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REGARDS CROISES SUR LES AFRO-AMERICAINS
CROSS PERSPECTIVES ON AFRICAN AMERICANS

HOMMAGE A MICHEL FABRE
CELEBRATING MICHEL FABRE

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In a 1932 article for the journal Opportunity, Charles Hamlin Good acknowledged an earlier “golden age” of African American literature. At the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Good reminded his readers of the writing produced by ante-bellum New Orleans’s Creoles of color. He argued that these writers “deserve more than passing notice for the work they did. In the dark ages of slavery their work foreshadowed the Negro cultural revival of today.” (Good, 79.)
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Remerciements

1 Patricia Donatien est native de Fort de France en Martinique. Elle mène de front des études anglophones à la Sorbonne, et des arts plastiques en fréquentant l’Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts où étudient ses amis du groupe Totem. Elle consacre son DEA puis son Doctorat aux arts plastiques, en particulier avec une recherche sur le groupe Africobra dont la production s’inscrit dans le cadre du Black Arts Movement. Maître de Conférences à l’Université Antilles-Guyane (campus de Schoelcher) elle poursuit une carrière artistique en participant chaque année à de nombreuses expositions collectives.

Acknowledgements

2 Patricia Donatien was born in Fort de France, Martinique. She studied both English at the Sorbonne and Fine Arts at the National Art School, where her friends of the Totem group were enrolled. Her Graduate School studies were followed by a PhD. dissertation on fine arts that focuses on Africobra—a group in line with the Black Arts Movement. An Assistant Professor at the Antilles-Guyane University (Schoelcher campus), she carries on with her artistic career and takes part every year in numerous group art exhibits.
Introduction

Claude Julien

This project has been a long time coming and I am certain my pleasure upon completion is shared by all contributors who will forgive me for my persistence and my eleventh hour e-mail questions...

The last leg of the road consisted in choosing which photos to include from Bill Ferris’s rich portfolio and, even harder, deciding on the volume’s lay out. Michel’s interests are so vast and multiform that contributors tapped a wealth of topics. So, the arrangement is as arbitrary as any other, except that, within some series, it follows a roughly chronological order.

Beginning with “Links across the waters” seemed appropriate for an indefatigable traveler like Michel. We start with Olaudah Equiano, move on to Victor Séjour, then Palmer Hayden who is followed by black intellectuals traveling in Europe between the wars. War leads us to taking a leap over the years with Primo Levi and Frederick Douglass. We go back to the US with a German scholar at Howard, and end the loop with Chester Himes’s influence on French-speaking African novelists setting their stories in France.

“Poets corner” ushers is James Emanuel and Ishmael Reed, as well as scholarly comments on Sterling Brown and Gwendolyn Brooks.

“Tributes” brings together John A Williams, as well as fellow scholars who have shared Michel’s interests and a former doctoral student. There are many of us, including myself whom Michel advised unofficially when, after a couple of years, my adviser gave me the name of a “real specialist” (those were her very words) she felt I must get in touch with.

Now for “Fiction corner”. Why not begin with Elizabeth Spencer, a white lady who writes about the South of her youth? Then we go back to Claude McKay (who could have found a niche in the first section); turn to Dorothy West’s vision of the thirties; and proceed to the contemporary scene with two vastly different approaches of John Wideman, followed by Toni Morrison. Last but not least in the fiction suite, Percival Everett playfully brings up the hopeless task of roping meaning in.

“The Caribbean and the mainland” could have moved up to the first section along with McKay, were it not for the French passion for classification. So, we find in this section Eric
Walrond and Vernon Anderson, Michelle Cliff’s acerbic critique of the US. We then turn to René Maran, one of Michel’s special interests who deserves to be better known, and conclude with the seeds and meaning of immigration for Cuban-American writers.

“Social concerns”, though not least in Michel’s spheres of interest, come last. We take a deep plunge into US racism towards black troops, and then move into Hollywood’s racial code. There follows a study of the itineraries of black domestics; and the volume ends with as contemporary a piece as can be, on the controversial “new” Harlem renaissance.

As I write this, I realize I should have begun by thanking my co-conspirators. But gratitude must first go to Michel who, in a way, has inspired what follows and brought us together through seminars and conferences over the years.

So, Michel, here is something to keep you busy some more. As you have shown us, retirement does not mean idleness. Enjoy...

Share a joke with Michel. Paris, Miss., 1979. Photo by Bill Ferris, University of Mississippi Special Collections

AUTHOR

CLAUDE JULIEN

Université de Tours
Links across the waters
The Pitfalls of Memory: Cross-Cultural Discourse and Autobiographical Form in Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*

Klaus Benesch

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   I now not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them; to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners; I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement; and every new thing that I observed I treasured up in my memory.

   Olaudah Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*...

2. The *Interesting Narrative of The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, The African*, originally published in 1789, is often seen as a forerunner and model of the well-known tradition of nineteenth-century fugitive slave narratives. Thus, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* reprinted selections of Equiano's text next to the three established classics of this genre, the autobiographical narratives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and William Wells Brown, and the eminent critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his introduction to an earlier, equally widespread anthology of African-American slave narratives, points out that the *Interesting Narrative* figures as a kind of "palimpsest" for Douglass's famous autobiography (Gates, 1988, XIII-XIV). Their many obvious similarities notwithstanding, we may yet find it difficult to read Equiano's report of his childhood in Benin (which is now part of Nigeria), of his ensuing enslavement by first a neighboring African tribe and later by British planters in the West Indies, of his service in the British Navy during the Seven Years War with France, of his conversion to Christianity, and his extended voyages around the world against the background of nineteenth-century
American "chattel" slavery. Not only did the American concept of what came to be known as the "peculiar institution" differ considerably from earlier eighteenth-century European views of slavery, but, what is more important, the search for an Afro-British identity underlying Equiano's influential text is in no way applicable to the American fugitive slave narrative.

3 Unlike the narratives of Douglass, Jacobs, and numerous other American slave narrators, Equiano's autobiography focuses on incidents and events that transcend the boundaries of just one single cultural context, thereby foregrounding a discourse of cross-cultural interrogation and acculturation rather than the physical ordeal of escaping an oppressive system that was generally seen as indigenous only to the American South. While African-American slave narratives reflect the internal contradictions and ideological schizophrenia of a fledgling new nation, their eighteenth-century predecessor is fully positioned within the European colonial framework. If the former are powerful deconstructors, according to Henry Louis Gates, of what nineteenth-century Americans "so ardently wished to be," the latter discloses a "transcultural" (in Mary Louise Pratt's terms) or "hybrid" self, as the postcolonialist critic Homi Bhabha would have it, the story of a traveler between worlds that were culturally as divergent as Africa, England, and the American colonies (Gates, 1988, 130; Pratt 1992; Bhabha 1986).

4 Since any critical assessment of eighteenth-century slave narratives must take into consideration the political and economical background of the slave trade and its cultural ramifications, I will begin my discussion by outlining first the historical context and second the contemporary ideological framework to which Equiano's text appears to be heavily indebted. Being enmeshed in an "imaginary" discourse on the alleged Otherness of the African, Equiano eventually becomes himself a prisoner of this projected image, a colonialist in disguise or, as Géraldine Murphy suggested, a "dissident" colonialist (Murphy, 1994, 553). To promote his self-authorization as a British subject, Equiano's autobiography not only caters to the formal and structural expectations of its eighteenth-century audience but is itself firmly embedded in the discourses and ideology of the enlightenment. What makes this "Interesting Narrative" so interesting even for twentieth-century readers is, after all, not so much its status as one of the first written documents by a former African slave, but a narrative voice that is constantly shuttling between some of the principle ideological assumptions of the colonialist environment, on the one hand, and the literary representation of the deplorable effects of the slave trade on the other.

5 In his powerful analysis of how Equiano's autobiographical text was influenced by contemporary economic theory, Joseph Fichtelberg takes issue with those critics who tend to write off this "colonialist" undercurrent of the Narrative, thereby presenting a lopsided picture of Equiano as rebel and avatar of African-American freedom. Interestingly, in his conclusion Fichtelberg seems to give in to the same kind of willful reappropriation he sees at work in the discussion of other readers. "The subversiveness of Equiano's position," he maintains, "lay not in what it advocated but in how it was achieved; for an ex-slave had reordered the white world according to his own peculiar vision. If the order remained hegemonically bourgeois, its creative inscription in the Narrative was no less significant and powerful, nor does Equiano's accommodation weaken the tradition it inaugurated" (Fichtelberg, 1993, 476). Given the vested political interest that informs such a reassuring judgment, Equiano's eighteenth-century slave narrative certainly remains a puzzling and dividing instance of African-American literary history. To alleviate the lasting ideological tension associated with both the original text
and some of its late twentieth-century criticism, it might be rewarding, therefore, to shift
the emphasis away from the ambiguous content of the Narrative altogether. Instead of
foregrounding its controversial political agenda, Equiano's astounding memoir should be
evaluated, as I will argue in the following, in view of the inherent paradoxes and
structural double-binds common to all minority autobiography.

(II)

To speak of Equiano's first person narrator as a "traveler" is, of course, by no means an
adequate description of the gruesome nature of his captivity and the hardships he
experienced during the so-called "middle passage" to the New World. Being snatch
from his family by fellow Africans and, successively, sold to European slave traders who
shipped him as human cargo to a place he had never even heard of, does not really qualify
for the kind of symbolic traveler that European travel writing, especially since the
Renaissance, repeatedly promulgated. In this scheme, the mostly white, male, European
traveler figures as a detached observer, a subject rather than an object, who consciously
reported on the foreign culture in order to produce an imaginary "non-western" world
available for colonization and empire building. In view of this tradition, as Murphy
argues, Equiano is more of a travelee than a traveler, not a subject but an object, not the
observer but the spectacle himself. That this Afro-British autobiographer nevertheless
takes on the pose of a traveler and not of a travelee, even in those parts of the narrative
where he tells us about his African origins and the contribution of Africans to the slave
trade, betrays not only his desire to speak more from a British than an African
perspective but also allows us to glimpse some of the idiosyncrasies of contemporary
discourses on slavery in general.

In contrast with later phases of colonial expansionism, Africa was still a blank space on
the geo-political map of the eighteenth century. Mainly because of the looming threat of
disease, Europeans who engaged in the slave trade were restricted to trading posts on the
coastal line and where therefore completely dependent on the complicity of African
tribes which they enticed to procure the desired human commodity from among their
own people. Since slavery was not unknown among the Africans themselves, there was at
first no need to vindicate the endeavor by negative racial ascriptions to the indigenous
population. As a matter of fact, the eighteenth-century slave trade was based on
predominantly financial rather than racial considerations. Enslavement of Europeans by
North African Moslems, for instance, was a well-known fact and Equiano himself
comments in his Narrative on the deplorable fate of white galley slaves in Italy and the de
facto enslavement of Greek laborers by the Turks. At the time Equiano set out to write his
autobiography, the African slave trade had not yet led to the idea that blacks were
genetically more suited to slavery than whites, an idea especially prevalent in
nineteenth-century America, and that therefore the darker race could never aspire to be
released from its subordinate, dependent position in Western society. In late eighteenth-
century England, social status, as Equiano's career makes apparent, could still supercede
race as a defining category.

In addition to this purely economic grounding of the slave trade, many of the eighteenth-
century slave narrators (both black and white) conceived of their bondage in terms of a
spiritual trial: the narrator's eventual deliverance was seen as a deliverance from sin, a
form of rebirth made possible by the agency of true faith. The literary model for this
religious assessment of slavery, the Protestant spiritual autobiography, is particularly
important in this context because it allowed simultaneously for a more positive reading
of the experience of enslavement and a progressive depiction of the history of the individual as well as the moral and spiritual development of "civilized" societies at large. If the blurring of physical and spiritual slavery served to alleviate the psychological pressure of bondage, the formal pattern of sin, repentance, spiritual awakening and, ultimately, new birth also provided a paradigm that reflected ideally the Christian conviction of potential audiences and the progressivist view of history proffered by such protean Enlightenment figures as Anne Robert, Jacques Turgot and the Marquis de Condorcet. 

What is more, since the progressivist, spiritual paradigm was shared by both the narrator and his/her readers, it was also a powerful argument for their common humanity. From this perspective, the experience of being taken a slave occasionally even becomes a kind of "fortunate fall", a blessed moment in the painful history of the black self towards religious education and ultimate redemption. Here is how another eighteenth-century black writer, Phillis Wheatley, depicts the middle passage in her short poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (1773):

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die."  
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,  
May be refin'd, and join th'angelic train. (Wheatley, 1966, 7)

Wheatley's portrayal of the middle passage as a journey from ignorance to refinement, from the darkness of sin to an awareness of God, corresponds with Equiano's story of his acculturation to British society and his conversion to the Methodist branch of English Protestantism. While it thus neatly follows the pattern of the spiritual autobiography, the Interesting Narrative can also be read, however, as a paradigmatic story of success, a Franklinesque treatise on self-reliance and modern entrepreneurship. True, Equiano's narrative is steeped in religious metaphor and his citational frame of reference alternates between the Bible, Milton, Bunyan and various contemporary religious tracts. But even where he concentrates completely on his spiritual awakening, his rhetoric remains glaringly utilitarian and market-oriented. "Now the Ethiopian was willing to be saved by Jesus Christ", he tells us towards the end of his text, but this only implied that he was now determined to swap his seafaring life for a more stable, economic career in London, to work out "my own salvation, and, in so doing, procure a title to heaven" (Equiano, 1995, 178-190).

Equiano's emphasis on self-reliance, frugality, and economic wit has prompted various critics to compare his narrative to Robinson Crusoe, whose stranded protagonist ends as proprietor of a small, but fully functioning colony (cf. Overton 1992). And indeed, there are some striking similarities between Defoe's fictional and Equiano's "disdendent" colonialist. Contrary to the authors of nineteenth-century fugitive slave narratives, Equiano does not achieve freedom by way of escape but through hard work and skillful trading. Having learned soon that the slave trade was basically profit-oriented, the enslaved sailor swiftly accustoms himself to the capitalist modes of exchange and, with the consent of his master for whom he worked on a merchant ship in the Caribbean, sets up a small-scale, itinerant trading business of his own. He is pleased with his captain's choice of a larger boat, because "from his having a larger vessel, I had more room, and,
could carry a larger quantity of goods with me" (Equiano, 1995, 131). And since his efforts return good profits, he immediately plans on extending his business during his next voyage when he "laid in as much cargo as [he] could, trusting God's providence to prosper [his] undertaking" (Equiano, 1995, 131). By thus accumulating the capital required to purchase himself from his master, Equiano implicitly accepts the economic grounding of the slave trade. Rather than instigating rebellion among his fellow slaves (which he could have done at various times), his mind was "replete with inventions and thoughts of being freed... by honest and honourable means" (Equiano, 1995, 119, my emphasis). And like Defoe's emblematic hero he not only survives the trials of actual enslavement but eventually becomes himself entangled in the slave trade, acting as overseer on a Georgia plantation and, later, buying slaves for a missionary expedition to Jamaica.

If Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* can be said to foreshadow the world view and ideology of the rising bourgeoisie, Equiano's project of becoming a British subject by way of free enterprise mirrored precisely the critical moment in history when England was about to assume world economic hegemony and the emergent liberalism extended to all segments of English society. Bourgeois attitudes, as Fichtelberg has shown, even pervaded British abolitionism and Equiano's narrative, which was written in part to influence the parliamentary discussions on the abolition of the slave trade, represented a powerful statement in favor of the newly established primacy of capitalist production (Fichtelberg, 1993, 466-67).

That Equiano argues from within the dominant liberalist framework becomes especially clear in his conclusion to the *Narrative* where he directly addresses the British senators as "the dispersers of light, liberty and science, to the uttermost parts of the earth" (Equiano, 1995, 233) and calls upon their willingness to renovate the damages done to the British Empire by the effects of the ignoble slave trade. Contrary to the earlier mode of spiritual autobiography, his argument here does not rest on any moral or religious grounds but is wholly geared to the magnificent prospects of economic progress. "I doubt not," he advises the British legislature,

> if a system of commerce was established in Africa, the demand for manufactures would most rapidly augment, as the native inhabitants would insensibly adopt the British fashions, manners, customs, etc. In proportion to the civilization, so will be the consumption of British manufactures. The wear and tear of a continent, nearly twice as large as Europe, and rich in vegetable and mineral productions, is much easier conceived than calculated.... It is trading upon safe grounds. A commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain, and to all which the slave-trade is an objection.... This I conceive to be a theory founded upon facts, and therefore an infallible one. (Equiano, 1995, 233-234)

I have chosen this particular quotation not because it illustrates the tangled skein of imperial interests, abolitionism and economic self-assertion of the colonial subject (which, of course, it does) but because it forcefully foregrounds the idea of an "insensible" adoption of the fashions and manners of the dominant culture, an idea that I believe to be of particular interest in regard to Equiano's autobiographical account of his own acculturation. That the *Interesting Narrative* supports a liberalist-economic scheme similar to the one portrayed in *Robinson Crusoe* can hardly be denied. But what if we compare Equiano's ambiguous position not to the colonizer but to the "colonized" of that novel, namely a cannibal called Friday, who, like the hero of the *Narrative*, appears to be a kind
of living oxymoron, a "willing" slave serving his master because he represents a culture allegedly superior to his own?

Although it would be easy to provide numerous instances where the hero of Equiano's text actually figures as a "willing" slave, this does not automatically mean that his account of slavery, refraining as it does from an overall critique of its economic foundations, is secretly condoning, as some critics believe, the machinations of the slave system. What appears to be more interesting in this context is the question of how the dichotomous cultural traditions of his African and English background, a dichotomy remarkably highlighted in both the full title of the *Narrative* and the frontispiece, featuring a strikingly ambiguous portrait of its author. Thus, the former explicitly provides the reader not only with the author's original African name, *Olaudah Equiano* (which signified that a person had a loud voice and was well spoken), but also with his second European name, *Gustavus Vassa*, a name that was forced on him by his first captain and master, who wanted to conceal Equiano's status as a slave (the practice of slave-holding, though widespread among British officers, was regarded as improper by the Admiralty). In the frontispiece, this doubleness is even more emphasized by the visual blurring of the author's impeccable European attire and his strikingly African features. Obviously, the Afro-British autobiographer was keenly aware of his ambivalent discursive position. Struggling hard to negotiate the divergent impulses that finally led him to transform his life into text, Equiano created a personal memoir that brings to the fore not only the pitfalls of autobiographical memory but the ideological ambiguities of colonial discourse at large.

(III)

Many of the glaring contradictions of the tale are actually generic and can be traced to the structural demands of representing the oppressed self as an autonomous subject and author of a self-contained autobiographical text. Structurally, autobiographical writing appears to be at once "a discovery, a creation, and an imitation of the self" (Olney, 1980, 19). By creating an original and consistent history of the author's life, autobiography also creates the notion of a self predicated on the intimate connection between the present writing self and the past written self. As John Locke pointed out, a person's identity can only be measured in regard to the past or, put another way, no form of identity is conceivable without history. "Consciousness always accompanies thinking," Locke argues in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, "and it is that that makes everyone to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things; in this alone consists personal identity, i.e., the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person" (Locke, 315). To represent the history of the self as a continuum of events that always only foreground the "sameness of a rational being" has been a major incentive of modern autobiographers ever since the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine. Based on the assumption that by transforming a life into a text that life somehow assumes wholeness or identity, autobiography ideally embodies what the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha has called "a tradition of representation that conceives of identity as the satisfaction of a totalizing, plenitudinous object of vision" (Bhabha, 1992, 5).

Embracing a literary form that privileges individual experience and the originality or "otherness" of the autobiographical persona vis-à-vis the larger society, Equiano is fully at home when reporting on his adult life as a former slave and alienated British citizen.
However, since all slave narratives are supposed to assume referential power not only in regard to the experience of the narrator but, by extension, of a whole group of people, the autobiographical voice is conspicuously shifting when confronted with the task of representing native African culture and/or non-western characters in general. Historically, the problem of claiming an authorial voice of one's own, the right to speak as an individual rather than merely as a member of an oppressed group, had always been a contested issue for African-Americans. If for many slave narrators the right to author a text could be gained only by way of substitutional authorization, that is, white patronage, they succeeded to an astonishing degree in wielding authorial control through complex, double-voiced narrative strategies. While their written documents were often taken as indicative of a common fate, as treacherous signs of a forced collectivism, the one element that could make a difference was precisely the answer to the unasked question "Who is speaking?". "Autobiography as a genre," as Roger Rosenblatt once remarked, "should be the history of individual craziness, but in black autobiography the outer reality in which heroes move is so massive and absolute in its craziness that any one person's individual idiosyncrasies seem almost dull in their normality" (Rosenblatt, 1980, 174). If Rosenblatt is correct here, it is hardly surprising that the fledgling author of an eighteenth-century slave narrative, a narrative originally designed to influence a controversial parliamentary petition against the slave trade, should entangle himself in the structural "double-binds" of this highly ambiguous genre.

A signal event of this kind of discursive ambiguity occurs early on in the Narrative when Equiano, who at that time was nominally still a slave and was serving as a captain's steward on board a British battleship, encountered another black boy of roughly his own size and age. His recollection of the incident bears to be quoted at length:

This boy having observed me from his master’s house, was transported at the sight of one of his own countrymen, and ran to meet me with the utmost haste. I not knowing what he was about, turned a little out of his way at first, but to no purpose; he soon came close to me, and caught hold of me in his arms as if I had been his brother, though we had never seen each other before.... This benevolent boy and I were very happy in frequently seeing each other, till... our ship had orders to fit out again for another expedition. (Equiano, 1995: 85, emphasis mine)

If Equiano has by then, as he maintains, almost become an Englishman, in regard to this fellow slave he does not yet appear to have cut off all of his former cultural ties. Although he initially describes his reaction to the African in typically European terms (that is, caught between anxiety and benevolence), he is still intrigued by his friendship and wholehearted, brotherly love. Even after he has bought his freedom and has again embarked on a voyage to Jamaica, Equiano's attitude towards non-western cultures remains indeterminate. On the one hand, he poses as the archetypal colonialist by adopting a ruse of which he "had read in the Life of Columbus" (Equiano, 1995, 208) to appease the native Indian population, while, on the other, he is "sorry to say that there was not one white person in our dwelling, nor any where else, that I saw in different places I was at on the shore, that was better or more pious than those unenlightened Indians" (Equiano, 1995, 206). Clearly, Equiano's cultural position is by no means homogeneous. While he seems to underwrite fully the moral and economic standards of the colonizer, he attributes those standards almost exclusively to representatives of the colonized. To him, the Indians acted more like Christians than any whites he had met and "they seemed to be singular, in point of honesty, above any other nation I was ever amongst" (Equiano, 1995, 207).
This latter ascription of the natives as honest and trustworthy is especially revealing because it reinforces the euphemistic depiction of African culture in the opening chapter of the Narrative. To portray his own people as embodying all of the protestant values he believes to be glaringly misrepresented by the British themselves, Equiano's account of West-African society is highly stylized and, as various historians have noted, to a great extent fictional (Ogude, 1982; Afigbo, 1981). For example, he suggests that its principle modes of exchange was pre-capitalist, depending neither on commerce nor on money as a general means of payment. Since eighteenth-century Benin was actually marked by both a thriving commerce as well as an extensive market and widely circulating currency, one is hard pressed to assume that Equiano consciously manipulated his childhood experiences to adjust them to the well-established stereotype of African "otherness."

The cultural gap between Europe and Africa had long been measured in terms of the latter's economic and commercial retardation. As economist Adam Smith wrote in 1763, "whenever commerce is introduced into any country, probity and punctuality always accompany it. These virtues in a rude and barbarous country are always unknown" (Meek, 1976, 253-54). Why, then, did Equiano suppress the vigorous commercialism of his original culture, a move that becomes even more puzzling when we consider that in his conclusion to the Narrative he envisions Anglo-African trade as essential for the development of England and the African continent? To answer this crucial question one cannot but conclude that he had himself "insensibly" adopted one of the major ideological premises of colonialism, namely, that Africa is a barbaric, undeveloped continent passively awaiting colonization to be aroused from its prehistoric slumber. In Equiano's account, West-African culture becomes just such an imaginary natural space; in contrast to Smith's colonialist dismissal of undeveloped societies, however, his Africans come across as true noble savages, a pious, friendly people who are innocent of most of the vices pertinent to so-called civilized countries. Significantly, Equiano also indulges in a series of misrepresentations of native character and mentality. Contrary to historical truth, he prides himself on the rumor that "West-India planters prefer the slaves of Benin or Eboe to those of any other part of Guinea, for their hardiness, intelligence, integrity, and zeal" (Equiano, 1995, 38); in fact, a contemporary history of the British colonies in West India described the Eboes as "the lowest and most wretched of all the nations of Africa... and more truly savage than any nation of the Gold Coast" (1793/2, pp. 70-71). Since the success of free trade relies largely on the concept of individual property as well as mutual accountability, Equiano apparently took pains to refute contemporary travel reports on the collective thievishness of Africans and their alleged disregard for personal property in general.

That he does so by having recourse to a more benign yet equally problematic distortion of African culture, namely Montaigne's idea of the noble savage, only goes to show that his narrative cannot be read simply as a subversive counter statement to colonialist rhetoric. Rather, Equiano's is a more comprehensive discourse, a hybrid, border-crossing text that continuously valorizes the colonized from within an ideology of the colonizer. If recent postcolonial theory has moved away from Fanon's famous phrasing of a Manichean struggle, a clash of antagonistic ideologies and interests between the conquering and the colonized nation, and is now emphasizing the intrinsic ambivalence and hybridity of all colonial discourse, this eighteenth-century slave narrative and its Afro-British protagonist may well be taken as an early representation of the complex, transcultural
self of the colonial subject. What is more, it may also be taken as a striking example of how an Anglo-African autobiographer, in the phrasing of William L. Andrews, while "presumably engaged in reconstructing his life... is also at work structuring a set of conditions in which the reader will find it appropriate to re-examine his concept of identity and personal value" (Andrews, 1984,36).

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Works Cited


NOTES


2. On the history and ideological foundations of slavery both in Europe and the Americas, see, among others, Davis (1975) and Walvin (1992).

3. As Vincent Carretta aptly put it, it is one of the later, cruel ironies of the American "democratic" revolution that "it also democratized slavery, making all people of African descent equally eligible for enslavement" (Carretta, 1996, 11).

4. Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1790) and Turgot's *Discours sur les progrès successifs de l'esprit humain* (1750) are only the most famous examples of the dominance of progressivist theories of history during the latter half of the eighteenth century.

5. On the history of autobiographical form and western identity politics, see Lejeune (1975) and Olney (1980).

6. In 1969 Michel Foucault ended a now famous lecture before the *Société française de Philosophie* by asking: "What difference does it make who is speaking?" In his presentation, entitled "What Is an Author?," Foucault exposed the discursive status of authorship and made clear that there is no ontological ground outside the text itself from which we can interrogate the authenticity or originality of an author. While his displacement of authorship soon became a staple of poststructuralist literary theory, it also posed a serious problem for marginalized groups like women and ethnic minorities. Having been excluded from official, authorized discourse for
centuries, the one thing that could make a difference for them was precisely the answer to the question: "Who is speaking?" (Foucault, 1979, 160).

7. In his 1961 *Les damnés de la terre*, Fanon observed an insuperable divide between the colonizer and the colonized, each inhabiting separate political, economic, and cultural zones that "are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity. Obedient to the rules of pure Aristotelian logic, they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible.... The colonial world is a Manichean world" (Fanon, 1963, 38-41).

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Disappearing Acts: the Dramatic Career of Victor Séjour, FMC

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1 In a 1932 article for the journal *Opportunity*, Charles Hamlin Good acknowledged an earlier “golden age” of African American literature. At the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Good reminded his readers of the writing produced by ante-bellum New Orleans’s Creoles of color. He argued that these writers “deserve more than passing notice for the work they did. In the dark ages of slavery their work foreshadowed the Negro cultural revival of today.” (Good, 79.) Still, it is not widely known that the first anthology of African-American literature was a collection of poetry by francophone Louisiana’s “Free men of color.” *Les Cenelles: choix de poésies indigènes* was published in New Orleans in 1845, the same year in which the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* appeared. And while Douglass’s text is now justly celebrated as an original American masterpiece, *Les Cenelles* has been confined to a rarely visited place in American literary history. And yet this anthology is a remarkable reminder of the varieties of black experience as well as the multilingual origins of multicultural America. Moreover, the volume represents an extraordinarily self-conscious gesture by writers who did not want their work to simply “pass” into anthologies of French literature and our understanding of American literature is incomplete without such texts. Of the numerous anthologies of African-American literature published in the twentieth-century only two included poems from *Les Cenelles.* Langston Hughes translated two poems and included them in *The Langston Hughes Reader.*

2 The volume itself and best illustrated through a comparison to Douglass’s *Narrative.* Everyone recognizes the slave narrative as an original American contribution to world literature and we acknowledge that Douglass’s *Narrative,* the extraordinary power of its rhetoric and the remarkable story it relates, has made it the standard and brilliant exemplar of much that we celebrate in African American literature and history. And very unlike Douglass’s *Narrative,* *Les Cenelles* is a volume of poetry inspired by French literary Romanticism. This has led some contemporary critics to conclude that the privileged Creoles of color produced little of interest because they “could not or would not confront the problems...
that blacks, no matter how elevated, experienced.” (Latortue, xiii.) Implicit here is the sense that because the 19th-century Creoles of color had not been slaves, and in some cases may have even owned slaves, their lives and work do not qualify as African American, indeed that they are something of an embarrassment. But Les Cenelles is not just another collection of French romantic poetry, it is very explicitly about Creoles of color writing French romantic poetry. And although there are no poems that address the problems of slavery, there are poems highly critical of the consequences of slavery such as the custom of *plaçage* or race-based injustice. It is evident from Armand Lanusse’s introduction that *Les Cenelles* was intended to be an eloquent critique of the racist ideology to which the United States was committed. Even though we will not find a slave narrative in the writing of the Louisiana Creoles, their work is often infused with and informed by the conflict of race in America. Among the contributors to *Les Cenelles* was the dramatist Victor Séjour, one of the mid-nineteenth century playwrights popular in Paris.

2 Victor Séjour was born into the Creole of color community of New Orleans in 1817. In the early decades of the 19th century, the flood of refugees from the Haitian Revolution dramatically increased the population of this already prosperous community. By the 1830s, Creoles of color owned cotton and sugar plantations, some owned slaves, others worked as carpenters, printers and iron smiths or entered professions such as medicine or education. Victor Séjour’s father, Louis, was a Haitian immigrant and his mother, Héloïse, was a free woman of color from New Orleans. The Séjour family lived in the Vieux Carré neighborhood where Louis owned a small business. Séjour attended the Saint Barbe Academy where prosperous families of the community sent their children. Like many of his peers, Victor Séjour left New Orleans between 1834 and 1836 to complete his education in Paris; instead he became a remarkably successful playwright (Fabre, 1991, 14-16; Fabre, 2000, 179-207; O’Neill, 1-7). From 1844 to 1875, twenty of Séjour’s twenty-two plays were staged in Paris, the French provinces and New Orleans.

3 Louisiana’s history as a French and then Spanish territory had an important impact on the way slaves and free people of color were perceived and treated. Evidence of this is apparent in the adaptation of the *Code noir*, a set of laws initially outlined to regulate the lives of slaves in the French islands under Louis XIV. The *Code noir*, according to historian Caryn Cossé Bell recognized the “moral personality” of slaves inasmuch as it required that slaves be instructed in the teachings of the Catholic Church and that they be baptized, married and buried in the church. Slaves were also forbidden to work on Sundays and other Catholic holy days (Cossé Bell, 12-13; Roussève, 20-22, 42). Indeed the origins of the racial mixture that came to be known as “Creole of color” are traceable to the early 18th century when French and Spanish colonists often took slave women as mistresses or wives, freed them and recognized and raised their children (Roussève, 25). Louisiana’s Creoles of color were an extraordinary exception to the general condition of free blacks in the antebellum United States. But the community occupied a precarious position white and Anglophone Americans, between black and white, between slave and free. In his first published work and in two plays, Séjour explores the vulnerability of this community through variations on the familiar trope of the “tragic mulatto.”

4 Séjour’s short story “The Mulatto” was first published in 1837 in the *Revue des colonies*, the organ of a radical society of people of color. It was founded by Cyrille Auguste Bissette, an «homme de couleur» from Martinique, was published in Paris and dedicated to social justice and the abolition of slavery (Bongie, 266-268; Sollors, 1997, 164). (The
journal’s story was first published in English in 1997 in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Set in Santo Domingo, now the Republic of Haiti, “The Mulatto” is Séjour’s only work set in the New World. It is the familiar story of the white master fathering a son he refuses to acknowledge. The theme appears repeatedly throughout the 19th century for example, Lydia Maria Child’s “The Quadroons” (1842), William Wells Brown’s *Clotel or: The President’s Daughter* (1853), Dion Boucicault’s *The Octroon* (1859) and Charles Chesnutt’s “The Sheriff’s Children” (1899). As far as we know, Séjour’s “The Mulatto” is the first published short story by an American of African descent. The tale is remarkable not only because it appeared so early, but because of the economy and frankness with which it renders the horrors of chattel slavery. Georges, the mulatto of the tale, is the son of a beautiful Senegalese woman and her brutal white master, Georges grows up a slave without ever knowing his father’s identity. Years later, when Alfred attempts to rape Georges’s wife Zélie, she resists and in the process, Alfred is injured. Georges pleads with Alfred to spare Zélie’s life, noting that he had recently saved Alfred’s life. Unmoved Alfred refuses and condemns Zélie to death. Georges escapes, but returns three years later and murders Alfred and his entire family. In the moment before his death, however Alfred confesses that he is Georges’s father. Horrified by his crime, Georges then commits suicide. In nineteenth-century American literature death is the predictable fate of the “tragic mulatto.” But patricide is rare in early representations of this conflict. The patricide and suicide of the mulatto in this story connect the new world themes of slavery and “miscegenation” to the themes of Greek tragedy: complicated family relations, obscure origins, incest and identity, and how these corrupt the family and ultimately society (Sollors, 1986, 296).

It is curious that Séjour chose not to dramatize his short story because the mulatto character, whose exotic origins and status as an outcast with a tragic past and a desire for revenge, was very popular with French audiences. During the 1840s there were two plays featuring a mulatto character on stage in Paris. Based on the popular novella, *Les Epaves* by Madame Reyboud, Alexis Decomberousse and Benjamin Antier wrote *Le Marché de Saint-Pierre* in 1839 and Eugène Scribe’s adaptation, *Le Code noir* appeared in 1842. But a dramatic rendition of Séjour’s short story, with its raw portrayal of the violence of plantation slavery, would never have gotten past the censors. Instead Séjour continued his exploration through a variation of this theme. In *The Jew of Seville* and later in *The Fortune Teller*, Séjour employs the New World’s trope of the tragic mulatto to critique both Old and New world racism.

In his representation of European anti-Semitism, Séjour employs the familiar themes of nineteenth-century African-American literature such as the idea of passing, the taboo of inter-group love and marriage and the ways in which such a polarized society makes it possible for parents to cause the deaths of their children. Séjour may have seen parallels between black/Creole of color/white America and Jewish/Christian Europe because for much of European history the difference between Jews and Christians was more than simply a matter of faith. Moreover, the similarities between the experience of European Jews and the Creoles of color might have struck Séjour with special force because anti-Semitism had been written into the laws governing his native Louisiana. The first article of the *Code noir* expels Jews from the colony (Code noir, 29-30).

Even though *The Jew of Seville* and *The Fortune Teller* look very unlike abolitionist texts such as Séjour’s “The Mulatto,” the tragic consequences for the offspring of mixed unions are similar. As important, the distance obtained by moving the conflict from the familiar
color context of black/Creeole/white, enabled Séjour to make visible the social rather than the supposedly natural construction of difference. By replacing the variable race with religion, Séjour dramatizes a difference that is invisible, as was true of many Creoles of color. For if phenotypical differences cannot be detected, how reliable are they to designate categories of difference? The fear of not being able to tell who is what is the source of the obsession with designations such as mulatto, quadroon and octoroon. Nineteenth century American society and individual identity depended on being able to see the difference between black and white, between free and slave. As important and perhaps unique to Séjour’s work, is the way these plays explore the relationship between Catholic anti-Semitism and a social and legal identity based on blood.

Victor Séjour’s first play, The Jew of Seville was, quite remarkably, accepted by the Comédie-Française (then the Théâtre Français) in 1843 when he was just twenty-six years old. One of the familiar themes Séjour draws upon from “tragic mulatto” literature, is the idea of racial otherness as a form of physical and spiritual pollution. When it is revealed that Inès is the daughter of the Jew Diégaris, Don Juan refuses to marry her because a Jewish wife would dishonor his name and corrupt his soul (act 3, scene 8). Inès’s mother was a Catholic noblewoman, but just as one drop of black blood was enough to make an apparently white person black, Inès’s Jewish blood taints her Spanish blue-blood. A similar theme appears in Dion Boucicault’s extremely popular melodrama The Octoroon (1859). Zoe, the beautiful heroine, reveals to George Payton, her white suitor, why she cannot marry him: “Of the blood that feeds my heart, one drop in eight is black—bright red as the rest may be, that one drop poisons all the flood.... I’m an unclean thing—forbidden by the laws—I’m an Octoroon!”

In Spain the notion of “pure blood” and the possibility of pollution by the Other found its earliest expression in a special statute, Sentencia-Estatuto, adopted in Toledo in 1449. This statute prohibited Jewish conversos from holding public office. Such practices culminated in the limpieza de sangre (purity of blood) statutes in 1556 (Kamen, 29, 46; Netanyahu, 76-85). Marc Shell has argued that these statutes were part of a nation-building process that began with the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 and the Muslims in 1502 (Shell, 26-30). The purity of blood statutes distinguished between “original” Christians and conversos, converts from Judaism or Islam, is based on heredity (Shell, 26-30). These statutes made it as impossible for a Jew or Muslim who had converted to Christianity (or their offspring) to be accepted by the “original” Christians as it was for a person of mixed heritage to be anything but “black.” Séjour seems to have understood this parallel by setting his play in Spain shortly before 1492, the year that links Spain to America and through limpieza de sangre, Jews to the Creoles of color. Séjour may have known that these laws were still in effect as he composed The Jew of Seville; they were not abolished until 1865 (Encyclopedia Judaica, 1022; Roth, 354).

Like a congenital disease, this pollution is transmittable to children even if, like Inès they are not raised Jewish or, like Zoe, it is impossible to detect blackness from her appearance. In fact, Inès has been raised a Christian; indeed at eighteen she has just learned that her father is a Jew. Moreover, according to Mosaic law, Inès is not a Jew because her mother Bianca was not a Jew and according to the laws of the Catholic church, Inès is a Christian. But no matter how white Zoe appears or how many times Inès is baptized, their perceived difference is fundamental to the identity and legitimacy of the dominant culture, and so the contradiction remains unaddressed. How else to explain the legal fiction that for centuries supported the view “that white blood, though it can be
wholly 'blackened' cannot be partly diluted" (Shell, 21). In Séjour’s native Louisiana up until 1970, a person with one thirty-second black ancestry was considered a “Negro.”

After his public humiliation, Diégarias tells his daughter that a Jew is never at home in the Christian world. In rhetoric that could easily describe the position of Séjour’s Creole community, Diégarias warns Inès:

Today, we spoke of country, you
And I, and of the noble heroes, through
The ages, whom the past bequeaths to us.
But why? What folly is it to discuss
Such things! Is there a fatherland for those
Who have no rights? Tomorrow, if I chose
To put aside my pride and, humbly, go
Trembling before his Majesty…. Bow low
And deep before our Christian King…. Yes him
Whom I sustained, defended, life and limb,
For many a year…. If I begged, on my knees,
Hands clasped in prayer: " O gentle monarch, please,
Help me! Many are they who now would seize
My wealth, my property…. Who would divest
Me of my very life! Pray, save me, lest
I die anon!" What think you would result?
Ah! How his rogues would mock me and exult
To chase away this Jew, so mad with pride,
That he knows not he ought be satisfied
Merely to live, and who, base citizen
Deprived of rights and lowliest of men,
Dares to invoke the justice of our laws!
So would it be! (act 4, scene 2).

Between 1850-1860, there was a distinct echo of Catholic Spain’s nation-building exclusionist practices in Louisiana vis-à-vis the Creole-of-color. In response to the pressure of the abolitionist movement in the North, Louisiana clung more fiercely to its identity as slave-holding and white; consequently the civil rights of the free people of color were systematically restricted, withheld, and on the eve of the Civil War all but annulled.

Séjour’s representation of the Jew uses themes that have their most popular expression in The Merchant of Venice, particularly in the Jew/Christian relationship. Both Shylock and Diégarias are publicly disgraced by Christians who need their money, both lose their daughters to Christian men, both use their wealth to extract revenge, but here the similarities end.

Unlike Shylock, who is always the social leper, Diégarias conceals his Jewish origins and “passes” into the Christian world where he succeeds magnificently; unlike Shylock, as a converso, Diégarias experiences life as simultaneously an insider and an outsider. The differences are further illustrated in each father’s response to the seduction of his daughter by a Christian. Throughout Shylock’s ranting over Jessica’s flight, he seems to be less wounded by her leaving than by the loss of what she took. When Inès confesses that she has married without his consent, Diégarias already knows that the marriage is a sham but his anger is deflected by her remorse and his determination to punish Don Juan.

Shylock’s famous discourse is a moving appeal for compassion between different peoples, but his archetypal Jewish greed is only surpassed by his hot desire for revenge; he refuses triple his original loan to watch Antonio die. Diégarias’s desire for revenge is no less
heated, but it is mediated by a call for justice that will only come with a revolution of the social order. Indeed when the tocsin initiates the civil war, Diégarias disrespectfully informs the King (in the second-person familiar) that he has betrayed him:

Yes, it is the people that you hear!
The sovereign people, who will persevere
Until, burning with rage, with arms of steel
Entwining you, they crush you, make you feel
Their rightful wrath trample your crown, destroy
Your throne, whose scraps, bits, in a fit of joy,
They will refashion in a coffin for
Your royal bones! Give ear! That mighty roar
You hear.... It is the people, with one voice,
Crying out for a ruler of their choice!
Resign yourself, prince of the blood! A Jew
Has smashed the throne for all who follow you! (act 5, scene 8)

The insertion of this republican rhetoric here (completely out of place in this play) further links *The Jew of Seville* to the social and political climate back in Louisiana. In the decade before the American Civil War, it alludes to the split between the republican north and the aristocratic south, where slavery, a system based on heredity, was the last vestige of the “old” world and the glaring contradiction at the heart of the Republic. Shylock wants Antonio’s life and only that; Diégarias wants the end of government based on heredity, that is, the end of a social and political system based on race. Shylock remains an outsider, but as an insider/outside (a concept which also characterizes Séjour’s Creole community) Diégarias wishes to make his revenge the catalyst for social and political revolution. Part of the reason for the erosion of the civil rights of the Creoles of color in Louisiana immediately before the Civil War was the fear that they would incite slave revolts and ultimately side with the North.

That Séjour chose to write a play in dramatic verse set in fifteenth-century Spain to explore the racist practices of his native Louisiana points to a poignant irony of which only history seems capable. Spain became a Catholic nation based in part on the purity of blood statutes, and expelled its Jews in the same year that Christopher Columbus discovered the new world—a new world that would later adapt features of those statutes to enslave and subjugate the Africans who had been brought there by force. In both content and form Séjour’s *The Jew of Seville* revisits the European origins of racist America. At the height of his career, Séjour returned to this theme in his most controversial play, *The Fortune Teller*.

In the years between the production of *The Jew of Seville* and *The Fortune Teller*, Victor Séjour had become a very successful playwright. Between 1844 and 1859 eleven of his plays had been produced. Stylistically he had moved from the classical drama of the Comédie Française to the popular theater of the Boulevard du Temple where some of the city’s best actors, such as Marie Laurent and Frédérick-Lemaître, performed his plays. Reviews of Séjour’s work, written by important critics such as Théophile Gautier and Félix Savard, regularly appeared in the city’s newspapers and theater journals. In 1859, Victor Séjour was in an excellent position to dramatize one of the most notorious instances of anti-Semitism in Italian history.

In June of 1858, the inquisitor of Bologna ordered six-year old Edgardo Mortara removed from his Jewish family. A Christian maid who had worked for the Mortaras claimed that she had baptized the boy some years earlier during an illness from which she believed he
would die. According to the church, Edgardo was now a Catholic and therefore could not
be raised in a Jewish home; the church would return the boy only if the family converted
to Catholicism. The hierarchy, specifically Pope Pius IX, refused to change or moderate
this position throughout the parents’ long campaign to recover their child. Edgardo
Mortara was never returned to his family.

In February 2000, the New York Times reported that the Vatican had beatified Pius IX, a
step in the process of canonization. The news provoked the Italian Jewish community,
who invoked the Mortara Affair, to protest the decision quite vehemently. Even in its
own day, the Mortara case prompted an international torrent of protest against the
Catholic Church in general and Pope Pius IX in particular. The affair prompted European
and American Jewish communities to create civil rights organizations such as Alliance
Israélite Universelle, and they flooded their governments with petitions for censure and
published and circulated articles on every aspect of the Mortaras’ struggle (Kertzer,
250-52). In France, the Jewish newspapers L’univers Israélite and Archives Israélites
petitioned Napoleon III to intervene on behalf of the Mortaras. The French, never overly
fond of the Vatican although French troops had enforced papal authority in Italy since
the Garibaldi uprising of 1848-49, were appalled that their government was complicit in
the whole affair (Kertzer, 83-90, 118-142). Ultimately, the case provided Napoleon III with
the opportunity to plan and participate in the 1870 coup d’état that brought a definitive
end to papal rule (Kertzer, 87, 261).

There were many literary responses to the Mortara incident. Séjour’s The Fortune Teller
was immediately translated into Italian and performed in Bologna in 1860; in the same
year, Flerman Moos, an American, published Mortara—or The Pope and His Inquisitor.
Riccardo Castelvecchio’s La famiglia ebrei appeared in 1861, and, in 1868, Stirling Coyne’s
English rendition of The Fortune Teller entitled The Woman in Red was published. Even
Garibaldi worked the Mortara incident into his novel, I mille. More recently, a novel
published in 1983, La Carrozza di San Pietro by Pier Domiano Ori and Giovanni Perich is
based on the case (Kertzer, 252-3, 325n2, n12).

In his 1997 study The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara, David Kertzer argues that The Fortune
Teller was the most historically significant of these numerous renditions because
Napoleon attended the play’s opening night, signaling the direction of France’s foreign
policy. The Fortune Teller differs from other representations of the case in that Séjour
makes the kidnapped Jewish infant a girl and moves the action of the play forward by
seventeen years.

In the prologue, Marta, a family servant and wet nurse to the infant Noémi renamed
Paola, has already turned her over to the church and nervously awaits the return of the
parents, Gédéon and Géméa Ben-Meir. Marta is pained by her decision but in a dichotomy
that formulates the conflict of the play says: “And if the heart of a mother tells me that
I’ve sinned, the heart of a good Christian tells me that I’m forgiven.” (prologue, scene 3).

Unlike the “tragic mulatto” characters, Georges and Inès, both Noémi’s parents are of the
same race and faith. And unlike the curse of blood in “The Mulatto” and The Jew of Seville,
in this conflict Catholic Bianca will deny the role of blood in the determination of the
child’s true identity. Instead she will argue the validity of a ritual in which Jews do not
believe to transform Jewish Noémi into Catholic Paola. Just as the name, Bianca (Inès’s
mother was also called Bianca) suggests an additional layer of difference, the names
Noémi and Paola refer to conversion narratives that are important in Judaism and
Christianity.
Noémi refers to Naomi, the Jewish mother-in-law for whose sake Ruth the Moabite converts to Judaism: "Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you: for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16). And just as Noémi becomes Paola, Saul of Tarsus marks his conversion to Christianity by becoming Paul (Acts 9:1-19, 13:9). But these conversion narratives underscore the difference between the voluntary act of an adult (Ruth and Saul choose their faith) and the abduction of a child, who is then reared in that faith.

When the contest to re-claim her daughter begins, Géméa invokes both God and the natural rights of mothers. "Nature will plead my cause for me! Nature and my God" (act 4, scene 8). So that when Marta tells her that Noémi is now a Christian, Géméa cries, "You can't tear the religion of our ancestors from a heart, and expect it not to leave its roots!" (prologue, scene 16). The power of Géméa's rhetoric is such that Bianca is compelled to employ it to argue her side. In the climactic scene, the mothers demand that Noémi/Paola choose between them. Bianca says: "... But I am your mother too!... She gave birth to your flesh, but I gave birth to your soul!" (act 4, scene 9). Géméa counters with the flesh and blood experience of having nursed her near fatally ill infant daughter back to life. In the biblical story to which this scene refers, Solomon decides to divide the contested infant in half to satisfy the rival mothers (I Kings 3:16-28). The battle between Géméa and Bianca similarly tears Noémi/Paola apart. But just as Solomon never really knows who the infant's mother is, only which of the two women does not want him to die, the battle to decide who has the greater right to the title "mother" is a draw. Indeed, so torn by the pressure to choose between them, Noémi/Paola accuses both mothers of trying to kill her, "Every word you speak kills me! Why can you not see it? Does your love give you the right to torment my sick heart? You would have me choose to reject my God or to betray my mother! How can I? How?" (act 4, scene 3) After this outburst, the young woman descends into madness and this brings about a truce between Bianca and Géméa. Noémi/Paola's madness only dissipates when she remembers her prayers. Ultimately she returns to Géméa but not to Judaism. In the context of the deep antagonism between the Jewish and Catholic communities, Noémi/Paola's position seems untenable. This "tragic mulatto" does not die, but it is difficult to imagine her life. Still despite her daughter's prayers, Géméa has the moral victory. In the end, even Bianca admits to the error of the abduction and begs Géméa's forgiveness.

In Séjour's rendering of the Mortara affair, in contrast to historical fact, there is a conspicuous absence of fathers; Gédéon Ben-Meir dies early on and Bianca's husband, Signore Lomellini, is held hostage by Turkish pirates for the entire play. (Momolo Mortara was the primary force behind the movement to release his son Edgardo from the custody of the church). The absence of the fathers parallels the absence of a criminal justice system to protect Géméa's maternal rights, because as a Jew she has no civil rights. Structuring the play so that seventeen years have elapsed between the abduction and recovery of the child, eliminates the issue that was central for the Mortaras; their natural rights as parents could not be assured without the protection of a law. Presenting the abducted child as a young woman enabled Séjour to criticize the church for the kidnapping of a six-year old child and simultaneously mitigate that criticism by presenting us with a lovely young woman who has flourished in the Christian home. And that Noémi/Paola is engaged to marry Octavio adds to the drama, for not only must she leave Bianca, but her fiancé too. By shifting the focus of the struggle from the civil rights
of minorities, to the natural rights of mothers, Séjour averted attention from the largely political crisis the Mortara affair ignited.

American Jews petitioned President James Buchanan to criticize the pope for the abduction of the Mortara child. Buchanan declined. On the eve of the American Civil War, the President may have been loath to call attention to the hypocrisy such a censure would be. For two hundred and fifty years, slave mothers and fathers had been made to endure the unspeakable sorrow of having their children taken from them, a practice protected by American law (Kertzer, 127). And in 1859, the Mortara affair must have been a stinging reminder of Louisiana’s increasingly cruel laws that by the start of the Civil War had reduced the rights of the free people of color (O’Neill, 53).

Victor Séjour’s career had all the elements of an American success story, as remarkable in its way as that of Frederick Douglass. More important, Séjour’s work challenges our ideas about the origins and nature of black American writing. For example, Ellen Frances Watkins Harper’s “The Two Offers” (1859) was thought to be the first African American short-story, but Séjour’s “The Mulatto” was published twenty-two years earlier (Shell & Sollors, 714n2). Moreover, the tale of this tragic mulatto did not conform to the typical abolitionist narratives: its violent oedipal conflict anticipates themes of twentieth-century African American literature such as Charles Chesnutt’s “The Sheriffs Children,” and Claude McKay’s sonnet “The Mulatto”, Langston Hughes’s short-story, “Father and son,” and his play, “Mulatto” (Shell & Sollors, 475n1). In addition, The Jew of Seville and The Fortune Teller raise concerns echoed in late 19th and early 20th African American literature by and about the “blue vein” black middle-class whose wealth and educational backgrounds were similar to the Creoles of color. This work also speaks to the problem of multiracial identity in a society that remains stubbornly attached to the belief that it is composed of distinct racial groups.

The Literature of Louisiana’s Creoles-of-color also worries the definition of American literature as monolingual. In our public debates the multilingual dimension of America’s multicultural origins receives little attention. The absence of linguistic difference as part of this discussion has contributed to an overwhelming emphasis on race and/or ethnicity and the prevalence of identity politics. The literature and history of this group compels us to ask if it is even possible to talk about cultural diversity without discussing language. These Creole voices remind us too that in New Orleans, one of the nation’s most multicultural cities in the 19th century, French was not a foreign language.

In 1997, the Norton Anthology of African-American Literature, a monument to a history and literature long denied, was published. In their introduction, the editors Nellie McKay and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., duly acknowledge that Les Cenelles: choix de poésies indigènes was indeed the Anthology’s distinguished ancestor. So it was disappointing not to find a single poem from Les Cenelles in the twenty-six hundred pages that follow. The editors did however include Victor Séjour’s “The Mulatto.” But to include the fiery abolitionist story and ignore the poetry registers a telling ambivalence toward Louisiana’s Creoles-of-color, their history and much of their literature. If, as the editors assert, every anthology defines a canon, it is also true that inscribed in every canon is the larger story of who and what matters in a people’s collective experience. To exclude this poetry and by extension its authors, is to repeat the original sin of omission the Norton now exists to correct. Indeed, according to the Norton’s narrative of the African American literary tradition, the literature and history of the Creoles of color seems to inhabit the place of the “tragic mulatto”: a contradiction in terms, a free floating signifier whose presence troubles the
foundation on which the canon is built. The history of Africans in America is not complete without the plays, fiction and poetry of these writers. These Creole voices are also the voices of Louisiana’s native sons.

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NOTES


7. Victor Séjour, La Tireuse de cartes (Paris: Michel Levy Frères, 1860). Translated by Norman Shapiro as The Fortune Teller with an introduction by M. Lynn Weiss (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2002). Jean-François-Constant Macquard apparently co-wrote the play with Séjour. Macquard was a minor writer who became the private secretary to Napoleon III. Critics complained that the play would never had made it past the state censors, were it not for this connection to the Emperor. The case was a highly sensitive political affair and most of the media were not permitted to comment on it. See O’Neill, 68-69.


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1 Palmer Hayden, l’un des peintres les plus connus de la Renaissance de Harlem, vit le jour en 1890 en Virginie dans une ville nommée Wide Water. Ce jeune homme, de son vrai nom Peyton Hedgeman, était curieux de tout et fit très tôt de la peinture le centre de sa vie. Dans sa ville natale, il réalisa déjà quelques œuvres, des aquarelles, et s’intéressait déjà aux visages, aux postures aux corps mais sans avoir véritablement de style bien défini.

2 Lorsque la guerre éclata, Peyton se retrouva engagé dans l’armée et dans une aventure qui allait changer le cours de sa vie ainsi que toute sa perception esthétique et artistique. Le jeune Hedgeman qui avait été surnommé Palmer Hayden par ses camarades de chambrée n’avait qu’un désir, voir l’Europe, et surtout Paris, ce centre du monde de l’art. Il savait que de nombreux artistes noirs américains s’y étaient rendus avant lui, musiciens, chanteurs mais aussi des peintres comme Henry O. Tanner. Celui-ci avait séjourné dans la capitale française de 1895 à 1897, avait régulièrement exposé au salon des artistes français de Paris, avait reçu plusieurs médailles du gouvernement français. Il avait également participé à l’exposition universelle de 1900 et avait finalement été fait chevalier de la légion d’honneur en 1937. Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, célèbre sculptrice noire avait aussi vécu dans la ville lumière pendant trois ans de 1899 à 1902 et avait été remarquée par Samuel Bing de la galerie « Art Nouveau ».

3 Ce fut donc avec enthousiasme qu’il se porta volontaire pour partir au secours des Français lorsque le gouvernement américain décida de prendre part au premier conflit mondial et envoya des contingents de soldats vers l’ancien monde.

4 La France fut pour Palmer Hayden une expérience marquante. Il était fasciné par cette liberté d’exister dont il tira profit à la moindre de ses permissions et c’est avec avidité qu’il goûta à tout : à l’architecture, aux musées, aux galeries, aux restaurants, aux dancings ; mais aussi à sa propre culture qu’il redécouvrit à travers ses frères qui déversaient sans complexe et sans retenue aucune leur musique sur les rives de la Seine. Il gardait toujours sur lui un carnet de croquis et une plaquette d’aquarelles et ne cessa de
travailler. L’originalité de l’œuvre parisienne de Palmer Hayden réside dans le fait qu’il a représenté exclusivement des personnages noirs, infirmières de la croix rouge ou soldats en permission dans un décor (cafés, métros, rues) parisien.

5 Mais l’armistice vint mettre fin à la quête émerveillée de Palmer Hayden et il rentra aux États Unis, bien décidé à revenir. Le destin, ou peut-être est-ce le dynamisme du jeune homme, voulut que les événements s’enchaînent sans lui laisser de répit. A peine était-il rentré de Paris qu’il fut happé par la Renaissance de Harlem.

6 La Renaissance de Harlem est bien connue de tous comme étant une explosion musicale et littéraire —mais on sait moins que cette décennie dorée qui fit de Harlem le quartier le plus fameux de New York fut aussi le berceau de la peinture africaine américaine contemporaine, révélant des dizaines de talents nouveaux et consacrant des valeurs sûres comme Aaron Douglas, William H. Johnson, Archibald Motley, Ellis Wilson et, bien entendu, Palmer Hayden.

7 Celui-ci débarqua à New York pour y étudier l’art. Il s’inscrivit à la Cooper Union et à la Boothbay Art Colony dans le Maine et ne cessa de hanter Harlem où il rencontra notamment Mary B. Brady qui l’introduisit à la Fondation Harmon qui était à la recherche de jeunes artistes pour les faire exposer. Palmer Hayden travailla d’arrache-pied pour avancer dans ses études et pour se faire connaître à New York. Durant son séjour en France, il avait approché l’avant garde de la peinture parisienne. Son art fut dès lors pendant plusieurs années visiblement influencé par la palette impressionniste, et ses lignes, de même que sa conception émancipée de la forme présentèrent des similitudes avec le cubisme. Dans les années vingt, il peignit une série représentant ses congénères : gens de Harlem croqués dans leurs activités diurnes et nocturnes tel Bal Jeunesse où les lignes déhanchées et très stylisées des corps structurent la toile dans une géométrie débridée. Palmer Hayden qui dans la lignée des avant-gardistes de ce début de siècle ne se soucia guère de ressemblance, de respect de la beauté et de l’esthétique traditionnelles, et encore moins de la susceptibilité des bien pensants, déforma comme bon lui semblait ses congénères dans les portraits qu’il en réalisa. Paris, symbole d’une liberté réelle ou mythique, lui avait offert une vision autre de sa culture et de lui-même, une vision débarrassée du poids écrasant de l’oppression raciste. Palmer Hayden se montra dès lors libre, dans sa gestuelle aussi bien que dans sa thématique. Il s’accorda également sans complexe mais aussi sans a priori le droit d’intégrer dans sa peinture des influences esthétiques diverses, notamment les influences de la statuaire et des masques de l’Afrique dont il fit la découverte au travers du cubisme et des musées ethnographiques parisiens. Comme les statuettes africaines, ses personnages se parèrent alors de lippes démesurées, de narines aplatis, de coiffures allongées et de membres disproportionnés. Comme cela est souvent le cas pour tous ceux qui sont en avance sur leur temps, Palmer Hayden fut très mal perçu par de nombreux critiques, artistes et intellectuels noirs comme, en particulier, James A. Porter. Ses œuvres furent ressenties comme des caricatures grotesques et ironiques des noirs. Il est vrai, que ce travail était dans un même temps applaudi par certains blancs qui en firent une interprétation erronée correspondant à la vision dégradante qu’ils avaient du noir.

8 Palmer Hayden un peu dépité, repartit pour Paris en 1927, comme il désirait d’ailleurs le faire depuis longtemps. Il y resta jusqu’en 1932. On suppose que mettant à profit son séjour, il compléta sa formation en étudiant aux Beaux-Arts. Il est en tout cas certain qu’il se nourrit des artistes et de la mouvance dominant la capitale à cette période.
Hayden rentra aux États-Unis en 1933, bardé d’une expérience et d’une maturité qu’il n’aurait peut-être pas acquises s’il n’avait pas quitté les États-Unis pour l’Europe. Ce n’est pas tant qu’il faille considérer Paris comme un carrefour édénique de créativité, mais il ne faut pas, par ailleurs oublier le dépit que les jeunes volontaires noirs éprouvèrent de retour d’Europe quand après avoir été accueillis en héros outre Atlantique, il ne trouvèrent aucune gratitude en rentrant au pays mais au contraire le mépris, des droits bafoués et surtout l’impossibilité de s’exprimer librement aussi bien d’un point de vue civique et politique que sur le plan artistique, comme ils avaient pu le faire en France.

Palmer Hayden était de ceux-là. Mais la fréquentation de la rive noire de la Seine lui avait donné et pour toujours la vision de ce que ses frères et lui-même étaient capables de produire une fois débarrassés de la peur.

Vers 1936 Palmer Hayden laissant de côté les sujets africains s’intéressa de plus en plus à la tradition orale afro-américaine et surtout à ses héros. Il y trouva sa thématique de prédilection. A Partir de 1940 il inaugura ce qui constituerait la partie la plus significante et la plus marquante de son œuvre avec une toile impressionnante intitulée When Tricky Sam shot Father Lamb. Il se lança dès lors véritablement dans la série des héros noirs et notamment dans celle de John Henry qu’il réalisa de 1944 à 1954. Il y mit en scène les tribulations tantôt comiques tantôt tragiques de ce personnage légendaire dans une palette vive et avec un tracé épuré surligné de noir.

La simplification extrême, caractéristique du style très particulier et personnel développé par Palmer Hayden a sans doute surpris ses contemporains mais avec le recul dont nous disposons aujourd’hui, nous voyons que ce peintre a su profiter de ses apprentissages parisiens sans en être prisonnier. Paris fut dans la vie et l’œuvre de Palmer Hayden à la fois un labyrinthe initiatique où il trouva ses racines africaines, et un tremplin qui le projeta vers l’ouverture de toutes les formes de l’avant garde artistique.

C’est en grande partie grâce aux rencontres qu’il fit à Paris et aux expériences qu’il eut lors de ses deux séjours qu’il put avec la réflexion qu’autorise la distance, redécouvrir la valeur de sa propre tradition. Cela lui permit d’exceller dans la thématique des héros noirs qu’il fut pratiquement le seul à développer et de se forger un style très contemporain avant même l’avènement de ce concept, ce qui fait de lui un peintre unique.

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African American intellectuals and Europe between the Two World Wars

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1 Black American intellectuals’ European adventure stories can be traced as far back as Phillis Wheatley, and perhaps even to Olaudah Equiano. Vincent Caretta has recently written of the tantalizing possibility that Equiano’s African identity may have been a rhetorical invention. In the documentary evidence of his baptism and naval records while serving with Pascal, Equiano had no control over the name recorded or the baptismal location of his nativity “in Carolina.” But on the [1773] voyage to the North Pole, he was a free man and presumably the only source of the information in the muster book of the Racehorse identifying him as “Gustavus Weston” (non-English names were often misspelled), an able seaman, aged 28, who had been born in South Carolina. (Caretta, 1998. [The muster book is reproduced in the Norton Critical Edition of the Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano. New York: W. W. Norton, 2000, xxx.])

2 If this hypothesis were to be verified, Equiano would turn out to be among the very first black American expatriates, and one with a very unusual cover story. Another rarely mentioned eighteenth-century African American who spent significant time in Paris was Sally Hemings, whose relationship with her travel companion, lover, and uncle Thomas Jefferson may be the reason why she is not typically included in discussions of blacks in Europe. William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, and James Weldon Johnson spent significant time in Europe and wrote about it (see Fabre, 1991), and Douglass’s German companion Ottilie Assing has recently been made the subject of a biography, and her essays have been republished. (See Diedrich, 1999; Lohmann, 1999.)

3 There has been a “European theme” in black American writing, in which Europe was typically stylized as the haven for black and mixed-race Americans, where there were whites who did not share white American prejudices, and where interracial couples and
their descendants could live happily ever after. Jessie Fauset’s novel *Plum Bun* offers this typical possibility for Angela Murray:

> [S]he asked for nothing better than to put all the problems of colour and their attendant difficulties behind her. She could not meet those problems in their present form in Europe; literally in every sense she would begin life all over. In France or Italy she would speak of her strain of Negro blood and abide by whatever consequences such exposition would entail. But the consequences could not engender the pain and difficulties attendant upon them here. (Fauset, 1990, 340.)

In other texts, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, England, the Scandinavian countries, or Russia were offered as alternatives to America, articulating what one could call the “European dream.” I would here like to focus on African American Intellectuals and Europe between the two World Wars.

The interstitial moment between World Wars I and II was a cease-fire during the Great European Civil War, a war that started with shots on the Balkans and ended thirty-one years later, leaving sixty-five million casualties and a degraded, bombed-out continent behind. This second thirty years’ war also took a severe toll among oppositional intellectuals.

The “interwar period” saw the rise of communism and its transformation into Stalinism, the emergence of fascism, and two momentous “interwar wars,” the Italian war against Ethiopia and the Spanish Civil War, in which Italian and German forces as well as African colonials helped Franco’s fascists to defeat the elected republican government.

It was uncertain which American response to fascism would prevail. One only has to remember that in 1928 Benito Mussolini’s autobiography was ghostwritten by the anti-immigration and pro-deportation writer Richard Washburn Child, who had been US ambassador to Italy during the march on Rome, and it was serialized prominently in the *Saturday Evening Post.* (Mussolini, 1928.)

By the mid-1930s, the American decision had been made; and it affected race relations in the US. When Joe Louis defeated Max Schmeling on June 22, 1938, in Yankee Stadium, this marked the victory, not of a *black* boxer over a white man, but of a hero of *American* democracy over a foreign fascist. (Early, 1990, 24.) Similarly, Jesse Owens was sometimes seen as an *American national* representative at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. In the interwar period, then, black American men could, for the first time, serve as symbols of the United States. I shall here relate a few Afro-European encounters (with an aside on fascist and Stalinist aesthetics) and leave it up to the reader to draw conclusions.

Black American soldiers went to Europe in World War I and brought back not only the expressions “boo coos” (from the word «beau coup») and “toot sweets,” but also a new militancy against injustice at home after having helped to make the world safe for democracy. Black American writers represented World War I with the plotline that Frantz Fanon was later to consider the typical Third World story: the veteran who has fought and been ready to die for a country that, upon his return, denies him his right to live.¹ W. E. B. Du Bois expressed the mood in the formula: “We return./We return from fighting./We return fighting.” (Lewis, 1982, 15.)²
1. Countée Cullen and Claire Goll

Many individual and civilian European encounters that followed raise issues of transnational intimacy, colonialist practices, and human misunderstandings. There is, for example, the case of the prototypical Harlem Renaissance poet Countée Cullen who wrote chain letters during his European year in 1928/29. These letters, published in the *Crisis*, conform to the chatty genre that has accompanied the European tour and that Anita Loos parodied in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925):

> Then Paris en route to Algiers. It was July 13th; tomorrow Paris would celebrate her Independence Day and the Fall of the Bastille. We must stay over for the parade. We ... hankered for a sight of the strapping black French colonial who, we had been told, led the parade with twirling baton, glistening face, and the gayest of martial strides. But, alas, though in Paris, we fell asleep as New Yorkers; consequently we arose at eleven to view a parade that had already passed at nine. (*Crisis* 26, 119.)

Cullen may have been particularly curious about, and proud of, the presence of black French colonials in Europe, but otherwise he sounds like any American traveler. After passing through Oberammergau for the passion play (Ferguson, 1966, 108), he reports on the German capital:

> Berlin, an orderly, clean, regimented city, as if on dress parade; the Germans shaped for joviality but in the main serious-miened. Remembered incidents: Crab-soup at Kempinsky’s; a chance encounter on the street with the Marcus Garveys....

Drinking coffee in a Berlin cafe and suddenly hearing the strains of “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” being softly wafted to us from a distant corner of the room; looking up gratefully to see the pianist watching us, his expression conveying the wish to make a stranger welcome with some remembrance of his own people. (Early, 1990, 553.)

Social and political issues do not pass him by. Cullen empathizes with prostitutes in Le Havre (see “The Street Called Crooked,” *ibid.*, 205), has friends in the socialist city government of Vienna and there visits a cooperative apartment house for impoverished people: “a one-room, kitchenette and bathroom arrangement for which the occupant pays less than one dollar per week.” (*Ibid.*, 554.) The socialist *Arbeiter-Zeitung* also published some Cullen poems in German (Ferguson, 1966, 109). Yet his oppositional passions get aroused most by American issues.

After an encounter with the writer Claire Goll, Cullen describes her as “slight, blond, and pretty; born of French parents and educated in Germany, she can write her books in either language and translate them herself for publication in the other.” (Early, 1990, 565.) Born in Nürnberg, Goll had fled Germany in protest against World War I, had married and divorced young, and lived in a radical circle in Switzerland that included Romain Rolland and V. I. Lenin. (Goldberg, 1996.) There she met and married the French pacifist and avant-garde poet Yvan Goll. She wrote feminist essays, published a sharp critique of the genocide of the Armenians, and was the author of the odd interracial novel *Der Neger Jupiter raubt Europa* (1926). She translated American poetry (including Fenton Johnson and other Negro poets as well as Native American poems) for her anthology *Die neue Welt* (1921) and praised Carl Sandburg for protesting both against “the civilized bestiality of war” and against “the enslavement and dehumanization of the Negro.” (Goll, 1921, 9.) In 1939 Goll fled to the United States; her last French home was ransacked by German troops when they occupied Paris. (Goll, 1989, 335, “Nachwort”.)
Cullen calls this firebrand radical “Madame” and faults her for what one could call Negrophilia. “When Madame speaks of the Negro’s artistic endeavors today,” Cullen comments, “she is well nigh irresistible if one does not hold himself in check against the enormity of her enthusiasm.” (Early, 1990, 568.) Cullen defends white American writers like Millay, Cather, and O’Neill against Golfs view that “little of artistic merit is now being produced in America except that which is being done by Negroes.” He claims a universalist aesthetic against the radical European’s preference for black art: “Must we,” Cullen asks after the encounter, willy-nilly, be forced into writing of nothing but the old atavistic urges, the more savage and none too beautiful aspects of our lives? May we not... create a bit of phantasy in which not a spiritual or blues appears, write a tract defending Christianity though its practitioners aid us so little in our argument....? (Early, 1990, 568.)

Cullen demanded freedom for black artists from the well-intentioned expectation that they produce black writing. He did not see a connection between the socialists he had visited in Vienna and Goll’s enthusiasm for revolution, pacifism, and the Negro.

2. Claude McKay, Alain Locke, and George Grosz

Unlike Cullen, the Jamaican-born and-trained poet and novelist Claude McKay was in search of a political aesthetic. McKay had submitted poetry to the radical Masses, a journal banned in November 1917 for its critique of America’s entry into the war. McKay took interest in the fates of prostitutes, in Irish independence, in working-class movements, and in the effects of the inflation in 1920s Germany. He engaged in dialogues with the likes of Trotsky and Mayakovsky.

One such confrontation took place between McKay and the New Negro philosopher Alain Locke when they met for the first time in Berlin in 1923. McKay triangulates his encounter with Locke by using the German political radical and post-Dadaist George Grosz as a touchstone. For McKay, George Grosz’s Ecce Homo (1923) rendered “perfectly the atmosphere, temper and tempo of the Berlin of that period.” McKay added: “For me that book of drawings is a rare and iconoclastic monument of this closing era even as Rabelais is of the Renaissance.”

Grosz attacked and unmasked the hypocrisy of the “pillars” of German society, ranging from military officers and bribed politicians to pimps, prostitutes, academics, and industrialists. (In the preceding year, George Grosz had also produced an image of a student for a play by Yvan Goll). As fellow radical spirits, McKay and Grosz had met in Moscow after both had appeared in a special pictorial section of Pravda. “It was the first time I had seen any of Grosz’s drawings. They gripped me,” McKay writes. And Grosz continued to fascinate McKay. McKay reports:

When I returned to Berlin I hunted him up to ask him to sign a copy of Ecce Homo, which I had bought privately. The book was banned by the government of the Social Democracy. Grosz’s remarkable personality gave not the slightest hint of the artistic type. And in his little apartment, his pretty and pleasant frau had surrounded him with the neatest of bourgeois comforts. He fitted respectably into the frame, and if you did not know he was an artist, you might have taken him for a responsible bank clerk. Yet there was a charming felicity and harmony in the ménage. It gave the impression that Grosz needed just that kind of domestic
background from which he could swing up and out with his powerful artistic
punches. (McKay, 1970, 240.)

19 It is against his rapport with Grosz (who fled to America in the 1930s) that McKay
describes his encounter with Locke.

When we met for the first time in Berlin in 1923, he [Locke] took me for a
promenade in the Tiergarten. And walking down the row, with the statues of the
Prussian kings supported by the famous philosophers and poets and composers on
either side, he remarked to me that he thought those statues the finest ideal and
expression of the plastic arts in the world. (Ibid., 312.)

20 Locke had been a student in Berlin from 1910-1911, so that this walk may have had
nostalgic meaning for him. But now McKay contrasts Locke with Grosz:

[Locke's] remark was amusing, for it was just a short while before that I had walked
through the same row with George Grosz, who had described the statues as “the
sugar-candy art of Germany.” When I showed Dr. Locke George Grosz’s book of
drawings, Ecce Homo, he recoiled from their brutal realism. (Dr. Locke is a
Philadelphia blue-black blood, a Rhodes scholar and a graduate of Oxford
University, and I have heard him described as the most refined Negro in America).
So it was interesting now to discover that Dr. Locke had become the leading
authority on African Negro sculpture. I felt that there was so much more affinity
between the art of George Grosz and African sculpture than between the Tiergarten
insipid idealization of Nordic kings and artists and the transcending realism of the
African artists. (Ibid., 312-313.)

21 In McKay’s eyes, “Dr. Locke seemed a perfect symbol for Aframerican rococo in his
personality as much as in his prose style,” and McKay deplored the “effete European
academic quality” of “Dr. Locke’s artistic outlook.” (McKay, 1970, 312-3 13.)

22 In an encounter between McKay and the second-generation Jewish-American proletarian
writer Mike Gold (born Ivan Granich) — a World War I pacifist who had dodged the draft
and left the US for Mexico during the war, but also a spit-on-the-bourgeois-Persian-rug-
style proletarian — McKay insisted on the importance of aesthetic standards: “I preferred
to think that there were bad and mediocre, and good and great, literature and art, and
that the class labels were incidental.... I believe that whenever literature and art are good
and great they leap over narrow group barriers and periods to make a universal appeal.”
(McKay, 1970, 139-140.) His Russian encounter with Vladimir Mayakovsky similarly made
McKay defend his poetry against the Russian proletarian poet: “He recited one of his
poems for me. It sounded like the prolonged bellow of a bull. He very kindly presented me
with a signed copy of his latest book. Also he presented me to his wife, and said that she
desired to dance a jazz (sic) with me.” McKay did dance with her but feared the he did not
“live up to the standard of Aframerican choreography.” (Ibid., 186-187.)

23 Another encounter took place between McKay and Leon Trotsky. Trotsky sounded like
Booker T. Washington and spoke of Negroes as a “backward” people who needed to “lift
themselves up as a group to a level of equality with the whites.” McKay specifically
remembered that Trotsky “used the word ‘lift’ or ‘uplift’. And he urged that Negroes
should be educated about the labor movement.” (Ibid., 208.) Trotsky also worried about France’s use of colonial troops (in the German Rhineland, for example) as a wedge between working-class interests in different countries and colonies: “It is necessary to set the blacks themselves against this. It is necessary to open their eyes to the fact that, by aiding French imperialism to enslave Europe, the blacks are enslaving themselves by supporting the dominion of French capital in Africa and other colonies.” (McLeod, 1979, 7.) Trotsky told McKay that “he would like to set a practical example in his own department and proposed the training of a group of Negroes as officers in the Red army.” (McKay, 1970, 208.) In his response, published in Pravda and Isvestija and as the separate pamphlet Negri ν Amerike (1923), McKay referred “Comrade Trotsky” to the growing Pan-Africanist movement as a sign of hope; but he shared Trotsky’s worries about the use of colonial troops. The effect was absurd: “progressive Negro radicals found themselves in the same camp with American officers,... and the capitalist newspaper [s]... in defending the morality of the Negro race and the presence of black troops in Germany before German nationalists and the leaders of the Second International.” (McLeod, 1979, 10.)

4. Horace Cayton and Nancy Cunard

In Long Old Road the sociologist Horace Cayton offered a retrospective account of a trip he took to Europe in 1933 in the company of a Swedish student whom he simply calls Torstein (perhaps with a nod to Veblen). At the time Cayton was what personal ads would now describe as an “interracially divorced black male,” and he was looking for a sense of “at-homeness in Sweden or France.” (Cayton, 1970, 208.) In Paris, then threatened by a coup of the fascist Croix de Feu, Cayton sees Mike Gold at a left-wing meeting “In Defense of Culture.”

I sent Gold a note stating that we had many friends in common and that I would like to meet him.... Hastily Gold scribbled a reply on the bottom of the note I had sent him, which the usher brought back to me. It read, “Come on up to the stage. We need a Negro badly.” (Ibid., 212.)

Cayton, though he had “published but one short article in The Nation,” was introduced to the audience as “the celebrated American Negro author” and met Aldous Huxley, André Gide, John Dos Passos, André Malraux, and perhaps more fatefully, the Anglo-American shipping line owner’s daughter, modernist, and risk-taking femme fatale Nancy Cunard, who without much ado took Cayton to a “circus,” “a sexual performance involving men, women, and animals.” There Cunard said to Cayton, “This is a bore. Let’s go where we can drink and talk.” (Ibid., 214.) Starting on a serious absinthe drinking binge, she abruptly began railing against America, “I hate your country for what it is doing to your people.” As Cullen had responded to Claire Goll, Cayton finds himself defending America. Cayton adds an attack on Cunard’s England for having “abused and repressed more black people than America ever has.” (Ibid., 214.) Though he was initially “attracted to this woman intellectually and physically” (as he puts it), Cayton is turned off by her maudlin conduct and takes her home to get the evening over with. In her apartment, however, he is truly impressed by her library: “there was more material about the Negro than I had ever before seen assembled in one place.” Cunard returns with coffee, is dressed in “an attractive dressing gown” and acts completely sober now.

She handed me an enormous binder across the front of which was printed “NEGRO/ BY NANCY CUNARD.” It was an anthology of Negro writing and writings about Negroes from contributors throughout the world. I hastily skimmed the table of
contents, and saw that every prominent Negro scholar I knew or had ever heard of in the United States was represented as were a number of foreign writers I was not familiar with. Altogether, it was the most complete collection of its kind that I had ever encountered. I was more impressed than I cared to admit, for I had fancied myself an expert in the field to which this exiled, alcoholic English noblewoman had devoted her life. (Ibid., 216-217.)

Yet just as his opinion of her has risen, she proclaims that she “loves Negroes,” tells him to move to Paris and offers him her support. Cayton is again completely taken aback. There was such superiority about her manner, as if she were dealing with a child. Underneath this preoccupation with Negroes, she was still the haughty upper-class English woman telling an inferior what he should do. (Ibid., 217.)

When he prepares to leave, she looks up at him “ lazily”: “Don’t go, I feel so comfortable and relaxed.” But Cayton’s mind has been made up, and he is tough:

“Do you usually get what you want from Negroes, Lady Nancy?” I asked.
“What do you mean?”
“I mean, do all Negro men oblige?” (Ibid., 217.)

Before he manages to leave her, she still accuses him: “You are afraid,... afraid of white women. I should have realized that.” Cayton fumes as he walks home, thinking that he would never understand people like her.9

World politics reenters Cayton’s narrative when he goes to Germany, then “filled with men in storm trooper uniforms,” and with arms always snapping “into the air with the cry, ‘Heil Hitler!’” (Ibid., 228.) When Cayton sits on a park bench in Hamburg, he is approached by an officer who asks him whether he is a Jew. His answer is unambiguous: “No, I am an American.” Cayton is told: “If you are not a Jew you don’t have to sit on this bench. It is for Jews only.” He replies: “I like it here.... Is there any law that says I can’t sit here?” This potentially quite dangerous encounter makes Cayton reflect:

I had, of course, heard of the persecution of Jews, but this was the first time I had actually encountered it. It seemed to me even siller than Mississippi, where discrimination was at least based on color difference. Here they couldn’t even be sure what a Jew looked like. (Ibid., 230.)

