

The Wright Era: African American Fiction in Retrospect

Werner Sollors

Beginnings

The study of African American literature is a child of the Enlightenment and of Quaker-inspired agitation against the slave trade and slavery.¹ Launched under the now unfashionable term “Negro literature,” it was understood to be global and to have deep historical roots, for its discussions included writing and artistic expression of all times, in many languages, and from many known places on the globe. It had a political thrust, for listing and presenting examples of creativity served as a vindication of Negroes against racial prejudice, thus weakening justifications of slavery on the grounds of those preconceptions.

Drawing on examples that Quakers and other opponents of the slave trade and slavery had presented, among them Michel Adanson, Anthony Benezet, Thomas Clarkson, James Ramsay, Granville Sharp, and William Wilberforce, as well as on extensive archival researches of his own, the Abbé Henri Grégoire (1750–1831)—who had also advocated the emancipation of Jews—put together a pioneering study that was explicitly intended to demolish the anti-Negro position of slavery sympathizers like Edward Long. *De la littérature des Nègres*, first published in Paris in 1808, appeared two years later in D. B. Warden’s English translation under the title *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties, and Literature of Negroes; Followed with an Account of the Life and Works of Fifteen Negroes and Mulattoes, Distinguished in Science, Literature and the Arts*. The book starts with a semantic discussion in which Grégoire gives preference to the term “Negro” (“Noir”) over “African,” because there are many non-blacks who live in Africa. Arguing

¹ The first protest against slavery in what is now the United States was published in 1688 in Germantown, Pennsylvania, under the leadership of Francis Daniel Pastorius.

against the presumption of black inferiority, Grégoire mentions the North African Terence, whose Roman comedies have remained popular throughout the ages, and the Andalusian Juan Latino, who taught Latin at Seville (158); Grégoire writes that the Turkish position of chief of black eunuchs, or Kislár-Aga, was held in 1730 by a man of “great wisdom and knowledge” (160); he refers to the Tagal Nicholas de la Cruz Bagay (178), who engraved the first map of the Philippines; an unnamed Negro mentioned in John Gabriel Stedman’s 1796 *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* who could “repeat from memory the Alcoran” as could the Gambian Job Ben Solomon who was taken as a slave to Maryland (160–61); and he invokes the Massachusetts slave woman Belinda who petitioned for her own and her daughter’s freedom in 1782 (168).

Grégoire asks but doubts whether Aesop was a Negro (169) and offers a biographical sketch of “Annibal, the African Negro” of Czar Peter the Great (173), now best known as the ancestor of Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (who was only nine years old when Grégoire published his study). Grégoire also includes the dissertation writers and academics Antony William Amo (173–76) and James Eliza John Capitein (196–207). He quotes from Capitein’s elegies and disagrees with his scholarly inference that slavery was lawful. He discusses Benjamin Banneker, Ottobah Cugoano, Ignatius Sancho, and Gustavus Vassa, to whose 112-verse religious conversion poem he calls attention. He quotes from Francis Williams’s Latin poems and defends him wittily against Edward Long’s charge of plagiarism, for Long was, Grégoire writes, essentially “blaming” Williams “for making Latin verses with Latin words” (211). Finally, he discusses Phillis Wheatley and quotes extensively from her poems, defending her accomplishment against Jefferson, who appeared “unwilling to acknowledge the talents of negroes” (236). With examples from Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and the Caribbean, Grégoire’s *Enquiry* offers a full-fledged global vindication of the Negro, and among his examples are those created by Negro subjects as well as testimonies to black

accomplishments by non-Negroes. He singles out the anti-slavery Quaker Anthony Benezet for praise, quoting a US colonel who reportedly said at Benezet's funeral: "I would rather be Benezet in his coffin than George Washington with all his celebrity" (245). Grégoire, who begins his study with Aesop's fable of the lion and the man, arguing that were pictures created by lions they would be different than those drawn by hunters, ends it with the exhortation to European nations to expiate their crimes (253).²

Many writers and anthologists as well as amateur and professional historians followed the cosmopolitan path that Grégoire had mapped out, from Lydia Maria Child, Charles W. Chesnutt, and J. A. Rogers to Janheinz Jahn, Rosey Poole, and the pan-African quarterly *Présence Africaine*. When Negro literature became the academic field of "African American literature," however, these global contexts tended to recede in favor of a US narrative that nationalized the scope of the field in which transatlantic figures like Gustavus Vassa now had an uneasy place, while Ottobah Cugoana or Francis Williams and post-Grégoire writers like Pushkin, Alexandre Dumas, or the Cuban poet Plácido (Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés) disappeared and had to be rediscovered through black Atlantic, hemispheric, or diasporic approaches. Two cases that suggest the global dimensions of early African American literature are the 1831 autobiographic account by Futa-Toro-born Muslim scholar Omar Ibn Said, an early US slave narrative written in Arabic in North Carolina, and the first published African American short story, Victor Séjour's "Le Mulâtre," that, written in French, appeared in the radical Parisian *Revue des colonies* in 1837, and opened a Parisian career in the theatre to its New Orleans-born author.

² Aesop's fable of the lion and the man was earlier invoked by the *Spectator*'s "Inkle and Yarico" (1711) and later referred to in Wendell Phillips's letter that serves as an authenticating preface to Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*.

Early anthologies, studies, and compilations often set out to show that Negro writers had equal talents and therefore invoked non-Negro authors, at least for reference and comparison. Alain Locke, for example, whose own landmark anthology *The New Negro* (1925) included non-black and non-US contributors (among them, the German-born artist Winold Reiss, the art collector Albert C. Barnes, and the anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits), reviewed *The Negro Caravan* in *Opportunity* in 1942 and praised the wisdom of the editors Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee for giving “some notion of the important correlation of Negro creative effort with that of white authors treating Negro themes; which somewhat offsets the inconsistency of the anthology’s non-racialist critical platform and its actual restriction to Negro authorship” (Locke 1989, 215). By contrast, more recent African American literary studies and anthologies often set out to demonstrate the independence and autonomy of the black American tradition and its resistance to white writing, making invisible the “important correlation” Locke still noticed. In short, while knowledge of the literature has without doubt broadened and deepened impressively, in the transformation from Negro to African American literature a narrowing has also taken place: from global to national, from interracial to racial, and from multilingual to Anglophone. This narrowing would have surprised many writers from before the 1960s, who often worked explicitly with non-black literary models and thought of, and often also reached, other writers and general audiences beyond the confines of race, nation, and time.

Three of the best fiction writers from before 1940 may illustrate their interrelationship with broader trends of literary production and reception. In 1857 the Philadelphian Frank J. Webb published his suspenseful novel *The Garies and Their Friends* with Routledge in England, where he was living before relocating to Jamaica, and reached an impressively broad audience with a cheap-edition print run of 10,000 copies. Introduced by Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose enormously successful novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851–52) served as

provocation and inspiration to the first black American novelists, and populated with Dickensian characters like the young Kinch and the arch-villain George Stevens, the novel offers full-fledged representations of interracial marriage, passing, mob violence, and public corruption in the city of brotherly love, while also showing the successes of the proud black businessman Mr. Walters, who has a portrait of Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint L'Ouverture on his wall. The novel reaches a climactic scene with a race riot during which a white mob is beleaguering the house of a colored family. The children Kinch and Caddy follow Quasimodo's example from Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1832): they pour a hot liquid (in their case, a mixture of cayenne pepper and hot water) over the attacking rioters, helping to drive them off. Webb also published two novellas set in France, at the very location Alexandre Dumas had chosen for *The Man with the Iron Mask* (1847–50) and in these novellas Webb did not include characters of color, thus starting a tradition that was later called "raceless" fiction (Bone 1965, 178) and included Paul Laurence Dunbar's spiritual autobiography, set in his native Ohio, *The Uncalled* (1898); Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's temperance serial "Sowing and Reaping" (1876–77); Wallace Thurman's *The Interne* (1932), co-written with Abraham Loew Furman, about life aspirations and temptations during training for the medical profession; Willard Motley's Italian American *Knock on Any Door* (1947); Ann Petry's *Country Place* (1947), about a Second World War veteran returning to his unfaithful wife and a changed Connecticut town, narrated by an elderly bachelor in the first person; Zora Neale Hurston's poor-white Florida novel *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948); William Gardner Smith's Philadelphia novel of marital infidelity, *Anger at Innocence* (1950); Chester Himes's autobiographically inspired indictment of prison brutality, *Cast the First Stone* (1952); Richard Wright's probing of a symbolic matricide, *Savage Holiday* (1954); James Baldwin's gay *Giovanni's Room* (1956), set in France; and much of Frank Yerby's

extremely popular historical fiction of the 1940s and 1950s, starting with *The Foxes of Harrow* (1946).

