall 2005, 17). Broadly speaking, both writers critique the shortcomings of the larger society's investment in such images. However, unlike Morrison's United States setting, the chains in the picture also suggest the island's proximity to slavery—a condition that is likely a result of Antigua's more recent colonial history and the longstanding dominance of such symbols. Annie's dislike of this historical figure is also implicitly a

reminder that "from the time of their discovery by Christopher Columbus at the end of the fifteenth century the islands of the West Indies, unlike the American mainland, were seen as objects to be exploited rather than as colonies to be settled" (Cobham 1995, 11). Although creators of history books (and by extension Caribbean teachers who use them) clearly accord Columbus a certain amount of respect, like the outspoken Claudia in Morrison's narrative, Annie departs from popular opinion. She recognizes that the figure's success necessarily represents the exploitation of her community.

Similar to Morrison's signifying on Dick and Jane, Annie inverts a hierarchical representation that was a staple in Westernized education, and the numerous overlaps in the authors' approaches illustrate the ways in which Kincaid worries the line between her work and that of her African American predecessor. Like Claudia, Annie questions textual representations of the empowered; however, in writing over the image of Columbus, the Antiguan girl asserts authorial control in ways that Morrison's protagonist lacks.<sup>12</sup> Ostensibly, the creators of the text, rather than the young girl, supply the images Annie describes. Yet subtle authorial control is evident in the use of language and particularly in images of "maroon-colored velvet," which simultaneously signals royal/wealthy colonizers and the rebellious "Maroons"/"colored" communities in the Caribbean who sabotaged British soldiers securing autonomous towns.

As Annie invokes Morrisonian wordplay and creates her satirical label from her mother's description, she unites literary and genealogical ancestry. To some extent her sense of self is based on a disavowal of patriarchal figures (even if it is a borrowed disavowal). One wonders about her level of agency as she appropriates her mother's language. Does this sharing demonstrate the importance of a communal questioning of patriarchal symbols of power? Throughout the narrative her mother remains a symbol of Victorian propriety. Yet this moment indicates that even the most subdued female colonial subject resists such patriarchal

marginalization. Countering class, race, gender, geographical and generational biases, in denouncing this "Great Man," the child cunningly uses her mother's tools to dismantle the master's house. Annie rejects attempts to map a fraught national and patriarchal legacy onto her sense of self. This borrowing from literal and literary ancestral figures reminds the reader of the varied female discourses operating in the text, as Annie worries multiple matrilineal lines.

Kincaid's worrying of the line with voices from diverse cultural contexts in her visual play is not surprising given Caribbean writers' need to engage different national traditions. Merle Hodge identifies this need when she states, "It is only a small fraction of 'our own people' who read our works... Our audience, therefore, is the larger English-speaking world, which is to say that we write largely, overwhelmingly, for foreigners" (Hodge 1998, 48). It is also well established (and evinced in Kincaid's publications), that many ex-patriot authors inevitably publish through British, American, and other Western centers, targeting readers in multiple locales. Thus the Antiguan writer's echoing of Morrison's text demonstrates not only the sharing between black women authors in different spaces, but a deployment of strategies that will resonate with her diverse audiences because of marketing considerations Morrison does not share. Ironically, given her targeting of varied readers, Kincaid is often criticized for minimizing Caribbean signifiers like language. Yet in the scene above, the subtle visual/wordplay in terms like "maroon-colored" (reminiscent of Morrison's compression) shows an intimacy with different registers of Caribbean life and the importance of such heteroglossia in the maintenance of black female identity.

Using mass-produced objects in her critique of a privileged Western aesthetic, Kincaid worries the line with Morrison's novel and hegemonic forms as she also calls readers' attention to both the typography and imagery that accompanies colonial literature. A metaphor for ethnic make-up and social conditions in Antigua as well as a

metaphor for words on a page, Annie's notebook boasts a "black-all-mixed-up-with-white cover" (40). Later, the protagonist expresses her joy at getting rid of books, "which had on their covers a picture of a wrinkled-up woman wearing a crown on her head and a neckful and armsful of diamonds and pearls—their pages so coarse, as if they were made of cornmeal" (40). In addition to the racial allusions of the "black-all-mixed-up-with-white cover," Annie's description of a "wrinkled up woman wearing a crown on her head" is an explicit reference to one of the most influential figureheads of colonial Antigua—Queen Victoria. The racial politics Kincaid introduces appears to contradict her assertions that in a Caribbean context because "everybody is black ... we don't think white people are permanent" (Ferguson and Kincaid 1994, 164). Kincaid also declared, "we don't feel permanent either, but the feeling that 'there will always be white people sitting on top of black people'—we don't have" (Ferguson and Kincaid 1994, 164). The general proximity between races that she alludes to in an American context is missing from many English-speaking Caribbean nations, which are predominantly black. Admittedly, though color is inextricably linked to domination, Kincaid's focus is on the hierarchy implicit in the bejeweled queen's dominance over her colonized subjects and in Columbus, the "Great Man's," decrepitude. In other words, building on the revisions of hierarchy that women's worrying the line practices introduce, in this instance, Kincaid foregrounds power and class, rather than race.

Still, in addition to the significance of class, the prominence of this "ancestral" figure highlights race's defining impact historically on Caribbean children's self-conceptions, and the strategies necessary to undo the attendant stereotypes. As with Columbus, this icon, the queen, notably placed on children's exercise books, does not garner the same level of respect from Annie as she receives from the generation that produces the books. Instead, Annie describes the queen (a historical figurehead, rather than the current English monarch) as "wrinkled" (read outdat-

ed). Victoria's superfluous ornamentation is an obvious cover for the ineptitude and hackneyed ideologies of a woman who was notoriously out of touch with the social realities of her subjects. In addition, the jewelry symbolizes the queen's usurpation of more resources than she reasonably needed; this is in sharp contrast to the stark realities of Antiguan who are stereotypically represented in the "course" pages of the notebooks and in the cornmeal, a food staple for the disenfranchised. Yet appearing on the cover of the notebook, and by extension presiding over the mixture of black and white, Victoria literally oversees and encompasses all the learning for impressionable colonial subjects. Her image attests to the colonial dominance children encounter before they literally and figuratively open educational texts. This scene reminds readers of one of the advantages of images when communicating racist ideology: they represent a more accessible vehicle of communication to those not yet able to read. Yet for the generation Kincaid depicts, the advertising machine had not taken hold in the Caribbean to the same extent as it had in the United States. In these ways, geopolitical and socio-economic difference account for Kincaid's and Morrison's different approaches to intertextuality/their worrying the line with Western forms. Unlike Claudia's wrestling with an onslaught of images in *Bluest*, the images in a Caribbean context are fewer and largely relegated to the colonial educational system, allowing bright precocious children to categorize them more readily.

### **Dangerous Play: Mass-Produced Images of Children**

In addition to highlighting education's role in forcing hierarchical images on children, both authors problematize the nurturing of Western aesthetics in popular culture. Morrison alludes to "shops, magazines, newspapers, and window signs" that offer images of white girls as normative in American society (20). She foregrounds icons like 1940s child actress Shirley Temple whose cherished representa-

tion has dire implications for young black girls. The multidimensional representation of Temple and her accessibility in film and other media call attention to the different vehicles through which Western conceptions of beauty are communicated to children. Since Temple's image is also widely commoditized, in dolls, mugs, magazines, wigs and clothing, she reaches a broader audience with greater immediacy than depictions like Columbus in a history book. The actress permeates all aspects of life and anyone can purchase her likeness. Responding to popular Western standards of beauty, in *Bluest*, Claudia notes that Pecola and Frieda have "a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was" (19). Though Morrison's use of the dash in the word "cute" is undoubtedly sarcastic, it also demonstrates language's inability to fully articulate Claudia's emotions in this moment. The protagonist states, "I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bo-jangles, who was my friend, my uncle, my daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me" (19). Despite Western pre-occupations with Temple's features, for Claudia, the child actress holds no physical advantage.

Claudia reveals the flaws of Western aesthetic biases and questions this interpretation of beauty and its impact on gender relations in the black community. For example, Bo-jangles stands in for every black man who must defer to white women or girls. In an inversion of latent notions of true womanhood and the threat to white female purity codified in early twentieth-century films like D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, for Claudia, it is Bo-jangles who is threatened and who ultimately represents communal sacrifice. Such scenes demonstrate the ways in which "the best defense against the destructiveness of racism, these writers assert, is the formation of a cultural identity derived from an understanding of history" (6). Utilizing this element of worrying the line, Claudia makes herself a symbol for every black woman or girl who lost a "friend, uncle, daddy," or other relative in the name of true wom-



anhood. Reminiscent of Annie's recognition of Columbus' significance, Morrison's protagonist astutely realizes that she dislikes Temple not strictly because of her appearance but because of this icon's negative impact on the community.

As Kincaid worries the line with *Bluest* she also critiques the impact of mass-produced images on young black girls' self-conceptions; however, whereas Morrison's characters critique and view images they receive, Kincaid's protagonist exhibits a different level of agency, serving as the cameras that produce visual representations. For example, early in the narrative, Annie John describes her fascination with Sonia, a "beautiful" little girl whose "long, thick black hair... lay down flat on her arms and legs; and then [ran] down the nape of her neck, down the middle of her back" (7). The narrator admits, "I would ... stare and stare at her, narrowing and opening wide my eyes until she began to fidget under my gaze" (my emphases, 7). Kincaid's humor leads one to think that this hairy girl might not have been attractive save for the child's "long, thick black hair" that lays down flat—a shibboleth of beauty in some African diasporic communities. Annie replicates a camera, and by extension the media, that records images and produces a verdict about its subject's value regardless of the discomfort of the individual in question. Furthermore, notions of real and unreal are obscured; the reader experiences the little girl through the lens of Annie's gaze. Like Morrison, Kincaid introduces technology as a central twentieth-century discursive weapon for black women, and her little girls wield more creative power than their literary counterparts in *Bluest*. The Antiguan author also inverts and complicates traditional renderings of an anthropological gaze as Annie, the "native," is active in capturing images and making the privileged Western symbol uncomfortable.

In contrast to this recognition of the mixed-race child's beauty, Annie describes her discomfort upon encountering a disfigured little black girl and thus problematizes Western constructions of ugliness. The intrusion of a

Western aesthetic, which renders the "native" inadequate is apparent as Kincaid describes attending the funeral of the "humpbacked girl" who made it seem as if Annie's toy, her View-Master, "wasn't working properly" (11). Of course, reminiscent of Morrison's negotiation of Western hierarchy, the obvious play on words in the term View-Master implies that the viewer is master and it is this person's privilege to peruse her subjects. Since typography is always central in these authors' critiques of Western visuality, the uppercase letters also remind readers of the premium placed on both of these terms. Also, since Annie views and owns slides of iconographic spaces in the non-Western world, "the pyramids, the Taj-Majal, Mt. Everest, and ... the Amazon River," her figurative "View-Master" allows her to similarly gaze at and implicitly control/create the humpbacked girl (11). Like her shuttered eyes, the toy serves as a camera. Under the View-Master's lenses, the child's body becomes another territory subject to exploration. The toy represents Western commoditization, and its plastic construction also symbolizes the constructedness of Western ideology. It is ambiguous whether the humpbacked girl's disfigurement is natural or a result of a Western intrusion/gaze. Yet the fact that the toy is not "working properly" suggests that the fault lies with the Western object. If, as scholars like James Elkins argue, "seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer," then Annie astutely identifies the unreliability of View-Masters, Western hierarchy and such claims to superiority (Elkins 1997, 11-12). That is to say, when she attempts to see through the Western object, rather than accepting the disfigured image and becoming transformed by Western paradigms, Annie recognizes that the mode of perception is "not working properly."

Like Morrison, Kincaid calls attention to the potential for corruption when limiting Western ideologies are conflated with toys and placed in the hands of children. The references to particular sites also allude to the View-Master's origins in the late 1930s as a way of marketing tourist destinations before it was revamped as a child's toy in the 1960s. A

foreign import—ostensibly American—it conflates multiple colonial powers in its references to occupied spaces. Kincaid offers a condemning account of such exploitation, particularly when the United States is involved, as she notes, “What is actually on the mind of the West Indies is that American corruption, American money, has undermined more than anything the British Europeans did” (Ferguson and Kincaid 1994, 164). The View-Master is therefore a poignant reminder for Caribbean individuals of the exploitation of the islands and their inhabitants through tourism’s early-twentieth-century emergence, and the commoditization of Caribbean individuals that ensues with late-twentieth-century neocolonialism when images of the marginalized proliferate. Like Claudia, who metaphorically declares, “The emperor has no clothes” when she questions Temple’s beauty, Annie makes the damning declaration that the View-Master, the ultimate symbol of neo-colonialism and Western framing device, isn’t “working properly.” Worrying the line with this problematic discursive space and more useful literary strategies like Morrison’s, Kincaid offers a more nuanced African diasporic worldview.

Throughout the narrative, it is sometimes unclear whether Annie recognizes the full significance of the Western gaze or camera that creates the above dynamics; however, her awareness of such objectification is evident in the Lacanian moment where she sees herself in the mirror and compares the image reflected with surrounding objects. The protagonist states,

What I was really looking at was my own reflection in the glass, though it was a while before I knew that. I saw myself just hanging there among pots and pans, among brooms and household soap, among notebooks and pens and ink, among medicines for curing colds. I saw myself among all these things. (94)

Again, Annie’s gaze, coupled with the glass, serves the same function as the View-Master, a Western lens that solidifies and reflects black female self-

hood. However, in this moment she turns the gaze inward. Ostensibly, her identity is constituted in much the same way that the surrounding domestic objects are created—through a Western perspective that constructs limiting categories. It is left to the protagonist to negotiate the seemingly inextricable web that binds her image, her corporeal body, her own perceptions and those of Western discourses. In the case of the View-Master, the presence of the lens between these individuals reminds one of viewers’ inability to fully engage in the world of their subjects. Like Morrison’s laboring black women who become inextricably linked with the green and white house (read American capitalism), Annie is literally objectified and becomes synonymous with the other goods on sale. Noticeably, she is indistinguishable from the domestic and other utilitarian tools and is little more than an object come to life. Yet the glass creates distance for the young girl, and her self-consciousness about her position suggests that she will be able to act, given this awareness.