Cayton interprets his action as a “broad gesture of protest against prejudice in any form.” Torstein realizes the danger, tells Cayton that the “Nazis are as much against Negroes as they are against Jews,” and mentions the terrible treatment of the mixed-race children that had been fathered by French colonial soldiers in the Rhineland.

5. Alain Locke and “The Black Watch on the Rhine”

African American responses to the French African troops on the Rhine have emerged as a theme. Alain Locke was commissioned to write a report on German complaints about French-African soldiers. In 1924 he published the article “The Black Watch on the Rhine,” (Locke, 1924, 6; Marks, 1983), illustrated with photographs of African soldiers in the Rhineland. Locke marvels at the variety of human types: “Among colored audiences of America I have seen many varieties of color and feature, but I have never seen a group of its size with more varieties of human countenance or figure.” He finds that French comradeship of arms really welds a brotherhood of soldiers. “Not only do black and white, straight national and colonial fraternize successfully, but black Christians with black Mohammedans, full-blood with half-caste and hybrid, men from Africa with men of the Indies, races that in Africa speak very different tongues and have traditional feuds;
and more significant still, men of very diverse grades of culture.” (Locke, 1924, 8.) Specifically addressing rape charges, Locke reports that in Königstein, for example, “respectable women” were “walking unescorted as far as two kilometers from the town, through the wooded lanes, as late as ten o’clock... obviously safe in mind and body.” His conclusion about the rape reports was to defend the African soldiers and blame German women by returning to “the fundamental equation”: “the attitude and bearing of the women themselves.” (*Ibid.*, 7.)

The francophone Martinique-born writer and Goncourt prize winner René Maran criticized Locke sharply for his rosy view of France’s use of colonial troops. Maran told Locke that he had “been the victim of a conjurer’s mirage,” for “the benevolence of France toward subject races is a matter of theory and official pretense.” He reminded Locke of French colonial coercion, and told him “that the black, brown and yellow soldiers did not come to the French colors as the little children came to Jesus.” Locke, who had just been elected Foreign Corresponding Member of the French Colonial Academy defended himself by saying that he had been “primarily concerned with contrasting [the] treatment of the man of color in the armies of France with that of our own American army, and with reporting... facts that would help to vindicate black soldiers in Europe as the little children came to Jesus.”

The German right wing exploited France’s use of African soldiers in propaganda; in 1920 the official Bavarian mint went so far as to represent a black phallus as threat to white womanhood, following a design by Karl Götz. (Oguntoyé, 1992, 50.) This was probably the only time that the Bavarian mint focused on this detail of the male anatomy.

6. Excursus on Fascist and Stalinist Aesthetics

The vulgar theme of a black threat was inter-woven into the anti-Semitic propaganda of the Nazi movement, culminating in a racially sanctioned ban of jazz and of modernist art and literature as the defining act of the official Nazi aesthetic. The “Degenerate Art” show in Munich 1937 used a reproduction of the African-inspired sculpture *The New Man* by Otto Freundlich as cover art. The “Degenerate Music” show in Düsseldorf 1938 had a specially designed cover on which a stereotyped saxophone-playing black appears wearing a star of David. “Niggerjazz” (this was the official term) was not permitted to be broadcast, for it was a music enjoyable only to “snobs aloof from the people,” and it was characterized by the “prominence of the saxophone, which alone carries the tune while all other instruments only hasten to emphasize the rhythm.” (Zwerin, 1985.)

An installation view of the “Degenerate Art” exhibition shows men in uniforms inspecting paintings such as Emil Nolde’s *Mulattin* (“The Mulatto,” 1913) and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff’s *Portrait of B. R.* under a banner that reads: “The niggerizing of music and theater as well as the niggerizing of the visual arts was intended to uproot the racial instinct of the people and to tear down blood barriers.” All Jews were considered *inherently* to be producers of degenerate art; but non-Jews and even Nazis could do the same. Thus Emil Nolde, who had joined the Nazi party as early as 1920 was exhibited as “degenerate” nonetheless. Nolde’s painting *Mulattin* (now at Harvard University; see Urban, 1990) was considered “entartet” for its modernist style as well as for its tabooed theme of racial mingling. Nolde was in good company at the Nazi art show, for among many other artists, George
Grosz, too, (who had effectively caricatured Hitler and who had produced a portrait entitled “Black Lady”) was exhibited as an example of “degenerate loathsomeness.”

At the same time, the official aesthetic of the Soviet Union turned from the avant-garde orientation of the post-revolutionary period that McKay had witnessed to the official propagation of socialist realism and the banning of jazz — both inspired by Maxim Gorky, whose essay “O muzyke tol’ stysh” (“On the Music of the Gross” [or perhaps, “fat” or, “degenerate” as the official English translator put it]), was published in 1928 in Pravda, and soon became the backbone of Stalinist repression of black music as exploitative, vulgar, sexualized, animalistic, threatening, and degenerate. Gorky also particularly loathed the saxophone which, he thought, emitted a “quacking nasal sound.” He heard the music, a foxtrot really, as follows:

One, two, three, ten, twenty strokes, and after them, like a mud ball splashing into clear water, a wild whistle screeches; and then there are rumblings, wails and howls like the smarting of a metal pig, the shriek of a donkey, or the amorous croaking of a monstrous frog. This insulting chaos of insanity pulses to a throbbing rhythm. Listening for a few minutes to these wails, one involuntarily imagines an orchestra of sexually driven madmen conducted by a man-stallion brandishing a huge genital member. (Starr, 1983, 89-90.)

Gorky believed that oppressed Negroes had turned away from jazz and were only laughing at the twin effects that such music radio broadcasts were having on white middle-class listeners — obesity (or “gross”-ness) and epidemic homosexuality. Somewhat surprisingly, Gorky’s essay became the theoretical backbone of Soviet bans of jazz and black musical entertainment.

7. Langston Hughes, James Yates, and the Spanish Civil War

Langston Hughes, who spent some time in the Stalinist Soviet Union where he also witnessed show trials, reports that his friend Sylvia Chen had to sing American spirituals and hymns on the Russian radio without any reference to God (replacing the word “God” actually by “dog” — as in “Rise and shine, and give dog glory”, [Hughes, 1964, 81-82]), but he seems unaware of Gorky’s role in cultural politics. Hughes writes cheerily how he participated during his train travels through Kazakhstan in a 1932 celebration honoring the fortieth anniversary of Gorky’s literary career, giving a speech, hearing it translated into Russian and the Kazakh tongue, and sending “a telegram to Comrade Gorky.” (Berry, 1973, 255.) Hughes may simply not have known Gorky’s position on jazz, though Gorky’s diatribe was published in English in the December 1928 issue of Dial, a few pages after a contribution by Jean Toomer and in the same volume with reviews of Cullen and Locke. (Gorky, 1928.)

Hughes also was among leftist African Americans who went to Spain during the Civil War, and in his reports for the Afro-American, even war-torn Spain became a meeting ground for black people. In Spain, Hughes felt, “there is no color prejudice.” After the battle of Brunete in July 1937, he visits wounded prisoners in a Madrid hospital, but he writes: “I was most interested in the Moors, who are my own color.” (Hughes, 1973, 103; Rampersad, 1986, 349.) Talking with a thirteen-year-old Moroccan boy whose mother had been killed, Hughes learns that Franco had brought Moorish women and men in to support the troops. “Thus the Moors die in Spain, men, women, and children, victims of
Fascism, fighting not only for freedom but against freedom — under a banner that holds only terror and segregation for all the darker people of the earth.” (Hughes, 1973, 104.)

After the battle at Brunete, Hughes met James Yates who later published his own memoir of the black members of the Lincoln Brigade. (Yates, 1989, 176-177.) Incidentally, Yates mentions that when he left for Spain, he took along three paperbacks, by McKay, Gorky, and Hughes — but found them too heavy and ended up holding on only Hughes. (Ibid., 112.) One of Yates’s encounters is with the black World War I veteran and strike organizer Oliver Law, who died in the Spanish Civil War. And here Yates draws a circle that unites the interwar period as a struggle against racism:

“Hey, Oliver is dead. They killed Oliver Law.”... I was very quiet. My thoughts were with Oliver Law.... He had made history on the battlefields of Spain and now he was dead. He was the first Black man in US history to become commander of a mostly white unit. 12

For James Yates, Oliver Law’s death still held the hope of a double victory over fascism abroad and racism at home. At the time of the Spanish Civil War, McKay had adopted an anti-Stalinist leftist position and attacked, in print, “Russia’s role, along with the Nazis and Fascists, in helping to destroy Democracy in Spain.” (Cooper, 1973, 231) By then McKay’s conversation partner Mayakovsky was dead, and Trotsky exiled in Mexico, where he would soon be murdered. 13

8. W.E.B. Du Bois in Nazi Germany 1936

My account ends with only a brief mention of W. E. B. Du Bois’s five-month trip to Nazi Germany in 1936, a trip I have recently described at greater detail. (Sollors, 1999.) On a grant by the right-wing Oberlaender Foundation to study German industrial education as a model for Negro industrial colleges, Du Bois was in Germany at the time of the Olympics and covered his trip in a series of opinion pieces for the Pittsburgh Courier. Among the many topics he wrote about were the Olympics, the role of black athletes, opera, and the Deutsches Museum in Munich. He perceptively noticed the power of propaganda, the “greatest single invention” of World War I, which actually made the mass of people believe in what it said; and stressed that an integral part of Nazi policy “just as prominent now as earlier and perhaps growing in prominence, is world war on Jews. The proof of this is incontrovertible, and must comfort all those in any part of the world who depend on race hate as the salvation of men.” Du Bois highlighted the anti-Semitic racism of the National Socialists while also reminding readers of the anti-black racism at home. He stressed that he, a colored man, had been “treated with uniform courtesy and consideration” in Nazi Germany and added: “It would have been impossible for me to have spent a similarly long time in any part of the United States, without some, if not frequent cases of personal insult or discrimination. I cannot record a single instance here.”

As I stated at the beginning, I wanted to present a series of black intellectuals’ European encounters and an aside on totalitarian aesthetics without offering a conclusion. I hope, however, that this brief foray will only be a beginning of more internationally oriented research at the crossroads of African American Studies and European Studies, spanning the black-and-white Atlantic. 14
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Works cited


NOTES


2. Lewis also calls attention to the American “War Department’s insistence that Afro-American soldiers not be depicted in the heroic frieze displayed in France’s Panthéon de la Guerre.”

3. Cullen continues: “Then off to Algiers by way of Marseilles to rest there for a day or two in the hope of meeting and exchanging a word with Claude McKay, but he was too deep in the beauties of Seville to get to Marseilles before we sailed for Algiers.” Actually, we learn from Wayne Cooper’s biography that McKay was in Barcelona at the time, accompanying a West Indian boxer who had a bout there, and finishing the novel *Banjo.* (Cooper, 1987, 238.)

4. Claire Goll made headlines when, after her husband’s death, she accused Paul Celan of having plagiarized Yvan Goll’s poetry, including even the famous phrase “schwarze Milch.”
5. According to Rogers (1967-1, 261), the title character of the novel Der Neger Jupiter raubt Europa was based on Prince Benhanzin of Dahomey. The novel appeared in French, translated by Claire Goll herself, under the title Le Nègre Jupiter enlève Europe (1928). A Spanish translation was published in Chile in 1935.

6. Goll also praised Vachel Lindsay for his opposition to war, and she included Fenton Johnson’s “Tired,” four anonymous African-American songs, and eleven Indian poems.

7. McKay (1970, 312) thought that Cullen was the “most outstanding” of the black writers in Paris.

8. McKay had sent his poem “Mulatto” to Alain Locke for inclusion in the special issue of the Survey Graphic which became The New Negro; but Locke had declined it “for its bitterly radical tone” (Cooper paraphrase). McKay wrote an angry letter to Locke (October 7, 1924): “You know of course that I am suicidally frank. Your letter has angered me. Your attitude is that of Booker T. Washington in social reform.... It’s a playing safe attitude—the ultimate reward of which are dry husks and ashes!... There are many white people who are longing and hoping for Negroes to show they have guts. I will show you by getting a white journal to take Mulatto.... No wonder the Negro movement is in such a bad way. When Negro intellectuals like you take such a weak line.... Send me back all the things—and I do not care to be mentioned at all—don’t want to—in the special Negro number of the Survey. I am not seeking mere notoriety and publicity. Principles mean something to my life.” (Cooper, 1987, 225.) Should Locke publish only the other poems and not “Mulatto,” McKay warned him “you may count upon me as an intellectual enemy for life!” He ended by saying that he was not too much surprised by Locke’s action since “you are a dyed-in-the-wool pussy-footing professor.” Locke ignored his request, and further angered McKay by printing the sonnet “The White House” under the title “White Houses.”

9. This encounter, or non-encounter, was not mentioned in Chisholm (1979), in which chapters 18 to 21 cover the period around the publication of Negro.

10. René Maran, Letter to Opportunity (Sep. 1924): 261-262; see also Locke’s response, pp. 262-263. Maran was the author of the Goncourt-Prize-winning novel Batouala (1921) that Jessie Fauset was offered but refused to translate into English. Michel Fabre (1991, 148-149) writes that Maran “exposed forced participation of African ‘volunteers’ as well as the sellout of African deputies condoning colonial exploitation.”

11. It had a direct impact on Paul Robeson’s career whose singing repertoire now had to focus on serious and political songs and who could not sing numbers like the “St. Louis Blues” in Russia, even though some audiences requested it. Robeson also witnessed the change brought about by the rise of National Socialism in Berlin, which he visited twice in the period. In 1930, Robeson starred for two performances of The Emperor Jones at the Berlin Deutsches Künstlertheater, in which Oskar Homolka otherwise had the leading part. Robeson and his wife Essie then loved Berlin and were enchanted by the aesthetic vitality of Weimar culture. They heard Sam Wooding’s Negro Band at the zoo roof garden. Robeson commented that “Germany is the gateway now of all of Europe” and that “on the Continent the colour bar does not exist” — the European dream. He seemed to be so little worried about fascism, that in 1932 he was quoted by a reporter from Jamaica as having said: “If the real great man of the Negro race will be born, he will spring from North America. The Negro Gandhi or Mussolini cannot be begotten but in the land of ancient oppression and revolutionary emancipation.”

During a second visit to Berlin in 1934, however, Robeson saw a different Berlin. Martin Duberman (184) reports: “On the walk from Friedrichstrasse Station to the hotel, his dark skin drew instant attention— surreptitious glances from passers-by, contemptuous stares from storm troopers.” A Jewish friend they called came “by the hotel, furtive and
frightened, and told them of the horrors of the mounting persecution. He looked like ‘a living corpse, skeleton head, haggard eyes,’ Essie wrote in her diary; he was ‘terrified.’” At the station (they were leaving for Moscow), an “older woman stared in angry disbelief at the sight of a black man and a white woman together.” She reported them to three uniformed men who had “hatred in their eyes.” The Robesons managed to board the train and get out of this threatening situation.


13. In his Autobiography, the exiled Trotsky reports the annoying habit of Americans to ask him casually at cocktail parties how he lost power. Mike Gold, who had hailed Trotsky when he was still in power, commented upon the assassination: “I... can shed no tears for him; I care for something greater that Trotsky’s fate; the proletarian revolution.” (Folsom, 1972, 194.)


ENDNOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was first presented at St. Louis in March 1999. I am grateful to the conference participants, and especially to Michel Fabre, for comments and suggestions, to Claude Julien for queries and editorial corrections, and to Erica Michelstein for research assistance.

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Who ain’t a Slave? On the University of Frederick Douglass

Sandro Portelli

... col potere veniamo a patti, volentieri o no, dimenticando che nel ghetto siamo tutti, che il ghetto è cintato, che fuori dal recinto stanno i signori della morte, e che poco lontano aspetta il treno. (Levi, 1991, 52)... we all come to terms with power, willingly or not, forgetting that the ghetto encircles us all, that the ghetto is walled in, and that outside the fence stand the lords of death and in the distance the train awaits.

1. Fading Trifles

Before he boards the whale boat Pequod, Herman Melville’s Ishmael makes a deal with power. This is how he explains why he goes to sea as a “simple sailor”:

What of it, if some old hunks of a sea captain orders me to get a broom and sweep down the decks? What does that indignity amount to, weighed, mean, in the scales of the New Testament? Do you think the archangel Gabriel thinks anything the less of me, because I promptly and respectfully obey that old hunks in that particular instance? Who aint a slave? (Melville, 1986, 96)

On the surface, Primo Levi and Herman Melville seem to be saying the same thing: in our “fragilità essenziale”, “essential fragility” (Levi), we are all “in one way or other served in much the same way —either in a physical or metaphysical point of view” (Melville). We are all Jews; we are all slaves.

On the other hand, some might disagree. As the ex-slave Frederick Douglass said, “I find the subject of slavery identified with many other systems, in such a manner, as in my
opinion, to detract to some extent from the horror with which slavery in the United States is so justly contemplated.” (Douglass, 1994, 8)

There is, in fact, an essential difference in the positioning of the two speaking subjects and in the dynamics of their discourse. Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, moves from the particular to the universal, and generously extends the meaning of his specific experience to the human condition in general; the materiality of the ghetto and of the camp become metaphysical metaphors without losing touch with their material existence. Ishmael and Melville, who have never experienced the slavery that was still flourishing in their country and age, seem to go instead from the universal to the particular, dissipating the specificity of physical and historical slavery into the metaphysical metaphysics of humanity’s existential un-freedom. In Levi’s image, the ghetto expands to cover the world; in Ishmael’s, the universe is so large that the plantation shrinks.

However, as Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs (and Primo Levi) remind us, the distinction between the “physical” and the “metaphysical” cannot be dismissed so glibly. As human beings, though many of the best minds of their generation are likely to forget it, Douglass and Jacobs shared everyone else’s “metaphysical” slavery of the soul. Unlike Ishmael, however, they were also “served” an excess in the form of the slavery of the body; as their narratives amply demonstrate, indeed, the slavery of the soul is to a large extent shaped and defined by the slavery of the body. They, like Primo Levi and unlike Ishmael, are the ones who are qualified to universalize the experience of total oppression, and philosophize upon it.

Ishmael’s question, however, is not an isolated instance, but rather both an extension and a tongue-in-cheek parody of widespread current discourse. Many of Melville’s most thoughtful contemporaries, including the most advanced democratic thinkers, seemed in fact to participate in the assumption that the metaphysical is superior to the physical, the immaterial to the material, the general to the particular, the eternal to the temporal — and that the former belongs to white people, the latter to blacks. Thus, slavery is mentioned often either as a trivial detail of secondary importance, or as a universal metaphor that dematerializes the substance of lived experience and social relationships. The consequence is less to enable us to perceive the horror of the human condition, than, in Douglass’s words, to “detract from the horror” of chattel slavery in its historical manifestations.

In the same year 1841 in which Melville boarded in New Bedford the whale ship Acushnet, and in which at an abolitionist meeting in New Bedford Frederick Douglass felt “strongly moved to speak”, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered his “Lecture on the Times.” The “man of ideas,” the Concord sage taught, feels that “If... I am selfish, then is there slavery, or the effort to establish it, wherever I go. But if I am just, then there is no slavery, let the laws say what they will.” (Emerson, 1983, 104) What the laws said at the time was that it was legal to seize the runaway slave Frederick Douglass and send him back into slavery. But Emerson explained:

Then again, how trivial seem the contests of the abolitionist, while he aims merely at the circumstance of the slave. Give the slave the least elevation of religious sentiment, and he is no slave; you are the slave: he not only in his humility feels his superiority, feels that much deplored condition of his to be a fading trifle, but he makes you feel it too. He is the master. The exaggeration, which our young people make of his wrongs, characterizes themselves. What are no trifles to them, they naturally think are no trifles to Pompey. (Emerson, 1983, 104)
The belief that sin (selfishness) is the problem, not slavery, allows Emerson to dismiss with insufferable paternalism the “deplored condition” and the “circumstances” of those who are both sinners and slaves—and as such are presumed to be unable to generate by themselves the elevation of the soul which must be “given” to them by someone else (without however tampering with their “humility”). It is true that Douglass’s spiritual “elevation” helped lead him out of physical bondage; but it is also true that, contrary to Emerson's claims, his intellectual and physical growth only made him feel that slavery, far from a “fading trifle,” was both physically and spiritually unbearable. Mr. Auld seemed to know human nature better than Emerson, when he warned his wife that a little learning would make the slave hopelessly discontent.

Emerson's use of “fading” includes one of the basic devices that help achieve the dematerialization of slavery: that of removing it out of historical and into sacred time—“in the scales of the New Testament,” as Ishmael says, and in the perspective of the Judgement. The classic statement of the “vanishing” of slavery in sacred time independent of human agency is, of course, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s. Slavery, Hawthorne wrote, is:

... one of those evils which divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances, but which, in its own good time, by some means impossible to be anticipated, but of the simplest and easiest operation, when all its uses shall have been fulfilled, it causes to vanish like a dream. (Hawthorne, 1883, 417.)

Henry David Thoreau was very much aware that slavery was no fading trifle, and took an active and principled stand against it. This makes it even more startling that he, too, could lapse into the same kind of rhetoric: “I sometimes wonder,” he writes, “that we can be so frivolous, I may almost say, as to attend to the gross but somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro Slavery, there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both north and south.” (Thoreau, 1989, 1638.)

A rhetoric that dismisses slavery as a vulgar material (“gross”) and “foreign” detail is indicative less of Thoreau’s politics than of the morals of social discourse in general in the times of Emerson and Melville. Just as Ishmael can jokingly dismiss the distinction between the physical and the metaphysical, Thoreau can (at least temporarily) erase the distinction between the “free” North and the “slave” South, and then go on to dismiss, on high moral grounds, that between slave and citizen: “It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself.” As if the slavery of the soul began where that of the body ceased.

One of the moral weaknesses of this approach, in fact, is that it disregards the fact that slaves, being human, also suffer from the same existential contradictions, pains and frailties as all others. That they are physically driven by the whip does not mean that they cannot also be driven by greed, ambition or competitiveness, or drive themselves to monetary ends (to buy their own freedom or that of a loved one; but also for less noble motives). In the passages I am discussing here, Emerson and Thoreau speak instead as if they thought that the slavery of the soul and that of the body excluded each other: if one is free in the soul then it does not matter if the soul itself is a slave in the body; symmetrically, those who are slaves in the body are somehow beyond the effects of the universal slavery of the soul (as if they did not have one—or as if slavery inherently ennobled its victims, for which we should therefore be thankful for it). Only the literature of the slaves, insisting that they are morally responsible beings demoralized by
physical oppression, consistently illuminates the connection between the body and the soul.

13 “This conception of the Negro as a symbol of man,” writes Ralph Ellison, “was organic to nineteenth century literature. It occurs... in Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and Melville.” (Ellison, 1973, 32.) The symbol, however, is not reversible: blackness may be a “mask of humanity,” but generic humanity cannot be invoked to dismiss the materiality of blackness. Ultimately, Levi’s generalization is also intransitive and only works in one direction: he is entitled to tell us “you are like me,” but we do not have the right to tell him (or Douglass, or Jacobs) “you are like us.” Indeed, if slavery and Auschwitz can be justly adopted as universal metaphors for the human condition, then we had better look for human universals in the partiality of their experience. The answers to Levi’s question “se questo è un uomo?” or to Ishmael’s “Who aint a slave?” must be sought less in the words of philosophers than in the words of those whose humanity was, in Douglass’s words, “cooly put on trial,” challenged, destroyed, and reconstructed: the words of the runaway slave and of the concentration camp survivor. “We are coolly put on trial for our manhood,” Douglass declared in a 1858 speech. (Douglass, 1989, 13)

14 Before I go any further: I am perfectly aware that the analogy between the Nazi concentration camp and the slave plantation, as such, has been exploded by historical analysis and criticism. It is not my intention to revive it here. The slave plantation was one thing, the concentration camp another. In fact, precisely because I am aware that the oppression of the camp inmate was much more total and pervasive than that of the slave, that the annihilation of the inmate’s humanity was the specific goal of the camp rather than incidental to economic exploitation, I can also be aware that the oppression of the slave is other than the exploitation of the proletarian, and that the exploitation of the proletarian is different from the alienation of the intellectual. This is why in this chapter while comparing the narratives of Primo Levi and Frederick Douglass, I do so always within the framework of their difference.

2. Mules and Men

“I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up.” (Morrison, 1987, 193)

15 The redefinition of what it means to be human takes place in Douglass’s Narrative on four distinct and related levels: the boundary between human beings and animals; the communication between the physical and the metaphysical, body and soul; the development of language and communication; access to political economy and citizenship. Let us begin with the first.

16 “By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their age as horses know of theirs.” (Douglass, 1959, 23.) Both in Douglass and Levi a pervasive animal imagery indicates that the crossing of the line that distinguishes humans from beasts is the crucial step both in the demolition and in the reconstruction of humanity. This process takes place, however, in different directions, and is represented in different forms. Let us compare two significant passages. Levi:

The SS escort did not conceal their amusement at seeing men and women squatting where they could, on the railroad banks or along the tracks; and the German passengers showed their disgust: these people deserve their fate, only look how
they behave. They are not Menschen, human beings, but beasts, swine; this is as clear as sunlight.

17 It was indeed a beginning. In later life, in the daily rhythm of the camps, the violation of shame was, at least in the beginning, an important aspect of the global violence.... However, within a few weeks the unpleasantness was attenuated and all but forgotten. Habit (not for all!) took over, which is a charitable way of saying that the transformation from human beings into animals was well on its way. And Douglass:

We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and all were subjected to the same narrow examination.... At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slave holder. (Douglass, 1959, 74.)

The differences between these two passages are as illuminating as their analogies. The most important concerns the direction of the transition. Levi and his fellow prisoners enter the story with an unchallenged belief in their own humanity; they have jobs, an education, a role in civilized society (“Eppure sono proprio io, il laureato di Torino,” “the college graduate from Turin”). The work of the concentration camp is one of “demolizione,” “dissolvimento” (“demolition,” “dissolution”) of human beings, literally stripped of the attributes that connote their originary humanity. (Levi, 1976, 111) Douglass, on the other hand, is born already into a condition not very unlike a horse’s, and must first recognize, then reconstruct, and finally defend, his negated humanity. While Levi describes how human beings are transformed into animals and things, Douglass describes how “animals” discover that they are human.

This difference in approach is underscored by differences in rhetoric and setting. When the free passengers see the prisoners as “swine,” theirs is primarily a metaphor; when the slaves are ranked and evaluated along with swine and horses, it is a metonymy that blurs into literal identification: they are literally cast with the other property.” Again: when Levi says that prisoners described their way of eating as “fressen” (a verb only used for animals), he is recounting a bitter metaphor of camp speech to describe demeaning conditions. When Douglass describes the slave children who were called “like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush” all together out of a “trough,” the resemblance is too powerful to read simply as a simile. The literal identification is clinched metonymically at the end of the following chapter, in the image of the starved slave girl Mary “contending with the pigs for the offal thrown into the street.” The prisoners defecating by the railroad tracks are metaphorically like pigs; Mary is metonymically one. (Levi, 1976, 94; Douglass, 1959, 52, 61.) Camp inmates tend to be treated like beasts, slaves as beasts.7 We can perceive the distinction better when we compare Douglass’s passage with a similar one in the Life of Equiano: the slaves in the merchant’s yard are “all pent up together like so many sheep in a fold, without regard to sex or age.” Like Levi, free-born Equiano has a recollection of his being human; therefore, he perceives his brutal treatment as a similitude (like sheep) rather than metonymy (with the sheep). (Equiano, 2002, 37)

This difference is reinforced by the setting. Douglass grows up on a farm; horses, calves, and other farm animals are very much a part of the landscape. On the other hand, in the barren landscape of Auschwitz “nothing is alive, except machines and slaves—the former much more than the latter.” (Levi, 1976, 90.) Levi’s animal imagery consequently is more abstract than Douglass’s. The most frequent analogy is with animals as a general category
“bestie,” “brutes”: “we are nothing but tired beasts,” “like three wild beasts,” “their eyes were like those of frightened beasts.” When specific animals are mentioned, they tend to be the ones of which prisoners have direct experience, such as parasites, insects, and worms: “like certain insect spoils,” “small like ants,” “like worms emptied of souls,” “as the ichneumon paralyzes hairy caterpillars.”

The dichotomy of metaphor and metonymy also mirrors the attitude of the captors. Though the Nazis defined their prisoners as inferior beings and worked to demolish their humanity, yet they ultimately admitted that they belonged to the human race: the scandal, to their eyes, was that they could be treated like animals. In Douglass’s time, instead, respectable ethnology classed African Americans either as a separate species or an intermediate stage in the “sliding scale” between animals and humans. As a public speaker, Douglass found it necessary to confute these theories and defend his own “claims” to be literally considered human.

The prevalence of metaphor and simile on the one hand, and metonymy and literal identification on the other, may not make much difference in terms of the relative material condition of camp inmates and slaves, but indicates a difference in the form of their de-humanization and of their resistance. While the literal or metonymic identification of humans with animals represents the starting point of the reconstruction of humanity, the metaphorical approach corresponds to its deconstruction.

Metaphor is a figure of similarity based on difference; by underlining that they are becoming like beasts, Levi constantly reminds us that they are not beasts: the space between signified and signifier represents the resistance of difference, the memory of having been human. Resistance to slavery, on the other hand, may be partly rooted in the memory of having been a beast. Identification with farm animals is the starting point of a liberation process in which the space of metaphor must be created as the slaves recognize and re-create their own humanity. Also, being like an animal, in Levi’s text, is a purely negative, non-human state; being an animal, as in the slave experience, means, at least, being alive—not a machine, not a tool.

In fact, in a passage most closely reminiscent of Douglass’s evaluation scene, when the prisoners are ranked and counted before being loaded on the trains, Levi suggests that they are treated less like living animals than as lifeless objects. They are counted as “pezzi,” “pieces” (Wievel Stuck”: how many pieces?) and treated as freight: “freight wagons, locked from the outside, and inside men women children mercilessly crammed, like cheap commodities, on our way to nowhere, on our way down, toward the depths.”

Douglass’s animal imagery, however, soon takes a turn toward the metaphorical, first in reference with the slave-owners and then to himself. As the narrative proceeds, his references, like Levi’s, become broader and less realistic: he speaks of “brutes” rather than specific animals, or evokes exotic and bookish analogies — snakes, lions, tigers. This indicates that, from a certain point onward, Douglass is confronted less with his original problem of becoming human than with the loss of humanity in the slave hierarchy and in himself.

Slavery, Douglass writes, has a “brutalizing,” “dehumanizing” effect on both slaves and masters; unlike the slaves, however, the masters start out being human (Mrs. Sophia Auld is the paradigmatic example), and are increasingly stripped of their humanity as they adapt to the system. Like Levi, Douglass represents the process of dehumanization by means of animal metaphors: Mr. Covey becomes a snake, Mrs. Auld’s “lamb-like
disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness.” The rhetorical shift is underscored by the fact that Douglass applies to the masters animal images that are at the same time Biblical and unfamiliar, as opposed to the domestic animals to which the slaves were assimilated: he refers both to Mr. Covey’s farm and to the slave South as a whole as dens of “wild beasts” or “hungry lions.”

27 When Douglass applies animal metaphors to himself, however, the effect is more complex. One of the important aspects that the Narrative shares with the work of Primo Levi is that both indicate that consciousness can be not only gained but also lost: the line between animal and human can be crossed several times, and in both directions. Frederick Douglass’s is a three-phased narrative of how (a) an animal was made a man; (b) a man was made a slave; (c) a slave was again made a man. In the central phase, in which Douglass all but loses his newly gained sense of self, metaphor prevails over metonymy. When he says, “I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own,” (Douglass, 1959, 67) he compares himself to an animal precisely to tell us that, having learned to read, he is no longer one.

28 At this point, Douglass is no longer endeavoring to become human but, like Primo Levi, in danger of losing his already achieved humanity and resisting by holding on to its memory. Thus, describing his experience with Covey the slave-breaker (an implicit animal metaphor!), he urges us to “behold a man transformed into a brute!”, tells us that he spent his leisure time “in a sort of beast-like stupor,” and weeps “O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute!” [my italics: he has apparently forgotten he told us he had been born a horse (Ibid., 95, 98)]. The shift from the specific “horse” or “cow” to the generic “brute” underlines the shift from the literal to the metaphorical, from the material to the mental. The semiotic space of difference is opening up and all of Covey’s violence can no longer crush it completely shut again.

29 At Covey’s, Douglass all but loses his new-found sense of humanity and is brought back to the state of a beast. Consequently, his rebellion to Covey is accompanied by the re-emergence of metonymy and of images of domestic animals. In implicit symmetry to Covey’s “breaking,” Douglass describes himself as “unmanageable,” and angers Covey by failing to manage the oxen; he is later set to driving pigs. When Covey attempts to “get hold” of him, Douglass is again metonymically assimilated to horses. He is in the stable, currying and feeding the animals, when Covey tries to rope him like a horse-wrangler breaking in an unmanageable colt: “Mr. Covey entered the stable with a long rope; and just as I was half out of the loft, he caught hold of my legs, and was about tying me.” (Douglass, 1959, 103) Only when his shoulders make contact with the stable floor does Douglass suddenly spring up and resist.

30 “From whence came the spirit I don’t know”: perhaps, part of Douglass’s “unexpected” resistance is related to the fact that, in order to once again retrace the road from brute to human, he must come as close as possible to the physical and metonymical assimilation to a farm animal. The horror of the imminent closing of the mental space of metaphor combines with the empowering sense of the physical power of the body, and together they allow Frederick Douglass to “rise.”
3. Body and Soul

Frederick Douglass had a picture of [pugilist] Peter Jackson in his study, and he used to point to it and say, “Peter is doing a great deal with his fists to solve the Negro question.” (Johnson, 1990, 208)

Like Thoreau, Frederick Douglass and Primo Levi also compare overseers, not as general types but as specific individuals. Levi:

Toward May 1944, our nearly innocuous Kapo was replaced, and the new one was a frightful individual. All Kapos beat us: this was an implicit part of their tasks, it was their language, more or less accepted; it was, after all, the only language that in that perpetual Babel might be truly understood by all. In its different shadings, it was understood as incitement, warning, or punishment, and ranked very low in the hierarchy of penalties. Now, our new Kapo beat us differently, in a convulsed, evil, perverse fashion: on noses, shins, genitals. He hit to hurt, to cause pain and humiliation. 13

And Douglass:

Mr. Severe was rightly named: he was a cruel man.... He seemed to take pleasure in manifesting his fiendish barbarity.... His death was regarded by the slaves as the result of a merciful providence.

Mr. Severe’s place was filled by a Mr. Hopkins. He was a different man. He was less cruel, less profane, and made less noise, than Mr. Severe. His course was characterized by no extraordinary demonstrations of cruelty. He whipped, but seemed to take no pleasure in it. He was called by the slaves a good overseer. (Douglass, 1959, 34-35)

The moral difference between a “cruel” and a “good” overseer, like that between an “innocuous” and a “perverse” Kapo, might have seemed “gross” and “foreign” to some, but apparently was “no trifle to Pompey.” While Thoreau seeks analogies, Levi and Douglass insist upon differences: even in the concentration camp, or in the slave plantation, there is both a linguistic and a physical difference between ordinary language and “extraordinary” violence. 14

Neither Levi nor Douglass say that the cruel overseer hit harder; both draw attention instead to the subjective state of mind that accompanied physical violence. It is ironic that victims ought to be concerned with the subjectivity and conscience of their torturers: ironically, even the “pleasure” of an overseer is “no trifle” to them. This capacity to see through the conscience of their oppressors is a testimony to the resistance of humanity of the oppressed, who retain the power of seeing the other just as the other does not see them and is in the process of annihilating them. Furthermore, the two anecdotes testify to the narrator’s awareness of the inseparability of the mental and the physical, the subjective and the objective.

In the first place, Levi and Douglass perceive this process as another example of the “dehumanizing” effects of violence upon its perpetrators. In order to be able to treat human beings as brutes, the slave and camp hierarchy must deny what they have in common with them: their own humanity, their own souls. The passage becomes also a device by which Douglass redirects the gaze from the objectified slave to the reader’s own subjectivity. By looking at the owners and the overseers, Douglass forces readers to look not only at the physical and psychological otherness of the suffering slave, but also at the behavior of subjects who are much more like themselves, and to recognize, along with the
horrors perpetrated upon the body of the “other,” also the horrors that can be perpetrated upon (and by) the soul of their likes.

There is a peculiar division of labor among literary genres: one is supposed to read Emerson for the soul, and slave narratives for the body. The accent on the physical suffering of the slave somehow clinches the image of the slave as a purely physical being, whose suffering is perhaps greater but somehow less exquisite (more “gross”) than ours: do we not, as we read of the whip, suffer as much in our sensitive hearts as they do in their hardened skins?

Douglass is not exempt from this kind of rhetoric, as the famous scenes of the whipping of Hester or his grandmother’s death indicate. When he speaks of the “demoralizing” effects of slavery upon its victims, he describes it in terms of reduction to the physical: “wallowing,” drunkenness, sexuality, loss of the sense of privacy and shame. He elicits the conventional association of slavery and sin to evoke both the ambiguous emotions of the gothic-oriented reader and the more conventional empathy of the sentimental one (often, of course, compounded into one).

And yet — let us read how, very early in the text, Douglass speaks of the death of his mother:

Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger. (Douglass, 1959, 25)

“Soothing presence” and “tender and watchful care” are ordinary evocations of the sentimental cult of domesticity; what follows, however, is its immediate, direct opposite. Douglass evokes his reader's tender sentiments only to hit them more sharply with the fact that he was unable to share them. How can you weep over one who cannot weep over his own mother’s death? Later, Douglass returns to this memory to explain a similar lack of feelings at leaving his siblings to go to Baltimore: “The ties that ordinarily bind children to their homes were all suspended in my case... the early separation of us from our mother had well nigh blotted the fact of our relationship from our memories....” (Douglass, 1959, 53.) No wonder that “separation” is such a crucial term in the Narrative: while it helps set Douglass apart as a lone heroic figure, it also indicates the inner loneliness generated by slavery.

Levi makes the same point: toward the end of his detention, when he hears that the camp is soon to be evacuated, he notes that “the news did not arouse any direct emotion.” Levi’s emotional detachment, however, is the consequence of loss: he no longer possesses “the sensitivity I used to have.” Douglass, instead, is hardly more than a baby who is unable to feel for his mother. The ultimate stage in Levi’s “demolition” is an extreme form of the stage in which Douglass finds himself at the beginning.

Although his Narrative is a very self-centered, individualistic text, part of the story it tells is about the recovery of the capacity to feel affection for others: the “strong attachment” he feels toward the little boys in Baltimore and the friendship with the fellow slaves with whom he sets up his reading classes and plots to escape. A song that Douglass also knew describes the slaves as “stolen souls from Africa”; indeed, what slavery steals is not only their bodies, but their souls and feelings. Douglass, however, uses this insight to remind us that the suffering of the slave is as much in the spiritual as in the physical sphere: slaves have souls that can be hurt because they “are like other people” —that is, “intellectual, moral, and accountable beings.” (Douglass, 1959, 113, 43)
What makes Douglass different from his more privileged contemporaries, however, is that (just as he refuses to identify the slaves as nothing but bodies) he does not find it necessary to disregard their bodies in order to display their souls. Ultimately, what crushes the souls of the slaves is the violence on their bodies; conversely, it is the crushing of their souls that reduces them to mere physical “wallowing.” More importantly, the redemption of their souls and the redemption of their bodies are one and the same process. Hunger assimilates Mary to the swine in the street; work reduces Douglass to a brute at Mr. Covey’s; better physical treatment (in Baltimore or on Mr. Freeland’s farm) revives his conscience and his yearning to be free. He may not be claiming in so many words that material being determines conscience, but he certainly rejects any separation between the two.

This approach culminates in the story of Douglass’s annihilation and rebellion on Covey’s farm. At first, the crushing of his body entails the near loss of his soul:

We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work, work, was scarcely more the order of the day that of the night. The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him. I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute! (Douglass, 1959, 94-95)

Douglass does not indicate whether “natural elasticity” refers to the liveliness of his intelligence or the nimbleness of his body: they are inseparable, and the loss of one entails the loss of the other. This mutual relationship is the hinge on which the scene of his fight with Covey revolves.

“I resolved to fight,” he says, “and as I did so, I rose”; when all is over, he repeats: “My long-crushed spirit rose.” Douglass, then, rises both in body and in spirit; indeed, first in body and then in spirit. The spirit was crushed through the body, and through the body it rises again: the claim that his “breed” is indeed metaphysical is placed on sturdy physical and material foundations. “It was a glorious resurrection”: indeed, the more glorious since, like Christ, Douglass rises “from the tomb of slavery” both in body and in soul. (Douglass, 1959, 103)

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NOTES

1. This phrase was coined during the May 1968 movement in Paris, in protest for the expulsion from France of the movement’s leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit.

2. In Frederick Douglass, “circumstance” makes the difference between an intellectual and a slave: “but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have today, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home, writing this Narrative, been confined to the galling chains of slavery”. (Douglass, 1959, 55-56)

3. Stefano Levi Delia Torre makes this point concerning the presumed “ennobling effect” of the extermination camp: “if the effect of persecution were that of improving the human beings who are their victims, let us then welcome persecution: the survivors, if any, will be the backbone of a better human kind”: Nosaico. Attualità e inattualità degli ebrei (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1994), p. 60n.


Era effettivamente un prologo. Nella vita che doveva seguire, nel ritmo quotidiano del Lager, l’offesa al pudore rappresentava, almeno all’inizio una parte importante della sofferenza
7. Indeed, one of the “defenses” of slavery was based precisely in the fact that slaves were as economically valuable as the rest of the farm animals, and therefore not considered expendable by their owners.


11. Levi, 1976, 15-16: “vagoni merci chiusi dall’esterno, e dentro uomini donne bambini, compressi senza pietà, come merce di dozzina, in viaggio verso il nulla, in viaggio all’ingiù, verso il fondo.” Slaves, of course, are also marketable commodities: but, like animals, living ones. For a description of slaves as a “cargo” of commodities, see Equiano, 2002, 32. The context is the loading of newly caught prisoners on the slave ship, closely reminiscent of the loading of prisoners on the train to Auschwitz. Like them, the African slaves are in the process of being deprived of a humanity they had been taking for granted.

12. Douglass, 1959, 24, 100, 143. Though the lamb is a domestic animal, yet the image is derived more from the Bible than from any actual experience.


15. Levi, 1976, 192: “la notizia non provocò in me alcuna emozione diretta”; “la mia sensibilità di prima”

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Anyone who is familiar with the economic and social structure of the U. S. must recognize that, particularly in times of crisis, the Negro problem is and will remain America's most pressing problem. In my view a solution within a capitalist system with its typical social and economic setup is impossible, and patchwork improvements which have been tried will be of small help. Only the removal of the racial and class divide, in other word the removal of capitalism itself would be the necessary first step for a solution of the negro problem. Only under a socialist system can this be achieved (my translation).

Thus ends the preface of a remarkable narrative published in 1950 by the Rector of Leipzig University, Julius Lips. (Lips, 1950, 13) Thirteen years earlier, he had taught in the Social Science division at Howard University in Washington D. C. in his area of specialization, African ethnology. His colleagues at Howard University included Ralph Bunche, E. Franklin Frazier, Alain Locke, Abram L. Harris, Charles Wesley and Emmet E. Dorsey. What story did he tell? His abiding interest was to document and comment on the pernicious impact of racism on individual black behavior and its baneful long-range effects upon the academic culture of “Hilltop University”: the wholesale aping of white ways on the part of students, faculty and faculty wives and the paranoid color consciousness internalized by the victims of white racism. With sardonic insistence, he dwells on individual and intergroup foibles and he finds the lack of a “cultural African identity” and of individual self-confidence in the black academic class deplorable. Why
would anyone want to acquire the norms of white America which he considered, from his European perch, somewhat shallow and wanting to begin with, when Africa had such a rich heritage? The time and place of this publication were unusual. The author had just been appointed Rector of an old and distinguished university in the brand-new Socialist Republic of East Germany. In keeping with the socialist world view of his employer, the GDR, he placed the blame for the “colonial socialization” squarely on white racist capitalism, a stance that would have found favor with current “whiteness studies.” Unlike them, however, he was not a radical contextualist and would not let those individuals off the hook who had made an art of “blaming the system” for their inadequacies and lack of personal achievement. In his narrative, he divides the blame among victors and victims, analyzes content of character and system of racism rather evenly. Thus, his account echoes and foreshadows E. Franklin Frazier’s insider account of the Black Bourgeoisie, which first appeared in 1955, interestingly, in French. Lips resolutely takes the outside point of view, that of a European Africanist whose superior positionality is implied on both counts. From our perspective today, the way he negotiates two epistemological barriers is most interesting: the color line and the Atlantic divide. This cognitive liability, to modify Ellison’s trope of invisibility, generates its own set of prejudices and tacit background assumptions. Last but not least, the book was a way of getting his own back by portraying in less than flattering terms those very colleagues who engineered his dismissal. His ire added an element of backstage gossip to this complex tale and its multiple refractions.

How did this German Africanist, Julius Lips (1895-1950), end up at Howard? Historical contingencies help to thicken the plot. His academic career began in Germany with a doctorate in philosophy with minors in economics and anthropology in 1919. In 1923 he added a degree in law, but then he chose to make a career of his minor, anthropology. He worked as a graduate assistant with Willy Foy (1873-1929) and Graebner (1877-1934) at the Museum of Ethnology in Cologne. When Foy became incurably ill, Graebner briefly took over the directorship, but was prostrated by the same nervous illness as Foy. In a remarkably shrewd career move, Lips, who at the time was Graebner’s research assistant, jockeyed himself into the position of director of the Museum. At the same time, in 1929, he submitted his “Habilitation” and, after a controversial vote in the committee, was promoted to associate professor at the University in 1930. This promotion did not go unchallenged and triggered an academic scandal; for there were strong allegations voiced by his co-students, Paul Lesser and Martin Block, that he had plagiarised the field work of his predecessors at the Museum. Due to the turbulent political times, these claims were never dealt with or substantiated in court. For soon thereafter, on 12 March 1933, Lips was dismissed by the new Nazi powers for reasons of “political unreliability,” probably owing to his running on the Social Democratic ticket in 1932 for the City council elections. The Nazis took the allegations of plagiarism, though voiced by two Jews, seriously and made several house searches to retrieve stolen materials. Lips now threw himself at the feet of the new Nazi mayor in Cologne in order to be reinstated as director. In a letter, he insisted on his excellent Aryan standing using the very allegations of plagiarism by his “Jewish” co-students as proof of his antisemitic credentials. But this groveling before the Nazi brass did him no good. After continued harassment by the Nazi powers, he chose exile in France in March 1934. It must have added insult to injury that a mediocre, one-legged student of his, who was a member of the Nazi party, became his successor. In May 1934, he was admitted to the US on the basis of a letter of invitation.
by Franz Boas. In his request to Boas, Lips had claimed that “he gave up his job voluntarily” because he could no longer live in “this prisonhouse of the mind.” In the US, he became active in anti-fascist organizations: the American Committee for Anti-Nazi Literature and the Council for a Democratic Germany. In that capacity, he formed a lasting friendship with Heinrich Mann and other exiled antifascist writers, a connection which stood him in good stead for the resumption of his career in Germany after the war. Quite obviously, he possessed the cosmopolitan charm of a consummate trickster. In 1937, his book *The Savage Hits Back: Or The White Man Through Native Eyes* was published in London and by Yale University Press. It dealt with the representation of the White man in African art and received strong endorsement, among others from Bronislav Malinowski who praised its innovative gaze “from the native point of view.” In an odd way Lips’s book was postcolonial avant la lettre. It adds to the irony that this book, which remains unique to this day, was based on those very field materials that Lips had in all likelihood appropriated from his predecessor’s collection. But in this time of political turmoil in Europe, nobody was there to protest or challenge his breach of copyright, particularly when such heavy support was forthcoming from Malinowski. This sudden fame in the profession prompted the invitation from Howard University.

The shortness of his tenure there and the abrupt change in the estimation by his colleagues at Howard are remarkable and give rise to further speculation. In 1937 he was emphatically endorsed for the post by three spokesmen of the Social Science division, among them E. Franklin Frazier. “The Division feels that Howard University can ill afford to present courses in this highly technical field except under the competent direction of Professor Lips’s calibre and attainments.” Yet his dismissal was demanded even more emphatically only two years later, this time signed by an even more powerful group in full academic regalia: “E. Franklin Frazier, Department of Sociology, Alain Locke, Department of Philosophy, Ralph Bunche, Department of Political Science, Abram L. Harris. Department of Economics, Charles H. Wesley. Department of History.” Their controlled and studied prose barely contains the profound contempt that this Africanist managed to shore up in less than two years:

> It is the considered opinion of the Division of the Social Sciences that instruction in Anthropology is a vital and desirable part of the college instruction in the social science field, and thus the Division has repeatedly urged its inauguration and expansion. However, this position is predicated upon the instruction in this subject constituting a program of standard courses of a type and sequence normally offered in American college. In reply to your letter of inquiry concerning the reappointment of Dr. Lips addressed to us as heads of the several social science departments concerned, we feel, with regret but upon the basis of concrete experience in the past, that Dr. Lips is unable by his background of experience and perhaps by temperament to participate effectively in the development of such a program. (Edgcomb, 1993, 110-112)

In an article in the *Atlanta World* of June 15, 1939, Dean Charles H. Thompson (who appears as Dean Blockhead in Lips’s book) spells out more specific details:

> First, Dr. Lips possesses an unfortunate temperament and personality which make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for him to get along amicably with his colleagues. At the present time his relationship with his colleagues in the social sciences is either one of polite indifference or suppressed hostility, so that any sort of real collaboration is highly improbable. Dr. Lips, for some reason, has attracted very few students to his courses, even after a two-year stay at the university. It will be observed that Dr. Lips has never had more than 38 students during any one of the five semesters he has been in the college, and during the current year he had...
only 15 students the first semester and 16 students are registered during the second semester (Ibid. 112).

Upon the request of a member of the Board of Trustees, Lips was given the opportunity to resign before he was fired (110-111). What precisely happened between him and his colleagues is nowhere clearly spelled out and must be extrapolated from his skewed version of the story. Rayford Logan’s history of Howard University does not mention Lips in the text, but curiously he lists his book *The Savage Hits Back* in a bibliography of Howard University writers in the appendix. After his debacle at Howard, Lips returned to New York where he did journalistic work in antifascist organisations. Although he conducted some field work among Native Americans, and although lectured at the New School for Social Research from 1944-48, he had trouble resuming or advancing his career in anthropology. Boas’s support had become muted before his death. Eminent American anthropologists such as Robert H. Lowie and A. L. Kroeber, whose recommendation he had solicited, found his talent “more literary than ethnological,” which in retrospect seems a fair assessment, and finally the ghosts of the past came back to haunt him. That same doctoral student from Cologne, Paul Lesser, who had made the allegations of plagiarism in 1933, raised this issue again when the New School offered him a position. Lesser declined the invitation arguing “that he would not be able to defend his scholarly honor while teaching in the same faculty with the plagiarist Lips.” With his reputation in decline, Lips made efforts after the war to return to Germany. First he gave Cologne a try. Upon the advice of a board member of the University of Cologne who had access to Lips’s correspondence with the Nazi authorities, he was denied reinstatement in 1947. He then answered a Leipzig University advertisement for a “politically untainted” Rector. His status as a “Nazi victim” and his American credentials made him look like the ideal candidate, and he was chosen. In his application, he made grandiose claims which, in the prevailing mood of quick restoration, nobody was able to contest nor inclined to question: Lips listed among his many achievements that he had co-authored Franz Boas’s *General Anthropology* 1938 when in fact he only contributed one short entry on government. He refers to extensive field work in Africa, when in fact he never traveled much beyond Algiers, and that as a tourist. He had visited that city on Mediterranean pleasure cruises in 1927 and 1932 which included stopovers and daily excursions, but no serious field work.

Lips died of colon cancer only a year after his inauguration as rector at age 54. After his death, his wife and fellow anthropologist Eva Lips saw to it that the self-aggrandizing myths he had spun were not challenged, and she wrote a hagiography to buttress his status as a soteriological figure. In her memoirs, she portrays him as a saintly figure with near superhuman talents. She calls him “a friend of Negroes and Indians,” “a great man and humanist,” a universalist and no less than “a man for mankind” and a “loving brother of humanity,” a veritable Mahatma Ghandi of Anthropology. But in fact, Lips was a self-aggrandizing confidence man, a raconteur who loved half-truths and half-lies, but also a gifted author who possessed a remarkable narrative talent, which he packaged in opportunism. Eva Lips somehow managed to take over his professorship and retired in 1966. She died 1988 at age 82, a revered figure in Socialist East German anthropology. The strange path of their careers was first explored and researched at greater length in a doctoral dissertation by Lothar Pützstück: *Symphonie in Moll. Julius Lips und die Kölnische Völkerkunde.*
Lips's book on his experiences at Howard was published in Weimar one year after the founding of the German Democratic Republic, in 1950. Understandably, there was no readership for a roman à clef about a black American university, and the book was duly ignored. After fifty years, it deserves to be rescued. The title of his narrative *Forschungsreise in die Dämmerung* (Field Trip into the Twilight) indicates that the narrator assumes the role of a participant observer to chart the twilight of black (mulatto) bourgeois life. Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb, in her book on exiled Germans at Black Universities, comments that Lips "portrays his Howard experience as a fascinating and moving sort of ethnographic field trip to explore the world of the African American bourgeoisie. Throughout his frequently sardonic descriptions and his astonishing, unscientific conflation of biological and cultural traits, he is the superior European, cultured and refined, generously giving, while observing these unhappy folk (115).” The account is semifictional. Historical or living characters such as Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Roland Hayes, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes are mentioned or interact with invented *dramatis personae* at Howard. With the exception of the president, who is closely modeled on the original, the latter are composite characters that Lips created bricolage fashion from recognizable traits of his real life colleagues. In these rather graphic description, of daily practice lies the most interesting part of the story.

The account begins aboard the ocean liner *Ile de France* en route from Le Havre to New York. The narrator and his wife, anthropologists Peter and Pat Smith, are of unidentified European origin (though with an English name) and introduce themselves as world citizens and cosmopolitans. Back from a research trip to England, they are returning to their new home in the USA. As anthropologists, they love to observe people on the world stage and they gaze upon the busy life on board with its myriad presentations of self as a sort of human zoo. This narrative stance of close scrutiny and quasi-ethnological evaluation is maintained throughout the book which therefore consists of a series of microevents, cultural vignettes, intimate portraits and social rituals. In the dining hall, a “pale elegant” gentleman with shortcropped, dark hair dines all alone. His solitude, they soon find out, is not voluntary. When they invite him to join their table for a glass of Veuve Cliquot, which he readily accepts, a white American couple next to them, after exchanging frantic whispers, moves to another part of the dining hall. The gentleman turns out to be an eminent black biologist, Dr. Parker, back from a research trip in Europe (probably modeled on the marine biologists at Howard, Ernest Just). Despite persistent inquiries, he refuses to tell them specifics about his profession or name the place where he works. When in New York, they suggest they should meet again; he curtly refuses, dropping a loaded remark that he has “a profession, but not a position.” Soon thereafter, the narrator opens the letter that invites him to assume a position at Hilltop University, a Negro university in Washington D. C., and a rash of memories overwhelms this “specialist of Africa”: “For someone who knew Negroes... instantly the old images returned: the moist damp jungle, the steppes and deserts, sounds of drums, wood carvings documenting an age old tradition, African metal work developed long before the white man invented foundries, the dances, the rhythms, old tales, the respect of Gods, the dynamic power of proud traditional tribes that, under the tutelage of chieftains, lived a primitive life that brought home to the white man the emptiness of his own so-called civilization.” In that same erotoprimitivist vein, the narrator makes frequent references to “real Negroes” or to a pure Africa, where “the genuine and noble children of the continent maintained traditions and customs, safety, hospitality and care.” Quite
different is what he finds at Hilltop, “in the border area between black and white: a mongrelized crew, which combined the vices of both worlds without any of its virtues” (22). He is both fascinated and horrified by race mixture and by the effects of assimilation on “Africans” transported to the New World. On the whole, this specialist of “the real Africa” which, in the absence of any real experience, is a fanciful projection, takes a dim view of hybridity and métissage, thus echoing Count Gobineau rather than Franz Boas. While African blacks were proud tribesman, new world blacks had to work as lift boys, porters, pullman staff or jazz musicians. They live in a twilight zone, neither here nor there. “Anthropologically speaking, they are not Negroes anymore. All their faces showed white blood. How had the old traits mixed with the new. How had it affected their souls. Had it turned them into denizens of a borderworld.” Hence, the very notion of a “Negro University” that has to operate under these liminal conditions intrigues him. “Was there such a thing?” Though many people warned him that Hilltop was faction-ridden, this “cosmopolitan” insists that he wants to go there “as a friend and helper,” whereupon he is given the cynical insider advice: “At Hilltop there are no friends.” His initiation to the color coded world begins as he rather naively tries to find lodgings in a racially territorialized city. Depending on where he looks in D. C., either no black visitors are allowed, or no white visitors will venture to come. Therefore, they move into a liminal space, a Hotel. When he arrives at Hilltop, he is delighted to find that his office will be in Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall where his wife, to the chagrin of Hilltop janitors, commits the first breach of etiquette as she begins to clean and put his office in order, something unheard of among Hilltop faculty wives. Now begins the inventory of the dramatis personae, the strange types who people this twilight zone between the races. First, Dr. Benjamin Jones, the chairman of the Sociology department is introduced, in all likelihood modeled on E. Franklin Frazier. The narrator quickly falls in line with the local color etiquette and sizes his characters up in the spirit of genealogicalcum-social ascription: “very dark, casually dressed, round forehead, broad nose, full mouth –bronze-Benin type.” Then, we meet President Obadiah Lamarquis de Wedlock (closely modeled on Mordecai Johnson), who is described as “light colored and as a cagey, shrewd operator with smooth hair, dark eyes. Nothing Negroid, more like a Jewish bandleader or a soft-featured Kapellmeister.” This is Lips’s least fictional figure; for Wedlock shares his looks, his leadership qualities and his controversial reputation with Mordecai Wyatt Johnson. The historian of Howard University, Rayford Logan, draws this portrait of the President: “Very few of those who have known President Johnson hold neutral views about him; the vast majority are fervent admirers or bitter critics.... There is, however, one view about him on which friends, adversaries and neutrals tend to agree — that he possessed a ‘Messianic Complex.’... In certain ‘Messianic Moments’, he would tell the late E. Franklin Frazier the kind of sociology to write or the late Abram Harris the kind of economics to study.... He was one of the great platform orators of his day. Practically never using a manuscript but relying almost entirely on an outline, his remarkable memory and his thorough ‘homework,’ he generally won the admiration of his audiences” (Rayford, 1969, 249-250).

9 In the narrator’s rhetoric and manner of description we detect that race mixture both fascinates and horrifies him. They meet their mixed student body from all over the world including Caribbeans, Asians and Africans. All of them “exaggerate” their “pseudo-identities”—they are not balanced or well in their skins.9 He notes compulsive behavior and is amazed at the stand-offish student-teacher relations. Next comes Angus Hastings, Dean of faculty and Professor of German, whose specialty is medieval Niebelungen epics,
which he readily recites, adding a moment of surrealism. Soon, another colleague, Dollar Grant McLee, a dark brown roundhead, head of economics (Abraham Harris), who emerges as a gifted storyteller along with Eusebius (Earl) Porter in Political Science, a 47-year-old bachelor and closet Marxist, whose home is filled with portraits of Marx and Lenin and who receives “foreign visitors,” a close portrait of Ralph Bunche. Porter, McLee and Jones are drinking buddies and welcome the chance to meet at the narrator’s office. They take him along on their drinking binges when stories are told, gossip is exchanged and in particular steam is let off against President Obadiah, whom all of them parody to great effect. Archibald Hume, who is part African and Asian and was educated in Europe, adds an intrigue-conscious denizen of the twilight zone along color lines. Then we meet Sidney Pretty, a Creole with straight hair who casually refers to his descent from Mexican forefathers, a claim which cuts little ice with his cynical colleagues. Dress conscious, he remains a black Victorian with a vengeance. He particularly despises the coarse presentation of self of his colleagues who love to tell off-color stories, and the mimetic talent of his colleagues, he says, reminds him more of monkeys. This may well be a partial portrait of Alain Locke. Enter Mr. Pradhana Tamil Grumukhi, disciple of Ghandi and dark Hindu who adds some condiment to the gumbo. He is introduced as “different in many ways.” Though blacker than most of his Hilltop colleagues and students, he turns out to run a caste-ridden New Age type religious center that does not admit blacks. Enter Dr. George E. Parker again, the distinguished scholar, biologist and embryologist, specialist of sea mollusks, etc., who greets them with “You don’t belong here.” The narrator comments: “On board he had been a cool, solitary and bored gentleman, on Hilltop campus he appeared as an ice cold, solitary and mute misanthrope.” He is characterized as the only true cosmopolitan who, though he moves in the best circles in Paris, Germany and Austria, is thwarted by the academic situation at Hilltop. We also meet Mr. Quivers, a Black Bostonian who is keeper of materials, a charming family man whose children do performances of Shoeshine Boy. The narrator praises the talent for mimicry and performance and cheers the “curious moment when the compulsively bourgeois mannerisms are thrown overboard... When the special talents of their race become visible.” He comments on the compulsively neutral housing and dress codes. Enter Puma, a passablanc art historian who feels like a Pariah and who marvels at white matrimonial habits. She finds its odd that Smith’s wife Pat should do the cleaning, plus secretarial and other service work for her husband. “No black woman would help her husband like you do, she would make him work for her.” Cauli Jones, wife of the department chairman, is a high yeller Venus of the “Willendorf type.” The Negro problem is the only topic she is interested in, which weighs down every conversation. When Pat protests that she is not color conscious, she is reminded by Cauli that in the US there is a culture of mutual hatred between black and white. She is given a lesson in cross-racial etiquette: “When we meet a white person who does not behave in accordance with the color line, we are puzzled and confused.” The narrator comments on the paradoxical situation that the Smiths may be invited by blacks to their homes, but they cannot reciprocate; for no black visitors will be let into their hotel by the black doormen. Therefore, they institutionalize a commons room afternoon tea at 4 p. m. in Douglass Hall, and this venue becomes a favorite exchange on the problems of the color line and of Hilltop University. Permanent topics are the South, the color line and President Obadiah. The narrator marvels at the use of “debasling” language, the use of the term “Nigger” is to him astonishing, as is the prevailing cynicism. When one of the protagonists, Jones alias Frazier, picks up a German edition of “Afrika singt” and reads Langston Hughes I too sing America in German, the trio
chimes in like a Greek choir and disses on Hughes’ “dream.” Clearly, their dreams are already deferred. Topics like “good hair” are prominent, and the problem of cutting black hair is raised. One of them relates that in London only Jews can do it well. A storytelling session is devoted to dissembling “Anabel,” a white do-gooder and “niggerlover,” perhaps a caricature of Nancy Cunard since Annabel is introduced as the author of a book entitled Black Man and White Lady.

As a teacher of ethnology, the narrators breaks many tacit rules of academic etiquette. He lets his students articulate their sense of self and invites essays on an anthropological archeology of their own situation, which brings forth surprisingly honest answers. He makes the observation that all students report on the experience of coming of age: of becoming conscious of the color line (107). He also notes that complaints about racism are strongest from the academically weakest (109). The practice of color coding among student fraternities gets commented upon as well as the popular genealogical family myths of having descended from free blacks (110). “These sounded like answers to questions nobody had asked” (110). His description of fraternity and sorority life becomes a scathing caricature, and he invites those students not admitted to critique these initiation rites. He includes a long list of rules for admission to three of the most popular sororities which one of his most intelligent students does not meet due to her skin color. Repeatedly, he praises the musical talent and mimic talent of his students. To him, moments of pure joy occur when the choir sings Ave Verum: “Could this exist: that perfect charm of color should pair with perfect charm of harmony?” (119) But he finds the talent most evident when they perform black music: “Rhythm, tricksters, magic, exuberance and music triumphed” (120). He notes with surprise that divinity students tend to be darker, and he attributes their choice of a religious career to the fact that they did not get into a fraternity of social climbers. Describing a Roland Hayes concert, he notes with astonishment that the bourgeois audience seems to prefer the classics on the program to the Negro spirituals which Hayes gives as encores. The latter draw muted applause at best. “Yes, this true artist did not find an echo amongst the brethren of his race that he would have encountered in the great concert halls of this world.” The same effect is observed at a folklife concert where a black group does work songs and draws criticism from Hilltop faculty wives: “Africans.” “Those with us had forgotten their simple origins, were trying to move from the swamps to the salon” (169). In their eagerness to assimilate, they had lost their ability to appreciate their own true folk art. But there is also insurgent political consciousness. A black militant student of Jamaican extraction explodes: “These know-it-alls here at Hilltop, the entire bastardized society, which is neither black nor white, will certainly not be the leadership in the fight toward the emancipation of blacks. We hate them, we despise them.” Even Afrocentrism makes an appearance. The narrator mentions a black professor of religion who is an advocate of Afrocentrism, a theory that the narrator dismisses as nonsense. “The achievements of African blacks are important enough not to call for absurdities.” Most puzzling to Smith is the power of the president and his ability to control the seething cauldron of discontent and to choreograph what Thorstein Veblen called “the conscientious withdrawal of efficiency.” When Smith proposes to do a public lecture on “the white man in primitive art,” a topic that creates a sense of panic at Hilltop, the first attempt is tacitly boycotted. The slide projector does not work, nobody shows up since someone forgot to hang the posters. Only when the narrator insists on going through with his lecture does the event happen. There is a mixed-race audience which is courting danger. A white visitors comments: “Your naiveté brought us together.”
As part of a project, Smith asks his students to do an anthropological study of black religion in the city. We get a fairly accurate description of Solomon Lightfoot Micheaux and his congregation, and we learn about the charitable institutions of Daddy Grace, also about his powers over his detractors. Two of his students, who are attuned to religious sentiments, introduce him to the shades of difference between rocking storefront churches and the more bourgeois congregations. He comments on a lengthy radio sermon by Lightfoot Micheaux rather positively, but finds the interruption by a commercial for a laxative shocking. A much advertised scientific conference set up by the Social Science Division turns into a major disaster: nobody at Hilltop or of the City shows up or is interested. In fact, there is a total lack of interest on the part of the student body, the other faculty members and the surrounding white world. The small group that attends decides to adjourn to a student bar where they are treated to a blackface minstrel performance got up by the students. The final two chapters deal with the secret powers and leadership talents of Obadiah Wedlock. There seems to be a revolution afoot to upset and demote the president. This corresponds to one of several attempts to oust President Johnson who ran Howard like an autocrat. The case against Johnson was raised by the General Alumni Federation, which issued a special issue of its journal in the winter of 1937/1938 (Logan, 338). How does the president deal with it in Lips’s account? First, he dresses down his staff by telling them what he thinks of their academic qualifications and what they owe to him. His legitimation of his criticism is that they have failed to improve the race. He particularly lambasts the stupid mimicry of pure science — an area of inquiry where they, with their strictly limited talents, would never make it anyway. In fact, pure science is a mere veil for their incompetence. Instead, they should have strengthened the applied sciences and contemplated their services to the race, a sentiment in line with Booker T. Washington. All those “performers” who had been so brave in combating Obadiah by parody or “putting pressure” on him are now mute and subdued. “Putting pressure on the president is dangerous.” When McLee tries to get a pay raise, the President outfoxes him. When Dean Hastings passes away, the president appoints a non-entity in education, Rockefeller Delirious Blockhead (Dean Thompson), who enters the fray with a “Ten Year Plan.” Again, there was a tradition of ten-year plans. Intriguing are his remarks on the treatment of white staff. Either they are superheroes, like Smith, who are above the caterwauling and cabales, or they are subordinate staff, who have to be doubly subservient (272). Often, they are from the American South and are made to pay for the sins of their fathers. But there are those who cynically exploit this niche in the racialized system. One Dr. Hall, a biologist who studies “roots” is known on campus as the hyena and as the root doctor (276). The most important chapter is entitled “The seven sermons of Obadiah” where the latter is introduced as a consummate performer and orator. Again, Lips stays very close to the original Johnson. Like him, Obadiah pulls all registers in his commencement speech on “The achievement of the Black Race.” Logan writes about Johnson: “He exploited his commanding physical presence and resonant voice which ran the gamut from an overpowering crescendo to almost a whisper... Few persons who heard him were unmoved, although many listeners had later reservations about the intellectual content of some of his public addresses” (250), and he adds that, regrettably, Johnson left no paper trace of his oratorical abilities, for he never wrote his speeches down. In two chapters, Lips gives a detailed rendering of two speeches which correspond in manner of delivery and radical content to Logan’s description of Johnson. The final chapter is entitled “homecoming” and ends on a note of hope. The blind emeritus Homer Anderson wants to set up a museum of American Negro. The final
scene brings Parker and Anderson together. In Smith’s estimate they are the finest specimens of the university. Parker pulls out of his pocket a letter by the student union propagating The James Weldon Johnson social register of Hilltop University. The narrator ends his survey of Hilltop mores with: “Everything is enveloped in the feeling of a great and unspecified sadness.” The dedication of the book reads: “I dedicate this book to the liberation of the Negro race from its black and white oppressors.”

Lips assumes the position of the imperial and colonial cosmopolitan, enhanced by a self-aggrandizing personality structure. It may be interesting to recall at this moment that under Lips’s successor, the Cologne Museum of Ethnology became the center of a “Neocolonial Movement” (a revival of German imperial dreams under Nazi tutelage). Given his opportunism, Lips would undoubtedly have been an enthusiastic proponent of this movement if the Nazis had let him stay. He is a staunch Eurocentric universalist and opponent of racism, but also a romantic Africanist, a defender of primitive tradition against “effete civilization,” of cultural purity against hybridity (twilight). This combination of attitudes made him highly suspect and perhaps a bit of a loose cannon for his well-meaning colleagues. A white innocent abroad at Howard could be a liability. There is no evidence what went on behind the scenes, whether his history as a confidence man was ever revealed to his colleagues, whether Boas was involved as much in his dismissal as in his hiring or whether it was indeed his constant breach of racial etiquette which made his stay at Hilltop a liability for his colleagues and for the president. These are questions that need further research.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Works cited**


**NOTES**

1. Stephan Palmié (Dept. of Anthropology, University of Chicago) drew my attention to this remarkable book. All references will be to the first edition, within brackets in the text.
2. Lips used the name of the student paper, *The Hilltop*, as an alias for Howard University.
3. The Museum passed to Lips’s one-legged student Andreas Scheller (1894-1977), who was succeeded in 1940 by Martin Heydrich (1889-1969) a fervent Nazi who, in accordance with the Nazi outreach for new Lebensraum, founded the “neo-colonial movement.” Despite this Nazi
mortgage, Heydrich received “denazification papers” in 1948, was reinstated and ultimately became one of the leading post WWII-ethnologists in Germany.


5. Social Democratic leader Robert Görlinger in a letter to Bruno Kuske of 12.4. 1947 states that „Briefe von Prof. Julius Lipsius vom 19.4.6.7. 19.7.1933 vorlagen, in denen er sich gerade zu in unwürdiger Weise dem Nationalsozialismus an den Hals geworfen hatte, nur um seinen Direktorposten am Museum und seine Lehrtätigkeit wieder aufnehmen zu können. Erst als das mißlingen war, ging er ins Ausland und wurde kämpferischer Gegner des Nationalsozialismus.“ (“I gained access to the letters from Julius Lips of 4/19, 7/6 and 7/19 1933 in which he threw himself in the most unworthy fashion at the feet of National Socialism, simply in order to regain his directorship at the Museum and his teaching activity. It was only when this did not succeed that he went abroad and became a militant opponent of National Socialism.”) Pützstück, 263.


a physiological side which is commonly called neurasthenia and sickliness. It occurs when races or classes that were long apart suddenly come together or cross-breed. The new race deposits different measures and values into the blood which results in excitement, irritation, doubt, trial. Even the best forces have a stalling effect, even virtues do not combine, there is no harmony, momentum, perpendicular safety in either body or soul. What declines most drastically in such mongrels is the will: they lack an independent decision, the brave urge of the will — they doubt this freedom of the will even in their dreams. Our Europe of today, the ground of radical class and race mixture, has become skeptical in high or low times, a skepticism which sometimes jumps, greedy and impatient, from branch to branch, sometimes hangs over us like a dark cloud; it is sick to death of its former will. Paralysis of the will: cripples everywhere..)

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1 Bien qu’il soit né aux États-Unis et qu’il y ait commencé sa carrière littéraire, Chester Himes est bien plus connu en Europe (où il s’établit à quarante-quatre ans) que dans son pays natal. Au terme de plusieurs années de nomadisme dans maintes villes du vieux continent, Himes s’établit à Alicante (Espagne) où il resta jusqu’à sa mort en 1984. C’est en Europe que Himes confirma son talent d’écrivain et fit une entrée magistrale dans la Série Noire chez Gallimard en 1958, en remportant avec La Reine des pommes le Grand Prix du roman policier. Parler donc de Himes outre-Atlantique peut s’apparenter à une évidence tant il est vrai que pour de nombreux lecteurs américains, Himes occupe une place à part dans l’histoire littéraire africaine-américaine du fait justement de la fortune qu’il a connue en exil.


3 En réalité, mon objectif consiste moins à étudier l’aventure outre-Atlantique de Himes que les effets littéraires de son œuvre sur quelques romanciers africains qui l’ont découvert, l’ont lu et s’en sont inspirés. L’œuvre de Himes n’apparaîtra donc qu’en filigrane dans mon étude mais son ombre plane avec une insistance particulière sur les textes qui seront pris en compte dans le présent article.

4 Avec Cercueil et Cie, le romancier camerounais Simon Njami ne met pas simplement en scène les deux inspecteurs de la série noire de Himes mais reprend également les thèmes majeurs du récit himesien. Mongo Beti, quant à lui, avoue dans une interview être « un
grand admirateur de Chester Himes, un passionné des romans policiers » (Beti, 2003). Et c'est tout naturellement que Himes lui a servi de modèle lorsqu'il a voulu écrire un roman d'angoisse, *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* (Beti, 1985), dont le titre, il faut le souligner, a été inspiré par *On The Sunny Side of The Street* de Louis Armstrong. La Polyandre, de Bolya s'inscrit dans le même registre. D'origine congolaise (Kinshasa), l'auteur qui vit depuis de nombreuses années à Paris reconnaît avoir eu l'idée de son polar au terme de la lecture de mon _Harlem de Chester Himes_ (Kom, 1978).

Certes, il n'y a pas de ghetto noir à Paris mais les rapports entre Blancs et Noirs tels que nous les peint Bolya sont on ne peut plus himésiens. J'aurais pu citer également Blaise N'djehoya qui a collaboré à _Un regard noir, Les Français vus par les Africains_, et qui est l'auteur de _Le Nègre Potemkine_ (N'djehoya, 1988). Mais N'djehoya se plaît à pasticher le style de Himes et même à calquer quelques uns de ses personnages sur ceux de Himes sans véritablement aller au-delà. Njami, Mongo, Beti et Bolya se présentent comme de véritables disciples qui se nourrissent des techniques élaborées par leur mentor.

Ma démarche consistera essentiellement à rappeler la problématique de l'écriture himésienne pour dégager quelques traits de l'écriture du romancier noir américain qui ont dû séduire ses congénères du continent noir vivant en France et ont contribué à faire de lui un pont, sans doute inconscient, entre l'Afrique, l'Europe et l'Amérique noires. À cet égard, on pourrait, sans forcer la note, parler d'une espèce de renouveau de la négritude tant il est vrai qu'on doit la négritude originelle, celle des années 1930, à la présence pour ainsi dire fortuite, des noirs d'origine américaine, africaine et antillaise sur le sol français, au Quartier Latin à Paris. Kimoni écrit à ce propos :


Analysant les échanges d'idées qui avaient cours entre artistes et écrivains noirs, Michel Fabre confirme et poursuit l'analyse des fraternités littéraires du monde noir. Il montre comment Richard Wright fit la connaissance de Senghor, Césaire, René Maran et Alioune Diop au milieu des années 1940:

> Wright's works also influenced Frantz Fanon's analysis of the psychological and social plight of the Negro in the New World. In *Black Skins, White Masks*, which he published in 1953, Fanon repeatedly referred to Wright's *Black Boy* and *Native Son* as well as to Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. (Fabre, 1991, 191)

Les marques que laisse Himes sur son passage, s'inscrivent donc dans la suite d'un mouvement de rencontre qui a certes commencé au XIXe siècle comme le démontre Michel Fabre, mais qui s'est accentué au début du XXe siècle avec l'arrivée en France dans les années 1920 de nombre d'écrivains du *New Negro Movement* tels que Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Claude Mac Kay et quelques autres.

Mais alors que le mouvement du début du siècle résulte d'une prise de conscience de l'identité du noir et répond donc à une espèce de quête délibérée de réhabilitation, les traces de Himes qu'on retrouve dans les productions de ses collègues africains ne sont
point le fruit d’une concertation mais correspondent simplement à l’attrait d’un modèle artistique à la fois captivant et efficace. Avant de passer à l’étude des cas annoncés, il serait utile de revenir un moment sur les aspects de l’œuvre de Himes qui trouvent un écho particulièremment mémorable auprès de ses congénères de l’Afrique subsaharienne installés en France. On sera sensible à cet égard au titre du volume II de son autobiographie, My Life of Absurdity (1976). Ce titre est certes l’histoire d’une vie qui fut absurde à plus d’un égard. Mais cette absurdité est d’autant plus significative qu’elle semble, du fait du racisme, consubstantielle au destin du noir américain :

Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition..... Racism generating from whites is first of all absurd. Racism creates absurdity among Blacks as a defense mechanism. Absurdity to combat absurdity. (Himes, 1976, 1).

Du racisme au colonialisme, le pas peut être Allègrement franchi. D’autant que le colonialisme présuppose presque toujours une certaine dose de racisme ou tout au moins d’un complexe de supériorité de la part du colonisateur. C’est peut-être tout cela qui explique l’attention particulière que suscite l’œuvre de Chester Himes auprès de ses congénères africains. La gestion pour le moins absurde des états africains post-coloniaux est incontestablement le thème majeur qui ressort de Trop de soleil tue l’amour de Mongo Beti, écrivain camerounais qui a vécu plus de quarante ans en France et qui s’en est retourné au pays natal depuis qu’il a pris sa retraite de la fonction publique française en 1994. En Afrique, le colonialisme a donné naissance à des administrations aux méthodes hasardeuses dont la gestion est pour le moins absurde. Par ailleurs, les rapports entre immigrés noirs et héritiers de l’ancien colonisateur français sur le sol métropolitain engendrent des heurts qui s’apparentent à bien des égards au genre de conflits qui opposent noirs et blancs dans la société américaine. C’est de là que Simon Njami, camerounais résidant à Paris, tire l’essentiel de son inspiration. Et Bolya, qui réside également à Paris, va un peu plus loin que Njami en ce sens qu’il ajoute une dimension historique et anthropologique à son récit.


Cercueil et cie, ou Chester Himes en play-back

Le récit de Njami démarre en trombe et les premières lignes du texte sont un pastiche presque parfait des romans policiers de Chester Himes :

Le Dew Drop Inn, au coin de la 129e Rue et de Lennox Avenue, à Harlem, était un endroit où on était sûr de s’amuser. Dans cette partie du quartier que l’on avait surnommée ‘la Vallée’, les Nègres endimanchés venaient chaque soir, en grappes compactes, se payer du bon temps. (Njami, 1985, 5).
Tout se poursuit dans cette tonalité et tout est mis en place pour créer un environnement himesien : style argotique exclusivement composé de dialogues, lieux, personnages, musique, aucun des ingrédients auxquels le lecteur de Himes est habitué ne manque. Mais Njami n’est pas Himes et il entend bien écrire un roman de son propre cru. Raison pour laquelle, la partie harlémiennne du récit ne dépassera guère le premier chapitre. Les deux policiers Smith et Dubois qui se sont toujours fait passer pour Cercueil et Fossoyeur se font démasquer :

Je sais qui vous êtes. Je sais que vous avez jamais vu Chester Himes et que vous êtes pas Ed Cercueil et Fossoyeur Jones. Toutes les histoires que vous avez racontées partout, à Harlem, sur vos aventures, elles sont bidons.... Un de mes potes de Columbia vient d’Afrique. Ses parents habitent en France et lui envoient régulièrement des tas de livres. Dans ceux qu’il a reçus ce mois-ci, il y a le dernier Chester Himes [allusion à Plan B, roman inachevé de Himes], Et quand il me l’a raconté, j’ai compris le jeu que vous nous jouiez à tous depuis des années.... Cercueil et Fossoyeur sont morts. Crevés. Enterrés. Doit plus en rester grand-chose à c’t’heure (Njami, 1985, 10-12).