Charles Chesnutt, who in his short stories from the 1880s and 1890s engaged with black folklore he collected or invented also wove motifs from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Vergil's *Eclogues*, and the Bible into his fiction, employing plotlines that reframed novels ranging from Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (in *House Behind the Cedars*) and William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty* (in "Her Virginia Mammy") to Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (in "The Wife of His Youth"), while stories like "The Dumb Witness" anticipate some of William Faulkner's haunting themes. In "The Web of Circumstance" Chesnutt (who supported himself and his family as a lawyer and court stenographer) showed how the unequal meting out of justice can nearly transform an upwardly mobile Franklinitan character who is given a harsh sentence for a theft he did not commit into a *Frankenstein*-like monster who almost enacts revenge on the innocent daughter of the man he wrongly believes to be responsible for the injustice; the story ends with a desperate allusion to millennial hopefulness. In his now best-known novel, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Chesnutt represented—with a focus on a divided interracial family—the engineering of a race riot, based on the 1898 events in Wilmington, North Carolina, that marked the beginning of the full onslaught of white supremacy and Jim Crow rule. Chesnutt's narrator makes literary allusions to Procrustes and Robert Louis Stevenson, while the no-good character Tom resembles a similar Tom in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894). Some of Chesnutt's short stories (e.g. "Baxter's Procrustes") feature no "coloured" characters; he wrote literary essays and gave speeches on writers from Samuel Johnson and Alexandre Dumas to George Meredith and Albion W. Tourgée; and his work has been translated into many languages, among them French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

While Webb and Chesnutt worked within a realist tradition, Jean Toomer was an aesthetic modernist closely allied with Waldo Frank. His most remarkable book, *Cane* (1923), deserves the attention of readers interested in the novel, even though it is not strictly speaking a novel, but an experimental mélange of prose, poetry, and drama. Set both in the rural South, a small Georgia town he calls Sempter, and in the urban centers of Chicago and Washington, DC, *Cane* represents the tension of tradition and modernity, country and city, religious spirituals and cabaret songs, as the author was searching for aesthetic equivalents of the African American Great Migration. A stunning stylist indebted to the poetics of Imagism, Toomer shines in individual sentences and images as well as in the montage of the whole book. Reading “Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon” (1) or “The flute is a cat that ripples its fur against the deep-purring saxophone” (149) makes the reader curious about the author of such a synesthetic imagination. His figures mysteriously project themselves onto the worlds they inhabit; when Esther “steps out,” Toomer writes: “There is no air, no street, and the town has completely disappeared” (48). Toomer, who had grown up on both sides of the more and more sharply drawn color line, was a relentless searcher for wisdom, unity, and wholeness, a quest that found full expression in his aphorisms, collected in his book *Essentials* (1931). Examining himself, he concluded, “I am of no particular race. I am of the human race, a man at large in the human world, preparing a new race.” In *Cane*, he repeatedly alluded to St. Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians: “For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). His search for wholeness and transcendence took him to Gurdjieff’s mysticism and a center of meditation at Fontainebleau, a guru in India, and a Quaker community in Pennsylvania. Though in his lifetime Toomer was more of a writers’ and artists’ writer, he is now widely taught and has been translated into French, Italian, Spanish, and German, among other languages.

In addition to these outstanding fiction writers, numerous African Americans tried their hand at novel-writing, three of them (in addition to Webb) in the slavery period, about half a dozen in the time between the Civil War and the First World War, and a great many more in the 1920s and 1930s. Racial passing, urbanization, and the Jim Crow experience remained popular themes in such novels as Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1890) in which a character refers to Pushkin and Dumas; Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1903), an important part of which is set in the Sudanese city of Meroë; James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), with a long, central section set in various European countries; Walter White's *Flight* (1926), whose heroine Mimi reads Romain Rolland and engages in a dialogue with the Chinese intellectual Wu Hseh-Chuan; Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1928), whose protagonist Angela Murray goes to Paris where she is united with her Brazilian friend Anthony Cross; and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), whose heroine Helga Crane is courted by a Danish painter in Copenhagen. The Jamaican-born and -trained Claude McKay approached global status with a career that took him to the United States, Britain, France, Weimar Germany, and Revolutionary Russia as well as to Morocco and Spain, and in his most famous novel, *Home to Harlem* (1928), the Caribbean intellectual Ray recites Wordsworth's sonnet on Toussaint L'Ouverture to the African American Pullman porter Jake. George S. Schuyler's raucously iconoclastic novel *Black No More* (1931) spoofs the logic of US race relations by satirically imagining an invention that turns blacks white, in fact, whiter than ordinary whites; at the end we find the central figures sun-tanning at the French Riviera. With Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932), African American mystery fiction featuring a black detective had emerged. Zora Neale Hurston, who added anthropology—and folklore-study-inspired humor—to her spontaneous-sounding prose, is most famous for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937); she also produced a somewhat fictionalized account of fieldwork in Haiti and the African American-idiom-

inflected biblical novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939). Surprisingly, before the Second World War only one African American historical novel set in the slavery period appeared, Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder* (1936), a fictionalization of the Gabriel Prosser slave rebellion in 1800 Richmond, Virginia.

Richard Wright's *Native Son*

On March 1, 1940, the development of the African American novel took a sharp new turn with the publication of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, a turn that would define much literature for decades. Divided, without further chapter divisions, into three books—"Fear," "Flight," and "Fate"—it is a novel focused on nineteen-year-old Bigger Thomas, who lives with his mother, his sister Vera, and his younger brother Buddy in a small, rat-infested kitchenette tenement in the black belt of Chicago. Interacting with his buddies Gus, G.H., and Jack, Bigger is near-hysterical, alternating between an indifferent, sullen stare and violent action that makes others "hate and fear him as much as he hated and feared himself" (472).³ Living in a segregated world, the young black men see "images of smiling, dark-haired white girls lolling on the gleaming sands of a beach" only on a screen that "flashed with the rhythm of moving shadows" (474) when they go to the movies. Bigger starts to work as chauffeur for the wealthy Daltons, first represented in a newsreel, both liberal philanthropists and large-scale owners of ghetto tenements. On his first day on the job, after he has driven his employer's daughter, Mary Dalton, and her Communist boyfriend, Jan Erlone, to be entertained in town, he has to bring the inebriated Mary safely back to her bedroom. At that moment her mother, who is blind, enters the room, and Bigger, panic-stricken by the fear of

³ Quotations from *Native Son* are taken from the 1991 Library of America edition, edited by Arnold Rampersad. This posthumous edition restores passages that were omitted, with Wright's consent, in the first edition and subsequent reprints of the novel.

being caught in a white woman's bedroom, silences, and smothers Mary with a pillow, inadvertently killing her. This act, seen as if it were Bigger's pre-ordained doom, also generates gory follow-up actions: in order to hide the evidence, Bigger puts Mary's body into the furnace and has to cut off her head: He "sent the blade of the hatchet into the bone of the throat with all the strength of his body. The head rolled off" (532).

Returning home with the strong sensation that this would be his last time there, he is keenly aware of how this deed has changed him. "Here he was sitting with them and they did not know that he had murdered a white girl and cut her head off and burned her body" (541–42). Bigger feels detached but also like a creator, and for the first time. "He had murdered and had created a new life for himself"; and: "He had a natural wall from behind which he could look at them" (542). Back at the Daltons, Bigger soon makes up a plot of his own: as a *writer*, he devises a ransom note signed "Red," suggesting a Communist kidnapping. "They wanted him to draw the picture and he would draw it like he wanted it. He was trembling with excitement. In the past had they not always drawn the picture for him?" (592). He acts as a subservient Negro during his interrogation by private investigator Britten. For a while Bigger's plot works, but when the remains of Mary's body are discovered by journalists, whose headlines and reports from now on are interspersed into the narrative, Bigger takes flight, goes into hiding with his girlfriend Bessie in the icy, snow-covered black belt, and later brutally rapes and murders her in an abandoned building, unconvincingly rationalizing that he "couldn't take her and he couldn't leave her; so he would have to kill her" (666). "He lifted the brick again and again, until in falling it struck a sodden mass that gave softly but stoutly to each landing blow" (667). Yet even at this point when Bigger has to horrify the reader, he is portrayed as if he were a perverted creator. "He had committed murder twice and had created a new world for himself" (671).