## Conclusion

Although they challenge problematic Western paradigms, both authors exhibit a longstanding engagement with this tradition. Specifically, Kincaid and Morrison write from a shared “American” literary context, Kincaid having migrated to the United States when she was nineteen years old. However, the Caribbean author also examines the complexity of black female identity from the perspective of an Antiguan woman. No stranger to controversy, Kincaid has tried to distance herself from African American female writers arguing: “I don’t think American women have much that we can draw from. I mean the use of language is very different, and their concerns are much different. A much different sensibility ... I think that American black people ... have a kind of nationalism about [being black] that we don’t have” (Ferguson and Kincaid 1994, 164). Yet Annie John elucidates the ways in which American women do have much that the Caribbean author draws

from, and the Antiguan writer demonstrates both the continuity and differences between her girls and those Morrison depicts. For example, Kincaid's early preoccupation with "writing down what [she] thought [a] picture should feel like," finds a striking parallel in Morrison's representation of the visual in *Bluest* (Ferguson and Kincaid 1994, 163). In short, the pronounced intertextuality between *Bluest* and Annie John reveals the authors' critique of Western visual culture and texts as inextricable forces that attempted to render New World black diasporic communities invisible and, therefore, demanded an unusual sagacity and cultural literacy of young black girls.

As Kincaid and Morrison identify these girls' struggles with paradigms introduced through education and popular culture, the futures the authors depict are troubled or ambiguous at best. However, these literary matriarchs highlight inventive scribal strategies that allow their protagonists to overcome objectionable visual representations. Often relying on orality, Morrison emphatically addresses the pitfalls of subscribing to Western con-

ceptions of beauty. On the other hand, perhaps as a result of Antigua's more recent colonial status, which is also evinced in her novel's depiction of antiquated icons, Kincaid highlights a need for more rigorous revision of Western constructs. The result is a female protagonist who is more assertive than Morrison's characters, and who literally rewrites history and controls the camera's gaze in her community. Although these authors explore distinct socio-historical influences, examining the ways in which Kincaid worries the line between her work and Morrison's simultaneously illustrates shared struggles among black women in the Americas; reveals new black diasporic cultural paradigms for visual representations of these individuals; and introduces a broader range of voices into the American literary tradition. Finally, given the increasingly urgent focus on African diasporic, transnational and feminist studies within the academy, comparing the contributions of such literary matriarchs offers useful paradigms for considering the innovations and literary conversations of a younger generation of black women writers throughout the Americas.

## Endnotes

1. Hereafter, only page numbers will be cited for this primary text.
2. The dolls call to mind images of Shirley Temple, a symbol Morrison engages elsewhere in the narrative and which I also interrogate later. Shirley Temple dolls were produced during every decade of the 20th century and into the 21st century.
3. One notable exception is Trinna Frever's "Oh! You Beautiful Doll," which compares *Bluest* to several Latin American narratives.
4. See "Talk with Toni Morrison" for the author's nod to Jamaica Kincaid as comparable to other African American women writers.
5. See, for example, Trinna Frever's "Oh! You Beautiful Doll!"
6. Although numerous scholars explore the significance of visuality in *Bluest*, in the spirit of examining Morrison's work in another cultural context, and in order to compare spe-

- cific moments of overlap between the author and Kincaid, I offer close readings of both of these authors' works.
7. This is not to overlook Hegel's limiting representation of those of African descent, which Paul Gilroy highlights in the epigraph to *The Black Atlantic*, and in his subsequent discussion (49-51). But rather, I acknowledge the utility of concepts of the "other" and Hegel's detailed discussion of master/servant dynamics, which Gilroy, Fanon and others complicate in an attempt to understand such relationships. Ironically, the predilection for male references, in the work of Mercer, Awkward and others, and the reliance of Ellison as the quintessential black author (the genius of *Invisible Man* notwithstanding), indicates the importance of highlighting the contributions of black women writers like Kincaid and Morrison.
8. Undeniably, there is overlap between the Black Arts and Black

Power Movements. However, there are also marked differences between the overtly cultural phenomenon and its overtly political counterpart. This discussion is not attempt to elide or oversimplify these differences; but neither is a detailed outline of such distinctions central to this essay.

9. Time will not allow for a detailed comparison between these three texts: *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Annie John*. Therefore, my analysis will explore the continuity between Kincaid's narrative and Morrison's first novel. Works such as Shu-li Chang's "Daughterly Haunting and Historical Traumas: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*" and Victoria Burrows' *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, and Toni Morrison* are notable exceptions to the oversight in compar-

ing Morrison's and Kincaid's works.

10. The notion of the collie as an exemplary pet for the all-American family was popularized by the mid-twentieth-century television show *Lassie*. Erick Knight's "Lassie Come-Home" introduced the character in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1938. Broadcast in the U.S. from 1954-1973, *Lassie* had reached the height of its popularity during Morrison's writing of *Bluest*, and the collie breed of dog was very present in the American popular imagination at this time.

11. Hereafter, only page numbers will be cited for this primary text.

12. Of course, Morrison's narrator exercises similar control in disrupting the typography of the Dick and Jane text. One can argue that the speaker and protagonist are one entity; however, this is certainly not always conclusive in the novel.

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## Poetry

### A. Leonard Slade, Jr.

#### Where Grandma Used to Live

Grandma's house sat back  
 From the road near juke joints  
 Where blues songs could be heard  
 And drunkards cursed until Sunday morning.  
 Miss Miner owned the dilapidated building.  
 Neighbors thought it sinful  
 To dance and sing the blues.  
 Money earned paid for Miss Miner's  
 Daughter's college tuition.  
 Townspeople found it  
 Difficult to send anyone to college  
 During the Depression.  
 Well, Miss Miner's daughter  
 Graduated with honors.  
 Miss Miner arrived at church  
 Early Sunday morning to  
 Thank God for juke joints  
 Where Grandma used to live.

## Tonic for the Soul

Teaching with sweat  
Counseling troubled students  
Grading papers  
Reporting at meetings  
Shopping for groceries  
Paying the bills  
Feeding the dogs  
Mopping the floors  
Mowing the lawn  
Cleaning the Buick  
Visiting the sick  
Giving to the poor  
Calling friends  
Going to church  
Create sweetness of spirit  
Bring joy to the soul.

## The Family Reunion Deification

It was that time of year again  
when the Family Reunion celebrated  
Matriarchs and Patriarchs now deceased.

Registration of blood relatives  
Lined halls in hotels.

The Banquet deified ancestors  
From West Africa to Europe,  
From Syria to Iraq.

The Patriarch had preached spiritual values,  
Planted family roots.

Honoring ancestors is their joy  
Living the Word is their challenge  
The Patriarch had preached it all.

## Going Home

It isn't the same now.  
I travel home to visit Mom and Dad.  
Having done so for fifty years.  
The white house still stands  
Where nine of us children ate, played, and slept.  
We used to swing on birches in the front yard.  
Some neighbors remain, and see me  
Returning each year to walk the fields  
Well. I think and cherish memories,  
Going to the grave by the road  
As a last visit. It is the pain of  
Remembering, and being reminded  
Of my own permanent  
Sleep one day.



## **B. Christian Motley**

### **Blood of a Slave, Heart of a King**

I sit and consider the differences  
Between a nigga  
And the king that I am

I know that rather than have me a roaring lion  
They'd like me docile as the lamb

But I was born in my father's image  
With my mother's spirit  
My grandmother's conviction  
My great grandfather's pride

I stand unashamed of this blood of the slave  
It doesn't just beat  
It pounds through my veins

Breaking chains and shackles  
Born of the cotton, cane, and tobacco still  
Know how to harvest  
Got 40 acres of mind I'm trying to grow fields in

This land of squires  
Nigga?  
...Please.  
Call me by my name

I've come to far from squalor  
To be tangled in your psychological chains

Not when my mind flows  
From KY to Cairo  
Where golden scrolls of papyri stand like pyramids  
A testament to the best of man and woman

I pray Ghanaian asantehenes from Ashanti  
See me as their reflection  
Knowing this blood is much thicker  
Than waters that  
Barrier our connection

Cradling the scars of a middle passage  
Dashing laws of kings and queens  
Into the dreams of slaves

The blood never changed.

Still a king, no crown  
No jewels, but dreams  
Adorn these emperor's clothes  
No gold, but washed from head to toe  
In the resonance of my ancestral  
Heart beats like thundering herds of Carthaginian war elephants  
Marching ancient Romans back to their door step

Pumping these unrelenting forces  
Through my veins

In tribal dancing rhythms and bass beats  
My feet are firmly placed on the shoulders  
Of those who've come before me

So, when you call  
Address me accordingly

I speak  
For a kingdom.

## C. Ron Samples (the grandson)

### For My People (many years hence) A Poem for Margaret Walker

I

There she<sup>1</sup> stood,  
in the midst of the garden  
of bright belief,  
one redundant sea  
of young and angry men,  
her strong voice firm,  
yet wavering,  
commanding, some  
long black song,<sup>2</sup> so much  
the matriarchal, so much  
the great grand mother,  
arms and legs  
like stout anyan,<sup>3</sup>  
strong hands gnarled  
like chitimeni,<sup>4</sup>  
provocative,  
prophetic,  
so propagandistic<sup>5</sup> –  
but thus poetic,  
so much, so much  
the image of my long dead nana.<sup>6</sup>  
Faint becomes the fond recollection,  
fades the salient remembrance  
of backyard fowl and mustard,  
citrus fruit and okra.  
Builders of nations  
now balk at mere houses;  
no new race,<sup>7</sup> the need, now,  
for legal, quiet assassins.<sup>8</sup>

Straight,  
as you round  
the city square,  
turn and take the gentle curve  
of Old Montgomery Road<sup>9</sup>

where  
not left, nor right, but  
there,  
behold  
the proverb wasted,<sup>10</sup>  
the imagist edifice,<sup>11</sup>  
the explicated hieroglyph.  
"Mira, por favor; y digame!"<sup>12</sup>  
Do you not see  
the way, the truth, and the light?<sup>13</sup>  
the silken halter for beasts in jungles?<sup>14</sup>  
the inscription at the entrance to this wood?<sup>15</sup>

II

"Click,"  
the sound,  
as pieces find their places,  
and I begin  
— so much depends<sup>1</sup> —  
a child, a neighbor, and a friend,  
a simple cabin in the woods<sup>2</sup>,  
a day's work, a day's wage,  
a something made of little or nothing,  
the whole no more  
— nay less —  
than line shack  
along the Rio Grande,  
whence I,  
alone,  
at midnight,  
emerge,  
coyote,  
I roam,  
ferrying flesh.  
Feverish the hoards, the endless waves;  
whither their desperate quest  
through valleys of shadows of death?  
Avatars,  
aught but shape shifters,<sup>4</sup>  
all; all  
Emersonian men.<sup>5</sup>  
I see them again,  
these faceless kin  
who teach,  
with tools,<sup>6</sup>  
I learn,  
the way  
they  
find a way, some  
trail of crumbs,<sup>7</sup>  
some . . . .

Weary, intent,  
in these waters I wade,  
undulating waves like Kansas grain  
that sifts between spread fingers,  
each seed a tale to tell,<sup>8</sup>

neglecting which,  
left mute or missed,  
we fail  
and fall into  
"that old affliction";<sup>9</sup>  
mud sills and studs,  
top rails and rafters,  
with nails,  
once again become nations.  
The road to Chimayo thus no digression,  
Pueblo mud huts,<sup>10</sup> confirmation;  
the spirit hole descends,<sup>11</sup>  
an invitation:  
Chimayo, Abique,  
Taos, the Jemez:  
es el pan, es comida  
en la casa adobe;  
es la sangre de Cristo  
en communion del dia.<sup>12</sup>

I sink,  
I drown,  
I lay my burdens down,  
soothed in the arms of this timeless river,<sup>13</sup>  
the lap of some Laurentian lover,<sup>14</sup>  
its too warm embrace disintegrates  
among precursors of this portion.  
But wait:  
truncate,  
Kokopelli's member floats,<sup>15</sup>  
flaccid  
on the water,  
and red clay ooze beneath bare toes  
recalls my youth,  
the mud,  
the straw,  
the big shoe boxes,<sup>16</sup>  
then,  
through unkept floors and back doors,  
alleys,  
thick-trashed,  
slime-wet balcony,<sup>17</sup>  
steadies,  
the hand of a mother,  
the Hundley<sup>18</sup> once again I see,  
she  
the tug and sense of obligation,  
as up and through  
she bouys  
when,  
high above a sea  
of likewise unseen<sup>19</sup> faces,  
I plunge,  
by now Ahabian,  
again and again and again and again,  
each thrust  
another "no, in thunder!"<sup>20</sup>

So,  
 come,  
 come and go with me  
 (and dare we, too, "reason as we go"?)<sup>1</sup>  
 along more northern roads,  
 where recollects the trinkets  
 of a past and leaves  
 the saplings of a future.  
 Gammon's halls yet ring  
 with footsteps of returns  
 and bargains made again:  
     the house, in '23, exchanged  
     for seminary; journeys  
     come full circle. Indeed,  
 the father's flag in hand for planting,  
 hallway rings yet dizzying,  
 pygmies and giants collaborating,  
 from some such full come circle,  
 Derridian,  
 eastward spins  
 an ill-begotten salvation,  
 the ironic southerner  
 conqueror, bent –  
 in patience forced  
 by lines of rounded city squares,  
 footpaths past  
 the trees so meant for hanging  
 swings,  
 so right  
 for fruit so strangely swinging –  
 to Water Street  
 whence  
 the trek begins  
 in lowlands  
 become now highlands,  
 bad lands  
 now named primed lands,  
 the lesson –  
 location, location,  
 do you see?  
 It moves on catlike  
 quick-shifting feet!

