

Emerging Afrikan Survivals

An Afrocentric Critical Theory



Kamau Kemayó

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Routledge
New York & London

Published in 2003 by Routledge 29 West 35th Street New York, NY 10001
<http://www.routledge-ny.com/>

Published in Great Britain by Routledge 11 New Fetter Lane London EC4P 4EE
<http://www.routledge.co.uk/>

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Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group
This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kemayó, Kamau. *Emerging Afrikan survivals : an Afrocentric critical theory*/by Kamau Kemayó. p. cm.—(Studies in African American history and culture) Includes bibliographical references and index. ISBN 0-415-94582-8 (alk. paper) 1. American fiction—African American authors—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 2. American fiction—African American authors—History and criticism. 3. Literature and folklore—United States—History—20th century. 4. American fiction—20th century—History and criticism. 5. Bradley, David, 1950- Chaneyville incident. 6. American fiction—African influence. 7. Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 8. African Americans in literature. 9. Folklore in literature. I. Title. II. Series. PS374.N4K46 2003 813'.509896073—dc21 2003004359

ISBN 0-203-48397-9 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-57696-9 (Adobe e-Reader Format)
ISBN 0-415-94582-8 (Print Edition)

For all our ancestors lost in the Ma'afa, the Middle Passage, whose spirits continue to guide us.

For all those lost and seeking, those found and doing "The Work," for those who are ignorant and those who know, but still want to learn.

For those who teach, honoring the past, honoring the future.

A people losing sight of origins are dead. (xiii)

...we, life's people, people of the way trapped now in our smallest self, that is our vocation: to find our larger, our healing self, we the black people. (13)

Our way, the way, is not a random path. Our way begins from coherent understanding. It is a way that aims at preserving knowledge of who we are, knowledge of the best way we have found to relate each to each, each to all, ourselves to other peoples, all to our surroundings. (61)

Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons*

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Preface

This project engages more than twenty years of study that culminated in a doctoral dissertation in 1998. This text is essentially that dissertation with a few corrections, revisions, and elaborations. The relatively few modifications function to maintain the integrity of the original research. It is always tempting to revisit previous research and expand it according to one's current perspective as well as to incorporate changes and new developments in the field. Certainly, there is no such thing as a perfectly written text of any significant length. In revising this book, I constantly sought to say things better and caught myself trying to say more. In the author's note of my beat up copy of Samuel Delany's *City of a Thousand Suns*, he warns of the dangers of constantly whittling at fiction or poetry. I have come to believe that the same applies to research. This process, for me, has been more like making a stew or planting a garden. Of course, one wants to remove the weeds. But when does one decide that one more plant would be too many, or one more pinch of pepper is too much? Delany represents my feelings about this text better than I could, "And I suspect, with all its flaws and excesses, it is time to stop whittling." (Delany 1965) Fortunately, in this case, the desire to revise and elaborate is inhibited by considerations in the field. Only a relatively few scholars address the issues of Afrocentricity in literature and African survivals usually come under review in anthropological contexts, so there are not many sources that could add to this study. The most significant developments have occurred in the literature itself. More African American authors are being published now than ever before, especially in the popular genre of romance novels. The depth and breadth of these efforts do not encompass the range of the novels discussed in this criticism, but the presence of such novels represents progress and new markets. As more writers enter the profession and, perhaps more importantly, can be supported by it, I suspect that their subsequent novels will be richer and deeper, and will rely on more of the African American literary traditions.

Many contemporary novels fit the parameters suggested in this Afrocentric theory. Many more than I could accommodate in two books. The presence of three constructs—identity, oral tradition and extended family structures, and ancestral communion or African spiritual dimensions—when used to facilitate harmony and balance can be found readily in a substantial number of recent novels. While the identification and application of these three elements is the primary focus of the book, it also uncovers some related issues that I find intriguing. My interests are inter-disciplinary, so it is natural to me that the fusion of historical, political, and social patterns with literary expressions yields interesting parameters of examination. In particular, useful analyses of African American narratives follow the expansion of Robert Stepto's concepts of the pregeneric myths, freedom and literacy, to identity and knowledge. But, even if the myths of knowledge and identity are emerging in the literature, the African American experience is consistently changing and novelists are at the forefront of those documenting social evolutions. Five years ago, in the conclusion of my dissertation, I suggested that the generic or emerging

myths of knowledge and identity would be supplanted by new myths that represent the dreams and goals of Black folk, specifically Power and Acceptance. A brief exposition of this idea projects the progression of literacy to knowledge to power, and freedom to identity to acceptance. Rather than alter the focus of this study, these ideas are being explored in other research projects. The expanding field of African American literature is rich and fertile enough to support several such projects by myself and other scholars in the years to come.

Acknowledgements

The origins of this book run deep. It has its very roots in my first truly intellectual experiences: trying to come to know myself and my place in the world as an undergraduate. I explored a major in psychology and found it lacking the ability to explain my reality. I found the African and African American studies major more appealing and rewarding. I encountered mentors and intellectual stimulation, and a pathway, the beginnings of my way. Jah Irvin Brown, Sylvia Wynter, and Kofi Lomotey all helped and contributed to my awakening and pushed me toward an Afrocentric idea. Their inspirations and their examples continue to guide me. Later, during my masters work, Hal Fairchild showed a faith in me and allowed me to blossom as an academic and teacher.

At a literature conference at the University of California at Los Angeles in the spring of 1983, just before beginning my studies there, I met and heard Stephen Henderson speak. No other forty-five minutes of my life contributed so much to this book. I had already read his *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. As his title implies, his constructs of the soulfield and mascon imagery brought an understanding of the cultural components of Black poetry. His presentation ignited ideas for analysis of Black literature, not just Black poetry, in ways that many hours of class lectures had not even approached. I asked Henderson if these ideas about Black poetry could be applied to other forms of literature and he looked at me with a wry smile, stating that he believed so, but he had not done the requisite research to provide an unqualified affirmative answer. He said, "That would be a task for another scholar." He held the ball out to me. Here I am almost two decades later, picking it up, running to the goal.

My background and training are interdisciplinary, covering the areas of psychology, education, African and African American studies, and American studies. This book is a revision of my dissertation. I had a very supportive committee who all read each chapter over the fourteen months it took to complete. This book would not be possible without the assistance of members Donald Matthews and Paul Shore. Sister Elizabeth Kolmer headed the committee and provided precise and useful editorial commentary from the beginning to the end. The community of scholars who have supported me over the years deserve mention here. The willing ears and useful advice of Barbara Wood and Karla Scott at Saint Louis University helped me through some stressful times. My colleagues Jacqueline BriceFinch, Joanne Gabbin, and Cheryl Talley have supported and motivated me over the last four years. Many long and deep conversations with Nikita Imani solidified my belief in Africentric and Afrocentric thought as a viable academic process. I offer my sincerest gratitude to these many fine people who have helped me achieve so many goals. Of course, there are others whose names are not mentioned, but I still appreciate the encouragement and assistance they have offered. All of our efforts have not been in vain, and praise for this project reflects their contributions. Of course, the faults are all mine.

Pursuing Afrocentric work in an academic culture that is often disparaging and scornful is no easy course of action. So many have paved the way, both with their scholarship and their integrity. I cannot list them all here. I could not have reached this level without climbing on their shoulders. Their models encourage me when confronting the entrenched opposition. In spite of institutional obstacles and individual nay-sayers, Black studies, ethnic studies, and multicultural scholarship continue to change the face of higher education and the world of ideas. My gratitude to the many thoughtful, serious and challenging students I have been blessed with over the last two decades—Peace & Progress!

There are always a great number of people behind the scenes who make any production possible. My sincerest appreciation to the editorial staff at Routledge for making this project happen. Also the series' associate editor, Kimberly Guinta, deserves my special gratitude for her patience and understanding.

My family has been unbelievably supportive and tolerant. My parents, Howard and Connie Shelton, saw that I received the best education and home training possible. The spirits of my ancestors, known and unknown, are an ongoing force and constant inspiration. Everything I am and all that I accomplish are a credit to them. The thousands of hours I have spent at the computer, or buried in books, or lost in thought doing this something important to me, have kept me away from the most important things in this life: my wife and children. I must take this opportunity to reiterate my love and commitment to them. Carmalita Kemayo, thanks for everything! Kiyana and Tombé—I love you. Hopefully we can have a little more quality time now that this book is complete.

ONE LOVE, ONE HEART, ONE DESTINY

PART I
Emerging Afrikan Survivals:
An Afrocentric Critical Theory

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American....

(W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 16–17.)

This project explores how one African American novel published before the Civil Rights/Black Power Movements and two novels published after those movements demonstrate the development of an African consciousness. This African consciousness is the by-product of African survivals emerging in the multicultural arena of the United States. It will apply Du Bois' theory of the Negro's historical drive to reconcile his dual consciousness—one African and one American—through analysis of the ways the novels' Black male protagonists' searches for identity are presented, as well as identify African cultural survivals, or "Afrikan" cultural markers, in the more recent novels. Such consciousness neither detracts from nor replaces the American consciousness. Instead, it expands upon African Americans' potential, enlarging the scope of their humanity, and ultimately their American-ness. This expanded consciousness of one's African cultural heritage, especially in the historical context where that African background has signified nothing but negative meanings, indicates a positive change in group esteem and cultural awareness. Such cultural markers as explored in this research, when expressed in the novel form, bring added richness, depth, and originality to the African American's "message for the world."

In essence, this project will trace the development and maturity of emergent paradigms in African American literature. The novels to be reviewed are Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), and David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981). *Invisible Man* is an ideal choice for this project, not only because of its plot. Ellison, perhaps more so than any other African American author, is also a literary and cultural critic who expounds a theory of Negro American literature and culture as inherent parts of the broader American cultural phenomena. His collections of essays, *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*, span diverse topics of culture, literature and art. Besides being extremely lucid on the purposes of the contemporary novel, Ellison's thought self-consciously demonstrates both American and "Negro American" viewpoints. Likewise, Morrison has an admirable critical background, though her consistent production of top quality novels commends her for inclusion in this endeavor. Bradley, trained as an historian, brings a decided didactic flair to the writing in *The Chaneysville Incident*. His historicism bolsters the historically situated methodology (which will be outlined in chapters two and three) and clarifies certain points of African culture and African American perspective without being overly or overtly deterministic.

Each of these novels has a male protagonist who eventually comes to face his ancestor's folkloric legacy.¹ Each legacy consists partly of a strategy for achieving, as an African American, certain personal goals within American society, given the oppressive constraints of the larger society and culture. Though their pathways, social status, and even goals and aspirations differ, these three men challenge the societies in which they live in efforts to find and fit into their own place. Eventually each man finds not knowing or understanding himself as an obstacle to success. How they cope with various confrontations—with social realities, with other individuals and with themselves—has significant impact on the outcome of their searches for identity. They learn, and with varying degrees of success, are able to internalize the lesson that they can only be truly free individuals when their sainted ancestors have come marching in.

THE TIMELY TIMELESSNESS OF Du BOIS

Contemporary scholars still debate the significance of Du Bois' concerns. Gerald Early's *Lure and Loathing* contains twenty thoughtful essays that explore "race, identity and the ambivalence of assimilation." The starting point for each of these essays is Du Bois' famous passage on double consciousness cited at the beginning of this chapter. Primarily professors or poets, the authors of these essays are diverse, yet the perspectives of politicians and the pulpit seem conspicuously absent. However, spirituality, religion, and political ideologies are exemplified throughout. No clear or obvious party line can be found in this collection. These authors can be said to be representative of the African American community—and I believe they are fairly representative of mainstream intellectuals and the diversity that group should imply—without *representing* that community. One also can say that, while the problem of the color line has not been solved during the twentieth century, it has been articulated in a manner such that there are multiple consciousnesses: White and Black, but also grays, shaded with browns, reds, and yellows. Furthermore, there are axes of consciousness, tilted to the right or left. These tilts or shadings do not negate the pervasive empirical realities of American dialectics:

life is still lived, thought about, discussed, and experienced in terms of black and/or white.²

The color line has been embroidered with a more problematic thread, that of culture or nationality. The concept of nationality or nationalism—*African American* or *African American*—presented here reflects Marimba Ani's use of the term. For her, nationalism "is not limited by the concept of the 'nation-state,' rather it refers to the commitment on the part of the members of a culture to its political defense, its survival, and its perpetuation" (Ani 23).³ American-ness, for people of African descent in the United States, is an inescapable, perhaps immutable, certainly ill-defined reality. Yet, it remains a reality vigorously upheld and enforced through numerous cultural manifestations. While the concept and definition of "Americanness" could be the subject of volumes comparable to *Lure and Loathing*, this population's African heritage is at the heart of my research problem. Given the nationalism of the European Americans in the U.S., African heritage was, from the beginning, a significant point of conflict, both outside of and within African America. From the first generations bound in involuntary servitude, who recalled their direct cultural influences and shared them around the quarters, to the activist-oriented literate free men and women who sought to emigrate to their African homeland, consciousness of Africa has dignified and enlightened on the one hand, and embittered and shamed on the other. In spite of European interests' consistent efforts to cast Africa as uncivilized and dangerous, and African cultural manifestations as subhuman or inferior, over the centuries, African Americans like Paul Cuffe, Martin Delany, Alexander Crummel, and Marcus Garvey advocated and actually attempted to relocate themselves and others in Africa. Even Du Bois finally rejected the U.S., choosing to repatriate and die in Ghana.

Consciousness of Africa as a physical location is not the issue that informed Du Bois' concept of dual consciousness. Acknowledging its *cultural* effects within U.S. populations, he clearly states, "He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world." In this passage, the term "Negro soul" is neither euphemism nor metaphor, it refers directly and only to African-ness, to cultural rather than physical or cosmetic aspects of the population. Du Bois does not suppose that the Negro wants to become culturally or physically "White." He addresses mutual acceptance and esteem, not assimilation. Self-acceptance and self-esteem coupled with an acceptance and recognition by America would yield a mutually reinforcing "better and truer self." This is the ultimate message of *Souls of Black Folk*: we are a people, we are valuable, we are civilized. We were brought here civilized humans, our humanity and some of our African culture survived. All that we are did not come from Europe or America, and while here in America, we developed and created along some similar, some different pathways. The book—written as it was, by a Black man with a largely White readership in mind—asserts that our (Africans'—Du Bois' accepted and lived identity) humanity, our African ness must be respected.

AFRICAN SURVIVALS

The general mindset of Europeans and White Americans to believe in African inferiority, evidenced by the likes of Thomas Jefferson and Alexis de Tocqueville, pervaded academia during the nineteenth century.⁴ As Black Americans began to progress slowly after emancipation and into the turn of the twentieth century, more critical and conscientious scholars considered issues of African culture in America. History could not be ignored. Slavery had an undeniably devastating effect on the enslaved Africans. Likewise, free Blacks were subjected to entrenched racism in the form of social and legal proscriptions against their intellectual, economic, and political advancement. Emancipation, in spite of the Freedmen's Bureau's band-aids, did not alleviate the gross disparities between Blacks and Whites. Segregation, discrimination and outright violent physical suppression enforced a status quo, essentially a system of neoslavery.⁵

In freedom, as in slavery, segregation afforded a socialization process removed from mainstream, White, Eurocentric society. Oppression and racism also provided a negative object example for Blacks who, unable to adopt their oppressors' world view, often rejected the ideologies of those who rejected them.⁶ Though Whites, and therefore European culture, have controlled U.S. society and culture as a whole, African Americans had a different set of rich cultural examples in their quarters, communities and homes. The product of the lure and experience of Blackness is the survival and presence of African cultural norms, Africanisms, or African survivals. Whether caused by unconscious socialization and acculturation in segregated ghettos or Black belts, or by conscious resistance, these survivals are most obviously observed in socio-linguistic phenomena, but are also extremely significant in religious and artistic expressions.⁷

Questions more relevant to the assertion of Africanisms in African Americans might arise: Did African cultural expressions somehow survive the middle passage? In other words, do Africanisms exist in contemporary U.S. or New World societies? Did European cultural forms survive, even in an altered form, when the colonizers (as well as *immigrants*) crossed the Atlantic? To the latter question, most would say "yes." Language forms, writing styles, beauty standards, behavioral norms, all, and more, crossed the Atlantic in various national and ethnic forms from their European homelands. Not only did these cultures survive the Atlantic crossings, they amalgamated and prevailed and exerted hegemonic influence within the resultant "American" cultural milieu. In spite of concerted efforts to eliminate remnants of African culture, it is reasonable to suggest that some African cultural patterns survived.

The former question begs a few more considerations: Were the slaves indoctrinated so well (or was European hegemony so successful) that nothing of their former culture/s remained? Or did Africa also remain in some amalgamated form due to the enforced close proximity and segregation of African populations and the power dynamics demanded by the processes of chattel enslavement? Herskovits' *The Myth of the Negro Past* suggests that some of traditional African culture remains or survives in Americans of African heritage. "Coming, then, from relatively complex and sophisticated cultures, the Negroes, it has been seen, met the acculturative situation in its various manifestations over the New World far differently than is customarily envisaged. Instead of representing

isolated cultures, their endowments, however different in detail, possessed least common denominators that permitted consensus of experience to be drawn on in fashioning new, though still African-like, customs.” (297) In spite of their tribal differences, the relocated Africans had more in common with each other than with the Europeans who transported them. Herskovits targets the viability and variety of African root cultures, while recognizing that some distilled cultural aspects remain. The African cultural remnants could become entrenched, if not flourish, in the diverse and pervasive interactions with each other over generations.

Spirituality or religious innovations are significant survivals. Herskovits also addresses this important cultural dynamic, as he continues. “The presence of members of native ruling houses and priests and diviners among the slaves made it possible for the cultural lifeblood to coagulate through reinterpretation instead of ebbing away into the pool of European culture.” (297) Christianity and Catholicism were adapted to fit the enslaved Africans’ needs and norms. This development does not negate the very real history and presence of significant fundamentalism in African American religious praxis. Contemporary African American literature depicts a broad range of spiritual and religious interpretations, many of them bound up in traditional African religious customs and philosophies. “...in the United States, African points of view and African fundamental drives were not entirely lost.” (297)... This principle of disregard for outer form while retaining inner values, characteristic of Africans everywhere, is thus revealed as the most important single factor making for an understanding of the acculturative situation.” (298)⁸

Herskovits utilizes the phrase “relatively complex and sophisticated cultures” that implies knowledge of the structured societies that existed in West Africa since at least the seventh century. After the Roman Empire until the seventeenth century, no European state, when viewed as a military, economic or cultural unit, approached the accomplishments of Ghana, Mali or Songhay. Of course, the advent of more contemporary European multi-continental colonization and expansion is difficult to compare to Africa’s essentially landlocked empires. Yet the main purpose here is not to compare the cultures but to acknowledge that Africa possessed sophisticated and complex cultures, and that her children transplanted to the New World shared in that rich heritage. Once this assumption, or concession, is made, it is easier to see that African culture (at least its *least common denominators*) could and did remain in some form in descendants of Africans in the New World.

It is because black Americans have undergone unique experiences in America, experiences that no other national or racial minority or lower class have shared, that a *distinctive* ethnic culture has evolved. Though this culture is overwhelmingly the product of American experience, the first contributing source is still African... Recently, of course, with the emergence of independent African nations, a concern with this continent has become more prominent in the cultural symbolism of the black community and presumably also in the personal identities of many individual black men and women. (emphasis as in original) (Blauner 352)

Following from Blauner’s statement, the central thesis of this work suggests that not only the emergence of independent African nations fueled the emerging interest in African

cultural symbolism. A positive race and cultural consciousness developed as a result of the social ramifications of the Civil Rights/Black Power Movements, the revolutions right here at home. Some of these social ramifications were purely cosmetic, like hair and dress styles (Afros and dashikis). Other ramifications had deeper import, like naming practices, or political pushes for Black studies programs and the development of cultural nationalist movements. As the sixties were coming to a close, the change was directly evident in Black music and poetry, as well as other cultural expressions: visual art; Africa as a symbol; red, black and green as liberation colors; and the upcoming wave of Blaxploitation movies. This race consciousness instigated further and closer *intellectual* perspectives on Africa and Africans throughout the diaspora.

The primary assertion of this work is that closer attention to and more awareness of the details of African culture which accelerated because of (or, since direct causality is extremely difficult—if not impossible—to prove, at the very least, during the time frame of) the Civil Rights/Black Power Movements, directly affected and inspired the next generation of Black writers and was also evident in their writing. Thus, the African survivals that had been in evidence throughout the history of Africans in the Americas began to emerge into literary consciousness and literary expressions as the people became exposed to and explored various representations of their African background.

The idea of African consciousness is demonstrated in a variety of cultural expressions, philosophies and theories. Emigration movements were one manifestation of Black nationalism. Pan-African ideologies recognize culturally and politically similar aims and needs among African Americans, Afro-Caribbean populations, Central and South American African populations and, of course, continental Africans. In a cultural sense, Negritude⁹ and the Black Arts Movement¹⁰ stand out as attempting to articulate cultural similarities among worldwide Black African populations. Africanity, as proposed by Wade Nobles, seeks to denote and analyze African survivals in the U.S.¹¹ Maulana Karenga has pioneered theories of African consciousness and value systems, most notably Kawaida theory from which sprang the Nguzo Saba and Kwanzaa, and Ma'at which comes from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.¹² The list of constructs encompassed by Africanity would create an excessively broad range of analysis which ultimately might confuse useful data. Such problems as created by the use of Africanity also exist in the attempt to apply Ma'at or Kawaida theory in a comparative literature format. Assessing certain literature for Pan Africanist or Black Nationalist sentiments would provide a substantial yield for political texts, but would exclude most literature from the parameters of analysis.

Afrocentricity is also a holistic theory that could pose similar difficulties, but it has the potential to be applied in a more limited sense. One of the central benefits of Afrocentricity is that it encompasses the political, social and philosophical range of the previously mentioned paradigms. This research project investigates how one novel published before the Civil Rights/Black Power Movements and two novels published after those movements demonstrate the development of an Afrikan consciousness by the ways their Black male protagonists' searches for identity are presented. The concept of Afrocentricity will be used as a guiding framework and focal lens for a close textual analysis of the three novels, *Invisible Man*, *Song of Solomon*, and *The Chaneyville Incident*. In narrowing the parameters of Afrocentricity for a literary or cultural analysis, the work of Molefi Asante, the foremost Afrocentric theorist, is instructive.

I suggest three fundamental Afrocentric themes of transcendent discourse: (1) human relations, (2) humans' relationship to the supernatural, and (3) humans' relationships to their own being. In any culture and under any conceivable circumstances, these would be the areas of discourse that occur to me. To posit these three general themes is to try to diffuse some of the specific issues that occur as "universals" in contemporary analyses. (Asante 1987, 29.)

Asante's "themes of transcendent discourse" perfectly fit the needs of this research. The themes, because they are transcendent, indicate their significant effect on the individual or group and, as themes of discourse, will be legitimately applicable to novels. Asante's third theme, a human's relationships with his or her own being, is directly pertinent to my question since "how someone relates with his/her own being" can be viewed as an alternate definition for identity.

A list of constructs of Africanness includes oral tradition, elastic time, extended family structure and kinship patterns, rhythm, unity of mind/body/nature, religion/philosophy (spirituality), death/immortality, experiential communality, unity, stylish expressions of individuality.¹³ These concepts also fit into Asante's transcendent themes. Oral tradition and extended family/kinship structure stand out as directly expressing humans' relationships with each other, especially as the constructs of unity and experiential communality can be subsumed under their broader ramifications. Religion/philosophy, unity of mind/body/nature, and death/immortality fit under an umbrella of humans' relationship to the supernatural. These constructs are especially useful in that the family or kinship relationships with the protagonists will be reviewed for the ways they contribute to identity development.

Karenga's *Nguzo Saba* also easily fits into Asante's parameters. *Ujamaa-Familyhood*, *Ujima-Collective Work and Responsibility* and *Umoja-Unity* all directly relate to one's relationships with close or significant others and the community. *Kujichagulia-Self-Determination* is essentially an identity construct with cultural and political dimensions. *Nia* and *Imani* connote spirituality and relationships with the ancestors and the legacies they have left. The only one of the seven principles not directly implicated in the three themes of analysis is *Kuumba-Creativity*, and the foci of analysis, the novels under review, are examples of creative expressions by African Americans. Pan Africanism and Black Nationalism are not limited to the scope of human political and economic relations, they lead directly to identity issues.

This study specifically proposes close readings of the texts to document the ways they present relationships with extended family members, including ancestors and lovers, and the importance of these familial or kinship relationships in the characters' searches for identity. Also, I will analyze the ways the authors and their characters, both seen as representative cultural extensions of African America, make use of the oral tradition in transcendent events, and how such events pertain to identity crises and/or relationships with family/kin and ontological concerns. Additional validation of this method can be found in Houston Baker's discussion of the importance of words and concepts like grandmother, folksong and human in an African American cultural context.¹⁴

I agree with Asante's suggestion that the three discourses he proposes would be extant in any Black context: human relations, ontological concerns (relationships with the

supernatural,) and identity issues (humans' relationships with themselves). Therefore, any novels chosen for this project could conceivably fit into the analytical structure provided. Yet, it is obvious to state that some might exhibit or detail these relationships more so or better than others. Or even not at all. I will not make the mistake of limiting any group or individual's creativity by mandating some formulaic expression. Yet, I will suggest that more instances of Afrocentric dynamics exist within the broad parameters of contemporary Black creative expression than in earlier works. They will be seen specifically in, for the purposes of this study but are not limited to, the novel. *Invisible Man* is a charter member of the African American literary canon, almost an historical event in itself. Its author, Ellison, is actively and consciously *American*.¹⁵ Yet the analysis presented in a later chapter yields a substantial number of instances where Africanness is evident in the characters' searches for identity or their relationships with each other, and/or the supernatural. Likewise, perhaps any two post-60s Black novels could be analyzed to find some relevant connections to the questions of African consciousness and identity. However, the novels chosen are not the result of some random process. The two more recent novels, Morrison's and Bradley's, have earned their own special places in Black and American literature. *Song of Solomon* was highly acclaimed and its author, Toni Morrison, went on to win a Pulitzer award for a subsequent novel, *Beloved*. *The Chaneysville Incident* won the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award for the best novel of 1981, yet it has not enjoyed the popularity such an auspicious beginning might suggest.

For the purposes of this project, these three novels are more than just highly acclaimed literature. Their plots and themes fit well in the paradigm of protagonists' searches for identity that need to come to some reconciliation with some elements of Africanity or Black consciousness. The "problem of the color line" is a personal, psychological reality for African Americans; they do not have the luxury of viewing it simply as a political or philosophical issue. The "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" form the matrix on which these authors—Ellison, Morrison, and Bradley—present their protagonists' challenges. To their credit, these novels are not simple, straightforward clash of the races, protest novels, or tragic mulatto tales. From the perspective of an African American, the generation, the 25 or 30 years between the publication of *Invisible Man* (1952) and *Song of Solomon* (1977) or *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981) saw some of the most significant political, social, and creative upheavals in the history of the United States. The Negro or Negro American of 1950 became the black or Black, or Black American, or Afro-American, or African American, or even African of the post-Civil Rights era. These are not merely labels, they contain seeds and fruits of a group identity consciousness that informs the later novels but is only hinted at in *Invisible Man*. While the United States poses certain social problems for the protagonists in each of the novels under review, their African cultural identities provide the keys to their psychological wholeness or its lack and a subsequent ability to continue functioning in American society in a state of mental health. The authors' use of, or lack of, African survivals contributes greatly to the effective portrayal of this emerging African consciousness.

THREE TROUBLED MEN

The enigmatic narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man* explored the depths of Black identity like no African American's text before it. The novel's circularity suggests a progression, but at the end/beginning as in the beginning/end of the book the narrator still has no name and has only sorted out his various experiences. Some of the ways that others do not see him (he is the *invisible* man) are explicated, yet for all the light in his dungeon of self-imprisonment, he still fails to see himself—only glimpses and reflections of his image catalyzed by others. Specific information about the narrator's geographic and family background is curiously absent from the text. His only heritage seems to be the dying words of his grandfather, "yes them to death and destruction." And the narrator was, has been, and is a "good boy," with yesses for all, except for his consistent rejection of Ras who symbolically represents African consciousness. By the end/beginning of the novel, for all his cooperation and following, scripted by others, the narrator is still underground, not yet visible either to others or himself. Though he understands what it takes to see himself, he has yet to actually take those steps.

Morrison's Milkman suffers a comparably intense though different identity crisis, he is a flat two-dimensional character. He lacks the depth to see others, to know the meaning of pain in their lives, if he even perceives it. Milkman avoids painful self-awareness for more than three decades. Milkman's story is one of an awakening, a growing self-knowledge to accompany his debilitating self-love. But that knowledge is only of his emptiness, his life bordered by the narrow scope of his father's plans for him to take over the family business. *Song of Solomon* climaxes as Milkman learns of and goes in search of a "rich" family inheritance: gold. Gold acquired by murder, found while evading other murderers. Milkman finds no gold, but he learns of a different richness in his heritage. He learns of people who had the strength to love others strongly and had the ability to run, and not just to run, but to fly, away because of strength rather than weakness.

John Washington, the focal character in Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident*, is a strong, intelligent, self-aware Black man. He daily confronts con-temporary and historical realities; he is a historian. He knows his past and his peoples' past. However, John is haunted by an ancestral legacy of mysterious deaths. The novel revolves around John's going home to fulfill an obligation to his guardian, Old Jack, and his attempts to learn the truth about his father's and great-grandfather's deaths. Both men were rebels who went against the grain of imposed racial limitations and identities, as does John. One of the significant themes underlying *The Chaneyville Incident* is found in the development of its love story. John Washington is not only a history professor, he has embraced the greatest taboo of all in the eyes of the previous generation of Black men represented by Old Jack: John is in love with a white woman. His identity crisis extends back in time through his forebears, and laterally through all the contradictions and ambivalence of love and racial awareness in contemporary society.

These three troubled men and the intricate stories woven around them tell a broader story. Their identity crises mirror those confronting Black men (and women) on a daily basis. Likewise, the experiences of Ellison's narrator, Milkman Macon Dead, and John Washington are reflected in Derrick Bell's *And We are not Saved*, Ellis Cose's *Rage of a*

Privileged Class, Cornel West's *Race Matters*, Haki Madhubuti's *Earthquakes and Sunrise Missions* and *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous*, or James Baldwin's *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, among a host of other writings about contemporary Black America, including the aforementioned *Lure and Loathing*. Many texts by African American women also reflect these identity issues. No trio of texts could be presented as definitively representing the experiences of any people. Yet these are representative texts in the same manner that a senator or congressperson is a representative of his/her constituency. The representatives, whether elected officials or cultural artists, are individuals with their own lives and ideas, but they owe something to their group and carry the message of that group to a larger audience.

Besides representing a group of people, these novels also represent a historical epoch. There had been substantial non-violent civil disobedience by Blacks prior to the publication of *Invisible Man*, including participation in the Communist Party similar to the political dogma of the Brotherhood experienced by the narrator. Though race riots, before the 1960s, had primarily consisted of groups of Whites brutalizing Blacks, there had also been organized and spontaneous Black physical resistance comparable to the riot led by Ras that occurred near the end of the book. However, *Invisible Man*, published as it was in 1952, is almost prophetic because the widespread occurrences of these forms of non-violent and violent resistance were still to come later in that decade and the next. While Ellison could envision these potential actions, his vision of Black potential was nevertheless limited. Though African Americans by 1950 had been present in small numbers in most of the prestigious universities across the country, his narrator was limited to the scope of an all-Black college supported by White philanthropy rather than the Ivy League or local state university. Interracial sex involving Black men and White women, either in the sublimated form of the battle royal or the direct potential of his interactions with Sybil, is not acceptable. White men have power in *Invisible Man*. The narrator is always aware of this power and is fearful of directly going against their wishes, even in his own best interest.

The more contemporary, post-1960s novels feature different patterns or habits of interracial interactions. *Song of Solomon* has no significant White characters and few direct interactions with Whites. In the scene where Milkman and Guitar are arrested, Milkman is contemptuous of the shuffling darky role Pilate assumes in the police station. The Seven Days go beyond random or organized violence; they are a covert organization, exacting retributive death on White society. John Washington, who already has a White significant other, treats Judge Scott (a venerable, previously powerful man fifty years his senior) with the respect of a peer. Washington treats the Judge's son, Randall, (twenty-five or more years older than he, but less powerful than his father) with the contempt one would show a peer. Washington is a professor, he teaches White kids, and he has raped a White woman. He demands respect from Whites rather than blindly giving it to them. These texts are not fantasies; Blacks still have little power and still know where they fit in the pecking order. However, their characters' broadened parameters of potential action are enabled by the social and political realities Blacks experienced during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s.

The sociopolitical consciousness engendered by the 1960s affects the presentation of interracial interactions in African American literature.¹⁶ As sociopolitical consciousness changed, so did cultural consciousness. The process was not one of either/or dialectics.

Blacks believed they were American and fought for their rights as citizens. Yet, they never denied their racial/cultural heritage. The dynamic of asserting their American-ness did not necessarily imply assimilation and buying into the pervasive anti-Black, pro-White rhetoric. In fact, for many, as the scope of their American-ness increased, so did their African consciousness.¹⁷

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this introductory chapter, I have used Black as synonymous with African American, Afro-American, or “of African descent.” In many ways this is both intentional and unconscious. It is neither contradictory nor ambiguous. Throughout my lifetime, I have seen these terms phased into popular and academic vernacular in place of and preferable to the term Negro. They have been used, seemingly interchangeably, to refer to the same population, so I use them interchangeably or for variety. Many did (and still do) suggest that there are political implications and reasons for choosing to use a shortened and hyphenated Afro-, or using African in conjunction with or without a hyphen between the two, or simply using Black (either capitalized or lower case.) These particular arguments have exerted minimal influence on my usages. The meanings and their implications are often idiosyncratic, since no real consensus seems to exist. The issue of terminology is only relevant here because I want to avoid the problem of having people read *their* idiosyncrasies into *my* usages. Therefore, the reader can only assume that I am defining a phenotypically or culturally identifiable population if I use the term Black or African American, or Afro-, as in Afro-Caribbean.

However, I do have some preferences and politicized meanings associated with terms as I use and choose them. First, I believe that a group of people expressed as a national or continental whole should be capitalized, it is a personal pronoun to an exponential degree. Black, as well as White, refers to a group of people identified by a continental, if not localizable into a national, distinction: Black people’s ancestors are from Africa, White people’s are from Europe, where they currently live is irrelevant. I believe that these, Black and White, are primarily phenotypic distinctions with cultural implications. Such a distinction does not ignore the fact that no person (or only a very few people) is purely homogenous in any “racial” sense, except that we all belong to the human race. Neither do my use of Black and White imply a lack of understanding of the diversity of “racial” strains—encompassing “Red,” “Yellow,” or “Brown” people from throughout Asia and the Americas in addition to the aforementioned populations—present and contributing to the multicultural character of the U.S. Adding the term American (I do not hyphenate it except in a first generation person) denotes cultural and national identity. This implies that the person has significant influence from a dominant and hegemonic Eurocentric culture and resides in or is a citizen of the United States, whether that person is of African, European or other continental descent. Examples of this are: A person born in Ghana visiting the U.S. is Ghanaian. A Ghanaian living in the U.S. is a Ghanaian-American or African-American. His/her children would be Ghanaian American or African American. However, within this distinction is that person’s preference, especially as regards that person’s tribal affiliation. If they prefer to consider themselves Ashanti or Akan, then I call them as they desire. White European and Black African, as I would use

the terms, are redundant. Of course, that contemporary world society offers many examples of Black Europeans, as well as White Africans must also be recognized. If specificity concerning nationality or political dynamics is needed, I will be explicit. If a person is of directly mixed heritage, then mixed heritage, multiracial, or biracial would be used.