Pour en avoir le cœur net, Ed Smith et Jones Dubois alias Cercueil et Fossoyeur décident de traverser l’Atlantique pour « aller voir Himes et le convaincre de ne pas faire traduire le bouquin » (Njami, 1985, 20) de sorte que les harlémiens ne puissent pas les démasquer et qu’ils continuent à faire semblant, en toute impunité. La stratégie de la traversée permet à Njami de quitter Harlem et de situer la majeure partie de son récit à Paris, un terrain qui lui est sans doute plus familier que New York et les États-Unis. Fidèle à l’effet de réel qu’il veut entretenir dans l’esprit du lecteur, Njami amène ses détectives à mener une enquête pour interpellér leur géniteur sur le mauvais tour qu’il leur a joué. À Paris, ils se rendent chez l’éditeur de la Série Noire. Mais personne ne peut les renseigner de manière précise. Marcel Duhamel, le directeur de la Série Noire qui incita Himes à écrire des “polars” n’est plus de ce monde et on leur appr end que Himes ne se fait plus éditer chez Gallimard. Il habiterait, leur apprend-on, du côté d’Alicante, en Espagne. Smith et Dubois se rendent à Alicante mais ne pourront malheureusement pas parler à Himes qui rend l’âme avant d’avoir pu les recevoir !

Pareille présentation peut faire croire que le roman de Njami s’achève à Alicante, avec la mort de Himes. En réalité, l’aventure de Smith et Dubois cache un autre récit policier, pratiquement mis en abîme. Il s’agit d’un récit qui s’inscrit dans le « Parinoir » et du « Black Mic Mac ». Le personnage principal de ce second récit en est Amos Yebga, journaliste camerounais exilé à Paris par goût de l’aventure. Dans les cent premières pages de l’ouvrage, les deux récits évoluent en parallèle. Alors que les inspecteurs américains suivent les traces de leur géniteur, Amos Yebga, journalisme oblige, cavale dans Paris puisqu’il s’est donné pour tâche de mener une enquête sur la mort de Salif Maktar Diop, petit dealer sénégalo-malien, « mort comme un chien, écrasé par une voiture que personne n’a vue et qui évidemment, ne s’est pas arrêtée » (Njami, 1985, 65). Qui pourrait bien avoir assassiné Salif Maktar Diop ?

À peine Yebga a-t-il commencé son enquête qu’il se fait agresser rue Lepic par une Mercedes roulant tous feux éteints. Smith et Dubois (Cercueil et Fossoyeur) qui passaient par là, en quête de poules françaises pour vérifier si elles « valent tout le boucan qu’on fait autour de leurs culs » (Njami, 1985, 109), ne peuvent souffrir de laisser un « frère » étendu dans la rue. Ce deus ex machina est le point de jonction des deux récits initiaux. La rencontre entre Yebga et le tandem Cercueil/Fossoyeur relève de Paris un lieu symbolique de rencontre des exilés noirs de tous horizons depuis le début du XXe siècle. Désormais, le
pont est jeté entre le monde de Yebga et celui des inspecteurs américains, une amitié prend naissance. Et c’est ainsi que l’assassinat de Dread Pol, le rastafari qui, en meilleur ami de Salif Maktar Diop, semblait en savoir long sur les activités du proxénète Ndiaye, les surprendra tous au "Day and Night", boîte de nuit du Paris noir.


18 Cercueil et cie défie toute tentative d’en résumer l’histoire. Les mondes africain, français, américain et antillais s’y croisent. Les thèmes himéiens s’y enchevêtrent et s’y bousculent tellement qu’il faudrait une étude intertextuelle détaillée pour déméler l’écheveau. Les principaux problèmes sociaux qui émaillent l’œuvre de Himes sont pratiquement tous repris en condensé. Prostitution et proxénétisme ; drogue et trafiquants de drogue ; préjugés raciaux et culturels sont récurrents. Et il convient de souligner que la thématic de l’œuvre de Njami ne jure nullement avec la réalité française. Certes, il n’y a pas de ghetto noir à Paris. Toujours est-il que la concentration des travailleurs immigrés d’origine africaine vivant dans la région parisienne et les problèmes soulevés dans les années 1980 par la phraséologie lepéniste ont rendu possible la naissance d’une littérature qui s’inspire fortement de la condition de la population immigrée, qu’il s’agisse de la littérature beur avec un romancier comme Azouz Begag², de la littérature africaine d’immigration comme les textes du congolais Daniel Biyaoula³ ou surtout des écrits de la romancière d’origine camerounaise Calixthe Beyala avec son cycle de Belleville⁴. C’est dans le même registre qu’il faudrait inscrire La Polyandre de Bolya.

La Polyandre, ou comment être black à Paris

19 Si le texte de Njami peut avoir des allures d’un roman d’aventure et même ressembler par endroits à un travail de dilettante tant les rencontres y sont fortuites, la construction de La Polyandre de Bolya obéit à tous les principes d’un récit criminel classique avec nombre d’ingrédients de ce que Franck Evrard appelle la prééminence du code herméneutique. Evrard écrit à ce propos :

La lecture d’un roman policier, un puzzle à reconstituer ou un palimpseste à déchiffrer, apparaît comme un acte essentiellement herméneutique. Le désir de retrouver le texte caché sous le texte indiciel, de reconstituer la chaîne des événements et des indices invitent à une lecture tendue, orientée par la réponse attendue à la question primitive. Tout énoncé, tout détail le plus anodin acquièrent un sens en étant indexés sur l’explication finale, si bien que le texte policier tout entier est signifiant... (Evrard, 1996, 13)

À une époque où l'immigration africaine est particulièrement mal acceptée en France et où Le Pen ne cesse de faire des émeules, pareils crimes font l'objet d'hypothèses multiples. L'assassin est-il un raciste, un psychopathe égocentrique et narcissique, une femme qui a contracté le sida en Afrique, un mari éconduit ? Difficile à dire. L'enquête sera d'autant plus complexe que le policier chargé du dossier, l'inspecteur Robert Nègre, est lui-même un individu au passé plutôt obscur.

Encore enfant, Robert Nègre avait vécu au Congo jusqu'au jour où, s'étant emparé du fusil de chasse de son père, il avait confondu une jeune pygmée avec un chimpanzé et lui avait tiré dessus. Après avoir fait disparaître le corps à sa manière, le père Nègre avait alors décidé du retour instantané de son fils en France. Tout au long de l'enquête, on a affaire à un Robert Nègre tourné par ses méfaits africains (viol, assassinat etc.) sur lesquels on avait jeté un voile noir. D'autant plus que Makwa, l'un de ses compagnons de chasse resté en Afrique, se doutant de la délicatesse de la situation de son ami d'antan dans la police française, orchestre à son endroit un chantage sans merci. Il lui écrit notamment : « ... j'ai besoin de 15 000 francs français afin de pouvoir acheter mon billet d'Air France pour Paris.... Je pense qu'il n'est pas besoin d'insister auprès de toi pour obtenir satisfaction par retour du courrier. À moins que ta mémoire des drames passés se soit effilochée » (Bolya, 1988, 86).


Oulématou, autour de qui gravitent nombre de personnages du récit, est une figure exotique, que l'on dirait sortie tout droit des films anthropologiques. Née de la rencontre entre Charles-Henri, un archéologue français (Bolya, 1988, 43-45) et une princesse polyandre de la tribu des Lele en Afrique Orientale, Oulématou s'était elle-même mariée sous le régime de la polyandrie avant de se retrouver à Paris où elle s'est mise en ménage avec Bourru, journaliste français en quête de reportages à sensation. C'est en des termes précis que la mère d'Oulématou avait expliqué les règles du mariage polyandrique à Aboubacar, le premier mari de sa fille :

Notre fille Oulématou aura plusieurs époux. Toi, tu es le premier mari, tu as le droit et le devoir de lui choisir son second époux. Mais le troisième mari et les autres, l'époux choisi, l'élu, c'est elle-même qui le choisira. Tous les enfants qui naîtront de toi et des autres maris appartiendront à Oulématou.... Pour ce qui est du lit, toi comme les autres, vous aurez trois jours pour chaque homme. Sache que c'est Oulématou qui décide de l'ordre des passages de ses maris dans sa case. C'est vous
les hommes qui viendrez dans sa case ou dans sa maison. Elle n’ira jamais dans la vôtre. Pendant les règles, tous les hommes sont d’office mis en congé (Bolya, 1988, 41)

24 La France n’est pas l’Afrique mais Oulématou entend y vivre en gardant son identité et son statut de polyandre, c’est-à-dire en imposant avec une intrinségeance sans pareille les mœurs de son pays à Bourru : « C’est toi Bourru, qui dois apprendre les coutumes de chez moi. Moi, j’ai bien fait l’effort d’assimiler les traditions de chez toi pour être acceptée en France. Aussi, chaque fois que je passerai la nuit avec Aboubacar, le lendemain ce sera à toi de laver les draps et de les repasser » (Bolya, 1988, 143-144).

25 Oulématou semble même faire des émules puisque son amie Rosemonde qui « aime les mâles performants, les coureurs de fond et non les sprinters » (Bolya, 1988, 173) met trois « Blacks » en compétition pour décider du rang de chacun dans le mariage qu’elle a décidé de contracter avec eux : « Bientôt vous allez savoir qui sera le premier, le second et le troisième co-époux. Pour utiliser le jargon des anthropologues et des ethnologues » (Bolya, 1988, 173).

26 Évidemment ce clin d’œil aux anthropologues n’a ici rien de fortuit. Bolya profite du micmac qu’il a créé pour évoquer subrepticement le malaise né des concepts d’identité et d’ethnicité qui sont à l’origine des complexes divers et qui entraînent l’épanouissement des individus. À cet égard, François Laplantine a peut-être raison lorsqu’il suggère que :

L’identité est avec l’ethnicité une production idéologique qui a contribué à cautionner l’anthropologie coloniale, mais n’a aucune réalité opératoire. Elle dissimule plus qu’elle n’éclaire. Mobilisée chaque fois qu’il s’agit d’éviter de penser l’altérité qui est en nous, le flux du multiple, le caractère changeant et contradictoire du réel ainsi que l’infinité des points de vue possibles sur ce qui est potentialité ou devenir, elle leste plus qu’elle ne fait avancer. (Laplantine, 1999, 18)

27 De ce point de vue, Bolya semble avoir choisi de toucher au cœur même de la problématique littéraire de Himes, à savoir le décryptage des relations interraciales ou interculturelles si l’on préfère. L’enquête de l’Inspecteur Nègre révèlera que c’est Bourru (faut-il entendre Bourreau ?), qui ne fréquente que des femmes noires parce qu’avec une Européenne, il a l’impression de coucher avec sa mère (Bolya, 1988, 100), est l’auteur des tempêtes sur les verges noires. D’une jalousie pathologique, Bourru ne supporte pas les mœurs polyandriques d’Oulématou et considère tous les noirs comme des rivaux potentiels. La Polyandrye se présente ainsi comme une véritable invitation à penser l’altérité puisque le récit met en question le mariage monogamique, institution fondamentale chez les Européens, en lui opposant les pratiques polyandriques venues du Nigéria, du Cameroun ou du Congo belge, autant de contrées où « les femmes peuvent être polyandres et les hommes polygames. C’est l’égalité parfaite » (Bolya, 1988, 61).

28 Riche et divers, l’ouvrage de Bolya s’inscrit avantageusement dans le sillage de la nouvelle littérature africaine qui porte sur les tribulations des anciens colonisés ayant échoué sur les rives de la Seine. Fortement angoissés par les harcèlements qu’ils subissent dans une France où le contrôle des faciès est quasi institutionnalisé et les charters toujours prêts à décoller, les immigrés qui refusent obstinément de baisser les bras, inventent au quotidien d’étonnantes techniques de survie. Bolya nous rappelle à sa manière que l’intégration n’est pas à portée de main, que le choc des cultures est loin d’être résorbé et que le rapprochement entre les mondes africain et européen, entre « nous et les autres » est plus utopique que jamais.
Trop de soleil tue l’amour, ou la post-colonie africaine en polar

Alors que les romans de Njami et de Bolya obéissent globalement aux règles du genre en ce sens qu’il s’agit des « récit(s) consacré(s) à la découverte méthodique et graduelle par des moyens rationnels, des circonstances exactes d’un événement mystérieux » (Messac, 1964, 7), le récit de Mongo Beti quant à lui, n’est pas construit autour de l’éclaircissement d’un mystère, bien que le texte n’en soit pas exempt. Trop de soleil tue l’amour fait tout à fait partie du genre policier qui, comme l’écrit Daniel Fondanèche, a atteint l’âge adulte et qui « s’inscrit dans le temps et lutte pied à pied avec l’Histoire contemporaine ; le crime n’est plus l’un des beaux-arts, comme le montrait de Quincey dans Le Club des parenticides, mais le résultat d’un dysfonctionnement social » (Fondanèche, 2000, 102). En effet, bien que Mongo Beti emprunte autant à Chester Himes qu’il cite nommément (Beti, 1985, 10) qu’à Peter Cheyney auquel il fait rapidement allusion (Beti, 1985, 73), Trop de soleil tue l’amour est avant tout une transposition critique de la société africaine post-coloniale, une société dans laquelle triomphent la fraude, la corruption, la prostitution et l’insécurité. Plusieurs crimes se disputent la vedette dans le texte. Avant même que Zam, journaliste à Aujourd’hui la Démocratie, féru de jazz et de l’odyssée des noirs américains se fasse voler sa centaine de CD de jazz et retrouve un cadavre mystérieux dans son appartement, le lecteur apprend que plusieurs autres assassinats jamais élucidés avaient eu lieu dans le même environnement. Ainsi en va-t-il du meurtre du révérend père Maurice Mzilikazi, « un grand savant, futur prix Nobel peut-être [qui] est assassiné presque dans l’indifférence, après bien d’autres victimes, y compris de paisibles ecclésiastiques étrangers » (Beti, 1985, 9). Sans doute le père Mzilikazi a-t-il été victime des escadrons de la mort qui « sévissent impunément de notoriété publique » (Beti, 1985, 9).

Mais alors que l’enquête sur l’affaire du macchabée découvert dans l’appartement de Zam se poursuit, la maison dans laquelle le journaliste s’est réfugié est détruite par une explosion. Et comme si ces malheurs n’étaient pas suffisamment accablants, il viendra s’y ajouter la disparition de Bébète, sa petite amie.

L’ambiance est d’autant plus sombre que la femme du président de la république est morte, elle aussi, dans des conditions obscures, laissant libre cours à la rumeur populaire qui suggère que ce sont des bandits qui l’ont assassinée. Et un leader politique de l’opposition de s’interroger : « Mon Dieu que peut signifier tout ceci ? Dans quel étrange pays sommes-nous ? Est-ce que nous allons tous y passer ? Et pourquoi ? » (Beti, 1985, 75).

Chez Mongo Beti, en effet, « les résultats de l’enquête comptent moins que les mobiles mis en jeu » (Fondanèche, 2000, 103). Bien que la police, tous grades confondus, soit omniprésente dans cette république bananière des tropiques, elle est réduite au simple rôle de figuration. Corrompue jusqu’à la moelle, elle fonctionne sans archives et ne fait jamais d’enquête : « ... nous, dans notre police, on ne fait jamais d’enquête ; c’est même interdit.... Chaque fois qu’on fait une enquête, on tombe immanquablement sur un grand (un homme puissant).... Même quand un grand est assassiné, comme le Père Mzilikazi, on ne fait pas d’enquête » (Beti, 1985, 125-126). À y regarder de près, plus rien n’étonne dans ce monde kafkaïen où l’absurde s’observe à pratiquement tous les niveaux de la vie quotidienne :

Comment se représenter sérieusement que, dans certains quartiers de... notre capitale, qui n’abrite pas moins d’un million d’habitants, l’éclairage public s’allume
le jour, mais s'éteint la nuit venue ? Et que dire de la coupure d'eau du mois dernier ? Totale et universelle : pas une goutte du précieux liquide pour les nouveaux-nés des hôpitaux et d'ailleurs, rien pour les maisons individuelles où les déjections humaines s'accumulèrent et mijotèrent trente jours durant dans les cuves des toilettes de résidences bourgeoises, empoisonnant l'air respiré par nos pauvres bambins, sans parler des parents (Beti, 1985, 11).

Le pays a pour ainsi dire tourné le dos au reste du monde et les dignitaires du régime n'en font qu'à leur tête :

Le pouvoir appliquait une tactique qu'on peut appeler de l'édredon : il ne répondait à aucune accusation, dédaignait les interpellations, faisait la sourde oreille aux propositions de dialogue, s'en tenait aux rigueurs implacables de la répression dès que les opposants faisaient mine de descendre dans la rue, tirant à l'occasion sans états d'âme sur la foule, ce qui avait le don de refroidir les enthouiasmes dans les rangs contestataires (Beti, 1985, 172-173).

Chez Mongo Beti comme chez Bolya, on retrouve la France en toile de fond. Du fait de la présence dans le récit de quelques intellectuels précédemment exilés en France, le récit est parsemé d'allusions aux lois Pasqua, à la lépénisation galopante (Beti, 1985, 43) ainsi qu'aux pratiques du charter dont sont souvent victimes les membres de la colonie africaine en France. Pourtant, si les républiques africaines francophones sont un espace où il fait si mal vivre, c'est bien à cause de l'incohérence de la politique française et de l'exploitation éhontée (« les Français dévastent les forêts avec frénésie », Beti, 1985, 54) dont les pays ont souffert pendant et après la colonisation ainsi que de la protection et du soutien que les anciens maîtres continuent d'apporter aux tenants locaux du pouvoir.

Si, comme nous le rappelle Yves Reuter, « les romans de Himes se présentent comme autant d'interrogations sur le statut des Noirs aux États-Unis et l'origine de la violence (voir *L'Aveugle au pistolet* en 1969) » (Reuter, 1997, 26), l'ouvrage de Mongo Beti s’interroge pareillement sur le devenir des États africains post-coloniaux. L’auteur en profite pour régler ses comptes avec la France, les instances de la francophonie et suggère que les dictatures tropicales ne peuvent s'expliquer que si l’on se réfère aux relations plus ou moins mafieuses entre la France et ses « anciennes » colonies. À telle enseigne que la question, « Y a-t-il une vie après le charter ? » (Beti, 1985, 98), qui se pose au sujet d’Éddie, « homme aigri et amer, sans doute parce qu’il avait été rapatrié par charter » (Beti, 1985, 98) pourrait tout aussi bien se lire, « Y a-t-il une vie après la colonisation » ?

Et autant Chester Himes jongle avec le *Black English* des ghettos noirs, autant Mongo Beti rompt délibérément avec le style châtié de ses romans antérieurs pour s'abreuver aux sources vives du français africain tout en en abusant s'il le faut, de l'art du dialogue. Qu'on en juge :

- Norbert, dit le commissaire, c'est comment ? Tu es inspecteur, non ?
- Oui, monsieur le Commissaire, répondit Norbert. Je vous demande pardon, grand, ajouta-t-il aussitôt.
- C'est pas grave, ça, fit l'espèce de sergent Garcia noir, riant aux éclats. Je connais ton dossier, tu sais ? Ton papa-là même, c'est quoi ? Il meurt tous les deux mois ?...
- Ce n'est pas le même, grand, vous savez bien...
- Et il te faut chaque fois une semaine pour l'enterrer ?
- Nous sommes en Afrique, non, monsieur le Commissaire ? Vous êtes même content, vous aussi !
- Chose remarquable, poursuit le commissaire en se rembrunissant, ta mère-là même, elle, meurt toutes les six semaines. Et il te suffit de deux jours pour
... l’enterrer...
- Mais non, grand, ce n’est pas la même ; nous sommes en Afrique non ? Quand je dis ma mère, ce n’est pas toujours celle qui m’a accouché [mis au monde], vous savez bien ; grand, vous êtes africain, non ?
- Laissons ça, Norbert. Prends même six mois pour enterrer chacune de tes mamans, je m’en fous. Quand le grand chef lui-même disparaît de chez nous là pour passer deux mois à Baden-Baden là, tu vas même lui dire que quoi ? Je te demande, Norbert, qui va même lui dire que quoi ? (Beti, 1985, 119-120)

De plus, tout comme chez Chester Himes, Trop de soleil tue l’amour est un livre profondément douloureux, construit autour d’une accumulation intense de situations tellement absurdes qu’il n’y a visiblement pas d’autre façon de les raconter que de recourir au truculent, au burlesque et à l’humour. Mais en plus de la technique du roman noir ainsi empruntée à Chester Himes, l’Amérique noire est présente sous plusieurs autres formes. L’auteur fait montre d’une fine connaissance de l’histoire noire américaine et d’une impressionnante culture jazzistique. Bien que Bébète, la copine occasionnelle de Zam avoue ne rien comprendre à la musique de son homme, ce dernier se fait insistant : « ... tu as des cousins Outre-Atlantique, qui sont des gens merveilleux. Livrés sans recours à l’enfer des champs de coton, les esclaves noirs ont inventé cette musique-là, la plus belle du monde. Tu comprends ça, Bébète ? » (Beti, 1985, 14). Et l’ouvrage se lit effectivement au rythme de la musique de Bessie Smith, John Coltrane, Stan Getz, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Mingus, Nat King Cole, Art Blakey, Joe King Oliver et autres. En clair, Mongo Beti procède à une espèce de retour d’ascenseur. Et s’il emprunte à Chester Himes, c’est aussi pour familiariser son public africain avec l’histoire et la culture de la diaspora noire.

On voit donc que, bien que Chester Himes soit arrivé en France bien longtemps après le mouvement de la négritude, la rencontre des écrivains noirs qui eut lieu en France au début du XXe siècle et qui aboutit à la naissance du mouvement de la négritude dans les années 1930 a laissé des traces qui se prolongent et se renouvellent. Aujourd’hui, la négritude est entrée dans l’histoire, les pays africains sont indépendants depuis plus de quarante ans, la France n’est plus pour nombre d’écrivains noirs, qu’ils soient américains ou autres, la terre d’accueil qu’elle fut au début du siècle dernier. Ni Mongo Beti, ni Bolya, ni Njami ne font partie d’une quelconque fratrie littéraire. Seule leur connaissance directe ou indirecte de l’œuvre de Chester Himes dont chacun d’eux se réclame à sa manière ainsi que leur séjour prolongé en France, permettent de rapprocher leurs œuvres. Tout indique que le séjour Outre-Atlantique de Chester Himes aura donc laissé dans la mémoire de ses congénères des marques insoupçonnées et quasi indélébiles.

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BIBLIOGRAPHIE

Ouvrages cités


NOTES

1. S’inspirant d’une pratique qui du temps de la ségrégation raciale dans le sud des États-Unis contraignait les noirs à emprunter le côté non ombragé de la chaussée, Mongo Beti suggère que son titre signifie que le soleil dont bénéficie les pays du sud n’est pas synonyme de bonheur, d’où *Trop de soleil tue l’amour.*


AUTEUR

AMBROISE KOM

College of The Holy Cross
Poets' corner
A good force in my life and work

James A. Emanuel

For Michel Fabre: Four Haiku

French spade dug Black seeds
Long hid from sight. Flowered, gleaned,
    They focused our sight.
Blooms of remembrance:
    Vivid their looks; voiced, lifelike,
This garden of books.
    Gardener, tirelessly
Transplanting pens, crossed Harlems
    With literate Seines.
Private-eye bookworm,
Green-thumb soul, DIG his method.
    NO LIMITS his goal.

Michel and Geneneviève Fabre, during the academic year 1968-1969, when I had an
invitational Fulbright professorship at the University of Grenoble, became my first
friends in France — despite the distance between Grenoble and Paris, their home.

Their friendship, besides reminding me of the irrelevance of place, helped me to
rationalize my nightmarish residence (autobiographically pictured) in the mountain
chalet of Seyssins, owned by Madame Disdier of nearby Grenoble. As the years passed,
and as Michel's reputation as a principal authority on African American culture
confirmed its international proportions, I began to see his career in its relationship to my
life as a Black writer in movement between two civilizations, North American and
European.

As I tried to suggest in the four-haiku tribute composed to accompany this note, Michel
has, more than any scholar in France and probably in Europe, tended the once-neglected
garden of African American literature; and he has hoed his rows and nursed their flowers with rare and skillful devotion.

In a literary garden of the magnitude of Michel's, there are always small areas curiously deprived of sun and rain — as if some undiscovered or uncodified law of nature, made seemingly constant by its own repeated imbalances, operates to deflect nourishing attention. Michel apparently sensed that my work was developing near the partial shadows imposed by such a wayward law; and he took pains to illumine parts of my life and publications by writing reviews, essays, and book chapters that I am pleased to remember.

If my lifework becomes more widely scrutinized — fulfilling predictions that I have read and heard — whatever flowering it achieves will owe much to Michel and to his sensitive comprehension.

AUTHOR

JAMES A. EMANUEL

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In a long interview I had the privilege to have with Sterling Brown during the summer of 1975, at his home in Washington, D. C., he revived for me some of his personal memories on the Harlem Renaissance and the early thirties, when *Southern Road* (his first and for a long time only book of poetry) was originally published. With his extremely gentle manners, his deep, intense, and truly fascinating talk, he managed to make very clear, among other things, that in his opinion the term “Harlem Renaissance” was in itself an ill-used definition for a relatively short literary and artistic flowering in which most of the African American individuals involved were not from Harlem, did not write about Harlem, didn’t show any collective consciousness of the place. Brown’s serene but firm position on this point (which he had convincingly and repeatedly been making throughout the years in a series of well-known essays and documents of various kinds) seemed to reinforce that sense of intellectual autonomy one couldn’t help catching as a distinctive feature of his writings. He stressed that his aesthetic choices had come “naturally” to him, that they were part of his cultural background, consistent with his intellectual interests, in perfect key with his inner disposition. In other words, he tended to represent himself as a young artist engaged in pursuing his own goals with a frankness that set him somehow apart from the social and ideological implications of the debate of the time, which he of course knew very well, though he didn’t feel particularly eager to be part of it.

Much the same attitude he showed concerning the situation of the mid-seventies, when, some forty years later, his strong sense of cultural identity, his apparently non-partisan and controlled position on the overheated, current debate again seemed to single him out from the majority of African American intellectuals, at the time deeply engaged in voicing their aesthetic and political beliefs. The blatant paradox of the entire situation being that a number of the artists then emerging, particularly among the "New Black
Poets”, as at that time they were often called, seemed to refer (either implicitly or in very explicit terms) to Brown’s own poetry and to his literary work in general as to an example to be well kept in mind, and followed. The conversation that ensued on this subject well clarified in the end that that paradox was largely only apparent, and that in fact Brown’s younger fellow poets shared with him a significant series of convictions and ideals; on the other hand, it certainly served to confirm that his life-long, consistent choice to move along individually, as a man, scholar and artist who does not pay too much attention to vogue s and fads, literary or otherwise, was a thing still very much cherished.

The following comments take the lead from this very point, in an attempt to analyze the nature of Sterling Brown’s solitary march, mostly outside the ranks of groups or schools, in terms of a prerequisite for that creative independence that critics have often acknowledged as the basis of his literary accomplishments. This is where I find the germ of his modernity as a poet whose “individual talent” has never shunned away from an intense dialogue with tradition, at the same time avoiding to be burdened by it. Even though often subdued, partially hidden behind well-known cadences, Brown’s use of language shows a strong creative tension that makes it immune from dealing in stereotypes. This feature I would like to assess, by relating his work both to that of fellow poets of the Harlem Renaissance and to that of some of the Modernists. My concluding remarks will deal with the other side of Brown’s “modernity”, that is with his influence on African American poets of later generations, whom I see as the closest followers of his artistic signature and aesthetic teachings.

A matter of independence

Sterling Brown’s artistic independence relies heavily upon an early recognition of Southern life as the core of the African American experience, as well as upon a wondrous linguistic versatility, a refined and cultivated sensibility, and an uncommon poetic ear. As Jean Wagner put it in his historical essay on Brown’s poetry that concludes his 1962 crucial work Les poètes Nègres des États-Unis:

...Sterling Brown s’est d’instinct tourné vers le Sud.... Par opposition à Langston Hughes, le poète de la ville, Sterling Brown est par excellence le poète du terroir.... C’est là que son nés les blues et les ballades dont il affectionne la forme pour y couler sa poésie... c’est là enfin que survit encore dans toute sa pureté native et dans toute sa richesse le langage savoureux et imagé qui est depuis toujours celui du peuple. (Wagner, 1962, 537.)

Brown’s choice to turn to the South not simply as to an inspiring source for his work, but rather as to a cultural and historical reservoir to be carefully examined and thoroughly assimilated, undoubtedly bears a strong resemblance to Jean Toomer’s own resolve out of which cane was conceived and composed. As Brown himself put it, in 1973, summing up his apprenticeship in Southern areas, while juxtaposing his field training to his formal education:

I taught at Virginia Seminary, where I learned a great deal that I could not learn at Williams (College; Mass.), I learned the strength of my people, I learned the fortitude. I learned the humor. I learned the tragedy. I learned from a wandering guitar player about John Henry, about Stagolee, about ‘The Ballad of the Bollweevil.’ I learned folktales. I learned folk stuff. (Harper and Stepto, 1979, 17.)

If placed against the artistic background and the overall policy of the African American cultural élite in the second part of the twenties, however, Brown’s “realistic” touch, his
non-episodic attachment to the folk and peasant roots of the South, his insistence on traditional figures of outcasts and outlaws can hardly be taken as a non intentional way of signaling his own distance from the urban-centered movement of the Harlemites. While the highly-suggestive and condensed imagistic prose and verse of *Cane* betrayed a deep absorption of modernistic techniques, *Southern Roads* seemed to move along a totally different path, as a self-conscious statement of poetic independence, deeply rooted in an African American folkloric grain, far apart from the experimental climate of the time.

Brown’s aesthetic choices were indeed bold and somehow provocative: his language persistently revived a tradition of dialect poetry that the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar and the popular success of minstrelsy had contributed to render manneristic and ambiguous; diving right into a quagmire objectively perilous for a young emerging poet, his verse seemed to play directly in the hands of the party who maintained that the use of vernacular could seriously endanger the welfare of the newly-discovered African American literature. If placed within the broader socio-political context, Brown’s position moved in a direction that was openly at odds with the philosophy of urbanization and social uplift that was then sustaining the Great Migration of black masses Northward. And it is a well-known fact that among the advocates of that philosophy there were influential members of the black cultural elite who, like Alain Locke, had repeatedly and successfully championed the self-complacent view of Harlem as a lively, prosperous, and tumultuous Black Mecca. In their subdued and indirect way, Brown’s early poems, that *Opportunity* had started publishing in 1927, joined in stirring an atmosphere that Langston Hughes’s manifesto “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” had already agitated the year before, and that Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* would further upset the following year.

In spite of all this, however, Brown’s *Southern Road* won wide appraisal among some of the leading figures of the “New Negro Movement”, including James Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke himself, neither of whom in previous years had shown great appreciation for dialect poetry. In writing the introduction to the book when it appeared in 1932, Johnson, eminent scholar and expert in black music and folklore as he was, emphasized the “uniqueness” of the author’s handling of his folk life “sources” as the major achievement of his work. In an article for Nancy Cunard’s *Negro Anthology*, entitled “Sterling Brown: The New Negro Folk Poet”, Alain Locke, on the other hand, went as far as writing, among other praises, that with Brown’s book black poetry had for the first time attained a “much desired and long-awaited acme” (Cunard, 1934, 111). It is perhaps worth noting that out of the 32 poems by young African American authors he had selected for his 1925 anthology *The New Negro*, none was in Black English, which implies that in the years between 1925 and 1934, when Cunard’s anthology was published, his outlook had somehow undergone considerable change. Tellingly enough, Locke’s appreciation for *Southern Road* lay to a great extent in what he saw as Brown’s ability in providing a significant link between the essence of the African American past and its language of the present, thus revealing an inner unity between the experience of the old and that of the new Negro.

Finally, as an example of the rather widespread consensus by fellow poets and critics, white and black, that *Southern Road* was able to command, Louis Untermeyer’s comments on Brown’s “detached” attitude (an aspect Locke himself had hinted at) seem to be particularly revealing in terms of the author’s deep sense of “independence” that has been so far discussed. Alluding to the uncommon strength of the poet’s language, to its apparently subdued, familiar ring, Untermeyer identifies Brown’s ability in never “raising
his voice” as the hidden key to the penetrating power of its utterance—a comment that in itself seems well to sum up the unwavering, steady direction Brown’s work would always follow. That in spite of all the generous tokens of appreciation and admiration, *Southern Road* should remain for over forty years as the only book of poetry Brown was to publish, may still be puzzling. Undoubtedly, though highly praised, his unconventional treatment of stereotyped folk materials as well as his use of contemporary black speech (both relevant features of his modern notion of “individuality”) were not enough to bail him out of the circle of the “black and unknown bards” of old. Brown himself, after all, tended to dismiss the hypothesis that his long public silence as a poet could have been due to reasons other than the objective difficulty to be published during the Depression and the 1940s, and to his academic duties at Howard University. Fittingly enough, his rediscovery as a prominent modern poet would have to wait until the mid-seventies, when the second edition of *Southern Road* finally appeared.

**Modernistic intersections**

Brown, of course, was not only very well acquainted with modernist poetry since the time of his studies at Williams College, but as a poet, scholar and professor of literature knew in depth the complexities of contemporary poetry as well as the intellectual subtleties of the so-called high modernist mode. Conversant with the technical experiments and innovations of Pound’s *Cantos* (which he candidly admitted not to have “dug completely”) he was familiar with the intricately allusive method of Eliot’s *Waste Land* he had studied at Harvard, and of which (again in his own words) he “worked out at that time a good exegesis”, getting to know the poem “almost by heart” (Brown, 1974, 20-22). Neither Eliot nor Pound, however, seem to have significantly influenced his work, whose own subtleties, if compared to those of the two encyclopedic expatriates, appear to be of an entirely different nature. A more intense proximity, on the other hand, seems to exist between Brown’s artistic outlook and that of other modern poets such as Edwin Arlington Robinson, Edgar Lee Masters, and most of all Robert Frost, whose unadorned style and direct use of the rural “yankee” language Brown repeatedly emphasized as a major achievement of modern American poetry. With Frost, he shared that substantial modernity of vision that effaces from both of them deceptive “simplicity”; but, unlike Frost whose technique occasionally appears rather conservative and predictable, Brown never tired of experimenting with traditional forms. As Stephen Henderson has effectively put it, “... Brown combines the blues form and feeling with the ballad and, in effect, he ‘invents’ the blues-ballad which, as a literary phenomenon, is as distinctive as Wordsworth’s ‘lyrical ballad.’” (Henderson, 1973, 51.)

In this line, however, Brown’s artistic relationship with the two “Midwestern Poets”, Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg, appears to be particularly interesting, though largely for opposite reasons. Lindsay, whose superficial, controversial acquaintance with African American music and folklore Brown never entirely forgave, is the direct target of sharp critical judgements in which he manages to partially lose his proverbial aplomb. Calling Lindsay’s celebrated poem “The Congo” a downright “monstrosity” (Brown, 1974, 20), Brown implicitly draws a clear dividing line between himself and Langston Hughes, whose appreciation for Lindsay’s poem, still in the years of his literary apprenticeship, is well-known and documented. Far from suggesting an animosity towards Hughes that to my knowledge Brown never really expressed, I’d like nevertheless to call attention to
what seems to be a significant difference in the poetic stance of the two major poets of the so-called black “folk tradition”. Particularly evident during the period of the Harlem Renaissance proper, that difference shows, among other things, in the divergent attitudes the two poets show toward white patronage—a subject that Sterling Brown openly addresses in his famous 1927 piece entitled “Cabaret”, later included in *Southern Road*. In his piece, Brown seems engaged in a dialogical countering of the view of Harlem's night life, that Hughes had expressed in his poem “Jazzonia” (incidentally, one of the three pieces he had originally given Lindsay to read) which had been reprinted, the previous year, in Hughes’s first collection, *The Weary Blues*. In his poem, Brown seems intent in showing the hidden face of cabaret life, concentrating, much like Hughes himself had done, on the figure of the black jazz player, only to convey an opposite view: that of an exploited performer, exposed to an eager, naive, heavily paternalistic, all-white audience. His bitterness contrasts sharply with Hughes’s energetic, passionate, rather emotional portrayal offered in “Jazzonia”, as it clearly shows from the following excerpt:

Rich, flashy, puffy-faced,  
Hebrew and Anglo-Saxon,  
The overlords sprawl here with their glittering darlings,  
The smoke curls thick, in the dimmed light  
Surreptitiously, deaf-mute waiters  
Flatter the grandees  
The jazz band unleashes its frenzy.  
Now, now,  
To it, Roger; that's a nice doggie,  
Show your tricks to the gentlemen.  
The trombone belches, and the saxophone  
Wails curdingly, the cymbals clash,  
The drummer twitches in epileptic fit....(Brown, 1974, 115)

It is only fair to add, to conclude, that in re-working the same subject some twenty years later (once Lindsay’s influence had obviously entirely subsided) Hughes himself would in turn propose a view of the black jazz musician much closer to that Brown had originally offered in his poem, all centered on the performer’s conscious role as an interpreter of his people’s endless exploitation and suffering.

Of a totally different nature is Brown’s relation to Carl Sandburg’s poetry, whose notable collection, *Chicago Poems* (1916), seems to anticipate both a number of motives and technical solutions that, due differences being made, *Southern Road* would eventually display. Though Sandburg’s book, as the title indicates, is mainly concerned with the various, contradictory facets of a burgeoning urban context, his constant focus on single representatives of the working class, his closing in on their capacity to endure exploitation and reaffirm their aspirations and rights, do bear a substantial similarity with Brown’s analogous concerns, as they are expressed in his poems. Similarly, their frequent use of striking juxtapositions of contrasting moods, settings and situations, as well as the abrupt, bitter ironic turns their poems not infrequently take provide further evidence of a common way of condensing the most striking contradictions of everyday life in clashing, concentrated images.

Brown’s hectic line, characteristic of his compelling narrative poems, moreover, seems to serve to a large extent the same purpose as Sandburg’s powerful, if occasionally unruly free verse—that is conveying and amplifying the overall realistic impact of the poem, sustaining it with the flexibility of a rhythmic structure for the most part unadorned and
unconstricted. Among the many possible examples, these lines from his famous piece “Strong Men”, may serve to illustrate this aspect:

They point with pride to the roads you built for them,
They ride in comfort over the roads you laid for them.
They put hammers in your hands
And said — Drive so much before sundown.
You sang:
Ain’t no hammah
In dis lan’,
Strikes lak mine, bebby,
Strikes lak mine. (Brown, 1974, 52.)

Thus, Brown’s “connection” with Sandburg is particularly relevant not only in terms of an aesthetic contiguity between two prominent artists, but also as a case in point of a more general direction that African American poetry starts taking during the Depression years. As Stephen Henderson suggested, it is during that time that:

A step toward objectification and distancing of personal involvement occurs when the poet depicts either real or imaginary Black figures. Here the technique, of course, merges with that of other literary traditions, at times rather obviously so, as in the case of the realistic writers of the thirties being under the influence of Carl Sandburg, E. A. Robinson, and other American whites. (Henderson, 1973, 23.)

From Modernism to Modernity

Brown’s experiments with modernistic techniques, his involvement with subjects, scenes and language taken from every-day life, and most of all his consistent use of blues and ballad forms since the mid-twenties, are relevant reasons for his enduring success among artists and intellectuals of later generations. The “modernity” of his aesthetic vision (not unlike that of Langston Hughes) has had a major impact on a number of African American poets, writers and critics who have been repeatedly paying homage to his personality, acknowledging the vital role he has played both as a creative interpreter of the folk tradition, and as the enlightening, influential observer of the black literary and cultural experience for the better part of the 20th Century. Indeed, Sterling Brown has gradually become something of a cultural hero, a historical figure whose presence in and positive influence on the black community has been often celebrated, particularly in the works of fellow poets who have drawn from his example. The extremely wide diffusion of blues poetry since the late Sixties would by itself testify to Brown’s poetry’s influence in the recent past—an aspect that becomes even more central if one considers the increasing relevance that the performance of the text has gained as “final” stage of the artistic communication between the poet and his/her audience. Also from this perspective, Sterling Brown’s well-known ability as reader and performer of his own, as well as of traditional texts should be seen as the touch of a gifted precursor whose lesson has fortunately been picked up by many others. Because of this, I would like to conclude with a few remarks on two contemporary poets like Etheridge Knight and Michael Harper, who, perhaps more effectively than other artists, seem to have turned Sterling Brown’s “teachings” into a vital asset of their own work.

One of the most striking aspects of Etheridge Knight’s personality is that he was able to bail himself out of his life as an outcast and a convict thanks to his somehow late, but truly intense encounter with poetry. As a drop-out first, and later as an inmate, he had learned from scratch the difficult art of oral self-defense, assimilating the technicalities
of toasts and dozens as part of his resource supply for daily survival, well before turning that same reservoir of first-hand knowledge into material for his writing. He had worked hard both to survive as a man and to emerge as a poet, and, as a memorable line of one his best-known poems goes, “he had the scars to prove it” (Knight, 1968, 11). From this standpoint, his closeness to Brown’s world seems to extend beyond the limits of a mere coincidence in literary interests and taste, since Knight’s own experience closely resembles that of many a bad-man that populates the older poet’s work: his familiarity with the raw materials of that popular tradition, with its different genres, characters and situations going back to his origins.

Knight’s frequent use of Southern landscapes, of rural Mississippi settings in particular, is also reminiscent of Brown’s favorite scenarios; a harsh background, made of “brown hills and red gullies”, that binds his stray wanderers to the “black earth” of their native environment, while at the same time affecting what often appears an unexpected upsurge of their worn-out sense of belonging. Poems like “One Day We Shall All Go Back”, “The Bones of My Father”, “A Poem for Myself” (all of them published in Belly Song and Other Poems) are telling examples of the insistence with which this particular motive keeps reappearing in Knight’s poetry. As it is often the case with Brown’s low-down heroes, the call of the rural roots in the South is what triggers an intimate revelation (sometimes rather evident, other times a barely perceptible one) that heightens the characters’ sense of identification with the land that was abandoned, its people and its warm, familiar atmosphere. Interestingly enough, Knight’s handling of the “Down South” theme (a characteristic motive of the blues tradition) is far from being romantic or self-indulgent, but rather shows a distinctive turn towards self consciousness and affirmative action:

One day we shall go back —
we shall all go back down home
to the brown hills and red gullies down home
where the blood of our fathers
has fed the black earth down home
We shall all go back down home
to avenge Medgar, and Martin, and lil Emmett Till,
and all the others who died the good death down home —
back—back to avenge our fathers and mothers killed and raped....
(Knight, 1973, 48.)

Knight’s Southern characters, as these lines clearly show, have come of age. Granted, their “marching home” may not properly be that of “De Saints” of old; their maturity and determination, however, is an ascertained fact, much like that of Sterling Brown’s “Strong Men”, who “keep a-coming on/Gittin’stronger.” (Brown, 1974, 53.) That Sterling Brown has been a vital presence in Michael Harper’s development as an artist since the years of his apprenticeship is a well-known fact that the younger poet has often acknowledged in his critical work and in his poems, as well as in public statements, interviews, and perhaps most of all through his editorship of The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown, originally published in 1980, and since then repeatedly reprinted. Their common concern with tradition is certainly a significant part of an aesthetic vision that calls for a heightened sense of responsibility towards their audience, for a clear understanding of their role as cultural mediators in a given historical time. From this standpoint, Harper’s poetry can indeed be interpreted as an articulated extension of the main lines of Brown’s creative and scholarly efforts, a suggestive and varied body of work that coherently moves towards a bold, creative fusion between subjects like racial memory, endurance, personal and collective responsibility, and a constant attention to verbal play, rhythm
and jazz-like improvisations. To stretch it a bit for clarity’s sake, one could say that John Coltrane is to Harper what Ma’ Rainey is to Brown—not merely a folk hero to be celebrated and passed on to posterity as a cultural duty, but rather an individual voice whose vital témoignage has to be revived, made clear and effective in the present because of its inner, powerful significance to daily experience.

The strong sense of kinship and solidarity with one’s own subjects that this operation implies seems to be yet another trait that both Harper and Brown share, their language being able to convey with heightened intensity the inner meaning of those voices, to reproduce, as it were, the full impact of that communication. Fittingly enough, the relationship between the two is said to have started upon a revealing hearing of Brown’s recordings by a still young Harper⁹; to have grown out of the common interest for orality that they have always shared, and that has led them, consequently, to view the performance of the text as the logical outcome of their own activity as poets. The “audibility” of the text works for both as a synonym of its social impact—what makes it bite, move, impress; in the final analysis, what makes it worth to be a poem at all. Like Brown’s, Harper’s texts insistently draw from the blues tradition, eventually moving on up to elaborate poetic schemes that, in jazz-like fashion, rely heavily upon improvisation—on irregular rhythmical punctuation, on alternated sound explosions and “circular” repetitions, on a synthesis of technical devices that, like jazz signatures, are never “accidental”¹⁰. Like Brown’s, Harper’s overriding concern (hence his occasional comments on some critics’ partial misreadings of his own pieces) is that a poem should speak by itself, be perfectly audible by audiences who have an ear. Moving in the tradition, constantly reviving it through a consistent work of innovation, finding new meaningful connections between past and present in an endlessly rocking, sharply dialectic (and dialogic) process is Harper’s updated version of Sterling Brown’s own credo. It is that very symbiosis, that mutual correspondence of intents that one hears speak loud in Harper’s powerful poetic portrait of his mentor, entitled “Br’er Sterling and the Rocker”:

Any fool knows a Br’er in a rocker
is a boomerang incarnate; look at the blade
of the rocker, that wondrous crescent
rockin’ in arness as poem.
To speak of poetry is the curled line straightened;
to speak of doubletalk, the tongue
gone pure, the stoic line a trestle
whistlin’, a man a train comin’ on:
Listen Br’er Sterling
steel-drivin’ man, folk-said, folk sayin’,
that chair’s a blues-harness star
turnin’ on its earthly axis;
Miss Daisy, latch on that star’s arc,
Hold on sweet mama; Br’er Sterling’s rocker glows.
(Harper, 1985, 58.)
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NOTES


2. Langston Hughes’s article, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, was published in The Nation (June 23, 1926); on Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem, see W. E. B. Du Bois’s bitter review, entitled “Two Novels”, in The Crisis (June 1928), Vol. 35, No. 5, 202.

3. On the reception to the publication of Southern Road, see Sterling Stuckey’s “Introduction” to the reprint of Brown’s book (Brown, 1974, xvi-xxiii.)

4. I derived this impression directly from the interview Sterling Brown gave me in July 1975, in Washington, D. C.

5. On L. Hughes’s first meeting with Vachel Lindsay, see his autobiography, The Big Sea, New York: Hill & Wang, 1963 (-1940), 212. Hughes in fact admits of being partially indebted to Lindsay for what he calls “my first publicity break”.


7. A marked similarity on these levels seems to link several of Brown’s poems to Sandburg’s; see, for example, “Strong Men” and “Child of the Romans”.

8. It would be too long to enumerate even only the names of African American poets and artists who have openly paid homage to Brown; let it suffice to recall here Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Mari Evans, Sonia Sanchez, Michael Harper, and Rita Dove, just to emphasize his enduring impact on poets belonging to different generations.


La structure du langage poétique de Gwendolyn Brooks

Françoise Clary

1 Le langage versifié où la musique s’ajoute à la prose façonne le destin esthétique du réel. La structure du langage serait-elle révélatrice de la vérité de l’être ? L’expression poétique de Gwendolyn Brooks indique une vérité par le transfert esthétique d’une instance idéologique, engendrement de la signification que l’on ne peut réduire à l’expression d’un idiolecte Afro-Américain. Définir la vérité de l’écriture de Gwendolyn Brooks par une simple imbrication socio-historique équivaudrait à stratifier sa production poétique en espaces-temps vestigiaux, traces d’un passé révolu, ou à la projeter vers les lignes de fuite d’un « à venir », cantonnant, de ce fait, à la seule compréhension d’initiés des poèmes scindés en flots de temporalité, figés dans l’incommunicable. Comment définir ce langage poétique qui ne se confond ni avec la langue, ni avec la logique, mais les déborde toutes deux ?

2 Une expression idéologique unifie le sens des poèmes de Gwendolyn Brooks en ce qu’elle permet à l’être de se retrouver dans une écriture poétique qui intègre l’expérience immédiate de la réalité et ne s’écarte du langage ordinaire que pour le reconstruire sur un plan supérieur. Le vers brooksien va au-delà du rapport du son et du sens. Dépassant la structure phono-sémantique, il met en relation image sonore et image visuelle, rassemble les éléments de différents registres perceptifs et s’articule en lieu de passage de l’idéologique vers la transposition esthétique. Il est clair qu’un processus de signification fait osciller la poésie de Gwendolyn Brooks entre une logique maîtrisable et la retranscription d’un rêve échappant à toute maîtrise. Aussi est-ce sous un angle dialectique que l’on peut saisir les mouvements de la transposition esthétique dans les poèmes de Gwendolyn Brooks en examinant tout d’abord le dispositif sémiotique au sein du processus de signification où la segmentation sémantique se double d’une segmentation phonique, puis en prenant en compte le système de conversion de la conscience à la connaissance.
Dispositif sémiotique et processus de signification

3 Saisir le système symbolique de l’écriture poétique de Gwendolyn Brooks impose de distinguer, en premier lieu, le dispositif sémiotique par lequel l’écrivain introduit les charges énergétiques et les marques psychiques des pulsions, telles la gestuelle d’impatience devant l’action et la musique syncopée de la frustration ou du désespoir, traduction du pré-conscient des Noirs victimes du racisme de la société américaine. Dans Selected Poems nous nous attacherons à des poèmes construits sur une thématique exclusivement raciale. Nous subdiviserons cet ensemble en deux groupes, le premier abordant la nature du racisme et l’existence même des Noirs, le second s’attachant à leurs réactions et à leurs humeurs.

4 Le réseau phonique, inhérent au langage poétique de Gwendolyn Brooks, confère aux textes des différents poèmes une unité et un sens. Le jeu des sonorités au sein d’une même strophe et leur reprise dans d’autres strophes, en écho amplifié ou contrasté, impose l’insistance phonique comme le principe organisationnel prépondérant dans le texte, allant jusqu’à occulter formes syntaxiques, procédés rhétoriques et figures poétiques. Deux réalités existent par elles-mêmes et indépendamment l’une de l’autre dans ces poèmes : le son et l’idée, pôles d’attraction ou de répulsion.

5 Dans l’expression poétique de Gwendolyn Brooks est enfouie la mémoire Afro-Américaine. La voix de l’émotion lyrique est celle du peuple noir avec les joies, les souffrances, les espoirs, les frustrations, les cris, les rires, l’esprit de révolte de toute une communauté. On peut, en ce sens, appréhender cette écriture poétique à la lumière des théories de Barthes :

Le style est presque au-delà (de la littérature) des images, un débit, un lexique naissent du corps et du passé de l’écrivain et deviennent peu à peu les automatismes mêmes de son art. Ainsi sous le nom de style, se forme un langage autarcique qui ne plonge que dans la mythologie personnelle et secrète de l’auteur, dans cette hypophyse de la parole, où se forment le premier couple des mots et des choses, où s’installent une fois pour toutes les grands thèmes verbaux de son existence. (Barthes, 1972, 12).

6 Si l’on retient l’idée des « grands thèmes verbaux » de l’existence de l’auteur, on peut constater, dans les poèmes de Gwendolyn Brooks, que la répétition ou la redistribution des potentialités phoniques et sémantiques propres à la langue produisent de nouvelles structures de signification. L’accumulation de phonèmes d’un même groupe ou le glissement vers des phonèmes de groupes voisins tendent vers une expression phonétique non linguistique. De plus, chacun de ces phonèmes est porteur de sème, de sorte qu’ils contribuent par leur regroupement, ou leur éparpillement, à la dislocation de l’expression purement syntaxique de l’émotion au profit d’une constellation sémantique. Il importe donc d’étudier comment Gwendolyn Brooks utilise le caractère distinctif, phonétique des mots pour établir des accords émotionnels, sans négliger le fait que les valeurs sémantiques peuvent être des sémantisations immédiates de la charge pulsionnelle, qu’elles passent par des morphèmes identifiables ou non.

7 Jouant des propriétés sémiotiques du système phonique anglais, Gwendolyn Brooks oriente son expérience poétique vers l’exploration des bases pulsionnelles de la phonation tout comme elle propose des agencements inattendus des composants syntaxiques. L’irruption pulsionnelle est-elle destructrice du sens ? En fait, l’image sonore
de la représentation du mot s’unit à l’image visuelle de la représentation de l’objet et s’insère dans une fonction de métaphoricité.

Dans le poème “We Real Cool”, évocateur des limites de l’existence des Noirs, l’artiste ouvre la voie à une écriture du pré-conscient qui repose sur le rythme de timbres vocaliques et consonantiques :

We real cool. We  
Left school. We  
Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We  
Sing Sin. We  
Thin Gin. We  
Jazz June. We  
Die soon. (SP, 73)

L’auteur donne vie aux ressources musicales de l’anglais par le recours aux possibilités allitérantes de la langue. Le /K/ post-palatal de “cool” associé, en sonorité différentielle, à la sifflante /s/ dans “school”, “strike” (elle-même surdétérminée par l’effet de récurrence introduit dans “sing/sin/Thin”) transcrit à la fois l’idée de rejet et la pulsion de destruction. En contraste, la répétition des liquides /l/r/ et de la voyelle antérieure fermée /w/ qui passe à l’ouverture du /i/ indique un relâchement de la charge pulsionnelle. Elle s’accompagne, sur le plan sémantique, de la condensation de l’effet de calme et de détermination qu’apporte la présence communautaire, soutenue par la réitération du pronom “we”. En fin de poème, la dominance de l’occlusive dentale /d/ juxtaposée à la sifflante /s/ souligne à nouveau l’agressivité sous-jacente et unifie la tension. Il est clair qu’une dichotomie pulsionnelle se dessine entre le début et la fin des vers où les valeurs différentielles /s/k/ et /d/s/, dénotant l’agressivité, s’opposent à la présence constante d’une voyelle antérieure ouverte, indice d’une oralisation plus euphorique. La pulsion, oralisée, oscille entre appropriation et expulsion.

On observe, au sein des poèmes, la constitution d’un réseau phonique composé d’éléments répétitifs qui, du fait des particularités propres à leur base articulatoire, sont porteurs de pulsions sous-jacentes. Ces pulsions en latence s’intègrent dans le fonctionnement d’un ordre symbolique. Emergeant de la contradiction, l’esprit communautaire évoqué par le “we” de “We Real Cool” s’efforce d’unifier les tirailllements propres à l’existence des Noirs ; mais la prépondérance du groupe de dentales et de sifflantes écrase la dyade “we”. Après s’être profilé au début du poème, le “we” communautaire Afro-Américain tente de se maintenir en fin de vers pour disparaître sous la pression des occlusives. Le « nous » énonciateur est un être « séparé » qui, dans la chaîne phonématique, s’exprime en dissociant constructions logiques et idéologiques. Une division fondatrice est établie par l’artiste entre le sujet (le « nous » communautaire) et l’objet (le racisme).

Il y a bien traduction trans-linguistique de l’écrasement des aspirations de la communauté noire, représentation d’un moi blessé, annihilé. On remarque dans ce poème (comme dans “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” qui retrace la souffrance d’une mère devant le corps de son fils assassiné) la structuration du pulsionnel en un dispositif de sémantisation dialectisée. Deux registres de langue s’entremêlent. L’un reflète une tendance à l’autonomie du réseau sémiotique, l’autre s’associe à la fonction symbolique du langage brooksien. On assiste à l’émergence d’une triangulation complexe entre le signe verbal, la pulsion d’agressivité, de peur) et la projection du Moi vers l’Autre.
Le rythme trans-linguistique propre à l’écriture poétique de Gwendolyn Brooks cerne l’irruption du pulsionnel et l’oriente vers le symbolique par le mécanisme de la répétition, fonction essentielle dans le déroulement du rêve. Ainsi, la réitération comme mode d’expression dans “of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery” met en relief l’apparente insignifiance de la vie des gens de couleur telle qu’elle s’offre au regard des Blancs. Ce faisant, la voie reste ouverte au rêve grâce aux ellipses et au rythme pulsionnel imprimé par la succession des occlusives labiales/b/p/qui correspondent à une intention d’entassement, de richesse acquise, de production. Cette oralisation de la vie des Noirs démunis est transposée sur le plan rhétorique par l’ évocation des lieux de mémoire qui ont donné un sens à la vie de De Witt Williams. Or ces lieux jalonnent à présent la route qui le mène vers sa dernière demeure... On constate que le principe rythmique où s’ imbriquent temps biologique et silences organise un texte qui se déploie comme une histoire, un épisode de fiction, tandis que l’indécision syntaxique générée par les phrases nominales suspensives ouvre la voie à la méditation, à l’émotion, au rêve. Dans “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed” on voit également se constituer un réseau interne de répétitions avec des inversions presque terme à terme et des glissements sémantico-phoniques. On perçoit le jeu entre le discours narratif sur la vie des Noirs, pétrie de violence, frappée de stagnation, et le niveau phonique des vers. En utilisant les propriétés sonores du langage, Gwendolyn Brooks transpose dans le texte poétique des rythmes trans-linguistiques où la discordance mètre-syntaxe est susceptible de variation intensive. Reflet des pulsions, le rythme disruptif participe au processus de signification en ce qu’il permet de faire ressortir l’intentionnalité réelle du texte. Primant la cohésion syntaxique, le rythme détermine la fin des vers, en rupture totale avec la solidarité grammaticale. Ainsi, dans le poème “We Real Cool”, cité plus haut, la pause sépare le sujet du verbe, c’est-à-dire deux unités hautement solidaires qui acquièrent, de ce fait, une existence autonome avec une mise en relief systématique du “We” en fin de vers, ce qui traduit la solidarité de la collectivité noire où l’individualisme s’efface devant le « nous » communautaire. Dans cette écriture, le vers n’est pas ‘agrammatical’ mais ‘antigrammatical’. Il marque un écart par rapport aux règles du parallélisme du son et du sens. A n’en pas douter, la dislocation du système des pauses a pour effet une déstructuration, limitée mais effective, du message poétique. C’est là le but que poursuit Gwendolyn Brooks dans le transfert qui s’opère de la conscience vers la connaissance.

De la conscience à la connaissance

Si la représentation affective existe en dehors du langage, il n’en reste pas moins vrai que la modalité de cette représentation est elle-même provoquée par un certain langage. La position idéologique adoptée par Gwendolyn Brooks est la condition de l’énonciation. Elle oscille, ambiguë, entre le sens grammatical et la valeur existentielle dans des poèmes qui ne cherchent pas à représenter la réalité mais visent la vérité du sens. C’est dans le mode subjectif d’appréhension du réel, dans le mouvement de va-et-vient, d’aller-retour du sens au non-sens puis du non-sens au sens que l’écriture poétique de Gwendolyn Brooks pose sa signification.

A travers le prisme du motif principal de son écriture, la lutte, Gwendolyn Brooks distingue l’occurrence sociale. La représentation de la femme noire est, ainsi, liée à la mise en œuvre spécifique d’un état social. Elle est repérable au niveau du processus de conceptualisation qu’implique le recouvrement archétypal d’une image devenue le point
de convergence de la conscience culturelle Afro-Américaine. Lieu de mémoire, archétype, la femme symbolise, dans les poèmes de Gwendolyn Brooks, le cycle historique d'où émerge l'imagination poétique. La représentation métaphorique de la femme apparaît sous des formes diverses. Dans le couple mère/enfant elle est source d'émotion, émotion complexe où l'on peut reconnaître la peur, la tendresse, l'admiration. “The Last Quatrain of The Ballad of Emmett Till” décrit l'impuissance d'une mère écrasée par le chagrin après le meurtre de son fils mais, en apparence, impasible. Vision déroutante que celle de cette femme dont la douleur semble minorée par l'artiste. Dans l'ordre de la fonction narrative du poème, le comportement de la mère est décrit en trois temps, elle reste assise, boit un café puis se lève en silence pour embrasser le cadavre de son fils. L'interprétation idéologique domine le motif du poème, s'y surajoute et l'enrichit. Le poème existe comme mise en scène et exploitation dramatique d'une vision codée perceptible dans la juxtaposition de deux constatations :

She kisses her killed son,
she is sorry. (SP, 81)

Par la condensation de l'effet dramatique, Gwendolyn Brooks retranscrit l'impuissance de la mère contrainte d'accepter la mort de son fils car elle sait, à l'avance, qu'aucun recours n'est possible, que rien ne pourra jamais compenser cette perte tragique. L'instance idéologique figure un sens de base offert à la compréhension du lecteur, à savoir que la femme noire est conscience et connaissance. Elle est la mémoire et la force du peuple noir. Sa douleur muette est celle de toutes les femmes noires qui ont peiné, souffert de l'esclavage, de la ségrégation, du racisme. La souffrance lui a donné sagesse et courage, elle a nourri son âme. La thématisation iconique du texte révèle que l'unité du poème dépend de l'évocation de la mère dont la place dans la lignée du peuple noir est due à son courage. La maîtrise qu'elle a de ses émotions fait d’elle un lien entre le passé des Noirs et « l’à venir » des jeunes générations.

La représentation de la femme comme force du peuple noir relève de l'ordre symbolique. On observe un lien entre l'instance idéologique et les possibilités de vérité propres au langage. La vérité n'est plus un renvoi à un objet identifiable en dehors du langage, mais à un objet défini par le réseau sémiotique inséré dans l'ordre symbolique, toujours rattaché au vraisemblable. Dans “Jessie Mitchell’s Mother” le rythme pulsionnel du dispositif sémiotique combine la force tensive des sifflantes, reflet de la détermination de la femme noire avec l'amplitude des labiales ouvrant le discours à une répartition plus harmonieuse de la tension. Tout au long des poèmes regroupés dans “The Bean Eaters”, l'image de la femme couvre un champ représentatif où elle est étroitement liée à la vérité du sens : femme noire détentrice de la tradition orale, femme pugnace triomphant spirituellement de l'adversité, femme usée par la vie évoquant la splendeur de sa jeunesse :

“I was lovely, had flowers
Tucked in the jerks, flowers were here and there”.
She revived for the moment settled and dried-up triumphs,
Forced perfume into old petals, pulled up the droop,
Refueled
Triumphant long-exhaled breaths.
Her exquisite yellow youth.
(“Jessie Mitchell’s Mother”, SP, 85-86)

La vision projetée de la femme noire est également celle d'une figure référentielle de la mémoire africaine : femme transcendant la souffrance, symbole d'une détermination
héroïque. Le système sémiotique vraisemblabilise toujours l’instance idéologique. Ainsi, dans "Mrs Small ", le regard inexpressif et dur ("sterile stare", SP. 94) que Mrs Small adresse à l’employé venu prélever l’argent des assurances est-il évoqué par le jeu des différencielles sifflantes/dentales qui marquent la résistance exacerbée de la femme noire. Dans la dernière partie du poème, dominée par une chaîne verbale où le sujet demeure sous-entendu, et de ce fait occulté, un dualisme s’installe. La pauvreté devient une entité subordonnée, quoiqu’invincible, un repoussoir nécessaire à la valorisation de la femme noire, un objet d’abjection.

And silence her six
And mix
Her spices and core
And slice her apples, and find her four.
Continuing her part
Of the world’s business.
("Mrs Small", SP, 84)

C’est bien par rapport à cette entité sans figuration (qu’il s’agisse de la pauvreté dans "Mrs Small" ou du racisme dans “Real Cool”) que se pose le processus de signification qui, lui-même, devient sujet. Par cette organisation du mode de signification, Gwendolyn Brooks ouvre vers l’infini le mouvement de rejet de la pauvreté ou du racisme. L’artiste place la limite dans le mal. Par ce mécanisme de décentrement du sujet signifiant par rapport au mal dénoncé, ce dernier se retrouve extériorisé et, en conséquence, symboliquement condamné.

Le passage de la conscience à la connaissance s’effectue, au niveau de l’énonciation, par une redistribution des pronoms et donc des rôles. L’élimination du « je » et du « tu » pour privilégier l’introduction du « il » ou du « elle » ouvre le texte à l’imaginaire. Le poème “Jessie Mitchell’s Mother” illustre clairement l’abrogation de l’échange discursif au profit d’une énonciation fixée sur la troisième personne qui acquiert, en son singulier, une valeur plurielle. La capacité qu’a le « elle » d’être non seulement une, mais multiple, d’être toutes les femmes noires s’ébauche, lorsque Jessie demande à sa mère, sur le point d’accoucher : “Are you better, mother, do you think it will come today ?” (SP, 85). En refusant à son enfant le « je » autant que le « tu » du dialogue, pour privilégier une réponse à la troisième personne, la mère confère à Jessie, devenue le sujet isolé sur lequel se fixe l’énonciation, une identité singulier-pluriel

Jessie’s black
And her way will be black, and jerkier even than mine
("Jessie Mitchell’s Mother", SP, 85.)

La subversion, dans la réponse, où le « tu » attendu est remplacé par « elle » (Jessie), ouvre la voie à l’imaginaire. Parce qu’elle fait de sa fille l’indicateur généralisé de l’instance discursive, la mère dépasse le cadre de l’échange verbal et atteint le principe même de la « Loi » de la société américaine. Du fait du passage du « tu », unitaire, au « elle », pluralisé (car ce pronom est, ici, représentatif de toutes les femmes de couleur) Jessie est confrontée à la connaissance. Son avenir annoncé est celui de toute femme noire et pauvre, c’est-à-dire une vie de peine, de souffrance, d’humiliation. Son identité pluralisée relève de la généralisation. La femme noire, sujet de l’énonciation, devient le pôle de convergence du processus de signification. Au niveau du langage, ce mouvement interne implique une redistribution d’ordre poétique et musical qui, à travers le rythme, affecte le symbolisme de l’écriture assurant le transfert de la représentation idéologique vers l’esthétique.
Transposition esthétique

Il existe, dans la poésie de Gwendolyn Brooks, divers systèmes producteurs de sens : le sémiotique qui s’ouvre au développement d’un rythme pulsionnel et à un langage trans-linguistique, l’ordre symbolique où l’instance idéologique est liée au décentrement du sujet et, enfin, le jeu syntaxique par lequel s’opère le transfert de la représentation idéologique vers l’esthétique. Le langage poétique de Gwendolyn Brooks repose sur une prose en puissance dans la mesure où il s’appuie sur les mots et sur leur charge culturelle. Comme le souligne le critique afro-centriste Molefi Asante, le mot est le fondement de la culture, de la religion, de la culture africaine.

... the word is imperative, it is the fundament as well as the fashioning instrument of African society. All religion, music, medicine, and dance are produced by vocal expression, inasmuch as creativity is called into existence by man speaking....
... no priest can exist apart from the word ; indeed without the word, nothing can be, for the word creates reality. (Asante, 1987, 70)

Il est clair que dans la poésie de Gwendolyn Brooks les mots, lourds de leur propre signification, se combinent en un flux dense, porteur d’une temporalité monumentale qui échappe à la succession aristotélicienne d’espaces temps indépendants. Ils sont le reflet du temps cyclique défini par Julia Kristeva, retour éternel d’un rythme biologique conforme à celui de la nature qui, pour reprendre la formulation même de Kristeva, débouche sur « la présence massive d’une temporalité monumentale sans faille ni échappatoire qui a si peu à voir avec le temps linéaire, celui qui s’écoule, que le terme temporalité lui convient à peine » (Kristeva, 1981, 16)

Les mots qui, dans l’oeuvre poétique de Gwendolyn Brooks, entrent dans ce continu temporel global, infini, sont individuellement porteurs de sens. Rehaussés par les silences qui soulignent leur autonomie, ils se fondent dans l’espace imaginaire, temps monumental, espace-temps du rêve ou de la pensée qui transcende le temps historique. La division entre le sujet et l’objet existe dans le langage, instaure des silences entre le moi, meurtri jusqu’à l’annihilation, et le monde objectivisé de l’abjection, le monde de la pauvreté, du racisme.

La pensée raciale ou philosophique de Gwendolyn Brooks fluctue, en conséquence, au fil des mots, épais, infranchissables dans leur charge culturelle, leur valeur métaphorique ou métonymique, et la pression qu’ils impriment aux poèmes. Par leur densité immédiate, brute et parfois brutale, les mots brisent la chaîne relationnelle de sorte que le mouvement des vers n’est pas nécessairement celui d’une progression régulée au sein d’un discours qui ne ferait sens que dans sa globalité. Que Gwendolyn Brooks décrive le comportement des petites gens dans la rue :

“Dirty, rich, carmine, hot, not bottled up
Straining in sexual soprano, cut
And praying in the bass partial, unpretty
(“I love those little booths at Benvenitti’s”, SP, 59.)

ou qu’elle décrive l’attitude des Dames de Charité :

Who are full
Sleek, tender-clad, fit, fiftyish, a-glow, all
Sweetly abortive, hinting at fat fruit,
Judge it high time that fiftyish fingers felt
Beneath the lovelier planes of enterprise
(“The Lovers of the Poor”, SP, 90.91.)

le discours est ramené au discontinu. Les mots qui, dans ces poèmes, rendent compte d’un comportement physique ou mental, se succèdent en une accumulation d’affirmations isolées, surdéterminées par l’absence de liaison. L’expression poétique tend vers l’oralité. Les mots impriment à la phrase des vibrations phoniques isolées de sorte que le timbre est le support d’une différence. Mais il ne s’agit pas, pour Gwendolyn Brooks, de brouiller le message. En s’appuyant sur une écriture où les mots ne sont pas banalisés par le sens général mais se retrouvent projetés en autonomie, avec leur densité et leur vérité propre, Gwendolyn Brooks vise à susciter chez le lecteur un mode de compréhension analytique fluide, proche de celui que provoquerait un message ordinaire.

L’écriture de Gwendolyn Brooks est porteuse d’un discours marqué par le discontinu. Toutefois, sur la ligne des différences sémantiques où les mots expriment leur signification dans leur singularité, les vers renvoient des échos continus par allitérations ou ressemblances phoniques (“straining in sexual soprano”, SP, 59). Le son, dans les vers de Gwendolyn Brooks, devient signe mais sa signification n’est pas aisément perceptible parce que les signes fonctionnent en antinomie avec l’écriture que l’auteur privilégie dans ses œuvres de fiction, notamment dans Maud Martha. Alors que son écriture narrative est linéaire, son écriture poétique est cyclique. L’artiste fait du retour phonique, qui est l’essence du vers, un mécanisme fonctionnant sur un rythme ternaire. A la similitude sonore vient s’opposer une hétérogénéité dénotative contrebalancée par une homogénéité connotative. Riche de ces divergences, le retour phonique se surajoute au message du texte du poème en lui conférant une vertu musicale. En fait, c’est l’antinomie qui constitue le vers.

Dans le transfert de l’expression idéologique à l’esthétique, l’écriture poétique de Gwendolyn Brooks se situe entre littéralité et émotion, entre science, au sens de savoir philosophique, linguistique, et fiction, au sens de discours narratif. Son message poétique se rattache à la fois au vers et à la prose. Une partie des éléments composant ce message intervient dans le jeu phonique tandis qu’une autre partie assure la linéarité normale du discours. Sous-tendu par un langage où les mots dominent dans leur singularité et fonctionnent dans le sens de la différenciation, le discours poétique de Gwendolyn Brooks s’appuie également sur des éléments qui font ressortir l’homophonie et agissent dans le sens d’une « dé-différenciation ». En privilégiant la differentiation phonématique et sémantique, Gwendolyn Brooks évite que son message poétique n’affaiblisse ses structures ou que les mots et les phrases ne perdent leur contour pour se fondre en un tout inanalysable.

Il existe, dans le langage poétique de Gwendolyn Brooks, une position d’écart où le sens se perd. Puis survient une réduction de l’écart où le sens se retrouve. Ainsi dans “The Chicago Defender” où le sens imprimé par l’expression idéologique est clairement marqué, à savoir l’hypocrisie raciale, on remarque que la position d’écart se manifeste par le jeu de figures poétiques, d’inversions, d’impertinences de type synesthésique, d’allitérations. Ces procédés participent d’une même négativité, d’une même obscurcation du message, mais c’est par ce jeu simultané et convergent des figures, que le langage de Gwendolyn Brooks existe en tant qu’expression poétique. Les mots, selon Hegel, sont « les signes des représentations » (Hegel, 1964, 50). Gwendolyn Brooks joue de deux types de représentation, la dénotation, désignant une réponse cognitive, et la connotation, se rattachant à la réponse affective. Parce que chaque mot possède un double sens virtuel,
une sorte de logique affective fixe une norme à la phrase poétique. Dans “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till”, la mesure du sens repose sur un différentiel sémantique selon lequel les mots sont définis par leurs qualités affectives. L’adjectif “red” contenu dans

she sits in a red room
(............................................)

Chaos in windy grays
through a red prairie (SP, 81.)

marque le texte du poème par sa connotation d’excitation et de violence. L’espace sémantique construit par l’artiste tire sa valeur et sa puissance de cette part du sens essentiellement émotionnelle. Une logique affective sous-tend la phrase poétique brooksienne. L’émotion, à la fois réelle et poétique y est centrale. L’émotion réelle est éprouvée par le sujet énonciateur des poèmes comme un état intérieur, en modalité, c’est à dire comme une modulation du moi face au monde qui demeure la cause extérieure de ses réactions subjectives. Juxtaposée, l’émotion poétique demeure liée à la qualité du monde évoquée par les poèmes. Le sentiment suscité chez le lecteur ne se rattache donc pas à un état de l’être mais à une propriété de l’objet, qu’il soit objet de désir, d’attraction, ou objet d’horreur, de répulsion. L’émotion poétique n’est pas plaquée sur l’objet, elle est immanente à la représentation de l’objet dont elle constitue l’image affective.

Si, comme l’écrit Hegel, «la vraie origine du langage poétique ne doit pas être cherchée ni dans le choix des mots et dans la manière de les associer pour former des propositions et des périodes, ni dans la sonorité, le rythme, la rime etc., mais dans la modalité de la représentation» (Hegel, 1964, 50), il n’en demeure pas moins évident que toute modalité de représentation est liée au langage.


Chercher à localiser une figure qui, entre toutes les figures, illustrerait le transfert de l’instance idéologique à l’esthétique, conduit à considérer le rôle de l’opérateur sémantique. C’est, en effet, par la logique de la métaphore, où le prédicatif s’oppose au déterminatif, du fait de changements de sens ou tropes, que l’artiste vise à transmettre un savoir, une vérité.

Il importe, également, de souligner l’emploi de la passivation, particulièrement frappant dans “The Lovers of the Poor”. Par ce procédé, le sujet énonciateur des poèmes se trouve protégé de l’objet de répulsion, en l’occurrence la pauvreté que les dames de charité craignent de côtoyer. En fait, la logique de la constitution de l’objet phobique appelle cette structure de passivation (“Perhaps the money can be posted”, “loathe-love likelier may be inverted”, SP, 93). On observe un déplacement, une inversion du signe verbal, l’actif devient passif. Mais, parallèlement à la passivation syntaxique, l’objet phobique se développe en tant que fonction signifiante tandis que le sujet énonciateur demeure face à sa peur.

Dans son écriture poétique, Gwendolyn Brooks obéit à une évidence des idées et des sentiments. Sa phrase poétique est toujours subjectivement vraie car elle exprime une vérité à laquelle le lecteur peut souscrire en allant au-delà du sens connotatif et en tenant compte de l’introjection pulsionnelle sous-jacente.
Une triangulation prend forme entre pulsionnel, notionnel et émotionnel. Les métaphores ne s'apparentent pas à un simple transfert de sens, mais à un changement de catégorie de sens, à un passage du sens notionnel au sens émotionnel. Elle rend compte du fonctionnement d'un langage poétique qui mêle jeux phoniques et rythmiques pour pousser plus loin encore les limites du plaisir de l'écriture esthétique.

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NOTES

1. Les références sont à l’édition de 1973 des *Selected Poems*, abrégée en *SP*.

AUTEUR

FRANÇOISE CLARY

Université de Rouen
Mo ku lana — mo jinde loni I died yesterday — I rose today

Ishmael Reed
Mo ku lana | I died yesterday
Mo ti mu petepete | I drank mud
Mo jinde loni | I rose today
Mo ti mu waini | I drank wine
Mo ku lana | I died yesterday
Mo jinde loni | I rose today
Mo ku lana | I died yesterday
Mo jinde loni | I rose today
Mo ku lana | I died yesterday
Mo jinde loni | I rose today
Mo jinde loni | I rose today
Mo ku lana | I died yesterday
Mo ko le korin | I could not sing
Mo jinde loni | I rose today
Mo n’korin yii | I’m singing this song
Mo n’korin yii | I’m singing this song
Mo n’korin yii | I’m singing this song
Mo n’korin yii | I’m singing this song

AUTHOR

ISHMAEL REED
UC-Berkeley, Writer
Tributes from friends and colleagues
Fabre: a Tribute

John A. Williams

1 One should pause at this time in our collective history to ponder where the Black Literatures of Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, and increasingly of Europe, would be without the exhaustive work of the French scholar, Michel Fabre. (He has also been in the forefront of broad-banding the several other post-colonial literatures in English so often ignored except for special authors by the English and American establishments.

2 He’s been doing this since some of his contemporary detractors were in knee pants, and with determination and drive before and since the publication of his first of several major works in 1973, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, written over a period of twelve years. The work follows the lead of André Malraux, Jean-Paul Sartre and other French literary figures in resurrecting Wright’s diminishing reputation at home, though he had died in 1960 at only 52.

3 Fabre’s generosity of spirit is widely known, and often underappreciated. And if he was not the head of an organization, scholarly or otherwise, he was an active member whose international reputation usually earned the focus of a spotlight. He’s hosted several notable conferences at the Sorbonne and for the African American Music and Paris 1996, he helped to arrange for the concert performance of an opera for which I’d written the libretto; Vanqui premiered in the U. S. three years later with Rodrick Dixon, Marietta Simpson, Carmen Balthrop, Benita Valente and twelve other performers.

4 In 1963 I met Michel Fabre over the sick bed of Chester Himes in Columbia Presbyterian Hospital on upper Broadway in New York. Himes had spoken often and with warmth of this slender, bespectacled young French teacher. Himes had come from the Yucatan from where he had written to me of being bitten by a scorpion and had to get immediately back to New York for treatment. As frequently happened, some weeks earlier he had arrived from Paris on his way to the Yucatan which he claimed he could not get to unless I lent him some money. I did, as usual, (he always paid it back) and he was off to see a friend.

5 Carl van Vechten called when he had somehow got Himes settled in the hospital and said Himes had a stroke. That was obvious looking down at his slightly twisted face and
listening to his tortured speech. Yet, the prognosis was good, Fabre told me, and that assessment by the doctors proved to be true. I told Himes that, since it was the spring break for my kids, they were coming to New York and we were then driving to Long Island. I would not be around to help him out. I detected a slight resentment, for when Himes came to New York, I felt obliged to help him and he got used to it. Clearly, with my kids the situation was very much different. I ignored him. His condition improved quickly and he was able to get back to Paris and more care. He was 54 at that time. (Fabre has more on this hospitalization in his *The Several Lives of Chester Himes*.)

Fabre and I began an irregular correspondence, so much so that I do not recall when next we met. He was writing and collecting materials for his big book on Wright and, I suppose, just as it is in the U.S., climbing the academic ladder to a full professorship. He was well on his way to becoming the pre-eminent European scholar of his time on African American literature and its relationship, particularly with France, as his *From Harlem to Paris. Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* (1991), firmly establishes—along with the frequent visiting professorships in the U. S. that Fabre so deftly fields. He is generous at securing such posts in France for African American scholars of the literature.

Most of my time in Europe has been spent in Spain, not France, and although I've often stopped in Paris, it was not, it seems, until relatively recently (some 20-odd years ago), that I met Fabre and his wife Geneviève there, or met them in New York while they were with Claire and Ed Margolies, a friend and also an African American literature scholar.

To Fabre I owe thanks for securing translators as well as publishers for two French editions of *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967, U.S.; France, 1994, 1999). I have had the pleasure and honor to have him speak at the Rutgers University Newark campus before I retired from there, and I've attended at least three conferences at which Fabre was present, two at the Sorbonne and one on the Canary Island of Tenerife. He may have aged like the rest of us, but he remains an astonishing bundle of intellectual energy with which he battles his Parkinson's every step of the way.