Thus told and taught, from this I turn,  
 wandering along  
 unknown streets,  
 in need of lions, historians,  
 the beat  
 of yet-chained hearts and minds  
 I hear, still here, still near:  
     the lighthouse, left,  
     that points no way,  
     and right,  
     the dungeon's smothering darkness.  
 Flee,  
 first straight,

then bend  
beside the beach,  
'til land's end,  
the water's edge,  
to come upon  
a complex aged and scowling crowd  
    in chorus,  
the row of uniformed waders,  
beyond, the row of sunburnt faces,  
the whole as though in tether,  
as parts advance but keep their places.  
the last are treading and must return;  
the pale and sheltered, grasping, wait.  
Strange,  
these angry officers of peace.  
Yet, strange,  
the crowd,  
not duplex now,  
but one,  
now wet,  
now washed,  
dispersed.  
Why must I,  
alone, and lonely,  
deny such resolution,  
afloat, adrift  
in one last look  
to sea,  
the distant, too-far land  
of men with sunburnt faces,  
the "tink, tink, tink"  
beneath my feet,  
the Hundley heard  
and seen, again,  
and I  
beneath the waves,  
now out  
both far and deep?

#### IV

From Tybee,  
Savannah, Atlanta,  
Tuskegee,  
I bob,  
a cork,  
among first people –  
    Biloxi,  
    Pass Christian,  
    Bay St. Louis,  
    and Waveland –  
then momentarily stand.  
Hear the wail of Civil War dead,  
calling,  
"Ikemefuna . . . .";  
Let not my blood be wasted."  
Beyond,  
a levee,  
from promised breach,



breaks,  
gives in,  
the creek has risen;  
and high above  
in arks of imagination  
arms in impotence too few enfold  
from Danzingers below,  
the flow of rotting corpses,  
and dead men in the making.  
Theodicies abound to validate wrongs,  
but,  
    given tests,  
    and failing grades,  
    the truth reveal:  
        due diligence, due diligence,  
        fore and aft,  
        due diligence, first and last.  
Thus,  
at Waveland's parsonage,  
they say  
    — take exit 13 —  
the pilings,  
foundation, straight,  
still stand, some  
Stonehenge of the South, they seem,  
their seed  
not spewed to waste in heaven,  
but rooted,  
penile,  
firmly in the ground.

V

And, so  
(as even the worst contend),  
"it is engendered,"  
Eugenic, ground-fixed gaze  
and a  
"jiggity jig,"  
appositive,  
I pluck pecans and wild onions  
from my front yard for  
    less than asking,  
    less than taking,  
    all this and more but for the making,  
found pennies, these,  
for pockets  
the which make propitious purchase,  
like blackberries,  
plump and wild and plentiful,  
for pies  
    — nay cobblers —  
deep dished,  
hot and steaming,  
for dead of winters.

Round and round and round the spin  
gathers like moss the cast of crazy friends,

propels them from  
and then in orbit.

Hence,  
though cryptic,  
consider this:  
somewhere south of Thebes,  
believe  
these three roads meet,  
the contemplated Cairo,  
crossroad,  
Spinoza  
— or no —  
where slave or free  
nor drifted Mississippi,  
thus is dared the peach,  
at last,  
though late,  
the union of Chris and Iroquois,  
Polonius become some old explorer.  
All walls, withal, a sandstone hue,  
paint windows and doors,  
all apertures  
in faint haint blue  
and build upon the shifting sands,  
embracing each day drift and chance.

Round and round and round the spin  
gathers like moss this cast of crazy friends,  
propels them then from prisoning orbit,  
the peninsula needling, the compass for  
some ship of fools,  
some motley crew,  
boatload of bootstrap captains  
in priesthood of new believers  
and  
declarations of independence.  
Neo-Columbians,  
Abudakaris of the day —  
Ebon Oedi,  
Freddie,  
the can man  
of penny-made millions,  
Pope and those two Tesueque boys,  
Eugene, the pope of policy,  
perhaps Papisto and his  
pile of junk,  
the Big and Rich,  
and short and tall,  
and all,  
perhaps — dare say? —  
"e'an lagoon,"  
and I, my  
secret Caesar secret still,  
the penmen of this pregnant tale,  
with cases of Two Buck Chuck as well —  
set sail, insightful, peruse  
in ever wise hypocrisy

as  
haunting Kokopelli tunes  
soothe a wounded trust and cognizance.

## End Notes

### Section I

1. Margaret Walker, who, in the late 1970s or early 80s, visited Texas Southern University, an open admissions historically black university in Houston, Texas, at the invitation of her long-time friend and English Department chair Dr. J. Marie McCleary, powerfully delivering "For My People" to a largely undergraduate audience.
2. An allusion to the book by the same title, written by Henry Louis Gates.
3. African iron wood.
4. A native African tree used in South African slash and burn agriculture.
5. Walker's response to objections that her poetry was too propagandistic was that the best poetry is the best propaganda. See also "The Ubiquity of Poetry" by Ron C. Samples.
6. Lavinia Ward McKinney, the author's maternal grandmother.
7. Walker's "For My People" ends with a powerful call for "a new race of men [to] rise and take control."
8. An allusion to Mari Evans' poetic utterance that "a good assassination should be quiet."
9. A geographically accurate description of the path from the town of Shorter, Alabama to the home of Booker T. Washington just south of the campus of Tuskegee Institute.
10. An allusion to the traditional African proverb that "the proverb is wasted on the man to whom its meaning must be explained."
11. The imagist credo calls for the use of images as word pictures that, as the proverb states, are worth thousands of words and are therefore more immediate in their communication.
12. Spanish for "look, please, and tell me."

### Section II

1. An allusion to Wordsworth's poem by the same title.
2. In 1992, the author, his older son (who was then 12 years old), and his former next-door neighbor, Homer Edmunson, constructed "a simple cabin in the woods" from hand-drawn plans and lumber costing two-hundred dollars and forty-one cents.
3. A combined allusion to the various avatars of the Confidence Man in Herman Melville's novel of that title and some native Americans' belief in shape shifting.
4. An allusion to the distinction between a farmer and man farming that Emerson makes in "The American Scholar."
5. An ironic allusion to the disparaging proverb that "those who can, do; those who can't, teach." The author is a teacher.
6. An obvious allusion to Hansel and Gretel.
7. An allusion to "A Deal in Wheat," by Frank Norris.
8. See *Oedipus the King*.
9. See Pueblo construction techniques, especially for headers.
10. The Pueblo equip all cave dweller homes with a spirit hole.
11. Spanish for "is the bread, the food or nourishment in the house of adobe; is the blood of Christ in the day's communion."
12. An allusion to the Sangre de Christi mountains in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.
13. The Rio Grande River.
14. D. H. Lawrence resided for the last years of his life on a small ranch north of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Frieda, Lawrence's lover, left him for a short-lived dalliance with another man, but returned before his death, upon which, in a dispute with Lawrence's family

over burial sites, she yielded his remains to the family but only after cremating them and burying them in a wheelbarrow load of concrete.

15. Kokopelli is the Pueblo god of fertility who, among other things, impregnates virgins who bathe in the river, upon which his phallus is shed.

16. Materials with which to make small quantities of adobe brick.

17. Prior to the late 1950s, African Americans in San Antonio, Texas were allowed only in the ill-kept balconies of public movie theaters, often accessible only via the alley. "Moby Dick," starring Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab, was released June 27, 1956.

18. Civil War submarine manned by South Carolinians who died in the first and only successful engagement with a Union vessel.

19. An allusion to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

20. An allusion to Leslie Fiedler's book by the same title and to the defiant hero in Melville's *Moby Dick*, the movie version of which was released June 27, 1956 and played at the racially segregated Majestic Theater in Downtown San Antonio, Texas in the mid-1950s.

### Section III

1. An allusion to an utterance by the devil in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown."

2. In 1923, the narrator's grandfather, Carson Robert McKinney, sold his house in Texas to pay for attendance at Gammon Theological Seminary, then housed on the Clark Atlanta University campus. More than 80 years later, the younger of the narrator's two sons began his four year stay as an undergraduate student in history and anthropology at Emory University, which, in the early part of the century, was in cooperative affiliation with Clark Atlanta University.

3. A proverbial allusion: "The pygmy who stands atop the shoulders of the giant can yet see farther than the giant."

4. An allusion, in part, to the legend that Savannah's architectural history was left largely unscathed because the city was captured without violence when the military went to the coast in anticipation that the Union's attack would issue from that direction but were surprised and forced to surrender when Union forces arrived from the south instead.

5. This line and the next five are descriptive of the route to downtown Savannah, Georgia and allude to the historic use of the oak trees on that route.

6. Once owned almost exclusively by African Americans, the properties on Water Street were of little value because of their vulnerability to rising water; they are now highly valued because of their proximity to the water.

7. An allusion to the real estate maxim that the three most important features of any real estate property are location, location, and location.

8. An allusion to another traditional African proverb: "Until the lion becomes a historian, the hunter will always be the hero."

9. This line and the next four are descriptive of edifices to the east of downtown Savannah at the beginning of the road to famed Tybee Island.

10. This line and the next sixteen allude to the historic civil rights era wade-in on the Tybee Island beach, August 17, 1960.

11. An allusion to Robert Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep."

### Section IV

1. Both the name of a city and an Indian word meaning "the first people."

2. Reportedly, the only place in the pre-civil rights era that allowed beach access to African Americans.

3. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a child character who becomes a blood sacrifice in recompense for the accidental death of a tribesman at the hands of a rival tribe; his name means "let not my blood be wasted."

4. Well before the historic devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans levees were known to be of suspect reliability as a hedge against flooding.

5. Allusion to the river and the bridge by that name. Later investigations would disclose that officers of the peace were guilty of atrocities against unarmed civilians who were trying to escape Katrina floodwaters.

6. Theodicy:
7. The Methodist parsonage at Waveland had recently been reconstructed when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast.
8. Exit 13 on Interstate 10 headed east leads to Waveland.

#### Section V

1. An utterance by Iago, the quintessential villain and renaissance man in Shakespeare's *Othello*.
2. An allusion to the nursery rhyme "to market, to market, to buy a fat pig; home again, home again, jiggy jig."
3. Literally.
4. An allusion to the site of Oedipus' fatal encounter with Laius in *Oedipus the King*.
5. Cairo, Illinois near the three-way junction of Illinois, Missouri, and Kentucky where, in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the raft sinks. In the actual composition of the novel, Twain suspended his progress for ten years while contemplating how he could realistically depict Huck and Jim floating down the Mississippi River and therefore deeper into slave territory.
6. An allusion to Spinoza's assertion that all philosophy is an attempt to defeat death.
7. An allusion to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," by T. S. Eliot.
8. An allusion to Theodore Roethke's "Journey to the Interior."
9. Oft quoted for the wisdom of his advice to Laertes, Polonius is also regarded as a politically two-faced yes man bent on protecting his self-interests.
10. A light, grayish blue believed to prevent entry by ghosts if applied around windows, doors, and other openings.
11. The Bolivar Peninsula, later devastated by Hurricane Ike in September of 2008.
12. An allusion to the Quaker notion of "the priesthood of all believers" which, along with "the doctrine of the inner light," according to V. L. Parrington, was a major contributor to the development of democracy in America.
13. Abudakari II, West African king in who, according to Ivan van Sertima's creative rendering in *They Came Before Columbus: Pre-Columbian Presence in the New World*, may have initiated the pre-Christian presence of Africans in the New World.
14. Freddie Robinson, long-time friend of the narrator who, in 1999, moved from Houston to Los Angeles "to become a millionaire," only to return two years later broke and reduced to collecting aluminum cans for a scant living until he hired on at an aluminum recycling plant, bought the operation from the childless retiring owner, opened two additional plants, and became a millionaire; Pope, organizer and leader of the first successful rebellion by members of an ethnic minority in the history of the United States, the Pueblo Indian rebellion against Spanish military rulers in 1680; two Tesuque boys were the runners who delivered orders to start the rebellion a day early when suspicion arose that the Spanish had discovered the plot; Eugene Samples, one of three figures who, according to historian Ken Mason, established the Harlem Renaissance era African American economic community in San Antonio, Texas as the second most successful in the history of the United States, superior even to "Black Wall Street" in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with Samples making his money from ownership and operation of a hotel, barber shop, and café in the Zumbro Center, located in what is now called Freedman's Square, and from administration of a "policy" operation, "policy" being a game similar to numbers running; Papisto, a Senegalese artist who literally creates his artwork from junk; Big and Rich, a contemporary Country Western duo.
15. Two Buck Chuck, an award winning American made wine that literally sells for two dollars a bottle but compares favorably in competitive taste tests with far more expensive wines throughout the world.

## From the College of Arts and Sciences: A Nexus

*" Every science begins as philosophy and ends as art." Will Durant*

In a beginning,  
a world,  
an incoherent all,  
and all that is in it  
begins in art,  
    to impose form on some liquidity,  
    to wring the word that fits the thing,  
    *logos tellei idean*, and then  
the poem wherein the pieces  
*dlick*  
in finding places;  
the presciential myth that,  
brief its moment as the light,  
becomes historic,  
but fades again to dusty myth;  
the probing composition born in chaos,  
the whole the sum of many parts,  
the parts the produce of division.

And, so,  
string theory the current avatar  
of spontaneous combustion,  
and God,  
    for both Pharoah and Franklin,  
some fierce economic,  
the prime rib of womanhood inseminates,  
engenders,  
begets  
the oxymorons of  
an outdoor kitchen,  
self-made man-cave made for grilling  
burgers, steaks, and ribs  
like stud walls not yet fleshed;  
Platonic idea of ideal renderings,  
rendered,  
eventually,  
in stubborn, ever-putrifying flesh.