Before long Bigger is found by the police, chased, and arrested. The third and longest part of the novel is devoted to the murder trial, marked by the opposition between State Attorney Buckley and Communist defense lawyer Boris Max, both trying to draw their differing pictures of Bigger, and neither understanding Bigger fully. The policemen who arrested Bigger “stretched his arms out, as though about to crucify him” (699), and during the trial, like a perverted Christ figure, “Bigger felt a wild and outlandish conviction surge in him: *They ought to be glad!* . . . Had he not taken fully upon himself the crime of being black?” (721). Bigger’s abandonment of religion is regarded as his first murder (710), and sentenced to death, Bigger remains aloof from the Reverend Hammond, who comes to see him in his cell. The texts of the gospel song “Life is like a mountain railroad” that Bigger hears sung by his mother (I, 454) and the spiritual “Steal away” coming out of a black church that he perceives as music “of surrender, resignation” (682) serve to suggest Bigger’s distance from any lived religion. He explicitly rejects the cross that Hammond puts around his neck, for “that cross was not the cross of Christ, but the cross of the Ku Klux Klan” (761). Bigger is stoically insistent to let his acts define him. Early on he refuses to tell himself that the killing of Mary was an accident (542) and thinks that “Mary had served to set off his emotions, emotions conditioned by many Marys” (550). And at the end he says to Boris Max: “I didn’t want to kill! . . . But what I killed for I *am*! It must ’ve been pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awfully hard to murder” (849). Despite Max’s pleading, Bigger continues, “What I killed for must’ve been good!” and “I can say it now, ’cause I’m going to die” (849). Max cannot face Bigger and gropes for his hat “like a blind man.” The novel ends with the clanging of the cell door.

In his story “The Web of Circumstance” Chesnutt had represented an unjustly sentenced blacksmith who *almost* becomes a monster; Séjour’s and Bontemps’s slave rebels commit or plan violent acts that could be understood in their political contexts. Yet no central

protagonist of an African American novel had been represented as a murderer. In his review of *Native Son*, the poet Sterling A. Brown praised Wright's courage in selecting such a hero, for "[m]ost writers of minority groups select as heroes those who disprove stereotypes" whereas Wright went straight for the "'bad nigger' without squeamishness," but only as a starting point for giving him complexity and depth (qtd. in Reilly 1978, 97).

The Gothic hardness in Wright's representation was intentional. Thus Wright asked himself in a manuscript note about Bessie's murder whether he had been hard enough, and it is strange that Wright should have dedicated such a tough novel to his own mother. What adds to this hardness is that Bigger Thomas is not an innocent victim and that he explicitly does *not* want to confess or repent or explain or be forgiven. Neither Fyodor Dostoyesky's Raskolnikov (in *Crime and Punishment*) nor Theodore Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths (in *An American Tragedy*), with both of whom Bigger Thomas has been compared, could be imagined saying, "What I killed for must've been good!" Compared to Raskolnikov and Griffiths, Bigger Thomas is harder in his actions, too: Raskolnikov and Griffiths kill only on *one* occasion--and Bigger's second killing, the brutal and most definitely *non*-accidental rape and murder of Bessie, is the point at which readers are meant to shrink back in horror from Bigger. This extensively represented scene—which, however, matters in the trial only because Bessie's body serves as circumstantial evidence for the charge that Bigger must have also raped Mary—is Wright's sharpest departure from Dostoyesky and Dreiser. Raskolnikov's affection for Sonya was the path toward confession, punishment, regeneration, and return to religion and society, whereas Wright's plotting was as if Raskolnikov had also killed Sonya. Love for a woman cannot redeem Bigger, and, from the beginning, his relation to Bessie is one of pure power and domination. And while Bigger Thomas remains detached from his mother to the end, Dreiser's Griffiths writes a series of letters to his mother from death row.

“What I killed for I *am*.” The sentiment expressed by Bigger Thomas is a far cry from Toomer’s aphorism, “I am of no particular race.” The metaphor of the veil that W. E. B. Du Bois had developed in his essay collection *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to characterize racial division in America but also the Negro’s ability of second sight has hardened into a “natural wall” that isolates Bigger. We are no longer in the bohemian Harlem of Claude McKay: we do not expect to hear the resilient Southern folk voice of Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or the urbane plotting of her Harlem short stories. In the background of *Native Son* is a migration and urbanization story, but one that shows the assault of modernity, compounded by the extreme social inequality of Jim Crow America, upon a young mind: it portrays a consciousness that is unmoored from any traditional social scaffoldings of family, religion, and custom. Only on the last page of the novel does Bigger give a small sign of kindness when he asks Max, “Tell. ... Tell Mister. ... Tell Jan hello. ...” (850, ellipses in original)—here, as James Miller has pointed out, “for the first time in his life dropping the use of ‘mister’ in front of a white man’s name” (Miller 1986, 506).

It was not the hardness of the plot alone that made *Native Son* haunting; it was also the novel’s mode of narration that made it effective. From the opening ringing of the alarm clock to the tolling of the bell in Bigger’s dream, Wright worked with onomatopoeia. He employed metaphors that later writers would re-employ, most importantly blindness and invisibility. As Michel Fabre has shown, Wright works with alliteration, with the recurring initial “bl-” sound of words like black, blaze, blind, block, blood, blot, blow, or blur; likes to employ Gertrude Stein’s favorite “-ing” form; and uses other patterns of repetition (see Fabre 1977 and Weiss 1998). He writes strikingly varied sentences, from the staccato brevity of “Elation filled him” (543) or “He was trapped” (675) and the Toomer-like phrasing “The room was black-dark and silent; the city did not exist” (665–66) to Faulknerian expansiveness, the longest sentences being the breathless account of Bigger’s dream (598–

99) and Bigger's dialect-free perception of Hammond's sermon, rendered in free indirect discourse (709–10). As would several of his successors, Wright represents type scenes of urban modernity and his protagonist's interaction with them: movies, streetcar, automobile, the gang, the kitchenette, or the skeletons of abandoned snow-covered buildings, where "many windows gaped blackly, like the eye-sockets of empty skulls" (661). Riding an eastbound streetcar from Chicago's Forty-seventh Street, Bigger "looked anxiously at the dim reflection of his black face in the sweaty windowpane. Would any of the white faces all about him think that he had killed a rich white girl? No! [...] He saw it all very sharply and simply: act like other people thought you ought to act, yet do what you wanted" (549).

The novel is narrated in the third person, but in order to bring the reader close to Bigger, Wright gives much room to Bigger's consciousness, his speaking, and his actions, alternating direct discourse, indirect discourse, and free indirect discourse—all focalized on Bigger. In his essay "How Bigger Was Born" (1940), Wright self-consciously commented on his narrative method as an attempt to catch "in a focus of prose" "the objective and subjective aspects of Bigger's life," finding it necessary sometimes "to use a stream of consciousness technique, then rise to an interior monologue, descend to a direct rendering of a dream state, then to a matter-of-fact depiction of what Bigger was saying, doing, and feeling" (878). With this technique Bigger's perhaps Nietzschean "queer sense of power" (669), his "terrified pride" (542) and feeling of having achieved freedom come across clearly.

Yet Wright also may step in as narrator and "speak outright" on his own. He knows things that young Bigger—who has been in Chicago for only about five years—could not possibly have known, thus adding distance and perspective toward the central consciousness. In a narrative that proceeds chronologically within a short time span in the late 1930s, this may be simply the temporal distance of flashbacks to a historical past that would seem to reach back to before Bigger's lifetime, as in an allusion to events of 1919: "Bigger

remembered that bombs had been thrown by whites into houses like these when Negroes had first moved into the South Side” (615).⁴ It can also be a clearly implied political narrative distance when the narrator shows Bigger’s limited understanding of the world in narrative comments like: “He did not know what a capitalist was” (494) or: “He had not understood the speech, but he had felt the meaning of some of it from the tone of Max’s voice” (826). At times, his limitations may reveal Bigger’s Fascist potential: “He liked to hear of how Japan was conquering China; of how Hitler was running the Jews to the ground; of how Mussolini was invading Spain. . . . He felt that some day there would be a black man who would whip the black people into a tight band and together they would act and end fear and shame” (551). Wright expanded this proto-Fascist view of Bigger in his essay “How Bigger Was Born” and in his introduction to *Black Metropolis* (1945).⁵

The reader who reacts viscerally to the violence of Bigger’s actions is thus invited, most especially in the section “Fate,” to reflect on their causes, contexts, and meaning. While the racist newspaper coverage and the state attorney’s approach are clearly false views the reader is expected to see through, many other views of Bigger remain open: Is he a doomed black victim of white capitalist America, and would Communism offer a hopeful alternative to him, as Boris Max suggests? A perverted creator, writer, artist *manqué*? A criminal mind, demonstrating the Fascist potential of man? A social-science illustration of an uprooted, poor, fearful rural migrant in the social trap of a big city? A young everyman who is doomed to go

⁴ Wright refers back to events ranging from 1919 to the late 1930s, among them the red scare, the Leopold and Loeb case (571), the Scottsboro trial, and the Lindbergh kidnapping (625).