I do make one political distinction with the use of a term, and this is used sparingly in the introductory chapter. The spelling of Africa with a K (Afrika), has been proposed by some, in particular Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), as a more authentic spelling and that using the C spelling is a “pol-lution” of traditional languages as most vernacular or traditional languages of the continent use a K spelling. The C spelling came into effect and was substituted only when the K was seen or heard, and when the population of the continent was dispersed over the world. The argument continues that the K spelling symbolizes a “Lingua Afrikana” and our (Afrikan peoples) coming back together again.¹⁸ I do not buy or buy into all of the rationale behind this argument. My main counterargument is that I do not know that either a C or a K comes from an alphabet one could say is legitimately attachable to an “Afric/kan” language, tribal group, or country. I also do not know that either “Africa” or Afrika” is a legitimate name for the continent. Dr. ben-Jochannen claims that Alkebulan is the legitimate name for the continent.¹⁹ I do know that K, in English phonetics, is either silent or consistently the hard C sound, whereas the C sound has a soft option, like the S sound. Therefore, the C is phonetically superfluous, capable of being replaced by either the K or the S to render its sounds, except in diphthongs (but it really is unnecessary to complicate the discussion with picayune tangents.)

I like the idea that the K spelling represents a diasporic coming back together and a joining of cultural consciousness across linguistic, tribal or national borders. Significantly, most African Americans do not know their direct national or tribal heritage, or, like most Europeans, it is from two or more groups. Unlike most Europeans, African Americans do not have even the benefit of knowing their traditional surnames, or having relatively easily traceable family trees, as a partial guide to ancestral heritage. The idea of a symbolic “Afrika,” rather than a specific and deterministic one, makes sense in this context. Yet, for me, the most important use of the K spelling comes about for those Black people who consciously choose to acknowledge, study, and celebrate their Afrikan heritage. Many of the poets during the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s chose the K spelling as their preferred option. While most Afrikan Americans are not of the Garveyite persuasion (desiring a permanent relocation to the continent,) a significant portion of the population has chosen Afrikan names in conjunction with or to replace their Eurocentric birth names. The Afrocentric Afrikan American may also practice Kwanzaa (a distinction from just celebrating it) and embrace the Nguzo Saba or Ma’at, adopt Afrikan styles of dress or hairstyle and choose Afrikan forms of Art, including music, sculpture and other graphic arts, and cuisine. In a hypermediated society, overexposed to Eurocentric images, such consistent choice of Afrocentric images, when contrasted with the faddish come and go of fashion or “cool,” must be both intentional and conscious. Such external trappings need not be present for the Afrikan consciousness to exist, but it must be actively expressed in some manner in the person’s lifestyle.

According to Robert Farris Thompson, the use of “K” in Kongo or Bakongo, rather than Congo, symbolizes, for Africanists, the Bakongo people or Kongo civilization as

distinct from the colonial states of the Bel-gian Congo, which includes many people from diverse tribal origins.²⁰ Thus the preference for a K spelling in Afrika to denote a conscious choice to acknowledge specific African-rooted cultural background rather than a colonial entity is a comparable and consistent lexical revision. This appeals to an Afrocentric consciousness that chooses conscious self-identity and kugichagulia over imposed ideologies or spellings.

Africanity, Wade Nobles' conceptualization of African philosophy within a New World context, is a recognition that the lifestyles of people of African descent have been substantially influenced by African survivals. Yet Nobles' paradigms do not imply conscious intent, merely significant action, organizational patterns and structure. Afrikanity extends Nobles' ideas to a population who actively, consciously embraces and espouses Africanity or African forms instead of, and often in contradistinction to, the mainstream or Eurocentric normative options. This distinction between African and Afrikan, or Africanity and Afrikanity, becomes important when considering cultural expressions like literature. In effect, this project amounts to a study of the development of "Afrikan" aspects in contemporary African American literature, yet acknowledges that the authors of many texts may not be embracing the emergent Afrikan survivals in any intentional manner.

CHAPTER 2

Historically Situating African American Culture

METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

This project will use a historically situated approach to locate each of the three focal novels in their historical and cultural epoch. While the methodology may seem similar to new historicism, it really owes more to contemporary directions of Black literary criticism, which will be discussed in detail in chapter three. Close readings of the texts, framed by Asante's three fundamental themes of transcendent discourse, will be used to determine their levels and modes of Afrikan expression. In this context, *Afrikan* explicitly references distilled examples of cultural imperatives arising on the continent of Africa, especially those behaviors or beliefs that transcend and/or cannot be identified exclusively with local cultural groupings. A comparative perspective will also be employed as the paradigmatic themes will be analyzed in relationship to each other.

Using a historically informed or situated methodology is essential to this project. By setting texts in their historical perspectives, the social and political parameters of their recursive strategies can be considered in conjunction with their literary intertextualities. History, the lived experiences of the authors, their local and more global communities, becomes, like music or folk expressiveness, significant influences on thematic and structural content. The earliest African American novels, William Wells Brown's *Clo-tel*, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, Martin Delany's *Blake, or The Huts of America*, and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, were either largely autobiographical—coming close to formal ex-slave narratives—or featured the slave society of the U.S. What is important is that although abolitionists could propose a free society, until after emancipation, no African American author could present a vision of how one might look. Though some of the characters might have been free, slavery still existed in the society. The specter of slavery haunted African American authors until around the turn of the 20th century.

Much twentieth century Black fiction, including many contemporary efforts, has been criticized for being merely protest literature or overly sociologically deterministic because of its foci on the effects of race within its characters' lives. In spite of Richard Wright's highly acclaimed *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, by consciously focusing on their characters' breadth of humanity and searching for more universal themes, were among the first African American author/critics to successfully proclaim a newer, higher vision for the Black novel. Some subsequent authors, like Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler, have escaped the boundaries of African American reality and forms of literary realism, and have been able to access contemporary society's technological

trends to create and publish in the science fiction arena. Other authors have stayed within the realm of reality as we know it but, in the light of the increasing diversity of African American experiences, have produced works reflecting a broad spectrum of potential within this society. Melvin Tolson (*Harlem Gallery*) and Ishmael Reed (*Last Days of Louisiana Red, Mumbo Jumbo*, among others) are only two examples of Black novelists who have transcended the limitations of realism in satirical criticisms of the foibles of contemporary culture. Trey Ellis' cyber-novel *Platitudes* is made possible by the social and political realities of contemporary, hypermediated *computer* literacy. The proposed methodology, in taking into account the historical, literary, and social contexts of texts, implies that literature is not only intertextual but also historically, sociologically situated.

Thus the new historicists have discarded the old distinctions between literature, history, and the social sciences, while blurring other boundaries.

...new historicists have reminded us that it is treacherously difficult to reconstruct the past as it really was—rather than as we have been conditioned by our own place and time to believe it was. And they know that the job is utterly impossible for anyone who is unaware of the difficulty and of the nature of his or her own historical vantage point...when the new historicist critics of literature describe a historical change, they are highly conscious of, and even likely to discuss, the theory of historical change that informs their account. They know that the changes they happen to see and describe are the ones that their theory of change allows or helps them to see and describe. And they know, too, that their theory of change is historically determined. They seek to minimize the distortion inherent in their perceptions and representations by admitting that they see through preconceived notions; in other words, they learn and reveal the color of the lenses in the glasses that they wear.¹

This passage by Ross Murfin, although describing the new historicist methodology, clearly outlines the rationale behind the approach this study takes in looking at Black literature in the U.S. Ralph Ellison, author, culture and literary critic endorses the idea of the novel as both an instrument and document of social change. If this is true, then it seems reasonable, if not necessary, for a critic to approach the novel on its own terms (or, rather, the author's,) instead of using some external and potentially arbitrary standard or set of standards. Yet the novel does not stand alone; it, too exerts force on the society it documents. The critic is not immune to the same historical forces working on the novelist; he/she should take into account their particular place within the unfolding history or their perception and response to it. Therefore, the new historicist or historically situated critic must look at: the text, the author's intentions, the historical and social backdrop of the novel, the critical response to the novel, and the critic's own intentions. Murfin details these critical interrelationships,

...historicist critics, who must be interested in a work's point of origin and its point of reception, will understand the former by biography and bibliography. After mastering these details, the critic must then consider the expressed intentions of the author, because, if printed, these intentions

have also modified the developing history of the work. Next, the new historicist must learn the history of the work's reception, as that body of opinion has become part of the platform on which we are situated when we study the book. Finally, McGann urges the new historicist critic to point toward the future, toward his or her *own* audience, defining for its members the aims and limits of the critical project and injecting the analysis with a degree of self-consciousness that alone can give it credibility.

(Murfin, 196–197.)²

As Ellison states, “as a literary form the novel has been primarily concerned with charting changes within society and with changes in personality as affected by society”³ these are the kinds of historical, social and personal changes concerning this project. The research focus on Afrocentric components of identity, interpersonal relations, and ontological concerns is represented in another of Ellison's statements, “But it is worth remembering that one of the implicitly creative functions of art in the U.S.A. (and certainly of narrative art) is the defining and correlating of diverse American experiences by bringing unknown patterns, details and emotions into view along with those that are generally recognized.”⁴ The emergent Afrocentric patterns of oral tradition, ancestral heritage and extended family that contemporary African American authors are replicating, elaborating upon, and revising are beginning to be recognized in the field of literary criticism.⁵

HISTORICAL CHANGE & CULTURAL MARKERS: THE HISTORICAL TRADITION

The focus of my research is cultural change specifically within the African American community as reflected in selected fiction. Cultural change for African Americans is intimately related to historical processes. History is used within a broad scope in this context. It necessarily includes political, psychological, and sociological phenomena. Berry and Blassingame's *Long Memory* and Franklin and Moss' *From Slavery to Freedom* survey an African American history that encompasses their cultural and artistic contributions to the United States. These histories clearly show that African Americans came to the New World with a strong cultural sensibility and, although oppressed and marginalized by the U.S. mainstream, consistently have struggled to express and enhance their human potential. The struggle is ongoing but, in view of such trials and tribulations as the group has experienced, has been successful.

Further justifications for the historical analyses presented by Franklin & Moss, and Berry & Blassingame are located in the more focal or period work. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750–1925*, Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long*, and Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, which, considered collectively, demonstrate that, in spite of the slavery status of the vast majority of the population, African Americans nevertheless maintained a belief in their intrinsic humanity, and endorsed moral and aesthetic value systems which continued beyond emancipation. Genovese's text takes a close look at the daily lifestyles of the

enslaved African American population. His work shows that they consistently developed and expressed behavior patterns that differed from, and resisted, the Eurocentric American norms in religion, work, and family life. Gutman traces African American family structure back to West African roots and demonstrates that, in contrast to the stereotyped presentation of the devastated Black family, slaves as well as free African Americans maintained close and valuable family ties. Litwack notes the myriad difficulties experienced during the Reconstruction era. Recovering from the turbulent upheaval of one structured lifestyle in antebellum society to create new and beneficent patterns out of the ambiguities of freedom for Black people in the U.S., African Americans struggled to effect self-sufficient economic lives, wholesome family lives, uplifting religious institutions, and adequate educational opportunities. Levine explores the intricacies of Black expressive culture, in particular the unique folk culture that developed out of the combination of their African background and the experiences of slavery in the U.S.

All of these texts support the argument for specific cultural patterns or African influenced world views which feature oral tradition, a veneration of elders or ancestors, and the significance and ambiguity of identity issues for African Americans. Genovese states,

Two other interrelated features of West African religion especially bear on the black experience in America. First, West Africans practiced what has often dubiously been called "ancestor worship"... The traditional attitude toward ancestors, and therefore toward the aged, perpetuated a profoundly "Eastern" rather than "Western" view of the world. Whereas Western civilization bequeathed to Euro-Americans, especially Anglo-Saxons, a vision of being heirs of the ages, African civilization bequeathed to Afro-Americans a vision of being debtors to the ages and, accordingly, a sense of responsibility to those who came before. (Genovese 212–213.)

Marimba Ani provides a more accurate label for Genovese's dubious ancestor worship. In *Yurugu*, she presents a concept of ancestor communion,

The African philosophical conception of ancestor communion transcends lineal time and allows people to avoid the limitations of their mortal and finite existences. Africans exist, through cosmic and sacred time, both in the past and the future, as they experience the present. In fact, the distinctions between past, present, and future disappear since the conception is not lineal, but cyclical, spiraling. Having children becomes an honor of participating symbolically in the primordial act of creation. It is a spiritual necessity, a cultural obligation, since birth represents the continuance of the group, and of the "self," our own immortality. Our ancestors and origins are repeated in sacred symbols through which we unite with them, not compete with them. (Ani 462.)⁶

Clearly Ani's sense of the cultural obligation of producing children is consistent with Genovese's description of debt and responsibility. Both focus on group dynamics rather

than an individual's immediate forebears. The concept of ancestor communion corresponds to Asante's ontological concerns and provides a sign to be considered as symptomatic of African cultural consciousness.

Almost all of Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* is focused on African-American oral phenomena. African orality is central to his discussions of Black religion, song, humor, and folklore. "The Africans from whom the slaves had descended lived in a world of sound; a world in which the spoken, chanted, sung, or shouted word was the primary form of communication" (Levine 157). This text is more than a study of the types of oral phenomena in the African American community. Levine details the content of these phenomena in a manner that elucidates the dynamics of Black identity in a White society. Each section—on religion, spirituals, changes after emancipation, folklore, humor, and heroes—demonstrates the significant differences between comparable mainstream cultural expressions and African American cultural behaviors. Levine very effectively argues for a cultural and cosmological continuity (stated in terms quite similar to Ani's African philosophy of ancestor communion) which places Africa as a significant, if not dominant, locus of stability, challenging those who claim that African culture disintegrated upon contact with European hegemony in the New World.

What has been lost sight of too easily in these pronouncements is that culture is more than the sum total of institutions and language. It is expressed as well by something less tangible, which the anthropologist Robert Redfield has called "style of life." Peoples as different as the Lapp and the Bedouin, Redfield has argued, with diverse languages, religions, customs, and institutions, may still share an emphasis on certain virtues and ideals, certain manners of independence and hospitality, general ways of looking upon the world, which give them a similar lifestyle. This argument applies with special force to the West African cultures from which so many of the slaves came. Though they varied widely in language, institutions, gods, and familial patterns, *they shared a fundamental outlook toward the past, present, and future and common means of cultural expression* that could well have constituted the basis of a sense of common identity and worldview capable of withstanding the impact of slavery. [italics added] (Levine 4.)

More than an analysis of the varieties of oral modes of communication in African American communities, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* documents the sociopolitical utility of the cultural expressions so that they are seen less as modes and more as means to various ends. Viewing these oral communication patterns as means to specific ends and incorporating Ani's definition of political behavior, especially in Levine's explications of the prevalence of the trickster role in folklore and the different perspective of "heroes" in the Black community, these cultural expressions can be monitored for political content or intent.⁷

The three novels under critique in this study use their characters' oral engagements as means to particular ends. While the characters in the texts do not always have group or cultural nationalist objectives—applying Ani's concept of nationalism—the authors' choice (whether conscious or subconscious is irrelevant to the outcome) to exemplify

ancestral communion and oral history as a means to deal with identity crises reflects, in Ani's words, "the commitment on the part of the members of a culture to its political defense, its survival, and its perpetuation." Such structures in contemporary African American novels function to defend and perpetuate African consciousness by recording it and translating it to a larger population in a hypermediated Eurocentric society. Such presentations, especially when found in so much contemporary Black literature, insure the survival of African cultural paradigms even if they are preserved in Western scriptocentric structures.⁸

Issues of Black identity that had existed even during the period of enslavement intensified with the echoes of Civil War battles still ringing in the freedmen and freedwomen's ears. While the more pragmatic needs for political representation, economic sufficiency, education, protection from retributive violence by Whites, and the opportunity to implement/develop stronger family lifestyles may have dominated the thoughts and actions of ex-slaves, they nevertheless found time to debate the relevance of their ambiguous, and often conflicting, dual heritages, the African and the American. With most of his text as a backdrop for comprehension of the sociological and psychological rationale behind the African's dilemma, near the end of *Been in the Storm So Long*, Litwack discusses the various positions on the question of nationality taken by the newly freed people.⁹ The need for an accurate racial label that expressed their loyalties to the United States as well as their race troubled Blacks in the 1860s as it did Blacks in the 1960s and 1970s. While the political similarities between those emancipated in 1863 and their African counterparts who were still in the throes of European colonization did not as closely parallel the twentieth century phenomena of Civil Rights and the achieving of independence for many African nations, the issue of African heritage was still important to the identity construction of 1860s African Americans.

What admittedly compounded the problem of identity and conceptions of Africa was the extent to which Americans, including many blacks, had been inculcated with the notion that whiteness was not only more acceptable but also more beautiful and alluring... Recognizing the importance of developing self-pride and racial consciousness in their people, some black spokesmen thought the aftermath of slavery a propitious time to question the premium placed on white, Western standards of beauty. Rather than view their blackness as a badge of degradation, they should be encouraged to embrace it as a symbol of strength and beauty, superior in many respects to the pale, pasty-complexioned Caucasians. Not only was blackness a color borne by their ancestors in Africa who had erected ancient and noble civilizations but it characterized a majority of the peoples of the world. (Litwack 544.)

The various issues encompassed by assimilation and beauty standards, and in how to be and celebrate being American while at the same time being and celebrating one's Negroness or Africanness remain as cogent in contemporary society as they were 130 years ago.

Cruse (1967), Carson (1981), and Carson, et al. (1987) detail twentieth century Black American resistance, using a variety of strategies and the means available to them, in ubiquitous efforts to realize “the American Dream.” Cruse identifies three dominant modes or strategies of social change utilized by African Americans: Political, economic and cultural. Cruse notes that these modes of social change are all attempts at achieving *autonomous* power. Perhaps as much social scientist as historian, Cruse presents Harlem as a microcosm of African America. He explores and analyzes exemplary group movements with respect to their locus of change. He finds each of them lacking because, in one way or another, they are ultimately controlled by interests outside of and antagonistic to the needs of Harlem/Black America.

In short, Harlem exists for the benefit of others and has no cultural, political or economic autonomy. Hence, no social change movement of a protest nature in Harlem can be successful or have any positive meaning unless it is at one and the same time *a political, economic and cultural movement*. A Harlem movement that is *only* political, or *only* economic, or *only* cultural, or *merely* a protest movement—has to fail. It must be a *combined* movement, yet the characteristic disunity of purpose, peculiar to Harlem movements, prevents such united efforts... A social movement of combined forces in Harlem must press relentlessly for *Harlem autonomy in politics, economics and culture*. [author’s italics] (Cruse 86–87.)

Cruse’s theories on social change are not as important, in this context, as his understanding of the multifaceted realities of social change. Cruse supplies another lens through which to view the novels as documentations of social change: What do the novels say about social change on the levels of culture, politics and economics? If, in Cruse’s analysis, no Harlem movement was able to combine successfully presentations of these three modes of social change, then perhaps it is unrealistic to expect any one novel or author or even group of authors with their novels to accomplish the feat. Yet, if it is considered that the novels themselves are cultural artifacts and cultural representations, what the novels say about politics or economics will be significant. On this level, *Invisible Man* is extremely lucid, and this accounts, in part, for its immediate and long-term success; Ellison’s presentation of the intricate effects on the Black’s individual powerlessness or the general and pervasive group powerlessness in U.S. economy and politics is extremely important. As the narrator’s attempts at leadership are controlled by others who do not have his or his group’s best interest in mind, his efforts can not be successful. This says much about his identity crisis, especially his identity as an American, which Ellison the author/critic was so adamant about developing.¹⁰

Cruse could be talking about Ellison’s narrator when he comments,

As long as the Negro’s cultural identity is in question, or open to self-doubts, then there can be no positive identification with the real demands of his political and economic existence. Further than that, without a cultural identity that adequately defines *himself*, the Negro cannot even identify with the American nation as a whole. He is left in the limbo of social marginality, alienated and without direction in the landscape of

America, in a variegated nation of whites who have not yet decided on their own identity. The fact of the matter is that American whites, as a whole are just as much in doubt about their nationality, their cultural identity, as are Negroes. Thus the problem of Negro cultural identity is an unsolved problem within the context of an American nation that is still in process of formation. (Cruse, 12–13.)¹¹

Thus Americans, Black and White (and Red, Brown, or Yellow) can identify with *Invisible Man*. In fact, this is the crux of the sixties for African Americans: so many factions in America were loudly questioning their and their country's identity—the Vietnam War protesters, who hated war, especially that *confusing, losing* war; the hippies, who loved sex, drugs, and rock music; the Women's Movement, who burned bras; Black Power militants, who burned cities; Civil Rights activists, who loved to march, hold hands, sing songs and get fire-hosed, police dogged, or cattle prodded; the ecologists (flower power), who loved not only the land, but the air, water, and healthy human bodies; the liberals, who hated to see so many with so little, and so few with so much; the conservatives, who never really lost power (they just had to provide an illusion that they were sharing a little of what they had); and the media, who brought it all into everybody's front room, live and in color—that, rather than further confusing an already confused situation, *African* or *Afro* or *Black* before “American” became a relatively stable identity. The stable identity came about, in part, as a result of the explosion of racial consciousness-raising being done in the areas of psychology, history and popular culture.¹² The passage by Cruse goes on, “It is the Negro movement's impact that brings such historical questions to the fore. It forces the whole nation to look at itself—which it has never wanted to do.” Indeed.

Carson's *Eyes on the Prize* and *In Struggle* catalogue the Civil Rights and Black Power efforts of the 1950s and 1960s, the movements that for over a decade and a half forced America “to look at itself.” Mired in a segregated and oppressive society, African Americans battled on political and legal frontlines to obtain the rights supposedly guaranteed them in the U.S. Constitution. Largely seen as attempts to achieve desegregation or integration, the Civil Rights Movement was also dedicated to the acquisition of power, specifically political power as represented by the vote and participation in all aspects of the electoral process. These texts tell the story of the actions by Black organizations (like the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense) to attain their sociopolitical goals. They also document the various organizations' responses to the resistance and repression by mainstream U.S. institutions encountered during their years of struggle. The legal and political victories were accompanied by widespread revelatory (and revolutionary) racial awareness and a psychologically healthy race consciousness that led to other demands, like academic honesty. *Eyes on the Prize* also documents some of the developments which led to the demands for Black studies programs on college campuses across the country.¹³ Besides the reduction of segregation (with its attendant effects on social and interracial relations) and increased participation in the electoral process, numerous Black studies programs and revised, more inclusive curricula in all levels of educational institutions nationwide are the most enduring legacies of the Civil Rights era.¹⁴

THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA AND AFRICAN AMERICA: HISTORICAL ISSUES

Mary Frances Berry and John Blassingame's *Long Memory* discusses the impact of the Black population's experiences of segregation and repression in the history of the U.S. They cover the pervasive protest efforts, both group and individual, which resulted from these experiences. Their analysis includes an understanding that artists, writers, and intellectuals were among the vanguard of Blacks to express increasing disenchantment with the situation, regardless of the period of time under consideration. Their last chapter in the book, "Black Nationalism" ends with a section detailing the inclusion of Africa as a locus of political activity for U.S. Black nationalists, "They clearly viewed African liberation as the next assignment in their historic mission to the land of their mothers and fathers." (Berry and Blassingame 423)¹⁵ The sixth edition of John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss, Jr.'s *From Slavery to Freedom* also ends on a note expressing the global consciousness of U.S. Blacks after their experiences of and during the Civil Rights and Black protest movements of the 50s, 60s and 70s.¹⁶ Africa had a special importance in this consciousness, particularly in the change to Black or Afro-American as racial labels. Students across the land demanded that colleges provide Black Studies curricula, which would expose others to the contributions and situations of Afrikan people.¹⁷ The peoples' consciousness was not just of Africa or people of color. In *Eyes on the Prize* (Carson, et al, 1987) the authors note,

They realized that the integrity and the future of American democracy were also at stake. In other words, the prize of freedom, justice, and equality for Africa's children in the United States was ultimately a gift for the entire nation. As a result, the central tasks of the 20th century black freedom movement were defined at their best not only as the achievement of rights and justice, but also as transformation of the spirit, consciousness and heart of a people... (*Eyes* 10.)

Perhaps the best statement of the relevance of the 1960's as a period in which the racial and cultural consciousness of a people changed, in ways which directly reflect on this study's focus on identity consciousness, can be attributed to John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, one of the most powerful activist organizations of the sixties. In *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960's*, Carson quotes Lewis,

'Something is happening to the people in the Southern Negro Community' he [Lewis] remarked in the summer of 1964. They're identifying with people of color... They're conscious of things that happen in Cuba, Latin America, and in Africa...there have been great changes going on. There's been a radical change in our people since 1960; the way they dress, the music they listen to, their natural hairdos—all of them want to go to Africa... I think people are searching for a sense of identity, and they're finding it.' (*In Struggle* 101.)

HISTORICALLY SITUATING THE CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Being historically situated necessitates an awareness of the individual critic's place in history and how it influences him or her. My personal intellectual development occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. These were the years associated with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and significant sociopolitical and historical change. My analyses are framed by the awakening of a cultural nationalist consciousness. This consciousness, which developed phenomenologically over decades, is too intricate to reiterate in this context. However, it is simply expressed as a belief that Black people constitute a nation within a larger nation and also a culture (subculture) within a more dominant culture. Furthermore, the nation and culture are marginalized by the larger nation (the U.S.) and the larger culture (Eurocentric, U.S./Western.) Black Cultural Nationalism seeks to function as a corrective to this mainstream marginalization. This ideology neither suggests nor implies a homogenous nation or culture. African America has the same complexities and diversities as any other nation/culture, including intra-cultural conflicts and contradictions. These are exacerbated by empirical relations within a hegemonic mainstream culture. My interpretation of cultural nationalism is not exclusivist, it does not preclude bi- or multiple cultural influences. In fact, it predicts that individuals, as well as groups, within the subnation will have, demonstrate, and seek multiple cultural heritages. Yet there is an insistent, consistent "blackdrop" for many (probably most, but certainly not all) people of African descent whereby they learn, via essentially segregated sociopolitical experiences and exclusivist, rejectionistic behaviors manifested by the dominant culture, and develop a "Black" consciousness in addition to their mainstream American (U.S.) socialization.

In discussing African American phenomena, cultural nationalist and similarly situated ideological arguments, to me, seem to be more cogent and accurate. Afrocentrism simply brings into focus the marginalized African components of one's multicultural being: it is not cultural determinism. It does not imply either exclusivity or superiority, though it may suggest an individual or group preference. In a mainstream society with such pervasive negative connotations of black, and consistent devaluations of African rooted cultural or phenotypic traits, Afrocentrism serves a healthy psychological function by validating a group's empirical realities based on internally rather than externally determined criteria. Powerful Eurocentric (and not always White) culture brokers challenge the idea of Afrocentrism on numerous fronts, especially with claims that it (or its proponents) is too emotional or too political, in particular when applied to intellectual or artistic venues. Yet perhaps their various arguments boil down to one basic reason: Afrocentrism is a challenge to their hegemony and their own self-concept. Wole Soyinka addresses these concerns,

The argument therefore is totally confused in the minds of the decriers of an African-World culture. Africanism, as a concept, has more than historic and economic aspects for its creative acceptance. So also, however, does the concept of an African world, a black world of Negroficanism, one that transcends the oceans whose far-flung members not only took with them the "narrow" culture of their homeland but also the

broader, in some cases a world view and a principle of social organization as a vital subculture in their environment....

Let me freely admit that the foregoing has not been entirely free of the emotionalism I have often had cause to remark of in others engaged in this debate. In mitigation it can only be pleaded that we, who organize ourselves as existing in an African cultural world, have for long been content merely to exist and practice our creative trades within its self-evident environment... (Soyinka 36)

Soyinka points out the existence of a worldview and experience that has both ongoing political and emotional effects in a community. This passage is pertinent, because African nations were on the cusp of independence in the political sense, but had yet to achieve a comparable cultural autonomy. Cruse's notions of a Harlem movement needing economic, political, and cultural components are exemplified by his words. Soyinka goes on to assert that the African worldview is not exclusive and xenophobic, it accommodates a pluralistic society. Yet, Soyinka is very clear that the existing labels, and modes of analysis implied by "externally mandated categories" are inadequate to describe this emerging sense of identity. Soyinka links Black Africans across the diaspora into this "ethnocultural reality."

...The knowledge that portions of this black world, through ideological blackmail or leadership antagonisms have been programmed into or have programmed themselves into, this mood of self-denial is of little consequence, for we believe that the masses of *baiki mutane* are not involved in this argument. They know themselves what they are, and their daily existence is testimony enough to the unique reality of their racial being.... So let the final words be a simple reminder that no one in the last ten years has seriously proposed an exclusive black community of being, not even in the United States of America or in South Africa where there would still be found justifications for such tactics in the overall liberation strategy.... But an ethnocultural reality, a humane quality that uniquely informs human artifacts, music, poetry, and philosophy, is a crucial factor of human existence, which cannot be programmed into externally, mandated categories.¹⁸

Being more concerned with accuracy and legitimacy than socioeconomic expediency and political correctness, my analyses are consistent with an Afrocentric worldview. Such a view, because it also encompasses a greater comprehension of subcultural nuances and values, is crucial to more fully understanding the significance and signifyin(g)—to use Gates' lexicon—of contemporary African American literature. "Signifyin(g) is the Black trope of tropes, the figure for Black rhetorical figures."¹⁹ By setting the frame of reference in *African-American* (or Black) patterns of communication, this study is self-consciously Afrocentric. Likewise, an Afrocentric world view notices the lack of such self-consciousnesses and comparable significance or significations *with respect to Africanisms* in most pre-60s African American literature.²⁰ Like Soyinka's analysis, this

study acknowledges that many African Americans have been ideologically blackmailed and exist in various states of self-denial.

Afrocentric issues like Africinity (from Wade Nobles) are validated by the first section of Jones' *Black Psychology*. Karenga's discussions of Black Studies methodology or Kawaida Theory and the Nguzo Saba help focus on what to look for in the current generation's writing, and inform the thematic and analytical foci of my research. In this regard, Asante's commentary on "three fundamental Afrocentric themes of transcendent discourse: (1) human relations, (2) humans' relationship to the supernatural, and (3) humans' relationships to their own being" is most useful in specifying what topical and thematic areas denote or connote an Afrocentric or Afrikan consciousness.

Asante's ideas, these three cultural markers, may be sufficient in and of themselves without the issues of Africanity or the Nguzo Saba, yet the conjunction of Nobles', Ani's, Karenga's, the contributors to Jones' editions and various other diverse scholars' thoughts on Afrocentrism solidify the argument for using its paradigms. African cultures are diverse and even, in some cases, antagonistic. While no laundry list of African cultural traits would apply en masse to each and every African culture—whether in tribal or contemporary postcolonial national manifestations—these theorists suggest cultural distillates or traits that, especially when viewed in contrast to comparable distillates of European cultures, articulate generic distinctions. With a profound awareness of and respect for human diversity and originality, and the problems of overgeneralizing about human populations, Afrikanity refers to a generalized African culture.

This process of generalizing from the diverse realities of African cultures really only becomes possible and valid in view of the forced transplantation and hybridization of Africans into New World slavery, a process unparalleled in human history. Coexistent with this process was a similar amalgamation of European cultures into a "White" population/culture in contrast to the people of various indigenous tribal cultures ("Red" or Indian/Native American, which certainly had the kinds of cultural diversity exhibited by Europeans in Europe or Africans in Africa) and the Black (brought from Africa) people. The dominant European colonial ideology was to strip the indigenous of their culture(s) and replace it/them with European institutions. Such cultural hegemony was not only found in the New World, European colonization of Africa also accounted for a substantial amount of cultural quantification, comparison, and ranking. In neither the New World nor Africa was it difficult to identify which cultural characteristics came from Africa and which from Europe until they became hybridized. All things considered, in discussions about Afrikanity, it is wise to heed Dorothy Pennington's warning (writing specifically about the African concept of time,)

These principles will be applied to the African culture with the realization that the diversity among African peoples makes rigid generalizations untenable. Likewise caution is urged against strict use of the term "cultural determinism," in the sense of making one-to-one causal attributions. It is safer, rather, to think in terms of tendencies.²¹

Afrikanity connotes the cultural and symbolic reconstruction of Africa by African Americans or others of African descent but generations removed from the continent itself. West Indian and other New World peoples fit this description but it can include

some who have migrated to Europe either directly from Africa or by way of the New World. In this research context, the specific use and focus is on U.S. populations as a means of keeping this project manageable. Many African theorists could come into this discussion—Cheikh Anta Diop, Leopold Senghor, and Chinweizu among them—and some do (recall the passage by Wole Soyinka.) However, to explore the diversity of Africans' thoughts about their cultural clashes with the Western world ultimately could deflect the aim of this research by diffusing the focus away from African American literature and the history of the U.S. Black cultural consciousness movements into other vast arenas where the historical experiences of Africans are substantially different from those of African Americans. Issues like colonialism, national independence, majority vs. minority concerns, linguistic and political issues of primary and secondary languages, and longstanding clan/tribal distinctions simply do not apply to the African American experience but are very central to understanding cultural phenomena on the continent of Africa.

A focus on the African oral tradition as a cultural marker clearly connotes a primary mode of African Americans' social interactions. This corresponds to Asante's first category, human relations. For his second category, that of ontological concerns, the idea of ancestors, ancestral presences and/or spirits is a valid mode marking a distinctive (albeit not exclusive) African culture. How an individual relates to himself or herself, Asante's third category, expresses issues of identity. The three discourses come together in my proposed methodology of looking at Afro-Americans' texts to see how the idea of ancestors, especially as learned or experienced through an oral tradition, mark, help to formulate, alter or otherwise affect identity issues. I suggest that not only would such ancestral presences be more evident in contemporary African American literature, they would also be more relevant to the protagonists' searches for identity and *positive* outcomes of that search.

The implications of these proposals for Black literary criticism are twofold. First, there is a "developmental" schema for Black literature. Following Ellison's idea of the novel as charting and documenting social change, then it can be seen as charting, among other social changes, the development of Africinity/Afrikanity as cultural expressions in the African American community. Second, an identity construct exists—for now referred to as "emergent Africinity" or "emergent Afrikanity"²²—if not for the Black community in general, then for a community of some of the protagonists of novels by Black Americans. The proposed methodology asserts that the historical factors of events, time, and place affect the creative products of writers. As social factors affect cultural or individual identities, they will also be reflected in works like novels. Novels can be analyzed for certain markers to chart the development or relevance of situated identities.²³

African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity, edited by Molefi Asante & Kariamu Asante, provides an understanding of the richness of African culture and its "survivals" in the New World. They are among the many scholars whose theories go beyond suggesting that African American culture is substantially different from European culture to identify the specific modes and/or means of expression. As editors, the essays they use present diverse perspectives that help to establish a worldview. Issues of spirituality, concept of time, social and political organization, education, and cultural values and expressions are explored with the end result a synthesis that points to some of the many boundaries of an African world culture or African American subculture.