Poet, painter, potter,  
the pygmy-god stands challenged,  
by codes and conduit,  
top plates and headers,  
by screws and nails  
and windstorm braces,  
two and four by fours and sixes,  
shingles, tile, and sinks and stoves,  
mitred corners of cabinet doors,  
and PVC that leaks inexplicably.  
The physics, Phythagorous, Archimidean;  
angles of incidence and angles of reflection,  
where level and plumb and square become  
a constant worry;



neglected,  
worry forever.

Hence,  
the obligatory mistake,  
(lest we blaspheme)  
the lean,  
at one to ninety-six,  
no, ninety-three,  
he thinks will last at least  
this lifetime. These things,  
uncooked,  
the pygmy-god prepares,  
for bride, himself,  
for progeny;  
while,  
elbows on the countertop,  
he sits upon the rustic stool,  
peruses,  
tilts his head,  
declares,  
"It is good."

Lengthening, the shadows pall  
the last of the supper guests.  
Wild scallions, plump berries, and candied pecans,  
condiments of the feast, lie  
in yet untapped abundance.  
No unicorn, for them, in this garden of plenty,  
no college of art and science,  
no poem in such perfunctory things.

# I'm Trying to Get You Free: Na'im Akbar, African Psychology and the Reconstruction of the Collective Black Mind

DeReef Jamison

As a child of the Black middle class in Tallahassee, Florida, Na'im Akbar was in the unique position of having two parents that were both college educated. He spent his entire childhood in the segregated South. However, as a product of Southern racial etiquette, he also had the opportunity to experience the strange and fringe benefits of Jim Crow segregation. These benefits included attending an all-Black school from K-12 that was located on the campus of Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, a Historically Black College in Tallahassee, Florida. Akbar reflects that "This Lab School located on an HBCU (Florida A & M University) campus in the 1950's was a model of intellectual and social prominence in our small insulated Black community. Even during this period when Black people all lived in economically and socially oppressed segregated communities of the South, academic excellence was the unquestioned standard" (Akbar, p. 408, 2008). Akbar carried the torch of this academic excellence with him to college, where he earned the B.A. in Psychology, the M.A. in Clinical Psychology and the Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Michigan. His experience with the Black student movement at the University of Michigan placed him in a social and intellectual climate that was conducive to fostering ideas that questioned the status quo approach to psychology. This atmosphere initiated "the early conversations that we began to have about a 'Black Psychology', and to deconstruct the psychology that we had been taught" (Akbar, p.410, 2008). The culmination of Akbar's graduate work was his dissertation entitled *Power Themes among Negro and White Paranoid and non-Paranoid Schizophrenics* (Akbar, 2008). Akbar comments:

My dissertation topic was a beginning effort to define the

unique definitions of psychology and mental health for Black people...This early work began to raise some of the fundamental questions about the validity of European American psychology's definitions of the mental health of Black people. Though I did not realize it, the course of my work and career as a psychologist was set from this point. (Akbar, 2008, p. 410)

After obtaining his Ph.D., Akbar held academic positions at Morehouse College, Norfolk State University and Florida State University. Akbar is considered to be one of the world's preeminent African American psychologists and a pioneer in the development and construction of an African-centered approach to modern psychology (Akbar, 2004). As a result of his pioneering research in Black Psychology, he received the Distinguished Psychologist Award from the National Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi). He served as president of ABPsi from 1987-1988. Akbar has also been awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Human Letters from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and Lincoln University as well as commemorative Days in his honor in Atlantic City, New Jersey; Jackson, Mississippi; Cleveland, Ohio and Cincinnati, Ohio (Akbar, 2004).

In his spoken word compact disc entitled, *I'm trying to get you free* (2003), Akbar explicitly articulates the mission of his life's work when he states "I'm trying to get you free". Who is he trying to free and why is he trying to free them? People of African descent in America have been legally free for more than 100 years, so to what type of freedom is Akbar referring? As a psychologist and thus a student of the mind, Akbar is referring to the freeing of the mind of people of African

descent. Similar to the old maxim that if you free the mind the body will follow, Akbar is arguing that the key to liberation is not just physical but also how a collective cultural group psychologically views itself relative to their historical experiences. According to Cheikh Anta Diop, "The historical factor is the cultural cement that unifies the disparate elements of a people to make them into a whole, by the particular slant of the feeling of historical continuity lived by the totality of the collective" (1991, p. 212). Williams (1981) discusses the collective Black mind as a gathering notion that refers to a common collective consciousness among people of African descent relative to how they interpret and understand their lived experiences. Thus, in the tradition of Diop and Williams, Akbar offers an understanding of the collective cultural mind that analyzes historical, cultural and psychological factors.

Akbar emerged as a public intellectual during the late 1980s and mid-1990s. At this particular historical juncture in Africana intellectual thought, there was somewhat of a renaissance in African-centered consciousness similar to the Black consciousness movement witnessed during the 1960s on college campuses in the United States. Black students in particular and Black people in general, were becoming more politically astute and historically/culturally informed (Asante, 1995). Correlated with this rebirth in cultural nationalism was a rise in a unique form of African-centered public intellectualism (hooks & West, 1990; Howe, 1999). These African-centered public intellectuals attracted a concentrated and captivated audience on college campuses and within Black communities. Akbar's body of work displays his intellectual flexibility to successfully navigate both traditional/academic and organic/community spaces with the primary intention of freeing the Black mind.

Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of traditional and organic intellectuals, Marable (2000) identifies strains of both of these intellectual schools of thought within the Africana intellectual tradition. According to Marable (2000), W.E.B. Du Bois, Monroe Work, Charles S. Johnson, Horace Mann Bond,

E. Franklin Frazier, Oliver Cromwell Cox, Carter G. Woodson, Rayford Logan and John Hope Franklin are representative of formally trained scholar-activists who dedicated their research to producing "a critical body of scholarship that sought over time to dismantle powerful racist categories and white supremacy itself" (p. 2). In addition to these aforementioned scholars, "there was also an influential group of what may be termed organic intellectuals" (Marable, 2000, p.4) such as J.A. Rogers, Arthur Schomburg, C.L.R. James and John Henrik Clarke. This group of organic intellectuals are comprised of scholars "who were not formally trained in traditional universities but who had a critical understanding of their world and communicated their ideas to black audiences" (Marable, 2000, p. 4).

The central thesis in this examination is that Na'im Akbar's articulation of African Psychology suggests that the major components in freeing the Black mind are (1) deconstructing the Eurocentric parameters of the discipline of psychology and (2) reconstructing/constructing an African psychology that is specifically relevant to the specific historical and cultural experiences of people of African descent. The African Psychology Institute defines African Psychology as follows:

It is the self-conscious "centering" of psychological analyses and applications in African realities, cultures, and epistemologies. African centered psychology, as a system of thought and action, examines the processes that allow for the illumination and liberation of the Spirit. African psychology is ultimately concerned with understanding the systems of meaning of human Beingness, the features of human functioning, and the restoration of normal/natural order to human development. As such, it is used to resolve personal and social problems and to promote optimal functioning. (Parham, White, & Ajamu, 1995, p. 95)

Akbar's search for an alternative articulation of how collective cultural groups experience and interpret reality mirrors the African Psychology Institute and is grounded in how he positions the roles and functions of African psychology. He states:

African Psychology is not a thing, but a place –a view, a perspective, a way of observing. African Psychology does not claim to be an exclusive body of knowledge, though a body of knowledge has and will continue to be generated from the place. It is a perspective that is lodged in the historical primacy of the human view from the land that is known as Africa. It is the view that led to the very dawning of human consciousness. (Akbar, 2004, p. ix)

Thus, for Akbar, African Psychology is a worldview or "place" that incorporates cultural variables that are specific to particular Africana experiences.

### **Deconstructing Eurocentric Psychological Thought**

African-centered psychologists have argued that the parameters of Western psychology have been defined by a European worldview that emphasizes individuality, material, and control over nature (Baldwin, 1980; 1986). Central to Akbar's discourse is the concept of paradigm and the process of deconstructing paradigms. A paradigm is a philosophical and theoretical framework of a scientific discipline within which theories, laws, and generalizations and the scholarly actions done to support these articulations are constructed (Miriam-Webster, 2003). According to Kuhn (1996), "A paradigm is what the members of a scientific community share, and conversely, a scientific community consists of men (*and women*) who share a paradigm" (p. 176). A paradigm shapes what type of questions are asked and not asked, thus a paradigm can expand and/or limit the scope and direction of future research endeavors. Furthermore, Kuhn (1996)

asserts that "when recognized anomalies, whose characteristic feature is their stubborn refusal to be assimilated into existing paradigms, give rise to new theories which give identities to these anomalies, a paradigm shift or a scientific revolution occurs" (p.146). Thus, when a paradigm no longer provides a constructive and progressive approach to interpreting a particular reality, a new paradigm that is consistent with that particular reality is needed. As a member of the new wave of Black psychologists that begin to raise critical questions about the applicability and/or non-applicability of traditional psychology relative to people of African descent, one of Akbar's main concerns was the deconstruction of the Eurocentric school of thought that had dominated psychological literature.

Akbar examines the limitations of Western psychology and questions its ability to address the psychological, cultural and spiritual needs of people of African descent. Building on the insights of Kuhn (1996), Akbar initiates a discussion of a paradigmatic shift. Akbar acknowledges how the Western paradigm fails to address the culturally specific African experiences in America when he states "The African American experience is itself an anomaly for Western Psychology. Given the existing conceptualizations of human functioning...Our very presence as effectively functioning scholars, fathers, mothers, citizens, even scientists actually contradicts their theories of human development" (Akbar, 1985, p.7). Inherent in the Western model of psychology is the idea that difference implies deficiency. Cultural manifestations that deviate from the established standards are perceived as wrong and abnormal. The limitations of the Western paradigm manifest within and across the interlocking systems of race, class and gender. Akbar asserts that an anomaly is "anyone who differs drastically from the essential (i.e. material) characteristics of the paradigmatic human being (i.e., Caucasian male of European descent of middle class status). The greater the degree of your difference from this model, the more of an anomaly you are" (Akbar, 1985, p.6).

Akbar argues that deconstructive activities must take place before the parameters of a new African Psychology are conceptualized and constructed. In its deconstructive mode, Akbar argues that African Psychology is grounded in:

A deconstruction of an ethic that has permitted humans to make servants and captives of their sisters and brothers and claim scientific legitimacy of the crime. It is a deconstruction of a worldview that has intentionally robbed most parts of the human family in the context of their legacy and particular cultural experience. (Akbar, 2004, p. ix)

This general yet concise statement by Akbar implies that the universe of ideas that influences scholars to create paradigms impacts much more than intellectual life. Paradigms not only shape how we conceptualize reality, but also how we interpret and implement the social and political changes that ultimately impact the quality of life we experience. Akbar understands that to deconstruct and not reconstruct would be iconoclastic. It would destroy the previous paradigm without constructing an alternative. Hence, Akbar attempts to lead Black psychologists along a new path of reconstructing the psychological experiences of people of African descent when he states:

African Psychology is a reconstruction of the world's Truth about the nature and potential of the human being. It is a reconstruction of the certainty of the human being's resiliency...It is the restoration of all that is correct and noble in the human spirit while being cognizant of its potential for downfall...that perspective that sees all humans as fundamentally spirit and therefore not subject to the gradations of worth and value that characterized the more distorted vision that bred racism, sexism, materialism,

classism and all the other 'isms' that diminished the human spirit. (Akbar, 2004, p. x)

### **Constructing an African Psychology Paradigm**

In tracing the intellectual history of African Psychology, Akbar comments that at the birth of ABPsi in 1968 there was a cadre of 'African Psychologists' who realized "that it is important to understand Black people within the conceptual framework of our cultural origins rather than being preoccupied with our current condition and circumstances" (Akbar, 2004, p. xi). While this was considered a radical idea to psychologists trained within the parameters of the European-American approach to psychology, Akbar and his colleagues refused to allow themselves to be limited by the narrow confines of their training. Akbar comments "Though we had been trained under the same set of assumptions, as young Ph.D.'s entering the field of psychology we had a degree of flexibility that our more seasoned colleagues initially found difficult to accept" (2004, p. xii). Akbar's refusal to be conceptually incarcerated by a paradigm that he found lacking initiated his search for an alternative paradigm. According to Akbar, ABPsi was a major influence in shaping his articulation of Black Psychology since it offered: (1) a national network of colleagues; (2) a support group in the pioneering struggle of defining psychology for Black people; (3) a forum for the dissemination of ideas that would have never gained acceptance in the mainstream white professional organizations and (4) an arena for the kind of professional creativity that has grown Black Psychology into a discipline recognized around the world (Akbar, 2008). In fact, Akbar takes the position that "Without ABPsi, I cannot imagine what direction my career would have gone. It was the legitimizing body for my work to uplift African people in America and throughout the world" (Akbar, 2008, p. 412).

In order to engage the process of constructing an alternative paradigm, Akbar indulged in the rich and robust arena of African intellectual history.

