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Black Culture and Appropriation in the American Novel from 1960 to the Present Day

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THESIS ABSTRACT AND LAY SUMMARY

Black Culture and Appropriation in the American Novel from 1960 to the Present Day

This thesis examines how the work of six American novelists engages with some of the key questions and arguments associated with contemporary debates and controversies surrounding the subject of appropriation in the context of African American culture. A legacy of postcolonial theory has been a heightened awareness of the pitfalls entailed in representing "the other". This has contributed to a tendency among many contemporary scholars to view "cultural appropriation" as a necessarily pejorative term. Rejecting this narrow understanding of the term, I accept the important distinction that the philosopher James O. Young makes between different types of cultural appropriation, and I argue that novels by William Styron, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, Philip Roth, and Percival Everett offer a more sophisticated exploration of the ethics of cultural appropriation than much contemporary discourse. As well as building upon Young's valuable 2008 work, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, this study makes original connections between the American novel and the work of a number of theorists in the area of black identity and its role in intellectual and political life. Key figures in this field of enquiry are Paul Gilroy, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Adolph Reed Jr., Stephen Best, Frank Wilderson, and Calvin Warren. Through the clarification and interrogation of certain persistent assumptions about black culture and identity, this study makes available a new understanding of both the work of major American novelists and the term "cultural appropriation".

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Introduction

On 8 September 2016, the American novelist Lionel Shriver opened her keynote speech at the Brisbane Writers Festival with the admission that she would not be speaking on the topic suggested by the festival organisers, "community and belonging", but instead would be discussing "fiction and identity politics" ("Lionel Shriver's full speech"). Shriver cited the criticism of students from Bowdoin College in Maine, who in February 2016 had worn sombreros to a tequila-themed party, as indicative of an increasingly censorious society. The message to fiction writers was, according to Shriver, both clear and perturbing: "you're not supposed to try on other people's hats". Shriver insisted that "the right to wear many hats" was essential for the creation of fiction, since the form is "born of a desperation to break free of the claustrophobia of our own experience". Thus, in considering whether or not the author Chris Cleave, as a white Englishman, had "the right" to write as a young Nigerian girl in his 2008 novel *The Other Hand* (published as *Little Bee* in the United States and Canada), Shriver concluded that "any story you can make yours is yours to tell".

Shriver's speech was widely perceived as a declaration of war on identity politics, and attracted some equally impassioned responses. The most incendiary of these was an article posted on *Medium*, and subsequently published by the *Guardian*, by the writer and activist Yassmin Abdel-Magied that culminated in the claim that Shriver's attitude prepared the ground for genocide (Abdel-Magied). In the

Washington Post, meanwhile, Ken Kalfus stood by his criticisms of *The Mandibles* (part of Shriver's speech had ridiculed Kalfus's review of her novel), namely that it contained an offensive stereotype of a Mexican, stigmatised African Americans by reporting the speech of a black character in sub-standard English (whilst having all the other characters speak standard English), and had "a plot development that features an uncontrollable black person who has to be kept under restraint like a dog", imagery that to Kalfus seemed "guaranteed to hurt and provoke outrage" (Kalfus). Another response simply declared "Lionel Shriver shouldn't write about minorities. The lack of nuance in her September 8 speech at the Brisbane Writers Festival proves that she mostly doesn't get it" (Gyarkye). Shriver, however, remained unapologetic; in a *New York Times* piece entitled "Will the Left Survive the Millennials?" she saw Abdel-Magied's genocide stake and coolly raised it, drawing an unfavourable comparison between the "censorship" and "weaponized sensitivity" allegedly produced by the identity politics of the Millennials, and the passion for free speech that, according to Shriver, led the liberals of her generation to "defend the right of neo-Nazis to march down Main Street".

The language employed in the above exchanges—"hurt", "outrage", "weaponized sensitivity", "genocide", and "neo-Nazis"—signals the volatility of the discourse surrounding the subject of Shriver's speech: *cultural appropriation*. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the term itself has provoked much debate. The extent to which "cultural appropriation" has meant—and continues to mean—different things to different people, is amply demonstrated by the reaction of Rosemary J. Coombe, author of *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties: Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law* (1998), to an "official" definition of the term provided in 1992 by the Advisory Committee to the Canada Council for Racial Equality in the

Arts. Coombe describes how for many years she had been working on a volume provisionally titled *Cultural Appropriations* that would explore

> the ways in which subaltern groups use mass-media texts, celebrity images, trademarks, and other legally protected commodity/signs to forge identities and communities [. . .]. In short, I had developed the concept of *cultural appropriation* as my shorthand for cultural agency and subaltern struggle within media-saturated consumer societies. (Coombe 208-09)

Given her intended use of the term, Coombe understandably experiences "consternation" upon discovering that the Advisory Committee had defined "cultural appropriation" as "the depiction of minorities or cultures other than one's own, either in fiction or nonfiction" (209). In addition to the irony of the Advisory Committee understanding cultural appropriation in almost exactly opposite terms to Coombe—the former taking the expression to mean appropriation *from* a minority culture, and the latter using it to denote appropriation *by* a minority culture—Coombe's interpretation of the committee's definition is highly revealing: "[the term] had been seized to exclusively denote the invidious practice of white elites stealing the cultural forms of others for their own prestige and profit" (209). In contrast to the studiedly neutral terms of the Advisory Committee's definition, Coombe makes assumptions about the racial identity of those engaged in cultural appropriation (white), their social class (elite), the moral status of the act (theft), the motivations behind the appropriation (the augmentation of social and financial power), and the attitudes of the appropriators (Coombe's term "invidious practice" suggests a desire both to cause offence and to discriminate). Coombe's assumptions underline the highly charged nature of the term "cultural appropriation" and suggest that any response to practices that could conceivably fall under the scope of this term is liable to be informed by a

range of attitudes on issues such as the meaning and role of culture, race and racism, class structures, artistic freedoms and responsibilities, and prevailing legal systems.

Coombe's polemicised version of the Advisory Committee's definition shares much in common with the definition of cultural appropriation that appeared in a Resolution of the Writers' Union of Canada, approved June 1992, just months after publication of the Advisory Committee's recommendations to the Canada Council. Here, the term is defined as

> the taking—from a culture that is not one's own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge [. . .] and profiting at the expense of the people of that culture (qtd. in Ziff and Rao 1, 24).

A slightly abbreviated version of this definition—excluding the final element regarding profiting at others' expense—was the one used by editors Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao in their introduction to the volume *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* (1997), and also by Susan Scafidi (9) in *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law* (2005).

A comparison of the definition endorsed by both Scafidi and Ziff and Rao with that given by the Advisory Committee brings into focus some difficulties with the term "cultural appropriation". The first is the issue of loaded terminology. *Appropriation* carries obvious negative connotations through its use in discussion of the appropriation of land that belonged to indigenous peoples, and the appropriation of the bodies of those enslaved by colonial powers. While the Advisory Committee neutralises the negative weight of "appropriation" through its use of the word "depiction", the Writers' Union retains (most of) the pejorative connotations through

its choice of "taking". This asymmetry in two of the most widely cited definitions of cultural appropriation renders discussion of the practice problematic from the outset.

A second issue is that while the Advisory Committee's definition only considers intellectual property ("fiction or non-fiction"), the Writers' Union goes much further and applies the term cultural appropriation to "intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge". One peculiarity of the Writers' Union inventory is the apparently accidental (though presumably conscious) juxtaposition of the tangible—the "artifacts"—and the intangible. Indeed, the ordering of the items make the artifacts appear doubly subordinate, first to "intellectual property" and then to "cultural expressions". Understood in this manner, the ordering suggests that the physical theft of Pieter Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* might be considered a less serious crime than a plagiarism of W.H. Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts". It is perhaps instructive that even Ziff and Rao, who endorse the Writers' Union definition and elsewhere prove sympathetic to other proclamations of the Union, baulk somewhat at such a casual conflation of tangible and intangible cultural products.[1] They list eight examples of cultural appropriation in what clearly seems to be an order of decreasing severity, beginning with what most observers would identify as most problematic (the taking of marble friezes from the Parthenon at the behest of Lord Elgin) and concluding with two examples that appear much more benign (fictional stories set on the Hobema reserve in Alberta, and the adoption of jazz, blues, soul and rap by white musicians and audiences).

On the one hand, a meaningful engagement with the ethics of cultural appropriation is likely to entail a comparison of the different systems of values found in different cultures, a process described by Charles Taylor (taking his lead from

Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*) in his seminal essay "The Politics of Recognition":

> What has to happen is what Gadamer has called a "fusion of horizons." We learn to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture. The "fusion of horizons" operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, by means of which we can articulate these contrasts. (Taylor 67)

Such considerations urge us to suspend any (culturally-situated) assumptions about the relative significance of different types of appropriation; it may be that certain cultures view the appropriation of intangible cultural products as a greater affront than the appropriation of tangible cultural products. On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the long shadow under which much of the debate around cultural appropriation takes place: the aforementioned misappropriation of land and peoples. This historical and all too *tangible* appropriation appears set to remain for the foreseeable future the silent but inescapable ethical criterion by which we evaluate all other types of appropriation. It is for this reason that I believe that it is necessary to distinguish between tangible and intangible cultural appropriation; whereas, in the former case, there exists a prohibitive difficulty in viewing the appropriating act apart from the history of colonialism, in the latter case, it may be possible to place the appropriation in an altogether more positive context, that of cultural exchange.

This is not to downplay the role that intangible cultural appropriation has had in the history of colonial subjugation. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon suggests that the coloniser's main strategy of domination is the imposition of his

worldview upon the colonised: “In the colonial context the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man’s values” (33-34). Here, one culture and worldview is appropriated in that it is viewed through the prism of another culture and worldview and condemned as inferior. Moreover, according to Edward Said, the worldview presented in novels engaged in cultural appropriation, such as Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* (1901) or Joseph Conrad’s *Nostromo* (1904), played a fundamental role in colonialism:

> The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative. [. . .] The power to narrate, or block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. (Said xiii)

Clearly, then, intangible cultural appropriation, in the hands of the colonisers, was a significant instrument of oppression. Rather than disputing this point, I merely contend that the appropriation of tangible cultural property bears a closer conceptual relationship to the malign history of colonial appropriation than does the appropriation of intangible cultural property, and thus it makes sense to distinguish between these two types of appropriation.

A final issue with the definitions—one that applies equally to the definition of the Advisory Committee and that of the Writers’ Union—is that neither gives any indication as to how we are to establish whether a culture is “not one’s own”. In 2006, Monica Ali’s debut novel *Brick Lane* (2003) provoked a public disagreement between

Germaine Greer and Salman Rushdie on the topic of when a writer stood inside or outside a cultural group. The controversy began when, writing for the *Guardian* about the planned film adaptation of *Brick Lane*, Greer claimed that Ali had "created her own version of Bengali-ness", contending that Ali's Bangladeshi father "was enough to give her authority in the eyes of the non-Asian British, but not in the eyes of British Bangladeshis" ("Reality Bites"). Rushdie responded by first quoting from Greer's article—"[Ali] writes in English and her point of view is, whether she allows herself to impersonate a village Bangladeshi woman or not, British"—and then asserting that "There is a kind of double racism in this argument. To suit Greer, the British-Bangladeshi Ali is denied her heritage and belittled for her Britishness, while her British-Bangladeshi critics are denied that same Britishness, which most of them would certainly insist was theirs by right" ("Brickbats fly over Brick Lane"). Such an exchange highlights the difficulties in defining "other cultures" relative to some conception of the novelist's own cultural identity. These complex issues must be attended to before a meaningful investigation into cultural appropriation can take place.

Before proceeding to an examination of some of the key contributors to the debates about cultural appropriation, I want to consider the constituent elements of the term under investigation.

"Culture" and "appropriation"

Raymond Williams famously deemed "culture" to be "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (76). Part of this complexity emerges by considering the Latin root of "culture", *colere*, which "had a range of meanings:

inhabit, cultivate, protect, honour with worship" (77). As Terry Eagleton has noted, the sense of "culture" as "husbandry" means that rather than "nature [being] a derivative of culture, culture, etymologically speaking, is a concept derived from nature" (1). Eagleton goes on to observe that culture's "meaning as 'inhabit' evolved from the Latin *colonus* to the contemporary 'colonialism', so that titles like *Culture and Colonialism* are [. . .] mildly tautological" (2). Indeed, to the extent that culture has "uneasy affinities with occupation and invasion" (2), the term "cultural appropriation" can similarly be seen to possess a tautological quality. The sense in which culture derives from nature, meanwhile, appears to inform the influential definition provided by the anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor, for whom culture was "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1). Tylor's "complex whole" resembles an ecosystem from the natural world, or, as Kwame Anthony Appiah puts it, is an example of "*organicism*", that is, a "vision of culture not as a loose assemblage of disparate fragments but as an organic unity, each component, like the organs in a body, carefully adapted to occupy a particular place, each part essential to the functioning of the whole" (*The Lies That Bind* 206). The enduring appeal of the notion of culture as an "organic unity" is suggested by Ziff and Rao's application of the word "integrity"—which derives from the Latin root *integer*, meaning "whole"—to culture (9). Appiah, however, contends that "there just isn't one great big whole called culture that organically unites all these parts" (206), and urges an abandonment of organicism so that "we can take up the more cosmopolitan picture in which every element of culture—from philosophy or cuisine to the style of bodily movement—is separable in principle from all the others; you really can walk and talk

in a way that's recognizably African-American *and* commune with Immanuel Kant and George Eliot, as well as with Bessie Smith and Martin Luther King Jr." (207).

Appiah presents a compelling case for his claim that "the Tylorian cultures of the North Atlantic [. . .] are not an organic whole" (206). Yet, if culture is simply "a loose assemblage of disparate fragments" (206), how useful is it as a concept? In *The Lies That Bind*, Appiah seeks to demonstrate the incoherence of the term "Western culture", and admits, more generally, to wondering "whether the concept of culture [. . .] explains rather less than we might hope" (202). In an earlier essay, Appiah contends that "African-American culture, if this means shared beliefs, values, practices, does not exist: what exists are African-American cultures" ("Race, Culture, Identity" 95). The philosopher James O. Young, however, seeks to defend the use of the term culture, which he defines as referring to "a set of beliefs, achievements, customs and so on that is characteristic of a group of people" and also to "the [group of] people who share these traits" (10). He examines two of Appiah's challenges to the notion of culture, first, that culture is a Western concept, second, that "cultures are mutable and that they blend together or interpenetrate" (12). Young's response to the first challenge is to insist that the difference between cultures precedes the definition of "culture": "Long before any anthropologist started to think about the distinction, there was a difference between the customs, beliefs, and arts characteristic of Scottish Highlanders and those of the Highlanders of New Guinea" (12). Responding to the second challenge, Young admits that "[g]iven the mutability and interpenetration of cultures, we cannot give necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in [them]" (14-15). To overcome the conceptual problem posed by the fact that "cultures do not have an essence"—that is, "there is no essential characteristic possessed by everyone who is properly categorized as participating in [a given] culture" (15)—Young

summons Wittgenstein's idea of a family resemblance concept. Young notes Wittgenstein's contention that there is "no property [that] is shared by [. . .] all games" (15). The idea of a game is nonetheless comprehensible "because we can grasp that something is a game when it possesses enough of some range of properties, none of them either necessary or sufficient for gamehood" (15). Similarly, "[a] culture is simply a collection of people who share a certain range of cultural traits. Perhaps no member of the culture has all of the traits associated with the culture" (15). Young's Wittgensteinian understanding of culture withstands Appiah's anti-essentialist critique and will serve as an adequate model for the discussion of culture throughout the present work. Moreover, it will allow us to speak of "African American culture" or "black culture" in the knowledge that such terms do not imply the existence of a defining essence.

A 2018 update of Williams's *Keywords*, includes the word "appropriation", noting that it "enters the language in lC14 from the late Latin *appropriare*, derived from *proprius*, the Latin adjective for 'own,' and linked etymologically to PROPERTY and proper, among others" (MacCabe and Yanacek 10). Thus, appropriation, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "[t]he making of a thing private property" ("appropriation, n."), contains within it the idea of the appropriate or the proper. These two meanings can be viewed as being in conflict; as MacCabe and Yanacek put it,

> **Appropriation** develops from the Latin verb [*appropriare*] and has a strong meaning of action, while the closely related adjective **appropriate** has the sense of a state. This grammatical difference leads to the very different

> valences that these two words have had on college campuses in C21. **Appropriate** is secure in the proper, while **appropriation** destroys the very notion. (10)

Indeed, Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*—a novel partially set on a college campus—stages this antagonism in that Coleman Silk, a retired classics professor who has appropriated a Jewish identity, disdainfully views "appropriate" as "[t]he current code word for reining in most any deviation from the wholesome guidelines and thereby making everybody 'comfortable'" (152), and imagines "teach[ing] 'Appropriate Behavior in Classical Greek Drama,' a course that would be over before it began" (153). That Silk at once endorses appropriation as an instrument of individual emancipation and eschews the appropriate as a puritanical stifling of human creativity suggests the oppositional nature of the two concepts. "Appropriation", then, contains within it the conflict over the freedom to appropriate and the appropriateness of such an act that lies at the heart of debates about cultural appropriation.

Cultural Appropriation: Some Key Debates

In *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (2008), Young states that, as he uses the term *cultural appropriation*, "it does not necessarily carry with it any moral baggage" (5). Unlike many other commentators, Young attempts to "distinguish between objectionable and unobjectionable cultural appropriation" (5). To this end, he differentiates between five types of cultural appropriation: (i) *Object appropriation* (tangible works of art); (ii) *Content appropriation* (intangible items such as "a musical composition, a story, or a poem" [6]); (iii) *Style appropriation* ("works with stylistic elements in common with the works of another culture" such as original jazz

or blues works by white musicians [6]); (iv) *Motif appropriation* ("related to style appropriation but only basic motifs are appropriated" such as Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* [6]); (v) *Subject appropriation* (which Young defines using an abbreviated version of the Advisory Committee's definition: "the depiction of . . . cultures other than one's own, either in fiction or non-fiction" [7]). For Young, *subject appropriation* is markedly different from the other four types since

> Appropriation involves taking but artists who engage in subject appropriation do not, in any obvious sense, take anything from insiders. [. . .] Artists represent their own experience in their works. In representing their experience, artists represent what is already theirs. They do not represent the experience of anyone else. When artists represent their experience of other cultures, the insiders are left with their experiences. They are not appropriated. Other cultures fall within the experience of the artists so, in representing other cultures, artists do not have to appropriate anyone's experience, even if that were possible. (8)

While Young wants a clear demarcation between depictions of another culture (what he calls *subject appropriation*) and other—for Young, less benign—types of appropriation, Coombe sets out to blur any such distinction. According to Coombe,

> Native peoples discuss the issue of cultural appropriation in a manner that links issues of cultural representation with a history of political powerlessness. [. . .] [I]ssues of culture and the proper place of texts cannot be separated from issues of spirituality, political determination, and aboriginal title to traditional lands. (Coombe 232)

Coombe claims that her stance—that issues of texts and lands are inseparable—is informed by a willingness to "conside[r] Native claims 'in context'" and a scrupulous desire to "avoid speaking 'on behalf of' Native peoples [. . .], employing direct quotations drawn from articles and public statements by Native authors wherever possible" (229, 232). Coombe presents a variety of statements from Native peoples decrying a range of acts of cultural appropriation. The following assertion by Métis filmmaker and videomaker Loretta Todd is representative of the way appropriation is understood by the Native peoples in Coombe's volume:

> Appropriation occurs when someone else speaks for, tells, defines, describes, represents, uses, or recruits the images, stories, experiences, dreams of others for their own use. (Todd qtd. in Coombe 240)

Coombe's commitment to channeling (with minimal interference) the voices of Native peoples means that she ignores what appear to be contradictions in their claims. For example, Coombe presents an extended quotation from B. Owl, a White Earth Anishnabe, which begins: "We have many particular things which we hold internal to our cultures. These things are spiritual in nature . . . They are *ours* and they are *not* for sale" (239). On the following page, Coombe, claiming to be articulating the view of Ojibway poet Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, states "it is precisely because Native people are so seldom publicly heard or recognized (or rewarded in the market) for recounting their historical experiences that non-Native representations of these themes are so offensive" (240). Coombe's use of the word "precisely" seems peculiar given that three paragraphs earlier she had quoted B. Owl claiming that cultural appropriation was offensive not because it robbed Native peoples of public platform, recognition, or financial remuneration, but because certain things were "spiritual in nature" and thus unsuitable for use in non-Native art. Referring to acts of cultural appropriation,

Appiah argues that "[t]hose who parse these transgressions in terms of ownership have accepted a commercial system that's alien to the traditions they aim to protect. They have allowed one modern regime of property to appropriate *them*" (*The Lies That Bind* 210). The conflicting attitudes of B. Owl and Keeshig-Tobias indicate a wide variance in the degree to which Native peoples have accepted such modern conceptions of property.

Elsewhere, Coombe cites a billboard created by Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds that reads: "Imperial Canada Doesn't Make Indians. Native People Recognize Themselves", a statement that seems to imply an indifference to what non-Native Canadians write about "Indians"; since such stories could never truly be about the culture of Native peoples, that culture would remain unaffected (236). However, a quotation from Richard Hill appears to assert the opposite: "If a white artist uses and invariably alters our cultural images, then this is an intervention in our culture, another of many" (240). Coombe does not identify, let alone challenge, such contradictions. Unlike the philosopher Will Kymlicka, who explicitly attempts to reconcile liberal values with minority claims (3), Coombe undermines liberal values by suggesting that "(purportedly) universal principles (such as authorship, art, culture, and identity) may operate as systematic structures of domination and exclusion" (231). Questions about cultural appropriation, Coombe asserts, "are not legal questions to be addressed in terms of asserting rights, but ethical ones to be addressed in terms of manifesting one's moral and political commitments" (242). Coombe's "moral and political commitments" are clear: her goal is to place herself in opposition to the "larger patterns of injustice" that have been perpetrated against indigenous peoples (231). Coombe evidently feels that the best way she can accomplish this goal is to allow Native peoples to speak for themselves, and to avoid as far as possible speaking

on their behalf. However, as we have seen, this strategy has some regrettable consequences. Even with her limited and highly selective choice of indigenous voices, Coombe is unable to avoid some discordant notes.

Perhaps Coombe does not address these areas of dissonance out of a belief that they are matters for the Native peoples to resolve internally. However, Coombe herself appears to call into question her default stance of deferential silence towards the various proclamations of her assembled Native spokespeople. When Coombe criticises anthropologists and museum curators for treating Native peoples “like historical artifacts rather than human contemporaries” (237) and claims that “being treated like a historical artifact rather than a human being to be engaged in dialogue is a central theme in many complaints of cultural appropriation” (240), she appears unaware of the potential complicity of her own approach. This complicity lies in a closing down of the possibility of dialogue; in Coombe’s scheme, the weight of historical guilt upon non-Natives, together with a wariness about the ways in which “Western liberal legal and political traditions that emphasize as ideals individual freedom, equality, universal reason, and abstract principles” (231) have been recruited to enact or mask injustices, seems destined to authorise an attitude of reverence towards *any* statements or claims by Native peoples, such that it is difficult to see how real dialogue could ever take place.

A final paradox in Coombe’s approach can be found in her attitude towards two non-Native artists, Andy Fabo and Liz Magore, who incorporated Native images in their artworks:

> Artists who address such issues seem more concerned with delineating the influence of Native images in their own personal histories and in the dominant

> culture from which they draw their artistic inspiration than in acknowledging the actual histories of colonization in which those images came to figure as part of the public sphere. (244)

There is a certain irony here in Coombe criticising artists for adhering too closely to their own biography rather than telling a story from a perspective closer to that of Native peoples, since the Native perspective is precisely what Coombe and her chosen Native spokespeople are attempting to insulate. Yet, the focus of Coombe's complaint—what she means by "acknowledging the actual histories of colonization"—appears to be that the artists have missed an educative opportunity. Richard Hill, whom Coombe quotes approvingly, shares Coombe's unease with works of art that incorporate Native images without explicit reference to a history of injustice or without signalling the intended meaning of these images:

> I notice the photographs on the nearby wall in black and white that depicted a man paddling a canoe, a blond hippie-looking woman in a headband, people camping on the beach, etc. . . . The title of the photo of the blonde woman was called "Cheyenne type." . . . This must be done ironically but how can I say for sure whether Magore's work was ironic? Maybe she was trying to point out the overlap of cultures, or the richness of First Nations culture as a resource for white artists? I left the work not quite knowing what was going on. (Hill qtd. in Ziff and Rao 90-91)

If William Empson held "the machinations of ambiguity" to be "among the very roots of poetry" (3), Hill, in the contemplation of visual art, appears to find such machinations exasperating. However, his claim that he had little idea of "what was going on" in Magore's work seems overstated; he gives two possible interpretations

(one generous, the other less so) and may have had others, but is unable to choose between them. That is, the work of art raised questions without providing a definitive answer, which seems just what one might expect a work of art to do. Coombe and Hill, thus, appear to place prescriptive demands upon work by non-Native artists that they would surely baulk at imposing upon comparable work by Native artists.

Even if one accepts Young's central claims about *subject appropriation*—that it is markedly different from the other four types of appropriation and that it does not involve the appropriation of the experience of insiders—there are still potential objections to this type of appropriation. It might be thought that subject appropriation by outsiders could reduce the share of the market available to insiders. This idea is premised upon the market for a particular type of story being fixed; if outsiders write about a certain aspect of a culture they may be taking from insiders a portion of the market. However, Young is doubtful about the economic harm caused by outsider subject appropriation arguing that there is "a potentially limitless appetite for books about any given culture [. . .] and it is likely that outsider books open up new markets for insider books" (116). Although Young's claim merits further investigation, a consideration of the economic consequences of cultural appropriation is beyond the scope of the present study.

Another objection is that "even when outsiders accurately represent a culture other than their own, they can do so in ways that are harmful and wrong" (Young 113). As Charles Taylor points out: "The projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized" (36). Yet, as Young notes, concern about harmful representations of a culture is not limited to the work of outsiders: "Representations of a culture by insiders could air dirty laundry just as surely as any representation by an outsider"

(114). Indeed, Philip Roth, early in his career, was strongly criticised in some quarters of the Jewish community for his perceived perpetuation of stereotypes. In Roth's story, "Defender of the Faith", published by the *New Yorker* in 1959, the portrait of a young army recruit, Sheldon Grossbart, who petitions his sergeant for favourable treatment because they are both Jews, was seen by some as projecting a demeaning image of the Jew. Roth later recalled two letters, received by him and the *New Yorker* respectively, in which the pernicious effects of his story are delineated:

> Mr. Roth:
>
> With your one story, "Defender of the Faith," you have done as much harm as all the organized anti-Semitic organizations have done to make people believe that all Jews are cheats, liars, connivers. Your one story makes people—the general public—forget all the great Jews who have lived, all the Jewish boys who served well in the armed services, all the Jews who live honest hard lives the world over.
>
> Dear Sir:
>
> We have discussed this story from every possible angle and we cannot escape the conclusion that it will do irreparable damage to the Jewish people. We feel that this story presented a distorted picture of the average Jewish soldier and are at a loss to understand why a magazine of your fine reputation should publish such a work which lends fuel to anti-Semitism. Clichés like "this being Art" will not be acceptable. A reply will be appreciated. (*Reading Myself and Others* 216)

Given that Roth's story was published just fourteen years after the end of the Second World War, it is perhaps unsurprising that his creation was seen—by some—as an indefensible act of betrayal. Yet, when a rabbi informed him that his story would please those "who sustain their anti-Semitism on such conceptions of Jews as ultimately led to the murder of six million" (218), Roth found this evocation not merely inappropriate, but downright offensive:

> the death of all those Jews seems to have taught my correspondent [. . .] nothing other than how to remain a victim in a country where he does not have to live like one if he chooses. How pathetic. And what an insult to the dead. Imagine: sitting in New York in the 1960's and piously summoning up the "six million" to justify one's own timidity (221)

Roth argued that Jewish identity could no longer be defined in negative terms ("*Jews are people who are not what anti-Semites say they are*"), and that a hypersensitivity to certain stereotypes was to pay undue attention to how unregenerate anti-Semites viewed Jews (221). So while novelist Naomi Alderman, reflecting upon the potential harm of cultural appropriation, warns against stereotypes—"it's not OK, for example, to make your Chinese character shifty and inscrutable or your fat character stupid and lazy" (Kunzru)—Roth appears to caution that the other extremes—a scrupulous avoidance of, or a simplistic inversion of, stereotypes—can be just as dehumanising, a denial "that the perils of human nature afflict the members of [a] minority" (217). Roth justified his controversial character by arguing that he was working with "facts" rather than stereotypes:

> To me Grossbart is not something we can dismiss solely as an anti-Semitic stereotype; he is a Jewish fact. If people of bad intention or weak judgment

> have converted certain facts of Jewish life into a stereotype of The Jew, that does not mean that such facts are no longer important in our lives, or that they are taboo for the writer of fiction. Literary investigation may even be a way to redeem the facts, to give them the weight and value that they should have in the world, rather than the disproportionate significance they obviously have for some misguided or vicious people. (214)

The reaction to Roth's "Defender of the Faith" signals the combustible emotions that attend representations—even by insiders—depicting a culture in unflattering terms. The issue of harmful representation by an outsider will be considered in the discussion of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) in Chapter 1.

A final objection to subject appropriation by outsiders is that the work might be considered inauthentic. For Young, "to say that a work of art is authentic is to say that it is an expression of the experience of one who has lived as a member of a culture. This sort of authenticity may be termed *experience authenticity*" (60). While Young concedes that outsider artists "will necessarily produce works that are not experience authentic expressions of the represented culture", he does not believe that this means "their works are necessarily aesthetically flawed" (60). On the contrary, Young suggests that "[a] work can have aesthetic virtues precisely because it is not the work of an insider. The perspective of an outsider on a culture can be an advantage when it comes to producing works of art that provide insight into the culture" (61). Many of the texts in this study engage with questions of outsider insight into African American culture, as well as with African American insight into the experience of white characters. In Chapter 2, I consider how James Baldwin explores the possibility of insight into the experience of the racial other, while in Chapter 6 I examine Percival Everett's interrogation of the notion of authenticity.

Having surveyed some of the key debates around cultural appropriation in general, it will be useful to examine a recent specific example and the attendant controversy. Given that, according to MacCabe and Yanacek, "the relations between dominant white American culture and black African American culture" are foremost in discussions about cultural appropriation (11), the discourse generated by the example below—an appropriation of African American subject matter by a white artist—exemplifies the nature of contemporary debate on the subject.

A Case Study: *Open Casket*

Perhaps one of the reasons that discourse about cultural appropriation has become so polarised is the propensity of various parties to mischaracterise—whether willfully or unintentionally—the positions of their opponents. This propensity can be seen in the debates surrounding the inclusion of Dana Schutz's painting, *Open Casket*, in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. When it emerged that the white Schutz had based a painting on one of the most appalling images in the history of American racism—the bloated and mutilated body of the teenager Emmett Till, lynched by two white men after a white woman had accused him of impropriety[3]—voices of dissent began to appear on social media, questioning whether this was appropriate subject matter for a white artist. On 17 March 2017, the day the Biennial opened to the public, the artist Parker Bright protested by positioning himself in front of the painting and unveiling a T-shirt with the words "Black Death Spectacle" written on it. Over the next few days, other protesters joined Bright in the museum. However, it was an open letter posted on Facebook on 21 March that drew widespread attention to the dispute. The letter, authored by British artist Hannah Black, opened with an "urgent recommendation that the painting be destroyed", before going on to assert that

> the painting should not be acceptable to anyone who cares or pretends to care about Black people because it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun [. . .] [N]on-Black artists who sincerely wish to highlight the shameful nature of white violence should first of all stop treating Black pain as raw material. The subject matter is not Schutz's; white free speech and white creative freedom have been founded on the constraint of others, and are not natural rights. The painting must go. (Black qtd. in Greenberger)

Black's uncompromising demands together with the vehement tone of her letter invited an urgent response to the question of whether the Whitney had made a grievous error of judgment in its inclusion of Schutz's painting. After the initial reaction to the open letter on social media platforms, artists, critics, and a variety of other commentators interrogated the ethics of the case in mainstream newspapers and magazines.[4]

Published fifteen months after the opening of the 2017 Whitney Biennial, Aruna D'Souza's *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts* (2018) attempts to both provide an overview of the controversy and place it in an historical context. In doing so, D'Souza—who was active in her criticism of Schutz and the Whitney during the Biennial—hopes to provide a series of arguments that support the stance of the most prominent protesters, Parker Bright and Hannah Black.[5] Yet, in overemphasising those elements of her opponents' arguments that rely on appeals to free artistic expression and opposition to censorship, D'Souza elides more powerful and persuasive objections to her own position. This overemphasis, then, is the first of the mischaracterisations cited at the beginning of this section as a factor in polarising the discourse around cultural appropriation. As such, it is worth exploring in some detail.

There's No Such Thing As Free Speech

The essence of D'Souza's argumentative strategy is to suggest that a defence of the inclusion of Schutz's painting in the Whitney Biennial entails an absolutist position on free speech; that is, defending Schutz's painting commits one to the defence of a variety of racist and fascist expression. This strategy is hinted at in the book's introduction when D'Souza ponders

> How to discuss questions of cultural appropriation (in other words, the questions of what histories to engage, how to engage them, and who is best to engage them) and of free speech, without also talking about whether Milo Yiannopoulos or Richard Spencer, notorious white supremacists, should be allowed to speak on college campuses [. . .]? (5)

The effect of this juxtaposition is to suggest that in forming a judgment about *Open Casket* one is forced into a choice: is it cultural appropriation (and thus, according to critics like D'Souza, vulnerable to criticism) or an example of free speech (and thus, according to figures like Yiannopoulos, worthy of protection)? This, as will become clear, is a false dichotomy.

Whitewalling's introduction goes on to underline D'Souza's conception of Schutz's defenders as free speech zealots, describing them as "those who insisted, often invoking the values of free speech, artistic freedom, civility in discourse, and anti-censorship, that the protests themselves were the 'real' problem" (9). In the chapter that addresses the controversy, D'Souza insists that "at moments it felt like [questions of free speech] were the only questions most of Schutz's staunchest defenders wanted to address—often to the exclusion of other, equally trenchant issues" (51). However, if there *were* any other issues that might have been raised in the

course of defending Schutz's painting, D'Souza, largely ignores them. The full value to D'Souza's overall argument of her depiction of Schutz's supporters as being primarily motivated by concerns over free speech only emerges in her second chapter. But, as it turns out, this focus on freedom of expression is less useful to D'Souza's argument than she imagines.

The strategic purpose of D'Souza's emphasis on the role of free speech in the introduction and first chapter begins to come into view in the title of the second chapter: "*The Nigger Drawings*, Artists Space, 1979". The infamously titled drawings belonged to Donald Newman, a relatively unknown artist who at the time of the exhibition at the New York gallery, Artists Space, identified himself simply as "Donald". The drawings were charcoal abstractions which, apart from "some explicit representational content in the photography, like a tree or Newman himself [. . .] seemed to have very little to do with race at all" (Henry). Indeed, D'Souza suggests that the only possible connection between the title and the drawing was the blackness of the charcoal (74-75). A group of artists, "both black and white, who called themselves the 'Emergency Coalition'" wrote an open letter objecting to the exhibition and sent it to both Artists Space and New York State Council on the Arts (72). D'Souza goes on to chronicle the various ways in which a number of (mainly white) artists, curators, and critics tried to justify Donald's title. A statement by Artists Space claimed "It was not anticipated nor intended that the use of an acknowledged provocative term in this situation would be interpreted as a racist gesture" (78); art critic Roberta Smith, noting that some protesters had implied the word would be acceptable if used in the title of nonabstract work by a black artist, wrote "It's peculiar to declare a word off-limits, and even more peculiar to declare it off-limits to some people and some work and not others"; the artist Dennis Adams

argued that since Donald's art rejected "a single level of meaning", then the manner in which the protesters had assigned a fixed meaning to the offending word was inappropriate (84). In a similar vein, prominent editor and curator, Donald Crimp, submitted the following argument:

> [It] has been the lesson of an entire century of aesthetic endeavour that both language and imagery function at a level of ambiguity that must suspend the imputation of an absolute and specific meaning to *any word, any picture*. It is, of course, the context of words and images that determines their meaning, and I would like to ask the protesters in this case to explain in what way Newman's drawings might provide their title with the context that could be construed as racist, or in any other way offensive. (Crimp qtd. in D'Souza 85)

These arguments are largely unpersuasive as a justification for the title of Donald's work. One might readily concede the point that the absence of an intelligible relationship between the title of the work and the drawings renders a racist interpretation impossible, yet still be troubled by the presence of the word "nigger". We might naturally ask what exactly is the word's function in the title. A generous view might take the word to be acting as an intellectual provocation, forcing the audience into the types of consideration of meaning and context exemplified by the responses of Adams and Crimp. However, another—less generous—interpretation is that the word's principal function in this context is to draw attention to the work of the artist; that is, rather than primarily serving as a catalyst for the contemplation of context and meaning, the word chiefly operates as an instrument of publicity. Understanding the use of the word through the latter interpretation, the challenge in the final sentence of Crimp's argument can plausibly be reversed so that the question

becomes: given the history of violence associated with the word, how can the artist and/or the artwork justify its recruitment as a promotional tool?

Despite citing examples that suggest that defences of Donald were rooted in appeals to the nature of language and meaning, D'Souza, as with *Open Casket*, continues to insist that his defenders were focused on issues of free speech and censorship (95, 99). In doing so, her implication is clear: if the principle of free speech cannot successfully defend such artworks as *The Nigger Drawings*, then why should we believe that it can succeed as a justification for *Open Casket*? Moreover, in emphasising the support for Donald from a sizable number of respected critics and artists (the critics Rosalind Krauss and Roberta Smith and the performance artist Laurie Anderson all signed an open letter criticising the Emergency Coalition for, inter alia, "their attempts to use government funding agencies as organs of censorship" [89-90]) D'Souza presents another implicit challenge to those inclined to defend *Open Casket*: if, in 1979, many commentators were prepared, on the grounds of free expression, to defend an artwork that by the standards of 2018 (when D'Souza's book was published) would be widely seen as indefensible, might not, in forty years' time, apologists for Schutz's painting appear similarly short-sighted?

If D'Souza is correct in her assumption that appeals to free speech play a crucial role in the most compelling arguments of her opponents, then it seems that she has severely undermined their position. Yet, far from being the most powerful weapon in her opponents' arsenal, free speech is, in reality, no weapon at all. Indeed, in Stanley Fish's memorable formulation, *there's no such thing as free speech*.[6] Fish argues that

> In ordinary contexts, talk is produced with the goal of trying to move the world in one direction rather than another. [. . .] It may seem paradoxical, but free expression could only be a primary value if what you are valuing is the right to make noise; but if you are engaged in some purposive activity in the course of which speech happens to be produced, sooner or later you will come to a point when you decide that some forms of speech do not further but endanger that purpose. (Fish 107)

Fish's argument can be applied to Artists Space's decision to exhibit *The Nigger Drawings* in the following manner. A major aim (perhaps the most important one) for public-funded galleries is to create a space in which the public can view (and perhaps derive some utility from) art. A gallery's efforts to create such a space may be somewhat thwarted if it finds that language employed by an artist in a particular artwork is likely to be considered highly offensive by a significant proportion of the public. In this case, the gallery must decide whether the benefits to be had from the inclusion of such an artwork outweigh the drawbacks. Such an analysis will take into account the purpose of the gallery, rather than appeal to any general principle of free expression. Therefore, if Fish is correct, those who appeal to free speech—and, as we have seen, D'Souza insists that such an appeal was central to Donald's defenders—are entirely misguided about what is at stake in this type of debate. Thus, D'Souza's criticism of her opponents' (supposed) focus on free expression is at once correct and devoid of content, since there is nothing—that is, no such thing as free speech—for her criticism to critique.

Ironically, although D'Souza's choice of *The Nigger Drawings* controversy appears specifically designed to highlight the shortcomings of appeals to free

expression, D'Souza herself appears to lament the ways in which certain forms of expression—the forms she *supports*—are subject to limits:

> There is a contradiction at the heart of our idea of open dialogue: while it seems to depend on clearing space for ambiguity, uncertainty, and the contingent, it is grounded in—and perhaps even depends on—de facto limits of who can speak and what can be said. (D'Souza 67)

In the context in which this sentence appears, it is clear that D'Souza thinks that these limits are regrettable (rather than, as Fish would claim, "a good thing"[7]). Intentionally or not, D'Souza's statement contains a strong echo of Fish's assertion that "all affirmations of freedom of expression are [. . .] dependent for their force on *an exception that literally carves out the space in which expression can then emerge*" (103; emphasis added). For Fish, "an unavoidable truth" (115) is that "[s]peech [. . .] is never a value in and of itself but is always produced within the precincts of some assumed conception of the good to which it must yield in the event of conflict" (104). Rather than acknowledging this, D'Souza decries the appeals to free speech that she imputes to her opponents, yet laments limits on "open dialogue" when these limits curtail expressions that she endorses. In doing so, D'Souza appears to be following Fish's pragmatic counsel:

> [S]o long as so-called free-speech principles have been fashioned by your enemy [. . .], contest their relevance to the issue at hand; but if you manage to refashion them in line with your purposes, urge them with a vengeance. (114)

Aesthetic Essentialism

D'Souza raises the issue of free expression (ostensibly via her opponents' arguments) in relation to both *Open Casket* and *The Nigger Drawings*, and in both cases the appeals to free expression as a defence of the artworks fail (or, more strictly, are empty). However, when it comes to considering what role issues of meaning and interpretation might play in the two controversies, D'Souza's approach is decidedly asymmetrical. In the Donald case, she engages with these issues, concluding that the formalist arguments of Crimp and others reflect a blinkered view of art "as a closed system of signification not depending on a larger social context for its meaning" and that even if it were possible for the offending word to "shed its long, violent history [. . .] it certainly would not be thanks to Donald's visual interventions" (85, 87). For the reasons given in the previous section, although the arguments of Crimp and Adams carry more weight than D'Souza allows, they do not succeed in justifying the artwork in question.

In the case of *Open Casket*, D'Souza largely declines to even consider whether the types of arguments submitted in defence of *The Nigger Drawings* could apply to Schutz's work. Instead, she appears to endorse a straightforward acceptance of the interpretation of the painting proposed in Hannah Black's letter, that is, as an object that "transmute[s] Black suffering into profit and fun" (23). Black's assertion invites many questions (including: How, or indeed why, should an artist avoid making a profit from a treatment of a tragic subject? In what way can *Open Casket* be considered "fun"?), the most pertinent of which is simply: why *this* meaning and not another? In deliberating on the earlier controversy, the difficulty in dissociating several hundred years of violent history from the meaning of the word "nigger"—a word whose first use the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates to 1577 ("nigger, n. and

adj.”)—was admitted as a crucial consideration. Schutz’s painting, on the other hand, had been on public display for just four days before Black confidently asserted its meaning. It might be argued that since the painting was based on a famous photographic image, its meaning was largely predetermined. Yet, not only is the painting manifestly different to any of the photographs of Emmett Till’s body, but the photographic images themselves have multiple layers of meaning. Thus, while black suffering, is, of course, a major component of both the photograph and the painting, so are, for example, white racism and maternal anger.[8]

For D’Souza, Schutz’s claim that her experience as a mother informed the way she approached the subject was evidence that she had “made Open Casket from an aesthetic and social vantage point that left a glaring blind spot: the complicity of whiteness, and of white womanhood, in those events” (48). As a white woman, when approaching the subject of her artwork, Schutz should have, according to D’Souza, identified with Emmett Till’s accuser, Carolyn Bryant Donham, rather than Mamie Till. Given that Donham’s unpublished memoir “recounts the story she told at the trial using imagery from the classic Southern racist horror movie of the ‘Black Beast’ rapist” (Tyson 6), one wonders what an artwork based upon such an identification would look like and how Black and D’Souza might have responded to it. One also wonders what D’Souza’s reaction would have been had Schutz issued a statement which, instead of speaking of maternal empathy, offered an explanation such as the following: “I made *Open Casket* as an acknowledgement of my complicity, as a white woman, in the death of Emmett Till. Painting his body was a way of saying: ‘*I* did this; my actions caused this to happen’”. But why is such an interpretation not *already* available? Do we really require a statement of the type just imagined to corroborate such an interpretation? Would an art critic who wished to view the sharply defined

white triangles in *Open Casket* as allusions to Ku Klux Klan hats (thus expanding the meaning of the painting to include white racism) be expected to confirm with Schutz that this was her intention?

The problem, then, with D'Souza's support of Black's letter is that it acquiesces in the limitation of the meaning of an artwork to a particular interpretation to the exclusion of all other interpretations. I claimed at the outset of this discussion that debates about cultural appropriation have become polarised in part because of the ways that various parties have mischaracterised the positions of their opponents. One of the ways that the positions of critics (such as Black and D'Souza) who take a hardline stance against what they see as the malign effects of cultural appropriation have been mischaracterised is by labelling them "race essentialists". Behind such an ascription is an assumption that criticism of representations of a particular culture or group must derive from an essentialist conception of that culture or group. However, this pays insufficient attention to the work of theorists such as bell hooks and Cornel West who have engaged with postmodern thought in their critiques of notions of "authentic" blackness, while, at the same time, seeking to promote psychologically healthy and politically effective ways of constructing black identity.[9] Thus, hooks, while asserting that the "[c]ontemporary African-American resistance struggle must be rooted in a process of decolonisation that continually opposes re-inscribing notions of 'authentic' black identity", goes on to note that

> The unwillingness to critique essentialism on the part of many African-Americans is rooted in the fear that it will cause folks to lose sight of the specific history and experience of African-Americans and the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience. An adequate response to this concern is to critique essentialism while emphasising the significance

> of "the authority of experience." There is a radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black "essence" and recognition of the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle. (hooks 29)

It seems reasonable to assume that Black and D'Souza would view themselves as following hooks's emphasis on "the experience of exile and struggle"—indeed D'Souza uses such language when she claims that the issue at the heart of the *Open Casket* controversy is "a struggle over resources" (57)—and so any attribution of essential ideas about racial identity is likely to be a severe mischaracterisation. Nonetheless, if we define essentialism as a narrowing of the set of attributes that we allow a person or object to possess, it is not a mischaracterisation to describe Black and D'Souza's attitude towards *Open Casket* as *aesthetic* essentialism. Asserting that the artwork cannot be anything other than economic exploitation of black suffering—an argument that, as artist and theorist Coco Fusco notes, "completely avoids consideration of the visual strategies employed by Schutz" (Fusco)—denies the possibility that viewers (whether black or not) might find something in the painting that affects them in any of the inexpressible ways that we expect art to move us. That such an outcome *is* a possibility (a claim so modest that it scarcely requires instantiation) is aptly demonstrated in Zadie Smith's article "Getting In and Out". Although Smith admits that *overall* the painting has little effect on her ("When I looked at *Open Casket*, the truth is I didn't feel very much"), she *does* find reward in attending to precisely those aspects of the painting—the formal elements—that Black and D'Souza ignore:

> [T]he anxious aporia in the upper face is countered by the area around the mouth, where the canvas roils, coming toward us three-dimensionally, like a

> swelling—the flesh garroted, twisted, striped—as if something is pushing from behind the death mask, trying to get out. That *did* move me. (Smith, "Getting In and Out")

If D'Souza's attitude towards *Open Casket* betrays an aesthetic essentialism, her characterisation of Schutz as a "bad ally" (46) may bring her farther into proximity with essentialist ideas. For the question that the label "bad ally" surely invites is: bad ally to whom? It cannot refer to the black population in toto unless the voices of black writers such as Zadie Smith (whose "Getting In and Out" sees the logic of Black's letter headed in a dangerously essentialist direction) or black artists such as Kara Walker and Coco Fusco (both of whom condemned the protest of *Open Casket*[10]) are to be wholly discounted. The term "bad ally" appears to only make sense if either of the following cases hold: (1) we limit the group to whom support is due to that segment of the black population inclined to protest *Open Casket*, in which case such an inclination comes to resemble a litmus test for "authentic blackness" (a clear indication that we have passed into the realm of race essentialism); (2) a "good ally" is defined as someone who scrupulously minimises the risks of causing offence to a particular segment of the black population by aligning with them in word and deed, even if this would-be ally's *actual* beliefs broadly correspond to those of a different segment of the black community (who disagree with much of what the first segment say and do), in which case the ally is effectively asked to eschew any commitments to artistic integrity.[11] The undesirability of either option demonstrates the difficulties that arise when one person claims the authority to determine the good for a diverse body of individuals. Rather than refuting Fusco's claim that Black's letter "presumes an ability to speak for all black people that smacks of cultural nationalism", D'Souza, on more than one occasion, either arrogates such an ability to

herself or imputes the ability to others (Fusco qtd. in D'Souza 40). In her third chapter, "*Harlem on My Mind*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969", D'Souza criticises the decision-making process that led to a perceived absence of black art in the titular exhibition (since, as D'Souza explains, photography was not then widely accepted as "art" [145]). That aspects of the exhibition were deeply regrettable—in particular, the manner in which Allon Schoener's curatorial dogmatism seemed to sideline the role of the team of black advisers he had appointed—is undeniable. Yet D'Souza's analysis struggles to account for the exhibition's popularity with a black audience:

> A large number [of the 450,000 visitors] were black, and it is likely that many of them had never entered the Met before. This was disappointing to the protesters. As Mahler Ryder of the BECC explained, "many black people who hungered for their images crossed the picket line, including lots of teachers who took black children across the picket line." (139-40)

Instead of acknowledging this popularity as evidence that artistic collectives such as the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) did not—indeed, *could not*—speak for all African Americans, Ryder undermines (by appealing to the notion of hunger) the agency of those who attended the exhibition. Moreover, the juxtaposition of "black children" with "black people" has the effect of infantilising all those who voluntarily crossed the picket line. The attitudes here of D'Souza and Ryder recall Paul Gilroy's remarks about the "ontological essentialist view" of "cultural and ethnic particularity":

> Its absolutist conception of ethnic cultures can be identified by the way in which it registers incomprehending disappointment with the actual cultural choices and patterns of the mass of black people. [. . .] The community is felt

> to be on the wrong road, and it is the intellectual's job to give them a new direction, firstly by recovering and then by donating the racial awareness that the masses seem to lack. (*The Black Atlantic* 31-32)

D'Souza's inclination towards the correction of the masses can be glimpsed elsewhere when, in discussing the Donald controversy, she refers to a "responsibility to educate the public on this issue", without further interrogation of the sources of authority that might be supposed to legitimise those assuming the role of educator (89). My point here is not the facile observation that any criticism of cultural appropriation is potentially vulnerable to a countercriticism that undermines the authority of an individual or group to speak on behalf of an entire "culture". (Although we should keep this observation in view, we should equally remain mindful of the ways in which such a perspective might be recruited to silence voices of dissent.) Rather, my point is two-fold. First, we should recognise, in the examples above, the high degree to which the assumption to speak on behalf of the black population is unreflective. Second, this unreflectiveness provides an index of the extent to which the political has been usurped by "the shortcuts into solidarity that race affords" (Gilroy, *Between Camps* xi). It is only in tracing the history of this usurpation that we can hope to negotiate a path back to politics.

Culture and Politics

Adolph Reed Jr.'s *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (1999) considers, inter alia, the influence of certain conceptions of "black culture" upon black politics "in the aftermath of the civil rights and black power movements" (1). In the opening chapter, Reed rejects a distinction that he had drawn in a 1986

essay between authentic and artificial African American particularities. Reed admits his distinction had "relied crucially on Jürgen Habermas's notion of 'living' versus 'objectivistically prepared and strategically employed' cultural traditions", a notion that Reed now finds unpersuasive in treating "living" cultural traditions as "organic, bounded entities, pristine with respect to—or at least clearly distinguishable from—surrounding structures of social relations or formal institutions" (13-14). For example, rather than standing apart from these structures, Reed insists that "contemporary black American popular culture is structured by the imperatives of corporate mass culture and marketed as folkish authenticity" (15). Reed sees this revised notion of culture as having important implications for the potentialities of black politics:

> If culture does not exist independently of concrete social relations—including hierarchy and ideology—and is a contested domain, then attempts to determine which voices or programs represent the group's *genuine* interests are pointless. Unravelling all the partial, hortatory, and ideological constructions of the group's nature and interests, like peeling away the layers of an onion, leaves not an essential core, but nothing. The group as a coherent identity with an identifiable standpoint, in this case the generic "black community" (or any given black community, for that matter), is a reification that at most expresses the success of some interest networks in articulating their interpretations and programs and asserting them in the name of the group. And the processes through which some interest positions succeed over others have less to do with their authenticity as representations of prior collective will than with their proponents' access to and ability to mobilize and deploy resources in order to defeat, neutralize, and pre-empt other outlooks and agendas and thereby to institutionalize their own as common sense. (15-16)

If, as Reed suggests, formulations such as the "black community" serve (at least in part) to obscure the extent to which culture is a site of continual contestation with no "essential core", then a study of black politics that fails to account for the processes by which certain individuals and parties assume a representative role in speaking on behalf of—to borrow Benedict Anderson's term—"imagined communities" (13), appears inadequate. Reed seeks to avoid such a defect in his own work by attempting to trace the operations that have led to "the rhetorical frame of racial populism" securing a central position in black politics (16).

Reed's analysis begins by examining how "a politics of racial custodianship" (18) arose from "the black population's disfranchisement and expulsion from civic life in the South and the concomitant consolidation of a white supremacist order in the two decades bracketing the turn of the twentieth century" (19). This custodial approach, which Reed notes was "warranted by the ideology of racial uplift", circumscribed the arena of black politics to "endeavours undertaken on behalf of or in the name of the race as an undifferentiated, corporate entity" (28). Reed acknowledges that as a response to "institutionalized discrimination and explicitly racial exclusion", a politics that sought to protect and advance the collective interests of the black population may have seemed appropriate (29). Yet, he is critical of studies of black politics (including those by Harold F. Gosnell and Ralph Bunche) which "trea[t] the racial interest as a given" and elide the complex processes by which group interests are constructed (33). Thus, Bunche is charged with too readily accepting a custodial model that, in attributing "an organic unity" to the black population, rendered "elite primacy in steering the affairs of the race" as unproblematic (34).

In the remainder of his survey of studies of black politics (which encompasses the latter half of the twentieth century), Reed finds the presumption of racial cohesion to be so forceful that even scholarship dedicated to examining differentiation within black politics "proceeds by assuming the primacy of corporate racial interests" (38). Katherine Tate's study limits the sphere of black politics to "areas of broad racial agreement" (39) so that differentiation becomes an anomaly to be explained away, while Michael C. Dawson's study asserts that "individual African Americans [can] use their perceptions of the interests of African Americans as a group as a proxy for their own interests" (Dawson qtd. in Reed 43), but fails to address how such individuals decide which "interpretations, issues, and strategies actually represent the interest of the collectivity rather than some more narrowly partisan or idiosyncratic agenda" (43).

Reed is wary of the "restriction of black politics thematically to the domain of collective struggle against generic racial inequality and subordination" for two main reasons. First, he believes that such a restriction masks "the *autonomous* political processes and structural, ideological, and institutional tensions that constitute the matrix of concrete black political action" (46; emphasis added). Reed should not be misunderstood here as downplaying or eliding the extent to which racial injustice and white supremacy structure the nature of black politics in America; his point, rather, is that any account that reduces the totality of black politics to antiracist struggle is "incomplete and static, devoid of political dynamics among black people" (47). Second, Reed is concerned that the triumph of "the racial vision of the black petite bourgeoisie—a singular class vision projected as the organic and transparent sensibility of the group as a whole" risks reintroducing "essentialist presumptions regarding the black American population", such as nineteenth-century notions about

the uniformity of temperament and thought among blacks (47). To avoid either of these undesirable outcomes, Reed concludes,

> We need to reconceptualize black political activity as a dynamic set of social relations and interests that converge on some issues as consequential for broad sectors of the black population and that diverge from others, based on other identities and interest aggregations. This is a black politics that does not pretend to exhaust all, or even necessarily the most important, aspects of all black people's political concerns and activity. It is a notion of black politics in which black people, as individuals and as groups, organize, form alliances, and enter coalitions freely on the basis of mutually constituted interests, crisscrossing racial boundaries as they find it pragmatically appropriate. (50)

It is important to note here that the reference to "broad sectors of the black population" implies that Reed's idea of black politics does not exclude issues that may be largely inconsequential for certain groups of blacks. Moreover, this politics encompasses substantive collective action by groups comprised of both blacks and non-blacks with common interests.

The philosopher Tommie Shelby conceives of black politics more narrowly than Reed: "Black politics is [. . .] about identifying, correcting, and ultimately eliminating race-based injustices" (151). Although Shelby concedes that there may be "remediable social problem[s] that *disproportionately* affec[t] blacks (such as urban poverty, joblessness, or failing schools)", he argues that addressing these problems should not be considered as "the political basis of *black* solidarity":

> Given the differences in socioeconomic condition [amongst blacks] that currently exist, this 'disproportionate impact' approach to black interests is not

> a reliable basis for political unity. [. . .] The very fact that a given social policy disproportionately affects the black population, as opposed to impacting all blacks, is a reason to think that some blacks will likely defect from the collective fight to resist it. For example, we have reason to believe that, on average, black elites will not have the same level of concern about social disadvantages that primarily affect working-class blacks (such as the unavailability of jobs that pay a living wage) as they will have about the closing off of opportunities for the more affluent (such as legal proscriptions against preferential treatment in higher education). (155)

Shelby is surely correct in his assumptions about the relative indifference of black elites towards issues that do not directly concern them. By effectively granting these elites a veto on what constitutes "black politics", Shelby limits his conception of "black political solidarity" to "black collective action in the interest of *racial* justice" (151; emphasis added), rather than action compelled by a more expansive idea of social justice. This puts Shelby at odds with the three thinkers—Gilroy, Reed, and Appiah—to whom his thesis of a black solidarity without a "positive shared identity" (11) is addressed.[12] Gilroy offers an inverted view of Shelby's depiction of black solidarity, suggesting that

> as the black communities of the overdeveloped world become more internally divided and riven by deepening inequality, their more privileged members (who are also far more likely to be competing against whites economically) develop different economic and political interests from the black poor upon whom they depend for their sense of what defines the racial group as a whole. They are therefore more inclined than the poor to invest in cheap racial solidarity and empty nationalist causes just at the moment when the world can

be seen to have moved beyond the grasp of those empty pronouncements. (*Between Camps* xiv)

Thus, in Shelby's conception, the relatively disadvantaged blacks are reliant upon the support of black elites for the realisation of a limited black political solidarity, whereas, for Gilroy, black elites are parasitic upon the black poor for definitional cultural signifiers.[13] Speculating on why "the black elite may find it expedient to fall back on exceptionalist narratives and essential identities", Gilroy "wonder[s] how much [these responses] are about a privileged group mystifying its own increasing remoteness from the lives of most black people, whose priorities, habits, and tastes can no longer be considered self-legitimating indicators of racial integrity" (270). Rather than hoping that the "[black] body [can be] used to restore that fading integrity" (270), Gilroy advocates an alternative basis for political solidarity and collective action, what he has variously called "strategic universalism" (230) or "planetary humanism" (2). "Strategic universalism", as Gilroy uses it, "reorients our thinking away from the glamour of ethnos and redirects it to what used to be called 'the problem of species being.'" (96). In *Between Camps*, "planetary humanism" is discussed in reference to Hollywood blockbusters *Independence Day* (1996) and *Men in Black* (1997), so that it is articulated in terms of "how the desire to retain [. . .] outmoded principles of [racial] differentiation recedes when it confronts more substantive varieties of otherness and forms of life that are truly other-worldly" (356). Gilroy's remarks, in his 2019 Holberg Lecture, on the "struggle with the planetary and pelagic dimensions of our own emergency" ("Never Again"), along with his ongoing book project "about the effects that the climate crisis is having on our ideas about race and humanity" (Koshy), suggest his more recent thinking around "planetary humanism" is situated in the context of climate emergency.