Marimba Ani has taken the original Black studies impulse full circle. Her critique of Eurocentric thought frames my analysis of historical change. Descendants of Africans in the New World, in particular in the U.S., have had to work for positive socioeconomic change within the hegemonic systems of established Western European-influenced institutional structures. Her analyses point out differing goals and ethical strategies that have guided Black historical endeavors. Her ideas contribute immensely to determining my use of historically situating techniques in the analysis of sociocultural experiences on subsequent cultural expression, specifically literature, in this research project.²⁴

The constructs and models for “psychological nigrescence” by William Cross and Charles Thomas suggest that the development of “Black” consciousness was not an isolated phenomenon. This process involved not only identity construction, but ideological components as well. Further validation of the import and pervasiveness of this conversion experience is readily noticed in the change of labels applied to the population of U.S. residents descended from Africans, both by its members as well as non-members. The almost wholesale rejection of “Negro” and “colored” in favor of Black, or African or some version of hyphenated American with an Afrprefix in academic, and social and especially political situations exemplifies this ideological crossover.²⁵ Such racial or ethnic labels were not being used with such regularity before the 1960s and did not come into significant use until a later period. Changes in sociocultural and political ideologies were significant factors in the adoption of new identity labels. During the 60s unparalleled social upheaval occurred: a civil rights movement matured and a Black Power movement was born with sociocultural manifestations like the slogan “Black Power;” the Afro hairstyle and dashikis; widespread name changes to African names; ideological cultural-political artifacts like Kawaïda theory, the Nguzo Saba, and Kwanzaa; demands for Black Studies curricula and more representation in media like television and film. While these events were unfolding in the U.S., many African countries were fighting battles for independence—and winning. “Africa” and “Black” became cultural symbols of power and pride, not just the names of a continent and a color. By focusing on how individuals rejected being an ideological “Negro,” with all its attendant cultural and psychological baggage, and came to accept being consciously “Black,” with new, different, and more affirming political and cultural baggage, Cross and Thomas detailed the psychological terrain that preceded the ideological shift.²⁶

The choice of a historically informed methodology places an additional burden on me as critic beyond the notion of historical change, especially as this research looks so closely at issues of identity and culture. In mainstream society, multiculturalism and assimilationism seem as prominent conceptualizations of African American identity as Afrocentricity, if not more so. Afrocentricity has almost become a bad word, with reactions to it more emotional than rational, approaching the dynamics of a moral panic.²⁷ The media and mainstream academy clearly prefer the former two ideologies, yet multiculturalism also poses a variety of threats. The identity issues imbedded in these three paradigms would make an interesting discussion topic themselves. The full range of materials that influence my attitudes about identity cannot be expressed adequately in this context. However, in spite of deprecatory misrepresentations of Afrocentrism by mainstream media and the excesses of its more notorious supporters, it is neither anti-

White nor exclusive. Nor does it make *any* claims of “cosmic moral, aesthetic, and intellectual superiority.”

Itabari Njeri, a woman of mixed African, European, and Native American heritage who is responsible for the previous quote (Njeri, 7) disparages Afrocentricity, yet describes herself as healthily “ethnocentric” and views the phrase “Black” as an ethnic, rather than racial nomination. These statements on ethnocentricity—but not her perspective of Afrocentricity—parallel my own views and will be helpful in comprehension of the various ethnic and racial descriptions used throughout the book. Though Njeri’s disclaimer shares some of professional journalism’s and mainstream media’s panic at the idea of Afrocentrism, Njeri nevertheless expresses its fundamental ideology very well. “We need to foster, I believe, a sense of identity that maintains the integrity of Afro-American culture in all its complexity and uniqueness but expands our psychological and, ultimately, our political capacity to reach out and connect with other communities.” (Njeri, 8)

Molefi Asante, Afrocentricity’s most prolific proponent, defines it somewhat differently, without much alteration of the net affect,

In such a situation, in the fringes of the European experience, pushed away from the center, we swirl around lost looking for a place, for location. Afrocentricity is the active centering of the African in subject place in our historical landscape. This has always been my search; it has been a quest for sanity.²⁸

Asante also addresses the issue of citizenship/nationality, not to be confused with Ani’s concept of nationalism, “I was straight up African in my consciousness and that fact did not contradict my nationality as an American; it simply threw everything into the most ordered reality possible for me.”²⁹ Asante’s search for sanity is a direct statement of my interpretation of the focal novels’ characters’ objectives. Many characters in contemporary Black novels are attempting to find or understand themselves. Afrocentricity, or “emergent Afrikanity” provides the keys they eventually use to achieve sanity in their Eurocentric environments that question their stability or cause them to self-reflect.³⁰

The essays in bell hooks’ *Talking Back* and *Outlaw Culture*, Early’s *Lure and Loathing*, Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* and *Living By the Word*, Patricia Williams’ *Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Lester’s *Falling Pieces of the Broken Sky*, Jordan’s *Technical Difficulties*, Madhubuti’s *From Plan to Planet* and *Enemies*, Steele’s *The Content of Our Character*, West’s *Race Matters*, and the vast diversity of Amiri Baraka’s writings serve as exposure to some of contemporary Black American thought. The social and political ideologies of these authors and their texts also function as historical source material and contribute to my understanding of the effects of the Civil Rights Era on cultural expressions.³¹ These authors are representative of a wider spectrum of thought and broadened consciousness rarely found in pre-sixties Black writing. There are deeper intellectual analyses here, supported by both a larger body of sociological data and different rhetorical strategies. Nevertheless, there is thematic consistency between these and earlier Black writings. The bandages put on by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements are coming off, revealing partially healed sores, some on their way to

keloid scars, others to healthy new skin. Still, too many are infected: the problems of racism, discrimination, and inequality fester, gangrenous. Black literature is no longer merely protest literature; it is probing. Rather than asking for acknowledgement of a common humanity or the legal and social recognition of it, more contemporary Black authors explore the various and diverse experiences of African American people. As their essays and thoughts have gone deeper, so have the souls and identities of the novelists.

THE PSYCHO-PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

In order to begin to comprehend the ways African or Afrikan consciousness or identity is constructed or expressed in the novels to be reviewed, one must understand the ongoing phenomena of the conflicting nature of being of African descent in the United States. The political labels of Black or Afr-anything also imply a recognition of the cultural residuals from Africa that have survived and adapted to new World realities in addition to any recognition of similarities between political situations. From the sixties through the eighties, a great number of scholars observed, analyzed and theorized about African-rooted philosophies, cultural expressions and consciousnesses. Several social scientists—Wade Nobles, Linda Myers, Reginald Jones, Robert Guthrie, Frances Cress Welsing, Bobby Wright, Charles Thomas, William Cross, among many others—have conceptualized the importance of personal acceptance of Afrikanity's social realities as essential to psychological well being.

During the seventies, psychologists William Cross (1971, 1978, 1978a) and Charles Thomas (1973, 1974) pioneered and championed versions of a "Negro-to-Black Conversion Scale". Cross' scale features the Negro as a self-hating individual, controlled by white perceptions and expectations, who becomes aware of her or his oppression and moves into an intermediate state of anger, hating and isolated from whites. The final, most progressive and healthy stage of identity is Blackness, where one's own Afrikanity as well as one's *Americanity* (my term) are affirmed without negating others' humanity. In Cross's conceptualization, the first step is Pre-Encounter—the "Negro" state of being. This phase is followed by Encounter—featuring exposure to a new belief system. Immersion-Emersion is next, during which the person becomes ultra-Black, involved in the actions and rhetoric of being "Black," then becomes less ego-involved, emotional and less rigidly dichotomous. After this comes Internalization—the person begins to internalize a new worldview and anti-white feelings decline, with Blacks remaining the primary reference group. The final stage is Internalization-Commitment, where the individual is comfortable maintaining a new identity of communality with other Blacks and is empowered to be politically active, yet can peacefully and productively coexist in a multicultural society.³² In other words, those in the final stage of progress toward "Blackness" have reconciled the "two souls, two thoughts,...two warring ideals in one dark body."

Thomas calls the "Negro" phase a sickness characterized by conformity, Negromachy. The points on his scale represent identity labels: nigger—a hybrid mix of psychological rebellion and social over-dependence; white middle-class negro—a marginal being that rejects ethnocentrism, but can neither be, nor be accepted as white. His final stage "Black" is the only role that affirms a positive identity and moves into acceptance of

Afro-American as an identity label.³³ Both Cross' and Thomas' conceptualizations are relevant to presentations of identity in that assimilation or emulation of white norms and the oppression of Black people are rejected by healthy populations who can claim a Black or Afro-American identity. The extension of this process is Afrocentricity, which can be further embraced by Afrikanity.³⁴

This project explores the implications of the developing Afrocentric consciousness and a psychosocial advance toward Blackness for the literature, specifically novels. The process of historically situating novels and analyzing thematic content follow very closely on the work of Robert Stepto in *From Behind the Veil*. He asserts two pregeneric myths that guide African American writing: the pursuits of freedom and literacy. Pregeneric myths are the ideas that dominate writing and social goals: the myths that shape and generate reality. Such ideas as freedom and literacy dominate the writing of African Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because of the intensity of the experience of chattel slavery and its institutional denial of liberty and intellectual development for Black people. Yet in contemporary society, freedom has become more and more of an assumption (I refuse to address in this context the question of whether or not African Americans can be considered to be *truly free*). Likewise, literacy is a guarantee (nor will I address the *effectiveness* of the public schools that all U.S. citizens may attend or the inner city schools most Black youth must attend.) Due to these historical developments, the pregeneric myths of freedom and literacy begin to lose some of their potency. The realities of being enslaved in the U.S. directed early Black writers toward these pregeneric myths. The realities of a century of freedom, along with the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements guide contemporary African American populations in new directions. I propose other pursuits that bound more contemporary African American literary endeavors have evolved from freedom and literacy, to the pursuits of identity and knowledge.

THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND KNOWLEDGE AS EMERGENT MYTHS

Du Bois' concept of a double consciousness informs much of the thematic expression, the specific stories themselves, in early twentieth century African American writings. While some of these stories involve the strivings toward education (literacy) or freedom (the trappings of citizenship), it is not too difficult to recast their problems as identity issues: Who am I? Negro? American? Both or neither? Citizen or outcast? The U.S. (American) rhetoric of democracy has been in consistent, if not constant, conflict with the empirical realities of both African American writers and the general Black populace. The history of emigration movements in the U.S., and African American support of and challenges to them, documents a longstanding discourse on African identification in the African American community. Even Du Bois, who during a prolific life experienced and endorsed almost every political option available to Blacks, ultimately rejected his "American" identity for Ghanaian citizenship. But this option was/is seen as too radical and extreme. Many still choose to straddle their African and American identities as if they are riding a bucking Brahma bull or spotted stallion. Others choose to enthusiastically adopt an assimilationist or mainstream ideology, rejecting racial

denominators and identities. Yet there are others who as enthusiastically embrace an African identity, but choose to maintain their American affiliations.³⁵

In twentieth century African American realities, literacy is not always freedom. Literacy is but a tool. A hammer can build or destroy. A nail can bind together, or pierce and puncture. A hammer in the hand of a novice is as likely to bust his or her thumb as hit the nail on the head. Sometimes literate people bind themselves into a deeper more devastating slavery: that of the mind. Literacy affords access, but access to resources does not imply understanding or productive use of them. Literate Blacks have too often forged their own chains by being (becoming) actors in a script they read but fail to fully comprehend.³⁶ Mere ability to read is not enough, even though the ancestors worshipped at the feet of letters and words. Knowledge, true knowledge of the meanings behind the illusive word, is freedom in the modern world.³⁷

Where once the range of options was as narrow as the choice of either slavery or freedom, with literacy being a significant key to unlock the chains of slavery, contemporary society affords Black Americans more options—though the choices may be the same. Literacy retains its usefulness as a tool. Yet more and more, people are questioning the mediation involved in literate endeavors as well as the hypermediated, social background from which such endeavors are made or determined. Society has become too complex, and too many inconsistencies and lies have been uncovered for anyone to believe that the mere acts of reading or writing can “set you free.” The ability to process data obtained and to ultimately use it knowingly, rather than it use “you” unknowingly, became a more viable goal. Where the Civil Rights Movement could be seen as being ushered in by the anti-segregation goals of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the demands for Black Studies signaled the social, political and cultural evolution of a new generation—one that understood that it needed new knowledges in order to better or more accurately make informed decisions in its identity crises—as well as the figurative death of the Civil Rights Movement.

CHAPTER 3

Change and Cultural Representation in African American Literary Criticism

For the critic of Afro-American literature, this process [theoretically responding to theoretical texts] is even more perilous precisely because the large part of contemporary literary theory derives from critics of Western European languages and literatures. Is the use of theory to write about Afro-American literature, we might ask rhetorically, merely another form of intellectual indenture, a form of servitude of the mind as pernicious in its intellectual implications as any other form of enslavement?

—Henry Louis Gates, Jr.¹

Chapter two discussed the emergence of Afrikanity in the cultural sphere of African Americans' lives as a manifestation of the desire to counteract Western hegemonic cultural praxis. Gates counsels critics of African American literature to be alert to the dangers of creating a theoretical response to Western criticism that is merely another Western theory. Taking Asante's Afrocentric cues and Gates' warning of intellectual bondage seriously, this chapter will focus on developing a critical theory that re-centers what is African in African American literary expressions. Recognizing that any critical approach is bounded by its linguistic heritage, this research project cannot escape the fact of its Western influences. Yet, the thematic content of African Americans' literature, like other cultural products (folklore, music, and religion) reflects a dual or multiple heritage, one that includes Africa. The impetus of this project is to stake out new ground and begin exploration of areas only indirectly addressed by literary critics, if any attention is devoted to these concerns. Since this enterprise desires to demonstrate a developmental process or stage in Black literature, it will be useful to analyze other theories that suggest developmental processes in either the literature or the criticism. Therefore, this chapter will attempt to analyze other developmental approaches to critical historiography. Then, vernacular theories will be discussed to assess what they say about African survivals in the literature. Other areas of contemporary criticism, especially Black feminist criticism, may provide some useful perspectives or pointers as this project sketches the outlines of Black or "Afrikan" poetics.

Poetics, as used by this author, denotes the range of images, themes, and/or standards of presentation that affect the reader's cultural sensibility. Afrikan poetics, then, distinguishes the component of the written text that explicitly or implicitly designates an African influence. More than an aesthetic sense of what may be perceived as beautiful, poetics articulates the fundamental socially constructed reality of a setting or plot. Suggesting Africa as a cultural and *poetic* locus for literature by Black Americans—and

it is important to stress that Africa is only *a* locus, not the only locus of cultural influence—encompasses the political argument of whether or not African American literature is completely subsumed as a subset of American or Western literatures, or if it can be considered to have its own or some hybrid structural or cultural identity. Understanding and explicating some of the permutations of Du Boisian double consciousness remains a consistent backdrop throughout this project. The texts addressed in Part II are assumed to have African, as well as American or Western/European influences. The focus in this chapter is to provide a fundamental overview of African American literary criticism. Chapter IV will elaborate on the various aspects of more contemporary criticism that support the construct of Afrikan poetics.

COOKE AND STEPTO

Michael Cooke's *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy*, along with Robert Stepto's *Beyond the Veil*, share similarities with this project, although as theories of literary criticism, they are quite dissimilar to each other. Cooke suggests four stages, or traditions, of development African American Literature has undergone through in the last century: Self-Veiling, Solitude, Kinship, and Intimacy. He analyzes many pieces of Black literature from different time periods for evidence of these constructs. However, over the course of time, these constructs develop and eventually evolve into the next, implicitly a more progressive, stage. The authors he uses for each category fit fairly neatly into a time line: Charles Waddell Chesnut (1899,) James Weldon Johnson (1912,) and Nella Larsen (1928–1929) for Self-Veiling; Zora Neale Hurston (1935–1942,) Richard Wright (1940–1945,) and Ralph Ellison (1952, 1956) for Solitude; Eldridge Cleaver (1968) and Michael Harper (1970–1977) for Kinship, and Robert Hayden (1970–1978) and Alice Walker (1976–1982) for Intimacy.²

There is slight overlap during the 1970s for the works by Harper and Hayden. However, this is not problematic in relating Cooke's work to this project. It actually helps to confirm the belief that social and political processes during the 1960s and 1970s resulted in changes of identity that coalesced into significant influences on literary themes in the late 1970s and 1980s for some African American authors. It is not too difficult to see that the first three decades of this century were characterized by historical forces that worked to demand that Blacks' true feelings remain behind Du Bois' "veil" in order for them to survive the various repercussions of a Jim Crow society. The Black intelligentsia, as well as the literary leadership of the next quarter century (@1930–1956), while pushing for greater opportunities and integration for "Negro" masses, were lonely pioneers in a potentially dangerous world. Though they eventually reaped the ambiguous rewards of belated recognition and more inclusion of other Black people in their target fields, Cooke's label Solitude accurately describes their efforts. The coming together of diverse segments of the Black community during the civil rights era easily parallel the dynamics represented by the label Kinship. The slight overlap in publication dates for Cooke's examples for the stages of Kinship and Intimacy (1970 through 1977) is easily explained by difference in individual consciousness and personal preferences in interaction with the diverse options available during changing times.

However, Cooke's conceptualization of Intimacy is somewhat problematic. Intimacy seems more a by-product of kinship than a significant stage in and of itself. If the preceding stage of Kinship is characterized by "black characters meeting or wanting to meet their kind with compassion and creativity and resolution" and Intimacy is "The difficult reciprocity of meeting the whole world, not just the whole of one's world" (Cooke 132), then the increased opportunities afforded by civil rights cosmopolitanism (desegregation/integration/affirmative action) could account for this phenomenon. It seems that Intimacy is more of a useful tool in discussing Robert Hayden and Alice Walker than an idea that could be applied to a broader cross-section of Black writing within the time frame he has set up. Clearly, the works of James Baldwin and John Williams, among others, in the fifties and sixties exhibit this characteristic. Also the definition of Kinship surely applies to almost all of Ernest Gaines' work, even those produced during the period of Intimacy.

Even Cooke's own analysis suggests a discernible pattern that, "Recent texts may more accurately be said to pick up the stage of kinship than that of intimacy" (Cooke, 207). He also proposes a label for this new direction in Afro-American literature, re-immersion, elaborating on a literary term (immersion) coined by Robert Stepto. Re-immersion texts address individual Black experiences rather than *the* Black experience. This literature seems more self-assured, the authors more free to explore a personal vision that encompasses their racial realities rather than being defined by those racial realities. Cooke states,

...a real difference exists between what is called '*the* black experience,' which is dogmatic and political, and what is involved here, namely 'black experience,' which is merely axiomatic and comprehensive. In the works in question, in the bearing of black literature today, "black experience" comes to the fore, without apology, without special pleading, without threat, without inhibition from without or within. (Cooke 210.)

In the terms that he uses to express Kinship, it seems that the compassion, creativity, and resolution of African American culture are more freely and diversely expressed in the Re-immersion literature. Given that this literature focuses on Black experiences without compulsions and inhibitions, it is no mere coincidence that Cooke uses a form of the term "immersion" which also comes up in Thomas' conversion scale. That Cooke, in his discussion of new directions in Afro-American literature, also addresses (albeit briefly) Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* and Morrison, though in the form of her novel *Tar Baby* rather than *Song of Solomon*, functions to validate the use of these authors to exemplify my conception of the newer stage in contemporary Black literature labeled Emergent Afrikanity or Afrikan poetics.

Cooke's work is essential to this project by exemplifying a literary developmental schema and providing critical references for *The Chaneyville Incident* and Morrison.³ From the historically informed perspective of this research project, it is necessary to state a disagreement with Cooke's analysis of Morrison's *Tar Baby* that dismisses it as a novel that "avoids re-immersion" (Cooke 222). He seems to feel that re-immersion points toward the future, a statement concurrent with the scope of this project. Yet, he misses the larger ramifications of history and historical change imbedded in this issue. The past

is what provides the keys to looking at the future. “Coming to grips” with the past—whether to understand and accept it fully by using its lessons, or to understand it and transcend its limits—is what assists characters of the newer Afro-American literature in their searches for identity and wholeness that will guide their pathways to the future. This idea is codified in folk philosophy that has almost become cliché. Two statements illustrate my point: *Those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it* and *If you don't know where you've been, you won't know where you're going*. These statements describe Son's and Jade's (Morrison's protagonists in *Tar Baby*) predicaments almost perfectly. This is an important point that has direct implications for the novels to be critiqued in Part II. Guitar, in *Song of Solomon*, repeatedly stresses this point to Milkman, and it also brought home by Paul and Sethe in *Beloved* through their needs to both escape and revisit/embrace the memories of Sweet Home. Clearly, knowing and understanding one's history, and its potential use as a guide for current and future actions, is a central theme for Morrison.

At the outset of *Tar Baby*, in that curiously unlabeled segment preceding chapter one, Son leaves the ship, and after being *immersed* in the ocean and turned around three times (certainly a signification on Dorothy's *leaving* the land of Oz) he enters, via a boat guided by two white women he never sees, the timeless Isle de Chevaliers where he finds both his past—Nanadine and Sydney—and his future, Jadine. At the end of the novel, in another of those enigmatic unlabeled segments, he finds his way back to the island, aided by a woman who cannot see. At least she cannot see the real world, for, though “legally blind,” Therese nevertheless sees the spirits of one hundred maroons galloping through the misty hills. Son is pursuing the future, whether chasing the men in the hills as Therese suggests, or following Jadine for whom he is the key to unlock her “ancient properties”. He is immersed again, this time in darkness and fog. *Tar Baby* is clearly a novel of immersion and/or re-immersion in a future that contains the past(s). Cooke's historical analysis may not be as much an issue as his apparent lack of exposure to African philosophy.⁴

Cooke has other questionable historical analyses. The most glaring is where he discusses the assassinations of Malcolm X and MLK. He is correct in stating that their deaths “cost the national drive of Afro-Americans for free ground, for vital spiritual space or *Lebensraum*, much of its direction and momentum” (Cooke 133). Yet his analysis goes on to ignore that the Black Power Movement, to which Malcolm was very much the spiritual and philosophical predecessor and leader, did not really begin until the year *after* his death. It, the Black Power Movement, was philosophically opposed to King's ideals of nonviolent protest. It also remained in effect at least two years beyond King's assassination, though the Civil Rights Movement was effectively stymied after his murder in Memphis. Both of their murders preceded the greatest pushes for Black Studies curricula and programs. Such curricula remain as some of the most enduring and powerful intellectual and institutional testaments to that era. So one must question Cooke's analysis when he states, “What had been left standing after the first assassination came down with the second” (Cooke 133) because the Black Power, Black Studies, and Afrocentric or Cultural Nationalist movements were only in their prenatal or infant stages at Malcolm's death. The latter two have only become stronger over the decades since King's death. This historical analysis that challenges Cooke's misrepresentation is an

essential foundation to comprehending the developmental processes within African American society and literature proposed by this project.

One could make other suggestions about the direction of African American literature that relate to the development of Cooke's stage of Intimacy. While certainly African American women authors like Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, Frances E.W. Harper, Ann Petry, Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks had always been in the forefront of our literature (if not in the criticism of it!), the 1970s and 1980's demonstrated a coming of age, if not a coming out, of Black women novelists. Cooke acknowledges and intensely analyzes Alice Walker's *Meridian*, but surely her *Color Purple*, which was published two years prior to *The Achievement of Intimacy*, and also was listed in his bibliography, deserves more than one passing reference. He also goes into great detail on Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, much more so than the scant two pages he affords *The Chaneyville Incident*, a novel he describes as "typify(ing) the new development". The clues are there, even in the early 1980's, to suggest the feminine, if not feminist, presence in contemporary Black literature and authors who would, by the nature of their gendered influences, bring more Intimacy into their works of art.⁵

Contemporary Afro-American literature stylistically or structurally changed from a straight-line narrative to incorporate more modern or "postmodern" norms of intricate, multilayered narratives that transcend linear temporal presentations and unidimensional characterizations. The works of John Williams, Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, Sherley Williams, Melvin Tolson, and Toni Morrison afford enough examples to point to this as another potential reason for increased intimacy in newer Black literature. Afro-American Literature has progressed beyond any simplistic analyses. There are many critical theories and conceptualizations, some having more merit, broader applicability, and legitimacy. Contemporary Black literature defies monolithic statements and any disagreements with Cooke should not negate the utility some of his conceptualizations have for this project. Even more "classic" Black literature or artists/critics like Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Zora Neale Hurston, in particular, have suffered the scathing criticism of literary establishments. Such disparagement has not been fatal to their contributions to the fields of literary criticism or Art—though in Hurston's case it seriously delayed her "fame". Disregarding any criticisms leveled against it, Cooke's work provides a reasonable comparative model that also sheds some light on new areas of analysis.⁶

In *Behind the Veil*, Robert Stepto, whose idea of immersion so influenced Cooke, suggests three kinds of African American narratives: immersion, ascendant, and hibernation. Simply stated, narratives either show characters who immerse themselves in the African American experience or ascend above its traditional limitations. The third alternative is a mode of hiding or retreat from the realities and traditions of African America. He also asserts two pregeneric myths that guide African American writing: the pursuits of freedom and literacy. Other pursuits that bound contemporary African American literate endeavors were proposed at the end of the previous chapter of this text, the pursuits of identity and knowledge. These modern "generic myths" (a progression beyond Stepto's "pregeneric") come out in the close readings of the focal texts, and will be explicated in and validated by the historical contextualization presented in the text of this study. A more accurate label is "emergent myths" as these myths are emerging out of the more recent experiences of African Americans. The extension of Stepto's analyses is

an important aspect of the developmental scheme proposed here. Identity and Knowledge are crucial and necessary components of emergent Afrikanity and stem directly from Afrikan cultural survivals.

Stepito is concerned with *form* of narratives and seeks to categorize them into their generic forms: he proposes phases of narration where the two “basic types” of narratives, eclectic and integrated, can be either be generic or authenticating.⁷ While his formal categorization is applied to autobiographies or “slave narratives,” the ideas that a text must either be authentic or authenticated, and involve active strategies by the authors, point to the larger problem of Black American fiction’s relationship to mainstream literature and the issue of authority: the need to “prove” oneself as a “legitimate” teller of the story or a teller of a “legitimate” story.⁸ Yet the whole argument of authenticity becomes suspect when contemporary Black literature is examined in closer detail. John Callahan’s *In the African-American Grain: Call-and-Response in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction* addresses the Black pattern of call-and-response that challenges mainstream definitions of authorship, acknowledging that everyone can be a teller (or hearer/reader) of a story. Stepito’s finger points beyond this factor to three broader assumptions about Black literary and critical history.

[1] One such premise argues that, once certain literary forms are set in motion in literary and historical time, they “express” from one major “station” to another without making any intermediate stops. This premise...sustains the unfortunate idea that, in literature, a historical event occurs only when literary materials assume generic form....

[2] Another premise contends that literary history may be cogently organized by associating—and perhaps defining—literary forms in chronological (as opposed to historical) terms... Adherence to this premise encourages the impulse to assign formal or generic appellations for reasons having more to do with chronological “facts” than with features and strategies.

[3] A third premise argues that Afro-American literary history chronicles the incorporation—but not necessarily the integration—of an aberrant literature into the literature of “mainstream” American (or, more broadly, Western) culture. Among the implications of this premise is the idea that, once a literature shifts its point of reference from the environs of a subculture (Afro-American) to that of a dominant culture (American), the literature itself develops in sophistication from pre-form (slave narrative, for example) to form (autobiography, etc.). Such a view of Afro-American literary history often occasions abandonment of Afro-American literary historiography in favor of what may turn out to be a rather peculiar and essentially synchronic view of American letters as an unwieldy whole.

(Stepito 33–34.)

Based on this passage, one might initially believe that Cooke’s efforts are in vain and run counter to Stepito’s intention in categorizing the variety of forms in African American narrative. But Cooke’s work actually continues in the same direction as Stepito’s. Stepito

seeks to find the vocabulary to wed analyses of structural (formal) issues to the thematic content in Black fiction and Cooke's stages reflect changes in the content of that same fiction. He goes on to state,

We need better working definitions of the critical terms essential to AfroAmerican literary historiography, and we need to question and probably abandon implicit literary historiographical premises such as those outlined above. The study of Afro-American literature...requires an approach, which employs critical terms expressive of the indivisibility of form and content. Such study places entire texts (not "parts," such as a single archetype) in literary history because of what they *are*, not what they might be; it liberates text and reader alike from both chronology and what Geoffrey Hartman calls a text's site in history... (Step 34.)

This is a significant critical issue for this project's historically informed viewpoint: Does the current critical vocabulary express and reflect the realities of the literary object under study? Yet this study does not seek to "liberate" texts from their historical site, if that means ignoring that they come out of a certain historical epoch as well as a specific, yet potentially diverse, literary tradition. The attempt here, as was Cooke's, is to find the authors' and texts' historical sites and identify the tradition in order to better explicate the texts and expand the awareness of what they *are*, rather than to codify or delimit them by categorization. This project does seek to liberate African American texts from any deterministic analyses or labels by providing an alternate analytic lens to be applied only where applicable. Of course, texts must first be subjected to such analysis before a judgement of the applicability can be made. Consistent with Step 34's concern about critical terms and definitions, this review seeks to locate relevant terminologies and perspectives that assist the objective of situating texts upon the creative terrain(s) in which they were spawned.

This is the challenge of the critic of Afro-American literature: not to shy away from literary theory, but rather to translate it into the black idiom, renaming principles of criticism where appropriate, but especially naming *indigenous black principles of criticism* and applying these to explicate our own texts.

—Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (*Figures* xxi) italics added.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has managed to fuse poststructural tendencies with Black cultural nationalism (or Black cultural studies, to use Baker's lower caliber term.) In *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*, Gates outlines his assumptions that "All theory is text-specific, and ours must be as well" (*Figures* xix), and "...it is language, the black language of black texts, that expresses the distinctive quality of our literary tradition" (*Figures* xxi). He appears to be making mudpies out of, rather than being mired in, Du Boisian double consciousness. His explication of the intellectual gymnastics inherent in the endeavor of "...learning to read a black text within a black formal cultural matrix and explicating it with the principles of criticism at work in both the Euro-American and African-American traditions," convinces one why, "I believe that we

critics can identify and produce richer structures of meaning than are possible otherwise” (*Figures* xxi). Gates’ statements support the idea of African poetics as an identified “richer structure of meaning.”

Gates charts his academic development through four stages or approaches to criticism of Black literature. He began with the “dead end” of the Black Aesthetic and “progressed” through a stage of repeating and imitating Eurocentric critical theories. After he came to understand that the imitation was “as fraught with problems as was Black Aesthetic criticism,” Gates proceeded to use the theories with the intent of critiquing their application to Black literature. This led Gates—prompted by many of his colleagues—to attempt to synthesize those canonical traditions with a Black vernacular tradition. Fittingly, the capstone of *Figures* is an essay on the Signifying Monkey, which he later developed more fully in the book by the same name that casts itself as a theory of criticism. The four approaches were therefore: Black Aesthetic, Repetition and Imitation, Repetition and Difference, and Synthesis.⁹

Taken as a developmental analysis, it seems curious that Gates would order the approaches the way he does, beginning with the Black Aesthetic. His discussion of the process states, “by Repetition and Imitation, I mean the often unreflective mimicry of theories borrowed from European and American literary critics. *Black Aesthetic* theorists were diametrically opposed to this position” (*Figures*, xxv). If “Repetition and Imitation” did not precede the Black Aesthetic, how could its theorists be diametrically opposed to that approach of criticism of Black texts? If the Black Aesthetic can be located in a specific timeframe, was there no Black criticism before it? Did not the Black Aesthetic develop as a critical response to its critical antecedents that “repeated and imitated” Western critical norms and practices? Even Gates seems to refute this organization when, in another essay published at about the same time, he writes, “I once thought it our most important gesture to *master* the canon of criticism, to *imitate* and *apply* it, but I now believe that we must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures.”¹⁰ Perhaps one can read Gates’ anecdote about his inability to read Black texts without assessing their content for what it said to him about being Black (see *Figures*, xvi) as representing his commitment to a Black Aesthetic reading of Black texts. His text does not make clear that he felt he was influenced at that time by the Black Aestheticians, either consciously or that in retrospect he interpreted himself as being influenced by such ideas.

How Gates sees or presents himself is irrelevant. For this project, the important thing is that if one can agree to the existence of developmental schemes in literature, then one would have to agree to developmental schemes in literary criticism also. Gates’ ideas provide a template on which a developmental theory for Black criticism can be founded. Placing Gates’ approaches in a different order, with Repetition and Imitation first followed by the Black Aesthetic, seems to be both more accurate and to make more sense as a developmental scheme. This ordering also facilitates a comparison between the Cross/Thomas Negro to Black conversion theories, which is probably more than a coincidence. Chart 1 may help to visualize the comparisons by demonstrating how and where they overlap.

Of course, by differences in their very natures one could not expect too much of a correlation between the two developmental schema. Yet, the similarities are nevertheless quite obvious: Both identity development and mode of literary criticism begin at an

uncritical, Eurocentric starting point. Next, they are exposed to, and wholeheartedly accept/embrace, an antithetical value system (Black in both cases.) Then, they progress through pro-Black but less anti-White phases (Houston Baker's *The Journey Back* comes to mind.) Finally, they (identity development and mode of literary criticism) are willing and motivated to find ways for the Black and White theory/social construction to coexist in a manner beneficial to both, a more contemporary "syncretic" approach. Thomas' concepts of the "nigger" clearly do not correlate with Gates' Black Aesthetic category, except in the overcommitment to psychological rebellion. The recognition of marginality links the Thomas "White middle-class-Negro" to Gates' "Repetition and Difference." A hybridization of the Nigger and White middle-class Negro with their recognition of marginality and psychological rebellion might approach a gross caricature of the Black Aesthetician: Something like, say, a Black middle-class Nigger. (This latter appellation also fits into Baker's acknowledgement of the essentially middle-class nature of the Black Arts movement.) Thomas' last label, Black, might be the most characteristic of contemporary criticism of African American literature. Contemporary movements in African American literary criticism with their undeniable phenomenological underpinnings could be described as reflecting a Black Aesthetic, without the interracial and overtly political and polemical baggage.

The significance of linking the Cross and Thomas theories to Gates' developmental scheme is not to have any individual critic's psychological stage assessed. Rather it is to provide a panoramic continuum in which to see and comprehend the vast diversity of Black critical and literary options, and to acknowledge that the critic's consciousness will also have an affect on her/his critical analyses. Viewed along some timeline, the options for critical praxis have increased. The earlier theories still remain in spite of more recent innovations. Yet it would seem that Gates views these categorizations, rather than options, as progressive stages where each step is an improvement upon the other. These conceptualizations support the idea of cultural change being represented in literature and criticism.