The organic intellectual John Henrik Clarke (1991) states "history is the compass that we use to locate ourselves on the map of human geography" (p. 72). Most psychologists trained in Western academia use compasses that point in the direction of Greece for the origin of the historical lineage of ideas. The Western intellectual tradition assumes that writings of Plato and Aristotle express in some manner almost all of the basic concepts of modern psychology (Viney, 1993). Using a different compass, African-centered psychologists point to Kemet as the origin of psychology. A major result of this paradigmatic shift was that the Kemet definition of psychology changed from the study of the soul to the study of behavior (Nobles, 1986). Kuhn (1996) argues "the historian of science may be tempted to exclaim that when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them. Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places.... we may want to say that after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world" (p. 111). For Akbar, the concomitant change in paradigms as a result of the change in worldview is located in the prophetic and profound insights of an African Psychology based in Egypt (1994). We observe in Akbar's appropriation of Kuhn a clear understanding of the deconstructive and reconstructive functions of African psychology as a new perspective that emerges as a result of a new paradigm. Akbar (1985) takes the position that "the entirety of the Kemet cosmology is actually a comprehensive description of the Psyche of man" (p. 121). Azibo (1996) confirms Akbar's position when he asserts:

It is of utmost importance to understand that an organized system of knowledge is being dealt with here and not just lofty speculations on life and the cosmos. As such, this Kemet system incorporated theory (ideas) and practice (applications). Techniques to guide the human in transformation to an ultimate state of development... were in use in this original (indeed original

human being) psychology.  
(p.4)

Akbar is one of the early pioneers who laid the foundation for the articulation of an African-centered psychology, however, scholarly analyses of his actual place within this intellectual legacy have varied. For example, Jackson (2009) asserts that "Akbar practices an 'African-centered' psychology similar to the versions of anthropology and 'psychogenetics' offered up in *The Isis Papers* and *Yurugu*" (p. 126). Following this logic, Akbar has been categorized, along with Welsing and Ani, as a member of the radical school of Black psychology (Karenga, 1992). Yet, Akbar's practice of African-centered psychology and social science is distinctively different from both Welsing and Ani. Welsing and Ani critique white supremacy behavior and its influence on people of African descent. According to Jamison (2008), social scientists such as Welsing and Ani "do not argue that European psychological theories are irrelevant. What they argue is that to the extent that major psychological theories were standardized and normalized on European people, then these theories are more appropriately viewed as culturally specific to people of European descent" (p. 103). They exemplify a branch of radical Black social scientists that attempt to demonstrate how Eurocentric social sciences are most applicable when and where they are applied to understanding the ways and actions of people of European descent. However, rather than strictly focusing on the behavior of Europeans, Akbar is more concerned with constructing new procedures and guidelines for establishing what constitutes optimal African mental health. For Akbar, these new procedures and guidelines must be culturally and historically grounded; and applicable to the lived experiences of people of African descent.

### Historical Memory

For Akbar, psychological analysis must take into consideration the historical antecedents or determinants of the behavior. At the core of Akbar's



understanding of historical memory is his understanding of the power of cultural mythology. Akbar (1994) argues:

every ethnic group shares a unique psychohistorical experience which has been shaped by their special experiences as a cultural group. Out of this unique experience emerges a cultural myth which serves as the foundation which unites that group and lays the foundation for their particular worldview...they are empowered by the noble self-image that they share... (p. 262).

His understanding of historical memory was heavily influenced by his involvement with the Nation of Islam. As a member of the Nation of Islam, Akbar worked in the Office of Human Development at the national headquarters in Chicago. Akbar (2008) states that the "impressive educational system, economic and business development as well as the effective self-help program that characterized the Nation struck me. These accomplishments were things that we had concluded in my Black Psychology classes were vitally needed if we were going to advance as a people" (Akbar, p. 413). He successfully blended the socio-religious teachings of Elijah Muhammad with the intellectual leanings of ABPsi. For Akbar, the Nation of Islam "was the 'post-doctoral training' in 'Black Psychology that I so desperately needed" (Akbar, 2008, p. 413). He further elaborates that "in addition to the support of the Association of Black Psychologists influence...the Nation of Islam became the most powerful influence on my development as a Black man and as a Black Psychologist" (Akbar, 2008, p. 414).

Akbar identifies Elijah Muhammad as an example of a thinker that understood the importance of using cultural myths as vehicle for psychological empowerment. He asserts that Elijah Muhammad "created a new cultural myth to match our current situation and built allegories out of our particular experience" (Akbar, 1994, p. 263). According to Akbar (1994), "the devil (evil personified) was no longer a meta-

physical creature out of a European medieval image but a 'kind of man' whose demonic qualities could easily be demonstrated within the recent historical experiences of any Black man or woman in America" (p. 263). For Akbar, it does not matter if the story is true or false, or whether it can be empirically validated, or if it is significant at the .001 level. What is significant to Akbar is the function the myth serves in people's lives. In other words, what would happen if Black people acted "as if" white people were the devil? What type of psychological and behavioral changes would take place? According to Akbar, people of African descent would be motivated and empowered, out of dialectical necessity, to start their own farms, schools, businesses and banks. Akbar conceptualizes mythology as a construct that can be utilized as a catalyst for cultural, psychological and economic self-determination. In conjunction with Akbar, Amos Wilson suggests that "he Honorable Elijah Muhammad was the greatest psychologist we ever had, and many of us still have not come to understand that yet. Some of us thought that we were doing our 'intellectual thing' when we got caught up trying to point out his 'mythologies'....We must look at function" (Wilson, 1993, p.27). Wilson (1993) further states that "The European doesn't care whether or not we remember the facts and the details as long as we just remember the impression, as long as our personalities have been impressed and transformed in a fashion compatible with European interests" (p. 27). Perception is of primary importance and historical facts are secondary once perception has been ingrained as reality. Mythology provides cultural guidelines and patterns for interpreting lived experiences.

Akbar (1994) asserts:

The young are taught the story of the world within the language of their cultural myth and the old are revered because of the mastery of the story. This lies as the groundbed for the values and the social organization which

ties a people together. This social unity is fundamental for the protection and growth of a people... Out of the cultural myth, people develop a metaphor about the human plight and its mastery, based upon the unique language of their collective experience. (p. 262).

For many people of African descent, an accurate understanding of their collective experience has been displaced and distorted by historical, cultural and social amnesia (Akbar, 1990). Relative to the social and cultural impact of these various types of amnesia, Bailey (2005) informs that, "From sanitation to omission, it is hard to say which is worse in terms of the preservation of the public (historical) memory of slavery and the implications it has for the heirs of that legacy today" (p. 8). For Akbar, the various types of historical amnesia are attempts by people of African descent to distance themselves from having to consciously confront the often harsh facts of historical reality and its contemporary impact. As a member of the contemporary psychological recovery movement, Akbar argues that the necessary corrective surgery on the African psyche must include a critical re-assessment of the legacy of enslavement.

One of Akbar's major contributions to African Psychology is his attempt to address and shed light on the impact of psychological slavery as a result of the sanitation and omission of history. Sanitation is the cleaning up of historical events to make them more palatable for public consumption. Omission is the intentional deletion of particular historical events so that they do not traumatize the psyche (Bailey, 2005). Akbar makes a rebuttal against the sanitization and omission of the experience of slavery. For Akbar, African American historical memory of slavery is critical to African American cultural knowledge of self. Akbar asserts:

In order to fully grasp the magnitude of our current problems, we must reopen the books on the events of

slavery. Our objective should not be to cry stale tears for the past, nor to rekindle old hatreds for past injustices. Instead we should seek to enlighten our path of today by better understanding where and how the lights were turned out yesterday...the study of the African-American psyche should include psychohistory... (1990 p. 8).

While some may argue that history has no impact on our current situation, Akbar takes the opposite position. For Akbar, history is not a compilation of dead, stale facts from the past that are no longer relevant, but a living reality that impacts how we interpret our contemporary world. Hence, Akbar acknowledges and understands the importance of articulating the intricate connection between the past, the present and the future.

Akbar established himself as a forerunner in the contemporary psychological recovery movement among people of African descent in his text *Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery* (1990). Akbar addresses the complex and confounding issues surrounding the lingering effects of the Maafa on contemporary people of African descent. In *Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery* (1990), he urges Black people to begin the process of filling the psychological void created by the Maafa and confront the historical amnesia created by the ahistorical acts of sanitation and omission. Akbar argues that as a result of historical amnesia, people of African descent continue to suffer from the effects of slavery. He states:

The list of attitudes and reactions which we have inherited from slavery is probably quite extensive. We want to identify here only some of the more blatant and currently destructive attitudes which clearly show their origins in the slavery situation. Hopefully, a look at this tarnished legacy will serve as a stimulus for us to rid ourselves of these slavery ideas.... (Akbar, 1990, p. 8)

Akbar raises several questions relative to the lingering effects of psychological slavery among contemporary descendants of enslaved Africans. What are some of these slavery ideas that still exist? How do they manifest themselves and impact our current realities? Akbar's list of psychological responses stemming from slavery is quite extensive. Thus, this discussion of his analysis of slavery will be limited to color consciousness/religious imagery which illustrate his understanding of psychological slavery.

### **Color Consciousness/Religious Imagery**

Akbar's attempt to highlight the impact of religious images and symbols is rooted in Africana intellectual and cultural history. Black Liberation Theologians such as Albert Cleage (1969), James Cone (1970) and Jacquelyn Grant (1989) paved the intellectual road that Akbar traveled in his efforts to address what he refers to as "racial religious imagery and psychological confusion" (Akbar, 1990, p. 37). For example, Cone (1970) argues that it is only logical that Black people should perceive God as being Black. Cone (1970) asserts "there is no place for a colorless God in a society where people suffer precisely because of their color" (p. 120). Critical to understanding Cone's articulation of the importance of Black people viewing God in their own image is his emphasis on perception. For Cone, perceiving God as Black does not necessarily mean that God is physically Black. Cone's liberation theology suggests that it is socially, culturally and psychologically important for Black people to *perceive* God as being a God of the oppressed that shares similar physical characteristics and acts in their best interests.

Akbar (1990) takes on a similar task as Cone when he defines color consciousness as "the unnatural assignment of mental or moral traits upon physical skin color. These traits can be either positive or negative, as long as the basis is assumed to be in the skin color" (p. 31). To counter the impact this cultural imposition has on people of African descent, Akbar seeks to introduce a concept of color consciousness that is consistent with how ethnic

groups have historically viewed the concept of color before it emerged out of the 15th century as a social construct designed to be used as a mechanism of political control (Clarke, 1991; Drake, 1990). Akbar draws on the intergenerational wisdom transmitted through organic scholars such as John Henrik Clarke who suggested that most ethnic groups, before constant and consistent interaction with other cultural groups, tended to perceive the Supreme Being/God in an image similar to their cultural selves. However, European exploration and global expansion created a different phenomenon that became one of the defining hallmarks of modernity. The implementation of global white supremacy required a justification to rationalize the exploitation and enslavement of the majority of the world's people of color.

The idea of religious imagery emerges as a major focus of Akbar when he comments that "there is a serious psychological problem created for the person portrayed in the form of the divine image...He begins to believe that the blond hair and blue eyes that are on the portrait are his qualifications for divinity. This begins to cultivate an ego manic" (Akbar, 1990, p. 42). As a student of the mind, Akbar seeks to demonstrate the interrelationship between religion symbols/imagery and cultural personality traits/behavior. Akbar (1990) asserts that "dark skin became equated with the reason for slavery. The skin color of the slave became associated with other kinds (negative) of human traits. On the other hand, the slave master's pale skin became equated with super human traits" (p. 32). Akbar understands that surface accounts of the implications of the chains and images of psychological slavery penetrated much deeper. Akbar (1990), stresses "that by shining the light of awareness on these dark recesses of our past, we can begin to conquer the plantation ghosts of our past, which continue to haunt our personal and social lives. We begin to move beyond the shackles of restricted human growth that have bound us since the kidnapping of not so long ago" (pp. 29-30). As people of African descent break and unravel the chains

and images of psychological slavery, a critical consciousness develops and matures that begins the process of reconstructing and constructing a psychology of liberation.

## Conclusion

For Akbar, the consequences of the Eurocentric approach to psychology (1994) is that the focus of psychology switched from the spiritual to Western Psychology's focus on emphasizing only measurable and observable behavior. According to Akbar (1994), a worldview emerges from this approach to studying humans that is based on individualism, competitiveness, futuristic orientation, affectlessness, empiricism, statistical normalcy and objectivity. Akbar's ability to travel abroad allowed him the opportunity to experience Africa firsthand and "removed all doubt about the concepts that we worked to develop in formulating African Psychology" (Akbar, 2008, p. 414). Heeding to Carruther's (1996) warning about the dangers of deconstructing without filling the void, Akbar identifies some characteristics of the new African Psychology paradigm that finds its origin in African ideas about the soul/psyche. According to Akbar (1984), the characteristics of the new paradigm are spirituality, spiritual/physical balance, affectivity, and naturalistic observation. He proposes:

The new paradigm that will emerge will be a balance between the extreme ontology represented in the Eurocentric model and the extreme spiritual and esoteric represented in the Eastern models. The paradigm that will emerge will be a natural or general human paradigm rather than the ethnocentric paradigm which describes a particular human. This model will accept the human being's experience of himself is as real as the environment's influence on the human being. (Akbar, 1985, p.8)

Akbar suggests a paradigm that is more inclusive of the broad array of

human experiences. We observe in Akbar's appropriation of Kuhn a clear understanding of the deconstructive and reconstructive functions of African psychology as a new perspective that emerges as a result of a new paradigm.

Akbar (1994) suggests that Black social scientists re-examine scientific paradigms as they relate to psychological methodology among people of African descent from an African philosophical perspective. In addition, Akbar defines the role that African social scientists must play in paradigm construction when he states, "the destiny of the African American social scientist is to be responsible for the paradigm shift or scientific revolution in the social sciences. It is important that social scientists began to recognize that destiny before the inevitable movements of time deprive of us our well-deserved fate or legacy" (1985, p.6). Hence, Akbar perceives the African social scientist as being endowed with a special and unique mission of not only reconstructing but creating a new social science that is culturally relevant and applicable to understanding a broader human experience that accounts for the complex dynamics of culture. Akbar (1985) concludes that "future generations will condemn us (African psychologists) as traitors to our heritage if we do not collect on our destiny to bring about a scientific revolution" (p.9).