⁵ In “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright states that as a writer, he was “fascinated by the similarity of the emotional tensions of Bigger in America and Bigger in Nazi Germany and Bigger in old Russia” (865) and concludes “that Bigger, an American product, a native son of this land, carried within him the potentialities of either Communism or Fascism” (866). And in his introduction to *Black Metropolis*, he explicitly draws more parallels between Bigger and Hitler.

wrong under the onslaught of modernity? A frighteningly typical “native son” of America? Wright, who added other layers of possible interpretations outside of the novel, offers a narrative that makes Bigger’s situation both vivid and problematic to the reader.

The question Wright asked in *Black Metropolis* may well describe what he was after in *Native Son*: “What would life on Chicago’s South Side look like when seen through the eyes of a Freud, a Joyce, a Proust, a Pavlov, a Kierkegaard?” (1945, xxxi). Drawing on moderns and modernists, *Native Son* offers urgent social criticism of the status quo and shows that segregation damages. Several reviews compared *Native Son* to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, implying that Richard Wright was offering a fictional critique of the Jim Crow system in the way that Harriet Beecher Stowe had taken on slavery. And this is what, starting with *Native Son*, became known as black “protest literature.”

Wright Effects

US and international audiences seemed ready for Wright. *Native Son*, the first African American bestselling novel, disseminated by the Book-of-the-Month Club, was successfully adapted to the stage (starring Canada Lee) and, less successfully, to the screen (with Richard Wright himself, in his forties, playing young Bigger Thomas). It was translated into dozens of foreign languages (including most Western European languages as well as Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Hebrew) and inspired writers abroad. Thus Boris Vian wrote *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* (1946; Engl. Transl. *I Spit on Your Graves*, 1948) and other French novels of US racial violence, pretending they were translations from a supposed English original written by a “Vernon Sullivan,” an African American author Vian had made up. And Hans Habe, whose *Weg ins Dunkel* (1951; Engl. Transl. *Walk in Darkness*, 1948) is divided into three books that could have been titled Fear, Flight, and Fate, followed the story of a black soldier in occupied Germany who ultimately dies on the electric chair.

Native Son also exerted a powerful influence on Wright's immediate successors, several of whose careers he actively helped launch, and set the tone for black American fiction and drama after 1940, starting with what Robert Bone called the "Wright school" (157). In *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), Chester Himes created in his protagonist Bob Jones the character of a black shipyard worker in Los Angeles whose constant exposure to racism generates a wish in him for violent retribution, while leftist union organizers are positively drawn; at the end Jones is framed on a rape charge and gets out of it only by joining the army. In Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), the story of the single mother Lutie Johnson shows "how simply and easily the environment can change the course of a person's life." Lutie lives at New York's drab 116th Street and is driven to murder a bandleader who makes sexual advances to her; at the end, she escapes to Chicago. William Gardner Smith's novel *Last of the Conquerors* (1948) represents many occasions for black GIs to feel bitter about rampant racism in the US Army in Germany; one soldier, who refuses to type up the blank discharge forms used to get rid of black GIs, in an outburst of rage kills an officer and tries to defect to the Russian zone; the central protagonist Hayes Dawkins manages to get discharged and becomes a college student on the GI bill.

Wright, who in 1947 left the United States permanently to live in Paris as an expatriate, continued publishing novels, most notably *The Outsider* (1953) and *The Long Dream* (1958). Yet it was *Native Son* that remained his most influential work of fiction. The criticism Wright received, however, from his followers and others, helped to create false images of him as a naturalist anti-modernist (as if he had not drawn on the same modernists that his successors held up to him) or as a male misogynist (as if his representation of a brutal rape were an endorsement), which meant that his accomplishment and importance as a politically engaged, internationally oriented modernist have not always been fully appreciated.

Wright's influence was palpable far beyond the 1950s. James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) turns the alienated Bigger into the suicidal jazz musician Rufus Scott. John A. Williams, in *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967) modeled the figure of Harry Ames on Richard Wright and represented the mystery surrounding his death in 1960 in the context of a CIA intrigue. In Lorraine Hansberry's popular drama, *Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Bigger's sister Vera Thomas seems to have been transformed into the college student Beneatha Younger who takes center stage, while Bigger has turned into the much less transgressive and thoroughly reformable Walter Lee Younger, who ultimately listened to his mother and was portrayed by Sidney Poitier. In *Dutchman* (1964), LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) inverted Wright's plot by letting a white Lula kill a black Clay, and in his short story "The Screamers" (*Tales*, 1967), the narrator evokes a Bebop-style concert by Lynn Hope, who plays a single note for so long that the black audience marches into the street releasing their "hatred and frustration, secrecy and despair," and when the paddy wagons and water cannons arrive, the "knives came out, the razors, all the Biggers who would not be bent, counterattacked" (80).

Such works come palpably out of Wright's fiction, vary upon it, but inhabit and try to rearrange an imaginative literary universe that he had created—even though their authors may criticize Wright and distance themselves from him in their essays, as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin famously did, or choose themes and settings far from Wright's but adopt from him the tone of urgency and features of modernism in voicing their social critique. A *Negro Digest* survey of 1968 showed that Wright was considered the most important African American writer by writers of the 1960s, and when the question was asked who was the most important US writer, black or white, Wright appeared together with Melville and Faulkner.

Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy* (1948), the title taken from the George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* tune "Summertime," satirizes black middle-class life in Boston, centered on the figure of Cleo. Owen Dodson's *Boy at the Window* (1951) focuses closely on

the feelings and growing consciousness of the nine-year-old Coin Foreman. Employing Joycean techniques, Dodson represents a central character who is deeply anchored in his family and its religious life.

Set far from the fictional world Wright had created, William Demby's novel *Beetlecreek* (1950), written while the author was living as an expatriate in Italy, questioned the gratifying melodrama of good and evil, as Demby wanted postwar readers to recognize that "the roots of Nazism existed in all of us," a sentiment Wright would have endorsed (Micconi 2011, 131). Drawing on life in Pittsburgh and a West Virginia town, Demby centered on the relationship between the white war veteran and ex-carnival man Bill Trapp (named in allusion to the Trapp Family Singers and to the trap of the middle-class dream) and the black teenager Johnny Johnson, a relationship that seems so scandalous to both blacks and whites in that provincial setting, that a gang of boys vindictively destroys Trapp's home. The subtly presented gay theme that Demby sounded from his Italian exile was a sign of the changing times. Demby's more experimental, fragmented, and self-reflexive novel *The Catacombs* (1965) is set in the Italian film industry, a chaotic world of love and politics and suicide where a character, a writer also named "Bill Demby," is trying to write a novel.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), a *Bildungsroman* that won the National Book Award, follows the life of an unnamed protagonist and narrator in vividly drawn chapters that represent hypocrisy, racism, and human folly in the South and the North. The picaresque novel introduces the narrator in a basement, giving his account of his social and racial invisibility that has him move in and out of various social worlds. He is a promising high school valedictorian who inadvertently uses the charged term "social equality" (I,30); we see him as a Tuskegee college student who gets into trouble when he drives Mr. Norton, a Northern benefactor, to the black sharecropper Trueblood, who tells them his troublingly true story of the multigenerational incest he has committed; the narrator then takes Norton to the

Golden Day, a tavern frequented by barely sane war veterans; he briefly works in the boiler room of a New York paint factory that explodes; and he ends up in a hospital receiving shock treatment, before moving in with the maternal Southern figure Mary Rambo; he makes a speech against an eviction and attracts the attention of the Communist Party (called “Brotherhood”) only to be disaffiliated when the Party deemphasizes the race question and denounces individualism; he puts on sunglasses that make people believe he is “Rinehart”—a minister who is also a gambling racketeer and a pimp; he gets into a riot, is pursued by the black nationalist Ras; and escapes into a basement where he has pirated electricity, thinks about his life, and tells his story, so that despite its picaresque structure the novel ends where it began. Southern educators and Northern philanthropists, union organizers, doctors, nationalists, ministers and—most extensively represented—Communist Party members: all are likely to be duplicitous or duped and, in any event, unable to see the increasingly disillusioned narrator as an individual.