VERNACULAR THEORIES AND THE BLACK AESTHETIC

Vernacular theories deserve a special consideration in this project. By insisting that Black literary expressions stem from the conditioned folk patterns of oral tradition in the African American community, these theories skirt the issue of that tradition originating in Africa. Yet this is undoubtedly the case. Perhaps this terminology, and a concomitant blurring of the tradition's African roots make vernacular theories more palatable to the academic mainstream. This project is not so concerned about the fragile hegemonic egos of the culture power brokers of the Western world. Asante's definition of Afrocentricity is a necessary perspective in this critical process; "Afrocentricity is the active centering of the African in subject place in our historical landscape." The influence of the Western world is neither denied nor vilified, it is merely marginal to the concerns of this project. The viewpoints of the White mainstream have long been an issue for Black writers and critics. First, that Blacks could even express themselves in an articulate manner in writing had been put forth to prove and demonstrate the Africans' humanity and intellect. Many Blacks wrote or published with this kind of proof in mind. Later, the issue of Black

writing being more Protest than Art begins to dominate the critical discussions of African American literature. The main concern is that the content of the literature has a negative effect on the artistic quality of the literature produced. Art is deemed to be of an objective nature and the Black subjective perspective is detrimental to artistic sensibilities. An alternate interpretation suggests that the protest content is detrimental to the subjective social consciences of the literary establishment and its objective pretenses. Therefore, protest content in Black literature is vilified. The Black Arts movement, the cultural ramification of the Civil Rights/Black Power movement effectively shelved that argument, if only for a moment: Black artists were to produce for and about other Black people, White feelings and perspectives be damned!

This political agenda was a backdrop to the development of the Black Aesthetic. It was developed with the input of critics who were also artists, or had artistic pretensions.

Chart 1

Black critical ideologies and racial identity

[Cross] (Thomas) Gates	Characteristics
1. [Pre-encounter] (Negro) <i>1. Repetition & Imitation</i>	[Acceptance of White value system; self-hate; assimilation] (self-hate, conformity) <i>Unreflective mimicry of White theories; application of same to Black creativity</i>
2. [Encounter] (Nigger)	[Exposure to new value system] (psychological rebellion)
[2a] [Immersion-Emersion] <i>2. Black Aesthetic</i>	[Ultra-black rhetoric; rejects White/Whites; less ego, strong emotion, & dichotomies] <i>New Black value system & rhetoric; rejection of white theories</i>
3. [Internalization] (White middle-class-Negro) <i>3. Repetition & Difference</i>	[New world view internalized; Blacks primary reference group] (marginal; realization that one cannot be white) <i>Focus on Blacks & how white theories do not fit; so something is wrong with theories—not Black creations!</i>
4. [Internalization/Commitment] (Black) <i>4. Synthesis</i>	[Constructive activist commitment; willing to accept positive definitions for both Black and White people, ideas, or cultural phenomena] (positive, self-affirming identity) <i>Willing/committed to accept & synthesize Black & White theorizations</i>

LEGEND: Text in brackets [] represents William Cross' constructs. Text in parentheses () represents Charles

Thomas' constructs. Text in italics represents a revision of Gates' critical ideologies.

Time unfolds linearly as one progresses down the chart stepwise from 1 through 4.

This aesthetic, grounded in analyses by people who also were looking at what made them write what and how they wrote, spurred the production of vernacular theories. The artistic part of the artist/critic knew that she/he was not writing merely for art's sake, and that the masses of African Americans were their intended audience, rather than the handful of (mostly White) cultural power brokers. The expected mainstream intellectual backlash coerced the development of less polemical, less threatening critical approaches rooted in more familiar Eurocentric theories. The political effects of Black Power saw more Black intellectuals entering academic institutions (colleges and universities,) both as students and faculty. The students were trained in the same manner as the faculty, and the faculty taught, and published (if they wanted tenure) in the same ways they were taught: Eurocentric critical methodologies.

The Black Aesthetic inspired a new generation of Black writers and scholars and, though the politics seemed out of date, some valuable perspectives were retained, most notably by the vernacular theorists. The Black Aesthetic remained too useful a tool in the analysis and explication of African American literature to discard completely. Gates states that imitation was "as fraught with problems as was Black Aesthetic criticism." Another perspective could easily assert that "in spite of its problems, Black Aesthetic criticism is still as useful as imitating the masters' discourse." Yet, the problems of mainstream academia's hegemonic power remain, and "syncretic" theories attempt to fuse the essential Afrocentric nature of African American expressive traditions to Eurocentric methodologies.

A relatively brief overview of Black Aesthetic thought and motivation in its historical situation is readily obtained by an analysis of Addison Gayle, Jr.'s *Black Expression* and *The Black Aesthetic* although other texts could be used just as definitively. Works like Jones' and Neal's *Black Fire* or either Chapman's *Black Voices* or *New Black Voices* would provide comparable perspectives.

Addison Gayle, Jr. edited two representative and influential texts on Black literary criticism of the Black Arts era, *Black Expression* and *The Black Aesthetic*. These texts exceed even the various anthologies of the day, with the evidence of exemplary creative literature on hand, in the manner that they set and elucidate the parameters of the nationalist informed literary criticism of the 60s and 70s. More so than any other characteristic, political motivations determine the critical praxis, even more so than artistic issues. Black Aesthetic critics, like the Black Power advocates of the time, believed that the "Negro" masses needed to change their relationship to mainstream—White, Western, European—American culture and society. Liberation was the watchword of the period. Blacks, Afro-Americans, or African Americans (no longer "Negroes") had to assert their independence politically, psychologically, socially, and culturally, as well as behave in ways that furthered the interests of Black people rather than Whites. The implications for literature, and in many cases these were explicit demands, were for the rejection of "White/Western canonical norms" in favor of Black forms and meanings. Black writing should not make itself amenable to White tastes, sensibilities, desires, or pragmatic ends.

The call for a rejection of the traditional Western canon was not simply a response to some notions of a perceived racist exclusion from mainstream academia: it was a demand to validate and assess literature from perspectives consistent with its production. Many of the contributors to *The Black Aesthetic* went to great lengths to demonstrate how

established critics had systematically devalued and excluded Blacks' writing through the use of standards that were often applied uncritically and inaccurately, and also were antithetical to the context of the writing itself. In the views of Black critics, the "political" dimension of African American literature was seen as a necessary component of a moral nature rather than purely protest or polemics. This morality proclaimed both the accurate reassessment of Black literature (including criticism by Blacks as well as Whites) and its function as a moral conscience for American society as a whole.

In the preface to *Black Expression*, Gayle is explicit about the demand for justice, which has been so significant to the content and context of Black writing in America. First, he contextualizes the perceptions of Blacks as writers and critics as marginal to mainstream literary circles, and those circles' beliefs about the inferiority of Blacks' efforts in their arenas. Next, he debunks the myth of Black literature being merely a protest literature by citing examples where such protest is missing. Gayle goes on to analyze the true nature of the place accorded Black literature.

However, the most important reason for the inferior status of Negro literature stems from the social mores deeply imbedded in the American psyche. A nation incapable of recognizing Negroes as other than inferior beings—hewers of wood and drawers of water—has been unable to transcend the myths used to buttress the arguments of slaveholders and modern-day segregationists." (*Black Expression* viii.)

He continues to disprove another of such myths,

An outgrowth of the concept of the inferiority of Negro literature is the widely held belief that Negroes are incapable of objectively criticizing efforts by other Negroes... But Negro critics have seldom been partial to their brother writers... For example: neither Baldwin nor Ellison has been reticent in attacking *Native Son*. John Killen's attacks on *Invisible Man* have been vehement, and no more scathing an attack has been made on any literary work than that by Saunders Redding on *Another Country*. Far then from being partial, Negro critics have assaulted the works of other Negroes... (*Black Expression* ix-x.)

In documenting Negroes' critical assaults on other Negro writers, Gayle presents the argument that aesthetics had always been a significant aspect of Black writing and criticism, though it was not as focal as its morality. In fact, he discusses this as being a longstanding argument between Black writers that Black critics must now join. This is a slightly recast version of the dual consciousness of Black Americans as it applies to artistic endeavors: To be Black is to protest, to be American is to be apolitical. Gayle credits Alaine Locke as being the first critic to suggest that Blacks eschew from moralizing to Whites, since it was unproductive, and to instead "turn inward to self expression" (*Black Expression* xiii). He cites Richard Wright as being the one to challenge that idea among writers "of his stature" whose sole concern was Art (included implicitly among these were Ellison and Baldwin.) Gayle insists that, since most Black

authors have taken Locke's admonishments to heart, the Black critic is left to present the other case.

He [the Negro critic] must, like Richard Wright, take an active part in the dialogue, . . . as an engaged participant, fully respectful of both sides of the dialogue. His criticism must be guided by a temperament that allows him to explicate the work of art in terms of its contribution to the alleviation of those problems that have confronted humanity for too long a time.

Gayle acknowledges that effective criticism of writers like Melvin Tolson, Robert Hayden, and LeRoi Jones need, "a sensitive and perceptive awareness which can only, in part, be conditioned by the academic establishment." But he is equally clear that, "the understanding of such poets depends equally upon a critical perspective conditioned by the multifaceted experiences of the Negro in the turbulent American society." The Black critic, though not destined to be visible, even if Black literature becomes an integral part of the mainstream canon, must maintain the role of a dual conscience. "For his is the predominant voice in American criticism which calls upon the Negro writer to dedicate himself to the proposition that literature is a moral force for change as well as an aesthetic creation."¹¹

Fewer than half of the selections in *Black Expression* were published during the decade of the 1960s. This collection effectively outlines the parameters of Black critical thought with an emphasis on the polemic nature of the Art/Protest components of Black literature.¹²

What seems to provide the essential conflict for the playwright, a tension which is invariably invested in the work, is that never yet resolved vacillation between assimilation and separateness, between the social responsibility of the black artist and the autonomy of art, the rogue's gallery of personae from polemicist, machine-gunner, troubadour, liquidator, collaborationist, witness, recorder, Kamikaze. The movement, though, seems to be against. As Jones raises in *Blues People* and others have discussed at length, this impulse stems from the old assumption that Afro-Americans are as earnest and devoted in defense of the American system as are American whites. The sixties playwright as well as other thinkers have stepped back to smile at that assumption as they decide what parts of that system, which values are worth saving, adopting; which of those so-called mainstream preoccupations are worth transforming by injecting which of the so-called minority values; which of those forked-tongued values that have formed the American reality of fine sentiment and broken treaties, broken spirits, broken bodies are real for black people.¹³

In discussing the vast array of forms inherent in the term "Black Theater" in an essay of the same name, Toni Cade pinpoints the Art vs. Protest argument, its relationship to the Black/American debate, and the direction in which Black artists/intellectuals of the sixties seem to be moving. She details the pervasive theatricality of Black art, music,

dance—and social protest. She asserts that “the Black Liberation Movement established Black Theater” (*Expression* 134). Throughout the rest of the essay Cade documents the receptions of a number of recent plays. She finds the established critical community is put off by the overt political messages of the dramas. However, the target community, Black people, is amused, inspired, and appreciative. Bambara’s findings underscore the need to alter the parameters of critical reflection and practice: if the writers are writing for the people, and the people “like” their products, then the critical voices that decry the literature must be wrong. New critical voices and new critical paradigms, like the Black Aesthetic, must be developed and presented, because they reflect the historical and cultural realities of artistic production.

If Gayle’s intent as editor of *Black Expression* is to focus the reader on the role of the Black critic, in particular the role of moralist who assesses the quality and qualities of Black writing in its dual functions as Art/Protest, then he is quite successful in exposing this aspect of African American literary criticism to his audience. Consistent with the Civil Rights movement’s demands for inclusion and participation in institutional America, *Black Expression* presents a fairly broad and balanced view of newer and older, albeit mostly male, voices to a constituency that had been clamoring to be heard. In this regard, the primary challenges this collection offers assail mainstream academia from three basic directions. When viewed as a generalized whole, with its reiterative analyses of the moral themes imbedded in the literature, its concern with the aesthetic or artistic quality of that literature, and its explication of the dynamics of African American life and culture as presented in a variety of discursive forms (folk culture, poetry, drama, and fiction), this collection, as a whole, is neither polemic nor aggressive. *Black Expression* debunks the myths of Black critical insensitivity or mimicry of mainstream criticism by demonstrating some of the dialogues about texts and writing—works by or about Wright, Ellison and Baldwin receive particular focus—that had been prevalent throughout the twentieth century.

When viewed separately, from a specifically chronological perspective, the newer pieces in *Black Expression* can be seen as predicting or demanding changes in the way Black literature and critics present themselves. These changes are consistent with the developmental process suggested in this project—the 1960s produced a new outlook in Black literature and criticism. James A. Emanuel’s “The Future of Negro Poetry” boldly declares,

“Black pride,” one of the rallying cries authentically attributed to “Black Power” as conceived and described by Negroes before its redefinition and distortion by the national press, has complicated the role of traditional scholarship....

...new attention is being given to the attitudes of authors and critics. The crucial question in the mind of the Negro, whether his interest is mainly political, educational, or broadly cultural, seems to be this: Is Negro leadership finally ready to assume practicable responsibility for the guidance and welfare of its black constituency?¹⁴

The theme of independence and autonomous thought (*Kujichagulia*) that Emanuel expresses is found throughout *Black Expression*’s newer pieces. K. William Kgositsile, in

“Towards Our Theater: A Definitive Act” predicts/demands that, “The images will be national... Yes, we will finally be coming to grips with *where we are really at*, historically. We will be destroying the symbols which have facilitated our captivity” (*Black Expression* 147). Dudley Randall says, “The younger poets no longer plead, or ask for rights from the white man... They reject whiteness and white standards. They call themselves blacks, rejecting the word Negro... Writing for a black audience out of black experience, the poets seek to make their work relevant and to direct their audience to black consciousness, black unity, and black power” (*Black Expression* 111–112). Hoyt Fuller’s “Towards a Black Aesthetic” reiterates the political and social analyses of sixties Black writing, its historicity, and the artistic difficulties these perspectives engender.

The young writers of the black ghetto have set out in search of a black aesthetic, a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people that reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience.

...They are fully aware of the dual nature of their heritage, and of the subtleties, complexities; but they are even more aware of the terrible reality of their outside-ness, of their political and economic powerlessness, and of the desperate racial need for unity. And they have been convinced, over and over again, by the irrefutable facts of history and by the cold intransigence of the privileged white majority that the road to solidarity and strength leads inevitably through reclamation and indoctrination of black art and culture. (*Black Aesthetic* 9.)

Published only two years later, Gayle’s *The Black Aesthetic* differs as significantly in content from *Black Expression* as the mobility and expression of a two-year old toddler compared to a four-year-old. It makes no pretensions of presenting a panoramic view of Black critical theory. The radical and militant concerns of 1960s Black nationalism as applied to the purposes and content of Art (and criticism) for and by Black people is its sole inspirational force. Only six of the selections were definitively published or copyrighted prior to 1960.¹⁵ Its focus is expressly theoretical and polemical. Gayle and the other contributors are concerned with figuring out the “special character and imperatives of black experience” and working through a process to develop and apply an analytical system to Black art. The political polemics go much beyond “protest.” Black Aesthetic writers offered a consistent rejection of White values and standards that was stated in the newer pieces in *Black Expression*. The politics of Black Aesthetics do not warrant further reiteration except to note that where *Black Expression* made the radical edge of Black nationalism’s knifeblade appear to be a viable yet relatively smaller part of the whole, *The Black Aesthetic* presents a greater unity of thought than existed anywhere in the Black community. Its nationalism is a deftly-wielded, razor-sharp sword. Its theory however is neither sharp nor developed, and has difficulty transcending its polemical framework.

Gayle’s introduction suggests that two significant expressions had always existed in Black literature: Anger and Black Nationalism. If the Black Aesthetic merely consisted of these ideas, it would not be new. According to Gayle, what is new are the terms and degree to which that nationalism and anger are expressed. On anger in Black American

literature, Gayle is lucid: “The black artist in the American society who creates without interjecting a note of anger is creating not as a black man, but as an American” (*Aesthetic* xv-xvi). He refers to the National Negro Convention movement of the 1830s, Martin Delaney, Sutton Griggs, and Du Bois to support his claims of a Black nationalist tradition.¹⁶ Also, “animosity against the inept, sterile critiques of American academicians—so prevalent in black critical writing today—is not new” (*Aesthetic* xvii).

Two other factors further distinguish the new and improved version of Black writing. First, he claims that the Black writer, like her/his less literary counterparts, is at war. More than a simple protest or repudiation of White standards, contemporary Black writing represents the advance guard of a cultural and political conflict. Black writers as a group are no longer concerned with pleasing a white public, though Langston Hughes had expressed similar sentiments more than forty years before in an essay included in this collection, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Hughes’ comments, “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. We know we are beautiful” could easily be an anthem for the Black Aesthetic movement except that the Black aesthetic clearly did not care whether Whites were pleased.¹⁷ In fact, it seems that Whites’ discomfort was a more expected or even desired reaction. And, of course, the word “Negro” must be replaced.

The second distinction Gayle makes is that the attention to a White audience led to “half-truths” in the artistic creation. “Speaking honestly is a fundamental principle of today’s black artist. He has given up the futile practice of speaking to whites, and has begun to speak to his brothers” (*Aesthetic* xxi). The “honest” message to his (/her?) brothers (/sisters?) is the most significant aspect of contemporary Black writing. Political content is more important than beauty in the Black aesthetic. Consciousnesses must be raised, old identities shed. The important question for a Black critic is not one of beauty, rather,

How far has the work gone in transforming an American Negro into an African-American or black man? The Black Aesthetic, then, as conceived by this writer, is a corrective—a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism, and offering logical, reasoned arguments as to why he should not desire to join the ranks of a Norman Mailer or a William Styron.” (*Aesthetic* xxiii.)

While Gayle’s comments demonstrate the decided patriarchal bias endemic to the Black Aesthetic movement, they also represent its focal concern of the Black community rather than a Eurocentric value system.

More than a rejection of “White,” Black aestheticians endorsed embracing “Black.” In so doing, they set themselves an extremely difficult task. They had to define their terms first, and “Blackness” was a new, socially, and politically constructed ideology. It is much easier to tear down a building than to construct one from the ground up. Their aesthetic had relatively few literary examples around which they could build a theory. Darwin Turner notes this in one of the most constructive and prophetic es-says in the collection, “Afro-American Literary Critics: An Introduction.” Previous literary critics had been able to *deduce* theories from a preexisting bulk of production. The Black

aesthetic literary critical process was forced to *induce* theories based on political ideals that, in the most optimistic light, were only nascent, and unrelated to any substantial body of literature or criticism.¹⁸ While Turner did not develop this idea of deductive versus inductive development of theories, which is a most explanatory theory of the growth of Black literary and critical production, he did discuss some of its ramifications in the contemporary socioeconomic political context. In concluding his essay, Turner suggested three significant trends in the future of black critics, or critics of African American literature.

[1] ...as increasing numbers of predominantly white institutions hire black instructors, and as additional money is given to black institutions, black scholars will find the time, the motivation, and the connections for publishing... As their publications increase, more black critics will become recognized and respected.

[2] ...as some of the present ferment subsides, the new black critics will look more closely at the current black writers. They will begin to evaluate more carefully on aesthetic bases, as Carolyn Rogers is now doing... In short, the new black critics may develop theory that may become influential in the evaluation of all American literature.

[3] ...unless America changes drastically within the next few years, most American readers will continue to look at literature through the eyes of white critics rather than the black... And full appreciation of the criticism of Afro-American literature will develop only when all readers perceive that a *thorough knowledge and understanding of the Afro-American experience, culture, and literary history is a prerequisite for an individual who wishes to be a critic of that literature.* (emphasis added)¹⁹

While Turner's prediction that Black American criticism may become influential in evaluating all American literature is a debatable and doubtful issue, his other "guesses" quite accurately describe what has happened over the three decades since this article was published. Black critics have entered mainstream (White) universities and many Black critics are respected members of the field, serving as editors of major American and African American anthologies, distinguished professorships, and officers in national professional organizations. Critics of African American literature, like many of those cited in this chapter, demonstrate knowledge and understanding of Black experience and literary history.

Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry* is the most theoretical text by an individual author to come out of the Black Arts movement, even though its greater bulk is taken up by a three-part anthology of Pre-Harlem Renaissance, Harlem Renaissance, and New Black Consciousness poetics.²⁰ His book opens with an extended introductory essay, "The Forms of Things Unknown." The title sets this text firmly in the Soul-Field, as it is borrowed from Richard Wright's essay "Negro Literature in the United States." In that essay, Wright identifies two major forms of Negro expression: The Narcissistic Level and The Forms of Things Unknown. The narcissistic level is that style of expression designed to assert one's humanity to the White man. The Forms of Things Unknown is a true cultural expression of the Negro, a conglomeration of "folk utterances,

spirituals, blues, work songs, and folklore” (*Expression* 210). Henderson theorizes that Black music and speech patterns that are self-directed or community-directed, without regard to any concept of a European, White, or Western aesthetic are the roots of “new” Black poetic references. Theme, structure, and saturation form the three critical categories that Henderson uses to discuss Black poetry.²¹

Theme is the subject of the poetry or the intellectual or emotional response to it. As a critical category, theme has the potential for diverse applications. But in the midst of a Black Arts movement, the central theme must reflect liberation rather than protest. Henderson derides the “masturbatory” art that screams “whitey” and “honkie” (Henderson, 17). The transcendent moment of Black poetry is not to be found in flagellating Whites, instead,

...the great overarching movement of consciousness for Black people must be called, in contemporary parlance, the idea of Liberation—from slavery, from segregation, from wishful “integration” into the “mainstream,” to the passionate denial of white middle-class values of the present and an attendant embrace of Africa and the Third World as alternative routes of development. This is not to say, of course, that all contemporary Black poets mean the same thing by Liberation, or even that they speak for the Black masses when they use that term, but if one substituted the old word “Freedom” for it, there would be no doubt at all that the message is clear. (Henderson 18.)

Spirituality, Africa, protest, didacticism, and collective ritual are some of the other themes identified by Henderson in his explication of the category of Theme. These are the predominant themes in the poetry of the sixties and seventies, and each has a political dimension that informs its aesthetic value. Henderson notes a historical “shift in consciousness from Black endurance and pride to revolutionary awakening” (Henderson 18). In this regard, a new pantheon of Black heroes and sheroes emerges. Musical icons, like Bird, Duke, or Trane in jazz, and Bessie, Lady Day, or Ma in the Blues join the established revolutionary figures of Nat Turner, Marcus Garvey, or Frederick Douglass. In addition, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and a host of African heroic leaders—Henderson cites Chaka, Kenyatta, Lumumba, Nyere, and Nkrumah—are included in a group of people who represent the indomitable spirit of *Kugichagulia* that infuses Black nationalism. This shift in consciousness in Black poetry is paralleled by similar developments in narrative expressions.

Structure is how the poetry is written, its linguistic components. The structure of Black poetry relates to two primary cultural referents that are intricately related: Black musical and verbal patterns. When Henderson states, “Structurally speaking, however, whenever Black poetry is most distinctly and effectively *Black*, it derives its form from two basic sources, Black speech and Black music” he is being inclusive of the broad range of Black America’s spoken language, from the dozens to sermons.²² Likewise, the verbal components of the spirituals, jazz, and blues influence the structure, as well as the themes, of Black poetry. Henderson extensively outlines both “Black linguistic elegance” and Black music as referents.²³ With substantial references to the pieces included in the anthology part of his text, these discussions are an invaluable foundation for

understanding not only the poetry but other forms of African American literature.²⁴ Henderson offers fairly detailed and explicated listings of the speech and musical patterns that influence Black poetry. Even though he clearly does not intend his listings to be exhaustive, one of the better-documented linguistic forms he neglected to include, call-and-response, was to be used by Callahan as the foundation for his theory of twentieth century African American fiction.²⁵

Two structural devices, “mascon images” and “the soul-field”, are direct linkages of literature (poetry) to Black experience. Mascon images (*mas*-sive *con*-centrations of Black experiential energy) are images that express transcendent meanings that, though obvious and common, are neither cliché nor naive, because they “are deeply rooted in an apparently inexhaustible reality.” (Henderson 45) The soul-field is that range of Black experience from which artists draw their associations. Such experience is not only within a popular realm; it also refers to associations with other art forms. Two examples Henderson presents involve titles of a song, Duke Ellington’s “Take the A Train”, and a play, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*.²⁶ More than just the name of a song, the “A Train” runs to Harlem. Of course, this is an important signification as Harlem was popularly viewed as the capital of Black America. Similarly, a line from Langston Hughes’ well-known poem “Harlem” [What happens to a dream deferred/does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? or fester like a sore, and then run...*or does it explode?*] becomes the title of one of the more famous African American plays that would later also achieve comparable fame as a film. The legacy of John Henry, *Night Train*, “Midnight Train to Georgia”, the underground railroad, Blacks’ employment as porters on *trains*, and John Coltrane all tie into this association in a massive concentration of African American experiences. Similarly, Hughes’ and Hansberry’s raisins would later have a popular notoriety in the California Raisins (characters with decidedly African American cultural idiomatic expressions) who sang a song relating the importance of the African American oral tradition, “I Heard it through the Grapevine”.²⁷ Multiple and revised associations that interlink with other aspects of Black experiences fertilize the soul field.²⁸

Saturation fits the poetry into the political needs of the Black Aesthetic by assessing how the poem communicates “Blackness,” and its “fidelity to the observed or intuited truth of the Black Experience in the United States” (Henderson 10). This is the most difficult of Henderson’s concepts because it is so loosely, almost tautologically defined. It does not help that it is also the least well-developed, warranting only a scant five page explication near the end of the essay. Saturation is clearly an attempt at a qualitative assessment of how well the applied constructs of theme and structure merge into the overall aesthetic of a poem/piece of Black literature.²⁹

Saturation/Blackness is the value component of Henderson’s critical theories. Assessed by a reader’s “knowing” or a perceived level of Blackness, this is a received quality, a subjective phenomenon that coincides with objective assessments. That Blackness is both objective and subjective fits into Ani’s conceptualization of non-dualistic African philosophy. There is an objective sociological reality in being Black in America, easily perceived in any statistical analysis like census data. If one is daring, a leisurely stroll through any U.S. inner city ghetto will provide a wealth of empirical data resulting in a subjective education. Yet, the measure of the Black human experience transcends sociological position. This is the message and intent inherent in the texts of the blues and spirituals. The application of Thomas’ psychological scale to a reader could

be a useful assessment for interpreting her/his responses to various literatures, especially as it recognizes personal and personality dimensions in its stages. In particular, the phase of immersion has a special significance when considering an individual's exposure to and ongoing engagement with issues of Blackness and Black culture. Note how the psychological term coincides with Henderson's expression of saturation in the following passage,

In the first place, it [saturation as a critical category] lets us know that the recognition of Blackness in poetry is a value judgment which on certain levels and certain instances, notably in matters of meaning that go beyond questions of structure theme, must rest upon one's *immersion* in the totality of the Black Experience." (italics added) (Henderson 65–66)

Again, as in Stepto and Cooke's usages of the term, immersion is a key word in assessing the perceptions of Black realities. If the reader is also to be a critic of a cultural expression like African American literature, it is imperative that one be exposed to, and aware of the cultural nuances of a diverse range of Black Americans' experiences.

Gates' endorsement of a black vernacular tradition seems to owe a great deal to Stephen Henderson, and, to a lesser extent, Houston Baker. In fact, Gates openly acknowledges Henderson's contribution to be "imaginative," "of the utmost importance," and "seminal." "His examination of form is the first in a race and superstructure study and will most certainly give birth to more systematic and less polemical studies" (*Figures* 35). For Gates, the political implications and lack of linguistic focus in Henderson's theories is damning. The form and language within the text must be the primary consideration. All Black Aesthetic criticism is suspect in Gates' view.³⁰

It seems to me that finding metaphors for black literary relations from within the Afro-American tradition, and combining these with that which is useful in contemporary literary theory, is the challenge of Afro-American literary history. (*Figures* 48.)

This research suggests that Afrikanity, a construct representing a pattern of Afrikan survivals, is emerging as a significant motif within contemporary African American literature. The veil of dual consciousness, and the mask of condescending and submissive Blackness are replaced by Black poetics, metaphorical worlds that signify and show Eurocentric hegemonic cultural constructions in sharp relief. Afrikanity, the soul field of mascon imagery, signals a new African American consciousness in Black authors. Non-Black European, American, or other authors and cultures undoubtedly still influence contemporary Black authors. Many of these authors have attempted to construct hybrid creations that combine various cultural traditions with a strong Afrikan influence. The challenge for this critical project is to combine the diverse metaphors of the Black literary tradition with what is useful in Afrocentric critical theory, rather than contemporary (Eurocentric) literary theory.

Gates' *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*³¹ takes its impetus from the folkloric master trickster. The Signifyin' Monkey is the U.S. descendant of the West African Esu-Elegbara or Legba. Other New World manifestations

are the Cuban Echu-Elegua, the Brazilian Exu, Papa Legba in Haiti's Vaudou, along with the Hoodoo (U.S.) Papa La Bas. Signifyin(g) develops under Gates' explication as the primary mode of African American rhetorical *structures*. It is "the black trope of tropes, the figure for black rhetorical figures." (*Monkey* 51) Signifyin(g) defies easy definition. It is at once the signifying of standard English usage or poststructuralist critical theory, with an additional Black vernacular revisioned twist, signifyin'. Double-voiced (recall Du Bois) and repetitive, signifyin(g) references and revises, compounding meaning(s) between texts as well as incorporating the diversity of African and African American oral traditions in criss-cross symbolism able to explode or transcend discourses in a single bound.³²

For all its theoretical discussion and critical vernacular, *The Signifying Monkey* does not offer substantially "new" insights into the analysis of African American literature. In continuing the process begun during the Black Aesthetic/Black Arts movement, it does provide a more developed theoretical framework with a different vocabulary, and does some of the supportive and detailed background work, the lack of which Gates so acerbically criticized in Henderson's work. In other words, Signifyin(g) is "more systematic and less polemical" than Black Aesthetics. The result is a set of methodological pointers that can be used to guide analysis of both formal structures *and* content. Henderson had proposed and argued for both the field of oral folklore, including its musical manifestations, and Black linguistic distinctions, "the living speech of the Black community," as poetic referents.³³ Likewise with Baker's focus on blues ideology and imagery.³⁴ Henderson's concept of "mascon structures," functionally translates as Gates' "signifiers," as his "Soul Field" comes down to "intertextuality" at the basic level of cultural experiences and meanings. Regardless of the terminology used, the thematic cultural content of the literature, and how it represents the peoples' experiences, is what is being addressed. Though Gates' tracing of *Esu-Elegbara* is a unique and valuable contribution to cultural studies and literary criticism, he, Henderson and Baker refer to the same folkloric and imagery database (soul field) to support their theories. The importance of *The Signifying Monkey* can be measured not so much by its breaking of new ground but in its cultivation of previous fields of criticism and the hybridization of their various crops.³⁵

Such analysis of Gates is not at all unique. Reginald Martin states that, "... Gates, in his recent book *The Sign and the Signifying Monkey* (1989), [sic] has now made a turn that in many ways would align him with some of the early separatists by insisting that signification is an original African-based trope" (Martin, 728).³⁶ Barbara Johnson, a respondent to Gates' essay "Canon-formation, Literary History, and the Afro-American Tradition: From the Seen to the Told" in Baker and Redmond's *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s* makes the same point in stating that "Gate's present work is driven by an empowering desire to have it both ways, to have his Western theory and his vernacular theory too" (Johnson 40). Martin's and Johnson's statements juxtapose vernacular theory with Western theory in a manner that affirms its African nature. However, Gates' continuing work as editor, critic, and leader in the area of Black literary criticism reflects his syncretic rather than Afrocentric position,

I can say that my own biases toward canon-formation are to stress the formal relationship that obtains among texts in the black tradition—

relations of revision, echo, call and response, antiphony, what have you—and to stress the vernacular roots of the tradition. (*Study* 38.)

Gates, by having it both ways, has truly become like the Esu-Elegbara figure, a mask that sees both in front and behind, wearing both a black and a white cap.³⁷ Yet he remains wary of the master's tools, and, though advocating their use, Gates is quite clear about which allegiances frame his world view. He is more than self-reflective, he is prescriptive to would-be critics of African American literature. And his prescription suggests, in a very literal manner, a kinship with the Black Aesthetics of the Black Arts movement.

We must not succumb, as did Alexander Crummel, to the tragic lure of white power, the mistake of accepting the empowering language of white critical theory as “universal” or as our own language, the mistake of confusing the enabling mask of theory with our own black faces... And much of my early work reflects my desire to outwit the master by trying to speak his language as fluently as he. Now, we must, at last, don the empowering mask of blackness and talk *that* talk, the language of black difference. While it is true that we must, as Du Bois said so long ago, “know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man,” we must also know and test the dark secrets of a black and hermetic discursive universe that awaits its disclosure through the black arts of interpretation. For the future of theory and of the literary enterprise in general, in the remainder of the century, is black, indeed. [boldness added] (*Study* 29.)

BLACK FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

As we continue the work of reconstructing a literary history that insists on black women as central to that history, as we reject the old male-dominated accounts of history, refusing to be cramped into the little spaces men have allotted women, we should be aware that this is an act of enlightenment, not simply repudiation.

—Mary Helen Washington³⁸

In an undoubted signification on Houston Baker's trope of repudiation that separates Black literature from mainstream literature, Mary Helen Washington notes a similarity as well as a distinction between Black feminist criticism and that produced by the Black Aesthetics. Feminist criticism has encountered some of the same difficulties and resistances from the dominant and established canons of literary criticism as did the Black Aesthetic movement. Feminist criticism is imbedded in the larger feminist movement and stems from the overt political need to revision and redefine a group's reality in relationship to a dominant paradigm. The Black Arts movement was likewise imbedded in the larger goals of the Black Power movement. Specifically, in asserting that female authors write in different patterns and a corollary demand for different critical standards, feminist literary criticism challenges male intellectual and cultural hegemony. The political impulse behind this movement is the same: “...in the literature I had been taught and in the world I was expected to negotiate, my face did not exist. I know that I

felt an immediate sense of community and continuity and joy in the discovery of these writers [Black female novelists] as though I had found something of my ancestry, my future, and my own voice.”³⁹ This Black feminist literary heritage, while imbedded in both African American and feminist concerns, nevertheless carves out its own specific niche in academia.

Washington’s words encompass some of the most significant buzzwords of Black feminist criticism: community, continuity, ancestry, voice, exist(ence). At the same time, it points to the inadequacies and lack of representation of women—Black or White—in the mainstream canon, and the realities of and desire for social change. As in the quote used at the beginning of this section, Washington’s words not only challenge the external focus of “repudiation,” they shift the concern from rejecting external mediations to inner enlightenment.

The Black Aesthetic was only one manifestation of an ongoing Black resistance to domination by Whites. Likewise, what is called feminism also has deep roots in movements and ideologies that sought to eliminate the dominance of men over women. Deborah McDowell elaborates on this point.

Like the black aestheticians, those women in the vanguard of the women’s movement’s second wave called for women’s release from unreal and oppressive loyalties. Feminist criticism became one literary manifestation of that political stance. Similar in spirit to the largely male-dominated black aesthetic movement, feminist critics likewise repudiated and subverted what they considered alien, male-created literary standards, and began to describe and analyze a female aesthetic which reflected women’s unique culture. (*Reading Feminist* 110.)