I also owe him thanks for being just Michel, a very special, unassuming scholar who is first and above all an extraordinary human being.

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**AUTHOR**

**JOHN A. WILLIAMS**

Rutgers University (retired), writer
A Tribute to a Mentor

Brenda F. Berrian

1 Once during a seminar for graduate students of color held at the university where I teach, two colleagues spoke on the importance of having a mentor. One colleague particularly stressed the choosing of someone who does not necessarily have to be a person of color. What should matter, she emphasized, is whether or not the mentor is supportive and avoids trying to make the student a duplicate of her or himself. While listening to my colleague’s speech I realized how fortunate I had been with the mentors who encouraged me during my studies. One of them who graced my graduate student days and continues to do so during my professional life is Michel Fabre.

2 It was during the fall of 1972 that I first met Michel Fabre. I had traveled to Paris, France, to work with a professor on my doctoral dissertation. In preparation, I had corresponded with the professor who agreed to supervise my doctoral dissertation. Upon my arrival in Paris in early October 1972, I learned, to my surprise, that the professor had been invited by Léopold Sédar Senghor, the then President of Senegal, to spend a year at the Université de Dakar. Cast adrift and unfamiliar with the French university system, I searched in vain for another advisor and questioned why the professor did not apprise me of her situation and/or arranged for me to work with someone else since I was a newly arrived foreign student. I virtually canvassed the Sorbonne, knocking on various professors’ doors and explaining my precarious situation. Finally, I summoned up enough courage to knock on Monsieur Fabre’s office door for I had previously read his well-known study on Richard Wright.

3 As soon as he heard my knock, Monsieur Fabre commanded me to enter. Seeing a young-looking, slightly built man with thick glasses and a beard, I haltingly explained my situation. “You arrived a day too late,” he told me. “I already have my quota of graduate students.” Seeing my look of despair, Monsieur Fabre took pity on me, suggesting I should contact Stanislas Adotevi at the then Jussieu-Paris 6 in ethnology. “Ethnology?” I squeaked. “My area is literature; I know nothing about ethnology.” Having no choice, I followed Monsieur Fabre’s advice and, to my relief, Monsieur Adotevi agreed to work with me as long as I enrolled in his course and one of Monsieur Fabre’s.
As an African American student and a graduate of an historical Black college in the United States, I was elated to be studying the “Ethnology of the Afro-American World” (Adotevi’s course) and “Afro-American Literature” (Fabre’s course). Never had I formally taken a course about the African American experience at an American university. What I knew about African American history and literature I had learned on my own in an informal setting and through the attendance of many readings and lectures by African American writers, historians, critics and politicians on several historical Black college campuses. How ironic. In order for me to study about my people and their contributions to the United States, I had to leave my country of birth to go to France where African American literature was seriously taught, studied and chosen as thesis topics for graduate degrees.

While immersed in my course work I found out that the learning process is continuous. On the first day of attending Monsieur Adotevi’s class, Monsieur Fabre entered the room and sat beside me. From then on, Monsieur Fabre often came to Monsieur Adotevi’s class because he had registered for a master’s degree in anthropology at Jussieu. Although he had already acquired the doctorat d’état and been teaching on the university level for eight years, Monsieur Fabre wanted to learn more about African American and Haitian social and cultural practices in order to direct the newly established Centre des Etudes Afro-Américaines et du Tiers Monde Anglophone at Paris III. From time to time, Monsieur Fabre and I engaged in a conversation at the end of the class period. After I had given an oral presentation for his class, Monsieur Fabre told me he would reconsider working with me if I should decide to spend another year in Paris. If I had to squeeze every penny I had from my scholarship or to find a part-time job, I was determined to stay in Paris and to transfer to the Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris III.

During the transition, I realized how myopic the educational system was in the United States. For instance, whenever I studied anything about America, or North America, the focus was always on the United States. However, the philosophy of the Centre des Etudes Afro-Américaines et du Tiers Monde Anglophone was that Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean and the United States all encompassed the North American region. Therefore, Monsieur Fabre was not surprised when I wanted to do a comparative study on the influence of the Harlem Renaissance poets upon the Caribbean and African négritude poets. Instead, he advised me on which libraries I should consult and queried me on what I had previously read about the two literary movements.

My self-discipline and study skills improved even more under Monsieur Fabre’s supervision. He expected me and his other graduate students to go beyond the basics. Never did he coddle me because I was a foreign student. Since I had registered in the program with other French students, I was to abide by the same rules and regulations. He simply explained the system of compiling bibliographical data and the format of the proposal that I had to submit to the central office of the Service des thèses at Nanterre for the official approval of my dissertation topic and admittance into the doctorat de 3e cycle. He usually scheduled a meeting once a month to assess my progress. Recommended readings would be added on to my list of things to do. Yet, Monsieur Fabre did not exercise a controlling manner; he just nudged me in the right direction and allowed me to be the one to reveal the latest information. He thereby allowed me the space and time to move along at my own pace and validated my opinions.

Participating in Monsieur Fabre’s courses, engaging in conversations with my classmates, and listening to their comments in class about African American writers all aided me in
my internal journey. Living and studying in Paris for two years were an adventure, a validation of who I was. Often I was questioned by my classmates about being an American. However, I explained to them that “my” experiences did not represent over 28 million African Americans. My position was reinforced when Monsieur Fabre required the class to read Dudley Randall’s anthology *Black Poets* (New York: Bantam, 1971), invited Addison Gayle, an African American literary critic, and the poet Ted Joans to class, and encouraged us to attend literary conferences in Créteil and Nanterre. By meeting the movers and shakers of African American literature, my classmates understood that African Americans did not necessarily adhere to a monolithic viewpoint about language, racism, survival and self-pride.

Even I learned a lesson about self-pride. After Monsieur Fabre read the first draft of the introduction and two chapters of my dissertation, he asked me to revise and restructure them in the French writing style. Accustomed to writing in an abbreviated American style, I struggled to learn how to digress and to manipulate the French language without going directly to the point. Three revisions later, and by and large, Monsieur Fabre finally gave his approval on the first three chapters. By this time, my second year of studies and funding had come to an end and I had no choice but to find a fulltime job. Reluctantly, I told Monsieur Fabre I would have to complete the dissertation in the States or wherever I found a job.

Luckily, my upbringing and the two years with Monsieur Fabre prepared me to be disciplined enough to finish the dissertation so far away. Also, upon my return to the States, my father, who was also a university professor, would inquire about my progress and remind me that many students washed out during the dissertation stage. Yet he would add that he was certain that I was motivated enough to finish. How right my father was. Every time I mailed a chapter to Monsieur Fabre a heavily marked paper with comments would be returned several weeks later. Yet I was spurred on by him and my father to do the revisions. Finally, I completed the typing of the second draft of the entire dissertation and wrote Monsieur Fabre about my worry: Did I hear that the French postal workers were on strike again? Monsieur Fabre responded that he had to visit the critic Edward Margolies in New York and asked if it would be possible for me to meet him there. Accompanied by my father who wanted to meet the professor who had written *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: Morrow, 1973), I drove to New York and happily handed over the document that I had spent numerous hours on. Years later, Monsieur Fabre told me how pleased he had been to meet my father because he had read one of his books, too.

Monsieur Fabre did not only extend himself to carry back my dissertation to France; he also found me a typist in Paris for the third and final version of the dissertation while I began a teaching job in Gabon, Central Africa. Since I was thousands of miles away from Paris, Monsieur Fabre also deposited copies of the final draft of the thèse at the Sorbonne for me and encouragingly counseled me to be very familiar with the content for the defense. Happy that the process was almost near completion, I flew to Paris from Libreville, Gabon, and immediately visited Monsieur Fabre at his home to ask for a final draft of the dissertation. To Monsieur Fabre’s dismay, he realized that I had paid a hefty sum for the typing. However, not enough copies had been made so that I could have one. Both of us were embarrassed. I also felt bad because he had gone beyond the call of duty as an advisor. To salvage the awkward situation, Monsieur Fabre advised me to approach the librarian at Sorbonne III about giving me a copy. After a very heated argument with
the librarian she reluctantly and temporarily “lent” me one of the two copies. A
document that I had paid for! As soon as I successfully defended the dissertation,
Monsieur Fabre offered me his copy, but one of the other faculty members on the
committee gave me his.

Fortunately, my relationship with Monsieur Fabre did not end when I received the
doctorate. He wrote favorable letters of reference whenever I applied for university jobs
in the States. I, in turn, kept abreast of his publications and required some of them to be
studied for my courses. During a trip to Paris in 1984 I met him at a patisserie in the
Quartier Latin where we exchanged stories about our travels and research. Then I lost:
contact with him until February 1992 when he and some American professors from
Harvard University organized a historical conference on Afro-Americans in Paris. When I
saw him, I berated myself for not staying in touch. In December 1999, we both
participated in a conference on jazz and African American literature at the Université des
Antilles et de la Guyane in Fort-de-France, Martinique. This time I did not have to
contend with masses of people who had surrounded him in Paris in 1992. Instead,
Monsieur Fabre, his wife Geneviève and I leisurely shared meals and conversed on a range
of topics.

One topic was about his current scholarship. Since learning is an ongoing process for
Monsieur Fabre, he continues to write about African American writers. Yet, learning is
also a two-way street and he inquired about my own research. When I explained that my
book on popular French Caribbean songs, music and culture would be published in May
2000, he offered to review it for an academic journal. Flattered, I, of course, sent him a
review copy as soon as the book was published and an excerpt from his review is located
on my web site.

When people in the States ask me at which university I received my doctorate, they
express surprise when I mention the Sorbonne. Yet, they are even more impressed when I
tell them who I studied with. After a stunned moment of silence, they ask how I was able
to accomplish such a feat. I only smile and tell them it was pure luck. On the other hand,
they don’t understand how risky it had been. To leave the United States to study in
France was a risk, which was frightening. Yet, the risk was well worth it. If not, I would
not have had the opportunity to work with Monsieur Fabre.

From 1964 until 1969, Monsieur Fabre taught American literature at Nanterre. His next
move was to Vincennes-Paris 7 where students were clamoring for one seminar or more
about the African American experience. In response, he taught a course on “Black Power”
from October 1968 until June 1969. That summer three of his students who had
thoroughly enjoyed the course, spent three months in Harlem. Meanwhile, in October
1969, Monsieur Fabre shifted to Paris III where he introduced a course on James Baldwin
in 1970 for the agrégation. Next, he became involved in introducing a doctoral program for
and the director of the Centre des Études Afro-Américaines et du Tiers Monde
Anglophone. Later, the name of the center was to be changed to Centre des Études
Africaines Américaines et des Nouvelles Littératures en Anglais. By the time Monsieur
Fabre retired in the 1990s, he had served on 222 jury committees for doctoral candidates
at the Sorbonne.

Participating in Monsieur Fabre’s courses and engaging in stimulating conversations with
my classmates about African American writers all aided me in my internal journey. The
two years I spent in Paris caused me to reassess who I was. Living and studying in Paris
was an adventure, a validation of who I was. I often questioned what it meant to be an
American beyond the boundaries of the United States, not only an African American. Coming from a country where the color of my skin is of primary importance did not prepare me for the positive reception that the French directed toward African American writers, visual artists, and musicians. Talent was more important than the person’s skin color. In addition, my American nationality rather than my African American ethnicity was prioritized by the French. On the other hand, I was not too naive to understand that such a reception did not necessarily occur for people from the formerly colonized African nations by the French.

Over the years, I have arrived at the realization that mentors come in all sizes, races, and nationalities. It is not a requirement for someone to look like me to be my mentor. People are misinformed if they think a mentor must share the same culture as them. If that were so, many African Americans would not be successful or be the first to do something. I, for instance, was one of the first students to complete a doctoral degree with Monsieur Fabre as the primary reader.

I was also one of the two African American graduate students who finished under his supervision. During the time, I was under his guidance I became more self-confident in my abilities, and most of all, Monsieur Fabre’s subtle approach brought out the best in me.

Unassuming but firm, Monsieur Fabre possesses the qualities that I look for in a mentor: humble, helpful, compassionate and well informed. Someone who keeps abreast of the latest development in his field of expertise. I would not be the person I am today if it were not for people like him who helped to show me the way. To express my gratefulness, I try to extend myself to students in a likewise humble manner. Helping students serves to help myself and others. It also causes me to remember that learning, support and guidance all come from people from a rainbow of colors.

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AUTHOR

BRENDA F. BERRIAN

University of Pittsburgh
A Tribute and a photo portfolio

William Ferris

1 I first met Michel Fabre in 1978 when I was teaching in the Afro-American and American Studies Programs at Yale University. Michel was a legend among my colleagues who admired his fine biography The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright and his encyclopedic knowledge of Afro-American writers. Michel and his wife Geneviève were doing research at Yale in the Beinecke Rare Book Library, and we often discussed my plans to move from New Haven to Oxford, Mississippi, to direct a newly created Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. The Fabres were very interested in the Center, and both agreed to serve as international advisors to its programs. Thus began a friendship that has enriched my life over the years in more ways than I can count.

2 Michel impressed me with his quiet, thoughtful presence. He listens intently to the person with whom he is speaking, and he does so with a wry smile and a gleam in his eye. Behind his smile I knew that ideas were churning. From our first meeting at Yale I felt that Michel was a kindred spirit, and each time we have visited—in New Haven, Oxford, Paris, Moscow, and Washington—magical worlds have unfolded.

3 During the fall of 1979 I spent a week in Paris lecturing as part of a two-month lecture tour in Europe that was organized by the United States Information Agency. I had the honor of visiting Michel’s seminar at the University of Paris where I spoke to his students. Michel’s seminar dealt with black writers and folklore, and the students were deeply engaged with writers like Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison. After the seminar Michel invited me to have dinner in his home where he and I helped Genevieve prepare the meal. We peeled pears in the kitchen and spoke about how we might work together in the future.

4 Being in Michel’s home was an especially moving experience for me. After a lovely dinner, Michel took me into his office and shared some of the priceless photographs, letters and manuscripts he had gathered during his research over the years. He opened each file lovingly and explained the significance of its contents. Showing me his correspondence with Margaret Walker Alexander, he said “Margaret probably doesn’t even remember writing me these letters, but I keep them and treasure them.”
During the summer of 1979, Michel and Genevieve came to Oxford for their first of several visits at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture. They arrived with their student Sylvie Marchand, who had decided to enroll in the Center’s undergraduate major in Southern Studies. As he descended the steps of the small commuter plane at Oxford airport, Michel looked around and remarked “C’est vraiment le bout du monde là!”

For the next week, we explored the countryside around Oxford. We swam in Sardis Lake and then got stuck on a muddy road driving back to Oxford. The next morning we enjoyed hot biscuits served by Louise Smith at Smitty’s Restaurant. After breakfast, Michel was surprised and pleased to see that local bookseller Richard Howorth carried both English and French language editions of William Faulkner’s work at Square Books. In a gesture toward his homeland, we spent an afternoon in Paris, Mississippi, where we both visited with a local farmer and admired the community’s tiny post office.

Several years later Michel and Genevieve returned to Oxford as Ford Foundation Visiting Professors of Southern Studies at the Center. During their stay, they led seminars for visiting faculty who taught at black and women’s institutions in the Deep South.

On one memorable Oxford evening we were invited to dinner at the home of John and Regan Hailman. John writes a regular column on wine for the Gannett newspaper chain and has also written a book on the wines of Thomas Jefferson. His wife Regan is a gourmet chef, and together they created a Jeffersonian dinner with the appropriate wines in honor of their French guests.

While teaching in Oxford, Michel introduced me to the Memphis literary worlds of his old friends Levi and Debbie Frazier. Through their Blues City Cultural Center the Fraziers use theatre to enrich the lives of prison populations in West Tennessee. They had corresponded with Michel for many years and were thrilled to have him nearby.

In 1991, Michel and I traveled to Moscow where we both spoke at a symposium on Richard Wright that the Center for the Study of Southern Culture cosponsored with the Gorky Institute of World Literature. While in Moscow drama critic Maya Koreneva gave our group a tour of the Kremlin and recalled how as a child her father took her to stand outside the hotel where Paul Robeson was staying in Moscow. To their delight Robeson opened his window, walked onto the veranda, and sang several spirituals for his admirers below. Michel listened quietly then mentioned how much Richard Wright had admired Robeson.

In 1992, Michel organized a historic conference at the University of Paris-Sorbonne on “Blacks in Europe”. The conference focused on black expatriate artists in Paris and was inspired by Michel’s book From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980. The weeklong event was cosponsored by the American Studies Program at Columbia University, the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, the Dubois Institute at Harvard University, and the University of Paris-Sorbonne. Over 500 speakers and visitors came from all over the world to attend a rich venue of programs that featured Ernest Gaines, Henry Louis Gates, Danny Glover, Kenneth Kinnamon, and Julia Wright. Richard Wright’s widow Ellen Wright joined Michel at a ceremony commemorating the home where she and Richard Wright had lived in Paris. The final night of the conference Ellen and her daughter Julia invited me to join the Fabres for dinner in her home. Over dinner we spoke of Malcolm X, for whom Julia’s son is named, and I mentioned my friendship with Alex Haley and the importance of his Autobiography of Malcolm X. Late, that night, Julia called me at my hotel to say she had just read in the New
York Times that Alex had died. It was a sad note on which to leave Paris after a program that reflected both the scholarly interests of Michel and the esteem in which all of the participants held him.

This past year Michel and Genevieve visited me in Washington at the National Endowment for the Humanities and recalled the many happy times we have shared over the years. We promised to again gather at their kitchen in Paris, to peel pears together, and share other adventures in the future. Michel’s vivid imagination, his keen wit, and his amazing knowledge of the black experience are unique. Far more than a friend, Michel is my soul mate, and I am proud to join many other voices in saying thanks for all he has done to make this world a better place.
With Ellen Wright and Herbert Gentry, Paris, 1992. Photo by Bill Ferris, University of Mississippi Special Collections

With (right to left) Stirling Stuckey, Dominique Marçais and Claude Julien. MELUS Europe, Orléans, 2000. Photo by Héliane Ventura
Oxford, Miss., 2000. Photo by Hazel Rowley

With Sonia Sanchez and Genevieve, Tours, 2002. Photo by Christiane Julien
AUTHOR

WILLIAM FERRIS

University of Mississippi
A Tribute to a Colleague

Edward Margolies

1 How does one write about a friend? I have known Michel for almost forty years and though I don't think I can be “objective,” I can perhaps tell a little about our relationship.

2 Some time in the early 1960's I determined to write my doctoral dissertation on Richard Wright. I sent off a letter to Paris to Ellen Wright, Wright's widow, for information. She immediately wrote back that I ought to get in touch with a remarkable French scholar in the United States who was also doing research on her husband. She would tell him about our mutual interests —I believe Michel was teaching in the Boston area at the time— and perhaps we could get together. At length we did meet, in New York, and we hit it off famously.

3 Michel was further along in his work than I, but we did pool together whatever we knew about Wright and promised to inform each other about any new material we could find. Michel had undertaken a far more ambitious project than mine. I would begin a critical study, but he would write a biography —which I thought madness at the time. It would take ages, I said, and what would make it even more problematic is that a European would be required to try to understand the mad tangles of American culture, especially as regards race. Would American whites and blacks respond to him as easily or openly as the French might if he were writing the life of a French artist?

4 However, Michel was confident, though I was also struck by his humor and irreverence. Of course he would do the most thorough job that he could, but he also knew that academia contained a lot of stuffed shirts, and perhaps what he would write might shock them into an awareness of important cultural forces under their very noses. And I believe this, among other things, is what Michel has succeeded in doing and by so doing has immeasurably helped broaden the university curriculum and intellectual environment both in America and France.

5 Although Michel and I have both necessarily gone our separate ways, we have from time to time come together for various projects: among them the first extended bibliography of Wright's works, collections of Wright's letters, and of course lately a biography of Chester Himes. I need not add here how conscientious and prolific a scholar in other
areas of American and African-American literature Michel has always been, but I should also like to inject a more personal note. As our work and interests coincided, we came to know each other more and more as friends. When Michel and his wife, Geneviève (also a fine scholar), and on one occasion his children, were in America, they would often stay at our apartment in New York; likewise my trips to France often included a stay at their home in Paris. The year I taught in Paris, Michel —however hard-pressed— was always generous with his time and assistance. On other occasions we would get together on Cape Cod or in Vermont. And only recently my wife and I joined Michel and Geneviève on an automobile journey along the Carolina and Georgia coasts. But whether at work or at leisure, I was constantly made aware of his limitless intellectual curiosity and energy.

There was very little about American culture or history or literature he would not inquire about, and of course he was a voracious reader who would plunge into books of any kind that might be lying around the house. But beyond all that there is his genuine selflessness in whatever help he can give to students and scholars alike, not only in Europe but on visits to universities and small colleges in the American South. I have also observed him going out of his way to befriend struggling authors. What I know of Michel is that even in retirement, he has been giving more of himself than those among us who are still fully engaged.

AUTHOR

EDWARD MARGOLIES

University of New York
I had heard of Michel Fabre before I went to Texas. I was teaching Literary Studies at an Australian university, and I had read articles by him in Commonwealth and Kunapipi and World Literature Written in English. I liked the idea of this Frenchman working away in Paris, his bookcases full of writers from Australia, Mauritius, Trinidad, Nigeria.

And then I went to Texas. I was in Austin, on a six-month sabbatical leave from Deakin University, Melbourne. I was writing a book of essays at the time, but I had a lost feeling. I’d just written a biography of the Australian expatriate writer Christina Stead, and to my astonishment, I was missing the obsessiveness of biography. One evening, at a party, a young African American with swinging dreadlocks and a rich Louisiana voice told me that Richard Wright had changed his life. The next day, I was browsing casually in a bookstore—I happened to be standing in front of the W’s, eyeing the Weltys and Whartons—when a colorful array of paperbacks caught my eye. I saw that several Richard Wright books had been re-issued by the Library of America in restored, unexpurgated editions. The previous evening’s conversation came back to me.

One thing led to another, as is the way of serendipity. Pretty soon I was in the University of Texas library (richly endowed by oil money), looking up books about Wright and finding Michel Fabre’s name all over the place. I saw that Fabre had not only written Wright’s biography; there was a collection of his essays on Wright; he had produced a bibliography of Wright’s vast collection of books; he and Keneth Kinnamon had compiled a book of Wright’s interviews, and there was more. I went home with a pile of books, feeling humble.

I was surprised to find that Fabre’s biography, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, was over twenty years old. Wright died in November 1960. Less than two years later, Fabre was in Mississippi interviewing Wright’s former friends and teachers. As he wrote in the introduction to his biography, he had quite a shock when he came to the United States to do his research. In France, Wright was considered a major American writer. Not in the United States. Not in the 60s. “Many professors of American literature showed polite
surprise when I mentioned the subject of my research,” Fabre writes. It made him wonder about his own enthusiasm. But he persevered, determined to “break the silence.”

5 Fabre, I came to realize, had truly been a pioneer. I thought Texas in 1994 was bad enough when it came to racism and segregation, but Fabre was down in Mississippi when racial segregation was still the law. He couldn’t sit next to a black person on a bus, or a private car, or in a restaurant, and there he was, this Frenchman with a notebook, trying to ask questions in the black community about Richard Wright. They spoke “sometimes with reserve because I was white,” he writes, “and sometimes with confidence, because I was French.”

6 A number of things had me wriggling in my armchair as I read my way through that pile of books. The bleakness of the racism I saw around me in Texas shocked me. Then there was Wright’s powerfully visceral writing, which made me feel as if I myself were in the shoes of a black man in the Jim Crow South and Chicago in the 1920s and 30s. There was the inspiration of Wright’s life —his courage, determination, and sheer awe-inspiring talent which led to his long journey from Mississippi to Chicago, New York, and Paris. On top of this, there was the picture in my mind of Fabre the intrepid outsider, who battled on, despite the disdain the academy showed towards Wright, and despite the difficulty of working on a black man at a time when racial tensions in this country were broiling. I kept getting up from my books, and striding up and down the room, talking to myself.

7 Foolishly, I felt a crazy desire to step out on these perilous paths myself. It seemed to me far easier because Michel Fabre had led the way, holding up the lantern. But meanwhile, thirty years had passed and things had changed. The Deep South was no longer segregated by law. The Cold War, which had profoundly affected Wright’s life and reception in the 50s, was over. Fabre himself had thrown out the gauntlet to future biographers: “There are details to be verified,” he wrote in his introduction, “and more source material to be collected, even before the passage of time permits certain more intimate aspects of [Wright’s] life to be explored.”

8 From Texas, I wrote to Michel Fabre, and sent him my biography of Christina Stead. A couple of weeks later, I followed up, as I told him I would, with a phonecall. I worried that he might think I was trying to usurp his place as a Wright biographer. I needn’t have. He said he would be happy to see me in Paris, on my way back to Australia. February? That was fine.

9 Michel and Geneviève Fabre live on a winding cobbled lane, five minutes from the Montsouris Park in the South of Paris. You feel as if you’re in a village in Normandy; I half expected a herd of cows to come sauntering along. You walk through the iron gate, and stand in the pocket handkerchief front garden. The front door is surrounded by creeping plants. The house is tall and narrow, dominated by a spiral staircase that winds its way to a kind of Rapunzel’s tower at the top. That’s Geneviève’s office. Michel’s, one floor down, is full to bursting point with books, filing cabinets, files and folders. His library must surely be the best collection of African American literature in the whole of France.

10 Michel Fabre is not a pushy man. He’s not even assertive. But he’s quietly encouraging. He sensed that I was feeling defensive about my own hubris, and told me he knew nothing when he started out on his Wright quest. “You have to start somewhere, and what better way to start than with curiosity, passion?” We talked for several hours, and established, among other things, that we were both Scorpios. To inspire me, he gave me a CD, Trois Américains à Paris, on which Richard Wright speaks French like a Mississippian, James
Baldwin speaks French like a Frenchman, and Chester Himes (who never learnt French) speaks English.

I returned to Australia in buoyant spirits and set to work. Four months later, in June, I hit an all-time low. I was back in Paris. Ellen Wright, in our interviews, didn’t seem to remember anything much. I’d spent a week in the close company of an African American friend, whose view was that the US was divided into two worlds (one black, one white) and protecting each from the other were high barbwire fences, vicious Alsatian dogs, and “Keep Out” signs. She told me that blacks would not like my book (since I am white), and whites were not interested in black subject matter anyway. The night before I went to Fabre’s, I re-read Wright’s novel, Savage Holiday, a facile Freudian novel (I’ve never liked this book) which culminates in the male protagonist stabbing a woman in her stomach, again and again, with a kitchen knife. I wondered what I was doing with Richard Wright.

The next day, Monday 19 June 1995, I went to Michel Fabre’s and sat at his desk on the ground floor while he worked in his office upstairs. It was hot, and flies were buzzing around the room. Michel had been generous enough to let me see his files, and I was perusing the dozens of letters he wrote to people in Mississippi and Chicago asking for information, their handwritten replies, the post-publication letters from people arguing with details in his biography. The letters were mostly about minor details, and I was reminded that writing a biography is hard, obsessive work. You write letters asking questions, letters asking for interviews, letters thanking interviewees, letters that never get answered. Most of this material doesn’t go in the book. Suddenly I felt quite overwhelmed by the sheer immensity of the task.

I remembered a close friend of mine in Melbourne. She was about to give birth for the second time, and she’d asked me to be there, as I had been the first time. I’d received the 3 am phone call and rushed around to her place in my car. While her husband was packing the last bits and pieces in the basket we were taking to the hospital, she and I sat on the sofa. She was counting the time between the contractions. Suddenly (and she was a very stoical woman, this friend of mine) she let out a sob. “I’d forgotten what this is like,” she wailed. “I don’t want to do it!”

At lunchtime I told Michel Fabre that I’d decided not to go ahead with a Wright biography. He didn’t look surprised. He didn’t try to persuade me otherwise. He listened. He understood. He said yes, it was a huge commitment. He agreed that maybe identity politics had made it harder for whites to write about black subject matter.

It took a month for this gutless wonder to get her courage back and to decide that she really did want to write a Wright biography, despite the difficulties. “I hope you understand this brief failure of nerve,” I wrote to Michel. “I think you will. You strike me as a very understanding man.” He wrote back: “Whatever you decide, fellow Scorpio, you’ll be welcome to use whatever I have.”

I returned to his house the following summer to examine those files. I was disappointed that Fabre hadn’t made written notes when he interviewed people on the Wright trail. But I was grateful for the many things Fabre did save for posterity. Because Fabre wrote to her, we have two wonderfully long and colorful letters from Jane Newton, describing what it was like to live in the same house as Wright when he was writing Native Son. And the only reason we have Wright’s unusually revealing letters to his Dutch friend and translator, Margrit de Sablonière, was that Fabre thought to type up copies. (Remember those days before photocopy machines?) Sablonière destroyed the originals.
With typical generosity of spirit, Michel Fabre put me on to various people, including Celia Hornung, Wright’s last girlfriend, who lives in Melbourne, Australia. We did not communicate often (he was busy and so was I) but throughout the long haul, he was always there for me if I needed him.

What makes Michel Fabre’s helpfulness to other scholars even more admirable is that he has not been well these past years. He has Parkinson’s disease, which makes it difficult for him to travel alone. His eyes are deteriorating, which makes it hard for him to read. Never once have I heard him complain. “My health is holding up,” he will say. “I’m fine.” He continues to travel, to stride around the Montsouris Park, to read and write prolifically.

I once wrote to him about some fine-tuning problems I was having with the book. He wrote back: “Scorpions just go ahead with things, don’t they?”

AUTHOR

HAZEL ROWLEY

Harvard University: WEB Du Bois Institute
Fiction corner
“Them”, ou la place des noirs dans l'œuvre d'Elizabeth Spencer

Michel Bandry

Of course, they were always around us, fully half of “us” was “them”. Jokes were told about them; their speech was imitated. Did we feel benevolence toward them, despite all this? Yes, and real affection, too, real friendships, though rare, were sometimes made. And hidden though such things might be, there were instances of real love. The talk about them went on in lowered voices, so as not to “hurt their feelings.” They would always be somewhere near enough to hear, cleaning or cooking or coming in to ask about what we wanted done. “Don’t ever say ‘nigger’,” my mother warned. “Even if people do, you mustn’t say it. Say ‘colored people’.” (Spencer, 1998, 145.)

C’est ainsi que commence le chapitre, intitulé “Them”, qu’Elizabeth Spencer consacre aux Noirs dans son livre de souvenirs, Landscapes of the Heart. Elle établit une sorte de bilan, de constat rétrospectif et lucide sur la place que tenaient les Noirs dans la vie des Sudistes blancs de la classe moyenne, des années vingt aux années cinquante et même au-delà. Née en 1921, Spencer passa son enfance et son adolescence à Carrollton, petite ville du Mississippi où son père, commerçant, hommes d’affaires, propriétaire terrien, était un des piliers de l’église presbytérienne. Une enfance ordinaire de fille de notable de petite ville du Sud, proche de la vie à la campagne grâce à de nombreux séjours dans la plantation de son oncle maternel non loin de Carrollton. Son expérience des Noirs est celle des gens de son milieu et de sa génération : jeux avec les enfants de la cuisinière, moments de complicité où l’enfant est dans la cuisine de la plantation et entend les histoires de fantômes, les conversations à mots couverts où se dit plus que ce qui s’entend. Sentiment de la coexistence de deux mondes si proches et pourtant si lointains :
connaissance intime que les Noirs ont de la vie des Blancs, perception par ceux-ci de cette connaissance et impuissance devant cette supériorité qui est celle des faibles qui doivent survivre. Lisons Faulkner, Caldwell, Welty, Harper Lee et tous ceux qui, à leur manière, rendent compte de cette frustration des Blancs devant cette acceptation fataliste de la réalité qu’ils veulent cacher. Rappelons-nous The Sound and the Fury et la scène où les enfants noirs savent ce qu’est la mort et les funérailles alors que les petits Compson pensent que ce qui se passe quand on les écarte de la maison à cause de la mort de la grand-mère est une réception (Faulkner, 1929, 39).

2 La relation particulière des enfants blancs avec le monde des Noirs est mise en scène dans une des toutes premières nouvelles qu’Elisabeth Spencer ait publiées, “The Little Brown Girl”. Une petite fille, Mabeth, âgée de sept ans, est fascinée par le journalier noir de son père. Enfant solitaire qui fuit la compagnie des autres enfants blancs, “the ugly children in the bus” (Spencer, 2001, 4), Mabeth s’attache aux pas de Jim, “a black, strapping Negro in blue overalls, stepping light and free and powerful on the road from town” (Spencer, 2001, 4), quand il travaille pour son père, du printemps au début de l’hiver. Jim a deux vies: il y a celle, étrangère à Mabeth, qu’il mène à la ville et qui donne au père et au frère de Mabeth l’occasion d’évoquer avec condescendance ses frasques du samedi soir. Pour les adultes blancs, Jim est le type même du Noir insouciant, buveur, joueur, irresponsable, qui rit des plaisanteries faites à son sujet. L’enfant sait au fond d’elle-même qu’elle ne peut pas se fier à ce que lui dit Jim, répondant “I know it” à sa mère qui lui dit “he’s fooling you” (Spencer, 2001, 5). L’autre vie de Jim est celle qu’elle partage avec lui, le suivant dans ses travaux des champs, lui posant mille questions auxquelles il a toujours une réponse, contrairement à son père. Avec Jim, Mabeth se trouve plongée dans un monde où le réel n’a pas toujours cours. Il donne des noms fantaisistes à la mule quand il labour, esquive d’un “lawd, lawd” toute demande précise mais sait répondre d’une façon séduisante à toute question d’une enfant de sept ans. Séduite par ce véritable magicien qui lui extorque les deux dollars en argent qu’elle a reçus pour son anniversaire afin d’acheter une robe à la petite fille qu’il s’est inventée pour que celle-ci puisse venir jouer avec elle, Mabeth croit voir au loin une petite fille vêtue de jaune qui semble lui faire signe. Échappant à l’envoûtement de cette vision qu’elle sait fausse, Mabeth retrouve avec soulagement le confort de la présence maternelle, après qu’elle eut chassé un coq batailleur, rappel de tout ce qui peut menacer sa quiétude de petite fille blanche. Jim représente un monde inconnu et séduisant qui ne peut qu’être terre de mirage pour les Blancs et leur rester étranger. S’approcher de ce monde, c’est entrevoir une autre vie que les adultes refusent ou ne veulent pas voir, comme dans la nouvelle “Sharon” (Spencer, 2001, pp. 87-96) où une jeune fille découvre que son oncle vit mariélement avec sa domestique noire, ce que sait — et tait sa famille.

3 Landscapes of the Heart est riche de souvenirs qui illustrent avec simplicité la complexité des liens unissant les Blancs et les Noirs, qu’il s’agisse des relations de sa mère avec Laura la cuisinière, de la certitude qu’a l’homme à tout faire de son père que ce dernier ne pourra pas se passer de lui après l’avoir licencié. Souvenirs d’une époque révolue, mais non pas construction nostalgique d’une situation où tout le monde s’entendait et s’aimait bien. Non seulement Spencer rend-elle très bien compte de la proximité et de la distance entre les deux races, ce que son titre “Them” exprime excellemment, mais elle montre à quel point les Blancs étaient inconscients des aspects les plus concrets de la situation et de ce qu’elle avait d’insupportable avec deux exemples : la découverte qu’elle fait des
conditions de logement indécentes réservées aux domestiques de la famille et l’épisode qui va lui inspirer son roman The Voice at the Back Door publié en 1956.

The greatest horror I can in all my life remember was because of Laura. (...) That night, an unspeakable thing took place. We knew nothing of it, but just before bedtime, a voice called to us at the back door, out of the dark. It was Laura, some young black person with her, I don’t remember who. She was hardly able to stand. She was covered with terrible purple blotches, seeping out blood everywhere. She had something white like a pillowcase, wrapped around her head. (Spencer, 1998, 146)

Alors qu’elle était en ville Laura avait été interpellée par une Blanche qui, de sa voiture, lui avait demandé de lui laver son linge. Laura ayant refusé, le mari de la Blanche était venu chez elle le soir, l’avait fait sortir de force et l’avait frappée à l’aide d’une planche cloutée tandis que sa femme éclairait la scène. La seule chose que put faire Mr Spencer fut de mettre Laura dans un train pour lui éviter de se faire tuer si elle restait dans la ville. Spencer ne pourra jamais oublier “her voice, the brown, home face of Laura, J. C’s mother, contorted with her effort to get out any words at all, and the awful blue marks around the bloody nail holes.” (Spencer, 1998, 146)

La voix à la porte de derrière dans le roman n’est pas celle d’une femme atrocement battue mais celle d’un Noir venu demander protection au shérif parce qu’il a blessé un Blanc dans une rixe en essayant de se défendre. Le fait qu’un Noir ayant besoin de protection vienne la demander le soir à la porte de derrière est une situation emblématique qui, pour Spencer, appartient à l’expérience de nombreux Blancs sudistes. Cela lui permet de faire véritablement œuvre de création, en donnant crédibilité à une intrigue entièrement contrôlée par son imaginaire. La meilleure preuve en est que la démarche du Noir n’est pas sincère et est faite pour piéger le shérif dans le but de lui faire perdre la prochaine élection.

Les enjeux liés à cette élection sont le moteur de l’intrigue : sentant la mort venir, le shérif de Lacey, petite ville du Mississippi, demande à Duncan Harper, ancien champion de football universitaire, véritable héros local et national ayant repris l’épicerie de son père, d’assurer sa succession d’abord provisoirement puis, plus tard, en se présentant à l’élection. A son corps défendant Harper accepte, et il a l’intention de faire appliquer la loi : respect des droits du citoyen, notamment ceux des Noirs, et respect de la loi prohibant la vente d’alcool. C’est ce dernier point qui va déclencher l’enchaînement dramatique aboutissant à sa mort. En effet les affaires florissantes de deux bootleggers associés sont menacées par sa résolution de faire respecter la loi, à la différence de son prédécesseur qui monnayait sa passivité. Aussi l’un des deux bootleggers, Jimmy Tallant, ami d’enfance de Harper, héros de la seconde guerre mondiale, va-t-il s’employer à empêcher l’élection de ce dernier en le faisant passer pour un ami des Noirs. Le plan est simple : un Noir, Beck Dozer, demande la protection de Harper qui le met en prison, seul lieu où sa protection peut être assurée, et attend de pied ferme à la prison les amis et parents du Blanc agressé venus le lyncher. Tallant parvient ainsi à prendre une photo de Harper, avec le Noir à ses côtés, interdisant, pistolet à la main, l’entrée de la prison aux supposés lyncheurs. Il s’agit d’une mise en scène dont Tallant va tirer parti en placardant cette photo partout pendant la campagne électorale afin de faire élire l’ancien adjoint du shérif, une brute vénale et raciste.

A la suite de péripéties mettant en jeu des gangsters de la Nouvelle Orléans, Dozer est accusé faussement de tentative d’assassinat et Harper est amené à le protéger à nouveau car il le sait innocent. C’est en l’amenant en voiture à la ville voisine qu’il est victime d’un
accident vraisemblablement provoqué : deux petits Blancs de la campagne sont choqués par le fait que Dozer s'assied sur la banquette avant de la voiture à côté de la femme de Harper, et l'un des deux a très probablement taillé un des pneus de la voiture qui se renverse dans un ravin lors d'un virage. Rien ne permet de prouver qu'il s'agit d'un acte criminel, mais la réaction des deux hommes est tout à fait représentative de l'état d'esprit de toutes les composantes de la société blanche. Qu'il s'agisse de l'élite estimant dangereuse la remise en question de l'ordre racial en vigueur et s'inquiétant des velléités de l'Administration Truman dans ce domaine ou des gens les plus simples. Le refus collectif du respect des droits élémentaires des Noirs ne donne pas véritablement lieu à des scènes de violence que réprouverait la population dans son ensemble : l'expédition sur la prison est l'objet d'une manipulation, tout à fait contrôlée, par Tallant de petit Blancs paysans frustes et violents, le même genre d'homme que celui qui est probablement responsable de la mort de Harper.1 Mais la détermination montrée par Harper est ressentie comme une aberration ou une trahison du code à tous les niveaux de la société, ce que comprend bien l'ambitieux jeune politicien qui le trahit après l'avoir encouragé dans sa campagne.

Harper n'est pas un révolutionnaire, c'est un juste parfaitement intégré dans sa ville que les circonstances amènent à se dresser contre le statu quo racial même si son comportement envers les Noirs est celui des gens de sa caste. Il fait remarquer, par exemple, à Dozer que ce dernier pourrait s'adresser à lui selon les formes convenues. Le choix de Spencer est de ne pas faire des relations raciales le thème dominant du roman mais de le faire apparaître comme incontournable dans sa mise en scène des contradictions d'une société blanche figée dans ses traditions bien confortables, contradictions que la mort inopinée du shérif va mettre à jour et que la première scène du roman illustre parfaitement. Pris d'un malaise alors qu'il est chez sa maîtresse noire, le shérif se précipite chez Harper car il ne veut pas mourir chez lui. Sa femme, Miss Ada, est le type même de la bourgeoise blanche sudiste protégée et délicate qui ne saurait que faire. D'autre part, il ne pouvait pas mourir chez sa maîtresse, car, dit-il à Harper, “She's been my nigger woman for fifteen years and everybody knows it, but it would likely embarrass her to have my corpse on her hands. You can't tell what they are liable to do to a nigger. She might have to leave town.” (Spencer, 1986, 8) Cet “everybody knows it” (tout le monde sauf, bien entendu, son épouse) résume l'hypocrisie d'une société qui ferme les yeux sur les accommodements avec la morale et le droit pourvu que l'ordre garantissant ses privilèges soit maintenu. Une société où étouffent les esprits libres comme l'ancienne fiancée de Harper qui a fui Lacey.

Pour s'en tenir à la représentation des Noirs dans le roman, on y trouve des personnages et des situations qui font partie de l'expérience des Sudistes : la vieille servante noire qui a veillé et guéri de nombreux enfants blancs, la crainte du jeune commis de l'épicerie qui s'enfuit quand le shérif vient mourir chez Harper, le viol de la jeune femme noire résignée... L'originalité du roman réside dans le personnage de Dozer, instrument involontaire de la mort de son protecteur et complice de Tallant. Une curieuse relation lie les deux hommes que tout devrait séparer. Peu après la première guerre mondiale, le père de Dozer a été assassiné avec un groupe de Noirs par une bande de Blancs menés par le père de Tallant. Cet épisode sanglant du passé de Lacey est inscrit dans la mémoire collective, mais sous une forme vague, celle du secret de famille dont personne ne parle mais dont tout le monde sait qu'il existe. Robinson Dozer, le père, est une figure
emblématique de la population noire. Fils d'esclave, il est éduqué après la guerre de Sécession par un ancien sénateur qui veut racheter les fautes du Sud. Robinson passe sa jeunesse comme disciple et serviteur zélé du vieillard ruiné. A sa mort, ce dernier lui lègue une terre et souhaite qu'il y aille faire des études dans l'Est. Sa fille demande au Juge Standsbury, un des notables de la ville, de lui écrire les lettres de recommandation nécessaires mais le juge n'en fait rien, tout simplement parce qu'il ne sait pas à qui s'adresser. Finalement Robinson va passer une grande partie de sa vie de jeune homme comme majordome chez le juge en attendant l'invitation promise pour aller étudier dans l'Est. Celle-ci ne viendra jamais, la famille du juge gagnera une grande respectabilité grâce à la présence de ce majordome plein de dignité qui impose, ironiquement, un code d'excellence dans l'étiquette qui glace toute la famille. Il décide un jour de quitter le juge et de s'installer sur son lopin de terre avec sa famille dont ses maîtres ignoraient l'existence et il fonde une école pour les enfants noirs. C'est pour défendre l'existence de son école et pacifier quelques fermiers blancs irrités par le comportement de trois jeunes Noirs revenus de la guerre que Robinson arrange une rencontre avec ces fermiers sous la présidence du Juge Standsbury. Alors que la délégation noire attend patiemment les Blancs et le juge dans la salle du tribunal, le père de Jimmy Tallant et ses acolytes font irruption dans la salle et mitraillent tous les Noirs. Les assassins seront impunis.

Cet épisode imaginaire a sa source dans un événement similaire qui s'est véritablement passé à Carrollton en 1886 et que Spencer évoque dans *Landscapes of the Heart*. Alors qu'un Blanc et plusieurs de ses amis allaient être jugés pour avoir agressé violemment deux Noirs, une cinquantaine de Blancs armés envahirent la salle du tribunal et tuèrent dix Noirs. D'autres Noirs se tuèrent ou se blessèrent en sautant par la fenêtre. Le nombre exact de victimes n'a jamais été connu et aucun Blanc ne fut inquiété à la suite de ce massacre. Spencer transforme cet épisode tout en gardant certains éléments (le fait qu'une des victimes se tue en sautant par la fenêtre, par exemple), mais ce qui est conservé, c'est la façon dont cet événement reste présent dans la mémoire de la communauté. Les murs de la salle du tribunal de Carrollton ont longtemps gardé la trace de l'impact des balles comme une sorte de monument à la mémoire des victimes alors que personne n'est capable d'expliquer à Spencer enfant ce qui s'est vraiment passé. Il en est de même dans le roman où les Blancs de la génération de Harper ne savent pas exactement ce qui s'est produit, à l'exception de Jimmy Tallant. Comme le dit Beck Dozer à Harper qui s'étonne qu'il se soit fait le complice de Tallant pour lui faire perdre les élections :

> "Mr Tallant and I are tied together on account of what his daddy did to mine. He wouldn't lose me, nor let me come to harm for anything in this world. He's my main protection in this life. That and he pays me for what he gets me to do. He's paid me as high as $200 for some jobs. You take that night I was up at the jail with you. That's what he gave me for it." (Spencer, 1986, 122)

Le fait que Beck Dozer, comme Tallant, ait combattu en Europe pendant la guerre, sans ramener toutefois autant de médailles, les rapproche. En fait, Beck n'a pas ramené de médailles, il ajuste ramené un fils qu'il a eu avec une Anglaise et qu'il a fait venir à Lacey quand il a su que sa mère était incapable de s'occuper de lui, parce que, comme il le dit à sa femme Lucy, "They're not like us. Don't seem they care for chillen like we do." (Spencer, 1986, 246). Le lien entre Tallant et Dozer fait de Tallant un des personnages les plus complexes du roman, surtout par rapport à Harper qui a épousé Tinker, dont Tallant a toujours été amoureux alors qu'elle était éperdument amoureuse de Harper qui, lui, était amoureux de la petite fille du juge Standsbury, Marcia Mae. Cette dernière, malgré
son amour pour Harper, l’a quitté, juste avant leur mariage, parce qu’il n’acceptait pas de quitter Lacey où elle étouffait. La complexité de ces relations, loin de donner au roman le caractère d’une fiction sentimentale où compte seule la subtilité de relations amoureuses, l’inscrit dans la peinture de la vie d’une petite ville du Sud où chacun se connaît et où la personnalité des personnages se définit par rapport à un cadre social étroitement régi par le souci de maintenir et de défendre les intérêts et prérogatives de la race dominante et, accessoirement, de son élite.

La complexité du personnage de Dozer est peut-être un des éléments les plus originaux et les plus intéressants. Ce n’est pas lui le « héros » puisque l’essentiel de l’intrigue est fondé sur l’action de jeunes hommes blancs confrontés à une situation sociale donnée et aux répercussions qu’elle a sur leur vie sentimentale et familiale. Son statut social n’est pas clair, ni parmi les Blancs qui l’ignorent ni parmi les siens. Dès la première scène, magistrale, du roman qui décrit la course de la voiture du shérif tentant d’atteindre le magasin de Harper avant de mourir, Dozer apparaît dans une situation presque folklorique : conversation de trois Noirs revenant du travail et s’interrogeant sur la raison qui pousse le shérif à aller aussi vite une fois qu’ils ont reconnu la voiture et remarques du contremaître (Dozer) laissant entendre qu’ils vont peut-être être licenciés. Cet épisode est marqué d’une certaine ironie, car les deux ouvriers se trouvent dans la situation banale où des Noirs risquent de perdre leur emploi selon le bon plaisir du Blanc, mais ici, c’est un Noir qui est apparentemment le maître de la décision, ce que comprennent fort bien ses deux compagnons qui adoptent immédiatement une attitude servile. En outre, le fait que Dozer laisse planer cette menace en l’exprimant sous la forme d’une chanson improvisée fait de lui, dès le début du roman, un personnage ambigu qui utilise une forme d’expression noire pour inquiéter ses compagnons ou marquer son pouvoir. Cette attitude de Dozer est tout à fait en contradiction avec sa fonction de correspondant d’un journal noir de Chicago qui relate l’épisode de la prison en vantant le courage de Harper présenté comme le héraut d’un ordre nouveau dans le Sud. De même sa posture courageuse et provocatrice devant Harper ou devant sa femme laisse place à la crainte quand le danger se précise.

En fait Dozer a un objectif : rester vivant et se servir des Blancs, si cela est dans son intérêt. Comme il le dit à Kerney, le jeune politicien qui a trahi Harper :

"They do a lot of talking, they’ll still go mark the X on the ballot in favor of the man like yourself who says he wants to keep me from marking X on another ballot, but the curious thing to me is that I, Beckwith Dozer, am still alive. I haven’t even been run out of town. You use the Negro question to fetch votes with, Mister Woolbright, but to me it’s a matter of whether my hide is on my back or ornamenting the barn door.” (Spencer, 1986, 323)

Les stratégies de survie des Noirs sont diverses. Elles impliquent toujours une conscience aiguë de la nécessité d’être toujours sur ses gardes et de ne jamais se fier aux Blancs, qu’il s’agisse des gens simples sachant d’instinct éviter les conflits ou d’un manipulateur comme Dozer. Les Noirs sont toujours en marge, population qui doit rester à la place que lui assigne la tradition garantie de l’ordre blanc qui ne saurait tolérer la moindre déviation. C’est parce que l’essentiel de l’intrigue est focalisé sur le comportement des Blancs que ce roman a été critiqué violemment par les Sudistes qui ont accusé Spencer de trahison.

Ecrire ce roman a été pour elle comme une sorte d’obligation qu’elle n’a pu remplir que loin du Sud, grâce à une bourse Guggenheim qui lui a permis de séjourner en Italie. Ses
deux premiers romans\(^1\) avaient été fort bien accueillis par la critique. Ils s’inscrivent dans la tradition sudiste, du moins celle inaugurée par Faulkner, qui met en scène la vie des habitants des petites villes d’un Sud rural, dans son cas cette partie du Mississippi qui est à la lisière du Delta, comme l’est le comté de Yoknapatawpha. S’ils restituent avec bonheur ce “sense of place” caractéristique de la littérature sudiste, ce ne sont pas de simples chroniques régionalistes, le thème central est, comme dans *The Voice at the Back Door*, l’obligation où se trouvent les personnages de se déterminer par rapport aux normes d’une communauté avec laquelle les circonstances les mettent en conflit, d’assumer les conséquences de leur liberté ou de leur sens du devoir, d’accepter la rupture avec le poids d’un passé qu’ils ne peuvent complètement rejeter. Elle y fait montre d’une maîtrise du récit remarquable, s’affranchissant des conventions traditionnelles et jouant avec dextérité de la diversité des points de vue. Loués pour leurs qualités d’écriture et leur appréhension de la complexité des relations humaines dans des communautés apparemment harmonieuses, les deux premiers romans n’abordent pas le thème de la race. Quand, dans la logique de sa volonté de rendre compte de la réalité sudiste, elle met en scène, peu avant la décision historique de la Cour Suprême de déclarer la ségrégation inconstitutionnelle\(^3\), les contradictions de la société blanche dans ce domaine, elle se fait vilipender par les Sudistes. Pourtant sa démarche est la même que dans ses deux premiers romans, les « héros » sont des jeunes gens blancs, les Noirs sont confinés dans des rôles marginaux, Beck Dozer est un personnage ambigu et la violence caractérisée et impunie à l’égard des Noirs appartient au passé.

\(^{16}\) La réaction des Sudistes a été exprimée de façon caricaturale en 1970 par Floyd C. Watkins dans un petit livre, *The Death of the Novel: Black and White in the Recent Southern Novel* dans lequel il passe en revue une quarantaine de romans écrits entre 1954 et 1970 et traitant d’une façon ou d’une autre le problème racial. La liste n’est pas exhaustive, un grand nombre de ces romans sont tombés dans un oubli sans doute mérité, mais elle comprend néanmoins des œuvres de William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Carson McCullers, Shirley Ann Grau, William Styron et bien sûr *The Voice at the Back Door*. La thèse de Watkins est simple :

> Except in a few instances, Negroes have the human values, and whites do not. Race distinguishes the good guys and the bad as accurately as the white and black hats in old Western movies. In the hands of the Southern white authors the novel has become a weapon turned against his own race. (Watkins, 1970, 2)

\(^{17}\) Watkins se livre à une critique systématique par amalgame de l’image du Noir et de celle du Blanc dans ces romans et termine son étude par un chapitre sur l’aliénation des écrivains traitres à leur patrie et responsables de la mort de l’art. L’exercice est un peu facile car il est aisé à Watkins de trouver des situations caricaturales dans certains romans visant manifestement un lectorat tout prêt à accepter une présentation réductrice de la situation raciale à la fin des années cinquante et au début des années soixante, d’autant plus prêt à l’accepter que l’actualité était riche en exemples de comportement raciste et violent de la part des politiciens, des forces de l’ordre et des masses sudistes. Il est cependant frappant qu’écrivant en 1970, donc avec un certain recul, ce critique estimé ait autant manqué de discernement, mettant dans le même sac toute une production parce qu’elle abordait le sujet de la race. Le jugement de Watkins sur *The Voice at the Back Door* est sans appel : la présentation de toutes les situations où interviennent Noirs et Blancs est biaisée, quant à Spencer, elle diffame son propre État.
A quoi bon se référer à un essai qui tient plus du pamphlet que de l’étude sérieuse ? Tout simplement parce que l’aveuglement patriotique dont fait preuve Watkins à la lecture, il est vrai, d’un certain nombre de romans donnant une représentation caricaturale de la situation raciale permet de comprendre le rejet du roman de Spencer par des gens comme Donald Davidson, son maître de Vanderbilt University qui l’avait soutenue et encouragée au début de sa carrière. L’écriture de ce roman, très favorablement accueilli par la critique au plan national, a été ressentie comme un acte de trahison envers la société dont Spencer était issue. Mais pour elle, ce roman fut l’occasion d’une prise de conscience nécessaire :

I wanted to write a novel about the confrontation of races on the local level. I was not trying to stand up and announce that I was above these characters and could therefore write a sermon in the guise of a novel. In fact, I felt that the reactions of many of the characters were mine in a way. I was struggling through the whole thing with them. While I was working on that book, I would hear again in my mind whole conversations that had passed over me and that I had never really analyzed. I began to listen to these inner voices, to people saying things that I had accepted all my life without question; and suddenly I found myself questioning. I realized for the first time how outrageous these things were. It was a healing experience for me to write this book. (Prenshaw, 1991, 61-62)

Ce fut aussi une expérience traumatisante qui marqua une rupture avec son milieu, rupture favorisée sans aucun doute par son séjour en Italie et son mariage avec un Anglais qu’elle suivit au Canada où ils vécurent une trentaine d’années. Son éloignement du Sud donna à son œuvre un caractère plus cosmopolite, et son désir de comprendre le monde, comme elle le dit dans un entretien, l’amina à mettre en fiction sa perception des bouleversements affectant la société américaine, qu’il s’agisse de l’après-guerre ou de l’opposition des jeunes à la guerre du Viêt-nam. Un des thèmes dominants de sa production à partir de *The Voice at the Back Door* est la prise de conscience par une héroïne de son besoin d’affirmer sa personnalité face aux pressions de la société. Le Sud reste présent dans une partie de son œuvre, surtout les nouvelles, mais pas la situation raciale, sinon incidemment.

Une seule nouvelle, « *The Business Venture* », publiée en 1987 dans *The Southern Review* et reprise dans *The Southern Woman*, aborde ce thème. Comme dans *The Voice at the Back Door*, l’évocation d’un problème lié à la race est perçue par un groupe de Blancs, de jeunes adultes, mariés ou célibataires, qui se connaissent depuis l’école primaire et forment une joyeuse bande. L’action se déroule en 1976 dans une petite ville du Mississippi, la narratrice se fait la chroniqueuse des bouleversements que cause l’initiative d’une des jeunes femmes du groupe, Nelle, qui, pour gagner sa vie en restant près de sa vieille mère, ouvre une boutique de nettoyage à sec. Sa démarche est doublement provocatrice pour l’ensemble du groupe et la petite ville : elle installe sa boutique dans la vieille maison victorienne qui est une des plus belles de la ville et, surtout, elle emploie un Noir, un ancien combattant du Viêt-nam, marié, père de famille qui devient son associé. Bien que les temps aient changé, comme ils s’amusent à le chanter, la double transgression de Nelle n’est pas acceptée et la narratrice qui tient avant tout à préserver l’harmonie du groupe par la fête et la bonne humeur est, malgré elle, obligée de prendre conscience de son propre malaise devant cette situation et du sentiment, qui gagne le groupe et conduira à des actions qui lui feront honte, qu’il faut faire quelque chose. Tout était si simple avant :

The thing to know about our crowd is that we never did go in for talking about the “Negro question.” We talked about Negroes the way we always had, like people, one
at a time. They were all around us, had always been, living around us, waiting on us, sharing our lives, brought up with us, nursing us, cooking for us, mourning and rejoicing with us, making us laugh, stealing from us, digging our graves. But when the troubles started coming in on us after the Freedom Riders and the Ole Miss riots, we decided not to talk about it... (Spencer, 2001, 180)

The Voice at the Back Door is one of the great novels of the fifties, which, over time, is read as one of the most honest attempts to account for how the Southerners of her generation perceived the racial situation and the challenges it posed. Spencer did not make this problem her stock in trade, she did not ignore it. With “The Business Venture” and Landscapes of the Heart she shows with elegance that this central problem of Southern life was constantly present in her conscience and that of the enlightened Southerners that only a consideration of all the components of the education, in a broad sense, of Southern people of her generation and of her milieu could really help to say the indescribable.

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NOTES


6. La narratrice est consciente par exemple du fait que la mère de Nelle appartient à une époque différente où les relations raciales étaient fondées sur le sens de l’obligation due aux faibles et où les mots n’avaient pas le même sens. Ainsi, “When Mrs Townshend said ‘nigger’, it wasn’t as if one of us had said it. She went back through the centuries for the words, back to when ‘ain’t’ was good grammar. ‘Nigger’ for her just meant ‘black’.” (Spencer, 2001, 168) Mrs Townshend représente, comme sa fille, une certaine aristocratie qui sait aller au-delà des préjugés raciaux.

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Race, Newspapers and Hegemony in *Banjo* by Claude McKay

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“Clearly the journalist speaks to all, for all.”
Melvin Mencher, *News Reporting and Writing.*

1 In 1968, following a rash of devastating riots throughout African American communities in the United States, the Kerner Commission released a report on race relations that contained a chapter on the media. Its findings, Carolyn Martindale says in her book *The White Press in Black America* (Martindale, 1986, 3): “the media had failed to report adequately on the causes underlying the disorders and problems in race relations [...] the media had failed to convey to their white audiences what it was like to be black in America”. For hundreds of years the press not only failed to represent the lives of African Americans; it aided and abetted racism publishing slave auction advertisements and runaway slave advertisements, assisting lynch mobs, and ultimately embracing the doctrine of social Darwinism that maintained segregation and buttressed white supremacy and a white sense of identity.

2 Through an analysis of Claude McKay’s novel *Banjo* this essay will examine how an African American novel enters into dialogue with its written counterpart — the newspaper. After all, both the newspaper and the novel play important roles in the construction of national identity, says Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*. Nationalism, Anderson argues, has its roots in literary realism and the type of linear and spatial imagination produced by reading newspapers and novels. Modern nations are comprised by people who imagine themselves part of a community of others who engage in similar activities (like reading the newspaper) at similar times. Newspapers engender a sense of linear, calendrical time and a consciousness of synchronicity that are essential to this notion of nationalism.

3 As an almost archetypal novel of post-World War I disillusion, *Banjo* displays open contempt for the type of nationalism and patriotism engendered by the daily press. This attitude is embraced by Ray, a central character of the novel who most reflects the sympathies of the author.
It seemed a most unnatural thing to him for a man to love a nation — a swarming hive of human beings bartering, competing, exploiting, lying, cheating, battling, suppressing, and killing among themselves; possessing, too, the faculty to organize their villainous rivalries into a monstrous system for plundering weaker peoples. (McKay, 1957, 137)

Instead, through its representation of newspapers and the imbedding of actual newspaper accounts into the text, Banjo offers an unusually broad critique of the press. Banjo represents the black and white press at home and abroad as agents of a notion of progress and civilization that disguises racist hegemony. Within Banjo, the newspaper becomes a chorus that represents the larger, white community. This community (which has always done the framing) is then framed within the structure of the African American text. The novel (to use a term developed by Henry Louis Gates) “signifies” on the newspaper as it repeats and revises the iconic and formulaic stories that buttress the ideology of racial oppression, leveling them and depriving them of their power.

As noted earlier, the newspaper presents a specific kind of discourse. Social scientists and media scholars have noted that in America, the press has worked to both script and maintain a white supremacist hegemony. David Domke in his research monograph Journalists, Framing, and Discourse About Race Relations makes this observation: “Many have theorized that the press’ selection and framing of language, news, opinion, and perceptions conveys and abets a social reality that legitimates the practices and ideas of the dominant social class, in this case the white majority” (Domke, 1997, 3). Such a legitimization of the dominating class is what is meant by hegemony, a term that is crucial to the social theory of Antonio Gramsci. Stuart Hall elaborates this notion in his essay: “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity.” According to Hall:

It is the process of the coordination of the interests of a dominant group with the general interests of other groups, and the life of the state as a whole, that constitutes the ‘hegemony’ of a particular historical block [...]. It represents a degree of mastery over a whole series of different ‘positions’ at once. Mastery is not simply imposed or dominative in character. Effectively, it results from winning a substantial degree of popular consent (Hall, 1996, 423-24).

In other words, hegemony is not the absolute domination of one homogenous class and its interests over everyone else. Instead, it is a “historic bloc” (an alliance) of interests that might be led by a minority class such as planters or industrialists. Thus, members of the press and their leaders are just two of the groups that have been “won over” and comprise a racist hegemony.

In relationship to American newspapers, this hegemony has two eras: the ante-and post-bellum era. In the ante-bellum era, the connection between newspapers and hegemony was fairly obvious. Before the Civil War and the invention of the steam driven “penny presses,” newspapers were characterized by “pure, blinkered partisanship,” says Carl Osthaus in his book Partisans of the Southern Press . Editorial Spokesmen of the Nineteenth Century. They served the interests of the ruling class. During and after the Civil War, the racist, slave-holding, planter class in the South maintained a tight grip over newspapers. Southern papers adhered to “a narrowly ideological line,” (Osthaus, 1994, 9). Thus, Southern newspapers were as openly racist as their owners and publishers.

In the North, the form of hegemony is harder to discern. For after the Civil War, Northern presses began to cater more to readership as they became more dependent on advertising and subscriptions and less dependent on political patronage. Yet, in the late 19th century, a theory known as social Darwinism became a national fad. Social Darwinism is a
nefarious admixture of evolutionism and laissez faire capitalism, Thomas Gossett argues, in his book *Race: The History of an Idea*. According to this theory: "Races were thought to represent different stages of the evolutionary scale with the white race—or sometimes a subdivision of the white race—on top" (Gossett, 1963, 144). And, Gossett concluded: "It is, in fact, similar to that which still so largely survives in the popular mind. Its central idea is that nonwhite races are oppressed, poverty-stricken, and of an inferior social status for no other reason than their innate lack of capacity" (Ibid, 173). "In the 1880s and 1890s," David Domke says, “Social Darwinist language became incorporated into common usage, supporting a ‘scientific’ racism that legitimated the rise of segregation and contributed to violence against African Americans” (Domke, 1997, 2). Domke then describes how newspaper editors used their papers to transform social Darwinism from a trendy theory of academic circles into the stereotypes and attitudes of a more banalized, shared ‘common sense.’

This occurred in a relentless barrage of stories representing African Americans as oversexed rapists, savage murderers, happy-go-lucky entertainers, simple-minded storytellers nostalgic about slavery and people basically unprepared for equality or to exist in society without the guidance of white benefactors. In short, newspapers were the written representation of American racism, its sign, its evidence, its script, its score, its program.

As another form of written representation, novels such as *Banjo* attempt to disrupt the script and undermine the newspaper’s racist hegemony. At the very least, they teach us how to read the paper, exposing and weakening its ideology. Indeed, *Banjo* contains one of the most interesting responses to the press in African American literature. First, it is set in France, not the United States. It was also written during what is commonly known as the Harlem Renaissance when a significant number of African American newspapers were around to challenge white racist hegemony. Thus, *Banjo* not only addresses international racism, but it addresses the very nature of journalism and its ability to resist hegemony. It thus carves out a place for the novel in the struggle against racism that goes beyond protest and propaganda.

For McKay, the novel is there to resist all forms of banality and control. As most writers of the Harlem Renaissance did, McKay exalts the artist. Yet, unlike many of these other writers, he views artists as those who resist living according to any script or program. Indeed, for him Banjo, the eponymous hero of his novel, is not just an artist because he plays the banjo; he is an artist because of his liminal lifestyle, his flair for dressing, his colorful speech and his live-for-the-moment attitude. Thus, *Banjo*, subtitled *A Novel Without a Plot*, strikes out for new territory in relationship to the more realist novels of race conflict and bourgeois resentfulness that characterize much of Harlem Renaissance writing. It consists of twenty-five episodes in the life of a gang of beach boys living a hand-to-mouth existence in the port of Marseilles in France. Its main characters are Banjo, Ray (an expatriate, Haitian writer who serves as McKay’s mouthpiece), Latnah (a prostitute of mixed, “exotic” origin), Bugsy (a hot-tempered West Indian), Taloufa (an Afro-centric West African) and four other more or less similar characters from Africa and the West Indies. Its somewhat experimental form conveys a deeply structured communication between all of the peoples of the African diaspora while foregrounding mimetic renderings of black speech (with its own version of eye dialect), storytelling, black music and black dance.

The novel is also imbedded with actual newspaper stories and presents characters that read the paper and comment on it. This enables Banjo to enter into a discussion on the
relationship of newspapers (and writing in general) to the novel. This is an important
discussion. Writing and Africans have a contentious history in the modern era. Writing,
Walter Ong says in his book *The Presence of the Word* gave burgeoning empires “power and
authority and control of military structures at a distance” (Ong, 1967, 85). Thus, it
enabled the industrial slave trade and the European conquest of Africa. Meanwhile,
theologians and philosophers published treatises on the inferiority of Africans.
Newspapers, when they mentioned Africans at all, editorialized about this inferiority
while publishing runaway slave advertisements and slave sale notices. Thus, Africans
constantly had to confront a written double in newspapers and other documents that not
only verified their inhumanity but revealed that they were the perpetual losers in the war
between the races. Indeed, to many, writing itself was a veritable crucible of Darwinian
race conflict. This is intimated by scholars such as Henry Louis Gates who says that “the
production of literature was taken to be the central arena in which persons of African
descent could, or could not, establish and redefine their status within the human
community” (Gates, 1988, 129). *Banjo* acknowledges this history. Indeed, for its characters,
writing is a suspicious, charged activity. For example, in the chapter titled “Story-
Telling,” a group of Senegalese beach boys evince distrust of Ray when they discover he is
a writer. They imagine “that he would write something... that would make them appear
‘uncivilized’ or inferior to American Negroes” (McKay, 1929, 114). Goosey (one of the
beach boys) agrees with them. He tells Ray that “the crackers will use what you write
against the race!” (Ibid, 115). In the minds of Goosey and the Senegalese beach boys,
writing is a weapon directed against them in a war of the races that even extends to a
struggle between African Americans and Africans.

*Banjo* tackles another aspect of this discussion as it pertains to creative work (work of the
imagination) and its relationship to documents, propaganda and protest literature.
Ultimately, *Banjo* witnesses what Jean François Lyotard terms a *différend* between
Lyotard defines this type of conflict: “A case of différend between two parties takes place
when the ‘regulation’ of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the
parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom” (Lyotard,
1988, 9). In other words, the “idiom” of daily journalism cannot address the atrocities of
slavery, colonialism and their aftermath because newspapers are among the major
culprits.

The newspaper is inherently flawed. Despite its more recent pretensions at objectivity
and fairness, the newspaper is *a priori* propaganda. It engenders and rallies mobs while
fostering a sense of identity that is intrinsically xenophobic, it trumpets progress and
civilization with an inherent though often hidden agenda that is socially Darwinist (and
thus white supremacist) in nature. This is the picture that *Banjo* not only presents of the
American press, but of the African, African American and European presses.

One of the first consequences of the failure of these newspapers to properly represent
African Americans is, in effect, to place them outside of history. The newspaper has been
defined as “history in a hurry.” If this is true, then the relentless absence of African
Americans in the mainstream press places them, in effect, outside of history. “Negroes
are rarely mentioned in the press unless they committed some crime!” Richard Wright
says in his essay “How Bigger was Born.” In fact, a glance at the *Chicago Daily Tribune* from
1938 (when Wright was writing *Native Son*) shows he is correct. During this period, one
finds stories about the buildup of Nazi Germany, the invasion of Austria, Sigmund Freud
fleeing to England and the Japanese bombing China. These are historic events. Meanwhile, African Americans are almost invisible among these stories of the world. They do not appear on the front page, in comic strips, in advertisements or even in classified ads. The only time an African American became a part of this document, became a part of history, is when he murdered a white woman, as in the case of Robert Nixon who inspired much of *Native Son*.

None of the characters of *Banjo* would have made it into either the white press or the Negro press. In *The African American Press*, Charles Simmons says that the African American press at the turn of the century had the following agenda: “uplifting race and community consciousness, protesting against discrimination, and reporting the news of Negro life back home in the South” (Simmons, 1998, 20). And before World War II, “much of the news that covered the pages of the Negro press had emphasized crimes committed by Negroes and the violence committed against them” (ibid, 70). None of the characters of *Banjo* commits a crime worth mentioning and none of them is a victim of an obvious atrocity. Nor is any character an accomplished member of Negro society and thus an example or agent of racial uplift. Nevertheless, Ginger says about his friends: “There ain’t a jack man of us that ain’t got a history to him as good as any that evah was printed” (McKay, 1929, 39). Indeed, the tension between what is and isn’t history (what is and isn’t printed) is an important aspect of a novel that pits itself against a notion of history that is grounded upon sequence, chronology, progress and development —plot. After all, the subtitle of the novel is: *A Story without a Plot*. This tension between the official and unofficial (written and oral testimony) also becomes apparent in the novel’s abundant discussions of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association. In 1923, Garvey was sentenced to five years in prison for mail fraud. While official newspaper accounts hold Garvey responsible for his imprisonment, one character in the novel believes the unofficial, oral accounts that proclaim his innocence. According to Goosey:

> Garvey is a bigger man among colored people since they jailed him. Taloufa was at Liberty Hall for the big manifestation. And all the speakers said that the British were back of Garvey catching jail (McKay, 1929, 92).

And like the often-discredited oral history describing the affair between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings, recent scholarship by people such as Robert Hill has shown that the rumors about Garvey were at least partially correct. He was the victim of a FBI vendetta orchestrated by J. Edgar Hoover.

This foregrounds the traditional distrust that African Americans have for newspapers, their history and what becomes the official (written) version of events. Within the world of *Banjo*, newspapers (and writers, as noted earlier) are inherently suspect. They exist to give rise to particular identities that are menacing for the characters. The novel constantly shows Ray, buying, reading and discussing French and international papers. Ultimately, he blames these papers for fomenting the type of nationalism and jingoism that he so detests. For example, he blames a mob incident in Marseilles, “the most international place in the country” on the manipulations of the French press that “had been doping the unthinking literate mob” with praise for peace and the English — followed by war talk and charges that the Anglo-Saxon nations were destroying the French economy. The result: a “theater crowd” nearly lynches an Englishwoman for squeezing her way through a line “while talking English” (ibid, 135). The press has a similar effect on the crowd presented in Ray’s discussion of Dr. Bougrat, a man who had been tried and convicted for murdering a cashier and hiding his body. According to Ray,
the “newspapers tried the doctor and called him a murderer and a thief and charged him with every criminal activity.” Then, in a scene that anticipates the coroner’s inquest in *Native Son*, an “army of touts and prostitutes” gathers outside the doctor’s office on the day that the court reenacts the crime and shouts “Lynch him! Lynch him!” (Ibid, 266). Meanwhile, the novel constantly represents its protagonists as victims of similar mobs and police violence.

18 The novel does not, however, accept the notion that an African American press could solve the problem. Instead, it asserts that in both cases the newspapers serve to construct unacceptable identities, replacing one mob, one unthinking reader, with another. For example, race conflict propaganda is as much a part of the African American press as it is the white press. In a discussion between the races, Ray rejects the notion that African American women are inherently victims of white men. “But that is newspaper truth and no more real than the crackers shouting that white women live in fear and trembling of black rapists” (Ibid, 206). On both sides, such “newspaper truth” gives rise to a false sense of identity that only leads to more violence and hatred.

19 Ray also rejects the myths essential to respectability and the notion of racial uplift that dominate the newspapers and literature of the early Harlem Renaissance. He does not treat the “uplift the race” writing of the Negro press as an antidote to white racist hegemony. Quite the contrary, at one point, he criticizes another character for talking “like a nigger newspaper”. “A nigger newspaper”, says Ray, “is nothing more than a nigger newspaper... That’s why we — you — the race — can’t get beyond the nigger newspaper in the printed word. That’s why an intelligent man reads it only for the comic” (Ibid, 183). Such papers are ill equipped to resist hegemony. Indeed, with their emphasis on racial uplift they emphasize respectability and actually aim towards integration into the hegemony that oppresses them.

20 Indeed, the African American press fighting for justice typifies the type of différend discussed by Lyotard. The African American press does not depart from the Darwin tainted “idiom” of the oppressor. This is expressed toward the end of the novel when Ray explains that he prefers the company of the “beach boys” because they refuse a framing that inherently devalues them. They literally reject the idiom of their oppressor, reinventing language with an “unconscious artistic capacity for eliminating the rotten-dead stock words of the proletariat and replacing them with startling new ones” (Ibid, 321).

Ray had felt buttressed by the boys with a rough strength and sureness that gave him spiritual passion and pride to be his human self in an inhumanly alien world. They lived healthily far beyond the influence of the colored press whose racial dope was characterized by pungent “bleach-out,” “kink-no-more,” skin-whitening, hair straightening, and innumerable processes for Negro culture, most of them manufactured by white men’s firms in the cracker states. And thereby they possessed more potential power for racial salvation than the Negro literati, whose poverty of mind and purpose showed never any signs of enrichment, even though inflated above the common level and given an appearance of superiority (Ibid, 322).

21 Thus, the language of the African American press (and the Negro literati) still expresses an unhealthy preoccupation with indelible notions of race and race conflict. The African American, within this discourse, is still struggling towards civilization and society.

22 Characters in the novel also discuss the international black press such as Marcus Garvey’s *Negro World*. At one point they read articles from Garan Kouyaté’s paper *La Race Nègre*. Kouyaté was an important architect of Negritude. Like articles from African American
newspapers of the period, the article contains a list of atrocities committed against Africans under French colonialism:

- Of native women insulted and their husband humiliated before them.
- Of flagellation.
- Of youths castrated for theft.
- Of native chiefs punished by mutilation. (Ibid, 76)

By imbedding these excerpts from a French paper, the novel shows the inherent weakness of such accounts while foregrounding the difference between itself and the black press. For example, at one point, Banjo completely forgoes prose and lapses into poetry as it tries to transform print into both music and dance: “Play that thing! One movement of the thousand movements of the eternal life-flow. Shake that thing! In the face of the shadow of Death. Treacherous hand of murderous Death, lurking in sinister alleys, where the shadows of life dance, nevertheless, to their music of life”, (Ibid 57). Within this context of a nascent negritude, the excerpts from the Negro world appear as mere lifeless pieces of script from the man’s program. Indeed, they say more about the Europeans than they say about the people whose victimization they describe.

Throughout the novel, Ray uses representations of the French Press to accuse France of embracing the same type of social Darwinist ideology as had become stylish in America. Indeed, it seems that McKay had written Banjo to correct many of the myths about France that had taken root since the end of the First World War when African American soldiers fought under the French flag and France welcomed African American jazz musicians and entertainers. For example, at one point, Ray argues with a French student over which newspaper he should read—the ironically named (for Ray) L’Humanité, L’Action Française, Le Petit Parisien or Le Journal. The student “had been in Paris and had heard black jazz players, and... liked the jazz musicians and Josephine Baker” (Ibid, 273). In his discussion with Ray, he reveals that his negrophilism is intrinsic to his patriotism. Indeed, he tries to convince Ray that France is “especially tolerant to colored people. We treat them better than the Anglo-Saxon nations because we are the most civilized nation in the world” (Ibid, 274). Ray disparages this idea as mere propaganda saying that “newspapers were full of it, and certain clever writers insisted that Paris was the paradise of the Aframerican” (Ibid, 275). For Ray, accounts of France’s beneficence towards African Americans were just more propaganda that had less to do with the equality of the races than with a rivalry between nations.

Finally, McKay gives the novel the feel of a Romare Bearden collage (or a rap single), as he slaps a large, untranslated portion of a French, leftist newspaper onto the text. Unlike little snippets of italicized quotes in French, this page-long “sample” has the effect of addressing itself directly to either a French or bilingual audience. The quote describes a “tirailleur sénégalais” who commits some sort of massacre in Toulon. Ultimately, the quote serves to close the door on the argument that France differs from America in its attitude towards Africans (and by extension African Americans). Indeed, the very notion of a tirailleur sénégalais is packed with dubious associations. First of all, Sénégalais (Senegalese) is used here as a generic term to refer to all of the men from the French West African colonies who were conscripted to fight for France during World War I. Also, the term not only refers to a fighting man and undifferentiated colonial subject, but it also refers to a type of domesticated Uncle Tom figure who, beginning in 1915 appeared on boxes of a breakfast preparation called Banania. This box displays a uniformed (wearing a distinguishing red fez and loose-fitting pantaloons), yet harmless soldier (only the stock...
of his rifle is apparent) sitting in the grass, gesticulating with a spoon, holding a bowl of Banania and smiling. Beneath the picture are the Caribbean Creole words “Y’a bon.” The imbedded excerpt presents an interesting gloss on this image of the transplanted, benevolent, protective native of the colonies. Indeed, it openly uses social Darwinist theory to transform this figure from a smiling Uncle Tom into an uneducable murderer. The excerpt tells us that no level of civilization can really take the jungle out of the African. For the African, it says: “civilization is a wine that is too strong”:

Sous les bananiers originels, Yssima était sans doute un brave noir, en perfaite harmonie avec la morale de sa race et les lois de la nature. Transplanté, déraciné, il est devenu un fou sanguinaire. (Ibid, 278)

According to the excerpt (which seems to summarize many of the same tenets of Plessy vs. Ferguson and the Booker T. Washington Atlanta Exposition Speech that concretized American segregation), the Senegalese Yssima is not ready for civilization. He cannot understand its subtleties, which require that he know the difference between murder and killing in war.

Imbedding the newspaper story also has the effect of upsetting the différend and turning the tables on the journalistic frame that has thus far reserved the right to define and devalue black subjects. It also allows McKay to use one of the novel’s most powerful weapons against the hegemonic discourse of the newspaper — irony. Indeed, Ray says he clipped and kept the article because it “was such an amusing revelation of civilized logic.” Moreover, “he was in tacit agreement with the thesis” (Ibid, 277). This first leads one to question how Ray could agree with such a piece of racist propaganda. Was he following in the footsteps of his countryman Marcus Garvey who met with the Ku Klux Klan? Perhaps. But it must be admitted that Garvey’s ill-fated gesture was laden with irony, as is Ray’s embrace of the newspaper excerpt. Ray may agree with the article’s author, or he may really agree with Yssima who rejects a civilization that would distinguish between different types of murder. The excerpt allows McKay to interject an element of indeterminacy in his text that reflects back on the act of reading. Indeed, he does this at another juncture through an act that seems to definitively sever the novel’s ties with realism and journalism. At one point, Ray encounters a man he calls “Home to Harlem Jake” Home to Harlem refers to a 1928 novel by McKay with Jake and Ray as characters. Referring to another novel for its referents of time and space upsets both the epistemological and the ontological assumptions of the text. It interjects an element of impossibility (if not amateurish artifice) into the text. The effect is to jar the reader out of the type of complacency fostered by the pre-scripted, iconic stories and propaganda of realist documents and newspaper journalism. Banjo resists being a piece of journalism. Its uneven sense of time and characterization and its relentless emphasis of the poetic over the prosaic also help it to resist being a novel.