For Reed, black political solidarity based solely around issues of racial justice is misguided since "[f]or the vast majority of people in this country—of all racial classifications or identities, all genders and sexual orientations—the common frame of reference is the employment relation, the fact of working, or being expected to work, a job" (*Class Notes* xxvii). Collective political action, therefore, should be aimed towards improving the "common experience of everyday life shaped and constrained by political economy—for example, finding, keeping or advancing in a job with a living wage, keeping or attaining access to decent healthcare, securing decent, affordable housing, pursuing education for oneself and intimates" (xxvii). Moreover, in an article co-written with Walter Benn Michaels, Reed points out that "black people would [. . .] benefit disproportionately from redistributive agendas that expand social wage policies and enhance the living standards and security of working people universally" (Michaels and Reed). Appiah, in a 2021 conversation with Reed, concurs: "[Reed] is saying that if you care about the people who are damaged by racism, you might want to think that [. . .] their objective conditions would be improved if we did some things about their class position. And I agree with that" (Appiah, 01:16:34-01:17:03).

The issues explored by scholars of culture and politics such as Shelby and Reed are often discussed within a wider debate about the efficacy of identity politics. Although, in recent years, it has become increasingly fashionable to point to the dangers of identity politics practiced by those on the right,[14] a number of left-leaning scholars of culture and race have questioned the coherence of the term. Henry Louis Gates sets out the problem as follows:

> Even though the discourse of identity politics and that of liberation are often conflated, on a more fundamental level they may be in mortal combat. Identity

politics in its purest form must be concerned with the survival of an *identity*. By contrast, the utopian agenda of liberation pursues what it takes to be the objective interests of its subjects, but may be little concerned with cultural continuity or integrity. More than that, the discourse of liberation often hinges on the birth of a transformed subject, the creation of a new identity, which is, by definition, the surcease of the old. (*Tradition and the Black Atlantic* 147)

Seyla Benhabib makes a similar point in her dissent from Will Kymlicka's position on group rights: "he ignores the fact that the kind of group one views oneself to be a member of may itself emerge and change through the process of political struggle" (64). For Gates and Benhabib, then, identity cannot be viewed as an immutable entity that serves as a stable foundation for a politics of liberation. As Gates puts it, "[t]he 'identity' half of the catchall phrase 'identity politics' must be conceived as equally labile and dynamic as the 'politics' half. The two terms must be in dialogue, as it were. Otherwise, we should be prepared for the phrase to be revealed to be an oxymoron" (149). For Gilroy, the phrase is indeed oxymoronic: "[b]ringing the word identity together with the word politics [. . .] makes politics impossible [. . .] in any meaningful sense. Politics requires the abandonment of identity in a personal sense" (Koshy), while Reed suggests that "insofar as politics is about the effort to mobilize an effective base for concerted public action, it may be improper to call the ideology and rhetoric of identity a politics at all" (*Class Notes* xxvi).

For the four scholars cited in the previous paragraph, politics—at least, left-of-centre politics—is a dynamic process in which people from diverse backgrounds with both shared and conflicting concerns work together to "advanc[e] democratic and egalitarian interests" (*Class Notes* xxvi). These scholars recognise that attempts to organise around identity—treated as a static property of an individual or group—may

risk obstructing the transformative action that constitutes politics. Indeed, for Asad Haider, the manner in which identity politics thwarts "collective struggle against an oppressive social structure" means that it "paradoxically ends up reinforcing the very norms it set out to criticize" (24). The conservatism that some scholars have located in identity politics is closely related to the conservatism that informs certain conceptions of culture. As Gilroy puts it, "[t]o be conservative is to be engaged in a politics of cultural conservation. It is to subscribe to a doggedly positive and always over-integrated sense of culture and/or biology as the essential reified substances of racial, national, and ethnic difference" (*Between Camps* 220-21). If identity politics, as Haider suggests, is conservatism masquerading as progressive politics, then the view of culture found in certain arguments against cultural appropriation might be understood as equally reactionary.

Chapter Outlines

In the chapters that follow, I examine the work of six novelists—William Styron, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, Philip Roth, and Percival Everett—who have interrogated questions of appropriation, of how black culture is defined and represented, and of the possibility of understanding across racial and cultural boundaries. This study is limited to issues of appropriation and black culture since, as was noted earlier, "the relations between dominant white American culture and black African American culture" occupy a central position in debates about cultural appropriation (MacCabe and Yanacek 11); including a consideration of other cultures in a work of this length would necessarily have resulted in a more superficial analysis. The earliest texts are taken from the 1960s, a decade during which the rise of black

power movements was accompanied by increasing interest in black culture and black identity.[15] For S. Craig Watkins, the cultural form of black nationalism was “based on the creation of cultural expressions that rejected virtually anything associated with white America” (191-92). This repudiation of whiteness had profound implications for literary production. Black writers who admitted a connection to elements of culture considered “white”—whether through literary style, an expressed admiration for white writers, or friendships with whites—were liable to be labelled Uncle Toms.[16] Meanwhile, the presumption of certain white writers to take as subject matter elements of black culture and history was being challenged. When, in 1967, Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was published, the author was charged with arrogance, ignorance, and wilful distortion. Although the term “cultural appropriation” was not employed by Styron’s black critics,[17] the novel has come to be viewed as one of the most conspicuous examples of the practice in American literature. Styron was encouraged to write from the perspective of Turner by his friend, James Baldwin, who, at the time, was working on *Another Country* (1962), a novel with a number of prominent white characters. The first two chapters look at the work of these two writers in the 1960s.

In Chapter 1, I examine the debates around Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, focusing on the criticisms contained in *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), a volume of essays edited by John Henrik Clarke. I also compare the reception of Styron’s novel to that of two related texts *Black Thunder* (1936) by Arna Bontemps and *Ol’ Prophet Nat* (1967) by Daniel Panger. Finally, I consider the orientation towards the past advocated by Stephen Best in *None like Us* (2018), and suggest that a similar orientation can be located in Styron’s

Confessions; that is, I read the novel as expressing “an aesthetics of the intransmissible” (Best 22).

In Chapter 2, I read Baldwin’s *Another Country* (1962) and *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968) in the context of Afropessimist writing by Frank Wilderson and Calvin Warren. I find that though Warren and Wilderson offer a useful conceptual framework for understanding Baldwin’s theorisation of blackness and whiteness, Baldwin is ultimately less despondent than these thinkers about the possibility of kinship across racial boundaries.

In the two subsequent chapters, I examine two novelists with seemingly opposing attitudes towards black culture. Toni Morrison identified as a black writer “exclusively interested in facets of African American culture” (*Mouth Full of Blood* 335), while Ralph Ellison saw his literary “ancestors” as being white European and American writers: Ernest Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, André Malraux, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and William Faulkner (*Collected Essays* 185). In Chapter 3, I compare the representations of black culture in Morrison’s *Tar Baby* (1981) and *Paradise* (1997). I argue that the former discloses a sympathetic attitude towards the preservation of black culture, while the latter reveals how the desire to protect black culture can degenerate into an obsession with racial purity that mirrors white supremacist notions of racial superiority. I conclude that, in *Paradise*, Morrison offers a vision of a community that celebrates the instability of individual identity and insists upon an openness to alterity that bears comparison to Jacques Derrida’s understanding of hospitality.

In Chapter 4, I examine how Ellison conceives culture in his essays, before exploring how this conception is complicated by elements of his unfinished second

novel and by the stance he takes on Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. I find that Ellison's essays reveal the centrality to the idea of "America" of a conception of identity as fluid and not merely inherited, while *Three Days Before the Shooting…* (2010) presents examples of white inability to comprehend certain aspects of black culture. Regarding the disagreements between Ellison and Styron on the role of history in the novel, I suggest that the work of Hayden White offers valuable illumination.

In the final two chapters, I look at several texts from the twenty-first century. In Chapter 5, I argue that certain critics have read Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) too narrowly, viewing it primarily as a celebration of the asocial individualism of the novel's protagonist. I claim that although certain perspectives in the novel—those of Coleman, his sister Ernestine, and Nathan Zuckerman—disclose their investment in Coleman's project of self-determination, these viewpoints are undermined by the text in important ways. I contend that the novel accommodates a position that is antithetical to Coleman's belief that he can transcend his own history, reading Roth's novel in light of Alasdair MacIntyre's insistence that one's life must be understood in the context of a narrative over which one has limited control. Thus, I conclude that the novel is a more pessimistic meditation on crossing racial and cultural boundaries than has generally been appreciated.

In Chapter 6, I explore how Percival Everett's *erasure* (2001) interrogates the term "black life" and engages with the work of Roland Barthes by considering what is lost through a narrow focus on the connection between a work of fiction and the author's lived experience. I then examine the critique of capitalist exploitation of blackness found in both *erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009). Finally, I read Everett's short story "The Appropriation of Cultures" (1996) as an homage to Ralph

Ellison's idea of the fluidity of culture, and argue that it proposes class as a more important differential than race in contemporary America.

The six writers in this study are linked through a web of connections: Styron was a friend to Baldwin and Roth; Morrison delivered a eulogy at Baldwin's funeral; Ellison's theme of invisibility was picked up by Roth and Everett in *The Human Stain* and *erasure*, respectively. However, if a single characteristic unites all six novelists it is surely a willingness to embrace complexity, even contradiction and paradox. Each of the texts examined gives voice to diverse positions on culture and appropriation, often positions at odds with public pronouncements by, or political affiliations of, the author. Such a state of affairs need not embarrass the author, but, rather, should be viewed as indicative of a commitment to explore multifaceted issues from a variety of perspectives. As Ellison once remarked, "[t]he novel at its best demands a sort of complexity of vision which politics doesn't like" (qtd. in Iton 11). In the present era of increasing polarisation, in both political and cultural arenas, where social media encourages instantly formulated opinions, Ellison's words are a timely reminder that the form of the novel offers an alternative approach to understanding the world.

CHAPTER ONE

William Styron: Appropriating the Past

Few novels in the history of American literature have proved as divisive as William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The novel, a first-person narrative account of a slave revolt that took place in Southampton County, Virginia in August 1831, takes its title and inspiration from a twenty-three page historical document based on an interview with Nat Turner conducted by Thomas Ruffin Gray shortly before Turner's execution on 11 November 1831. When it was published in 1967, Styron's novel garnered favourable reviews—Philip Rahv deemed it the "best [novel] by an American writer that has appeared in some years" (qtd. in Ross 127)—and it won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1968. However, writing for *The New Yorker* in November 1967, George Steiner, towards the end of a broadly positive notice, hinted at an approaching storm: "The question now is this: Would a Negro recognize Nat Turner for one of his own, would he find Mr. Styron's fiction authentic to his own experience?" (qtd. in Ross 124).

An emphatic answer, or rather ten emphatic answers, to this question arrived in the summer of 1968 with the publication of *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, a volume of essays edited by John Henrik Clarke chronicling the supposed failings of the novel. Many of the essays assumed a strongly polemical tone, attacking not just the novel—which was characterised by Lerone Bennett, Jr. as

"a deliberate attempt to steal the meaning of a man's life" (qtd. in Clarke 5)—but Styron himself, with Ernest Kaiser labeling the author "an unreconstructed southern racist" (56) who was "psychologically sick" (65). Although Styron enjoyed several prominent defenders, the arguments presented in *Ten Black Writers Respond* (*TBWR*) greatly influenced perceptions of his novel.[1] Indeed, while Styron would enjoy further success with *Sophie's Choice* (1979), *The Confessions of Nat Turner* has remained under suspicion; for many, the latter is still Exhibit A in the case against cultural appropriation in fiction.

In this chapter, I first consider the central contentions of *TBWR* in the light of both the philosopher James O. Young's writing on cultural appropriation in fiction, and certain interventions in the area of the Nat Turner revolt by historians and literary scholars. I then turn to an examination of two novels that have been favourably compared to Styron's *Confessions*: *Black Thunder* (1936) by Arna Bontemps and *Ol' Prophet Nat* (1967) by Daniel Panger. I argue that the positive evaluations of these texts rely in part upon downplaying elements that closely correspond to those aspects of Styron's novel that met with opprobrium. Thus, insofar as Styron was criticised for characteristics of his work that have featured in other novels without censure, his sense of being treated unfairly by certain critics appears justified. Finally, I read Styron's *Confessions* in the context of Stephen Best's provocative text *None Like Us* (2018). Best seeks to challenge the prevalent assumption in black studies that a collective "we" can be recovered from the slave past, that is, "at the point of our violent origin" (13). Rather than viewing the slave past as "a ready prism for apprehending the black political present" (63), Best instead emphasises the discontinuity between these periods: "The point is to see in our severance from figures in the past, to see in their opacity, the idea that they are present to us in the

only way they can be, and thus to be acknowledged, but not to be known" (99). Although Styron's *Confessions* has generally been viewed as a (possibly misguided) attempt to appropriate the past, I argue that in important ways it can be viewed as an exemplar of the type of artistic endeavour Best celebrates in his study, that is, one that admits "the unforthcomingness of the past" (24).

Styron and "the Ten"

In his 1992 essay, "Nat Turner Revisited", Styron recalls the charges he faced in *TBWR* and concludes that the Ten's "major complaint was apparent from the book's first sentence: How dare a white man write so intimately of the black experience, even presuming to become Nat Turner by speaking in the first person?" (Styron, *My Generation* 146). Although approximations of this sentiment appear several times in *TBWR*, they are limited to four of the nine essays.[2] Vincent Harding writes "Perhaps we must now say with charity that it is too much to expect a white, twentieth-century American novelist to be able to conceive of the world of a black, Old Testament-type messiah" (29). According to John Oliver Killens, Styron merely "tells us *about* the story of Nat Turner, but he is not *of* the story and the reader does not feel it, does not live it, for the simple reason that the author has not felt it, has not lived the reality of being black in a white supremacist society" (44). For Loyle Hairston, "white writers" are "incapable of portraying black characters as human types" (68), while Mike Thelwell asks "Is it possible [. . .] for a white southern gentleman to tune in on the impulses, beliefs, emotions, and thought-patterns of a black slave?", concluding that it would entail a "miracle of empathy" (80). However, taking an opposing position to the above four essayists, John A. Williams writes "Since I do not believe that the right

to describe or portray or in other ways delineate the lives of black people in American society is the private domain of Negro writers, I cannot fault Styron's *intent*" (45), while, more equivocally, Charles V. Hamilton is willing to grant Styron his "literary license" but argues that "black people today cannot afford the luxury of having their leaders manipulated and toyed with" (73).

Given that a minority of the essayists assumed an explicitly sceptical position on the ability of white novelists to write about the black experience, Styron's claim that this was the "major complaint" in *TBWR* is misleading. Indeed, three other categories of complaint are more prevalent in the volume. Each of the nine essays contains at least two of the following criticisms: the historical detail in the novel (both relating to Nat Turner and the wider picture of slavery) is incorrect, the character of Nat Turner is psychologically implausible, and the novel contains racist or condescending attitudes towards black characters. I shall examine each of these three complaints in turn before returning, at the end of the chapter, to the broader question of a white author's ability to write about the black experience.

Whose history?

The main criticism of historical detail in *TBWR* is located around Styron's portrayal of slave revolts, in particular, their frequency and the motivations that produced them. For a number of the Ten, the accuracy of the novel in this area was cast into doubt from the outset, since the first sentence of Styron's "Author's Note" (which preceded the main body of the novel) read: "In August, 1831, in a remote region of southeastern Virginia, there took place the only effective, sustained revolt in the annals of American Negro slavery" (Styron, *Confessions* ix). Williams takes issue

with Styron's use of the word "only," claiming that it gives the impression that Turner was not influenced by previous revolts; Williams cites Gabriel Prosser's attempted revolt in Richmond in 1800, the Denmark Vesey revolt in Charleston, South Carolina, and (citing the African American historian Carter G. Woodson as his source) asserts that "there were no less than seven *known* revolts during Turner's lifetime, most of them probably to his knowledge" (Clarke 46). Williams initially suggests that Styron has "failed here as a novelist to research the historical influences on his character," before revealing that Styron reviewed a book in 1963—Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*—that contained the relevant material. Thus, Styron, according to Williams, was not simply ignorant, but was "guilty here of manipulation" (47). Ernest Kaiser also cites Aptheker's work claiming it "shows that Nat Turner's revolt was the culminating blow of a period of rising slave unrest which began about 1827" (55). And John Henrik Clarke appears to be drawing upon Aptheker when he claims: "There were hundreds of uprisings and conspiracies preceding the Southampton, Virginia, uprising led by Nat Turner" (ix). Taking the elements of his definition of "slave insurrection" as "a minimum of ten slaves involved; freedom as the apparent aim of the disaffected slaves; contemporary references labelling the event as an uprising, plot, insurrection, or the equivalent of these terms", Aptheker "found records of approximately two hundred and fifty revolts and conspiracies in the history of American Negro slavery" (Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* 162).

Styron, when asked about some of the books that influenced his novel, did not mention Aptheker's work. Instead, he cites William S. Drewry's 1900 dissertation *The Southampton Insurrection*—a work which claimed that "Never in the history of slavery [. . .] was there less danger to owners, more contentment among the slaves themselves, fewer runaways, and greater advantages, social, financial, and political,

gained from this institution" (Drewry 18)—as "the seminal work for anyone who wants to know anything about Nat Turner" (qtd. in Greenberg 218). In the same interview, however, Styron does bring up Aptheker, suggesting that the historian helped bring about *TBWR*:

> I was never able to substantiate it, but I'm almost certain that one of the people behind the Ten Black Writers book was Herbert Aptheker, the historical theorist of the American Communist Party. [. . .] Aptheker, I think, was upset over my interpretation of Nat Turner. Aptheker himself had written a book about Nat Turner, one that more or less took the conventional view that the South was filled with such revolts. He was upset over my interpretation of Nat Turner and was determined to do what he could to make it clear that my view, my interpretation, wouldn't stand. (qtd. in Greenberg 221)

Styron's dissent from Aptheker's position appears to have been greatly influenced by his admiration for the work of another historian, Stanley M. Elkins, whose *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959) presented a very different view of slave life. Whereas Aptheker's portrayal of slavery was replete with various acts of rebellion, Elkins believed that the oppressiveness of American plantation slavery was such that it produced the personality type known in the racist language of Southern lore as "Sambo". Elkins describes the stereotype of Sambo as follows:

> Sambo, the typical plantation slave, was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childlike

> attachment: it was indeed this childlike quality that was the very key to his being. (Elkins 82)

To a large extent, Elkins accepted this stereotype, arguing that "there were elements in the very structure of the plantation system—its 'closed' character—that could sustain infantilism as a normal feature of behavior" (86). While his critics countered that "Sambo was a mask the slave wore to protect himself and which he could remove at will" (Lane 10), Elkins allowed for a degree of internalisation of the role of Sambo, contending that there was a "broad belt of indeterminacy between 'mere acting' and the 'true self'" (251).

Given Elkins' assertion that "of all the roles in American life that of Sambo was by far the most pervasive" (131), along with his belief that the playing of this role went beyond "mere 'accommodation'" (86), it is unsurprising to find him adopting an attitude of scepticism towards both Aptheker's estimation of the frequency of revolts and his claim that "discontent and rebelliousness were not only exceedingly common, but, indeed, characteristic of American Negro slaves" (Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* 374). Indeed, Elkins allows only three revolts that are "worthy of any note"—the Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, and Nat Turner revolts—and denigrates the last of these as "characterized by little more than aimless butchery" (Elkins 136).

As might be surmised, Elkins' position was deeply offensive to certain of the Ten. It had not escaped their notice that Styron, in his 1963 review of Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*, had sided with Elkins' "brilliant analysis" and suggested that, though Aptheker had demonstrated that "unrest and disaffection" were common amongst the enslaved, "true rebelliousness on any organized scale" was rare (Styron, *My Generation* 101). Two of the Ten viewed Styron's *Confessions* as a

further effort to vindicate Elkins: Ernest Kaiser asserts that Styron "again accepts wholeheartedly the fraudulent and untenable thesis of Frank Tannenbaum and Stanley M. Elkins that American slavery was so oppressive, despotic and emasculating psychologically that revolt was impossible and Negroes could only be Sambos" (Clarke 54), while for Lerone Bennett, Jr., Styron, by aligning himself with the "sophisticated modern apologist" Elkins, was "playing the 'new history' game of reviving Big Black Sambo" (7). A key question then is to what extent Styron's novel endorses Elkins' controversial ideas about the prevalence and nature of the Sambo stereotype in plantation slavery.

In an episode from Part One of the novel, Hark, one of the leading figures in the revolt, is ostensibly revealed as an example of the Sambo personality type. When Jeremiah Cobb, the judge who will later sentence Nat Turner to death, arrives at the Travis plantation and enquires about the location of the cider press, Hark, assuming a voice that Turner describes as "downright unctuous", directs Cobb to the press with the observation: "Marse Joe, he save dat red bar'l for de fines' gennlemens" (55). Turner is dismayed by Hark's readiness to "play the obsequious coon" (55), describing his manner in Cobb's presence as that of "the unspeakable bootlicking Sambo, all giggles and smirks and oily, sniveling servility" (56). Additional elements—a face of "malleable docility" and "the eyes of a child, trustful and dependent" (56)—would appear to confirm Hark as the Sambo of Southern stereotype, as described above by Elkins.

Yet, a number of factors complicate this picture. Whereas Elkins held that the characteristics of Sambo were "something much more basic than mere 'accommodation'" (Elkins 86), Hark's behaviour with Cobb is acknowledged by Turner to be a masquerade, a "repulsive outer guise" (Styron, *Confessions* 58). In this

respect, the novel's depiction of Hark would seem consonant with Earl E. Thorpe's position on Sambo. Dissenting from Elkins' more essentialist construction, Thorpe argues that "Sambo was often the side of his personality which the Negro *chose* to present to the white man [. . .] The bondsman wore many faces, of which Sambo usually was only his public and not his private one" (qtd. in Lane 27; emphasis added). Indeed, despite Turner's apoplectic reaction to Hark's performance—"Snivelin' black toadeatin' white man's bootlickin' scum!" (56)—he too feels forced into a pretence of ignorance with Cobb: "I chuckled idiotically, gazing toward the ground while I slowly wagged my head—as if to indicate that this poor darky understood precious little if indeed he understood anything" (65). Finally, given that the fictional Hark goes on to play a key role in the revolt, Styron's position might be construed as being approximate to that of another Elkins critic, Eugene Genovese, who argued that "Sambo [. . .] could turn into a rebel [. . .] the personality pattern could become inverted and a seemingly docile slave could suddenly turn fierce" (qtd. in Lane 44).

Nonetheless, despite the important ways in which Styron's characterisation of Hark departs from Elkins' conception of Sambo, several of the Ten felt that the novelist aligned himself with the historian on the question of docility (Clarke viii, 10, 42). Styron's Turner states that "it is a painful fact that most Negroes are hopelessly docile" (Styron, *Confessions* 58), apparently viewing Hark—and the other rebels—as exceptional, rather than exemplary, figures. Turner's belief appears to be corroborated by the novel's depiction of the reluctance of slaves to join the revolt. Styron has Thomas Gray, author of the original *Confessions*, gloating over the rebels failure to recruit more men, estimating that along their route they may have encountered two thousand enslaved adult males, yet succeeded in recruiting no more than seventy-five (384-85). In a 2016 study of the revolt, the historian Patrick Breen arrives at a more

conservative estimate of the number of potential recruits (since his figure includes females), but similarly concludes that the rebels struggled to gain support:

> The rebels recruited successfully only at a handful of plantations, notably including places where the original members of the revolt lived. [. . .] As a result, a rebel army that traveled throughout St. Luke's Parish in Southampton County, home to nearly twenty-five hundred slaves over age twelve, almost certainly never included as many as eighty men. (Breen 5-6)

Although Breen asserts that "the vast majority of slaves were disinclined to engage in overt resistance" (32), he does not attribute this reluctance, as Styron's Turner does, to their docility. Instead, Breen suggests several plausible explanations for why many blacks did not join the rebellion, the most compelling of which is that they "may have thought a revolt foolhardy, not worth the vengeance that the whites would inflict upon innocent black bystanders" (58). Potential rebels must have been acutely aware of the possible consequences for participation in a failed rebellion, not just for themselves, but also for those close to them, especially family members. Thus, while one might admire the attitude of Will in the original *Confessions*—he explains his decision to join the rebellion by declaring that "his life was worth no more than others, and his liberty as dear to him" (Clarke 105)—one can scarcely fault the reasoning of those who chose not to join. To ascribe non-participation to docility suggests a refusal to comprehend the nature of the dire circumstances under which enslaved people were forced to live. Of course, it is not Styron but the character Nat Turner who makes the claim about "hopelessly docile" blacks. Whether this viewpoint is credible for a revolutionary leader is part of the wider question of the character's plausibility to which we now turn.

The (Im)plausible Nat Turner

One of the most frequent complaints in *TBWR* was that Styron had rendered Nat Turner a less heroic figure than he was in reality. Bennett claims that "According to the historical data, the real Nat Turner was a virile, commanding, courageous figure", yet Styron depicts him as "a neurasthenic, Hamlet-like white intellectual in blackface" (Clarke 5). Williams takes a similar view, first alleging that Styron's Turner is "a modern black intellectual", and then comparing him to "a Hamlet fearful that he will lose the ability to act when the time comes" (48). Alvin F. Poussaint charges that Turner is presented as "an emasculated and 'abnormal' character" who "participated in [the rebellion] reluctantly" (21). For Harding, "Styron is unable to comprehend Nat Turner's real stature and meaning", nor can he "perceive Turner's role as a tragic-triumphant hero in the biblical genre" (25). Kaiser approvingly paraphrases Albert Murray's review of *Confessions*, noting that Styron ignored "the Negro conception of Nat Turner as an epic hero, a special, dedicated breed of man who had given his last measure of devotion to liberation and dignity" (63). Finally, Hamilton concludes his essay with what might be taken as a summary statement of *TBWR*: "Nat Turner is our hero, unequivocally understood" (78).

To understand the wide divergence between Styron's Turner and the Turner imagined by the Ten, one must return to the original *Confessions*. For Bennett the "racist" Gray, who "loathed Nat", is preferable to Styron since the lawyer "gives [Turner] to history unrepentant, courageous, sure of his act and his eventual vindication", while the novelist "destroys him as a man and as a leader" (16). Crucially, the very quality that Bennett finds so admirable—Turner's absolute certainty in the rectitude of his actions—is to Styron repellant:

> I eventually read the original *Confessions* countless times, trying to pick up useful clues about the man and his background, but early on I was struck by the impression that our hero was a madman. A singularly gifted and intelligent madman, but mad nonetheless. No attempts on my part of sympathetic reinterpretation could alter this conclusion: his apocalyptic and deranged visions, his heavenly signs and signals, his belief in his own divinely ordained retributive mission, his obsessive fasting and prayer, his bloodthirsty megalomania and self-identification with the Deity (to a provocative question about himself by Gray, he replied: "Was not Christ crucified?")—there was no shaking the fact that on the record Nat Turner was a dangerous religious lunatic. I didn't want to write about a psychopathic monster. (Styron, *My Generation* 140-41)

In the place of the certitude of a "religious lunatic", Styron inserts doubt and ambivalence. Turner doubts the desirability of becoming a free black, remembering his mother's words: "Druther be a low cornfield nigger or dead than a free nigger" (190). Contemplating his "great mission" in the summer of 1825, he is "still fearful and laden with anxiety and unwilling to formulate any definite plans" (253). After resolving to go ahead with the rebellion, he worries that his "great scheme would come to the attention of some obsequious coon of a house nigger who [. . .] would hurry to Old Massah or Ole Mistis with the tidings" (350). He also doubts his ability to manage the "unfocused hatred and madness" of one of the rebels, Will, sensing that he "could in no way control or govern him" (357). Finally, after the rebellion has been quashed, Styron's Turner, in marked contrast with the Turner of Gray's *Confessions*, appears at least partially repentant, praying "*O my God, forgive me the blood of the innocent and slain*" (106).

Despite the protestations of the Ten, it is not difficult—should one seek it—to locate an undercurrent of doubt and hesitation in the 1831 text. The revolt is originally planned for 4th July but has to be postponed when Turner falls ill with anxiety: “Many were the plans formed and rejected by us, and it affected my mind to such a degree, that I fell sick” (Clarke 104). When the revolt does begin, on 21st August, Turner seems to have been compelled by his associates—rather than volunteering himself—to initiate the killing: “It was then observed that I must spill the first blood” (105). What occurs next becomes in Styron’s hands the surest indication of Turner’s ambivalence about his project. In Gray’s text, Turner describes entering the bedroom of his master, Joseph Travis, “armed with a hatchet”, but is unable to kill him: “it being dark, I could not give a death blow, the hatchet glanced from his head, he sprang from the bed and called his wife” (105). It is left to Will to kill Travis with his axe. Later that night, Turner attempts to kill Sarah Newsome, but again fails: “I took Mrs. Newsome by the hand, and with the sword I had when I was apprehended, I struck her several blows over the head, but not being able to kill her, as the sword was dull” (106). Once more, Will takes over and accomplishes the task. In fact, only one of the fifty-five whites killed by the rebels died by Nat Turner’s hand. At the Whitehead house, as Will drags Catherine Whitehead onto the front step to kill her, Turner notices one of the Whitehead daughters, Margaret, hiding behind a cellar cap. Margaret flees but Turner catches up with her and at the third time of asking is able to kill: “after repeated blows with a sword, I killed her by a blow on the head, with a fence rail” (107).

Styron makes much of the fact that Turner twice fails in the act of killing. Early in the novel, Gray torments Turner by underlining the fact that he only killed one person, referring to his “overall reluctance”, and gleefully pointing out that the

darkness of Travis's bedroom—which Turner cited as the reason for his failure to kill—had proved no obstacle for Will: "'Twarn't any less dark in there for Will than for you, less'n he was a cat" (Styron, *Confessions* 39). When, later in the novel, the events of the revolt are recounted by Turner, it is clear that he is psychologically ill-suited for the task of bloodshed; after his attempt on Travis he recalls feeling that: "all strength had left me, my limbs were like jelly" (378), while, at a different plantation, the sight of Will splitting open the head of William Reese causes Turner to "st[eal] off to puke my guts up for minutes in the woods" (393).

For Styron, giving his protagonist a distaste for killing was part of his attempt to furnish Turner with "dimensions of humanity that were almost totally absent in the documentary evidence" (Styron, *My Generation* 141). For the Ten, however, rather than humanise Turner, Styron had emasculated him. They read the character's reluctance to kill whites in the same way as one of the Ten, Poussaint, read the brief homosexual encounter Turner has in the novel, that is, as "impl[ying] that Nat Turner was not a man at all" (21).[3] Styron, in turn, responded to the criticisms of the Ten by claiming that "what disturbed them" was that his version of Turner "did not correspond, on the crudest level, to a kind of stereotypical cardboard black hero, but instead [was] a person with enormous frailties, wounds, miseries, and indecisions" (qtd. in Greenberg 222). In *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination*, Celeste-Marie Bernier rejects this claim: "Styron misreads the antagonism toward his representations of Turner not as being based on his one-dimensional racist portrayals but as being rooted in an illusory desire among Black audiences for an idealized archetype: such was not the case" (127). Although Bernier goes on to note that "if debates regarding battles over the ownership of Turner across the centuries prove anything, it is that no 'real' heroic figure exists that can be

accessed either through historical representation, folkloric memory, or imaginative re-creation" (127), she elides the fact that the Ten claim access to the "real Nat Turner" (Clarke vii, 5, 11), the "real history" (48, 91), and "Nat Turner's real stature and meaning" (25).

In a more sceptical reading of *TBWR*, Charles Joyner claims that "[the Ten's] version of history, like Styron's, was painfully ill-formed" (Greenberg 199). Joyner takes issue with Harding's reference to the Nat Turner found in "the living traditions of black America" (Clarke 29), arguing that the image of Turner presented in *TBWR* was "certainly not supported by any evidence in the scores of collections or analyses of authentic field-recorded African-American oral tradition" (Greenberg 199). Rather, "[the Ten's] construction of a powerful, commanding Nat Turner is far more nearly in the image of the Paul Bunyans and the frontier boasters of white folklore than in that of the great tricksters" who "overcome larger and more powerful critters not by using their physical force but by using their intellect" (199-200).

One aspect of Styron's Turner that the Ten do not challenge is his intelligence. For Bernier, however, "[w]hile the Turner/Gray *Confessions* had documented the white man's admiration for the Black man in spite of his racist beliefs over a century before—Gray admitted to Turner's 'uncommon share of intelligence'—Styron's *Confessions* places undue emphasis upon the Black man's involuntary respect for, and inferiority to, the white man" (131). The latter "white man" to which Bernier refers is Joseph Travis whom Turner describes as "brave" when confronted by the rebels (Styron, *Confessions* 378). Yet, considering the characterisation of Turner across the entire novel, any claim that he is presented as inferior is difficult to support. Indeed, Turner is by some distance the book's most impressive character. Unlike in Gray's text, the Turner of the novel is not given to implausible boasts, such as claiming

mysterious knowledge of events before his birth (Clarke 99). Thus, when Turner describes designing and constructing two "ingenious" devices—the first a heating system (Styron, *Confessions* 48), the second a type of toilet (313)—his intelligence is credibly revealed to be beyond that of any person in the surrounding area, black or white. His capacity for subtle irony is displayed in an exchange with Catherine Whitehead in which she condescendingly commends him as "the handiest young darky anywhere around" and praises him for "turn[ing] out an honest day's work like no darky I've ever come across" (316-17). Although Turner seethes with hatred for Catherine Whitehead's unthinking complicity in the institution of slavery, he wittily disguises a prophecy about the destruction of slaveholders in the form of a religious platitude: "I do my best, Miss Caty [. . .] Paul said every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor, for we are laborers together with God. I do believe that" (317). Finally, Styron's Turner is given a complex psychology with a self-reflective relation to it. In a characteristic contemplation, Turner asks: "Does it seem a hopeless paradox that the less toilsome became the circumstances of my life the more I ached to escape it? That the more tolerable and human white people became in their dealings with me the keener was my passion to destroy them?" (333). Turner's penetrating insight is that the more benevolent whites appear—it should be noted here that Gray's Turner describes Joseph Travis as a "kind master" (Clarke 104)—the more appalling becomes their participation in the system of slavery.

While Thelwell complains that "Nat sounds like nothing so much as a conscious parody of the prose voice of James Baldwin" (Clarke 81), a measure of Styron's success in creating a compellingly intelligent central character is that Baldwin himself welcomed the comparison, admitting: "Yes, I think there's some of me in Nat Turner. . . . If I were an actor, I could play the part" (qtd. in Stone 122). As

for the separate question of whether the voice of a twentieth-century intellectual was appropriate for a nineteenth-century revolutionary, a generous reading of Styron's choice of narrative voice might be to view it as an admission by the novelist that he could not hope to access the voice of the historical Turner. Indeed, Styron comes close to conceding as much when he admits: "I placed the [young Turner] in a milieu where he could not possibly have belonged" (Styron, *My Generation* 141).

A final area of controversy around Styron's characterisation of Nat Turner relates to the attitude Turner expresses, first, towards other blacks, and second, towards himself as a black man. Three of the Ten—Bennett (Clarke 9), Hamilton (74), Thelwell (82)—describe Turner's attitude towards other blacks as one of "contempt", and cite numerous examples. Indeed, one need not look far for evidence of Turner's disdain for other blacks, whom he calls "my black shit-eating people" (Styron, *Confessions* 29). Certain groups of blacks are treated with especial scorn. Having grown up in the "big house"—which is described as a "world apart"—Turner views those blacks from outside this environment as "a lower order of people—a ragtag mob, coarse, raucous, clownish, uncouth" (133). Elsewhere he describes his "lifelong contempt of all black people who dwelt down the slope" (197), and when "a mob of Negroes from the cabins" (170) comes to the house to receive Christmas gifts, the sight of them fills Turner with "a loathing so intense that it was akin to disgust, belly-sickness" (171). When groups of blacks are being sold from Samuel Turner's plantation, Nat Turner is dismayed by their apparent indifference to their plight: "Like animals they relinquished the past with as much dumb composure as they accepted the present [. . .] Such creatures deserved to be sold, I thought bitterly" (219).

On one occasion, Turner's contempt gives way to feelings of tenderness. During a church service, Turner is filled with hatred for his fellow blacks, viewing

them as “meaningless and as stupid as a barn full of mules”, yet, after glimpsing Margaret Whitehead’s “serene young face”, his “hatred of the Negroes diminishes, dies, replaced by a kind of wild, desperate love for them” (102). On one hand, the fact that Turner’s sudden change in attitude towards other blacks is facilitated by an attractive young white woman who functions as a symbol of innocence appears a gratuitous provocation on Styron’s part. On the other hand, the episode might be read in light of both W.E.B. Du Bois’s idea of double consciousness, the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Du Bois 8), and Frantz Fanon’s reference to the black man being forced to “experience his being through others” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 82). If Turner’s cynical view of blacks is momentarily softened by looking through the eyes of Margaret Whitehead—who admires Turner’s intelligence and is the sole white character in the novel who insists that the enslaved blacks of Virginia should be emancipated (357)—then his default attitude of contempt can be at least partially explained as an internalised racism that has flourished through habitually viewing himself and other blacks through the eyes of white slaveholders.

A more thoroughgoing reversal in Turner’s attitude towards other blacks occurs when he witnesses Will and Sam being forced to fight each other by the slaveholder, Nathaniel Francis. This sickening spectacle reveals to Turner that the low sense of self-worth that he sees in other blacks has been systematically inculcated by slaveholders through a variety of brutal methods. Turner is reborn into a new consciousness—“My heart [. . .] shrank inside me, died, disappeared, and rage like a newborn child exploded there to fill the void” (298)—and resolves to annihilate “the whole world of white flesh” (299). Seeking to restore the self-esteem of his fellow blacks, Turner launches into a sermon in which he exhorts the importance of pride:

> Black folk ain’t never goin’ to be no great nation until they studies to love they own black skin an’ the beauty of that skin an’ the beauty of them black hands that toils so hard and black feet that trods so weary on God’s earth. And when white men in they hate an’ wrath an’ meanness fetches blood from that beautiful black skin then, oh then, my brothers, it is time not fo’ laughing but fo’ weeping an’ rage an’ lamentation! Pride! [. . .] Pride, pride, everlasting pride, pride will make you free! (303)

The above section of Turner’s sermon bears some similarity to a famous passage from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) in which Baby Suggs urges those gathered to love their flesh:

> Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. (103)

For Morrison, however, the overriding sense of Styron’s Turner is of someone who “hated black people”. Given Turner’s repeated expressions of “revulsion”, Morrison wonders “why would anybody follow him?” (“Toni Morrison, The Art of Fiction, No. 134”). An equally pertinent question might be raised about Turner’s motivation to lead a revolt given his frequently voiced dissatisfaction with his fellow blacks. Although Styron may have believed that, in Turner’s sermon, he had sufficiently indicated a reversal in his protagonist’s attitude towards blacks, the regularity and intensity of Turner’s earlier denunciations appear, for many readers, to have overpowered the later figure who exhorts the value of black pride. While Styron could

plausibly point to the instances in Gray's *Confessions* where Turner states that he "studiously avoided mixing in society" (Clarke 101) and "withdrew myself [. . .] from the intercourse of my fellow servants" (102) as some justification for his portrait of an aloof and contemptuous figure, the Ten's criticism about the improbability of a revolutionary leader harbouring disdain for the very people he hopes to emancipate remains valid.

Arguably less justified is Poussaint's charge that Styron's Turner yearns to be white. As evidence for this, Poussaint cites the episode in which Turner is left alone on the deserted plantation, waiting for the Reverend Eppes to arrive. Surveying the buildings and fields, Turner imagines that they now belong to him and, "exercis[ing] the privilege of ownership", urinates on the veranda steps, whilst thinking to himself: "What a strange, demented ecstasy! How white I was! What wicked joy!" (Styron, *Confessions* 227). For Poussaint, this proves Turner's "desire to be white" (Clarke 19), while for Bernier it reveals Turner "fail[ing] to assert his own worth in preferred fantasies of whiteness" (Bernier 130-31). Yet, as his act of urination makes clear, the fantasy that Turner is here indulging in is not of physical whiteness, but of proprietorship and freedom. That Turner first has to envisage himself white in order to assume the role of plantation owner should be read more as an indictment of the system of white supremacy than as a reflection of either the limits of Turner's imagination or his internalised racism. A comparable example of the term "white" standing in for freedom and power, rather than an innate quality, can be found in Philippe Girard's biography of the leader of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint Louverture.[4] In response to a boast by the French commissioner Léger-Félicité Sonthonax: "I am white but I have the soul of a black man", Louverture replied: "And I am black but I have the soul of a white man" (166). Louverture should be

understood here as conveying, not self-hatred, but the same idea as when he wrote: "I was born a slave, but nature gave me the soul of a free man" (Hazareesingh 19). Similarly, Styron's Turner's fantasy is of freedom and power, rather than of whiteness.

The White Woman Question

The last—and perhaps most charged—category of complaint is that the novel contains racist or condescending attitudes towards black characters. In this area, the two elements of Styron's *Confessions* that the Ten found most objectionable were its depiction of the relationship between Nat Turner and Margaret Whitehead, and its portrayal of one of the rebels, Will. We shall examine these in turn.

Of the ten contributors to *TBWR*, nine took issue with Styron's characterisation of Nat Turner's association with white women, with eight of these focusing their critique on Turner's relationship with Margaret Whitehead. For some of the Ten, this aspect of the novel had the effect of perpetuating harmful stereotypes about black male desire for white women.[5] According to Poussaint, Styron, in "present[ing] a Caucasian stereotype of the black man's innermost desires [as being] to sexually possess a white woman", was simply rehearsing what "the white racists have been telling the black man for centuries" (Clarke 20). A second criticism was that Styron had shown Turner as allowing his relationship with Margaret Whitehead to detract from his role as revolutionary leader, thus fuelling racist stereotypes around black incapacity. For Hamilton, the subtext of Turner's connection to Margaret Whitehead was: "[blacks] are really incapable of [. . .] being leaders. All they really want is to have sexual intercourse with our women" (77). A third area of critique was the note of condescension Bennett detected in Styron's decision, in a work

purportedly about Nat Turner, to "elevat[e] the white woman to a position of central importance". For Bennett, this choice revealed Styron to be "shift[ing] the focus of the Turner insurrection, downgrading the main issues (white oppression and black liberation)" (6).

The first of these criticisms can be approached via James O. Young's consideration of harmful representation in fiction. Young asks whether it is acceptable for an outsider novelist to represent a culture in such a way that, although accurate, "puts the culture in a bad light" (Young 113). Young notes that:

> Some cultures are plagued by serious problems. Colonization disrupts cultures and causes a series of problems such as high rates of violence and substance abuse. A novel may accurately represent this reality. One might think that when outsiders (accurately) represent the culture, its members may be stigmatized. Discrimination against members of the culture may be reinforced and perpetuated. In this way the insiders could be harmed and, one might conclude, even the accurate representation of insiders by outsiders is wrong. (113-14)

Despite the argument against accurate representation put forward here, Young goes on to express scepticism that it can ever be wrong to "reveal the truth", concluding that:

> Any accurate representation of the social problems faced by a culture will reveal the sources of these difficulties. It will show when they have been externally caused and when they are not the responsibility of insiders. It will show that the appropriate response to these difficulties is understanding, compassion, and assistance. The correct response is not discrimination. (114)

In light of Young's arguments, the relevant questions about Styron's representation of Nat Turner's attitude towards white women and, more specifically, Margaret Whitehead, are whether the representation is accurate, and whether it contains an adequate explanation of any aspects that could be construed as harmful.

Considering the paucity of historical information about Turner, the question about accuracy might usefully be modified to the following: does Nat Turner's attitude towards white women correspond to a recognised phenomenon or is it purely based in racist mythology? One approach to answering this question would be to look at attitudes towards white women revealed in the work of black male writers. Given the way in which the racist stereotype of the African American male's desire for the white woman has contributed to the endangerment of black male life throughout American history—most shockingly evidenced by the brutal murder of the 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955—there would seem to be some incentive for a black male writer to deny or challenge the stereotype. For example, in a memoir, he might choose to conceal or downplay relationships with white women, while in a novel he might avoid having black male characters in, or pursuing, romantic relationships with white women. However, a survey of some of the major works by African American male writers—Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962)—indicates that the topic of romantic relationships between black men and white woman was not only considered a legitimate subject, but was something of a preoccupation. Indeed, when asked why the topic arose in both *Invisible Man* and *Native Son*, Ellison responded as follows:

> I would say that anyone writing from the Negro-American point of view with any sort of thoroughness would certainly have had to write about the potential meaning and the effects of the relationship between black women and white

> men and black men and white women [. . .] a great part of the society was controlled by the taboos built around the fear of the white woman and the black man getting together. [. . .] Hence any novelist who is going to write from the Negro background would certainly have to deal with these particular aspects of society. They're unpleasant, and yet it is in the unpleasant, in that which is charged with emotion, with fears, with irrationality, that we find great potential for transforming attitudes. (*The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* 543-44)

If Ellison offers a compelling reason for writers to broach the subject—to challenge the irrationalism of racist attitudes—his response gives little indication of the extent to which fictional representations of relationships between black men and white woman were rooted in reality. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) offers greater illumination in this area, with the candid explanation that "in [1940s] Roxbury, in any black ghetto in America, to have a white woman who wasn't a known, common whore was—for the average black man, at least—a status symbol of the first order" (152). There are several reasons why a romantic relationship with a white woman might have conferred prestige to a black man. First, the man's acceptance of an increased risk of physical harm at the hands of white racists would have demonstrated a certain fearlessness. Second, the fact that, for her role in the relationship, the white woman may have risked ostracism from some members of the white community might have suggested a particularly attractive quality in her black male partner. Finally, amongst the black man's peer group there may have been a degree of internalisation of racist ideas placing white women in a superior position to black women. This third reason would appear to explain the high esteem in which Styron's Turner holds white women, since he describes being "reared in surroundings where

women (at least white ladies) seemed to float like bubbles in an immaculate effulgence of purity and perfection" (Styron, *Confessions* 173).

Yet, although Turner's apparent preference for white women can be understood as internalised racism, a product of his upbringing, the nature of his relationship with Margaret Whitehead is more complex. Turner himself struggles to understand his feelings towards her:

> Suddenly, my heart still pounding uproariously, I am filled with a bitter, reasonless hatred for this innocent and sweet and quivering young girl, and the long hot desire to reach out with one arm and snap that white, slender, throbbing young neck is almost uncontrollable. Yet—strange, I am aware of it—it is not hatred; it is something else. But what? What? I cannot place the emotion. It is closer to jealousy, but it is not even that. (91)

What seems to have produced the confusing emotion in Turner is the following remark: "*I mean it's funny, you know, when I tell the girls at school they just don't believe me when I say I go home on weekends and the only person I can talk to is a—is a darky!*" (90). Although they are spoken without malice, Margaret's words are at once cruel, condescending, and dehumanising. They raise the possibility of a special—perhaps romantic—connection, only to abruptly foreclose it. They invite Turner to take pride in his intelligence, yet imply that he is merely an exceptional member of an inherently unintelligent group. Their overall effect is to reduce Turner to the status of an impressive object; later in the novel, after a conversation with Margaret's mother, Catherine Whitehead, Turner has the impression that she views him "[not as] a creature with lips and fingernails and eyebrows and tonsils but some miraculous wheelbarrow" (319). The sense that Margaret Whitehead is unable to view

Turner as fully human is reinforced when she appears before him in pantalettes and no skirt. Turner surmises: "had I not been a Negro and therefore presumably unstirred by such a revealing sight, she would never be so immodest to flaunt thus beneath my nose" (329). Thus, while Turner's impulse to snap Margaret's neck may still seem gratuitously violent, Styron does provide an insight into the source of Turner's anger.

In a later episode, Margaret further infuriates Turner with her astonishing lack of understanding of the predicament of those living in bondage. First, she informs him that if she were "a *man* and a darky" and was struck by a white man she would "just hit him right back" (355). She then goes on to express frustration at "why darkies stay the way they do—I mean all ignorant and everything" (356). Finally, she proudly recounts enlightening a racist friend from the Seminary: "I happen to know that where I live in Southampton my mother hires a darky slave who is *almost* as intelligent and refined and clean and religious and profoundly understanding of the Bible as Dr. Simpson" (357; emphasis added). Yet, despite Turner's annoyance both with Margaret's misinformed views about the realities of slavery and her general tactlessness, there is more than a suggestion of a mutual attraction between the pair. When they go for a ride through woods, on three occasions—each seemingly accidental—they make physical contact (357, 362, 364). In the third instance, as they are walking through the trees, Margaret trips and falls against Turner. Their eyes meet in what feels to Turner a meaningful way, and he wonders: "Could it be, too, that I felt her relax, go the faintest bit limp, as she slumped against me?" (362). By insinuating a white woman's sexual desire for a black man—particularly in a novel set in a period when African Americans were routinely described as "a *biologically* inferior species" (92)—Styron provides a powerful challenge to the racist stereotype

whereby the white woman's characteristic emotion in respect of the black man was fear.

Interestingly, the only one of the Ten not to take a harshly condemnatory view of Styron's depiction of a repressed romantic relationship between Nat Turner and Margaret Whitehead was also the most acclaimed novelist of the group, John A. Williams, author of *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967). Williams's only remark about the relationship suggests he wished to see a fuller treatment: "This distant, spider-web-thin affair between Nat and Margaret never really comes into any kind of focus" (48). It might be thought that Williams's marriage in 1965 to a white woman, Lori Isaac, placed a constraint on his expression of stronger views on Styron's representation of an interracial relationship. However, if one accepts the implied claim common to many of the Ten—that their blackness gave them greater insight into Nat Turner than Styron could hope to achieve—then Williams's experience of an interracial relationship would seem to place him in an ideal position to critique a racist or otherwise problematic depiction of such a relationship. Therefore, the fact that, in this area, Williams charges Styron with nothing more than timidity is instructive.

As for the rest of the Ten, they ignored the novel's suggestion of Margaret's attraction towards Turner, instead focusing their attention on Styron's repeated emphasis on Turner's lust for white women. Certainly, it is difficult to dispute the claim that Styron overplayed this aspect of the narrative; indeed, at several points on their ride together, Turner contemplates raping Margaret. It might be argued that Styron's Turner—who witnesses his mother being raped by an Irish overseer (144)—was rendered more plausible by the appearance in 1968 of *Soul on Ice*, in which Eldridge Cleaver claimed that he had raped white women as revenge for "the

historical fact of how the white man has used the black woman" (Cleaver 14). Yet, even allowing for a similar inclination towards revenge on Turner's part, Styron's method of expressing this inclination—such as having his protagonist desire to "shoot inside [Margaret] warm milky spurts of desecration" (Styron, *Confessions* 358)—has justly led to criticism of his "excessive reliance upon hyperbolic language and sensationalized representations relishing in taboo" (Bernier 125).

There is also some justification for the Ten's second criticism—that Styron's Turner allows his relationship with Margaret Whitehead to distract him from leading the revolt—but in a more limited way than the Ten allow. Before Margaret's death at Turner's hands, there is little textual evidence that Turner's focus was diverted from the rebellion. Indeed, during the episode in which he and Margaret ride through the woods, Turner's single-mindedness is revealed in the fact that he ceases listening to her altogether to concentrate instead on a particular aspect of the revolt (359). However, when Turner kills Margaret, he seems to temporarily forget about his role as leader of a rebellion, "aimlessly circl[ing] her body" for an indeterminate period of time, before finally rejoining his men (404). For the Ten, it is clear that such a lapse offended their conception of Turner as a "virile" and "commanding" figure (5), and was viewed as an example of Styron's acceptance of the idea of black inferiority. Styron, meanwhile, apparently believed that his protagonist's capacity to experience trauma in the wake of a violent killing was preferable to the cold indifference of the "psychopathic monster" whom he found in Gray's *Confessions* (Styron, *My Generation* 141). Such widely divergent viewpoints indicate why public exchanges between Styron and supporters of the Ten tended towards acrimony.

The Ten's third complaint, that Styron had moved a white woman to a position of central importance in the narrative, and, in doing so, had deemphasised the

issues of white oppression and black liberation, appears incontestable. When, at the novel's end, Turner is summoned to his execution, he repents his killing of Margaret Whitehead (while remaining unrepentant over leading the revolt), and achieves reconciliation with God. Killens justifiably wonders why, "in the end, just before he goes to the gallows, he is not thinking about his people's freedom or his own death" (Clarke 40). Elsewhere, Thelwell reads the novel as implying that "if [Turner] had given way to his secret lust and raped the white girl he is later to murder, the rebellion would never have occurred" (85). Perhaps surprisingly, one of the questions that Styron poses to himself in imagining the relationship between Turner and Margaret Whitehead appears to corroborate Thelwell's reading: "Since she was his sole victim, could the entire rebellion have been conceived as his retribution against her?" (Styron, *My Generation* 144). Despite Styron's remark, the idea that the revolt is presented as having its genesis in thwarted sexual desire elides the powerfully damning portrayal of slavery presented in the novel through the appalling experiences of various individuals. One such individual is Turner's grandmother, who is brought to America from the Gold Coast at the age of thirteen. Having been "driven crazy by her baffling captivity", when she is presented with her baby (Turner's mother) she "trie[s] to tear it to pieces" (Styron, *Confessions* 127). Refusing to eat, she dies shortly after the baby's birth; Turner recalls the words—the chilling hypocrisy of which needs no comment—carved into the headboard on her grave:

'TIG'

AET. 13

BORN AN

HEATHEN

DIED BAP-

TISED IN CHRIST

A.D. 1782

R.I.P.

(128)

Equally harrowing is the story of Hark's wife and child—"a little boy about three or four years old" whom Hark "cared for [. . .] almost more than anything"—being sold "off down to Mississippi" (71). Turner's own experiences at the hands of two of his masters, Reverend Eppes and Thomas Moore, include, respectively, attempted molestation (231-32) and gratuitous violence (245-46). Even the most tolerant slaveholder, Samuel Turner, is revealed as a self-deceiving coward whose betrayal of Nat Turner provokes in the latter "fury such as I had never known before" and a desire to see his master "strangled by my own hands" (241). Considering such a litany of horror—to which can be added two aforementioned incidents: the rape of Turner's mother, and Nathaniel Francis forcing Will and Sam to fight one another—the notion that the revolt is shown to be caused primarily by Turner's repressed desire for Margaret Whitehead loses much of its credibility. Thus, Styron's decision to foreground the relationship between Turner and Margaret at the novel's climax seems an error of judgment, distracting as it does from the novel's formidable indictment of slavery.

Arguably another of Styron's errors of judgment is his depiction of Will, whom, according to Thelwell, is portrayed as "an evolutionary marvel, half-nigger, half-beast, [. . .] surely familiar to anyone who knows such classics of southern literature as Dixon's *The Klansman* [sic]" (88). The accuracy of Thelwell's claim can

be verified by comparing the following description of Will: “streaked with mud, stinking, fangs bared beneath a nose stepped upon and bent like a flattened spoon, it seemed to me that he *was* an animal” (Styron, *Confessions* 367), with that of his counterpart in *The Clansman*: “Gus stepped closer, with an ugly leer, his flat nose dilated, his sinister bead eyes wide apart, gleaming apelike” (Dixon 304). Despite the similarities in these representations, two important points should be raised in Styron’s defence. First, the description in Styron’s novel is provided by Turner and thus may be understood to reflect his internalised racism, while that in *The Clansman* is delivered by an omniscient narrator. Second, unlike Dixon, Styron offers an explanation for Will’s violent impulses in the malicious treatment inflicted upon him by his master: “The torture that had been imposed upon him had made him hate not just [Nathaniel] Francis, hate not just white men but all men, all things, all creation” (Styron, *Confessions* 294). It should be remembered that it is the obscene cruelty of Francis—using his whip to force Will and Sam into combat with one another—that proves the final straw for Turner, steeling his determination to “destroy all the white people” (285).

These qualifications, however, only partially exonerate Styron. Since Sam is subject to the same brutal treatment meted out to Will, but does not become a murderous madman and would-be rapist, there is a suggestion that Will is not entirely the creation of the sadism of Nathaniel Francis; perhaps he had certain inclinations that were exacerbated by his ill-treatment. Although Styron might maintain the right to create a black character with undesirable characteristics, just as a black novelist might create a white character with criminal proclivities, two factors made his depiction of Will particularly offensive to the Ten and other black critics. First, in Gray’s *Confessions*, Will’s noble explanation for joining the revolt—“his life was

worth no more than others, and his liberty as dear to him" (Clarke 105)—was viewed by the Ten as proof of a disposition very different to that presented in Styron's Will. Arguably relying too heavily on the veracity of Gray's document, Williams asserts: "In real history, not Styron's, Will was almost as patient and self-possessed as Turner" (48), while, in an essay submitted too late for inclusion in *TBWR*, Bernard W. Bell writes that "the implied nobility of the historical Will is in sharp contrast to Styron's obscene, pathological killer" (B.W. Bell 290). While the idea that a patient, self-possessed, and noble Will can be easily accessed in "real history" is highly questionable, there can be little doubt about the obscenity of Styron's version, who, when not "mutter[ing] to himself [. . .] incoherently" (294), is given to such ominous declarations as: "I gwine git me some meat now—*white* meat. I gwine git me some dat white cunt too" (367).

The second factor, which makes Will's maddened desire to rape white woman so problematic, is that, as Thelwell points out, "no sexual incidents are mentioned in the record of the trial" (Clarke 89). A certain ambiguity arises in this area in that Thelwell implies that Styron depicts Will raping Catherine Whitehead, while Eugene Genovese maintains that "there are no instances of rape [during the revolt] in Styron's book" ("The Nat Turner Case"). The passage in question reads as follows:

> There deserted of all save those two acting out their final tableau—the tar-black man and the woman, bone-white, bone-rigid with fear beyond telling, pressed urgently together against the door in a simulacrum of shattered oneness and heartsick farewell [. . .] Then I saw Will draw back as if from a kiss and with a swift sideways motion nearly decapitate Mrs Whitehead in a single stroke. (Styron, *Confessions* 401)

Taken in isolation, the first sentence of this passage might be read as a description of a sexual assault, yet the preceding part of the narrative indicates that when Turner sees Will, the latter has only just come out of the house, in which several of the Whitehead daughters have been killed moments earlier (400-01). The implied sexual element of the description is, therefore, more plausibly understood as a product of Turner's feverish imagination; shortly before viewing Will and Catherine Whitehead, Turner appears to have fainted, with one of the rebels remarking: "You's sick, Nat, isn't you?" (400). Nonetheless, even if one concedes Genovese's point, it appears reasonably clear that Will has abstained from the rape of white women only because of Turner's earlier injunction against it (368). Thus, while Will's restraint in this area means that Bell's claim that "Styron's Will is another stereotype: the archetypal 'bad nigger' run amok" (B.W. Bell 291), is not entirely accurate, Styron arguably places insufficient distance between his character and such a stereotype.

As should be clear from the foregoing, the disagreements between Styron and the Ten were numerous and complex, and the temptation to award victory in the dispute to one of the parties, as some have sought to do, should be resisted. Each appealed to the veracity of Gray's *Confessions* when it suited them, yet ignored those aspects of it that contradicted their version of Turner and the revolt. Styron's dismissal of many of the Ten's charges as being rooted in an aversion to a white man writing about a black historical figure can be justly viewed as an evasion of legitimate criticisms. On the other hand, the Ten's criticism of the liberties Styron had taken with history was itself often based on a speculative and limited historical approach.[6] In the next section, I approach the controversy from another angle by considering two texts that certain

critics of Styron's novel have viewed as superior models of historical fiction depicting black resistance.