There is no doubt that the push for Black Studies also fueled a recovery of past Black women writers whose works were buried in obscurity. Additionally, the sexism in the Black Aesthetic movement can be credited with stimulating a large number of female students, teachers, researchers and writers. Many women, whose feminist consciousness found Black Studies (as well as Black Arts and Black Power) to be inadequate to their needs as women and not representative of their realities, were motivated to create a space for themselves in contemporary academia. Mary Helen Washington’s anthologies represent the first wave of recovery/discovery of Black women’s texts that was followed by many scholarly and critical endeavors to interpret the old and new works which did not fit into any of the pre-existing critical boxes. Again, as with the Black Arts movement, many of the writers themselves functioned in multiple roles of critic/activist/artist. In this regard, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Ntosake Shange, and Toni Cade Bambara deserve honorable mention for pioneering a field that drew criticism from (or lacked the support of) not only mainstream White critics, but also significant numbers of White feminists and Black males, inside and outside of academia. In the contemporary era Black women writers and their works enjoy a substantial share of popular and critical attention. Add to the aforementioned names: Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, Rita Dove, Maya Angelou, Terry MacMillan, Bebe Moore Campbell, J. California Cooper, among many, many others. Black female critics (like Hortense Spillers, Nellie McKay, Barbara Christian, Deborah McDowell, and the ubiquitous bell

hooks) are among the country's elite academics. The current state of affairs assures that, at least for the foreseeable future, Black female writers and Black feminist critics will have no chance of fading back into obscurity.

As women have entered the academic mainstream, in the multiple roles as writers, critics and teachers, the pattern observed by Darwyn Turner is evident. Women are having significant effects on the writing and the criticism. The new voices of Blacks, women, and other so-called minorities that have entered the mainstream en masse are being read by each other, speaking to each other, and being heard by each other, not just the dominant and established literary institutions. The stories of their lives and their particular perspectives are intertwined with those whose stories and perspectives share similarities and the literature and criticism they create. Such interactions between textual worlds and lived experiences are not unusual and derive directly from the practice of being literate in contemporary society. Gates' introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* is not only insightful regarding Black feminist literature and criticism but highlights the aspects of it which will be most useful in the methodology proposed in this project.

Literary works are in dialogue not because of some mystical collective unconscious determined by the biology of race or gender, but because writers read other writers and *ground* their representations of experience in models of language provided largely by other writers to whom they feel akin. It is through this mode of literary revision, amply evident in the texts themselves—in formal echoes, recast metaphors, even in parody—that a “tradition” emerges and is defined.

...When sexuality, race, and gender are both the condition and the basis of personal identity, they must shape the very possibility of expressive culture.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that these critics have brought home the importance of attending to one's own positionality... Criticism, for them, is as local, provisional, and context bound as the literature on which it comments. (*Reading Feminist* 7–8.)

The most important components of this project that are influenced by Black feminism are the emerging traditions, the idea of positionality and interestedness, the recognition that experience and history shape expressive culture, and that criticism is local, provisional and context bound. These components are consistent with the idea of being “historically situated” as expressed in chapter 2.

Mary Helen Washington's “The Darkened Eye Restored” outlines the parameters of a literary history of Black women. She refutes previous critical traditions that viewed works by Black women as inferior, or failed to view them at all. With particular emphasis on the critical response to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Maud Martha*, Washington shows how these and other texts elucidate a different world of female characters, sexuality, and work than have been presented by Whites and Black males. She debunks the methods by which Black women's texts have been kept out of Black and White critical canons. She completes her effort with a bibliographical review of the major contributions to the field.

Barbara Christian presents a vision of “The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism” in which she self-reflects on the relationship of language (the word) to the various communities she claims; the high of academia, with its critics, classrooms, and canons; the lows of kitchens, playgrounds, and streets. She, too, notes the enlightening effects of the Civil Rights/Black Power 1950s and 1960s and the re-evaluation of the “low.” Eurocentric academia had no place for a Black woman as scholar or writer, and therefore, did not understand them or had no pre-labeled box in which to place them. Yet she is clear as to the importance of her literal and figurative ancestors.

In the space created for us by our foremothers, our sisters in the streets, the houses, the factories, the schools, we were now able to speak and to listen to each other, to hear our language, to refine and critique it across time and space, through the written word. For me, that dialogue *is* the kernel of what a Black feminist literary critic tries to do. We listen to those of us who speak, write, read, to those who have written, to those who may write. We write to those who write, read, speak, may write, and we try to hear the voiceless. We are a many-voiced palaver of thought/feeling, image/language that moves us to *move*—toward a world where, like Alice Walker’s revolutionary petunias, all of us can bloom.

We found that in order to move beyond prescribed categories we had to “rememory”-reconstruct our past. (Christian 48.)

In words that echo Zora Neale Hurston’s objections to the race champions, Washington’s sense of community, ancestry and voice, as well as Gates’ conversion, Christian goes on to finger the real challenges of being a successful “Other” studying “others” in the academy. The academy has no language, history or tradition that accommodates the lived experiences of women and incorporates their perspectives. The processes of movement, revision, (re)writing, and inclusion lead to ambiguous practices that stereo-typify and sterilize the diversity of our worlds unless those processes honor the multiplicity of women’s experiences. “For we now confronted the revelation we always knew, that there is both a She and many she’s. And that sometimes, in our work we seemed to reduce the *both-and* to *either-or*.... The awareness that we too seek to homogenize the world of our Sisters, to fix ourselves in boxes and categories through jargon, theory, abstraction, is upon us.” (Christian 49.)

Christian suggests that education and the creation of an academic high community might be partly responsible. But in self-reflexive honesty, she also brings the locus somewhat closer to home, “I sometimes wonder if we critics read stories and poems, or if as our language indicates, our reading fare is primarily that of other critics and philosophers.” (Christian 50) Her response is to revision her world away from the dialectic high/low into a conceptualization of a high, low, and middle. Her middle world of class-rooms, reading, and negotiating boundaries is a less abstract locale where creativity and understanding can occur.

Multiple identifications of otherness accommodate negative representations from multiple perspectives. Michele Wallace explores how the “various oppositions of race, class, and sex” informed her writing of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* as well as her reading of Black women’s writing, fiction and criticism. The “variations of

negation” she identifies result from being negated as one type of other (a woman,) and another negation from a different other status (Black). While she positions herself inside a middle class through her claims of a private school education and a personal ancestry of accomplished women—her mother is artist Faith Ringgold, and her grandmother was a fashion designer—Wallace can nevertheless see class issues in literature as yet another vehicle for negating or othering Black women. She is critical of the dualistic logic and polar oppositions so essential to Western discourse (recall Christian’s point about either-or) in that Black women fit outside of the boxes created and negated by patriarchal Eurocentrism. Black men are the others by race, White women are the gendered others, but Black women and women of color are still “others” to both men of color and White women.

The dynamics of multiple oppressions and their effects on the realities, identities, and cultural expressions of the community of women of color is at the center of Black or women of color’s feminist critical perspectives. Washington writes of how her mother and aunts were kept from pursuing the quasi-professional careers like bookkeeping and when it came to employment “found every door but the kitchen door closed to them.” Besides positing herself within that community, her anecdote is a personal testament to the reality behind Black women’s writings that show how “several generations of competent and talented black women, all of whom *had* to work, were denied access to the most ordinary kinds of jobs and therefore any kind of economic freedom” (Washington 36). Almost every selection in *Reading Black*, *Reading Feminist* incorporates not only racialized and gendered analyses, but also takes into account the ways that the focal literature incorporates or addresses powerlessness and/or negation that stems from other demographic factors. These essays are often intensely personal but also explicitly critique the institutional issues that support narrow reading of significant writers and their works, and inhibit the creativity of Black women writers.

The impetus on Black feminist criticism may have been its connection to the political needs of women who found no other viable representations in literature other than the ones they created and the critical text may have overt or subtle political overtones. However, McDowell cites contemporary Black women authors as overcoming some of the creative neglect common to the male-dominated efforts of the New Negro or Black Arts movements. Earlier female authors had few options of how to present their characters, and even fewer examples from which to model or base revisions. Yet creative fiction by Black women has earned vast critical and popular acclaim while continuing to address various and diverse political concerns. Gates discusses the popularity of “the resounding new voice” of Black women authors as coming from its newness as well as its “compelling blend of realistic and lyrical narrative modes” (*Reading Feminist* 2). Deborah McDowell suggests a different reason for the attraction modern readers have for the works of black women, one consistent with Wallace’s analysis of Morrison’s *Sula* about which she declares, “Neither Sula, nor her mother Hannah, nor her grandmother Eva fits anybody’s notion of a good guy.” (*Reading Feminist* 62) For McDowell,

Although these recent writers have preserved the revisionist mission that inspired that ideal [the public role of 19th century women’s writing], they have liberated their own characters from the burden of being exemplary

standard-bearers in an enterprise to uplift the race. The result is not only greater complexity and possibility for their heroines, but also greater complexity and artistic possibility for themselves as writers. (*Reading Feminist* 99.)

The link of a literary theory to a sociological analysis comes out in Wallace's "Variations on Negation" and Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition" which concludes the section on "Constructing a Tradition." Henderson's primary thesis is that when reading Black women's literature it is inappropriate to filter it through only a Black or only a female lens. What is important in one context may occlude insights in the other, thereby preventing the analysis or understanding of the text as a whole. This seems to me to explain some of the most significant differences between the androcentric Black aestheticians and Black feminists who were (are) dissatisfied with them as both readers and writers. By failing to comprehend adequately the complexity of Black women's writing or (re)present it in their own female characters, the male critic/author, regardless of his intent, effectively reifies his own limited notions of Black women, or trivializes reality *as presented and experienced by Black women*.

Mae Henderson describes her theoretical model in a manner consistent with the expositions of other Black feminist critics who stress not only a multiplicity of identity, but also the interrelationships between the different identities as necessary components of study. For her, identity formation is global in that it is a result of complex relationships within the broader society and its groupings, and also local as it stems from inner psychological dynamics as well.

What I propose is a theory of interpretation based on what I refer to as the "simultaneity of discourse," a term inspired by Barbara Smith's seminal work on black feminist criticism. This concept is meant to signify a mode of reading which examines the ways in which the perspectives of race and gender, and their interrelationships, structure the discourse of black women writers... In other words, I propose a model that seeks to account for racial difference within gender identity and gender difference within racial identity. (*Reading Feminist* 117)

For Mae Henderson, the nature of Black women's writings interrogates the multiple sites of identity formation by noting the mechanisms by which the dominant institutions and their legions confer the status of other on Black women. Yet her concepts are more dynamic and less deterministic than this simplification might imply. Women are self-defined by different factors than mere males' notions of them. Likewise, the nature of identity formation for Africans throughout the diaspora is not grounded solely in Europeans' ideology. Black women's writing looks outward at the components that make up society and inward at the diverse and complex aspects of experience that make up self.

What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women's writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the "other(s)," but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self

that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity. (*Reading Feminist* 118)

This matrix provides a useful acknowledgement of the multiple possibilities of interaction. These identity frames, “plural aspects of self,” are sites of both alliance and conflict, as she goes on to explain,

As such, black women writers enter into testimonial discourse with black men as blacks, with white women as women, and with black women as black women. At the same time, they enter into competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women. (*Reading Feminist* 121.)

This last passage, in particular, is directly related to the theoretical foundations of Black feminism and the critical perspectives that derive from it. In *Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, The Combahee River Collective makes this oval (from *ovum*—somehow “seminal” always seems out of place in a feminist context) point, “We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism” (*The Combahee River Collective* 213). Henderson clearly extends the parameters of “struggle with” and “struggle about” to include the worlds of White women and men.

The various experiential realities of Black women throughout their history in the U.S.—as well as throughout the “New World,” Europe, and Africa—triangulate and frame a world view with reference points outside of and inside of the more hegemonic perspectives of White, or Male, or White female. Though “local, provisional, or context bound,” Black women’s writing and criticism fits into a tradition that recognizes the diversity of an individual’s personal experience along with the commonalities shared between authors. This traditional “field” provides its own interpretations and examples. Barbara Smith is one of the pioneer theorists of Black feminist criticism. She addresses some guiding principles for a Black feminist critic,

...Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition... theirs is a verifiable historical tradition that parallels in time the tradition of Black men and white women writing in this country, but that thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share....

Another principle...would be for the critic to look first for precedents and insights in interpretation within the works of other Black women. In other words she would think out of her own identity and not try to graft the ideas or methodology of white/male literary thought upon the precious materials of Black women’s art. Black feminist criticism would by definition be highly innovative....⁴⁰

For me, as a Black *male* critic looking at literature by both Black males and females, this passage provides subtle guiding principles. While literature by Black women may

constitute a tradition, that tradition is neither separate nor exclusive, and may even include commonalities with works by non-female Blacks based on similar racial, cultural or class experiences. Rather than attempt to “graft male literary thought or methodology” onto Black women’s art, I believe that some of the theories and methodologies coming out of Black feminist criticism can and should be able to apply to non-female texts. The “precedents and insights” of Black women’s literature and criticism can and should prove useful in the analysis of Black males’ texts. If one accepts the premise that previous works of literature affect or influence subsequent literary efforts, then it is unreasonable to assume that the works of contemporary literary giants like Morrison, or Walker, or the resurfaced Hurston would not have an effect or influence on works by Black males as well as females. Certainly Trey Ellis’ *Platitudes* is an example of a novel that plays on the dialogue, or lack of, between Black male and female (or macho and feminist/womanist) consciousnesses that have developed over the last two or three decades. Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* and other novels also make ample use of dialogue between feminist and patriarchal perspectives. The matrixes produced by being African American or European American, male or female, added to the stratifications of class and issues of sexuality produce neither static identities nor exclusive cultural materials. One of the guiding theses of this research is that there is something identifiably African or African American in some works of African American males and African American females. As a critic, I think and read out of my own identity and experience, and that includes many experiences and influences shared in common with African American women.⁴¹

The trap Mae Henderson identifies, of viewing literature through only one lens and failing to recognize the multiplicity of identities inherent in the piece of literature, is not being ignored in this conversation. In fact, the general workings of identity as a psychological construct and sociocultural phenomenon argue against delimiting any individual to the narrow parameters of a few of her or his demographic factors. Being American is not a homogenous experience, neither is being African in a diasporan sense or in the sense of being Igbo or Ashanti. Neither is being low, middle, or upper class. Multiplicity of identities must apply to other populations than Black women. Many (if not most) texts can be analyzed to show what they say about the various fields of experience/identity they present. Such a multicultural critique is essential to African American literary study in that the texts inevitably say something about being American, and being Black, in addition to being x, y, or z, where xyz can be gendered, ethnic-ed, classed, sexed, or other demographic variables. The idea of *simultaneity* of discourse suggests, however, a more specifically focused reading of texts. Yet such a localized reading does not preclude the texts from having more global or national implications. In that sense, using the Black feminist perspective of being aware of the different voices within a text allow one to analyze what that text says about being “Afrikan” without rejecting the idea that the text also carries messages about what it is to be a part of some other demographic group(s.)

An important factor to note is that Black women’s writing cannot be represented by a dualistic analysis of the local or global: it is also interpersonal, with a stress on dialogues, not only with external texts, but within the specific texts where women are presented as talking *with* each other. This specific form of intimacy is discussed by Washington,

Women talk to women in this tradition, and their friendships with other women—mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers—are vital to their growth and well-being... That intimacy is a tool, allowing women writers to represent women more fully...female relationships are an essential aspect of self-definition for women. (*Reading Feminist* 35–36.)

This is another example of how Black women's writing challenges the dialogic nature of Western patriarchal thought. When Gates states that Black feminist criticism is "local, provisional, and context bound" it shakes the foundation of the so-called "objective" academic perspective. In fact, his words cannot be limited to the writing of criticism: they also must be applied to the reader and the writer. This lesson is restated by Elizabeth FoxGenovese, "Personal experience must be understood in social context. Its representation is susceptible to the critic's reading, regardless of whether he or she shares the personal experience" (*Reading Feminist* 183).

The rest of *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* presents examples of Black feminist criticism and two interviews with contemporary Black women writers. While each selection offers valuable textual insights, they usually fit within the theoretical guidelines outlined above. As such, few of the pieces are directly applicable to this project. Many refer to Toni Morrison's works, though *Song of Solomon* receives little attention. Likewise, *Invisible Man* is a reference point, but not subjected to any rigorous analyses and David Bradley is not mentioned. Only a few of the essays address issues of Africa or Afrikanity. Even though these critics do not provide direct references for the novels to be reviewed in this project, their points of view are useful and illuminating as a foundation for a theoretical perspective. The review of critical literature in this chapter sets up the theoretical perspective of Afrikan poetics and emergent Afrikan survivals without focusing on the criticism generated about specific texts. Criticism of Black literature can be centered in the historical and cultural experiences of Africans transcending the limits of the Black aesthetic. Black feminist critical theories demonstrate that focusing on issues of otherness are viable perspectives. Cooke and Stepto identify myths and thematic structures that apply to African American literature in specific periods of time. Recent developments, especially the re-valuation of Africa in the post-civil rights era, require new theories. The task for Afrocentric critical theory is to look for the specific markers that denote and define contemporary African American literature and experience.

CHAPTER 4

Recent Directions in African American Literary Criticism:

Toward an African Poetics

AFRO-AMERICAN LITERARY STUDY IN THE 1990s

Baker and Redmond's *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s* came about as the proceeds of a conference featuring the "leading scholars of Afro-American literature." Its format consists of seven papers/chapters and two respondents to each. While the published document could not present the kind of dialogue that was shared by the complete host of participants, this format outlines past and future Black literary criticism, its contradictions and ambivalences. The agenda for future Black criticism is mediated by a constructive self-reflexivity that expands the field's perspectives rather than producing consensus.

The first essay, by the omnipresent Henry Louis Gates Jr., addresses issues that surround the formation of a Black literary and critical canon. By reviewing significant anthologies, Gates suggests that traditions already exist around which to build a canon. Yet, attention to past efforts is not enough; Gates also announced that W.W.Norton had empowered himself and a group of scholars to edit yet another anthology, a "dream book of black literature." A Norton anthology offers the benefit of mainstream distribution and marketing so "no one will ever again be able to use the unavailability of black texts as an excuse not to teach our literature" (*Study* 37). Gates' healthy skepticism about and growth away from mimesis of the (White) master critical discourse seems lacking in the glow of a Norton rubberstamp on Black literature but the essay is not so self-congratulatory as to ignore the pressing issues of developing a distinct discourse and specific critical tools. "Our task now is to invent and employ our own critical theory, to assume our own propositions, and to stand within the academy as politically responsible and responsive parts of a social and cultural African-American whole" (*Study* 28). Gates had earlier referred to this task as the need to find "indigenous black principles of criticism."

Such refined Black aestheticism—especially in the light of Gates' well-documented insistence on the use of critical methodology, which was also a focal point in this essay—does not go unrecognized or unmentioned by the respondents, Barbara Johnson and Donald Gibson. Barbara Johnson accuses Gates' present work of being "driven by an empowering desire to have things both ways, to have his Western theory and his vernacular theory too" (*Study* 40). Gibson acknowledges that the problem is not Gates' alone. "...insofar as we have stakes in the academic profession, insofar as we are committed to academic institutions, we are both jailers and jailed" (*Study* 47). Neither Gibson nor Johnson are extremely critical of Gates' position, they merely explicate some of the "politics and ironies" that Gates' discussion glossed.

Deborah McDowell takes a feminist stance in the analysis of Toni Morrison's works. Her essay has numerous implications for this research project. McDowell supports Ani's concept of a non-dialectical African cultural worldview. She notes about Morrison's *Sula*, "We enter a new world here, a world that demands a shift from a dialectical either/or orientation to one that is dialogical of both/and, full of shifts and contradictions, particularly shifting and contradictory conceptions of self" (*Study* 60). For McDowell, Morrison's uses of character present self/identity as a process rather than a "static entity." Morrison also rejects the linear mode, shifting in or across time, again suggestive of Ani's conceptualization of African circularity, distinct from Eurocentric assumptions of linear temporality. McDowell offers dialogic reading as a means of interpretation for Black feminist (and other) critics to uncover the layered meanings within texts. She stresses that such readings need not set up oppositions or discredit other readings. This, too, reflects an Africanized both/and worldview, rather than a dialectical either/or position that does not accommodate the coexistence of such dissimilar perspectives.

The respondents to McDowell, Hortense Spillers and Michael Awkward, elaborate on her ideas and their implications. Spillers notes that the link between critic and community is that both are fraught with ambivalence. Ambivalence underscores three significant "lines of stress." First, "The need to develop "intramural" social and critical practice that indeed comes to fully regard those "differences within" and "between." Next, she recognizes that notions of community can be built around and within the "shifting subject position." She notes, "holding down as it were, several spaces at once marks the dilemma of African-American culture, of a people, of individual ones of us, and out of it our practice of criticism, teaching, and writing arises." Her third point is that Blacks or critics or writers ("we") must be the agents who "articulate the *spaces* of contradiction." Spiller's points are all directly related to the goals of this project. Addressing the dilemma of African American culture in that it is both American (Western/European) and African acknowledges that criticism and writing arise from within the contradictory nature of the conflicts between those two cultural heritages. African American writing is an act of articulating some of the spaces of contradiction.¹

Awkward warns of the dangers in a primarily poststructuralist reading of Black literature which has the hazard of "virtually erasing the blackness out of Afro-American authorial utterance." He notes that Morrison's writing is accessible on those terms, but is equally accessible in terms of Black cultural precedents. Awkward's analyses are particularly relevant to this research project in that he validates the need for analyzing various texts for African cultural components as well as mainstream critical considerations. He uses Morrison's own words to demonstrate that she intentionally develops Black artistic sensibilities in her work. He cites an extended version of a passage that McDowell herself quotes, only McDowell uses it to make the point that Morrison's work is driven by poststructuralist impulses. Once again, an African critical ethos is suggested. The ideas Awkward proposes are consistent with a both/and, rather than an either/or analysis, because he does not say that McDowell's understanding is wrong, only that Black artistic sensibilities (he uses the term denigration) must also be seen as viable interpretations. Awkward believes that critical theory can be appropriated by critics of African American literature without writing the Blackness out of the texts, but this must be a self-conscious process.

William Andrews' "A Poetics of Afro-American Autobiography" provides useful insights into the poetics of African American narratives this project explores. He reiterates the point that slave narratives are the "roots, if not the soul, of Afro-American autobiography" (*Study* 81). "Free storytelling" is a significant formal component of this tradition, and autobiography is a form of oral and written expression. In tracing how Douglass' *Narrative* dethroned Washington's *Up From Slavery* as a result of the many revolutionary autobiographies and narratives of the sixties, Andrews targets selfhood as the fundamental poetic impulse. This selfhood is neither static nor deterministic, but varied and evolutionary. Presentations of selfhood changed over Andrews' focal period, 1865–1930. Increasingly free storytelling, though not the content of the stories, is identified as a consistent form in the Black autobiographical narrative.²

Andrews identifies as a tradition in autobiography that can also be seen in contemporary African American fictional narratives. Given the privileged place of the slave narrative and autobiography in Black literature, Black writers have signified and revised this form in their fictional creations. Andrews' notion of the "unconventional" nature of free storytelling can only be referring to Western literary traditions and guidelines as the normal conventions, storytelling has always been a significant component of African discourse. The stories are told to a reader(ship.) For the purposes of this research, Andrews' analysis stimulates the suggestion that *free storytelling correlates well with how the author relates to others*, one of Asante's Afrocentric keys. The focus on selfhood, albeit within a communal ethos, as the thematic or poetic impulse of Afro-American autobiography correlates with my privileging of identity (selfhood, or how one relates to him or her self) as an Afrocentric marker in Black narratives. Andrews' discussions parallel and, in fact, set the stage for my concept of Afrikan poetics emerging (evolving) in contemporary African American fiction.

This point is underscored by Sandra Paquet's response to Andrews. She discusses the role of ideology and cultural allegiance as they frame the poetics of African American autobiography. Her discussion incorporates the collective nature of Black writing, as well as its bearing an ambiguous responsibility to "ancestors." For Paquet, "This use of autobiography for a purpose that is collective rather than individual is an aesthetic value that links West Indian works to Afro-American autobiographical modes" (*Study* 95). Though she does not mention any African autobiographies, the work of Nelson Mandela (*Long Walk to Freedom*) and Winnie Mandela (*Part of My Soul Went With Him*) are also accountings of group struggle with a clear collective purpose, even if they are centered around one individual's experience within that struggle. In keeping with Du Boisian double-consciousness, and bringing African cultural influence to the fore, both of which are fundamental to this undertaking, Paquet notes,

...there are important correspondences between Afro-American autobiography and its West Indian counterpart. Both have their genesis in the epic struggle to name their vision and experience of the New World. Both record the transformation of self endemic to slavery, and the double inheritance of a transplanted and transformed African culture and a dominant, hostile European culture. (*Study* 96.)

Paquet calls attention to the diasporan struggle for an independent or autonomous presentation of self that tells our own story. Transforming self encompasses first the initial assessment and then the progress toward a “better and truer self.” In a challenge to Andrews’ call for more literary histories, Paquet warns of their ultimately oppressive nature.

A poetics that is grounded in literary history is bound by the allegiance that informs it it seeks to clarify the ancestral vision and to codify it in selected metaphors of past generations. In reality, literary history fosters veneration of the ancestral genius rather than dialogue; it nourishes imitation rather than assimilation. Here, the theme of ancestry that is everywhere an issue in Afro-American literature and criticism reveals its repressive as well as its nurturing aspects. (*Study* 94.)

Cognizant of the potentially repressive traditions, this research project self-consciously pursues developing more organic and liberating ones. Black authors today circumvent the fences of Western cultural hegemony by infusing their works with African cultural patterns and identities. Though we do not address the same issues, Paquet’s phrase “the theme of ancestry that is everywhere an issue in Afro-American literature and criticism” demonstrates the relevance of ethno-cultural, as well as literary inheritances, in the field.

Houston Baker’s essay “There is No More Beautiful Way: Theory and the Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing” offers an insightful exposition on the term poetics that illuminates this project. Baker’s idea of “imagistic fields” is reminiscent of Henderson’s soulfield and resonates with pregeneric and emergent myths as guidelines for assessing cultural values as expressed in literature.

The “poetics of Afro-American women’s writing” signals a theory that seeks to arrive at the guiding spirit, or consciousness, of Afro-American women’s writing by examining selected *imagistic fields* that seem determinative for selected texts.... By examining imagistic fields that compose space, therefore, we also come to apprehend values and beliefs that govern our lives. Our cultural geographies are, thus, comprehensible through images.

...[W]e assume that there is a field of “particular” or vernacular imagery unique to the Afro-American imagination. (*Study* 150.)

Baker goes on to suggest, and in this his Black Aesthetic roots come out, that critics must know something of Black culture before attempting to appropriate Black women’s texts. He notes that such “self-interested” readings and criticisms have battled over who can most accurately read, and lay claim to, some Black women’s writings. Yet Baker is honestly self-reflexive about his own criticism. He, too, is interested, as a Nationalist with “a decided interest in expressive cultural theory and interdisciplinary approaches to cultural texts.” (*Study* 154) His intellectual pedigree notwithstanding, Baker accepts that critics can be “interested” but demands “*The Work*” of African American Women’s writing to be governed by a higher calling.

But having acknowledged the interestedness of my orientation, I want still to claim that the success of a poetics of Afro-American women's writing should be measured by the extent to which such an enterprise avoids limitations of a narrow self-interestedness and offers broadly comprehensive analyses of the guiding spirituality to be discovered in the imagistic fields of black women's writing. The spirit work that is imagistically projected by such writing is, I think, like what is called by the religion of voodoo—*The Work*. (*Study* 154.)

The Work is seen here by Baker as women's work, a spirit work of "conjure." No doubt conjure was/is one of the realms of women. However, this study will suggest that males, too, are conjurers, both as writers and as figures in the writings of Black men and women. Mae Henderson's response to Baker's essay emphasizes the notions of dialogue in Black women's literature and criticism. She challenges Baker's idea of felicitous images by focusing on many of the nonfelicitous images in African American women's writing. A significant issue is difference, a difference that creates a dialogue. The most current level of differing discourse would appear to be a metalevel intracultural discourse between Black feminists and a dominant male mode of analysis. Yet she notes that there are levels of discourse between cultures, presumably Black (African) and White (European.) Mae Henderson's proposal of a "multiplicity of interested readings" that can dialogue with others characterizes the goal of this project. Afrocentric readings can dialogue with feminist, mainstream assimilationist, or other critical camps, in a manner that illuminates the depth and diversity of the African American experience, which is more accurately described as African Americans' experiences.³

Using the differing theories of Madhubuti and Baraka, representing the Black Arts movement, and Jackson and Ellison as American/Western universalists, Kimberly Benston outlines the continuing saga of Black literature and its criticism.⁴ The genius of this piece is in its insistence that difference—between, among, and within these critical camps—is exemplary of the process and goals of Black literature and poetics. He offers no solution, only a reading of poetry as performed Blackness. Struggle, renewal, and the seeking of identity in the shared space of ideological difference represents the dual or multiple consciousnesses that inform African American writers and critics alike. Benston's essay permits an Afrocentric analysis of Black literature (like the one I propose) to simply exist. The analyses offered in this research project are rendered legitimate, without having to bear the burden of being *right* to all, in every case. Their accuracy and validity may be the subject of further analyses, but *no* critical endeavor can or should be everything to everyone.

KARLA HOLLOWAY AND THE RELEVANCE OF BLACK FEMINISTS' PERSPECTIVES

Karla Holloway's study *Moorings and Metaphors* is crucial to this project. She merges African spirituality with ancestral communion and stresses their primacy in the writings of Black women. She asserts,

It is through the ancient spirituality of this literature [Black women's] that the unity of soul and gender is not challenged but is recovered and celebrated. Within this spirituality, the recovered metaphor that articulates the relationship between soul and gender is the metaphor of the goddess/ancestor. (Holloway 2.)

Her assertion of specific strategies and structural dynamics that both influence and identify Black women's writing will not be challenged. However, I believe Holloway is being too exclusive in her rejection of *all* Black males' writing as not fitting, even loosely, within the parameters she outlines. Certainly males' writing makes use of the metaphor of ancestors.⁵

While the metaphor of Goddesses may not be present in Black males' writing, there are significant instances of a different "non-Western" spirituality. "Mojo," Voodoo/Hoodoo, or other forms of conjuration are readily found throughout the literature of Black males. Houston Baker's essay, "There is no More Beautiful Way," discussed earlier in this chapter, also appears to close off the African inheritance of conjurer to males.⁶ Perhaps Black males' uses of ancestral presences are not the same as those by Black women writers, and those differences can be traced to gendered concerns. Yet the very use of such structures as spirits and ancestral presences suggest a kinship both within their ranks as writers and within an African worldview, in spite of their gendered differences. Though Holloway's focus is on specifically cultured (African) *and* gendered (female) essences, it will be demonstrated how some of her theories can be applied to the African component of Black males' writing.

In "Some Implications of Womanist Theory" Sherley Anne Williams notes the "disturbing" separatist tendency of Black feminist criticism to "see not only a *distinct* black female culture but to see that culture as a separate cultural form having more in common with white female experience than with the facticity of Afro-American life" (*Reading Feminist* 70). Williams extends some of the arguments in McDowell's "New Directions for Black Feminist Theory." McDowell suggests a critical posture that affirms kinship with African American male writers. By focusing on the commonalities between their writings, the implication is that,

...feminist inquiry can only illuminate works by women and works that include female portraiture, that our rereadings of the female image will not also change our readings of men. Womanist inquiry, on the other hand, assumes that it can talk effectively and productively about men." (*Reading Feminist* 70.)

My point is that feminist/womanist criticism can, and should, have some applicability to the writings of, by, or about men that do not hinge on a gendered perspective. If the experience of being racially (culturally) marginalized in mainstream society could fuel an insurgent feminist interpretation—as happened with the evolution of the Black feminist movement out of and/or away from the Black Arts and Black Power movements—then the analyses stemming from a gendered marginalization would seem to have some relatedness to cultural/racial issues as they affect writing.⁷ Holloway's own words support this subversive reading, "Ownership of the creative word means making these

words work in cultural and gendered ways that undermine the hegemony of the West” (Holloway 27). I suggest a revision, applicable to Holloway’s work, as well as my own: Ownership of the critical word means making these words work in cultural (and gendered) ways that undermine the hegemony of the West.

Holloway’s intent—as is mine—is to “extend the frame of traditional methodologies, *not* to replicate them” (Holloway 11). She creates a specific critical vernacular that is useful in this process in that it appropriates existing mainstream terminology while elaborating on how its application to Black literature denotes a different critical process. She identifies and defines: “recursive,” “shift,” “plurisignant,” “translucent,” “mediation,” “(re)membrance,” “aspect,” in addition to offering numerous discussions that help develop my own critical perspective.⁸

Holloway’s text represents a literary analysis located in and coming out of a particular worldview. She positions herself, and Black women’s writings, within the realm of gendered and cultured uses of language. She speaks of mythology and metaphor in a manner that presupposes a cultural reality of multiple influences substantially different than for Black men. Individual examples of Black women’s literature are related to other works by Black women. They elaborate on, or revise, other women’s texts, like a quilted fabric of experience. Perhaps unique and distinct from the next text, the individual work is nevertheless a part of a larger whole. The various voices of Black women’s literature also dialogue with, as well as challenge, Black men and their writings. Granted: patriarchal, macho, sexist nonsense is too often present in African American male’s experienced and created worlds. However, common cultural reference points persist. As surely as there is a community of African American women, that same community is intersected by a larger community of African American *people*, both male and female.

One of the most persistent goals of Black feminism is to maintain both cultural and gendered perspectives in the forefront, privileging the struggle rather than the oppressors with whom they struggle. The Combahee River Collective makes this explicit, “We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.”⁹ The commonality of the struggle against racism is only one of many cultural similarities between Black women’s and men’s writing. I propose that Holloway’s feminist perspective, clearly an ally in the struggle *with* Black men, also has useful points of reference for the struggle *against*, as represented in the diverse cultural layers in Black male’s writing.

TOWARD AN AFRIKAN POETICS

Some literary critics claim that history or politics do not figure in the criticism of literature, that to bring such fields into play contaminate the criticism with “extraliterary concerns.” Criticism and analysis of texts should be confined to the text itself, or texts themselves. This seems clearly, almost absurdly, wrongheaded to me. Writers, authors, poets, and even critics, are social, political beings. While there are some major influences from other literary sources, to ignore the influences of the broader world that created the creator of the literature or the critic of the literature runs the risk of completely misunderstanding the literature in question. Or, and perhaps this more crucial aspect applies to the critic of the literature: ignoring the extraliterary realities accommodates

misinterpretations and misrepresentations that function to sustain Western cultural hegemony. For example, in discussing Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*, one must consider the political, social, and economic realities of slavery. Without such historical understanding of the context, and how it encouraged or motivated the author, no serious criticism or appreciation is possible. Chopin's *The Awakening* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* further demonstrate this point. Both of these novels were widely criticized and unappreciated into oblivion after their initial publications because their feminist content was beyond the grasp or tolerance of most critics. Yet after the society progressed (albeit only slightly) these novels were uncovered or rediscovered and are now considered classics. The story of their initial rejections reflects extraliterary and political aspects of the critics more so than Chopin or Hurston. That these novels are now canonized is a significant statement about contemporary extraliterary perspectives on these texts.