Ellison takes some of Wright’s Gothic sensibility as a point of departure, but adds a comic twist, thus representing violence as a constant possibility that can, however, be deflected into verbal humor. Richard Wright wrote: “Gently, he sawed the blade into the flesh and struck a bone. He gritted his teeth and cut harder.” (531; this is Bigger Thomas severing Mary’s head from her corpse.) At a tense moment in the Golden Day, Ellison’s narrator counters as follows: “He sliced the white heads off” (and before the reader can gasp the sentence continues) “a couple of beers with an ivory paddle and passed them up the bar” (III,76). And the mugging scene in the prologue to *Invisible Man* is the perfect answer to Wright’s pattern. “And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him in the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth—.” Up to this point, this could be Richard Wright, but the dash marks the Ellisonian swerve from Wright’s pattern: “when it occurred to me that the

man had not seen me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare! . . . I ran away into the dark, laughing so hard I feared I might rupture myself. The next day I saw his picture in the Daily News, beneath a caption stating that he had been ‘mugged.’ Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man!” (4-5) Ellison’s America is a country of humor and the vernacular, and his allusion to the popular biblical passage from Corinthians is a case in point: “‘For now we see through a glass darkly but then—’ I couldn’t remember the rest.”

Ellison criticized *Native Son*, for “Wright had to force into Bigger’s consciousness concepts and ideas which his intellect could not formulate,” and Ellison famously insisted on distinctions between literary ancestors and relatives. Why should Ellison be coming out of Richard Wright? This was forcing an intellectual relationship between mere “relatives.” No, not Wright, but Dostoyevsky, Joyce, Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, and Hemingway were Ellison’s literary “ancestors.” Yet these were also the moderns and modernists on whose work Wright had drawn on in his earlier novel *Lawd Today* (completed in 1935 and published posthumously in 1963). Despite its stylistic brilliance, *Invisible Man* was as much a continuation of Wright’s project as it was a new beginning. Both books focused strongly on one character, the protagonist. Bigger Thomas was detached from his family, but he still had a mother, a sister, a brother, and a girlfriend, whereas Ellison’s unnamed narrator has no parents or siblings, no ongoing relationship with a woman, and only a grandfather’s one-sentence advice to “overcome ’em with yeses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction” (I,16). Mary’s folk voice, too, (“I’m in New York but New York ain’t in me” [XII,255]) is important to the narrator and indicative of the folk ethos in the book. Yet Ellison removed an additional chapter with Mary from the novel and published it elsewhere. At the end Ellison leaves his protagonist isolated and in limbo, disconnected from any bonds with folk, family, or even a single friend, in the company of only light bulbs and a record

player with Louis Armstrong's 1929 recording of "Black and Blue." As an invisible man the narrator can state in the epilogue: "Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" Letting his protagonist tell his story rather than imagining him becoming active in society, in addition to his satirizing Communists and nationalists, is what made readers on the left as well as black nationalists likely to be dissatisfied with Ellison's novel. In Ellison's allegorical representations of America, the physical foreground shrinks at times to make room for *meaning*. This is the case, for example, in the paint factory that produces "optic white" with its slogan, "KEEP AMERICA PURE WITH LIBERTY PAINTS" (X,196). Believable factory, or allegory of Ellison's America, that is the question here.

The new buzzword "identity," not yet present in *Native Son*⁶ and rarely if ever used in black American literature before Ellison, appears more than ten times in *Invisible Man*, starting with the protagonist's loss of identity when he is driving Mr. Norton, and intensifying after the factory explosion: "Left alone, I lay fretting over my identity" (XI,242). The Party gives the narrator a new identity, and the theme continues all the way through the novel. If Ellison's narrator gives an authoritative answer to the ever-present identity-question, "who am I?," it is the tellingly folk-and-sweet-potato-inspired sentence, "I yam what I am" (XIII,266), that is perhaps also a response to Bigger Thomas's more somber self-definition of "what I killed for, I *am*."

⁶ In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright explained that some Negroes were fascinated by Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin because of a "wild and intense longing (wild and intense because it was suppressed!) to belong, to feel identified, to feel that they were alive as other people were" (860). In *Native Son* the word "identity" appears only in the sense a question of the "identity" of Red, the signer of the ransom note Bigger made up (636), and the coroner's question about the "identity of the deceased" Mary (738).

Like Ellison, both Ann Petry and James Baldwin came out of an initial association with the “Wright school.” Again, like Ellison, they moved toward more explicit stylistic experiments (in their case, time shifts, flashbacks, different points of view, absence of an omniscient center of consciousness—all probably inspired by Faulkner)—that are employed to express thematic concerns that continued Wright’s social vision but set different accents. Both Petry and Baldwin also focused on new themes: whereas Wright had turned away from black-white love stories (except to the extent that they can generate violence) and Ellison used black-male / white-female encounters only for satirical purposes, Petry attempted to portray the old topic of an interracial couple in the new context of the full and complex social world of a Connecticut town in *The Narrows* (1953); and whereas Wright had represented religion weakened and attenuated by modernity, Baldwin took the terms of religion very seriously as the metaphoric realm and starting point of a coming-of-age story in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), its title taken from a spiritual. In *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), Baldwin, of course, also was the first African American writer to take on fully the then still controversial subject of homosexuality that his first novel suggested only subtly.

The Narrows is Petry’s most complex and experimental work and combines her deep concern with the New England locale that she had explored in *Country Place* with the racial-social complex that had shaped *The Street*. Life and death in a small town are affected by larger social forces, and (similar to *Native Son*) political allusions to Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin, Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, the Cold War, and McCarthyism appear in the background of the novel. The narrative focus is on three months in Link Williams’s life, from his first meeting with the rich white Camilo in the fog and their subsequent love affair, to Link’s murder, committed by Camilo’s husband Bunny in collusion with her mother. Link’s name is explicitly derived from Abraham Lincoln: “Emancipation Proclamation Williams.

Named after him” (V,67). The novel employs direct and indirect discourse, and Petry especially likes sentence fragments to suggest interiority.

The doomed love story of Link and Camilo is embedded in history and modern society. History is represented through flashbacks, in which “white” and “black” also become metaphors, as Link’s (black) foster mother Abbie Crunche represents white Puritanical cleanliness whereas barkeeper Bill Hod, in whose “Last Chance” Link also spent a number of years, embodies masculine physicality and black consciousness. Modernity is fully present in the small town with radios, automobiles, trolleys, newspapers, ads, and popular culture, including references to Marlene Dietrich’s legs. A transcendently disorienting moment in Link’s life comes when he goes to the town’s movie theater, the Emporium: “the picture started and he was gazing into a new and wonderful world, looking straight into it, and as he looked he became a part of it. . . . He held tight to the sides of the chair because he was afraid that if he didn’t he would float off around the ceiling, he had grown so light and buoyant. He left everything solid and commonplace and ordinary that composed his everyday world far behind him” (V,76). In the movies all that is solid may melt into air, but in Monmouth, class and racial hierarchies are firm, and Link’s affair with Camilo is a disturbance.

A larger cast of characters surrounds Link, and some of them get focalized in various parts of the novel, which is divided into 24 chapters, framed by Abbie Crunche’s opening and closing sections. Thus stream-of-consciousness writing is developed from different vantage points, and among the surrounding characters are Peter Bullock, editor and owner of the town newspaper, the photographer Jubine, or the prim, rabbit-like butler Malcolm Powther who turns into the Judas figure who will betray Link. Powther is married to the sensuous Mamie, associated with the blues “Same Train” that appears as a leitmotif throughout the book. Petry’s employment of different points of view was indebted to Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930), with its large cast of points of view, and *The Sound and the Fury* (1929): like

Faulkner's black Dilsey, Petry's white Camilo remains a person who is only seen by others; it is as if she were tied to the fog in which she first appears to Link. The general device is that the narrative meanders—perhaps following the river image as narrative pattern—and that its parts have to be patched together by the reader.

Link remains the center of consciousness, even in by far the strangest and most memorable scene, that of him getting shot and killed. It is seen not through the lens of a witness or of Mrs. Treadway, Camilo's multimillionaire mother, or of Bunny Sheffield, Camilo's husband, but it is focalized on Link himself—the center of consciousness losing consciousness. "He heard the explosion. It was in his ears, his chest, his head, at one and the same time." Soon he "felt the great engulfing thickness in his chest well up into his throat" and, finally, he "tried to laugh, and pitched forward on the floor" (XXII,407). The next chapter has Camilo's husband and her mother cleaning up the scene and discarding the body in the river. Petry's social criticism thus continued and even intensified Wright's project, for Link's murder by the Treadway-Sheffields was as if the Daltons had killed Bigger for having a relationship with Mary.