Black Thunder (1936) and *Ol' Prophet Nat* (1967)

The Ten's criticism of Styron's *Confession* sometimes took the form of an unfavourable comparison to a related novel. Killens quotes a line from Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966)—"No matter what a white planter said, every slave craved his freedom" (qtd. in Clarke 37)—believing that it provides a more accurate picture of slavery than that in Styron's novel, while Williams recommends John Clellan Holmes' *The Horn* (1958) as "far and away the best work by a white author on Negroes in contemporary times" (46). However, the most commonly cited novel was Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder* (1936). Williams admires Bontemps as "*both* a novelist and a historian" (46), Kaiser similarly praises his "hard historical work" (56), and Killens, whose discussion of *Black Thunder* spans three pages, venerates Bontemps' depiction of "desperate men [. . .] who are ready to write a tragedy with their lives" (39). Albert E. Stone has noted the efforts of Beacon Press (who republished *Black Thunder* in 1968) to present Bontemps' novel as a less problematic alternative to *The Confessions of Nat Turner* by advertising it on the back cover of *TBWR* as "a black writer's novel of Gabriel Prosser's slave revolt, rich in the pride and integrity which black writers feel Styron's novel ignored" (193).

Given certain of the Ten's criticisms of Styron's *Confessions*, it is clear why *Black Thunder* was strongly preferred. First, in contrast to a leader who, in the heat of battle, vomited, fainted, and lost focus (Styron, *Confessions* 393, 400, 404), Gabriel Prosser is revealed to possess qualities of resilience and courage that only flourish

under pressure. When his executioner invites him to make a final statement, Gabriel coolly replies: "Let the rope talk, suh" (*Black Thunder* 223). Moreover, Gabriel's physical strength far outstrips that of Styron's Turner; the former's reputation as "the baddest nigger in Henrico County" (18) is established when he defeats a formidable black driver, Ditcher, in a fight. Second, whereas Styron depicts Turner struggling to recruit rebels, Bontemps suggests a greater enthusiasm for resistance by having a free black, Mingo, committing to Gabriel's revolt. Finally, while Styron's novel contains no reference to previous slave revolts, Gabriel and his rebels take inspiration from the example of the Haitian Revolution; in one of their planning meetings Toussaint Louverture's famous rallying cry of 29 August 1793 is read aloud: "I have undertaken to avenge your wrongs. It is my desire that liberty and equality shall reign. I am striving to this end. Come and unite with us, brothers, and combat with us for the same cause" (66). Killens may have this reference to Louverture in mind when he takes issue with Styron's Turner seeking to fix "the idea of a nigger Napoleon" in the rebels' minds (Styron, *Confessions* 323), asking "why did not Nat think to inspire them with an example of black militancy in the person of black Toussaint" (Clarke 41-42).

Nevertheless, there are particular aspects of Bontemps' novel that resemble elements of Styron's *Confessions* that attracted harsh condemnation from the Ten. The first of these is the similarity between the character Criddle in *Black Thunder* and Styron's Will. Criddle, a black stable boy, is tasked with guarding a house to ensure that the white owner does not leave and alert the town to the rebellion. Squatting beneath a bush, Criddle notices the white man's sixteen-year-old daughter, Grisselda, at a lighted window, a sight that stirs him with violence and lust: "He passed a thumb meditatively down the edge of his scythe-sword and derived an unaccountable

pleasure from the thought of thrusting it through the pale young female" (90). The sexual symbolism of Criddle's sword becomes more explicit later in the chapter—"He held his sword arm tense; the scythe blade rose, stiffened, stiffened and remained erect"—so that when Criddle declares: "I'm going to start in right here, me" (92), it is unclear whether he is referring to rape, murder, or both. Thus, in their unqualified praise of Bontemps' "hard historical work", Williams and Kaiser appear to accept as fact what some of the Ten (especially Poussaint [Clarke 20]) objected to in Styron's novel, namely that, during slave revolts, certain rebels viewed the rape of white women as legitimate revenge for the treatment of black women by white slaveholders.

The question here is not about whether rapes occurred during the Turner revolt—as noted above, the historical records indicate they did not—but about the possible desire, at least amongst some rebels, to repay the violation of black women in kind. In his robust defence of Styron, Genovese notes that "C. L. R. James, in his superb book, *Black Jacobins*, refers without fuss to the raping of white women" ("The Nat Turner Case"). The passage to which Genovese alludes reads: "They, whose women had undergone countless violations, violated all the women who fell into their hands, often on the bodies of their still bleeding husbands, fathers and brothers. 'Vengeance! Vengeance!' was their war-cry" (James 88). Killens laments the fact that Styron's Turner does not look to the Haitian Revolution as a model of resistance, yet if James's picture of the revolution as entailing widespread retaliatory rape can be admitted as even partially accurate, then it is unsurprising that Turner, a Christian preacher, should not have sought to emulate it. Styron's Turner, despite his conflicted emotions towards Margaret Whitehead, is repelled by Will's "obsess[ion] with the idea of raping white women", insisting that it is "something that I could not abide" (Styron, *Confessions* 353). Moreover, Killen's belief that Styron's Turner should have

followed Bontemps' Gabriel in taking Toussaint Louverture as a role model assumes a deep irony given Louverture's apparently numerous affairs with white women (M.S. Bell 199-200), which Girard believes went beyond "mere sexual gratification", becoming "a way for Louverture to avenge past slights and publicize the new racial order" (223).

A second similarity with Styron's *Confessions* arises in *Black Thunder*'s portrayal of Ben Woodfolk, an elderly black house servant who is recruited to the conspiracy but later reveals it to his master, Moseley Sheppard. In *TBWR*, Killens introduces Bontemps' novel having just declared that the fact that "every slave craved his freedom" (quoted from Walker's *Jubilee*) was a "fundamental truth" that Styron had failed to accept in his *Confessions* (37). Yet, Bontemps' Ben presents something of a challenge to the purported universality of this truth. When invited to swear allegiance to the rebellion, Ben, feeling that he "wasn't in for no such cutting up as all that" (56), begins to weep and the following exchange takes place:

> "What's the matter, nigger, don't you want to be free?"
>
> Ben stopped sobbing, thought a long moment.
>
> "I don't know," he said. (56)

In addition to being uncertain about the merits of freedom, Ben appears to share some of the docility and internalised racism displayed by characters in Styron's *Confessions*. He is "glad" when "Marse Sheppard" calls him "a good boy" (51), he is "tortured with the vision of filthy black slaves coming suddenly through [the] windows" of Sheppard's house (61-62), and he tells Sheppard that "Niggers ain't people" (92). It should be noted that whereas Styron's Turner believed that "*most* Negroes are hopelessly docile" (Styron, *Confessions* 58; emphasis added), Ben, and the other

traitor, Pharoah, are depicted as anomalous cases, who, by the novel's end, have been ostracised from the black community. Nonetheless, the presence of such unattractive characters in *Black Thunder* indicates that black novelists such as Bontemps were more willing to consider the full range of responses to the call to rebel than were some of the Ten.

While Daniel Panger's 1967 novel, *Ol' Prophet Nat* is not discussed in *TBWR*,[7] one of the Ten, Loyle Hairston, reviewed it favourably in *Freedomways* in the summer of 1968. Hairston's praise of the novel was perhaps surprising, given that Hairston had previously asserted that "white writers" are "incapable of portraying black characters as human types" (Clarke 68). *Ol' Prophet Nat* had apparently caused Hairston to rethink this claim, although his position on Styron's novel had not softened: "Where Styron conceived an ogre, Daniel Panger created a human being" (Hairston 267). Hairston praises Panger for telling the story "simply and without literary pretension" (267), and felt that Panger had underlined the necessity of resistance: "Mr. Panger helps us to understand an essential fact about [Nat Turner]: the condition of slavery provided no alternative to him as a man—except rebellion" (268). More recently, Bernier too prefers this lesser known work to Styron's bestseller, arguing that "[Panger] documents Turner as a Black heroic role model in intellectual and moral dialogue with his community rather than as a bathetic stereotype persecuted by white racist delusions and imaginary demons" (133).

Given the criticisms of Styron's *Confessions* in *TBWR*, several elements of Panger's novel are likely to have appealed to Hairston and *Freedomways*, whose Associate Editor, John Henrik Clarke, had edited *TBWR*. First, unlike Styron, Panger

provides his Turner with a black wife and children. Indeed, Panger's modern-day frame narrator[8] presents the existence of Turner's wife as an historical fact, noting, in the book's final paragraph, that "Turner's wife was discovered by the whites during his weeks of hiding; she was severely beaten in an attempt to have her betray her husband's whereabouts" (159). Second, *Ol' Prophet Nat* provides a background picture of resistance—which the Ten felt was denied in Styron's novel—in the shape of Denmark Vesey's planned revolt. Turner, who has heard about Vesey's failed uprising from many different sources, recalls being told that "Vesey had ten thousand slaves ready to follow him", including "black men ready up to one hundred miles away from Charleston—black men with arms, with money, with food" (26). Panger's reference to Vesey's planned rebellion would have been welcomed by Clarke, who had asserted in *TBWR* that "The Nat Turner revolt cannot be understood out of context with the atmosphere of revolt that prevailed throughout the first half of the nineteenth century" (Clarke ix).

A final, and perhaps most important, aspect of *Ol' Prophet Nat* that made it a more likely candidate for the endorsement of *Freedomways* than Styron's *Confessions* is its inclusion of a type of rhetoric associated with the Black Power movement of the 1960s. Indeed, a paragraph near the end of Turner's narrative might be mistaken for an excerpt from a Malcolm X speech:

> If we wait for the whites to give us our God-given rights, we will wait until the sun grows cold. If we wait until the whites decide to treat black people like human beings, we will wait until the ocean is dry. The black man will only get as much as he is willing to fight for. For a man to be free he must be ready to die for that same freedom. (Panger 156)

In *TBWR*, Clarke (ix) and Killens (36) had compared Nat Turner to two inheritors of Malcolm X's philosophy of black empowerment, Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. Another contributor, Charles V. Hamilton, had co-authored *Black Power* (1967) along with Carmichael. Vincent Harding, meanwhile, began his essay by taking issue with Styron's claims that Rap Brown should not be viewed as "an archetypal American hero" in the manner of Nat Turner, and that "what [Brown] is preaching [is incapable] of anything but disaster" (Styron qtd. in Clarke 23). Panger's decision to attribute to Turner the ideology of Black Power, compared with Styron's refusal to do so, helps explain the favourable reception of *Ol' Prophet Nat* in *Freedomways*, despite the many ways in which Panger's novel replicated elements that the Ten had objected to in Styron's *Confessions*.

The most obvious similarity between the two novels is their approach to the question of docility amongst slaves. In one particular passage, Panger's Turner is revealed to have a similar attitude on the subject as Styron's Turner, whose assertion that "most Negroes are hopelessly docile" (Styron, *Confessions* 58) was vehemently denounced by several of the Ten:

> There is a quality about the state of slavery that causes men to lose their knowledge of exactly what is good and what is bad. To be sure, not all are touched in the exact same way. But it is a tragic truth that many, if not most, unless they fight against it, become like dogs who are whipped too often. Dogs that lick their master's hand, the same hand that held the whip, when that hand gives the beast a piece of meat. (Panger 59)

Other examples suggest that Panger, to a large degree, accepts Elkins's thesis about the system of slavery having such a brutalising effect on the enslaved that their

capacity for resistance is often destroyed. Panger's Turner concedes as much when he writes, "[t]hose who suffer most oftentimes are so broken that they cannot even think of freedom any more" (60). When a visiting white preacher promises the riches of Heaven to those slaves who are "good and loyal to [their] masters" (96), Turner notes with dismay the credulity of the black audience, concluding that "[t]he white preacher had captured them all" (97).

An equally controversial area in which Styron and Panger find common ground is on the topic of so-called loyal slaves. In Styron's novel, Thomas Gray antagonises Turner by claiming that "you not only had a fantastic amount of niggers who did *not* join up with you but there was a whole countless number of other niggers who was your active *enemies* [. . .] who were as determined to protect and save their masters as you were to murder them" (386). Though Turner does not respond to Gray's provocation, he "[feels] rage above all at those Negroes who refused us or fled us or who had become the enemy—those spiritless and spineless wretches who had turned against us" (387). He recalls Hark "shouting above our own rifle fire: *Look at dem black fuckahs shootin' at us!*", and admits that "Gray was not wrong: the black men had caused my defeat just as surely as the white" (388). In the letter pages of *The Nation*, Aptheker had strongly objected to Styron's suggestion that black slaves had been armed by certain slaveholders during the Turner revolt:

> Concerning the use of armed black slaves by the masters in Virginia in 1831 to crush Turner's rebellion, I did say that this was inconceivable and hold to that word. But the main thing I said was that it was untrue and that, furthermore, never in the history of slavery in the United States were black slaves armed by their masters for slave-suppressing duties. One who reads Styron's novel and sees the pages devoted to detailed description of black

> fighting black and recalls that it is this "fact" that finally, in the novel, breaks Turner [. . .] will understand the full dimensions of this perversion of reality. (Aptheker, "Truth & Nat Turner: An Exchange" 544)

In *TBWR*, Thelwell, perhaps following Aptheker who is referenced approvingly throughout the volume, calls Styron's suggestion that "Turner's ultimate defeat com[es] as a result of the actions of loyal slaves who fought in defense of their beloved masters" the "major invention that gives color to the entire novel", and claims it is "contrary to any historical evidence" (Clarke 90). The historian Patrick Breen, however, contends that whites did arm slaves at Blunt's plantation (Breen 73), but notes that "the whites restricted the blacks' access to the guns to those times when they thought an attack was about to happen" (74).[9]

In Panger's novel, Turner proposes, in a planning meeting, that the rebels avoid Doctor Blunt's plantation since "Blunt was known to have such a heavy hand upon his slaves that I doubted our chances of having those beaten, frightened slaves join our ranks" (111). During the revolt, however, Turner, believing that the whites have fled, is persuaded to lead his group to Blunt's place in the hope of replenishing supplies and recruiting men. Yet, they meet resistance there in the form of Doctor Blunt, several other white men, and "ten or more of his slaves all armed with good muskets" (151). In describing Turner's reaction to the behaviour of the armed slaves, Panger appears again to be drawing upon Elkins's view of the effects of slavery, though with a slight modification: "They had been beaten so often that they were no longer human. The whip had made them into willing beasts. [. . .] The poor slaves knew not what they were doing" (151-52). Whereas in Elkins's account of "Sambo", the brutality of slavery resulted in infantilism, Panger's Turner views the slaves as having been reduced to the status of submissive animals. Given the severe criticism

Styron received at the hands of the Ten and elsewhere for his acceptance of aspects of Elkins's work, Panger appears fortunate to have escaped similar censure.

A final area of similarity between the two novels is in the often-unflattering depiction of enslaved blacks. While Bennett criticises Styron for his portrayal of Hark as docile (Clarke 7), the portrait of Hark in Panger is arguably much more offensive. As noted above, Styron's Turner admits that Hark's docility is a mask. Elsewhere in the novel, Turner registers Hark's crafty intelligence; he is "the only Negro in Virginia whose wise flattery could gull a white man out of his very britches" (Styron, *Confessions* 32-33). Panger's Hark, meanwhile, is shown to be miserably simple-minded; rather than gulling white men, Hark is the victim of their gulling. With such unimaginative taunts as "I'm betting, big as you are, you can't whip that fellow. [. . .] They call you Hercules but I've been watching; Old Nat is a better man than you" (67), Doctor Blunt is able to manipulate Hark into fighting Turner. The depiction of the other rebels is equally disparaging; they are shown defying Turner's orders (138-39), getting drunk at Parker's place (141), and even deserting him (150). Although Turner regularly loses his temper with his men, on one occasion admitting "I lost my head and started shouting" (139), he is also "filled with such a feeling of love" toward his followers that he is unable to speak (136). Stone correctly contends that a "sense of racial solidarity and cultural unity chiefly distinguishes Panger's from Styron's protagonist" (189). Yet, if Styron's Turner's (supposed) contempt for his fellow blacks might cause the reader to distrust his unflattering descriptions of their behaviour, Panger's Turner's comparative love for his people means that his often critical account of their actions carries greater weight. Hairston and Bernier choose not to focus on *Ol' Prophet Nat*'s depiction of the rebels as undisciplined, untrustworthy, and cowardly, in favour of emphasising the novel's heroic conception

of Turner. This elision of the more problematic aspects of Panger's text, has allowed such critics to view it as an antiracist novel. Yet, given the similarities between Styron and Panger in the areas noted above, a condemnation of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* as racist would appear to compel a similar judgment upon *Ol' Prophet Nat*.

Styron and Best: The "Aesthetic of the Intransmissable"

The debates examined in the two previous sections often revolved around the question of which party could claim the most authoritative access to the past. In *None Like Us*, however, Stephen Best commends artworks that "resist the impulse to redeem the past and instead rest content with the fact that our orientation toward it remains forever perverse, queer, askew" (65). Best's project takes its inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche's contention that "a historical phenomenon, known clearly and completely and resolved into a phenomenon of knowledge, is, for him who has perceived it, dead" (Nietzsche qtd. in Best 95). Thus, for Best, in approaching the slave past, the historian must be prepared to engage with "a history of people with whom we fail to identify, who appear stuck in the past beyond the reach of our historical categories; a history of people whose minds we can acknowledge but cannot know; a history, in short, of those who are unfit for history" (96).

In this section, I argue that in certain ways Styron's *Confessions* can be seen to fulfill the criteria for such artworks as Best has in mind. Despite the implication in "This Quiet Dust" that *Confessions* was born out of Styron's sense that "to come to *know* the Negro" had "become the moral imperative of every white Southerner" (Styron, *My Generation* 74), the novel can be seen to signal that the historical Nat

Turner is ultimately unknowable; in Best's terms, the novel admits "the unforthcomingness of the past" (24).

One of the main methods by which Styron's novel casts doubt upon our access to the historical Nat Turner is by drawing attention to the uncertain status of Gray's *Confessions*. The limitations of this document (and indeed of Styron's own novel) as a means of coming to "know" Turner are suggested from the outset in Turner's explanation of his refusal to answer one of Gray's questions: "there were matters which had to be withheld even from a confession, and certainly from Gray" (Styron, *Confessions* 35). Thus, even if Gray has accurately transcribed Turner's words, the original *Confessions* can only yield a knowledge that is partial and unstable. That Gray *has* recorded Turner's words with accuracy is cast into doubt by his admission that he has made certain alterations: "Of course, Nat, this ain't supposed to represent your exact words as you said them to me" (31). Moreover, when Gray reads his transcript to Turner the latter has little interest in determining its veracity, his mind often wandering to contemplation of other subjects. As a result, Turner is sceptical about the document's authenticity, as indicated parenthetically in his description of his attention returning to Gray's reading of his transcript: "His words (mine? ours?) came back in my brain" (38).

Turner's relation to Gray is rendered even more enigmatic when they meet for the final time:

> He hands the Bible to me through the bars of the door. For a long moment we gaze at each other in the flickering light and I have a strange sensation which passes almost as quickly as it comes, that never have I seen this man in my life. I say nothing to him in answer. (413)

Turner's "strange sensation" that he has never seen Gray lends itself to a variety of interpretations. It may simply be that Gray's rare act of kindness casts him in a different light so that Turner encounters him anew. More intriguingly, however, Gavin Cologne-Brookes suggests that the passage, together with Turner's sense that Gray is "another man" (413), might be read as Turner encountering a different author: William Styron. For Cologne-Brookes, "[i]t's as if Nat is somehow aware of the metafictional truth: that Gray is indeed the author's distorted self-image beamed back in time for this encounter" (140). Viewing this figure as Styron, Turner's lack of response—"I say nothing to him in answer"—assumes special significance. One might read Turner's silence as a refusal to cooperate with a white southerner whom he eyes with suspicion. Alternatively, following Cologne-Brookes's suggestion that Gray's gift of the Bible figuratively reads as Styron handing Turner his completed novel, Turner's refusal to pass comment can be seen as underlining the futility of all efforts—by Gray, Styron, Panger et al.—to speak on Turner's behalf. In this manner, Styron's *Confessions* can be thought to enact "an aesthetics of the intransmissible" (Best 22), that is, it admits its own failure to access "the voice of the enslaved" (127).

Two other readings of Turner's feeling of having never before seen Gray further complicate Styron's orientation to his subject. On one hand, there is the sense that Turner has not previously been interviewed by Gray, suggesting that Gray's *Confessions* has been written without input from Turner. Such a reading takes the above-noted scepticism about the authenticity of Gray's document to its most extreme point. On the other hand, Turner's curious sensation of having not seen Gray before can be read as an acknowledgement by Styron that his Turner is not the Turner of the original *Confessions*. In this reading, Styron can be seen to preempt accusations that he has departed from certain details in Gray. Viewed in this way, Styron's novel

assumes aspects of those artworks that Best sees as "striv[ing] to forge critical possibilities by way of a kind of apocalypticism, or self-eclipse, appearing to take on a self-consuming form by attempting to either close themselves off or use themselves up" (37). Insofar as Styron's *Confessions* divorces itself from Gray's *Confessions*—generally recognised as the central source of knowledge about Nat Turner—it becomes an historical novel that places its protagonist outside of history. Put differently, Styron's Turner is acknowledged as a figure, in Best's suggestive term, "unfit for history" (96).

A final way in which Styron's *Confessions* signals Turner's unknowability is in his recurrent dream of a white temple on a promontory facing the sea. Turner dreams of this temple three times, and the novel begins and ends with it. In the first dream the temple is described as follows:

> In the sunlight the building stands white—stark white and serene against a blue and cloudless sky. It is square and formed of marble, like a temple, and is simply designed, possessing no columns or windows but rather, in place of them, recesses whose purpose I cannot imagine, flowing in a series of arches around its two visible sides. The building has no door, at least there is no door that I can see. Likewise, just as this building possesses neither doors nor windows, it seems to have no purpose, resembling, as I say, a temple—yet a temple in which no one worships, or a sarcophagus in which no one lies buried, or a monument to something mysterious, ineffable, and without name. (6)

For Toni Morrison, this "sealed white structure [. . .] serves as an allegorical figuration of the defeat of the enterprise [Styron] is engaged in: penetration of the black-white barrier" (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 69). Certainly, the absence of

windows and doors in Turner's imagined temple make Morrison's impenetrable barrier explanation appear plausible. Yet, paying close attention to other particular details in the description of the temple yields a different, and more surprising, interpretation. Significantly, these details are repeated in Turner's imagining himself as the owner of the plantation: "I suddenly felt myself its possessor; in a twinkling I became white—white as clabber cheese, white, *stark white, white as a marble Episcopalian*" (226-27; emphasis added). While Turner's repetition of the terms "stark white" and "marble" in the context of imagining himself as a plantation owner supports Morrison's interpretation of the temple as the white world, closed off from blacks, the fact that Turner applies the terms to himself should not be ignored. Indeed, it points towards an interpretation of the temple as symbolising, inter alia, Nat Turner and the ways in which he has proved inaccessible, unknowable. Reading the temple as Turner—that is, reading Turner as equally mysterious and impenetrable—calls for a different orientation to the past than that embodied in the public exchanges between Styron, the Ten, Aptheker, and Genovese, where each party claimed superior knowledge of Turner. It is a reading more in keeping with Henry Louis Gates's expert contention that "there is no Nat Turner back there whole to be retrieved" (Gates in Burnett 00:10:44-49).

Such a reading also accords with Best's project to reorient our relation to the archive. Just as the temple in Turner's dream is doomed to "dwindle in the serene and secret light, fade out, removed from recollection" (7), Best views the past as similarly beyond recovery, arguing, instead, that "our challenge isn't to successfully recover the past so much as it is the more modest task of simply describing something that appears to be vanishing" (87). Crucial to Best's endeavour is the rejection of what he calls "melancholy historicism", which he defines as: "a kind of crime scene

investigation in which the forensic imagination is directed *toward the recovery of a 'we' at the point of 'our' violent origin*. It participates in a broader intellectual matrix within black studies that assumes slavery as the point of origin of this we" (21). Best's contention that our orientation towards the past "remains forever perverse, queer, askew" (65), leads him to conclude that this recovery of a "we" is impossible, and that: "Whatever blackness or black culture is, it cannot be indexed to a 'we'—or, if it is, that 'we' can only be structured by and given in its own negation and refusal" (22). Thus, one might imagine Best responding to George Steiner's question, noted at the start of the chapter—"Would a Negro recognize Nat Turner for one of his own, would he find Mr. Styron's fiction authentic to his own experience?" (qtd. in Ross 124)—by rejecting the premise upon which the question is based, that is, the presumption of a "we" that encompasses Nat Turner and the twentieth-century black readers of Styron's novel.

Regarding the issue of authenticity that Steiner raises, Best might counter that artworks that express an aesthetics of the intransmissible are "enacting a 'style' of freedom: freedom from constraining conceptions of blackness as authenticity, tradition, and legitimacy" (22). Reading Styron's *Confessions* with Best's style of freedom in mind opens the possibility of discovering, as Gates does, an author challenging "easy essentialist distinctions between black and white" (qtd. in Cologne-Brooks 127). In the conclusion of his essay "Nat Turner Revisited", Styron speaks admiringly of his friend James Baldwin, who, according to Styron, had encouraged him to "try to become a black man" and write the novel from Turner's point of view, telling him: "I've done this as a black writer trying to become white people" (Styron qtd. in Greenberg 219). Styron writes "[we] were both setting out to break through the imprisoning walls of color and into the alluring challenge of alien worlds" (Styron,

My Generation 151), before quoting from Baldwin's 1985 essay "Here Be Dragons"[10]: "Each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black, and black in white. We are part of each other" (151). Though the temple of Turner's dreams is constructed with "imprisoning walls" of white, Turner surmises that "inside, it would be as dark as the darkest tomb" (Styron, *Confessions* 410). Thus, in creating a symbol that can be seen to represent both the white world and the black man who sought to annihilate that world, Styron appears to be reaching towards Baldwin's idea of communion across racial barriers—to a sense of "white in black, and black in white".

Conclusion

We are now in a position to return to a question raised at the start of the chapter: can a white author write the story of Nat Turner? As we noted earlier, four of the Ten answered this question in the negative, although one, Hairston, subsequently underwent a change of heart upon reading Panger's *Ol' Prophet Nat*. Despite her admiration of Panger's more heroic treatment of Turner and his rebels, Bernier shares some of the Ten's scepticism about white authors approaching the subject: "Clearly, the inability of a white writer to represent black heroism with any degree of sensitivity or empathy lies at the crux of these difficulties" (127). However, Bernier's description of the negative response to Styron's novel—"Black activists, philosophers, and writers were so angered that they published a lengthy intellectual tract titled *Ten Black Writers Respond*" (125)—gives the misleading impression of a monolithic black voice, channeled into a single volume. In reality, Styron enjoyed the support of a number of prominent black figures. James Baldwin, the historian John Hope

Franklin, the writer and academic J. Saunders Redding, and the social scientist Benjamin Quarles each publicly endorsed the novel (Stone 122-26), while Alex Haley wrote to Styron: "I don't know if I've ever seen captured so succinctly what I, too, feel are the essences of our ethnic condition, and the true motivations of the social tragedies recently" (Tanenhaus). Bernier also ignores the reaction to the novel by arguably the two most influential figures in the field of African American literature: Toni Morrison and Henry Louis Gates Jr. Although Morrison, as noted above, expressed criticisms of Styron's Turner's attitude towards other blacks, she robustly defended the author's decision to write the novel, observing "He went into territory that *is* his territory" (Morrison qtd. in Cologne-Brooks 127). Gates's appreciation of Styron was less equivocal, viewing him as "a brilliant writer" (ibid.), who, in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, did "a brilliant job" (Gates, 00:01:52-55).

The fact that Gates admires Styron's novel is particularly significant given the dim view he takes of the discussion of "Sambo" in Elkins's *Slavery*: "Rarely can I think of a colder, nastier set of claims than these about the lack of courage or 'manhood' of the African-American slaves" (Gates, "What Were the Earliest Rebellions by African Americans?"). Since Styron was certainly influenced by aspects of Elkins's study, that Gates does not find *Confessions* similarly repellent suggests the novel's ability to transcend its limitations. Furthermore, an indication that Styron's text remains a much more complex entity than its critics have allowed is provided by the contradictory positions of two of its contemporary detractors; for Bernier, Styron's Turner is characterised by "irrational primitivism" and "hyperbestialized sexuality" (125), while, for Christopher Tomlins, Styron's "rational calculating Turner" (22) is "a sexually inhibited, homoeroticized celibate" (2).

The demise of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* following *Ten Black Writers Respond* is indexed by a sly reference towards the end of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). The protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, finds himself on a radio talk show where literary critics have assembled to discuss "whether the novel was dead or not" (150). Billy attempts to ask a question, but is beaten to it by a critic who suggests "it would be a nice time to bury the novel, now that a Virginian, one hundred years after Appomattox, had written *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (150). Although "the novel", as a form, has survived, Styron's *Confessions* remains effectively buried under the weight of critical opprobrium. The prevalent assumption in black studies, as Best describes it, that a collective "we" can be recovered from the slave past (13), together with the "constraining conceptio[n] [. . .] of history as inheritance, memory, and social reproduction" (22-23), mean the resurrection of a novel about a black revolutionary hero written by a white author seems a remote possibility. However, the efforts of scholars such as Best to challenge the dominance of "melancholy historicism" may yet open up the possibility of new readings of Styron's novel. Thus, the future of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* depends upon a reorientation to the past.

CHAPTER TWO

James Baldwin: The Cost of Kinship in the 1960s Novels

As with several other mid-twentieth century black intellectuals—Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King—James Baldwin remains a contested figure amongst historians, literary critics, philosophers, and filmmakers.[1] If, as Henry Louis Gates has claimed, there exists "a Fanon for all seasons" (*Tradition and the Black Atlantic* 85), the same might be said of Baldwin. Compare, for instance, Richard Rorty's Baldwin with that of Nikhil Pal Singh: Rorty admires an essentially hopeful figure, who, though unwilling to forgive America's historical sins, nonetheless does not "tur[n] away from the project of achieving the country" (13), while Singh's Baldwin has, by the late 1960s, recognised the "error of investing the generalities of American universalism with his political hope" (56). That these "Baldwins" appear to bear so little resemblance to each other bears out Douglas Field's claim that Baldwin's "work reveals a myriad ambiguities, contradictions and uncertainties that sit uneasily with his increasingly iconic status" (457).

This contradictory nature extends to the subject of this chapter: how the novels *Another Country* (1962) and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) engage with the possibility of kinship across racial boundaries. Each novel explores and amplifies one of the key themes of Baldwin's essays: what occurs in the act of describing the other. This act, Baldwin insists in both his fiction and non-fiction, can

lead to a profound revelation. Yet the person about whom something profound is revealed is not the person being described, but rather the person engaged in the act of description:

> One labels people; [. . .] one labels them "Negro," one labels them "white man." But in the doing of this, you have not described anything—you have not described me when you call me a nigger or when you call me a Negro leader. You have only described yourself. What I think of you says more about me than it can possibly say about you. This is a very simple law ("The Uses of the Blues", *The Cross of Redemption* 75)[2]

We might call this principle Baldwin's *law of description*. Baldwin chiefly invokes this law in respect of the white describing the black, since this act of description, in Baldwin's estimate, has been occurring "for thousands of years" (*TCOR* 13). According to the law of description, this history has afforded blacks a considerable knowledge of whites: "you will see that what a black man knows about a white man stems, inexorably, from the white man's description of who, and what, he takes to be the other—in this case, the black cat: me" (151). Indeed, this knowledge represents the keenest understanding of American whites to be found anywhere: "Nobody else knows white Americans except black Americans" (158). Such assertions, which can be found in numerous essays,[3] sustain Baldwin's confidence in his representations of white consciousness in *Another Country*. Here, the white characters reveal themselves chiefly through the manner in which they observe and describe their black friends. In *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, meanwhile, the family of Leo Proudhammer's white friend, Barbara King, unconsciously expose themselves when they discuss the "Negro problem", an issue that Baldwin famously contended had "nothing to do with the Negroes" (14).

In his meditations on what happens when whites describe blacks, Baldwin goes further than his law of description and suggests that the observation that precedes the description fails or is impossible. That is, whites never had to look at blacks in the way that blacks were forced to look at whites: "you have never had to look at me, because you've sealed me away along with sin and hell and death and all the other things you didn't want to look at, including love, my life was in your hands, and I had to look at you" (17). Rather than seeing black experience, whites invent blackness as a means of distancing themselves from this experience, as a means of *not* seeing it. The idea of whiteness is parasitic on this idea of blackness. The former is defined by its distance from the latter, while the latter encompasses everything that the former cannot be. As Baldwin puts it in "The White Problem": "What it means to be a Negro in this country is that you represent, you are the receptacle of and the vehicle of, all the pain, disaster, sorrow which white Americans think they can escape. This is what is really meant by keeping the Negro in his place" (96). The role of "the Negro", then, is to lend coherence to the idea of whiteness. Whiteness projects its fears and anxieties ("pain, disaster, sorrow") onto blackness, which is at once rendered socially invisible and produced as the image of aberration.

Theorising Blackness: Wilderson and Warren

One can trace the influence of Baldwin's conception of blackness and its relation to whiteness in the work of a number of contemporary theorists of blackness, in particular, that of Frank Wilderson and Calvin Warren. In *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010), Wilderson builds on the work

of Orlando Patterson, Frantz Fanon, and Baldwin to articulate how the idea of the "Human" relies on the social death that constitutes blackness:

> The race of Humanism (White, Asian, South Asian, and Arab) could not have produced itself without the simultaneous production of that walking destruction which became known as the Black. Put another way, through chattel slavery the world gave birth and coherence to both its joys of domesticity and to its struggles of political discontent; and with these joys and struggles the Human was born, but not before it murdered the Black, forging a symbiosis between the political ontology of Humanity and the social death of Blacks. (20-21)

In his account of why the Human required the "social death of Blacks", Wilderson invokes the definition of slavery given in Patterson's seminal work *Slavery and Social Death* (1982): "[slavery] *is the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons*" (qtd. in *Red, White & Black* 14). As Wilderson observes, forced labour is not a constitutive element of this definition since "it does not define the structure of the power relation between those who are slaves and those who are not" (14). For Wilderson, Patterson's key insight is his separation of "experience (events) from ontology (the capacities of power—or lack thereof—lodged in distinct and irreconcilable subject positions, e.g., Humans and Slaves)" (14). This insight aids us in understanding force as "a phenomenon that positions a body, *ontologically*", and labour as "a possible but not inevitable *experience* of someone who is socially dead" (14; emphasis mine). Decoupling force from labour leads Wilderson to distinguish between "the experience of slavery (which anyone can be subjected to) and the ontology of slavery, which in modernity (the years 1300 to the present) becomes the singular purview of the Black" (18).

Baldwin enters Wilderson's analysis via his 1961 essay "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" in which he details his tentative friendship with Norman Mailer. Wilderson quotes Baldwin's identification of the difference between himself and Mailer as being that "[Mailer] still imagines that he has something to save, whereas I have never had anything to lose" (12). This "something to save" that the white man has is, according to Wilderson, "the Master/Slave relation itself" (12). By way of historical proof as to the immense value of this relation to the white man, Wilderson cites David Eltis's detailed explanation of how Europeans could have greatly decreased the costs of enslavement by taking white slaves from Europe to America, rather than sailing to Africa to take black slaves. The reason they declined to do so is that "what Whites would have gained in economic value, they would have lost in symbolic value; and it is the latter which structures the libidinal economy of civil society" (15). To further his exploration of the "something to save" that whites have, Wilderson turns to Peter Dorsey's essay "To 'Corroborate Our Claims': Public Positioning and the Slavery Metaphor in Revolutionary America". Wilderson first cites Dorsey presenting F. Nwabueze Okoye's claim that, for the revolutionary Americans, slavery "represented a 'nightmare' that white Americans were trying to avoid" (21). Dorsey, quoting Patricia Bradley, goes on to note that "the slavery metaphor 'served to distance the patriot agenda from the antislavery movement'", and that "widespread use of the metaphor 'gave first evidence that the issue of real slavery was not to have a part in the revolutionary messages'" (22). Thus, when slavery was used as a metaphor for American subordination in relation to Britain it could provoke the desired revolutionary fervour without casting doubt on the ethics of the actual system of slavery. That is, Humanism could decry the subordination of a particular group of people by another group through an appeal to the Slave—an embodiment of

the anti-Human—as a condition to be avoided. As Wilderson puts it, "the Slave is [. . .] a position *against which* Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity" (11; emphasis added).

The limits of Humanism when confronted with the figure of the Slave has fundamental implications for the idea of freedom:

> [F]irst political discourse recognizes freedom as a structuring ontologic and then it works to disavow this recognition by imagining freedom not through political ontology—where it rightfully began—but through political experience (and practice); whereupon it immediately loses its ontological foundations. Why would anyone do this? Why would anyone start off with, quite literally, an earth-shattering ontologic and, in the process of meditating on it and acting through it, reduce it to an earth-reforming experience? [. . .] Because, I contend, in allowing the notion of freedom to attain the ethical purity of its ontological status, one would have to lose one's Human coordinates and become Black. Which is to say one would have to die. (22-23)

The above passage connects with Baldwin's work in two important ways. First, in seeking to return the idea of freedom to the domain of ontology rather than experience, Wilderson's work intersects with one of Baldwin's major themes: the ontological status of the black American. Later sections of this chapter will explore how this theme is figured in the characters of Rufus Scott and Leo Proudhammer in *Another Country* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, respectively. Second, in raising the (im)possibility of "becom[ing] Black"—impossible, for Wilderson, because of the structural antagonism between the "Black" and the "Human"—Wilderson can be seen to be in dialogue with Baldwin's repeated insistence that

"white is a moral choice" (*TCOR* 157). As I argue below, Baldwin's most powerful critique of America revolves around its refusal to acknowledge that whiteness is an invention, a "machinery [that] operates day in and day out, hour by hour, to keep the nigger in his place" (141). In *Another Country*, both blacks and whites suffer under the delusion of whiteness. The novel suggests that, if whiteness operates through distancing and a refusal to see, then the white American who is morally committed to ending white supremacy must be prepared to embrace blackness—that is, "become black"—in terms of proximity to, and a willingness to see, black experience.

Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror* (2018) approaches the question of blackness via Martin Heidegger, arguing that "black ~~being~~[4] incarnates metaphysical nothing, the terror of metaphysics, in an antiblack world. Blacks, then, have function but not Being—the function of black(ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing)" (5). In a passage that bears comparison to Wilderson's analysis of the Slave's relation to the idea of freedom, Warren argues that:

> [M]etaphysics can *never* provide freedom or humanity for blacks, since it is the objectification, domination, and extermination of blacks that keep the metaphysical world intact. Metaphysics uses blacks to maintain a sense of security and to sustain the fantasy of triumph—the triumph over the nothing that limits human freedom. Without blacks [. . .] nothing's terror debilitates metaphysical procedures, epistemologies, boundaries, and institutions. Black freedom, then, would constitute a form of *world destruction* (6)

In Wilderson's schema, the Slave is the anti-Human against which the Human defines itself, while in Warren, black(ness) is a metaphysical nothing that humanity cannot abide. For Wilderson, the Human can embrace the Slave only at the cost of the death

of the Human, while for Warren, metaphysics—which he limns as "the world and its symbolics" (41)—needs blacks to structure its sense of dominance over nothing, so that "[b]lack freedom" would precipitate a collapse of metaphysics.

In its theorisation of the central "function of black(ness)" in metaphysics, *Ontological Terror* addresses a question that Baldwin untiringly wrestled with in essays, novels, and interviews: "why it was necessary to have a 'nigger' in the first place [. . .] [if] you the white people invented him, then you've got to find out why" (Baldwin and Peck 109). Baldwin's 1963 response to this conundrum in "Down at the Cross" can be compared to Warren's response in 2018:

> The white man's unadmitted—and apparently, to him, unspeakable—private fears and longings are projected onto the Negro. (*Collected Essays* 341)

> Heideggerian anxiety transforms into antiblack violence when Dasein flees the anxiety nothing stimulates and projects it as terror onto blacks. (Warren 9)

If Baldwin and Warren concur that blackness is a necessary invention that enables the fantasy of escaping from terror (for Baldwin this is the terror of Americans' "private selves" [*Collected Essays* 386], while for Warren it is the terror of "nothing"), they diverge over the possibility of remedial action. For Baldwin—at least the 1963 Baldwin—there is the possibility that the white man "can be released from the Negro's tyrannical power over him [by] consent[ing], in effect, to become black himself" (341). Clearly, Baldwin's suggested renunciation of whiteness would entail discarding the idea of blackness as a necessary projection of private terror. However, for Warren "the world *needs* blacks, even as it tries to eliminate them" (10), and there can be "no solution to the problem of antiblackness; it will continue without end, as long as the world exists" (3). Warren's pessimism is informed by his rejection of "the

humanist fantasy (or narcissism) that anything humans have created can be changed", and his insistence that antiblackness belongs to the category of creations that "are no longer in the hands of humans, for they constitute a horizon, or field, upon which human existence itself depends" (24). Wilderson suggests that, by 1968, Baldwin had become equally pessimistic and had "permitted himself to give up hope and face squarely that the Master/Slave relation itself was the essence of [the white man's] 'something to save'" (*Red, White & Black* 12). Certainly, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, together with essays and public statements in the wake of its publication, can be read as the work of an author who has reached a point of despair regarding the possibility of America relinquishing the fantasy of white supremacy. This despair is perhaps most prominent in Baldwin's 1969 essay "The Price May Be Too High":

> I will state flatly that the bulk of this country's white population impresses me, and has so impressed me for a very long time, as being beyond any conceivable hope of moral rehabilitation. They have been white, if I may so put it, too long; they have been married to the lie of white supremacy too long; the effect on their personalities, their lives, their grasp of reality, has been as devastating as the lava which so memorably immobilized the citizens of Pompeii. They are unable to conceive that their version of reality, which they want me to accept, is an insult to my history and a parody of theirs and an intolerable violation of myself. (*TCOR* 106)

If such passages would appear to corroborate Wilderson's claim that Baldwin had resigned himself to the permanence of the Master/Slave relation, the more optimistic leitmotifs of his meditations on race did not fall silent after 1968. First, in essays from the 1970s and 1980s, Baldwin continued to assert that white(ness) was a choice, that

is, a position from which whites could abdicate by becoming or embracing black(ness).[5] Such a claim would appear to contest Warren's insistence that antiblackness had escaped to a realm beyond any human control or remedy. Second, Baldwin did not cease to remind readers and audiences of the kinship between black and white; a characteristic formulation he used with white interlocutors to express this kinship was to describe himself as "the flesh of your flesh and bone of your bone" (116).[6] That Baldwin could, in 1969, use a formulation emphasising the common humanity of blacks and whites, while at the same time endorse separate schooling (Leeming 300), reveals him to be a more complex and contradictory figure than Wilderson allows.

Despite such divergences from Baldwin's work, the conceptual frameworks employed by Wilderson and Warren are helpful in understanding Baldwin's own theorisation of blackness and whiteness in *Another Country* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. I begin with the earlier novel, first examining its representation of black insight into white life. The two main black characters, Rufus Scott and his sister Ida, regularly demonstrate a knowledge of white people that is deeper than that possessed by those white people about themselves. In terms of white insight into black life the novel is more ambivalent; it can be seen as both hopeful and sceptical about the prospects of white authors successfully representing black consciousness. On the one hand, two of the novel's main white characters, Vivaldo and Cass, are afforded a large degree of insight into the psychology of the two main black characters, Rufus and Ida. Indeed, these white characters are sometimes able to account for the thoughts and actions of their black friends in a manner that suggests an understanding superior to the self-knowledge possessed by Rufus and Ida. On the other hand, despite their psychological perspicacity, Vivaldo and Cass are seemingly

unable to approach a full comprehension of their friends' social situation as African Americans. That is, they cannot—or are unwilling to—achieve the type of understanding that would necessitate a different category of commitment to and responsibility for the wellbeing of their friends. The failure of Vivaldo and Cass to achieve such understanding is encapsulated by two petitions which, like the music of Bessie Smith, permeate the novel and provide ironic commentary on the action: "you've got to know what's happening" (340), and "*all you got to do is pay your dues!*" (273).[7] I thus argue that *Another Country* indicts white individuals for their failure, first, to appreciate the singularity of black experience in America, and, second, to face up to the historical debt amassed through slavery and white supremacy.

In the section on *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, I claim that the pessimism of the novel moves Baldwin closer to the theoretical positions of Wilderson and Warren. This pessimism has several consequences: a reduced likelihood of whites understanding black experience; the potential permanence of white supremacy in America; and greater likelihood of black understanding of whites (to the extent that the latters' thought and actions are predictably directed towards the preservation of white supremacy). Despite the generally more pessimistic tenor of *Tell Me*, I note that in the novel's characterisation of Barbara King, Baldwin presents a white southerner who, in her relationship with the black Leo Proudhammer, exhibits an extraordinary capacity for the type of understanding and sacrificial love to which Vivaldo, in *Another Country*, pays lip service.

<u>Part 1: *Another Country*</u>

Imagining Whiteness

In the introductory "Autobiographical Notes" to his 1955 volume *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin contends that his African descent meant that he brought to the various "creations" of the West—"to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral of Chartres, and to the Empire State Building"—"a special attitude" (*Collected Essays* 7). According to Baldwin, these creations "contain[ed]" neither his "history" nor his "heritage", but, since he "had no other heritage which [he] could possibly hope to use", he would have to "accept [his] special attitude" and "appropriate these white centuries" (7-8). Baldwin's use here of the word "appropriate" conveys his sense of being an outsider, or—in his own words—"a bastard of the West", "an interloper" (7). Yet, when, in the same volume, Baldwin turns from a survey of the creations of the West to a survey of white Americans, he moves from the "special attitude" of an outsider to the special knowledge of an insider.

This movement to special knowledge becomes evident in the second essay in the volume, "Many Thousands Gone". In the course of a discussion about "what it means to be a Negro in America" (21), Baldwin makes the following claims:

> [I]f we could boast that we understood them, it was far more to the point and far more true that they understood us. They were, moreover, the only people in the world who did; and not only did they know us better than we knew ourselves, but they knew us better than we knew them. (22)

The claim here that black Americans knew white Americans “better than [they] knew [them]selves” is underscored by Baldwin’s adoption of the authorial persona of a white American. In another essay from *Notes of a Native Son*, “Encounter on the Seine”, Baldwin presumes to inform the reader what the white American sees when he “regards his darker brother”; he apparently views him “either as a needy and deserving martyr or as the soul of rhythm” (86).

Baldwin’s confidence in speaking from a “white” perspective partly derives from his conception of the lives of white and black Americans as intertwined. When regarding white Americans, the black American realises that “he is bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh; they have loved and hated and obsessed and feared each other and his blood is in their soil. Therefore he cannot deny them, nor can they ever be divorced” (89). In his second volume of essays, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), Baldwin would again conjure the image of a permanent marriage between black and white America:

> [T]his is a wedding. Whether I like it or not, or whether you like it or not, we are bound together forever. We are part of each other. What is happening to every Negro in the country at any time is also happening to you. (*Collected Essays* 221)

The aptness of the metaphor of marriage would be called into question by Baldwin’s persistent critique—in both his essays and his fiction—of white Americans’ inability or unwillingness to recognise the nature of their relationship to their black compatriots. Indeed, this failure is a key theme in *Another Country*. Nonetheless, Baldwin never renounced his conception of black and white as indissolubly wedded; in one of his last essays, “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood” (1985), he

insisted that “each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other” (828).

In the previous section, I introduced one of Baldwin’s most powerful justifications of his claim that blacks have a special knowledge of whites, namely, his *law of description*. This is concisely stated in “Stranger in the Village”: “by means of what the white man imagines the black man to be, the black man is enabled to know who the white man is” (123). In this essay, Baldwin describes the various reactions he provoked during his stay at Loèche-les-Bains, the model for the unnamed Swiss village in the piece. Children want to touch his hair, or rub his skin to see if the colour will come off; some women speak to him, while others smirk; some men drink with him, while others accuse him of stealing their wood. Each reaction informs Baldwin about the extent to which the villager accepts him as a human being, rather than “an exotic rarity” (122). The experience reminds Baldwin that Americans were once “discontented Europeans”, who, upon entering a marketplace and seeing black men for the first time, “decided that these black men were not really men but cattle” (124). Yet, the white Americans whom Baldwin addresses in his essay no longer “have the luxury of looking on [him] as a stranger” (129). Between the cries of “Neger!” in the Swiss village and the shouts of “Nigger!” in the streets of New York, there is a “dreadful abyss [. . .] the abyss is experience, the American experience” (123-24). Since the contemporary white American has lived in a country in which the black is “an inescapable part of the general social fabric” (125), he is without excuse for his failure to accept “his human reality, his human weight and complexity” (127). Thus, when Baldwin looks upon the white American looking at the black and straining to “den[y] the overwhelmingly undeniable” (127)—their kinship—he is a witness to the creation of “a new white man”, that is, the creation of “a monster” (129). Baldwin’s

law of description figures in *Another Country* through the characters Rufus and Ida, and their experience of racism.

Towards the beginning of the novel, Rufus and his white girlfriend Leona are taking a walk through a park in Greenwich Village, when Rufus begins to feel the eyes of onlookers inspecting them "as though where they stood were an auction block or a stud farm" (38). Noticing Leona's apparent obliviousness to the malign judgment of the Villagers, Rufus wonders if he is "making it all up" (38), only for his earlier suspicions to be confirmed when "an Italian adolescent [. . .] look[s] at him with hatred; his glance flicker[ing] over Leona as though she were a whore" (38-39). The account of the boy's gaze is preceded by the following description: "The boy was splashed by the sun falling through the trees" (38). Here, the sunlight—together with the sense of cleansing contributed by the verb "splashed"—serves to expose the boy's true nature. The boy, in looking at and seeking to uncover what Rufus is, merely reveals himself to the latter. Thus, rather than being paranoid or delusional, Rufus is proved correct in his perception that passersby are impugning the rectitude of his relationship with Leona.

Yet, an alternative reading of the description of sunlight upon the boy is available. If we pay attention to the effect of the light "falling through the trees" we can see that the boy must appear at once light and dark, or, more to the point, both white and black. This fact, together with the boy's identification as "Italian" serves to remind us of Baldwin's contention in "On Being 'White' . . . And Other Lies" that "No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country" (Roediger 178). Indeed, in Baldwin's schema, the Italian boy's variegation is the normal condition of the "white" American; it is on this very point that the final essay in *Notes of a Native Son*,

"Stranger in the Village", concludes, that is, that the white American must recognise the extent to which his identity depends crucially on his conception of the black other. For Baldwin this recognition means that "This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again" (129). If Baldwin was regarded as a stranger by the inhabitants of Loèche-les-Bains, the inhabitants of Greenwich Village are, he is subtly suggesting, only deceiving themselves by regarding Rufus in a likewise fashion. (The extent of such "white" deception is explored further below in the section entitled "White Denial".)

Two other instances in the novel where a black character is granted special insight into the psyche of a white character are connected by a common theme: betrayal. In the first instance, Rufus observes that "most white men" will betray a friend for a woman (44). The fact that the one person Rufus believes might prove exceptional in this respect, Vivaldo, will abandon him for his on-off girlfriend, Jane, merely proves the soundness of his generalisation. In the second instance, Cass, a white friend to Rufus and Vivaldo, notices Ida watching her and "sense[s] for the first time in her life, the knowledge that black people had of white people" (350). But what, Cass wonders, does Ida know about her, "except that she was lying, was unfaithful, and was acting? and was in trouble" (350). Cass's list ostensibly refers to her extramarital affair with Eric, yet the context in which it occurs—during a discussion of the American "system" of "free enterprise"—forces the reader into a wider interpretation, into a consideration of how Cass's transgressions might mirror those of white America. (Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts argues that Baldwin's movement in his essays from the specific to the general is "so particular that, if he'd been an athlete, sportscasters would have codified the maneuver and named it 'the Jimmy'" [107]. This manoeuvre is crucial to what Baldwin attempts to achieve in *Another Country*.)

Before her revelation about Ida's special knowledge, Cass responds to a question—"What would you replace [the system of free enterprise] with?"—with one of her own: "What [. . .] *does* one replace a dream with?" (350). Ida's response to Cass's question—a question in which one might hear a reverberation of Langston Hughes's "What happens to a dream deferred?"—is short and pitiless: "I suppose [. . .] that one replaces a dream with reality" (350). One dream that Ida seeks to replace with reality is the dream that Vivaldo and Cass could not have done anything more to help her brother Rufus, could not have proved better friends to him, could not, in short, have prevented his death. This specific dream corresponds to the general dream of white America: a complacent belief that they have no outstanding obligations towards their black compatriots. For Baldwin, the reality for white America is that—like Cass—they are lying, unfaithful, acting, and in trouble; they know what they should be doing yet are not doing it. As Baldwin warned in an address to the World Council of Churches: "people are always in great danger when they know what they should do, and refuse to act on that knowledge" (*Collected Essays* 752). Thus, for Baldwin, entering the consciousness of white America in his fiction has a powerful moral dimension: it provides a means by which he can alert his mainly white readership to the moral peril they are in.

Becoming Black

1. The Problem of Self-knowledge

As outlined in the previous section, Baldwin's supreme confidence in his capacity to access the minds of his white characters arises from two convictions: (1) that he is specially equipped with the necessary knowledge; (2) that he has a duty to warn white

America of the moral danger engulfing them. When it comes to considering the extent to which his white characters can achieve a comparable understanding of their black friends, Baldwin is much more equivocal. In *Another Country*, Baldwin appears to suggest that this understanding can only occur to the extent to which it is possible *in general* for someone to understand another person better than that person can understand herself. That this *is* possible is suggested by Baldwin's insistence on the difficulty of self-knowledge in essays such as "The Creative Process", from 1962, where Baldwin claims that "the barrier between oneself and one's knowledge of oneself is high indeed" (*Collected Essays* 671), and "The White Problem" from 1964, in which he states: "The truth, forever, for everybody, is that one is a stranger to oneself" (*TCOR* 89). However, unlike the situation in the previous section, the white American possesses no special knowledge to enhance her understanding of the black American. Moreover, as I will argue in subsequent sections, Baldwin suggests there is much to impede this understanding.

The degree of success that the white characters have in understanding their black friends can be measured by looking at how Vivaldo, Leona, and Cass attempt to understand Rufus and Ida. The three white characters each display some aptitude in understanding or empathising with Rufus. Leona demonstrates impressive insight after a heated exchange between Rufus and Vivaldo:

> Rufus said, with an astonishing and a menacing humility, 'I guess you don't think she's good enough for you.'
>
> 'Oh, shit. You don't think she's good enough for *you*.'
>
> 'No,' said Leona, and both men turned to watch her, 'ain't neither one of you got it right, Rufus don't think he's good enough for *me*.' (64)

Leona has identified the underlying reason for Rufus's erratic and violent behaviour towards her; he has, to a large degree, accepted society's evaluation of himself as worthless, and is thus unable to admit the possibility that Leona values him as an individual. His inability to view himself as worthy of being loved means that he mistakes Leona's genuine love for something else, namely an unnatural vice. Just as Rufus accepts society's evaluation of himself, here he accepts its categorisation of a white woman who pursues a romantic relationship with a black man; she is supposed to be both promiscuous and oversexed, indicated by Rufus's accusation that Leona is "sleeping with other coloured boys behind his back" (62).

Vivaldo and Cass are also able to perceive that racism has severely damaged Rufus's sense of self-worth. When Rufus tells Vivaldo "I know you're the only friend I've got left in the world", the latter thinks "And that's why you hate me", realising that Rufus's self-hate is liable to be projected onto those who demonstrate love towards him (77). Cass, who looks at Rufus in a way that suggests "she knew things he had never imagined a girl like Cass could know", tells him "I've always thought of you [. . .] as a very nice person [. . .] It might help if you thought of yourself that way" (84, 86).

Although these examples show that Rufus's white friends are capable of understanding him better than he understands himself, they do not indicate any *special* knowledge or powers of empathy. Rather, they suggest, first, the difficulty of obtaining self-knowledge even under ideal conditions, and, second, the near impossibility of the black American remaining impervious to the distorting effects of the racist stereotypes promulgated by the ideology of white supremacy. The difficulty of obtaining self-knowledge is perhaps most baldly stated by a peripheral character, Belle, who declares "I want to be me", before lamenting that the accomplishment of

this apparently simple desire is "hard to get straight" (302). The figure of Eric, a white Southern actor, embodies a more sustained study of the trouble with self-scrutiny. His "secret life" (as a homosexual) turns out to be more a secret to himself than the people he encounters: "his fantasies, however unreadable they were for him, were inscribed in every one of his gestures" (198). Even Cass, the most careful and empathetic reader of others in the novel, has imperfect self-knowledge; when she arranges a meeting with Eric she "[does] not yet know what [is] in her heart" (281). If, for these three white characters, self-knowledge proves elusive, then for Rufus and Ida—faced with the ubiquitous misrepresentations of blacks that they encounter in a racist society—it is doubly so. It is this difficulty with understanding themselves that—at times—allows their white friends to offer an illuminating perspective. However, since this perspective on Rufus and Ida could presumably just as easily have been achieved by their black friends, it would seem that whites do not possess the *special* insight that blacks are said to have into white consciousness.

2. Black Experience

If Baldwin, as we have just seen, admits the possibility of white insight into black consciousness, in *Another Country* he appears more concerned in limning the impediments to such insight. These impediments arise from two main sources: (1) the fact that whites have not had direct experience of anti-black racism, (2) the extent to which whites are in denial about their role—and hence their responsibilities—in the racial situation in America. I will explore the first of these in this section and the second in the next.

I have noted in an earlier section the racism that Rufus is forced to endure whenever he appears in public with his white girlfriend, Leona. Further evidence of the demoralising and dehumanising effects of racism can be found in a passage in which Rufus rails against a social hierarchy that relegates him to the lowest tier simply because of his colour: "Any bum on the Bowery can shit all over you because maybe he can't hear, can't see, can't walk, can't fuck – but he's *white*!" (75). When, a few pages later, Rufus feels "black, filthy, foolish" the final two adjectives seem to express the precise meaning that society has given to the word "black", a meaning that Rufus, in his ruined state, has lost the will to dispute (84). In respect of the degree of desolation wrought by racism, Baldwin anticipates a possible dissent via Vivaldo's assertion that "the same things have happened" to him (117). Cass's response—"But they didn't [. . .] happen to you *because* you were white. They just happened. [. . .] But what happens up here [. . .] happens *because* they are coloured. And that makes a difference" (117)—is given an elucidation in "My Dungeon Shook", Baldwin's letter to his 14-year-old nephew:

> You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. (*Collected Essays* 293)

Although Vivaldo does not specify the events which comprise his "same things", we might assume that he has in mind such incidents as being beaten by racists, as occurs in the first chapter of the novel. Baldwin's point—both in Cass's response and in the lines quoted above from *The Fire Next Time*—would seem to be that Vivaldo is beaten because he *chooses* to stand up for his black friend, while for Rufus the element of choice is absent; it is this inability to control one's destiny that is the truly demoralising aspect of black experience in Baldwin's America.