A further challenge to an exclusively "literary" criticism has already been made by numerous theorists who embrace the ideas of Black musical forms, in particular jazz and the blues, and/or speech patterns as significant influences on Black literary forms. The theories of Henderson, Gates, and Baker essentially make the folk expression of the living word into other "texts" which have been "read" into the African American experience and revised in various written forms in a manner similar to the revisions of more formal "written" texts.¹⁰

When Baker argues for the legitimacy of "interested readings" and Benston discusses an "engaged interpretation," they situate themselves as proponents for including non-literary concerns in the criticism of (Black) literature. Gates' description of Black feminist criticism as "Local, provisional, and context bound" or the idea of "positionality" refer to critics' ideological commitments. The methodology used in this study is self-conscious about its historical, ideological, and political positions. Afrocentrism is a political phenomenon made possible by a particular set of historical conditions. The Black Arts and Black Power movements erected a foundation on which Afrocentric philosophy could be developed. Yet the time had not come for a serious attempt at Afrocentric analyses. Recent directions in the criticism of African American literature have paved the way for Afrocentric criticisms that were not possible after the publication of Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry* or Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic*.¹¹

The field of Black literary criticism is changing in ways that reflect the changes within the literature itself. The shift of pregeneric myths from freedom and literacy to identity and knowledge are occasioned by both enlightened historical awarenesses, and changing historical and experiential realities. In theory, if not for the chattel enslavement of Africans in the New World, freedom for Africans in the Americas *could* have followed the same lines as it did for the other European populations who became Americans, citizens, free.¹² If not for the enforced ignorance of their potential, and the intentionally and institutionally squelched development of Africans' intellectual resources represented by their being systematically maintained in a state of illiteracy and economic subsistence, literacy would not have been as important a key to freedom for so many Africans in America. In the same manner in which enslavement and illiteracy were incorporated into the African American experience and generated pregeneric myths of literacy and freedom, so too have the relatively recent experiences of both freedom and literacy (in

their often limited forms) revised the goal of literacy to knowledge and revised the goal of freedom to identity.

This reconceptualization of Stepto's pregeneric myths is consistent with Cooke's idea of re-immersion. He states, "It is necessary to distinguish the passion for understanding in the new re-immersion from the possession of self-knowledge and knowledge of the black situation that Du Bois initiated at the beginning of the century." (Cooke 222) This citation points out the necessary component of taking the knowledge one step further to, in Cooke's vernacular, "understanding" and also historically contextualizes the process of a community establishing new goals as other prior goals are achieved. This kind of understanding can only become possible when there is a (new) body of knowledge or facts to understand. The idea of re-immersion, when contextualized to the kinds of knowledge generated during and after the sociocultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, means that the new knowledges must be understood. The references here are specifically the knowledges and consciousnesses of African culture in an existential Black society. These knowledges are incorporated into new concepts of identity, evidenced by the many variations of self-labeling including "African" or its derivative "Afro-" which gained popularity during the 1960s and continue through today. These consciousnesses influence not only the political expressions but also the cultural expressions of the Black community.

There is only a semantic difference in what I call Knowledge, as the next step after literacy, and Cooke's revision of Stepto's immersion to re-immersion. Cooke posits a focus on understanding, which he sees as the next step after "the possession of self-knowledge and knowledge of the black situation" that is characteristic of Stepto's pregeneric myth of literacy. For me, true knowledge implies comprehension, understanding, *and* the ability to utilize information, whereas literacy only implies ability to access or awareness of scriptocentric information and the ability to produce scriptocentric texts (literature.)

In the Afterword to *From Behind the Veil*, Stepto suggests that there is a "discourse of distrust" in African American writing that combines with the didactic, storytelling nature of Black literature to subvert the current "theories of creative reading and/or authoring." The reader is positioned as the one who is in need of authentication. "However, the most subversive, and hence most interesting claim that storytelling makes is that, contrary to what most modern critics and even some writers tell us, it is the reader—not the author or text and certainly not the storyteller in the text—who is unreliable" (Stepto 202). Such a perspective places a double burden on the critic: 1) to situate himself or herself in relationship as a reader of the literature in question; 2) "...we must ask how literary history may be reconstituted to accommodate the storytelling strain in its own right" (Stepto, 203). He elaborates on this second point by asserting that oral literature scholarship yields "a critical language that usefully examines written tales as well" (Stepto 203). For this project, one of his most useful examples is the documentation of the utility of Albert Lord's definition of theme as a repeated incident or description (a narrative building block) rather than the conventional approach to it as a "central or dominating idea." Also, Stepto's citation of Harold Scheub's idea that narrative repetition is demonstrated in "expansible and patterned and parallel image-sets" fits into the notion of ancestral and extended family imagery as important in contemporary African American fiction¹³

The relationships between the various (story)tellers and listener/hearers in the text itself are important to an analysis of oral literatures. For a reader to be situated within a written storytelling text implies another level of teller-hearer relationships that occur outside of the text between the author (who is known) and the reader (who is not known.) Both authors/storytellers and readers/hearers operate, often actively and consciously, on presumptions about the other. Yet both may be guilty of being unaware of their own complicities in the constructions and interpretations of the texts. Stepto's analysis suggests that African American authors are aware (presume) that their readership is mostly white.¹⁴ Their tales may be framed within the text to have either White or Black (or Red, Brown, or Yellow) tellers or listeners. Yet, that the text—rather than the tellers in the text—speaks to its readers (whatever their demographics) suggests a broad range of potential “significations” about the messages imbedded in the text and the stories it tells. Gates' theories of signifyin(g) are extremely illuminating when combined with Stepto's discussion, especially when neither authors nor readers sidestep the issues of how race complicates “competent readership.”

It is quite possible that the most useful, amending model—useful especially in terms of comprehending the abiding link in America between race and readership—is to be found in rough form within the aggregate literature of the Afro-American written tale. We must therefore attempt to extract and formalize the social mode of reading... In doing so, we should be less concerned with offering a chronology or even a history of Afro-American literature based upon those authors than with suggesting how the “basic” written tale has been modified over time, usually in an effort to accommodate *the changing subtleties of America's race rituals*, so that appropriately revised models of competent readership can be advanced.

The basic written tale is fundamentally a framed tale in which either the framed or framing narrative depicts a black storyteller's white listener socially and morally maturing into competency. In thus presenting a very particular reader in the text, the basic written tale *squarely* addresses the issue of its probable audience while raising an issue for some or most of its readers regarding the extent to which they can or will identify with the text's “reader” while pursuing (if not always completing) their own act of reading. (*italics added*) (Stepto 207.)

Frankly, the concern here is not an analysis of the basic tale. The certainty that readership encompasses “many historical and interpretive communities” surely affects the role of reader as critic and resulting theories or interpretations. My concern is more in line with an idea of “competent authorship.” Do African American authors competently and conscientiously represent their community? The concern about representation is not in the manner of an elected official, but rather in the way that they, Black authors, create communities and cultural realities within their texts. The “changing subtleties of America's race rituals” demands that certain interracial truths be explored: the ongoing realities of racism, interracial relationships, the anger and pain Blacks still feel, the insensitivity and ignorance of White liberals, the potential for love, and the reality of cultural differences (intra-racial rituals), to name a few such truths. Coming together

within and over literature offers some starting points for those willing to make positive social change. James Baldwin's works speak to these better than any author before or since. Subtlety is nice and comfortable, but candor and honesty are preferable and potentially more productive. I agree that

...the Afro-American framed tale confronts interracial and intraracial rituals" and "in their narrative intentions and recognition of communicative prospects, both types of written tales [framed and unframed] are far more candid than the reader-response literary critics have been about how acts of listening and reading may be complicated by race." (Stepito 205.)

The concern with reader-response critics that are uninformed about the African American culture represented in the text and unaware of how their listening and reading are complicated by issues of race is quite justified. In fact, this research can foster some awareness that some cross-cultural expertise is requisite in Whites who would critique Black writing. Some methods and specific pointers are proposed here, but anyone is cautioned about being too deterministic in applying them. This concern of Stepito's is well-placed, however, I have difficulty accepting the deeper implications of his statement that Black authors presume a White readership, in particular contemporary authors like Morrison or Bradley. Both of these authors feature White and Black characters as listeners and tellers. This analysis could be legitimate in a nineteenth century context, but today its application is dubious.

Contemporary Black authors know, beyond presumption, that their readership will include Whites, perhaps even more Whites than Blacks. But Stepito's statement implies that their work is somehow tailored to speak to the White audience as *primary*, perhaps in interracial baby-talk, and that their (the Whites') maturation is the focus of the Black writer. This appears to place the Black writer in the position of being some version of an "intel-lectual mammy" who is more concerned about the welfare of the massa's children than her (or his) own kinfolk. While the literary history of African Americans undoubtedly contains examples of Black writers who pandered to White tastes and needs—perhaps for economic as well as sociological reasons—I would only suggest that, of the twentieth-century representatives on the list of authors Stepito provides, only some of Chesnutt's Uncle Julius stories are really concerned with the moral and social development of their White readers. And, recognizing the significance of Julius as a trickster figure, that suggestion is made very, very cautiously. Zora Neale Hurston, while supported by a benefactor for a brief period, eventually left her and (more or less) wrote what she wanted, how she wanted. Frederick Douglass created his own abolitionist newspaper rather than continue to be limited by William Lloyd Garrison.

Clearly many early Black authors had to tap-dance around or within America's interracial race rituals, but, even then—and Chesnutt's work is an ideal example—their stories included metalevels of communication not designed for or really understood by their White audience. In fact, they included specifically subversive messages. This is exemplified in seeing the dual nature of the Trickster/"Tom" characterization of Uncle Julius. The Black Arts/Black Power movements, beyond the constraints of the Civil

Rights movement, helped free Black people/artists from the need to gear their actions and products for the benefit of White people.

Part of my primary thesis indicates that many contemporary Black authors incorporate African cultural forms and worldviews into their works rather than structure convenient and familiar Eurocentric environments. This is part of “the changing subtleties of America’s race rituals” that stimulate this project: contemporary Black self-esteem and self-identity encourage or allow the population to go “beyond respectability.”¹⁵ The social flagellation of guilty White liberals has been lampooned in various media, but perhaps the satirical aspects underplay a real phenomenon, a new interracial ritual: Black people are able to behave, or write, as Black people without adhering to Eurocentric guidelines, and White people can access those expressions without expecting or demanding that they fit some preconceived formula—and like it! Because of their high visibility in this hypermediated society, popular forms of Black expressive culture (Blaxploitation films, music and dance forms, comedy, vernacular vocabulary, and greeting rituals like handshakes and high-fives most readily come to mind) exert a social pressure on mainstream norms that alter the previous limits of respectability and normality.

More than merely negating the distrust of a White readership, by ignoring or refusing to cater to them, Afrikan poetics authenticates the authors to their Black readership.¹⁶ Certainly competent Black authorship is not reliant only on the presentation of an expanded cosmos. This is only one more tool among many—like dialogue, characters, or environments that are received as accurate or believable. The so-called magic realism of Morrison’s, Naylor’s or Walker’s texts, for example, are not contrived literary techniques. Instead they are renderings of (sub)cultural belief systems that have survived the onslaught of Western rationalism. Of course, many other issues like religious beliefs, education, and region interact to affect individuals differently, so no monolithic pronouncements about the worldviews of Black readerships can stand unchallenged. However, the didactic components of Bradley’s *Chaneyville* or Walker’s *Temple of My Familiar* explicitly denounce Western rational monotheism and explicate an Afrikan worldview.

CONCLUSION

This study continues the critical inertia Gates expressed as the search for “indigenous black principles of criticism.” Using Asante’s Afrocentric keys as a starting point, African American literature can be critiqued along the following three parameters, or indigenous Black principles. These paradigms emerge out of Afrikan cultural survivals in interaction with U.S. environments:

1) African Americans’ relations to self.

Selfhood and identity are important dimensions of African-American autobiography. As Black writing expands into more fictional genres, the themes move from freedom and literacy to identity and knowledge. This is not merely a notion of self-identity. Identity is conceived of and presented as within an African/African American cultural

consciousness. Close readings of texts should provide opportunities to see how an author frames her or his characters in relation to Afrocentric or Eurocentric norms.

2) African Americans' relations to others.

Awkward points to "free storytelling" as a structural component of African-American writing. Telling stories within the plot of novels may interact with more thematic aspects like extended family and communal relations, rather than a Horatio Alger-like individualist ethos, to provide reliable representations of an Afrikan world view. The communal ethos is more than telling/writing about a community, but exploring the ways the characters, as members of specific communities, are bound together, how their histories link and help to structure their presents and futures. To the extent that free storytelling helps develop a character's or community's identity, or a character's identity within a community—her/his extended family—this analytical focus can demonstrate the self-conscious, or subconscious, Afrikan survivals emerging within a text.

3) African Americans' relations to their ancestors.

Ancestors and their legacies are more than characters or devices to further plots in African American writing. Their presence in characters' consciousnesses are important identity constructs, as well as inspirations or guides to behavior. The cyclic, rather than Eurocentric linear, nature of African reality imposes relationships between the past and future that will be played out in a "present" community of individuals. Orality—oral legacies and inheritances, as well as straight-forward stories—is the key cultural venue for transcendental events. Wills and other written documents do not carry the weight of narrative relevance or import as oral inheritances. The manner that folkloric ancestral legacies bind characters to others, behavior patterns, and/or places is crucial in African American narratives.

The point must be stressed that these three Afrocentric keys are not separate, discreet methodological components. Instead, they are expected to interact, intersect, and combine within the form and structure of the African American author's individual creative vision. One particular impact of the Afrikan worldview is that the ending of the narrative is not always the ending of the story, neither is a definitively happy or unhappy ending necessary. It is merely a point on the cycle, sometimes going up, sometimes going down, or other times simply just there. The author's task to articulate her or his vision is not encumbered with the necessity of coming to some linear conclusion.¹⁷ Black authors' representations of communal and personal identities or interactions rarely support an "and-they-lived-happily-ever-after" ending.

The study of Afrikan poetics (emerging Afrikan survivals or self-actualized Afrikanity) will give literary critics a new set of thematic constructions through which they can view contemporary, as well as older, Black literature.¹⁸ These concepts will not, and should not be expected to, have "universal" applicability (even within the set of African American narratives) but nevertheless provide a useful lens for many texts. Exposing *The Chaneyville Incident* to a broader readership and critical audience is another valuable contribution to American literature in general. Much of Black literary criticism has functioned to bring previously under-appreciated gems to light and this study continues in that tradition. This is evidenced by Alice Walker's championing of Zora Neale Hurston and the canon's resounding reaffirmation of her genius. *Invisible*

Man will be reinterpreted. By focusing on the unnamed narrator's unresolved psychological plight—how it does not succeed in reconciling his subconscious Afrikanity or the need to express it—this study will clarify *Invisible Man's* relationships to many subsequent authors and creative literary works. Many contemporary African American authors transcend the narrator's invisibility and identity confusion and positively represent the African aspects of the African American experience. *Song of Solomon*, while not lacking in positive reputation, has been overshadowed by one of Morrison's subsequent novels, the Pulitzer prize winning *Beloved*. This project hopes to revitalize that novel in the perspectives of academicians and scholars who have placed it in a back seat to *Beloved*. The idea of emerging Afrikan survivals has utility for those concerned with the analysis and understanding of African American literature, as well as those interested in developing a fuller comprehension of and appreciation for cultural pluralism in America.

PART II
Application of the Afrocentric
Critical Theory:
Three Troubled Men

Overview to Part II

Three novels are the focal points of this research: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Each will be analyzed using the methodology set up in Part I, organized under the umbrella of Asante's three fundamental Afrocentric themes. Asante's themes are the most significant keys to locate Afrikan survivals in African American literature. The first Afrocentric marker will be human relations, or how one relates to others. The significant pointers should be an author's use of extended family dynamics and the oral tradition. Everyone has a mother and father. They may or may not be present in a person's life, but they are a biological fact. Kinship relationships and interactions including others outside of the nuclear family are the hallmarks of an extended family. In an Afrocentric sense, this encompasses other near or distant kin, as well as non-blood relatives.

The essence of Afrikanity is unity or community, rather than individuality. Within the community, orality—stories—are a significant mode of communication of important information. An analysis of Afrocentricity, going back to Asante and Stepto, as expressed within a novel (which, in itself, is a story or series of stories) would assess the use of free storytelling to achieve transcendent awareness. Of course, in the context of a novel, such stories are not random and arbitrary. Instead, they are crafted and structured by the author to achieve his or her narrative purpose. They are set up in a social and cultural context that encompasses the extended family and the community, as well as the other two fundamental Afrocentric pointers. The analysis, then, centers not only on whether or not stories are told and listened to, or who is telling them, but also on how they are used to resolve central conflicts in the characters' lives.

The next analytical paradigm will be how characters relate to the supernatural. Ancestors should be a significant aspect of an Afrocentric discourse. This paradigm expresses the conundrum of African American cultural identity and the linguistic difficulty of communicating in a language that does not share a similar cultural perspective: the Western world views interactions with the corporally deceased as supernatural, the Afrikan views it as merely natural. Other phenomena like conjuring and paranormal psychic powers also fit the parameters of the supernatural. An Afrikan sense of the spiritual will be an essential component of the author's presentation. To clarify spirituality, I again refer to Ani.

We mean to imply a particular vision of a universal reality in which a given order underlies organic relationship of all beings within the resultant cosmos. This order, which is both perceived and is, at the same time, a matter of faith, is of a metaphysical-essentialist nature. It is on this ultimate, primordial level that meaning is derived, which then helps to explain material (physical) reality. Perhaps the most significant

characteristic of this concept of spirituality is its transcendent nature. While one functions pragmatically within a profane reality, that “reality” is never thought to be the essence of meaning. In spiritual conceptions there is always a striving for the experience of a deeper reality that joins all being. Learning is the movement from superficial difference to essential sameness (Na’im Akbar). This “sameness” is spirit; beyond and ontologically prior to matter. It is the basis for human value. One’s spirituality involves the attempt to live and structure one’s life on a national, communal, and personal level in accordance with universal spiritual principles. It allows for the apprehension of spirit (energy) in matter (form). (Ani 368.)¹

Another extended passage will demonstrate the significance of spirituality in conjunction with kinship and ancestral communion in a characteristically Afrikan context. David Bradley’s character, John Washington, is a history professor. Through him, Bradley is able to achieve a decidedly didactic tone by having Washington deliver many “lectures” throughout the text. The following is an excerpt from one such lecture about the cultural clash represented by the African Slave Trade. Its central topic is death and it represents a description of a worldview that has significant influence on the creations of many contemporary Black novelists. This passage is undoubtedly the most significant example of how Afrikan cosmological concepts survive in African American culture and emerge in its literature.

Not death from poxes and musketry and whippings and malnutrition and melancholy and suicide; death itself. For before the white men came to Guinea to strip-mine field hands for the greater glory of God, King and the Royal Africa Company, black people did not die.

There was, of course, dying in Africa. It occurred in the proportion (one man, one dying) deemed by many appropriate for the apportionment of voting rights. But the decedent did not die—he simply took up residence in an afterworld that was in many ways indistinguishable from his former estate. Evidence for this is found in more recently observed African practices. Following an expiration, it is common for the living to report seeing the deceased, and carrying on conversations with him. It is also common practice to build him a house and to leave food about for his nourishment. Liquids, including alcoholic beverages are poured out on the ground for the deceased to enjoy. Tools, such as hunting and fishing implements, are buried with him. The Kalabi fishermen of Nigeria rely on the deceased to enforce tribal kinship norms. In Dahomey, the folk tales report the existence of a “market of the dead,” which suffers from a chronic meat shortage, much to the delight of living purveyors, who take the opportunity to “make a killing” as the European would say. The Nuer of the Sudan have an institution called “ghost marriage,” whereby a deceased man is the father of all children borne by his widow, no matter how long the delay and even if she should remarry.

One might protest that these are current beliefs, having little to do with those that held sway five centuries ago. It is difficult to counter this protest, since Europeans were too busy “trading” to make even the most cursory study of African belief; it was widely believed by them that heathenism was not the proper concern of a white man. There exist, therefore, few records. However, one can counter the protest by pointing out that the first major schism in Christianity did not occur until that religion had existed for over seven hundred years and the second did not come about for another eight hundred; to postulate a similar stability for African belief over a mere five centuries seems reasonable. One might also protest that these are the primitive beliefs of primitive people. This is beside the point. The simple fact is this: if, following his “death,” a man, never mind if he is accustomed to wearing breechclout or B.V.D.’s, hangs about on the corner, talking to his friends, has an apartment, goes on hunting or fishing trips as a means of relaxing from his job as a policeman or judge, is vulnerable to price gouging, and can be slapped with a paternity suit, he cannot really be said to be, in the Christian sense of the term, dead. (*Chaneysville* 217–218.)

African American authors’ uses of the supernatural do not necessarily fit into the specific categories of fantasy or science fiction literature, though the mainstream is more comfortable with this categorical approach to much of the literature.² Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* confounded the film world. When made into a feature movie, the novel took on aspects of the genre of horror films. While this embodies a certain accuracy—the institution was indeed filled with horror for the Africans entrapped in it—the movie lacked the sensitivity to the psychological disaster slavery wrought on the survivors of Sweet Home. The worlds created by many African American novelists, even though they trample the boundaries of scientific rationalism, nevertheless are presented as real and accurate, not viable and believable as with science fiction literature, and certainly not sensationalized as with science fiction and fantasy exemplified by the film version of Morrison’s *Beloved*. Linear temporality or scientific rationalism does not bound creative visions of “a deeper reality that joins all beings” for African American authors. This research project reviews only two of many contemporary authors whose creative voices promote an Afrikan spirituality as real, going back through time and distance to Africa and our ancestors.

Lastly, how characters relate to their own being, their *identity*, will be central to the discussion of Afrocentric discourse within a text. Any one or all of three textual phenomena can delineate identity issues. Developments or changes in individual characters over time and specific statements by or about those characters; world view statements and presentations within the general context of the novel, and external validations or descriptions can attest to identity issues. These constructs take into account conscious or unconscious authorial intent. The author may or may not have identity development or change as one of her/his significant themes. If, in reflecting the reality of the world s/he creates, any of the characters as individuals or a group move toward a cognizance of or expression of an African genetic or cultural heritage, this indicates

historical and/or cultural changes over time. The novel, as a cultural document, details the emergence of Afrocentric ideologies.

When the author's characters manifest some conscious willingness to embrace and/or make declarations of their African heritage, not merely in a label but in some manner that is central to their core being and existence, that is a statement about the character's identity. Self-conscious use of African cultural constructs as a result of authorial prerogative also will declare an African identity, even when it is mediated in and by Western cultural norms. As in the passage by Bradley, he is clearly claiming an African-influenced world view, while, at the same time he is defining for the uninitiated reader exactly what is encompassed by that world view.³ Readers' and critics' perception of the text and the range of terminology used to describe novels are barometers of the creative product and also of the cultural context in which it was produced.

These three Afrocentric pointers cannot be seen as separate and exclusive paradigms. Neither will they emerge separately in the texts. Convenience and pragmatism dictates some organized analytical approach in the academic context of this research project. In order to facilitate the provision of such a presentation and discussion, the pointers will be analyzed in separate sections of each chapter, preceded by brief overviews of the novels. The discussions will be hampered by the variety of temporal structures in the novels. Any individual passage, or textual, thematic device may incorporate more than one marker and indicate a pattern of conduct reflecting African (Afrikan) cultural origin. Yet, in the complexity of human behavior, cultural patterns intersect and reinforce each other, and can only be fully comprehended when these interrelationships are recognized. In particular, the analysis of emerging Afrikan cultural constructs incorporates both their existence in the individual's or group's experience and the significance of such constructs to the overall well-being of the individual or group. That such constructs are used is significant, how such constructs are used is even more significant. The attempt to understand the net effect or gestalt of a Black text is outlined by Asante,

In an Afrocentric conception of literature and orature, the critical method would be employed to determine to what degree the writer or speaker contributed to the unity of the symbols, the elimination of chaos, the making of peace among disparate views, and the creation of an opportunity for harmony and balance. (Asante 34.)

Karenga also discusses the idea of harmony and balance in many different texts. Yet, the most clear and definitive statement comes as a part of his discussion of traditional African religions in *Introduction to Black Studies*, "ancient African religions stress the necessary balance between one's collective identity and responsibility as a member of society and one's personal identity and responsibility. Like religion itself, a person is defined as an integral part of a definite community, to which she/he belongs and she/he finds identity and relevance...the highest moral ideal is to live in harmony, know oneself and one's duties through others and reach one's fullness in cooperation with and through support from one's significant others."⁴ This approach gives a basis for a thematic analysis that can speak to the Afrocentric goals/effects of a text, in conjunction with its Afrocentric components. It addresses how the text manages its central and peripheral conflicts. Identity can be assumed to be more than a question of "Who am I?"but expands

to “Who am I with respect to how (well) I interact within my community.” This also allows one to open the discussion of the relevance of an Afrikan identity to the development of characters and plot. Parameters of identity development can include, but are not limited to, the movement from a Eurocentric individualism to a more communal ethos, the incorporation of ancestral issues into a coherent identity structure, or direct relationships with an Afrikan consciousness and worldview. This project will pursue such an Afrocentric critical approach.

CHAPTER 5

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

O Sugarman done fly
away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across
the sky
Sugarman gone home

—Pilate's song¹

THE TEXT

Song of Solomon begins with a Black man jumping off the roof of Mercy hospital, a hospital that would not accept Black patients. Coincidentally, one of the onlookers, the pregnant Ruth Foster Dead, was to be the first Black patient admitted there the next day when she gave birth to the novel's main character, Macon Dead, III—who would come to be known as Milkman. Most of the significant characters are introduced in this scene. Guitar Bains, a young child newly arrived from the south, is told to go get a security guard. Guitar is to become Milkman's first, best, and only friend. Guitar ultimately develops murderous intentions toward Milkman. Pilate Dead, Milkman's aunt, is in the crowd, singing as she watches the unfolding drama. Pilate will play an important part in Milkman's development from a child to an adult to a conscious being, secure in his identity. The song Pilate sings in that scene will be the key to Milkman understanding and accepting his identity, though it will not happen until he is in his thirties. The jumper, Robert Smith, is a current member, and Guitar is a future member, of a secret organization, The Seven Days. The two other significant characters are not in the scene: Pilate's granddaughter, Hagar, and Macon Dead—Milkman's father.

HOW CHARACTERS RELATE TO OTHERS:

Extended family and stories in *Song of Solomon*

Morrison weaves an intricate tapestry of extended family and familial relationships in *Song of Solomon*. The central nuclear family is the Dead family consisting of Macon

Dead, his son Macon also known as Milkman, his wife Ruth Foster Dead, and his daughters, First Corinthians and Magdalene called Lena. Although they are brother and sister, Macon and Pilate are not close and do not interact. In fact, the older Macon forbids his son to associate with his aunt. Pilate has one daughter, Reba. Reba has one daughter whose name is Hagar. Pilate's family by no means fits Eurocentric notions of a normal nuclear family. Three generations of women live under one roof with no men in their household. Pilate functions as more of a mother to Hagar than does Reba. Between bootlegging for economic sustenance, irregular dietary habits, promiscuity and a lack of attachments to males as significant others, Pilate's family appears to be dysfunctional. Yet, Morrison's text shows this improbable family to be relatively happy and stable, at least by their own standards. For most of the novel, because they have, help and support each other, Pilate, Hagar and Reba function as a healthy and whole extended family unit.

Though Pilate and Macon have no direct interactive relationship, Pilate plays a significant role in the lives of his wife and son. She intervenes for Ruth and assists in the conception of her son. At Ruth's request, Pilate demonstrates her knowledge of the "ancient properties" of herbal healing by providing her with a concoction of roots that stimulates Macon to come to her for sex. Later, Pilate will also prevent Macon from forcing a miscarriage on his wife. Her home becomes a second home for Milkman. In fact, it is more of a home than the house he lives in with his family. He drinks wine there. He has his first perfect egg there. His long-time lover (and cousin) Hagar lives there. Milkman describes Pilate's house as, "...the only one he knew that achieved comfort without one article of comfort in it. [No material amenities] But peace was there, energy, singing, and now his own remembrances" (*Solomon* 304).

Macon Dead's life and lifestyle directly contrasts Pilate and her lifestyle. Macon Dead and his family appear to fit the Euro-American ideals of a normal family unit. Macon is financially stable, he is married with three children, he lives in one house and owns many others. He is a respected member of his community. Yet, Macon Dead is a lonely man with no friends. So are his wife and their two daughters. Macon Dead's "ideal" household lacks the harmony and balance found in Pilate's "dysfunctional" home. Milkman would have been as lonely as the rest of his family if not for Guitar's intervention in a playground fight on his behalf. The incident sparked a lifelong friendship, Guitar becoming a surrogate big brother. Guitar's residence, a small apartment, like Pilate's house, becomes a home away from home. Guitar describes it as the place where, "...if anybody wants to find you they come here if not first then last" (*Solomon* 118). Milkman, in effect, has two extended families: Pilate and her daughters (Hagar really being a granddaughter), and Guitar. Milkman's daily existence is linked to others, especially those like Pilate, Hagar, Guitar and the sons and daughters of Shalimar who are beyond his father's influence. The central conflict in the text is Milkman's development of an autonomous Afrikan voice in spite of his father's domineering patriarchal materialism. Though Milkman basks in the material comfort of his father's house and makes a living by working for his father's real estate business, Milkman needs something else. The "lure and loathing" of Du Boisian dual consciousness is symbolized by Macon who represents the ideals of the White material west. Milkman is at once seduced by the material comfort of his father's lifestyle and repelled by its sterile stagnancy.

Macon's and Pilate's father had been killed for his land. This sets up a chain of events where they leave their household and hide in the home of the murderer. When they leave

that house, they hide in a cave, after killing its occupant, a White man. While in the cave, Macon finds a bag of gold. This bag is significant to Macon because Pilate talks him into leaving it in the cave. Macon later learns that Pilate has a bag hanging in her living room and convinces Milkman to steal it. After breaking into his Aunt's house and learning that her bag contained old bones and no gold, Milkman begins a journey to find that gold, a kind of lost inheritance. Milkman's journey becomes a search for his ancestral roots as he learns that his family name has meaning to others who remember the original Macon Dead. He begins to reject the search for the wealth of gold in favor of the wealth of self-knowledge and identity.

Over the course of the text, Milkman develops from a self-centered individual whose best friend Guitar "had never seen Milkman give anybody a hand, especially a stranger" (*Solomon* 299–300) into a man who had begun to consider the feelings of others. This slow process accelerates as the novel climaxes. As a thirty-something year old man still living with his parents, Milkman was chastised by his sister Lena,

You have yet to wash your underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. And to this day you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. You never picked up anything heavier than your own feet... (*Solomon* 217.)

The only real problem in Milkman's life after Guitar had stopped the playground bullies from picking on him was how to avoid the attentions of the obsessed Hagar.

The catalysts for Milkman's maturation are the stories and confidences of "his people." In spite of the narrow circle of his experience, Milkman knew little about any of the people he saw daily. First, he learns about his father's life with his mother. Then he hears from his mother about her life as a neglected wife who had experienced no affection for more than twenty years. Even Guitar's revelation about his involvement in the Seven Days, a secret organization of Black men dedicated to retribution for racial violence against other Black people, fails to move Milkman. Yet, he does begin to consider that he has no control over his life and no real sense of direction to it.

Milkman decides to try to live on his own. While asking his father for a stake to make it for a year, Milkman provides a clue about Pilate's inheritance. Macon believes the bag hanging from Pilate's ceiling with something in it hard enough to leave a bump on a person's head to be long-lost gold. Macon tells his son the story of his own father's murder, and he and Pilate's escape from the area that would have been their death, too. He tells of being hidden in his father's killers' house for two weeks. He tells of seeing his father again and being directed to a cave with gold and a White man that he and Pilate kill. They see their father again. He says to them, "Sing." Macon and Pilate fight over whether or not to take the gold. Pilate wins, they separate, and leave the gold behind in the cave, as she had desired. Three days later, Macon returns to find the body still there but the gold gone. Believing that Pilate took the gold, Macon sets his son to the task of retrieving the "family inheritance" from Pilate's house.

Milkman's only friend, Guitar is brought into the intrigue to help him retrieve the bag from Pilate's house. Guitar is set to earn a share of the booty. Guitar and his friends, the Seven Days, are in need of money because one of their members was evicted and his

check garnisheed. They also have a very big job coming up, as four little Black girls were killed in a church bombing one Sunday. Their brand of retribution requires that four White girls die a comparable death. The explosives necessary to accomplish this revenge, travel expenses, and the Days' other miscellaneous financial needs are Guitar's main goal in assisting Milkman. They decide to steal the bag from Pilate's shack.

The burglary attempt succeeds. While making their getaway, Guitar and Milkman are arrested for possession of a bag of human bones. Pilate is required to provide a statement that gets them out of jail. Afterwards, she tells her side of the story to Macon and Milkman, including the repeated visits from her father who consistently told her to "Sing" and that "you can't just up and leave a body." She never took the gold from the cave. Her bag contains the remains of the White man she and Macon killed as youths. At least, that is what she believes.

However, Macon does not believe her story. He thinks the gold is still in the cave and sends his son back to Virginia after it. The trip does not yield any gold. Milkman does find a sense of family and camaraderie with some of the people who knew his murdered grandfather, and his father and aunt as youth. He finds the old woman who hid Macon and Pilate. He finds the cave, but no gold. He fights and hunts with some of the locals in the rural Virginia town of Shalimar and finds that he can be accepted as a man on his own, albeit a city slicker. In a new world where Milkman is developing new friends, Guitar turns on him. His old friend stalks Milkman. Guitar sees Milkman as a traitor who stole the gold and shipped it away, rather than offer a rightful share to Guitar and the Seven Days.

The idea of an extended family takes on various manifestations in *Song of Solomon*. The Seven Days are more than a political action group bent on retribution or revenge. They are clearly a kind of family. They function as a social group, centered in the barbershop. Beyond the social aspects of their interactions, they are concerned about each other's welfare. When Porter is kicked out of his dwelling by Macon Dead and has his wages garnisheed, Guitar and the others support him until he can get back on his feet.

At first, Milkman seems out of place in Shalimar. The closeness and integrity of a small rural community is offended by Milkman locking his car door, not asking anybody's name, and leering at the women. Milkman undergoes the first phase of a macho initiation rite when he gets into a knife/broken bottle fight with a local hothead. The hunting party that includes Milkman is more than a group of friends out for a good time. It is the second phase of his initiation rite. Their camaraderie that extends to include Milkman is a signal that Milkman is growing away from his self-centeredness. He has created new ties. In an unusual self-reflective mood, Milkman is beginning to transcend his previous being. Being alone in the woods at night accommodated new thought patterns. "They were troublesome thoughts, but they wouldn't go away. Under the moon, on the ground, alone...his self—the cocoon that was "personality"—gave way" (*Solomon* 280).

The hunting party scene is crucial from an Afrocentric analytical viewpoint. Although it is not the climax of the novel, this is the first time that the three major Afrocentric markers converge in a single transcendent event. The Afrikan cultural survivals emerge as the catalysts that drive the narrative. After the initial initiation rite, it is an invitation into their extended family (how characters relate to others.) The manner that the oral tradition (also how characters relate to others), how characters relate to the supernatural,

and how characters relate to self (identity) are presented will be clarified in later discussions of this scene.

During the hunting party, Milkman becomes aware of a unique version of the oral tradition. The whoops and hollers of the hunting men, the varied barks and yelps of their hunting dogs constitute a language, a way of communicating “that was there before language. Before things were written down” (*Solomon* 281). Milkman’s initiation is into more than the community and extended family of Shalimar. He is awakened to his past, a heritage deeper than blood and family. In a selfless reverie, Milkman understands he has been selfish, and leaving his self, he also understands the wordless communication going on around him. For the first time, Milkman senses the language of the earth itself, the ground and the trees. He has come to appreciate Ani’s spiritual concept of “a deeper reality that joins all being.” Old bonds of friendship, behavior, and his past life symbolically break when Milkman is attacked by Guitar.