James Baldwin, too, adopted a Faulknerian multiperspectival form of narration in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and given the religious context of the novel, Baldwin found the intriguing formal solution of calling various sections "prayers." At the center of the novel, written in Switzerland and set in 1935 Harlem, is John Grimes, who, unlike Wright's and Ellison's protagonists, is presented in a thick if oppressive set of family relations. The first part of the novel, "The Seventh Day," takes place on John's 14th birthday, which goes by unnoticed by his family. John is yearning for recognition and a love that has a sexual and forbidden valence to it and ultimately becomes focused on the figure of Elisha.

Turning earlier positive comparisons between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Native Son* into a liability for Wright, "the one [Stowe] uttering merciless exhortations, the other [Wright]

shouting curses,” Baldwin criticized Wright for writing “Everybody’s Protest Novel” and found that “Bigger’s tragedy is . . . that he has accepted a theology that denies him life . . . and feels constrained . . . to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth.” If Bigger’s murders had defined him and given him a “wall,” Baldwin’s John finds that being praised in school “gave him, from that time on, if not a weapon at least a shield,” “a power” with which “he might one day win that love which he so longed for.” As did Ellison, Baldwin uses the new word “identity” when he writes that John’s yearning, which also merges with hatred for his stern stepfather Gabriel, a righteous and repressive Pentecostal minister, “was his identity and part, therefore, of that wickedness for which his father beat him and to which he clung in order to withstand his father. . . . He lived for the day when his father would be dying and he, John, would curse him on his deathbed (I,20–21).

A great strength of the novel lies in Baldwin’s pervasive use of biblical plotlines and biblical language, as if in a perhaps futile search for a theology that would *not* deny life to his central character. In his quest toward a religious conversion in the Temple of the Fire Baptized, John Grimes (a telling surname) experiences the threat of “dirt” in all senses that would be opposed to purity. Dirt pervades his room like an abstraction, a personification: “Dirt was in the walls and the floorboards, and triumphed beneath the sink where roaches spawned; was in the fine ridges of the pots and pans, scoured daily, burnt black on the bottom, hanging above the stove; was in the wall against which they hung, and revealed itself where the paint had cracked and leaned outward in stiff squares and fragments, the paper-thin underside webbed with black” (I,21–22). When John ascends a mundane hilltop in Central Park, the reader may think of the title of the novel, but Baldwin goes further in infusing this secular setting with sacred meaning. After at first feeling a strange, Edgar Allan Poe-like sense of exultation like “a madman, willing to throw himself headlong into the city that

glowed before him” (I,33), John fears a Satanic presence, reminding the reader of Christ’s temptation by Satan (Matthew 4). Furthermore “the marks of Satan could be found in the faces of the people who waited at the doors of movie houses; his words were printed on the great movie posters that invited people to sin” (I, 34). And when John actually goes to the movies, his experience is unlike that of Wright’s Bigger who saw rich white people on the screen or of Petry’s Link who left everything solid behind him. In the cinema John encounters sin incarnate, or perhaps the great whore of Babylon, in a “most evil” woman, “blonde and pasty white.” She “had a great many boy friends, and she smoked cigarettes and drank,” thus is both repulsive and weirdly fascinating to John: “Nothing tamed or broke her, nothing touched her, neither kindness, nor scorn, nor hatred, nor love. She had never thought of prayer. It was unimaginable that she would ever bend her knees and come crawling along a dusty floor to anybody’s altar” (I,38–39). When John reaches a triumphal moment of religious ecstasy, the infusion of sexual feelings—especially toward Elisha—makes the reader wonder about the true meaning of this moment.

The second part of the novel, “The Prayers of the Saints,” introduces, in similarly religious language, both biblical and infused by spirituals like “Steal away,” flashbacks to the Southern past of John’s aunt Florence, his stepfather Gabriel, and his mother Elizabeth. Florence, ill and afraid of dying, repents her sins of leaving her mother and driving her husband Frank away. Gabriel had a childless marriage to Deborah, a rape victim, and an affair with Esther that resulted in the birth of a son, Royal, who is killed, never having been recognized by Gabriel; after Deborah’s death, Gabriel marries Elizabeth, but remains aloof from her son John; they also have another son of their own, also named Royal, who, however, turns away from religion. As John is on the Threshing Floor, their voices merge, and the complex family story is refracted through biblical prototypes. Gabriel’s thwarted wish for a “Royal” descent line makes him a tragic Abraham, for whom John is only Ishmael,

as “the son of a bondwoman stood where the rightful heir should stand” (II,114). John may also slip into the role of Isaac, about to be sacrificed by his father Abraham when “the knife came down” (II,199). Then Gabriel seems like Noah to John as Ham, who has looked “on his father’s hideous nakedness. It was secret, like sin, and slimy, like the serpent, and heavy, like the rod. Then he hated his father, and longed for the power to cut his father down” (II,197; see Genesis 9:20–27). Elizabeth is like Ishmael’s mother Hagar, but also like the biblical mother of John the Baptist, and when Elizabeth looks at her little boy John, this is expressed with an allusion to First Corinthians: “She found herself staring at him darkly, as though she were trying to read his future in his face” (II,178).

At the end the reader knows more about these characters than they know about each other and themselves. The last section, “The Threshing-Floor,” with its resolution of John being “saved” in the temple by Elisha (see 1 Kings 19:16–19) offers a mix of religious ecstasy and erotic attraction. “In his heart there was a sudden yearning tenderness for holy Elisha; desire, sharp and awful as a reflecting knife, to usurp the body of Elisha, and lie where Elisha lay” (II,194–95).

Varieties of Fiction

With the widely received and internationally recognized work by Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin and the critically acclaimed fiction by Demby and Ann Petry, doors to mainstream publishers opened for more African American writers, and a mere listing of authors and titles of their works would be quite extensive. I shall here attempt to sketch only some trends and call attention to a few of the more outstanding examples.

Ishmael Reed is a writer who participated centrally in a whole number of these trends. While his work has been considered in the context of postmodernism, Reed also explored black history (slavery and Harlem Renaissance), American genres (the Western and political

dystopia), and contentious political issues (leadership aspirations of black militants and tensions between white feminists and black men), and inspired other writers—or provoked them to debate him. Reed already claimed freedom from any pieties in the midst of 1960s radicalism days, coming expressly out of the freewheeling and politically incorrect satirical tradition of George Schuyler (whom he interviewed in *Shrovetide in New Orleans*, 1978) and the comic vernacular voice of Mark Twain (with whom he has often been compared). His too rarely taught early satirical novel *The Freelance Pallbearers* (1967), pits the rebel Bukka Doopeyduk against the dictatorial realm of HARRY SAM, takes buckshots at nationalists and beatniks along the way, and ends with Bukka's ascent to the Nazarenes and his crucifixion. Reed's Western spoof *Yellowback Radio Brokedown* (1969) created much free space for the imagination, as his black cowboy Loop Garoo Kid advocates an early version of Reed's "Neo-HooDoo" aesthetic. Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) opened up a new, heady view of the Harlem Renaissance for fiction, as Papa LaBas and the jazzy "Jes Grew" movement shake up the world dominated by the manipulative Atonist Ohio gang. In *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974), an engagement with the genre of detective fiction, Papa LaBas returns and goes to 1960s Berkeley in order to solve the death of Ed Yellings. Reed's no holds-barred *Flight to Canada* (1976) invented what became known as the "neo-slave narrative," as it takes slave runaway and poet Raven Quickskill and engages with the fixtures of anti-slavery writing since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, while also introducing wild anachronisms. In his sharply satirical *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986) Reed took on clichés about the black male gaze and lynching, and in his protagonist Ian Ball's play, the young African American Ham Hill is lynched for staring at a white woman and found guilty by a jury of "eye-rape." Controversial though that novel was, Alice Walker picked up the phrase "reckless eyeballing" in her novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989). Versatile and virtually unstoppable, Reed has kept writing poetry, fiction, and provocative essays and interviews

over the years and was awarded the Italian Premio Nazionale Alberto Dubito in 2016, at which occasion he gave an acceptance speech about Dante as an exiled writer who had placed a great number of Florentines into hell.

Dante's *Inferno* also provided the structure for LeRoi Jones's prose experiment, *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965), in which associative prose slowly gives way to "straight narrative," as sinners are assigned to circles of the inferno, with a particular black nationalist condemnation of "treachery to kindred," whereas the first-person singular narrator, a "black man unfocused on blackness" ("Sound and Image") seems to turn away from white literature, perhaps from literature altogether, and wishes to move toward more social commitment at the end, a sharp reversal of Ellison's ending. Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1969), written while the author was on the Greek island Mykonos, tells the story of Dan Freeman, a black CIA agent who becomes a revolutionary and tries, with his militarily trained gang of Cobras, to overthrow the status quo and create a new society based on black pride, and with the last lines of Billie Holiday's "God Bless the Child" serving as a kind of blueprint.