All of this allows the novel to challenge hegemony as it upsets traditional notions of identity as located in specified notions of time and space. Banjo invokes a sense of fluid, emergent, inchoate identity. This is why it chooses a port as its setting, an archetypal liminal space that resists being any one thing. Ray rhapsodizes about this aspect of the docks of Marseilles:

The eternal harvest of the world on the docks. African hard wood, African rubber, African ivory, African skins. Asia’s gifts of crisp fragrant leaves and the fabled old spices with grain and oil and iron. All floated through the oceans into this warm Western harbor where, waiting to be floated back again, were the Occident’s gifts. Immense crates, barrels, cases of automobiles, pianos, player-pianos, furniture;
sand-papered, spliced, and varnished wood; calico print, artificial silk; pretty shoes and boots; French wines, British whiskeys, and a thousand little salesmen-made goods. Composite essence of the soil of all lands. (Ibid, 307)

Banjo is thus a novel that strives to foment a sense of identity that goes beyond that of the lynch mob engendered and fostered by newspapers of all types. Instead, it aches to produce an identity based on movement, difference and ultimately acceptance.

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**Works Cited**


NOTES

1. According to Stuart Hall’s reading of Gramsci, common sense refers to the way “philosophical currents enter into, modify and transform the practical everyday consciousness or popular thought of the masses”. It is ultimately an ideological position (Hall, 1996, 431).

2. During the next eighty years, artists would radically transform and stylize the picture with the smile being its only constant.

____________________________________

AUTHOR

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Années trente : le regard de Dorothy West

Hélène Christol

Sweetie May was accompanied by two young girls, recently emigrated from Boston. They were the latest to be hailed as incipient immortals. Their names were Doris Westmore and Hazel Jamison. Doris wrote short stories.... Raymond liked them more than he did most of the younger recruits to the movement. For one thing, they were characterized by a freshness and naïveté which he and his cronies had lost. And, surprisingly enough for Negro prodigies, they actually gave promise of possessing literary talent. (Huggins, 1995, 317-8)


Deux perspectives critiques semblent émerger de l’ensemble des articles analysant son œuvre. L’une s’attache à la biographie de West, à ses origines sociales et à l’influence qu’elles ont pu avoir sur ses choix de sujets et de thèmes ; fille de la bourgeoisie noire de Boston, Dorothy West partage avec d’autres écrivains noirs de sa génération (Weldon Johnson ou Nella Larsen par exemple) un point de vue unique, à la fois interne et externe, sur les moeurs et valeurs de la bourgeoisie noire. Dans l’introduction au volume de nouvelles publié en 1995, Mary Helen Washington écrit : “[She] writes about the black middle class from the viewpoint of the marginalized insider, both a fierce critic of the bourgeois life and a loyal daughter upholding the values of family and class.”

Cette
dualité qui nourrit nombre de situations explorées dans ses livres se retrouve dans son dernier roman The Wedding, dans lequel elle peint les tensions au sein d’une famille noire à l’occasion du mariage de l’une de ses filles à un musicien de jazz blanc. Le lieu, Martha’s Vineyard, où West elle-même passa une grande partie de sa vie dans une propriété familiale sert de cadre à ce drame qui peint avec une duplicité ironique les affrontements créés par les tensions raciales, sociales et sexuelles.

La critique plus récente, qui s’est développée à la faveur des approches féministes et de l’explosion de la littérature noire féminine des années 60-70 s’est aussi intéressée aux œuvres de Dorothy West et a mis l’accent sur le point de vue féminin, voire féministe de certains textes, lorsqu’ils évoquent par exemple le statut des femmes de la bourgeoisie ou les rapports difficiles entre mères et filles comme dans le magnifique portrait de sa mère que brossে West dans la nouvelle “Rachel”.

La plupart de ces études consacrées à l’œuvre de West portent essentiellement sur les sketches autobiographiques, certaines nouvelles des années soixante ou post-années soixante ou les deux romans. Peu d’études ont abordé la période des années trente qui représentent pourtant un moment intéressant dans l’évolution de l’auteur, période de transition entre les années vingt de l’innocence comme elle nomme elle-même les années de la Renaissance de Harlem, et celles de son installation à Martha’s Vineyard en 1947. Pendant les années trente, sous l’influence de la Dépression et des mouvements sociaux, comme beaucoup d’écrivains américains noirs et blancs, Dorothy West se tourna un moment vers une littérature plus réaliste, plus engagée aussi, qui ouvrait d’autres mondes que ceux qu’elle avait explorés jusqu’alors. Elle-même découvrit d’autres horizons, en faisant partie du voyage en 1932 vers l’Union Soviétique d’une équipe d’artistes noirs, dont Langston Hughes, qui devait aller participer au tournage d’un film sur « l’exploitation des Noirs en Amérique de l’esclavage à nos jours ». Les Russes avaient lancé le projet, ils accueillirent le groupe avec enthousiasme. Si Dorothy West fit allusion à l’épisode beaucoup plus tard dans sa nouvelle “An Adventure in Moscow” où elle décrivit le voyage comme un événement plus mondain que politique (mais après tout, la nouvelle paraît dans la Vineyard Gazette en 1985, n’était certainement pas le lieu où publier une analyse politique sérieuse,) elle reconnut aussi que c’est en Russie qu’elle apprit les détails de l’affaire de Scottsboro, un événement politique que l’on retrouve dans sa décision de travailler pendant dix-huit mois pour le WPA et comme enquêteuse au Service des Affaires Sociales (Welfare) pour le quartier de Harlem. Ainsi, d’une certaine façon, elle rejoignit les écrivains de la « génération sociale », lança avec Richard Wright le magazine New Challenge en 1937, après avoir créé Challenge, et écrivit quelques nouvelles qui furent publiées par le New York Daily News.

Le Daily News était un journal qui contenait une page spéciale, “Blue Ribbon Fiction”, réservée à des œuvres de fiction populaires. Dorothy West l’évoque avec ironie dans l’introduction à The Richer, The Poorer : “I knew that the News was a tabloid”, écrit-elle. “So of course I read the New York Times, or at least I said so, if asked...” (RP, 4) La section fut supprimée peu après, mais un accord préalable permit à West de publier quelques nouvelles dans une autre partie du journal :

The page that gave part of its space to a daily short story of limited strength was still intact. They would be glad to let me write two such stories a month... The sum for a story was fifty dollars, but I knew and they knew that it was not the money that mattered. (RP, 5)

7 comme dans les œuvres citées ci-dessus, les trois nouvelles recréent un environnement sinistre dont la description s’accompagne de tous les marqueurs spécifiques de la pauvreté. Pour cette investigation quasi anthropologique de l’homme sans possession, West plante un cadre, quartier, habitations, nourriture, vêtements, boutiques, qui reflète manque et solitude. Dans “Jack in the Pot”, le quartier, “a smelly third-run neighborhood”, (RP, 31) abrite les maisons les plus anciennes de Harlem, “old law tenements” (RP, 32), ne jouissant donc d’aucun des avantages des nouvelles lois sur les taudis. Images de couloirs mal éclairés, avec leurs odeurs de déjections canines et leur fenêtres cassées qui claquent au vent, d’appartements tristes et mal chauffés, comme celui qu’habite le couple de chômeurs, les Edmunds, autour duquel s’organise la nouvelle. Mêmes images dans “The Penny” où la misère prive l’habitation de chaleur et vide les placards. Quant à la maison des protagonistes de “The Roomer”, elle s’inscrit aussi dans cette cartographie de la misère qui la place “a shabby block away from the railroad tracks” (RP, 115) Chaque nouvelle offre donc des réseaux sémantiques très riches traduisant la tristesse, le froid, la désolation de ces quartiers sans lumière où la vie meurt avec l’espoir. Lieux du manque souligné par l’utilisation de doubles, voire de triples négations comme dans “Jack in the Pot” par exemple où M. Edmunds s’exclame : “We don’t live human. I never see a paper... I ain’t had a cigarette in three years. We ain’t got a radio. We don’t have no company...”, avant de laisser sa femme conclure “Tisn’t nothing no use”. (RP, 37-8)

8 dans ce monde dévasté, émergent quelques figures emblématiques de la pauvreté : l’enfant en haillons de “Jack in the Pot”, “in the familiar rags of the neighborhood children” (RP, 33) ; l’enfant mort de pneumonie du gardien de l’immeuble ; la figure pathétique de ce gardien, époux d’une femme qui meurt de la tuberculose pendant que ses enfants végètent dans un sous-sol inhabitable. A cette galerie de victimes de la pauvreté, on peut ajouter le petit garçon anonyme de “The Penny” —“The little boy’s stomach could growl in school. His face and faded shirt would show the scarcity of hot water and soap” (RP, 85)— ainsi que la femme abandonnée de “The Roomer”. Le langage même des corps trahit la défaite, qui transforme enfants en gnomes, et hommes respectables en vagabonds, “bums”, ou en vieillards avant l’âge. Dorothy West, par cette représentation qui se veut réaliste du monde de la pauvreté, par l’équilibre entre éléments mélodramatiques et précision du détail, par l’aspect documentaire de ses descriptions fondées sur son expérience d’enquêteuse du Welfare, se rattache bien au courant réaliste, sociologique des années trente dans ces quelques nouvelles qui, non
contentes de brosser le portrait de la pauvreté, veulent aussi démonter les structures de pouvoir qui définissent et animent les univers présentés. Le destin qui écrase M. Edmunds—"Mr Edmunds lay staring at the ceiling. It kept coming closer". \(RP, 38\)—ce "it" qu’il ne peut ni ne sait nommer, c’est le narrateur qui va en donner la clé au lecteur en lui en révélant les arcanes.

Curieusement, ni "The Roomer" ni "The Penny" n’évoquent le problème du pouvoir en termes raciaux. La couleur des protagonistes n’est jamais mentionnée et la lecture des deux textes ne permet pas de la connaître. Dans "The Penny" l’enfant est décrit comme “a pale creature with the pinched face hollow eyes”, \(RP, 86\), ce qui peut laisser supposer qu’il est blanc. Dans "The Roomer", de la même façon, les protagonistes peuvent être noirs ou blancs : ce n’est pas ce qui définit leur histoire ni leur destinée. Seule la nouvelle “Jack in the Pot” présente deux figures traditionnelles du pouvoir blanc au cœur d’une intrigue centrée essentiellement sur un couple de Noirs, les Edmunds, vivant difficilement de l’aide sociale. La première figure est emblématique, "a too jovial white man", \(RP, 31\) figure du hasard et du destin, qui en tirant les numéros d’une loterie, permet à Mme Edmunds de gagner la somme de cinquante-cinq dollars. Que ce “jack in the pot” soit blanc n’est sans doute pas fortuit : l’aspect grotesque de ce diable dans sa boîte dont le nom indique aussi la trahison, laisse deviner que ce gain, loin d’être une bénédiction, la clé du bonheur, est en fait une tromperie et ne pourra devenir libérateur que lorsqu’il se transformera de gain en don.

L’autre figure plus réaliste du pouvoir est l’enquêtrice des services sociaux qui est un personnage fort intéressant dans la littérature du New Deal, réaliste mais aussi hautement symbolique puisque c’est elle qui détermine si les Edmunds peuvent continuer à recevoir l’argent qui leur permet de survivre. Figure d’inspection, de vérification, de contrôle, elle a donc pouvoir de vie ou de mort sur eux. Pourtant le portrait est brossé avec sympathie : “She was small and young and white”. \(RP, 40\) Rien de menaçant donc dans son aspect physique, au contraire, car elle se conduit avec bonté et politesse, s’excusant d’être en retard et faisant preuve de compréhension devant la crainte de Mme Edmunds. Tous les adjectifs et adverbes qui la caractérisent sont positifs : “kindly”, “open honest face” “pleasantly” et M. Edmunds est amené à conclure : “You ain’t much like an investigator”. \(RP, 41\) Enfin, après l'affrontement avec Mme Edmunds, elle révèle qu’elle aussi pourrait bien manquer d’argent, “I wish my family could win five dollars for food” \(RP, 42\), et part en sanglotant. C’est donc moins la personne de l’enquêtrice que le système lui-même que met en cause Dorothy West dans ces nouvelles, un système responsable du regard générique que l’on retrouve dans l’œil de M. Edmunds, “that wild look of waiting for the investigator” \(RP, 39\). La critique de Dorothy West n’est pas de nature raciale. Contrairement à Malcolm X qui voyait le système du Welfare comme “a white man in charge of a black man’s children. Nothing but legal modern slavery—however kindly intentioned”, (Malcolm X, 1968, 101) Dorothy West en fait une critique sociale et le dénonce comme un système de contrôle qui crée peur et traumatisme en mettant les pauvres sous surveillance : il les prive ainsi de liberté, éveille en eux un sentiment de culpabilité malsain et leur enlève leur dignité et leur autonomie. Dans une autre nouvelle, écrite en 1940, intitulée “Mammy”, et publiée dans \textit{Opportunity}, West met en scène une autre enquêtrice de l’aide sociale, de race noire cette fois, qu’elle place dans plusieurs situations de confrontations sociales et raciales. Dans la dernière scène, la jeune femme, pressée de quitter son travail (en bonne fonctionnaire, elle s’arrête à cinq heures ! ) refuse de prendre en compte les propos de la vieille femme noire dont elle examine le
cas : sourde à l’appel à la solidarité raciale de sa cliente, elle évalue la situation à distance, administrativement comme en témoigne le ton de procès-verbal, en style semi direct, de son commentaire :

To the young investigator his was evasion by superstitious mutterings... This last speech had been rambling gossip. Here was an old woman clearly disoriented in her Northern transplantation... Evidently she felt that gave her a matriarchal right to arbitrate its Destinies... (RP, 37)

11 Les certitudes de cette jeune femme, soulignées ironiquement par les adverbes “clearly”, “evidently”, sont bien sûr contredites à la fin de la nouvelle.

12 Ainsi le pouvoir de l’institution, tel que symbolisé par les deux enquêteuses des services sociaux est moins un pouvoir blanc qui s’exerce sur les Noirs qu’un pouvoir tyrannique (Mme Edmunds parle de “triumph over tyranny”, [RP, 33]) qui s’exerce sur les pauvres, un pouvoir politique qui persécute ceux qui sont dépossédés, les manipule, les traite comme des objets. Un pouvoir à distance qui met cependant face à face administrateurs et administrés, en des confrontations qui peuvent être mortelles : “If you had fifty dollars and made a change”, remarque M. Edmunds, “them relief folks would worry you like a pack of wolves”. (RP, 37)

13 Ce monde de la curée, des prédateurs, ce pourrait être celui des grands fauves du roman réaliste : on remarquera cependant que la critique sociale de Dorothy West, du moins dans “Mammy” et dans “Jack in the Pot” porte sur les services sociaux qui furent pourtant créés dans les années trente pour venir en aide aux victimes de la Dépression. L’empathie du narrateur est réelle pour les victimes de la pauvreté, mais l’analyse du rôle du gouvernement et en particulier des choix faits par le New Deal reste ambiguë. Contrairement à certaines œuvres dites prolétariennes de son époque qui débouchaient sur une vision politique large, West privilégie une mise en scène de la pauvreté qui trouve ses solutions dans l’individu, dans l’humain. Elle échappe ainsi au dogmatisme des fictions des années trente attaquées comme le note Helen Mary Washington “as a literary genre with little flexibility, no subtlety, and circumscribed possibilities, one that sacrifices the complexity of experience in order to score political points.” (Washington, 1987, 299).

14 La nouvelle “The Penny” cependant est un peu différente et met en scène une situation qui pourrait évoquer un affrontement de classe. Elle est entièrement construite sur le face à face entre le jeune garçon, fils d’une famille pauvre, petit animal blessé (“a whipped puppy” [RP, 86]), et Miss Hester Halsey qui le domine physiquement (“She stood over the boy” [RP, 87]) et socialement. Miss Halsey est une caricature de la femme aisée, célibataire, prisonnière de ses préjugés, arrogante, sentimentale et pétrie de moralisme :

Miss Halsey came down the street, walking in her prim way, with her nose, as always disdainful. She had worked in the same office for twenty years and saved her money. She had no patience with people who were poor. They were simply shiftless. Miss Halsey saw the huddled figure of the boy... He was the son of that worthless drunk and that lazy slattern. (RP, 87).

15 Sa connaissance de la pauvreté se réduit à un ensemble de clichés qui l’empêchent de comprendre l’histoire du petit garçon : tous les pauvres boivent, se prostituent, et battent leurs enfants. Le jeu de mot sur “Home” qui pour elle signifie orphelinat alors que, pour l’enfant, il signifie le lieu où il retrouve l’amour de ses parents souligne de façon ironique que la communication ne peut pas se faire entre le haut et le bas des hiérarchies sociales. Le malentendu se poursuit jusque dans les derniers mots ironiques de la nouvelle : “In the whole town, there were no two people happier than Miss Halsey and the little boy ”. (RP, 89)
La cruauté de cette nouvelle où tout le récit est fondé sur le regard distancié du narrateur naît du jeu sur les espoirs et les illusions des protagonistes. Le pouvoir est symbolisé par ce penny, donné par le père comme un cadeau rare à son fils en dépit des difficultés financières de la famille, puis perdu et retrouvé entre les mains de Miss Halsey, “a shining penny”, objet de désir, qui ouvre la porte des possibles (“he was walking on air”, [RP, 88]), objet de libération mais aussi objet de mort, puisqu’il va détruire le monde familier et rassurant de l’enfant en l’arrachant à sa famille. L’argent dans les trois nouvelles est en fait symbole de mort. Dans la Préface de The Richer, The Poorer, Dorothy West se présente comme quelqu’un “who never cared about money. I’ve always said cheerfully that I would die a happy pauper. I care about people and they care about me”. (RP, 5) Propos de femme qui n’a jamais connu la réelle pauvreté ? ces mots semblent contredire les portraits de pauvres qu’elle peint avec tant de sympathie dans ses nouvelles de 1940. Cependant, même dans ces textes, l’argent garde une valeur problématique. Dans “The Room” les deux dollars supplémentaires, que la femme a perçus de son locataire et cachés à son mari, provoquent la fin de leur couple : à la fin de la nouvelle, elle se retrouve seule : “Her straining eyes searched the empty street. She uttered a desolate cry. The outgoing train blew a mocking good-bye” (RP, 139). Dans “The Penny”, la pièce d’argent va provoquer un drame familial et envoyer l’enfant dans un orphelinat. Mais c’est dans “Jack in the Pot” que la richesse toute relative de Mme Edmunds provoque le débat le plus long : tout en mettant en lumière la tyrannie du système de l’aide sociale, les cinquante-cinq dollars de Mme Edmunds pèsent de plus en plus lourd sur sa conscience et deviennent à la fin de la nouvelle “burial money”, l’argent qu’elle n’a pas eu la générosité de donner immédiatement à M. Johnson pour enterrer son bébé. Ils resteront donc inemployés tandis que Mme Edmunds retourne acheter la maigre chère qui forme l’ordinaire des repas du couple.

Le conflit, on le voit, est finalement de nature plus morale que politique. Il s’agit moins de redistribuer l’argent ou le pouvoir que de renouer le dialogue interrompu, de retrouver une solidarité qui, au-delà des races et des classes, peut redonner un sens à l’humain. C’est ce qui différencie les trois nouvelles de West d’un ouvrage comme The Street de Petry par exemple : l’environnement y détermine sans doute le destin des personnages, mais les nouvelles ouvrent aussi un espace de liberté que la redécouverte des valeurs de la communauté, de la famille et de l’individu peut investir et transformer. Dans “Jack in the Pot”, c’est la communauté de l’immeuble où vivent les Edmunds qui est évoquée. Malgré la saleté et le froid, cette communauté évite de dénoncer le gardien, Mr. Johnson, pourtant en partie responsable de l’état des lieux, par solidarité :

Five young children shared the unhabitable basement with him. They were always half-sick, and he was always neglecting his duties to tend to them. The tenants were continually deciding to report him to the agent, and then at the last moment deciding not to. (RP, 34)

Lorsque son bébé meurt, M. Edmunds propose de passer un moment avec M. Johnson. A sa femme qui veille encore jalousement sur les cinquante dollars qu’elle a gagnés et dont elle ne lui a pas encore parlé, il dit :

“Me, I wish I had fifty dollars to give him.”
“As poor as you are,” she asked angrily, “You’d give him that much money ? That’s easy to say when you haven’t got it.”
“I look at it this way,” he said simply. “I think how I’d feel in his shoes.” (RP, 44)

Enfin, Mme Edmunds elle-même, après avoir longtemps hésité et avoir été tentée par des achats divers, cède à l’élan généreux et offre, trop tard, les cinquante dollars symboliques
à M. Johnson. Cet argent ne sera jamais dépensé à des fins égoïstes mais devient l'argent du don, "burial money. She could never use it for anything else" (RP, 47).

20 La communauté mais aussi la famille sont présentées comme des lieux où la solidarité et l'amour créent le respect et la dignité. Dans “The Penny” le narrateur ouvre la nouvelle en mettant en scène le don du père à son fils, un penny retiré de la somme pourtant insuffisante qui leur permet de vivre :

“His father had brought home his piddling pay for his part-time job... He was their husband and father. They had shared his good times. They loved him no less when his luck was bad.” (RP, 85.)

21 C'est ce lien que vient détruire Miss Halsey, pour remporter ce que le narrateur nomme ironiquement une victoire morale. L'ironie de la nouvelle permet cependant de comprendre où est la morale de cette histoire.

22 Enfin, le couple quoique mis en péril par les aléas économiques de la vie, peut aussi offrir ces instants de générosité et d'amour qui devraient structurer toute vie sociale. Ainsi Mme Edmunds, qui malgré sa rage, ses peurs, ses frustrations, est capable de reconnaître l'affection de son mari : “She wished she knew how to cross the room to kiss him. ‘Go wash’, she said gruffly” (RP, 36). Ce sont ces moments de tendresse, ces failles qui permettent aux individus de communiquer de façon plus réelle que West met en scène avec finesse et habileté, face aux monstres froids des systèmes, des divisions raciales ou sociales ou de l'argent. Ces valeurs sont cependant constamment menacées et les nouvelles de la Dépression mettent l'accent sur les dangers qui guettent les individus socialement et économiquement désavantagés. “The Roomer” va même plus loin en mettant en scène un drame qui naît de la pauvreté et de l'argent, mais surtout des rapports entre hommes et femmes dans une société qui attend des hommes qu’ils soient responsables du soutien économique de leur femme et de leur famille. Ce que reproche le personnage féminin à son époux, c’est qu’il n’est pas un “get-up-and-go man”, un battant, lui qui a accepté sans lutter une baisse de salaire. Dans la nouvelle, il est décrit comme un homme anxieux, “his little apologetic smile turning up the corners of his flaccid mouth.” (RP, 136.) Un mou, un vaincu alors que sa femme a eu la force et l’astuce de réclamer deux dollars de plus à son locataire et d’ainsi s’offrir le manteau d’hiver dont elle a besoin, et ces petits repas qu’elle déguste seule, en secret, pour mieux savourer son pouvoir. Lorsque le mari menace de partir, le texte décrit la femme comme terrifiée : “She crossed to him swiftly. For the first time in years she clung to him” (RP, 137). Le verbe “clung” qui implique la relation de dépendance qui aurait dû rester celle qui liait le femme à l’homme dans leurs rôles traditionnels souligne ironiquement la cause souterraine de leur séparation. Il est intéressant de noter que dans “Jack in the Pot” également, c’est la femme qui gagne la somme de cinquante-cinq dollars et qu’elle le cache à son mari : cet argent secret, sale, n’est-il pas la marque d’une subtile transformation des rôles sexuels qui donnerait à ces deux nouvelles un avant-goût de certains des thèmes féministes abordés dans The Living is Easy, le silence des femmes, leur place revendiquée et niée dans le monde économique, le lien entre la femme créatrice et la femme monstrueuse. Il y a dans ces deux nouvelles une autre dimension politique, dans le sens que Kate Millett donne au terme dans Sexual Politics, qui en fait des œuvres non pas des années trente, mais bien d’une époque plus contemporaine.

23 “Russia had become communist,” écrivit Dorothy West en 1985, “a state of being that for me was not the solution to man’s dilemma, but having learned from the Russian writers that salvation lay in the soul, I was glad to leave New York for a time and reexamine my
own soul.” (RP, 222). Si dans les années trente, comme beaucoup d’écrivains de sa génération, Dorothy West, qui pendant ses années d’innocence sur l’Île de Martha’s Vineyard n’avait jamais connu le racisme et la pauvreté, prit conscience de la misère et des difficultés économiques d’une partie de l’Amérique et sut les mettre en scène dans quelques nouvelles écrites à cette époque, elle ne limita pas cependant son projet à l’exploration de cette réalité sociale et politique : c’était le dilemme humain qui l’intéressait avant tout, l’examen de son âme et de son art, Dostoïevsky plutôt que Lénine. Ces années de transition avant la publication de son premier roman, *The Living is Easy*, ne doivent cependant pas être oubliées : elles furent les années où Dorothy West décida de ses choix avant de s’installer définitivement à Martha’s Viényard, décida d’être Bess plutôt que Lottie, celle qui après un bon repas avec sa sœur, “began to spin stories. They were rich with places and people, most of them lowly, all of them magnificent. Her face reflected her telling, the joys and sorrows of her remembering, and above all, the love she lived by that enhanced the poorest places, the humblest persons”. (“The Richer, The Poorer”, RP, 64)

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**NOTES**


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Wideman’s Breadth

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

Note: This essay was originally the basis of my introductory remarks at the “True Fictions” panel, which I chaired at the conference “John Edgar Wideman: A Callaloo Celebration” held at the University of Virginia on May 31, 2000. I would like to thank my co-panelists at the session, Stephen Casmier, James Coleman, Michel Feith, Roland Murray, and Fritz Gysin, as well as Wideman himself, who was in attendance. I am particularly grateful to Charles Rowell, who made the event — and the Callaloo special issue of recent criticism on Wideman — a special occasion for all of us.

1 I have decided here to retain the context-specific gestures and mode of address that bind this introduction to its moment, rather than to try and clean it into a more abstract essayistic form. I do so partly because it seems to me appropriate to discuss the historical imperative in Wideman in a form that strives for the rough-edged contingency and layered voices in much of his fiction. Moreover, it seems fitting to honor Michel Fabre, for me the dean of European Americanists, by evoking an occasion that brought a number of European scholars to the United States. I may be relatively exceptional among the many African American scholars who have been influenced by Michel’s work (and who have enjoyed his legendary hospitality in Paris) during the past decades, since — although I have learned a great deal from his groundbreaking studies and translations of Richard Wright, Chester Himes, and especially Claude McKay — our most impassioned conversations and exchanges have centered around a group of understudied Francophone writers who lived in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, such as Paulette Nardal and René Maran. What follows stays in the American grain, but even there I can’t help hearing echoes of Paris and of Michel.

2 I’d like to discuss briefly a few of the ways that John Edgar Wideman’s practice as a fiction writer strives to “invent new nets” to capture the truths and insights it seeks (Coleman, 77). I hope I’ll be able to lay out some directions for our panel discussion this morning.
Since the panel is titled “True Fictions”, it would make sense for us to discuss the place of the historical in Wideman’s oeuvre. One might argue that a historical imperative commences with the opening of *The Lynchers*, and then develops in much more complex forms in the later work — in *Philadelphia Fire*, *The Cattle Killing*, short stories such as “Fever” and “Newborn Thrown in Trash and Dies”. This imperative involves a stance towards evidence and the status of historical truth, and a concern with epistemological terror and enforced silencing. It also necessitates a sense of community memory, the intellectual work it involves — and so many emblematic intellectual or popular archivist figures (I’m thinking mainly of Cudjoe in *Philadelphia Fire*) who take on the task of finding new modes of “historical” discourse in the face of institutional and state effacement of so many stories.

These issues come up in various ways throughout African American literature, from William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* to James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. But it seems to me that Wideman’s work stakes out a quite unique stance on these questions, even in the way it so often marshals a discourse of historicization (dates, quotations, “factual” narrative) in the midst of a fictional architecture without quite using it as evidence. In some ways the later work might be read in a kind of conversation with a novel such as David Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident* — one also thinks of Charles Johnson’s *The Oxherding Tale* or Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* or Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*, or a number of other novels with such concerns — but still, Wideman’s work isn’t as obsessed with producing an authoritative, alternative historical narrative as most of those other examples.

The elaboration of this discourse of historicization in Wideman’s work is striking. Think of the numerous dates, epigraphs, and epistles cobbled into the fictional architecture, its predilection for etymologies (“plague” in *The Cattle Killing*, “aëdes aegypti” mosquitoes in *Fever*, “zoo” in *Two Cities*, “tempest” in *Philadelphia Fire*), its clinical descriptions (of melanin in *Sent for You Yesterday*, of yellow fever in *Fever*). The turn to fact and document we encounter so often in Wideman’s fiction serves above all to show up the inadequacy of quantification. Facts and figures are not enough, alone: they must be creatively pushed against, flipped through, read against the grain.

There are many examples of this futility of efforts to measure and rationalize the experiential world, from Muybridge’s attempts to freeze motion photographically in *Reuben* to the autopsy fiends in *Fever*. The only access to truth in Wideman’s fiction, in the end, is through language, and more specifically, through story. In *Fever*: “The doctors believe they can find the secret of the fever in the victims’ dead bodies. They cut, saw, extract, weigh, measure. The dead are carved into smaller and smaller bits and the butchered parts studied but they do not speak. What I know of the fever I’ve learned from the words of those I’ve treated, from stories of living that are ignored by good doctors.” (Wideman, 1989, 145-46)

I tend to read these devices, this apparatus of “fact”, as part of a paradigmatically African American concern with literary form (an attention to and extraordinary pressure on the frame of a text) that has developed in a highly complex response to the way the origins of African American literature in the slave narratives was predicated on the generic framing of black subjectivity through the documents (letters, photos, prefaces, attestations, appendices) so often affixed to the narratives in order to “authenticate” them. Since Frederick Douglass, the articulation of black subjectivity has hinged in part precisely on
the ways African American texts so often undermine and undo and supplement such documentary authentication.

8 But this does not mean that language in Wideman's work allows an easy access to truth. Language is treacherous; its nets get tangled; it slips away from intention and can be turned against truth, as in the false prophecy of self-immolation that gives *The Cattle Killing* its title.

9 In one interview, Wideman, commenting on the prevalence of tragedy and catastrophe in his work, says that

> Like Antonin Artaud, I think that societies, in some metaphysical sense, create the diseases they need and that those diseases are metaphors for the basic problems of those societies... And I think that, maybe in the same sense that you can see the universe in a blade of grass, if we look at certain events long enough and hard enough through the lens of fiction, maybe we can learn more of what we need to know. (Rowell, 1998, 100)

10 I would add that fiction itself creates the “diseases” it needs, in representing those problems of knowing. This would explain much of what some consider the “postmodernism” or “nagging difficulties” of Wideman’s work — it should come as no surprise that an oeuvre so intimately concerned with articulating diaspora, conditions of recurrent dispossession and dismemberment, loss and longing, would turn to scattered voices, nameless speakers, and temporal discontinuity. As one of the voices in *Fever* puts it:

> We have bred the affliction within our breasts. Each solitary heart contains all the world’s tribes, and precarious dance echoes the drum’s thunder. We are our ancestors and our children, neighbors and strangers to ourselves. Fever descends when the waters that connect us are clogged with filth. (Wideman, 1989, 132)

11 The reconnection, then, if it is to be realized, becomes the responsibility of the reader, whose clear sight, whose endurance of dis-ease, whose pilgrim’s progress through the novel’s waterways is demanded by the texts. As Wideman told Bonnie TuSmith in 1997,

> I depend immensely on the reader to process the novel, to make sense of it. It’s not a kaleidoscope, although it has some features of a kaleidoscope. You turn it this way it looks one way, turn it that way it looks another way... But it’s not random. There are certain ways of getting through it that I try to push the reader into. There are paths. (TuSmith, 1998, 206)

12 This aesthetic of dis-ease in the very joints of the fiction follows Ralph Ellison’s dictum that “the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived” (Ellison, 1989, 580). As Wideman himself puts it, the architectonics of his writing is geared to “unveil chaos within the patterns of certainty”, to enact a multiply-voiced stance of dissonance, of being "In it, but not of it. And that stance produces bodies of enabling legislation, a grammar of nuanced tensions, incompatibilities, doors and windows that not only dramatize the stance itself but implicate the medium” (Wideman, 1990, 45-6).

13 Yves-Charles Grandjeat’s essay in the *Callaloo* special issue meditates on the constitutive role of silence in Wideman’s fiction. Wideman himself writes that his “impulse is to give voice to the dead, the unborn, to outlaws and outcasts whose voices have been stolen or muted by violence” (Wideman, 1999, 549). And yet he stresses the barriers and breakdowns inherent in any such coming to voice, as though silence and inarticulacy are a necessary component in the achievement of testimony. Wideman is also fascinated in so much of the fiction with what he terms “the body’s ingenuity” (Wideman, 1999, 549) in
inventing alternative forms of speech — characters whose straining toward expression is ultimately translated (might one describe it as transcribed?) in a complexly prolix physicality. For Wideman, the places where the somatic exceeds the semantic — glossolalia, stuttering, scat, nonsense words, screams, convulsions — would seem to evidence feeling at the edges of expression that “bubbles up out of your body” (Berben-Masi, 1999, 578).

Many critics have described the figures of this excess in Wideman’s fiction as part of the work’s emulation of black music. Think of Brother Tate’s scatting and compulsive drumming in Sent For You Yesterday, or the descent of the narrator at the end of The Cattle Killing into stammering. These are places Wideman’s language moves away from signification and towards the openness of the musical. Words “travel the road of sound without reaching it”, in the felicitous phrase of Alejo Carpentier (Carpentier, 1989, 200); they achieve what Nathaniel Mackey calls a “telling ‘inarticulacy’”—a slide away from explicit meaning that nonetheless communicates (Mackey, 1993,253).

But the “body” of the novel itself stutters, too, hesitates, skips, trips away from linear narrative. It “saves space” for the reader. At the end of The Cattle Killing:

Aren’t we lovers first, spirits sharing an uncharted space, a space our stories tell, a space charted, written upon again and again, yet one story never quite erased by the next, each story saving the space, saving itself, saving us. If someone is listening. (Wideman, 1996, 208)

On the one hand, these open spaces in the text are what Jay Wright would call “distributive forms of the sacred”— they make room for the unthought, the unexpressed, the spectral and the spiritual (Wright, 1986). But they also (or simultaneously) call out to entreat and entice the reader into intimacy and engagement, pleading for the rememberment of reading. “I pray you are not disappointed when I leave things out. Promise we can return together and sort out what’s missing. I can’t bear to think this single telling is my last chance, my only chance to be here with you” (Wideman, 1996, 264).

Last night I was thinking about the daunting situation of discussing Wideman’s work in front of Wideman. Sweating that task, to tell the truth. It’s about the vulnerability of his own self-inscription in the writing, first of all. But also about the way the work calls for such a face-to-face encounter, demands we speak these difficult and sometimes disjointed truths in each other’s presence, like the storytelling couples in The Cattle Killing, like Muybridge and Reuben, like Kwansa and Toodles, like Carl and Lucy, like John French and Albert Wilkes. The preferred form of exchange is the apostrophe — address and invocation, sometimes imperative — and it’s unnerving to find yourself faced with that voice in the flesh.

Apostrophe is inherently about loss, an intimacy longed for and beckoned from afar. The hope of Wideman’s fiction, though, and the joy of reading it, is that there can be something that opens in that limping moment of expression. As Wilson Harris has so long realized, a reinvigoration of the imagination might be possible precisely because of that very legacy of loss, if the possibility of the radically new indeed necessitates what Ernst Bloch calls “fissures of disintegration.” Or, in the words of Ralph Ellison’s Reverend Hickman in “Juneteenth”: “It was, as I understand it, a cruel calamity laced up with a blessing — or maybe a blessing laced up with a calamity...” (Ellison, 1965, 264).
That lacing weaves a kind of fabric. That lacing spins a romance, a voiced romance, a speaking jostled out of notation into motion. A romance with the jagged voicing of the unspoken and the unimagined.

This romance is danced thru, as Cecil Taylor would say, in that juggled, buoyant fabric. But in that musical weave (finally an oblique way of figuring a diasporic history where calamity is laced up with blessing, and blessing laced up with calamity) the way-out-of-no-way, the longed-for “cut”, is not at all a break in the fabric of time, not a tearing, not transcendence. It is a break in the pattern — a wrinkle in the smooth fabric — the unexpected gift of a new color, a new stitch. The chance opens that the pattern might shift, altered by the new. That wrinkle in time is the winking of Wideman’s words, the moment when light glints off the many facets of a jewel, and the echoing shimmer of the words we give back.

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“The Father-Son Paradigm as Microcosm of Diaspora: Theme, Style, and Structure in John Edgar Wideman’s Fiction”

Jacqueline Berben-Masi

The parameters of the present study include the whole of John Wideman’s works. First, from haunting allusions to the scattering of formerly united African communities taken into slavery, we encounter reliving the Middle Passage in *Hurry Home* and again in *The Cattle Killing*. Of particular interest, there is the inescapable identification between the Jewish and African holocausts, linked to Diaspora, “lest we forget” in *Hurry Home* and *Sent for you Yesterday*. Next, the destruction of family bonds tears apart parent and child, siblings, and ultimately, through anonymity and invisibility, the black man himself. *Reuben* brings us an example of fragmentation and dispersion of the African male body. Omnipresent ghosts of the past appear in things scattered by nature in *Hurry Home*, *Fatheralong*, and *Brothers and Keepers*, or those “Certain passionate African spirits” who “are so strong and willful they refuse to die” and “roam the earth, bodiless, seeking a new home” through the “serial inhabitation of mortal bodies” (Wideman, 1996, 15). Initially, the latter multiply the effects of Diaspora by again casting adrift black souls, but they gradually devour the lives of their host victims, thus condemning them to a state of limbo, another Diaspora, cut off from the community of “saints.” Prison, too, is an agent of Diaspora that separates families, walling off those elements mainstream society cannot otherwise control and effectively exiling them from their communities. Lastly, Wideman’s increasingly disjunctive style projects readers into a Diaspora of the imagination, one that demands reconstruction of the stories to fill in the missing figures. While “All Stories Are True,” the full tale is elusive because of the kaleidoscopic reconfigurations of the tantalizing shards of information provided, an apt image of Diaspora.
Thematically, in Wideman, the black Diaspora leaves its imprint of historic tragedy first in the dispersion of peoples and families; then, in the twinning motif that inevitably ends in severance and the feeling of inconsolable loss; and, lastly and most traumatically, in the destruction of the male bonding between fathers and sons that he seems to accuse not only as the root cause of present-day black Diaspora but also the rent in the racial and social fabric of the nation that it causes. Several Wideman characters seek to halt the process. Hence the heroic quest, a universal myth, underpins both *Hurry Home* and *Fatheralong* by renewing the son’s peregrinations in search of the father, who, once rediscovered, will confer his blessings, powers, and kingdom upon the man-child he recognizes as his offspring (Campbell, 1949). The father found legitimizes the child and resolves the issue of identity, one that Ralph Ellison has singled out as the African-American obsession of the XXth century. By contrast, Diaspora effaces the trail; it blurs the evidence; it frustrates the need to identify one’s roots; it cuts off communication and destroys community.

Wideman’s entire opus has been qualified as a Middle Passage, symbolizing that journey between the African homeland and the land of bondage, even if its scope encompasses the psychological transition of the loss of innocence in a racist society. He does not discount the endless, nefarious effects of the Middle Passage which denatured the lives of those who survived it, but also their descendants, to the last generation. The prefatory chapter, “Common Ground” in *Fatheralong* states outright and all in capital letters: “WE ARE IN THE MIDST OF A SECOND MIDDLE PASSAGE” (Wideman, 1994, xxii). The significance of the theme to the writer casts Diaspora into a central position. Diaspora, the catastrophe which preceded and followed that Middle Passage, from capture and deportation to the auction block, then in the migration from rural South to urban North, and ultimately in the devastation and desertion of black neighborhoods and communities.

At the heart of its disastrous consequences is the sabotage of the male bonding between fathers and sons, thus forming a vicious circle, which, in turn, accelerates the process of Diaspora. Instead of a celebration of approaching maturity as a rite of passage that complements the severing of the psychological umbilical cord, the social separation of the young man from the mother’s domain and entrance into the men’s circle, an atmosphere of mourning surrounds the physical or psychological sundering of the paternal-filial link. That cleavage of male bonds precipitates a never-ending quest for the lost ascendant/descendant, as Wideman’s father-son characters nurse an open moral wound. Estrangement shapes the father-son paradigm. Critic Yves-Charles Grandjeat sees the father-son conflict as Wideman’s overriding obsession: the anguished question writes itself between the lines:

Car il faut le dire avec force, *la première question* autour de laquelle gravite avec angoisse son écriture, c’est celle-ci: comment être père ? Comment peut-on être père, être un père digne de ce nom quand on est Noir aux Etats-Unis aujourd’hui ?

(Grandjeat, 2000, 69.)

In free English translation, “How to be a father? How can one be a father? A father worthy of the name, when one is black in today’s USA?” Whereas Grandjeat’s rhetorical question defies resolution, it suggests active soul-searching and proselytizing. If Wideman’s texts resemble South Africa’s post-apartheid “truth commissions,” the goal is healing, after wiping the slate clean. Wideman treats the father-son conflict as a literary truth commission. The telling is necessarily painful: the individual father’s desertion of his family and the collective emasculation of the black man are intertwined themes, at times...
juxtaposed, as in *A Glance Away* when recovering drug addict, Eddie, suffers from recurring nightmares of lynching, with its inevitable castration (Wideman, 1967, 24). His north to south itinerary to the mythic and ironic "home" from which his forebears came revisits Jean Toomer's Kabnis in *Cane*. Kabnis and Eddie undertake their heroic journeys conscious of the real dangers for a northern black in the white south where the threat of lynching destabilizes and isolates them.

Forty years after *A Glance Away*, *Fatheralong* renews the quest tale along a similar itinerary. Here, the author brandishes his political engagement by addressing a Jeremiad to all Americans in general, but to blacks in particular:

> This country, as it presently functions, stands between black fathers and sons, impeding communication, frustrating development, killing or destroying the bodies and minds of young men, short-circuiting the natural process of growth, maturity, the cycle of the generations.... Unless enough of us transform ourselves, subdue our selfishness and shortsightedness and thereby change the direction the country is going, the prospects for young black men, all young people, won't improve. Young people understand their peril, are voting with their feet. They're long gone. Live and die elsewhere. (Wideman, 1994, 66-67)

In Wideman's creative universe, fathers forsake their sons and sons betray their fathers as if under the spell of some ancient curse that will ultimately lead to total isolation, moral and/or bodily death, and ultimately, the disappearance of the race. In evidence thereof, note that in *A Glance Away*, Eddie never speaks of his father, absent at his birth, but of his grandfather, Daddy Gene, present. Childless Cecil in *Hurry Home* mentions only Uncle Otis who named him and counseled him; he mourns his miscarried son, fantasizes about impregnating Estrella, the Spanish prostitute, yearns for procreation, for fatherhood. After his therapeutic, imaginary reliving of the Middle Passage, refurbishing his self-image by association with the black kings as "El Moro." Cecil appears reconciled. In stark contrast, there is little sympathy lost on Webb, the white father of a black son he has never met, another "Johnny-come-lately dad" who seeks his image in replacement figures, of whom Cecil is the freshest recruit. Might the blatantly artificial kinship between Webb and Cecil be emblematic of the lack of mutual knowledge that separates fathers from sons in Wideman's universe? Cajoled by the mother, John the son and Edgar the father in "Across the Wide Missouri," dutifully observe the ritual that brings the two of them tantalizingly close to the symbiosis the child craves, yet the desired rapprochement does not occur. Edgar in *Brothers and Keepers* tries to get adolescent Robby back under control before the youth's rebelliousness can carry him beyond the father's reach, but Robby challenges his father to a fight, thereby refusing due respect and externalizing the abyss between them. Both are losers in this encounter. Edgar's frustration and anxiety over the incident are the price he pays as the inevitable fallout of their failed rapport. Beyond the violence and humiliation in the father's loss of authority over his son, the removal of the latter from under the father's roof leads to the youth's disappearance, to his becoming invisible by dissolving into a series of other worlds. Like a cancerous cell division, Diaspora exponentially accelerates the malignancy. Robby rejects not only his father as a man, but also Edgar's mediocre economic situation in favor of pursuing "get-rich-quick" dreams and schemes that backfire; his penalty is an ironic step backward into servitude, like his slave forebears. In prison, Robby's very essence and existence are in constant jeopardy. He has become a number, perhaps even a commodity now that prison management is open to public bids, but his humanity is of equal unimportance to his keepers as to the slave masters. Worse, he is cut off from his own
whose access to him is severely restricted. *Fatheralong* discloses that Edgar has never visited Robby in prison, as if not witnessing the fact personally could belie its truth. Even gentle, old Mr. Mallory in *Two Cities* had abandoned his wife and children to fight World War II, but never returned for reasons too emotionally complex for rational explanation.

8 If indeed it is virtually impossible to be a black father in white America, one fit for the role, to whom can the child turn? The adage, “the child is father to the man” makes a different chord vibrate for Wideman. Preacher Richard Allen undertakes dual responsibility in “Fever” when he espouses the African notion that time is circular rather than linear and extrapolates the notion to procreation as well: “We are our ancestors and our children” (Wideman, 1989, 132) suggests far more than the commonplace that our childhood experience is formative in determining the adults we become. Yet again, Preacher Allen’s entreaty, “Pray for me, child. For my unborn parents I carry in this orphan’s potbelly.” (Ibid, 156), seems nonsensical or arcane. Reset into the context of Diaspora, the line loses it ambiguity: “unborn parents” because of Wideman’s notion of Great Time wherein past, present, and future are one, but also because Diaspora has turned the world topsy-turvy.

9 Fortunately, an African tradition transplanted to American soil is perpetuated when the black community as a whole is entrusted with nurturing the many “orphans” and outsiders. Grandfathers and uncles, surrogate fathers, guides and mentors are left to perform a quasi-patriarchal role. The simple-minded child/man Clement in *Hiding Place* trusts in Big Bob, the Barber. Albino Brother Tate of *Sent for You Yesterday* is an adopted child. By his example and teachings, Ryan, the rebellious old slave who was stolen from Africa as a child and who venerates Damballah, the serpent Father and god, the archetypal African father figure, makes a disciple and spiritual son of his anonymous young observer. Both seem content to accept that Damballah’s only fatherly gift is the blessing he can bestow, a meager inheritance in a very material society. Having deserted his own wife and children in *Philadelphia Fire*, Cudjoe, across the miles and the waters, “adopts” the orphan rebel, Simba, escaped or rather risen, like the Phoenix from the ashes of the MOVE firebombing. Thus does Cudjoe—perhaps the same character kidnapped as a boy by Waddell, another irresponsible and unscrupulous father—develop a new consciousness and vocation that culminates in his mission to find Simba. Cudjoe’s spontaneous paternal instinct toward the child signal his transcendence; only now is he psychologically ready to assume fatherly responsibilities. In contrast to these surrogates, the official generator is a mystery man clad in an emotional cuirass, a fortress of “invisible walls” in Wideman’s words, that protects his heart from the loss he intuitively knows he must endure, and makes of his silence the eye of the hurricane, the only “space” where communication occurs.

10 Hence, there are means to fight back. *Fatheralong* chronicles a belated attempt to reconnect: John and his father, Edgar, set out to reclaim their respective fathers and grandfathers and those who preceded them. Their “success” however is mitigated: the pioneer fathers and grandfathers are dead and gone, their bodies often consigned to unmarked graves; the “middle generations” have abandoned the epicenter of the ancestor’s town, leaving as testimony of their passage the dilapidated farm homes they once occupied; the sons and grandsons are often in prison, effectively “removed” from this world. Although differently structured, the quests in *Fatheralong* and *Hurry Home* for identity and reconciliation pursue an ideal meaningful, male relationship based on
mutual respect, complicity, trust, comradeship, companionship, and counseling. Its absence brings negative images, the sense of humiliation and failure.  

*Fatheralong* seeks out the missing partners and the emblems of their manhood, the key to regaining the lost kingdom. This work is both celebration and mourning, for if one tantalizing piece of the puzzle is found, the picture is incomplete. Missed opportunities, faulty connections seem to be the family hallmark. The measure of the compromise can be taken with Edgar’s ironic return to the low-income housing units for the elderly that are one more symbol of Diaspora, the social separation of the parents from the mature child’s domain, a banishment into the desert. This isolation makes him miss his grandson’s wedding ceremony, a rare occasion for which his family has assembled. His only compensation being to watch the video they had made. He is present, but nonetheless a non-participant in the events, just as if he had gone to the cinema—or if he were a ghost. Despite his finally getting to embrace his assembled progeny, he can never recover the essential moment of union and reunion.  

The final pages of *Fatheralong* move the debate to a more spiritual plane; the external journey is duplicated by an internal voyage deep into the soul of John as father of Jake. As in *Brothers and Keepers*, the work is structured around a double helix: as the father’s fortunes rise, the son’s descend, and vice-versa (Berben-Masi, 1985, 21-32). Thus John’s prayer beneath the vault of nature’s temple allows him to vent his anguish, but not to undo the evil or to obtain a miracle. His keening for his lost son in prison, an institution that paradoxically encloses yet disperses populations, reopens the Diaspora wound. For Diaspora in the African-American experience is not just the events that sent its children scattering over the earth; it is an ongoing, omnipresent, and malevolent process carried out by economic and political forces that perpetuate physical separation via social, emotional, educational, and cultural factors, as Wideman repeatedly denounces.  

The dissipated inheritance left by Diaspora may have created Utopian expectations alien to any normal filiations, all the more so in a vulgar American culture that undermines respect and leads to family breakdown. The conflict that surfaces in much of his writing eventually leads to emasculation through denial of the place grown man and man child should naturally expect to hold. Are the sons greater victims than the fathers, as Grandjeat asserts? Are the fathers bad husbands justly put on trial by the wives they had demoralized by their “unhinged” macho behavior (Grandjeat, 2000, 61)? Is Wideman indeed writing from a feminist position that excoriates all fathers, as Grandjeat insinuates, in counterattack to Mbalia’s screed? Of course, these judgments may be deliberately provocative. Can one ascertain who is the greater victim, father or son? Is not the father, astride both roles, prey to continuing a pattern of disruptive behavior he has witnessed and seen others engage in? How is a man to follow the straight and narrow path of “proper conduct” when the folk culture adulates the baad man, the street hustler, the womanizer, the hard drinker, the armed fighter? (Hoschild, 1995, 191-192, 210-211.) And when mainstream society seems to impose a “Numerus clausus” or quota upon the minorities it will admit into its fold? In the last section of *Fatheralong*, John’s aporia, his inability to bypass conventional banalities whenever his son Jake calls home from prison, leaves the poet father inarticulate before the emotional intensity. The silence over the phone is echoed by another; John’s paternal prayers seemingly rise to a deaf heaven or to yet another absent Father image. As do Cecil’s for Simon and Brother’s for Junebug when they pray for their dead sons, proffering them posthumous advice about life, trying to maintain the momentum and so the illusion of a live dialogue and an intact link.
Thus, the father-son rift incapacitates and casts into limbo its victims. It can upset carefully made plans, as in the *Lynchers* when Thomas Wilkerson’s father, “Sweetman,” ruins the first encounter with the son’s fiancée, then throws away his own freedom and future in a drunken bout that ends in a fatal combat. The elder Wilkerson’s self-image is obviously predicated upon that of the hard-drinking, tough-fighting ghetto hero; but the fates leave him humbled rather than glorified for his exploits. Even worse, for his son, Sweetman’s debacle is instrumental in compromising both marital plans and the daring plot central to the novel. Two black victims are sacrificed in the place of the original white “transgressor.”

Mature black men like Robert Jones in *Two Cities* acknowledge their responsibility, their guilt, even a sense of having served as accomplice to the wheel of violence that cuts down gang members and innocent, nine-year-old bystanders. Whether this burden that, according to Harvard psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, affects half the black population of the U.S., be the inescapable heritage of centuries of Diaspora and the remnants of the institution of slavery that intentionally destroyed community and familial relationships or whether, as Wideman accuses, it be the dominant American values that privilege property over persons, the fallout from the racism that continues to afflict mainstream American society, ever in need of a scapegoat, ignorant of our own, home-grown have-nots, insensitive to, perhaps even scornful of non-Western cultural traditions, there is no denying the ravages done and still to come, unless the recommendations made in the *Fatheralong* passage quoted above are taken to heart and black men converse.

So pervasive is the theme that it penetrates the author’s artistic conscience to the point he does not claim full paternity for the stories he writes, sharing the honors with one or more tellers, often female relatives, but at least once with a son. Thus, the fictional letter penned by John but signed in the text by Dan Wideman that clotures *The Cattle Killing* again puts another voice, another authority into the tale. All critics point to Wideman’s disjunctive style and structure, some with admiration for his versatility, others with resentment for the extra effort required of the reader. From *A Glance Away* to *Two Cities*, three separate story lines intertwine. The fragmented and dislocated narrative voices that relate in an anonymous chorus the equally refracted tales corroborate the main narrator’s authenticity even as they diminish his narrative presence and weight. At times, John resists surrendering control of the word, as he confesses in *Fatheralong* when he recalls how he behaved like a peevish child while Edgar gleaned essential information by palavering with Littleman: in the old relative, John had not discerned the helpful guide who would empower them on their quest; bored and impatient with his elders, he had not been initiated to the rituals of the private language of personal experience that the two older men engage in, full of allusions hermetic outside of their context. He was not ready to listen, the principal criteria to be worthy of receiving the gift of telling, as Liam explains to the anonymous narrator character in *The Cattle Killing* (Wideman, 1996, 131). Yet, as John comes to realize, Littleman is providing essential help, without which their search would have come to naught. The anecdote that characterizes John underscores the communications gap between generations even for those aware of the problem.

If the curse of Diaspora is prophesied for God’s Chosen People in Deuteronomy: “The Lord make thee to fall down before thy enemies, one way mayst thou go against them, and flee seven ways, and be scattered throughout all the kingdoms of the earth” (Deut. 28:25), the first wave of its realization dates back to the ninth century B. C. E. Note, however, that the term itself was quickly adopted by Christ’s apostles for those Christians living outside
of what was then Palestine. Though Diaspora is the Greek for “dispersion”, suggesting Mediterranean origins for the concept, its application to the African-American experience in no way misappropriates a significant part of Jewish history. Certainly not in Wideman’s universe. The protagonist of Sent For You Yesterday shares in the Jewish suffering in the episode that evokes Jews being deported in freight cars to the death camps. Thus does the defining experience of the Hebrews fleeing before various conquerors, most notably the ancient Babylonian exile, renew itself in the Jewish deportees being “ferried to Hades” under a modern barbaric regime, with three centuries of African Diaspora between.

Significantly, Wideman had already begun to universalize the suffering of the scattered, decimated Jewish tribes by making an implicit parallel in Hurry Home, which directly confronts the Middle Passage and offsets it with the Moors, victorious over the southern Iberian peninsula. That selfsame defining experience was the fate of African peoples carried off to bondage in the Americas or of Jews. Ultimately, the Moors dispossessed of their holdings in Europe and sent into exile repeats Hebrew history and anticipates the Jewish eviction from Spain at the end of the fifteenth century. This was the conquest of Spain by the Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, the same queen who financed Columbus’ fleet. In the context of Diaspora, Columbus himself is an ironic agent. To begin with, his voyage coincides with the decree that resulted in the “ethnic cleansing” of Spain. In discovering the route to America, Columbus inadvertently mapped the oceans for the slave ships to ply during the Middle Passage. His dreams of a Utopian society based on peace and cooperation between peoples as he claimed the newfound land led instead to setting the stage for the major African Diaspora. To complete the circle, in Orthodox Jewish circles, historic evidence is cited that Columbus himself was the scion of a Genoese Jewish family; some maintain that his grand adventure was largely motivated by the desire to find the ten lost tribes of ancient Israel. Thus, a connection between Diasporas past and future, in the old world and the new, can be intuited in Columbus’s exploit. Hurry Home does not mention Columbus; the sacred American symbol of the statue of Liberty in New York harbor is mocked as the lady with the ice cream cone; Cecil’s journey undercuts the founding myths of mainstream America: departure, not arrival, spells liberation.

A recurring leitmotif in Hurry Home is directly bound to the themes of Diaspora and lost identity: the multiple references to the black kings who conquered, then ruled and developed Granada. Their reign was the antithesis of Diaspora: a united black kingdom, the remnants of whose flourishing culture leave us breathless in admiration centuries later. Their technical achievement of making the dry desert of their part of Spain blossom by channeling water from the mountains anticipates the modern miracle of Israel where agriculture has dominated a hostile nature through irrigation—and through the reversal of the process of Diaspora, a reclaiming of a heritage. The black king in the painting Cecil returns to contemplate over and over, “The Adoration of the Magi”, reasserts this same dignity and power. The dark figure, richly clothed, is on an equal footing with his fellow kings or wise men. Law student Cecil, ridiculed and harassed as “the Magistrate” by the youth gangs in his home neighborhood in transition, seems empowered by association with the black kings when nicknamed, “el Moro” in Spain. He thinks of himself and his adventures in the third person, in his new—albeit ephemeral—heroic identity. And thanks to his experience, he can resist and overcome the centrifugal pull of Diaspora by returning to his wife, Esther. The ressentiment, as Frederic Nietzsche named the
phenomenon of a structure of negativity typical of both impoverished black Americans and lawyer protagonists, seems to have abated, thanks to the moral inheritance and self-esteem realized in identity partially recovered. (Weisberg, 1984, 1-2)

20 With Reuben, Wideman seems to be engaging in Afrocentrism as a palliative to the evils of Diaspora. To briefly recall, Afrocentrism is the belief in an African Family of Man, one originally homogeneous people with dignifying Egyptian roots. The theory credits these black Egyptians as the true originators of the philosophy and values later copied and espoused first by the Greeks, then by the entire Western world (Shipley, 1997, 191-204). The title character exemplifies that Egyptian connection, for Reuben brings both the Diaspora theme and the Egyptian myth/heritage to the fore in the allusions to and comparisons with Osiris. By implication, Reuben’s twin participates as victim in the reenactment of the slaying and dismembering of Osiris, the adulterous procreator of Anubis, rival to his impotent twin brother, Seth, who ordered the murder, dismemberment, and scattering of Osiris’ body. Wideman leaves to his reader’s culture and imagination the task of drawing the parallels between the myth, the novel, the real and symbolic missing brothers that together constitute a lament for a lost civilization, lost because of the disbanding of its members, their diffusion and hence dissolution in the sea of white America, their loss of definition, self-respect, and identity.

Naturally, the theme conjures up the “how” as well as the “what” in Wideman’s writing. The very shape and structure of the novel reflect this shattering of lineage, leaving a collection of potent spirit packages, prenda, a pundle, a paquet congo, assembled by Reuben as part sorcerer, part lawyer, another black king and wise man (Thompson, 1984). These eclectic mixtures of elements —minkisi— capture a flash of the spirit —a link perhaps with a ghost, a helpful soul. Reuben’s amulets and incantations are the indispensable black complement to the hermetic jargon of the white man’s law and its often unequal application to black Americans. As a self-taught jurist, Reuben’s legal practice is restricted: he must collaborate with a member of the bar to validate his efforts. Reuben is an unrecognized son of his chosen profession, a non-member of the official body. His vocation enables him to help others, but without a law degree, he can never be joined to the body of the bar. The parallel with the twin carries over to Reuben’s relationship with his “colleagues” —he is the cut-off member, in both senses. Like Osiris, the pieces of whose reassembled body remain short of a key element: his penis, male identity, gets sacrificed. Reuben’s love story with Flora is interrupted before coitus can take place. His masculinity is mocked by the student lawyers from the fraternity house where Reuben, like Cecil, is the janitor. His life is nearly snuffed out in the fire set by the frat brats and Flora is burnt to death, a lost love never to be replaced, another emasculation.

Returning from the symbolic to the stylistic and structural, in Reuben, critics variously see the compositional fragmentation, repetition, riffing, and rhythms as imitations of different musical genres. Thus, Reuben has been analyzed as an appropriation of a blues style that some black musicians define as black life itself, others as the laughter that keeps you from crying. The novel’s structure could also be a jazz form, totally unpredictable, a shower of small packages of magic, spontaneously yet deftly assembled, each capable of exploding into a new theme or shooting off into a totally different direction (Casmier, 1998). Scat singing and glossolalia, for example, explode lyrics and score into fragments. The music and poetry are there, drawing us into the song, but forever leaving us readers with the sensation that we have overlooked something, that a few bars have been left unscored, incapable of being captured on the printed page or ir
between the lines, inviting us to improvise on the theme, or to respect the silences. They are like those absent members of the African American Family of Man, a dream, an obsession repeated in the form as well as in the content. In the multiplicity of voices that has become John Wideman’s trademark, voices whose testimony must be pieced together, speak the souls of the dispersed Africans. These voices vying for the opportunity to make their stories heard represent their conscience and consciousness, the ghosts of Diaspora forever haunting the core of Wideman’s creative universe wherein he attempts to catch that “flash of their spirit” as the trace of their existence and refusal to vanish from the Earth.

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**NOTES**

1. See Wideman, 1984, 1994 and 1999. I am indebted to Michel Feith, who first called my attention to imprisonment as a form of Diaspora during discussion at the *Callaloo* symposium for European contributors to the special issue on Wideman criticism in the spring of 2000 (22.3).

2. At Geneviève Fabre’s October 2000 Diaspora conference in Paris, choreographer-dancer Dean Moss performed “Tale Telling Telling”. Making chalk diagrams on the floor, he sketched out, danced, and related the destruction wrought by generational abandonment. The space he drew was a semiotic square, starting with the man’s home circle, the creation of new circles with children, abandonment and the multiple paths pursued in search of the father’s father, ending most often in a failed quest, missing the absent brother, seeking out risk, pain, and fear to overcome them and survive, to achieve that new definition of black manhood for himself, and to communicate it to others. So, too, does Wideman. Confronting the father-son obsessions, Moss portrays the grown child’s need to link with his parents’ original joy in coupling; thus, he backtracks along the trail of their exodus in search of his roots.


4. The successful black career women interviewed in *Newsweek* (cited above) admit it is hard to find a man in their demographics. “Black men... have to find a way to survive in a patriarchal society that never intends for them to be able to play it out.... They have to redefine manhood for themselves. And they’ve got to start that conversation with themselves”. (63) See also Hochschild’s tables in chapters 2-5, 7, 11, and the appendices.


6. That John, not Dan, wrote the letter, although the son indeed did find documentary proof of the existence and saga of the historical person upon whom John’s protagonist is based, was a personal communication Wideman.

7. The letters between Colombus and his father are all prefaced by the Hebrew letters, BH or “bes/het” (*Bahruch Hashem*, “Blessed be the name [of God]) just as devout Catholics head their missives with “JMJ” for “Jesus, Mary and Joseph”.

8. See Kennedy, 1997, for the history and analysis of the use of the law in America to safeguard white control over black citizens.
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Consciousness and memory cancel each other out.  
(Freud, letter to Fliess, 1896)

Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation.  
(Morrison, 1984, 384)

Critics of Toni Morrison’s novels have often dealt with the theme of memory (in German Gedächtnis and Errinnerung) that is central to creation in her work (Andrews, 1999; Fabre, 1993). Remembering shapes the narrative that espouses the ceaseless returns to the not-so distant past, the comings and the goings between now and then, and ultimately the circular motion of the production of memories. The literary text inscribes the tribulations of individual and collective history in and through what memory both holds up and passes on. The question is: can one shed light on Morrison’s writing starting from a reflection on memory? To do so, I intend to look at the excerpt that describes what she calls “rememory” in order to understand to what extent the staging of the workings of memory is akin to a fantasy. Morrison’s coinage is derived from the Black English “to memory” or “to remember”; it can be read as a “the narrative of a fable”, or “fabulation”, that figures the return of the repressed.

The main character of Beloved, the slave Sethe – with a possible word play on Lethe, the river of oblivion – willfully buries the memory of her infanticide. Only a hurtful process – “anything dead coming back to life hurts” (B, 35) – that requires wording can make it present to memory. Beloved can then be said to be a novel about the necessity of remembering in its relation to History’s trauma: the Middle Passage and slavery in America. Trying to forget may help one survive. Yet surviving means being able to confront that traumatic memory in the very process of reconstructing the scene of its happening. This figuration, that bears the weight of the return of memory, opens the way for its transcendence. It then permits one to “pass on” to something else, to take up the verb that stigmatizes intransitivity in the novel: “This is not a story to pass on” (B, 275). The “story” halts transmission. Conversely, transmission can only happen through the paradoxical telling of that story as “no-story”, as trauma.
1. Memory/creation: fantasy and reality

Beloved deals with collective as much as with individual memory, with America's amnesia about its past of slavery and the slave trade. Morrison has not written an autobiography but autobiographical elements enter the composition of her novels. In an essay entitled “The Site of Memory” she explains that the point is not to remember things precisely, but the creation of a character, or of a scene, finds its origin in an impression, an association, a concentration. One could even go so far as to use the Freudian term “condensation”. “Pieces” coalesce to form a “part”. For the writer the act of creation is akin to archeological research:

It is a kind of literary archeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. (SM, 302)

The metaphor of the site is explicit: it is an archeological site, loaded with the possibility of History, a necessarily incomplete History: fragments, remnants. These “remains” retain in their very “remanence” what cannot and will not be wholly erased. Starting from these remains, the construction of the past that finds its source in the imagination can begin. In the creation of fiction, the writer mingles “re-collection” with imagination, as well as with the feelings associated with the image:

What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image – on the remains – in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth. By “image”, of course, I don't mean “symbol”, I simply mean “picture” and the feelings that accompany the picture. (SM, 302)

No wonder that the metaphor of the veil, so recurrent in Black American literature – the veil of self-censorship in slave narratives, among others – should come back under Morrison's pen. She wants to tear that veil: “My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'” (SM, 302). In another section of the text, she uses the word “part” again, this time with the meaning of parting, lifting, putting aside:

If I'm trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left – to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement that stories that I heard – then the approach that's most productive and most trustworthy for me is the recollection that moves from the image to the text. Not the text to the image. (SM, 303, italics mine)

The “picture” comes before the memory; it tells what the memory means; it informs it. That definition is close to a psychoanalytical definition of memory in so far as it is linked to the visual. Like the patient who confides all he or she knows together with what he or she does not know, the image gives access to memory as soon as it appears. One can also take up the metaphor of the magic slate that Freud used in 1925 to describe the process of memory. The writer proceeds as follows: from the image, she moves to the meaning, and finally to the text. To illustrate this motion, she takes the example of the corn on the cob “that she sees” when she is working on the manuscript of Beloved (cf. Harding and Martin, 1994):

I'm trying to write a particular kind of scene, and I see com on the cob. To “see” com on the cob does not mean that it suddenly hovers; it only means that it keeps coming back. And in trying to figure out “What is all this com doing?” I discover what it is doing. (SM, 304)
The image keeps coming back, a sign that compulsion towards repetition is linked to memory, but in this case, not in a morbid way since the repetition is acknowledged. The image as picture imposes itself; it is linked to childhood memories. Here is the narrative of these memories:

I see the house where I grew up in Lorain, Ohio. My parents had a garden some distance from our house, and they didn’t welcome me and my sister there, when we were young, because we were not able to distinguish between the things they wanted to grow and the things that they didn’t. So we were not able to hoe, or weed, until much later.

I see them walking, together, away from me. I’m looking at their backs and what they are carrying in their arms: their tools, and maybe a peck basket. Sometimes when they walk away from me they hold hands, and they go to this other place in the garden. They have to cross some railroad tracks to get there.

I also am aware that my mother and my father sleep at odd hours because my father works many jobs and works at night. And these naps are times of pleasure for me and my sister because nobody’s giving us chores, or telling us what to do, or nagging us in any way. In addition to which, there is some feeling of pleasure in them that I’m only vaguely aware of. They’re very rested when they take these naps.

And later on in the summer we have an opportunity to eat corn, which is the one plant that I can distinguish from the others, and which is the harvest that I like the best; the others are the food that no children likes – the collards, the okra, the strong, violent vegetables that I would give a great deal for now. But I do like the corn because it’s sweet, and because we all sit down to eat it, and it’s finger food, and it’s hot, and it’s even good cold, and there are neighbors in, and there are uncles in, and it’s easy, and it’s nice.

The picture of the corn and the nimbus of emotion surrounding it became a powerful one in the manuscript I am now completing.

Unmistakenly, the personal memory of the family garden from which the children are excluded points to sexual difference, a distinction only faintly veiled in the little girls' inability to tell what can be eaten from what cannot. They cannot tell the edible, what can be consumed, from the inedible weeds. The parents' sexuality, already implicitly present earlier, resurfaces in the vision of their joined hands and of the reserved territory that is barred by the railroad tracks: “that other place in the garden”, or that place of the Other. The opposition has been gradually built up by the motion from the vegetable garden to the sexual space. In the next sequence, the children play while the parents take a nap. Transgression is then possible. There is no law, which is what is spelt out, among other things, by the inversion between day (sleep) and night (work). The parents’ “disappearance”, their absence, also signals lawlessness, since, not being there, they cannot forbid anything. Two taboos, the sexual, and what stands for it in Morrison's memory, the vegetable garden, are juxtaposed. Both spaces are forbidden to the children. In the narrative reconstructed through memory the garden yields fruit, sensual sweet warm finger food. The memory also tells that it is adult food. From that space of exclusion emerges the possibility of a collective (adult and children) gathering imbued with sensuality.

Although Morrison does not explicitly link that childhood memory to a particular scene in *Beloved*, summertime, the family garden, the parents' nap, the food shared with the neighbors, the uncles, and the extended family, suggest the passage in which Sethe and Paul D remember the time when Sethe and Halle, then slaves on Garner's plantation, made love in a corn field. From the image of the food that one seizes with one's fingers
(“finger food”), the writer frees a complex erotic scene. The ear of corn is both food one shares, but also food of partition. Slave work, fieldwork, the separation of the cob from its sheath and its threads, calls forth in its association to food, sexual intercourse, in the same way as both elements were linked in the writer’s childhood memory. The taboo of sexual intercourse is exposed at the same time as the food taboo is transgressed. That forbiddance is doubled up for the slaves by a dictate for procreation since sexual coupling was imposed by the logic of chattel slavery. Moreover, Paul D and his companions steal corn from their master. Their jouissance takes place within that space, that of theft and of the consumption of food that does not belong to them. The space of theft is also that of metaphor. Metaphor, that displacement from one space to another, allows the subtraction and the appropriation of what necessarily belongs to the other. Morrison also writes that eating corn is never what it appears to be, that metaphor signals theft, freedom, “flight”, precisely within a controlled space.

The ears of corn from the writer's memory become in the text of Beloved Sethe's memory in which Halle's body melts with cast away husks and silk threads torn off from the cob: “[Sethe] remembered that some of the corn stalks broke, folded down over Halle's back, and among the things her fingers clutched were husk and cornsilk hair” (B, 27). There is a mise en abyme of autobiographical memory, relayed by the character who does the remembering. In love as they are with Sethe, the other slaves' voyeurism is elaborated textually starting from the gradual disclosing of the cob, the baring of the kernels of unsheathed corn: “corn shucking”.

In Morrison's memory, the little girls were also excluded from their parents' sexuality, from their parents' garden. In the fictive scene, secretive sexual intercourse becomes public knowledge. One cannot not see the space created by the broken and folded down stalks in the field. The text constructs the scene starting from the autobiographical memory and by following a logic of inversion: “The jealous admiration of the watching men melted with the feast of the new corn they allowed themselves that night” (B, 27). From sexual intercourse one moves without transition to food whereas the garden and its produce appear before the parents' nap in the childhood memory. Corn is a metonym for sexual intercourse and conversely, sexual intercourse is nothing but a displacement from the infants' first relationship to food, that of need. The genital stage replaces the oral stage; the oral stage is substituted to the genital.

The memory is also that of Paul D, as if sharing food had to be translated in the text into the sharing of memories: “... now Paul D could not remember how they'd cooked those ears too young to eat. What he did remember was parting the hair to get to the tip, the edge of his fingernail just under, so as not to graze a single kernel” (B, 27, italics mine). The task becomes an act of sharing, of parting, which recalls in its very expression the veil ripped over the unspeakable. The male character parts so as not to hurt, not to scratch, not to graze. Excessive youth, immaturity, both topos and symptom in a novel whose central theme is the murder of a little girl is evoked by this food which should not be consumed. The ambivalence between the cob and the body persists through the use of the word “hair”. The following sentence is written from Sethe's point of view; she cannot help associating the sharp noise of the sheath, when it is taken off, to physical pain: “The pulling down of the tight sheath, the ripping sound always convinced her it hurt” (B, 27). The text then moves abruptly to Paul D’s point of view: “As soon as one strip of husk was down, the rest obeyed and the ear yielded up to him its shy rows, exposed at last” (B, 27). Through the creation of characters who symbolise “male” and “female” in their
relationship to sexual intercourse, the act of writing inscribes sexual difference in alternating semantic doubles: protection vs exposure, untouchability vs physical pain, shyness vs experience. The omniscient narrator passes from one to the other and thus shares with the reader the workings of difference within the slaves' imaginary, what Morrison calls: "the unwritten interior life of these people" (SM, 302). The advent of writing consists in this deployment of this register of images from the core of the childhood memory.

In an excess of sensuality and explicit correspondences, poetic evocation translates into a promise of freedom, chanted in the text like the lyrics of a song. The refrain calls for freedom in crescendo variations. The reader does not know whether they are uttered by one character, by both, by all the characters mentioned, all the slaves working for Garner, or indeed by the omniscient narrator: "How loose the silk. How jailed down the juice".... "How loose the silk. How quick the jailed-up flavor ran free".... "How loose the silk. How fine and loose and free" (B, 27). The narrative deliberately blurs the different points of view and re-calls the presence of sexual metaphor in the slaves' worksongs. The text exposes and enacts the reappropriation of this ability to tell without telling that the slaves have always possessed. Freedom, jouissance, spaces not controlled by the Master find in the metonymic play of corn their ideal expression. The feast stands at the antipodes of the horrors described by slave narratives, yet it also comes close to the horror for one touches at this point in the text upon the unspeakable of jouissance.

This example of the workings of an image that transforms itself into text after a series of displacements illustrates the creative process at the core of writing. Contrary to analytical recollection or to an impulse that might want to reach the goal of an exhaustive description of the past, the act of creation rests content, so to speak, with details yielded up by the act of remembering:

I have a memory of [a woman called Hannah Peace], and it's like this: the color of her skin – the mat quality of it. Something purple around her. Also eyes not completely open. There emanated from her an aloofness that seemed to me kindly disposed. But most of all I remember her name – or the way people pronounced it – never Hannah or Miss Peace – always Hannah Peace. (T, 386)

In the essay "The Site of Memory", Morrison also mentions the creation process at work in Sula and the place of memory in the composition of that novel:

I began to write my second book, which was called Sula, because of my preoccupation with a picture of a woman and the way in which I heard her name pronounced. Her name was Hannah, and I think she was a friend of my mother's. I don't remember seeing her very much, but what I do remember is the color around her – a kind of violet, a suffusion of violet – and her eyes, which appeared to be half closed. But what I remember most is how the women said her name: how they said "Hannah Peace" and smiled to themselves, and there was some secret about her that they knew, which they didn't talk about, at least not in my hearing, but it seems loaded in the way they said her name. And I suspected that she was a little bit of an outlaw but they approved in some way. (SM, 304)

Within the act of creation, memory and its aggregate of emotions are what matters: "What is useful – definitive – is the galaxy of emotions that accompanied the woman as I pursued my memory of her, not the woman herself" (T, 386, italics mine). Creation is memory work, work that stems from memory. Creative imagination is part and parcel of the strength of remembering: "The act of imagination is bound up with memory" (SM, 304).
Morrison closes her essay on the site of memory with the metaphor of the Mississippi floods. In stormy weather the river goes back to its old bed even when dikes have tamed it. Old Man River remembers his original place and reconquers violently what man’s work and willpower had taken away from him. The memory of water, fluidity and infiltration, flooding and remembering share the movements of overflow and access. The excess which makes both go back to the origin, the primal site before the detour because taming means breaking down, redressing, making right, straightening. A writer’s memory is wild like the river flow.

2. Remembering/"rememory": the site of the scene in fantasy

In Morrison’s syntax the word “rememory” changes category: from verb it becomes a noun whereas the noun “memory” becomes a verb. It is a reminiscence? A mnemonic trace? A screen memory? Or more than that in the novel’s poetic universe? Sethe explains to her daughter Denver that a memory is linked to a certain space where it dwells while the location has been transformed not to leave any trace of human presence, no imprint or sign that might feed memory. The dialogue between Sethe and Denver, after the latter has seen her mother hug the white-robed ghost who looks like her, is a series of interrogations. Denver asks her mother to tell her what she was saying:

“I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone but the place – the picture of it – stays, but not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.”

“Can other people see it?” asked Denver.

“Oh yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. And it’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm, every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more if you go there – you who never was there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over – over and done with – it’s goin to always be there waiting for you.” (B, 35-36, italics mine)

Sethe first mentions a time made of loss. The reader cannot help but link the passing of time to the sentence which, when transitive, paradoxically closes and does not close the narrative: “It was not a story to pass on” (B, 275). But time is also made up of what remains (“stay”). Time is both parting and staying, disappearing and remaining, flight and “being there”. Sethe describes the workings of memory, a combination of forgetting and traces, an alternative placed under the sign of the cycle, of re-turn: “re-memory”. Remembering gives way to “recalling”, a process whose crucial role in the psychoanalytic cure Freud underlined:

[The doctor’s] goal is to recall memory in the old way, its reproduction in the psychic realm. This goal, he pursues it even when he realizes that the old technique does not enable him to reach it. In order to maintain on the psychic terrain
impulses that the patient would like to enact, he undertakes, against the latter's will, a neverending struggle and when he succeeds, thanks to the work of rememoration, to get rid of what the patient would like to ease himself from through action, he considers this result as a triumph of the cure. (Freud, 1997, 112, translation mine)

The fantasy articulated around memory is stated in Morrison's text as the reality of places: “Places. Places are still there”. Time is scanion. Constitutive of the workings of memory and consubstantative with it it is made of forgetting, memory lapses, remembering, recalling. It makes room for space, or rather for place. Fantasy is anchored there, in a “being there” of place. The character of Sethe describes in fact the motion from individual to collective memory. The house burns, but the place remains, or rather the picture of the place. The irreducible quality of fantasy translates into a passage from inside to outside. Sethe seems to be naming in this dialogue the fundamental fantasy of the link between place and experience. The scene of the trauma is inscribed within space. Indeed, Freud spoke of “exhuming” memories. One could say that a “territorialisation” of memory takes place, a link to the soil is established in the motion from individual to collective memory. Individual memory is objectified in order to be fixed down. The scene of the trauma thus moves from its presentation in the individual psyche to a presentation without a subject. The text effectively passes from “my rememory”, a rememoration which is that of the singular subject, to “Place”, to “The picture of the place”. Indeed, psychoanalyst Gérard Miller sums up the articulation of the subject to fantasy as follows:

The reflection on fantasy is constructed upon the subject of the unconscious. Fantasy is actually the necessary consequence of the subject at the same time as it constitutes the limits of the symbolic functioning of the speaking subject. There is no subject without fantasy, but fantasy is what allows the subject to think that it can escape the supremacy of the signifier. (1987, 112)

Freud’s statements describes the three phases of fantasy as follows: 1) “A child is being beaten”; 2) “I am being beaten by the father”; 3) “The father is beating a child that I hate”. Transposed to Sethe's fiction, this “core of individual myth of the neurotic,” to take up Lacan's words, or fundamental fantasy, seems to make the trace of the subject disappear behind the visual impact of the image of the place, and ultimately behind that place itself. One could even read this passage as an allegory of the notion of screen memory. The irreducible quality of fantasy translates into the fading of the subject behind the place of the trauma: “A house has been burnt out there” (cf. B, 36) which becomes in Sethe's mind: “A child has been killed out there”. The primacy of place is written in the passage from the singular to the plural. Collective memory is constituted upon the fundamental fantasy of the link of the place to the scene of trauma: in the present case, Sethe's rape, her torture, the murder of her daughter. Thus this fable that stresses the fundamentally external character of memory tells the fantasy of a soil which maintains its link to an inter-subjective collective memory.