Ultimately, Akbar (2008) believes that psychology should serve "as a tool of human liberation" (p. 414) and that the primary purpose and "objective of human life is for human beings to be given the freedom to develop themselves and to discover the gifts that we have all been given" (p. 414). Although the aspects of the above discussion may sound esoteric, it is critical to the development and understanding of a new paradigm of African Psychology. Akbar's construction of an African Psychology is part and parcel of the Black radical imagination (Kelley, 2002) that has been central to the African intellectual tradition. It is important to center analyses within the framework of new and innovative attempts to conceptualize psychological constructs relevant to people of African descent. An intriguing concept that taps into this exciting yet

unexplored arena of ideas that assists in interpreting and understanding a new paradigm of African Psychology is Elizabeth Alexander's notion of "the black interior". According to Alexander (2004) the black interior is:

black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination. The Black interior is a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of...Tapping into this black imaginary helps us envision what we are not

meant to envision: complex black selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetished black beauty. (p. x)

Akbar attempts to dig into this deep reservoir of black life and creativity that is embedded in the Black interior that was shaped, formed and developed by the experiences of Africans throughout the diaspora. This Black interior is an unexplored space of possibility and potential. It is in the deep darkness of this Black interior that Akbar's African Psychology finds its place to begin the work of reconstructing and ultimately constructing a new paradigm of African Psychology.

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# Narrating the Gaze in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

Marybeth Davis Baggett

*Quicksand* tells the story of one woman's search for acceptance and approval. That woman, Helga Crane, searches in five different locations over the course of the novel for a place she can call "home." Her search begins at Naxos, a school for black children in the South where she teaches in hopes of participating in a vision of racial uplift. Discontented in Naxos, she heads to Chicago, the city of her childhood. Discontented again in Chicago, Helga moves on to New York City, to Denmark, back to New York, and finally to Alabama, each move driven by her relentless discontent. Yet, the people she finds in those places do not offer Helga the approval she desperately seeks. Helga cannot find this approval, though, because her search serves only to illuminate her lack of self-acceptance and self-approval.

Whenever Helga begins to feel discontented in a situation, she seeks out a new one, hoping that in the new situation, she'll fit in. But Helga's own thoughts suggest that her search will never lead to happiness because *she herself* is her problem, not the judgments other people make of her. In Naxos, she finds that she carries some of the blame for not fitting into the community there (7). In Denmark, her "incompleteness" (92) leads her to the question, "Was there [ . . . ] some peculiar lack in her?" (81). She wonders also, "Why couldn't she be satisfied in one place?" (93). And in Alabama, and elsewhere, she senses a feeling of "unworthiness" (126) and "self-loathing" (55). In each of her failed searches for acceptance, Helga is the common denominator.

Jacques Lacan's theory of the gaze<sup>1</sup> informs the reader's understanding of Helga's discontent and her inability to find the approval she seeks. As Lacan explains in his seminar "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*," "the gaze" embodies a person's constant awareness of being an object in the world, as being "other than" everything and everyone else.

This awareness leads to another awareness, that as an object capable of being viewed by others, he or she is at the mercy of the judgment of those onlookers. But the caveat is that subjectivity keeps a person from ever objectively grasping the judgments those onlookers make. So, as Lacan explains, Helga can get back from others only what she herself sends out: "This is how the world is struck with a presumption of idealization, of the suspicion of yielding me only my representations" (Lacan 81).

As though aware of Lacan's theory of the gaze, Larsen's narrator, in the opening chapter, presents Helga to the reader as an object to be looked upon. In an essay examining the connection of portraiture and identity in *Quicksand*, Pamela Barnett emphasizes the narrator's direct mention of a possible observer who might be watching Helga in spite of the fact that she is alone in her room (577): "An observer would have thought her well fitted to that framing of light and shade" (2). Barnett develops this concept further, explaining that the description of the room itself objectifies Helga by framing her somewhat in terms of a painting: "The lighting focuses on Helga's features and catches the sheen of the fabrics she wears. The narrator paints Helga's image with meticulous attention to colors, shadows, and shapes" (575). And, on the surface, Helga does fit well into this "frame." The narrator's description of the setting parallels the description given of Helga's physical appearance: both are called "attractive" (1-2), and in each description vivid colors play a significant role. The room has a lamp with a "black and red shade," a "blue Chinese carpet," and "many-colored nasturtiums" while Helga herself is clothed in a "vivid green and gold negligee" with "skin like yellow satin" (1-2). In Denmark as well, at Helga's first afternoon tea and first evening party, the narrator again presents Helga in descriptive terms suggesting that she is merely a



tableaux to be viewed: she is simply an object on display while her aunt and uncle “did all the talking, [and] answered the questions” posed by curious onlookers (70). Helga has even been prepped for this exhibition with provocative new clothing and jewelry, simply so she can spend the evening “posed on a red satin sofa” (70).

This “Helga as object” motif continues throughout the book. In Naxos, Margaret Creighton begs Helga to stay because of her value to the community as a “decoration.” The narrator as well refers to her as a “decoration” in Denmark, where she is also a “curio” (73), a “peacock” (73), and a “pet dog” (70). There, too, the narrator compares her with a picture come to life from the “pages of [a] geography book” (68). She even literally gets transformed into an image through Axel Olsen’s painting. In all these cases, Helga presents herself as an object to be seen by those around her with the goal of being admired because as Kimberly Monda explains, “[...] she conflates being admired with being understood.”

The opening chapter not only presents Helga as an object; it also reveals Helga’s subjectivity in making sense of the perceptions other people have of her. Though Helga is completely alone in her room in this scene, the reader sees her viewing herself through the eyes of several people. She thinks of the white preacher who has spoken at Naxos that afternoon, of her students, of her family, of her uncle, of the other members of the Naxos community, of James Vayle, and of James’s family, all in terms of how they perceive her. But in these visions, Helga can only see herself seeing herself, to adapt Lacan’s phrase, “[...] I see myself seeing myself” (81). Helga’s thoughts make sense in light of Lacan’s claim that “[t]he gaze I encounter [...] is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me [italics added] in the field of the Other” (84).

The point of view itself, third-person limited, reinforces that the judgments of any other characters are in fact solely a projection of Helga’s self-concept. Even though the reader learns of many other characters’ perceptions of Helga, those perceptions come second-hand through Helga’s

view of them. The narrator regularly interjects qualifying statements, such as “she thought” and “she felt,” which reiterate that all external perceptions of Helga are subjectively filtered through her experience. The following quotes, with italics added to the qualifying statements, provide representative examples: “Uncle Peter was, *she knew*, the one relative who thought kindly, or even calmly of her” (6); “She was, *she knew*, in a queer indefinite way, a disturbing factor [to James]” (7); “He [Anderson] would, *she was sure*, have understood, even sympathized” (26); “She had been, *she told herself*, insulted” (84); “It wasn’t, *she contended*, herself at all” (89); “But she couldn’t escape from *sure knowledge* that she had made a fool of herself” (110). “Instinctively *she had the knowledge* that he would be shocked” (117). With these qualifying phrases, the narrator seems to be calling attention to Helga’s participation in creating her own self-identity even when she sees the judgments she feels as coming from other people.

Almost everyone is aware of being different from those around them, but Helga’s otherness has deep roots in her traumatic childhood, and subsequent rejections reopen that childhood wound. As Lacan explains, the gaze reveals to the subject his or her most vulnerable aspects, and this revelation produces shame: “The gaze sees itself—to be precise, the gaze of which Sartre speaks, the gaze that surprises me and reduces me to shame, since this is the feeling he regards as the most dominant” (84). For Helga, this shame originated in her family’s rejection of her as a child, which was based solely on her difference in appearance. Her mother’s marrying a white man after Helga’s father abandoned them brought her into an all-white community who ostracized her simply because of her black skin. So even after leaving home and continuing on into her adulthood, Helga remains keenly aware of any differences that others may perceive in her. And, with Helga’s mixed racial background, she is different from the members of any group—white or black—in which she tries to find a place for herself. As a result, Guy Reynolds

explains, "[. . .] Larsen's heroine finds a grim, if not tragic, lack of fit between self and society" (102).

And this inability to fit in is tragic for Helga. Only through the narrative voice does the reader know the depths of Helga's shame and the pain she feels as a result of her perceived difference. Memories of her childhood deal "her torturing stabs" (23); she considers herself "an obscene sore" in her family's lives" (29); and her difference in appearance made her childhood "unloved, unloving, and unhappy" (33). For this reason, Helga sees any attempt to "look into" her life as a threat. The threat these gazes pose are presented by the narrator in physical terms: the predatory "hawk" eyes of the women at Naxos watch for any signs of weakness in her (18), and the "piercing" eyes of Robert Anderson penetrate Helga's controlled façade (22). Her pride is "lacerated" when she feels self-contempt for her childhood in the presence of Anderson's statement that she is a "lady" with "dignity and breeding" (21). Her aunt's rebuff causes her a deeper wound than those from her childhood rejection because she has her guard down, having fully expected her uncle to help her financially (29). And when turned away from the YWCA employment office due to her lack of references, she has "a feeling that she had been slapped" (33).

Because rejection reminds her of her past childhood shame and creates such pain for Helga, she uses masks of various kinds to protect herself, to portray a different person externally than the one she feels herself to be internally. By presenting a false face to those around her, Helga believes that she can shield herself from the effect of the gaze that causes her pain. When Helga enters the main office at Naxos to deliver her resignation, the narrator explains that she has a "sudden attack of nerves," which "was a disease from which she had suffered at intervals all her life" (17). But instead of revealing this insecurity to those people working in the office, Helga sees it as a "point of honor [not] to give way to it" (17). So she presents an "outwardly indifferent" façade in this instance of fear and anxiety (17). This false representation of

herself is a common self-protective reflex for Helga.

Helga's chameleon-like ability—and tendency—to morph into what is required by her immediate situation is apparent right from the opening scene of the novel. The narrator's physical description of Helga set in harmony with the room and the comment he or she makes that "IaIn "observer would have thought her well fitted to that framing of light and shade" (2) lead the reader to believe that Helga completely fits in at Naxos, and this conforming image is the one Helga hopes to portray to those around her as well. But the narrator's further comments reveal that she is not at ease there in her room, that she has growing discontent with Naxos and in fact is planning to leave because of that discontent. The narrator's giving the reader access to Helga's thoughts shows a clear contrast between her external presence and her internal being.

And as the book continues, the reader realizes Helga consistently and intentionally puts forth this false appearance when threatened. Sometimes this self-protective instinct makes her avoid eye contact to keep her thoughts and feelings from being exposed as she does when Mrs. Hayes-Rore pries into her family history: "At that command Helga Crane could not help sliding down her eyes to hide the anger that had risen in them" (38). Twice, intensely personal revelations of herself to others who are not receptive to those revelations cause her to don "a mask"—after her confession to Mrs. Hayes-Rore about the shame of her childhood and while talking with her aunt about her objections to interracial marriage. She wears a "mask" in the form of a smile when on display for Axel Olsen: "For a bit longer he lingered before the silent girl, whose smile had become a fixed aching mask [. . .]" (71).

Most often, though, Helga's self-protective instinct causes her to act in ways not in sync with her internal feelings. When she goes to church in Chicago, she "hoped that some good Christian would speak to her, invite her to return, or inquire kindly," but "her self-sufficient uninterested manner" discouraged the very contact she

desired (34). When Helga encounters Robert Anderson in New York, her desire for him contradicts her need to stay in control of the situation: "She was aware, too, of a strange ill-defined emotion, a vague yearning rising within her. [ . . . ] But she held out her hand calmly, coolly" (50). After Anderson kisses her at the party, in the days that follow she is "outwardly serene [but] inwardly tumultuous" (105). All of these instances are attempts on Helga's part to convey her total control of her situation, to counter the lack of control she so often feels.

In addition to altering her behavior to meet what she perceives are the expectations of others, she also uses clothes to provide a mask of sorts, adopting the accepted fashion of those around her and rarely wearing anything of her own choosing in spite of her internal protests against such acquiescence. In Naxos, she submits to the unspoken rules of decorum. While she is partial to bright colors, conformity requires that she wear muted ones; she loves jewelry but is forced to wear only minimal accessories. When she seeks a job at the library, she wears the most understated outfit she can find. She agrees when Anne Grey thinks a dress she has purchased is too flashy, so Helga waits a year before ever wearing it. She adopts whatever clothing that her aunt, uncle, and Axel Olsen purchase for her in Denmark even though she feels over-exposed as a result. She feels that she has little choice but to take on the role prescribed to her by others in their choice of clothing because of the gap she perceives between herself and those around her.

She puts on masks of all sorts to close this gap, to attempt to make herself feel as though she fits in with her present social group, but these masks only reiterate to her even further how deeply she feels that she doesn't fit. As understandable as it may be for Helga to want to protect herself from pain by covering up her vulnerability with a false representation of herself, Lacan argues that such self-protective masks lead to a fractured self because though she may give others the look she thinks they want or one that will deter further inquiry into her private life, Helga's

inner feelings remain the same: "[T]he being breaks up, in an extraordinary way, between its being and its semblance, between itself and that paper tiger it shows to the other" (107). So Helga has to make a choice between two bad options: she can wear a mask and be fractured, or she can be whole and feel the pain that results from the self-exposure.

When Helga takes a chance, baring all the insecurities, hurt, and shame of her childhood, the fallout of this unpleasant revelation, for both Helga and Mrs. Hayes-Rore, reinforces Helga's fear of self-exposure. This realization is perhaps why Anderson's rejection of her causes her downfall. She does exactly what she believes led to her mother's downfall: she "risk[s] all in one blind surrender" (23) and exposes to Anderson her inner self, her weaknesses and desires, yet he rejects her. In the midst of this, her most devastating rejection, she struggles to keep her two sides—her external actions and her internal feelings—separate and in control, but she cannot: "She was secretly congratulating herself on her own calm when it failed her. Physical weariness descended on her. Her knees wobbled" (106). When she can no longer contain her rage, she slaps Anderson, leaving him stunned.