Clarence Major, known in black nationalist days as the compiler of a *Dictionary of Afro-American Slang* (1970), experimented on the boundaries between poetry, prose, and visual art and paid particular attention to all his aesthetic influences, including African American predecessors. "I wanted to be like van Gogh, like Richard Wright, like Jean Toomer, like Rimbaud, like Bud Powell," he writes (2001, 69). Major's *Emergency Exit* (1979) contains catalogues of partly scrambled names from literature, like Tolstoy Karenina, Toomer Cane, Johnny Beetlecreek, and Doris Catacombs. In *My Amputations* (1986), about a man pursued by his shadow, the narrator states at some point in the first few pages, "Mason, too, felt good—at the edge of anger, though, and Richard Wright-fear. Agony, really." And a little later, "It was dusk, Jean Toomer dusk. Red dirt. Half moon. The whole bit." According

to Major, “Richard Wright’s *Native Son* was an overwhelming experience, and so was Rimbaud’s poetry” (2001, 66). And his novel *Such Was the Season* (1987) took its very title from “November Cotton Flower,” a poem in Toomer’s *Cane*.

If we recall that Bontemps’s *Black Thunder* was the only pre-the Second World War novel set in the slavery period, we notice that historical themes have now become far more prominent, in novels that confront the trauma of slavery, beginning with Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966), focused on a mixed-race woman around the time of the Civil War and continuing with Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), reaching back to Brazilian slave origins and tales of rape and incest. What may have intensified the turn toward history was the success of Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1976) and of the TV mini-series that followed it. Told in the familiar form of a multigenerational family saga, *Roots* managed to connect the past (Africa and slavery) with the present (the US bicentennial moment), and to create vivid characters in a shorthand fashion with whom readers and viewers could identify. With its search for the symbolic ancestor Kunta Kinte, *Roots* also opened up a whole new genre of at times widely popular African American historical fiction, often set in the slavery period, as were Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings* (1977), about Jefferson’s relation with a slave woman in Virginia and Paris, Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986), which begins in slavery-time Alabama, Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988), which confronts present-day characters with the slavery past on the Sea Island of Willow Spring, Louise Meriwether’s *Fragments of the Ark* (1994), which follows escaped slaves in South Carolina through the Civil War and into the Reconstruction period, or Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (2003), with the twist that its characters include black owners of slaves.

Novelists also chose later periods for at times autobiographically inflected historical fiction. Meriwether’s earlier *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (1970) is set in the great depression in Harlem, Alice Walker’s epistolary novel *The Color Purple* (1982) in the 1930s

South, and Colson Whitehead's imaginative *The Intuitionist* (1999) in an unspecified moment of the Jim Crow era. David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981) places the historical work itself in the foreground, as its present-day protagonist John Washington's sleuthing takes him first to the recent and then the more distant past of slavery in and beyond Pennsylvania.

Several writers who have produced remarkable historical fiction of an epic scope seem to have fallen by the wayside on the literary market. Albert Murray's ambitious Scooter series, *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974), *The Spyglass Tree* (1991), and *The Seven League Boots* (1996), is a coming-of-age epic that begins in 1920s Gasoline, Point, Alabama, continues with college years, and concludes in the world of jazz. Partly inspired by Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brethren* and by anthropological concepts of the hero, while working with folk influences and employing a blues and jazz idiom, Murray's extended *Bildungsroman* shows the growth of Scooter's consciousness against the background of stories about the past that he and his friends hear, including their recognition that some townsfolk had been brought from Africa on the slave ship *Clotilde*. It is a trilogy that regrettably has slipped out of print. John Edgar Wideman's three volumes of intricately interrelated stories set in a neighborhood in 1970s Pittsburgh that was founded by a runaway slave, were also published together as *The Homewood Trilogy* (1985). It is an epic that conveys a full sense of a black community through portraying its people and ranging far back in history. Originally published to high critical praise (one of the volumes received the PEN/Faulkner Award), it has gone out of stock, while a number of the immensely productive Wideman's impressive other works are available only as self-published books at lulu.com. Leon Forrest's novels *There is a Tree More Ancient than Eden* (1973), *The Bloodworth Orphans* (1977), and *Two Wings to Veil My Face* (1984), known as "Forest County Trilogy," may be connected to Baldwin's merging of sacred biblical language and secular stories. As one of Forrest's characters puts it, you must

“keep dipping your body in the icy water of tragedy to make that old Jordan roll and keep on rolling.” Published with enthusiastic introductions by Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, it is also currently out of stock. Starting in the 1970s, when Richard Wright was also getting subjected to criticism for his gender politics, the black literary market became more hospitable to women writers.

Toni Morrison, the winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, became the towering figure in the field of African American historical fiction, with her substantial body of novels set throughout the entire range of US history, from the 17th-century to the present, and with her pervasive employment of such high modernist devices as time shifts and stream-of-consciousness writing in exploring serious themes. Having earned a master’s degree from Cornell University with a thesis on William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, she was a senior editor at Random House for twenty years, and published many new talents there, including Gayl Jones and Toni Cade Bambara, whose 1970 *The Black Woman: An Anthology* had set into motion the new focus on women writers. Morrison’s own first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), opens with an ironic page from a Dick and Jane reader that is echoed and continued in six further epigraphs. Set in the 1940s and narrated by Claudia in the first-person singular, the book explores Pecola Breedlove’s sad desire to live up to the cultural ideal embodied by the actress Shirley Temple. With the publication of *Sula* (1973), Morrison achieved a broader national success, including a nomination for the National Book Award. The book, full of “rebel ideas,” as the author once put it, has at its center the enigmatic Sula, a black female outcast who is a willing pariah. A carefully structured novel that takes the reader from the First World War to 1965, *Sula* leaves an important decade missing between the two parts that relate to each other in mirror fashion. In the figure of Eva, Morrison also pursued her interest in a maternal character who kills a child in order to save him from a fate worse than death.

Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), marked her breakthrough to recognition on a new level. The book sold over half a million copies in the first year, was reviewed on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*, won the National Book Critics Circle Award, and was the first African American novel since *Native Son* to be chosen as a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection. Morrison focused on a male protagonist, nicknamed Milkman. The novel, set in the 1960s, but reaching back to the 1920s, interweaves elements of the African American tradition, most notably the folktale of the Flying African, with echoes from the bible and classic epic tales of heroic questers as well as allusions to popular culture; for example, Milkman encounters Circe who shrugs a Shirley Temple, little-girl-helpless shrug; and he memorizes Pilate's song "O Solomon don't you leave me here / Buckra's arms to yoke me. / Solomon done gone / Solomon cut across the sky, / Solomon gone home" (XII, also II and XV). Morrison's playfulness is apparent in the names she chooses for her characters, including not only Milkman Dead and Pilate, but also First Corinthians. In tone, *Song of Solomon* successfully combined, as Samuel Allen observed in a review, both gospel and barcarole.

Tar Baby, set on a French Caribbean island, appeared in 1981 and examines the relationship of two incompatible characters, Jadine and Son. In 1987 Morrison published *Beloved*, a work that was also selected for the Book-of-the-Month Club and for which she received both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award. Inspired by magical realism, the intricate narrative structure, with its baffling time shifts, leaves open the possibility of reading the plot in natural or in supernatural ways. At the work's center is the novelist's longstanding concern for connectedness in the face of the most cataclysmic ruptures and even of death itself, while the narrative form forces the reader to recognize the human desire for transcendence in community as well as the gaps and disjunctions that may thwart such a project. Morrison had been a moving spirit behind the publication of *The Black Book* (1974),

a work that included a startling Cincinnati story entitled “A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child” (10), culled from *The American Baptist* of 1856—the same year in which Harriet Beecher Stowe included “Milly’s Story” in her novel *Dred*.

Morrison’s novel *Jazz* (1992), inspired by the style of musical improvisation and James Van der Zee’s photographs of the dead, set in 1920s Harlem and reaching back in history, together with *Paradise* (1997), centered on the founding and failing of an all-black town in 1950, is said to form a trilogy that began with *Beloved*. *Love* (2003) represents women’s responses to a man, long after that man has died. *A Mercy* (2008) is set in 1682 slaveholding Virginia, *Home* (2012) follows Frank Money, a returning Korean War veteran returning home to Jim Crow America, and *God Help the Child* (2015) takes place in a contemporary-sounding world of child abuse.