This mythological narrativisation of the process of memory leads to a foregrounding of the fundamentally external and indelible character of fantasy: “Out there” is repeated several times. It is what fantasy bumps into. Sethe describes a visualisation which is such that memory becomes a mental image, a “thought picture”. Memory detaches itself from the subject to subsist, stay, remain permanently in the place (in place) of its experience. How can that memory be “out there,” be “outside” to such a degree as to no longer belong to the subject? This aspect of Sethe's memory mirrors Zora Neale Hurston's inner memories (“memories within”) and could then be understood as outside memories or
“memories without” (1984, 3). However, how can “memory” be both the outcome of Sethe’s introspection—or her inner gaze—and be located, “stuck” to the very place of the experience which produced it? That place reaches then a degree of utmost reality: “That place is real,” Sethe tells her daughter. “The real,” writes Lacan, “is what is missing in its place.”

One may also read this passage as the fantasy of the link to the mother’s body, that “real” place of origin: the body of the mother and southern soil. Sethe’s infanticide would then be placed in relation to the mass murder of the slave trade. The subject’s individual story, shaped by the murder of a child, parallels a people’s History constructed upon the non-being and the animal nature at the core of the practice of slavery.

Let us go back to the scene of fantasy in Beloved. In Jean-Daniel Nasio’s words, fantasy is “a narrative that depicts an imagined scene with its places, its colors, its time, its light and its sounds” (1994, 168). In Sethe’s narrative memory becomes an object; it is external to the subject to the point of turning into an object. From process, memory becomes the production of a series of image-objects: “thought pictures.” These objects, as outside traces of a subject’s memory, become obstacles into which another subject happens to bump. The object “picture” has first become bound to a subject’s consciousness to then turn into an object for an other consciousness. This brutal encounter acts as a figuration of the cure in which the analytical relation – “that space in-between that encloses and absorbs the two analytical partners” (Nasio, 1994, 133) – contains both the analyst and the analysand.

Sethe describes a scene in which the other speaker in the dialogue is struck: he or she sees, hears, feels something that assails him or her since it belongs to that place, the “already there” of the subjectivity that produced it. The formal matrix of fantasy contains four elements, a subject, an object, a signifier, and images: “Everything is ordered according to a precise, generally perverse scenario, generally through a sentence in the patient’s narrative” (Nasio, 1994, 171). In the present case, the one who remembers becomes memory. The subject becomes a process of remembering. He or she gives rise to a hybrid object: a mental image, a “thought picture.” From a psychoanalytical perspective, one is indeed dealing with fantasy: i.e. with what one loses. The mise en abyme of fantasy leads to fundamental fantasy (Nasio, 1994, 172). At its deepest level, Sethe’s fantasy is articulated around the death of her child. Yet at the beginning of the novel, she also loses her memory: “[S]he could not remember remembering” (B, 39). In this radical staging of the process of memory, Sethe loses what she owns, what is hers only (“her rememory”) in order for that object to become somebody else’s (“a rememory that belongs to someone else”).

The sentence in the patient’s narrative around which fantasy is articulated would be in the present case, if one transposes the Freudian statement to Morrison’s text: “You bump into a rememory that belong to someone else.” Like the verb “to beat” in the fantasy analysed by Freud, the verb at the core of this fantasy is “to bump.” The sudden, chance blow received when one bumps into somebody else’s memory may be turned around. The memory that belongs to the other hurts; it strikes one, makes one fall down. These blows of the memory of the other are violent, indelible, “stuck” to the scene: “The picture is still there” (B, 36). The motionlessness, the fixedness of the picture pierce through the notion of the “always already there” of rememory. Memory’s repetition does not take place within an individual conciousness but memory, that has now become a process, is watching/waiting for the other subject, ready to catch up with him/her, as if the familiar
phrase “it will catch up with you one day or another”– in French: “Tu ne perds rien pour attendre” – were to be taken literally: “If you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you... It’s going to always be there, waiting for you” (B, 36, italics mine). The “always” of this waiting, halfway between pursuit and desire, its enactment in the blow and the enigma of its happening point to the subject of Beloved. Like fantasy, the ghost is a hybrid being. In a letter to Fliess, Freud describes fantasy as a half-breed, a being who does not specifically belong to either of the worlds from which he springs. Like a psychic formation in constant motion, fantasy is both conscious and unconscious. He called it the “black-white to show that fantasy changes register in the comings and goings between consciousness and the unconscious” (Nasio, 1994, 172).

At the end of her “mythological” narrative on memory, Sethe utters the sentence that justifies the murder of her child when placed back within the context of the novel: “That’s how I had to get all my children out. No matter what” (B, 36) She wanted to take her children out of the grip of these phantoms/fantasies that were on the look out for them, ready to assail them, to take them out of the site of memory, of the memory of the site. If one paraphrases the Freudian fantasy of the beaten child, the depths of the murderous act can be spelt as follows: “There, a (female) child is being beaten/There, a (female) child is being killed.” Fantasy is acted on but within it, the child’s murder can only be told in the following paradoxical way: “I am taking my child from the place – site of death/site of life – of her certain death, threatened as she is by the other’s reminiscences and I take her into a place where she shall be free from these assaults: i.e. death”. Indeed, Denver talks about her mother as a murderer: “There sure is something in her that makes it all right to kill her own” (B, 205).

If remembering is taboo in the sense that Sethe refuses to remember, Beloved follows the meanderings of memory’s journey to consciousness as a mechanical process where things are re-ordered after having been misplaced: “The click had clicked; things were where they ought to be or poised and ready to glide in” (B, 176). The moment of remembering is presented as a a series of concentric circles that Sethe describes physically around Paul D and mentally around the subject. Incidentally, Freud uses the same metaphor of circles for memory:

She knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask.... The truth was simple.... Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher’s hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where noneone could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. And the hummingbird wings beat on. (B, 163, italics mine)

To the traditional “out there” of the scene of memory’s fantasy corresponds the “over there” of the moment of the murder that is superimposed to flight: Sethe’s flight to the free states, but also her flight into death described here as a passage “through the veil”. For the metaphor of the veil returns to echo that veil of prudishness, of censureship that the writer wanted to lift, to part in order to invent the slaves’ inner lives. Sethe takes her children beyond the veil, to the other side of the veil, and she performs that act literally if one thinks of the dead child. This dead child whose name nobody can remember at the
end of the novel cannot be “reclaimed”, re-called. At this point, one comes up against the play on transitivity and literalisation which the French translates as reflexiveness (se rappeler).

30 The metaphor of that mother who collects her life’s most precious fragments mimicks memory’s effort to gather, to cull, to recollect, to give that memory a shelter. It is also akin to the creative act in the relation between pieces and parts. The “yes, yes, yes” of fantasy that inscribes the indelible character of the object-souvenir, its remanence and permanency, echoes in this passage the “nonono” of refusal, the rejection of violence, or its acceptance in the name of a withdrawal from a greater violence. The circle cannot be closed even if it tries to narrow down its subject. It inscribes in its center the void of the unspeakable, what writing cannot spell. Whereas the memory-object blocks, fills in, clogs, the re-call of the murder of the daughter points to a void, a hole, a place that has been emptied out, both loss and excess (Raynaud, 1993).

3. Narrative/re-creation: the color of memory

31 The narrative creates reality and substitutes for it several times in the novel through the character of Beloved. The ghost, this phantom, acts as the return of the repressed. Sethe’s second daughter Denver spins a web of words the better to hold up her fleeing sister, running away like water, who showed up one fine day without warning. The two sisters love to recreate in their dialogue the story of Denver’s miraculous birth, a narrative that only the mother can tell since she is the only one to have experienced birthgiving, a “delivery”:

The two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it: the quality of Amy’s voice, her breath like burning wood. The quick-change weather up in those hills – cool at night, hot in the day, sudden fog. (B, 78, italics mine)

32 To tell one’s story is described as an a posteriori recreation of experience, an act of figuration which takes time. But the metaphor of abrupt change (“quick”, “sudden”) and this switching between hot and cold recall the fog of that day, a necessary blurring, a liminal state between liquid and solid, “condensation”. The unspeakable of voice and breath, the narrative of birth become the birth of the subject in the alienation of language. It is symptomatic of the novel that Denver should ask to hear it several times and that the sisters should generate the tale of the birth of the latter through the words of the dead other. Their mother Sethe also learns that listening can be appeasing, can bring satisfaction:

Sethe learned the profound satisfaction that Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because very mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost... But as she began telling about her earrings, she found herself wanting it liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the events itself or her thirst for hearing it – in any case it was an unexpected pleasure, (italics mine,)

33 In the narrative of the past that Beloved demands, Sethe’s pain gives way to pleasure. The loss inscribed in the memory of events changes into the production of a narrative for the other that is motivated by desire (want) and an unexpected pleasure found in storytelling. The objectification of the other must happen for pain and suffering to give way to pleasure.
Further on, the text describes the surprising eruption of this memory that one thought was lost, but that is still there. Sethe folds and refolds a sheet after Paul D’s visit:

Then she folded, refolded and double folded it. She took another. Neither was completely dry but the folding was too fine to stop. She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind right behind the slap on her face and the circled cross, (italics mine)

In *Study on Hysteria* Freud reports the following exchange. He tells Lucy R.: “But since you have said that you did not like the professor”. Lucy answers: “I did not know it, or rather I did not want to know it, I wanted to chase it from my mind, never think of it, I think I managed quite well lately”. Like Sethe, whose task consists in resisting the removal of the repressed once the latter has come back to consciousness, the patient does not want to know (that she knows). The removal of the repressed, as in the case of any defense mechanism, consists in acknowledging that one always already knew and to go through other - in the present case traumatic- memories. They are indeed inscribed within Sethe’s flesh; the slap her mother gives her on the one hand and, on the other, the symbol of the circle and the cross (the circled cross) which is the Master’s mark. The trace that serves for the daughter’s recognition of the mother is at the same time the mark of her “chattel” status.

The folds and the refolds, the double folds of the sheets converge to support the analysis of a multilayered memory, akin to the folds in the sheets of the washerwoman or the ironing woman. The iron of slavery’s shackles can be heard in the English metaphor whereas the French tells of the comings and goings, the passing of the iron: "*repasser*". Memory lapses must be added to the irreductible loss of the mother tongue. Sethe no longer remembers: “What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma’am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message - that was and had been there all along” (B,). It is literally a language of no-return since the words are no longer there and the African soil has been lost. The return of the trauma ("re-memory") is spelt in the text precisely in opposition to the impossibility to recover this original language. Sethe’s first traumatic memory is that of being raped, deprived of her mother’s milk by Schoolteacher’s nephews. Mother’s milk – essential food and answer to need – runs into blood: but is it the blood of life (genealogy) or the blood of death (murder)? The bleeding child with the slit throat symbolically translates into self-mutilation. The infanticide is that other moment that Sethe cannot put into words, in place, around which she describes concentric circles.

Following a progress that contrasts with Sethe’s remembering, Halle’s mother, Baby Suggs, once a courageous and powerful woman, a female preacher for unloved bodies, gradually locks herself into a gray and black universe, a colorless world. She gives up her struggle. Her mental evolution towards death is described as a process in which she forces herself to think of colors, to go through the colors of the rainbow, one by one in her head to reach red, a color she will fail to get at: the impossible color of murder. “Pondering color” () means both to weigh the burden of color or race, while thinking what makes one go from one to the other while maintaining that unstable balance. Dividing colors into discreet entitiesledas to an impossible abstraction. What is white when white is so white that it becomes blue, and blue so dark that it becomes black? That will be one of the questions asked about Beloved’s eyes which were wells of darkness. Baby Suggs dies before the moment when she could have reached red. Paul D will reach it.
at the bottom of a heart: “Red heart”. Amy yearns for the color red of the velvet material sold in Boston: "In Boston they got all the colors. Carmine. That means red but when you talk about velvet you’ve got to say ‘carmine’" (B, 33). Stamp Paid fishes from the river the red ribbon to which still clings a bit of scalp: a macabre souvenir, a fetished fragment of memory:

Tying his flatbed up on the bank of the Licking River, securing it the best he could, he caught sight of something red in its bottom. Reaching for it, he thought it was a cardinal feather stuck to his boat. He tugged and what came loose in his hand was a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet wholly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp. (B)

38 Stamp keeps this ribbon:

He kept this ribbon; the skin smell nagged him, and his weakened marrow made him dwell on Baby Suggs’ wish to consider what in the world was harmless. He hoped she stuck to blue, yellow, maybe green, and never fixed on red. (B, 181)

39 Sethe, who had failed to understand the meaning of the old woman’s retreat, enters her bedroom and analyses this process. She herself in her desire to maintain a certain distance with her past, or in her words “to [keep] the past at bay” (B, 42), had reached a stage where she could no longer percieve colors:

Sethe looked at her hands, her bottle-green sleeves, and thought how little color there was in the house and how strange that she had not missed it the way Baby did. Deliberate, she thought, it must be deliberate, because the last color she remembered was the pink chips in the headstone of her baby girl. After that she became as color conscious as a hen. Every dawn she worked at fruit pies, potato dishes and vegetables while the cook did the soup, meat and all the rest. And she could not remember remembering a molly apple or a yellow squash. Every dawn, she saw the dawn, but she never acknowledged or remarked its color. It was as if one day she saw red baby blood, another day pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it. (B, 39, italics mine)

40 The process of repression is described as a mise en abyme of remembering. Sethe does not remember the fact that she could remember. What is lost is the ability to remember; she cannot remember the workings of memory. The visual aspects of memories also fail her. Dawn is colorless. Two colors forbid the process of remembering: the red of her child's blood and the pink of the marble tombstone on which she has had her daughter's name engraved: “Beloved.” Sethe passes from red to pink, ans stops there. This process is the reverse of Baby Suggs'. To remember means to allow the memory of the narrative of the child's murder, of her child's blood that she herself has shed, to come back to her consciousness.

41 At the end of her essay on the “site” of memory—as one speaks of an archeological site—Morrison defines her inner memories as follows: “These ‘memories within’ are the subsoil of my work”, taking up the words of her literary foremother Zora Neale Hurston at the beginning of *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Hurston uses the comparison with apparently dead rocks whose apparent coldness nonetheless contains the material of the “I”: “Like the dead seeming cold rocks I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me” (1984, 3). It is within the enigma of this death-in-life that memory works on creative imagination. The geological metaphor is nothing but innocent. It yokes the “myth” of memory as it relates to the soil (“formation” of a nation, of a people, “sites” of memory) to the metaphorical process at work in Black American literature.
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Works cited


NOTES

1. An earlier version of this essay appeared in French in *Etudes de poétique* (Raynaud, 2001).


4. "Slaves not only picked cotton but planted rice, husked corn, rowed boats, rocked babies, cooked food, indeed performed almost every conceivable task to the accompaniment of song with an intensity and style that continually licited the comments of the whites around them" (Levine, 1977, 6). Levine refers to these songs which accompanied that specific task as "corn shucking songs" (Levine, 1977, 16).

6. In the monologue when she addresses Beloved, Sethe remembers and asks her daughter to remember, but she was too small at the time: “But you were there and even if you too young to memory it, I can tell it to you. The grape harbor. You memory that?” (B, 202, italics mine).

7. Another narrative instance of the difficulty in remembering linked to the fragmented body is exemplified by Ella who links the loss of her tooth and that of her child: “She remembered the bottom teeth she had lost to the brake and the scars from the bell were thick as rope round her waist. She had delivered but could not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by 'the lowest yet'. It lived five days never making a sound. The idea of that pup coming back to whip her too set her jaw working, and Ella hollered” (B, 258-259, italics mine). Beloved’s body is also dismembered: “Beloved. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her hips attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. She had two dreams: exploding or being swallowed” (B, 133, italics mine).

AUTHOR

CLAUDINE RAYNAUD

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The Devolution of Nuclear Associability

Percival Everett

1 We are all too familiar with Saussure's

\[
\text{sign} = \text{__________} \quad \text{Signifier} \quad \text{Signified}
\]

2 and likewise all too familiar with the notion that the line separating the signifier and signified is somehow sliding or shifting. And finally, we are as familiar with the instructional icon:

3 As elementary as these concepts might now seem, I begin with them as Semiotics begins with them.
So, I ask you to imagine a character Adam. Adam is deficient in a singular linguistic way. He is never quite able to say what he means. Adam often gets very close, but never realizes his intention. Adam might attempt to explain the Pythagorean Theorem, but can only manage to get across that the sum of the squares of two sides of a triangle equals the square of the third side, being unable to make clear that the third side in the hypotenuse. Likewise, if Adam means to draw our attention to a right angle, he can only manage triangle. So, that space or gap between the signified and the signifier is never quite crossed. We get:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{triangle} \\
\end{array}
\]

Since nature abhors a vacuum, something must fill that space. To say that it is nothing merely begs the question. For if Adam, with his peculiar problem were to intend to mean triangle, he would only be able to convey geometric shape. We have then:

\[
\text{Geometric shape}
\]
If we place above this Adam's attempt to offer the Pythagorean Theorem, then we see a ladder of sorts, which we might consider bounded on either side by some associative thread:

We can well imagine how this disability of Adam's can prove frustrating, specially when he attempts to, say, summon help to his burning house, he being capable only of directing the firefighters to a house near his or to one which looks much like his, his meaning becoming twisted in his frantic efforts, much as our meaning often twists.

Meaning is difficult enough without metaphor and metonymy. But imagine Adam undertaking to say something subtle and metaphoric. His meaning will not only fall short, but might, in fact must, be misconstrued by misdirection. His ladder of meaning breaks:
And depending on the situation in which his attempt is made, his broken meaning can accept (un) intentional connotational import, which we’ll call *contextual clutter*, and so looks like this:

That *new* meaning cannot be denied (whether acquired randomly or designedly), but it was not, in fact, Adam’s intention to make that meaning. Too heavy for his initial chain, the new meaning falls off and becomes an attempt at meaning all its own which might in turn be defended, regretted or repeated and certainly twisted.
The picture is yet another familiar one. I submit that it is an accurate and even a final representation of meaning. This is the stuff of meaning. Meaning is what we are and we are meaning. Meaning is molecular.

AUTHOR

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The Caribbean and the Mainland
Although living approximately during the same period of time and in the same tropics, Eric Derwent Walrond (1898-1966) and Vernon Anderson (1900-2000) never came into contact with each other. However, it may not be in any way irrelevant to bring together in the present study the works of these two anglophone Caribbean writers, who until recently have been either almost forgotten or largely ignored. A comparative approach may also add to the debate on colonial literatures and on the “frontiers of the Caribbean.”

Whether it was by mere chance or the hazards of chronology, the two authors remained very much unaware of each other’s existence, and their literary careers developed in worlds largely apart. Walrond’s began after his arrival in New York where, in the early 1920s, he started writing his first articles and vignettes in Garvey’s Negro World, then in various New York magazines before participating in Alain Locke’s The New Negro (1925) with one of his first short stories, “The Palm Porch”. While working as managing editor for Opportunity, he published Tropic Death, his only book, in 1926. After being appraised as one of the most gifted writers of the Harlem Renaissance for this collection of short stories, for some fifty years Walrond was somewhat forgotten after his disappearance from the New York literary scene.

Meanwhile, Vernon Anderson had left Jamaica to study medicine in various British universities and, in 1928, was appointed officer in the British Colonial Medical Service in British Honduras, in the village of El Cayo “at a post on the frontier between that country and Petèn, Guatemala.” It is only in 1987 that his single novel, Sudden Glory, came out in London in the Heinemann Caribbean Writers Series. Although it had been completed as early as 1952, it had failed being published in the United States at that time.

Whatever their other achievements, it is on these two books only that the respective fame of the two writers must rest. However, their “undefined” national allegiances or cultural
anchorages may perhaps explain why their works have long remained unclaimed. Both writers, who were born in what was then the colonial West Indies, found their inspiration in the westward Hispanic fringe of the Caribbean, where both resided for a rich and significant part of their lives. Even later on, Walrond seems to have kept a strong attachment for Panama, where he had migrated with his mother as a child and which remained a central theme in the literature he produced. In a lyrical autobiographical sketch, published in 1924 together with his short story, “The Godless City,” he evokes his first voyage to Barbados at the age of eight from Georgetown, British Guiana, where he was born, as well as a new crossing, five years later, on another ship bound for the Isthmus of Panama. “It was the most exciting moment of my life. No matter where I go, how many countries I visit, I love America!” he exclaims, yet adding, “I am spiritually a native of Panama” (Parascandola, 1998, 332). Although, his role in the New Negro Renaissance was early recognized and recently emphasized, “The Palm Porch” and Tropic Death, from the very first, were also criticized for their exotic stance. Walrond’s aesthetics as well as his literary concerns have often been seen as diverging from the goals of the New Negro movement. On the other hand, after a long exclusion from the Caribbean literary canon, Walrond is now considered as the true Caribbean writer by some West Indian critics.

Notwithstanding Anderson’s “growing interest in the literature signifying the ‘coming of age’ of Jamaica”, his interests may also have appeared strangely remote from the immediate concerns of national independence and racial assertion that developed in the West Indies at the time when he was writing Sudden Glory. According to Harold Barratt, “The novel’s themes are not distinctly Caribbean.” However, he adds, paradoxically: “The novel’s strength is its powerful evocation of the menacing, yet compelling, Central American landscape, the symbolic resonances of which link it with the equally compelling Guyana jungle of Wilson Harris’s fiction” (Barratt, 1994, 43). And the back-cover advertisement of the novel asserts that “it is in the finest tradition of Latin American writing, and that it could compare with the great works of Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.”

Such remarks obviously raise questions on the notions of exile, “exote” (Segalen, 1999, 744-781), exoticism, and the “frontiers of the Caribbean” as well as on the meaning of Caribbeanness in literature. It is through the individual study of these two writers within their historical and geographical contexts that these problematics will be approached here.

The phrase “external frontier of the Caribbean” was introduced by George Lamming in Toronto in 1985 when he proposed “to reverse a traditional world-view in which European rulers regarded their colonial possessions as outposts on the periphery of their world—the white, rich, politically and technologically powerful metropolis of Europe and North America” (Birbalsingh, 1996, 9). Defining the concept of an imperial frontier in relation to the Caribbean, Lamming shows that with the transformation of the region by the introduction of the sugar cane, this concept “had to shift to coincide with what we have since come to know as plantation society” (Lamming, 1996, 3). Lamming’s unifying vision of the Caribbean transcends the political fragmentation of the region by his claim that it “is opposed both by our common historical experience, and by a center of resistance that has been planted and is expanding” (Ibid, 4). These metropolitan centers “comprise what [he calls] the external frontier, and this frontier, particularly the
visionary progressive elements within it, has a very decisive role to play in the future cultural and political development of the Caribbean” (Ibid, 9).

8 Walrond’s life and writings may be seen as an illustration of this process of expansion, which had in fact begun in the mid-19th century to become an important feature of the New York Negro life by the second decade of the 20th century. While Walrond is mostly known for this early period, his experience obviously partakes of Lamming’s Caribbe an. When he left British Guiana, then Barbados, and later on Panama for New York, Eric Walrond was part of the vanguard of the successive migrations that led to the constitution of those Caribbean “external frontiers.” Yet what is emphasized in his fiction is not the construction of “centers of resistance” but pauperization, displacement and crude exploitation in the Caribbean region.

9 In Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants in the Harlem Community, 1900-1930, Irma Watkin-Owens proposes a more precise if less ideological explanation of Walrond’s personal achievement and his father’s failure, as well as of the family’s various migrations: “Migration in search of work, both within the setting of the Caribbean and to points beyond its geographic boundaries, has long been a way of life for the people of the region.” (Watkin-Owens, 1996, 11). Her first chapter, “Panama Silver meets Jim Crow,” offers a socio-historical description of the new exodus which, at the turn of the century, led rural masses from all parts of the Caribbean first to Panama in search of an elusive gold, and then to New York City at the time of the Great Migration to Harlem and the New Negro movement. Considering the period following the British abolition of slavery (1838), she describes a first wave of inter-territorial migration from the eastern islands to Trinidad and Tobago and to British Guiana, “at the same time that thousands of Asian indentured laborers were imported... The result was the evolution of culturally heterogeneous societies in the Caribbean with their own complex set of social dynamics” (Ibid, 12). At the time of her marriage Walrond’s mother was a Barbadian living in British Guiana. Walrond’s father, a British Guianese living within the frontiers of the British empire, joined the labor force recruited largely among the impoverished peasants of the decaying Caribbean plantation system to build the Panama Canal. But work in Panama only turned out to be but the passage from one system of exploitation into a no less harsher one within what had already become a larger empire.

10 Watkin-Owens’s study also accounts for the double aspect of this last exodus from the Caribbean region to its external frontiers—that of a cheap labor force, the peasant masses described by Dubois, and also of a West Indian political and intellectual elite.5

11 These various elements have been variously recognized, identified and interpreted in Walrond’s works, to the point that his short stories have been cited to document the sociological descriptions of the new Caribbean migrant societies. Autobiographical elements have also been emphasized and seen as the thematic structural elements of his collection of short stories. Hence two complementary and contradictory readings of Tropic Death.

12 Robert Bone was the first to offer a documented and detailed interpretation of Walrond’s literary production in “Masks of Arcady”, the section he devotes to some authors of the Harlem Renaissance. Focusing on Walrond’s “penchant” for the Gothic as a mode of the anti-pastoral in Tropic Death, Bone argues its sources are “both psychological and literary [and] may be traced to the anguish of a fragmented self”(Bone, 1975, 172-173). Tropic Death is not seen here as a collection of short stories but as an “exploration of the self moving back in time,” at the same time that Walrond’s own migrations from the
Caribbean to its external frontiers are described as “the outward and visible emblems of a spiritual journey: the Black Briton’s pilgrimage to Westminster” (Ibid, 173). The theme of racial discrimination, which prevails in Walrond’s early writings, is explained by the traumatic experience of the young Caribbean in his first contacts with American society. Walrond’s use of voodoo as the supernatural element that sustains the Gothicism of various stories in Tropic Death’s is then interpreted as a symbolic antidote to the poisons of racial hatred encountered in the Western world. It was at this point that Walrond discovered the possibilities of Gothic as a literary mode. He employed it to express that part of his personality which remained resistant to the white man’s culture: the black, African, pagan, ungovernable, inassimilable, or in a word demonic self that stubbornly refused to be ‘redeemed.’... Like Kurtz he journeys to the heart of darkness only to recoil from the horror” (Ibid, 173-174).

13 In his article, “El Africano,” Walrond, while describing the art of a Spanish Canarian artist, compares him to several writers: “Were he a literary artist he would be a combination of Balzac, Pierre Loti, Lafcadio Hearn, Joseph Conrad and de Maupassant.” Of these authors, seen as meaningful sources for understanding, in turn, Walrond’s own works, Bone retains only Loti and Hearn and the above allusion to Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness,” leaving aside the references to the other realistic authors (Bone, 1975, 186). In Hearn he finds the literary source of Walrond’s interest in Gothicism and further underlines the similarity in the two writers’ lives, their being “cosmopolitan, belonging to no one nation or cultural tradition” (Ibid, 187). Drawing the parallel to the point of representing Walrond as a sort of “doppelganger” of Hearn, Bone is led to conclude that they shared the same Darwinistic vision of Caribbean history, the victory of the “slave races,” an era whose “future tendency must be to universal blackness... perhaps to universal savagery... Tropic Death is in fact the veiled confession of a colonized black that cannot return to his primitive source” (Ibid, 202).

14 Although Bone’s interpretation offers a very keen and subtle understanding of Walrond’s writings, one cannot help recoiling from the horror of such Gothic gloom. If death informs Walrond’s tropics, there is also a lot of life and genuine humor and gaiety in the fictional representation that he gives of the Caribbean. To other critics, Walrond’s stories also reveal a wealth of human warmth and a sensuous luxurious beauty that is sustained by the author’s rhythmic and colorful prose. Whatever may have been for Walrond the shock of racial discrimination on his arrival in the U. S., a shock that he expressed in his early fiction and essays, Tropic Death, in a Caribbean perspective, cannot be read as an experience of such existential agony.

15 While always making it clear in his writings that the issue of race was primordial to him, and recognizing the racial basis of Caribbean societies, Walrond refused the Anglo world perception of a black/white duality whose symbolism he almost constantly excluded from his descriptions or narratives. Walrond’s world is one of colors and colorism is his technique. His Caribbean is no heart of darkness, and neither the authorial self nor the narrative stance in his short stories can evoke duplicate versions of Kurtz or Marlowe, as suggested by Bone.

16 For the two West Indian critics, Kenneth Ramchand and Carl Wade, “Walrond must be reclaimed from North America” (Ramchand 67), for his work can only be understood though the prism of Caribbean culture and society. Walrond did find in his American experience and the Harlem Renaissance “at least for a time, a racial solidarity and a political focus in an era when opportunities for these were lacking in his own Caribbean
environment” (Wade, 1999, 404). Yet, whatever the literary and aesthetic influences that helped shape his own literary career, his work is essentially Caribbean.

Both Wade and Ramchand insist on the realistic dimension of Walrond's fictional world, on its representational quality. His intimate knowledge of folk life and language, his strong awareness of the natural and social environment, the complexity of his response to social problems, all stand in contrast with the demands prevailing in the New Negro movement, McKay included.

Banana Bottom suggests that for McKay, as for the mainstream of the Harlem movement, literature is a strategy of self-definition, for the Walrond of Tropic Death an expression of personal, social and even universal reality. Yet McKay himself would later express a skepticism similar to Walrond's about the threat to the creative process posed by overemphasis on social and ideological agenda that emerge in his disagreement with Dubois (Ibid, 410) [emphasis added].

The Caribbean specificity of Walrond's works in relation to the Harlem Renaissance resides in the achievement of a universality within the particularity of his own personal representation of West Indian reality. "For Walrond the most accomplished black writing reconciles the demands of the private world with those of the immediate social context and of the wider community of man” (Ibid, 429). This openness that, according to Wade, he shared with George Lamming, might also be seen as a sign of his créolité. For Ramchand, Walrond stories go beyond the simple hardship-and-emigration themes to be found in so many West Indian works... Walrond is both moving his material away from conventional social realism and protest against the social order, and seeking to balance or complicate the tone of the narrative by adding elements that lie without the sphere of satire, protest or indignation.” [Instead of concurring with an allegorical interpretation of the stories, Ramchand also makes it clear that in Walrond's] “fictive world, so sensuously reminiscent of the tropical world which is its source, one thing spontaneously becomes the symbol of another... In the perspective thus created, man's inhumanity to man is only one aspect of a general fate." [To him Walrond's treatment of his subject is a form of realism that can also be found in] “the matter of fact treatment of the supernatural element in the voodoo stories [which] makes it acceptable as part of the natural order of things” (Ramchand, 1983, 70).

Walrond's use of voodoo would partake less of a Gothic vision of the Caribbean world than of a wider concern for a realistic representation of West Indian folk ways and culture that has prevailed in the Caribbean since the late 1960s. There is no hesitation on the characters' parts, nor consequently on the reader's, regarding the reality of the supernatural elements, which are accounted for and dealt with by resorting to the usual voodoo instruments or rituals.

For Ramchand, Walrond must of necessity be reintegrated into the history of West Indian literature, but it is also important to address the question of why “the larger projects of the talented man who had abandoned wife, children, mother and home in the 1930's, remained unfulfilled” (Ibid, 75). While acknowledging Walrond's failure to pursue a consistent literary career beyond Tropic Death and, after his departure to Europe, to achieve the great work he had been funded to produce, Parascandola insists that Walrond never stopped contributing reviews, short fiction and essays in various magazines while residing first in France and later in England, as evidenced by his bibliography of the writer’s works. These later articles, which still deal with the racial issue, as well as contemporary political topics or literature, confirm the reality of Lamming’s “external
frontiers" of the Caribbean. Ramchand’s concern that Walrond’s “life of exile, journalism, and vagabondage, its promise and strange failure is profoundly a part of the history and malaise persistent in the region of his birth” (Ibid, 67), has been given a response not only in Lamming’s reversed perspective but also in the recent debates on “exile” among contemporary writers and intellectuals of the Caribbean Diaspora, particularly in Canada. 10 This point will be developed further in a comparison between Walrond’s and Anderson’s Caribbean.

As indicated by Parascandola, because of his continued hope that he might complete The Big Ditch, his great work on the construction of the canal, Panama remained Walrond’s favorite source of inspiration when in Europe. At least five of the six stories and three vignettes, published in England in the latter part of his life, take place in Panama and are reminiscent of the collection of stories that constitute Tropic Death. The changes Walrond brought into “The Palm Porch,” his first Panama story, when including it in Tropic Death, may explain why Walrond’s impressionistic technique and his use of the short story, sketch or vignette were the modes that structured his writings to the exclusion of explorations into more extensive narrative forms, such as The Big Ditch. 21

To George Hutchinson, the first version of “The Palm Porch” is a “complicated and intriguing case of the American pan-African reach of The New Negro. Despite the ironic title of the story, named after the bordello at its center, there is nothing picturesque about the story’s ‘exotic’ tropical city” (Hutchinson, 1995, 410). Referring to the double quote (or misquote), in the story, of the biblical passage from John that inspired Conrad’s symbolism, he adds:

The point of view of Walrond’s story looks back at that ‘Heart of Darkness’ from the other side of the ‘veil,’ almost exactly inverting Conrad’s perspective and blurring his white/black duality: for Walrond individual Europeans are shadowy, interchangeable presences drifting somewhat pitifully if barbarously about Miss Buckner’s colorful porch of the brutally exploited and racially incoherent New World (Ibid, 410).

In the second version of “The Palm Porch,” which appeared one year later in Tropic Death, Walrond seems to have pruned the story not only of its manifest references to Conrad’s work but of many of the trappings that Hutchinson called “a glib exploitation of male oriented exoticism” (Ibid, 410). In the space of one year Walrond seems to have matured his style. Drifting away from some of the mannerisms that marked his earlier writings, as well as from the influence of Toomer’s Cane, he seems to have sharpened his purpose—as is also manifest in the 1926 Opportunity issue on the Caribbean that he edited. 11

In this new three-part dramatic narrative, the characters are portrayed in a dense almost terse style with only a touch of the baroque exuberance so typical of the Walrond manner. For instance, the white colonist is no longer fumbling with his biblical invocations, but “Gallant and half-drunk” and swearing, he expresses the only blunt reference to the black/white distinction in the text whose plot relies on more subtle racial hierarchies. 12

Walrond’s anti-imperialist thrust has been trimmed of all unnecessary comments, and although it is now more diffuse it remains as biting. 13 The long evocation of the destruction of the landscape with the building of the canal by the Americans has been reduced. It is now presented as a reminiscence by the main character of a past that is gone, and integrated into the action that is dramatically developed in the two sections
that follow. This condensation serves a double purpose: a more effective dramatization of the action and the foregrounding of a more comprehensive historical vision.14

In the first part of this new version, History is scenery. It is expressed in images of the destruction of the primeval natural environment, the intrusion of “a gang of ‘taw’-pitching boys, sons of the dusky folks seeping up from the Caribbean isles” (Walrond, 1972, 86), the groaning and vomiting of the sea with the digging “far into the recesses of its sprawling cosmos. Back to a pre-geological age it delved, and brought up things” (Ibid. 87). The shifting symbolic natural elements in what is described as a continuous flow of life not only serve as background to the story, but also make for a representation of the history of Panama and the Caribbean. History is no longer a narrative—it tends to dissolve into a visual evocation of the natural landscape in which markers of time are progressively eluded, the temporal aspects of the verbs indicating process, action, transformed into the expression of a timeless presence, a mythical essence.

With the aftermath there came a dazzling array of corals and jewels—jewels of the gripping sea. Magically the sun hardened and whitened it. Sandwhite. Brown. Golden. Dross surged up; guava stumps, pine stump, earth-burned sprats, river stakes. But the crab shell—sea crabs, pink and crimson—the sharks’ teeth, blue, and black, and purple ones—the pearls, and glimmering stones—shone brightly. Upon the lake of jeweled earth dusk swept a mantle of hazy blue. (Ibid., 87)

“The Palm Porch” shows Walrond at his best in his choice of the short form (whether the vignette, sketch or short story) for a representation of the Caribbean historical reality. For Walrond the writing of his great narrative, The Big Ditch, may have implied effects as disruptive and destructive as the building of the Panama Canal itself. “Tropic Death,” the eponymic last short story in the collection, has been seen as a geographical and autobiographical conclusion to the collection, the final stage in the author’s personal migrations in the Caribbean and, with his father’s death, his own coming of age. The longest and most consistently narrative story apparently ever written by Walrond, it may also have constituted a technical dead-end, for he finally returned to the shorter forms and more dramatic techniques of representation which he had used from the very first. His short stories rely on the pre-literary modes of writing which he was trained in during the two years he worked as a journalist in Panama and which brought him in contact with the «faits-divers.» Walrond’s interest in the chronicle of these small events in which are recounted the lives and deaths of those who do not count, is evidenced in many of his stories, but more particularly in “Subjection” (in Tropic Death), and “Consulate” (1936, reprinted in Parascandola, 1998, 305-309)—two stories which present two different treatment of casualties.15

Tropic Death presents itself as a mosaic of these various genres and modes, a polyphony of voices. It constitutes a collage of impressionistic descriptions, at times exuberant, and scenes of dialogues in which the multifarious voices appear on the page through a more visual than phonetic representation of patois. The orality of the dialect is transcribed in subtle variations of lexical and syntactic constructions, a language that puzzles and confuses the reader’s immediate understanding thus creating a feeling of strangeness, a kind of “unheimlich” inherent to exoticism. In his presentation of Walrond’s works, Parascandola offers a lexicon of various phrases or words, some of which are already signaled by the author’s italics, thus foregrounding their eccentricity.

In this dialogism, the authorial and narrative voices are fluctuating. Variously omnipresent, polymorphous, and almost always ambiguously elusive, they suggest an
impression of detachment which Parascandola explains by Walrond’s situation as the foreigner, the exile. Yet, this stylistic trait may also be seen to derive from Walrond’s function as a “passer” on the frontier — a bridge, a sort of go-between — opening a passage through what is too often perceived as barriers that divide center from periphery. Neither an “ex-centric” nor an exile, as a passer he is of here and there at once, in the immediacy of the present moment.

Vernon Anderson’s *Sudden Glory* stands in many ways in striking contrast to Walrond’s short fiction. It looks back to a Caribbean society that is still colonial, whereas Walrond’s migrations to Panama and New York City placed him outside the pale of the British empire. Although published after the independence of Jamaica (1962), and even of British Honduras (1981), Anderson’s novel occupies an ambiguous position on the external frontiers of Caribbean literature. As previously indicated, it was written in Jamaica in the early 1950s, on the author’s return from his thirty-year stay in Belize, before Jamaican independence, and finally published in London in 1987, after Anderson had definitely left his native island to live in Toronto. *Sudden Glory’s* setting is a small isolated microcosm on the Central American border of the Caribbean and on the frontier between colonial British Honduras and the province of Petén in Guatemala, as described below.

They had, earlier that morning, accompanied by a band of chicleros and baggage mules, crossed the border between Guatemala and British Honduras, at El Cayo. They were on their way to Shoonantonich [Xunantunich] which was the headquarters of the U. S. Consolidated Chicle Company and the location of an archeological expedition funded by the Nethersole Foundation. Dr Cutbush was the President of the latter and was making his first visit to the almost empty forest lands of Petén where, once, a peaceful Mayan civilization had flourished (Anderson, 1987, 1-2).

The novel itself is historically situated in the aftermath of the 1929 crisis which had serious effects on the economy of the region in that period of growing US economic penetration. It takes place during Ubico’s dictatorship in Guatemala (1931-1944), and Deodato Grana, the president of Guatemala in the novel, stands for President Ubico. The political situation is summed up in the caustic remark, that while for the Guatemaltecs these revolutions “formed the bulk of their diet the frontier question of ‘Belize the Lost province’ was something for them to chew between meals” (Ibid, 3). However, the isolation of the town of El Cayo, in which the local physician found “a purgatory of futility” (Ibid, 3) is slightly perturbed by the news of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (which situates the story more precisely in 1935).

The news he had heard on the D. C.’s ‘wireless’ was that Mussolini’s forces had invaded Ethiopia and, he thought, another colony was, thus, in the throes of birth. It was a conquest that did not, however, involve any stout Cortez and 500 hundred men, but rather corps, squadrons of bombers and bloodshed raised in the nth degree of (rightfulness” (Ibid, 3).

The novel is thus placed in a double context, a period that announces new histories of conquest and domination and an isolated geographical situation in the midst of a still wild natural environment. This situation is summed up in the local doctor’s witty but cynical following remark: “The trouble with living in a bankrupt and stagnant backwater of the far-flung British Empire was that it ‘could not, nor could ever have been, flung far enough’” (Ibid, 3). In its spirit and in its formulation, this comment cannot but evoke Aldous Huxley’s note in his journal written while on a tourist cruise in the Caribbean in 1933: “If the world had any end, British Honduras would certainly be one of them.”
Huxley’s statement, which read in its context is no more than a casual observation in a series of very anecdotal notes and incidental impressions, has come to be the most notorious definition of Belize. It has been turned into a definitive assessment, either accepted for its intuitive understanding of the country’s “abnormal” situation as a British enclave in Hispanic Central America, or rejected as the expression of the British colonial stereotype on a Caribbean colony. Zee Edged, the first Belizean writer to be known internationally for her first novel, Beqa Lamb (1982, also published by Heinemann), declared that such statements made her feel “it necessary to write back,” to take up the gauntlet thrown down by Huxley and other travelers of the Empire (Shea, 1997, 582). In contrast, Anderson’s view on that question, at least as expressed by one of the novel’s protagonists, may appear in keeping with the Empire’s condescending attitude to its Caribbean colony. A wry comment which gives the tone to the novel’s first description of the contemporary setting, it is pronounced by the local doctor who occupies the very same position Anderson held in reality.

Neither Anderson nor his novel have ever been defined as “Belizean.” Because of his citizenship, the author is presented as a Jamaican writer. Yet Sudden Glory is a product of Belize, if only because it relies so much on his author’s long personal experience of that country. The novel’s situation on the extreme confines of that disputed colony of the British Empire takes it miles away from the multi-ethnic and fragmented Caribbean society of the Belize described by Edgell or other contemporary Belizean writers. The setting in Sudden Glory has not much in common either with Belize’s perilous lowlands that sheltered the first Scottish pirates who settled on its shores washed by the Caribbean sea, or with the holiday visions of tour guides describing the colorful “coral islands of childish imagination” (Huxley, 1935, 29). Furthermore, the novel’s protagonists may hardly be said to partake of the motley population of the city of Belize, or of the Garifuna or the Hispanic communities, which have all been the scenes of most Belizean fiction. Set in the midst of the green ocean of the rain forest that helped maintain Belize’s economy and existence, the novel is Belizean in that it shows the pregnancy of its Mayan past, and the nation’s separate position and at once its intricately close relationship as regards Central America.

Anderson was also drawing on his personal experience of Belize when introducing one of the main themes of the novel. “I also had the good fortune to be at my portal—the village of El Cayo—when the ruins of the great cities of the Ancient Maya began to interest the archeologists. On several occasions I was host to two of the archeologists mentioned by C. W. Ceram in his Gods, Graves and Scholars—p. 425, Bantam Book.” Ceram’s book, which was translated into several languages, helped popularize recent discoveries in Mesoamerican archeology, but also the past explorations of John Lloyd Stephens who, with Catherwood, discovered the Mayan site of Copán (footnote no 21). In his Incidents of Travels, Stephens had already made the claim that Amerindian civilizations should be seen on a par with those of Ancient Greece, Italy or the Middle East, whose monuments he had visited and described in his books of travels. Ceram (1975, Ch. 4) also brings together those ancient civilizations and the newly rediscovered Mesoamerican empires—a comparison which also comes up in Anderson’s novel, as some of his archeologists developed an interest in Mesoamerican civilization after studying Egyptian archeology. In his letter to Heinemann, Anderson refers to Ceram as a source of documentation for his fiction—the interest of his archeologists for Mayan acoustics, their mathematical theories, their knowledge of astronomy as revealed in their calendar. The novel also makes it clear that
Mesoamérica is part of the ancient heritage of humanity that must be saved from destruction and oblivion.

Yet, the title of the novel explicitly refers to another cultural heritage, that of British literature and philosophy. Anderson asserts that its title, “‘Sudden Glory,’ is derived from Hobbes (1588-1679)—the 17th century rationalist philosopher. He said, “Laughter is a passion without name—it is a Sudden Glory.’ But the book does not deal with philosophy or psychology. It is very mundane.” (letter to Heinemann). The phrase taken from Hobbes’s essay on human passions serves as an epigraph to the novel. It is further developed through the archeologists’ reference to the polyporus that grows on the Erythryna orchid of the Petén rainforest. The plant, when used as a drug, might offer a possible clue to the enigmatic smile on the clay masks of the Totonacs, who by absorbing it may have “laughed themselves into limbo,” thus defying death and their own human limits (Anderson, 1987, 43-52).

Notwithstanding Anderson’s assertion that his novel does not deal with psychology or philosophy, the story develops on those very premises. It presents the confrontation between the scientists’ rationality and the world of Mayan beliefs and rituals which they are attempting to reconstruct as well as the natural environment which their scientific studies help to exploit. “Sudden Glory” refers simultaneously to the enigmatic smile of the Totonacs’ clay masks, to the deadly splendor of the flower’s beauty, and to the action as a comedy of the human passions against the background of the mysterious ruins of the Mayan empires (this last metaphorically and literally). A tragicomedy in fact whose outcome is death or escape, for Anderson’s novel does not develop into any tragic sublimation but only expresses the sober recognition that science may defeat itself, that rationality may be baffled by absurd chance and human insanity. Even if its ending lines suggest the hope of some redeeming resolution, this hope has been previously questioned, and seems all the more dubious as it is uttered by the most lucid yet mistaken character in the novel. In an almost mystic vision of a possible future, it suggests that after “a period ‘like unto the dark night of the soul’ which St John of the Cross described,” some truth might be reached through a mystic Christian experience involving a character called the Speaker (Anderson, 1987, 274).

In spite of the novel’s narrative structure, based on a succession of stories as in the ancient tradition of story telling, its style is not at all marked by any form of “oraliture,” in contrast to Walrond’s short stories. This characteristic is reinforced by a narrative technique of indirection and mediation. Almost always reported in indirect speech, the action unfolds through the successive narratives, which are presented in the form of monologues, or as the reflections or reminiscences of a protagonist who may appear on the moment as a center of consciousness.

This weaving together of the multiple threads of the plot into an almost circular pattern foregrounds the conversationally “mundane” and at times “futile” expression of the characters’ utterances. As if emotion could be kept at bay by imposing on the story the conventions of social life and etiquette, the novel exhibits an insistent use of linguistic formalities, literary allusions, understatements, wry humor, or irony, all of which may be seen as deriving from a “British” cultural model. Beyond the sustained reference to a British cultural archetype, this strategy of indirection moreover suggests the fragility of human societies or civilizations in their attempts to impose order against such threats of chaos or utter destruction as brought an end to former ancient empires.
More than *Heart of Darkness*, *Sudden Glory* evokes Forster’s *Passage to India*. Both seem to partake of this change in the British colonial novel after World War I, which no longer attempts to portray the spirit of a people (as Kipling did), but foregrounds the impossibility of a meeting point between two civilizations engaged in the colonization process (Moura, 1999, 22). Yet Anderson’s novel, almost to the end, presents no encounter with the colonized Other. Exoticism in *Sudden Glory* is geographical and historical or, rather, spatial and archeological. The voice of the mysterious “Speaker” may be heard, it has in fact been heard as an ironical intrusion on the very stage of the drama, but he can hardly be said to speak for the voiceless peasants or Mayan people. Muted down by a history of conquest, repression and military dictatorship, they only endure. On this point Anderson’s novel might compare with Walrond’s stories about which Ramchand noted: “If a deep pessimism seems to underlie them, there is a hard optimistic layer too, based upon man’s endurance in humility in the living world” (Ramchand, 1983, 74). *Sudden Glory* does not deal with the people and their history, but with the archeologists’ attempts to understand the Mayan empires.

Based on obvious similarities in their situation on the external frontiers of Caribbean literature, this parallel presentation has come to emphasize confrontation rather than conjunction in Walrond’s and Anderson’s choices of two apparently conflicting systems of representation—the literature of exoticism and the colonial novel. This choice of modes that symbolize the imperial or colonial power in relation to an exotic or foreign Other, seems particularly paradoxical in their situation as British colonials.

These two diverging literary responses to their situation of cultural displacement may have been induced by the modes of representation which were available to them at that time, but also by the particularities of their individual personalities or experience, and those of the countries which they somehow adopted. These choices however derived from their confinement within the English language, as neither ever addressed the Spanish literary readership which otherwise might have been also theirs—but which also may not have recognized them as nationals.

Because of the particular circumstances of their personal lives, both Walrond and Anderson found themselves in geographical and cultural situations that could not be accounted for by normal national or ethnic categories. Nevertheless, although they spent a significant part of their lives on the anglophone fringes of Spanish-speaking Central America (the West Indian migrant community in Panama for Walrond, the border of the British colony of Belize with Guatemala for Anderson), they both, later on, left the Caribbean tropics to spend the rest of their lives in other less peripheral parts of the British Commonwealth (respectively London and Toronto). These nearly similar developments of their lives place them in almost identical situations as regards national literary canons and formal definitions of national literary allegiance. Neither “exotes,” nor exiles, as writers they actually also chose to remain throughout their lives within the linguistic limits of their English native culture and language (except, in the case of Walrond, for the short period when he worked as a journalist in Panama). In that country, particularly in the Colon West Indian community, Walrond found himself outside the pale of the British colonial rule but under the American hegemonic empire—as emphasized in most if his Panama stories.

In literary exoticism, Walrond found a stylistic mode in which he could express the complexity of the cosmopolitan situation of the Caribbean world where he had lived and for which he felt such a spiritual bond, as well as his own personal literary tastes (see
Walrond’s appreciation of Blaise Cendrars, Fabre, 1991, 139). His use of the exotic mode obviously also derived from his necessary use of English in his new American environment and from the incitement to write that he found in the New York of modernism and of the New Negro Movement. He consequently was in the position of the “exote” in regard to Panama as well as to his New York reading public—a dubious position that contributes to the ambiguity of some of his fiction. Walrond’s exotic stance may also suggest another explanation to his inability to go beyond the short story form in so far as exoticism, by posing its object in its otherness, tends to transform it into the essence of its difference (Durand, 1999, 7). In presenting his “people,” the Panama people, as exotic objects for his New York World, Walrond also came to represent their (and his own) history as essence, hence fixed in its atemporal presence.

45 Anderson’s situation within the British Empire and on the external frontiers of the Caribbean tends to confuse all criteria as regards the colonial novel model. As a Jamaican officer in the British Colonial Medical Service in British Honduras after a period of studies in British universities, he was writing from within the Empire but on blurred frontiers as regards the binary opposition of the colonial and colonized of his literary model. His novel was written after his return to Kingston and Jamaican independence, when Belize was still a British colony, as is the Belize of which he writes in a reminiscence of his own personal experience in the village of El Cayo in the 1930s. His novel hardly fits into the binary colonial and post-colonial division, at least in relation to the date of its publication, which further situates Sudden Glory in a totally different context from that described in the text of the novel or the context in which Anderson was writing it. The indeterminate geographical border situation in Sudden Glory is in keeping with Anderson’s own situation in relation to the colonial novel. A British “anomaly” in Spanish speaking Central America, Belize, particularly at that time, was in an ambiguous status situation in relation to Guatemala. Moreover Anderson’s sustained use of English in the novel, as the dominant language and a cultural model, is double-edged as it is also indifferently the language of the colonial and the colonized, and, as in Walrond’s story, also that of the new American imperial hegemonic order. This also meant for Anderson an ambivalent choice of a reading audience, as evidenced by his attempts to have his novel published first in the United States, and much later in London. Perhaps the reason for the novel’s failure to achieve the recognition it deserves, comes from its denial of national literary barriers and its successful attempt to expand Caribbeanness on to the continent (as the above mentioned comparison with Wilson Harris and with South American writers tends to show).

46 By eluding all national categorization Walrond’s and Anderson’s fictions further question the apparent contradiction between the two literary modes in which they chose to express themselves. Pushing out the frontiers of the Caribbean world to its Central American counterpart, both authors confirm its paradoxical unity within its inherent fragmentation. While anticipating on later theorization, they enact an aesthetics of the Caribbean diversity that transcends problematics of essence or identity.
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Woks cited


NOTES

1. In 1923 Walrond broke away from Garvey and Negro World and began working as editor for Opportunity. However, when “in the late 1930s, Walrond and Garvey were both living in London, Walrond again contributed to a Garveyite publication, this time the Black Man. Walrond was the second most frequent contributor after Garvey himself” (Martin, 1983, 132).

2. I am quoting here from an unpublished letter of Anderson to Heinemann Publishing Co, which was communicated to me by his daughter, Sonia Shiletto.

3. On this question see Bone, Lewis (, 1981, 189-190), Hutchinson (, 1985, 200, 248).

4. In the second edition of his study, Ramchand, devoting but a few lines to Walrond before presenting McKay’s works, declared: “Walrond’s life of exile, journalism and vagabondage, his promise and his strange failure to produce must form an important chapter of West Indian literary history, but it is with the career of a more emblematic figure in West Indian writings that it is proposed to deal herein” (Ramchand, 1983, 240-241). However, before Ramchand’s article, “The Writer Who Ran Away” (1970), Walrond had never been included in the Caribbean literary canon. Frank Birbalsingh, in his Frontiers of Caribbean Literature in English (1996), while mentioning Walrond and McKay as the first writers who “had appeared on the North American frontier,” inaccurately refers to 1927 as the date when Walrond moved to New York, one year after the
publication of *Tropic Death*, with the result of situating the novel outside the pale of the American Harlem Renaissance. The back cover advertisement of the second edition of *Tropic Death*, mistakes Guyana for Guinea!

5. *Crisis*, Sept. 1920, quoted in Watkin-Owens. Concerning the political influence of Caribbean intellectuals in the various American metropolises, whether around Marcus Garvey or in socialist or Marxist circles, see also W. James, Tony Martin, W. B. Turner and J. Moore Turner.


7. Bone sees in Walrond’s “The Wharf Rats” a rewriting of one of Hearn’s sketches “Ti Canoti.”

8. On this point see Martin on Walrond and Garvey (mentioned above), and Parascandola (1998, 33-34), as well as the latter’s detailed bibliography of Walrond’s works (341-348).

9. “It is this primal world and its ways (though not especially these aspects of it), conveniently referred to as ‘folk’ which Louise Bennett, Olive Lewin, Rex Nettleford and J. D. Elder have helped to capture, and which the newer West Indian writers like Lindsay Barrett, Earl Lovelace and L. Edward Brathwaite are seeking to re-integrate” (Ramchand, 1983, 71).

10. This concept has been the object of numerous debates in Canada It is this primal world and its ways (though not especially these aspects of it), conveniently referred to as ‘folk’ which Louise Bennett, Olive Lewin, Rex Nettleford and J. D. Elder have helped to capture, and which the newer West Indian writers like Lindsay Barrett, Earl Lovelace and L. Edward Brathwaite are seeking to re-integrate” (Ramchand, 1983, 71), particularly in the Haitian Diaspora. Some of the questions that have been raised are presented in Birbalsingh’s *Frontiers of Caribbean Literature in English*.

11. For a detailed description of this special issue of the magazine, see Charras, 2001.

12. In a description that smacks of caricature, he is “Young Briton, red-faced, red-eyed, red-haired. Yellow-teethed, dribble-lipped, swobble-mouthed, bat-eared,” who exclaims: “Where’s my Anesta,’ he said, ‘by God, she is the sweetest woman, black or white—on the whole god-damned—” (Walrond, 1972, 94).


14. “All, all gone,” cries Miss Buckner after the evocation of the “gradual death of and destruction of the frontier post” given in the first paragraph. “‘All of that’ she sighed, ‘all of that was swamp — when I came to the Isthmus’” (86).

15. “Subjection” and its conclusion have been variously appreciated for the indictment of American hegemony on the Canal leading to an exceptional case of tragic individual rebellion: “In the Canal Record, the Q. M. at Toro Point took occasion to extol the virtues of the Department which kept the number of casualties in the recent native labor uprising to one.” (*Tropic Death* 112). In contrast, the matter of factness of the Consul’s clerk, “the arbiter of life and death,” who punctuates his recording of the various cases with a “Next!” (Parascandola, 1998, 305-309).

16. Drawing on the somewhat romantic vision of the exile as the divided self, Parascandola asserts: “Like many people from the Caribbean, Walrond became a permanent migrant, always having a sense of home while simultaneously feeling the loss of it. This contradiction is what often adds power and *poignancy* to his work. Despite *the torture of living* in an American or European society in which he faced racism he could neither understand nor accept, he returned to the Caribbean only for short visits. For this reason, perhaps, his work is detached enabling him to write objectively about the area. Such detachment is often true for writers in exile (Said. 1996, 150-51)” (Parascandola, 1998,36) [emphasis added],

17. Although rarely used, this word is found in the Oxford English Dictionary, it seems to convey the connotations suggested by the French phrase « l’écrivain-passeur, » who belongs in « ces zones de contact, ces carrefours, ces lieux intermédiaires de la production littéraire où s’exprime de multiples façons la relation à l’étranger. » Foucriet & Mortier, eds, (1999, 5).
18. Situated on the Mopan Branch of Belize River, Xunantunich is half a mile away from the border with Guatemala and a mile from Benque Viejo. Perhaps a regional capital during the Mayan Classic Period, it was still occupied at the post-classical period. The site is thought to have been abandoned after a natural catastrophe. It was first brought to scientific notice in 1895 and the first major excavations took place in 1938 under the direction of J. E. S. Thompson who exhumed lots of ceramics. The research continued in the 1950s. (Mackie, 1985, 7-9).

19. In *Beyond the Mexique Bay*, Huxley continues: “It is not on the way from anywhere to anywhere else. It has no strategic value. It is all but inhabited, and when Prohibition is abolished, the last of its profitable enterprises—the re-export of alcohol by rum-runners—will have gone the way of its commerce in logwood, mahogany, and chicle. Why do we bother to keep this strange little fragment of the Empire? Certainly not from motives of self-interest. Hardly one English in 50,000 derives any profit from the Britishness of British Honduras. But le cœur a ses raisons. Of these mere force of habit is the strongest” (Huxley, 1935, 34).

20. The American E. G. Squier, on a mission to explore the possibility for the construction of the Honduras Inter Oceanic Railway remarked: “Belize is an anomalous British settlement or establishment,” while recalling its past history of plundering of Spanish establishments (Squier, 1858, ch. 26). Alain Rouquié comments: « Erreur historique que la géographie condamne ? Si Belize est 'une aberration' en raison de son isolement culturel, racial et linguistique dans le contexte régional, c'est à cause justement de cette aberration, comme on l’a dit, que Belize 'a le droit d’être une nation'” (Rouquié, 1992, 26).

21. “In a frontier nearly one hundred miles long there were only two official portals of entry. As the only doctor at one of these portals I had a good opportunity to know those who came and went” (Anderson’s letter to Heinemann).

22. Anderson was well integrated into Belizean society where he lived with his family from 1928 to 1948. His wife was of old Belizean origin.

23. Belize’s population has been described as a melting pot—half of its population being Creole and metis of African, Karib, West Indian, and European origin. This aspect was already remarked upon by John Lloyd Stephens, who, an American Southerner, repeatedly expressed a feigned surprise at the lack of racial feelings in Belize (Stephens, 1944, ch. 1). Often emphasized, this melting pot is questioned nowadays. Belize’s original Maya civilization lasted longer than elsewhere in Central America, apparently until the 14th century. Unexplored by the Spanish conquerors, Belize was occupied by Europeans only with the arrival of the first Scottish pirates in 1638. They were followed by Karibs, Garifunas, East Indians, Chinese, Lebanese, German Mennonites, etc., who all now constitute its multi-faceted society. See Alain Dugrand’s travel account (*Belize* 1991).

24. A situation that is becoming even more complex with the various recent waves of refugees and economic immigrants, mainly from Guatemala and Nicaragua, as the increasing Spanish-speaking minority creates a demographic imbalance that may eventually challenge Belize’s English political and cultural specificity.

25. Marcel Brion shows the same contemporary interest for Mesoamerican archeology. He offers a detailed description of those enigmatic sculptures, the only portraits in Mexican sculpture that wear a smile. (Brion, 1949, 266-267)

26. In 1972, Anderson wrote a dramatic adaptation of its novel. This dramatization of an insistently narrative novel emphasizes the theme of the comedy of passions and obliterates the novel’s rich cultural theme which makes for its complexity and ambiguity.


28. This notion has been developed in Segalen’s notion of “an exoticism in time or place” (Segalen, 1999, 748).
29. For a definition and criticism of these categories, see Durand ed., 1999, vol. 1, more particularly Durand’s introduction and the articles by Moura and Halen.


31. For a description of the transformations of notions related to Caribbeanness, see the Introduction of Odile Ferly’s unpublished thesis on Women Writers from the Francophone and Hispanic Caribbean.

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Michelle Cliff’s Free Enterprise\(^1\): Writing the Americas as Crossroads

Andrée-Anne Kekeh-Dika

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1 Michelle Cliff’s *Free Enterprise* reads as a narrative concoction of “ingredients from here, there, and everywhere” (*FE*, 5) used to make a textual crossroads. The author reworks official literary, historical or mythical versions of “America” to reconstruct a New World. Cliff’s use of the crossroads as narrative pattern iterates her urgency to offer a “babel” translation of America (*FE*, 5), one which contests and complements what Cliff’s narrator calls the “official version”, the version sustained by the “European imperial Gaze” (*FE*, 7-8). The novel is about making new sense of America as the recurrence of the term “mean” seems to indicate. As such, the narrative embodies a political as well as a literary endeavor to capture the diversity of America. Such a task implies an intricate and thorough questioning of the modes of representation and the “enterprises” of the American continent, an uncovering of the unofficial, secret and subterranean voices. The purpose of the book is to organize and inscribe encounters, often conflictual, with other texts, other tongues and languages. *Free Enterprise* delves into and rereads the trajectories and destinies of the histories of the American continent; it questions its languages and stereotypes as well as the diverse stories of all the people who have built and continue to populate the American landscape. In this regards, the crossroads pattern is an adequate emblem for a multi-faceted story which stands out as an involved “enterprise” speaking to the multiple sides of the New World. As a consequence, a dominant vision of America as monolithic, imperious and homogeneous breaks down, or symbolically unravels.

2 Conflating myth, story, history, and memory, fusing past and present, combining fictional and “real” characters, Cliff’s crossroads narrative runs counter to the linearity, homogeneity and surface simplicity of dominant history. “The official version entertains. Illumines the Great White Way” says the anonymous narrator at the beginning of the book (*FE*, 17). Cliffs own version does not entertain: it is a disruptive, meandering “free enterprise” whose purpose is to recover all the components, vestiges of memory and history of the Americas, to unveil alternative stories, those of the silenced and the oppressed of all kinds.
3 The book’s title, *Free Enterprise*, can be read as a polyphonic embodiment of the crossroads image, a term that signals layers of embedded significance. *Free Enterprise* stands out as a variation on the word “enterprise”. The novel unfolds the different connotations of the word and points out variances in the term meanings from the perspective of the individuals and groups who have shaped the Americas. The narrative recounts the ambiguity and instability of the concept “enterprise” in the history of the American continent. When it first appears in the novel, “Free enterprise” is the name of a black restaurant, the place where the main two female figures of the book, Annie Christmas and Mary Ellen Pleasant meet; but the term also conveys other nuances that the novel deploys. The word refers to the “enterprise of slavery” (*FE*, 77-8), the many-faceted trade which has built America. At some other point, it ironically designates the American frontier, “the greatest enterprise the continent had ever witnessed” (*FE*, 105), but it also alludes to the invisible struggle for freedom in which Mary Ellen Pleasant, Mary Shadd Carey and many others are engaged. In a similar fashion, the term also points to the subversive labor of the unknown but “enterprising slave” (*FE*, 71), to the ways of women who have either aborted or killed their children to resist slavery and who have left no trace in history. Throughout the narrative, “enterprise” appears in different guises, speaking to and about unacknowledged and secret voices, gestures or signs which offer alternative textualities and histories of the Americas.

4 Two female voices dominate, giving sense and direction to Cliff’s discontinuous novel: those of “real” Mary Ellen Pleasant and fictional Annie Christmas, the Afro-American activist and the Caribbean exile who has left her island and chosen to combat slavery on US soil. Reuniting these two female figures, Cliff deliberately chooses to set her narrative at the intersections of history and fiction, of “real” life and “invented” life as if the “truth” were to be found in the interstices between those two narrative modes. By allying the Caribbean female subject to her African-American counterpart, Cliff also seems to be willing to rehabilitate and foreground the broken links between Caribbean and American history at large. As one of the personae puts it in *The Land of Look Behind*: “Our connections are limited by silences between us.” (Cliff, 1985, 36).

5 Along with those central voices that produce narrative coherence, the novel creates space for the gendered stories of many women, including Rachel de Souza, the Jewish immigrant whose ancestors fled the Inquisition in Spain, Clover Hooper, a 19th-century American female photographer, Quasheba, the warrior-woman and mother of Pleasant. The narrative also rings with masculine speech: Captain Parsons, Pleasant’s father, tells parts of his story as a resisting seafarer who outwits “England Trading” (*FE*, 7) by conducting contraband Africans to freedom, or the reader can overhear John Brown arguing with Mary Ellen Pleasant over the legitimacy of their “enterprise” to dismantle slavery she calls the *peculiar institution*. As a whole the novel sounds like a polyglossal space filled with famous voices and a number of other anonymous tales, those of the unknown people, the “gens inconnu [s]” of the Caribbean as the narrative puts it in French (*FE*, 6), of all of those who have remained in “the silence” (*FE*, 62) and in the background of history. Indeed, if primacy seems to be given to orality, one must not forget that Cliff’s novel also attempts to capture what has been silenced because it was considered too trivial or ordinary to be part of History. That is the reason why lists of objects, foodstuff and names saturate Cliff’s novel (*FE*, 45, 55-56); making lists of terms appears as a textual and strategic way of compensating for what has been lost or “dissembled” (*FE*, 192). One of the central purposes of the narrative is to circulate, pass on
and (re)translate what has thus far been maintained in limbo between the different accounts of the Americas. The various intersecting stories that emanate from the colony of lepers are significant in this respect, and illness may be viewed as a metaphor of silenced but resurgent discourse. As such Cliff’s book skillfully confronts the loud and “official version [which is] in everybody’s mouth.” (FE, 17).

The multiple voices of Free Enterprise are set against a broken, non linear narrative which counters chronological time and circumscribed space. The story of Annie Christmas and Mary Ellen Pleasant roughly takes place between 1858 and 1920, but the narrative alternatively jumps back in time and refers to the “discovery” of the New World and the time of Columbus or Magellan, or jumps forward into a time period which has not yet occurred. Cliff also explodes spatial boundaries: ignoring the unity of space, the narrative moves in a disorderly fashion from one place to the next. The novel’s setting is not limited to US soil but convenes the whole of the American continent, and also gestures to all the countries that, in one way or another, have participated in the slave trade. The fragmented structure, along with the multi-layered and multi-voiced texture of the novel read as Cliff’s formal attempt at conveying the crossroads quality of the Americas. It is a way of textually embedding the intricacy of the New World and to show how the “here and now”, the “there and then” ceaselessly intersect and interweave with one another (FE, 210). Cliff’s deliberate collision of different time periods, minor and major voices, and spaces not only encodes and expresses America’s hybridity and polyphony; it also echoes back to the unending power struggle and collision of interests at stake in the construction of the Americas. The author’s mention of the difficult negotiations between languages in the New World is a good case in point: “Tongues collided. Struggled for hegemony. Emerged victorious, or sank into the impossibly blue waters, heavy as gold” (FE, 6). One might also argue that Cliff’s will to disrupt the stability of the narrative also points to the impossible task of writing about or fictionalizing the origins of the Americas and its history in a linear and univocal way. Retrieving and accounting for plural history can only be done through a heterogeneous or miscellaneous process. In this regard, Annie Christmas’s “bottle-tree” which is decorated with bottles and “ingredients, from here, there and everywhere” (FE, 5) might be the emblematic embodiment of such a process. No wonder then that Cliff’s textual fabric is made of dissimilar materials such as drawings, paintings, excerpts from poems, novels, essays, letters and lists of names that the author represents and reinvents, and which coalesce with the stories of Pleasant and Christmas. Hence, Cliff’s inter-textual purpose seems to be making an extensive inventory of America and its various materials and tales, to extend beyond the borders of fictional and historical narrative, to address, contest and dialogue with meta-texts, and to question the myth of America’s oneness.

The titles of the subparts and chapters of Free Enterprise echo the “enterprise” of the novel’s title and are also about unraveling official and less official meanings, about organizing dialogues between dominant and more hidden voices or texts. Each chapter or subpart is organized around its title and illuminates, contradicts or expands it. The enigmatic title phrase, “She was a Friend of John Brown”, is gradually elucidated in the course of the book. It refers to the epitaph that Mary Ellen Pleasant, a comrade-in-arms of John Brown, has had inscribed on her gravestone. Thus Mary Ellen Pleasant symbolically comes to the foreground of the text, getting space and prominence in the title. “The axe is laid at the foot of the tree” is also one of those seemingly “meaningless” titles whose
forgotten significance is unveiled in the novel—a fragment of the last message of Mary Ellen Pleasant to John Brown before he was defeated:

When he was captured there was a piece of paper in his pockets, with my words on it. “The axe is laid at the foot of the tree. When the first blow is struck, there will be more money to help.”

Not much of a farewell, but at least a promise.

In the end our conversations wafted into the ether, meaningless.

Meaningless, but to me who repeats them over and over in my head. (FE, 151-2).

Thus fictional discourse uncovers traces, fragments, voices and perspectives overlooked by institutional history and iconography. *Free Enterprise* addresses the issue of loss, but it also collects and gathers the remains of history, memory and myth with the aim of making sense of the Americas and re/membering it (FE, 191-2). This is a vital and urgent “enterprise” since as the last chapter suggests, the ocean has lost and erased all the traces: “The ocean closed its books, darkness revealing nothing” (FE, 210). In order to recover “a history sunk under the sea” as Cliff puts it, it is all the more necessary for the author to once again delve into the voices, languages, and experiences of the known and unknown people that have made the Americas. Resonating with numerous sometimes antagonistic voices, Cliff’s novel is made into “a talking book” (FE, 211) whose purpose is to compensate for the fragility and unreliability of the written word.

Strategies of naming and translation are keys to Cliff’s fictional articulation of the crossroads idea: they enable the writer to organize unsuspected linguistic encounters and connections. This is in keeping with Cliff’s desire to unveil both the secret and public subtexts of the Americas. These discursive practices reveal the underside of history. One of the ways of translating America is to journey into tongues. Cliff’s use of words other than English shows that America is a linguistic crossroads where “tongues” have always struggled and negotiated with one another in order to achieve supremacy. The novel is interspersed with words borrowed from French, Spanish, Latin, Yiddish, or African languages (Mande, Akan, Bambara, Ewe). Sometimes, meaning is given to the reader in parentheses or through paraphrase; sometimes it is not. The writer’s refusal or inability to provide translation forces readers to cooperate with the text in an active way, and to engage in the arduous quest of recovering meaning by themselves. In order to capture the true meaning and essence of the Americas, readers must be able to move through and decipher “foreign” signs and retrace the origins of terms that have been confiscated by the English language. The author’s strategy also suggests that translating the Americas as a whole may prove impossible because meaning has been lost. The novel includes for example a number of arcane signs which Annie Christmas and Captain Parsons are unable to translate because they point to too distant an African past: “She looked closely and saw markings, foreign to her, etched on the dangling tongue, suddenly disembodied” (FE, 21). Thus, making sense of America is a comprehensive practice which implies journeying back through space and time past, and being also able to decode European history and sites of memory (such as painted by Turner, for instance) as well as African sacred figures like Dan, the snake.

*Free Enterprise* touches upon cultural translation and the original significance of words, names, or emblems. There are many references to historic places, moments and events to be recognized if one is to grasp full sense of the narrative. The overwhelming presence of first names of figures whose last names are not given strongly engages the reader’s “capability” (FE, 13). Reading Cliff’s novel is a demanding “enterprise”: one has to be aware of the implicit significance and resonance of the names and nouns which Cliff
disseminates lavishly through her narrative. The naming practice becomes a strategy to assert existence or to rehabilitate forgotten presence. Indeed, the novel reinvestigates proper names (the known and the less known), domestic objects, foods, all the official and less official memory sites of those who have become the "New World people." *Free Enterprise* seeks to retrieve the origins of names in a "confused" (*FE*, 6) universe where chief "Powhatan" has been reduced to be simply the name of a horse (*FE*, 177), and where the term "Caribbean" solely designates the "perfect sea" (*FE*, 116). Cliff’s fictional inventory of the Americas enlarges history and the English language and is meant to welcome back words, materials and characters from "everywhere".

Offering a new version of the Americas also means interrogating the slogans, the clichés that are part of history and popular discourse (*FE*, 15). *Free Enterprise* questions the ways in which stereotypical discourse tends to displace names and to obliterate an individual’s true nature. Thus, Mary Ellen Pleasant is lost to historical reverence and popular discourse defines her, at best, as a "Mammy" or a "voodoo queen"; the fluctuating and false identities given to her negate her role as an "entrepreneur" and a resisting historical agent (*FE*, 18). In the same line, Cliff’s narrative suggests that Sojourner Truth’s position has been reduced to a cliché: "Am I not a woman and your sister" (*FE*, 70); this has de-emphasized her political "enterprise" and transformed her into some kind of accommodationist character.13 Ceaselessly, the novel draws on common topoi, searches through them in order to break them down and to restore their hidden nuances and origins.

*Free Enterprise* is a search to uncover hidden monuments. Cliff’s renewed fictional construction of the Americas tries to see through the sites and moments of history which have been canonized in the “official version”. Her account of the “false” nature of photographs (Clover Hopper’s work, *FE*, 87, 94), paintings (*Turner* FE, 71-75) and sculpture (Saint-Gaudens, *FE*, 159-165) is significant because it addresses issues of representation, interpretation and distortion, and the sometimes dubious collusions between art and dominant history.

As Robert Lowell did before her, Cliff draws Saint-Gaudens’s Bobert Gould Shaw Memorial into her fictional space.14 Her account of the genesis of the sculpture implies that aestheticized rendering of history can alter and betray the suffering and the authenticity of the experiences of the powerless. The narrative retraces the elaboration of the "Shaw Memorial" through a series of letters exchanged between Saint-Gaudens, his sponsor and one of the black survivors of the 54th regiment. The letters show how the artist gradually discards the war testimonies (letters, pictures, stories) of the surviving soldiers because he is solely concerned with aesthetics; thus he chooses to reject historical “truth” and use living models who have nothing to do with the historic event and the soldiers to commemorate.

Cliff pushes this issue further in the chapter devoted to Turner’s painting, “Slaves Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhon Coming on”. Faced with the ambivalent response of a 19th century audience,15 Mary Ellen Pleasant strongly questions the link between aesthetics, a history of abomination and capitalism: can art remain apolitical? can the Middle Passage and the slave trade become mere aesthetic objects or capitalistic commodities?16 Pleasant does not force any answers on the reader, but Cliff’s forceful insertion of the photograph, the painting and the monument graphically articulates her desire to interrogate the meaning of the foreground and the background in official cultural representations of history.
The recurrence of the preposition “behind” that she used to title her first story collection encapsulates Cliff’s concern for those who have remained in the background. Her narrative is like a palimpsest through which she tries to illuminate who has been lying in the background or on the edge (FE, 3, 171). Cliff revives for example the unknown woman who led John Wilkes Booth to the site of Lincoln’s assassination (FE, 86). However, the author skillfully avoids privileging one “heroic” version (FE, 49) over the other; her book addresses and qualifies the over-romanticized and “purified” (FE, 51) translations of history offered both by the colonized and the enslaved people of America: “What my great-grandfather told me, what he carved into this bone, was the heroic version, the one he wanted to become history. But the real story is not as colorful, not as tidy; it never is.” (FE, 49). Cliff tries to integrate all the pieces into the overall history of America following a crossroads pattern, which seems to be in keeping with what she sees as her specific practice and crossroads position as a Caribbean writer. In an interview with Judith Raiskin, Cliff suggests that coming “from a culture that is not mainstream” may give the Caribbean writer more room and latitude to experiment with form, style and genre and to escape from “dichotomous” representations. Towards the end of the novel, the unidentified narrator says, “The official version is for public consumption—in both senses of that word.” (FE, 138); in many ways, Cliff’s “anarchic” (FE, 45) and over-rich version of the Americas is meant not to be digested easily. The author’s use of the fragment and her disjointed narrative which borrows from many sources and materials symbolically tell about the urgency to break down the boundaries of nation and narrative, to question the narrow-mindedness of national history and mythology and to rebuild a comprehensive and plural story/history for the “New World people”.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works cited


NOTES

1. All references following the FE abbreviation will be to the following edition: Free Enterprise, 1994 (-1993). New York: Plume. I would like to thank V. Havan (U. Le Havre), H. George, W. Gleeson, J. Mayes (Syracuse U.) & J. Merchant (Paris 2) for their help and suggestions.


3. Mary Ann Shadd Cary (note the difference in spelling) was a 19th century abolitionist and feminist who was involved in the suffrage movement (Gidding, 1985, 69-71).

4. “We are New World people, and we built this blasted country from the ground up. We are part of its future, its fortunes.” (FE, 151).

5. The following statement uttered by one of Cliff’s characters points to the difficulty to grasp historical truth: “The truth, I suspect, lies somewhere in between.” (FE 51). “For some, this is fantasy; for others, history.” (FE 29). On the significance of silence, see also Miles Davis’s epigraph to Cliff’s book: “I always listen for what I can leave out.” On the value of narrativity, see White, 1980, 5-27.

6. Cliff fictionalizes the life of Marian Hooper, the wife of Henry Adams who was called Clover and who had a strong interest in photography. Mrs Hooper committed suicide in December 1885. See Jerry L. Thomson (1989); the book includes a few pictures by Marian Hooper. I’m indebted to H. Perrin (Paris 8) for this information.

7. See how Michelle Cliff stages a futuristic encounter between “hologrammatical” Malcom X and Mary Ellen Pleasant (FE, 76-7).

8. The novel has four parts, each of which is divided into an unequal number of subparts: Part I has three subparts, Part II has two, Part III has seven and Part IV has five. Such imbalance in the structuring of the book may be an expression of the author’s will to disrupt and counter the pseudo-harmony and balanced order of the “official version” of America.

9. “And when the smoke cleared the name officially attached to the deed was John Brown. Who has ever heard of Annie Christmas, Mary Shadd Carey, Mary Ellen Pleasant? The official version has been printed, bound, and gagged, resides in schools, libraries, the majority unconscious.” (FE, 16).

10. This is a discursive strategy Cliff uses extensively in The Land of Look Behind.


12. This seems to be the point of the various lists of food names of foreign origin that pervade the narrative.

13. “I know they mean (meant) well—that phrase!! but supplication was not our mode, and divergence was inevitable.” (FE, 70).


15. “The thing [the Zong incident] is behind us; surely we can enjoy the art it engendered. The man [Turner] had a brilliance about him, with form, color.”(FE, 74). See Boime, 1990, 67-70.
One could argue that Cliff’s argument may also work against her own literary enterprise. After all she is also fictionalizing and commodifying a history of horror.
René Maran lecteur

Florence Martin

1 René Maran (1887-1960) : « écrivain », mais aussi « critique en titre », nous dit Michel Fabre. C’est donc un des prolongements possibles de la lecture de Michel qui m’intéresse ici, une façon aussi pour moi, nourrie de son immense générosité, de renvoyer la balle à plus d’un titre à mon ancien prof, l’espace de quelques pages.

2 Ainsi, dans le large sillage de Michel, au terme de « critique » pour qualifier Maran j’ajoute celui de « lecteur ». Dans cet essai, « lecteur » désignera à la fois le « critique » (selon Michel) et le dégustateur de littérature gourmet ; « lire », l’activité au sens archaïque du terme, du temps où parler et lire partageaient le même vocable, où lire signifiait toujours lire à voix haute, c’est-à-dire lire et partager ce qu’on lit, clamer fort son plaisir du texte. Pour Maran, lire implique tout de suite la notion de choix – un choix mûr :

   Le verbe latin intellagere, qui signifie discerner, saisir, comprendre, avoir du jugement, semble avoir en partie conservé certaines des significations du verbe legere, dont il dérive. Or legere ne se traduit pas seulement par lire ; il se traduit aussi par choisir et cueillir. Le geste qu’on fait pour réaliser le second, n’intervient logiquement qu’après la courte hésitation qu’exige le premier. Qui veut cueillir un beau fruit doit, avant que de le faire, procéder à un choix, par conséquent faire preuve de discernement.