Helga's desire for a sexual encounter with Anderson encompasses her desire for admiration, acceptance, and love from another human being, something she has never received, and because this revelation of herself is so complete, his rejection of her offer pushes Helga beyond her breaking point. No longer calm, collected, and reserved, Helga first attempts to drink away her troubles and later dons a red dress, walks "aimlessly" through the streets of New York in a storm, and "desperately struggl[es]" toward a storefront mission where a service is underway. In spite of "a hundred pairs of eyes" watching her, she breaks down in delirious laughter. Here she relinquishes all of her self-protective instincts and lays her soul bare before God, acknowledges herself a sinner, and turns herself over to God's representative, Reverend Pleasant Green. This relinquishing of all her desires does not

produce the peace she had hoped it would, though, and she continues to feel burdened when comparing herself with people like Sary Jones who find contentment where they are.

In addition to being burdened by her perception of other people's perceptions of her, Helga attempts to find in another woman all the qualities she wishes she possessed. Several women in the novel could possibly fill the role of Helga's "image of the ideal Helga," but only one embodies all the qualities Helga feels she lacks—Audrey Denney. Anne Grey almost fills the role, but her hatred of white people obviously disqualifies her as an ideal image for Helga because of Helga's own white heritage. The narrator's descriptions of Audrey and Helga reinforce the mirror image of the two women: they both wear dresses described as "*décolleté*," and they both have smiles that aren't exactly happy—Helga's is "a fixed, aching mask" (71) while Audrey's mouth is "softly curving" yet "somehow sorrowful" (60). Both women have light skin and dark eyes. And because Helga never meets Audrey, she can easily create a persona for the image she sees without having to deal with the realities of the woman herself. As Joyce McDonald explains, "Pictures are malleable. One can make up one's own story to accompany them, or choose to see nothing beyond the immediate image" (74), and Helga chooses to "make up" her own story to accompany Audrey's image.

But, as Lacan explains, envy in the gaze does not occur in the realities of the object itself, but in what the subject thinks that the object represents to the other:

Everyone knows that envy is usually aroused by the possession of goods which would be of no use to the person who is envious of them, and about the true nature of which he does not have the least idea. Such is the true envy—the envy that makes the subject pale before the image of a completeness closed upon

itself, before the idea that the *petit a*, the separated *a* from which he is hanging, may be for another the possession that gives satisfaction [ . . . ].  
(116)

To Helga, Audrey does embody all the qualities she seeks for herself, confidence and an independence from the need for other people's approval of her actions. Anne Grey despises Audrey for her interracial relationships, and, as far as Helga knows, this displeasure has no effect on Audrey's actions. She continues to live as she pleases and not according to the rules of other people. Michael Lackey explains, "As for Audrey Denney, a regular denizen of the Harlem speakeasy, her nightclub experiences empower her, at least according to Helga, 'to ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people,' and such a response inspires within Helga, 'not contempt, but envious admiration' (62)." Helga watches Audrey appear to truly enjoy her experience in the club, apparently oblivious to the judgments being made about her. Whether or not this is an accurate portrait of Audrey is unclear; Helga's gaze on Audrey tells the reader more about Helga's desire and lack than it does of Audrey since the reader only gets Helga's impression of Audrey, not Audrey herself.

All of these revelations of Helga's insecurities throughout the text work together to explain Helga's inability to break free from her sense of hopelessness and to find a place of acceptance no matter where she seeks it out. A line that comes early in the book sums up well Helga's dilemma: "There was something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself, which was frustrating her, had always frustrated her, kept her from getting the things she wanted" (11). She cannot get away from herself, the source of her self-perception no matter who fills in as the screen for that self-perception. It does not matter where she finds herself; even alone in her room, the gaze is in her.

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## Endnotes

1. Jacques Lacan, of course, builds his theory of "the gaze" on Jean Paul Sartre's theory of "the look" (see *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, Part III, Chapter 1, "The Existence of Others"). However, Lacan did not simply co-opt Sartre's conception, but built upon that

conception, arguing that, ultimately, the effect of the "gaze" is self-stimulated, requiring no outside, real Other to produce in the subject vulnerability and shame of his or her separateness. Thus, Lacan's theory is better suited for explaining Helga's psychological motivations than is Sartre's.

## Poem

**Leonard Slade, Jr.**

## Decision

He was a worshiper  
no one paying attention to his dirty clothes,  
talking to himself,

so he sat at the front  
where few ever sit.  
The fear. Three personalities,  
Voices heard while the minister preached.

One couple moved  
Four rows behind him  
Like nothing was wrong.  
One person remained up front.

When the peace was exchanged  
After the preaching,  
Several departed  
Before the Holy Spirit came.

## Book Reviews

Kaplan, Alice. *Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Reviewer: Cleophus Thomas Jr.

In the American public mind, foreign collegiate study is perhaps most often thought of as branded post-graduate scholarships (Rhodes, Marshall, Fulbright, Rotary) that permit distinguished recent college graduates an opportunity to pursue study abroad at premier universities. In *Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis*, Yale literature professor Alice Kaplan reveals that college-based, "junior year abroad" programs are, and have been, every bit as institutionalized as branded post-graduate scholarships. Her graceful, revealing narrative is a history and a meditation of the Parisian experiences of three *ingénues* (Kennedy, Sontag, Davis) who eventually became towering public, cultural, and intellectual presences.

Paris figures prominently in one of the most memorable of John F. Kennedy's self-deprecating quips, made years after his wife, Jaqueline (née Bouvier), first studied in the French city: "I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris." What is the trajectory that launched Jacqueline Kennedy's triumphal re-entry into Paris as the closest thing to royalty or nobility that the United States of America had to offer? In 1949, a then Jacqueline Bouvier was enrolled at Vassar College. Because Vassar did not have a junior-year abroad program, she sought admittance and was accepted into Smith College's rigorous Parisian program. Her years in Paris were spent in the home of the de Rentys. Kaplan writes:

Jacqueline Bouvier's host family had a history as complex and tragic as any in post-war Paris .... The de Rentys were deported with other members of the resistance on the last convoy out of Paris, August 15, 1944—a week before the City's liberation. The Comte de Renty was taken to the German slave labor camp, Dora. Confined to a part of the camp called Ellrich, he worked on the construction site of an underground factory for building V1 and V2 missiles—Wernher von Braun's brainchild. It meant digging through rock—the equivalent of digging through a mountain. He died after four months.

Bouvier focused her Parisian studies "almost exclusively on art history and literature," notes Kaplan, though she did take International Relations since 1870, a course that Pierre Renouvin taught at the *Institute d'etudes Politiques*, commonly known as the Science Po. One of Bouvier's most memorable events, however, was extracurricular. Jeanne Saleil, director of the study-abroad program, asked Bouvier "to tell the most embarrassing faux pas of the year. Jackie's was equestrian: 'J'ai monté à poil,' she ... told her elegant hosts. 'I rode the horse naked,'" instead of "je l'ai montée à cul" (I rode the horse bareback).

In 1961, just six months into her husband's American presidency, "Jackie" Kennedy returned to Paris triumphantly as first lady of the United States. At a Parisian state dinner, she was seated according to the protocol between General de Galle and the first in line to succession to the French presidency, Gaston Monnerville, the grandson of a slave from Cayenne, a hero of the resistance, a person of color, and president of the French Senate. Placing the dinner in historical context, Kaplan recounts: "Three years before the passage of the civil rights act in the United States, it was an indication, if only on a symbolic level, that the laws of inclusion and exclusion were different in France."

Unlike Bouvier, the Paris sojourn of Susan Sontag was not a junior year abroad, as she already was a graduate of the University of Chicago when she travelled to Paris in 1958. Moreover, her "invitation" to the French city was largely self-delivered. Sontag read Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood*, an important literary and intellectual tract, that, as Kaplan summarizes, "revolves around a trio of female lovers and the freakish, omnis-



cient, transvestite gynecologist who narrates this impossible passion." For Sontag, Barnes's novel invited her to visit Paris, drink in Parisian cafes, stay in Parisian hotels, and "abandon American daytime certainties for nighttime European delirium." That is exactly what she did.

Given Sontag's later identification with liberation moments, Kaplan finds it interesting that she (Sontag) visited France when the country was "on the brink of civil war, the Algerian war for independence." That happening helped to make Sontag's Paris stay profoundly enriching culturally, but the stay was not curricular. She pursued no degree, recalls Kaplan, asserting: "if [Sontag's] diary and course notebooks are any indication, she attended no regular classes at the university." She was, however, "a vivacious consumer of culture." In addition to witnessing the Algerian War for Independence, Sontag went to the cinema several times a day and to the theatre regularly. Before leaving Paris, she also secured a walk-on part in a film called "Le Belige" by director Pierre Kast. Those and other Parisian experiences had a lasting effect. "From 1966 to the end of her life," Kaplan concludes, "Susan Sontag was a transmitter, an adapter, an interpreter, a collector, a lover of what France had given her."

Angela Davis of Birmingham, Alabama, was born in 1944. Her mother was a native of Sylacauga (a small town located about forty miles from Birmingham) who became a schoolteacher and, in the mid-1950s, studied during the summers at New York University. This seasonal migratory pattern from the South to the urban North in the summer was notably uncommon. Most black Southerners were participants in out-migration in search of better opportunities in the North, but they usually sent their children back south for the summer. Not only did the Davis children accompany their mother to New York, but they also stayed there throughout her summer studies. Indeed, Janet McDonald, a black woman and native New Yorker (and like Jackie Kennedy, a Vassar student) in the 1980s became an expatriate lawyer living in Paris, writes in her memoir, *Project Girl*, of migrating southward for a harrowing summer in Decatur, Alabama, from whence her parents came.

For Angela Davis, summers in New York were seasons of unaccustomed freedom: "zoos, parks and beaches open to them; Puerto Rican, white, and black children to play with; seat on the bus behind the driver." In the fall of 1963, Davis was in France at a momentous time for America: The Birmingham bombing occurred after she arrived in France but before she took up residence in Paris. She read of the bombing during an orientation period in Biarritz and learned of the deaths of four little girls. One was a close friend of Davis' sister, Fania. Another, Cynthia Wesley, "lived in the house just behind the Davises."

According to Kaplan, "Angela Davis was one of only six students out of forty-six in her group who were advanced enough for the most difficult program of all—an intensive course in contemporary literature at a special Sorbonne Institute." Madame Micheline Lamotte, Davis's host mother, recalled in a 2010 interview, at age ninety, that Davis's French was exquisite: "Angela a toujours le mot juste" (Angela always finds just the right word).

Davis's brilliance is incontrovertible. In 2010, Swann Gallery auctioned and sold for \$700 a letter from Herbert Marcuse to Professor P. Linwood Urban, a professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Swarthmore. The letter stated:

Dear Professor Urban:

I rank Miss Angela Davis among the top five graduate students I ever had. Miss Davis graduated from Brandeis University in 1965 and went to Frankfurt, Germany where she studied mainly with Professor Theodor Adorno. Adorno is in my view the more eminent and at the same time the most difficult philosopher of today, and he told me that Miss Davis did exceedingly well, and proved herself as one of the top students. She had learned German fluently and has since concentrated her work on German 18th and 19th century philosophy. She passed her written qualifying examinations in 1968 and is now working on her thesis .... I expect her thesis to be a genuine contribution to philosophy.



That innumerable mainstream American citizens, particularly whites, deemed Davis a social and political radical during the 1960s and the 1970s is incontrovertible as well. But her junior-year abroad in Paris in 1963 and her affinity for French culture ultimately caused countless French citizens to become unyielding supporters when she was indicted for conspiracy arising out of her support of the Black Panther Party and allied causes. The “outlaw writer” Jean Genet, author of *The Blacks*, was a particularly stalwart ally, and Kaplan does a fine job relaying the relationship of the two “radicals,” Davis and Genet.

The Paris experiences of Kennedy, Sontag, and Davis affected them profoundly. All three came to represent the cosmopolitan strain in American life and culture inaugurated by Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Kaplan’s deeply satisfying book captivates the forgoing representation extraordinarily well. In writing the cultural and intellectual history of the late twentieth century, she tells the particular stories of a diverse cast—Kennedy, Sontag, and Davis—without a hint of condescension and with the clear suggestion that the most powerful academic intellectual of the cast was the black woman, Davis. Who would have “thunk” it? I must be dreaming. Kaplan’s book is recommended for undergraduate and graduate students as well as for scholars and general readers alike.

**Slade, Leonard A. jr. *Sweet Solitude: New and Selected Poems*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 2010.**

**Reviewer: Jacqueline Trimble**

In “Ars Poetica” (1926), the acclaimed American poet Archibald MacLeish argued that “a poem should not mean, but be.” MacLeish’s argument against the strictures of context represents the ultimate statement of imagistic modernism and impracticality. Though too narrow a focus on meaning risks stifling the creation of art which speaks truly and, seemingly, spontaneously to unique moments of experience, poetry that is its own reference point can be impossible to write or daunting to read. Leonard A. Slade Jr., author of *Sweet Solitude: New and Selected Poems* (2010), a collection encompassing twenty years of his poetry gleaned from eleven volumes published from 1998 to 2007, along with new poems from 2008, occasionally embraces and eschews MacLeish’s philosophy. Slade in *Sweet Solitude* takes as poetic subjects such topics as African-American history, familial relationships, religion, nature, and jazz, alternately celebrating and critiquing American culture through the topics. A deep love for family and an abiding reverence for literature are apparent in each poem. Many poems, however, are focused inwardly, causing the collection to feature a litany of private, self-referential musings. Perhaps this introspection accounts for the “solitude” of the collection’s title. At any rate, many of the poems, rather than “mean,” seem to “be” (to quote MacLeish) products of Slade’s conversation with his own metaphorical psyche. This quality of “being” is the collection’s greatest strength as well as its essential weakness.