A new flourishing of hardboiled detective fiction has given Fisher’s *Conjure Man Dies* company. It includes Chester Himes’s Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson mysteries, of which *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965) has become most popular and Walter Mosley’s prolific crime fiction, starting with *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), set in postwar L.A., with Easy Rawlins as detective. Mosley also published the science fiction novel *Blue Light* (1995), joining Samuel R. Delany’s many novels in that genre beginning with *Babel-17* (1966), and Octavia Butler’s Patternist series, beginning with *Patternmaster* (1976). Their work merges the science fiction genre with some recognizable features of racially divided worlds.

The Schuyler-Reed tradition of broad humor, of generating laughter about events that are often fictionalized only in the most serious manner, is also alive and well. Charles Johnson’s novel *Oxherding Tale* (1982) is a parody of the slave narrative as much as it is a mock-autobiography and a mock-historical novel in the tradition of the picaresque, with a good inflection of Western philosophy and Eastern Buddhism. It represents the education of

Andrew Hawkins, the son of a slave and the plantation mistress, and Andrew's birth is the result of a night when master and slave decided to switch places. Andrew is trained by a transcendentalist tutor—only to have his Hegelian fallacies corrected by none other than Karl Marx, who visits the plantation. The raucous first-person-singular novel includes such found language as the word “bondsman,” a self-reflexive chapter that is an essay on the slave narrative as a genre, and willful anachronisms. James McBride, *The Good Lord Bird* (2013), is also told in the first-person singular by Henry Shackleford, beginning in 1850s Kansas Territory, when John Brown is about to prepare his raid on Harpers Ferry. The stubborn Brown believes Henry is a girl whom he calls Henrietta, after hearing Henry's Pa trying to say “Henry ain't a—” girl, and mistaking this for the name “Henrietta.” This narrative situation permits McBride to draw sharply satirical portraits of historical figures, and a visit to Frederick Douglass with his two wives (drawing on the figure of Douglass's German translator Otilie Assing) is a masterpiece of comic writing. That both Johnson and McBride won National Book Awards for their impious comic fiction about the slavery past may suggest that a long tradition of black humor may be stronger than any countervailing trend toward piety.

At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the contexts in which Negro literature was launched were somewhat revived, as both international and interracial prose writing returned. Migrants from the Caribbean forcefully reasserted an international perspective, as Paule Marshall had done through the lens of a second-generation Barbadian protagonist in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). In Jamaica Kincaid's widely translated and globally circulating work, a drily critical postcolonial point of view emerged. Her carefully crafted *A Small Place* (1988) begins with a strongly exhortative, tour-de-force apostrophe to a white addressee and ends with an eye-opening historical account of Antigua, where Kincaid was born and grew up. Her most famous novel *Lucy* (1990) traces the life of a

migrant woman to New York whose experiencing, past “I” and present, narrating “I” are sharply divided. The name of the titular character may allude to Lucifer, to the martyr Saint Lucy after whom Columbus named Santa Lucia, and to the Lucy poems by Wordsworth, whose daffodils in “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” also throw light on the problems of a colonial education: “do you realize that at ten years of age I had to learn by heart a long poem about some flowers I would not see in real life until I was nineteen?” (30). Interracial issues emerge not only in relationships but also in narrative point of view, as when the narrator describes the family in which she works as a nanny: “In photographs of themselves, which they placed all over the house, their six yellow-haired heads of various sizes were bunched as if they were a bouquet of flowers tied together by an unseen string” (12). *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), with its intriguing title, goes even further in its novelistic split between subject and narrative persona, while Kincaid’s novel *See Now Then* (2013) mixes mock-heroic social satire with musical patterns of word repetition in paradoxically evoking a New England townscape in which human relationships fall apart. Yet through it shines another landscape, “that paradise of persistent sunshine and pleasant weather, a paradise so complete it immediately rendered itself as hell” (182).

African-born African Americans have also added new voices, complicating any nationalist definition of “the tradition.” Thus Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) offers a sharp perspective on US racial obsessions and blind spots from the point of view of a Nigerian immigrant woman, and Teju Cole, born in the United States but raised in Nigeria, brings such a global perspective to his flâneur-narrated novel *Open City* (2011) that he is often discussed under the label “cosmopolitan literature.” As more contemporary black writers stress international and cosmopolitan themes, the corpus of “raceless” fiction from Frank Webb to the present (i.e., we remember, fiction by black authors but without black

characters) has also been reexamined and reprinted, most notably by Gene Andrew Jarrett's *African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reader* (2006).

Indicative of the continued tendency to set novels outside of the United States are two notable novels set largely in the German capital, Berlin. Paul Beatty's hilarious *Slumberland* (2008) and Darryl Pinckney's ambitious *Black Deutschland* (2016) both confront their black narrators with life in nightclubs, the music scene, and the meaning and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Following the massive, unjustly critical response to William Styron's Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), major white US writers became more reticent in representing black characters and interracial plotlines centrally. That changed by the end of the twentieth century. Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) gave the old theme of passing new life and new twists in a remarkably full-fledged American saga. Richard Powers's *Time of Our Singing* (2003) and Dave Eggers's *What Is the What?: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (2006), both with an international perspective, too, are other well-known examples that indicate a new turn toward such themes in literature. Adam Mansbach's novel *Angry Black White Boy, or, The Miscegenation of Macon Detornay* (2004) is another contributor to this stream of writing, and his angry white protagonist Macon introduces himself to the reader as a Wrightian character: "I was hoping someone would call me the white Bigger Thomas. . . , what with Bigger being a chauffeur and me a cabbie" ("Prologue").

Bigger Thomas! *Native Son* has remained alive and well, and it is not an exaggeration to call the period since 1940 the "Wright Era." Charles Johnson, in his novel *Dreamer* (1998), imagines Chaym Smith, a *doppelgänger* of Martin Luther King, Jr., who eerily rooms in a flat rented from a "Vera Thomas" and her mother, at 3721 Indiana Avenue—in short, in the precise territory of Wright's Bigger Thomas. In Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* (2001)

the protagonist Thelonious (“Call me Monk”) Ellison writes the novel-within-a-novel *My Pafology* (2001), an ironic revision of Wright’s *Native Son*, with many echoes to Bigger Thomas and the image of the “wall” that separates him from others. It is not by chance that Ta-Nehisi Coates’s bestselling essay *Between the World and Me* (2015) takes its title from a startling, first-person-singular anti-lynching poem by Richard Wright that was first published in a 1935 issue of *Partisan Review*, and that was reprinted in the same year in the classic anthology *Proletarian Literature*. Coates had previously described, in *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), how his father had found in Wright “a literature of himself. He’d read *Manchild in the Promised Land* and *Another Country*, but from Wright he learned that there was an entire shadow canon, a tradition of writers who grabbed the pen, not out of leisure but to break the chain” (2008, 72). Of course, writers—like all of us—tend to have more than just one ancestor, but, Ellison notwithstanding, Richard Wright has not just been a racial “relative,” but has remained alive as a meaningful literary “ancestor” of a rather large flock of descendants to whom he bequeathed his double legacy of modernism and social urgency.

(Completed October 1, 2018)

Bibliography

- Bone, Robert (1965). *The Negro Novel in America* (1958). Rev. ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi (2008). *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Fabre, Michel (1977). *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Grégoire, Abbé Henri (1810). *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties, and Literature of Negroes; Followed with an Account of the Life and Works of Fifteen Negroes and Mulattoes, Distinguished in Science, Literature and the Arts*, trans. Thomas Kirk. Brooklyn, NY: Thomas Kirk.
- Jarrett, Gene Andrew (2006). *African American Literature beyond Race: An Alternative Reader*. New York: NYU Press.
- Locke, Alain (1989). "Who and What is 'Negro'?" in Leonard Harris (ed.), *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 207–28.
- Major, Clarence (2001). "Necessary Distance Afterthoughts on Becoming a Writer," in Bernard W. Bell (ed.), *Clarence Major and His Art: Portraits of an African American Postmodernist*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 63–76.
- Micconi, Giovanna (2011). "Ghosts of History: An Interview with William Demby," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 56.1, 123–39.
- Miller, James A. (1986). "Bigger Thomas's Quest for Voice and Audience in Richard Wright's *Native Son*." *Callaloo* 9, 501–06.
- Reilly, John M. (1978). *Richard Wright: The Critical Reception*. New York: Burt Franklin & Co.

Weiss, M. Lynn (1998). *Gertrude Stein and Richard Wright: The Poetics and Politics of Modernism*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Wright, Richard (1945). "Introduction," in St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Clayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, xvii–xxxiii.

Wright, Richard (1991). *Early Works: Lawd Today, Uncle Tom's Children, Native*