Wilderson conceptualises this facet of blackness in terms of "Black incapacity" (*Red, White & Black* 45). By "capacity" Wilderson means "something more comprehensive than 'the event' and its causal elements and something more indeterminate than 'agency.' We should think of it as a kind of facility or matrix through which possibility itself—whether tragic or triumphant—can be elaborated" (45). Vivaldo's declaration that "the same things" have happened to him is part of his refusal to admit the gulf between the possibilities available to him and those available to Rufus. That is, he is unwilling to acknowledge the difference between white capacity and black incapacity. As Wilderson notes:

> Whiteness can grasp its own capacity, be present to itself, coherent, by its unavailability [. . .] to the a priori violence of Black accumulation and fungibility. If it experiences accumulation and fungibility [. . .] those experiences must be named, qualified, that is, "White slavery," [. . .] so that such contingent experience is not confused with ontological necessity. In such a position one can always say [. . .] "I'm being treated like a nigger." (49-50)

The difference between Vivaldo's suffering and Rufus's suffering is thus the difference between experience and an ontological position. For Vivaldo's suffering to truly be "the same thing" as Rufus's he would have to forfeit capacity by "becoming black". To the extent that he is unwilling to do this, Baldwin submits him to censure, questioning his moral position. As Wilderson puts it: "one cannot embody capacity and be, simultaneously, ethical. Where there are Slaves it is unethical to be free" (49). When Baldwin was asked what necessary action lay beyond the "liberal façade" that he critiqued, he responded: "Commitment. That is what is necessary. You mean it or you don't" (*TCOR* 184). For Vivaldo, commitment would entail giving up his freedom and embodying Rufus's black incapacity. His refusal—and his denial of his

refusal—to do so is the central theme of *Another Country* and a microcosm of the refusal and denial of white America.

For Rufus's sister, Ida, the racism she encounters is specific to her identity as a black woman. As a waitress, "she was always waiting for the veiled insult or the lewd suggestion. [. . .] It was the way the world treated girls with bad reputations and every coloured girl had been born with one" (146). Walking beside Vivaldo, passersby look upon her "as though she were no better, though more lascivious and rare, than a whore" (146). Such experiences lend weight to Ida's assertion to Vivaldo that "*You* don't know, and there's no way in the world for you to find out, what it's like to be a black girl in this world" (341).

In addition to attesting to the singularity of black experience through specific examples from the lives of Rufus and Ida, Baldwin portrays the abject failure of their white friends to comprehend the nature of this experience. By far the most naïve of these friends is Richard Selenski who, when Ida suggests a missing black man—her brother Rufus—might be treated as a less than urgent case by the police, demurs: "Oh, well, now [. . .] is that fair? I mean, hell, I'm sure they'll look for him just like they look for any other citizen of this city" (105). Richard's refusal to conceive that a black man might be treated as less than a full citizen embodies the type of intransigence and willed blindness depicted by Baldwin in his claim that "[A white man] will face in your life only what he is willing to face in his own life" (*Collected Essays* 272). The question of whether the idea of "citizen" can embrace "black ~~being~~" is treated by Warren in the second chapter, "Outlawing", of *Ontological Terror*. Examining Chief Justice Roger Taney's opinion in the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision, Warren finds that, for Taney, "the real error in this case was assuming that the ontological presumptions of the citizen (humanity and the ethical relation) applied to black ~~being~~"

(81). Warren argues that Taney's opinion "divides the world through disparate grammars: the grammar of the material world, imported and sold, and the grammar of the world of humans, the political community, rights, privileges, and immunities" (82). For Warren, the abyss between these worlds is unbridgeable, since "[t]he human [. . .] is an ontological relation and not a mere legal designation. The law is unable to transform what ontology what not allow" (88). Emancipation fails to achieve freedom since the "freedom paper" ensures that the "returned property [the black self] *remains* property, and the white public is the owner. It is still property for another, and the freedom paper is the *materialization* of this self-as-property" (100). Because of the failure of law to change the ontological status of "black ~~being~~", Warren is utterly sceptical of the type of liberal progress towards equality in which Richard appears to place so much faith:

> [E]mancipation never intended to fulfill the promises of individual liberalism; in fact, it could not. [. . .] The fantasy of equality and the humanist imagination can dream about a world of freedom, justice, and equality, but it must continually disavow the nightmare of the metaphysical holocaust, which continues. Whether we are in the antebellum period, the post- Reconstruction period, or the post–Civil Rights period, the metaphysical holocaust that obliterates black ~~being~~ and sustains ontological terror is unchanging. [. . .] Emancipation is entangled in the myth of progress, temporal change, and freedom dreams. (89)

What Richard is unwilling to face in his own life—and, thus, according to Baldwin, unwilling to face in Rufus's life—is not merely the idea of being treated as less than a citizen, but the idea of being less than human. As Warren would put it, he is unwilling to (attempt to) imagine the metaphysical nothing that is "black ~~being~~".

If Vivaldo is certainly a more sympathetic figure than Richard, not least in his willingness to stand in solidarity with Rufus against racists, Baldwin ensures that readers never lose sight of the gulf in the experience of Vivaldo and that of his friend Rufus. When, at a party to celebrate the publication of Richard's novel, Vivaldo feels the distasteful obligation to do some networking, he tells himself to "take the plunge", reminding himself that the people in the room, though disagreeable, were "the only water there was" (166). The metaphor of diving into water immediately invokes Rufus's literal plunge into the Hudson River and places the life of Vivaldo at a considerable remove from that of his friend.

Cass, the most empathetic figure in the novel—and thus the most likely to achieve an understanding of black experience—readily admits the limitations of her knowledge. In conversation with Richard about Rufus, she declines passing judgment on his violent behaviour towards Leona: "I just don't know enough to be able to judge him. He must – he must have been in great pain" (111). While Vivaldo ceaselessly attempts to "strike deeper into that incredible country" of Ida's private thought, repeatedly imagining what "she would say", Cass appears to align herself with Baldwin's increasing emphasis on the role of experience (173, 291). In the opening pages of his next book, *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin would make explicit what seems to be a key message of *Another Country*: "Take no one's word for anything, including mine—but trust your experience" (*Collected Essays* 293). Indeed, in "Down at the Cross", Baldwin expresses doubt about the extent to which experience can be conveyed through words at all, asserting: "For the horrors of the American Negro's life there has been almost no language. The privacy of his experience [. . .] is only beginning to be recognized in language" (326). Assuming experience *can* be expressed in language, it apparently becomes unassailable: "One cannot argue with

anyone's experience or decision or belief" (328). By the time of *No Name in the Street* (1972), Baldwin was insisting that: "The key to a tale is to be found in who tells it" and criticised Faulkner's depictions of blacks for "lack[ing] a system of nuances that, perhaps, only a black writer can see in black life" (380). In placing so much weight on experience and drawing an inextricable link between text and author, Baldwin can be seen to foreshadow the thought of black feminist thinkers such as Patricia Hill Collins who, in 1991, would state that "[f]or individual women, the particular experiences that accrue to living as a Black woman in the United States can stimulate a distinctive consciousness concerning our own experiences and society overall" (23-24). The claim that "particular experiences" can give rise to "a distinctive consciousness concerning [those] experiences" appears to echo Ida's insistence to Cass that "there's no way in the world for you to know what Rufus went through, not in this world, not as long as you're white" (344). For both Baldwin and Collins, then, private experience is indeed another country, one with an unscalable wall along its perimeter.

3. White Denial

In addition to an inability to access the experience of black Americans, the white characters in *Another Country* suffer from a willed ignorance about the "racial situation" and their role in it. In the preface to his 1964 play, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Baldwin describes precisely such a scenario:

> What is ghastly and really almost hopeless in our racial situation now is that the crimes we have committed are so great and so unspeakable that the acceptance of this knowledge would lead, literally, to madness. The human

> being, then, in order to protect himself, closes his eyes, compulsively repeats his crimes, and enters a spiritual darkness which no one can describe. (xiv)

Although this passage appears in the context of a discussion of the murderer in the play, Lyle Britten, Baldwin insists on a collective responsibility for his crimes: "we, the American people, have created him [. . .] and we are responsible for the crimes that he commits" (xiv). In *Another Country*, the central paradox is that, on one hand, the great crime committed by Rufus's white friends appears to be their failure to "know what was happening to him", while on the other hand the charge levelled against them appears to be that they *did* in fact know what was happening to him, but failed to act, failed, that is, to "pay their dues" (319, 320). The manner in which an individual can both know and not know something is suggested in the passage quoted above; the individual possesses knowledge of the fact but cannot *accept* this knowledge since such acceptance would risk insanity. In an example noted earlier, Richard could not accept the possibility of a racist police force, since the police, by definition, are employed to uphold justice. Similarly, Ida claims that "Vivaldo didn't want to know my brother was dying because he doesn't want to know that my brother would still be alive if he hadn't been born black" (344). The repetition here of a desire not to know indicates Vivaldo's refusal to recognise the threat that white supremacy represented to the life of his friend, and the attendant responsibility of Vivaldo to act to mitigate this threat. Yet, that Vivaldo *is* cognisant of the extent of this threat and the resultant position of vulnerability in which Rufus is placed is suggested at various points in the text, particularly in his account of what happened on the night of Rufus's death:

> 'He was supposed to stay at my place,' said Vivaldo, 'but we – I – got talking to somebody – and then, when I looked up, he was gone.' He seemed to feel

that this was not the best way to put it. 'There were lots of his friends around; I figured he had a drink with some of them and then maybe went off and decided to stay the night.'

'Do you know these friends?' Ida said.

'Well, I know them when I see them. I don't know – all their *names*.'

The silence stretched. Vivaldo dropped his eyes.

'Did he have any money?'

'Well' – he looked to Richard and Cass – 'I don't know.'

'How did he look?'

They stared at each other. 'All right. Tired, maybe.' (104)

Vivaldo's account oscillates between renouncing and accepting responsibility for his role in Rufus's demise. It begins with an implication that Rufus has let Vivaldo down by breaking his agreement to stay at the latter's home. Then, in describing his decision to effectively abandon Rufus for Jane, Vivaldo, perhaps both upbraided by his conscience and guided by the necessity of rendering his story plausible, assumes a greater degree of responsibility by correcting his "we" to "I". However, the use of the passive "got talking" and the anonymous "somebody" work to disguise his prioritisation of his sexual desire for Jane over Rufus's more pressing need for the love of a friend. Moreover, Vivaldo's reference to the presence of "lots of [Rufus's] friends" and his imagining Rufus drinking with them and "stay[ing] the night" might be seen as further evidence of his refusal to admit the difference between "white capacity" and "black incapacity", as theorised by Wilderson. Wilderson notes that "White theorists [. . .] find [capacity] where they are, among their 'contemporaries,'

and assume its ubiquity" (43). Similarly, the white Vivaldo assumes that Rufus's capacity—his matrix of possibility, to paraphrase Wilderson—is comparable to his own. Pressed by Ida, Vivaldo is forced to admit, in effect, that, rather than leaving Rufus to decide between a variety of options, he has abandoned his exhausted and destitute friend to the charge of strangers. Shortly later, Vivaldo concedes to Cass "I know I failed him", while towards the novel's end, Ida compels him to realise that Rufus's story is one that he "had always known, but never dared believe" (117, 404).

In pointed contrast to Vivaldo's treatment of Rufus is Eric's truly empathetic care for Yves in a similar moment of crisis. Shortly after meeting in Paris, Eric and Yves are searching for a bar when the former becomes aware that Yves is in desperate need of food:

> Eric had been watching Yves with more intensity than he realised; as they passed the brasserie, it suddenly flashed through him that Yves was hungry. He did not know how he knew it, for Yves said nothing, did not pause or sigh; and yet Eric could not have been more certain that the boy was faint with hunger had he abruptly collapsed on the sidewalk. (215-16)

Unlike Vivaldo, who after ceasing to watch over Rufus "looked up" to see that "he was gone", Eric watches Yves with "more intensity than he realised", and is rewarded with an insight into Yves' specific needs in that moment. Rather than ask Yves if he is hungry, Eric tactfully declares his own hunger, and insists to Yves that "you'll be doing me a favour", before taking him to a restaurant (216). In the previous section, I argued that Baldwin placed such a strong emphasis on experience as to all but rule out the possibility of comprehending the experience of another person. Yet, here, after a period of intense observation, Eric is vouchsafed a crucial insight—without which "he

and Yves would never have met again"—into the experience of a complete stranger (216). We might resolve this apparent contradiction by interpreting Eric's revelation not as an insight into Eric's mental life but rather as an insight into his physical needs. While we are told that Yves presented no clues as to his condition, it might be assumed that Eric, watching intensely, has unconsciously picked up on a physical indicator of hunger. Although Eric's declaration of hunger is primarily tactful, it might also be read as exemplifying the biblical image of marriage as the unification of two bodies; Yves' hunger becomes Eric's hunger. In summary, when Eric looks with compassion and love upon Yves, a stranger, he is able to achieve an identification that allows him to recognise and respond to Yves's condition.

In contrast, Vivaldo too readily assumes identification with Rufus (indicated by his claim of having endured the "same things" [117]), and so looks upon him—when he looks at him at all—with complacency, and thus fails to align himself with his friend's condition and needs. Baldwin's ideal of a marriage between black and white mirrors the identification aspect of Eric and Yves's relationship revealed in the Paris episode: "We are part of each other. What is happening to every Negro in the country at any time is also happening to you" (*Collected Essays* 221). Vivaldo is unwilling to "become black" in that he refuses to accept that what is happening to Rufus is also, in a sense, happening to him. In order to face the facts of Rufus's life, Vivaldo would have to "accept the fact that what he thinks he is, he is not", that is, he would have to "surrender his image of himself" (*TCOR* 74). For Baldwin, a crucial part of giving up a false image of yourself in order to "become yourself" is arriving at an understanding of "how to pay your dues" (90).

4. Paying Dues

In *No Name in the Street*, recounting his time at the First International Congress of Black Writers in Paris in September 1956, Baldwin claimed to have encountered newspaper photos of Dorothy Counts being verbally abused and spat on as she walked to school in Charlotte, North Carolina. According to Baldwin, it was these photos that triggered his return to America: "I could, simply, no longer sit around in Paris discussing Algeria and the black American problem. Everybody else was paying their dues, and it was time I went home and paid mine" (*Collected Essays* 383). However, as Christopher Winks has pointed out, the Dorothy Counts incident took place in September 1957, one year after Baldwin claims to have read about it (Winks 611). This chronological alteration indicates that, for Baldwin, "paying your dues" commanded a central position in his personal narrative; he shifts the sequence of historical events to accommodate it. In *Another Country*, perhaps the central question of the novel is: what dues did Vivaldo owe in his relationship with Rufus? This question comes to stand for the wider problem of how white America might begin to pay its debt to black America.

To address the question of what Vivaldo owed to Rufus one might first enquire as to the nature of their relationship. Early in the novel we learn that Rufus considers Vivaldo his "best friend" (57). When Vivaldo, speaking to Ida about the missing Rufus, declares "I love him, too", Ida "look[s] over at him, her eyes very big" (106). Ida's large eyes suggest that she will subject Vivaldo's professed love for Rufus to intense scrutiny, while inviting the reader to do likewise. Yet, they also evoke the famously bulbous eyes of the author. Looking at Vivaldo through Baldwin's eyes, one might see the "too" in Vivaldo's statement as asserting a love for Rufus equal to that of his sister, that is, that Vivaldo is claiming to love Rufus as a

brother. That this is the essential relation between *all* men is a repeated theme of Baldwin's non-fiction: "all men are brothers—simply because all men share the same condition, however different the details of their lives may be" (*TCOR* 252). Thus, Vivaldo's responsibilities towards Rufus might be thought of as those of a brother.

Baldwin's reaction to seeing photographs of the fifteen-year-old Dorothy Counts "being reviled and spat upon by the mob" is "Some one of us should have been there with her!" (*Collected Essays* 383). It is this conviction that leads Baldwin to the understanding that paying his dues entails eliminating the physical distance between himself and the events in America. In *Another Country*, the distance that Vivaldo might have traversed to pay his dues as Rufus's "brother" is at once much less and much greater than the span of the Atlantic Ocean. Several months after Rufus's death, Vivaldo recounts to Eric one of the last times he saw him. After a fight between Vivaldo and Rufus concerning the latter's troubled relationship with Leona, Rufus gets into his bed while Vivaldo, fearful about his friend's mental state, decides to stay and watch over him. Before Rufus goes to sleep, he looks at Vivaldo in such a way that Vivaldo has "the weirdest feeling that he wanted me to take him in my arms" (335), yet fear of misunderstanding prevents Vivaldo from doing so: "I was afraid that he wouldn't understand that it was – only love" (336). After Rufus's death, Vivaldo chastises himself for not obeying his instinct: "I thought that maybe I could have saved him if I'd just reached out that quarter of an inch between us on that bed, and held him" (336). In an inversion of Eric realising that he would have "lost" Yves had he not acted on his intuition regarding the latter's hunger, Vivaldo senses that he might have "saved" Rufus had he acted on his instinctual awareness of his friend's emotional needs.

The distance between Vivaldo and Rufus, then, is the distance between thought—or, put differently, dreaming—and action. Thus, Cass's exclamation—"What a great difference there is [. . .] between dreaming of something and dealing with it!" (169)—embodies the critique levelled at Vivaldo throughout the text. References to dreams or dreaming occur some fifty-eight times in the novel, often in the context of the dreamer seeking to escape from the "real" world. Indeed, at one point, the narrator explicitly states that such escape is the purpose of the dream: "The aim of the dreamer, after all, is merely to go on dreaming and not to be molested by the world. His dreams are his protection against the world. But the aims of life are antithetical to those of the dreamer" (198). Vivaldo's dream is that he loved Rufus, despite his repeated failure to act in Rufus's best interests. The final section of the novel, Book Three, opens with a dream in which Vivaldo is fleeing from an unidentified enemy. Confronted by "a high, stone wall", he senses the enemy closing in, only to look down and find that Rufus is helping him to scale the wall (373-74). Vivaldo soon finds himself on top of the wall, while Rufus falls through the air and is impaled on a spiked fence. Rufus then appears beside Vivaldo who awakens at the moment he "surrender[s] to his sweet and overwhelming embrace" (374). The dream can be interpreted as an allegory of the invention of "whiteness" as described by Baldwin in "On Being White … and Other Lies". Vivaldo, an Italian American, is the symbolic immigrant who can achieve whiteness (reach the top of the wall) only to the extent that he can insert and maintain a distance between himself and blackness, "denying the black presence, and justifying the black subjugation" (*TCOR* 167). He is able to awaken from this dream—or, rather, nightmare—only by rejecting the conditions of his ascent, that is, by rejecting his whiteness and the distance that it places him from blackness, and, instead, embracing his black brother, Rufus. In

“What Price Freedom?”, an essay written two years after the publication of *Another Country*, Baldwin uses this same imagery to signify a renunciation of white supremacy: “In order for us to survive and transcend the terrible days ahead of us, the country will have to turn and take me in its arms” (85). For Baldwin, the meaning of this physical embrace is the white recognition of the black as “another human being” (85). Since such a recognition entails the death of whiteness—and the blackness upon which whiteness is built—neither Warren nor Wilderson can conceive of such an event; the ontological abyss between white and black renders such recognition impossible.

Returning, finally, to the question of how the white man might “pay his dues”, Baldwin’s formula might be summarised as follows: eliminate distance (that is, reject whiteness); know what is happening (by paying attention); act in love (born out of an acknowledged kinship). In the case of Rufus, Vivaldo knew (instinctively) what was happening, but failed to act in love. In the case of Ida, his failure was that he “didn’t want to know what was happening to [her]” (412). In both cases, Vivaldo can be understood as indulging in a fantasy—sustained by white supremacy—about the nature of the society and world in which he lives and moves. The “other country” suggested by the novel’s title might, then, be interpreted as the reality of black experience. For Vivaldo, a termination of his “flight from reality” (*TCOR* 95) would mean a recognition of this experience, an enlargement of his familial responsibilities, and a commitment to paying his dues.

Part 2: *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*

The six years between the publication of *Another Country* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* were eventful for Baldwin. He travelled to Africa, participated in the March on Washington, worked with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Selma, wrote the play *Blues for Mister Charlie*, debated William F. Buckley twice, witnessed the assassinations of Medgar Evans and Malcolm X, and embraced the Black Panther Party. Each of these experiences—among others—can be seen as contributing to a shift in Baldwin's thinking about the racial situation in America. Narrated by the Baldwinesque Leo Proudhammer, *Tell Me* offers a perspective closer to that found in the author's essays than any previous novel. Although *Tell Me* revisits many of the themes of *Another Country*, it does so in a different register. As Field notes, "*Tell Me* is an angry novel, full of despair and disillusionment" (470). Indeed, the pessimism of *Tell Me* means that it inhabits a position much closer to those of Wilderson and Warren than does its predecessor. In this section, I look at three implications of this pessimism—relative to *Another Country*—for questions of understanding and representation across racial boundaries. First, I argue that the novel is less hopeful about the possibilities for white understanding of black experience. Second, I claim that it is much more doubtful about the prospects of defeating—or even challenging—white supremacy. Third, I suggest that—partly as a corollary of the second point—the novel proposes that black understanding of whiteness can often be achieved with relative ease. (My argument here is that the apparent permanence of white supremacy indicates a certain predictability in respect of white action and thought that facilitates black understanding.) Despite these claims about the pessimism of *Tell Me*, I argue that Baldwin's position should not be seen as coincident with the more extreme pessimism

of Wilderson and Warren. Indeed, I conclude this section by observing that the depiction of the relationship between Leo Proudhammer and Barbara King is an important exception to the novel's general pessimism about the capacity of white America to view and treat blacks as humans.

Failing to Understand Blackness

As advanced in an earlier section, in *Another Country*, some of the main white characters—Vivaldo, Leona, and Cass—are, up to a certain point, able to understand their black friends, Rufus and Ida. In *Tell Me*, instances of white understanding of black experience are rarer. More common are examples either of whites refusing to see black experience, or black characters, especially the narrator, Leo Proudhammer, insisting on white inability to understand blacks. In one episode, Leo describes modelling for a life drawing class comprised for the most part of "ageing, idle women" (*Later Novels* 122). During these classes, Leo wears "the regulation jockstrap", an item that makes him more self-conscious than if he were naked since "all of me could be seen except that most private and definitive part of me, which was on no account to announce its presence" (122). The anxiety caused by the obligation to remain—as a sexual being—invisible, "inexorably" causes Leo's "vengeful organ [. . .] to stretch and swell" (122). Despite the apparent visibility of Leo's erection, the women typically represent him as "a noble savage [. . .] adorned with a loincloth as bland and as shapeless as their faces – a harmless savage, suitable for a pet, and one who could certainly never have any children" (123). Baldwin, here, appears to be critiquing the type of Northern liberal sensibility that prides itself on having a more enlightened attitude to race than its Southern counterpart. The women who are

charged with depicting Leo scrupulously avoid the racist trope of the "black buck", the stereotype of the violent and sexually threatening (especially to white women) black male. Yet, in furnishing Leo with a "bland" and "shapeless" loincloth, they betray a refusal to look at the "most private and definitive part of [him]" (122). (The centrality of Leo's virility to his self is conveyed, with no great subtlety, by his surname, "Proudhammer".) In *Another Country*, a prerequisite for understanding is a willingness to look attentively at the other; Eric reveals himself to be capable of such attentiveness, while Vivaldo is less successful. The Northern liberal women fail even to begin to understand Leo, since they refuse to look at him. Baldwin may have had such refusal in mind when, shortly before the publication of *Tell Me*, he wrote that "anyone who contends that the Northern racial attitudes have not always been, essentially, indistinguishable from those of the South is either lying or is deluded" (*TCOR* 277). For Warren, since "black ~~being~~ incarnates metaphysical nothing" (5), it is impossible to look upon it. The impossibility of the group of artists to look at Leo can thus be seen as Baldwin moving closer to Warren's position of pessimism in respect of antiblackness.

Tell Me takes up a further critique of white representation of black bodies when Leo and his friends enter a bar called *Lucy's Place*:

> I saw, with a peculiar shock, the root of the despicable and tenacious American folklore concerning the happy, prancing niggers. Some of these people were moving, indeed [. . .] but prancing scarcely fairly described their uses of their vigour. Only someone who no longer had any sense of what constituted happiness could ever have confounded happiness with this rage. Yet, the scene we entered had been tirelessly reproduced, in stale and meticulous, absolutely libellous detail, in countless musical comedies and

> innumerable pork-chop-in-the-sky films: the nigger, moving in uncanny time to the music, hips, hands and feet working, all flashing teeth and eyes, without a care in the world. (144)

In his 1969 essay, "The Price May Be Too High", Baldwin laments the possibilities faced by the black artist working in America. The "price" he must pay is "at best, to minimize and, at worst, to lie about everything that produced him, about everything he knows" (*TCOR* 108). For Baldwin, "the system" sought to recruit "the black face into the national fantasy in such a way that the fantasy [would] be left unchanged and the social structure left untouched" (108). The black artist, James Baldwin, and the black artist, Leo Proudhammer, arrive, then, at the same conclusion: the white entertainment industry profits through telling its (mainly white) audience exactly what they want to hear, part of which is the fantasy that America is indiscriminate in its distribution of happiness. Baldwin protects his own work from this critique by devoting much of *Tell Me* to chronicling the racism endured by Leo and his brother Caleb, especially at the hands of the police, whom Caleb curses as "white cock-sucking dog-shit miserable white motherfuckers" (48).

In addition to condemning the falsity of the representation of black experience in the work of white artists—a preoccupation dating back to his 1949 essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel"—Baldwin's implication in "The Price May Be Too High" that a black artist should seek to change the "social structure" can be seen as a riposte to the largely negative reviews of *Tell Me*. Mario Puzo, writing in *The New York Times*, deemed the novel "propagandistic fiction [. . .] with a positive social value", but did not think it could be considered "art" (Puzo). Baldwin, Puzo suggested, had to choose a vocation: black revolutionary or artist. However, "The Price May Be Too High" implied that this was a false dichotomy. Artists, Baldwin

insisted, “are produced by people who need them, *because* they need them” (106). In other words, the reason that black actors found themselves in false roles was that the films were the product of a system that *needed* a certain fantasy. Baldwin, on the other hand, to the extent that he was “produced” by blacks, was giving them what *they* needed, namely, an alternative to the fantasy of white supremacy. For Baldwin, the alternative that he offered to this fantasy was not propaganda, but, simply, reality. If white America—including white book reviewers—could not see this, then, according to Baldwin/Proudhammer, this was because “people won’t see what they can’t afford to see” (*Tell Me* 258).

A final way in which *Tell Me* suggests white failure to understand blacks is by returning to a theme of *Another Country*: the distance that whiteness maintains from blackness. When Leo’s father tunes the radio away from the news the following exchange occurs:

> “Now, don’t you want to know,” asked Caleb, “what’s happening in the world?”
>
> “No,” said our father imperturbably, still clicking dials, “ain’t no white boy living can tell me what’s happening in the world. Not before they find out what’s happening on my job.”
>
> “And they ain’t never going to do that,” said Caleb.
>
> “No,” said our father, and clicked off the radio. (165)

Leo’s father rejects the imbalance involved in “white news” entering his home via the airwaves, while the white world remains indifferent and impervious to “black news”. His assertion that “no white boy living can tell [him] what’s happening in the world” invokes Vivaldo’s failure to know—or failure to act on—what was happening in the

lives of Rufus and Ida. Yet, the decision of Leo's father to turn off the radio marks a departure from *Another Country*. Rather than feeling—as Rufus and Ida do—betrayed and disappointed at the distance the white world insists on keeping from black experience, Leo's father's action symbolises his rejection of the white world. It is a futile gesture, since, as Warren might put it, the white world *is* the world. Nonetheless, it is a necessary act of defiance, a way of maintaining dignity in the face of white hostility and intransigence.

The act of turning off the radio foreshadows the climax of the novel: Black Christopher's insistence on the need for guns. That the idea is met with Leo's approval appears to stem from the visit of Barbara's family from Kentucky. When, Barbara's brother, Ken, asserts that America is a land of equal opportunity and cites Leo's success as proof, Leo responds as follows:

> "You can't imagine my life, and I won't discuss it. [. . .] The point is that the Negroes of this country are treated as none of you would dream of treating a dog or a cat. [. . .] If you don't want to believe it, well, that's your problem. And I don't feel like talking about it any more, and I won't. [. . .] This *is* my house." (349-50)

Leo, despairing of the efficacy of argument and persuasion to reveal to people what they refuse to see, withdraws from his effort to engage with his white interlocutors. The failure of Ken to imagine Leo's life is the failure of the white imagination in respect of black experience. Leo's response to this failure is to remind Ken where he is and, implicitly, what that means for his behaviour. To the extent that Black Christopher's guns will serve a similar purpose—to remind white police where they are when they enter black neighbourhoods[8]—Leo is persuaded of their necessity.

Leo's acceptance of Black Christopher's plan reflects Baldwin's endorsement of the Black Panther Party, an affiliation reflecting his growing sense that the liberal response to white supremacy had failed.

The Durability of White Supremacy

As I have suggested above, *Tell Me* marks a move to a position of pessimism that is close to (although not quite concurrent with) that of Wilderson and Warren. Indeed, in one particular scene, Leo Proudhammer experiences what, following Warren, might be characterised as ontological terror. After a groundless arrest (he is seen leaving a white woman's house), Leo is being interviewed at the police station where he realises that neither of his own feelings of fear and hatred towards the detective questioning him are reciprocated since "I was not real enough for that. I was not as real for him as he, unspeakably, was for me" (193). Leo's discovery evokes a statement by Fanon that is crucial in the work of both Wilderson and Warren: "The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (Fanon qtd. in Warren 62). In the context of Leo's police interview, being "not real enough" or having "no ontological resistance" means experiencing an unmitigated susceptibility to threat, in this case the threat of incarceration and/or violence. When Leo attempts to exert ontological resistance by appealing to his "rights [. . .] as a citizen of this country", the policemen's response is laughter, with the detective asking "What's the matter with you, boy? You some kind of nut? Are you a Red?" (193). The term "boy" enforces the Master/Slave relation, a relation that—according to Wilderson—Baldwin had finally come to recognise the white man would never relinquish (*Red, White & Black* 12). The violence underlying this relation "destroys the possibility of ontology

because it positions the Black in an infinite and indeterminately horrifying and open vulnerability, an object made available (which is to say fungible) for any subject" (38). A crucial step in the process by which Leo becomes such an object—or "available equipment in human form" (Warren 6)—is his silencing. His position of vulnerability is "unspeakabl[e]" in part because—in being denied the rights of the citizen—he effectively loses his power of speech. Moreover, he is robbed of his individuality by his placement into the generic categories of "boy", "nut", and "Red". These categories signal his essential fungibility, a condition described by Bryan Wagner in his claim that "To be black is to exist in exchange without standing in the modern world system" (1).

Leo's experience at the hands of the police underlines the futility of his father's earlier symbolic rejection of the white world by turning off the radio. The omnipresent possibility of "gratuitous violence" (*Red White & Black* 31) means that the white world will remain for the black man unspeakably real, that is, inescapable. That Leo formerly believed that the white world could divorce itself from the Master/Slave relation and the gratuitous violence that structures this relation, is suggested by the following lament: "I was nearly twenty years older than Christopher, and it made me ashamed [. . .] that not all of my endeavour, not all of the endeavour of so many for so long, had lessened his danger in any degree" (250). The note of regret corresponds to Baldwin's retrospective attitude toward the civil rights movement, which, by 1979, he was characterising as "a slave rebellion" that had been "brutally put down" (*TCOR* 141). A precipitous declension in optimism is evident by comparing Baldwin's 1963 hope that the "relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks [. . .] may be able [. . .] to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world" with his 1972 judgment that

“Nothing would ever reach the conscience of the people of this nation—it was a dream to suppose that the people of any nation had a conscience” (*Collected Essays* 346-47, 436). The earlier dream of whites and blacks working together seems to have yielded to Black Christopher’s warning that blacks “[couldn’t] afford to trust the white people in this country” (359), a sentiment echoed by Baldwin in his declaration that no black “can trust any longer the really most well-meaning white person to teach his child” (Hall 22). Apparently endorsing the type of separation called for by Malcolm X, Baldwin states that “the necessity, now, which I think nearly all black people see in different ways, is the creation and protection of a nucleus which will bring into existence a new people” (*Collected Essays* 456). Leo, also following Malcolm X, suggests progress will not come about gradually, but violently: “it seemed to me that Christopher’s options and possibilities could change only when the actual framework changed: and the metamorphosis of the framework into which we had been born would almost certainly be so violent as to blow Christopher, and me, and all of us, away” (250). Leo’s conviction that an end to white supremacy will entail violence is in accord with Baldwin’s claim that white America would sooner “blow up the globe” than “abandon the doctrine of white supremacy” (*TCOR* 107). Thus, the expectation expressed by both Leo and Black Christopher that they may soon find themselves “behind barbed wire” or “[shot] down like a dog” (359) corresponds to similarly apocalyptic projections by Baldwin, who warned that since “what we call this civilisation” was unwilling to undergo “healthy transformations” it would “be destroyed” (Hall 23).

The position of pessimism Baldwin had reached by the time of the publication of *Tell Me* resembles that of Wilderson and Warren in one especially important respect: in demoting the civil rights movement—in which he had played an influential

role—to a "slave rebellion", Baldwin diminishes the significance to black life in America of the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Acts of 1965. Wilderson, following Patterson, asserts that "no slave is *in* the world" (11). Since, for Wilderson, the "Slave" is an ontological position, and "Blackness cannot disentangle itself from slaveness" (52), it follows that the "Black" (as Wilderson employs the term) is not "in the world". Thus, the issue of civil rights—as an issue that belongs to the world—has no commerce with Blackness. As Wilderson puts it: "our analysis cannot be approached through the rubric of gains or reversals in struggles with the state and civil society, not unless and until the interlocutor first explains how the Slave is of the world" (11). Warren reaches a similar conclusion, dissenting from Patterson's claim that "the release from slavery is life-giving and life-creating" (91), and arguing, instead, that "[a] resurrection never occurs, simply the extension of death in a different form" (92). Hence, for Warren, as was noted earlier, the "metaphysical holocaust" encompasses the "post-Civil Rights period" (89). In its concurrence with Wilderson and Warren on the inconsequentiality of the civil rights movement to black being, Baldwin's position can be distinguished from that of Kenneth Warren and Adolph Reed, who emphasise "the changing terrain of American life in the wake of the major civil rights court decisions and legislative acts" (Reed and Warren xi).

If Baldwin's position vis-à-vis blackness and civil rights broadly corresponds to that of Wilderson and Warren, he departs from these theorists in other respects. In an above sub-section, "Theorising Blackness", I argued that Baldwin's insistence that whiteness was a choice together with his emphasis on kinship made his outlook a more hopeful one. In *Tell Me*, the idea of whiteness as a choice is given a playful twist when Leo's two tanned white friends, Barbara and Jerry, join him in a collective

they label “the Negro colour problem” (102). Perhaps more significantly, Baldwin’s idea of the common kinship of black and white is expressed in Leo’s declaration “I was part of this people, no matter how bitterly I judged them. I would never be able to leave this country” (249-50). The possibilities of such kinship is radically undermined by Wilderson’s notion of a foundational antagonism between the “Slave” (or “Black”) and the “Master” (or “Human”), and the irreconcilability of their “grammars of suffering” (26, 37). Warren, meanwhile, would surely dismiss Leo’s claim that he is “part of this people” as “romantic humanism” (90), emphasising instead that “black ~~being~~ is a structural position” that “subtends human identity but is not incorporated into it” (39). Baldwin’s response to an interviewer’s question about what white people need to do, brings into focus the disparity between his position and that of Warren:

> They have to love my child as much as they love their child; they have to decide that human life is more important than their profits, more important than their safety, and they won't do that. (Hall 22)

Certainly, Baldwin is pessimistic about the possibility of whites coming to see black life as equally valuable as white life. However, his (impossible) solution to the racial crisis remains centred on the value of “human life”. For Warren, this is a fundamental error. The alternative that he urges is that “black ~~being~~ begins to get over the human and its humanism fantasies” (170). Accepting Rinaldo Walcott’s claim that “What it means to be Human is continually defined against [blacks]”, Warren argues that “black thinking (philosophizing, theorizing, theologizing, poeticizing) [must] imagine black existence without Being, humanism, or the human” (171). According to Warren, such thinking will lead, first, “into an abyss”, then, “into the spirit” (171). “Black nihilism”, he concludes, “must rest in the crevice between the impossibility of transforming the world and the dynamic enduring power of the spirit” (171). Thus, in

proposing a radical departure from a human-centred metaphysics, Warren moves significantly beyond the position inhabited by Baldwin's philosophy in the late 1960s.

The Predictability of Whiteness

A corollary of the robustness of white supremacy is that the actions of white people, *in general*, can be predicted with a high degree of certainty: they will tend to act so as to protect and maintain the idea of white supremacy. As Leo puts it: "these people would not change, they could not, they had no energy for change" (250). For Baldwin, this means that even the "most well-meaning white person" cannot be trusted "because he brings his history with him" (Hall 22). In looking beyond conscious intention, Baldwin anticipates Wilderson's claim that "America's structuring irrationality [is] the libidinal economy of white supremacy" ("Gramsci's Black Marx" 231).

The libidinal economy might be said to meet the market economy in the figure of the Barbie fashion doll. Launched by Mattel in 1959, Barbie became America's first popular adult-figured doll for children (Kershaw). Her inventor, Ruth Handler, conceived of the doll as a means by which girls could enact the fantasy of being a woman: "Every little girl needed a doll through which to project herself into her dream of her future" (Handler qtd. in Kershaw). The launch of the Ken doll, in 1961, introduced a male partner into that dream. In 1967, Mattel created a black friend for Barbie, "Colored Francie", and has subsequently launched "ethnic" Barbies. Yet, as Shirley Steinberg notes, "Mattel has defined 'ethnicity' as 'other than white' [. . .] Barbie's whiteness privileges her to not be questioned; she is the standard against which all others are measured" (Steinberg qtd. in McLaren).

Barbie and Ken make an unlikely appearance in the central scene of Book Three of *Tell Me*, the visit of the King family from Kentucky. In bringing genteel Southerners face-to-face with the Panther-esque Black Christopher and the leonine Leo, Baldwin seeks to uncover the "structuring irrationality" of white supremacy. The first manifestation of this ideology is the fact that the Kings have named their children Barbie and Ken. That this is a tawdry attempt to impose whiteness on their progeny—an attempt Barbara thwarts by rejecting the name "Barbie", but Ken appears to accept—is indicated by Mrs. King's attitude towards Leo. When she expresses incredulity at being invited to the residence of a "real famous movie star", Leo points out that Barbara is a also a movie star, only for Mrs. King to counter "Oh, but that's different [. . .] She's my own flesh and blood" (345). As noted earlier, Baldwin's idea of kinship often appealed to the imagery of black and white being the same flesh and blood. Here, however, Mrs. King denies the possibility of kinship by suggesting that Leo's flesh and blood belong to a different category than her own. That these separate categories are "Slave" and "Master" becomes evident through her use of the term "boy" to describe Leo (345). A few minutes later, Mr. King reveals his position to be similarly structured by the Slave/Master relation when a "slight flush" on his face informs Leo that "he had almost said 'Boy'" (346). The Kings continue to expose themselves in their effort to prove they "ain't nearly so bad [. . .] as people up North *say* we are!" (351). When Mrs. King declares that her father "would have skinned me alive had he ever heard of [her] mistreating a colored person" she unwittingly discloses the very history of white on black violence that she is strenuously attempting to deny (348).

Leo's reaction to the Kings is marked by an absence of wonder or curiosity. He is "not in the least surprised by this family", "[doesn't] care at all what these

people felt, or thought”, and declares that “[t]alking to them was a total waste of time” (349). They can be dismissed from his life since, as he coldly states, “they were not my concern” (351). Ultimately, the Kings embody the predictability of the plastic dolls after which they have named their children. While Baldwin, I have suggested, uses the Kings to personify the durability of white supremacy, some critics felt that the overall depiction of whites in the novel was tediously negative. James Campbell provides, as evidence, a list of the characteristic adjectives used in the novel to describe white people: “‘snooty’, ‘bored’, distrustful’, ‘dangerous’, ‘brutally cruel’, ‘hateful’, ‘successful and vocal Fascists’”, lamenting that the “hallmarks of Baldwin’s moral outlook—equivocation, ambivalence, doubt—have all but vanished” (227-28). Though Campbell may be justified in his complaint that the insistently polemical *Tell Me* made for a “tiresome” read, the loss of “equivocation, ambivalence, doubt” in Baldwin’s writing cannot be dissociated from the loss of Medger Evers, Malcolm X, four Birmingham schoolgirls, and numerous other black Americans in the six years since *Another Country*. That is, *Tell Me* must be understood as a reflection of how an reorientation in Baldwin’s conception of the possibilities for black being in America transformed his moral outlook.

A Hopeful Exception?

If, as I have argued, *Tell Me* charts a more pessimistic turn in Baldwin’s thinking about black-white relations in general, it nonetheless offers a specific example of a cross-racial relationship embodying the type of kinship that Vivaldo supposed to exist between him and Rufus in *Another Country*. Indeed, while the earlier novel charts Vivaldo’s failure to live up to the responsibilities entailed in his assumption of a

brotherly bond with Rufus—leading to the latter's death—the opening section of *Tell Me* affirms the mutual understanding between Leo and Barbara that they are "like brother and sister" (328). After Leo has suffered a heart attack, he recognises Barbara's care and support—her "determin[ation] not to let [him] die"—as "the most tremendous consummation of [their] love" (10). In contrast to Rufus, who struggles to accept the love of others (perhaps, as it turns out, with some justification), Leo is able to receive Barbara's love and is grateful both for her love and his recognition of it: "Barbara loved me. I was very happy to know that. I was happy to know I knew it" For people *had* loved me, after all, when I had simply not dared to know it" (247). Thus, at the same time as *Tell Me* depicts the widespread intransigence of white supremacist views, it presents a persuasively rendered example of a cross-racial friendship sustained with greater success, and with less misunderstanding, than those portrayed in *Another Country*.

One important difference between Barbara and Vivaldo is that the former acknowledges her inability to fully comprehend the experience of black Americans, while the latter (as previously noted) seeks to minimise the difference between his experience and that of his black friends. Barbara's greater sensitivity in this area is revealed in her conversation with Fowler and Matthew, two black men who have been invited to join Leo and Barbara's party at a pizzeria. After Barbara has declared "I just want to live!", Fowler, the older man, asks "it don't have nothing to do, do it, with being white or black?", to which Barbara replies "No [. . .] Not really" (136). However, when Fowler then, "gestur[ing] toward Matthew", says "You hear her", Barbara's response is to demur from equating her experience with that of the young black man: "Oh, [. . .] I can't speak for *him* [. . .] I don't know enough" (136). Later in the novel, in what might be read as a more overt reference to the limits of cross-racial

empathy, Barbara remarks to Leo "I'm not in your body. I can't live your life. I only want to *share* your life" (208). The above exchanges can be read as suggesting the existence of the following reciprocal relation: Barbara's closeness to Leo enables her recognition of the unavailability—to her—of the experience of bearing Leo's ascriptive racial identity; this recognition brings her closer to Leo, since it aids her acceptance of the reliability of Leo's experiential account of living a "black life", including his encounters with direct and indirect forms of racism. Thus, when Barbara expresses a desire to "*share*" Leo's life, she is not presuming to share his experience of being black, but rather is underlining her commitment to a mutually supportive relationship.

Finally, Barbara surpasses Vivaldo in her willingness to *pay her dues*. If, as suggested above in the final section on *Another Country*, part of Baldwin's understanding of "paying one's dues" means the expression of kinship by eliminating distance, then Barbara pays her dues by supporting Leo through his sickness and by maintaining their friendship despite the likely detriment to her career (244). In regard to the first item, Leo recognises the sacrificial love demonstrated by Barbara (and his dresser Pete) in terms of a debt paid on his behalf: "It had cost them something: and they would never let me see the bill" (238). Respecting the second item, when Barbara is asked by a journalist whether she feels she has been overlooked for certain roles because of her association with Leo, she wittily replies "I have no idea. I was a little girl when they did *Gone With The Wind*, but since then I've been doing just fine, thank you" (244), signalling her refusal to jeopardise her friendship with Leo by accepting career-advancing roles in films whose ideology perpetuates a white supremacist outlook. In "paying her dues", then, Barbara justifies her claim to a familial relation—that of "a white, incestuous sister"—to Leo (209).

The relationship between Barbara and Leo thus provides a powerful counterweight to Leo's general pessimism about America, which is often expressed in hyperbolic language: "My countrymen impressed me, simply, as being, on the whole, the emptiest and most unattractive people in the world. It seemed a great waste of one's only lifetime to be condemned to their chattering, vicious, pathetic, hysterically dishonest company" (249). Barbara, in her devotion to Leo as a brother, her recognition of the limits of her understanding, and her readiness to pay her dues, is a hopeful exception to Leo's indictment of his country and its willed ignorance regarding its condition of moral peril.

Conclusion

As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the paradoxical quality of Baldwin's writing is on display in his two novels from the 1960s. *Another Country* offers a guardedly optimistic evaluation of the possibility of cross-racial understanding, yet its white characters struggle to comprehend the harshness of their friends' black experience, and thus fail in the brotherly/sisterly roles they imagine themselves to inhabit. Although *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* is much more pessimistic, in general, about whites understanding black experience, it allows that certain individuals, such as Barbara King, have the requisite sensitivity and dedication to realise Baldwin's vision of blacks and whites living on genuinely familial terms. Moreover, despite his increased pessimism by the late 1960s, Baldwin does not, as Warren does, abandon a humanist solution to the problem of black being. Thus, while the work of Warren and Wilderson offers a useful conceptual framework for understanding Baldwin's theorisation of blackness and whiteness, an enduring

element of hopefulness in Baldwin's writing means that his quality of despair remains markedly different from that of the school of Afropessimism.

CHAPTER THREE

Toni Morrison: From *Tar Baby*'s Black Eden to *Paradise*

Tar Baby (1981) occupies an unusual position in the oeuvre of Toni Morrison. When the novel was published in March 1981, Morrison's star was on the rise, following the critical acclaim bestowed on her third novel *Song of Solomon* (1977), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction in 1978. In the weeks following the publication of *Tar Baby*, Morrison would appear on both the cover of *Newsweek* and *The Dick Cavett Show*. The reviews for the novel were mostly positive. John Irving, writing for the *New York Times*, despite some complaints about the "excesses of the book's dialogue and lyricism", called it Morrison's "most ambitious" work and approvingly compared it to the novels of Thomas Hardy (in Gates and Appiah 21-24). Maureen Howard, in *The New Republic*, also took issue with "some stylistic excesses", but still found *Tar Baby* "an admirable novel" and praised the "new lightness and brilliance in Toni Morrison's enchantment with language" (ibid. 20). In addition to a warm critical reception, *Tar Baby* was a commercial success, spending seventeen weeks on the *New York Times* hardcover best sellers list, the first of Morrison's novels to appear on this list (Garner).

Yet despite its initial acclaim, *Tar Baby* currently languishes amongst Morrison's least popular novels.[1] While the phenomenal success of *Beloved* (1987) at first threatened to overshadow her earlier work, it eventually contributed to her first

three novels being favourably reappraised. That *Tar Baby* has not experienced a similar commercial and critical renaissance is indicated by its absence from the typical narrative of Morrison's career. When Morrison died in August 2019, many of the obituaries charted her writing life from *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to *Sula* (1973) to *Song of Solomon* (1977) before skipping past *Tar Baby* to *Beloved* (1987).[2] Similarly, the idea that *Tar Baby* is a somewhat expendable part of her oeuvre might be inferred from a Facebook post by former President of the United States Barack Obama shortly after Morrison's death in which he specifically recommends four out of her first five novels: "you can't go wrong by reading or re-reading the collected works of Toni Morrison. *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, everything else" (Gutterman).

Furthermore, it seems that Morrison herself was complicit in this tendency to ignore *Tar Baby*. Two documentaries made in the last decade of Morrison's life—*Imagine: Toni Morrison Remembers* (2015) and *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am* (2019)—each discuss her first three novels before moving to an extended analysis of *Beloved*. *Tar Baby* is not mentioned in either film. In the case of *The Pieces I Am*, director Timothy Greenfield-Sanders has acknowledged that Morrison was given "a lot of narrative control" ("FF Presents" 00:10:10-41), so that the decision to exclude any reference to *Tar Baby* (except for a brief glimpse of the book's cover) might be partly attributed to the author. Given that Morrison decided not to authorise a written biography in her lifetime, *The Pieces I Am*—made while Morrison was in her mid-80s—represented an important opportunity for the writer to shape her legacy. Thus, the absence of *Tar Baby* suggests that Morrison did not envisage a prominent role for the novel in that legacy.

In this chapter, I argue that Morrison has tended to distance herself from her fourth novel because of a modification in her attitude towards black culture. I examine this altered view by comparing the representation of black culture found in *Tar Baby* with its portrayal in a novel published sixteen years later, *Paradise* (1997). The earlier novel discloses a sympathetic attitude towards the preservation of "ancient properties" (305) and keeping "heritage intact" (199). This perspective is given elucidation in several of Morrison's essays and speeches. In a 2005 lecture, Morrison states that a question motivating all of her writing is "What is there of value in black culture to lose and how can it be preserved and made useful?" (*Mouth Full of Blood* 222). A specific example of a valuable aspect of black culture is given in a 1984 piece, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", where she identifies Pilate from *Song of Solomon* as a model of the ancestor, citing her capacity for providing "intimacy and support" in her "nurturing relationships" with males as a quality that subsequent generations have risked losing ("Rootedness" 344). By the time of *Paradise*, however, Morrison demonstrates a greater anxiety about two potential hazards inherent in her earlier conception of the preservation of black culture. *Paradise* cautions against allowing a desire to protect black culture from degenerating into an obsession with racial purity that mirrors white supremacist notions of racial superiority. Moreover, compared to *Tar Baby*, the later novel embodies a feminism that is more impatient with the persistence of patriarchal structures within black culture.

***Tar Baby* and the critics**

Tar Baby has proved as problematic a text for Morrison critics as it has for its author. Much scholarship has focused on the antagonistic romantic relationship between

Jadine—a Sorbonne-educated model now living in Paris—and Son, a Vietnam veteran from rural Florida. The conflict between Jadine and Son appears to represent the clash of white Eurocentric and black Africanist outlooks. Jadine, who is orphaned as a girl, eschews markers of "blackness"; she keeps her hair straight, is bored by the music of Charles Mingus, prefers Picasso to Itumba masks, and—perhaps most tellingly—is contemplating marriage to a white European man. Son, meanwhile, hymns the virtues of his all-black Floridian home town Eloe, proclaims the importance of upholding tradition (including gender roles wherein "fat black ladies in white dresses min[d] the pie table in the basement of the church" [119]), rails against the racial injustices of US economic and legal systems, and questions whether blacks and whites should "sit down and eat together" (210), let alone marry. The standoff between Jadine and Son is encapsulated in the oft-quoted lines: "Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?" (269).

Given the centrality of this clash of perspectives, it is unsurprising that critics have often approached *Tar Baby* with the intention of determining which point of view—Jadine's or Son's—is endorsed by the text. Critics such as Angelita Reyes, Judylyn S. Ryan, Karin Luisa Badt, and Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems have tended to find the novel more sympathetic towards Son's concern with preserving black culture. Ryan argues that Morrison has created a "narrative consciousness that seems to acquiesce to, if it does not quite sanction, Son's perspective" (617-18), while Samuels and Hudson-Weems view Son as "the bearer of [Africa's] culture and values, its black Messiah come to save Jadine from the street/Streets of Babylon" (85). Fewer critics have made the case for Jadine as the novel's hero, although Lauren Lepow claims exactly that (372), while Shirley A.

Stave finds in Jadine not "a desire to flee some 'authentic' African self", but rather "the musing of any intelligent person, of any gender, who resists being reified as an embodiment of a culture, an ethnicity, etc" (398).

Other critics, instead of choosing between Jadine and Son, have argued that the "meaning" of the text is located in the complexity, confusion, and contradiction that result from the collision of irreconcilable perspectives. In one of the most compelling responses to the novel, Letitia L. Moffitt argues that "[w]ith all of those 'worrisome' facets—its use of stereotypes, its fragmented narrative, and its lack of resolution—*Tar Baby* confuses readers because it is meant to be confusing, in the sense of resisting easy categorising and convenient definition" (12). Morrison "challenges us to embrace the complexity that comes with multiple visions" (12), to recognise that "subjective viewpoints can be perceptive even when at odds with each other" (19). In a similar vein, Yogita Goyal places contradiction at the heart of *Tar Baby*, arguing that the conflicts in the novel "spiral out in ever more complex and uncontainable ways, proliferating in the process all the contradictions that make diaspora a stimulating concept today" (394). Goyal notes how "the realist and mythic registers of the novel work at cross-purposes" so that "even as [*Tar Baby*] explicitly asserts the value of cultural memory and tradition, it simultaneously undercuts the basis for identifying a stable definition of tradition or authenticity" (410).

Although the approach taken by Moffitt and Goyal—to turn the contradictions in *Tar Baby* into a virtue—is appealing, such readings risk investing the novel with critical insights that were only attained subsequent to its publication. That is, these readings downplay the evolution in Morrison's thinking around issues of race, culture, and tradition that occurs in the interval between *Tar Baby* and *Paradise*. Given the significant scholarship undertaken in areas such as cultural studies, critical race theory,

and black feminist theory between 1981 and 1997, it would be surprising to find Morrison's thought unaffected by these developments. *Pace* Moffitt and Goyal, I argue that the scepticism towards both definitions of black culture and notions of racial authenticity that they locate in *Tar Baby* is only properly realised upon the publication of *Paradise*. Thus, rather than viewing the earlier novel as anticipating later critical attitudes towards the concept of "blackness"—like those found in such seminal works as bell hooks' 1990 essay "Postmodern Blackness", Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House* (1992), and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993)—I suggest that a more productive approach is to view it as being in dialogue with the work of an important antecedent, James Baldwin.

Morrison and Baldwin

Tar Baby was the first of Morrison's novels to feature white characters in significant roles. The inclusion of Valerian and Margaret Street arguably allows greater opportunity for the interrogation of one of the chief preoccupations of Baldwin's writings: the operation of white supremacy. This theme is primarily explored via Valerian Street who is four years into his retirement on Isle des Chevaliers, a Caribbean island he purchased "for almost nothing" (53) after inheriting the Street Brothers Candy Company from his father. The small amount Valerian has paid for the island reflects the low value he places on its inhabitants; he refuses to call his indigenous employees by their actual names, calling Gideon "Yardman" and Thérèse "Mary". Although he appears to have a good relationship with Sydney and Ondine Childs—employed as butler and cook respectively—he refuses to allow his wife

Margaret, who is desperately lonely on Isle des Chevaliers, to "consort" with servants, thus thwarting a potential close friendship with Ondine (59).

Valerian first encounters Margaret on a float at a parade in Maine where she is dressed in the red and white colours of the Valerian candy (a gumdrop named after "the Candy King" [31]) and standing with a polar bear, "holding on to one of the bear's forefeet like a bride" (16). The double comparison—between Margaret and an item of consumption, and between Valerian and a natural predator (reiterated later in the line "And Bride of Polar Bear became his bride" [54])—indicates that their union will entail exploitation and cruelty. In this respect, it is a microcosm for the greater exploitation involved in the production of the Street Brothers' candy. Son observes an example of Valerian's cool mistreatment of others when he (Valerian) "dismiss[es] with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort" (202). When Son later views Valerian as "one of the killers of the world" (204), the polysemy of the second "of" means that the phrase captures both Valerian's predatory quality (he is a killer *in* the world) and the murderous effect of his ruthless exploitation of the natural world (he literally kills the world). Moreover, reading "the world" as the global human community, Valerian's prominent role in an inequitable capitalist system inextricably linked to white supremacy renders him culpable for the destruction of this community.

Despite Valerian's manifold sins, his greatest crime is that of innocence: "[A]ll he could say was that he did not know. He was guilty, therefore, of innocence. Was there anything so loathsome as a willfully innocent man?" (243). Here, Morrison picks up a central theme in Baldwin's work (discussed in the previous chapter): the failure of the white man to "know what is happening". In addition to Valerian's willed ignorance about the names of his employees (noted above), there are several other key

moments where Valerian eschews knowledge of the racialised other. When he is mugged by black teenagers in Miami, they, observing the "disdain in [his] eyes", ask "You don't like us, do you?", to which Valerian replies "Gentlemen [. . .] I don't know you" (91). As with Margaret's abuse of her son Michael (provoked by Valerian's oppressive treatment of his wife), Valerian remains wholly ignorant about the socio-economic environment that has limited the life opportunities of the black teenagers: "He had not known because he had not taken the trouble to know. [. . .] Knowing more was inconvenient and frightening" (242). Morrison follows Baldwin in suggesting that Valerian is invested in maintaining a divide between himself and the racialised other since the elimination of difference would precipitate a psychic collapse. When Jadine tells Son that it doesn't matter what colour Valerian is, Son observes that *Valerian* "cares what color he is" (263). Valerian's "whiteness" enables him to stand apart from the plight of the "non-white". Thus, he chastises his son for his endeavours at helping indigenous Americans: "The Indian problem, he told Michael, was between Indians, their conscience and their own derring-do" (145). When Jadine, Sydney, and Ondine take Valerian's side against Son, whom he sees as "a black who was one of their own", he feels "[d]isappointment nudging contempt" (145), presumably because this confuses his notion that one's loyalties and responsibilities do not extend across racial boundaries. With Valerian's refusal to acknowledge his intrinsic role in the exploitation of others—or his obligation to atone for these abuses—*Tar Baby* advances Baldwin's theme of white America's failure to face up to its historical debt accrued through centuries of enslavement and misappropriation. As Son puts it: "[Valerian's] debt is big, woman. He can't never pay it off!" (263).

If Valerian is the clearest embodiment of white supremacy in the novel, perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the story is the manner in which it depicts the dissemination of this ideology. Beginning with Valerian, attitudes and beliefs associated with white supremacy spread outwards, infecting a wide circle of characters, including Margaret, Sydney, Ondine, Jadine, and even Son. In inhibiting Margaret's potential friendship with Ondine, Valerian helps to preserve his wife's racist attitudes, which surface in her description of Son as "look[ing] like a gorilla" (129) and her recurrent fear that he will rape her. Sydney too views Son as a "wife-raper" (99), and both he and Ondine follow Valerian and Margaret in not taking the trouble to discover the real names of the indigenous employees. Indeed, Gideon claims that Ondine regularly fires Thérèse whereupon he "bring[s] her right back and tell[s] them it's a brand-new woman" (153). Thus, in her relation to Ondine, Thérèse experiences fungibility, a condition of Wilderson's concept of "black incapacity" (see Chapter 2); Ondine has assumed the Master role in the Master/Slave relation. Jadine, as noted earlier, has acquired Eurocentric sensibilities, perhaps partly through Valerian's influence as well as her European education, which lead her to denigrate African art. When Ondine praises her niece's modelling success in Paris, she exclaims that Jadine "[m]ade those white girls disappear [. . .] right off the page" (40), suggesting that Jadine has introduced blackness into the predominantly white world of 1970s Parisian fashion. Yet this assertion is immediately undercut by the text, which notes that Ondine "stirred milk into the chocolate paste" and then has Jadine requesting "whipped cream" (40). The implication is clear; rather than Jadine bringing blackness into a white world, Jadine's blackness is being diluted by whiteness. When her magazine cover shot is described later in the novel, the fact that her hair is "pressed flat to her head" suggests that she has submitted to Western

standards of beauty, while the "wet and open lips" look, repeated over a four-page spread, indicates her complicity with the commodification of sexuality in a capitalist system (116).

Though, in the critical literature, Jadine is often discussed in terms of her status as the novel's most conspicuous example of a black individual imbibing white supremacist notions, the effect of this ideology upon Son has attracted relatively little attention. Yet arguably the manner in which Son's attitudes and behaviours replicate those of Valerian is one of the most significant features of the text. As the embodiment of black culture, Son represents the alternative to the white supremacist worldview. However, in ways that have escaped the notice of most critics, Son—like the Childs—is infected by the ideology to which he stands in opposition.