From this point on, Milkman is no longer the cynical, citified, “Western” man unto himself. His worldview altered, he is able to signify with the old men when he catches up to their group. They tease him and ask if he was scared,

...egging him on to tell more about how scared he was. And he told them. Laughing too, hard, loud, and long. Really laughing, and he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there—on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp.

(*Solomon* 284)

The next day, the men offer Milkman the bobcat’s heart. The members of the community are open to him and his questions about his ancestors are answered.²

Morrison has set a plot in motion that needs a more direct form of the oral tradition to further it along. As Milkman moves toward maturity and a sense of personal identity, his real inheritances and acquisitions are the stories and details of his extended family. Kinship relations figure prominently as none of Morrison’s characters are cast in an individualist mode. Even Macon, a capitalist isolated from any real human society, is nevertheless linked as caretaker and provider to his wife and three adult children. The thwarted quest for Pilate’s gold pulls him into closer proximity and more personal interactions with his son and estranged sister than he had previously experienced. The story of his murdered father and lost youth is reiterated, shedding some light on the greed that motivated Macon Dead.

Names and naming practices are significant in the African American oral tradition.³ Names are of utmost importance in *Song of Solomon*. For most of the book, the original Macon Dead’s real name is not known. While registering as a freedman, his birthplace (Macon) and parent’s status (Dead) were entered into the wrong spaces on a form. These become his name and the inheritance he passes down to his son, which in turn becomes his grandson’s unused name. Having three Macon Dead’s in the text certainly adds an element of confusion to discussing it. To facilitate discussion, the original Macon Dead’s name at birth was Jake. This does not come out in the text until near the end. However, to accommodate consistency, he will be referred to in discussion as either Jake or

Macon/Jake. His son Macon Dead will be called Macon. His grandson, also a Macon, will be referred to by his nickname, Milkman.

Pilate is named by a tradition where the Bible is opened and a finger is randomly placed on a page. The first name it touches is the name of the child. Magdalena, called Lena, and First Corinthians were likewise named. Milkman is truly named by another, more pervasive tradition. Some circumstance of a person's life is singled out and becomes the basis of their name within the community, regardless what is written on a birth certificate or driver's license. Milkman was nursed by his mother well past a toddler's age, "too long." Ruth Foster Dead was caught nursing her "too old" son by a neighborhood snoop. Both mother and son suffered ridicule, and the resultant label, "Milkman," stuck. Likewise, his friend, Guitar was named after an instrument he craved as a baby. Morrison knows and understands the significance of naming traditions. She describes the importance of names, "Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness" (*Solomon* 333).

Names of places, like the names of people, carried by mouth from one generation to the next, like Not Doctor Street, No Mercy Hospital, Ryna's Gulch, or Solomon's Leap, contain the stories of the community. By the end of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman sees names as more than labels. They are people and places, though dead or isolated, alive with meaning. Morrison demonstrates the power of the oral tradition in conflict with Western scriptocentric literacy. The mistakes of literacy that become permanent because documented and written down are corrected in the oral tradition. In fact, the oral tradition creates its own stability and traditions. Mains Avenue becomes Not Doctor Street and all the community knows this. The name and deeds of Jay, the only son of Solomon, renamed Macon Dead by a drunk Freedmen's bureaucrat, are preserved in the lyrics of a child's ring game.

HOW CHARACTERS RELATE TO THE SUPERNATURAL:

Spirituality, and Ancestral legacy/communion in *Song of Solomon*

Afrikan spirituality is seen most clearly in the character of Pilate. Pilate's life revolves around her exemplifying Ani's concept of "a deeper reality that joins all being." She is "a natural healer" in the archetype of the conjure woman. She knows, and has access to, what Ruth needs to get Macon to "come to her" and conceive their son. She also helps Ruth avoid miscarriage. In harmony with the world and the people in it, Pilate is able to mediate a peace "among quarreling drunks and fighting women." Pilate possesses and shares the secret of a perfect boiled egg. Her daughter, Reba, is thought to be lucky. Reba's link to the cosmos puts her in the right place at the right time, like when she wins the diamond ring in a department store promotion, though she was only trying to use a restroom. This spiritual bond to the universe—a deeper reality that joins all being—represented by the ability to heal, bring peace and harmony, and intuit what is good for human health is also expressed in the ability of a human to fly.

The context of an Afrikan spirituality is demonstrated by the hunting party that has to literally commune with nature, rather than attempt to control or conquer it, in order to locate and kill the hunted bobcat. Milkman realizes that the dogs are speaking to the

hunters, that their (the hunter's, the dogs, even the night's palpable presence) existences are tied up in each other instead of existing as individual entities or beings. This passage exemplifies the purpose of an Afrocentric transcendental consciousness to bring about harmony and balance. Without the conscious harmony of each participant, the hunt would become a failure.

Bradley's discussion of "death" as traditionally viewed in Africa is particularly germane to Morrison's text. Children see parents who are corporally "dead". These parents are consulted for emotional support, and even offer unsolicited guidance—like living parents. The dead Jay/Jake's spirit is not content in the vagabond life of his daughter and tells her about it. Pilate recounts, "Then right after Reba was born he came and told me outright: 'You can't just fly off and leave a body,' he tole me." (*Solomon* 209) The novel's climax shows this to imply that the spirit had no "house" or final resting place where it could be in peace. Solomon's leap becomes that place. In that location, the four generations whose stories are told in the novel are joined: Milkman and Pilate, Jake the first Macon Dead's bones, and the spirit of Solomon/Shalimar. In the last scene of the novel, Milkman and Pilate take her bag of bones, that they now know to be the bones of her father Jake, to Solomon's Leap for burial. When Guitar's bullet kills Pilate, she is with her ancestors, her father ad grandfather. While the ending of the novel leaves Milkman's fate "up in the air," he becomes free and embraces the wind as did the Solomon for whom the cliff is named.

The most significant examples of ancestor communion, as discussed by Ani, come in the form of Pilate's and Macon's repeated visits from their dead father. Both children saw him and he acted as a guide to his children during the difficult aftermath of his murder. Pilate took his admonitions to heart and lived by them. Because her dead father said "You can't just fly off and leave a body," Pilate carried the bones around wherever she went. Because he told her to sing, she constantly sang. Through his father, who fought and died for his land, Macon learned of the importance of land and spent his life acquiring it. Macon and Pilate both saw their father in the cave with the White man and the gold.

...as he [Macon] stood there trying to distinguish each delicious color, he saw the dusty boots of his father standing just on the other side of the shallow pit.

"It *is* Papa!" said Pilate. And as if in answer to her recognition, he took a deep breath, rolled his eyes back, and whispered, "Sing, Sing," in a hollow voice before he melted away. (*Solomon* 171)

The greedy and rational Macon goes on piling up the gold, but Pilate tells him they cannot take it. They argue and eventually fight. Pilate runs around the cave calling her father, but he does not appear again. Pilate succeeds in chasing Macon out of the cave. When he returns three days later, the gold is gone.

Macon remembered little about his mother. Pilate knew nothing about her because she died during childbirth—her own birth. But Milkman learns the truth of her, his grandmother's, presence. Macon/Jake's wife was named "Sing." What Pilate mistakes as a direction to vocalize is merely a man calling to his lost love, or telling his daughter her mother's name. The direct contact or communion with a deceased parent leads to Pilate's habit. In turn, Pilate's song is her heritage, although she is unaware of the deeper

messages it carries. While its underlying significance may be lost on Pilate, the cultural construct it represents is doubly important. The oral tradition preserves the memory of the father who commands her to sing, and the grandfather whose story the song tells.

Pilate had a more direct communion with her father than just the memory of his visage. While he occasionally "visited" her and spoke to her, Pilate was actually carrying his bones around with her. What she thinks are the remains of the White man she and Macon had killed while hiding in the cave are actually the bones of her father. While Morrison never clarifies the fate of the dead White man, Circe confirms that the first Macon Dead was buried in that very same cave. This was the body whose bones Pilate retrieved from the cave. Hung from the ceiling in the middle of her house, Pilate literally carried her ancestry everywhere she went. The guidance his spirit provided was present not in the flesh but in the bone. Many factors set Pilate off from the mainstream as "different" in some minds, "crazy" in others. Yet she seemed to make sanity out of a unique and unusual lifestyle.

For Ruth Foster Dead, ancestral communion played a similarly important role in developing and maintaining identity, even though it was displayed quite differently. Macon tells Milkman about catching his mother Ruth in the act of kissing her dead father's fingers. Milkman himself follows her one night as she goes to visit his grave. Ruth lays down on the grave and converses with her father. Though presented as a series of perversities, Ruth's communions with her dead father are the only things that keep her spirit alive. They provide her with an opportunity for harmony and balance in a household where her husband hates, emotionally abuses and occasionally assaults her. She talks to (with) her deceased father and knows that he is the only one who cares about her. Ruth has no other support except what is provided by her father's presence in her life, even though he is "dead."

Morrison intensifies the meanings of names by hiding their relationships to her characters, or by hiding their very existence. With the discovery of the name and the existence signified, the characters also uncover the significance. Neither Macon nor Pilate knew their mother, Sing. After she died, Jake—the original Macon Dead, Milkman's grandfather—never spoke her name. Shalimar, or Charlemagne—the place where his people lived before migrating north—is not on maps. Neither is its location reliably related by "official" AAA word of mouth. Likewise, no census roles or Freedmen's Bureau records accurately record the lives or location of Jake or Sing. Milkman's search for a place where there might be a cave with gold in it had turned into a search for a place where *his* people had been and still resided in the memories of people who lived there. Hearing of his grandfather's exploits from the locals whets Milkman's appetite for knowledge. He needed more than names and places, he needed people to fill in the gaps and explain the real meanings of the names and places. Finding those local residents who knew his people and could witness their deeds became Milkman's primary motivation. "It wasn't true what he'd told Susan Byrd: that it wasn't important to find his people" (*Solomon* 296).

Local lore linked place to person. This lore was encoded in an oral tradition of naming and telling. No maps detailed backwoods Virginia, except for those in the minds and daily lives of its inhabitants. Solomon's Leap and Ryna's Gulch were landmarks in the countryside around Shalimar. The wind whistled through Ryna's Gulch making the sound of a sobbing woman. Solomon's Leap symbolizes the place where Solomon supposedly

began his journey home. No longer mere names of places far removed from Milkman's life in Michigan, these places represent his own kinfolks' experiences. The strong, self-destructive, and obsessive love Ryna felt for Solomon—the distraught Ryna had cried and pined away after Solomon left—was the love Hagar felt for Milkman. She, too, died when her lover left. To escape an unbearable life of slavery, Solomon took flight. Three generations later, Milkman, hunted by his best and only friend, his aunt already murdered, and having nothing of any consequence to return to, leapt toward a better future.

Ancestral communion takes on various shapes in *Song of Solomon*. Ancestor's lives are relived. Macon Dead, like his father Jake, loves the land that is his. Times and location changed. The original Macon/Jake was a farmer who "had one of the best farms in Mountour County" (*Solomon* 237). He was legendary for clearing the land and working it himself, with his son. The second Macon does not work the land that is his, though he loves it as much as his father loved his. The second Macon turns a capitalist trick and makes the land work for him. As landlord, Macon loves the rents he extracts from his tenants the same way his father loved the crops he coaxed from unwilling soil. Macon Dead also requires his son, Milkman, to work the land with him by sending him to the collect the rent on his various properties.

Hagar loves, and dies, as hard as Ryna, and for the same reason. Ryna loved Shalimar (Solomon) and gave him children. Her heart broke when Solomon left. Ryna's legend is one of sorrow and pain. She dies pining after the man she loved. Her cries can be heard whining through the gulch that bears her name. Hagar, a great-great-granddaughter of Solomon, also pines after the man she loved—his great-grandson. Her cries are heard as she runs through the streets looking for him. Hagar also pines away when Milkman leaves her, seemingly for good. As long as he is in town, her heartbreak is minor. However, when Milkman leaves for Virginia, she can no longer handle the pressure of being without him or his company. Company is what Milkman gives her. Love is not something they share, even given the intensity of her feelings for him. In spite of Pilate's and Reba's best efforts to provide material sustenance and the cosmetic improvements she believes will make her attractive to him again, Hagar dies before Milkman returns.

Compared to the women descended from Solomon, the women in the Foster line—Ruth, Lena and Corinthians—do not know love strong enough to die for. Ruth, like her mother who married the only Black physician in the county, marries the most prestigious Black man in the community. Macon earns his living and status by being ambitious and developing a real estate business. Corinthians and Lena, like their mother, are confined to their father's house. Like their mother, they do not know love. However, unlike their mother, they do not know or find "a shining knight" who will take them away with a father's blessing. Macon is clearly no knight, but his money shines enough for him to be acceptable to Dr. Foster. Porter is also not a knight. Neither does he have the money to impress Corinthians' father, Macon. Though she does not really love Porter, Corinthians has enough of the Solomon line in her to be willing to take the jump and snatch at the lifeline Porter represents.

Ancestral communion is clearly embodied by the characters in *Song of Solomon*. The first Macon/Jake was murdered and buried in a shallow grave. When his body resurfaced, it was placed in a nearby cave. Pilate unwittingly took her father's bones from the cave and carried them away. One of her father's messages to her, interpreted by Milkman once

he had all the pertinent information, was that he wanted to be returned to the land where he was born and raised. In burying those bones on Solomon's Leap, Pilate had returned her father "home." Jake/Macon Dead's final resting place is also the place where his father had taken off, departing for his own "home" across the water. Milkman, like Solomon, flies in the face of adversity. The life of a slave was too much for him to bear. Milkman, who had been a slave to his own carnal desires as well as his father's wishes, felt hemmed into a life devoid of autonomous choices, a kind of slavery. He felt trapped by his friend, Guitar, who, in effect, by taking "his living life," had put Milkman into a kind of slavery.⁴ In order to escape the slavery imposed on him by his fear of Guitar and dying, Milkman faces that fear and confronts Guitar, offering him his life. At that point, Milkman leaps toward his antagonist, flying to freedom.

If ancestors' lives are reflected by their progeny, ancestors also have a tangible place in the lives of the characters in *Song of Solomon*. Pilate and Macon report seeing and hearing their father. Pilate literally carries the bones of her father around for years and attempts to return them to a rightful place when she tries to bury his remains at Solomon's Leap. Pilate sings. Whether because her father told her to, or whether she "inherited" the habit from a mother named Sing/Singing Bird/Byrd is irrelevant to this analysis. Pilate's song in the beginning of the book is the oral history of her people. It is also the ring song sung by the scattered seed of Solomon—Jake was his twentieth child—that eventually stimulates Milkman to make the connection to his ancestor's story. Ruth Foster Dead, though not of the line of Solomon, communes with her father. Trips to the cemetery for graveside chats with him provide her with emotional support she does not get from her corporeal acquaintances.

Milkman's ancestors also have a special role in affecting the perceptions and actions of people around him. His father's and grandfather's legacies give him an unearned status in Danville. People welcome him as Macon Dead's son. One man, Reverend Cooper, takes him into his home. Cooper shares his knowledge and offers his car to help Milkman pursue Circe, Milkman's only lead to the cave where the gold is hidden. Here he begins a transformation as he learns about his ancestors from others. Before Danville, the only information about his family had come from his father and aunt.

A child's ring game, accompanied by a song, provides the key for Milkman to figure out who his people were and what they did. He had been given enough clues to sketch together a family tree and an outline of where they had been. Heddy was Sing's mother. Jake was Solomon's son. Sing and Jake were Macon and Pilate's parents. Morrison's fictional myth achieves a realism via the children's song and the story it relates. The African American folktale of the flying Africans was given wings. Solomon became an example, but he left family behind who remembered him and told history generations later.

Jake the only son of Solomon
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Whirled about and touched the sun
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

...

Solomon done fly. Solomon done gone

Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home.

(*Solomon* 306–307)

HOW CHARACTERS RELATE TO HER/HIS OWN BEING:

Identity and Worldview issues in *Song of Solomon*

The identity issues in this text are not centered in whether or not Milkman or any of the characters are indeed Negro, or of African descent. Instead of any racial or social indeterminacy like could be found in a tragic mulatto character, Milkman is clearly aware of his African Americanness. His is not a political “Black Power” consciousness and Morrison’s message about identity is not focused on Milkman’s political awareness. Milkman is given ample opportunities through his interactions with Guitar and discussions of the mission of The Seven Days to become politicized. In fact, he is rather scornful of Guitar for “slipping into his race bag” (*Solomon* 155). Yet Milkman also seems to defend Malcolm X after suggesting that Guitar should change his name to Guitar X. Milkman is unable to see how the random killing of Whites advocated by the Seven Days helps him or any other Black person (Negro) live or change their “slave status.”⁵ Milkman appears fairly sure of his philosophy regarding the Seven Days and their retributive violence. Milkman’s identity issues stem from not having a place or knowing how he fits into society as himself, rather than as Black man. However, Milkman’s inner conflicts are resolved only when he learns about a new way of being in the world and accepts what amounts to an Afrikan worldview.

This worldview is intricately linked to Milkman’s ancestral heritage. It is gained through the verbal interactions with his ancestors and extended family: Macon, Pilate, Circe, Reverend Cooper, and Susan Byrd. No one of these individuals knows the whole story of his ancestry. However, given the pieces they provide, Milkman has the keys to unlock the secrets of his ancestor Solomon as sung by the children in Shalimar. African American Blacks know that they have at least one ancestor who came from Africa, even if they have no idea who he or she was. The revelation for Milkman was not that Solomon came from Africa, but that he could fly. The fact (or imagining) of human motion through the air is not the issue here. Belief is the significant factor. Solomon believed and the people he left behind believed he could fly and that is the legend they left or handed down for Milkman to learn. Susan Byrd is the first one to name them as a group or clan when she refers to Jake as “one of them flying African children” (*Solomon* 325).

Of course, the modern, citified rational Milkman does not have to believe the legend. It transcends all of his prior experience and rationale. Yet Milkman, who had been skeptical throughout the novel, finally is able to adopt or *claim* the heritage of Solomon. He sings the children’s ring song when going swimming with Sweet, a woman he connects with in Shalimar. She is surprised and asks him about it, saying that she played the same game when she was little. Milkman’s response is, “Of course you did. Everybody did. Everybody but me. *But I can play it now. It’s my game now*” (*Solomon* 330, italics added). This was his first expression of joy since being a child and something

he had never experienced, even as a child: a sense of belonging. Milkman believed that he belonged to, "That tribe. That flyin muthafuckin tribe. Oh, man!" As if he was in church, testifying—proud, loud, and happy—Milkman shouted to Sweet, the world in general, and his friend turned nemesis, Guitar, "Wow! Woooooe! Guitar! You hear that? Guitar, my great-granddaddy could flyyyyy and the whole damn town is named after him. Tell him, Sweet. Tell him my great-granddaddy could fly" (*Solomon* 332).

The novel ends at dusk on Solomon's Leap, the place where legend has it that his great-granddaddy had flown off to Africa. Guitar shoots Pilate and, as she lay dying, a bird flies away with the earring containing her name. The symbolism is undeniable; Pilate is able to fly. She is one of the flying African children." Milkman sings his/her/their song to the dying Pilate, "Sugargirl don't leave me here/Cotton balls to choke me/Sugargirl don't leave me here/Buckra's arms to yoke me" (*Solomon* 340). With the dead woman's blood still on his hands, her head comforted by a rock, and his grandfather's bones newly laid to rest in a makeshift grave, Milkman joins the most recent three generations of his ancestors. Milkman surrenders to the air, rides it, and "leaps into the killing arms of his brother."

The novel's conclusion is by no means definitive. It is unclear whether either or both Milkman or Guitar will survive. Yet it is obvious that Milkman has achieved a personal triumph and a transcendent moment. In the last moments of the book, the legacy of the flying African, Solomon/Shalimar, who is also Milkman's ancestor, defines his life. The scene contains four generations of the Dead family: The place is named after the original African Solomon, his son Jake's bones are buried there, Pilate who is Jake's daughter, and Milkman who is Jake's grandson. Beyond the expectations of others, Solomon could fly. Though corporally dead, Jake sought his ancestor's presence by requesting his daughter and son to return his bodily remains (bones) to a rightful resting place. Living beyond the constraints of others' expectations and limitations, Pilate knew a freedom and a love that Milkman had only briefly tasted. Pilate had intuited a lifestyle that Morrison described as, "Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (*Solomon* 340). Finally, Milkman, too, could fly.

CHAPTER 6

David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident*

And then I began to think what a man's dying really means: his story is lost.¹

THE TEXT

The Chaneyville Incident begins with the main character, John Washington, a history professor in his thirties, receiving a phone call from his mother informing him that his father surrogate, Old Jack Crawley, is sick and is asking for him. Old Jack was one of the two best friends of John's father, Moses Washington. Moses had died while John was still a child. One of his last conversations with Old Jack was a request that he look after his oldest son, John. At the beginning of the novel, John had gone away to college on a scholarship and gone on to become a history professor. John had not returned to his hometown since his younger brother's funeral a decade or so earlier. He comes back, only to nurse Old Jack until he dies, and then bury him. Though they spend just one day and night talking, Old Jack tells John a story that will be a key to understanding what really happened to his father one day near Chaneyville, Pennsylvania.

Meanwhile, John receives some documents his father left for him with Judge Scott, the county's political power broker. The papers lead him to believe that Moses' death, which had been represented as an accident to cover up what they thought was a murder, was actually a suicide. Moses Washington, a bootlegger and blackmailer, had "dirt" on half of the powerful men in the county, the main reason his death had been suspected of being a murder. John decides to stay in order to find out the truth about his father's death. The mystery of why Moses Washington killed himself dominates the last half of the book. The plot is not a simple, straight-forward narrative. It goes back and forth between the present and the past lives of Moses, C.K. Washington (Moses' grandfather) and John.

The plot is also complicated by the fact that John is in love with Judith Powell, a psychiatrist in Philadelphia. John does not return to Philadelphia after the funeral and burial. He sends Judith a letter of only four lines informing her of his decision to stay without telling her why. Judith comes out to rural Pennsylvania to see for herself. John Washington is Black; Judith Powell is White. While that is a major issue in their relationship from John's perspective, John has many other problems Judith suspects of being at the root of their disharmony. John is an alcoholic and does not communicate his feelings very well. Their love story, imbedded in John's search for the meaning behind his father's and great-grandfather's deaths, and his need to understand his own life, is also one of learning and reconciliation between past and present, Black and White, man and woman.

Moses had sold bootleg whiskey to Judge Scott, the most powerful man in the county who nevertheless represented himself as a teetotaler. Scott, acting as Moses' lawyer and

executor of his estate, provides John with papers—left by Moses specifically for him—that tells the story of John's great-grandfather C.K. This long lost relative was a runaway slave, abolitionist, underground railroad conductor, and activist who instituted a campaign to undermine slavery by stealing women and children slaves from the deep South. C.K. had disappeared mysteriously. John's investigation of Moses' death leads to the need to understand C.K.'s also because it appears that was also Moses' goal. In the end, Judith proves to be the catalyst that helps John to "imagine" what happened to his ancestors. Her presence motivates him, but the spirit of Old Jack returns to guide him as it had so many times during his youth. Though no historical "truth" is generated or discovered, John comes to accept the imagined scenario. His knowledge of the facts is supplemented by understanding.

HOW CHARACTERS RELATE TO OTHERS:

Extended family and stories in *The Chaneyville Incident*

Old Jack raises John Washington after Moses dies. At least, Old Jack is the one who teaches him how to hunt, fish, drink, and survive in the outdoors. He teaches the young John about White people, whisky, and women. In their rural, segregated, society these things are all that count. Old Jack was also one of Moses' few friends. Their closeness is enough to place Old Jack in John Washington's extended family. Though John's mother Yvette detested Old Jack while alive, his relationships with her husband and son are enough for her to be concerned about his health. Though the text's time frame switches often, Jack is Moses' only living friend who will talk to John. The only other living friend, Josh "Fishbelly" White, an albino, did not talk to anybody. In taking over his father's paternal duties, Jack also provides the invaluable service of being able to tell John about his father. Moses, literally a legend in his own time, left a legacy of rumors. When John first sought out Old Jack, he was given his first toddy, as well as his first lesson about his father. Coming from Old Jack, the lesson was laced with homespun philosophy. This philosophy seems to guide the young John in his future vocation. It is, at the very least, prophetic.

An'I don't guess it changes nothin' to speak of him. [Moses] Everybody else is. They *been* speakin' of him. Most folks, they gotta be dead an' gone 'fore there's a chance anybody'll talk about 'em. Not Mose.... Wasn't nobody that knowed nothin' about him, though.... But not knowin' facts don't stop folks talkin'; hell, it just sets 'em goin'. Most folks'd a hell of a lot rather listen to rumors than go around the corner to see what's what. And Mose helped 'em right along.... Fact is, you found out somethin' about Moses Washington, you knowed for sure either he wanted you to find it out jest 'xactly the way you done it, or it was a lie. An' most times, it was both. (*Chaneyville* 37.)

John became a historian who wanted to "find out where the lies are." Soon after John learned how to read, he began to read and love history. He liked to piece together the

stories of historical figures and figure out why they did what they did to become famous.² John's initial attempt at being a historian had been as a teenager when he tried to learn what Moses was doing that led him to go hunting and die on a hillside in the South County. Moses left many subtle pointers and a few specific directions for John to follow. Though he was unable to follow the trail left by his father, John followed this inclination into a career. He would pick up this trail almost twenty years later, after Old Jack's death, after he learned a few more stories.

After the example of Old Jack as John's surrogate father, the idea of extended family is most obvious in the relationships between Moses, Josh, and Jack. They are brothers, they are the only family either of them have. Drinking, hunting, and gambling buddies, these three helped each other through any difficulty. Josh and Jack had met while youngsters. They were the only survivors of a typhus epidemic on the "other" side of the hill. The people on the surviving side, the County's Black neighborhood, kept the epidemic a secret from the White people in the county. They relied on the Whites for income and did not want to and could not afford to be shunned. They knew the boys survived and left food for them, even though they were not allowed to come into the community.³ In effect, the whole community was one large extended family that had to look out for each other.

Moses joined up with Old Jack and Josh in less drastic circumstances. He was a moonshiner and gambler. They met in the back of Hawley's store, when Josh was trying to cheat Moses at poker. Jack tried to warn Josh about Moses, who already had a reputation for having killed at least six government agents. However, there was no bloodshed as it was only a "friendly game." Moses was impressed, though. He thought it important that somebody was willing to watch the other's back. After Moses was accepted into the community, he assumed the role of anonymous benefactor. Moses purchased the Hill and maintained a system of rent control for the Black residents. While they mostly lived in poverty, Moses' actions gave them freedom from speculating landlords.

John Washington is a loner. As a child, he had no friends his own age. He and his brother, Bill, were close, but ran in different circles. Extended family comes about in the text in the form of its small town community where everybody knew what everybody else did and when they did it. When Judith comes to see John, he tells her about her walk up the hill, including details about people shaving, or making biscuits. As during his father's life, John recognizes that the sense of community is important in this setting. In the segregated world of rural Pennsylvania, the Black community is its own only resource.

One of the most important of the community resources is the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society. Bradley describes the WH&FMS as

...a gaggle of buxom ladies who had sat in the living room praying while my mother had struggled upstairs to bring forth her firstborn at the relatively ripe age of thirty-three and who had thereby earned the rights to a place in the [family] photo gallery and the honorific "Aunt."
(*Chaneyville* 136.)

The WH&FMS is ubiquitous on the Hill. Moses Washington's funeral is illustrated as having,

...two dozen paper fans thoughtfully donated by the Mordecai D. Johnson Funeral Home of Altoona, PA., and expertly wielded by the ladies of the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society—middle-aged women of various shapes, sizes, and shades, who spoke often simultaneously but rarely unanimously. (*Chaneyville* 22.)

This extended family is significantly present all the most important occasions, life and death. The cultural dynamic Bradley demonstrates as a way of life is important to understanding how Afrikan survivals emerge in contemporary literature. Such survivals have existed unremarked in African America, yet authors have this in their personal experience and, in representing their creative worlds in a realistic fashion, now begin to depict the complexity of African American communities.

The extended family denotation of Aunt is also represented by the term “brother” in a context that does not refer to siblings, church, or other group membership. The proprietary concern that Jack had for Josh when they met Moses, that Jack had for John because of Moses' request, that Jack and Moses had for Josh when he was about to be lynched, is echoed in their concern for the community on the Hill. The local Black prostitute, Miss Linda Jamison, attended Jack's burial. When she addressed the community to pay her last regards to him, she told of how he carried water and ice to help break her daughters' fevers. Whenever they were sick, he would bring her money so she would not have to “take care of some other business.” Likewise, Uncle Bunk related a story about when Jack visited his family and found them starving with only a few beans to eat. Jack came back later with four stolen chickens. Uncle Bunk said, “A sinner's a man who steals and chicken an' eats it. A brother's a man who steals a chicken and shares it” (*Chaneyville* 225).

The burial ceremony is a ritual of community, extended family and oral tradition. The community comes together to share their last regards. For them, sharing is not to listen to a preacher commend Jack's soul to the next life. Instead, the community commends the soul for the ways it interacted with them while alive. They tell stories about the individual, as well as sing songs to his/her memory. The songs are cast in a call and response mode that links singers and hearers. In Old Jack's case, the stories document his relationship to the various people who attended the burial. The extent of his proprietary concern or generosity may be the focus of their comments but the intimacy they shared with him is quite evident. Though Old Jack has no blood relatives, his actions on their behalf clearly represent him as a member of an extended family.

Jack is not the only one to exhibit such philanthropic concern as he is credited with at the burial. The reading of Moses' will detailed that he had provided burial insurance for both Jack and Josh. However, the most surprising detail was that he had bought all the land on the Hill and had insured that its residents would not be subjected to price gouging by avaricious landlords. He stipulated that the rents could not be raised above the current rate as long as the resident continued to occupy the building. Many wills do not explicitly attend to the details of daily financial survival for some close family members. Such community activism is rare indeed, especially when these financial arrangements were not made publicly. Moses had nothing to gain by his generosity. He also regularly contributed time (sweeping and cleaning) and money (anonymously—though the pastors knew that no one else in the community had the wealth to donate such sums) to the

church, even though he was neither a member of the congregation nor a believer in Christian theology.

John had mentioned Old Jack to Judith but she was skeptical about his existence. Their dialogue firmly sets Jack's character, when John tells her that he has to leave because Jack is sick, Judith states,

"Jack? The old man with the stories?"

"The old man with the stories."

"So he's really there."

"...of course he's really there. Where did you think he was—in Florida for the winter?"

"I thought you made him up."

"I don't make things up."

"Relax, John. It's just that the way you talked about him, he was some sort of legend. I would have thought he was indestructible. Or a lie."

"Yeah, that's him: an old, indestructible lie." (*Chaneyville* 3.)

Jack is the epitome of both the oral tradition and the extended family. He shares stories and the lives of two generations. He experiences the passing of the father, Moses, and his own passing is witnessed by Moses' son, John.

Bradley's use of the word "lie" in describing Old Jack is instructive. He does not mean something untrue. Instead it parallels Zora Neal Hurston's usage when she returns to Eatonville to solicit folklore from the people in the town where she grew up. Their stories are known as lies, and that is what she solicits from them. The oral tradition had been the only instruction allowed the slaves. This pedagogical function is preserved and continued by Old Jack, who "educates" the young John. Jack stands as an old, indestructible lie, the same as the stories he tells. They will not go away, the oral tradition does not fade so easily. Like the lies told to Zora nearly eighty years ago, Old Jack's stories are timeless.

The African American oral tradition is not confined to folklore and lies. Neither does Bradley confine his representation of surviving Afrikan oral traditions to these two areas. John's mother, Yvette Washington, tells him about the telephone calls she had to make to spread the word about Jack's funeral. She had come to understand why Moses Washington had refused to allow her to install a telephone in his house. He had said it would be the death of the community. This passage stressed the importance of the Black community's oral tradition, especially as it was a different one than that embraced by the "white folks." She tells him that they used to have a chain of information where one woman would tell two other women, who would then tell two others and soon everybody in the community would know whatever message was being passed. When all the "Negroes" had gotten telephones installed ("just like the white folks") the system "just died." The phones had pleased Yvette Washington who believed in integration and the trappings of White American culture like a phone and automobile. Because the local newspaper could not run the announcement until two days later, she had to call everyone over the phone.

...and so I tried to get through to folks on the phone and I thought to myself, there was a time you could have told everybody you needed to tell

by talking to two people, but now you have to make twenty phone calls, and you have to look up the numbers in a book, and those poles marching up the Hill weren't progress, they were death. Just like Moses said.
(*Chaneyville* 157.)⁴

The stories in *The Chaneyville Incident* center on John Washington. He is either hearer or teller. Old Jack tells him the most significant stories. Jack is the primary authenticator, a master storyteller.⁵ He passes his skills and legacy down to John, the next generation storyteller, to continue the tradition. Yet John Washington is more than a new generation storyteller, he is a new breed of storyteller. He is also a historian who has any number of packaged stories/"lectures" he shares with listeners/readers in a primarily didactic mode rather than the entertaining mode Jack uses. Old Jack improvises or remembers his stories, whereas John has researched the ones he tells. John's stories are composed of facts, a store of book knowledge. Jack's stories, though entertaining, nevertheless contain information and tradition, things that are not written down anywhere for anyone to find. Many of Old Jack's stories are borrowed from others, especially Moses Washington. The lore contained in Old Jack's stories form the basis of the knowledge that John needs and uses to understand the documents and legacy left to him by his father Moses.

When Jack tells young John about how he met Moses, his intentions are to comfort a confused little boy. He begins a pattern where stories are a balm to a troubled soul as well as a source of information and entertainment. Jack later tells a story that he claims was one of Moses' favorites. It is about a group of runaway slaves who were caught in the mountains. Rather than go back to slavery, they committed group suicide. He also tells how, when the conditions are right with snow on the ground and one is not listening for them, their spirits can be heard still, panting as they run from the dogs and slave-catchers. Images of runaway slaves being pursued by dogs and slave-catchers are common in many genres of African American creative expression, the songs, poetry, film, and other literature. Such a motif fits Henderson's construct of the mascon image. For Bradley, even though the specific incident is significant to the unfolding plot, the oral tradition is the vehicle that accommodates John resolving his inner conflicts.

On his deathbed, Jack tells John how he and Moses had to rescue Josh from a lynching. Josh had fallen in love with a White woman and was going to ask her father if could he marry her. It turns out that he was being set up, her father and brothers were expecting him and the Klan was also coming. Again, this is a common motif in African American cultural expression. More than just entertaining narratives, these stories document the two significant events that determine the title of the text, *The Chaneyville Incident*.

John is ultimately able to merge the stories of his great-grandfather, C.K. with the story of the runaway slaves. He believes that his father, Moses, went on a "hunting trip" to find his grandfather, C.K. John, the historian, lacks the imagination to figure out exactly what happened because he needs to base such an extrapolation on facts he is able to verify. The final merger of traditions, the factual and the folkloric (or the American and the African), came about as a result of his need to explain to Judith what happened. She becomes the hearer of the stories that had been orally related by Jack and were contained in the written documents left by Moses.