3 René Maran est à la fois lecteur et critique, au sens noble du ternie : il choisit son texte, puis dit ou écrit comment la chose lui résonne en lui. En d’autres termes, écrire et lire chez lui constituent les deux pendants complémentaires et indissociables d’une même activité. C’est selon cette dualité indivisible que je propose aujourd’hui de lire certains textes de Maran, qui reflètent trois personnages en un : l’écrivain-lecteur de Batouala, le lecteur-critique de la « Littérature Nègre », et enfin le lecteur qui proclame le plaisir de lire.
I. L’écrivain-Lecteur « français » de Batouala

4 Sa double identité de lecteur/auteur est déjà déclinée dans Batouala, son premier roman et Prix Goncourt 1921, qui acquiert rapidement, au-delà des frontières de l’hexagone, une renommée mondiale.

5 Le livre est double : une préface vigoureuse dans laquelle Maran dénonce les exactions des autorités coloniales en place, et qui déclenche une formidable polémique en France (dont l’auteur ne se remettra peut-être jamais tout à fait) ; et un roman, sous-titré « Véritable Roman Nègre », qui décrit le quotidien du protagoniste fictif Batouala, mokondji ou chef de tribu Banda. Le monde Banda y figure, minutieusement décrit : paysages, coutumes, langue, mœurs, esthétique, rites collectifs, voire la structure symbolique même du roman (Cameron, 14-41). Bref, le livre présente deux textes en apparence désassortis.

6 Keith Cameron explique la disjonction entre les deux textes par l’usage de deux voix narratives distinctes : dans la préface, Maran « parle en son nom propre », tandis que la voix narrative du roman demeure impersonnelle. Michel Fabre, quant à lui, ajoute à propos du roman : « René Maran propose une écriture dans laquelle l’objectivité anthropologique et l’exactitude des notations s’uniront à un sentiment de sympathie et de poésie qui n’exclut pas, à l’occasion, un certain recul » (Fabre, 241). Le roman serait donc issu d’une patiente recherche sur le terrain, tandis que la préface tiendrait plus du cri d’un cœur révolté. Cette disjonction semble refléter celle de l’expérience de Maran en Afrique Équatoriale Française où il part en 1910 rejoindre son père lui-même administrateur colonial (qui, cependant, rentrera au bout de six mois à Bordeaux, pour raison de santé). C’est de ce pays qu’il découvre qu’il écrit dans une lettre :

... maintenant, avec un cœur français, je sens que je suis sur le sol de mes ancêtres, ancêtres que je réprouve parce que je n’ai pas leur mentalité primitive ni leurs goûts, mais ce n’en sont pas moins mes ancêtres. (...) Que sont venus faire les Européens sur cette terre ? Ils ont spolié inutilement de pauvres êtres apathiques éternellement ensomnolés auxquels la civilisation fait plus de mal que de bien.

7 Cette double appartenance paraît déséquilibrée : Maran affirme une identité culturelle française et semble adhérer à la vision idoine d’une hiérarchie culturelle (qui justifie la mission civilisatrice de la France). En même temps, il clame son appartenance au continent noir et à son peuple, ne veut en aucun cas renier ses origines — mais prend soin de les faire reculer dans le temps. Sa lettre énonce : les Africains me sont étrangers et je ne partage avec eux que l’espace présent et le temps lointain d’ancêtres communs. Toutefois, il se situe ici hors des deux groupes : la communauté coloniale européenne dont il note l’inutilité de la présence plutôt que sa violence, et la communauté africaine apathique qu’il semble ne pas vouloir chercher à connaître. Il faudra attendre une dizaine d’années pour que, après bien des vicissitudes dans les cercles de l’administration française raciste vis-à-vis des Africains et des fonctionnaires antillais comme Maran, le romancier s’insurge contre les pratiques des colons. Il rédige alors la préface de Batouala.

8 Voici donc un observateur formé en France (avec les valeurs de l’instruction reçue à Bordeaux sous la Troisième République) qui déchiffre et interprète l’Afrique Équatoriale Française. Même s’il concède ses origines africaines, celles-ci n’ont pas grand-chose à voir avec son mode de perception du monde. Maran : un lecteur français qui apprend à lire les réalités de l’Oubangui pour les (d)écrire à un public français.
Dans le contexte français, le sous-titre de « Véritable Roman Nègre » est porteur de sens. Ce n’est, en effet, ni le premier roman autour d’un personnage africain, ni le premier roman d’un auteur noir (Dumas père et fils connurent un grand succès longtemps avant Maran). Mais c’est bel et bien le premier sur l’Afrique écrit en français par un auteur noir, formé à l’école française. Le qualificatif véramble qui souligne une volonté d’authenticité, pose le livre d’entrée de jeu comme différent –voir différend au sens Derridien du terme : la préface se pose en porte-à-faux par rapport au système colonialiste français qu’elle dépèine et aux écrits qui en découlent ; le roman, quant à lui, d’inspiration et de plume africaines « véritables », se voit inscrit par son auteur antillais dans la littérature française. Le « roman nègre » s’insère alors au sein des Belles Lettres, dont il se distingue par le contenu plutôt que par le style (classique français). C’est en ce sens que Maran, dont ce roman initial lui a valu d’être vu comme l’un des précurseurs de la Négritude, décrirait ce que Senghor entendra, en 1939, par « raison nègre », sans toutefois participer lui-même à cette « raison » :

... le Nègre n’est pas dénué de raison comme on a voulu me le faire dire. Mais sa raison n’est pas discursive ; elle est synthétique. Elle n’est pas antagoniste ; elle est sympathique. C’est un autre mode de connaissance. La raison nègre n’appauvrit pas les choses, elle ne les moule pas en des schèmes rigides, éliminant les sucs et les sèves ; elle se coule dans les artères des choses, elle en éprouve tous les contours pour se loger au cœur vivant du réel. La raison européenne est analytique par utilisation, la raison nègre intuitive par participation. (Senghor, 289).

Le roman de Maran « se coule » dans la littérature française, et c’est sous une forme classique française émailée de termes Banda qu’il décrit dans le détail un univers africain. Ici, Maran est à nouveau double : lecteur qui déchiffre la culture de l’Oubangui et écrivain qui propose ce que Michel Fabre appelle « une compréhension sympathique, voire poétique, des visages africains » (Fabre, 240). Maran épouse ici la figure du messager entre deux mondes complètement différents. D’où, peut-être, la difficulté de ses critiques à démêler ce qu’ils perçoivent comme des tensions idéologiques contradictoires (par exemple, était-il pour ou contre le colonialisme ?) entre ces deux textes dont la voix narrative distante procède soit de l’observation quasi-clinique (dans le roman) soit de l’ironie (dans la préface).

En effet, dans la France de l’entre-deux-guerres où l’on ne songe guère à remettre en question l’institution du colonialisme, la préface critique les autorités coloniales sur le terrain et agit comme une provocation sulfureuse. Elle dénonce en effet, au-delà du préjugé raciste, les dégâts dévastateurs causés par le passage des représentants de la soi-disant « civilisation » française, qui, par exemple, laissent mourir de faim leurs administrés et pillent les tribus Bandas. Le texte est d’autant plus virulent que la voix narrative distante procède soit de l’observation quasi-clinique (dans le roman) soit de l’ironie (dans la préface).

Le jeu du « je » est ici particulièrement subversif puisqu’il part d’une assertion raciste partagée à cette époque, pour mieux la déconstruire de l’intérieur, en faire bifurquer la direction et la vider de son sens premier. L’auteur/narrateur atteint ici la forme a contrarium de l’ironiste selon Jankélevitch : celui qui, au niveau rhétorique, feint de prendre une position pour mieux la saboter. « s’il épouse la cause de l’adversaire, c’est afin de mieux servir la sienne ». Autrement dit, l’ironie tient de la ruse la plus perverse :
"L'ironie est donc, au sens propre de ces mots, «extatique» mais non pas «sympathique», car bien qu'elle entretienne des intelligences dans le camp opposé, elle ne trahit pas, sous ce nouveau pavillon, l'obéissance première" (Jankélévitch, 76).

13 Que l'ironie prenne le dessus avec tant de brio n'est pas le seul élément original de cette préface. Elle intrigue par un curieux détail liminaire à l'indignation justifiée de Maran : l'exhortation de l'auteur à ses «frères en esprit, écrivains de France» à joindre leurs voix à la sienne :

Honneur du pays qui m'a tout donné, mes frères de France, écrivains de tous les partis; vous qui, souvent, disputez d'un rien, et vous déchirez à plaisir, et vous réconciliez tout à coup, chaque fois qu'il s'agit de combattre pour une idée juste et noble, je vous appelle au secours, car j'ai foi en votre générosité (Maran, 1979, 11).

14 Maran s'inscrit ici en écrivain-lecteur. Son invitation au dialogue avec ses pairs est d'ailleurs émaillée de références intertextuelles — il commence sa préface par une dédicace au poète Henri de Régnier, cite Montesquieu (10) et divers journalistes et critiques (11-12). C'est une préface qui proclame à pleine voix son appartenance à un polylogue littéraire qui déborde du strict cadre du livre. De plus, même si Maran ne semble pas remettre en cause l'expansionnisme «civilisateur» français, il compte bien rassembler dans un combat commun ses frères hommes de lettres et intellectuels de France.

C'est à redresser tout ce que l'administration désigne sous l'euphémisme «d'errements» que je vous convie. La lutte sera serrée. Vous allez affronter des négriers. Il vous sera plus dur de lutter contre eux que contre des moulins. Votre tâche est belle. À l'œuvre donc, et sans plus attendre. La France le veut ! (Maran, 1979, 14.)

15 Mais il ne s'agit pas seulement d'un cri de ralliement politique stricto sensu : Maran veut avant tout confirmer l'importance de la littérature. D'où l'injonction finale de la préface adressée au récepteur encore inconnu de son roman :

Maintenant, ainsi que disait Verlaine tout à la fin des «terza rima» liminaires de ses Poèmes Saturniens, Maintenant, va, mon livre, où le hasard te mènera. (17)

16 Ainsi, pleinement engagé dans sa tâche d'auteur, Maran construit son lecteur et sa lectrice, comme reflets de lui-même (lisant les Poèmes Saturniens de Verlaine ou évoquant les moulins de Don Quichotte). C'est avec insistance qu'il souligne dans ses écrits (fictifs ou non) sa double identité d'écrivain et de lecteur. Plus tard, ce ne sera plus la culture Banda qu'il lira, décoderà, et interprétera pour d'autres, mais les textes des auteurs africains et de la diaspora africaine. Sa dualité initiale se multiplie alors : de lecteur-écrivain de France, il devient lecteur politique (diffuseur) et épicurien des Belles Lettres et écrivain qui partage ses lectures d'ailleurs. Ainsi, dans ses notes et comptes-rendus, dans ses conférences sur les différentes littératures noires de l'époque, il opère un choix précis, politique, tout en prêchant une attention profonde à ce que Barthes appelle le «corps» du texte, sa matière, source de plaisir.

II. Le Lecteur critique de la littérature «Nègre»

17 Qui lit-il donc ? D'après Michel Fabre, qui voit en Maran «le maillon le plus solide(avec Locke) de la chaîne qui unit les négritudes américaine, antillaise et africaine» (Fabre, 1973, 172), il lit et glose sur les auteurs de la Renaissance de Harlem, d'Afrique, des
Antilles anglophones, hispanophones ou francophones. Toutefois il convient ici de ne pas confondre « la négritude comme mouvement littéraire bien limité et la négritude comme mythe ou idéologie politique » (Ibid., 172). C’est au creux de cette distinction que j’aimerais m’attarder ici. Maran fut accusé de toutes sortes de vilénies de part et d’autre : son assimilation française fut ainsi interprétée comme preuve manifeste d’un racisme anti-africain. En fait, il pourrait correspondre, avant l’heure, à ce que Jenny Sharpe appelle l’homme mimétique (mimic man), « une figure contradictoire qui à la fois renforce l’autorité coloniale et la contrarie »12, une figure entièrement construite par le discours colonial, et dont la voix semble reproduire ce discours. Mais cette voix, Maran l’utilisa dans deux buts : révéler au monde certaines pratiques intolérables émanant de l’administration et de l’armée coloniales, puis lire à voix haute les textes de la diaspora africaine.

C’est alors de sélection et de diffusion qu’il s’agit dans ses chroniques de La Dépêche de Toulouse, La Corrèze Républicaine, des Lettres Françaises, des Belles Lectures, du Journal du Peuple, de Gavroche ou encore, après la seconde guerre mondiale, de Présence Africaine. Il participe aussi, avec France Danielly, à une série d’émissions radiophoniques sur divers sujets pour la Radio Coloniale de 1945 à 1959, intitulées « Au-delà des mers ». Dans ses notes et conférences, il fait circuler l’information, établit des ponts entre les littératures de Harlem, des Antilles, d’Afrique, d’Haïti, d’Amérique du Sud, et inscrit leurs auteurs dans la littérature mondiale. Il se fait le « trait d’union » entre des auteurs et des textes géographiquement et culturellement dispersés. D’après Michel Fabre :

«... la plupart des écrivains afro-américains de passage à Paris durant les années vingt et trente se rendirent chez Maran presque comme en pèlerinage... Si l’on se souvient de la profonde admiration qu’ils portaient à Maran, si l’on songe à ses rapports fraternels avec la quasi-totalité des écrivains noirs francophones des Antilles et d’Afrique qui lui envoyaient leurs œuvres, si l’on pense à son inlassable travail de propagandiste et de critique visant à diffuser dans le monde entier la littérature de couleur, si l’on rappelle enfin le rôle d’initiateur qu’il joua vis-à-vis de Paulette Nardal, Césaire et surtout Senghor, il ne semble nullement exagéré de voir en Maran... le maillon le plus solide (avec Locke) de la chaîne qui unit les négritudes américaine, antillaise et africaine – échange d’idées dont Paris fut, aux années vingt et trente, le principal carrefour (Fabre, 1973, 172). »

plus seulement par un passé distant mais aussi par une expérience contemporaine partagée. Cette communauté dispersée écrit et crée selon des préoccupations partagées qui révèlent une inspiration commune : le cri de révolte poussé à Harlem résonne en Haïti, à la Martinique, en Guyane, à Rio, à Paris. Ainsi, l’écriture afro-américaine, l’écriture afro-caribéenne sort de son régionalisme et devient écriture d’une même diaspora. L’océan Atlantique ne sépare plus un écrivain noir d’un autre.

Au cours des décennies qui suivirent, Maran ne cessera de diffuser cette littérature dans ses chroniques et conférences. Dans l’une d’elles, intitulée « Le Mouvement littéraire aux Antilles et à la Guyane », Maran commente le poème I, too, am America de Langston Hughes en soulignant sa paradoxale universalité :

> I, too, am America.

Il n’est pas un mot de cet orgueilleux poème que les écrivains de couleur nés à Haïti et dans les départements français de la Guadeloupe, de la Martinique et de la Guyane ne fassent entièrement leur, après avoir pris soin de remplacer le I, too, am America, qui sert désormais de cri de ralliement aux noirs des États-Unis, par cet autre cri de ralliement : Nous aussi, nous sommes Français !

Il met à jour les mêmes revendications et préoccupations à l’œuvre dans les textes d’auteurs écrivant à partir de régions différentes du globe (ici le droit à la reconnaissance effective d’une citoyenneté à part entière, sans différence raciale). Dans cette même conférence, il commente les poèmes de la diaspora africaine et souligne leur cohésion :

Satires violentes débordant d’exaspération ou cris désespérés, tous véhiculent une souffrance, charrient une douleur provenant du fond des âges, douleur et souffrance d’une race que l’Europe chrétienne a déportée aux États-Unis, dans les îles de la mer Caraïbe, en Amérique Latine, à la Réunion et à Madagascar pour des fins en voie de disparition à l’heure actuelle.

Maran souligne ici les appels-et-répons que les auteurs échangent d’un continent à l’autre. Profondément investi dans sa mission de reconnaissance et de diffusion des littératures noires, il loue, applaudit et s’attache à mettre en valeur les filiations littéraires au sein de ces littératures. Ainsi, en présentant un nouveau recueil Minéral noir du poète haïtien René Depestre, il note :

> Quelque indéniable que soit sa personnalité, quelque grand que soit son talent, le développement de l’un et de l’autre, leur maturation doivent beaucoup non seulement à l’influence d’Aimé Césaire, de Jacques Roumain et de Léopold Sédar-Senghor, mais encore à celle des poètes américains de race noire.

Autrement dit, Maran trace les contours d’un clan littéraire noir, hors-frontière, qui a son histoire, sa critique, ses références.

Parfois, son désir de promouvoir les textes noirs ne l’empêche pas d’exprimer des réserves, voire un étonnement choqué, vis-à-vis des romanciers ou des poètes sur leur style. Ainsi, il oppose le talent du même poète à celui d’autres poètes noirs à propos de qui il déclare dans une autre chronique littéraire sur diverses anthologies de poésie :

Nous devons à L’Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie Nègre et Malgache de Langue Française de Léopold Sédar-Senghor, à Poésies Hâtiennes de Maurics A. Lubin, à la toute récente Antologia Negra da Expressao Portuguesa de Mario de Andrade, sans oublier The New Negro d’Alain Locke, qui date de 1925, et trois ou quatre ouvrages analogues, de connaître un nombre croissant de poètes de race noire, mais ignorant, pour la plupart, tout ce qui ressortit au vers français et à la rime, dont ils se moquent, au demeurant, comme d’une guigne, car ils préfèrent les uns et les autres, confier à une prose souvent énervée qu’ils appellent vers, leurs diatribes vengeresses.
Ailleurs, il s’indigne des choix suspects des prix littéraires français qui ne sont pas décernés à certains écrivains. Ainsi lorsqu’il vante le second roman de l’auteur martiniquais Raphaël Tardon :

Le malheur est que toutes sortes de jury écartent maintenant des grands prix littéraires de fin d’année des œuvres qui en paraissent dignes. C’est ce qui est arrivé à Starkenfirst du jeune romancier martiniquais. C’est ce qui arrivera sans doute à La Caldeira qu’il a récemment fait paraître aux Éditions Faquelle, et qui, tout comme Starkenfirst, éclate des dons répartis à tout romancier né.\(^\text{18}\)

Bref, Maran donne à la fois une vue d’oiseau des littératures noires à l’échelle mondiale, sans complaisance, avec une vigilante honnêteté intellectuelle, et une vision rapprochée, méticuleuse de chaque texte. Finalement, de même que Batouala est un élément significatif de la Weltliteratur\(^\text{19}\), les lectures de Maran elles aussi peuvent s’interpréter dans ce contexte comme autant de contributions au dialogue littéraire intercontinental noir, et au-delà, à l’inscription de ce dialogue dans la Weltliteratur. Sa conception de la littérature mondiale part de l’expression littéraire locale qui s’évase pour atteindre des dimensions transnationales. Témoin de la façon dont il honore deux auteurs guyanais :

La Guyane ne pourra remonter la marée d’ignominie qui a failli la submerger que si l’un des siens donne le jour à des poèmes aussi beaux que ceux des Chansons de Chambrée ou à des romans méritant d’être comparés à Lord Jim ou à La Folie Almayer. Deux jeunes écrivains guyanais l’ont compris, et que tout écrivain avait un éminent devoir social à remplir envers sa petite patrie et la grande. Ils se sont attachés tous deux, silencieusement, à cette tâche difficile et méritoire. Le premier des deux, à qui les Editions Faquelle ont confié la direction des « Écrits Français d’Outre-Mer », s’appelle L-G. Damas, le second René Jadfard.\(^\text{20}\)

Ici Maran décrit deux visées de sa critique : d’une part la reconnaissance de la littérature guyanaise en tant qu’entité littéraire, et d’autre part, son inscription dans les Belles Lettres. Ce faisant, il repousse les frontières de la « petite patrie » qui rejoint la « grande », celle de la littérature écrite en français, mais aussi, au-delà, celle de la littérature mondiale. En ce sens, René Maran se pose en critique/lecteur de la Weltliteratur au sens original où Goethe l’entendait :

... un pont littéraire qui franchit les fleuves séparateurs, une route spirituelle au-dessus des montagnes qui divisent. C’est un marchandage intellectuel, un trafic d’idées entre les peuples, un marché littéraire auquel les nations viennent échanger leurs trésors intellectuels.

Et le commentateur de Goethe d’ajouter :

... la littérature mondiale est ainsi la sphère intellectuelle dans laquelle, à travers les voix de leurs écrivains, les peuples ne se parlent plus d’eux-mêmes à eux-mêmes, mais se parlent les uns aux autres...\(^\text{21}\).

Participer à la Weltliteratur peut prendre plusieurs formes : être écrivain de cette littérature, mais aussi traduire, commenter, promouvoir celles des autres, s’engager dans une activité de glose transnationale, construire soi-même les ponts. Et puis aussi partager l’enthousiasme de ses découvertes avec d’autres.

III. Le lecteur-écrivain d’un nouveau plaisir du texte

Critiquer signifie aussi : faire partager son plaisir du texte. En cela, ce qui m’intéresse est la voix de Maran tout autant que son rôle de lecteur professionnel, et la façon dont cette voix dit le plaisir du texte.
Il se pose d’abord en lecteur/auteur professionnel, qui s’enthousiasme : « La plus belle joie que puisse avoir un écrivain est celle qu’il tire soudain de la certitude d’avoir découvert un grand livre » écrit-il à propos de Gouverneurs de la Rosée de Jacques Roumain qu’il décrit comme un « roman où la virilité de la pensée s’allie à l’émotion de la qualité la plus secrète »22. Après avoir résumé le roman, il commente ainsi son écriture :

Parée de termes propres au terroir haïtien et de proverbes sentant leur origine africaine, elle s’exprime tantôt dans la langue d’un Giono qui se serait débarrassé de tout procédé littéraire, tantôt dans celle d’un Péguy qui serait né sous les tropiques et aurait bénéficié des apports filtrés du surréalisme23.

Le lecteur puise au sein d’un nouveau texte littéraire haïtien la réminiscence heureuse d’autres plaisirs textuels (la richesse lyrique d’un Giono, le ciselé des phrases d’un Péguy).

De même, il ausculte la poésie d’Emmanuel-Flavia Léopold pour en déceler les influences :

Classique, son vers, qui ne porte jamais si loin que lorsqu’il se plie aux plus strictes disciplines de la métrique traditionnelle, est riche des emprunts qu’il a faits au romantisme, à l’école parnassienne, au symbolisme, au vers-librisme, voire même à un surréalisme assagi.


Dans la même conférence, il décerne les palmes à Aimé Césaire dont il présente un texte en ces termes :

Il est regrettable que la trop courte citation qui va suivre ne puisse donner qu’un très faible aperçu du souffle qui soulève d’un bout à l’autre l’admirable poème en prose rythmée qu’est Cahier d’un retour au pays natal, et de la densité de la pensée qui l’anime.

Il ne s’agit pas ici d’une critique au sens plus ou moins vaguement répressif du terme, laudatif ou accusateur, mais bien plutôt de ce que Barthes entend par la critique en tant que plaisir ; celui, ici, qui émane de la rencontre entre le lecteur et l’expression écrite dynamique d’une pensée. Il peut aussi correspondre à celui, défini plus haut, du moment vocal de la lecture.

Plaisir du texte. Classiques. Culture (plus il y aura de culture, plus le plaisir sera grand, divers). Intelligence. Ironie. Délicatesse. Euphorie. Maîtrise. Sécurité : art de vivre. Le plaisir du texte peut se définir par une pratique (sans aucun risque de répression) : lieu et temps de lecture : maison, province, repas proche, lampe, famille là où il faut, c’est-à-dire au loin et non loin (Proust dans le cabinet aux senteurs d’iris), etc. Extraordinaire renforcement du moi (par le fantasme) ; inconscient ouaté. Ce plaisir peut être dit : de là vient la critique. (Barthes, 82.)

Le plaisir barthien du texte à sa lecture inclut donc celui d’une glose voluptueuse qui prolongerait le plaisir initial de la rencontre avec le texte en exprimant ce dernier. Ici, le plaisir est à différencier de la jouissance : « La jouissance est indicible, interdite » écrit Barthes (82). Ainsi, lire à voix haute, « faire de la critique », c’est dire son plaisir de lecteur ou de lectrice et réamorcer ce processus à chaque lecture : un plaisir qui ne s’épuise pas.

Or, lorsque je lis les critiques de René Maran, j’ai parfois l’impression de lire par-dessus l’épaule d’un lecteur comblé. « Je mets chaque année à profit les grandes vacances estivales pour parler de recueils de poèmes que l’on m’envoie de temps en temps » annonce-t-il dans une de ses chroniques littéraires intitulée « Un peu de poésie ». Ou encore, je crois surprendre une rêverie. Ainsi lorsqu’il commente les poèmes du recueil d’Emmanuel-Flavia Léopold, Toi qui n’étais que lumière, c’est de musique et de silence dont
le lecteur s’est épris. « Ils ont du mouvement, ils sont d’une inspiration et d’une pureté admirable. Le livre fermé, les yeux mi-clos, on entend encore, on écoute encore leurs résonnances »25. Ce n’est plus le vers lui-même que Maran décrit, mais l’effet du vers sur le lecteur, sa réverberation en lui, son point d’ancrage et de diffusion à l’intérieur du corps même du lecteur. Le moment de la lecture à voix haute devient presque celui de la lecture à voix chuchotée, tant il décrit une résonnance intime du texte.

37 A d’autres moments, c’est à une dégustation que Maran convie ses lecteurs. Ainsi, dans sa critique de Bon Dieu rit d’Edris Saint-Amand, il utilise des termes empruntés au registre gastronomique pour comparer les thèmes du roman à ceux de Gouverneurs de la Rosée de Jacques Roumain : « ...alors que M. Jacques Roumain les saupoudrait d’une prose toute poétisée de surréalisme à l’usage du grand public, M. Edris Saint-Amand a préféré faire appel, en ce qui le concerne, au plus savoureux des naturalismes régionalistes »26 (c’est moi qui souligne).

38 Toutefois, il serait réducteur de voir en Maran un guide Michelin nouvelle formule décernant des toques à ses romanciers/chefs favoris. Car si le plaisir de lire prend les voies (à peine détournées) de la gourmandise pour se dire, il excède aussi cette dernière. Sous le charme de sa lecture, Maran devient lyrique dans sa critique. Ainsi, pour conclure sa conférence sur « le mouvement littéraire aux Antilles et à la Guyane », il décrit son plaisir à la lecture des poèmes de la diaspora africaine comme suit :

Ce rythme, cet égarement, l’exultation de leur exaltation, leur humeur singulier, leur tristesse, leurs blasphèmes, leurs élans paniques imprègnent l’art européen d’aujourd’hui de lumière sonore, de splendeur magique, le pénètrent non seulement du mouvement de la vie charnelle, mais aussi, mais surtout de joie gratuite, de création spontanée, de fantaisie qui de ses propres inventions s’enchanter et s’alimenter, et enfin de cet idéalisme qui le pare de l’éclat d’un printemps que l’on croyait oublié : celui de la jeunesse du monde27.

39 Le terme de critique ici semble bien faible pour rendre compte de l’élan magistral de Maran-lecteur. D’un style haletant, comme s’il cherchait à ne rien perdre, à tout garder de ses lectures, des façons multiples dont la poésie a résonné en lui (esthétique, intellect, émotion, humour), il montre à quel point cette poésie a maintenant « pénétré » la littérature européenne et l’a dynamisée ; enfin, il termine sur l’affirmation d’une nouvelle jouvenue, d’un nouveau recommencement. A travers sa critique, Maran nous propose l’image d’un nouvel Eden : celui, (re)trouvé, du bonheur initial et spontané de lire.

40 Finalement, Maran, en affirmant sans cesse sa double identité de lecteur et d’auteur, nous montre la voie à suivre : écrire en toute conscience du plaisir du texte en formation ; lire à voix haute, le stylo à la main pour goûter et partager les délices du texte de l’autre, et se laisser porter par son élan. Pour Maran, lire-écrire constitue, au-delà du geste politique, la forme privilégiée et généreuse d’un hédonisme intellectuel partagé.

41 Et c’est bien pour cela, Michel, que Maran a fini par me fasciner : parce que, comme toi, il indique une voie possible à suivre. Comme toi qui m’as confié avec un large sourire, ces écrits de Maran à regarder, il donnait, lui aussi, à lire, à regarder. En suivant ses traces d’agent de la Weltliteratur, c’est sur les tiennes que je me suis retrouvée. Cela ne m’a pas franchement étonnée : que ce soit à New York, à Paris, ou à Dakar, je finis toujours par tomber sur un membre de ton réseau (ou plus exactement de ta famille internationale) d’agents formés par toi à la fac. Et c’est avec un peu de ta chaleur que ces lointains cousins ouvrent grand leur porte, en espérant avoir le geste aussi large que le tien.
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NOTES

1. « On sait également que Maran, promu critique en titre de ce que l’on appelait alors le ’roman régionaliste d’expression coloniale’, sut témoigner à l’égard de ses émules une bienveillance prodigue d’encouragements autant que de conseils éclairés. » Fabre, 1990, 239.

2. Michel, m’entendant dire en été 1999 que je travaillais à un projet sur la littérature guyanaise (Martin, Florence et Favre, Isabelle. De la Guyane à la diaspora africaine : Ecrits du silence. Paris : Karthala, 2002), me confia tout un dossier de manuscrits de Maran récoltés à la bibliothèque de Dakar. « Prends-les et écris un article, » me dit-il...

3. Voir l’histoire de la lecture par Alberto Manguel à ce propos, qui inverse volontiers le sens du proverbe « Les paroles s’envolent, les écrits restent ». “Written words, from the days of the first Sumerian tablets, were meant to be pronounced out loud, since the signs carried implicitly, as if it were their soul, a particular sound. The classic phrase scripta manent, verba volant — which has come to mean, in our time, “what is written remains, what is spoken vanishes into air” — used to express the exact opposite; it was coined in praise of the word said out loud, which has wings and can fly, as compared to the silent word on the page, which is motionless, dead. Faced with a written text, the reader had a duty to lend voice to the silent letters, the scripta, and to allow them to become, in the delicate biblical distinction, verba, spoken words — spirit. The primordial languages of the Bible — Aramaic and Hebrew — do not differentiate between the act of reading and the act of speaking; they name both with the same word.” Alberto Manguel. A History of Reading. New York: Penguin Books, 1996 : 45.
4. René Maran, « La Martinique littéraire et la libération ». Université Cheikh Anta Diop, ms non daté : Rés. 5182

5. ... ce roman reçoit non seulement le Prix Goncourt, mais fut également traduit, au cours des années 20, dans douze langues étrangères, de l’anglais au norvégien, en passant par l’allemand, le hongrois, le japonais, le hollandais, le roumain et le tchèque. A la singulière canonisation par le Prix Goncourt et au nombre impressionnant des traductions, fait écho la multiplicité des traces de lectures et des réactions : aucune œuvre couronnée par le Prix Goncourt dans les années 20 n’a rencontré pareil retentissement. (Lüsebrink, 145.)

6. “The preface appears strangely detached from the novel that follows. This paradox arises from the fact that in the introduction to his novel Maran speaks in his own name. He wishes to provide the essential social and political background for his characters so that what he has to relate will be within the given context. The novel, on the other hand, is impersonal but, as we shall see, it bears the clear stamp of its author in both its style and content.” (Cameron, 25.)


11. D’ailleurs cette dualité se retrouve dans ses autres romans. « Aux colonies, je n’ai d’amis que mes livres », écrit Jean Veneuse, l’*alter ego* de l’écrivain dans *Journal sans date* et dans *Un Homme pareil aux autres*.

12. “The mimic is a contradictory figure who simultaneously reinforces colonial authority and disturbs it.” Ashcroft et all, 99.


15. René Maran, « Un peu de poésie », Chronique littéraire, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, coupure non datée.

16. Ainsi, à propos du roman de Jean-Louis Baghio'o, il écrit : « Nous sommes à une époque où les revendications sociales et les problèmes raciaux sont partout à l’ordre du jour. On était en droit de supposer, de par la personnalité même de Jean-Louis Baghio'o, qu’il traiterait, dans son ouvrage, d’une question aussi douloureuse que délicate, et projetterait sur elle les clartés de son expérience. L’auteur d’*Issandre, le mulâtre*, on ne peut que le regretter, ne s’est même pas permis de l’aborder de biais. (Maran, « Le Romancier Guadeloupéen Jean-Louis Baghio'o », Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, ms daté du 1er octobre 1949.

17. Maran, « Un poète haïtien : René Depestre », chronique littéraire, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, coupure non datée.


19. « *Batouala* reste –et doit rester– une œuvre de la littérature mondiale... à cause de son immense impact idéologique et socio-culturel, des années vingt à nos jours. » (Lüsebrink, 153.)

21. World literature is, then, according to Goethe, the literature which serves as a link between national literatures and this between the nations themselves, for the exchange of ideal values. Such literature includes all writings by means of which the peoples learn to understand and make allowances for each other, and which bring them more closely together. It is a literary bridge over dividing rivers, a spiritual highway over dividing mountains. It is an intellectual barter, a traffic in ideas between peoples, a literary market to which the nations bring their intellectual treasures for exchange. To illustrate his idea, Goethe himself uses such images taken from the world of trade and commerce. World literature is thus the intellectual sphere in which, through the voices of their writers, the peoples speak no longer to and of themselves but to each other. (Strich, 5)

23. Ibid.


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Is Memory the Amnesia You Like? Some Remarks on Self-Invention and the Presence of Caribbean Literature in North America

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1. Is Memory the Amnesia You Like? Some Remarks on Self-invention and the Presence of Caribbean Literature in North America

2. If we look at what is generally termed "Contemporary American Literature" by colleagues in academia and much of the media in the United States, we realize that we are facing a more or less interrelated mosaic of literatures that can be distinguished by race, gender, and class. This view has increasingly been accepted since the 1960s with the advent and establishment of what was then called Black Studies, Chicano Studies or Ethnic Studies. We “Americanists” at German (and generally at European) universities followed this trend; in fact most of us were quite happy to see the mythic, monolithic (Anglo or WASP) concept of culture supplanted by a more varied, more subtle, more just perspective that stressed difference, hybridity and what has been called "imagined communities" (Anderson). Many scholars are tempted to speak of North American literatures in the plural, avoiding the stigma of imperial narrowness. In the meantime, Postcolonial Studies, Multicultural Studies and Cultural Studies have, in the eighties, in the wake of so-called French theory, occupied the center stage in many humanities programs on both sides of the Atlantic.

3. The presence of Caribbean writers and writing in the imperial centers of the north is justly felt to be a relevant and vital aspect of an ongoing enrichment process within North American culture and literature. As we all know, both the United States and Canada count among the classic countries of immigration; and we also know that immigration, emigration, as well as migration, may have many motives. The cultural production of immigrants in and for what is, at the initial stage, their host country entails a partial renunciation of the immigrant (or longtime resident) writer’s former national culture, a
questioning of cultural identity. As James Clifford has amply shown, cultural contact zones come into existence. Culture is translated, interpreted as it moves from a more or less colonial position into, or close to, an imperial center. It is interpreted both by the colonial, the ex-colonial, and the so-called First World — and not necessarily in the same fashion and with the same intentions or results. Self-definition becomes an important endeavor. Thus the ever increasing number of memoirs and autobiographies of first generation immigrants. These texts are attempts at self-positioning in a world that is felt to be increasingly puzzling. Many are also attempts at self-justification, vindication and confession; just think of the many exile Cuban writers. Mythicizing often enough becomes part of the game, both as regards a personal life and as regards a nation and its course in history. Many texts are Janus-faced: they look both back to the country, the life, the culture of origin – and ahead to the host country and existence in that new context. What was familiar once, becomes strange, what is familiar now, was strange before, or may partially still be so. The concepts of otherness, of alterity, of what is or was considered one’s own become important, may be shifting, may have to be revised. A troubled, not so unequivocal perspective creates hybrid texts with mixed, sometimes tormented loyalties and binary or multifocal cultural referents.

4 As we know, Caribbean cultures have grown and flourished outside the Caribbean space proper as a consequence of migration, emigration and/or immigration. And by no means can we say that authors must become less imbied with their own native cultures or feel less obliged to them when living in another country. Who would dare to charge a José Marti having become less Cuban during the fifteen years he lived in the United States? That he as hardly any Latin American or Caribbean person before understood (and made the southern continent understand) important aspects of the United States does not invalidate the above statement. I would uphold the presence of the same fervent Cubanidad for a writer like Reinaldo Arenas, regardless of his strident anti-Castro stance. Scholarship is still having a hard time to define what a nation, a national culture is. Most scholars agree that a national (and an individual’s) identity is not naturally given, that there may be a whole series of identities within a nation — religious communities, regions, linguistically and/or ethnically defined communities, etc. There are also identities based on class structure within and across nations. One may perhaps say that *grosso modo* specific cultural conditions in a specific period in specific geographical and socio-political conditions can forge concepts of a nation, that nationhood can be understood as an imagined community in which fictions, fantasies, myths may play an important role. Scholars like Benedict Anderson and others have gratefully taken up Salmon Rushdie’s statement of "imaginary homelands". One has to ask oneself in the context of migration literature what the term "home" means. German culture has the term/concept of "Heimat", which carries a whole bundle of emotions and which is by no means identical with the terms "state" or "nation". In fact, it can be used as an oppositional concept. "Heimat"/home is a place one may fall back on, may want to return to. It implies familiarity, intimacy — refers to a small entity like a region or a street or a house. It is at all times an essential part of an individual’s or a small group’s identity. Should one leave that space, chances are that everything else, everything that is new, will at first be measured against what has shaped that cultural, social and emotional space.

5 These issues are important in a Caribbean context when you consider that half the population of Jamaica and Puerto Rico lives abroad, when there is a massive ongoing northbound emigration from islands like Haiti or the Dominican Republic. Hardly a
Guyanese writer is living in Guyana today, a country which has since the forties been extraordinarily fertile, as literature goes. Examples could, with some variations, be multiplied. It is evident that especially the literatures of the United States, Canada, Great Britain and France have become enormously enriched by a galaxy of writers who at least in part belong to their literary tradition, who in fact are creating a transnational literature. Is Austin Clarke a Barbadian or a Canadian writer? David Dabydeen a Guyanese or a British writer? V. S. Naipaul a Trinidadian? Caryl Phillips a writer from St. Kitts, Britain, and/or the US? Are Junot Diaz and Julia Alvarez Dominican or Dominican-American authors, members of the hyphenated Americans? Which criteria must we use to "locate" them, and is that relevant at all? In the US bilingual aesthetics, bilingual literatures are in existence; at Harvard University a conference on bilingual aesthetics in US literature (meaning mainly Spanish/English, but also Chinese or Tugalog/English literature) was held in 1999. So these are phenomena we have an interest in watching closely in the years to come.

6 Let me look briefly at three Caribbean writers and show how they dealt with their diasporic situation. What do they write about, where do they look, what do they remember, want to remember, and what do they choose to forget? Which axes do they have to grind? What is mythicized, newly construed? How do these writers deal with the Other, with alterity?

7 Jamaica Kincaid, an alias Elaine Potter Richardson, grew up in Antigua (not in Jamaica) and has been living in or close to New York City since she was seventeen. Her prose is characterized by an incisive precision that barely veils an analytic aggressiveness for which she has become famous. In her slim 1988 volume *A Small Place* she goes back to "her" island, Antigua. The text transcends the genre of the protest pamphlet, which naive readers could limit it to. Instead, it is a highly crafted, poetic, repetitive, incantatory dissection of traditionally held views (both by Antiguans of African descent and by former white masters, as well as by their new masters). It is the deconstruction and to a certain degree the reconstruction of a Caribbean nation, a geography, a cultural, racial and affective space with references to historically based reasons for omnipresent insular corruption and hypocrisy. The voice in *A Small Place* belongs to a person who has indeed left — and returned with a cold eye only to be horrified and to tell the truth. The island’s beauty is unreal, its institutions are foul, its elite corrupt. The tourists are despised. We have a somber anti-idyllic, anti-Columbian discourse that dismantles any idea of a Paradise surrounded by blue and green waters. It is also a text written by a person who does, after years in the US, have quite anti-imperial ideas on how a country should not be run. Kincaid asserted in an interview given for the *Mississippi Review* in 1991 her conviction that life was and remains disagreeable and hard in any Caribbean country, that no tourist would want to live there for any length of time and that "the main lesson we have learned from colonial rule is all the corruption and none of the good things of it." And she adds in an attempt at a self-definition, almost obsessively: "So I come from one kind of corruption, the moral corruption of Europe, and now I find myself in a new kind of corruption. My background is that I am a product of corruption"(11).

8 My second example, a kind of double feature, is taken from Cuban-American literature, if I may use that hyphenated label. Gustavo Pérez Firmat, a noted scholar at Duke University, who came to the US at age eleven, wrote in 1995 an autobiography with the ominous title *Next Year in Cuba* and a much more appropriate subtitle, *A Cubano’s Coming-of-Age in America* . Both his discussion of who he was as a Cuban boy from retrospec and
what or who he has become is interesting in a context of alterity. He does, after several decades, doubt whether he remembers correctly the boy he had been in Cuba. Does he still have anything in common with that person, and how much, and in which areas? He states: "More than three decades later, the distance between the boy on the dock and the man I am today seems incalculable" (21). His life in Cuba has become "a soft blur" (33). Memory has to a considerable degree been reconstructed, invented — lovingly or "morbidly" (33). For a long time, he has excluded that memory from his consciousness. Exile, we should remind ourselves, both remembers and forgets — represses, sometimes quite willingly. Language is a potent vehicle of expression and feeling, of culture; if you come from one language and move into another, loyalty and competence conflicts arise. At present, Pérez Firmat is convinced that the written word for him is essentially English, while the spoken word, the oral delivery is overwhelmingly Spanish (52). Whenever there is parenthood in a country that initially was not your own, generational conflicts also entail cultural conflicts. For Pérez Firmat there seems to have been a division of labor with an outcome that he is quite happy with: "Being American is for me a reverse inheritance, one that flows from the younger to the older generations, from children to parents. I gave Cuba to my kids, and they have reciprocated by giving me America.... we have raised each other." (55) The volume is a single extended attempt at self-positioning and self-definition. Pérez Firmat became a citizen of the United States in 1977. However, in his house, so he tells us, you will find to this day a row of santería objects and a veneration for Eleguá. And he has not yet been able to bring himself to vote for an American president. His life is not a synthesis, as he at the end of his book admits, but rather a "seesaw" (274). The problem of experiencing both the United States and Cuba as elements of both the familiar and the Other remains.

Roberto G. Fernández, a Cuban-American writer who came to the United States at age ten, one year earlier than Pérez Firmat, has not written an autobiography. He produces fiction and (to a lesser extent) drama, which means that the urgency, the immediacy of Pérez Firmat is lacking. On the other hand, he is much freer with his material, and this all the more since he is a satirist. The target of his pen is mainly bourgeois Cuban society based in Miami: people with pretensions he finds ridiculous, with a mentality that recreates an island past that objectively never existed, and reactionary political attitudes. In his successful 1988 novel Raining Backwards, his heroine, Mirta Vergara, an aging virgin, has become a raging nationalist who defends the beauties of Varadero Beach against all other beaches in the world. It is her preferred geography which she idealizes and mythicizes to no end. Eloy, a neighbor’s boy, scrubs (and tickles) her naked body in a bathroom that she has decorated garishly to fit an imaginary Varadero, while she, as a recompense and in an increasingly (self-)eroticizing fashion, tells him about her adventures back in Cuba. To the rollicking, comic, fairy-tale elements in Mirta’s neurosis comes a tragic component, when the reader notices that Mirta has not only the problems of an aging spinster and a desterrada, but that her remembering is tragic because of its lack of substance of a previous vivencia, due to the passing of time and the constantly receding images. Mirta Vergara is reconstructing a Cuba that never existed; her nostalgia turns into self-professed patriotism and ends in a psychotic, shrill nationalism that sublimates (more or less) a whole array of needs, including the vaginal alluded to within last name.

If Fernández’s characters, especially Mirta, look backwards, the Puerto Rican poet Víctor Hernández Cruz in his 1973 volume Mainland takes life in New York City much more into account. Hernandez Cruz, who was, together with his friend and colleague, the African-
American author Ishmael Reed, among the first ones in the US to advocate and practice a "culture of hybridity" and to coin the term "Tropicalization" in 1976, published many poems that could both be claimed by a Puerto Rican national literary tradition and by North American ethnic literature. One culture infuses, suffuses another, none remains the same after life in the contact zones. In his poem, "Los New Yorks", the speaker sees tropical Puerto Rico in Manhattan, a tropicalization takes place.

I present you the tall skyscrapers
as merely huge palm trees with lights...

by which he reduces their modernist monstrosity to something familiar and natural.

The roaring of the trains is a fast
Guaguanco
dance of the ages. (1971, 10)

In the poem "Thursday", a dream poem, the speaker moves Thursday, a rainy Manhattan and the sea close to each other into an interior landscape of pleasure:

Today I eat guineo
with my hands
Under a palm tree by the beach
Where I am not
Do you see the dance that could begin
Evolve (8.)

The fusion does not take place, a cautionary, potential "could" is upheld, the two worlds do not dissolve, but something new is about to happen, to evolve. Fernando Ortiz would, I assume, be interested in Hernández Cruz’s version of "transculturacin" where the desire for doubleness and wholeness is evident and a flexible, fluid transnational concept imminent.

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**WOLFGANG BINDER**

Universität Erlangen
Social concerns
“Pearl Harbor Blues”: Black Americans and World War II

Leon F. Litwack

1 Near the end of World War II, Richard Wright visited the Schomburg Library in Harlem. The curator had told him about a recently acquired collection of letters written by black servicemen. Wright spent the afternoon reading them. Most were bitter letters, complaining of brutal treatment and expressing a cynical view of the war. “I feel deeply,” wrote one soldier, “that the most important roles Negroes are playing in this war are that of hostages to prevent Hitler, Goebbels, and company from using our omission from the war effort as propaganda. The longer I stay in the service, I wonder why in hell we criticize Hitler and his Jew-eliminating technique.” Another wrote, “I’m not a coward, never was one. I’m not afraid to fight when I find something worth fighting for. But this much I know: If the so called democracies win this war they do not intend to do the right thing [for colored people] any more than Hitler.” Another wrote his mother, “I’ve finally ended up in the South, and I don’t like it.... If what I’ve already experienced is any example of Southern ways, I think I’d just as soon be overseas, or dead, than to stay down here.” Still another black GI told his family how the army handled Negroes (like himself) who object to discrimination. “They are declared to be of “paranoiac personalities” and are sent to the hospital for observation and treatment. Such has happened to me —so I speak with authority.”

2 Richard Wright left the library “in a daze,” deeply moved by what he had read, and he recorded his anger in the daily journal he kept, “Good God, what a sea of despair to swim in! Reading these letters are [sic] horrible. They are a wail, a cry, but a useless one, for in no single letter was there even a ghost of an idea about how they could get out of their hated lot.” The letters reinforced earlier reports he had heard of violent skirmishes involving black and white seamen carrying cargoes to the war zones. “Some world!” Wright thought. “Why does not the country call off the war with Germany and concentrate single-mindedly on Japan, a nation whom they can hate without reservation for they are colored? I think that the average white man would fight Japan for fun!”
The day after his visit to the Schomburg Library, while brooding over the imminent induction of his friend Ralph Ellison into a Jim Crow army, Richard Wright gave full vent to his feelings about the black experience and race relations in America.

Again I say that each and every Negro, during the last 300 years, possesses from that heritage a greater burden of hate for America than they themselves know. Perhaps it is well that Negroes try to be as un-intellectual as possible, for if they ever started really thinking about what happened to them they'd go wild. And perhaps that is the secret of whites who want to believe that Negroes really have no memory; for if they thought that Negroes remembered, they would start out to shoot them all in sheer self-defense. (Wright, 1945-47. Entries for Jan. 7, 28, 29, 1945.)

The outburst by Richard Wright addressed an issue that persisted throughout World War II—the condition of black men and women in white America and their exclusion from participation in the larger society. Through the first three decades of the twentieth century, the essential mechanisms that fixed the place of black men and women in southern society remained largely inviolate. Individual blacks made some breakthroughs into the professions and the middle class, the New Deal encouraged a politics of hope, but most black southerners still lived out their lives in a rigidly segregated and repressive world; were denied a political voice, refused equal educational resources ("enforced ignorance"), confined to an economic system that left little room for ambition or hope, subjected to a criminal justice system that operated with ruthless efficiency in upholding the absolute power of whites to command black subordination and labor.

The narrow boundaries, the limited possibilities, the need to curb ambitions, to contain feelings, to weigh carefully every word, gesture, and movement when in the presence of whites still shaped black lives in the South. Personal security lay in repressing any impulses toward individuality or assertiveness, in learning how to accommodate to daily indignities. Reflecting on the eve of World War II over what he had endured in his lifetime, Arthur Brodie, who lived in Franklin County, North Carolina, felt numbed by the experience. “There's been so many times that you get to the point you feel it's a way of life for a long, long time.”

Bluesman Willie Brown employed a chilling, apocalyptic imagery to convey that same feeling.

Can't tell my future, I can't tell my past.
Lord, it seems like every minute sure gon' be my last.
Oh, minutes seems like hours, and hours seems like days.
Yes, minutes seem like hours, hours seems like days. (Brown, 2002.)

On the eve of World War II, that was the racist order in the South into which black youths were socialized. And it is in the context of this experience that black Americans would view the events unfolding in Europe and Asia. The cynicism ran deep. Four days before the United States entered the war, Charles Jenkins, a black man, wrote President Franklin Roosevelt, “If there is such a thing as God, he must be a white person, according to the conditions we colored people are in.... Hitler has not done anything to the colored people—it’s the people right here in the United States who are keeping us out of work and keeping us down.” (Blum, 184) The cynicism was rooted in the conviction that this was essentially a white man's war, a war to maintain white supremacy throughout the world, involving colonial nations such as France and Great Britain with a sordid record of racist repression and exploitation. After all, the same President Roosevelt who told the western democracies, “We Americans are vitally concerned in the defense of your freedom,” placed a low priority on defending the freedom of black men and women in the United
States. “What I wants to know,” a Georgia black youth asked, “is, if democracy’s so good for white folks, why ain’t it good for niggers too?” (Redding, 259.)

Even with America’s entry into the war, the mood of cynicism in black America did not suddenly vanish in a patriotic frenzy. If some remained indifferent, others could no longer contain the rage and resentment they felt. “I hope Hitler does come,” a black domestic in Raleigh, North Carolina, told her employer, “because if he does he will get you first!” (She was sentenced to prison for three years for her outburst. [Ottley, 307]) For some, the war seemed distant and took on less meaning than the daily struggle for survival. Unable to enjoy the rights and privileges accorded white Americans, many blacks might have wondered if this was their country under attack. An old black sharecropper, after coming to the Big House to receive his ration of cornmeal and fatback from the plantation owner, noted in passing the news of Pearl Harbor. “By the way Captain, I hear the Japs done declared war on you white folks!” (Cayton, 267.)

If anything, as the war progressed, the questions only grew more insistent. How could white Americans express outrage over the plight of Jews while remaining indifferent to the lynching and brutalization of black Americans? How could a Jim Crow army fight for a free world? How could black Americans fight abroad in defense of freedoms denied to them at home? No amount of patriotic hype or sloganeering could settle or postpone answers to these questions. “The Negro today is angry, resentful and utterly apathetic about the war,” a black writer observed early in 1942. “Fight for what?” he is asking. “This war doesn’t mean a thing to me. If we win I lose, so what?” (Brown, Earl, 546.) This time the democratic war slogans found no ready acceptance in black America. “White folks talking about the Four Freedoms, and we ain’t got none.” (Silberman, 61.) This time blacks resolved not to rely upon the expected gratitude and sense of fair play of white Americans, for each time they had done so in the past (as in World War I) they had been betrayed. “Now we are disillusioned,” the Pittsburgh Courier editorialized in 1942. “We have neither faith in promises, nor a high opinion of the integrity of the American people, where race is involved. Experience has taught us that we must rely primarily upon our own efforts if we are to enjoy the full fruits of the victory for which we fight. That is why we protest, agitate, and demand that all forms of color prejudice be blotted out.”

World War II, then, would be fought on two fronts. This time blacks responded to the calls for wartime unity and loyalty with a conditional patriotism. Rather than lessen the agitation for civil rights in the spirit of wartime unity, they heightened the agitation. “So we must speak, even as we fight and die,” proclaimed The Crisis, the organ of the NAACP in 1942.

We must say that the fight against Hitlerism begins in Washington, D. C., the capital of our nation, where black Americans have a status only slightly above that of Jews in Berlin. We must say that if forced labor is wrong in Czechoslovakia, peonage farms are wrong in Georgia. If the ghettos in Poland are an evil, so are the ghettos in America. We must say that the enslavement of the bodies and spirits of men, of whatever color, or race, or residence, must be wiped out. We must say all the things that cry aloud to be said—not later, but now. (The Crisis, n° 49, 7.)

Endorsing that same theme, a Harlem leader observed, “If we don’t fight for our rights during this war, while the government needs us, it will be too late after the war.” (Sitkoff, 662.)
With unprecedented unity in the black community, civil rights and community organizations, along with the black press and the black church, exposed and attacked the gross disparities between the American democratic creed, proclaimed war aims, and racial practices. Protest became not only widespread but respectable, involving individuals never before mobilized in the struggle for civil rights. Membership in the NAACP multiplied nearly ten times during World War II, the number of its chapters tripled, the membership crossed over class lines and became more representative of the black population, and that significant change in the reach of the NAACP altered the strategies and direction of its activism. The black press also played a critical role. Despite attempts to censor black newspapers and threats to deny them scarce news print, the press maintained its vigilance, covering in depth every racial incident and every invasion of civil rights. (White, 1969, 206-210; Washburn, 1986.) If these reports and protests threatened the nation's wartime unity, as public officials believed, they persisted nonetheless. Responding to charges of disloyalty, a black observer captured the prevailing mood, “It is not a question of Negro... loyalty, but essentially that of lack of enthusiasm for a war which they do not believe is being fought for... true democratic principles.” (Blum, 189.)

If most blacks accepted, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, their obligation to serve in the military, if some still believed (as had blacks in previous wars) that their service would be recognized, respected, and honored and ultimately promote changes in white attitudes, many retained their doubts. This time the pessimism, the ambivalence, the bitterness, the frustration, the questioning, the cynicism ran much deeper, as it did for this black youth about to be inducted into the Army. The very nature of the war and its racial implications tempered his enthusiasm and patriotism. “Just carve on my tombstone, ‘Here lies a black man killed fighting a yellow man for the protection of a white man.’” (Cayton, 268.) Since army recruiters deemed them troublesome and inferior, some blacks opted to turn racial stereotypes to their advantage, even play into them to avoid service. Malcolm Little (Malcolm X) showed up at his physical as a Harlem jivester, wearing his most outrageous zoot suit and yellow shoes. He proclaimed great enthusiasm for serving his country. “I want to get sent down South,” he confided to the psychiatrist. “Organize them nigger soldiers, you dig? Steal us some guns, and kill up crackers!” (X, 108.)

If blacks needed “to fight for the right to fight for democracy,” as Walter White of the NAACP insisted, some blacks could not mount a sufficient enthusiasm for the war to make that kind of commitment. It made more sense to drop out. Horn player Howard McGhee, a pioneer of Be Bop, adopted no conscious strategy to avoid service. He simply told the army psychiatrist how he felt, articulating doubts and a bitterness no doubt many might have shared with him. “Man, why should I fight?” he asked the army psychiatrist, “I ain’t mad at nobody out there.... I wouldn't know the difference.... If he's white, I'm going to shoot him. Whether he's a Frenchman, a German, or whatever, how the fuck would I know the difference?” The army informed McGhee it could not use his services. “I wasn't ready to dodge no bullets for nobody,” McGhee later reflected. “And I like America. But I didn't like it that much. I mean, it's all right to be a second-class citizen, but shit, to be shot at, that's another damn story.” (Deveaux, 246.) Dizzy Gillespie attracted the attention of the army psychiatrist when he appeared carrying his trumpet in a paper bag. His words attracted even more attention.
They started asking me my views about fighting. “Well, look, at this time, in this stage of my life here in the United States whose foot has been in my ass? The white man’s foot has been in my ass hole buried up to his knee in my ass hole! Now, you’re speaking of the enemy. You’re telling me the German is the enemy. At this point, I can never even remember having met a German. So if you put me out there with a gun in my hand and tell me to shoot at the enemy, I’m liable to create a case of ‘mistaken identity,’ of who I might shoo.... They finally classified me 4F because I was crazy enough not to want to fight in anybody’s army. (Gillespie, 120.)

To quantify such reactions would be impossible, but in the streets and rural crossroads of black America there is substantial reason to believe that many shared this cynicism and evinced the same spirit. Wherever black men and women gathered, the subject of the war provoked considerable discussion, as a reporter for the Chicago Defender observed:

The men in the barbershop, on the assembly line, sweeping the floors or washing windows know their spirit concerning the war is not right. They can’t diagnose it. Uncle Sam is aware of it too, and he calls it morale. So the millions of Negroes who go through all the motions of patriotism —and are actually patriotic— do not feel patriotic, because in the recesses of their minds there is disturbance, a disturbance which won’t quiet.... (Johnson, 90.)

In Harlem, a white draft board member had been accustomed to giving black draftees “a little patriotic talk to make them feel good.” It didn’t, he confessed. “They only laughed at me. Now I bow my head as they come in for their induction.” (Brown & Leighton, 8.)

Whatever these stories suggest about the depths of black disillusionment, the threat of Hitlerism and Nazi racial theories were not lost on black Americans, and the outbreak of war found most of them responding (once again) to the call to fight a war to make the world safe for democracy, enlisting at a rate sixty per cent above their proportion of the population (Blum, 184). Heavy weight champion Joe Louis, the hero of black America, came closest to capturing the prevailing sentiment: “There may be a whole lot wrong with America, but there’s nothing that Hitler can fix.” Upon being inducted into the Army, Louis recalled, “they gave me my uniform and sent me over to the colored section.” (Brown, S., 483; Louis, 172.) At the very least, some thought that military service afforded them the opportunity to escape the economic and social subordination that circumscribed their lives as civilians. Blues man Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup envisioned still other opportunities:

I’ve got my questionnaire and they need me in the war (twice)
Now if I feel like murder, won’t have to break the county law.
All I want is a 32-20, made on a 45 frame, (twice)
Yes, and a red, white, and blue flag waving in my right hand.5

If many blacks expressed cynicism about the democratic slogans, still others embraced the promise that a war to wipe out Nazi bigotry might eradicate racist bigotry in the United States. Some blacks believed (as in the Civil War) that only a prolonged war would enable them to achieve their objectives. That is, the longer the war, the more blacks might make of their opportunities, turning white dependence on their loyalty into measurable gains. “Not only will a long war develop a new white outlook,” George Schuyler wrote in The Crisis, “but a new black outlook as well... America will need the Negro as never before and will act accordingly even if the war ends tomorrow. But let the struggle last for many years and there will be interracially little resemblance left to the United States of December 7, 1941.” (The Crisis, n° 50, 329, 344.) The long-delayed commitment of black units to combat has been called a reaction to the length of the war and wartime needs as well as to relentless pressure. With every month, as the questions
became more insistent, the pressure mounted, forcing the armed services to move from exclusion (as in the Marines and Air Corps) and confinement to kitchen duty (as in the Navy) to segregation and to sporadic attempts at integration. (Sitkoff, 667.)

To many African Americans, the struggle for “the right to fight for democracy” took on a special meaning. If denied the right to fight for their country on an equal basis with whites, what could they envision after the war but a return to the racial status quo? The armed forces thus became a focal point for black agitation, and there was much to agitate about. The rigidly segregated army into which more than a million blacks were inducted reflected at all levels the dominant racial attitudes of white America, including the doctrine maintained throughout the war that blacks were inferior to whites. Secretary of War Henry Stimson vowed that the U.S. Army was not about to be turned into a “sociological laboratory,” General George Marshall (a Virginian) insisted that desegregation of the Army violated American customs and habit and would destroy morale, and both agreed that “leadership” was not “embedded in the Negro race” and that segregated blacks had to serve under white officers (preferably southerners who knew how to handle and control them [Blum, 184-185.]). Not only did black servicemen undergo their basic training in segregated camps, mostly in the South, but they were usually assigned to menial or construction labor, in keeping with the dominant view of the “place” of black men and women in American society.

Well, ‘airplanes flyin’ ‘cross the land and the sea,
Everybody flyin’ but a Negro like me.
Uncle Sam says, “Your place is on the ground,
When I fly my airplanes, don’t want no Negro round.”
The same thing for the navy, ships goes to sea,
All they got is a messboy’s job for me.
Uncle Sam says, “Keep on your apron, son,
You know I ain’t gonna let you shoot my big navy gun.”
Got my long government letters, my time to go,
When I got to the army, found the same old Jim Crow.
Uncle Sam says, “Two camps for black and white,”
But when trouble starts, we’ll all be in that same big fight.
(White, Josh, 148-9.)

Even as President Roosevelt committed the nation to a worldwide struggle for freedom, black soldiers faced a consistent denial of that freedom, coupled with acts of discrimination, violence, and humiliation. It was left mostly to the black press to document the abuses: the insults hurled at black GIs; the harassment by Military Police; the hostility of civilians in towns near military bases, especially in the South, where Jim Crow laws were relentlessly enforced, often with the assistance or compliance of MPs, and where military authorities refused to protect black troops off base. Numbers of black soldiers, including army nurses, were brutally beaten and jailed for defying Jim Crow laws, many more were simply turned away from cafes, saloons, hotels, and railroad restaurants. Violent racial clashes, with a disproportionate number of black casualties, broke out at army bases in the South, many in the North and West, and some in Australia, England, and the South Pacific. USO and service clubs and canteens might bar black soldiers altogether, exclude them on the nights white soldiers were admitted, or provide separate facilities, as did post movie theaters and PXs. “It is pretty grim,” observed an NAACP official, “to have a black boy in uniform get an orientation lecture in the morning on wiping out Nazi bigotry, and that same evening be told he can buy a soft drink only in the ‘Colored’ post exchange!” (Wilkins, 1944, 130) Segregated chapels existed on many
bases, and some found a unique way to post the schedule of religious services: “Catholic, Jews, Protestants and Negroes.” Not only did the Red Cross maintain segregated entertainment centers but to calm any fears in this war against Nazi racism and Aryan superiority, the Red Cross ordered that the blood plasma from white and black donors be kept separate. Without any medical justification, the Army, with the blessing of the Red Cross, thought it inadvisable “to collect and mix Caucasian and Negro blood indiscriminately for later administration to members of the armed forces.” For any black soldier to question any of these practices was to run the risks of transfer, the stockade, or dishonorable discharge. 

Perhaps the ultimate humiliation was best described by Lloyd Brown, when he recalled the greeting he and his fellow black soldiers received in Salina, Kansas when they entered a lunchroom on the main street:

As we entered, the counterman hurried to the rear to get the owner, who hurried out front to tell us with urgent politeness: “You boys know we don't serve colored here.” Of course we knew it. They didn't serve “colored” anywhere in town.... The best movie house did not admit Negroes and the other one admitted them only on the balcony. There was no room at the inn for any black visitor, and there was no place in town where we could get a cup of coffee. “You know we don't serve colored here,” the man repeated.... We ignored him, and just stood there inside of the door, staring at what we had come to see —the German prisoners of war who were having lunch at the counter. There were about ten of them.... No guard was with them.... We continued to stare. This was really happening. It was no jive talk. It was the Gospel truth. The people of Salina would serve these enemy soldiers and turn away black American G. I.'s.... If we were untermenschen in Nazi Germany, they would break our bones. As “colored” men in Salina, they only break our hearts.

What Lloyd Brown had seen was by no means rare. Nazi POWs en route to POW camps in the South and in parts of the Midwest and West were permitted to eat with white soldiers, guards, and civilians in railroad dining cars and in station restaurants, but black soldiers, even if assigned to guard the POWS, were barred from such facilities. That, to bluesman B. King, was the “eye-opener.”

German prisoners of war were on the same train. But unlike us, they weren't forced to sit in separate and inferior compartments. They sat with the white folk. And these were our sworn enemies!... It upset me even worse when I saw how the German prisoners were used to pick cotton in the Delta. We blacks picked till nightfall — seven or eight in the evening. But the Germans were allowed to take off at three in the afternoon. Plantation owners worried about overworking them. That made us feel less than human. We were seen as beasts of burden, dumb animals, a level below the Germans. To watch your enemy get better treatment than yourself was a helluva thing to endure.... As a kid, I was brainwashed by a segregated system. I was taught caution and strict adherence to society's codes. As a twenty-year-old, fresh out of basic training, I was starting to feel the weight of the system. I felt the injustice. And I felt anger. (King, 91-2.)

At one prisoner-of-war camp, black entertainer Lena Home appeared. The camp commander had filled the front rows with German POWs; their black guards had to sit in the back of the auditorium. “I don't think I have ever been more furious in my life,” Lena Home recalled. She stepped down from the stage, walked up the aisle, and with her back turned to the POWs sang to her own people in the back of the hall. “But by the third or fourth song I was too choked with anger and humiliation to go on.” After the performance, she wired the USO that she was leaving the tour. “The word was very
quietly passed down,” she remembered, “to keep that big-mouth woman out of the Southern camps.” (Home, 175.)

The hypocrisy was too glaring, too conspicuous, too humiliating to ignore, and blacks reacted with an anger that could not always be contained. “Honest to God” a southern black youth declared, “I hope Hitler wins the war. If he does and comes over here, he will treat American white people the way they treat us. They’ll know then what it feels like to be treated as dogs. They’ll understand how we feel.” After reciting the dreary news of still more lynchings and the abuses of white officers, a black GI pleaded, “Good God give me something to fight for.” He would just as soon die fighting “Georgia crackers” than Germans.8

Military intelligence and the War Department documented black unrest and the many different ways in which it was manifested, and circulated the information (marked “confidential”) to commanding officers. Thousands of pages, organized under such headings as “Monthly (or Weekly). Estimate of Subversive Situation,” or “The Racial Situation in the U.S.,” detailed black agitation and “subversive” speech; black and white provocations; editorials in the “incendiary” black press; willful defiance of Jim Crow laws; violent and deadly clashes between black and white soldiers, black soldiers and white civilians. Black undercover agents (posing as “city-slickers” or “draft dodgers”) reported regularly on the meetings they had infiltrated and the utterances they had overheard, and evaluated the loyalty of suspect black soldiers. The amount of time and print spent on “subversive” activity and utterances in black America validated the conclusion reached by one Army officer based on the correspondence reaching his desk, “The threats to the nation were ‘first Negroes, second Japs, third Nazis —in just that order!’”9

The War, it seemed, had made no difference at all. On the contrary, the treatment accorded blacks seemed designed to make certain that the war would change nothing. If anything, segregation laws were enforced even more rapidly, defended as a war emergency and deemed essential to the morale of white soldiers, workers, and civilians. In a national poll conducted in 1942, a majority of white Americans (six out of ten) thought black Americans were not dissatisfied with how they were treated, they were accorded all the opportunities they deserved, they should not expect to be treated any differently after the war, and the inferior position they occupied in American society reflected their own shortcomings, not white practices or beliefs. Perhaps as revealing, a majority of whites interviewed in the Northeast and West expressed a preference for separate schools, separate restaurants, and separate neighborhoods for the races. (Dalfiume, 103.)

With such beliefs deeply entrenched, the tensions, the anxieties, and the frustrations could only mount. In urban America, the availability of better-paying jobs in the North and West, particularly in the war industries, stimulated a migration involving millions of black men and women. That migration accelerated the competition for scarce housing and recreational facilities, heightened the competition for advancement in jobs, and reinforced the vigilance with which whites policed the racial boundaries. At the same time, if the war had not succeeded in obliterating segregation, it had raised black expectations and increased anger and frustration over the betrayal of those expectations. “What happens to a dream deferred?” Langston Hughes had asked. It explodes, as it did in 1943 in an epidemic of race riots: 242 racial clashes in 47 cities, the worst of them in Los Angeles, Beaumont, Tx., Mobile, Harlem, and Detroit. By the time federal troops arrived in Detroit, the riot had taken the lives of 25 blacks and 9 whites, more than 700 had been
injured, and more than 2 million dollars in property had been lost. (Sitkoff, 671-676; Blum, 199-207.)

27 Commissions made their reports, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover promised to round up the communist agitators causing racial unrest, and Secretary of War Stimson blamed the tension on “the deliberate effort... on the part of certain radical leaders of the colored race to use the war for obtaining... race equality and interracial marriages.” (Dalfiume, 106.) But to an elderly black woman in Detroit, the causes of racial unrest were easily discernible, and she needed no sociologist, no government commission, no J. Edgar Hoover or Henry Stimson to explain what was happening. “There ain't no North any more. Everything now is South.” (Lee & Humphrey, 141.) The extent to which whites — from the Roosevelt Administration and local and state government officials to newspaper editors and ordinary Americans— sought to blame black disillusionment on outside influences and agitation revealed only the depths of their ignorance of or indifference to what blacks experienced day-to-day. In a “Draftee's Prayer,” published in 1943, a black soldier gave voice to that experience.

Dear Lord, today
I go to war:
To fight, to die,
Tell me what for?
Dear Lord, I’ll fight
I do not fear
Germans or Japs;
My fears are here.
America! (Takaki, 25)

28 The persistence, even the heightening, of racial discrimination, segregation, and violence during World War II suggests little change in race relations, whether in the dominant racial attitudes of white Americans or in the racial policies of the states and the federal government.

The Jim Crow car’s still dirty.
The color line’s still drawn.
Yet up there in Washington
They’re blowing freedom’s horn!

29 And yet, in many significant and far-reaching ways, in the ways it dramatized the disparity between American democratic rhetoric and racial practices, in the ways it heightened, even revolutionized black consciousness and black expectations (much to the horror of the white South), in the stimulus it gave to black migrations northward and westward, in the growing political power blacks exercised in the North, World War II altered the relationship of African Americans to American society. “To put it briefly, and somewhat too simply,” James Baldwin wrote, “a certain hope died, a certain respect for white Americans faded.” (Dalfiume, 90.)

30 Not only did blacks lose respect for whites, but those who had fought in the war and still others lost another quality which had been instilled in black people over several centuries — fear of whites, and that would have dramatic and far reaching implications, as poet Langston Hughes suggested,

Negroes, sweet and docile
Meek, humble, and kind:
Beware the day
They change their mind!
Wind
In the cotton fields,
Gentle breeze:
Beware the hour
It uproots trees! (Hughes, 365.)

The very nature of World War II, along with its proclaimed objectives, focused attention on race relations throughout the world. None of this was lost on blacks in the United States. “If we don’t take action the Negro will be lost,” a black preacher told his congregation. “Play dumb to the white man,” but prepare for what needs to be done. The progress blacks had made during the war in challenging the entire apparatus of Jim Crow only increased their impatience and made the remaining disparities that much more glaring, as bluesman Big Bill Broonzy suggested.

When I was born in this world, this is what happened to me:
I was never called a man and now I’m fifty-three.
When Uncle Sam called me I knew I would be called the real McCoy
But when I got in the army they called me soldier boy.
When I got back from overseas, that night we had a ball
I met the boss the next day, he told me ‘Boy get you some overall.’
I wonder when will I be called a man.
Or do I have to wait ’till I get ninety-three? (Broonzy, 44.)

But after World War II, the conviction grew that the way it used to be did not have to be, and black men and women, many of them born during that war, would give voice to that feeling in ways white America could no longer ignore. “You said they said wait until the war is over, you damn right,” a black soldier overseas wrote in response to a column in a black newspaper, “wait until it’s over here and it [the war] will really be fought down there [the South], I hear these young fellows talk and I know they mean it. A new person will come back home, embedded with more hate than ever before....” Incidents like the one reported in Waynesboro, Georgia began to take on epidemic proportions. A returning veteran responded to an insult by a white man by knocking him to the pavement. As his friend recalled, “All that anger he had, and fear, frustration he had when he was in the war, World War II, just came out on him. And he hit that guy twice and knocked him cold. And he walked away, he didn’t run.” When he decided it might be safer to settle elsewhere, he went to Florida, taking with him a small arsenal: a hand grenade, two guns, and a long rifle with a bayonet attached. He was ready for war, he was still a very angry person you know.

Such incidents confirmed the worst and most deep-seated fears of white southerners: that returning black veterans would seek to undermine the status quo in race relations. After the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and World War I, what blacks viewed as an opportunity to use their military service and patriotism to secure their civil rights, white southerners perceived as black men dangerously out of place. The sight of uniformed black men had always terrified whites, dramatizing the fear that military service would have a demoralizing effect on them when they returned, that it would raise expectations that could not be fulfilled. Even as many blacks believed that Jim Crow could not survive World War II, whites insisted on reinforcing the machinery of their supremacy, making certain that military service in no way misled blacks about changes in race relations. The warning sounded by the city prosecutor in Macon, Georgia in the trial of a black non-commissioned officer after the Spanish-American War echoed throughout the white South after World War II: “I am going to show a nigger soldier that he is the same as any other nigger.” (Litwack, 466.)
Nearly a century after the Civil War, on new battlefields (Montgomery, Selma, Birmingham, Jackson, New Orleans, Little Rock, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles) another struggle would be fought over the meaning of freedom in America. This time it would be fought in the context of the experience of World War II, a new generation of black Americans, a rapidly changing world, and a new climate of political necessity that would force the United States as a leader of the free world to reassess the traditional position of inferiority assigned to black people. More than a million black Americans had fought a war to make the world safe for democracy. After the war, even larger numbers developed new strategies and ideologies to make the United States safe for themselves. No longer did they feel the need to contain their anger, or to veil their feelings.

I feel my hell a-risin', a-risin' every day;
I feel my hell a-risin', a-risin' every day;
Someday it'll bust this levee and wash the whole wide world away....
(Levine, 418.)

The struggle would never be easy. Nor has that struggle ended.

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NOTES


2. Robert Palmer used the term “apocalyptic imagery” in his review of the album in Rolling Stone, March 5, 1992.

3. Pittsburgh Courier, September 12, 1942


9. For having assembled these materials from the National Archives (most of them declassified in 1992), I am indebted to Ron Ridenhour who was until his untimely death writing a book on race relations in the military during World War II, with a focus on what happened at Camp Van Buren, Miss., in 1943. I am deeply grateful to Mary Howell of New Orleans for permitting me to reexamine Ridenhour’s archives in her possession. The conclusion reached by an army officer is quoted in Reddick, L. D., “The Color of War,” p. 10, a ms. in the L. D. Reddick collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.


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A Provisional Interpretation of a Difficult Word

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One difficult word I came across in my current research on Hollywood censorship is “miscegenation”, as it appears in one famous Hollywood document of 1930, the Production Code written by Martin Quigley and Daniel Lord for the MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America).

“Miscegenation”, is defined in article six of section II of that text as “sex relationship between the black and white races”, and as such, its representation is banned by the major companies, which means that films that do not conform will be refused the seal of approval and, as a consequence, will not be shown in the best theaters of the country. Surprisingly enough, despite the amount of scholarly research published on the question of censorship in the past ten years (in Europe and the United States), this clause number six, which was only repealed in 1956, has attracted little critical analysis. And in the few cases when it did, commentators were usually content with confirming the prevailing explanation that the miscegenation-clause was meant to flatter the white audience of the Southern States where inter-racial marriages were forbidden by law. The motion picture industry would have thus placed itself, as one French critic put it, “within the ideological sphere of the South”.

My contention is that this interpretation takes the word “miscegenation” at face value, and that it disregards a more complex and deliberately hidden message intended not for the public at large, but for the Hollywood community of film makers.

Let me first recall the general philosophy of the Production Code. Ever since 1922, the publication and implementation of the Code had been one of the paramount projects of Will H. Hays, the President of the MPPDA. Finally passed and published in 1930, but strictly enforced only after 1934, this industry guidebook acknowledged the general responsibility of cinema as a mass medium — and there is no reason to doubt the
sincerity of that purpose. However, the first objective of that document was to protect the 
business of motion pictures from the deleterious activity of local and State censorships 
boards, which had hindered the expansion of the industry ever since the emergence of 
the nickelodeons in 1904. One must keep in mind that before 1948, the movies, contrary 
to the press in general, were not protected by the first amendment of the Constitution, 
the Supreme Court having defined them in 1915 as “business pure and simple”. As a 
consequence, cinema remained fragile when attacked by the censorship boards that had 
multiplied in the late teens and early twenties, with the active support of lobbies, leagues, 
clubs and other pressure groups.

4 One priority for the industry in 1922 was to compile and classify all the cuts and 
rejections ordered by censorship boards across the country, notably those of the six State 
Boards (Kansas, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia) and the biggest 
local boards of Chicago, Memphis and Atlanta, which directly controlled about two thirds 
of the national audience. The motion picture producers were then strongly advised to 
take that list into account, for the good of the industry as a whole. Self-censorship was 
put forward as the best answer to censorship proper.

5 This is why all the articles of the Code precisely referred to images or words which, in 
the movies of the roaring twenties and of the cynical early thirties, had been repeatedly cut 
out by censors. All, of course, concerned the basic, possibly structural voyeurism of the 
motion pictures in terms of sex and violence, whose complacent exhibition can indeed be 
spotted in hundreds of silents and early talkies since they were, then as ever, a major 
drawing force of the medium. Limiting myself to the rules of section II, I can certainly 
think of precise sequences which the Code meant to ban from precise films: 
representations of passion, seduction, rape, white slavery, childbirth or even sex-hygiene. 
One exception though is that article number six, for if I temporarily leave aside one 
famous film, I cannot quote even one example of “sex relationship between the black and 
white races”. Now then, what was the use of forbidding something that did not exist? 
What was the use of suppressing something that no one even thought of indulging in?

6 At this point, I have tried to check that I was not forgetting examples or overlooking 
relevant censorship data. We do find in the Hollywood silents examples of love stories 
between whites and Asians (Griffith’s Broken Blossoms in 1922), between cowboys and 
squaws (DeMille’s The Squaw Man), and between WASP boys or girls-next-door and a wide 
variety of dark vamps or latin lovers. But apart from The Birth of a Nation (which of course 
is the exception mentioned above), one cannot find images (even derogatory ones) of 
mixed couples in films released before the Code. The presence of mulatto characters can 
perhaps be considered as an effect of inter-racial sex, and thus as a kind of indirect 
allusion to miscegenation, but I have only heard of two Hollywood films before 1930 (The 
Debt in 1912 and The Octoroon in 1913) which present such characters, and the archetypal 
story which they introduce (in which “tragic mulattoes” first believe they’re white, but 
must eventually forsake their hopes of integration when they learn of their black blood) 
obviously confirms racist prejudices.

7 When I looked into the files of the censorship boards of the teens and twenties, I was 
unable to find a single example of a film being cut or rejected because it showed love or 
sex between blacks and whites. The censors of Tennessee or Georgia (like the famous and 
in infamous Lloyd T. Binford who reigned over the Memphis censorship Board from the 
twenties to the fifties) did refuse movies for racist reasons, but mostly after 1934, and 
ever for breaches of the miscegenation taboo. What Southern censors did forbid in
motion pictures was whatever conveyed a positive image of African-Americans, or of course anything that seemed to question the institution of segregation. In 1920, Oscar Micheaux’s *Within Our Gates* was refused by Southern theaters because of a lynching sequence. Even after the Code was enforced, between the mid thirties and the mid fifties, they found quantities of objectionable material on those grounds. All the Lena Home numbers were cut by Lloyd T. Binford because, he said, “there are plenty of good white singers”. In 1949, *Curley*, a small comedy featuring children, was censored because black and white children were seen together at school...“The South”, Binford then reminded oblivious producers, “does not permit Negroes in white schools or recognize social equality between the races, even in children.” In 1934, John Stahl’s *Imitation of Life* was banned in Georgia and Tennessee, not because the story was about passing, but because passing was not clearly disapproved of, and because the actress who played the part of Peola was a genuine mulatto, Fredi Washington. By contrast, Elia Kazan’s *Pinky* (1949), where a white actress, Jeanne Crain, plays the part of the mulatto, and where she eventually renounces the idea of passing for white, was not rejected by the Atlanta censors.

Paradoxically, the few outspoken representations of inter-racial sex that reached the Screen were found acceptable by Southern censors when they were meant to inspire a feeling of disgust. Thus, while the South would not tolerate images of the white man’s sexual desire for the black woman (and of the consequent black woman’s sexual slavery as mistress, concubine or prostitute) because such images acknowledged inter-racial libido and objectively threatened the ideal of racial purity and the principle of segregation, it found no objection to images illustrating or sustaining the central racist fantasy of the white woman’s rape by the Black Buck. In other words, far from being an absolute taboo in the eyes of the Southern censors, miscegenation became acceptable on screen when its evocation confirmed racist ideology.