An early indication that Son's "blackness" is being compromised by the white world of the Streets can be located in the scene in which he takes his first shower in Jadine's bathroom. The water that runs off him is described as "dark—charcoal gray. As black as the sea before sunrise" (132). When he swallows some water direct from the showerhead it "taste[s] like milk" (132), a detail that can be interpreted as Son ingesting whiteness, or likening him to a baby (entering a white world). The latter interpretation is supported by the presence of "placenta protein" in the shampoo that he uses (132) and is corroborated several pages later: "now here he was with the immediate plans of a newborn baby" (138). The sense that an earlier version of Son is being eclipsed by a version that must accommodate itself to a white world is suggested later in the chapter when he feels his "other way of being in the world [. . .] leaving him when he stood in the white towel watching Yardman's—Gideon's—back" (166). In addition to the explicit departure of his "other way of being", the

symbolically "white" towel alongside his initial use of the demeaning designation "Yardman" signals the insidious intrusion of white supremacy into his perspective.

Since Son's entry into the Street household occurs at the point at which they are expecting the return of their son Michael (who is approximately the same age as Son), the narrative encourages the reader to imagine Son replacing the son. This imagery returns us again to a central concept in Baldwin, the notion of kinship across racial boundaries: "I am the flesh of your flesh and bone of your bone; I have been here as long as you have been here—longer—I paid for it as much as you have. It is my country, too. [. . .] My history and culture has got to be taught. It is yours" (*The Cross of Redemption* 116). This idea both supports and contradicts Son's view of the racial situation in America. It augments his claim (noted above) that whites owe a historical debt to blacks, and is congruent with his vehement assertion that Jadine's education was impoverished to the extent that it neglected a history of African Americans like him: "Did they describe me to you? [. . .] If they didn't teach you that, then they didn't teach you nothing, because until you know about me, you don't know nothing about yourself" (264). (Although, in a narrow sense, Son is here talking to a black woman about black culture, the argument employed is a clear echo of Baldwin's claim that Americans of any racial ascription can only properly understand themselves by understanding "the interracial drama acted out on the American continent" [*Collected Essays* 129], and so Son's words can plausibly be interpreted in Baldwin's wider sense.) On the other hand, the idea of kinship between blacks and whites makes a mockery of Son's insistence that "they should not eat together or live together or sleep together. Do any of those personal things in life" (210). Reading Son as "son" puts him on intimate terms with the Streets, so that the reader might identify

with Jadine's response of gentle ridicule—"Oh, Son" (210)—to his disavowal of a "personal" element in black/white relations.

Yet, although the novel at times appears to undermine Son's separatist leanings, in more subtle ways it can be seen to sympathise with his desire to avoid community with whites. One of the most startling revelations in the text is the abuse that Michael Street underwent as a baby; Margaret's repressed anger at Valerian manifested itself in her inflicting physical injury on her son using pins and cigarettes. The disclosure of this history of maltreatment should alert readers to the way in which the Streets' other "son"—Son—has suffered abuse at the hands of his allegorical parents (here the Streets stand for white America). Serving in Vietnam at the age of eighteen, Son experiences a nervous breakdown and is "discharged without honor or humor" (224). The enduring effects of his psychological ordeal are insinuated in his violent reaction to discovering his wife sleeping with a teenager (224), and in an ostensibly less explicable outburst of anger directed towards a fish that has "slapped his face" (167). In the second episode, Son's furious response may be partly explained by the laughter of two of his crewmen, "[t]he Mexican and the Swede" (167). The nationalities of these crewman are significant since the text has already informed us that Valerian provided gainful employment to Swedes in his candy company (52) and recruited the services of a "brilliant Mexican architect" to design his island home (10). Yet, rather than employing blacks, the salesmen at the Street Brothers Candy Company disparagingly refer to them using the racial epithet "jigs", while selling them Valerians, sweets made from leftover "syrup sludge" (50) that Son remembers eating (146). Thus, when the Mexican crewman, observing Son's violence, says "*Americano. Cierto Americano. Es verdad*" (167), there is a bitter irony; despite Son having fought for his country, both the Mexican and the Swede can much more easily

"become American" in the sense that, by virtue of not being black, they have a greater opportunity of sustaining a livelihood on American soil[3]. To paraphrase the condition of Shakespeare's Caliban (to whom Son is compared [166]), the only language America has taught Son is violence. In this respect, white America has abused and traumatised its son/Son, leaving him singularly ill-equipped for the modern world. Hence, it is unsurprising that Son should be so wary of the company of whites.

Pursuing further the idea that Son has been abused and corrupted by the white world helps to explain an episode in the novel that many critics have either missed or ignored: Son's rape of Jadine. The incident occurs in chapter nine during Son's recounting of the tar baby story and was first identified as a rape by John N. Duvall in a 1997 essay[4] in which he quoted only Jadine's side of the dialogue:

> "Don't touch me. Don't you touch me."
>
> "Quit! leave me alone!"
>
> "You better kill me. Because if you don't, when you're through, I'm going to kill you."
>
> "I am going to kill you. *Kill* you."
>
> "As sure I live," she said. "I'm going to kill you." (Duvall 106)

Duvall notes as further proof the description (after Son's departure from the bedroom) of Jadine "[lying] in wrinkled sheets, slippery, gutted" (*Tar Baby* 271). Shirley Stave, also identifying the scene as a rape, persuasively connects the words "slippery" and "gutted" to the fish that Son has violently beaten earlier in the novel (18). Less convincing, however, is Stave's description of Son as "possibly the only truly static male character within Morrison's oeuvre" and her claim that he "does not in any way

transform or mature in the course of the novel" (17). In fact, the rape scene, which occurs in the penultimate chapter, is the clearest demonstration that Son *has* transformed over the course of the text; he has transformed into the likeness of Valerian.

When Son arrives at L'Arbe de la Croix, Margaret, Jadine, and Sydney each express fear about the possibility that he will rape, steal, or murder. Yet, as Ondine points out to Sydney, Son has turned down ample opportunities to commit such crimes: "he's been here long enough and quiet enough to rape, kill, steal—do whatever he wanted and all he did was eat" (99). Although it seems that all Son is eating is chocolate—so much so that Thérèse and Gideon brand him "the chocolate eater" (104)—he is also consuming white Western culture. In respect of this point, the scene in which Jadine hands Son a copy of *Elle* in which she appears is crucial, since it inaugurates him into a Westernised way of looking. Son responds to the provocative photographs by touching them, first "tracing her blouse with his forefinger" (116), before "circling" the "priceless" earrings that once belonged to Catherine the Great (117). As this action continues, it assumes a more overtly sexual connotation; the word "tracing" is replaced by "fingering" (118). With Son in an apparently trancelike state "silent, still staring at the pictures" (119), the following exchange takes place:

> "Why don't you look at me?" she asked him.
>
> "I can't," he said.
>
> "Why can't you?"
>
> "The pictures are easier. They don't move."
>
> Jadine felt a flash of pity. "You want me to be still? Will you look at me if I'm still?"

> He didn't answer. "Look," she said. "I'm still. Very still."
>
> He lifted his head and looked at her. Her eyes were mink-colored just like in the pictures, and her lips were like the pictures too. Not moist, but open a little, the way they were in sleep. (119)

Son prefers the photographs—with their Western fantasy of a passive and sexually available woman—to the reality of the ambitious and intellectually combative Jadine, and attempts to impose the qualities of the former upon the latter. The woman presented by *Elle* will submit both sexually and ideologically, allowing Son to "insert his own dreams into her [. . .] to press his dreams of icehouses into hers" (119). When Son senses the incongruity between the woman in *Elle* and the woman who "at any moment [. . .] might talk back or, worse, press her dreams of gold and cloisonné and honey-colored silk into him" (120), he verbally abuses her, a foreshadowing of the violence of the later rape. Indeed, the rape seems precipitated by Son once more noticing with dismay and anger that Jadine is not the woman of the photographs; gazing at the latter, Son observes that "[h]er eyes were the color of mink and her lips wet and open" (116), while, looking at Jadine before he rapes her, "he [sees] the sheen gone from her minky eyes and her wonderful mouth fat with disgust" (270). In the context of Jadine's role in an industry in which mink fur has historically been highly prized, the references to Son seeing Jadine's eyes as "mink-colored" (119), "mink-dark" (219, 300), or simply "minky" (117, 132, 270) mark Jadine as prey and Son as predator. Significantly, it is not Jadine, but the woman in the photographs whom Son first views in this manner. Therefore, it is only when Son looks at Jadine through Western eyes that he joins the white men Valerian—who, as noted earlier, is allegorised as a polar bear—and Ryk—who gives Jadine a coat made from "the hides of ninety baby seals" (87)—in the ranks of predators.

The convergence in the perspectives of Son and Valerian is expressed in other subtle ways. Just as Son encounters a distorted and objectified version of Jadine in the "Mademoiselle Childs" (116) of *Elle*, Valerian meets Margaret as "Miss Maine [. . .] looking like the candy that had his name" (54). Son views Margaret in a similarly reductive manner—that is, an object of consumption—later in the novel when he sees her in a bathing suit and thinks she is "like a marshmallow [. . .] no bones, no cartilage—just liquid sugar, soft and a little pully" (196). Valerian's sense of worth is derived from the fortune he has made by extracting surplus value from the "ninety others" (52) who worked in his candy company; Son's confidence in what he perceives as his "authentic" blackness derives from the "ninety houses" in his "all black" hometown of Eloe (172). Valerian's nostalgic attitude towards his "family shop" from which emanated a "marvellous candy odor that greeted [the local people] in the morning and bid them goodnight" (52) is comparable to Son's wistful memories of "the pie ladies and the six-string banjo" (299); yet both men have deserted their beloved neighbourhoods. Finally, Son claims that Valerian—like him—"cares what color he is" (263), with each sharing a distaste for close relations between races. Son's rape of Jadine can thus be seen as the endpoint of a process in which he increasingly comes to resemble Valerian and his "rape of the earth and its people" (Furman 58).

What can it mean for Son—in certain respects the archetypal black man—to become like Valerian, who can similarly be viewed as the archetypal white man? Susan Edmunds, drawing upon the work of Bernette Golden, argues that the rape of Jadine by Son needs to be understood in the context of the psychohistory of rape in the United States: "Rooted in the institution of slavery, this psychohistory casts black women as 'pawns' in a battle for dominance between white and black men and

encourages black men to adopt 'the white man's attitude [that] Black women were not to be valued or protected'" (631). Edmunds claims Jadine's relations with white men (Valerian and Ryk) causes Son to "experienc[e] the traumatic past as a present threat to his gender and his race" and that he responds by "reassert[ing] a personal and political claim on her body, attacking her in the flesh as a living symbol of the race's failure to unite in the face of ongoing white domination" (632). While Edmunds' reading is persuasive, I would supplement it in two ways. First, since my reading of the novel identifies the moment that Son looks at *Elle* as his fatal fall into a white Western perspective, the (presumably white male) magazine photographer can be added to the list of white men with whom he competes for Jadine. Second, and more important, while Son may be angered by the claims of various men upon Jadine, he accepts the false passivity attributed to her in the *Elle* photographs, since his plan to make a home with her in Eloe relies upon an improbable degree of timidity. Put differently, he is outraged by white males gazing upon Jadine, but finds that she becomes more attractive when he views her through the (hopelessly distorted) white male gaze.

Another way to think through the implications of Son becoming like Valerian is to remember that the latter figure embodies capitalist exploitation. Valerian's ninety exploited workers can be linked to the ninety baby seals killed to make the sealskin coat Ryk gifts Jadine. It is perhaps less obvious how this pattern of exploitation and violence can be connected with the ninety houses in Son's cherished Eloe. Might Morrison be suggesting that Son is comparably ruthless in his exploitation of the "authenticity" that his Eloe origins lend him? Certain episodes in the novel support the idea that Son—in his performance of "blackness"—is consciously exploiting the credulity of others. Immediately after he coolly lies to Ondine about why he left

Florida (he euphemistically describes killing his wife by driving through their house as "car trouble" [161]) he ingratiates himself by imparting an impressive piece of folk knowledge regarding banana leaves in shoes. Similarly, his knowledge about how to bring greenhouse plants into bloom has Valerian—to whom Son cynically advertises his blackness through phrases such as "It's sho pretty in here" (146) and jokes about "three colored whores" (148)—enthusing about his "Black magic" (189). While Sydney warns Son about Valerian—"White folks play with Negroes"—Son knows enough about the "Phil-a-delphia Negro" that Sydney proclaims himself to be to realise that in order to win him over he must play the role of simple country black: "he kept calling him Mr. Childs and sir and allowing in gesture as how he was a reprobate" (162-63). From one viewpoint, Son's willingness to consciously act out various black stereotypes for personal advantage discredits his conception of himself as more authentically black than Jadine, whom he labels a "white gir[l]" (121). On the other hand, his strategic role-playing connects him to Esu-Elegbara, "the divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology", whom in Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s seminal work *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) is placed at the centre of a "topos [that] functions as a sign of the disrupted wholeness of an African system of meaning and belief that black slaves recreated from memory" (5). Thus, the reader is left with an unsettling paradox: the episodes in the novel in which Son's "blackness" appears most artificial and cynical might—in situating him within an African tradition—simultaneously be those where his claims to authenticity are most plausible.

Despite Son's readiness to adopt "postures and phony accents" (150) when it proves expedient to do so, he appears to sustain a belief in an essential self. This belief surfaces in the diatribe Son aims at Jadine directly before he rapes her: "when a black woman treats me like what I am, *what I really am*, you say she's spoiling me"

(270; emphasis added). Yet earlier in the novel we are told that Son "did not always know who he was" (165). Once again, Baldwin can help us understand this contradiction. As noted in the previous chapter, a recurrent motif in Baldwin's essays is the invention of "the nigger" by the white man as a means to sustain the latter's racial identity and sense of superiority. As long as the black man accepts the definition given him by the white man, then the white man can maintain the illusion that he is superior. But, as Baldwin notes, "if I am not what I've been told I am, then it means that *you're* not what you thought *you* were either! And that is the crisis" (*Collected Essays* 682). Son's sense of identity appears to have a similarly precarious foundation to that of the white man in that it is conditional on his relation to an other, in this case, the figure of the black woman. Son's knowledge of who he "really is" derives in large part from being treated with love and affection by black women, often in a mothering role. Thus, the (perceived) refusal of black women to perform this role precipitates in Son an identity crisis analogous to that (in Baldwin's schema) of the white man confronted with the black other who rejects the category of "nigger".

In the absence of his dead mother, Son has been raised by an emotionally withdrawn father; reunited after an eight-year separation, "[t]hey didn't touch. They didn't know how" (247). The importance of loving female figures in his upbringing is indicated by his dreams of "yellow houses with white doors which women opened wide and called out, 'Come on in here, you honey you'" (6); these women are later identified as "the ladies at the pie table at Good Shepherd—Aunt Rosa; Soldier's mother May Downing whom they called Mama May; Drake's grandmother Winnie Boon who switched them every spring; Miss Tyler who had taught him how to play piano" (294-95). That Son is a perpetual child in need of a mother's love and nurture is suggested by the multiple "births" he undergoes over the course of the novel. In

addition to the shower scene noted earlier, the other births occur at the start of the novel, when after jumping ship he emerges from the "tunnel" of a whirlpool into "blood-tinted" water and "ammonia-scented air" (4), and at the end, when Thérèse—a "wet-nurse" (154)—deposits him at Isle des Chevaliers, where he "crawl[s]" ashore, "[b]reathing heavily with his mouth" and surrounded by the "nursing sound of the sea" (306). Son's desire for a nurturing environment is suggested by the first line of the text—"He believed he was safe" (3)—and contrasts with Jadine's resolution to be her own "safety" (290); the contrast between the pair is underscored by Jadine's complaint that Son is like a "big country baby" who was "just born" (172).

Son brings his need for the love of a mother into his romantic relationships so that whenever he senses his partner's focus being diverted from him, his response is akin to that of a young child jealous of his mother's attention. He reacts with uncontrollable anger to Cheyenne's infidelity, he childishly refuses to discuss the possibility of Jadine accepting a loan from Valerian to "open a shop or start an agency" (263), and when Alma Estée informs him that Jadine has met a white man at the airport he wants to "smash something [. . .]. Smash the man who took the woman he had loved" (301). If Son's most fundamental sense of identity relates to his upbringing in Eloe where he was loved by a variety of substitute mothers, then a perceived failure of a romantic partner to play the mother role threatens his sense of himself. That is, if Jadine is not who he thinks she is—or wants her to be—then he is no longer who he thinks he is.

An important question arises from the fact that Son's sense of himself as the embodiment of black culture is rooted in his experience in Eloe: to what extent does the text validate Son's view of Eloe as a model of African American culture?

The Black Eden

A number of critics—especially those sympathetic to Jadine's predicament in the novel—have found Son's sense of Eloe as an important repository of black culture to be illusory. Susan Willis claims that "Son's dream of [. . .] 'fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table' [. . .] bears no resemblance to his real past [. . .] where tough black women with little time for pie tables have built their own rough-hewn, unpainted homes" (685-86). Lauren Lepow states that "Eloe is not Eden", noting that "[e]ven Son ceases to see Eloe as paradisal after he has lost Jade, when he looks at photographs she took on their trip and finds their radiance gone" (372). Ann Rayson, in contending that "[a]uthenticity is hard to find and achieve" (99), also refers to the photographs "where everyone now looks stupid to [Son]" (94), as well as appealing to a 1983 interview with Nellie McKay in which "Morrison says that maybe Eloe 'wasn't real anyway. If it were, she could not destroy it with a camera. He did not live in that world either. Maybe there was just a little bit of fraud in his thinking as he did [sic] since he was away. So you can't really trust all that he says'" (100). These readings seek to debunk what they see as Son's naïve and nostalgic view of Eloe. The perspective offered by Jadine's photographs is privileged as a realist corrective to Son's rose-tinted vision.

Certainly there are elements of Eloe that readers are likely to find problematic. That the town has remained untouched by any feminist revolution is apparent in Soldier's degrading language about Cheyenne ("She had the best pussy in Florida" [254]), Rosa's prudery about Jadine's preference for sleeping unclothed (252), the conduct of Frisco, who "[t]reated his wife like a dog and ran other women all over

town" (170), and Old Man's lack of sympathy for the late Sally Brown despite the fact that her daughter was killed by his son (248). Yet rather than dismissing Eloe, as Jadine does, as "rotten" (259) and "a dump" (264), it is possible instead to trace some of the distasteful attitudes and behaviours of the residents back to the malign influence of white supremacist ideology. Despite Son's initial boast that Eloe is an "[a]ll black" town that "[r]uns itself", when Jadine enquires: "Who pumps the water, hooks up the telephones?", he is forced to backtrack somewhat: "Oh, well, white folks do that" (172). That the apparently self-sufficient Eloe relies on white institutions for the provision of certain basic goods and services serves as a metaphor for the difficulty of escaping from what Morrison calls the "master narrative", which she defines as "whatever ideological script that is being imposed by the people in authority on everybody else" (qtd. in Moyers). Indeed, the provenance of Eloe's running water might remind readers of the shower water that "tasted like milk" (132) which ushered Son into the white world of Valerian Street, the implication being that Eloe is less "black" than it imagines itself to be.

In fact, the white world invades the culture of Eloe in several significant ways. Although Son and his friend Soldier seem to have little in common with Valerian, all three have served in the United States Army. Son's time in Vietnam meant becoming a witness and accomplice to "the slaughter of whole families in their sleep" (131); his violent behaviour towards both Cheyenne and Jadine may be partly explained by his traumatic experience in the army. Indeed, that U.S. military campaigns abroad may have had a significant detrimental effect upon Eloe is suggested by the text's casual mention of a "Frank G." (possibly Son's uncle) who "died in Korea" (247). Closer to home, the harm caused by police negligence is more tangible; Son's sister Francine is attacked by a police dog and so badly shaken that she ends up "frail as a pick tearing

all her hair out in the state hospital" (268). Frisco, the man who furnished Son with his much-vaunted "original dime" (169), suffers an even worse fate at the hands of white capitalists. Working on the gas fields—presumably the ones at "Poncie and Sutterfield" where the "white folks" live (172)—Frisco is "blown to bits" (170). Whether Frisco's family receive due compensation for their loss seems doubtful given that "[t]hey didn't know about state aid in Eloe" and "unemployment insurance was a year of trouble with no rewards" (268). A final instance of the white world's intrusion upon the physical and psychic wellbeing of Eloe can be found in the manner in which Son's friends Drake and Soldier look at Jadine "like she was a Cadillac he had won, or stolen, or even bought for all they knew" (254). Here the reference to the famous luxury car brand serves as a reminder that, despite its separatist aspirations, Eloe is still part of a capitalist country and thus cannot easily divorce itself from a system that encourages the commodification of individuals. Moreover, the suggestion that Jadine might have been purchased reveals how the memory of slavery—the ultimate manifestation of white supremacist ideology—remains deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of Eloe.

These various examples illustrate the heavy price Eloe has paid for U.S. military exploits abroad, unconstrained police terror at home, a capitalist system that sanctions economic exploitation, and the psychic legacy of slavery. They suggest that if Eloe lacks the Edenic properties ascribed to it by Son, this is due not to an inherent problem with the idea of an all black town, but rather to the exploitation and degradation arising from the outside influence of whites.

If the problems with Eloe can be traced to the influence of "whiteness", its virtues cannot only not be understood by the white world, they cannot even be *seen* by it. Indeed, the novel is at pains to point out how elements of black culture remain

invisible to the white Western perspective. Various media—photography, drawing, and television—are each shown as failing to capture what Morrison presents as the unique qualities intrinsic to blackness.

In a Parisian supermarket, Jadine encounters a woman with "skin like tar against [a] canary yellow dress" (45) whom she admires as possessing an "unphotographable beauty" (46). In one sense, the phrase means that, compared to the models in *Elle*, the woman has "too much hip, too much bust" (45) so that a Western fashion photographer might not recognise her as "beautiful". Yet the phrase also suggests a quality in the woman's character that cannot be captured by a camera. Certain details—the woman's tribal markings and bright yellow gelée, her disregard of the cashier's instruction that eggs must be purchased by the half-dozen, and her rejection of Jadine's Westernised appearance, signalled by her act of spitting—combine to suggest a quality of defiance, a refusal to acquiesce in the privileging of European over African customs. The text invites the reader to recognise the woman's powerful sense of self as a superior form of beauty to that offered by the submissive and sexualised representations of women in the pages of *Elle*.

Son is connected to the woman in yellow in that he too possesses qualities that evade capture by the Westernised eye. When Jadine tries to sketch him, she laments that "[t]oo many art history courses [. . .] had made her not perceptive but simpleminded. She saw planes and angles and missed character" (158). Part of the reason that Jadine struggles to convey the personality that animates Son's "laughing heaven-raised face" (170) appears to be the under-representation of people like Son in media such as television. To Son, the black actors on television seem like "black people in whiteface playing black people in blackface" (216). That is, to enter the television industry, the actors must first embrace a white perspective, and then be

prepared to play caricatures of black people. Son is disturbed by how "happy" the black characters are, with "the sound of their televised laughter" lacking any "irony or defiance or genuine amusement" (216).[5] Their situation seems so remote from his own that it triggers an identity crisis: "If those were the black folks he was carrying around in his heart all those years, who on earth was he?" (216-17).

Such a question seems to open up the possibility that Son's idea of blackness is delusional; Linden Peach implies just this by viewing Son's "estrangement from the blacks of New York" as "[casting him] in the mythical role of country mouse" (85). However, the question arrives in the text just after descriptions of the grotesque transformations black men and women undergo in New York City. The women are "crying girls split into two parts by their tight jeans" (215) while the men, who have "found the whole business of being black and men at the same time too difficult" (216), have "stoked their cocks into bikini underwear and opened their shirts to their tits" (215). Against the backdrop of such physical distortions—which are presented as expedient alternatives to being black, rather than freely chosen expressions of identity—Son's determination to preserve a fixed idea of blackness appears comparable to the woman in yellow's pride in her African origins. Indeed, in comparison to Son and the African woman, both Jadine and the "crying girls and the men on tippy-toe" (216) are presented as "lonely and inauthentic" (48). That Son is unsketchable places him alongside the unphotographable woman—whom Morrison refers to as the "original" and "authentic self" (Taylor-Guthrie 148)—beyond the range of the Eurocentric perspective.

Perhaps the most sustained examination of the difference between the European and African worldview is found in the character of Thérèse, who is identified as a mythic figure in several ways. A wet-nurse to "hundreds of French

babies" (112), both her names—Thérèse and "Mary"—evoke figures associated with maternal qualities: Mother Teresa and the Virgin Mary. Together with her blindness, her name also invokes the prophet Tiresias; she is said to belong to "a race of blind people" who see only "with the eye of the mind" (152). In a novel where the eye is continually susceptible to the corrupting influence of Western media and advertising—exemplified by the commodification of women in fashion magazines, racial stereotypes on television programmes, and mass-marketed yet innutritious or noxious items like Dr Pepper or Chesterfield cigarettes (170)—to be blind is a virtue. Similarly, since the dominant Eurocentric outlook initially shared by Valerian and Jadine is shown to be specious, that "Thérèse had her own views of understanding that had nothing to do with the world's views" (151) redounds to her credit.

When, near the end of the novel, Son prevents two Germans from photographing Thérèse, it is an act of some import. Although Thérèse's idiosyncratic beliefs have previously been undermined by Gideon's ridicule, her commonality here with the woman in yellow in respect of being "unphotographable" is a verification of her "authenticity". Moreover, since the two Germans are symbolically connected to Valerian whose candy company employed "Swedes and Germans" (52), Son, by arresting their photography, signals a rejection of Valerian's worldview, and a reversal of the process (noted above) by which he increasingly resembled the white arch-capitalist. In rejecting the legitimacy of photography as a way of viewing a woman who embodies black culture, Son aligns himself with Thérèse's perspective, which privileges instead the "eye of the mind" (152). While photography and drawing represent an approach to ontology that has no place for the invisible or the supernatural, Son and Thérèse ultimately embrace an outlook that accommodates emperor butterflies curious about human affairs (87), trees that dance and "ste[p] back"

for “a certain kind of man” (306), blind horsemen that “race each other” and “sleep with swamp women” (153), and ghostly visitations from both the quick and the dead. In this outlook, the realist perspective that Jadine’s photographs of Eloe offer is rejected as providing a merely partial view of the world.

In summary, if the portrait of Eloe in the novel is somewhat unflattering, this is at least partly because it is presented through the consciousness of Son and Jadine, both of whom, under the sway of the Streets, have been influenced by a Euro-centric value system. It is also partly due to the corrupting influence that the white world has exerted upon the town itself. The presence of these powerful mitigating factors means that, in *Tar Baby*, Morrison leaves open the possibility that a town such as Eloe—if it could better insulate itself from the white world—might succeed in its goal of embodying black wholeness and authenticity, and preserving black culture. As I argue later in this chapter, by the time of *Paradise*—where the experiment of an all black town takes centre stage—Morrison has become considerably more sceptical about the chances of such a venture succeeding.

Son of Eloe

Although I have argued that *Tar Baby* is sympathetic towards the efforts of Eloe and Son to uphold black culture, some critics have read the novel’s ending—in which Jadine returns to Paris while Son joins the blind horsemen on Isle des Chevaliers—as expressing a deep pessimism about such efforts. In particular, these critics view the ending as marking the failure of Son’s attempt to ignite in Jadine an interest in—and even reverence for—her ancestors. Ann Rayson claims that “Jadine Childs gives up the soul of a black folk culture she never knew, one which Son has romanticised and

that may not exist, to survive" (99). Dorothy H. Lee sees Thérèse's assertion that Jadine "has forgotten her ancient properties" (*Tar Baby* 305) as "a fact that is bound to promise ill for [Jadine] individually and in her relationships" (358), and concludes that for Jade "the importance of origins [. . .] seem[s] permanently lost" (359). Jan Furman views Jadine's return to Paris as an indication of her "accepting the either/or interpretation of her choices [. . .] between a home and a career" (59).

In these readings, Jadine rejects wholesale Son's belief in the value of embracing black culture and maintaining a connection to the history that informs this culture. However, two metaphors from nature near the end of the novel suggest that, contrary to appearances, Jadine is now on a path towards cultural awakening. In the first metaphor, a queen ant copulates with a male, whereupon "he drops dead" while she "keeps [the sperm] in a special place to use at her own discretion" (291). The section ends with the queen ant being identified with Jadine, who will find it "very hard to forget the man who fucked like a star" (292). The symbolism of Son as a star is picked up in the second metaphor, in which a gull "swoop[s] down on a black starfish" and extracts "the magenta string that was its heart" (293). In each metaphor, the Son figure perishes in the act of bequeathing something precious to the Jadine figure.

What exactly Jadine has inherited from Son is unclear. That Morrison, at the end of the novel, is less than forthcoming on the subject of how Jadine has "benefitted" from a relationship in which she is raped, beaten, and dangled out a window, is unsurprising.[6] Yet, despite a certain reticence in the text regarding this question, there are two interrelated ways in which one can envisage the long-term consequences of Jadine's exposure to Son's variety of black nationalism. First, there is the effect of Son disclosing to Jadine the extent to which she has been constructed by the white

world in the form of Valerian. When recounting the tar baby story, he emphasises this point: "[The white farmer] made him a tar baby. He made it, you hear me? He made it!" (270). That Son's words continue to reverberate in Jadine's mind is revealed when, looking at Margaret, she reflects: "And he thinks Valerian made *me*" (278). Viewing Valerian as the white farmer of the tar baby story should cause Jadine to suspect his motives for helping her. His apparent largesse in putting a young black woman through school can be seen as a disguise for how the operation of white supremacy has enabled him to amass a fortune through the exploitation of others, epitomised by his misnaming and mistreatment of Thérèse and Gideon. Recognising that Valerian has only been able to support her financially *because* he has exploited others should awaken Jadine to the wider picture of inequality and instil a greater compassion for the millions of African Americans who, unlike her, do not enjoy the backing of a wealthy white benefactor.

Second, for Jadine to realise the extent to which she has been constructed by a narrowly Eurocentric worldview—through both Valerian's influence and her European education—opens up for her the possibility of choosing a different perspective. Jadine's association with Son seems to have guided her towards a recognisably "black" aesthetic, signalled by her new hairstyle, to which Margaret applies the demeaning term "poodle-cut" (276). Given that for Jadine's lucrative *Elle* photoshoot her hair was "pressed flat to her head" (116), her decision to reject a Western model of beauty may damage her future modelling prospects, and so prove financially costly. This rejection indicates the strength of her determination to "begin at Go. Let loose the dogs, tangle with the woman in yellow—with her and with all the night women who had looked at her" (290). Jadine's resolve to "tangle" with the African woman who made a display of carrying "[three] eggs aloft" (45) through a

supermarket, as well as with the ghostly figures who "wanted her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building" (269) suggests a new attitude towards the business of "how to be a woman" (281). Rather than deciding between career and family, Jadine appears to recognise that she is able to choose both. For Morrison, Jadine's new perspective connects her to the past: "Our history as Black women is the history of women who could build a house *and* have some children, and there was no problem" (Taylor-Guthrie 135). Thus, rather than returning to Paris to pick up where she left off, Jadine—in the wake of her relationship with Son—returns as a radically different woman, with an altered set of relations to her past, present, and future.

***Paradise*: The Black Eden Revisited**

Morrison's seventh novel, *Paradise*, is commonly referred to as the final instalment of a trilogy that includes *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992)[7]. However, given its exploration of black nationalist thought in 1970s America and its staging of a clash between patriarchy and feminism, *Paradise* might just as plausibly be viewed as a companion piece to *Tar Baby*. More specifically, the later novel revisits the earlier book's premise of an "all-black" town and inspects its successes and failures with a greater level of scrutiny. As noted previously, Son's boast that Eloe is an "[a]ll black" town that "[r]uns itself" (*Tar Baby* 172) is exposed as delusional; in fact, it has not escaped the economic, political, and legal reach of the white world. In contrast, *Paradise*'s Ruby, founded in Oklahoma in 1950 by fifteen black families, appears to have been more successful in severing such ties with the white world. As Marni Gauthier notes, "[Ruby] is entirely self-sufficient and completely isolated [. . .] and

therefore subject neither to the fluctuations of the national economy nor to the 'tax man'" (401). Despite this, Ruby remains just as far from the utopia that Son imagined Eloe to be. *Paradise* chronicles how the inhabitants of Ruby—through an internalisation and inversion of the racist ideology of white supremacy—"become the world they had escaped" (*Paradise* 292).

The source of the unofficial skin colour hierarchy operative in Ruby appears to be a traumatic event referred to as "the Disallowing", whereby the town's forefathers (who in 1890 migrated from Louisiana and Mississippi to found Haven in Oklahoma) were "thrown out and cast away" (188) by the inhabitants of another all-black town, Fairly, apparently on account of their darker skin. According to Patricia Best, a local teacher who researches Ruby's history, part of the reason this rejection cut so deep is that it exposed the "Old Fathers" for the first time to colourism: "Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence, to Negroes themselves. [. . .] The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain" (194). In Ruby mythology, the Disallowing becomes the equivalent of the New Testament story of Mary and Joseph being turned away from the inn. Thus, rather than a source of shame, the rejection becomes, for the Old Fathers and their descendants, a point of pride, proof of their "chosenness". Similarly, the inhabitants of Ruby invert the hierarchy that led to the Disallowing; their "8-rock blood" (a reference to a "deep deep level in the coal mines" [193]) is to be protected against outside contamination, meaning that Menus Harper is dissuaded from marrying a "pretty redbone girl" (278) and that Delia Best (at least according to her daughter, Patricia) dies during childbirth due to the town's hesitation in arranging medical aid for a fair-skinned black woman.

That Ruby's failures cannot (for the most part) be directly attributed to white influence indicates a shift in the focus of Morrison's thinking about race and racism since the publication of *Tar Baby*. Absent a Valerian figure—that is, a patriarchal embodiment of white supremacy—*Paradise* instead depicts a more subtle intergenerational transmission of racist ideology amongst a close-knit black community. Anna Hartnell views the novel as "an exploration of a reaction to the pain of white supremacy" (172), yet a more precise formulation is provided by the text itself; *Paradise* is not so much about the ramifications of the Disallowing as it is about "the ramifications of those ramifications" (*Paradise* 189). The first order ramifications of the Old Fathers' rejection by Fairly would appear largely to consist of a veneration of self-reliance and a promotion of racial pride. The principal second order ramifications are an obsession with racial purity and an associated political and sexual conservatism. In tracing the movement from the first order to the second order ramifications, *Paradise* goes beyond *Tar Baby* in its critique of elements of black nationalism—the notion of racial authenticity and the endorsement of patriarchal values—to envision a community that celebrates the instability of individual identity and insists upon an openness to alterity.

Ruby's psychic wound: Morrison and Critical Race Theory

Despite the fact that—as Hartnell (172) and Jenkins point out—Ruby's lack of power in the outside world cautions against viewing the town's colour preference as "simply a mirror image of white racism" (Jenkins 281), the novel does, in various ways, encourage a comparison between the attitudes informing white supremacy and those that now govern Ruby. First, the story of Big Daddy Morgan wisely heeding the

advice of three Sac and Fox men who warn him against entering "Pura Sangre", a town with a "No Niggers" sign on one side and a cross on the other (153-54), reads as a portent that his descendants ignore to Ruby's detriment. Rather than committing to memory a cautionary example of racist blood rules, the men of Ruby allow their racial pride—forged in the face of racism—to give birth to notions of racial purity so that non-violation of 8-rock blood becomes the unspoken rule of the town. Whilst there is nothing as overt as a "No Niggers" sign in Ruby, the town's prejudice against lighter skin occasionally surfaces in hateful outbursts, as in Steward Morgan's description of Delia Best as the "dung we leaving behind" (201). Moreover, just as the cross at Pura Sangre appears to sanction rather than temper the town's racism, religious authority figures in Ruby such as Reverend Pulliam—who, by Patricia's account, was as culpable as the rest of the town for Delia's avoidable death (198)—seem unperturbed by the blood rule. Thus, the name "Ruby", in evoking a blood-red colour, can be seen as an allusion to that of its white supremacist counterpart, Pura Sangre, whose name conveys a more explicit rejection of those whose blood is deemed impure.

Second, in the "Ruby" chapter the third person narrative—focalised around the men who have entered the Convent armed with guns—reveals a misplaced pride in Ruby and its environs as a region where a woman could walk unafraid at any time of day or night since "Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey" (8). The pride is misplaced not only because the chapter ends with the group of Ruby men "tak[ing] aim" at women running like "panicked does" (18), but also because the way in which the Ruby men regard the Convent women as "bitches", "heifers" (276), and "mares" (308) betrays an aggressive misogyny. In figuring the women in terms of dogs, cattle, and horses, the men evoke the tragic death of Ruby Morgan in 1952; two hospitals refuse to admit Ruby because of her colour, and she is left to die while a

nurse "tr[ies] to reach a veterinarian" (113). Thus, despite the men's self-conception as protectors of Ruby against the threat of white racism, their words and actions invite comparison between themselves and white segregationists who place scant value on black life.

Finally, the strongest indictment of what Ruby has become is the textual subversion of the Ruby men's concept of "Out There" (16). In chapter one, the phrase is a euphemism for the violence that supports and enforces white supremacy. Out There is "a void where random and organized evil erupted when and where it chose, [. . .] where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled, [. . .] where every cluster of whitemen looked like a posse, [and] being alone was being dead" (16). Ruby's raison d'être is—as the name of its predecessor, Haven, suggests—to act as a sanctuary against the threat from Out There. It is a place where its black inhabitants are what they can never be Out There: "free and protected" (8). The Ruby men initially conceive of the town as the centre of an area extending "ninety miles around" (8) that will offer refuge to blacks; beyond this area lies Out There. Yet, as the Ruby men's definition of "blackness" becomes increasingly narrow and rigid, the borders of this circle of sanctuary recede until eventually the Convent—located just seventeen miles from Ruby—is considered part of Out There; when the men meet to discuss the Convent women the phrase is repeated several times: "What they teaching *out there*?", "Something's going on *out there*", "These here sluts *out there* by themselves never step foot in church", "Drawing folks *out there* like flies to shit" (275-76; emphases added). After the raid on the Convent, when Pious DuPres asks what had happened to the women, Sargeant Person "indicate[s] 'out there' with a head motion" (290). In one sense, Sargeant's reply can be read as an explanation of the women's deaths: because the Ruby men

have defined the women as being "out there", they have killed them, and their bodies now lie out there "[i]n the grass" (290). On the other hand, although it is hardly Sargeant's intention, the reply might be interpreted as meaning that the women are still alive "out there", which is the "miracle" that Billie Delia longs for: "She hoped with all her heart that the women were *out there*, darkly burnished, biding their time, brass-metaling their nails, filing their incisors—but *out there*" (308; emphases added). In Billie Delia's imagining, a total inversion of Ruby's relation to Out There, relative to how the men originally see it, has taken place. The town that was conceived of as a haven protecting its people from white supremacist violence beyond its borders has become a "prison" (308) from which Billie Delia dreams of being rescued by the women she hopes are still alive Out There.

In the above examples, the manner in which the threat from within Ruby eventually exceeds the external danger—or as the text puts it: "Scary things not always outside. Most scary things is inside" (39)—signals Morrison's engagement with aspects of the work of the critical race theorists emerging in the 1980s and 1990s, in particular, Derrick Bell's assertion that "racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of [American] society" (ix).[8] Ruby's inability—despite having separated from the white world—to escape from the hold of race and racial hierarchy suggests that Morrison's focus corresponds to that of theorists who, having decried the civil rights legislation of the 1960s as "hollow pronouncements issued with great solemnity and fanfare, only to be silently ignored, cut back, or withdrawn when the celebrations die down" (Delgado and Stefancic 48), have urged that meaningful social change must entail an interrogation of the "psychic and cultural effects of race" (Schur 289). These theorists argue that though "formal racist barriers" may have been removed, "the power of race as an organizing force in social relations

and as a psychic wound remains" (289). Hence, as Richard Schur puts it, "'[w]hiteness' may rule [Ruby] without the presence of white people" (293).

Critical race theory's preoccupation with the enduring psychological effects of race are rehearsed in *Paradise*, most notably in the "Patricia" chapter where ideas about racial authenticity and purity inherited from white supremacy precipitate a rupture in the psyche of both the individual and the community. Indeed, the chapter's characterisation of Patricia demonstrates the distance between an intellectual rejection of race and a recuperation from the damage caused by race's psychic wound. The succeeding chapter "Consolata" engages with another tenet of critical race theory: voice-of-colour thesis. I argue that though in interviews, essays, and literary criticism Morrison has at times appeared to concur with the voice-of-colour thesis, in *Paradise* her notion of "stepping in" appears to depart from this element of critical race theory since it—at least read metaphorically—privileges imaginative identification over shared experience. Furthermore, I argue that connecting Morrison's "stepping in" with Jacques Derrida's idea of hospitality illuminates *Paradise*'s embrace of multiplicity and reveals the novel's view of identity as more radical than has been generally recognised.

Stepping Out: "Patricia"

The sixth chapter of *Paradise* opens with Patricia Best working on decorations for the Ruby Christmas play—a yearly re-enactment of the Disallowing melded with the Nativity story—before proceeding to a description of her town "history project" (187). Although initially the two activities might appear complementary, they are in fact in deep tension with each other. The aim of the Christmas play is to buttress the master

narrative of Ruby, presenting it—almost literally—as gospel. This narrative memorialises the shameful mistreatment the Old Fathers suffered in Fairly, lauds the prophetic leadership of Zechariah "Big Papa" Morgan (96-98), underlines the necessity of Ruby's isolationism, and celebrates community solidarity. Patricia's historical research—mostly conducted by "talking to people, asking to see Bibles and examining church records" (187)—provides a persuasive counter-narrative to the town's official history. While she does not dispute the key elements of the town's version of the Disallowing story, Patricia questions the image of a devout and unified town suggested by Nathan DuPres's benediction: "May God bless the pure and holy and may nothing keep us apart from each other" (205). Despite the piety implied by the first names of the Morgan men—Zechariah, Rector, Elder, Pryor, Deacon, Steward—Patricia insinuates that their motivation is often primarily earthly power, rather than the service of God or even Ruby. She notes that the message that Zechariah is said to have formulated for the Oven, "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" (87), can be read not as an injunction to fear God but as a threat to anyone who crosses the Morgans. The malign use to which the Morgans' power is put is exemplified by the case of Menus Harper and the "pretty sandy-haired girl from Virginia" (195) whom he hoped to marry. According to Patricia, "Menus lost (or was forced to give up) the house he'd bought for her and hadn't been sober since" (195). Thus, the imposition of the unspoken blood rule leads to heartache and alcoholism for Menus and financial gain for Deacon and Steward through their bank's repossession of the house.

A more subtle indictment of the Morgans comes through Steward's revelation that the family's name might have originally been "Le Moyne" (192). On one hand, the possible association with French Catholicism in an aggressively Protestant town[9]

undercuts the Morgans' conservatism—in particular, their desire to maintain a "pure" blood line—suggesting as it does that flux and hybridity are unavoidable. On the other hand, the name "Le Moyne" might be seen as an allusion to Matthew Lewis's Gothic novel *The Monk* (1796), in which the titular character, Ambrosio falls from a life of godly devotion into one governed by desire. Ambrosio's sins of lust and murder might be analogised with Deacon's and Steward's dealings with the nun Consolata—the former conducts an adulterous affair with her while the latter kills her—yet perhaps the more profound link between *The Monk* and *Paradise* is the common theme of incest. While Lewis treats the subject explicitly—Ambrosio discovers that Antonia, the young woman he has raped and killed, is his sister—in *Paradise*, the problem of incest, like other problems in Ruby, remains just beneath the surface. Patricia encounters the issue when her genealogy of her husband's family reveals that Fawn Blackhorse has married her maternal grandfather's brother (196). Though Patricia prides herself on challenging much of Ruby's self-serving mythology, even she is reticent in broaching the topic of incestuous relationships; her discussion of Fawn's marriage to August Cato contains euphemisms—"well, you can see the problem with blood rules"—and extenuations: "And he never would have done it without Blackhorse permission" (196). Indeed, the fact that the word "incest" does not once appear in the novel is testament to Ruby's determination to keep the subject out of sight.

However, the threat that incest presents to the longevity of Ruby looms over Patricia's remarks about Jefferson Fleetwood "father[ing] only defectives" and the "later Morgans [being] not as prolific as the earlier ones" (191), and is given symbolic heft in her description of tea leaves being drained of their potency: "More boiling water, a little steeping, and the black leaves would yield more. Even more. Ever more.

Until. Well, now. What do you know? It was clear as water" (217). The Ruby myth of immortality ("nobody dies in Ruby" [217]) is thus apparently the only means by which the town can avoid confronting the fact that its policy of keeping its 8-rock blood "[u]nadulterated and unadulteried" (217) is unsustainable in the long run.

By exposing both the Morgans' abuses of power and the damage wreaked by the tacitly accepted blood rules, Patricia presents Ruby as a dysfunctional community riven by racial, sexual, and economic hierarchies. However, despite the damning depiction of the town that emerges from her history project, Patricia's pattern of behaviour discloses the powerful psychic hold that Ruby has over her. In writing about her marriage she states "I married Billy Cato partly because he was beautiful, partly because he made me laugh, and partly (mostly?) because he had the midnight skin of the Catos and the Blackhorses" (198). The parenthesised and queried "mostly" stands for the unquantifiable effect of Ruby's blood rules on Patricia's unconscious. Just as the "supplementary notes" to Patricia's history project (initially intended as a "collection of family trees; the genealogies of each of the fifteen families" [187]) have swollen and eclipsed the original, the deep wound that Ruby's history has left on Patricia's psyche appears to be a more important determinant of her decisions and actions than her careful analysis and reasoning.

In addition to her possibly racially motivated marriage to Billy Cato, the chapter discloses three other clear instances of Patricia's inability to extricate herself from Ruby ideology. The most striking of these is the episode in which she finds herself running up the stairs with an electric iron, intent on slamming it into the face of her daughter, Billie Delia. Although details about the ensuing confrontation are vague, Patricia's claim that she "missed killing her own daughter by inches" (203) together with reports elsewhere in the novel that Billie Delia "knocked" her mother

down the stairs (11, 280), suggests that Patricia attempted to strike her daughter with the iron, then fell—or was pushed—backwards. Patricia struggles "to remember how that pressing iron got into her hand" (203) and subsequently concludes that it "was there to smash the young girl that lived in the minds of the 8-rocks, not the girl her daughter was" (204). This description, in appearing to render Patricia as the (almost passive) vessel through which the prevailing prejudices of the town find expression, bears affinities with Stephen Greenblatt's insistence that "the apparently isolated power of the individual genius turns out to be bound up with collective, social energy" (15). Indeed, the episode with the iron conforms to the new historicist idea of "selves fashioned and acting according to the generative rules and conflicts of a given culture" (15). Thus, although Patricia conceives of herself as an exceptional figure comparable to Greenblatt's "individual genius"—she believes that "*she alone* ha[s] the required emotional distance" to interpret Ruby's stories (188; emphasis added)—her assault on her daughter suggests that stepping outside Ruby society in order to view it dispassionately is no trivial undertaking; in fact, it may be impossible. In this sense, Patricia's fall down the stairs can be seen as a toppling of the pedestal upon which she had placed her reasoning and objectivity.

A second indication that Patricia embodies Ruby's values despite disavowing them is her conduct during an exchange with Richard Misner at the Christmas play. When Misner, trying to "smooth a situation out at the Pooles'" (207), asks to speak to Billie Delia, Patricia abruptly refuses to help. As with the iron incident, Patricia appears unable to regulate her reaction: "She would have liked to stop being so hostile to him, but with the mention of her daughter's relationship with those Poole boys, she couldn't control it" (207). When the conversation turns to the question of what should be taught in the "Negro History" class they jointly teach every Thursday afternoon,

Patricia rejects Misner's preference for instructing the pupils about their African ancestry in favour of an emphasis on slavery as the foundational aspect of their identity: "Slavery *is* our past. Nothing can change that, certainly not Africa" (210). Patricia's attitude towards slavery might be considered somewhat surprising. In the pages that precede her talk with Misner she laments the malign consequences of Ruby's adherence to a blood rule that has strong parallels with—and ultimately derives from—white racism associated with the history of slavery. Thus, given that Patricia's critique of Ruby indicates her support for the rejection of such blood rules, one might expect her to share, or at least give a sympathetic hearing to, Misner's proposed diminishment in the significance granted to slavery. Instead, Patricia's assertion of slavery as the definitive element in Ruby's past appears to bring her into a rather unlikely alliance with the school of Afropessimism and their insistence on the durability of the Master/Slave relation (discussed in Chapter 2). Shortly after her conversation with Misner, Patricia acknowledges the incongruity in her position, wondering "why had she defended people and things and ideas with a passion she did not feel?" (214). An answer may lie in her admission to Misner that in Ruby the words *outsider* and *enemy* "mean the same thing" (211). Though Patricia explicitly rejects this equivalence—when Misner claims he is not an enemy, she agrees: "No, you're not" (212)—the fact that, in her persistent hostility towards him, she continues to treat him as an adversary again demonstrates that the psychic power of Ruby history exceeds her individual will.

If, as I suggest, the "Patricia" chapter opens with the somewhat understated tension between Patricia's history project and the town Christmas play, it concludes with a dramatic moment of internal conflict. Dismayed and exhausted by Ruby's tacit racial hierarchy and their treatment of her own family (whom they excise from the

Christmas play), Patricia hauls the files containing her historical research into the garden and burns them. Though the attempt at catharsis is partially successful—after washing her ash-dusted hands and face she feels "clean" (217)—Patricia cannot prevent herself from continuing to ruminate on the town's blood rules, and in so doing arrives at an epiphany: if the Morgans believed that "8-rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby" then "everything that worries them must come from women" (217). Yet this moment of comprehension gives way not to a renewed sense of purpose or action, but to paralysis: "'Dear God,' she murmured. 'Dear, dear God. I burned the papers'" (217). Given that Patricia's sudden insight into the Morgan psyche—which occurs in December 1974, some nineteen months prior to the raid on the Covent—might have alerted her to an imminent threat to those females the Morgan men deemed "impure", the tragedy of Patricia's inability to act upon her knowledge is acute. It is one more indication that though Patricia has "trained herself to reasoning" (203) and seeks to act "dispassionately" (296) in her dealings with others, her individual will is always constrained by the claims of her community.

Patricia's ability to diagnose and critique Ruby's racial pathologies together with her inability to avoid acting in ways that perpetuate those pathologies corresponds to Morrison's characterisation of racism as causing a fracture in one's psyche: "The trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis—strangely of no interest to psychiatry" (*Mouth Full of Blood* 177). In the figure of Patricia, Morrison demonstrates how the legacy of white racism has a deep psychological bearing even on those individuals who seem best equipped to combat its effects, thus underscoring the challenges faced by a community trying to heal the psychic injury caused by race.

If a central theme of the "Patricia" chapter is, as I have argued, the difficulty of an insider stepping outside a community, the next chapter, "Consolata", explores the ability of an outsider to step *inside* not just a community but another person.

Stepping In: "Consolata"

The issue of an outsider's relation to a community is raised in the chapter preceding "Consolata" during a short but provocative exchange between Patricia and Misner:

> [Misner:] "This community used to be tight as wax."
>
> [Patricia:] "It still is. In a crisis. But they keep to themselves otherwise."
>
> "Don't you mean 'we'? 'We keep to ourselves'?"
>
> "If I did, would you be asking me to explain things?" (207)

Patricia's final response might be interpreted in two ways. First, it might be viewed in relation to her earlier point about the community "keeping to themselves"; that is, if she was really part of the "we" of the community, then she would be keeping to herself—i.e. withholding—the type of explanations that Misner is seeking from her. A second and perhaps more provocative interpretation is that Patricia's remark implies that the ability to "explain things" is predicated on her (relative) outsider status; that is, Misner has chosen Patricia to explain the Ruby community precisely because he recognises her (partial) estrangement from it. Understood in this second sense, Patricia's reply—which is also a question—invites the reader to think through the issue of positionality.

The position from which one speaks, writes, or explains is an issue that has exercised Morrison throughout her career, in both her fiction and non-fiction. In

numerous interviews and essays, Morrison has underlined her self-conception as a black writer "writing for black people" (Morrison qtd. in Hoby) about the "cultural specificity" of their experience (*Mouth Full of Blood* 336). This apparent certainty about her own métier has often been allied with a scepticism regarding the approaches of white writers—and whites more generally[10]—to the representation of African American culture. Indeed, Morrison's influential work of literary criticism *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) can be viewed as an indictment of canonical white American writers for their failure to engage with and accurately portray black experience. Perhaps anticipating the type of critique embodied by Harold Bloom's pejorative label "School of Resentment" (Bloom 20), Morrison begins her volume by insisting it is engendered by "delight, not disappointment" (4). Yet, by asserting, on one hand, that "[t]he ability of writers to imagine what is not the self [. . .] is the test of their power" (15), and implying, on the other hand, that these particular writers, rather than successfully imagining black selves, were instead engaged in the "fabrication of an Africanist persona" (17) that merely reflected their *own* selves—"the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" (17)—Morrison betrays a profound dissatisfaction with white representation of black experience. In fact, for Morrison, the work of these writers "has nothing to do with black experience, nothing at all [. . .] It has to do with the way [the writers] interpreted, imagined, and recorded an other, who was black, which had nothing to do with the way they really were" (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 285).

Given Morrison's explicitly stated self-identification as a black writer "*exclusively* interested in facets of African American culture" (*Mouth Full of Blood* 335; emphasis added) together with her apparent misgivings about the ability of white

writers to represent black life, the advice she gives to her creative writing students at Princeton is somewhat surprising:

> [They] had been told all of their lives to write what they knew. I always began the course by saying, "Don't pay any attention to that." [. . .] Think of somebody you don't know. What about a Mexican waitress in the Rio Grande who can barely speak English? Or what about a Grande Madame in Paris? Things way outside their camp. Imagine it, create it. [. . .] I thought it was a good training for them. Even if they ended up just writing an autobiography, at least they could relate to themselves as strangers. (Morrison qtd. in Gross 3)

While in *Playing in the Dark* Morrison contends that canonical white American writers failed to connect with African American life and instead constructed "American Africanism" (6) as a negative trope that buttressed their white identity, the advice she gives to her students suggests that her account of past failures need not imply an unyielding pessimism about future attempts to imaginatively inhabit radically different lives. To the extent that Morrison's advice can be seen as an endorsement of writing across cultural and racial boundaries it runs contrary to a strand of critical race theory that emphasises the uniqueness of "voices of colour". According to Delgado and Stefancic, "the voice-of-colour thesis holds that because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, American Indian, Asian, and Latino writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know" (11).[11] *Paradise* offers a model of understanding that does not demand shared "histories and experiences" as prerequisites but instead privileges the role of imaginative identification; Morrison's advice to her students can be seen as encouraging them to follow Consolata in "stepping inside" the other.

Consolata's special ability is revealed to her by Lone who persuades her to "[g]o inside" Scout Morgan and "[w]ake him up" after his apparently fatal crash (245). Despite not knowing the risks entailed, Consolata follows Lone's instructions and "steps in" whereupon she feels Scout's physical pain—"the headache, the chest pressure, the unwillingness to breathe"—and is able to revive him by "[p]ulling up energy" through an act of intense identification: "she concentrated as through the lungs in need were her own" (ibid.). This description of the act of stepping in has certain affinities with Derrida's writing on hospitality. Drawing on *Manifeste pour l'hospitalité*, an untranslated seminar published in 1999, Derek Attridge notes that "unconditional hospitality"—which, in Derrida's terms, is *indissociable* from, yet *heterogeneous* with "conditional hospitality" (Attridge 286)—necessitates risk: "To the degree that I'm taking a chance in welcoming the other, my action is informed by unconditional hospitality" (292). Furthermore, hospitality can be understood as the "interruption of the self by the self as other" (Derrida qtd. in Attridge 300). Attridge notes that another aspect of Derrida's idea of hospitality is that "it requires that the other's *specific* needs be taken care of" (299). These three characteristics of hospitality are present in Consolata's act of stepping in: she exposes herself to unknown risks, allows her self to be interrupted by an other, and ensures that this other's specific needs are attended to. Thus, this supernatural gift available to Lone and Consolata might be thought of as approaching an instance of unconditional or "impossible hospitality" (296).

Yet hospitality, in Derrida's sense, is also operative in a different direction. In *Manifeste pour l'hospitalité* Derrida criticises a translation of Camus in which the word "hôte" is translated as "guest" and not "host" (305). Derrida's wish to preserve the ambiguity suggests reversibility as a property of hospitality, that is, unconditional

hospitability exposes one to, as Attridge puts it, "a reversal of power" (284) whereby "the one inviting becomes almost the hostage of the one invited" (Derrida qtd. in Attridge 284-85). Arguing against the tendency to read Derrida's notion of hospitality through a Levinasian lens focused on the ethical burden of a potential host faced with a vulnerable other (the potential guest), Martin Hägglund emphasises instead the unlimited threat to the host by insisting on the "intrinsic link between alterity, violence, and temporality" (Hägglund 96). For Hägglund,

> Derrida's notion of unconditional hospitality designates the exposure to the unpredictable, which can always be violent and to which one cannot know in advance how one should relate. The "hospitality" to otherness is unconditional *not* because it is ideal or ethical as such, but because one is necessarily susceptible to violent visitations (104)

Hägglund's understanding of unconditional hospitality as "exposure to the unpredictable" means that both Consolata *and* Scout are implicated in this type of hospitality. Indeed, given Derrida's claim that "to be hospitable is to let oneself be overtaken [. . .] to not even let oneself be overtaken, to be surprised, in a fashion almost violent [. . .] unprepared in a mode that is not even that of the 'not yet'" (*Of Hospitality* 361), it is Scout—whose self is invaded and "overtaken" by Consolata—who most closely fulfils these requirements of hospitality.

The openness to alterity that "stepping in" entails results in Scout being brought back to life. Although Hägglund insists that the logic of Derrida's argument requires that such openness have an equal possibility of deadly consequences, *Paradise* implies that, for Ruby, this risk is worth taking. As Patricia's historical research has revealed, the rejection of alterity inherent in the town's blood rules has

led to falling fertility and the hazard of incest, each greater threats to Ruby's continued existence than any external danger. Moreover, Hägglund's claim that for Derrida "absolute peace would be absolute violence" (106) is borne out in Ruby. The town's attempts to insulate itself from the outside world and the violence of white supremacy through the enforcement of blood rules means that, as Patricia notes, "everything that worries them must come from women" (217). This seed of suspicion grows into an animus that eventually leads to the massacre at the Convent. Thus, the supposed guarantor of Ruby's peaceful existence—its blood rules—turns out to be the generator of gratuitous violence.

Significantly, the two individuals possessing the gift of "stepping in"—or as Consolata terms it, "in sight" (247)—are both relative outsiders in Ruby; Lone was adopted as a motherless infant by the founding families on their way to Haven (190), while Consolata was kidnapped as a nine year-old by Mary Magna in Brazil (223). In bestowing these marginal figures with "in sight", Morrison appears to be confirming what Patricia's comment to Misner suggested: that outsiders to a community might enjoy a deeper understanding about certain aspects of the community than those on the inside. On the other hand, Consolata insists that "in sight" is "[s]omething God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it" (247). Indeed, "in sight" is what Consolata inculcates at the Convent through the ceremony of body "templates" and "loud dreaming". When Consolata paints the silhouettes of the Convent women on the cellar floor, they are initially "reluctant to move outside the mold they had chosen" (263), suggesting the difficulty of breaking loose from identities shaped by traumatic histories. However, the loud dreaming appears to offer the women a means of stepping outside their individual identities and entering into others, each woman "step[ping] easily into the dreamer's tale" (264). The activity of adding detail (using

paint and chalk) to their templates produces a new self-reflexivity that stimulates a change in behavior; instead of cutting her inner thigh, Seneca marks her template. Consolata's ceremony thus engenders self-understanding—"in sight"—which leads to renewal: "[The women] understood and began to begin" (265). The result of this process is that "the Convent women were no longer haunted" (266).