*Sweet Solitude* begins with “The Black Man Speaks of Rivers, Part 2: A Tribute to Langston Hughes,” a poem taken from a previous volume titled *Another Black Voice: A Different Drummer* (1988). The poem unabashedly ties the chronologically arranged collection (*Sweet Solitude*) to the African-American poetic tradition and suggests that Slade has taken on the monumental task of filling some very big literary shoes. Even though he uses the word “tribute” in the subtitle and quotes Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Slade is bold in daring to rework the seminal poem, whose speaker has “moved into the mainstream/a century after Huck and Jim journeyed down the/Mississippi” by the end of the poem. Mark Twain’s river is the site of Huck’s transformation and, symbolically, America’s transformation. Not unlike America, Huck has to decide forever between heaven and hell or, more to the point, between slavery and Jim’s personhood. Huck chooses hell, and the ever-good Jim ends up free.

Hughes’ poem uses rivers to call up a history as old as memory, and connects the children of the Middle Passage to an ancient and rich tradition. Slade uses Twain’s Mississippi, a river synonymous with slavery and commerce, as a place of change, under-

girding the agency beneath a century of Black progress by calling the names of Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, Leontyne Price, and others who helped to facilitate the “mainstreaming” of African Americans. Reimagining “A Negro Speaks of Rivers” is an audacious move, but Slade’s work frequently is unselfconsciously sentimental, deeply personal, and unrepentantly evocative of American literary and cultural history, particularly from an African-American perspective.

In part, *Sweet Solitude* is a tribute to the American literary tradition, for many of the poems turn on allusion. Undoubtedly, Slade’s long academic career as a professor of Africana Studies and English accounts for the numerous literary references, which provide a connective thread that binds the work together. For example, “Lilacs in Spring” (1998), a poem from the book by the same title, simultaneously points to Abraham Lincoln’s life and Walt Whitman’s elegy to Lincoln, “When Lilacs Last at the Dooryard Bloomed.” “The Country Preacher’s Folk Prayer” (1988) harkens back to James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones* and the practices of black church religion. “The Beauty of Blackness” (1989) recalls the syncopated rhythms and celebratory tone of Black Arts Movement poetry. “Overcharged” (1992) evokes an updated, male version of Hughes’ Alberta K. Johnson. But Slade does not simply parody the originals; he puts his own spin on tradition, replacing, for example, the landlord or the operator in Hughes’ “Madam” poems with a hotel clerk, and transforming poor Alberta K into a trash-talking, middle-class, college professor.

The best poetic moments in *Sweet Solitude*, by this reviewer’s estimation, occur when Slade finds a proper balance between astute revelation and what seems to be personal experience. He strikes such balance in “Picnic” (2008), a poem that ends with a suggestion and an observation:

You may as well be God-like  
At picnics, too, where  
Divine light shines  
And the devil runs for cover.

The poem is as much a shrug as a meditation on the nature of life itself. Herein Slade explores the inevitable introspection and resignation that come with aging, observing that, no matter what trauma one faces, God can send the devil running.

“Picnic” is a prime example of Slade’s aesthetic at its best. The poem contains folk wisdom laced with wry humor, a real sense of African-American literary and cultural history, and an internal meditation on the nature of loss. The speaker is melancholy, but hopeful: “Crisp winds, radiant sunlight, the day/ of happiness—maybe these are/the signs to believe in the future.” In fact, the picnic conceit connects sorrow and hope while simultaneously describing a traditional, multi-generational event at which people sit, talk, and reflect. One generation becomes the next, occupying the same space as the previous generation, all the while realizing that “Im]ore and more you learn to celebrate/the small things in life.”

At the end of “Picnic,” an epigram “22 July 2007/Colonie, New York,” points to a specific event, and the lines “[a]t least now/there are moments to laugh” suggest something has happened that necessitates the balm of a picnic where “conversation becomes/food for the soul.” Although occasioned by a trouble that remains unrevealed, the poem still works as a moving meditation on loss and hard-earned wisdom.

While much of Slade’s poetry seems to come from deeply personal introspection, some of the poetry is so self-reflective that the reader is either barred entry or is confronted by what amounts to little more than earnest self-indulgence. For instance, the humorous poem “Rapping My Way Home from an English Conference at Hunter College on March 22, 1997” (1997) attempts to elucidate the event described in the title, but the result is more verse than poetry. “Rapping” captures the speaker’s exuberance, but the lines never surmount superficiality and the prosody is labored:

Coming from Albany on a rocky train  
Made me want to do a special thang.

I arrived at Hunter tired and mean  
But the conference today made me clean.

Perhaps, it may be argued, that the poem represents an English professor's attempt at rap (poetry outside his genre) and therefore humor derives from its intentional clumsiness. Even so, the poem has to "work" and "be" in a way that provides the reader pleasure. Most poetry is grounded in lived experience, but, despite MacLeish's argument, the work must transcend the poet's own context and speak to the imagination, intellect, or emotion of the reader. In other words, the poem must invite conversation or at least provide talk so deliciously that the reader wishes to eavesdrop. If the poem provides pleasure only for the writer, or perhaps the one to whom the poem is written, what is the point of publication?

In contrast to "Rapping" and "When I Heard from the Tax Man" (1989), which chronicle rather than illuminate particularized experiences of the speaker, "Heifer" (2008) unflinchingly describes a fierce woman who "laughed with thunder/In her voice" and who "loved and hated [and] shouted until her foot broke." Equally as unflinching, and more illuminating, is the incantatory movement from sunrise to a new language that Slade describes in "A Song for the Black Woman" (2000):

Let the sun rise  
Early in the morning  
And the silence  
Be of love, sweet and holy, precious  
And pure, quick  
For new language.

These poems, "Heifer" and "Song," are simple, lovely, and primal. The poems' language represents what Vanderbilt University professor Houston Baker refers to in the cover blurb of *Sweet Solitude*: "The beauty of Slade's poetry is the adequacy of their feeling and the fine images he discovers for their expression." Indeed, whether the subject is rivers or breast cancer or prayer, Slade's work is full of feeling and fine images. "I Shall Pray" (2008), the collection's final poem, is simultaneously a malediction—"I burial for my adversaries with earthworms/Will precede my own death"—and a benediction; unceasing prayer, the poem argues, will lead to triumph. Such duality seems appropriate for a collection of poems that is as paradoxical as the lives and the histories that the collection chronicles. There are many moments to admire in Slade's collection: moments of insight, moments of sweet solitude, moments of being.

## **Leonard Slade, Jr.**

### **Abuse of Power**

Administrative titles in the academy  
Can make some holders intoxicated  
And downright abusive of subordinates.  
But when changes at the top come  
And "new sheriffs" come to town  
To replace them  
The ax falls on remaining heads.  
Blood runs like water.  
Faculty smile.

## **Southern Conference on African American Studies, Inc.**

### **HISTORY:**

S.C.A.A.S.I had its beginnings in 1979 following a successful statewide Black History and Culture program at Texas Southern University. The program at T.S.U. was held to bring together persons from across the state of Texas who were interested in interpreting and preserving black history and culture. The participants were very responsive. It was reasoned that this venture was such a success that the momentum had to be kept alive and expanded. Even though the southern states contained, perhaps a majority of African Americans, most of the intellectual activities geared at interpreting and preserving African American history and culture were centered elsewhere. This was virtually a virgin field. Here was something that had to be done. It was immediately decided to try to bring together, regardless of color or creed, all who were interested in interpreting and preserving Black history and culture, especially that which had originated in and/or affected the South.

### **MEETINGS:**

S.C.A.A.S.I. holds an annual meeting/convention. Eventually, each former Confederate and border state will be the site of a meeting. Most importantly, attempts are made to hold meetings at historically black colleges. At the meetings, scholarly papers are presented and critiqued. Unlike other meetings, after the paper is read, the discussion leader(s) look at the paper, not simply to negatively critique it, but to examine the validity of the work; its reflection on the black and white communities; and the possible future effect(s) of the subject matter.

Meetings have been held at the following colleges/universities: Texas Southern University; Dillard University; Tougaloo College; Alabama State University; Morehouse College; Jackson State University; North Carolina A&T University; Southern University; LeMoyne-Owens College; Virginia State University; Clark-Atlanta University; University of Texas-Arlington; Florida A&M University; Philander Smith College; Bennett College; St. Phillip's College; and Tennessee State University.

### **INQUIRIES:**

S.C.A.A.S.I. membership inquiries should be addressed to Howard J. Jones, Secretary/Treasurer, Southern Conference on African American Studies, Inc., P.O. Box 330163, Houston, Texas 77233. The annual membership fee is \$50.00. All members of S.C.A.A.S.I. receive the journal free. Single copies are \$30.00 each. The library subscription rate is \$75.00 per year. The international rate is \$100.00.

Inquiries concerning **THE GRIOT** should be addressed to Andrew Baskin, Editor of **THE GRIOT**, CPO 1715, Berea College, Berea, Kentucky 40404; email: [andrew\\_baskin@berea.edu](mailto:andrew_baskin@berea.edu).

### **YVONNE OCHILLO GOLDEN PEN AWARD:**

Named after the former vice president of S.C.A.A.S.I., the late Yvonne Ochillo of Southern University, the purpose of the award is to recognize and honor the best article published in either issue of **THE GRIOT** during the preceding year. The winner is announced by the editor of **THE GRIOT** at the annual meeting/convention.

### **Previous winners:**

- 1990-** "The History of Black Studies: Edward Willmont Blyden-A Portrait of a Forgotten Radical" by Shiame Okunor
- 1991-** "On the Edge: The Houston Riot of 1917 Revisited" by C. Calvin Smith
- 1992-** "Playing with Fire!!", Manifesto of the Harlem Niggerati" by Matthew Henry
- 1993-** "Establishing and Maintaining White Supremacy in Florida: 1876-1905" by Wali Rashash Kharif
- 1994-** The three articles dealing with the reigns of popes of African Origins by Adrian R. Roberts and Deora E. Hazel which appeared in the Fall 93, Spring 94, and Fall 94 issues of **THE GRIOT**
- 1995-** "Why Pan-Africanism Failed: Blackness and International Relations" by Rhett Jones

- 1996- "The Sweet Scent of Ginger: Understanding the Roots of Song of Solomon and Mama Day" by Holly W. Fils-Aime
- 1997- "The Pursuit of Racial Equality in America: A Reality or a Mere Fantasy?" by John Okegbe Belle-Ogunu
- 1998- "Can the Poet Make A Griot? Memory and Orality in African Poetry" by Niyi Afolabi
- 1999- Suicidal Tendencies: African Transmigration in the History and Folklore of the Americas" by Daniel Walker
- 2000- "How Paul Became Saul: The African-American Conversion Experience" by Yolanda Pierce
- 2001- "The Sado-Masochistic Dynamic in Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, as Illuminated by Sartre's Being and Nothingness and Chancer's Sadomasochism in Everyday Life" by Tommie L. Jackson
- 2002- "The Pelletier Case: A Study of the Correlation between Racial Politics in the United States and American Diplomacy Toward Haiti, 1861-1865" by Wanda Jackson and "On the Wings of Birds, Butterflies, and Bats: Fear, Flight and Freedom in African Diaspora Women's Literature" by Alexis Brooks de Vita
- 2003- "The Physical and Psychological Context of Slave Diseases: From the Senegambia to Southern Louisiana, 1812-1860" by F.K. Danquah
- 2004- "Black Environmental Liberation Theology: The Historical and Theological Roots of Environmental Justice Activism by the African American Church" by Dianne Glave and "Western Christianity: A Nationalist Ideology in African Political History" by Rupe Simms
- 2005- "Womanhood, Motherhood, Life and Death in African/Diaspora Folktales: Metamorphosis and Affirmation despite Loss and Sacrifice" by Johnea Brooks de Vita
- 2006- "Geography and the Slave Creation of Blackness in the Americas" by Rhett Jones
- 2007- "Privilege Lost: Shifting Creole identity in Antebellum Louisiana" by Miller W. Boyd, III
- 2008- "How Holy a Cause: Revisiting Slavery and the Secession Debate in Alabama, 1860-1881" by Bertis English
- 2009- "From Alabama to Moscow: Black Americans and the Soviet Experiment" by Joy Gleason Carew
- 2010- "African American Amusement Parks in the Jim Crow District of Columbia" by Mary Stanton
- 2011- "Dundus: Disabling the Concept of Race in Namba Roy's *Black Albino*" by Vida Robertson

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THE GRIOT solicits articles relative to any disciplinary perspective in the humanities that further enhances knowledge of the African's (African-American, Caribbean) experience. Poetry and book reviews will also be published. Typed articles submitted for publication should not exceed 20 pages and should conform to a style manual in the author's discipline. Please send two copies of the original manuscript, a brief autobiographical sketch, and a stamped return address envelope. The Griot: The Journal of African American Studies, the organ of the Southern Conference on African American Studies, Inc., is published at Berea College, Berea, Kentucky

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# Call for Papers

S. C. A. A. S. I. CONVENTION  
Tallahassee, Florida  
February 7, 8, 8, 2013

Theme:

*Changes in African America Brought by the  
Civil War*

Proposals considered in disciplines such as  
History, Literature, Political Science, Music, Counseling,  
Sociology, Education, etc.

**MEMBERSHIP IS REQUIRED** for program consideration!

Completed paper *must* be received on or by  
December 25, 2012!

Send proposal to—

Dr. Howard Jones [Sec.-Treas.], P. O. Box 330163, Houston, TX 77233-0163,  
Fax: 713-641-9711 or Email: SCAASI6@aol.com (preferably—please email)  
See web: [www.scaasi.org](http://www.scaasi.org)

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### Annual Individual Dues

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LIFE MEMBERSHIP (individuals): \$750.00 (payable over a three-year period)

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