Evidence of this tolerance is provided by the case of *The Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915. As everybody knows, this film of David Wark Griffith, a masterpiece by many standards, is one of the most racist works in the history of cinema. Not only does it provide a shameless apology of the Ku Klux Klan, but it displays the full series of racist stereotypes inherited from older times and other media and now given their first and seminal illustration in film: “Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, Bucks”, to quote Donald Bogle’s famous title, and quite a few others to boot. The portrait of the horrible Gus, a lasting archetype of the black rapist, who drives the blond virgin to suicide in order to escape “fate worse than death”, remains, even by moderns standards, one of the most extreme visualizations of militant racism. As most African-Americans in the film, including the black representatives of the South Carolina Congress during Reconstruction, Gus is psychologically reduced to his one and single obsession to “marry” (as titles elegantly put it) a white woman. Griffith’s film is extremely spectacular in terms of production values and cinematic power, but there is no question that most of its dramatic efficiency relies on the exploitation of that primeval fantasy of the white girl’s rape by the colored beast.

Like the book *The Clansman* from which it was drawn, *The Birth of a Nation* was clearly set within the ideological sphere of the South, even though it was celebrated by a majority of the cultural elites of 1915. Strictly speaking however, this is the only film I can think of whose explicit topic is miscegenation, and which fully represents inter-racial sexuality on screen: apart from Gus, two mulattoes, a man and a woman, are given important parts. The woman is the mistress of a white politician, while the man lusts after the daughter of...
the same Yankee. The two mulattoes are products of miscegenation, but they also seem bent on perpetuating it.  

11 Naturally, the film was a huge success in the South. Special trains took crowds of spectators to Atlanta where Joseph Simmons, head of the Klan, took opportunity of the première on December 6th 1915 to launch a new campaign in support of his movement.  

12 Now, if one admits that the film which most blatantly disregarded the taboo of miscegenation before the Code was also the most openly sympathetic to Southern ideology, it becomes impossible to establish a formal link between article n ° 6 and Hollywood’s supposed efforts not to alienate the Southern audience.  

13 Yet, in spite of its overall success at the box-office, *The Birth of a Nation* was a cause of concern for the industry. The Boston Branch of the NAACP had published damning criticisms. “In my judgement”, wrote Oswald Garrison Villard, the film “is a deliberate attempt to humiliate ten million American citizens, and to portray them as nothing but beasts. The play should not be tolerated in any American city”. In *The New Republic*, Francis Hackett judged that it “degrade[d] the censors who passed it and the white race that endure[d] it”. The film was boycotted in numerous towns and cities, with many white liberals joining black ranks in protest. When it was re-released in Californian art theaters seventy years later, it still brought about hostile demonstrations and picket-lines before the cinemas.  

14 Local and State censorship boards were very much aware of the discontent (and the occasional violence) with which the film had met. And their standards clearly testify to the fact that they worried about it. The influential Police Standards of Chicago banned any “racially offensive material”. The Kansas State Board of Review Standards stated that “no comedy which ridicules any religious sect or peculiar characteristics of any race of people should be shown”. In Ohio, “national, racial and class hatred should not be fostered”, in Maryland, “inflamatory scenes and titles calculated to stir up racial hatred” were banned, in Pennsylvania, “stories or scenes holding up to ridicule and reproach races, classes or other social groups... will be disapproved”.  

15 These are precise directions, tangible primary sources, which the first draft of the Code, the “Don’ts and Be carefuls” of 1927, clearly echoes when it prohibits any “willful offense to any nation, race or creed”. The Code itself confirms them. While it forbids miscegenation, it also rejects the “racisme ordinaire” of its time with a sort of “political correctness” *avant la lettre* toward ethnic minorities. In one 1934 addition to the original draft of the Code, one can read this: “In the administration of Section V of the Production Code, the Production Code Administration may take cognizance of the fact that the following words and phrases are obviously offensive to the patrons of motion pictures in the United States and more particularly to the patrons of motion pictures in foreign countries: Chink, Dago, Frog, Greaser, Hunkie, Kike, Nigger, Spig, Whop, Yid”.  

16 My hypothesis is that behind the apparently pointless prohibition of *miscegenation*, Will H. Hays and his aides meant in *fact* to rule out the racist representations associated with the white fantasy of the hypersexed black male. They were indeed successful in this, for as Donald Bogle remarks, the figure of the Black Buck completely disappeared from American cinema under Will Hays and Eric Johnston, to return in full force, although with a new twist, after such blaxploitation pictures as *Shaft* and Sweet Sweetback’s *Baadasssss Song*. 
In conclusion, what we find here in Hollywood’s textbook is a rather successful example of a deliberately ambivalent signifier. While it seems to condone dominant prejudices of racist ideology, it in fact provides Hollywood professionals with specific advice to steer clear of them. For the ultimate purpose of article n° 6 as we now see it can be summed up as follows:

1. On the surface, it would seem to placate the South by putting into the Code what was a matter of law in several Southern states (the law against miscegenation was only repealed in 2000 in Alabama). Simultaneously, the article also flattered the ordinary racism of mainstream America. After all, the Supreme Court itself did not declare miscegenation laws illegal before 1967. It also reminded the Hollywood professionals of another more secret but far stronger taboo: never should black and white actors and actresses be shown in each other’s arms. Griffith himself had taken that never written law into account: the black characters who came really close to white girls in The Birth of a Nation were all interpreted by white actors. And though modern spectators may smile when they see black and mulatto characters played by white men in black face, and though black actors now occupy a significant percentage of Hollywood credits, this taboo has not altogether disappeared from today’s films. Love scenes between Whoopi Goldberg and her white partner were cut out of the final version of Fatal Beauty after spectators at sneak previews protested against them. And this also happened to Wesley Snipes and Denzel Washington with their white girl friends in respectively Drop Zone and Devil in a Blue Dress.

2. More importantly however though less explicitly, the purpose of article 6 will have been to discourage the expression of white racist fantasies in American cinema. For even though such representations were likely to attract part of the audience into the theaters, the profession feared that they should eventually affect the box-office negatively and perhaps even bring about serious “race” trouble. That was the “business lesson” of The Birth of a Nation. The industry leaders surmised that what had been acceptable and eventually profitable because of Griffith’s fame and genius might no longer be tolerated with the more run-of-the-mill products of second rate directors. In short, it was the progressive, not the reactionary, that Hollywood mostly feared.

Here again, Tinsel Town provides us with a small masterpiece of ideological hypocrisy. Its approach, however, is perfectly accorded with the general policy of the “Hays Office”, which was never content with pleasing only a majority. As early as 1930, reaching a mass audience meant taking into account even the smaller segments of the public. The weight of African-American spectators and that of militant white liberals, as that of all other minorities, could not be sacrificed to that of the conservative Southern whites, even if their racism remained widely shared.

NOTES

1. Even Micheaux’s “race movies”, when they approached the theme of inter-racial love, clearly rejected it — a bias which has persisted to this day in African-American cinema.
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De lieu en lieu, de place en place : le parcours des domestiques africaines-américaines

Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry

1 Les femmes africaines-américaines aux États-Unis ont souvent été associées au travail domestique, et ce depuis l’esclavage, mais l’image des bonnes noires a aussi été fréquemment utilisée dans la culture populaire, que ce soit dans la fiction, le cinéma, ou bien encore la publicité. Il est vrai que nombre d’entre elles ont eu à travailler au service de familles blanches comme bonnes, cuisinières, ou nourrices. Le taux de femmes de ménage noires est en diminution depuis les années soixante, nous y reviendrons, mais elles furent particulièrement nombreuses, d’abord dans le Sud bien sûr, mais aussi dans le Nord, dès lors que les Africaines-Américaines participèrent au mouvement de migration hors des anciens États esclavagistes pour rejoindre les centres industriels du Nord. Nous nous intéresserons tout particulièrement à cette période, qui commença après l’esclavage dès les années 1870-1880, et se termina dans les années 1960, quand le nombre de personnes migrant vers le Nord devint pour la première fois inférieur à celui des Noirs retournant dans le Sud.

2 On a longtemps laissé de côté la place et le rôle des femmes pendant cette période déterminante de l’histoire africaine-américaine. Les domestiques qui représentaient pourtant une proportion importante des travailleuses noires n’ont été vraiment étudiées qu’à partir des années soixante-dix quand des historiens et sociologues, et beaucoup de femmes parmi eux, se sont intéressés à ce groupe en particulier. Il ne s’agira pas ici de faire une simple mise à plat du travail domestique noir mais plutôt de s’intéresser à l’itinéraire de femmes qui, depuis le démantèlement de l’Institution Particulière, sont allées d’une place dans une famille blanche à une autre, non seulement pour participer à la survie économique de leur famille, mais aussi comme médiatrices entre des mondes différents (leur foyer et celui dans lequel elles travaillaient et parfois habitaient, leur quartier de résidence et celui de leurs employeurs blancs), et enfin, dans des parcours personnels qui les ont souvent conduites à affirmer leur indépendance par rapport à leurs
employeurs et à redéfinir le travail domestique selon leurs propres termes. Les employées noires partageaient de nombreuses caractéristiques avec les bonnes issues de l'immigration pendant l'époque considérée et nous examinerons celles-ci, mais leur appartenance au groupe noir les mettaient dans une position particulière dans la société américaine comme dans les maisons où elles travaillaient. Finalement, ce qui semble important ici n'est pas seulement le statut de ces femmes (de ces enfants parfois) depuis leur premier emploi jusqu'au dernier mais plutôt le parcours suivi d'une place à l'autre, parcours qui les aida à se définir, à "s'inventer", à résister. Ces femmes eurent des expériences singulières de par leur âge, leur lieu d'origine et d'installation, leur histoire familiale, et leurs rapports avec leurs employeurs, mais leur appartenance au groupe noir pendant la migration dans une société raciste et ségrégationniste, de même que leur pouvoir de résister individuellement ou collectivement à leur sort font sens commun et permettent de tirer, je crois, quelques conclusions sur ce groupe de travailleuses en général.

I. De l'esclavage à la migration : la domestique comme représentative de la travailleuse africaine-américaine

3 Dès le début de l'histoire africaine-américaine, le service domestique fut déterminant. La majorité des esclaves travaillaient dans les champs mais une partie non négligeable d'entre eux devaient assurer le quotidien de leurs propriétaires blancs ; ainsi les servantes noires furent-elles partie prenante de la vie dans les plantations du Sud. Au Nord, les Noirs libres travaillaient aussi parfois comme domestiques dans des familles blanches. Nous devons noter ici que les hommes comme les femmes pouvaient être serviteurs même si leurs tâches étaient distinctes, les femmes travaillant plus couramment comme cuisinières ou nourrices, par exemple, et, en général, autour des enfants ou de la nourriture (non seulement la préparation des repas mais aussi la culture des fruits et des légumes et leur conservation). Les enfants aussi pouvaient avoir des tâches diverses dans la maison de leurs propriétaires et commençaient à servir ces derniers dès l'âge de huit ou neuf ans.

4 A la fin de l'esclavage, les emplois disponibles pour les Africains-Américains en général, et les femmes en particulier, étaient rares et les femmes continuèrent non seulement à travailler dans les maisons des Blancs, mais nombre d'entre elles devinrent domestiques pour la première fois. Le système de métayage mis en place après la Guerre de Sécession ne permettait pas à de nombreux Noirs de vivre décemment car les lopins de terre étaient trop petits pour nourrir des familles encore nombreuses, en raison d'un endettement très fort de certains métayers, ou encore à cause de changements climatiques défavorables pendant cette période. Les Noirs récemment libérés préféraient travailler la terre qu'ils louaient que d'être directement sous les ordres de leurs anciens propriétaires et, surtout, les hommes acceptaient mal que leurs compagnes continuent à s'occuper des enfants et de la maison des blancs. Le travail de la terre rappelait bien sûr celui de l'esclavage mais le système de métayage semblait leur donner un certain degré d'autonomie, illusoire souvent, alors même que les Blancs cherchaient à maintenir à tout prix la dépendance de leurs anciens esclaves. Toutefois, les conditions économiques difficiles dans le Sud, et surtout dans les zones rurales, poussaient de nombreuses familles à placer malgré tout les femmes et jeunes filles comme domestiques, parfois temporairement. Dans les zones urbaines, les emplois étaient rares pour les femmes en dehors du service domestique et
les salaires masculins si bas que le système de parenté devait compter sur le lebar du plus grand nombre de personnes possible ; les femmes durent travailler dans les foyers blancs, qu’elles l’aient choisi ou non. Ainsi, « la femme afro-américaine se trouva confinée à ce type de labeur en vertu de son appartenance sexuelle et raciale » (Jones, 12).

5 Comme pendant l’esclavage, certains serviteurs émancipés avaient des tâches précises ; c’était le cas pour les cuisinières, les nourrices, ou les jeunes filles qui s’occupaient des enfants et des jeunes adolescents, mais, dans l’ensemble, les servantes noires devaient accomplir des besognes multiples et infinies. Les domestiques se plaignaient souvent du lebar trop lourd et diversifié qu’on leur imposait sauf peut-être dans les maisons riches où le nombre de serviteurs était important et le travail plus spécialisé.

6 Les heures de travail étaient très longues pendant l’esclavage et le furent aussi après. Elles variaient d’un employeur à l’autre, mais la majorité des domestiques avaient peu de temps libre. Comme leurs prédécesseurs, les domestiques dans le Sud libéré, puis dans le Nord pendant la migration avaient peu de repos (le plus souvent le dimanche, le jour de Noël, parfois une autre fête nationale ou religieuse), et surtout, elles déploraient le fait de devoir être toujours à la disponibilité de leurs employeurs. Comme certaines esclaves, de nombreuses domestiques noires habitaient dans la maison des blancs pour lesquels elles travaillaient (live-in work) et pouvaient être dérangiées à tout moment pour répondre à des demandes diverses, y compris la nuit. C’est en partie pourquoi elles firent en sorte, dès que possible, de trouver des emplois leur permettant de rentrer chez elles le soir et parfois le dimanche (day work), nous y reviendrons.

7 Comme les esclaves, de nombreuses domestiques durent aussi faire face à l’exploitation par des Blancs peu enclins à considérer leurs employées comme des êtres humains à part entière. Leur fonction primait avant tout et de nombreux témoignages attestent des difficultés rencontrées par ces femmes noires ; il en est deux en particulier qui semblent avoir beaucoup marqué les domestiques : le manque d’attention reçue en tant qu’individu et l’exploitation sexuelle.

8 De nombreuses domestiques soulignèrent le manque de respect de leurs employeurs qui, souvent, les appelaient par un prénom couramment utilisé pour désigner une bonne noire, quelle qu’elle fut, ou par un qualificatif désignant sa fonction (Mary Jane, cook, nurse, Mammy, (Litwack, 169)) ; on les baptisait ‘Miss’ même quand elles étaient mariées : les domestiques étaient interchangeables aux yeux de nombreux Blancs. Combien regrettaient également avoir à entrer chez leur employeur uniquement par la porte de derrière ou devoir utiliser un escalier de service réservé à la domesticité. Dans ce cas, les noires émancipées étaient parfois davantage restreintes que ne l’avaient été les esclaves. Dans le Sud post-esclavagiste, les Noires apprirent les règles imposées par un système classiste et racial rigide ; elles furent aussi confinées dans les cuisines et devaient souvent utiliser des toilettes différentes et une vaisselle réservée à leur seul usage (Litwack, 19). Dans le Nord tout particulièrement, l’architecture refléta ces changements. Une maison plus grande et une domesticité plus nombreuse devinrent des symboles forts du statut social dans les villes nordistes en pleine expansion ; les architectes ajoutèrent force détails séparant maîtres et serviteurs (une cuisine reléguée au sous-sol, un escalier de service, et des chambres, souvent sous les combles, réservées aux domestiques)

9 Dans les maisons où travaillaient peu de domestiques, et souvent une seule, la séparation forcée entre maîtres et serviteurs renforçait l’impression d’isolement, de solitude de ces femmes qui, fréquemment, devaient de plus restreindre les contacts avec les autres domestiques. Les employeurs déconseillaient les relations avec les serviteurs des maisons voisines, et
dans le cas des mères de familles, ils décourageaient fortement les visites des enfants qui pourtant aimaient, quand c'était possible, passer voir leur mère sur son lieu de travail.

L'uniforme imposé à certaines bonnes eut un effet semblable à celui de l'architecture ; il servait de symbole social puissant pour les employeurs mais exprimait tout autant l'exploitation et le statut souvent stigmatisé des domestiques. Elles firent d'ailleurs beaucoup pour ne plus avoir à porter ces vêtements représentatifs de leur condition inférieure dans la société, nous le verrons.

Nombreuses également furent les domestiques qui eurent à se plaindre de harcèlement sexuel. Ceci faisait partie du lot réservé à de nombreuses bonnes, noires ou non. Les immigrantes arrivées aux États-Unis à la fin du dix-neuvième et au début du vingtième siècles qui travaillaient comme domestiques, eurent à faire face à des situations semblables et certaines se retrouvèrent enceintes contre leur gré et sans grand recours contre un employeur responsable. Toutefois, dans le cas des Noires, la ségrégation dans le Sud et les pratiques discriminatoires dans le Nord rendaient difficiles toute plainte envers l'homme blanc. De nombreux maris noirs venus demander des comptes à un employeur blanc se virent accuser de mensonge et même poursuivis par la justice !

La société américaine accordait alors peu de crédit à ses citoyens de couleur.

Les domestiques employées par des familles blanches après la Guerre de Sécession, dans le Sud comme dans le Nord, travaillaient dans un continuum qui semblait interrompu depuis l'esclavage. En même temps, elles partageaient beaucoup avec les bonnes immigrantes qui travaillaient dans les centres urbains du Nord mais ces dernières pouvaient envisager un avenir différent pour elles-mêmes et pour leurs filles, ce qui, malheureusement, était plus rarement le cas pour les femmes noires. Tout d'abord, toutes les immigrantes n'eurent pas à devenir domestiques ; certaines participèrent à l'économie familiale en travaillant dans leur propre maison comme mère au foyer, couturière à domicile, blanchisseuse, ou en dirigeant des pensions de famille ou des commerces. La période d'arrivée aux États-Unis comme la composition des groupes d'immigrants doivent être prises en compte. Ainsi, il y eut davantage de bonnes irlandaises que juives ou italiennes ; les premières arrivaient plus souvent seules et célibataires et ne pouvaient compter autant sur le réseau de parenté pour assurer leur quotidien. Un emploi de domestique était facile à trouver et elles pouvaient plus aisément habiter chez leurs employeurs que les immigrantes mariées plus nombreuses dans d'autres groupes. De plus, le service domestique était souvent considéré comme un choix ultime, peu estimé, souvent stigmatisé ; les immigrantes les plus appauvries et isolées y avaient recours. Pour ces femmes, toutefois, ce genre d'emploi était perçu comme temporaire et de nombreuses bonnes irlandaises, par exemple, le quittèrent dès que possible, quand elles se marièrent ou dès qu'elles eurent des emplois dans l'industrie. Ainsi, le taux de domestiques irlandaises diminua après les années 1850 quand le nombre de nouvelles arrivantes commença à décroître et quand elles tirèrent avantage de l'accès des femmes aux emplois industriels.

A leur arrivée dans les villes du Nord au tournant du vingtième siècle, les Noires eurent à faire face à la concurrence accrue avec les immigrantes pour trouver un emploi, concurrence qui avait déjà affecté les Africaines-Américaines nées dans le Nord. Déjà, dans les années 1830-1840, les femmes noires, comme leurs compagnons d'ailleurs, s'étaient vues reléguées à un nombre réduit d'activités. L'arrivée massive d'immigrants dans les décennies suivantes contribua à restreindre davantage l'accès à l'emploi pour les Noirs, notamment les femmes. Les tensions croissantes entre Blancs et Noirs pendant la
période de forte migration des Africains-Américains vers les centres urbains au Nord conçut à une séparation accrue des travailleurs des deux groupes. Les Noirs trouvèrent plus difficilement des emplois de serveur, vendeur, etc., les Blancs refusant d’être servis par eux (Bair, 290). Dans les maisons privées à la domesticité nombreuse, les relations entre serviteurs des deux groupes se détériorèrent ; certains refusaient de manger à la même table, de travailler ensemble, et, éventuellement, de dormir dans la même chambre (Dudden, 63). C’est à cette époque que les femmes noires commencèrent à travailler à la journée et non plus à résider chez leurs employeurs.

A partir du début du vingtième siècle, les Noires eurent peu d’occasions de trouver une activité différente, et l’accès à l’emploi de leurs maris et compagnons ne permettait pas aux femmes noires de quitter le service domestique. Etre bonne était une nécessité, très rarement un choix, et pourtant, les femmes noires devinrent quasiment les seules représentantes de cette profession si mal considérée, non seulement dans le Sud, où l’immigration ne représentait aucunement une concurrence pour les Noires, mais aussi dans le Nord où les immigrantes purent trouver d’autres voies que le service domestique.

**II. Les domestiques africaines-américaines : passeurs et interprètes**

Jusqu’à présent, le service domestique a surtout été présenté comme producteur d’exploitation et d’isolement, et on ne peut que déplorer les conditions de travail des bonnes noires et les schémas racistes qui enfermaient les Noires dans ce type d’emploi. En même temps, il serait injuste et erroné de penser que les domestiques noires acceptaient aveuglément leur sort sans jamais y trouver ou y organiser des échappatoires. Le groupe noir dans son ensemble a toujours su tirer parti des conditions défavorables dans lequel il se trouvait et les domestiques surent elles aussi repenser et réinventer leur emploi pour y trouver des avantages. Il serait inexact aussi de ne pas prendre en considération les quelques points positifs inhérents à la fonction domestique.

De par leurs allées et venues entre deux quartiers différents et deux communautés souvent opposées, les bonnes noires occupaient une position unique dans la société américaine : elles étaient pratiquement les seules à se déplacer du quartier réservé aux Africains-Américains vers les zones occupées par les Blancs dans des villes de plus en plus ségrégées par groupes raciaux. Elles avaient, grâce au travail dans les maisons des Blancs, une connaissance, unique jusqu’à récemment, des domaines intimes des deux communautés. Elles surent utiliser ce savoir à bon escient et en faire profiter leurs familles et leurs communautés.

Parallèlement, les femmes participaient à une économie familiale servant le réseau de parenté dans son ensemble et leur entrée dans la domesticité se faisait grâce au système d’entraide inhérent aux familles noires. Le premier emploi comme bonne était souvent organisé par les membres de la famille et participait de l’auto assistance pratiquée dans la communauté africaine-américaine. Les jeunes filles (très jeunes parfois) prirent part activement à la survie économique de leur parenté. En un sens, elles connaissaient déjà certaines modalités du travail domestique puisque les aînées, entre autres, avaient l’habitude de tenir la maison et de s’occuper des plus jeunes lorsque leur mère travaillait à l’extérieur, dans les champs où en ville. Les places se transmettaient aussi au sein d’une
même famille, les jeunes filles rejoignant parfois une mère, une tante, ou une sœur plus âgée.

Pendant les années de migration vers le Nord, une chaîne s’organisa autour de ces jeunes filles et de ces femmes. Elles rejoignirent des parents déjà installés dans un centre urbain et participèrent activement à l’économie du réseau de parenté au-delà des distances géographiques. Elles envoyaient de l’argent dans le Sud dès qu’elles en gagnaient suffisamment et aidayaient aussi leur famille d’installation. Combien de jeunes Noires arrivées en ville n’ont-elles pas gardé leurs cousins et neveux autorisant ainsi les adultes, femmes comprises, à travailler à l’extérieur et permettant ainsi d’accroître les ressources collectives ? Le passage du rural à l’urbain, du Sud au Nord, fut largement expérimenté par les femmes qui furent parfois plus nombreuses que les hommes à quitter leur terre d’origine. Les femmes, et les domestiques en particulier, faisaient partie intégrante de la migration ; leur mobilité était au cœur du fonctionnement familial et social dans des espaces d’échanges variés.

Le départ des jeunes migrantes était souvent organisé autour de rituels précis : les parents installés au Nord envoyaient billet de train et robe pour le transport tandis que ceux du Sud offraient conseils et cadeaux d’adieu aux partantes. Les jeunes filles étaient parfois formées à leur voyage en une sorte d’apprentissage en vue de la séparation d’avec leur famille et d’une occupation dans le Nord. Toutefois, des témoignages d’anciennes migrantes montrent que les jeunes Noires avaient peu de choix en ce domaine ; les besoins du réseau de parenté primait sur les désirs individuels.


Les Noires profitaient autant que possible de leur placement comme domestiques. Elles apprenaient et transmettaient des informations sur la vie dans un quartier blanc, dans une famille aisée. Elles étaient les seules à avoir accès au domaine privé des Blancs et pouvaient faire des comparaisons avec leur propre culture et manière de vivre. Ces informations étaient utiles pour leurs familles : pour les enfants et adultes qui devaient comprendre le monde de leurs futurs employeurs potentiels et le groupe dominant en général.

Elles transportaient aussi des biens matériels. Elles pouvaient profiter des vêtements usagés ou passés de mode offerts par leurs employeurs et nombre d’entre elles comprenaient sur le surplus de nourriture qu’elles pouvaient ramener chez elles. Certaines domestiques étaient d’ailleurs moins bien payées car ces avantages étaient pris en compte dans leur rémunération. Sans cet apport supplémentaire de nourriture, couramment appelé ‘Service Pan’, de nombreux enfants noirs auraient eu bien peu à manger.
Certaines Noires appréciaient l'environnement dans lequel elles travaillaient : par exemple, de beaux meubles, des tables joliment dressées, et des manières et usages différents. Certaines d'entre elles s'efforcèrent de transmettre ces façons de vivre à leur famille. Elles imitaient ainsi les classes plus aisées et le groupe dominant Blanc. D'anciennes domestiques rencontrées par Tucker et Clark-Lewis exprimèrent leur fierté devant leur foyer empli de souvenirs de leur passage dans les maisons bourgeoises et insistaient sur des règles de politesse et de courtoisies inspirées de la culture blanche et pas toujours en rapport avec les usages africains-américains. Les domestiques servirent dans ce cas à maintenir et à disperser les valeurs des classes dirigeantes auxquelles elles adhéraient au moins en partie puisque beaucoup avaient foi, par exemple, dans l'éthique du travail ou la notion de mobilité sociale (Thornton Dill, 17). Parallèlement, « le service domestique renforçait et perpétuait les stéréotypes ethniques et les usages sociaux de déférence et de condescendance » (Coontz, 256). Toutefois, il ne s'agissait pas de simple mimétisme, mais parfois aussi d'une manière de résister à l'image des domestiques noires comme des femmes ignorantes et peu raffinées. D'autres, au contraire, se réjouissaient de retrouver un environnement qui leur était propre et qui était distinct de celui de leurs employeurs par le décor de leur logement, leur cuisine, ou leur manière de parler. Chez elles, elles pouvaient tomber le masque mis en place lors de leurs rapports avec les Blancs.

En fait, les domestiques noires apprenaient à fonctionner entre deux cultures et à passer plus ou moins aisément de l'une à l'autre. Leurs compagnons n'avaient pas souvent cette possibilité et se trouvaient parfois plus démunis quand il leur était nécessaire d'avoir des contacts avec des Blancs : lors d'entretiens à l'embauche, dans des agences gouvernementales diverses, dans certains commerces.

Le passage n'était pas unidirectionnel toutefois et les domestiques noires apportaient aussi leur culture sur leur lieu de travail. Lorsqu'elles s'occupaient des enfants de la famille blanche, elles échangeaient avec eux des éléments de leur culture : chansons, histoires, vocabulaire, même si les employeurs cherchaient en général à réduire, voire à proscrire, l'influence des domestiques sur leur progéniture. Les Africaines-Américaines profitaient de leur temps avec les enfants pour leur enseigner le respect de leur personne et de la culture noire. Elles usayaient de leur autorité pour être appelées par leur nom et non Betty, May, girl, ou Mammy, par exemple. Dans certains cas, les heures de travail étaient organisées de manière à laisser du temps à la bonne pour passer chez elle ; les enfants à sa charge découvraient alors le quartier noir et une réalité autre que celle de leur communauté.

Les domestiques noires apportaient aussi des manières de travailler, de cuisiner dans la maison de leurs employeurs qui pouvaient alors les intégrer à leur façon de faire. Concernant la cuisine, les familles sudistes, noires et blanches, partageaient davantage que celles du Nord aux cultures plus diversifiées. Ces échanges et apports divers existaient bel et bien mais doivent sans doute être considérés comme limités en vue du mépris assez généralisé envers la culture noire dans une société raciste.

On ne peut négliger toutefois cette fonction de passeur des domestiques noires qui devenaient des médiatrices entre deux cultures et qui jouaient ici un rôle privilégié. Les immigrantes travaillant dans des familles d’un autre groupe ethnique remplissaient aussi cette fonction dans une certaine mesure et elles apprenaient, par exemple, à mieux parler anglais, à s’habiller différemment, comme elles utilisaient leurs propres caractéristiques culturelles dans la maison de leurs employeurs. Toutefois, la position singulière du
groupe africain-américain dans la société américaine et le peu de contacts familiers entre communautés noire et blanche exacerbèrent la fonction d'interprète, de 'go-between' des domestiques noires. De par leur fonction, celles-ci franchissaient les barrières socio-économiques et légales qui étaient attribuées à chacun aux États-Unis, barrières qui semblaient longtemps immuables. Elles travaillaient avec les Blancs, et surtout des femmes, au cœur de relations intimes qui dépassaient les divergences entre différentes ethnies, religions et classes (Thornton Dill, 3).

D’un lieu à l’autre (du Sud au Nord, du quartier noir au quartier blanc) et d’une place à une autre (comme aide dans la famille d’arrivée à une place dans un foyer blanc), ces dernières parcoururent l’espace géographique et social américain par nécessité mais aussi en réinventant la fonction du service domestique. De dominées elles devinrent créatrices et responsables. Elles arrivèrent souvent à se déprendre de circonstances défavorables, à améliorer leur sort, et doivent être considérées aussi comme des agents de leur propre destinée et non seulement comme des sujets passifs dans une situation délétère.

III. Réinventer le service domestique : résistances individuelle et collective

Les femmes noires employées de maison surent trouver des avantages pour elles-mêmes, leurs familles, et leur communauté dans des emplois peu rémunérés, difficiles, et souvent dénigrés. Dans une sphère privée qui n’était pas la leur en propre, elles surent aussi résister à l’exploitation.

Nous l’avons vu, de nombreux employeurs payaient peu leurs domestiques et les conditions de travail étaient le plus souvent difficiles. Dans certains cas, les domestiques avaient affaire à des patronnes autoritaires ou abusives. Elles n’étaient toutefois pas sans ressources. Elles pouvaient ‘rendre leur tablier’ et chercher une autre place et, ici, les informations données par les autres employées de maison sur les habitudes et travers des employeurs blancs s'avéraient fort utiles. Quitter sa place « ne garantissait pas nécessairement une meilleure situation ailleurs (...), mais renforçait le désir des travailleuses pour l’autodétermination et privait les employeurs de l’ascendant auquel ils étaient accoutumés » (Hunter, 346).

Elles pouvaient aussi résister de l’intérieur et affirmer leur propre autorité, leur personnalité. Avec l’expérience, ces femmes apprenaient à répondre aux remarques qui leur étaient faites, à négliger des ordres considérés injustes ou irréalisables, et à détourner l’attention de leur employeur21. Elles pouvaient prendre un jour de congé contre l’avis de leur employeur mais aussi travailler moins vite ou moins bien. Certaines bonnes allaient jusqu’à ‘gâcher’ un repas ou ‘bâcler’ toute autre tâche précise pour exprimer leur mécontentement. Elles utilisaient aussi efficacement les stéréotypes qui leur étaient appliqués et pouvaient feindre la stupidité (“to act the nigger”), ou faire preuve « d’obséquiosité, de duplicité, d’humilité, de flatterie et de dérobade » comme l’avaient fait, avant elles, les Noirs pendant l’esclavage (Litwack, 39). Les Noires étaient conscientes de l’impuissance de leurs employeurs dans la vie quotidienne, ce qui leur donnait une certaine liberté d’action dans leurs transactions avec les Blancs (Litwack, 118).
Les domestiques détournaient aussi à leur avantage leur position dans une maison bourgeoise. Elles réussissaient notamment à mieux nourrir leur famille, non seulement en profitant du *Service Pan* donné par l'employeur, mais aussi en s'appropriant des provisions ou en achetant davantage de viande ou de légumes si elles étaient chargées de faire les courses. Cette pratique répandue, qualifiée parfois de 'toting' par les bonnes, fut un bon moyen d'augmenter le maigre salaire offert par les Blancs (Tucker, 49). Les patrons avaient peu de contrôle sur ces agissements et la cuisine, symbole de la mise à l'écart et de l'isolement des domestiques, devenait ici un espace de liberté et d'indépendance. Bien sûr, les domestiques en général, et non pas seulement les Africaines-Américaines, usèrent de ces conduites qui s'apparentaient à un conflit entre une bonne et sa patronne mais aussi entre deux personnes représentatives de deux classes sociales opposées.

Malgré tout, certaines femmes noires réussirent à créer des relations satisfaisantes, et parfois même proches, avec leurs employeurs et leur famille. Elles restaient parfois plusieurs années de suite dans la même maison, élevant, dans certains cas, des enfants de leur naissance jusqu'à l'âge adulte. Des liens d'interdépendance furent ainsi conçus. Les bonnes noires fonctionnaient parfois comme mères de substitution et participaient activement à l'éducation des enfants à leur charge. Elles comptaient aussi sur les conseils et les appuis apportés par les employeurs qui pouvaient aider leurs domestiques à trouver un logement, un emploi pour un membre de la famille noire, ou une bourse pour l'éducation d'un enfant. L'entraide et les contacts entre bonne et employeurs perduisaient fréquemment après le départ à la retraite de la femme noire et exprimaient clairement les liens tangibles qui pouvaient se créer dans ces circonstances. Ces liens persistaient davantage par l'intermédiaire des femmes blanches (mères ou filles), bien moins grâce aux hommes, ceux-ci travaillant le plus souvent à l'extérieur tandis que leurs compagnes étaient principalement femmes au foyer jusqu'aux années soixante, période considérée ici.

Ceci n'enlève rien au poids de contradictions qui entachaient les rapports entre bonnes et employeurs, et surtout entre la domestique noire et sa patronne. Si des relations duraient de nombreuses années et étaient fondées sur une affection réelle, beaucoup ne dépassaient pas le cadre des relations entre travailleuse et employeur. Dans tous les cas, les liens étaient définis par l'appartenance à des groupes raciaux différents, à des classes antagonistes, et ils rappelaient parfois les relations entre maîtres et esclaves. A cela, il faut ajouter l'ambivalence du lien entre les deux femmes en présence, l'une blanche et riche et l'autre pauvre et noire. Le labouret de la femme noire offrait à sa patronne une certaine liberté par rapport aux tâches domestiques et à l'éducation des enfants, tâches qui lui avaient été dévolues en priorité à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle lors de la mise en place d'un ‘culte de la domesticité’ et dont les valeurs étaient encore pertinentes pour les femmes de la classe moyenne au début du vingtième siècle (Dudden, 7). La bonne et sa patronne se retrouvaient pour partager le même foyer. Elle se reconnaissaient aussi dans les relations entre les sexes : la domestique noire était spectatrice de la dépendance financière et affective de la femme blanche et connaissait parfois elle-même l'exploi-
faisable facilement aux Africaines-Américaines d’abandonner leurs places dans les maisons blanches mais elles usèrent de stratégies leur permettant de les contrôler au mieux. L’une des plus marquantes, car individuelle d’abord mais collective ensuite, fut de quitter les emplois qui requéraient leur présence la nuit (live-in work) pour des postes qui leur permettaient de passer davantage de temps chez elles et avec leurs familles (day work). A partir des années vingt, en raison du coût prohibitif des serviteurs et de la mécanisation de certains travaux, les domestiques habitant chez leurs maîtres devinrent moins nombreux et sont par exemple très rares aujourd’hui. Mais c’est aussi la résistance des employées, et surtout des femmes noires, qui conduisit à un changement vers des emplois plus spécialisés et sélectifs.

35 Les immigrantes, nous l’avons vu, choisirent des places à la journée assez rapidement alors que les femmes noires durent se contenter des places disponibles et eurent moins de choix. Mais dès la fin du dix-neuvième siècle, elles résistèrent et insistèrent pour rentrer chez elles à la fin de leur journée de travail. Grâce au réseau d’entraide parmi les domestiques, elles rassemblaient aussi des informations sur les emplois de blanchisseuses qui leur permettaient de travailler depuis leur domicile et, à la première occasion, elles quittaient leur place de bonne. Laver le linge était un labeur dur et souvent encore moins bien rémunéré que celui de domestique, mais l’urgence avec laquelle les Noires l’élurent prouve leur volonté de dominer leur travail et leur temps25. L’éducation de leurs enfants se révélait une motivation très forte pour ces femmes qui pouvaient enfin passer du temps avec ces derniers et les surveiller, et ne devaient plus autant dépendre de parents et amis 26.

36 Avec le temps, les emplois de nuit se firent plus rares et les femmes noires commencèrent à réclamer de meilleurs salaires et des conditions de travail moins difficiles (horaires réduits, tâches moins disparates). Elles le firent individuellement en réclamant des changements directement à leur employeur, mais aussi collectivement, en organisant des grèves. Celles-ci furent rares car il était difficile pour elles de se concerter : elles étaient dispersées dans des activités et des quartiers différents et la concurrence entre elles était forte. Plusieurs mouvements de protestation émergèrent, mais le plus emblématique est sans doute celui des blanchisseuses à Atlanta en 1881 qui cessèrent de travailler pour réclamer une hausse de leurs tarifs. Leurs revendications ne furent pas entendues mais ce mouvement prouva aux femmes noires qu’elles pouvaient donner vie à un mouvement collectif et qu’elles détenaient un certain pouvoir malgré tout (Bair, 293 ; Jones, 148-149 ; Dudden, 232).

37 Plus tard, les employées de maison demandèrent leur incorporation dans les syndicats nationaux et elle fut possible à partir des années vingt mais limitée. Des prestations sociales ne leur furent attribuées que difficilement à partir des années quarante. C’est seulement en 1951 que les employés de maison eurent droit à la retraite (Social Security) et en 1974 que fut instauré un salaire minimum (Clegg-Gray, 96, 161). Il était difficile de réunir ces travailleuses aux prestations et aux besoins si diversifiés mais, surtout, le racisme des syndicats américains et des lois discriminatoires empêchèrent longtemps la reconnaissance des domestiques noires.

Conclusion

38 Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale, puis durant la Deuxième, les femmes noires purent enfin travailler ailleurs que dans les maisons des Blancs et beaucoup choisirent de rentrer
dans l’industrie ou dans des bureaux désertés par les soldats américains pendant des années de moindre immigration. Les femmes blanches furent recrutées en priorité et laissèrent aux Noires des emplois souvent subalternes et moins rémunérés, mais qu’importe ; ceux-ci payaient mieux que le service domestique et éloignaient les Africaines-Américaines de tâches de plus en plus dénigrées et déconsidérées. Les guerres finies, cependant, les Noires durent rentrer chez elles et reprendre les emplois si vite délaissés. Il leur fallut attendre les années soixante et les lois contre la ségrégation et la discrimination de même que les programmes en faveur des pauvres sous Johnson pour enfin avoir accès à l’éducation et à des emplois de cols blancs. Surtout, ces mesures permirent aux Noires d’accomplir ce qu’elles s’étaient promis depuis des années : éviter le service domestique à leurs filles. Les Noires dominèrent ce type de travail depuis la première guerre mondiale jusqu’aux années soixante ; elles ont été depuis souvent remplacées par des femmes issues de l’immigration (les Hispaniques en particulier) même si elles travaillent encore dans les villes à faibles taux d’immigration. 

39 Beaucoup d’entre elles refusent aujourd’hui ces emplois difficiles et ‘dégradants’ et ne reconnaissent pas certains des avantages examinés ici. En même temps, la demande pour les domestiques, dans le privé du moins, a diminué et le chômage fait partie de la réalité de nombreuses femmes noires, surtout dans les ghettos urbains. Les passages entre cultures et quartiers différents sont alors quasi inexistant. Mais, il est vrai, les médiations entre Noirs et Blancs sont aussi plus courantes dans la classe moyenne.

40 Le rôle des domestiques noires dans l’histoire africaine-américaine ne peut être ignoré et leur itinéraire singulier doit être noté. De la jeune migrante envoyée dans une famille blanche du Sud, puis dans le Nord, pour aider à la survie de sa famille élargie, à la mère de famille travaillant nuit et jour pour nourrir les siens ; de la domestique employée uniquement à la journée à la blanchisseuse, ou à celle qui choisit de travailler seulement en institution (hôpital, immeuble administratif, bureaux), le parcours de ces femmes est finalement ce que l’on soulignera. Elles purent affirmer leur indépendance et leur pouvoir d’une étape à l’autre : l’indépendance par rapport aux obligations familiales et aux employeurs blancs, la possibilité de choisir son lieu et son mode de travail, pouvoir s’occuper de ses enfants et de sa famille (nucléaire ou non), avoir du temps pour aller à l’église ou participer à des activités de loisir (soirées dansantes, fêtes religieuses, familiales ou communautaires) furent des motifs puissants pour redéfinir le travail de ces femmes. Elles réorganisèrent leur vie mais surent aussi ‘ré-interpréter’ le domaine privé de leurs patrons à leur avantage, le transformant autant que possible en un abri par rapport au contrôle social imposé par leur fonction et leurs employeurs.

41 Les domestiques noires eurent le courage de partir d’un lieu familier, de quitter un emploi, pour toujours améliorer leur sort et celui de leurs proches. Pour reprendre les mots de Michel Serres, on peut dire qu’elles furent des messagères qui appartenaient à différents mondes parce qu’elles les mettaient en communication. C’est ce passage multiple d’un lieu à l’autre qui fut « source et échangeur de sens » (Serres, 245 puis 27) et l’on retiendra en priorité le « processus de transformation,… nourri de confrontations successives », qui amena ces femmes à construire leur propre identité.
BIBLIOGRAPHIE

Ouvrages cités


NOTES

1. Le terme ‘domestique’ est peu usité aujourd’hui et il est d’ailleurs intéressant de noter l’évolution des qualificatifs utilisés pour parler de cette catégorie de travailleurs, qualificatifs qui ont changé au vu de la fonction, de la nature et des personnes concernées. A ce propos, lire l’étude de Geneviève Fraisse (1979). Elle s’y intéresse à l’évolution du travail domestique en France mais ses remarques sont souvent pertinentes sur les États-Unis également. Comme je m’intéresses dans cet article aux femmes noires travaillant pour des familles blanches pendant la période de migration des États du Sud vers le Nord, j’utiliserai ce terme qui était alors le plus courant même si je suis consciente que les changements depuis ‘domestic’ jusqu’à ‘household worker’ sont à forte charge politique et idéologique.


6. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese fournit un travail très documenté sur la vie quotidienne des femmes pendant l’esclavage et s’intéresse bien sûr aux servantes (enfants et adultes).

7. Sur la période suivant la Reconstruction et la mise en place du système de ségrégation dans le Sud, lire Leon F. Litwack.

9. Voir Dudden, 119 et Sutherland, 34). Relire aussi le témoignage poignant de Richard Wright dans Black Boy (1945) quand il narre sa recherche d’un premier emploi dans un quartier blanc et, notamment, quand on lui fait remarquer qu’il ne doit pas se présenter à la porte d’entrée mais à celle située à l’arrière de la maison.


11. Il est à noter que ce problème, comme le manque de respect de l’individu mentionné plus haut, n’était pas réservé aux domestiques américaines mais semble avoir été partagé par les employées de maison en général. Sur la situation en France à la même époque, voir les observations de Geneviève Fraisse).


13. Voir Steinberg, 160-165). Outre les Irlandaises, il y eut de nombreuses bonnes allemandes ou Scandinaives mais elles travaillaient dans les zones rurales, ou dans des quartiers restreints, et souvent dans des familles de leur groupe d’origine, ce qui n’était le cas ni pour les Irlandaises, ni pour les Noires. Voir Dudden, 61).


15. Orlando Patterson, 20-22, note la tendance encore aujourd’hui de membres de la communauté noire comme de certains analystes à mépriser ou sous-estimer la domesticité chez les femmes noires. Il insiste au contraire, comme d’autres auteurs sur lesquels nous reviendrons, sur le rôle et le pouvoir relatif de ces femmes.

16. Nous l’avons mentionné plus haut, il y eut aussi des employés masculins dans les maisons blanches mais leur nombre diminua fortement après la Première Guerre Mondiale quand la mécanisation du travail domestique et le coût des serviteurs augmentèrent. La domesticité fut ensuite presque exclusivement féminine. Les hommes eurent eux aussi accès aux quartiers blancs mais leurs emplois impliquaient davantage des tâches à l’extérieur (chauffeur, jardinier, coursier) que ceux des femmes. C’est pourquoi nous parlons ici des domestiques femmes uniquement. Pour une vision ‘masculine’ des gens de maison, consulter, par exemple, les témoignages recueillis par Gerald Early.


18. Je rejoins ici les conclusions sur la migration, en France cette fois, de Bourdieu et al. qui envisagent ce phénomène au sein de stratégies coopératives utilisant les ressources familiales et non plus comme opérant sur la seule base de motivations extérieures (‘push and pull factors’).


21. La littérature, et surtout celles des femmes africaines-américaines, rend bien compte de ces querelles entre bonnes noires et patronnes blanches. L’abus d’autorité des employeurs mais aussi le pouvoir de résistance des domestiques par l’humour, l’ironie, et la ruse y sont courants. Voir notamment les nouvelles de Alice Childress, toutes centrées autour de la même femme de ménage : *Like One of the Family. Conversations From A Domestic’s Life* (Boston : Beacon Press, 1986 (-1956)). Zora Neale Hurston et Toni Morrison, entre autres, ont aussi exploré le personnage de la domestique noire, par exemple dans *Their Eyes Were Watching God* ou dans *Tar Baby*.

22. Dans le Sud, pendant la période post-esclavagiste, il était courant que les hommes supervisent le travail du personnel de maison, ce qui était extrêmement rare dans le Nord. Dans tous les cas cependant, les contacts entre bonne et patron restèrent superficiels et n’atteignirent jamais le degré potentiel de grande intimité entre femmes. (Clark-Lewis, 107).

23. Les paroles d’une domestique noire de 82 ans, divorcée et sans enfants, rencontrée en entretien en août 2000, illustrent bien mes propos. Elle avait quitté le Sud au début des années soixante pour s’installer à Saint Louis (Missouri) et après divers placements dans des familles différentes, avait commencé à travailler pour une famille blanche plus de trente ans plus tôt. Elle travaillait encore malgré son âge (à des tâches allégées me dit-elle), passait la semaine chez son employeur, mais les samedis et dimanches dans une maison de retraite pour Africains-Américains où je la rencontrai. Elle insista beaucoup sur ses bonnes relations avec ses patrons et répéta à plusieurs reprises : ‘I love them’ ‘they love me’ ‘they are my family’. Elle me montra des photos du mariage de la fille aînée de son employeur qui témoignaient de sa présence à cette cérémonie familiale et privée. Malgré tout, et alors qu’elle m’indiquait les bibelots et photos qui ornaient son studio, elle me fit remarquer que, si ses employeurs la conduisaient le plus souvent entre leur résidence en banlieue et la maison de retraite située en centre ville pour lui éviter les avatars des transports en commun, ils la déposaient dans la cour et n’étaient jamais entrés dans son appartement. Il s’agissait peut-être pour mon interlocutrice de délimiter son territoire intime, mais cette situation exprimait plutôt, je crois, les barrières persistantes entre bonne et patrons.

24. Toutes les employeuses n’appartenaient pas à des classes aisées et des ouvrières blanches purent parfois utiliser des bonnes noires ; ce fut notamment le cas pendant la Grande Dépression des années trente, quand la concurrence féroce pour les emplois fit chuter les salaires des domestiques de façon vertigineuse. Toutefois, ces patronnes, même ouvrières, se trouvaient dans une situation économique largement supérieure à celle de leurs homologues noires. Joe William Trotter, “‘From A Raw Deal to a New Deal ?’ 1929-1945”, in Kelley & Lewis, 409-444.


26. Les jeunes enfants devaient être pris en charge par la famille étendue car, longtemps, il exista peu de modes de garde institutionnalisés, surtout dans les quartiers noirs. Par exemple, en 1923 à...


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La « nouvelle renaissance de Harlem » : entre mise en fiction et référent

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1 L’expression Nouvelle Renaissance de Harlem fleurit dans la presse de grande diffusion vers 1998 à travers de nombreux articles pesant le pour et le contre, voire la réalité de ce renouveau dont l'idée même remontait alors à environ six ans puisqu'elle avait mûri dans l'entourage du vice-président Gore avant d'être présentée devant la Chambre des Représentants par Charles B. Rangel, élu harlémien du parti Démocrate, en 1994.

2 Dès 1995, soit une année avant le terme de son cheminement législatif, l'idée d'une renaissance économique de Harlem donnait le jour à un roman décapant qui s'inscrivait en faux contre la possibilité même qu'elle devienne réalité.

3 L'essai à venir se donne deux buts. D'abord, débusquer le pessimisme iconoclaste de Uptown Heads, en montrer les rouages satiriques pétris dans la culture noire et qui construisent un propos désabusé. Ensuite, préciser les cadres législatif et socio-économique du renouveau, puis en prendre la mesure. Nous verrons que l'opinion critique qui structure le roman trouve un écho dans les prises de position ultérieures à la fiction, motivées par le bilan.

4 mitigé de l’opération et les craintes des résidents qui se sentent tenus à l’écart de la promotion sociale, voire chassés de chez eux par l’arrivée de buppies fortunés et ambitieux, et de commerces tournés vers le tourisme plutôt que vers leurs besoins quotidiens.

5 Uptown Heads s’ouvre sur une boutique de coiffeurs, lieu d’échange communautaire noir privilégié. Les trois coiffeurs, Supreme, Mike et Riff, sont installés 126 rue où ils coupent les cheveux des anonymes du quartier, d’amis et d’amies, et aussi de nombreuses célébrités noires. Supreme et Mike sont amis d’enfance, des fils du peuple. Vince, le troisième membre de leur groupe d’autrefois, a mal tourné puisque le voilà devenu le caïd local de la drogue.
Supreme vit en père célibataire car il a arraché son fils à une mère qu’il juge indigne d’élever le petit Born. Supreme est dur à la besogne, affable et plein d’humour. Dans la boutique, chaque partenaire module les coupes selon son propre style nettement reconnaissable et, dans ce respect de la diversité, chacun a ses clients attitrés. L’équipe est exemplaire et tout un microcosme gravite autour du salon, en particulier des créateurs inventifs en pleine ascension sociale comme Sharon (étudiante en architecture qui a inventé un ciment révolutionnaire) ; ou encore Slick, le petit ami de Stephanie, la sœur de Supreme, qui a conçu une voiture de rêve et qui, grâce à l’aide d’un mécène inconnu, a fondé une entreprise florissante.

Du côté du sentiment, Mike s’éprend d’Andréa. Attirance improbable car Andrea est une buppie qui paraît intouchable à l’enfant de la rue, amoureux transi qui, au bout d’un an et demi, décide de se faire passer pour gay afin de pouvoir l’approcher... et lui présente Supreme comme son compagnon. Andrea arrange une rencontre au Zimbabwe (le restaurant noir à la mode) où elle vient accompagnée de Vanessa pour qui Supreme, censément homosexuel, a le coup de foudre. Les chances de Supreme paraissent d’autant plus minces que Vanessa, fille d’un banquier, est éprise de Rhineholt Dunn III, mystérieux homme d’affaires noir, la coqueluche de Wall Street depuis deux ans mais que personne n’a jamais vu.

Le célèbre financier invisible réussit un coup fabuleux en bourse contre un certain Donald Ace, richissime investisseur blanc, et cette affaire lui permet d’acheter un riche et vaste domaine pétrolifère au Wisconsin où, mêlant la philosophie du Pouvoir Noir au Garveyisme, il ambitionne de fonder une colonie noire indépendante (cela va de soi) du pouvoir blanc. De surprise en imbroglio, tout est bien qui finit bien dans ce conte de fées new yorkais. Supreme et Rhineholt Dunn III, comme on pouvait s’en douter, sont la même personne. Un règlement de comptes balaya Vince le mauvais garçon de la scène. Les amoureux convolent tandis qu’un bel avenir se dessine pour tous, mais loin de Harlem où les noirs n’ont rien à attendre de la vie.

Sommes nous en plein wishful thinking racial ou en plein signifying ? On peut s’aviser de saisir la diversité des styles des trois amis coiffeurs comme une façon de recommander une plus grande tolérance ; et le ciment révolutionnaire de la jeune Sharon s’offre lui aussi comme une critique métaphorique d’une société éclatée. D’autre part, le livre surfé sur la réalité boursière par jeu de cartes interposé car Donald Ace est susceptible de renvoyer à Donald Trump. Cet ironique contact avec le monde réel ne débouche pas sur une grande richesse interprétative. En revanche, le nom de Rhineholt Dunn accroche davantage l’esprit : dun, c’est d’abord une couleur, un brun-gris terne (peut-on lire là une allusion au statut social inférieur des noirs — shoe Shine?) ; c’est ensuite un créancier insistant (le monde blanc serait-il devenu débiteur ?). Le prénom Rhineholt peut évoquer le Rhinehart d’Invisible Man, être aux personnalités multiples, et dont les évanescences sont partout. Pareil jeu onomastique ouvre bien sûr des perspectives sur une lecture d’Uptown Heads décalée vers une satire impitoyable des Etats-Unis.

Une instance narrative omnisciente très dirigiste prend toute l’information en charge et s’introduit dans la tête des personnages pour décrire ce qui s’y passe. En bref, au niveau littéraire, les rouages infiniment grossiers invitent à lire Uptown Heads au second degré comme un pastiche de la littérature rose ; et, au niveau social, l’éclat de rire est évident parce que tout est utopique, parce que les noms (celui du révérend Needabuck [31] par exemple) et les situations jouent avec les stéréotypes. Les liaisons amoureuses en apportent la preuve : que Mike avance sous le masque de l’homosexualité par timidité
dément le machisme noir (les allusions à Michèle Waller ne laissent aucun doute à ce propos). Ici ce sont les femmes qui, habitées d’un franc désir sexuel, provoquent les rencontres [125, 129]... quitte à prendre la fuite quand leur attente risque de réussir [141-142]. Pour finir, homme parfait, amant trompé qui arrache son fils à une mère déchue [6, 7] pour l’élever selon les meilleurs principes américains [23, 47], Supreme fait du livre un brûlot anti-Farrakhan. Supreme le coiffeur, alias Rhineholt le financier, est un double de Frère Lapin à l’aise dans un roncier (Harlem et Wall Street) inhabituel. Il porte les masques qui conviennent à ses entreprisés et sa double personnalité [91] le situe parmi les authentiques noirs, dont Vanessa (frangine autant que fille de banquier [102]) dit qu’ils doivent tous être bilingues [173].

Il n’est pas besoin d’être familier de la culture noire pour percevoir l’intention comique car personne n’a jamais entendu parler de gisements pétrolifères au Wisconsin. Le seul choix de cet État rural, le cœur des États-Unis blancs (jouxtant le Minnesota où Louis Malle tourna “God’s Country”) est porteur d’intention critique. Qui connaît un tant soit peu l’histoire des Afro-Américains saura en outre que le Wisconsin fut le second état à les priver du droit de vote en 1849 (le Connecticut l’avait devancé en 1819), ce qui en fait le lieu idéal, à condition de le penser avec le grain de sel du signifying, pour fonder une colonie noire !

La critique n’épargne pas la communauté noire elle-même. A preuve le dégoût qu’inspirent à Supreme l’argent facile des malfaçons les ivrognes ou bien les paresseux qui se satisfont de vivre au jour le jour de la charité publique ou de subsides. Les noirs sont également objets de satire intracommunautaire. A preuve l’attirance de Vanessa, la jeune bourgeoise assimilée, pour Supreme qu’elle prend pour un fils de la rue mal dégrossi. Sa démarche tient de ces blancs qui vinrent flirter avec le soufre, le primitivisme noir dans les cabarets des années folles. Vanessa, tel est son plan, souhaite fréquenter un “bad boy” [165] pour voir ce que cela lui fait avant de se ranger du côté des nantis [125]. S’encanailler... Mais pas trop, car l’argent de Rhineholt Dunn III, le financier charmant qu’elle n’a jamais rencontré, l’attire plus que tout.

Le chèque sans provision rédigé par les États-Unis blancs est au cœur de la satire raciale, car la réussite fulgurante de Supreme se donne à voir comme un rêve plus américain que le rêve américain. En accédant au pinacle de Wall Street en deux ans, Supreme et son double (n’oublions pas le coiffeur, artiste au coup de ciseau génial) sont un seul et même héros ultra positif, un all-American boy/man qui travaille dur et ruse pour battre les blancs à leur propre jeu. Coiffeur en jeans et T-shirt le soir et le week-end, authentique gamin de la rue capable de jouer au basket ball aussi bien qu’aux dozens ; habile investisseur en costume trois pièces les jours ouvrables à la bourse, Supreme le démiurge est à la fois le ciment et (secrètement) le bailleur de fonds de la communauté — à condition que l’emprunteur soit méritant et le risque financier bon. Excellent et fidèle ami, parfait amant et père accompli, il donne à son fils l’étrange prénom de Born dans la vie courante et Born Supreme à l’état civil. Ainsi, avec Born Supreme Rhineholt Dunn IV, une dynastie noire va-t-elle se perpétuer. On ne manquera pas de prononcer le quantième the fourth afin de mieux entrer dans la dérision car on peut y lire une allusion à la malédiction divine prononcée jusqu’à la troisième et quatrième génération. Le rire s’impose d’autant plus que c’est le petit Born (déjà pourvu, à cinq ans, d’un sens aigu des affaires) qui permet à Supreme de réaliser l’opération du Wisconsin en lui prêtant à huit pour cent une forte somme gagnée au loto clandestin avec sa bande de copains.
Le délire comique subvertit également les attentes en matière de délinquance : un certain Breeze (la première gâchette de Vince) se révèle en fait être aussi un militant imaginatif puisqu’il conçoit le plan de réorganiser le trafic de drogue au bénéfice des noirs en développant la clientèle des banlieues : la logique en est simple : ce commerce-là serait plus lucratif et contribuerait donc au développement du pouvoir d’achat du ghetto plutôt qu’à sa déchéance [37-40],

Upton Heads ne tient pas du chef d’œuvre impérissable mais caricature la société américaine en représentant comme crédible un conte de fées teinté de rêve américain. Mais ce rêve américain implanté à New York, censée être la ville de tous les possibles, ne peut se réaliser qu’ailleurs — un ailleurs au demeurant improbable.

Ce rêve d’une revitalisation économique de la communauté noire (par New York interposé) n’est recevable que par le lecteur oublié de situations désopilantes, et, surtout, de ce que le prologue lui a donné à lire sur Harlem. Car cette page et demie d’italiques serrées (il pourrait s’agir d’une disposition typographique délibérée puisque la compacité rend la lecture rebutante) donne à voir une tout autre vérité quant à l’avenir du ghetto : que les (rares) nouvelles constructions abritent les mêmes turpitudes et que les nouvelles poubelles accueillent toujours les mêmes détritus. Que le bon vieux smack a été remplacé par le crack plus nocif. Que les citoyens en vue et les fripons de haut vol préfèrent désormais rouler en BMW plutôt qu’en Cadillac. Que les rats, les cafards, les délinquants, les gogos, le loto, les pickpockets, les marchands de politique, de chair, de drogue et de religion sont toujours en quête de clients au même coin de la même rue. Que ceux qui croient à la Nouvelle Renaissance de Harlem coexistent avec les reliquats de l’ancienne. Bref, que rien ne changera jamais ; et qu’un mystère reste inexpliqué : les raisons pour lesquelles les noirs aiment tant Harlem et y restent... Peut-être est-ce parce que, à l’instar de ce roman qu’il convient de lire à rebours, Harlem piège l’esprit — comme celui de James W. Johnson ou de l’Homme Invisible sortant du métro, tout ébahi de voir les automobilistes blancs obtempérer aux signaux d’un sergent de ville noir.

Il convient d’emboîter le pas à Uptown Heads afin de lever l’ambiguïté des termes Nouvelle Renaissance de Harlem car le mouvement actuel est de nature nettement économique. Même si des artistes s’installent à Harlem et des galeries d’art s’ouvrent (surtout à compter de 1997) le phénomène n’est pas de la même nature que la Renaissance des années vingt qui témoignèrent d’une affirmation culturelle et identitaire sans précédent. Cela dit, il ne faudrait pas grandir cette Renaissance d’autrefois au-delà de ses mérites car, quelques fortunes spectaculaires mises à part, l’économie afro-américaine resta en panne, de même que l’intégration. N’oublions pas que le fameux Apollo Theater n’accueillait que des spectateurs blancs et que, au niveau du quotidien, Adam Clayton Powell organisa en 1938 un boycott (“Don’t buy where you can’t work”) qui contraignit la Chambre de Commerce à un quota d’embauche d’au moins un tiers d’employés noirs. La Renaissance de Harlem fut humainement décalée (alors que l’Amérique venait de découvrir Freud) par l’engouement de libéraux et de mécènes blancs pour le primitivisme et la vie libre des noirs ; mais là n’est pas le vrai débat. La Nouvelle Renaissance de Harlem devrait plutôt s’appeler autre que nouvelle — terme qui fleure le slogan médiatique ou politique racoleur. Le quartier (337 000 habitants au recensement de 2000) bouge, cela est certain. Beaucoup de jeunes viennent, ou reviennent, s’installer. Des noirs mais aussi des asiatiques, des Hispano-Américains et des blancs qui, pour la première fois en 2002, représentent environ la moitié des arrivants ; tandis que les prix de l’immobilier et les loyers flambent.
Derrière la médiatisation de la transformation de Harlem se cache un programme fédéral plus vaste ; donc, si l’on s’en tient au discours critique de *Uptown Heads*, une situation suscitée de l’extérieur a priori défavorable aux noirs. De fait, il y a paradoxe. A première vue, la loi cadre vise à promouvoir l’intégration économique de citoyens défavorisés, mais le moyen choisi pour promouvoir le standing du quartier s’apparente avant tout à un marchandisage appuyé sur l’investissement privé, l’argent des nantis.


Au cours des années 80, avant même d’être nommé Secrétaire à la tête de HUD, Jack Kemp proposa de lutter contre les poches de pauvreté en conjuguant les ressources des secteurs public et privé, le premier devant, à terme, se retirer afin de laisser le second prendre le relais. La relance économique de Harlem (cette fois proposée par le camp Démocrate au début des années 90) démontre l’existence d’une sorte de consensus quant aux bienfaits attendus d’une association entre l’argent public et l’argent privé. Les projets reformulés par le vice-président Gore vers 1994 (à temps pour les élections de mi-mandat) aboutiront en 1996 sous la forme d’une loi sur le renouveau des communautés offrant une incitation fiscale et des prêts à moyen terme (cinq ans) à taux réduit dans le cadre de projets concernant des aires géographiques défavorisées. Une fois validé par les instances locales, le projet était présenté au niveau fédéral, HUD puis OMB, pour être enfin approuvé en commission du Congrès.

Le renouveau de l’agglomération new yorkaise concerne le nord de Manhattan (Central Harlem, Inwood et Washington Heights constituent la Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone — UMEZ) et la partie Sud du Bronx (Bronx Overall). Le processus d’incitation et de sélection est localement confié à deux associations distinctes (*Development Corporations*) à but non lucratif. La mise en application de l’ACRA à New York est particulière en ce que les 300 millions de dollars de crédits ouverts (entre 1996 et 2006) proviennent par parts égales du gouvernement fédéral, de l’état et de la ville.

Le mécanisme incitatif repose sur un montage financier réalisé entre les aides publiques et le secteur privé lors de l’élaboration des projets. Le conseil de l’UMEZ mit en avant
trois facteurs de développement pour attirer les capitaux vers Harlem. Premièrement le fort potentiel commercial du quartier : quoique totalisant la même population que Seattle _intra muros_, un Harlem dépourvu de centres de grande distribution voyait entre 60 et 70 % de ses résidents dépenser leur argent à l'extérieur. Cet argument était de poids : dès 1974 (cette tendance s'accélérant à compter de 1990), incapable de remettre en état des milliers d'immeubles insalubres saisis pour cause d'impôts impayés, la ville de New York en fit don pour un dollar symbolique à des associations à but non lucratif qui mirent leurs ressources en commun pour construire ou rénover environ 30 000 logements qui firent refluer un pouvoir d'achat significatif vers le centre ville. Secondement, l'UMEZ insista sur un solide potentiel touristique qu'il était facile d'estimer à travers la clientèle (plus nombreuse que les visiteurs de l'Empire State building) des compagnies d'autocars circulant dans les hauts lieux des années vingt, précisément là où les grandes réalisations sont concentrées. Troisièmement, l'UMEZ mit en avant la baisse constante de la délinquance et la criminalité à partir de 1993 sous le mandat de David Dinkins.

De 1996 à janvier 2002 furent consentis, entre UMEZ et BO, 161,7 millions de prêts, soit un peu plus de la moitié des fonds prévus, à quoi il convient d'ajouter 356 millions venus du secteur privé — moins enthousiaste qu'escompté dans un premier temps. Ces investissements ont généré la création d'environ 13 000 emplois dans le secteur. Du côté de l'immobilier, les sommes engagées pour la restauration de _brownstones_ depuis 1994 s'élèvent à 1,2 billion. Parmi les lieux célèbres, l' _Apollo Theater_ a rouvert ses portes sous le contrôle de la société Time Warner. En revanche, la réouverture de Minton's (projet comportant un restaurant susceptible d'accueillir 225 couverts) n'est pas venue à terme en dépit d'un investissement de 3,1 millions engagé par Robert de Niro et ses deux associés. On ne parle guère dans la presse, et même sur le site de l'UMEZ, que de deux réalisations majeures en matière de commerce de grande distribution. L'énorme complexe _Harlem USA_ placé au cœur des lieux touristiques, au coin de la 125e rue et de l'avenue Lenox est le fleuron le plus vanté. Il est vrai que _Harlem USA_ a dynamisé le renouveau du quartier. Si l'accord ne s'était pas fait sur ce projet, grâce à l'engagement de Disney qui impliquait l'accord des banques, il est vraisemblable que l'UMEZ n'aurait pu prendre le même essor. La galerie comporte un point de vente _Disney_ (modeste par la dimension mais important pour les relations publiques — raciales — de l'entreprise), _The Gap, Old Navy, Polo Ralph Lauren, HMV Records_, le cinéma multiplexe _Magic Johnson Theater_ qui a ouvert ses portes en 2000, _Modell's Sporting Goods_ et, bien sûr, une succursale de la _Chase Manhattan_ qui a parrainé le montage financier. Vient ensuite, pour la notoriété, l'hypermarché _Pathmark_ (au coin de la 125e rue Est et de l'avenue Lexington) qui occupe une place particulière parce qu'il s'y vend avant tout des denrées de première nécessité et parce qu'il s'agit d'une entreprise conçue par l'Abyssinian Development Corporation créée en 1987 au sein de l'Eglise Baptiste Abyssinienne (autrefois la paroisse d'Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.). L'ADC gère un patrimoine immobilier offert à la location, de même que des associations de quartier œuvrant en matière d'assistance sociale, d'éducation et de loisirs. Son conseil a accompagné le projet _Pathmark_ de bout en bout jusqu'à l'ouverture en 1999 du complexe dont le succès a dépassé toutes les espérances, de même que celui des franchises _Rite Aid, Blockbuster_ ou _Papa John's Pizza_ qu'il abrite. 

Quoique le voisinage ait accueilli favorablement l’ouverture de ces commerces, cette revitalisation n’alla pas sans rancœurs, voire des actes de violence. Le plus souvent cité se produisit en 1997 : un tireur ouvrit le feu sur les clients de Freddy’s Fashion Mart (huit
morts) puis incendia le magasin dont l'extension prévue allait chasser un petit commerce de disques implanté depuis un quart de siècle17. Au-delà de ce fait divers tragique révélateur de tensions antisémites, US News and World Report rapporte des frictions entre habitants de West Harlem (majoritairement noir) et de East Harlem (fortement hispanique)18.

La question se pose de l'adéquation de cet essor aux besoins des Harlémiens eux-mêmes. Qu'apportent aux résidents ces disquaires, ces cinémas, ces cabarets et ces restaurants qui (comme Sylvia's, lequel fut établi au cours des années folles) font le plein de clients venus d'ailleurs ? Avec quel argent les Harlémiens vont-ils consommer des produits de luxe ? D'autre part, ce développement commercial s’articule-t-il avec une véritable offre de travail ? L’hypermarché Pathmark a créé 250 emplois permanents (dont 75 % réservés aux résidents locaux) ; Harlem USA environ 500. Mais s’agit-il d’emplois qualifiés et bien rétribués ou de postes de vendeurs ou manutentionnaires à cinq dollars de l’heure ? Sans se rallier aux déclarations incendiaires du Révérend Sharpton, il faut reconnaître qu’il pose de bonnes questions à propos de l’emploi — “Harlem’s on the rise, but who’s riding the wave ?”, “Are the people of Harlem surfing, or being drowned?”19. Une fois débarrassé de ses outrances, son discours se résume à critiquer l’UMEZ pour n’avoir pas fait coucher l’obligation d’embaucher localement dans les contrats. En rapportant les paroles de Wilbert Tatum, le propriétaire de The Amsterdam News, l’article du Washington Post déjà cité tient des propos voisins, à savoir que la Nouvelle Renaissance de Harlem est une opération d’appropriation du quartier par et pour la finance blanche et les noirs aisés. Un article du Monde du 30-31 janvier 2000 évoque le cas d’un chirurgien aux multiples ambitions commerciales (il est également agent immobilier et engagé dans un partenariat dans la restauration) qui a rénové une brownstone à Sugar Hill : 600 mètres carrés pour un couple sans enfant là où vivaient auparavant, plus ou moins clandestinement, neuf familles expulsées vers des destinations non spécifiées. La lutte entre l’argent et la compassion est peut-être plus inégale aux États-Unis qu’ailleurs, et il est clair que le renouveau du quartier ne peut s’accomplir sans douleur humaine. Les résidents les moins argents sont menacés de départ, ne serait-ce qu’en raison de l’augmentation générale des prix et des services. D’autant plus que seulement 6 % des habitants de Harlem possèdent leur logis, par rapport à 66 % des Américains au niveau national.

Nous manquons de recul pour trancher. Grosso modo, l’ACRA est à mi-parcours. Que vont apporter les quatre années restantes ? La conjoncture n’est guère favorable car les ressources fiscales de la ville ont été aménues (l’actuel maire, Mike Bloomberg, estime le déficit à 4,8 milliards) par la relocalisation des sièges sociaux naguère installés dans le World Trade Center. Certes, les sommes inscrites au titre de l’ACRA ne représentent qu’une faible part du budget d’une ville comme New York, mais on peut penser que le deuil de la ville va déplacer les priorités dans les esprits — en particulier du côté de l’argent privé dont la loi exige qu’il vienne abonder les projets.

Le bilan actuel est partagé. Certaines réalisations sont spectaculaires. Par exemple, la 140e rue Ouest : le pire des lieux en 1994 avec ses immeubles abandonnés au commerce de la drogue et son cortège de malheur est méconnaissable aujourd’hui après un investissement de 33 millions engagé par le City Reconstruction Fund. Les maisons rénovées sont d’autant plus visibles qu’elles sont achetées ou louées par des célébrités du sport ou des arts et des spectacles. La relance du commerce est également sensible. L’argumentation développée dans le numéro du 23 août 1999 de The New Republic, à savoir que bien des projets ont échoué faute d’un vivier suffisant d’hommes d’affaires et de
commerçants noirs, semble devoir être remise en cause du fait de l’accélération des réalisations que suggère le tableau ci-dessous élaboré à partir des statistiques (les chiffres sont arrondis) figurant sur le site de l’UMEZ :

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Périodes</th>
<th>Projets approuvés</th>
<th>Investissement UMEZ en millions</th>
<th>Autres financements (privés et publics) en millions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996-1er trim 2002</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-1er trim 2002</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-1er trim 2002 : en % du total</td>
<td>35,5 %</td>
<td>31 %</td>
<td>46,5 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On constate qu’environ un tiers des projets furent approuvés au cours de la seule année 2001 et du premier trimestre 2002, et, surtout, que l’investissement propre de UMEZ a décru tandis qu’augmentait l’argent venu d’autres sources publiques et privées. Il est clair que l’intérêt des investisseurs est allé croissant. On dénombre en outre récemment l’aboutissement de plus d’une trentaine d’initiatives émanant du commerce de proximité dans des domaines aussi divers que l’épicerie, l’habillement, les livres et journaux, la restauration, la construction, les voyages et le déménagement et garde meubles. La lunetterie de luxe est même concernée avec le magasin franchisé Sterling Optical (au coin de la 125e rue et de l’Avenue Lenox) spécialisé dans les montures de marque qui résulte d’un partenariat entre l’Abyssinian Development Corporation impliquant six hommes d’affaires harlémiens et Bankers Trust. L’élan contemporain est indéniable : on remarque (là où Barnes & Noble avait renoncé en 1999) l’ouverture en août 2002 de Hue-Man Bookstore qui prétend être la plus grande librairie spécialisée dans le domaine afro-américain, et dont le propriétaire exerçait autrefois à Denver. Des boutiques plus modestes, fondues ou modernisées, sont bien visibles. De même qu’un commerce de bouche comme le Sugar Hill Bistro établi dans une brownstone qui comporte un bar au rez-de-chaussée, un restaurant au premier et une salle culturelle (inspirée de la pratique de A’Lelia Walker dans les années vingt) au dernier étage. La vie culturelle, c’est aussi le Classical Theater of Harlem qui ouvrit en 1999 avec une adaptation de King Lear transposée en Afrique. C’est aussi le Performing Arts Complex (deux théâtres et une bibliothèque) établi dans une ancienne caserne de pompiers, de même que la galerie Fire Patrol n° 5 Art. Tout n’est pas succès, cependant. Le nouveau Cotton Club n’est pas implanté sur les lieux de l’ancien et n’est jamais qu’un établissement pour touristes où est servi un Sunday Gospel Brunch. La réouverture du Savoy Ballroom n’est pas envisagée. L’Apollo Theater stagne et l’ambitieux projet d’englober l’immeuble mitoyen du Victoria Theater dans une extension a été retardé en septembre 2002 par crainte du climat économique. Là est le nœud du problème, ou la clé de l’avenir. Car une certaine fragilité du projet ne peut échapper à l’esprit en cette année où le tourisme new yorkais a subi un tassement important. La clientèle, le moteur du renouveau commercial, a-t-elle été bien ciblée ? La réponse est affirmative pour l’hypermarché Pathmark où les produits de consommation quotidienne sont offerts à la vente ; et il en va de même pour les initiatives du Business Resource and Investment Service Center (BRISC) créé dès 1996 au sein de l’UMEZ et doté d’une provision de 2,2 millions dont plus de la moitié ont été engagés à ce jour. Reposant sur cinq aires commerciales chapeautées par trois organisations la structure de BRISC montre le souci
de répondre aux besoins et aux sensibilités locales et raciales, bref de prendre en compte le tissu humain. En revanche, le salon Starbucks (au coin de la 125e rue et de l'avenue Lenox) de même que Harlem USA reposent sur le postulat de l'existence d'un Harlem majoritairement bourgeois qui ne paraît pas susceptible de surgir à court terme.

Quel sera le bilan de l'UMEZ en 2006 ? Vraisemblablement positif puisqu'elle a d'ores et déjà triomphé de circonstances politiques qui ont failli hypothéquer son développement. Car le devenir de cette Nouvelle Renaissance dépend peut-être moins de la tradition harlémiennede résistance à l'emprise blanche et/ou juive que des tirailllements entre les décideurs et les élus : à preuve l'affrontement entre le gouverneur Pataki et la municipalité de Giuliani qui provoqua en 1999 la démission de Deborah Wright qui prit la direction de l'UMEZ en 1996 et à qui est due la création de BRISC.

Tout en percevant les limites et les dangers d'une philosophie interventionniste naguère qualifiée de « troisième voie » par le gouvernement Clinton, l'apport de l'ACRA se révèle plus bénéfique que l'injonction pure et simple, à partir des années 70, de crédits publics (100 millions en un peu moins de vingt ans) par la Harlem Urban Development Corporation (HUDC). Toutes choses égales par ailleurs, il est clair que le devenir de Harlem, devenu zone d'exode depuis une vingtaine d'années, exigeait une intervention. Ne serait-ce que parce que les marchés ne sauraient surgir spontanément dans des lieux aussi délaissés que ceux que vise l’American Community Renewal Act de 1996.

Un UpTown Heads tenant le même discours négatif à l'égard du renouveau de Harlem pourrait-il encore s'écrire à présent qu'un élan économique semble prendre tournure ? Peut-être bien si l'on ne veut envisager l'essor du commerce et de l'immobilier comme un phénomène de mode attirant les nantis et chassant les miséreux. Au-delà du surgissement d'un discours fictionnel plutôt que d'un autre, processus insaisissable, on constatera pour terminer que UpTown Heads est bien de son temps pour être, d'une certaine façon, en phase avec la philosophie économique de l'ACRA. Il est vrai, le livre s'inscrit en faux contre la possibilité même d'une Nouvelle Renaissance à Harlem et, en véritable pince sans rire, invite les noirs à quitter New York parce qu’on ne peut plus y cultiver la terre ni construire [170], mais il ne demande pas de manne, fédérale ou autre. Rhineholt, le type même du fils de ses œuvres, met son argent astucieusement arraché au monde blanc au service de l'initiative communautaire. Son projet est d'investir dans les inventions et les projets porteurs conçus par des noirs. Il est temps, dit-il, que la communauté prenne son destin en mains — qu’elle se réveille enfin comme Martin Luther King l'avait fait... et aille planter ailleurs, mais aux Etats-Unis, une véritable alternative noire. Rêve fou. Envisageable seulement dans le franc parler moderne d'une fiction goguenarde. D'une comédie des erreurs qui ne se dénoue que dans l'intellect du lecteur qui ne croit pas aux contes de fées et s'amuse des rebondissements ingénieux de cette parodie sévère du fameux rêve américain.
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Abyssinian Development Corporation : <adcorp.org>
NOTES


2. Le néologisme *buppie* est formé sur « yuppie » (young upwardly mobile professional) et désigne de jeunes noirs intégrés en pleine ascension sociale.


4. Exode. XX-5.

5. Voir “*Coming up Harlem*”. *Smithsonian Magazine*, nov. 2002, 74-86. Le locataire le plus célèbre est Bill Clinton que Charles Rangel avait tenté d’attirer vers Harlem alors qu’il était encore à la Maison Blanche. Après avoir dans un premier temps préféré installer ses bureaux 57e rue Ouest dont la cherté lui valut des critiques acerbes, l’ancien président se replia sur Harlem où les autorités et les élus s’arrangèrent pour que soit oubliée une promesse de location antérieure au n° 55. 125e rue Ouest. Il s’implique dans la vie locale principalement par le biais de programmes éducatifs et un service gratuit de conseil aux entreprises.


9. New York n’était pas la seule visée. On dénommait alors la situation des grandes villes “the nation’s arc of crisis” et la presse insistait beaucoup (pour la dénoncer, car on était alors au début de l’ère Reagan) sur la participation fédérale au budget des agglomérations, comprise entre 32 % à Cleveland et 8,5 % à New York en chiffres ronds. [Voir : “*Mr. Fixit for the Cities*” *Newsweek*, 4 mai 1981.]


12. Les sommes allouées varient entre 550 et 300 millions de dollars selon les différentes sources (écrites et informatiques) consultées. J'ai opté pour les chiffres figurant sur le site officiel de New York.


16. L’UMEZ a investi 11, 2 millions, environ le sixième d’un projet se montant à 65 millions.

17. Le ressentiment racial couvait depuis 1995, notamment à travers le soutien tonitruant du Révérend Sharpton aux associations 125th Street Business et 125th Street Vendor qui défendaient les commerces de proximité et faisaient campagne sur le thème « achetez noir ».


19. Pour simplifier : (1) LDCDB représente Harlem Est, majoritairement hispanique ; (2) BID représente Harlem Centre, majoritairement noir ; (3) APED représente Harlem Nord, aire davantage résidentielle.

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