The women's success in mitigating the effects of past trauma seems to owe something to Morrison's advice to her students (noted above): by stepping outside their original templates and altering them, the women now appear better able to "relate to themselves as strangers". For Hägglund, Derrida's key insight is that such a relation of self-estrangement is not merely feasible but is *the only possible* relation: "The subject can never be given in an autonomous presentation but is constituted by relating to itself as an other" (65).[12] Thus, while critics have (correctly) noted that the Convent is distinguished from Ruby by its willingness to accept alterity in others,[13] the more radical aspect of this group of women is their acceptance of alterity *in themselves*.

Conclusion

The instability of identity suggested by the Convent women breaking free from their templates signals the gulf between *Paradise* and *Tar Baby*. While the earlier novel treats Son's essentialist claims about "what I really am" (*Tar Baby* 270) with irony, it nonetheless presents the woman in the yellow dress as an unironical example of the "genuine article", the "original" and "authentic self" (Morrison qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 148). This acceptance of the idea of individual authenticity together with the fact that Eloe's failings can be traced to the influence of the white world means that *Tar Baby*

leaves open the possibility that a community founded on the premise of black authenticity might succeed. However, if, as I suggest, *Paradise* rejects the possibility of authenticity at the level of individual identity, then the prospect of a community premised on such authenticity appears doomed. That is, if identity is inherently unstable, then black identity becomes a precarious notion on which to build a community.[14] Indeed, Ruby's attempts to do so not only prove futile but lead to violence.

Although much scholarly attention has focused on the first line of *Paradise*: "They shoot the white girl first" (3),[15] the conclusion of the opening chapter is perhaps equally provocative: "God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby" (18). From the men's perspective, the meaning of the two sentences is clear; in order to protect and maintain the integrity of Ruby they must kill the Convent women. Yet an opposing interpretation is also available: in taking aim at the women the men are taking aim *at* Ruby, at least Ruby as an idea. Insofar as the town was established as a haven from violence, in perpetrating gratuitous violence the men are destroying the principle upon which Ruby was founded. A third interpretation—and the one most consonant with my Derridean reading of *Paradise*—is that the men are taking aim at Ruby in the sense that the Convent women are part of Ruby. That is, the Convent, rather than being "Ruby's opposite" (Furman 97), is instead a constituent element. Indeed, since, as Patricia's history project reveals, an adherence to what the men view as Ruby's core idea—the blood rule—condemns the town to a moribund future of falling fertility and incest, Ruby's association with the Convent—and through it, alterity—can be seen as its surest source of vitality. More generally, a culture that takes purity—that is, the exclusion of alterity—as its defining feature is a contradiction since, as Derrida insists, "[h]ospitality is culture itself" (*On*

Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness 16). In elaborating upon this contradiction, *Paradise* reveals hospitality to the other—which, as Attridge notes, "is also hospitality to the future" (297)—to be a dangerous yet necessary choice.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ralph Ellison: "The Homeness of Home"

Given the vehemence of the criticism directed at Ralph Ellison both throughout his career and posthumously—he was frequently denounced as an "Uncle Tom", labelled in the pages of *Black World* as "psychologically sick", and, as Charles Johnson recalls, excluded from a new black studies course at Southern Illinois University in 1969 since he was "not a black writer"[1]—the critique of his life offered by fellow novelist and sometime acquaintance Toni Morrison appears relatively tame. Yet, if one concedes the central contention of the previous chapter—that Morrison moves towards an acceptance of the instability of identity, both at the individual and communal level—her appraisal of Ellison assumes a degree of irony. Writing to Ellison biographer Arnold Rampersad, Morrison claims that the "contemporary world of late twentieth-century African Americans was largely inaccessible" to Ellison, and that in his writing life "the gaze of the beholder remained white" (Rampersad 549). Morrison's remarks appear to uphold a distinction between "black life" and "white life" that Ellison devoted much of his intellectual energy to dispelling. Indeed, rather than being in flight from black life as Morrison suggests, Ellison, in both his essays and unpublished second novel, strenuously sought to reveal the contributions of black creativity, fortitude, and humour to an American identity best understood as an amalgam of cultures, and thus comprising "diversity within unity" and "blackness with whiteness" (*Collected Essays* 586). In perhaps his most famous assertion of the

inextricability of black life from American life Ellison declared that "whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black" (587). The irony in Morrison's claim that Ellison was drifting farther and farther from black life is that in the interval between *Tar Baby* and *Paradise* Morrison's own thinking around blackness had moved away from the idea of "authentic blackness" towards Ellison's powerful critique of identity. An exploration of that critique and its implications for the ethics of cultural appropriation in relation to the novel is the subject of the present chapter.

One other element of Morrison's assessment of Ellison invites further challenge. When Morrison claims that Ellison had little contact with the "contemporary world of late twentieth-century African Americans" she perhaps has in mind his "perceived lack of regard for younger writers" (Rampersad 547), or his stubborn determination to continue work on a novel started in the 1950s whose subject she felt to be outdated (359). In respect of these aspects of Ellison's life, Morrison's suggestion that he was out of step with the modern world may be somewhat justified. Yet, this ignores the astonishing prescience of Ellison's essays on themes of identity, culture, and appropriation. Indeed, taking hip hop as one of the more conspicuous facets of twenty-first-century black American life, to find Kanye West sampling the music of a 1960s Hungarian progressive rock band, or Kendrick Lamar borrowing from a 1970s Yugoslavian jazz rock group[2] (not to mention the dazzling eclecticism of artists such as Frank Ocean or Tyler the Creator) is to be reminded of the "freewheeling appropriations" that Ellison saw as one of the defining features of American culture (516). Thus, while Morrison may have eclipsed her older rival in terms of literary prizes and current prestige, it is far from certain that her inclination towards preserving the components of black culture, rather than embracing

cultural fluidity and exchange, will prove a more accurate anticipator of the future than Ellison's more dynamic and cosmopolitan outlook.[3]

In this chapter, I will examine the portrait of culture found in Ellison's essays, before exploring how this portrait is complicated by certain aspects of his unfinished second novel and by the stance he takes on William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). I argue that Ellison's discourse, in two of his major essays, on the "democratic process" renders his critique of identity less transparent than critics have sometimes suggested, given his commitment to the democratic identity. Nonetheless, I claim that these essays reveal the centrality to the idea of "America" of a conception of identity as fluid and not merely inherited. In turning to *Three Days Before the Shooting…* (2010), I argue that the celebration of cultural hybridity found in the two essays is tempered by the novel's examples of white inability to comprehend certain aspects of black culture. Finally, I examine the reasons why Ellison's general tolerance—and often enthusiasm—towards acts of cultural appropriation did not extend to Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Here I argue that the work of Hayden White offers some illumination upon the disagreements between Ellison and Styron on the role of history in the novel.

Cultural Appropriation and the Democratic Process

Perhaps the clearest expression of what Ellison understood by the terms "culture" and "cultural appropriation" in the American context can be found in two essays from the late 1970s, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" and "Going to the Territory". In the

former, the titular character is introduced to Ellison by concert pianist and music teacher Hazel Harrison. While at Tuskegee Institute in the mid-1930s, Ellison, then a trumpeter and aspiring composer, performs a recital in which he "substitut[es] a certain skill of lips and fingers for the intelligent and artistic structuring of emotion" which the music demands, and is left reeling from the harsh criticism of faculty members (*Collected Essays* 493). Turning to Harrison for sympathy, Ellison is instead gently admonished; he is told: "you must *always* play your best, even if it's only in the waiting room at Chehaw Station, because in this country there'll always be a little man hidden behind the stove" who will "know the *music*, and the *tradition*, and the standards of *musicianship* required for whatever you set out to perform!" (494). While the young trumpeter's immediate reaction to Harrison's insistence upon connoisseurship lurking in unlikely quarters is dismissive—"*She has got to be kidding!*" (494)—the essay that Ellison pens four decades later is dedicated to revealing how the ceaseless process of cultural appropriation creates "a climate of free-floating sensibility" which authorises the little man's "unaccountable knowingness" (498). Indeed, such is the force that Ellison ascribes to the various mechanisms of cultural dissemination and exchange operative in America that "the little man at Chehaw Station [becomes] not only possible but inevitable" (499).

A key theme of "The Little Man"—and one which Ellison will develop in his later essay "Going to the Territory"—is the relation between democracy and culture, or, more specifically, between what Ellison terms the "democratic process" (504) and the dispersal of cultural sensibility. On one hand, the democratic process can be seen to contribute to the making of the little man by making available previously inaccessible forms of culture, and so fostering "a society in which certain assertions of personality, formerly the prerogative of high social rank, have become the privilege

of the anonymous and the lowly" (498). On the other hand, the democratic ideal urges a determined indifference between "low" and "high" culture: "Democratically innocent of hierarchal striving, [the little man] takes his classics as he takes his tall tales or jazz: without frills" (501). For Ellison, this twin set of encounters—the unprecedented exposure of particular groups to certain forms of culture, and the coming together (and democratisation) of different cultural forms—contributes to a culture in "cacophonic motion [. . .] a vortex of discordant ways of living and tastes, values and traditions, a whirlpool of odds and ends" (508). Thus, the democratic process is one of the main engines of cultural hybridity in America.

Ellison goes even further declaring that: "In our national beginnings, all redolent with Edenic promises, was the word *democratic*" (506). Invoking the opening verses of both Genesis and the Gospel of John, Ellison seemingly desires to make democracy *the* originating force behind America. Yet, given that, in order to gain independence, the American colonists first had to renounce their identity as subjects of the British Crown, *rejection of inherited identity* might seem an equally plausible candidate for this role. By this way of thinking, scepticism towards received identity might be considered as preceding the democratic process that the Constitution inaugurates. Ellison, though, appears to prefer the idea of the Constitution creating new identities, rather than the other way around; in "Perspective of Literature", he has the Constitution "proclaiming a new set of purposes and principles [. . .] which would be made manifest through the enactment of a new set of democratic hierarchal roles (*or identities*)" (778; emphasis added). Ellison's apparent conception of the democratic identity as foundational to the idea of America might seem to confound the notion that Ellison's oeuvre stages a critique of identity. Indeed, if, as Ross

Posnock suggests, Ellison aims to "abolish [identity] as a grounding term" (186), why, then, does he grant such importance to democratic identity?

One way of comprehending Ellison's affinity towards democratic identity is to consider the implications of "The Little Man"'s subtitle: "The American Artist and His Audience". Figuring the audience as the artist's "instrument", Ellison cautions against assuming that it can be "as easily manipulated as a jukebox" (501). Rather, the artist should "forge images of American experience that resonate symbolically with [the little man's] ubiquitous presence" (502). As Ellison explicates what this symbolic resonance might entail, it becomes clear that he believes the artist should enable the audience to project themselves into the work of art. Thus, in imagining the little man's response to *The Great Gatsby*, Ellison has him "imposing collaboratively his own vision of American experience upon that of the author" (502). This model of interplay between artist and audience would appear to enforce certain limits upon the former; rather than aspiring to the creation of a starkly original "vision of American experience" she evidently must select from those visions that will be recognisable to her audience. Alongside this idea that the artist is necessarily constrained by the experience of her audience is Ellison's assertion that people cannot easily give up the idea of a solid identity. According to Ellison, "we cling desperately to our own familiar fragment of the democratic rock" (504)—the "racial, cultural, religious" identities we inherit from our parents—so as to "avoid the mysteries and pathologies of the democratic process" (507).[4] Therefore, given that in order to communicate to her audience the artist must employ recognisable forms of experience, and given the tendency of people to experience their lives through the prism of identity, Ellison, by his own argument, seems forced to speak to *his* audience via the language of identity.[5] So, while Ellison's oeuvre as a whole might be plausibly viewed as staging a critique

of identity, here, perhaps principally as a strategy for successfully communicating with his audience, Ellison appeals to a common democratic identity. Put simply, Ellison knows that his (startling to some) claims about cultural hybridity will be more palatable if he roots them in an accepted identity ("American" or "democratic", near synonyms for Ellison), rather than in an assertion of the illusory nature of identity.

Indeed, Ellison prefaces his discussion of cultural appropriation with the suggestion that America's relation to culture is a natural outgrowth of the democratic identity established by the Constitution: "Having rejected the hierarchal ordering of traditional societies, they improvised their culture as they did their politics and institutions" (*Collected Essays* 513). For some, Ellison's formulation here might invite a question about whether it is the rejection of inherited identity that informs both political and cultural forms, or does the Constitution create *ex nihilo* a political identity that determines one's approach to culture. Yet Ellison eschews such binary choices in favour of a productive ambiguity. Such ambiguity can be seen in his assertion, in reference to the appropriation of "tastes, traditions, ways of life, and values", that "it was through this process of cultural appropriation (and misappropriation) that Englishmen, Europeans, Africans, and Asians *became* Americans" (514). Ellison refuses to specify whether the quality of being American inheres in the *culture* that is appropriated, or in the *act* of appropriation. In leaving open both interpretations Ellison's commitment to democracy might be seen as extending to his essayistic style.

Less ambiguous is Ellison's view of cultural appropriation as a valuable mechanism in bringing about "unity in diversity" (507), a phrase that becomes a leitmotif throughout his essays. In connection with this theme, he appeals to the idea of the "melting pot" asserting "It is here, on the level of culture, that the diverse

elements of our various backgrounds, our heterogeneous pasts, have indeed come together, 'melted,' and undergone metamorphosis" (514). For Ellison, unity in diversity derives from various groups sharing both a hybrid culture and a propensity for appropriation. Declaring that "Everyone played the appropriation game" (515), he cites specific examples: Pilgrims "appropriat[ed] the agricultural, military, and meteorological lore of the Indians", Africans "took up the English language and the biblical legends of the ancient Hebrews" (514), and whites "took over any elements of Afro-American culture that seemed useful: the imagery of folklore, ways of speaking, endurance of what appeared to be hopeless hardship, and singing and dancing" (515).

Conscious that including Africans alongside Pilgrims and whites risks obscuring their vastly different historical circumstances, Ellison does not shrink from the dark undercurrent that atttends discussion of cultural appropriation in an American context: the appropriation and enslavement of human beings. Immediately on noting what Africans *took up*, he switches perspective and drily observes that among the items they had *imposed upon* them were "a goodly portion of European chromosomes", bequeathing them "a complexity of bloodlines and physical characteristics that have much to do with the white American's reluctance to differentiate between race and culture" (514). If one is tempted to read this last remark as directed chiefly at white supremacists and opponents of integration, then an impassioned letter from Ellison to his white liberal friend, Stanley Edgar Hyman, suggests a more widespread refusal to understand that "race" does not determine one's culture: "Why demand (if that's what you're doing) that Phillis Wheatley's racial identity produce a type of poetry that was alien to her personal culture? [. . .] it seems to me unreasonable to treat her as though she were denying her heritage when, in effect, she was giving expression to the only heritage of which she was aware"

(*The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison* 683). In raising, in the "Little Man" essay, the spectre of the rape of enslaved women by white slaveholders, Ellison appears to be proposing that the efforts of whites—of all political persuasions—to circumscribe "white race/culture" from "black race/culture" are not only wrongheaded, but serve as a strategy for evading uncomfortable truths about American history.

Perhaps eager to avoid accusations of historical evasion himself, Ellison is careful to balance his presentation of the positive aspects of cultural appropriation with an account of the harms caused by it. He notes that some appropriations have been carried out "imperialistically", that there has been "misappropriation" (*Collected Essays* 514), and that "in improvising their rather tawdry and opportunistic version of a national mythology, the moviemakers—Christian and Jewish, northerners and southerners—ransacked and distorted to their own purposes the backgrounds and images of everyone, including the American Indians" (515). Given Ellison's awareness of the liability of certain appropriations to misrepresent minority groups in detrimental ways, it is unsurprising to find him elsewhere calling for these groups to shape their own image. In "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity", written in 1946 and published in 1953, he insists that "A people must define itself, and minorities have the responsibility of having their ideals and images recognized as part of the composite image which is that of the still-forming American people" (99). Meanwhile, in "A Very Stern Discipline", published in Harper's in 1967, he calls for "a corps of artists and intellectuals who can evaluate Negro American experience from the inside" since "[outside] interpreters might well be not so much prejudiced as ignorant, insensitive and arrogant" (751). Ellison's anxiety here about harm caused by misrepresentation as a result of—perhaps unconscious—racist attitudes belies his portrayal by some commentators as largely indifferent to the

effects of racism in American society.[6] We shall revisit Ellison's scepticism here about white understanding of black culture when we look at *Three Days Before the Shooting…* later in the chapter.

In spite of his reservations, cultural appropriation remains for Ellison "one of the most precious of [Americans'] many freedoms" (515). Perhaps its chief virtue lies in its capacity to act as an engine of change, a quality with enduring relevance to a country in which "we are often less interested in what we are than in projecting what we will be" (516). In "Going to the Territory", Ellison picks up this theme, but with a greater emphasis upon the urgency of change, repeatedly stressing the extent to which America has failed to fulfill its democratic promise: "for all our many achievements as a nation, we have never been able to make our principles adequately manifest in either our conduct or in our social structure" (603). Indeed, he suggests that bringing to light those elements of American history that have been left unrecorded could precipitate despair: "we might become so chagrined by the discrepancies which exist between our democratic ideals and our social reality that we would soon lose heart" (598). Nonetheless, the "democratic process" is still hailed as an "irrepressible force" that "moves all too slowly, but steadily, against and around those forces which would thwart our progress toward the fulfillment of the democratic ideal" (600). Given the movement here from a frank admission of America's unpromising history to a seemingly irrational belief in the all-conquering power of democracy, it is hardly surprising to find one Ellison critic claiming that "Only someone naively seduced by the propaganda of the American Dream and an essentialist notion of individualism could articulate some of the positions that Ellison held" (Nadel 403). Indeed, if Ellison comes off as something of a Jay Gatsby in Nadel's hands, Ellison's essay at times reads like Fitzgerald's novel, with one passage beginning "And so it is that we

go on striving" and ending with the hope that "that some day we'll achieve the transcendent dream which was projected by the Founding Fathers when they committed their conception of an ideal society to paper" (601). Is Ellison's belief in the "transcendent dream" any more warranted than Gatsby's belief in "the green light, the orgastic future" (Fitzgerald 171)?

It should be noted, however, that Nadel goes on to allow that "only by assuming that naïve role and rhetoric could Ellison put himself in the position to make so fully visible the contradictions between the imagined (or imaginary) America and its lived practice" (403). Nadel's modulation from a figure "naively seduced by the propaganda of the American Dream" to one who assumes roles for strategic purposes is shrewd, allowing as it does for the breadth of thought found in Ellison. Consider, for instance, Ellison's position in relation to the Afropessimism of Frank Wilderson and Calvin Warren (discussed in Chapter 2). Wilderson, as we saw, asserts the irrelevance of civil rights legislation to black life (*Red, White &* Black 11), while Ellison declares "Civil rights laws and agitation have changed the nation" (Graham and Singh 104). Warren believes that "Black freedom [. . .] would constitute a form of world destruction" (Warren 6); Ellison, referring to the freedom struggles of the 1960s, states that "The moment of apocalypse is past" (Graham and Singh 104). One might easily extend these comparisons—contrasting, for example, Wilderson's belief in the durability of the "Master/Slave relation" with Ellison's more sanguine formulation of "blackness with whiteness"—in a manner that would indicate the ways in which Ellison's position is diametrically opposed to those found within the school of Afropessimism. Yet, in a 1977 interview, Ellison strikingly anticipates some of the school's key tenets. Referring to the Founding Fathers, Ellison states:

> [T]hey had to have a standard by which they could gauge the extent to which their theories of democracy were being made manifest, both in the structure of the new society and in the lives of its citizens. Theoretically, theirs was a "classless" society, so what better (or easier) way of establishing such a standard than to say, "Well, now, here we have all these easily identifiable Blacks who're already below the threshold of social mobility—why not use them? They're not even human by our standards, so why not exploit them as the zero point on our scale of social possibility. Why not designate to *them* the negative ground upon which our society shall realize its goals? (Graham and Singh 351)

That the above remarks are made just a year before the appearance of "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" points to Ellison's ability to reside in paradox. Almost in one breath, he attributes to the Founding Fathers both a scheme in which the country's fortune relies upon the subjugation of blacks (a subjugation that Afropessimism would contend is permanent), and the creation of a document (the Constitution) that, in inaugurating the "democratic process", unleashes a force that impels the nation towards greater equality and freedom for all. Far from being oblivious of or evasive towards such seeming contradictions, Ellison brings them to our attention, noting along similar lines "the paradox that the revolutionary documents [. . .] were written in the language of the very hierarchy which they had overthrown" (*Collected Essays* 778), and observing elsewhere the tendency for the word "democracy" to "chang[e] into its opposite, depending upon who is using it" (31). In such moments, Ellison reveals himself to be no naïf, but rather intensely alive to the near impossibility of looking squarely at America's past whilst holding onto an optimism about its future.

As he himself puts it, "from the beginning, racism has mocked the futuristic dream of democracy" (Graham and Singh 351).

That Ellison does not either "lose heart" or surrender his "transcendent dream [. . .] of an ideal society" is principally due to the endlessly inspiriting example he finds in American culture. Since "the culture of the United States has always been more 'democratic' and 'American' than the social and political institutions in which it was emerging" (*Collected Essays* 614), Ellison's implicit hope is that cultural change will inform social and political change. In "Going to the Territory", Ellison adds a new phrase to the lexicon with which he addresses the theme of culture: "the vernacular process". It is important to note that Ellison has a rather idiosyncratic understanding of "vernacular", seeing it as "a dynamic *process* in which the most refined styles from the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-by-ear improvisations which we invent in our efforts to control our environment and entertain ourselves" (612). Fleshing out his conception of the vernacular, Ellison adds that "in its integrative action the high styles of the past are democratized", that it is "no less than the styles associated with aristocracy, a gesture towards perfection" (612), and that "the vernacular process is a way of establishing and discovering our national identity" (613). As Ellison's discussion of the vernacular proceeds, it becomes clear that he is using the terms "vernacular process" and "democratic process" almost interchangeably. Indeed, in the paragraph from which I quote below, he begins by using the latter, before switching, without signaling the transition, to the use of the former. This sleight of hand seemingly allows Ellison to better accomplish what he attempts to do in "The Little Man", namely, to grant central status to the "democratic process" in the formation of America:

> I am saying that within an area of our society which has been treated as though it were beyond the concerns of history, the democratic process has been made to operate by dedicated individuals at least on the level of culture [. . .] [F]ortunately, American culture is of a whole, for that which is essentially "American" in it springs from the synthesis of our diverse elements of cultural style. It is the product of a process which was in motion even before the founding of this nation, and it began with the interaction between Englishmen, Europeans, and Africans and American geography. When our society was established, this "natural" process of Americanization continued in its own unobserved fashion, defying the social, aesthetic and political assumptions of our political leaders and tastemakers alike. This, as I said, was the vernacular process [. . .]. (614)

Here, not only does the democratic/vernacular process precede the Revolution and the Constitution, it even attains a certain independence from the political. Yet, Ellison's attempt to collapse the vernacular into the democratic seems questionable. For Ellison, what is "essentially 'American'" in culture is "the synthesis of our diverse elements of cultural style". However, this synthesis—which later seems to be identified as the "vernacular process"—need not arise from a democratic impulse. As Ellison notes (in the next paragraph of the essay), elements of culture can be—and have been—"simply appropriated without credit" (615). Indeed, such (mis)appropriation, rather than being a product of the "democratic process", might be viewed as a repudiation of it, with its perpetrators casually exploiting those whom they consider inferior. Perhaps Ellison could respond by arguing that the synthesis of culture that he has in mind arises from "cooperative effort" and "is achieved through contact and communication across our divisions of race, class, religion and region" (614-15). Yet,

such a response would seem to require a rather anemic retreat from the "freewheeling appropriations" celebrated in "The Little Man".

Despite the problems with his introduction of the "vernacular process" as a covert substitute for the "democratic process", Ellison concludes his discussion of the vernacular with a memorable provocation in the direction of cultural separatists. After insisting that "[t]hrough the democratizing action of the vernacular, almost any style of expression may be appropriated", Ellison furnishes as an example "a group of middle-class white kids doing their best to sound like members of an old-fashioned black Baptist congregation" (615). Admitting that he finds this particular appropriation "incongruous", Ellison nonetheless allows that: "[a]s Americans who are influenced by the vernacular, it is natural for them to seek out those styles which provide them with a feeling of being most in harmony with the undefined aspects of American experience. In other words, they are seeking the homeness of home" (615). In Ellison's extraordinary formulation—"the homeness of home"—one might hear the distant echo of a passage from Ellison's most celebrated work: "The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps *only* Rine the rascal was at home in it" (*Invisible Man* 498). If the protagonist of *Invisible Man* is apprehensive about a world "without boundaries", by the late 1970s, Ellison appears to be as equally at home in it as the infamous Rinehart. Indeed, Ellison's image of white children who feel most "at home" in their appropriation of black gospel music, suggests that his earlier claim that "one of the most precious of American freedoms [is] our freedom to broaden our personal culture by absorbing the cultures of others" (609) is an understatement, and that the absorption of other cultures is, in fact, the *defining* American freedom. Thus, despite his efforts to make the "democratic process" constitutive of "American", here Ellison

seems to allow that this role might be equally well played by a conception of identity as fluid and not merely inherited.

Misappropriations in *Three Days Before the Shooting…*

The publication in 2010 of *Three Days Before the Shooting…* added new perspectives on Ellison's attitude towards cultural appropriation. In particular, two episodes, both absent from *Juneteenth* (1999), portray instances of perceived white appropriation of black culture. In the first of these, the black jazzman LeeWillie Minifees, reacts with outrage to the revelation that the man who shot the racist Senator Sunraider was white. Minifees had previously entered into an antagonistic struggle with Sunraider; after the Senator publicly jokes that the Cadillac has become so popular in Harlem that it should be renamed the "Coon Cage Eight" (*Three Days Before the Shooting…* 47), Minifees stages a spectacular protest by setting fire to his own Cadillac on Sunraider's lawn (36-38). Although Minifees admits that he had not considered shooting Sunraider, he nonetheless sees his act of defiance as an original "riff" that has been appropriated: "some white cats feel that they have the right to move in on anything you do. You take your time and you work out a riff from way deep inside yourself, and just as sure as you're born, some white cat is bound to come up and grab it and *distort* it" (222).

On one hand, Minifees's attempt to construe the attempted assassination of Sunraider as a form of intellectual theft might be viewed as Ellison adopting a satirical attitude towards a certain overzealousness in the identification of harmful instances of cultural appropriation. On the other hand, Minifees's sensitivity around the subject of appropriation is rendered understandable by reference to historical

examples of white artists gaining credit for music originally written by black artists. Responding to Minifees, the hospital attendant Charleston remarks: "Like they grabbed 'Tuxedo Junction' from Erskine Hawkins and ain't even smelled the funk of Birmingham! Like they grabbed credit for Don Redman's 'Marie,' and never even rubbed a chick at a breakfast dance!" (222). Minifees's own objection goes beyond issues of artistic and financial misappropriation; he is opposing what he views as an exertion of white supremacy, the attempt "to prove that the white folks are still in the lead!" (222). Thus, while Ellison, in "Going to the Territory", sounds a reassuring note about cultural appropriation, asserting that "it is no longer possible to take the products of a slave or an illiterate artist without legal consequence" (*Collected Essays* 615), in the characters of Minifees and Charleston he gives voice to an outrage about the pernicious effects of cultural appropriation that is largely absent from his essays.

A second depiction of cultural appropriation in Ellison's unfinished novel provokes similar indignation. Reverend Hickman and his associate Deacon Wilhite have arrived at the residence of Aubrey McMillen (the brother of a congregation member) when they are confronted by a white detective who suddenly begins to

> [speak] in a voice that had become a thick-throated, inept imitation of Amos and Andy doing an imitation of a black, streetwise hipster.
>
> "Now look, man," the white man said, "don't try to snow me, understand? Because, like, man, I been *around*; you dig?" (*Three Days Before the Shooting…* 438)

The black tenants of the building look upon the detective with "undisguised disgust" (438), while Hickman views him as being

> caught up in the grips of an arrogant, insane illusion which had led him to believe that with no more than a clumsy change of accent and manner he could not only transform himself from white to black but could achieve in the process such a penetrating insight into the secret lives and histories of his out-maneuvered black audience that no lies or deceptions that they might contrive to protect themselves could withstand his omniscient scrutiny. (438-39)

The abject failure of the detective to embody "blackness" is signalled by his inability even to reproduce a white imitation of "blackness", namely that of Amos and Andy, black characters voiced by the white actors Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll. What appears to be particularly offensive about this instance of cultural appropriation is the perpetrator's utter indifference to the "secret lives and histories" of the group from which he is appropriating. His complete lack of regard for his audience means he is blissfully unaware of the shallowness of his attempted transformation. Some of the scorn that Hickman here displays for white ignorance about black history reappears (albeit in more subtle fashion) in Ellison's exchange with William Styron, the subject of the next section.

Another aspect of *Three Days Before the Shooting…* relevant to the present discussion is Ellison's choice of narrator over the 218 pages that comprise Book I. Though he does not appear in *Juneteenth*, the newspaper reporter Welborn McIntyre represents one of Ellison's most sustained attempts to inhabit a white character. If the considerable length of McIntyre's narration—the only first-person narration in the novel—suggests that Ellison had few qualms about his ability to imagine a white consciousness, the substance of the narration reveals the author's doubts about insight in the other direction. That is, McIntyre's understanding is repeatedly shown to be inadequate to the task of making sense of the words and actions of the various black

characters with whom he engages. This failure of insight is cast in an ironic light since not only does McIntyre's training as a reporter, as well as his PhD in Sociology, render him a supposedly expert observer of human behaviour, but in the very first line of his narrative he situates himself as a key witness to, and interpreter of, the major event in his story, the attempted assassination of Senator Sunraider: "*Understand me, I was there*; sitting in the press section at the start of the shooting" (13; emphasis added). Though McIntyre's serendipitous proximity to this event presents him with an occasion to interview the foremost authority on Sunraider, Reverend Hickman, he squanders this opportunity through a combination of insensitivity (interrupting Hickman in the act of prayer [70]) and lack of composure (reacting furiously to Hickman calling him "Boy" [71]). Hickman quickly surmises that McIntyre's capacity for understanding is incommensurate to the complexity of Sunraider's story and castigates him in the following terms: "You're like a youngster who has grabbed his instrument and jumped on a bandstand full of strange musicians right in the middle of a complicated number and insists on trying to play without even knowing the riffs, the chords, and barely the melody" (72).

McIntyre's hubris in respect of his understanding of matters relating to race appears to derive in part from his sense of wide divergence from the openly racist reporter, McGowan. McIntyre's conception of himself as "a liberal, ex-radical Northerner" (61) positions him as McGowan's opposite, while his relationship with and apparent willingness to marry a black woman named Laura Johnston during the 1930s further enhance his progressive credentials. Nonetheless, McIntyre is sufficiently self-aware to admit that his enmity towards McGowan is at least partially based on the latter's ability "to make [him] feel buried motives and memories" (61). Similarly, when Hickman makes himself available as a blood donor for Sunraider (78),

McIntyre confesses "my upset over Hickman's offer of a transfusion was concealing something else, something painful and vile which I feared to face" (100). The disturbing memory that McIntyre would rather forget is the fact that he abandoned the then pregnant Laura Johnston after being threatened by her shotgun-wielding mother. McIntyre's "excruciating sense of shame" arises not merely from having neglected his paternal duties but from the anxiety he experienced over the genealogy of his progeny: "I burned to know by what chain of genes Laura was sustained [. . .] Who and what stood back there in the dark behind her? How would they assume form, become repersonalized, now that they were linked with my future destiny?" (102-03). Thus, although McIntyre rejects McGowan's explicit racism, assures Hickman that he is "neutral" (71), and is mindful of his professional obligation "*to be objective*" (74), he is unable to escape from the irrationality of racist thinking, and so his self-conception as an impartial reporter of events is placed under question.

McIntyre's limitations are highlighted by his frequent expressions of bafflement when faced with unusual events or personalities. Reacting to Minifees's car burning he states: "The act speaks for itself [. . .] but what it says is as confusing as hell to me, and *I was there when it happened*" (51; emphasis added). Here, McIntyre's admission of bewilderment functions as a deflation of the first line of Book I in which his claim of being present at the event—"I was there" (13)—attempts to secure his credibility as a narrator. Mere presence at an event seems to count for little without understanding and one of the impediments to McIntyre's understanding, the text appears to suggest, is his lack of familiarity with—and perhaps his indifference to—elements of black culture. Thus, when Minifees and Charleston begin discussing white appropriation of black culture, McIntyre, after admitting that he doesn't understand what they are talking about, attempts to redirect the

conversation back to a subject in which he has a stake: "'That's very interesting,' I said, trying to get them back on the shooting, 'but I'd like to ask you this …'" (222). The superficiality of McIntyre's interest in black culture is again suggested when, hoping to secure an interview with Minifees, he feigns an interest in his music:

> "You mean you dig LeeWillie?"
>
> "Dig?"
>
> "I mean do you understand him, like his music?"
>
> "Oh, sure, I admire him very much. Do you know him?"
>
> "Hell, yes I know him. But I said do you really dig him."
>
> "Well, I think I do. Shouldn't I?" (209)

McIntyre's rather unconvincing pretence of familiarity with elements of black culture invites comparison with the aforementioned efforts of the white detective to perform blackness. Yet if the detective offends through arrogant appropriation, McIntyre is more likely to cause insult through naïve insensitivity; when he uses the phrase "coloring the news" (209), Charleston mistakenly, if understandably, suspects him of a racial slight. (Alternatively, one might take McIntyre's slip as evidence of unconscious racism.)

McIntyre's various failures of understanding can be seen as the continuance of a project that Kenneth Warren identifies in *Invisible Man*: "[Ellison] had reversed the critical gaze and [. . .] had rendered white presumption about its insight into the ways of black people remarkable" (*So Black and Blue* 31). However, if, as noted in the previous section, Ellison's scepticism about white understanding of black culture led him to call for "a corps of artists and intellectuals who can evaluate Negro American

experience from the inside" (*Collected Essays* 751), he nonetheless defended the right of artists to appropriate experience radically different to their own. When asked, in a 1968 interview, to comment on "the legitimacy of a southern white's—namely William Styron's—attempting to enter into the consciousness of a Negro revolutionary", Ellison responded as follows:

> William Styron might fail, might have failed, but he has every bit as much right to project himself into the character of Nat Turner as I have the right to project myself into the dilemmas of Abraham Lincoln or the Jew who became Klansman, or Leontine Price has a right to project herself into the roles of a heroine of Italian drama. This is not a racial matter; it is a matter of sensibility, of talent, and of willingness to become the other. (Graham and Singh 137)

While Ellison here offers a robust defence of Styron's right to attempt a novel such as *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, his remarks at the 1968 meeting of the Southern Historical Association—to which we now turn—suggest that he did, in fact, believe Styron had failed.

Ellison and Styron: "leave history alone"

Given the powerful influence that Hayden White's work would exert upon historiography during the 1970s and beyond,[7] the Southern Historical Association's decision in 1968 to invite three novelists (Ralph Ellison, William Styron, and Robert Penn Warren) and just one historian (C. Vann Woodward) to engage in a panel discussion at their thirty-fourth annual meeting looks somewhat prescient. To be sure, the topic of discussion was "The Uses of History in Fiction", rather than the "The Uses of Fiction in History", or, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact", as the title

of White's seminal 1974 essay runs. Yet, as we shall see, White's work is helpful in making sense of some of the key arguments presented by—and disagreements between—Ellison and Styron.

Ellison surprised—and certainly dismayed some of—his audience at the SHA meeting when he claimed not to have read Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. This claim has been treated sceptically by many commentators, especially given that Ellison evidently *had* read the volume of critical essays, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*.[8] Styron biographer, James L. W. West III, thinks it probable that "Ellison had read Styron's novel but had misgivings about the book and did not want to embarrass Styron by stating his criticism in public" (West 111). Yet, despite Ellison's possible intention to avoid making a direct critique of the novel, certain of his remarks can plausibly be read as taking issue with Styron's work. Ellison's two main points can be summarised as follows.

First, Ellison articulates his acute reservations about American written history, remarking that "our written history has been as 'official' as any produced in any communist country" (Graham and Singh 147). This "official history" has "ruled out" certain "realities of American historical experience", so that the "sense of history" shared by African Americans "is only now beginning to get into the history books" (152-53). According to Ellison, "Part of this [sense of history] is legend. Part of this is myth. But so much of it—so very much of it—is what actually happened, happened to them" (153). The fact that this version of history—which "exists in oral form" and "constitutes the internal history of values by which [African Americans have] lived"—has been marginalised in favour of an official history which condoned oppressive social conditions for blacks has "imposed upon Negroes a high sensitivity

to the ironies of historical writing and created a profound scepticism concerning the validity of most reports on what the past was like" (154).

Ellison here offers justification for some of the critiques of Styron made in *Ten Black Writers Respond*. When Lerone Bennett, Jr. takes issue with Styron's omission of Nat Turner's wife he appeals to "the oral tradition" as evidence for her existence (Clarke 11), while Bennett (7) and Ernest Kaiser (52-54) criticise Styron for being too in thrall to white historians such as U.B. Phillips, Stanley Elkins, and Frank Tannenbaum. Indeed, whether or not Ellison had read *The Confessions of Nat Turner* it is likely that Styron's professed admiration for Elkins's 1959 study *Slavery*[9] left Ellison somewhat sceptical of Styron's view of American history. In his essay "If the Twain Shall Meet", a review of Howard Zinn's *The Southern Mystique* (1964), Ellison criticises Zinn's acceptance of "the archstereotype of 'Sambo' (that craven creation of nineteenth-century white Southern pseudosociology, recently reintroduced into what passes for intellectual discussion by Stanley M. Elkins)" (*Collected Essays* 577). Given Ellison's contempt for Elkins's thesis—Kenneth Warren describes Ellison's reaction to *Slavery* as "occasion for disgust" (62)—were he not constrained by his friendship with Styron,[10] Ellison might have reacted to Styron's novel in terms not dissimilar to those used by his close friend Albert Murray in a 1967 review:

> What Southern Negroes will find in Styron's version, alas, is not the black man's homeric Negro but a white man's Negro (specifically, Mister Stanley M. Elkins' Sambo)—a Nat Turner, that is to say, who has been emasculated and reduced to fit all too snugly into a personality structure based on highly questionable and essentially irrelevant conjectures about servility [. . .]. (Murray 125)

Ellison's scant sympathy for Styron in the face of the fierce criticism is indicated in a letter to his literary executor, John Callahan, in which he thanks him for the transcript of the Southern Historical Association meeting and admits "roaring with laughter over the vividly recovered memory of Bill Styron's slapping away at the persistent attacks of his impassioned 'bete noir' [sic]" (*Selected Letters* 738). ("Bête noire" was Styron's ill-judged moniker for a questioner who had previously denounced him at a talk at Harvard Summer School and had journeyed to New Orleans to renew his attack.) For Ellison then, Styron's representation of slavery—insofar as it followed Elkins—was met with appropriate scorn.

Ellison's second main point is a consequence of his first. Since written history in America is so contested—especially by those who feel that their sense of history has been excluded from it—Ellison exhorts novelists to "leave history alone" (Graham and Singh 158). By this Ellison does not mean that novelists should not examine historical periods, but rather that, when doing so, they should disguise the historical figures. Thus, Ellison praises Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946)—a novel widely thought to be based upon the life of Senator Huey Long—for taking an indirect approach to history: "[Warren] was canny enough to realize that he could never get *that* particular man into fiction" (149). Elaborating on why he thinks it impossible to portray certain historical figures undisguised in a novel, Ellison asserts that "the work of fiction comes alive through a collaboration between the reader and the writer" (158). Taking the example of Robert E. Lee, Ellison argues that "Lee is no longer simply an historical figure [but] is a figure who lives within us" (158). This means that the novelist who sets out to portray Lee must operate *within the constraints* of her audience's conception of Lee or the collaboration that enables the fiction to come alive will fail. Thus, while Styron argues that his novel, though it

might "deal with history", should be conceived "as a separate entity which has its own autonomy" (156), for Ellison, autonomy in fiction can only be achieved by approaching history in an indirect fashion.

Another way of understanding the disagreement between Ellison and Styron is by considering the implications of Ellison's assertion that when a novelist "moves into the arena of history" she "takes on the obligations of the historian" (154). This claim appears to collapse the distinction between the novel and the historical study, a distinction that Styron wishes to uphold, arguing that "a work of literature [has] its own being, its own fountain, its own reality, its own power, its own appeal, which derive from factors that don't really relate to history" (156) and that literary works "exist outside of history" and "have to be judged by other levels of understanding" (157). For Styron, a key difference between fiction and history is the prerogative of the "novelist dealing with history" to "say that such and such a fact is totally irrelevant, and to Hell with the person who insists that it has any real, utmost relevance" (160). He goes on to claim that "[facts] don't really mean anything", to which Ellison responds "They *mean* something. That's why you're in trouble" (159).

It is in this area of disagreement that the work of Hayden White offers a useful perspective. White's 1974 essay "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" offers support to claims by *both* Ellison and Styron. In a frequently quoted passage, White defines "historical narratives" as "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (*Tropics of Discourse* 82). Here White joins with Ellison in casting doubt upon the conventional distinction between the novel and history, yet does so from the opposite direction. That is, Ellison thinks that the novelist dealing with history assumes the role of the

historian, while White suggests that historians create their narratives by employing the techniques of the novelist. A consequence of the collapse of this distinction (assuming one accepts it) is that Styron's attempt to evade criticism by distinguishing his work from that of the historian fails. If both historical studies and historical novels are, as White suggests, "translations of fact into fictions" (92), then the novel cannot, as Styron desires, "exist outside of history". On the other hand, if historians must rely upon novelistic techniques, then they cannot imperiously denigrate the work of a fiction writer such as Styron as that of a "mere novelist".[11]

Moreover, White's view of the role of "facts" in historical narratives more closely corresponds to Styron's position than that of Ellison. In concurrence with Claude Lévi-Strauss, White claims that historical "facts" are always subordinate to the story the historian wants to tell and that "[w]e can construct a comprehensible story of the past [. . .] only by a decision to 'give up' one or more of the domains of facts offering themselves for inclusion in our accounts" (90). Such an argument would appear useful to Styron in defending his decision to exclude the "fact" of Turner's wife from his particular "story of the past". As for Ellison's claim that facts "*mean* something", White would seem to disagree, suggesting instead that facts themselves have no inherent meaning without a context supplied by the historian. For White, historians borrow these contexts from existing literary forms: "[historical narratives] succeed in endowing sets of past events with meanings [. . .] by exploiting the metaphorical similarities between sets of real events and the conventional structures of our fictions" (91).

That White's work offers support to Ellison's position in one area and to Styron's position in another area should not be surprising given that the conclusion to

his major work, *Metahistory* (1973), emphasises the undecidability of choosing between theories of history:

> In my view, no given *theory* of history is convincing or compelling to a given public solely on the basis of its adequacy as an "explanation" of the "data" contained in its narrative, because, in history, as in the social sciences in general, there is no way of pre-establishing what will count as a "datum" and what will count as a "theory" by which to explain what the data "mean". (429)

Given the breadth of disagreement between Ellison and Styron, and between Styron and the ten black critics, it seems clear that different theories of history were at work (so that Styron was impressed by Elkins's *Slavery*, while Ellison repulsed by it) as well as different conceptions of what counted as a datum (meaning that for many of the ten, the existence of Turner's wife was a datum, but for Styron it was not). Small wonder then that the controversy over Styron's novel appeared—and still appears—intractable. Indeed, the incommensurability of historical narratives that White's complex study *Metahistory* asserts is suggested more pithily by Ellison's concluding remarks at the SHA meeting when he notes that "a real problem for the novelist" is that he is beseeched on all sides by the plea "Damn it, tell it like *I* think it is" (172).

Conclusion

In the aspects of Ellison's work examined in this chapter—his essays, his unfinished novel, and his public engagements—he reveals himself as arguably the most contradictory of the writers in the present study. On the subject of democracy, his utopian tendencies jar with his reference to the "pathologies of the democratic process" (*Collected Essays* 507). On the subject of appropriation, he champions its capacity to

generate cultural change, while obdurately instructing novelists: "Don't appropriate the names [of historical figures]" (Graham and Singh 170). And on the subject of understanding across racial boundaries his optimistic talk of "blackness with whiteness" and "unity in diversity" somewhat conflicts with the examples in *Three Days Before the Shooting…* of the limitations of white comprehension of black culture. Yet, in his many contradictions, Ellison can be seen to embody his rejection of essentialist constructions of African American identity. Indeed, his career might be viewed as a rebuke to John Henrik Clarke's admonition that "[The writer's] definition of himself will define the role he is to play, and no one can play a positive role when his own self-definition is ambiguous" ("The Visible Dimensions of *Invisible Man*" 30). Ellison, instead, adopted an existentialist conception of identity,[12] one in which action defined the self rather than the other way around, declaring "We are what we do and not do" (Graham and Singh 17). This dynamic view of identity would prove influential amongst future generations of black writers, including novelists such as Charles Johnson, Paul Beatty, Zadie Smith, Colson Whitehead, and—as we shall see in Chapter 6—Percival Everett.

Philip Roth: (De)constructing Identity in *The Human Stain*

Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) is perhaps one of the richest and most unusual meditations on crossing racial and cultural boundaries in 21st century American fiction. In it, we find the author, Philip Roth, imagining a Jewish character, Nathan Zuckerman, with an autobiography similar to that of Roth himself, with Zuckerman, in turn, imagining an African American character, Coleman Silk, who is "passing"[1] as a white Jew.[2] Hence, in a novel that risks the pitfalls of its author being seen to appropriate the life of an African American, the African American in question appropriates (to a degree) the life of his Jewish author.[3] Such multiple levels of crossing and appropriation are suggested by Julia Faisst's description of the novel as "a white book about black America, or a black book about white America, or an interracial book about interracial America" (132). Faisst's description captures the contradictory nature that is at the core of the novel and that has been somewhat understated in some of the critical responses. Mollie Godfrey and Larry Schwartz separately claim that *The Human Stain* sees its protagonist, Coleman Silk, emerge as a hero of "liberal individualism" (Godfrey 242). Schwartz concludes that the "social dimension is suppressed in favor of Zuckerman's triumphant adulation of Coleman's individualism" (78), while Godfrey argues that Coleman "experiences none of the guilt, little anxiety, and no real regret" (240) about his decision to pass. Rather than dismissing such claims about the novel's favourable view of Coleman's autogenetic ambitions, I want to suggest that the text incorporates antagonistic perspectives. Thus,

I argue that the novel can *also* be read as portraying the failure of Coleman's project of self-determination and that his guilt over his decision manifests itself not only in the infamous "spooks" incident, but on numerous other occasions.

In another influential reading of the novel, Mark Maslan argues that, for Zuckerman, renunciation of one's past is part of becoming an American and so the story of Coleman Silk's decision to pass is the story of "an American's struggle to realize his nationality" (379). While Maslan's presentation of Zuckerman's view of Coleman is certainly persuasive, I argue that the novel itself transcends Zuckerman's vision and presents a powerful case for an alternative point of view: Coleman, rather than renouncing his past, must, to a large degree, accept his role in the narrative in which he finds himself. Moreover, I contend that Coleman's attempt to cultivate a remove between the private realm and the public sphere is shown to fail, principally through his relation to the figure of Lester Farley.

My central claim is that the novel offers a more severe critique of Coleman's decision to pass than has been recognised in some critical responses, and that the overt enthusiasm Zuckerman appears to express for Coleman's individualism is counterbalanced in a subtle yet pervasive manner. That my reading of the novel seeks to sit alongside—rather than usurp—those of Godfrey and Schwartz is demonstrated by my claim that *The Human Stain* might be best understood as a meditation on Roth's attempt to admit contradiction—even chaos—into his art. To this end, I argue that the aesthetic strategies employed by Jackson Pollock—whose work is referenced in the novel—resemble, in important respects, Roth's approach to writing *The Human Stain*.

Implicit in much of the above is a claim that Roth is more alive to the nuances and difficulties of crossing racial and cultural boundaries than has been acknowledged in some of the critical literature. Before proceeding to my main argument, I will first substantiate this claim.

"Slipping the Punch"

Given his close friendship with William Styron,[4] it would be unsurprising if Roth sought, when composing *The Human Stain,* to avoid—or at least anticipate—the severe criticism encountered by Styron for his perceived appropriation of an African American life in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). Indeed, there is evidence that, just as Coleman seeks to "slip punches" (90), Roth aimed to dodge some of the critical blows that came Styron's way. The clearest defense employed by Roth is the figure of Ernestine, Coleman's sister. If Styron hoped that the support of several prominent African Americans, including James Baldwin, might help defuse the controversy surrounding his work (see Chapter 1), Roth seems to have attempted to forestall criticism by having Ernestine deliberate on the problematic issues around white authorship of black subject matters.

Despite only appearing in the final chapter, Ernestine plays an important role in the novel. Described by Zuckerman as someone whose "inmost reflex in any conflict would be to act automatically as the mediator" (324), Ernestine attempts to reconcile the opposing perspectives of her two brothers, Walter and Coleman. While Walter is active in the struggle for school integration during the post-war years, Coleman "was *not* one of those ex-GIs fighting for integration and equality and civil rights" (324). However, Ernestine encourages Walter to view Coleman's decision to

pass as an equally valid form of protest against the system of racial hierarchy: "*Both* of you are fighters and *both* of you fought. You did battle your way and Coleman did battle his" (327). Just as Ernestine arbitrates between Walter and Coleman, her role as mediator might be seen to extend to mediation between Roth and potential critics of his novel. In this role, Ernestine's discussions of issues around race appear to preempt the types of criticisms that *The Confessions of Nat Turner* attracted.

Perhaps fearing reproach for the appropriation of an African American life, Roth raises the issue in *The Human Stain* through Ernestine's discussion of Black History Month: "Youngsters were coming to me the year I retired, telling me that for Black History Month they would only read a biography of a black by a black. What difference, I would ask them, if it's a black author or it's a white author? I'm impatient with Black History Month altogether" (329). Here, Ernestine's scorn for the idea that only black authors can write books about black subjects would seem to implicitly grant Roth permission to imagine the life of Coleman Silk. Indeed, Ernestine's comments might be seen to clear Roth (or Nathan Zuckerman, the supposed author of *The Human Stain*) of any wrongdoing in a manner similar to that by which the black professor of Political Science, Herb Keble absolves the apparently white Coleman of the charge of racism.

If the "teacherish" authority with which Ernestine speaks (330), together with the sincerity suggested by her name, invites the reader to accept her claim about the irrelevance of the race of an author to a book's subject matter, there remains the troubling paradox that the race of the person making this claim seems far from irrelevant. Just as Zuckerman doubts the sincerity of Keble's oration at Coleman's funeral because of how he had earlier acted out of self-interest, Roth seems to recognise that a reader might suspect a claim about the irrelevance of race to

authorship issuing from a white character to be a self-serving denial of racism and demonstration of white privilege. Thus, Ernestine's blackness assumes special importance at the precise point that she advocates a diminishment in the significance of a writer's racial identity.

Further ironies arise from Ernestine's discussion of Matthew Henson and Dr. Charles Drew. Ernestine contends that, instead of these figures being assigned to Black History Month, Henson (reputedly the first person to reach the North Pole) should be studied "when you do other explorers" (329), and Drew (who according to Ernestine "discovered how to prevent blood from clotting so it could be banked" [333]) should be studied "when you have health" (330). For Ernestine, it is the achievement of these individuals that is the cause of celebration, not their race. However, the reason that Nathan Zuckerman has heard of neither figure appears to be that they have been excluded from (or at least marginalised by) historical accounts and school curricula precisely because of their race. As Ernestine notes regarding Henson: "When it was reported in the *New York Times*, he was given full credit. But now when they write the history, all you hear about is Peary" (330). Ernestine also relays to Zuckerman the popular, though factually disputed,[5] story of Dr. Charles Drew bleeding to death from injuries sustained in a car accident due to the refusal of the nearest hospital to "take colored" (333) patients. It is clear, then, from the accounts presented in the novel, that these two important historical figures were unfairly treated, both in life and posthumously, because white society identified them as intellectual inferiors. Ernestine's point appears to be that Black History Month, while it obviously seeks to counter the idea that black lives are inferior, nonetheless runs the risk of perpetuating the idea that black lives are different. Ernestine's view—and perhaps also Roth's—would seem to coincide with Paul Gilroy's insistence that

"action against racial hierarchies can proceed more effectively when it has been purged of any lingering respect for the idea of 'race'" (13), a view complemented by his wariness of the commodification of "blackness", which he notes "can now signify vital prestige rather than abjection" (36). Yet, it is difficult to see how—absent endeavours such as Black History Month and other projects to recognise black accomplishments—an educational system that has developed in a white-dominated society in which black achievement was both impeded and unrecognised will produce mechanisms to address the omission of figures such as Henson and Drew.

Although Zuckerman is speaking ironically when he attributes his ignorance of Henson to his school years predating Black History Month, the novel readily admits that knowledge production in a white-dominated society has historically excluded the role of blacks. Zuckerman's education has left him in little doubt that the North Pole was discovered by a white man, even if he cannot remember exactly which one: "I forget whether it was Peary or Cook" (330). Moreover, although Ernestine's authority, intelligence, and experience might appear designed to seduce the reader into complicity with her tutelary views and her distaste for Black History Month, which she compares to "milk that's just about to go sour" (329), Zuckerman sufficiently recovers from his initial captivation to recognise the limits of her perspective: "every perplexity pumping the human imagination seemed to lie somewhat outside her own unswerving allegiance to a canon of time-honored rules" (333). Thus, if Ernestine at first seems in danger of becoming a somewhat too convenient vessel of Roth's own views on artistic freedom, political correctness, and the possibility of a post-racial America, her positions and perspectives are subsequently called into question and hence shown to be perhaps as limited as those that she critiques.

It should also be noted that Ernestine plays a crucial role in both the genesis and the eventual content of Zuckerman's narrative of events. It is Ernestine's revelation about Coleman's decision to pass as white that prompts Zuckerman to begin writing the novel. In addition, she apparently provides much of the biographical information about Coleman's pre-passing life. Thus, Roth, through the example of Zuckerman, implicitly acknowledges the care with which a white author must approach the writing of a black life. It is only with the help of Ernestine—who provides intimate knowledge of Coleman's life and shares his experience of growing up as an African American in pre-Civil Rights East Orange—that Zuckerman is able to compose his narrative. In this manner, Roth appears eager to avoid some of the types of criticism that Styron encountered over his depiction of Nat Turner: namely that he ignored oral African American sources and relied on a single document written by a white man. For Zuckerman's account of Coleman's life, the information provided by a black woman, Ernestine, is indispensable.

A final way in which Roth can be seen to evade critical punches is by conceiving the process by which Zuckerman imagines Coleman's story as something quite distinct from the act of appropriation. In a 1993 interview, Roth describes his own biography as a diving board: "I jump up and down on the biographical data of my life and then I leap forward into the imagining and into the Zuckerman books. So I leap into the water [. . .] the water is the Zuckerman books. I leave behind the diving board" ("Philip Roth: My True Story" 00:40:06-19). Zuckerman himself enacts a similar process with the biographical information about Coleman given to him by Ernestine. When Zuckerman speculates that Coleman revealed his secret to Faunia Farley, Ernestine asks him "How do you know that?", to which he candidly replies: "I don't. I don't know anything. It's a thought I have" (326). If Zuckerman admits that

The Human Stain is mainly a product of his imagination (with Ernestine's biographical information as a "diving board"), he nonetheless seems to view his task as allowing the characters in his book to speak in their own voices, and thereby tell their own stories. Thus, for Zuckerman, the book begins when, standing beside Coleman's grave, he "wait[s] for him to speak" (338), and then waits for Faunia to reply.

When Zuckerman imagines Faunia explaining to Coleman the background to a suicide case for which she was tasked with cleaning up the bloody aftermath, there is an unmistakable echo of the earlier exchange between Ernestine and Zuckerman:

"How do you know this?" Coleman asked.

"I'm assuming. I don't know. This is my own story. This is my story." (339)

Here, the supposedly illiterate Faunia emulates Zuckerman by becoming the author of her own story. The repeated emphasis on "my story" indicates that Zuckerman, rather than engaging in appropriation, assumes instead the role of medium. Instead of viewing his novel as setting him against the other major actors—Coleman, Ernestine, Delphine Roux—and their versions of Coleman's life, Zuckerman identifies a more formidable antagonist. In commencing work on *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman sees himself as "entering into professional competition with death" (338). Death, then, is the ultimate appropriator, silencing voices and ending stories. Zuckerman rages against its annihilating force by endeavouring to revivify and sustain all of the various narratives that surrounded Coleman's life.

The fact that the narratives around Coleman enter into conflict with one another only affirms Zuckerman's sense of the essential flux of human life: "the flow of the unexpected" that marked the relationship between Coleman and Faunia (52).

This instability is characterised by Zuckerman's rather Delphic declaration that: "Nothing lasts, and yet nothing passes, either. And nothing passes just because nothing lasts" (52). Applied to Zuckerman's narrative, his statement might be taken to mean that the tensions between the different versions of Coleman's life ensure that no single narrative will emerge as the definitive one (that is, will "last"), just as none will completely fade (or "pass") away. Without a singular dominant version of Coleman's story, the potential charge of appropriation loses much of its force. In contrast to Styron's attempt to "become a black man", Roth's project—via Zuckerman—is not "becoming" Coleman, but is closer to the curation of a number of key perspectives on Coleman's life. Zuckerman retains the authorial power involved in the selection and arrangement of these viewpoints, while seemingly ceding to others the authority to speak for themselves. It is a project no less ambitious, but perhaps less fraught with danger than that to which Styron was committed.

Exit Ghost: "All he ever wanted was out"

I return now to my main argument that *The Human Stain* offers a more thoroughgoing critique of Coleman's decision to pass than some critics have allowed. In doing so, I want to suggest that the novel takes seriously the question of whether Coleman's act should be viewed as a "great crime" (109). This is the phrase Zuckerman employs when describing the genesis of Coleman's decision to pass. The exact moment of revelation occurs when Coleman is completing navy enlistments forms and has just lied about his age: "it didn't immediately occur to him that, if he chose to, he could lie about his race as well. [. . .] It occurred first to his heart, which began banging away like the heart of someone on the brink of committing his first great crime" (109). The

centrality of Coleman's unconscious (figured here as his heart) in his decision to pass is highly ironic, given that the conscientious exercise of reason, together with an appeal to order and rules, appears to be his *modus operandi*. When explaining to his parents his remarkable success as an amateur boxer, Coleman assures them that "It's brains that win [. . .] It's all about thinking" (95, 97) and that the dangers presented by even the toughest Newark boys are neutralised once they enter the ring, since such formalised combat is governed by "rules" (96). Faced with a different set of antagonists during the "spooks" controversy, Coleman again appeals to the rulebook—in this case the "unabridged dictionary" that gives the "primary meaning" of "spook" as "*Informal*. a ghost; specter" (84)—to justify his choice of language. For Coleman then, both in the ring and in the classroom, a robust intellect operating within the parameters of strict rules is the mechanism by which he can remain in control and ultimately triumph. There is thus great irony in the fact that the biggest decision of his life—a decision that ostensibly affords him a much greater level of control over his own destiny, obviating as it does the chief impediment to his success (racial prejudice)—springs from his unconscious, a realm over which he can exercise no control.

The words and actions that emanate from Coleman's unconscious repeatedly undermine his belief in the efficacy of an "orderly and reasoned approach" to life (63). Indeed, the trajectory of the entire novel is a descent from order into chaos. The novel's conception takes place with Zuckerman standing at Coleman's grave, the site of which appears strategically selected to retrospectively impose stability and meaning on his life: "The next day Coleman was buried beside his wife in the orderly garden of a cemetery across from the level green sea of the college athletic fields, at the foot of the oak grove behind North Hall and its landmark hexagonal clock tower"

(293-94). From this position, with its comforting coordinates of order, rationality, and respectability ("the orderly garden", "the level green sea", "the oak grove", "North Hall", and the "landmark hexagonal clock tower"), Zuckerman commences a narrative that leaves the reader in little doubt about the "inherent instability" of life and the "terrifyingly provisional nature of everything" (124, 336). It is a narrative that places alongside the carefully manicured public image of Coleman's life the messy private reality. This alternative version is suggested by a second—and very different—description of Coleman's grave: "Instead of my then heading home, I drove crosstown to the cemetery and, [. . .] not quite knowing what was happening, standing in the falling darkness beside the uneven earth mound roughly heaped over Coleman's coffin, I was completely seized by his story" (337).

Here, the symbols of order in the first description of the grave have been usurped by markers of contingency and confusion. Zuckerman appears to hardly know what he is doing or what unnamable force has directed him to gaze upon the ominous "uneven earth mound" (a far cry from the "level green sea") in the "falling darkness". In providing two contrasting visual representations of how the grave symbolises the "meaning" of Coleman's life, the novel invites us to contemplate secondary (and perhaps tertiary) meanings behind Coleman's words and actions. Thus, while Coleman seeks to limit the meaning of the word "spook" to its primary dictionary definition, the novel advocates that we at least entertain the idea that he also meant it in its secondary sense: "*Disparaging*. A Negro" (84). To the degree that we accept Zuckerman's elevation of the role of contingency and "uncontrollability" (335) in human affairs, then we must be prepared to accept the possibility that Coleman, despite his strenuous efforts to impose order on his life through the exercise of reason, is ultimately exposed by his unconscious.[6]

Amplifying the irony of the rational classics professor being undone by the irrational is the fact that the medium of his undoing is language. In addition to his professional expertise in the area, Coleman has benefitted from the tutelage of a father whose defining characteristic was precision in his use of language. In contrast to Coleman's precocious boxing skills, Clarence Silk had "another way of beating you down. [. . .] [Speaking with] deliberateness and precision and directness [he] could wither you with words" (93). Indeed, the reason Coleman goes to Howard University is that "[h]ad he not, his father would—with words alone, with just the English language—have killed him" (102). If we recall that the senior Silk's discovery that Coleman has been partaking in boxing matches behind his back leads to an exchange that culminates in Coleman denying that he is his father's son, then the "spooks" incident can be viewed as language enacting the father's revenge for Coleman's teenage renunciation.

There are two other instances in which language operates as the medium of retribution for Coleman's symbolic patricide. The first occurs when Coleman reads a poem about him hastily penned by his then girlfriend, Steena Palsson, a white woman unaware of Coleman's African American heritage. Coleman mistakes the word "neck" for "negro" and spends an anxious few minutes wondering how Steena could have discovered his secret. The second takes place when, after a receiving a patronising lecture from his lawyer about the imprudence of conducting an affair with Faunia Farley, Coleman tells him that he never again wants to "see his smug fucking lily-white face" (81). We later find out that Coleman is unconsciously echoing the phrase that his older brother, Walter, had applied to him over forty years earlier, after he visited his mother to inform her of his upcoming marriage to a white woman. Each word that threatens to undo Coleman—"spooks", "negro", and "lily-white"—can be

seen to be directed inwards, suggesting his unconscious remorse for his betrayal of his family. Thus, while Coleman, on one hand, appears to be a victim of the historical and cultural forces of his time—racial prejudice and political correctness—on the other hand, his language enacts a linguistic self-sabotage that seems to disclose shame about his decision to pass.

Another way in which Coleman's decision is challenged is through the comparison of his actions with those of his older brother. Walter Silk—unlike Coleman, who decided in 1953 to live the rest of his life as a white man—was active in the civil rights struggles of the '50s and '60s. Ernestine tells Zuckerman that Walter actively fought for integration of the schools in New Jersey and that part of the reason that he cannot forgive Coleman is that in his "eyes there was a fight to fight then, and Coleman didn't want to fight it" (326-27). For Walter, Coleman "was never fighting for anything other than himself. Silky Silk. [. . .] In it always for Coleman alone. All he ever wanted was out" (324). Even Coleman's less strident critics, Zuckerman and Ernestine, suggest that he was oblivious to the "larger picture" of what was happening in America in the 1950s (88, 323). When, in 1944, a Jewish neighbour offers Coleman's father $3,000 for Coleman to get B's in his "two weakest" subjects so that his son can become class valedictorian, the academically brilliant Coleman incredulously exclaims: "My two weakest subjects—which are those?" (87). Despite his supreme self-assurance, Coleman's apparent inability to grasp the historical narrative of his time—and the role that he might be expected to play in this narrative—might be considered one of his crucial weaknesses. In *After Virtue* (1981), Alasdair MacIntyre proposes that one's life must be understood in the context of a narrative: "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (216). For MacIntyre,

such stories are constrained by the circumstances of one's birth: "I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point" (220). Walter would appear to agree with MacIntyre. Indeed, even Ernestine, who is much more sympathetic towards Coleman's decision, appears to concede that there are limits to liberal individualism[7] and that there are certain roles that one has to play: "'One can do only so much to control one's life,' Ernestine said [. . .] a summary statement as philosophically potent as any she cared to make" (337). Ernestine here casts serious doubt on Coleman's ability to "spring the historical lock" (335). History, she seems to suggest, stands a much greater chance of directing one's fate than one does of "forg[ing] a distinct historical destiny" (335).

For Maslan, however, *The Human Stain* "posits the idea of a national identity grounded in [. . .] historical discontinuity", such that Coleman's efforts to repudiate his past are equated with a realisation of his American identity (366). Maslan argues that Coleman's renunciation of his ascriptive racial identity is endorsed by the novel since its narrator, Zuckerman, privileges historical discontinuity (over historical continuity) as a model of identity. This privileging, it is argued, can be seen both in the novel's form—in the discontinuity between Zuckerman's knowledge of Coleman and the story that he (Zuckerman) constructs—and in the similarity between Coleman's disavowal of his past and Zuckerman's renunciation of his own history (his decision to lead a solitary life in a cabin in the Berkshires). Maslan's argument is persuasive to the degree that Zuckerman's views emerge as dominant among the competing views expressed in the text. According to Maslan, this occurs to a large extent since "Zuckerman's views are powerfully reinforced by the narrative's form" (367). However, this assertion ignores the subtle, yet persistent, ways in which the

text undermines Zuckerman's narrative by allowing us to see through the main authorial frame to other narratives that escape from Zuckerman's authorial domain and challenge his perspective of Coleman's life.

This idea of competing narratives can be seen in the novel's treatment of Coleman's liberal individualism. Zuckerman, it seems, experiences a vicarious thrill in contemplating Coleman's rejection of the "we" of black solidarity: "You can't let the big they impose its bigotry on you any more than you can let the little they become a we and impose its ethics on you. [. . .] Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral *we* with its insidious *E pluribus unum*" (108). Although the vitality of Zuckerman's prose here conveys a sense that he is willing the success of Coleman's project of self-determination, elsewhere in the text we discover that, despite Coleman's defiance and his determination to write his own story—the story of the "raw I" (108)—he ultimately cannot deny that the "moral we" is inescapable. In subtle ways, Coleman's actions betray an unspoken acknowledgement of the claims of a community from which he cannot entirely absent himself. After the "spooks" incident at Athena College, he gives up using the college's library, gym, and swimming pool. He begins instead to use the "less agreeable" facilities at a "depressed mill town" with the suggestive name "Blackwell" (82-83). Given that—in certain Southern states—such venues were among the most prominent public spaces in which Jim Crow laws were enforced, Coleman's decision to exchange the facilities at the mainly white Athena for those at Blackwell can be seen as a symbolic act of penance. Since his rise to prominence at Athena College has been aided by his decision to pass—rather than following Walter's example by assuming an active role in the effort to end segregation—Coleman's disavowal of some of the benefits of his position signify

contrition regarding his failure to play a part in the struggle for Civil Rights. At the "rundown gym", Coleman resumes boxing workouts for the first time since the 1940s, an indication that his move to Blackwell represents a symbolic journey into pre-Civil Rights era America (83). Hence, Coleman's passage from Athena to Blackwell can be seen as a revelation of unconscious guilt about his pursuit of the "raw I." It conveys a tacit admission that the path of liberal individualism that he has chosen did not lead to the successes won by the Civil Rights movement; instead, it was the collective action of the "moral we" that achieved these victories. Thus, despite Coleman protesting against the tyranny of the "we" and railing against what he calls the "imprisonment" of "ancestor worship" (144), he is arguably unable—or his unconscious reveals him to be unwilling—to renounce the claims of community and the responsibilities entailed by an inherited narrative.

The three words that threaten to undo Coleman can be read in light of MacIntyre's idea of a life as a narrative. Placed in the chronological order in which they occur in Coleman's life these words read: "negro", "lily-white", and "spooks." It is possible to trace in this sequence a process of erasure: from black to white to invisible. In attempting to impose too much control and order on his life, Coleman, who is described by his daughter as "invisible" and by Zuckerman as a "blank", appears to have exited his own story (158, 213). By committing to a programme of self-invention, he has denied "the fact that we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our narratives" (MacIntyre 213). For MacIntyre, Coleman's belief that he is "free to be whatever he wants" (109) is misguided since there are always "constraints on how the [narrative of an individual life] can continue", and there remains the possibility that the narrative might "lapse into unintelligibility" (216). That such a lapse has occurred in the story of Coleman's life is suggested by

Zuckerman's description of him as an "uncohesive person" (333). This characterisation seems particularly apt in the wake of the "spooks" incident, after which it becomes difficult to envision how Coleman's narrative can proceed. To continue to live as a white man, he must accept the taint of racism, a thought so intolerable to him that he is "consumed by his rage" (21). However, to take the alternative path—to reveal his great secret—is unimaginable. Unable to advance in his narrative, Coleman chooses instead to figuratively retreat to the 1940s through both his boxing training at the Blackwell gym and his listening to "old swing music" (14). This imaginative return to the era just before his 1953 decision to pass represents a futile longing to rewrite a narrative that has become unintelligible.

Advancing the Race/Achieving our Country

The foregoing discussion of the ways in which Coleman's project of self-determination is a failure is not to suggest that *The Human Stain* should strictly be viewed as an "anti-passing" novel. Its critique of Coleman need not be understood as directed towards his renunciation of a black identity. Rather, the target of criticism is Coleman's refusal to play a role in one of the key American narratives of his time: the struggle for Civil Rights. That is, Coleman's guilt lies in his using his ability to pass as a means of evading his responsibility as an American citizen. As Zuckerman conceives him, Coleman repudiates a cornerstone of the American credo, *E pluribus unum*, thus disavowing (instead of realising, as Maslan has it) his nationality. More than a refusal of the "tyranny of the we", Coleman's rejection of *E pluribus unum* is a denial of the idea of a common national goal. Thus, instead of joining the effort to end racial discrimination for *all*, he rejoices in his own good fortune. Rather than seeking

ways to alter a society in which only African Americans who are able and willing to pass as white can escape the worst effects of racism, Coleman abnegates responsibility for his choices by viewing passing as his ineluctable destiny: "What can be avoided / Whose end is purposed by the mighty gods?" (107-08). Although he might argue that his decision is simply a refusal to allow "an unenlightened society to determine his fate" (120), it also facilitates his refusal to play a role in enlightening that society. As Dean J. Franco has pointed out, Coleman's decision to pass can be seen as both denying and confirming the black-white racial binary (93-94). In deciding to exploit—rather than reform—the racial hierarchy, Coleman stands in marked contrast to his brother. In a suggestively ambiguous formulation, Ernestine reveals the distance between the perspectives of Walter and Coleman: "It's *because* [Walt]'s a human being that he believes that what you do, you do to advance the race. [. . .] Coleman couldn't wait to go through civil rights to get to his human rights, and so he skipped a step" (327).

The most plausible interpretation of Ernestine's first remark is that Walt, as a black man, wishes to advance the aims of the black community. Yet, the syntax—which leaves "the race" unspecified—forces us to consider a second meaning, namely that Walt, as "a human being", believes in promoting the interests of the *human* race. Since ending segregation (as part of a wider effort to combat injustice and promote equal human rights) is surely in the long-term interests of the human race, Walt—whatever his actual motivation—can be seen to be working for humanity's advancement. This second meaning has the effect of convicting Coleman of a solipsistic obsession with the "raw I"; instead of striving for human rights for everyone, he prioritises his own interests.

It should be noted here that any perceived moral obligation on Coleman to partake in the struggle against segregation does not derive from his former designation as black. As Amy Gutmann has argued, regardless of the existence of *general* obligations to support struggles against injustice, "there is no good reason to think that this support should come—*as a matter of special moral obligation*—primarily from people of the particular ascriptive identity that is still unfairly disadvantaged in society" (141). According to Gutmann, "[t]he moral blight [arising from injustice within a democracy] is especially great on the lives of people who materially benefit from injustice but do nothing to combat it" (145). Thus, to the extent that Coleman, by his decision to pass as white, is able to arrogate benefits not available to African Americans either unable or unwilling to pass, there may be a greater moral obligation on him to protest the injustice of the system. Put more succinctly, any special moral obligation derives from his white—not his black—identity.

Rather than a view of justice that demands special obligations from disadvantaged groups, Gutmann urges "the identification view" wherein

> individuals perceive that their own interests are bound up with living in a more just society, and they therefore think that contributing without undue sacrifice to making society more just will improve their own lives. [. . .] We can perceive it to be in our own interest to contribute to fighting injustice insofar as we identify with other people and therefore with a society that treats other people justly. (145-46)

While Gutmann is not chiefly concerned with specifying the basis of identification,[8] in *Achieving Our Country* (1998),[9] Richard Rorty argues that, for Americans, such

identification is best located in "[their] citizenship in a democratic nation-state" (97-98).[10] In a similar vein, David Hollinger has argued that "[a] stronger national solidarity enhances the possibility of social and economic justice within the United States" and that "the triumphs of the Civil Rights movement [. . .] were predicated on a strong national 'we'" (201). As noted above, Coleman's rejection of *E pluribus unum* represents a repudiation of such solidarity and its potential for combating injustice. In this sense, he is an inverted image of his nemesis, Les Farley, who embodies both a commitment to the ideal of national solidarity, and the failure of the US to fulfill the promise of this ideal. Early in the novel, Farley is introduced—in third-person focalised narrative—as someone dedicated to both his local community and his nation: "a road crew employee who gave his all to the town no matter how lowly and degrading the task assigned him, a loyal American who'd served his country with not one [Vietnam] tour but two" (64). Yet, Farley's role as model citizen has been repaid with treachery by a government currently helmed by a "draft dodger" (213-14). While Coleman has benefitted from the GI Bill by attending New York University in 1948, no such provision has been afforded Farley upon his return from Vietnam. Moreover, Farley and his fellow veterans feel aggrieved over what they perceive as the more compassionate treatment of Gulf War veterans whose experience of a "four-day ground war" (73) scarcely bears comparison with their own Vietnam ordeal, which has bequeathed them both post-traumatic stress disorder and the contempt of their fellow countrymen.

Thus, when Coleman and Farley meet on the road in the incident that results in Coleman's death, they are arriving from opposite directions in more than one sense. Coleman has rejected the obligations of democratic citizenship in favour of liberal individualism and enjoyed a largely successful career, while Farley has accepted these

obligations and suffered from the betrayal of the democratic nation-state he has sought to serve. Farley's disillusionment, then, can be seen as the consequence of an increasingly individualist US culture from the post-war years up to the Clinton era.[11] Coleman's choices, meanwhile, despite his best efforts at insulating "his particular life as a created self" (335) from the vagaries of historical forces, can be seen to both contribute to and be shaped by the very strain of US history—the trend of post-war individualism—that will marginalise figures such as Farley. To put it more starkly, Coleman meets in Farley the public results of his private decisions.

"the ridiculous quest for significance"

Although *The Human Stain* engages with recognisable trends in recent US history, the American Trilogy should not, as is sometimes implied, primarily be understood as a historical study, but rather as an account of Nathan Zuckerman's struggle to *make sense* of American history. In *The Human Stain* the ultimate merits of this endeavour are far from clear. The extent to which Zuckerman, in constructing his narrative, has to manipulate and coerce the available data—not to mention his numerous speculations and outright inventions—appears deliberately designed to provoke in the reader the question that provides chapter four with its title: "What maniac conceived it?" While this question can be applied to Zuckerman's novel, in the context in which it appears in the body of the chapter, the maniac is God and the "it" under question is life and the inevitability of death (209). If all human life is nothing more than the senseless creation of a maniacal God, then it is little wonder that Zuckerman regularly evinces wariness about imparting too great a sense of order to Coleman's life story. While recognising "The human desire for a beginning, a middle, and an end",

Zuckerman knows that "outside the classical tragedy of the fifth century B.C., the expectation of completion [. . .] is a foolish illusion for an adult to hold" (314-15). On the other hand, he understands that art cannot succeed without a certain amount of order. Zuckerman's task, then, is to solve the following puzzle: how can a novel incorporate the chaos of life and remain a novel? His central problem is how to find a form that "will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else"; he must "find a form that accommodates the mess" (Samuel Beckett qtd. in Gordon 1).

In arriving at a solution to this problem of form, Zuckerman's inspiration appears to be not another novelist, but a painter. When Delphine Roux attends a Jackson Pollock retrospective and views *Number 1A, 1948*, the "chaos of the painting" jolts her out of her world of thought, stirring up a "mania of lust" and provoking her to threaten a bystander with deadly violence (198-99). If we recall Zuckerman's admiration for Kafka's insistence that a book should "rouse us with a blow to the head" (*Unbound* 200), then, since Pollock's effect on Delphine appears to be of this order, it would be unsurprising to see the novelist taking an interest in the techniques the painter has employed to achieve such results. Indeed, if Pollock's "action painting" technique can be seen to succeed by hinting at patterns and connections while admitting (in both senses of the word) the chaos, then Zuckerman proceeds along similar principles, with his narrative being interrupted by candid confessions of the limits of his knowledge.

The case for comparing Zuckerman's strategies to Pollock's can be made with greater force by attending to Allan Kaprow's observations about Pollock's formal innovations:

> Pollock ignored the confines of the rectangular field in favor of a continuum going in all directions simultaneously, *beyond* the literal dimensions of any work. [. . .] The four sides of the painting are thus an abrupt leaving off of the activity, which our imaginations continue outward indefinitely, as though refusing to accept the artificiality of an "ending." (Kaprow 5)

The final chapter of *The Human Stain* likewise resists the imperatives of narrative closure through a multiplication—rather than resolution—of the various mysteries revolving around Coleman's biography. In addition to seventeen unanswered questions about Coleman (333-34), there is the riddle of the anonymous "on-line eulogy for Faunia" (288), the possible existence of Faunia's diary, and, of most interest here, Zuckerman's interrupted visit to Walter Silk in East Orange. It would seem that Zuckerman does eventually meet Walter, which raises the question of why he does not include the episode *within* the novel. After all, as Coleman's severest critic, an extended exploration of Walter's point of view would surely contribute something valuable to Coleman's story. Yet, by conspicuously omitting the episode—which promises a climactic final scene only for it to be usurped by Zuckerman's encounter with Farley—Zuckerman, like Pollock, invites the reader to imagine beyond the boundaries of the work of art, beyond the writer's limited and fallible version of Coleman's life story. Moreover, replacing the visit to Walter with an episode designed to bolster a highly dubious speculation—that Farley played a crucial role in Coleman's death—provides a deliberately unsatisfactory ending, which involves an implicit admission of, in Kaprow's terms, "the artificiality of an 'ending.'"

Thus, noting the analogies between the strategies employed by Roth and those of Pollock lends plausibility to the picture of *The Human Stain* as a work of art sufficiently capacious to contain: Ernestine's scornful view of Black History Month

and arguments for the necessity of such initiatives; Zuckerman's heroic conception of Coleman's liberal individualism and the inability of Coleman to transcend the claims of community; and Lester Farley as both the violent—possibly murderous—anti-Semite and the model citizen eager to "achieve his country". Ultimately, it is a picture that, like "a lake that's constantly turning over its water" (361), never remains the same.

Conclusion

In a work that calls for the renunciation of the categories of "race", Paul Gilroy asserts "we must be prepared to give up the illusion that cultural and ethnic purity have ever existed, let alone provided a foundation for civil society" (248). Nathan Zuckerman makes the point more pithily in his declaration "The fantasy of purity is appalling" (242), a statement that plays on the etymological roots of 'appall' (to make pale) to invoke the novel's theme of "passing". Though Coleman holds no illusions about racial purity—indeed, he seeks to escape from a form of this purity at Howard University, where "he was a *Negro* and nothing else" (108)—he falls instead for the purity of the "raw I", believing that by following the path of asocial individualism he can transcend his own history. Yet, in one of the novel's central ironies, by pursuing this path Coleman becomes "invisible" (158), thus embodying the historical fate of the black American; that is, he becomes "a socially dead person" (Patterson 5), "a subperson" (Mills 58), or "'nothing' [. . .] [a] black thing without ontology" (Warren 14). Viewed in this light, *The Human Stain*, far from being a celebration of liberal individualism, might be understood as an Afropessimist text.

Zuckerman's polemic against purity persists into the novel's closing paragraph, where a comparison between two types of "stain" presents a final provocation in the debate about cultural appropriation in fiction. Against the "icy white of the lake", Les Farley appears as "a tiny spot [. . .] like the X of an illiterate's signature on a sheet of paper" (361). The spot—or human stain—that is Farley is the sole impurity on the white landscape, just as the X—itself a symbol of negation—spoils the purity of the white page. Thus, a novel that opens with Nathan's imagined banner on the White House suggesting that the president's "shameless impurity" primarily proves that "A HUMAN BEING LIVES HERE" (3), concludes with an impure mark on a page similarly attesting to a human presence. If one can detect in certain condemnations of cultural appropriation in fiction an appeal to what is "appropriate", to what is "pure",[12] the final paragraph of *The Human Stain* can be read as a defiant assertion that writing, like living, is the destruction of purity.

CHAPTER SIX

Percival Everett: Appropriating B(l)ack

Over the course of a remarkably varied writing career Percival Everett has interrogated ideas and themes—such as authenticity, identity, and stereotypes—central to discussions around cultural appropriation. Everett's chief concern, however, appears not to be with white representation of aspects of African American culture,[1] but rather with restrictive conceptions of what might constitute a "black life". Often intensely critical of a publishing industry "controlled by white America" (Everett, *Conversations* 84), Everett laments the fact that "African American writers were, and in some ways still are, stuck trying to supply fictions that are palatable to American culture's tastes and expectations and that do not upset the way America wants to see black people and itself" ("Foreword" xvi). In a 1991 essay, "Signing to The Blind", Everett emphasises that the problem is not primarily with the fiction being written by African American writers but how that writing is received:

> I do not believe that the works [black writers] produce need to be any different; the failing is not in what we show but in how it is seen. And it is not just white readers, but African-American readers as well who seek to fit our stories to an existent model. It is not seeing with "white" eyes, it is seeing with "American" eyes, with brainwashed, automatic, comfortable, and "safe" perceptions of reality. (10)

For Everett, this existent model of African American fiction derives from the fact that readers "want their black experience to be inner-city and rural south" (*Conversations* 63), a desire shaped by a "bogus notion of authenticity that bedevils music and fiction made by black people" (34).

Everett resists the cultural expectations placed upon black novelists in a number of ways. He writes novels such as *Walk Me to the Distance* (1985) and *Cutting Lisa* (1986) that have ostensibly little to do with race. In interviews, he rejects assumptions around black homogeneity, asserting, instead, multiplicity: "People of African descent in this culture are as diverse as people of European descent. They don't share all the same experiences. They don't all talk the same way. They don't all have the same concerns" (*Conversation* 105). Indeed, Everett exemplifies this quality through both the variety of subject matter (from Greek mythology to post-structuralism to lynching) across his fictional output and in the individual interests (which include hydrology, ranching, and abstract painting) of his black characters. When, in a 2004 review in the *New York Times*, Sven Birkerts mentioned, in the second line of his article, that Everett "happens to be African-American" ("The Surreal Thing"), Everett wrote to the editor stating that "the color of my skin has little to do with [the novel *American Desert*]", and doubting whether Birkerts had elsewhere "found it necessary to identify other authors as European-American or white" (Everett, "Letters"). Viewing Birkerts's remark as an example of "insidious racism", Everett went on to express his exasperation with "people connected with publishing and art in this culture being so amazed that anyone not white can create a work that race is all they can see".

Yet, if Everett's "rebel[lion] against the established practice of pigeonholing the black experience" (Everett qtd. in *Conversations* 85) often takes the form of

writing fiction that either eschews issues of race or challenges prevailing expectations in subtle ways, it also manifests itself in works in which the subversion of racial archetypes is more explicitly a central theme. In this chapter, I examine three works that fall into the latter category. In *erasure* (2001), I trace the ways in which the term "black life" is interrogated, before exploring the novel's critique of capitalist exploitation of blackness. I then look at how *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009) continues this critique in a more political vein, and with a sharper focus on identity. Finally, I look at the short story "The Appropriation of Cultures" (1996) in which Everett pays homage to Ralph Ellison's idea of the fluidity of culture, as well as suggesting that in contemporary America class might be a more important differential than race.

On "living a *black* life"

The destabilisation of identity staged in *erasure* begins in the novel's opening paragraph in which the narrator introduces himself in the following manner: "My name is Thelonious Ellison. And I am a writer of fiction" (3). The juxtaposition of these declarative sentences invites the reader to compare the function of "My name is" with "I am", perhaps suggesting that the label "Thelonious Ellison" is a superficial property, bestowed on the narrator without his consent, in contrast with the more fundamental—since self-determined—identity "writer of fiction". Yet, the narrator instantly merges this identity with others, which he occupies "not instead [of]", but "in addition [to]" being a writer, namely "a son, a brother, a fisherman, an art lover, a woodworker" (3). These identities are inhabited by the narrator throughout the novel; what appear to be the two main strands of the narrative—the narrator's relationship with his parents and his brother and sister, and his activities as a professional writer—

are interwoven with, and sometimes illuminated by, discussions between historical figures on the subject of aesthetics, and sections on trout fishing and woodworking. The opening paragraph closes with another juxtaposition of declarative sentences that calls into question the meaning of the earlier one: "I am Thelonious Ellison. Call me Monk" (3). Here, in the first sentence, the label "Thelonious Ellison" appears to have moved from its previous peripheral position to the centre of the narrator's identity. However, this sense is immediately undermined by the narrator's request to be known as "Monk", a plea whose formulation, in its reference to the opening of *Moby-Dick*, once more suggests "writer of fiction" as the predominant identity.

Absent from the opening paragraph is any mention of the narrator's racial identity. Yet, the subsequent section (separated from the opening paragraph by a row of asterisks) begins with the following sentence: "I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race" (3). The final part of the sentence—"I am black; that is my race"—contains an echo of the earlier distinction between "I am Thelonious Ellison" and "My name is Thelonious Ellison". Significantly, however, it is society that "tells" Ellison that he is black; unlike with his name, Ellison does not independently declare that he is black. Indeed, he goes on to admit, in the closing paragraph of this second section: "I don't believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors" (4). The reversal here of the order of certain components of the earlier sentence—the narrator's relation to race is now placed at the beginning, while his physical characteristics and ancestry appear last—underline the sense that Ellison wishes to

undo the process by which society has come to believe in race. Given that this belief in race enables phenotypic discrimination to occur, placing Ellison in physical danger, his desire for the erasure of such belief is understandable. As Barbara and Karen Fields have observed, "*Race* is the principle unit and core concept of *racism*"; the latter cannot take place without granting "the objective reality" of the former (17). It is important to note here that Ellison's position of nonbelief in regard to race does not entail scepticism about the existence of racism. Indeed, he asserts his belief in the reality of racists, their racism being, according to Ellison, a product of their belief in race.

Elsewhere in the second section of the first chapter, Ellison notes that he is told—both by those "whom the society calls white" and those "described as being black"—that he is "not *black* enough" (4). When, at a New York party, a book agent advises him to "forget about writing retellings of Euripides and parodies of French poststructuralists[2] and settle down to write the true, gritty real stories of black life", Ellison responds by "[telling] him that I was living a *black* life, far blacker than he could ever know, that I had lived one, that I would be living one" (4). Since Ellison does not believe in race it is not immediately obvious what his claim to have been living a life "far blacker" than the book agent could understand might mean. Yet, given Ellison's earlier assertion that he is only black because society tells him so, his suggestion that he is living an especially "black life" could be interpreted as meaning that in his profession as a writer he is subject to particularly intense societal pressure to conform to and reproduce prevailing ideas about black experience. That is, his designation as black means he is expected to write about black life, where "black life" is understood in terms of stories about the "inner city or the rural south" (3). Ellison's condition might be compared to that of the narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*:

> Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (3)

Everett's Ellison is invisible insofar as he is unable to be seen in terms of his primary identity, "a writer of fiction"; instead, he is viewed, through the lens of race, as a "black writer", where "black" refers to both his racial designation and his subject matter. Thus, when he writes a "*reworking of Aeschylus'* The Persians", a reviewer wonders what the novel "*has to do with the African American experience*" (4; emphases in original). Ellison's association with the narrator of *Invisible Man* becomes more evident later in the novel, when in meeting Hollywood producer, Wiley Morgenstein, he is able, without great difficulty, to pass as the invented author Stagg R. Leigh. As Fritz Gysin has noted, when Ellison (as Leigh) claims to have "killed a man with the leather awl of a Swiss army knife" (*erasure* 245), he is effectively ridiculing Morgenstein's ignorance, safe in the knowledge that the producer has never heard of Stagolee, let alone the blues version of the story in which he "bullied two Chicago police down/with a ten cent pocket knife" (qtd. in Gysin 75). Thus, rather than risking exposure, Ellison's reference to the Stagolee story only enhances the credibility of his Stagg R. Leigh character, since the depiction of the invented author as a murderer corroborates Morgenstein's racist ideas about authentic black experience. Put differently, the more Ellison makes Leigh an outrageous stereotype of black criminality, the more invisible Ellison becomes—or the greater his erasure—in the eyes of the publishing and film industries. Hence, when Ellison claims to have been leading a "far blacker" life than the book agent can comprehend,

he may be equating the "black experience" with the invisibility/erasure that occurs when an individual is viewed through the prism of race.

The discussion of race in the second section of *erasure*'s first chapter suggests a new reading of the discourse on identity in the opening paragraph. Thelonious Ellison's name, in its evocation of Thelonious Monk and Ralph Ellison, situates him as an inheritor of African American culture. Yet, both of these historical figures rebelled against aspects of inherited traditions in their respective fields. According to John Brooks, Thelonious Monk "launched an assault on the idea of representation", and was praised by the French composer André Hodeir for "reinventing traditional musical structures" (1048). Ralph Ellison, meanwhile, in his essay "The World and the Jug", famously took the critic Irving Howe to task for implying that Richard Wright was "the spiritual father of Ellison, [James] Baldwin and all other Negroes of literary bent to come" (*Collected Essays* 156). Suggesting that Howe held a reductive view of black life—"Evidently Howe feels that unrelieved suffering is the only 'real' Negro experience, and that the true Negro writer must be ferocious" (*Collected Essays* 159)—Ellison went on to imply that his stylistic innovations were as valid a form of protest as that to be found in Wright's novels: "[Protest] might appear in a novel as a technical assault against the styles which have gone before" (183). This tradition of rebellion is one that the narrator of *erasure* is proud to inherit, hence his declaration "I *am* Thelonious Ellison" (3; emphasis added). Yet, he follows the example of these ancestors (in the Ellisonian sense[3]) by asserting his individualism in his demand to be known by a different name: "Call me Monk" (3). That the name "Monk" retains a connection to the jazz pianist suggests that Ellison seeks not to reject the traditions he has inherited, but to adapt them in his own particular manner.

Ellison's allusion to Melville's famous opening line, "Call me Ishmael" (3), might be taken as an admission that—as the other Ellison noted of Wright—he is "as much a product of his reading as of his [. . .] experiences" (*Collected Essays* 163).[4] This conception of identity has profound implications for the critique of authenticity the novel stages in its treatment of the runaway bestseller, *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* by Juanita Mae Jenkins. When Jennifer Berman and Malin Lidström Brock each read Ellison's decision to write *My Pafology* as driven by outrage over Jenkins's claim that her novel is based on her brief visit to relatives in Harlem at the age of twelve (*erasure* 61),[5] they arguably misconstrue the crux of his discontent. Ellison's primary objection to Jenkins is not her appropriation of subject matter about which she possesses an inadequate understanding, but rather her attempt to promote her novel as representative of her race. Speaking on the Kenya Dunston Show (clearly modelled on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*), Jenkins explains her motivation for writing the book: "I got this job at a publishing house. I watched these manuscripts come by and these books come out and I thought, where are the books about our people? Where are our stories? And so I wrote *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*" (61). When asked about the lucrative film deal she has secured, Jenkins responds "Why shouldn't *we* get some of that good money, chile" (62; emphasis in original). The Ohio-born and Oberlin-educated Jenkins, then, appears to view both herself and her novel as representative of all African Americans. In contrast, Ellison refuses "to have [his] art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression" (238). When he wonders "why did Juanita Mae Jenkins send me running for the toilet?" (240), he arrives at an answer via a comparison with Tom Clancy. Clancy, Ellison observes, "was not trying to sell his book to me by suggesting that the crew of his high-tech submarine was a representation of his race [. . .]. Nor was his publisher marketing it in that way. If you

didn't like Clancy's white people, you could go out and read about some others" (240). In his rejection of the idea that a novel can represent a "race", Ellison resembles his author: "The whole notion that you can write about any [. . .] one people is [. . .] not only obscene, it's absurd" ("Percival Everett on the myth of race" 00:00:27-37). The extracts from *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* along with *My Pafology*, which appears in its entirety within *erasure*, testify to the obscenity and absurdity of "the assumption that a single or consensual African-American Experience exists to be represented" (Russett 360).

As Lesley Larkin notes, one of the points that Ellison's comparison between Clancy and Jenkins appears to make is that "lack of diversity in literary representations of blackness is a more significant problem than the specific representations derived from individual works" (162). *erasure* seems to attribute this lack of diversity to the publishing industry's acceptance of capitalist values. Everett, himself has stated: "For me, the book is about how our culture seeks to interfere in the production of art" (*Conversations* 31). It is to this subject that we now turn.

How Much Is That Negro in the Window?[6]

erasure's indictment of the publishing industry begins on its second page when the Mephistophelian "tall, thin, rather ugly book agent" informs Ellison he could "sell many books" if he would abandon his artistic experimentation and "settle down to write *the* true, gritty real stories of black life" (4; emphasis added). The agent's use of the definite article indicates his narrow view of the range of stories that constitute "black life", a view shared by the reviewer for whom *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* is a representation of "the experience which is and can only be Black America" (46).

Tellingly, the agent moves on from Ellison to "an on-the-rise performance artist/novelist who had recently posed for seventeen straight hours in front of the governor's mansion as a lawn jockey" (4). When the agent "flip[s] one of her braided extensions and tosse[s] a thumb back in [Ellison's] direction" (4) he appears to be making a connection between the two artists purely on the basis of race, a gesture that assumes a deep irony given the opposing stances of the artists on the issue of race, one refusing it as subject matter, the other embracing it. On the other hand, the agent's connection between the two can be read as foreshadowing Ellison's decision to write *My Pafology* and effectively join the performance artist in her satirical employment of racist caricatures. The artist's lawn jockey performance is linked to *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* through Ellison's comparison of the latter to "a display of watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings and a pyramid of Mammy cookie jars" (35), items comparable to "Jocko" style lawn jockeys in their racial stereotyping. In turn, Ellison's creation and performance of Stagg R. Leigh can be connected to the artist's performance as a lawn jockey. Although Ellison's invented author evokes the African American folk hero, Stagolee, Gysin has astutely noted that when Leigh speaks the lines of the "white betrayer", Jack, from the dream sequence near the end of *Invisible Man*—"Now you're free of illusion [. . .] How does it feel to be free of one's illusions?" (*erasure* 293; *Invisible Man* 569)—*erasure* can be seen as "present[ing] the avatar of vernacular power as a pawn in the hands of the commercial white establishment" (77). Thus, in a novel abounding in reflections and echoes—*We's Lives In Da Ghetto*/*My Pafology*, *My Pafology*/*Native Son*, Thelonious Ellison/Stagg R. Leigh—the end of *erasure*, where Ellison's novelistic act of protest is embraced by the publishing industry and wins the Book Award, echoes the novel's beginning, where the lawn jockey protest artist is awarded the attention of the

mercenary book agent who sees the commercial possibilities in her willingness to trade (however ironically) in racist stereotypes.

The "on-the-rise performance artist/novelist" (4) at the beginning of *erasure* may also be one of the novel's more subtle allusions to the novelist and performance poet, Sapphire, whose 1996 novel, *Push*, is a model for both *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* and *My Pafology*. Gysin (70) and Larkin (149) have noted some of the more conspicuous similarities between *Push* and *My Pafology*. The mother of *My Pafology*'s protagonist, Van Go, is called Clareece, while the name of *Push*'s heroine is Claireece Precious Jones. Both Van Go and Precious have a child with Down Syndrome. The themes of "sexual assault, teenage pregnancy, [. . .] the eroticization of breastfeeding, expulsion from school, obsession with television" feature in both novels (Larkin 149). Other references to *Push* not noted by critics include the misspelling of "father" in both the first line of *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* and *Push* (the word is spelled "fahvre" [*erasure* 34] and "fahver" [*Push* 3]), and the reference by both Van Go and Precious to stabbing their respective mothers (*erasure* 73; *Push* 13). More subtle, yet perhaps more significant, is the fact that Stagg R. Leigh—in evoking Stagolee—can be seen as an allusion to Ramona Lofton's adoption of the similarly folkloric name, "Sapphire", "a name of opprobrium black men use for the nagging black wife" (Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks"). Ellison is inspired to write *My Pafology* by "remember[ing] passages of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy*" (70). Since one of the main female characters on *The Amos 'n' Andy Show* was called "Sapphire", and since the style of *My Pafology* more closely resembles *Push* than either *Native Son* or *The Color Purple*, the mention of this show can be read as both a veiled reference to *Push* and a condemnation of Sapphire's novel as an act of minstrelsy.

When Ellison compares the effect of *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* to pleasantly browsing an antique mall and suddenly encountering "watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings" and "Mammy cookie jars" (35), he does so in the context of being told that the film rights to the book have been sold for "something like three million dollars" (34). As Rolland Murray expertly notes, "In Monk's formulation the inflated economic value that the culture attributes to the minstrel commodity registers the correlation between corporate economic influence and the imposition of negative, retrograde modes of representation" (736). Indeed, *erasure* repeatedly draws attention to the market's willingness to invest in works that recruit the language and imagery of an unabashedly racist past. Ellison's initial reluctance to follow Jenkins's example means that his latest novel is rejected seventeen times (49), a figure that recalls the seventeen hours spent by the performance artist posing as a lawn jockey (4). The connection between Ellison's failure and the success of the "on-the-rise" performance artist is made more explicit in the following exchange between Ellison and his agent:

> 'The line is, you're not black enough,' my agent said.
>
> 'What's that mean, Yul? How do they even know I'm black? Why does it matter?'
>
> 'We've been over this before. They know because of the photo on your first book. They know because they've seen you. They know because you're black, for crying out loud.'
>
> 'What, do I have to have my characters comb their afros and be called niggers for these people?'
>
> 'It wouldn't hurt.'
>
> I was stunned into silence.

> 'Look at that Juanita Mae Jenkins book. It's sold like crazy. The paperback rights went for five hundred thousand.' (49)

Yul's claim that Ellison is insufficiently black conjures the image of the performance artist with (one imagines) her face blackened and lips reddened to resemble the racist caricature of the lawn jockey. When Ellison sarcastically queries whether he should employ the literary equivalent of blackface he is shocked by his agent's candid admission that such a tactic would likely render his work more attractive to publishers. Certainly, the reaction of the industry to Ellison's "challenging and masterfully written and constructed" novels (48)—"It's too difficult for the market" (48), "Too dense", "Not for us", "The market won't support this kind of thing" (69)—is in marked contrast with its enthusiastic embrace of *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*. Significantly, the $500,000 figure mentioned in relation to the paperback rights for Jenkins's novel is identical to the advance reportedly paid to Sapphire by Knopf for the unfinished 96-page manuscript of *Push* (Powers). By repeatedly inviting the reader to compare the industry reception of the fictional *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* to that of the real world *Push*, Everett appears to encourage contemplation of *erasure*'s own fate in the market. Indeed, Murray contends that "[Everett's] fiction draws its verve from his strict counterpoint to dominant concepts of racial representation while insisting that these institutional and market forces inevitably constitute his fiction" (729). By its own logic, *erasure*'s very inclusion of *My Pafology*/*Fuck*—regardless of the context in which it appears—helps explain why the novel has become Everett's most popular work.[7] Thus, *erasure* is at once a protest against the influence of the market upon the creation of art and a cry of despair over the novelist's powerlessness to substantially alter this state of affairs.

Erasing the author

Given its explicit references to Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, one might ask why *erasure* eschews any direct reference to Sapphire's *Push*. It seems possible that *erasure*'s series of (often subtle) allusions to the earlier novel offer an approach to reading that diverges from the manner in which various influential figures in *erasure*—book reviewers, representatives of the publishing industry, TV hosts, and judges for literary awards—read fiction. Time after time, these figures read both *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* and *My Pafology* as something closer to autobiography than fiction: "Is it a true story? Share with us what in your life prompted you to write such a gripping and truly realistic tale" (277); "The characters are so well drawn that often one forgets that *Fuck* is a novel. It is more like the evening news" (288); "This is the truest novel I've ever read. It could only have been written by someone who has done hard time. It's the real thing" (290). Arguably the most ironic remark in this vein comes from Stagg R. Leigh's meeting with Wiley Morgenstein; admiring Leigh's writing about "the real people, the earthy, gutsy people", Morgenstein asserts "They can't teach you to write about that in no college" (243-44). Equal in absurdity to any of the comments made about *My Pafology* is the fact that, despite the novel's inclusion of a Dalton family, no one appears to notice the references to *Native Son*. While the reaction to *My Pafology* is exaggeratedly dimwitted, in part for comic effect, Everett is nevertheless making a serious point about precisely what is lost through a narrow focus on the connection between a work of fiction and the author's lived experience, namely the manner in which a text is "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthes 146). *erasure* itself, with its assorted forms of writing, including a lecture paper (18-22), a *curriculum vitae* (64-66), a *New York Times* book review

(288), a short story called "Àppropos de bottes" (192-202), and, of course, a novel within the novel, draws attention to itself as a text constructed from texts, or, in Barthes's terms, "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (146). Thus, while readers of *My Pafology* reflexively trace the novel back to the life of the author, *erasure* invites the contrary recognition that "life never does more than imitate the book" (Barthes 147). Indeed, in its placement of numerous indirect references to Sapphire and *Push*, *erasure* rewards readers who attempt to locate the novel in a textual web, rather than looking to the autobiography of the author.

Alongside Sapphire and the references to Ralph Ellison[8] and Richard Wright, *erasure* mentions, or alludes to, a number of other writers, including Jean Toomer (26), Zora Neale Hurston (26), Alice Walker (70), Frederick Douglass (184), and James Weldon Johnson (185). Henry Louis Gates, arguing that "black writers read and critique other black texts as an act of rhetorical self-definition", notes how "Toni Morrison in several texts revises Ellison and Hurston; similarly, Ellison (1951) revises Wright (1940, 1945)" (*Figures in Black* 242). Through numerous references, *erasure* clearly signals its dialogue with *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*, while its formal experimentation recalls the blending of different types of writing in Toomer's *Cane* (1923). Everett's novel also extends the arguments in Hurston's 1950 essay "What White Publishers Won't Print". Yet, two other writers are each mentioned or alluded to more than once. The novel opens with an epigraph by Mark Twain, who appears again in the "Publications" section of Ellison's *curriculum vitae* in a work entitled "The Devolution of Twain's Memory" (65). As noted earlier, Herman Melville is alluded to in the opening paragraph's "Call me Monk" (3). Both writers then appear in a reference to a survey course that Ellison considers teaching at American University, though he suspects the students there "didn't care a hill of

beans about Melville, Twain or Hurston" (158). Ellison's grouping of two white writers with a black writer is suggestive in two directions. On one hand, it accords with Ellison's contention that books by black writers should not automatically be labeled as "African American" literature. In a 2005 interview, Everett explains his own aversion to his work being categorised in this manner by way of an analogy with the labels "folk art" or "naïve art" which he views as an attempt to "put art in a separate category to make it seem as if somehow it is not quite art" (103-104).

On the other hand, the grouping might be read as proposing Melville and Twain as "black writers". Ellison's dismissal of the idea that his *Persians* should be filed under "African American Studies" (not least because potential readers of "an obscure reworking of a Greek tragedy would not consider looking in that section any more than the gardening section" [34]) raises a number of interesting questions about categorisation. Where, for instance, should texts such as *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) and *Benito Cereno* (1855)—both of which examine the historical treatment of African Americans—be placed? Melville's profound influence upon Ellison's *Invisible Man* is indicated by both the opening epigraph from *Benito Cereno*, and the episode in the Prologue featuring a sermon on the "Blackness of Blackness" (9), an allusion to a sermon on the "blackness of darkness" being preached in "a negro church" in *Moby-Dick* (Melville 11). In his review of Bucklin Moon's *Primer for White Folks* (1945), Ellison notes that "from 1776 to 1876 there was a conception of democracy current in this country that allowed the writer to identify himself with the Negro", and includes both Melville and Twain in a list of white writers who chose to do so (*Collected Essays* 147). Should Melville and Twain, then, be considered "black writers"?

For Gates, the defining feature of "black texts" is language: "it is language, the black language of black texts, that expresses the distinctive quality of our literary

tradition" (*Figures in Black* xxi). Yet, *erasure* calls into question the assumption that "black language" can be readily identified and agreed upon. The Oprah Winfrey-like Kenya Dunston, in praise of *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, asserts that "[t]he language is so real" (61), yet Ellison, contemplating the type of language employed by Jenkins—"*dint*, *ax*, *fo*, *screet* and *fahvre!*"—finds himself "screaming inside, complaining that I didn't sound like that, that my mother didn't sound like that, that my father didn't sound like that" (70). Moreover, when he asks Marilyn Tilman, a black female friend, "Have you ever known anybody who talks like they do in that book?" (213), she admits that she has not. If language is not as useful an indicator of the "blackness" of a text as Gates implies, then perhaps subject matter is a more appropriate determinant. By this measure, books by Melville and Twain—and many other white writers—might be moved to the "African American Literaure" section of bookstores.

In the satirical epistolary novel *A History of the African-American People [proposed] by Strom Thurmond as told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid* (2004), Everett and Kincaid playfully interrogate the category of "black writer". Barton Wilkes, a shadowy figure who variously describes his role as "Assistant to Aide" (9), "Junior Advisor, Public Relations" (10), and "Senior Advisor, Senator Strom Thurmond" (73), attempts to recruit two literature professors, Everett and Kincaid, to help Thurmond with researching and writing a book entitled "*A History of the African-American People by Strom Thurmond*". Wilkes explains to Everett and Kincaid that the book should: "Show that [Thurmond] is, properly understood, a black writer. Strom has always understood 'negrohood' as a matter of spirit and capacity, at least as much as it is of blood" (263). While the idea of a senator famous for his opposition to Civil Rights legislation embodying "blackness" is one of the chief sources of the novel's comedy, the text also, in a more provocative pose, ridicules the

idea that a work on African American history *necessarily* accrues greater legitimacy by virtue of being written by a black author. Early in the novel, Wilkes writes to an editor, Martin Snell, at Simon & Schuster asking for "some suggestions on writers and scholars (some authentically black)" (37). When Everett agrees to Snell's invitation to assist with the project, he drily notes: "I gather you wanted a genuine person of color" (51). Later in the novel, after Kincaid has also been recruited to the project, Everett decides to quit his role, prompting Kincaid to clumsily plead with him to remain:

> I mean, this I can do, but only with your help and not just because they wouldn't do it with just me because I'm white. It's because you're black, see?
>
> I messed that up. What I mean is, I think this may be my last chance and I plead with you as a friend not to take it away from me. (181)

Everett, evidently finding distasteful the fact that his racial identity is essential to the success of the project, replies: "Of course I'll carry on. I hear what you're saying and we won't have to mention it again" (182). Everett's discomfort appears to stem from the suggestion that regardless of his aptitude for the role in other aspects—his record of academic excellence, his knowledge and understanding of the relevant history, his ability to communicate complex ideas to a specific audience—his foremost credential remains the colour of his skin. As the "real" Everett has noted with chagrin several times in interviews, "anthropologists gave up race as a category in the beginning of the twentieth century, but our culture hasn't, so race exists" (*Conversations* 103).

The fictional Everett's queasiness over the category of "race"—which the "real" Everett views as "bogus" (*Conversations* 139)—being used by the publishing industry as a commodity signifying authenticity returns us to arguably the central

critique of *erasure*, the critique of the very idea of authenticity. In *erasure*, misconceived notions around "authentic black life" effectively "shu[t] Monk out of 'literary blackness'" (Sanchez-Arce 153), while in *A History*, Everett's blackness becomes a source of legitimacy, an epidermal (in Fanon's terms) guarantor of authenticity. Put differently, in *erasure* "authentic blackness" is assumed to necessarily entail a certain type of writing of which *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* is an exemplar, while in *A History* a certain type of writing—historical work on African Americans—is assumed to require an "authentically black" author. Everett apparently wishes to dispel both assumptions, the first being offensive to his own aesthetic aspirations, the second reifying the category of race. To this end, Everett calls for a Barthesian demarcation between work and text:

> [The novel] has become the magic show where we care more about how the magician and his assistant are dressed, what kind of light display is offered, whether there is live music than about the content and *stuff* of the act itself. The new fiction will require a special kind of asceticism, even selflessness on the part of novelists, a love of the art which transcends glory and defensiveness, when glory is not achieved or fades. One might describe this asceticism as a kind of distancing of the artist's self from the work. ("F/V: Placing the Experimental Novel" 22)

The asceticism Everett prescribes here is suggested by Thelonious Ellison's preferred name: "Monk". Perhaps Monk's first failing as an ascetic is allowing his photograph to appear on his first book, thus affording publishers the opportunity to complain that his work is "not black enough" (49), really a complaint that the work does not sufficiently resemble its author. Monk falls further from the path of asceticism when he becomes Stagg R. Leigh, an artist who, rather than distancing himself from his

work, is a physical manifestation of the idea of "black life" as represented in *My Pafology*. Monk, as Stagg, becomes even less monk-like when he appears on the Kenya Dunston show, while in the novel's conclusion he appears ready to publicly reveal himself as Stagg, at the same time as he figuratively becomes Van Go, the protagonist of *My Pafology*, by exclaiming "Egads, I'm on television" (294), a clear echo of the closing lines of Monk's parody: "Look at me. I on TV" (150). Monk, then, seemingly succumbs to the force of a trend away from the Barthesian position of separation between work and author. As Rita Felski notes, "The 'death of the author' thesis—a ubiquitous slogan in literary studies for several decades—has come to seem increasingly outdated, as authors become ever more visible, voluble, and inescapable" (90). On the other hand, the manner in which Monk is unable to exert authorial control over the meaning of his text—he fails to have his parody read as such—appears to corroborate Barthes's claim that "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God)" (146). Thus, the satire in *erasure* can be seen to be directed as much at Monk and his attempt to delimit the meaning of his novel as it is at the failure of readers of *My Pafology* to get the joke.

Stuck in Sidney

I Am Not Sidney Poitier revisits several themes from *erasure* from a slightly different perspective. Cultural representations of blackness are again interrogated, this time with a focus on the film industry, and to more overtly political ends. Meanwhile, Thelonious Ellison's inability to control the meaning of his novel is echoed in Not Sidney's powerlessness over the way in which his physical resemblance to Sidney

Poitier shapes the course of his life. An indication that *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* is intended as a type of sequel to *erasure* is the explicit reference to the earlier novel in a conversation between the media tycoon Ted Turner and a fictionalised Everett:

> "Percival Everett. Didn't you write a book called *Erasure*?"
>
> Everett nodded.
>
> "I didn't like it," Ted said.
>
> "Nor I," Everett said. "I didn't like writing it, and I didn't like it when I was done with it."
>
> "Well, actually, I loved the novel in the novel. I thought that story was real gripping. You know, true to life."
>
> "I've heard that." (225-26)

It is perhaps not coincidental that in the same year as *Precious* (2009), the film version of Sapphire's *Push*, was released, Everett has one of the most influential figures in American media endorsing *My Pafology*.[9] The fact that Turner appears by name—in contrast to the indirect allusion to Oprah Winfrey in *erasure*—suggests that, despite the absurd premise of the later novel, its critique of Hollywood is no less historically grounded than is *erasure*'s engagement with the recent history of African American literature.

I Am Not Sidney Poitier begins with the protagonist's description of his birth to his "poor disturbed" mother after "two years of hysterical gestation" (3). Given that the novel was published two years after Everett's previous novel, *The Water Cure* (2007), the abnormally long pregnancy appears to call attention to Not Sidney's status as a fictional character. By reminding the reader that Not Sidney is a character subject

to the manipulations of an author, Everett underlines the novel's central theme of subjection to external forces. One such force is Ted Turner. In 1970, Not Sidney's mother, Portia, invests thirty thousand dollars in "a little-known company called the Turner Communications Group that would later become Turner Broadcasting System" (6). Five years later, when Not Sidney is seven, Turner pays Portia a visit, shortly after which she dies from an unspecified illness. Turner returns and, as Not Sidney recalls, "took me away to live with him in Atlanta" (8). Although Not Sidney has inherited a fortune as a result of his mother's investment and is "supposedly free to make decisions concerning [his] own life" (8), his agency is in doubt from the outset. As Murray notes, "[t]hat Ted Turner takes Not Sidney into his home without consent implies that he has been pulled into a relationship with capital rather than entering one out of his own volition" (743). Indeed, after the death of his mother—an event that appears suspiciously connected to Turner's visit—Not Sidney is effectively appropriated by Turner, an act that foreshadows the (mis)appropriation of aspects of black culture in the Sidney Poitier films alluded to later in the novel.

Not Sidney's wealth does not prevent his exploitation at the hands of a female teacher, Miss Hancock, who threatens to fail him if he rebuffs her sexual advances. After dropping out of high school—Miss Hancock fails him despite his reluctant acquiescence to her indecent proposal—Not Sidney decides "to light out for the territory [. . .] and to discover myself" (43), thus emulating Huckleberry Finn's resolution to "light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it" (Twain 262). Not Sidney's decision, then, can be viewed as an attempt to escape the fate of Sidney Poitier, who, as Everett notes, became "the icon of the palatable black man in the '60s or '70s" (*Conversations* 163). Yet, the final lines of Chapter 1—"I was a fighter of windmills.

I was a chaser of whales. I was Not Sidney Poitier" (43)—suggests the improbable success of his endeavour. In invoking two giants of literature, Don Quixote and Captain Ahab, as models, Not Sidney discloses his desire to inhabit roles beyond the ambit of the "sivilized" black man. However, his choice of two famously delusional figures forecasts the ultimate failure of his efforts at not being Sidney Poitier.

Chapter 2 begins with Not Sidney declaring "I was my own person, so I was told, so I believed" (45). Yet, almost immediately, Not Sidney's assertion of self-ownership is undermined when he finds himself in a series of scenarios from various Sidney Poitier films. In the midst of a plot based on *The Defiant Ones* (1958),[10] Not Sidney has a dream that transports him into the role of Poitier's character, Rau-Ru ("Raz-ru" in Everett's version), in *Band of Angels* (1957). During the course of the dream, Not Sidney oscillates between breaking out of and involuntarily conforming to his assigned role. Thus, shortly after Raz-ru tires of the constant background music of cheerful singing slaves—a conspicuous feature of the original film—and angrily reprimands them, "Would you niggers please shut the fuck up!" (67), he finds himself being asked by his master, Hamish Bond (played by Clark Gable in the film), to sing for him and a visiting sea captain, and is unable to refuse: "Though I did not want to, I could not stop the song from finding my throat" (67). Raz-ru notes that his singing voice is "deeper than usual" (67), a reference to the fact that, in the original scene, Poitier lip-syncs to someone else's singing. Everett picks up the image of Poitier being robbed of even the minimal agency of his own voice when Not Sidney, following a procession of "singing Negroes", wonders "what I was doing there as Raz-ru and what I was doing in this dream that *certainly could not be my own*" (68; emphasis added). Indeed, Raz-ru's sense that the wind that blows open the French

doors of Samantha Moon's room "possessed agency" (67) serves to emphasise his own deficit in this area.

When Raz-ru makes reference to "[his] station as *boss Negro*" (66), he invokes the role effectively foisted upon Sidney Poitier throughout much of his career, that of representative "race man". The impact and importance of Poitier in this role is indicated by his biographer, Aram Goudsouzian:

> Before his 1950 film debut, images of blacks in film consisted of the stereotypes that justified racial segregation: oversexed bucks, absurd pickaninnies, beefy mammies, grinning song-and-dance men, and slothful comic servants. Poitier's image contradicted this burden. By the late 1950s, he was the Martin Luther King of the movies, an emblem of middle-class values, Christian sacrifice, and racial integration. (3)

Yet, if Sidney Poitier was, perhaps reluctantly, prepared to accept the role of representative "race man", Everett's Raz-ru derides the phrase "boss Negro" as a "meaningless designation" (66). The context in which the phrase appears in the film offers some illumination. Hamish Bond, formerly a slave trader in Africa, "up in the Rio Pongo" (01:22:25-26), adopted and raised Rau-Ru after his mother was killed during a raid by traders. When Bond tells Amantha Starr (Samantha Moon in Everett's retelling) that Rau-Ru "gets off the sidewalk for nobody. No constable or paddy roll ever stopped him" he explains that such privileges are afforded him "Because he's Big Bond's boss Negro" (00:37:41-51). Everett's Raz-ru, thus, recognises his position as one of "artificial dignity" (66), since his authority is contingent on the sustained favour of Bond.

The predicament of Rau-Ru/Raz-ru mirrors that of Poitier since "by 1967 many radicals, college students, and film critics were condemning Poitier's recurring role as a noble hero in a white world" (Goudsouzian 3). Indeed, during this period Poitier suffered public designations not dissimilar to Bond's "Big boss Negro" with *Variety* branding him "The Useful Negro," and Clifford Mason, in the *New York Times*, charging him with repeatedly playing the role of "showcase nigger" (3). Goudsouzian suggests that Poitier's "acting trademark" was "the cool boil", which "struck a delicate balance, revealing racial frustration, but tacitly assuring a predominantly white audience that blacks would eschew violence and preserve social order" (1). In his characterisation of Raz-ru, Everett rejects this delicate balance by having him shoot Hamish Bond in the chest, rather than aid his escape as Rau-Ru does. Raz-ru's act of revenge elicits an ambivalent response amongst other blacks: "The room became filled with hovering sullen, perhaps angry, perhaps relieved, black faces, and none of them sang" (71). While the absence of song might initially seem to suggest sadness, it can also be read as the expression of a newfound freedom—with the demise of Bond—from the performance of racial stereotype. Nonetheless, the fact that Raz-ru's decision to kill Bond is not met with the unanimous and unambiguous approval of other blacks validates his earlier contention that "*boss Negro*" was a "meaningless designation" (66); despite his position of relative power, he is unable to conjure black solidarity. As Murray notes, "Everett refuses to sustain the authority of black elites to represent the interests of a racial collective" (749). Moreover, Everett signals the capitalist system's ability to incorporate opposition through the irony of Not Sidney awakening from his fantasy of defiance as Raz-ru to find himself still in the plot of a film called *The Defiant Ones* (1958). Similarly, after a further act of defiance—leaving the sleeping Patrice and Sis to catch the train alone (79)—he soon

finds himself in the plot of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), where yet another act of defiance propels him into *Lilies of the Field* (1963), and so on.

The manner in which Not Sidney's acts of opposition become, if anything, increasingly ineffective at removing him from the shadow of Sidney Poitier is anticipated by Ted Turner's method for neutralising the effect of "pernicious and deleterious" television shows such as *Diff'rent Strokes*: "I'm going to [. . .] air that trash every day several times a day [. . .]. That way we'll all become desensitized to its harmful and consumptive effects by sheer overexposure. That's what I mean by jingles. They'll become meaningless and innocuous little ditties" (12-13). Given that Not Sidney Poitier is born in either 1967 or 1968,[11] that is, around the height of black power and urban unrest, Everett's novel can be read as a meditation on how oppositional gestures are incorporated by capitalist and political forces. Or, from an alternative perspective, its subject is the way "the system manufactures and structures its own pacified opposition" (Reed 71). Viewed in this light, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* can be seen to revisit *erasure*'s scepticism regarding the subversive value of certain forms of writing. In reference to Everett's earlier novel, Ana Maria Sanchez-Arce asks: "Is 'ghetto' writing giving a voice to the underprivileged or reinforcing our perceptions of them by yet another predictable representation? Given the multiplication of oppositional discourses and their absorption by the establishment, perhaps we should start questioning their alleged resistance" (153).

I Am Not Sidney Poitier signals a failure of "oppositional discourses" in its (historically accurate) list of the "men of our race" produced by the "mission" of Morehouse College: "Doctor Reverend Martin Luther King Junior and Edwin Moses, Maynard Jackson and Spike Lee, Howard Thurman and Samuel L. Jackson" (95). The three pairings of political figures with figures from the entertainment industries of

sport and film suggest that agitation for meaningful political change and social justice has given way to mere satisfaction with what Paul Gilroy has termed the "glamour and attractiveness of African-American culture" and its "representative modern icons" (346). Indeed, Spike Lee's 1996 collaboration with the advertising agency DDB Needham is cited by Gilroy as proof "that the culture industry is prepared to make substantial investments in blackness provided that it yields a user-friendly, house-trained, and marketable 'reading' or translation of the stubborn vernacular that can no longer be called a counterculture" (239). As if underlining Gilroy's point, Everett juxtaposes Bill Cosby delivering a parody of his infamous Pound Cake speech in which he harangues young black males while repeatedly advertising an ice lolly brand ("Pudding Pops!" [97]), with the "Big Brothers" of the Omega fraternity—whose *raison d'être* is "business connections after college" (93)—watching a Spike Lee film (98). Thus, more explicitly than *erasure*, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* charts the manner in which black politics in the post-Civil Rights era has been evacuated of its oppositional power as a result of capitalist incorporation allied to a narrow focus on racial representation.

"*I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY*"

Not merely having to contend with multiple confusions over his name, Not Sidney encounters—both within and without the Poitier scenarios—a range of perplexing and contradictory attitudes towards the notion of an authentic racial self. In the *Band of Angels* section, Not Sidney as Raz-ru witnesses Samantha Moon being sold at auction, while the auctioneer spews racist nonsense: "Her good white blood is evident, but I can guarantee her hot and steamy nigger disposition. [. . .] Her skin might be white,

but she bleeds black" (64). Apparently no one in the auction room questions the claim that Moon's blood is both "white" and "black". When she arrives at Bond's mansion, Michelle, Bond's "last high yellow object of affection" (65), diagnoses Moon's problem as follows: "she doesn't believe she is what she is" (66). Michelle's formulation, "she is what she is', anticipates a topic of the fictional Percival Everett's course in the "Philosophy of Nonsense" (87): "Everett talked on and on about a thing being self-identical, but failed at any turn to make a drop of sense" (106). Not Sidney's use of the phrase "drop of sense" recalls the issue at stake in Samantha Moon's fate, her proverbial "one drop" (66) of "black blood". Despite the connection between Everett's course and the discussion of Moon's blood implying that the latter is also nonsensical, Raz-ru—like Poitier's Rau-Ru—embraces Michelle's unfounded belief in "race" and "blood", declaring: "She [Moon] may soon wish that her blood will accept her" (66). However, upon Raz-ru effectively asserting the reality of "race", Not Sidney notes that "in the dream, the words felt strange in my mouth" (66). Nevertheless, Raz-ru underscores his acceptance of racial essentialism when he tells Moon that "[he] was sad for her, for her inability to accept herself, for her refusal to acknowledge her *real self*" (68; emphasis added).

The insistence, in both the original film and Everett's parodic version, that Amantha Starr/Samantha Moon accept her "blackness" as the singular, defining fact of her "real self" is rendered not just nonsensical but deeply ironic, given that Hamish Bond repeatedly lays claim to a fluid identity, including multiple selves. Describing to Moon his previous experiences sailing around Africa and the Caribbean (though not yet disclosing his slave trading activities), Bond quips: "Or maybe it wasn't me at all. Maybe it was that other fellow, the fellow I used to be" (Walsh 00:52:11-15). Bond then reveals that he took his name from the skipper of a ship upon which he was

initially "just a mate" (00:52:24-33). He continues: "I got a past I'd like to forget, but I can't run away from it, no more that you can run away from what you are" (00:52:47-54). Later, in attempting to dissuade Rau-Ru from killing him by recalling the story of how he saved him when a two-month-old infant, Bond attributes his heroism to his alter ego: "I guess that was the other fellow with me, not Hamish Bond" (01:54:20-24). Despite Bond's claim that he cannot escape his past, the film invites its audience to accept Bond's attempt to fashion multiple selves from which he can choose at will, depending on the circumstances, while, at the same time, believing that Amantha Starr has a single, immutable, and *essential* identity, namely "black". Indeed, part of Bond's heroism seems to be located in his willingness to accept a "black" woman as his wife. This double standard regarding racial identity recalls Thelonious Ellison finding his *Persians* in "African American Studies" under the twin assumption that Ellison's "blackness" constitutes his fundamental identity and that his writing is a transparent expression of this identity. Yet, as Everett has pointed out in several interviews, few bookstores have a section dedicated to "White Literature" (*Conversations* 103), the implication being that "white" writers—unlike "black" writers—transcend "race" and are thus free to inhabit many different identities.

Professor Everett, through a series of provocations, encourages Not Sidney to challenge such assumptions. He urges him to "read Althusser and Habermas. [. . .] Something about ideology functioning to obscure the real conditions of existence or some such shit" (102). He sets an examination paper with a question beginning: "Is the *I* one's body?" (113). He tells Not Sidney "I know, you're Not Sidney Poitier and also not Sidney Poitier, but in a strange way you are Sidney Poitier as much as you're anyone" (102). Everett's cryptic remarks contrast sharply with the simplistic racial essentialism on the Morehouse campus. At a fraternity meeting, where the "dark

glasses and red beret" of one of the "bigwigs" suggests a retrograde black nationalist sensibility, a "Big Boss" (recalling Raz-ru's "*boss Negro*") informs the pledgers "You are not yet black enough to be Omegas" (94). Yet, by the end of the novel, Not Sidney appears to have understood Professor Everett's message. In a scene strikingly similar to the end of *erasure*, Not Sidney accepts an award—for "Most Dignified Figure in American Culture"—meant for Sidney Poitier. His acceptance speech is a subtle meditation on identity: "I came back to this place to find something, to connect with something lost, to reunite if not with my whole self, then with a piece of it. What I've discovered is that this thing is not here. In fact, it is nowhere" (234). Not Sidney's revelation is that his "whole self"—that is, a unified, coherent conception of selfhood—is elusive. This realisation enables him to formulate what should be written on both his and his mother's headstone: "***I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY***" (234). The inscription has at least four obvious interpretations. First, taken as the common idiom, meaning something like "I feel peculiar today", it reads as a comic understatement. Second, it can be read as a solemn declaration of death extinguishing the self. Third, it can be read as meaning "I am someone else today". This interpretation can be read as conveying the sense in which African Americans—and especially Not Sidney—must struggle to define themselves against the backdrop of pervasive and often negative stereotypes. Finally, applied to Not Sidney, the inscription can be interpreted as "I am Not—myself—today". In this final reading, the statement conveys a sense that death has facilitated a straightforward sense of identity that could not be achieved in life; the living "self" can be anything, while the dead "self" is a unitary nothing. In his acceptance speech, Not Sidney declares "I have learned that my name is not *my* name" (234; emphasis added), a realisation that one's name is simply a label, shared by others, assigned one at birth. Yet, for the future deceased Not Sidney, all that remains

of the self is the name on the headstone; in this way, the "I", the "Not", and the "myself" finally cohere.

Not Sidney's reflection on the "self" at the end of *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* resembles Nathan Zuckerman's rumination on the same subject towards the end of Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* (1986):

> All I can tell you with certainty is that I, for one, have no self, and that I'm unwilling or unable to perpetrate upon myself the joke of a self. It certainly does strike me as a joke about *my* self. What I have instead is a variety of impersonations I can do [. . .] I am a theater and nothing more than a theater.
>
> (324-25)

Both *erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* might be understood as a demand that the capacity to inhabit a variety of personae—to become "a theater", in Zuckerman's terms—be extended to black artists, and indeed blacks more generally. That Everett felt the need to make the point twice and as late as 2009—some twenty-three years after *The Counterlife*, itself a relatively late arrival to the postmodern understanding of identity—indicates the reluctance of a culture industry to move on from outdated, though still eminently marketable, modes of representation.

"The Appropriation of Cultures"

In the "Hickman in Washington, D.C." section of Ralph Ellison's *Three Days Before the Shooting*… the Reverend Hickman recounts a memorable incident from his days as a jazz musician:

And that endless confusion over race and color, money and music—like that Christmas Day when the white owner of a black dance hall refused to let us perform until we agreed to parade through the streets like minstrel men playing "Dixie," which we had to do or be run out of town. Yes, and with me turning the tables by sneaking in that nasty, wailing obbligato of "Your Mama Don't Wear No Drawers" on which the others performed variations all along the way... which made it not only bearable but side-breaking fun, with the local Negroes laughing and the white folks applauding and none the wiser... It's a wonder we came through any of it alive [. . .]. (569)

Ellison recalls a related incident in his essay "Notes for Class Day Talk at Columbia University". Taking an afternoon walk in New York City, Ellison sees a "tall brown-skinned man" striding towards him in "a subdued version of the Harlem strut". As he comes closer, Ellison sees that he is "wearing a gray cap which bore the insignia of the Confederate Army" (843). A stunned Ellison asks: "So you've joined the Confederacy?", but there is "only a grim look of reply", and both men continue on. Ellison then pauses, and, looking back, sees the man "hands on hips, Confederate-capped head thrown back, bubbling with uncontrollable laughter" (843). Contemplating the bizarre episode at a later point, Ellison finds his "alter ego whisper[ing], 'Ellison, the Confederates were also Americans, and so, God help him, is he!'" (844).

Everett's 1996 short story "The Appropriation of Cultures" combines the central elements of the above episodes to brilliantly encapsulate the "*endless confusion over race and color, money and music*". The story's first line reads "Daniel Barkley had money left to him by his mother" (24). The rest of the opening paragraph continues in a similar vein, informing the reader that Barkley has enjoyed an Ivy

League education, lives in the house his mother left him, drives a classic sports car, plays an expensive guitar, does not work "and didn't pretend to need to, spending most of his time reading" (24). The paragraph closes by noting that Daniel sometimes "played jazz with some old guys who all worked very hard during the day, but didn't hold Daniel's condition against him" (24). As in several of his other works, Everett, in this opening, is playing with readerly presumptions about "race". Given the apparent subject of the story is explicitly stated in the title, the reader is already primed to identify a character—probably white—misappropriating aspects of a marginalised culture. When the opening paragraph paints a picture of material wealth, the stereotypical connection between money and whiteness renders it likely that Daniel will be precisely this character. When the paragraph then ends with the information that Daniel, a man of leisure, plays jazz with men who work hard for a living, it appears that both the appropriator and the item being appropriated have been implicitly specified. The story appears familiar; a privileged young white man thoughtlessly appropriates music from black culture. Indeed, a version of this tale forms the premise of Hari Kunzru's 2017 novel *White Tears*.

Yet, the next two paragraphs of Everett's story turn this initial interpretation on its head. While Daniel is playing at his usual venue, "a joint near the campus of the University of South Carolina", several "white boys from a fraternity" shout "at the black man holding the acoustic guitar [. . .] 'Play *Dixie* for us! Play *Dixie* for us!'" (24). Since we are told, in the opening paragraph, that Daniel plays a "nineteen-forty Martin guitar" (24), we can infer that the "black man" is Daniel. After the provocative request, Daniel looks across to the rest of the band and sees "uncomfortable expressions on the faces of the old guys" (24). Are they "uncomfortable" because

they are black or because they are white? Everett refuses to clarify. Daniel begins to play the song.

> He sang it slowly. He sang it, feeling the lyrics, deciding that the lyrics were his, deciding that the song was his. *Old times there are not forgotten* . . . He sang the song and listened to the silence around him. He resisted the urge to let satire ring through his voice. He meant what he sang. *Look away, look away, look away, Dixieland.* (24)

Unlike Ellison's Hickman, Daniel does not smuggle any satirical content into his performance. He sings it in earnest. He appropriates it as his own. The sincerity of his performance leaves the frat boys defeated and they "stor[m] out" in embarrassment (24). Roger, one of the "old guys" in the band, slaps Daniel on the back and says "something like 'Right on' or 'Cool'" (24). Do these phrases indicate that Roger is black, or are they simply another appropriation? Once more, Everett invites the question, yet withholds the answer.

Contemplating his performance, Daniel realises that "as he played it, it came straight and from his heart, as he was claiming southern soil, or at least recognising his blood in it" (25). Later that night, after reading about "Pickett's charge at Gettysburg", Daniel has a dream in which he stops Pickett's men and says "Give me back my flag" (25). If Daniel's burgeoning sense that "black" and "white" cultures cannot easily be separated and treated in isolation owes a good deal to the essays of Ellison, the recognition of "his blood" in southern soil recalls imagery that James Baldwin was fond of employing in describing the relation of the black American to white Americans: "he is bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh; they have loved and hated and obsessed and feared each other and his blood is in their soil" (*Collected*

Essays 89). Perhaps most of all, Daniel's sense of a shared cultural history evokes Albert Murray's 1970 essay "The Omni-Americans": "*American culture, even in its most rigidly segregated precincts, is patently and irrevocably composite. It is, regardless of all the hysterical protestations of those who would have it otherwise, incontestably mulatto*" (23). However, this portrait of cultural hybridity is questioned in the next section of the story when Daniel's friend, Sarah, thinks about painting her nails "black *or* with red, white and blue stripes" (25; emphasis added). The "or", rather than an "and", in Sarah's formulation suggests an opposition between "black" and "American" that invokes W.E.B. Du Bois's famous discussion of "double consciousness": "One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (8). On the other hand, the fact that Sarah would seemingly be happy with either option might indicate that she feels both black and American in a less antagonistic manner than suggested by Du Bois. Moreover, Sarah's deliberation about nail colour is juxtaposed with Daniel's decision to buy a truck primarily for a flag. The self-indulgence involved in both decisions is suggested in Daniel's ironic response to Sarah asking why he needs a truck: "So I can drive you around when you paint your nails" (25).

The material comfort of Daniel's life is thrown into relief when he travels "across the river" to Irmo, "a name which Daniel had always thought suited a disease for cattle" (26), in order to buy a truck with a "full rear cab window decal of the Confederate flag" (26) from a white man named Travis. Several markers—"a chain-link fence", the nearby presence of a grease-covered father and son, "a maze of plastic toys" in the front yard (26)—place Travis and his wife Barb in a much lower socio-economic category than Daniel. Meanwhile, Barb's whispered remark to Travis, "I couldn't tell over the phone" (26), suggests their shock in discovering Daniel is black.

Given the surprise experienced by Travis and Barb may have been shared by the reader earlier in the story, Everett can be seen to be implicating the reader in a structure of racism that ranges from unconscious stereotyping to the proud display of the Confederate flag. On the other hand, the setting of the same trap for both the reader and Travis and Barb seems designed to produce an empathetic connection between the reader and these ostensibly unattractive characters. Indeed, the following exchange between Daniel and Travis encourages pity for the latter:

> "The ad in the magazine said two-thousand."
>
> "Yeah, but I'm willing to work with you."
>
> "Tell you what, I'll give you twenty-two hundred if you deliver it to my house."
>
> Travis was lost, scratching his head and looking back at the house for his wife who was no longer standing there. (27)

The faint note of condescension in Travis's offer to negotiate on the price is met with resounding haughtiness in Daniel's extravagant offer of an extra $200 for a thirteen-mile delivery trip. The dramatic reversal of archetypal racial roles causes Travis to be "lost", while the sudden disappearance of his wife adds to the sense that his world is collapsing around him. Travis's state of disarray seems to corroborate Frank Wilderson's claim (noted in Chapter 2) that "the Master/Slave relation itself [is] the essence of [the white man's] 'something to save'" (*Red, White & Black* 12).

A seemingly incidental yet powerfully resonant detail illuminates the above exchange and, more generally, the interplay of colour and class in the story. As Travis closes the truck door, Daniel notices that "one of the man's fingernails was blackened" (27). The observation, in recalling Sarah's pondering over whether or not to paint her

nails black, suggests that a black presence is a necessary constituent of Travis's "white" identity. Everett, here, might be subtly alluding to the ten black drops that the protagonist of *Invisible Man* is advised to add to the "Optic White" paint in order to create the "purest white that can be found" (202). The idea, in both Everett and Ellison, appears to be that whiteness achieves its status only in opposition to blackness. As Calvin Warren puts it (to return once more to the discussion of Afropessimism in Chapter 2), "the world *needs* blacks, even as it tries to eliminate them" (10). On the other hand, unlike Sarah, Travis has not painted his nail black; it has presumably been blackened as a result of travails, as his name suggests. Travis's blackened nail thus becomes another class indicator, a sign of the material gulf between him and Daniel. The fact that Travis's "blackness" is involuntarily inscribed on his body, while Sarah is voluntarily considering whether to mark her body as black—even though society has already done so—invites a comparison between the ways racial and class identities operate. Does, for example, Travis's lower socio-economic position curtail his range of identities to a greater extent than does Sarah's skin colour?

The two novels examined in the previous sections of this chapter leave little doubt as to the manner in which the persistence of racist attitudes means that the ascription of African American identity can restrict opportunities for self-fashioning, perhaps especially for artists. However, when, in a 2019 interview, Everett was asked whether Du Bois's famous assertion about the twentieth century could be extended, that is, was "the problem of the twenty-first century [. . .] also the color-line?", Everett responded in the negative: "No, it's not the color-line. [. . .] it's class" (Manuel). That class may be a more powerful determinant of identity than "race" in Everett's short story is suggested by an exchange involving Barb, Daniel, and Travis.

> Barb sighed and asked as if the question was burning right through her. “Why do you want that flag on the truck?”
>
> “Why shouldn’t I want it?” Daniel asked.
>
> Barb didn’t know what to say. She studied her feet for a second, then regarded the house again. “I mean, you live in a nice house and drive that sports car. What do you need a truck like that for?”
>
> “You don’t want the money?”
>
> “Yes, we want the money,” Travis said, trying to silence Barb with a look. (28)

Barb’s sense of white identity is evidently threatened by Daniel’s eagerness to keep the Confederate flag on the truck. When Daniel challenges Barb’s implication that a black man has no business flying the Confederate flag, she appears to change the subject from the flag to the truck, but the phrase “I mean” suggests that she is simply clarifying her earlier question; that is, rather than moving on, she is really continuing to talk about the flag. Understood in this way, her reference to Daniel’s “nice house” and “sports car” together with her question “What do you need a truck [flag] like that for?”, can be interpreted as meaning that for Travis and Barb the Confederate flag—and, by extension, their white identity—are primarily tools of consolation for those in a lowly socio-economic position. In other words, improved material circumstances would eliminate, or at least greatly diminish, reliance upon the dubious psychic compensations afforded by racial identity. That this, indeed, is the case is indicated by the fact that Travis is willing to go ahead with the sale of his truck even after Daniel signals his intent to appropriate the Confederate flag as a symbol of black power. Thus, in his portrayal of white characters willing to trade the insignia of their psychic

investment in whiteness for financial gain, Everett appears to dispute a central contention of Afropessimists; recall Wilderson's claim that Europeans eschewed decreasing the costs of enslavement by taking white slaves from Europe to America since "what Whites would have gained in economic value, they would have lost in symbolic value; and it is the latter which structures the libidinal economy of civil society" (*Red, White & Black* 15). Everett, by having his whites accept the loss of symbolic value for a gain in economic value, positions himself in opposition to Afropessimism, aligning, instead, with the historical materialism of Adolph Reed, as delineated in the Introduction.

In the story's final movement, an increasing number of blacks adopt the Confederate flag as a symbol of pride until it is finally removed from State Capitol. Yet, the apparent triumph of Daniel's project of appropriation is undercut by two main ironies. First, if the flag has truly become a symbol of black pride then the removal of it from the statehouse can be viewed as a defeat, rather than a victory. Second, despite Daniel's appropriation of the rhetoric of working class protest, the process by which the flag changes its meaning—in which the key players appear to be black doctors, businessmen, and ministers (29-30)—resembles "a politics of racial custodianship" that "inscribes elite race spokesmen as arbiters of group strategy" (Reed 18, 33). In one particularly ironic scene, Daniel, a twenty-three-year-old so wealthy he can choose not to work, exclaims "Power to the people" (a reference to the Black Panther Party mantra "All Power to the People") to a BMW-driving lawyer named Ahmad Wilson (29). The fundamental insincerity of Daniel's call to class struggle is signalled by the fact that the sound of laughter—his own—attends his injunction. By the end of the story, there is little evidence that any meaningful power has been redistributed to anyone, black or white. Thus, given that the truck at the

centre of the story dates—like Not Sidney—from an era of protest and revolutionary movements (it is "a nineteen-sixty-eight Ford" [26]), "The Appropriation of Cultures" can be viewed as anticipating the manner in which the subsequent failures of black politics are figured in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*.

Conclusion

Taken together, the three texts examined in this chapter offer a series of challenges to anyone engaged in critical thought about black culture and appropriation. Everett's work raises questions about the impossibility of representing an entire people, the problems with notions of "authentic blackness", the unstable relationship between the work and the artist, the possible reification of discredited theories of "race", the difficulty of defining "black stories", and the potential elision of the complex interplay of "race" and class. Everett also recognises the harm caused by insensitive, misguided, or downright racist appropriations of aspects of black culture. The ferocious reprimand of Not Sidney as Raz-ru directed at the incessantly joyful, "singing Negroes"—"Would you niggers please shut the fuck up!" (67)—effectively places *Band of Angels* in the third category, and invokes Baldwin's memorable provocation: "What white people have to do, is try and find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a 'nigger' in the first place [. . .] [if] you the white people invented him, then you've got to find out why" (Baldwin and Peck 108-09). In the case of *Band of Angels*, the fantasy of the "contented slave" is an invention that allows the filmmakers to avoid acknowledging in full the inhumanity of slavery.

As seen in *erasure*, Everett's Barthesian sense of the uncontrollability of meaning leads to a certain wariness about the conscious employment of racial

stereotypes, even in satire and parody. The continued appetite for negative representations of African Americans means that such stereotypes are still marketable, and in ways that may escape the author's intended meaning. Writers, therefore, must take especial care to avoid their work being incorporated into a culture industry that endorses a narrow range of black representation. In this area, the example of how Everett's own oeuvre approaches the representation of black characters is instructive. In choosing multiplicity over "the glamour of sameness" (Gilroy 38), Everett's body of work stages a vital protest against the intrusions of a culture that continues to erase that which its "*inner* eyes" (*Invisible Man* 3) are constructed not to see.

Conclusion

In the period during which the present study has been completed, the term "cultural appropriation" has gained currency as a topic for discussion and debate. In 2021, the poet and creative writing professor Paisley Rekdal published *Appropriate: A Provocation*, a book-length essay—addressed to an unnamed young writer—exploring the ethics of cultural appropriation in fiction. Part of Rekdal's "provocation" can be located in her choice of the word "appropriate"—rather than "appropriation"—for the book's title. In addition to signalling a discussion of the "proper", Rekdal's title can be read as an injunction to the young writer being addressed to appropriate in their creative work. Indeed, the sense that Rekdal views appropriation as a valuable resource for the artist is supported by her contention that "if you treat appropriation as a solely negative practice, you ignore one of its accidental benefits, which is that it enlarges, rather than shrinks, our sense of connection by requiring us to interrogate the historically enmeshed relationships we have, and don't have, with one another" (189-90).

Yet, Rekdal's approach to thinking about cultural appropriation raises a number of problems. First, she builds upon James O. Young's definition of cultural appropriation in a somewhat confusing manner. Rekdal initially appears to accept Young's classification of the types of cultural appropriation, noting that he "breaks down cultural appropriation into two general categories: subject appropriation and

content appropriation" (23).[1] However, Rekdal later limits her understanding of the term "cultural appropriation" to a strictly pejorative interpretation:

> I myself use the term "cultural appropriation" specifically to suggest a work that's bound up in the production and dissemination of negative, if also unconscious, stereotypes of another group or culture, and the specific terms "subject" and "content appropriation" for works that are attentively influenced by other cultures, or include nuanced non-White or non-Western characters. (32)

Rekdal provides no rationale for treating two of Young's subsets—"subject" and "content" appropriation—as benign, while viewing the broader category of "cultural appropriation" as injurious.

Second, Rekdal seems to accept the overly simplistic view of racism proposed by Ibram X. Kendi in his bestselling work *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019). Kendi writes "there is no such thing as a not-racist idea, only racist ideas and antiracist ideas" (20). In a passage in which she quotes from Kendi approvingly, Rekdal observes "the strange reality of people is that they can express both racist and anti-racist ideas, even in the same conversation" (162). While Rekdal's observation is clearly true, it elides the even stranger—and more complex—reality that the *same idea* can be viewed as both racist and anti-racist.[2] Though Rekdal's assertion that "[l]iterary texts [. . .] move between racist and anti-racist sentiments" leads her to reject "classify[ing] a text or author solely as 'racist' or 'not racist'" (162), it nonetheless reveals a reductively binary approach to reading that is incommensurate to the complexity of writing by novelists such as those considered in the previous six chapters of this study.

Third, Rekdal's conception of equality appears narrowly focused around race, excluding from consideration issues of class. When Rekdal asks her young writer to reflect on what "equality look[s] like, exactly?", her own answer to the question seems to revolve around the number of "working writers and editors of color in the publishing industry" (88). The absence of any reference to the class background of these writers signals Rekdal's relative indifference to questions of economic equality. Her position thus becomes vulnerable to the critique of approaches to diversity and equality made by writers such as Walter Benn Michaels for whom "leaving the economic inequalities of American society intact while rearranging the skin color of those who suffer from and those who benefit from those inequalities doesn't exactly count as progress. And certainly not if what we are seeking is economic equality" (129-130). As was made evident in the discussion of Percival Everett's "The Appropriation of Cultures" in Chapter 6, questions of class and economic inequality should inform our thinking about cultural appropriation.

Fourth, Rekdal accepts with insufficient interrogation the following proposal by Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda in their introduction to the anthology *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*:

> Are we saying Asian writers can't write Latino characters? That white writers can't write black characters? That no one can write from a different racial other's point of view? We're saying we'd like to change the terms of that conversation, to think about creativity and the imagination without employing the language of rights and the sometimes concealing terms of craft. To ask some first-principle questions instead. So, not: can I write from another's point of view? But instead: to ask why and what for, not just if and how. What is the charisma of what I feel estranged from, and why might I wish to enter and

> inhabit it. To speak not in terms of prohibition and rights, but desire. To ask what we think we know, and how we might undermine our own sense of authority. (Rankine et al. 17-18)

Rekdal aligns herself with this approach to cultural appropriation: "Like Loffreda and Rankine, I, too, see appropriation finally as a question of desire" (52). Certainly, questioning the novelistic desire behind a particular work is an understandable response that may yield useful insights. Some novels may strike particular readers as unusual—even offensive—because of the racial identity of the author. In the 1960s, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was such a novel. To take a more recent example, one might consider the likely response to Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* (2016) had it been written by a white author. Given that, in certain respects, the novel reads as an attempt to document the lived experience of the black male in contemporary America—the first line of the novel begins: "This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man" (3)—it would be unsurprising to find many readers calling into question the motivations that would lead a white author to create such a work. In some quarters, the novel might be condemned as an act of minstrelsy. While such responses should not be disregarded,[3] treating desire as the ultimate factor in assessments of appropriative acts (as urged by Rekdal) presents significant difficulties since the desire or motivation of an artist are rarely transparent, even to the artist herself. When Rankine and Loffreda advise writers "[t]o ask what we think we know, and how we might undermine our own sense of authority" (18), perhaps the epistemic humility being urged upon the writer should equally apply to the critic striving to comprehend the writer's desire. The application of humility in the latter case does not eliminate the question of desire from conversations about cultural appropriation, but, rather, helps

ensure that the ascription of motivation does not assume disproportionate significance in such conversations.

In the course of "unknit[ting] the term 'desire'", Rekdal declares "I'm suspicious of empathy as a critical or creative value" (52), going on to assert that "[empathy] cannot be used to justify or critically frame any work engaged in appropriation" (54). Rekdal is persuaded by Namwali Serpell's article "The Banality of Empathy" which offers Hannah Arendt's theory of "representative thinking" as a preferable alternative to empathy. Serpell summarises Arendt as follows: "Rather than virtually *becoming* another, [Arendt] asks you to imagine using your own mind but from their position. It's a matter of keeping your distance, maintaining integrity, in both senses" (Serpell). For Rekdal, to practise "representative thinking" is "to visit but not encompass or homogenize the other's perspective. By doing this, you and I maintain our own detachment while respecting the independence of the other person's experience" (54). Thus, this approach to thinking and writing about the racial other revolves around the notion of conscious distancing, that is, a wariness of encroaching upon an experience to which you cannot lay claim. This emphasis on remoteness—the artist might "visit" but must not "become" the other—informs Rekdal's more hesitant alternatives to the term "cultural appropriation" for "works that appropriate respectfully": "transcultural dialogue", "cultural homage", and "cultural approximation" (32).

The "representative thinking" advocated by Serpell and Rekdal is strikingly at odds with the way that James Baldwin approached imagining the other. As noted in Chapter 1, Baldwin urged William Styron to "try to *become* a black man" and write his novel from Nat Turner's point of view, explaining "I've done this as a black writer trying to *become* white people" (Greenberg 219; emphases added). Moreover, as I

argued in Chapter 2, Baldwin believed that the way for the white American to reject "whiteness" was to express kinship with the black other, not through a cautious detachment from the other's experience, but through an elimination of psychic and physical distance.

Seemingly sharing Baldwin's sense of fiction as a medium in which one might imaginatively inhabit the other, Zadie Smith, in a 2019 essay, questions the increasingly accepted adage "*Stay in your lane*" and its assumption that "personal experience is inviolate and nontransferable" ("Fascinated to Presume"). As a creative writing teacher, Smith is troubled by "the emergence of a belief that fiction can or should be the product of an absolute form of 'correctness.' The student explains that I should believe in her character because this is *exactly* how X type of person would behave". According to Smith, the notion "that one could ever be absolutely 'correct' when it comes to representing fictional human behavior" is a "dubious idea". Smith sees an irony in the juxtaposition of a pervasive anxiety about the appropriation of experience in fiction—"[w]e behave as if don't want to be known by one another"—with a willingness to submit to "the digital exploitation and modification of selfhood" routinely performed by "technological monopolies". She wryly observes that "[the] data version of you is 'correct' to the nth degree: it sees all and knows all, and makes the fuzzy knowledge of selves that fiction once claimed look truly pathetic". In defiance of the contemporary pursuit of absolute "correctness" in fiction, Smith maintains a faith in the power of empathy: "if fiction had a belief about itself, it was that fiction had empathy in its DNA, that it was the product of compassion". Though Smith, like Serpell and Rekdal, recognises the limitations of empathy and compassion—"How many compassionate stories about the other do *we* need to tell *you* before *you* see *us* as fully human, the way you see yourself?"—she departs

from these writers in her celebration of the novel's capacity to make one "felt known".[4] Indeed, the terms that Smith offers as alternatives for "cultural appropriation"—"interpersonal voyeurism", "profound-other-fascination", and "cross-epidermal reanimation"—betray an intrusiveness from which Serpell and Rekdal, with their emphasis on remoteness from the racial other, recoil. Ultimately, Smith rejects the "respectful" and "correct" appropriations valued by Rekdal in favour of the writer's prerogative to pursue her "inappropriate curiosity about the lives of others".

The tone and content of Smith's essay is markedly different from that of Lionel Shriver's 2016 speech on cultural appropriation with which I began this study. While Shriver derides a "climate of super-sensitivity" ("Lionel Shriver's full speech"), Smith acknowledges the "substantial" harm caused by the "distorted mirrors, monstrous cliché, [and] debasing ridicule" of black representation in novels such as *Gone with the Wind*. However, despite their differences, Smith and Shriver find common ground in important areas. Smith would appear to agree with Shriver's contention that "[t]he spirit of good fiction is one of exploration, generosity, curiosity, audacity, and compassion", while Shriver would surely approve of Smith's insistence that the writerly impulse—what Smith, borrowing from Emily Dickinson, calls the "fascination to presume"—necessarily carries the "risk [of] being wrong". Paul Gilroy, too, recognises that audacity and the willingness to risk being wrong informs the work of our best storytellers:

> Bolstered by the cautious, strategic universalism toward which the history of fascism inclines us, diverse stories of suffering can be recognized as belonging to anyone who dares to possess them and in good faith employ them as interpretative devices through which we may clarify the limits of our selves,

> the basis of our solidarities, and perhaps pronounce upon the value of our values. (*Between Camps* 230)

During the two decades since Gilroy wrote these words, the idea that "diverse stories of suffering" might "belon[g] to anyone who dares to possess them" has come to seem increasingly transgressive. Yet, if Gilroy is correct, then audacious acts of appropriation may yield more profound ways of understanding what it is to be human. It is against such rewards that the far from trivial risks of being wrong must be weighed.

Notes

Introduction

1. Ziff and Rao take a decidedly dim view of cultural appropriation, finding in it "strategies of authority and legitimation exercised over the processes of cultural transmission by dominant groups that may practice cultural imperialism and engage in the commodification of cultural forms" (7). Indeed, their impulse to curb forms of cultural appropriation ("in a world permeated by social constructions of reality there is something to be said about controlling the process of creating that world, of imposing some control over who can or should hold the pen" [17]) at times reveals itself in a more censorial approach than that taken by the Writers' Union in their resolution calling for "the responsibility and accountability that attend the freedom of imagination and the freedom of expression" (18).

2. In comparing Turner to Christ, Styron was echoing the Turner of Gray's *Confessions* who, when asked whether he now thought he was mistaken in his original belief that God had signalled to him that he should lead a rebellion, replied "Was not Christ crucified?" (Clarke 104).

3. In his 2017 book, *The Blood of Emmett Till*, the historian Timothy B. Tyson claimed that the woman in question, Carolyn Bryant Donham, had admitted to him that parts of her testimony were false (6).

4. Notable articles discussing the controversy include those by the art critic Roberta Smith in *The New York Times* ("Should Art That Infuriates Be Removed?"), cultural critics Josephine Livingstone and Lovia Gyarke in *The New Republic* ("The Case Against Dana Schutz"), and the novelist Zadie Smith in *Harper's Magazine* ("Getting In and Out").

5. In the "Acknowledgements" section, D'Souza thanks Bright and another artist at the centre of the protests, Pastiche Lumumba, for contributing artwork to her book.

6. See the titular essay in Fish's *There's No Such Thing As Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing, Too* (1994), pp. 102-119.

7. Fish condemns the decision of a Duke University student newspaper to publish an advertisement that claimed "the Holocaust never occurred" as blind adherence to the First Amendment. He argues that in appealing to the principle of free speech (an empty appeal according to Fish), the editor of the newspaper ignored more relevant

questions—such as whether the content of the advertisement was true—that would have (correctly, to Fish's mind) placed a limit on expression.

8. Emmett Till's cousin, Simeon Wright, has said Mamie Till decided on an open casket because "she wanted to world to see what those men had done to her son because no one would have believed it if they didn't see the picture or didn't see the casket". See Callard, "Emmett Till's Casket Goes to the Smithsonian", *Smithsonian Magazine*.

9. See hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990) and West, *Race Matters* (1993).

10. At the time of the Schutz controversy, Walker posted an image of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612-13) along with the following text: "The history of painting is full of graphic violence and narratives that don't necessarily belong to the artist's own life… a lot of art often lasts longer than the controversies that greet it. I say this as a shout to every artist and artwork that gives rise to vocal outrage. Perhaps it too gives rise to deeper inquiries and better art. It can only do this when it is seen" (qtd. in Stoilas). For Fusco's position, see her article "Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz's Image of Emmett Till".

11. Note that the assumption of a purely passive role by the would-be ally is ruled out by the very definition of "ally".

12. The opening section of Chapter 1 ("Two Conceptions of Black Nationalism") of *We Who Are Dark* contains the following passage: "Some political theorists, such as K. Anthony Appiah, Adolph Reed Jr., and Paul Gilroy, have challenged the currency of these racialist ideas by attempting to dismantle and discredit black nationalism altogether through a radical critique of what they take to be its various conceptual, empirical, political, and moral flaws. Yet if the point of such critiques is to shift black political culture in a more progressive direction, this strategy is unlikely to be effective. Strains of black nationalism have become, for all practical purposes, a constitutive component of the self-understanding of a substantial segment of the African American population. These strains run so deep that an uncompromising and comprehensive attack on them will surely be met with hostility or suspicion, if it is taken seriously at all" (25). A striking example of the hostility to which Shelby alludes can be located in a footnote in Fred Moten's *Black and Blur* (2017): "To whom is Gilroy speaking? (Or, in another register, by way of another structure of address, directly to him though I am certain he'll never read this, Who the fuck you talking to?) The question is crucial insofar as much of what Gilroy has written in the last decade seems directed toward the Great Tribunal of Rational Men, The National-Cosmopolitan Star Chamber. I wonder if they listen to him" (293).

13. For Gilroy, the black elites' "sense of what defines the racial group" may be "the black vernacular", "the ruthless alterity of hip-hop" (*Between Camps* 179) and the "visuality, icons, and images" of "youth culture" (270).

14. See, for example, Ashley Jardina's *White Identity Politics* (2019).

15. See, for example, *SOS – Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader* (2014) by Bracey, et al., and *Is It Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism* (2002) by Glaude.

16. See the opening paragraph of Chapter 4 for a summary of Ralph Ellison's treatment at the hands of certain black nationalists.

17. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term "cultural appropriation" was first used in an essay by Arthur Christy, published in the 1945 collection *The Asian Legacy and American Life* ("cultural appropriation"). Although the term was employed by Harold Cruse in his 1968 work, *Rebellion or Revolution?* (120), its use did not become widespread until the 1980s.

Chapter One

1. Reviewing *TBWR* in the *New York Review of Books*, the historian Eugene D. Genovese defended Styron against many of criticisms made in the volume. In their 1971 article "History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner", Seymour L. Gross and Eileen Bender are similarly sceptical of some of the key allegations made by the Ten. However, in *The Return of Nat Turner* (1992), arguably the most comprehensive study of the controversy to date, Albert E. Stone is largely sympathetic to the claims made in *TBWR*, while more recently Celeste-Marie Bernier's *Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination* (2012) and Christopher Tomlins' *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History* (2020) each accept the charges of racism made against Styron's *Confessions*.

2. *TBWR* consists of nine chapters with a brief introductory note by the editor, John Henrik Clarke. Thomas R. Gray's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831) is included in an appendix.

3. In an interview conducted for the documentary film *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* (2003), Alvin F. Poussaint defended his earlier reading of the homosexual episode in Styron's *Confessions*, arguing that, in 1967, "psychiatrists [. . .] believed that homosexuals lacked 'manhood', that they were feminized, that they were some form of woman, and that they were weak" (Poussaint qtd. in Greenberg 241).

4. One of the Ten, John Oliver Killens, laments the fact that Styron's Turner does not take Louverture as his model (Clarke 42).

5. Another controversial element of Styron's depiction of the relationship between Nat Turner and Margaret Whitehead is that it displaces the traditional idea that Turner had a black wife. Both Lerone Bennett Jr. and Alvin F. Poussaint point to Thomas Wentworth Higginson's claim that Nat Turner had a wife (Clarke 11, 20). Writing in

2016, the historian Patrick Breen states "With the notable exception of Eugene D. Genovese, who saw Thomas W. Higginson's piece [in the *Atlantic Monthly* in August 1861] as the only evidence for Turner's wife, historians have generally accepted that Turner was married" (Breen 194). Bennett sees the novel's omission of Turner's wife as "emasculating," part of Styron's "project of destruction involving the vitals of the historical personage named Nat Turner", while Poussaint claims that Styron was trying to show that Turner "was not a man at all" (Clarke 11, 21). Styron insists that there is not "any conclusive evidence of the existence of a wife" and that "if the original confessions of Nat Turner had provided Nat with a wife I would have given him a wife" (Greenberg 223, 224).

6. As Charles Joyner notes, "[The Ten] apparently entertained the delusion that historical research consisted of no more than reading *American Negro Slave Revolts*, Herbert Aptheker's 1937 master's thesis, ultimately published in 1966" (Greenberg 199).

7. Ernest Kaiser merely mentions *Ol' Prophet Nat* in a list of "novels dealing with Negro slave uprisings and unrest" (Clarke 50).

8. The frame narrator of *Ol' Prophet Nat* discovers Turner's first-person narrative written in the margins of an old Bible that he happens upon in "a secondhand goods store" (11).

9. Breen writes in a footnote "History contains many examples of masters arming slaves. The best single survey of slaves fighting for their owners is Christopher Leslie Brown and Philip D. Morgan, ed., *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006)" (222).

10. The essay was originally published in *Playboy* in January 1985 under the title "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood".

Chapter Two

1. See, for example. Henry Louis Gates' *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora* (2010) for a discussion on the conflicting interpretations of Fanon; see Manning Marable's *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (2011) and the reaction it elicited in Jared Ball's *A Lie of Reinvention: Correcting Manning Marable's Malcolm X* (2012); and see Nikhil Pal Singh on "the disjuncture between King as a redemptive national icon and King as an unsettling figure in opposition to the nation-state" (4).

2. *The Cross of Redemption* is hereafter referred to as *TCOR*.

3. See, for example, "Many Thousands Gone" (22), "Stranger in the Village" (123), "In Search of a Majority" (220), "Down at the Cross" (344), and "The Negro at Home and Abroad" (602-03). All page references to *Collected Essays* (1998).

4. Warren places the word "being" in "black being" under erasure throughout his text to emphasise its ontological impossibility.

5. See, for example, "Black English: A Dishonest Argument" (157) and "On Being White . . . and Other Lies" (167) in *The Cross of Redemption* (2011).

6. See Baldwin and Peck (50) for a similar statement.

7. The importance of knowing "what's happening" to blacks in America is also expressed on pages 319, 407, and 412 of *Another Country*, while further instances of the idea of "paying dues" can be found on pages 320, 343, and 407.

8. See chapter 2, "Policing the Police", of Bloom and Martin for an account of the Black Panther Party's strategy of armed self-defence.

Chapter Three

1. As at 21 April 2020, according to the sales rankings of both paperback and electronic books on Amazon.com, *Tar Baby* is the least popular of Morrison's first seven novels. (Its paperback/electronic ranking is #56,157/#985,459 compared to the next least popular, *Paradise*, #42,891/#909,185. Morrison's most popular work, *Beloved*, is ranked #2,154/#125,860.)

2. This is the pattern followed by Fox and Innes writing for *The New York Times* and *Guardian* respectively. Langer writing for *The Washington Post* also follows this trajectory although *Tar Baby* is given a passing mention in the transition from *Song of Solomon* to *Beloved*.

3. Here Morrison anticipates the thrust of Baldwin's impassioned 1984 essay "On Being White . . . and Other Lies" (*The Cross of Redemption* 166-70).

4. Duvall's essay "Descent in the 'House of Chloe': Race, Rape, and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*" was later collected in his book *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison* (2000). While few subsequent critics have mentioned the rape scene (although Stave and Edmunds both do), it does not appear that anyone has disputed Duvall's reading of the passage.

5. The scene has parallels with the scene at *Lucy's Place* in Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, where Leo Proudhammer sees "with a peculiar shock, the root of the despicable and tenacious American folklore concerning the happy, prancing niggers" (144). Proudhammer, however, sees beyond the surface appearance of things, noting that "[o]nly someone who no longer had any sense of what

constituted happiness could ever have confounded happiness with this rage" (144). Morrison may be nodding in the direction of the title of Baldwin's novel when Son wonders: "How long had he been gone, anyway?" (216).

6. Readers who find in the idea that Jadine has received something valuable from Son a disappointingly lenient attitude towards abusive masculinity should note that in the gull/starfish metaphor Jadine figuratively kills Son.

7. Critics have frequently referred to the three novels as a trilogy about "excessive love" (see, for example, Gauthier [396] and Hartnell [211]). Although this identification appears to originate with Morrison herself—a 1993 interview with the author claims that *Jazz* is "the middle volume of a trilogy" (Streitfeld)—when asked in 2001 if she wrote the novels as a trilogy. Morrison answered "No", before allowing that her initial intention (when writing *Beloved*) was to write "three stories on the same theme [. . .] variations of human love: love of a mother for children, romantic love, and spiritual love", and although she "never really effected [the idea of the trilogy]" the novels have "the thread of these varieties of love" ("In Depth with Toni Morrison"). Despite Morrison's own reservations about viewing the novels as a trilogy, Justine Tally has argued that "there are many valid reasons for considering these three novels as a whole" (75).

8. Morrison's proximity to critical race theory is indicated by the inclusion of two of the movement's key originators, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Patricia J. Williams, in a collection of essays entitled *Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case* (1997) that she co-edited. Morrison's own contribution to the collection, "Dead Man Golfing", along with her stated conviction of Simpson's innocence (Jaffrey), suggests a view of the police—as a deeply racist and corrupt institution—that broadly aligns with those of many critical race theorists, who hold that "racism is ordinary, not aberrational" (Delgado and Stefancic 8).

9. Ruby's three churches are all Protestant—Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal (83)—and an animus towards Catholicism is suggested by a dismissive afterthought in the opening chapter's description of the Convent as "a place that once housed Christians—well, Catholics anyway" (7).

10. See, for example, Morrison's essay "Harlem on My Mind: Contesting Memory—Meditation on Museums, Culture, and Integration" in which she presents—and appears to share—misgivings over the manner in which Harlem was represented in a 1969 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition overseen by a white director, Thomas Hoving (*Mouth Full of Blood* 79-85).

11. It should be noted here that critical race theory is a diverse body of thought encompassing conflicting ideas. Thus, the voice-of-colour thesis, in appearing to flatten out important differences in individual experiences within particular groups, "coexist[s] in somewhat uneasy tension with anti-essentialism" (Delgado and Stefancic 11).

12. The context of Hägglund's claim is his defence of Derrida's deconstruction of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology of internal time-consciousness. Hägglund argues that Husserl's model fails since it relies on the notion of an "extended presence" and cannot account for the fact that "self-presence and temporal extension are mutually exclusive attributes. Nothing that is temporally extended can ever be present in itself" (61). Thus, "Husserl repeatedly sets out to elucidate experience at its most immediate, only to discover that there can be no presence in itself" (70).

13. See, for example, Timothy Aubry's observation that "In stark contrast to the rigorously monitored borders of Ruby, [the Convent's] doors are open to anyone who wants to stay there, and, within its walls, people from all kinds of different backgrounds come together to form a community" (364).

14. Richard Schur makes a similar point—"If black identity is constantly under revision, then communal life may be impossible, because its foundations are constantly in flux" (294)—yet does not insist, as I do, that *Paradise* denies the very possibility of individual identity. Moreover, in his discussion of critical race theory, Schur does not argue, as I have, that in *Paradise* Morrison departs from one of its key tenets, namely the voice-of-colour thesis.

15. See, for example, Page (637-38), Widdowson (329), and Li (44-57).

Chapter Four

1. See, respectively, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (363), Kaiser (96), and Singh and Graham (397).

2. Kanye West's "New Slaves" samples "Gyöngyhajú lány" by Omega, while Kendrick Lamar's "Duckworth" samples "Ostavi Trag" by September.

3. One index of the differing attitudes of the two writers is to compare Morrison's question "What is there of value in black culture to lose and how can it be preserved and made useful?" (*Mouth Full of Blood* 222), with Ellison's statement that "For us, the question should be [. . .] what in our background is worth preserving or abandoning" (*The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* 213). That Ellison places equal weight on conservation and relinquishment indicates his much more acute sense of flux inhering to questions of culture.

4. Ellison's reference here to the "pathologies of democracy" may refer to an anxiety that he appears to share with Alexis de Tocqueville about the "tyranny of the majority". In *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville writes "In my opinion the main evil of the present democratic institutions of the United States does not arise, as is often asserted in Europe, from their weakness, but from their overpowering strength; and I am not so much alarmed at the excessive liberty which reigns in that country as at the very inadequate securities which exist against tyranny" (303). Ellison,

meanwhile, commenting on post-Revolutionary America, notes that once "the collectivity that had made the Revolution became fragmented" then "the rights of individuals and minorities required protection from the will of the majority" (*Collected Essays* 778).

5. Here, I take it as a given that Ellison treats his consummately crafted essays as works of art.

6. In *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life*, Jerry Gafio Watts repeatedly claims that Ellison either downplayed or was somewhat oblivious to the consequences of racism upon black Americans. For examples of such claims see pages 57, 85, and 117.

7. Writing one year after White's death in 2018, Herman Paul notes that "no other author occupies a position in the field [of philosophy of history] that is remotely as central as White's" (4).

8. Ellison's familiarity with *Ten Black Writers Respond* is indicated by his noting that "two of the ten critics tried to stick to the literary, to the artistic problems involved" (qtd. in Graham and Singh 170).

9. Reviewing Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*, Styron writes the following: "In his brilliant analysis, *Slavery* Stanley Elkins has demonstrated what must have been the completely traumatizing effect upon the psyche of this uniquely brutal system, which so dehumanized the slave and divested him of honor, moral responsibility, and manhood. The character (not characterization) of 'Sambo,' shiftless, wallowing happily in the dust, was no cruel figment of the imagination, Southern or Northern, but did in truth exist" ("Overcome").

10. Rampersad suggests that by 1968 the friendship between the two writers had diminished due to an unfortunate incident some years earlier (450-51). After the Ellisons had visited the Styrons at their home in Roxbury, Connecticut, they were considering purchasing a house there. But when the Styrons arranged for them to meet the agent who had sold them their own house, instead of showing them houses in Roxbury he took them "some miles away to Seymour, a dull industrial town". The Styrons were "deeply embarrassed" by the agent's apparently racially motivated actions. Rampersad quotes William Styron recalling the incident: "Ralph was furious, he was indignant, as he should have been [. . .] It was a calamitous insult" (451).

11. A recent example of such high-handedness can be found in the preface of Christopher Tomlins's 2020 study: "*In the Matter of Nat Turner* also attempts a meditation on history. But unlike William Styron I am a historian" (x).

12. I am using "existentialist" here in a sense that derives from Jean-Paul Sartre's discussion of cowardice in *Existentialism and Humanism* (2007): "There is no such thing as a cowardly temperament [. . .] what produces cowardice is the act of giving up, or giving in. A temperament is not an action; a coward is defined by the action he has taken" (39).

Chapter Five

1. Roth claimed that the word "pass" (in the racial context) "doesn't appear in 'The Human Stain'" (*Why Write?* 354). In fact, it does make a solitary appearance in relation to Coleman's expulsion from a brothel: "he'd once been identified [. . .] as a nigger trying to pass and been thrown out" (16).

2. Many black writers, including James Baldwin in both his 1967 essay "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White" and his 1984 essay "On Being White . . . and Other Lies", have noted the relative ease with which American Jews have "become white." This observation is sometimes made in the course of claims about anti-blackness being foundational to the modern world. In *The Racial Contract* (1997), Charles W. Mills views the ease with which "borderline Europeans"—a category including Jews—have been "accepted as full whites in the United States" as evidence supporting his contention that the modern world is structured by the division of whites (who are "granted full personhood" [71]) and nonwhites (who must "accep[t] subpersonhood" [88]).

3. Miriam Jaffe-Foger has noted that "Coleman Silk's crossing of the color line into Newark is especially symbolic because he is crossing into Roth's hometown, thereby beginning his transformation into Roth's likeness" (51).

4. See *Selected Letters of William Styron* and Pierpont Roth (42) for evidence of the friendship between the writers.

5. See Scherr on the likely apocryphal nature of the story surrounding Drew's death.

6. Alternatively, one might treat with suspicion Zuckerman's elevation of contingency, viewing it, for example, as a stratagem designed to obscure the operation of white supremacy, a system from which he too benefits.

7. "Liberal individualism" is—as the work of Bird and Krause suggests—a contested term. Dow proposes three chief senses of the term: "the juridical, the economic, and the self-realization model" (2). The sense in which I employ the term here is closest to the third of these. Dow identifies John Stuart Mill and Jacob Burckhardt as key figures here, the former in his championing of the individual's right to "experiment with different styles of living" despite "the demands of social conformity", and the latter in his characterisation of the Italian Renaissance as "a time in which persons moved from thinking of themselves only as members of a group to recognizing themselves as 'spiritual individuals'" (4).

8. Gutmann asserts: "The distinctiveness of the identification view depends not on the basis of identification, which can vary [. . .] [but] rather on how people perceive their contributions to combating injustice in relation to their interest in living a good life" (146).

9. The title of Rorty's book evokes the Civil Rights struggle by borrowing from the penultimate line of James Baldwin's seminal work *The Fire Next Time* (1963).

10. More recently, Francis Fukuyama has argued for the "need to promote creedal national identities built around the foundational ideas of modern liberal democracy" (166). These identities "requir[e] citizenship and the exercise of certain virtues" (162).

11. *The Human Stain* was published in the same year as *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* in which Robert D. Putnam traces a decline in political and civic engagement in the US between the 1960s and the 1990s.

12. For Coleman, "appropriate" is the "current code word for reining in most any deviation from the wholesome guidelines and thereby making everybody 'comfortable'" (152). The association between "appropriate" and "wholesome" conjures the supposed "country purity" of Organic Livestock's raw milk, a product that, for Zuckerman, induces "otherwise sensible adults" to indulge in a fantasy of childhood innocence, "pretending that they are seven years old" (46).

Chapter Six

1. Some of Everett's comments in interviews provide insight into his views on cultural appropriation. In a 2005 interview, he questioned the relevance of the race of the author to a book's content: "Even if the novel had African American characters, I don't know why it makes a difference that I'm an African American writer" (*Conversations* 117). When, in 2017, Yogita Goyal invited him to comment upon Dana Schutz's *Open Casket*, a 2016 painting depicting Emmett Till, Everett responded as follows: "A lynching is as much a part of a white American's history as it is mine. A white person perhaps cannot understand the fear and sheer rage associated with such an atrocity. But perhaps I cannot appreciate the shame associated with my culture's action. A terrible American event does not belong to one kind of American. That art addresses atrocities is a good thing" (Goyal, "Coming Home from Irony").

2. The agent's description can be read as a reference to two novels by Everett, *For Her Dark Skin* (1990) and *Glyph* (1999), respectively.

3. In "The World and the Jug", Ellison makes a distinction between his "relatives" (Richard Wright and Langston Hughes) and his "ancestors" (Ernest Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, André Malraux, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and William Faulkner) (*Collected Essays* 185).

4. Ellison goes on to state: "The same is true of James Baldwin, who is not the product of a Negro store-front church but of the library, and the same is true of me" (*Collected Essays* 163).

5. Berman writes that Ellison "is appalled that the novel's young, middle-class, Oberlin-educated author based her book's so-called authentic urban experience on a couple of days spent visiting relatives in Harlem. In a fit of pique, Monk fires off a

parody entitled 'My Pafology'". In a similar vein, Brock states that Ellison arrives at his decision to write a parody after "[f]inding out that Jenkins has no more experience than he of the life she describes" (164).

6. Everett has stated that this was the original title for *erasure* (*Conversations* 34).

7. In a 2005 interview, Everett was reminded of the fact that his "most successful novel [. . .] is the novel which offers up parodies of notions of race", to which he responded: "I can't tell you how much that pisses me off" (*Conversations* 105). When the publishing house Doubleday made him an attractive offer for the paperback rights to *erasure*, which they intended as the inaugural novel of their African American imprint, Harlem Moon, Everett turned them down, and joked: "It was tempting to have them invalidate themselves with their first publication but, you know, I really couldn't do that to my work" (34).

8. See Robert J. Butler's "Percival Everett's Signifying on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in *erasure*".

9. In a 2010 interview, Everett makes the following comments about *Precious*: "I call it tolerant racism, when educated people go to see a film about poor blacks at the bottom of society. This even gains force by appearing to be authentic, and school groups go to see such films with their teachers. And in this way what it means to be black once again becomes cemented in viewers' minds. You don't see many movies with well-functioning blacks. . . . They might not be exotic enough" (*Conversations* 186).

10. The addition of a young blind female character, Sis, is an allusion to Selina D'Arcey (played by Elizabeth Hartman) in *A Patch of Blue* (1965).

11. Not Sidney is aged "two, in 1970" (6).

Conclusion

1. In fact, Rekdal slightly mischaracterises Young's classification in that she omits from her discussion the appropriation of tangible works of art, what Young calls "*object appropriation*" (5-6). Thus, Young's categories are object appropriation, content appropriation (which he breaks into two subsets, style appropriation and motif appropriation), and subject appropriation. See Introduction for Young's definition of each category.

2. In 2020, the website of the National Museum of African American History and Culture displayed a chart titled "Aspects & Assumptions of Whiteness & White Culture in the United States". The chart, which according to the *Washington Post* was was based on a 1978 book, *White Awareness: Handbook for Anti-Racism Training* by Judy H. Katz (McClone), listed over fifty aspects/assumptions of "whiteness",

including "Objective, rational linear thinking", "Cause and effect relationships", "Hard work is the key to success", and "Intent counts" (Dreher). Although the chart was posted by the museum as part of its antiracist initiative, several black commentators found the implication that blacks did not subscribe to or possess the listed values and attributes to be racist. The writer Thomas Chatterton Williams tweeted "[t]he awful irony is that saying that black people somehow lack these qualities is the worst kind of racism a real white racist would spew" (qtd. in Dreher), while the legal scholar Richard Thomas Ford remarked that the chart "reflects a fairly common misconception that races are defined by distinctive cultural practices and norms" (Ford). The museum removed the chart from its website on 16 July 2020 (McGlone).

3. James O. Young allows that the appraisal of an artwork may involve consideration of the "circumstance of the work's production and, in particular, the context in which the work was produced" (33). Young arrives at this position by accepting and extending the scope of Nelson Goodman's assertion that "the aesthetic properties of a picture include not only those found by looking at it but also those that determine how it is to be looked at" (qtd. in Young 33).

4. Smith's phrase "felt known" recalls Lionel Trilling's insistence that "[a] real book reads us" (7). Trilling continues: "I have been read by Eliot's poems and by *Ulysses* and by *Remembrance of Things Past* and by *The Castle* for a good many years now, since early youth. Some of these books at first rejected me; I bored them. But as I grew older and they knew me better, they came to have more sympathy with me and to understand my hidden meanings" (7).

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