HOW CHARACTERS RELATE TO THE SUPERNATURAL:

Spirituality, and Ancestral legacy/communion in *The Chaneyville Incident*

Bradley's didactic passage about death in Africa is not the only example of an African-rooted spirituality. In that passage, John Washington is not merely giving a prepackaged lecture about the cultural peculiarities of tribal Africa. He, the history professor trained in the ways of the West, also believes and is detailing the tenets of that belief. When he tells Judith that he will be staying for the funeral on Wednesday and coming back afterward, he realizes the chasm separating their worldviews. For John, Old Jack had only "passed away." But Judith's perspective is different. "And it occurred to me that she did not understand—she thought that he was dead" (*Chaneyville* 165). Later in the novel, when they find the Iames cemetery where Moses committed suicide, Judith is again guilty of not understanding John's African worldview. Speaking with John about a stone marker,

"Somebody marked his death," she said.

"Yeah," I said, and went on, not wanting to tell her it wasn't a death that somebody had marked, it was only a grave.⁶

Certainly the plot itself demonstrates the importance of ancestral communion in Moses Washington. By the end of the novel, Moses has been shown to have committed suicide in order to follow the trail of his grandfather, C.K. Seemingly drastic, and at the very least untimely, these actions are almost unconceivable in a Western context. Even though Moses had taken care of his family responsibilities by providing for his sons and wife, as well as Jack, Josh and the other residents of the Hill, a more rational approach might assume he could wait for death to occur naturally without going out looking for it.

The necessity of understanding his ancestors' experience for John Washington encompasses the lives of his father and great-grandfather. When John, as a teenager, begins his quest to understand Moses, he does not have the information about C.K. This effort ends in failure. Once the data on C.K. is introduced, understanding and knowing the significant details of both these men's lives and deaths are crucial to John's well-being. John puts his relationship with Judith and his teaching responsibilities on hold to pursue ancestral communion.

Schueb's/Stepito's idea of theme being a repeated action, as in music, is directly relevant to the manner that Bradley structures this novel. By repeating the actions of their ancestors, the characters are able to attain a kind of communion with them. This is particularly important in *The Chaneyville Incident* because these actions are often chosen behavior patterns rather than socialized patterns in a similar lifestyle. When Jack teaches John how to make a toddy, he uses Moses' recipe. As a teenager, John had gone up into Moses' attic and read his books. When John finally receives Moses' portfolio, he chooses to open and read it by candlelight, because that is how his father wrote it. Bradley has his characters replicate behavior patterns as well as specific behaviors of their ancestors. In some cases the characters choose these patterns. In other situations, the behaviors are not represented as conscious manifestations. Either way, the net effect is one where a character in effect communes with his ancestor or ancestors.

The year after Moses' death, Bill Washington takes the initiative to continue to plant the garden his father had made the brothers work. Though he and John had hated the work they were made to do with their father, Bill paid a tribute by planting a flower garden rather vegetable garden—and placed the flowers on Moses' grave. John does not so consciously recreate Moses' activities except when he reads his books by firelight. However, the drinking, hunting, and camping he learned from Old Jack were things that Jack and Moses had shared together. During his teenage years, Old Jack was John Washington's running buddy, rather than any classmate. That friendship and John's loner status is another parallel to his father's life. Even John's love of books and history is a pastime shared with Moses Washington, though John does not learn of this until after his father's death.

Moses Washington is presented as consciously attempting to do some of the same things his grandfather C.K. did. He becomes a moonshiner, he loves a woman and has children because C.K. had done so. In this text, action is linked to person. Before calling her, John makes coffee specifically to connect him to Judith. Though the attempt is fruitless, it sets a pattern. While drinking toddies, he sits in reverie, remembering previous interactions with Old Jack, especially stories he had been told. The act of drinking, especially alcohol (with the males, Moses, the judge, Old Jack, and John) or coffee (for the women, Yvette and Judith) achieves an almost spiritual or religious significance in the way memories of significant others are evoked while one is drinking. It is by no means coincidental that Moses' wife, also John's mother, like Judith, John's lover and future mother of his children, is an avid coffee drinker.

By the end of the novel, the idea of ancestral communion even assumes a component of the extended family. For most of the novel, John is embroiled in a search for Moses and/or C.K. These are the ancestors with whom John seeks to commune. Old Jack is clearly a father figure for John and has a strong enough emotional pull on him to bring him back to the Hill. At one point in the novel, while he was sitting in the shack thinking, John even thinks Old Jack has returned from the grave to advise him. "I heard a sound behind me; the cot creaking. For a minute I was confused, and thought that it was Old Jack come back from the dead to give me some guidance. But it was not; it was only Judith" (*Chaneyville* 278). This mis-perception becomes reality when Old Jack returns. John actually communes with this extended family ancestor in the shack while sitting in Old Jack's chair and telling a story to Judith, as Jack used to sit and tell him stories. "And suddenly I heard his voice, calling me through the darkness, above the wind. No. Not calling, like a ghost. Just...talking. And I recognized the words, knew where they came from" (*Chaneyville* 408).⁷

Old Jack guides John on the hunt for his grandfather, and in the process finds an acceptance of his father's choice. This sequence features a scene where John attempts to track a buck he has shot but not killed. Old Jack realizes that John does not know exactly where to find the buck. The buck represents C.K. When Jack points out that he is not lost, only that John has lost the feel for him, John is able to begin the story that will take him to the end of his journey. As John tells the story of C.K. to Judith, he almost becomes Old Jack, taking the roles that Jack had played in his life. He sits in Jack's chair and uses his words, "You want a story, do you?"⁸ That story interweaves the historical facts he knows with his own life. John gives characters the names of people he knows, weaving extended family into the stories he tells. John extrapolates C.K.'s actions based on the

legend of twelve runaway slaves who refused to allow themselves to be captured and returned to slavery. The twelve killed themselves instead. But there are thirteen graves! C.K. the runaway slave, abolitionist, and underground railroad conductor gets caught with them while trying to help them escape. He also shares their fate. The legend only tells of the end result of the suicides. John's imagination, goaded by Judith and guided by Old Jack, fills in the blanks of their actions leading up to the fatal conclusion of their story.

When the song died there was a silence, and Uncle Bunk moved through it, limping back to his place among them. The white men were confused, not sure what would happen next, lost without a printed order of service. But the rest of them waited patiently. For the spirit. (*Chaneyville* 226.)

Old Jack's funeral and the burial demonstrate a spiritual consciousness different from traditional Western norms. The first and most conspicuous divergence is the inclusion of various personal items in Old Jack's casket. John placed an old pair of boots (in case the new ones Jack was wearing hurt his feet), hunting and fishing gear, shotgun and shells, along with other essentials like chewing tobacco and a jug of corn whiskey.⁹ The songs sung at the burial and the words were not presented as being part of a rational or religious flowing of sentiment. They were spontaneous, a product of the "spirit." There was not a printed program, all the community were welcome, even expected, to contribute something of their memories and experiences with Old Jack. In fact, John's thinking about what he wanted to say got in the way of his actually saying anything. His Western rational mind was out of its element. Only when he stopped trying to think was he successful. "...t it was all right then. I stopped trying to think; I went on impulse and said the words that came" (*Chaneyville* 229).

The words that choose John Washington at the burial are firmly set in the spiritual call for ancestral communion. "Do not dread death's sentence; remember those who came before you and those who will come after..." And, "In their descendants there remains a rich inheritance born of them. Their descendants stand by the covenants and thanks to them, so do their children's children. Their offspring will last forever..." (*Chaneyville* 229).

This is one of the most crucial conflicts in the novel: John's rational mind impedes his progress toward communication or understanding. John has communication problems with Judith. She feels he hides things from her. From his perspective, he just does not tell her things until he knows everything about them. This often leaves her confused and agitated because he has not even shared an outline of what is going on in his mind. Judith and John are involved in an intimate emotional and physical relationship. He has difficulty expressing his emotions to her because he cannot fully rationalize them to his own satisfaction. The same processes of letting go of his rationalism that facilitate John's coming to grips with Moses and C.K. also help John to open lines of communication with Judith. The very last paragraph in the novel suggests that John is committed to Judith and concerned that she will understand that his past is no longer a problem and they can have a healthier future together.¹⁰

While still a child, John and Jack would listen to the west wind coming off the mountain in winter. John would say it was singing, because that is what it sounded like.

However, for Jack, it was the souls of Indians who had lived and died in the mountains before White men came. They were panting as they chased game through the mountains in "their hunting grounds beyond the grave."¹¹ Even though it is applied to a Native American population, Jack's interpretation is indicative of the spirituality and worldview that Bradley documents as being African. The young John does not accept Jack's view. He learns in school that it was neither souls panting nor singing. The noise was made by the wind going over the land, and if one knew the shape of the land and temperature, and wind speed, the pitch of the sound could be predicted. Nevertheless, the next time he hears the west wind blowing over the naked mountains, it still sounds like singing. John's rational mind, even as a youth, could not conquer the reality of his subconscious worldview.

While John is trying to explain to Judith what he knows about his father's death, he tells her to listen for the souls of runaway slaves, panting as they try to evade the dogs, and horses, and slave-catchers. She repeatedly claims she cannot hear anything. Later, John realizes that what she hears is the wind. While in school John had "known" the sound was the wind, but even then it sounded like something else—singing. It takes him a little while to retranslate the worldview he has internalized into her rational mindset where the wind is only the wind and not singing or the panting of African or Native American souls.

The conflict between rational versus natural/spiritual mind is further exemplified in the text as Judith Powell, being a White psychiatrist, represents the opposite of John's Black or African perspective. In spite of, or perhaps even because of, his upbringing that involved intense reading of Western and other literature, as well as hunting, fishing, woodcraft, and Old Jack's representation of an antithetical viewpoint, John is able to embrace a U.S. middle class lifestyle. This lifestyle includes a professorship and relationship with Judith. However, these accomplishments cannot help John in his need to understand himself or where he comes from; his ancestors, Moses and C.K. After he comes back to the Hill, with Old Jack's help and guidance, John has moved out of his rational mode and is able to solve his problems. The passage on page 408 where Old Jack comes back to help him "trail" Moses/C.K. is the beginning of the story that he tells Judith. Yet Jack's living experience—the stories he relates—and his consistent challenge of John's new "White" lifestyle, even while on his deathbed, dropkick John's consciousness out of the rationality with which he had grown so comfortable.

HOW CHARACTERS RELATE TO THEIR OWN BEING:

Identity and Worldview issues in *The Chaneyville Incident*

The naming and naming practices that assume major importance in Afrikan cultures are quite evident in *The Chaneyville Incident*. Naming, and the identification that comes along with the name is one of the primary issues in C.K. Washington's life. He had been born a slave. First named Brobdignag by his owner, he later changes it to C.K. C.K.'s father, Zack, had entered into a contract with his master to purchase his own freedom, his wife's, and his son's. It appeared (Bradley leaves it open to John's speculation, this is not a historical "fact") that Zack gambled with White men. He was unable to purchase his

own or his wife's freedom, but deferred the payments he had made to his son, and only child. Zack was later executed for being a part of an insurrection thwarted by a loyal slave who turned in the participants of the insurrection. Brobdignag got caught in an unpardonable offense—writing his father's name in the dirt—before he could completely erase it. As a punishment, he was branded with the letters C and K, the last two letters remaining visible on the ground.

This episode clearly fits into Stepto's modes of pregeneric myths, freedom and literacy. Yet, the myth only begins there. Brobdignag took the knowledge of his father's name and the literacy that came with it, and forged an identity out of it, becoming C.K. He almost literally communes with his dead father by assuming part of his name. In a different sense, this is also significant as it goes against rule of slaves not being able to name their own children, especially not naming them after their father. C.K. later sought to avenge Zack's death. He learned how to use government records and tracked the whereabouts of the slave who turned Zack in to the authorities. C.K. killed the man. C.K. would go on to be an activist, an abolitionist, and a conductor on the underground railroad. He pursued the generic myths of knowledge and identity, using them to become a literate entrepreneur and activist, the ideal of a "self-made man"—an extremely rare accomplishment for a Black man in the early nineteenth century.

Due to the lucidity of Bradley's John Washington character, the text is very explicit about African identity and worldview. The didactic mode of the history professor with his lectures denotes the intellectualized consciousness of his Afrikanity. The most obvious example of this consciousness and knowledge is the passage of which the extended citation used in the overview to Part II of this document is only a fraction.¹² John Washington intimately relates the realities of African survivals and how they came to exist in the New World. He discusses how Africans altered Christianity in general, and the more intense forms of *vaudau* (*voodoo*) in Haiti. Call and response is "the way you sing a song" (*Chaneyville*, 222). In a few sentences, the character outlines the dilemma of dual consciousness with a clarity lacking in many books on the subject. In another section of the novel, John Washington asserts that it was the African natives who used to make canoes by hollowing out the core of a log with fire, not only the Native Americans. (*Chaneyville* 156) The professor has researched, studied, and elaborated his understanding of the element of African cultural survivals into a "lecture" format. The author, Bradley, incorporates this same knowledge into the novel's structure and themes.

Yet these articulate expositions are not the most pertinent examples to employ in the endeavor to suggest an Afrikan identity. Actions, in the case of John Washington, speak louder than words. The historian's lectures document a worldview. That worldview is actualized in the way Washington interacts with his environment. John Washington not only articulates a specific and particular worldview—Afrikan—he also lives it in tension with his Western consciousness. The Afrikan is truly a part of his identity, not just an area of academic expertise. John is an ideal example of the generic myths of knowledge and identity replacing freedom and literacy.

John's maternal grandfather was also a professor. While he was shown to be a literate man, he did not support his grandson's thirst for knowledge and would not let John read any of the numerous books in his library. His mother is also an extremely literate woman. In her capacity as a legal secretary for Judge Scott she actually functions more as a legal clerk. Moses Washington, the moonshiner and outdoorsman was also depicted as an avid

reader who lacked the credentials of any academic degree, but nevertheless had all the requisite skills of an academic. C.K. Washington was quite literate and an activist in ante-bellum society. His son, Lamén, was also literate, but refused his own son, Moses, the knowledge of his grandfather, C.K. This pattern shows earlier generations of Blacks' preoccupation with literacy, and a more recent generation's concern with knowledge, progressing to the accomplishment of both in the current generation.

The previous section of this chapter is replete with episodes where John has demonstrated an Afrikan belief system. Oftentimes this is in conjunction with his awareness that Judith, as well as other Whites and some Blacks, is operating from a different experiential frame of reference. He chooses not to confront her with the idea that Old Jack is not dead. (*Chaneyville* 165) Neither does he stress the point that it was only Moses Washington's grave that was marked, not his death. (*Chaneyville* 398) He details the reasons behind the various personal items he puts in the casket because of their practical utility for Old Jack. He also realizes that the other people at the funeral will probably not understand, even his mother. John is not concerned with the uninformed consciousnesses of others, for his consideration is for his friend, Jack's soul—not his Christian soul, his Afrikan soul. The word soul is used in this case because English lacks a more appropriate noun that articulates the part of being that passes on after the body is deceased.

After Jack passes away, John brings him to the other side of the Hill, where he will be forwarded on to the mortuary. Bradley recounts how John treats the corpse as if it was still conscious.¹³ John respects Old Jack by cleaning up his shack, dressing him in clean clothes, and putting a coat on him before carrying him into the cold. John does not sling the corpse over his shoulder, he "cradled him carefully as I carried him, protecting his arms and legs from collisions" (*Chaneyville* 119). When John slips and falls on the slick pathway, he shields Old Jack's body from the impact by twisting and landing on his back instead. Once, Jack's shoulder strikes a boulder. John cries and apologizes as if he were interacting with a live human being.

John Washington's significant other, Judith Powell, represents the "White" or European consciousness. She loves John, but does not understand him or many of his actions. While John is intellectually aware of his Afrikan cultural roots, he has also been socialized into a greater awareness of his difference by empirical reality.¹⁴ Judith, in her attempt to make sense out of her lover's actions, prompts John to explain what he is doing and why he is doing it. There is a significant aspect to his identity that has been socially ascribed because of the fact of his Blackness but Judith has never been able to grasp what that means for John. The realities he describes are not really personal in the manner that it reflects his individuality or a singular experience. Instead, the incidents he details involve many people in the Black community and are representative of common occurrences in the lives of African Americans. White America, represented by one of its respected and influential professions in the psychiatrist Judith, remains ignorant about what Du Bois articulated as the veil, twoness, and double consciousness. Bradley makes a significant statement about the state of society in displaying how a White person trained in psychology and therapeutic techniques is nevertheless so clueless regarding the state of mind and quality of life of Black Americans.

In trying to describe his cultural upbringing and background and why he hates what it symbolizes, John begins with a story about how the people were afraid of "ghosts." He is

not merely discussing the superstitions of an ignorant people. This is a coherent belief system, but Judith initially scoffs at his example. Ghosts has one connotation for him, and a different one for Judith. John also must rely on a dialectical rhetoric to explicate his ideas, because he knows from previous experience that Judith will not understand. John ends his first story—which is not enough to convince Judith—with a statement that goes straight to the heart of European/African cultural conflict, “So you see, what you see as being strange isn’t strange for me isn’t strange at all: I can’t go native; I *am* native.” When Judith expresses her dissatisfaction with his answer, he responds, “It may sound corny to say this, but these are my people” (*Chaneyville* 292). She still rejects this statement of extended family consciousness.

John goes on to recount how his brother was led into away from an education by a school experience that focused on his brawn as a football player and wrestler, rather than scholarship. This chain of events resulted in his not going to college and getting drafted by the army, rather than the NFL. For John, this amounts to murder, because his brother died in Vietnam. He also explains how one of the local Black young ladies had little chance to avoid becoming a prostitute like her mother, and the range of actions she takes to avoid such a fate, including various covert sexual liaisons with him. He then talks about fights he got into as a schoolboy, and his experience with racist jokes. He tells Judith about his only childhood friendship with a peer. The boy was otherwise “slow” but, like John, loved history. They used to borrow each other’s books until one day John went by his house to return some he had borrowed. The boy returned his books later that evening, even though he could not have finished them. Before leaving, the boy informed John that he could not come by his house again. This story in which another White person is seen to suffer or the sheer weight of the stories, including the past five years worth of lectures, finally makes Judith accept John’s anguish.

At the end of the novel, John “invents” a story to tell Judith. The story is about his great-grandfather, C.K. and twelve other runaways who choose to commit suicide rather than be caught and returned to involuntary servitude.¹⁵ The tale is an epic that involves heroism and bravery. Yet the most important aspect of the story as it regards the documentation of an Afrikan identity, is a short folktale told by an old man.¹⁶ This man’s father had been from Haiti, and told him the story that had come from Africa. The story is about the clash of cultures between the Africans and the Europeans. The Great Sky God sent a message through Papa Legba to tell the people not to fear death.

...the Stillness That Comes To All, that they call death. Death was not an ending of things, but a passing on of spirit, a change of shape, and nothing more; that when the Stillness came upon those they loved, they should not grieve, but rejoice, because the loved one had merely left the body that bound him to the ground and become a spirit who could fly wherever he willed. (*Chaneyville* 447.)

Legba told Rabbit, who, being lazy and stupid, only told one person. That person had pale skin, straight hair and gray eyes. The pale men did not tell the men with dark skins, only other pale men. They decided to keep the message to themselves. Instead they told the dark-skinned men that the great god had said that the pale ones were better than them.

They also said that the dark ones would be cast into a lake of fire to burn forever, unless they did as the pale men said.

But, the old man said, some of the men with dark skins guessed the truth. Those men did not fear the lake, for they believed that when the Stillness came upon them they would simply go away and live in a place where there were no men with pale skins who stole the spirit by telling lies. And so they did not do exactly as the men with pale skin said. And so they were beaten, and chained, and starved. But it did not matter. For they believed the truth... (*Chaneyville* 448.)

This story gave the runaways the strength to commit suicide. They sang as they did it. But their voices grew weaker. "But the song went on. Because the wind had shifted again, and was blowing from the west; because now the wind sang."¹⁷

This story told by an old African from Haiti reflects the conscious Afrikan identity adopted by Moses Washington who went "on a hunting trip" in search of C.K. Washington. Moses sought the expertise of all the local ministers, and even went to war to get a first hand look at death. In the end he believed that he only went from one shape to another, and he wanted to see his ancestor. The story of a mass suicide to avoid a life of slavery suggests that the runaways including C.K. also embraced this Afrikan truth. John Washington, like his ancestors, does not know, he only believes. ----

CHAPTER 7

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

... I've lived in the darkness into which I was chased, but now I see. I've illuminated the blackness of my invisibility—and vice versa.¹

THE TEXT

Invisible Man begins with a Prologue where the main character, a narrator who remains nameless throughout the text, suggests that he is almost ready to leave a self-imposed hibernation or exile in an underground cave of light. The novel tells the story of how the narrator came to be underground in the first place, and how he is now prepared to begin to re-enter the real world above ground. The narrator's self-reflexive ambiguity pervades the text. The more he seeks to understand the situations he is in, the less he seems to know. The more he tries to conform to the expectations of those around him, the less he fits in. The text details a series of partially answered, unsatisfactory, and ultimately discarded answers to the question, "What did I do to be so black and blue?"² The text details the incidents which contribute to the narrator's blues.

The epilogue picks up where the prologue left off. It is more philosophical than the rest of the novel. It sums up the narrative's ambiguity and the narrator's journeys, "No indeed, the world is just as concrete, ornery, vile and sublimely wonderful as before, only now I better understand my relation to it and it to me" (*Invisible* 498). The narrator questions himself and society, without posing answers more definitive than,

It's 'winner take nothing' that is the great truth of our country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many—This is not prophecy, but description. Thus one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites escaping blackness and becoming blacker everyday, and the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray. None of us seems to know who he is or where he's going.³

The narrator's search takes him through the south where he grew up, to the north, from high school through college, through a seesaw series of jobs and unemployment, through a political career and ultimately to his underground sequestering. Most of the time, the narrator is not an active agent; forces and events, seemingly beyond his control or awareness, push him into new and different situations. He earns an opportunity to give a graduation speech to the prominent White men in his town. However, before his speech, he is put into a battle royal with nine other young Black men for the opportunity to

scramble for fool's gold on an electrified carpet. Afterwards he is allowed to give his speech and receives a briefcase and a scholarship.

The narrator is a successful college student. He receives good grades, is on the debate team, and earns the favor of the college's president. He is given the honor of driving one of the college's White benefactors, Mr. Norton, around the campus. He takes Norton to the old slave quarters where he hears the story of Trueblood's incest. This is a shock to Norton's system, and, in order to find some spirits to calm him down, that narrator takes Norton to the Golden Day, the local jukejoint/tavern/whorehouse. Norton is further disoriented as a riot breaks out among some local inmates of an insane asylum who are also visiting the Golden Day. Norton meets a doctor, a Black veteran, also an inmate, who diagnoses Norton's peculiar medical problem thereby earning Norton's respect. Yet the vet also upsets Norton by pointing out the inadequacies of the racist society they both inhabit. After Norton's eventual return to the college, the president, Bledsoe, has the veteran transferred, and the narrator expelled from school. The narrator is given letters of introduction to other philanthropists in New York. Although the narrator does not know it, the letters are instructions to keep him chasing a chimera rather than to help him obtain employment, as he had supposed.

The letters take him to a Mr. Emerson. Actually, the interaction is with the addressee Emerson's son, who informs him of the misrepresentation. This leads to a job in a paint factory in the middle of a labor dispute. Distractions centered on other employees' attempts to find out where the narrator stands on the labor question lead to an explosion. In the aftermath of his treatment and recovery in the factory hospital, the narrator receives "lobopressure" and shock therapy.⁴ Sufficiently calmed-down, he is returned to society.

The narrator meets an older Black woman, Mary Rambo, who takes him into her rooming house. A long and unsuccessful search for employment surprisingly ends when the narrator speaks out at an eviction and moves the crowd to action. He attracts the attention of the "Brotherhood" who hires him to become their Harlem spokesman. He leaves Mary's residence to take an apartment in another part of town. As he delivers the Brotherhood's message of peaceful cooperation and interracial alliance, the narrator attracts the enmity of Ras the Exhorter, a nationalist who grows more militant over time. The narrator encounters conflict from various members of the White and Black communities. Yet, the ideological controversies between the Brotherhood on one side, Ras on another side, and the narrator who ultimately endorses neither Ras' nationalism nor the Brotherhood's patriarchal liberalism, form a triangle of potential in which the narrator never truly situates himself.

The narrator embraces the teaching and strategies of the Brotherhood. Yet, he leaves the Brotherhood after he learns that they do not care about the Black community. For the Brotherhood, the community is a political tool or opportunity, to be sacrificed if that will further their cause. The narrator learns, and his awareness grows, but not in the direction of the nationalistic Ras—just away from the Brotherhood. He learns of the power of dissemblance. While running from Ras' forces, he disguises himself in dark glasses and a hat. He is mistaken for a numbers runner, pimping, hustling, gun and knife-toting hipster, named Rinehart, who is also a preacher.

Ras, too, politically evolves. During the period of the narrator's affair with the Brotherhood, Ras goes from being an *Exhorter* to a *Destroyer*. This new militancy fuels a

riot that begins after Tod Clifton, an ex-member of the Brotherhood and popular community leader, is murdered, a victim of police brutality. Though he helps its residents burn down an apartment building, the narrator does not believe in militant action as a solution to social problems. Yet, he is pleasantly surprised that, counter to the Brotherhood's rhetoric and expectations, the community is capable of autonomous political action. Learning of the Black community's capacities for covert social masking and overt political action enlightens and confuses the narrator. When he is confronted by Ras again, this time he responds with violent self-defense and flight. While running from Ras, with the riot going on around him, that narrator is cornered by four White men, who wonder what he has in the briefcase he has carried with him throughout all. He opens a manhole cover, descends, originally to hide. However, he is unable to escape from the hole and ultimately chooses to stay below ground and contemplate "what he did to be so blue."

HOW CHARACTERS RELATE TO OTHERS:

Extended family and stories in *Invisible Man*

There is no significant or truly functional extended family in *Invisible Man*. Except for his grandfather, the narrator's nuclear family is essentially nonexistent in a physical or psychological sense. The dearth of references to family members, and the indifference in the few that do exist imply that the narrator has severed family ties. When he is kicked out of college, he does not go home, and only informs them that he is going to work in New York for the summer.⁵ The narrator also does not even say goodbye to a roommate or girlfriend. There is no other contact with family, and even this one instance is only superficially recounted. The narrator does not contact them during the episode of his hospitalization, surgery and recovery. The only kin to have any major effect on the narrator is his grandfather who left a deathbed ideological legacy that is bound up in his search for a consistent and conscious personal and political identity.

The narrator does not develop emotional attachments with other people. Instead he connects with places, like the college, symbolic things, like the letters, a broken bank from Mary, or the shackle given to him by Brother Tarp. He carries the bank he stole from Mary, yet he never makes it back to let her know how he turns out. He also becomes attached to ideologies like the mission of the college, and the Brotherhood's policies. It appears to many in the community that the narrator has sold out, and no longer relates to their realities. He is not a member of the community, their extended family. One of the men sitting in the bar makes this clear as he rebuffs the narrator's greeting, "Good evening, Brothers" a standard reference in the community.

"Shit," the tall man said.

"You said it man; he a relative of yourn?" "Shit, he goddam sho ain't no kin of mine!"

... "He must be drunk," the second man said. "Maybe he think he's kin to you."

“Then his whiskey’s telling him a damn lie. I wouldn’t be his kin even if I was...”⁶

The dialogue continues across the next few pages with the bartender, Barrelhouse, joining in and keeping the peace, asserting that the narrator is his brother. Yet this is not enough, as the antagonist warns Barrelhouse, “You just tell your brother he ought to be careful who he claims as kinfolks. Some of us don’t like his kind of politics” (*Invisible* 368). Barrelhouse goes on to inform the narrator what has been happening, the problems in the community, since he has been relocated uptown and lost touch with the people.

Perhaps part of the explanation for the community’s dissatisfaction with the narrator is that he has no close emotional or social bonds in the community that would draw him physically there to see for himself the changes they go through, or experience with them firsthand. In isolation from the community, he also lacks the oral interactions with the residents whereby he could learn about their state of affairs in a timely manner. For him, the people are a political entity, rather than a personal or social reality. The lack of attachments to people prohibits the development of any extended family dynamics in the text. From the Afrocentric perspective developed in this project, *Invisible Man* fails to demonstrate this component of the cultural context. The novel, though detailing a variety of African American cultural contexts, consistently underplays Afrikan cultural survivals. The narrator’s interactions with Mary are the closest he comes to an extended family. Yet even with her, all is expediency. He is able to leave her without telling her where he is going or what he is doing. Near the end of the novel, the narrator sees Mary as a safe haven, and attempts to go to her house. Too many obstacles keep him from reaching Mary: roving looters, police, Ras’ forces, and lastly, a group of White males who chase him into the manhole. All this symbolizes that the narrator has no real home and no supporting community.

Brother Tarp also comes close to being an extended family member, in that he confides in the narrator, telling him the story of how he was an escaped convict and why he still limps. Tarp gives the narrator the leg chain he wore while on the chain gang. However, the relationship does not progress beyond the professional and collegial. Though he has the opportunity to confide in Tarp about a warning note he receives, the narrator keeps the specifics of his problem to himself. This pattern is consistent throughout the novel. The narrator never tells anyone (except the reader) about his troubles at the battle royal, the college, the factory, the hospital, or with the Brotherhood. When confronted by the White Emerson with one of Bledsoe’s letters, he explains the incident with Norton and Bledsoe. But neither the younger or older Emerson can solve the narrator’s problems. He does not solicit the help or emotional support of the Black community who might be better able to understand his experiences and the frustrations that result from his difficulties. *Invisible Man* offers institutionalized versions of an extended family, rather than community-based examples: the college, the factory, the Brotherhood. He is not able to open a dialogue where someone could assist him in resolving the quandaries of his life. He carries the Western individualist ethos to the extreme by self-sequestering in his cave.

Personal stories, shared with one another, do not figure as a significant motif in *Invisible Man*. Yet, while the novel is intensely oral, its stories are public, rather than interpersonal. Formal or ritualistic oral modes of communication like speeches, sermons

or streetcorner addresses dominate the novel. Sometimes the narrator is the one on stage or behind the microphone. But whether the narrator hears or delivers the speech, he is not moved toward personal transcendence. Trueblood's monologue revolts him, and Norton as well.⁷ Homer Barbee's speech ends in the blind man tripping on the stage, and the narrator feeling lost and guilty.⁸ Neither do his more interpersonal interactions with the veteran in the Golden Day and on the bus north—both of which offer lessons he refuses—help to resolve any problems.⁹ No interaction or conversation with Ras, nor any of his speeches, have any positive or progressive ideological effect on the narrator.

The Afrikan oral tradition surfaces in more than the speeches and monologues. Jack the Bear and Jack the Rabbit, as folkloric figures come into various situations, usually as names, nicknames, or personas attached to the narrator. The musical tradition of call and response plays an important role in the funeral scene where the singer and horn player pull the crowd into a march incorporating the spiritual, There's Many a Thousand Gone. Signyfin' also comes up when the narrator interacts with the street peddler pushing blueprints. He is initially confused by their exchange, but after a little while, becomes more comfortable. He again becomes comfortable on the street when he purchases the yams. The two incidents remind him of home, down south. Misrepresenting himself as Rinehart in Barrelhouse's bar, the narrator is able to project a rough, violent street image. While in the streets among the people, the narrator seems to develop a relaxed social persona that he does not have any other time in the novel.

Ellison uses a call and response mode to signal the narrator's effectiveness in front of crowds, but this is not the interaction of street dialogue. The street demands a certain kind of masking presentation, a detached, though engaging, performance. Pursued by Ras when he assumes the character of Rinehart, the narrator attempts to emulate the "cool" of the streetwise hipster.¹⁰ Though not Rinehart, he fits into the street life, the dialogue, the jive talking; the roles and manifestations of a Rinehart. He knows how to behave and, once attuned to his situation, his instincts serve him successfully, unlike at the college, the factory, or in the Brotherhood. He does not smoothly fit into the mold of the street life, yet he adapts more readily to its demands than his other environments. Even when he is caught as an impostor by the two women who realize their mistakes in assuming he is Rinehart, he is able to leave the situation with a minimum of conflict.¹¹ In the bar scene with Brother Maceo that almost ends in bloodshed, the narrator is able to extract himself without losing either life, limb, or face.

Indeed, the narrator seems to have knowledge of the oral tradition in its myriad presentations. Yet his ability to interact harmoniously, either verbally or socially, is hampered by distrust, fear, and isolation from the community he seeks to lead. In contrast, he is led too easily by the whims of the White characters in the novel, without suspecting their motives and intentions. In fact, the narrator arrives at the same conclusion near the end of the novel,

And now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure. They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply material, a natural resource to be used. (*Invisible*, 439.)

Many events force the narrator to learn this lesson. First, he leads Norton to the old slave quarters, seemingly oblivious to the inappropriateness of his actions. This is confounded when he discusses Trueblood and allows Norton to begin a conversation with the man. Norton, clearly in physical and mental distress, commands him to take him to get some spirits. Rather than cutting his losses and taking him directly to the infirmary, the narrator takes Norton to the Golden Day. The sequence of events after that point quickly gets beyond the narrator's control. One of the most useful lessons learned in the African American folkloric tradition is the trickster role. Bledsoe, the president of the college, condemns his lack of attention to the basics of interracial relationships in the south,

“Damn what *he* wants,” he said, climbing in the front seat beside me.

“Haven't you got the sense God gave a dog? We take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see.

Don't you know that? I thought you had some sense?” (*Invisible* 93.)

“But I was only driving him sir. I only stopped there after he ordered me to...”

“Ordered you?” he said. “He *ordered* you. Damned white folks are always giving orders, it's a habit with them. Why didn't you make an excuse? Couldn't you say they had sickness—smallpox—or picked another cabin? Why that Trueblood shack? My God, boy! You're black and living in the south—did you forget how to lie?” (*Invisible* 124.)

Growing up hearing, understanding the stories of Jack-the-Bear, Jack-the Rabbit, and Bucky-the-Rabbit should have acculturated the narrator so that he knows how to behave around “white folks.” The idea and pervasiveness of speaking in code is emphasized by Ellison when the narrator goes back to the dorm and a young lady asks him to deliver a message to her boyfriend, coincidentally named “Jack” Maston.¹² The street peddler, who had been singing some *familiar* blues, asks him, “What I want to know is...is you got the dog?” (*Invisible* 153). Neither knowing the correct response nor the reason behind the question, the narrator immediately feels angry and exasperated. Yet as the peddler consistently demands recognition (“Why you trying to deny me?”) as the narrator is forced to remember long-forgotten lessons. As the peddler begins to recite a litany of classic lines from traditional street toasts, the narrator grows amused and comfortable. Clearly comfortable with the surface manifestations of oral interactions, the narrator is confounded by the dynamics of their inner meanings.

Another episode of the narrator being led by White men's desires is while trying to deliver one of the letters Bledsoe provided him, the narrator ends up interacting with a younger Mr. Emerson, the son of the addressee. When Emerson is candid with him by exposing Bledsoe's duplicity, the narrator suspects Emerson's motives, even after reading the letter that was intended for his father. The narrator is distrustful of his Black brothers and Emerson, the only White man who has no hidden agenda for him. He is easily led astray by the Brotherhood that, although interracial, is dominated by White policy-makers and Black subordinates. He accepts their teachings, their philosophies of collaborative, interracial alliance. Yet, he is unaware that, when he is relocated to a position uptown, they have essentially abandoned the community. When he learns of

their actions, the conflict between the narrator and the Brotherhood is not easily resolved. He opts to cooperate, or at least appear to, but this strategy backfires on him.

The murder of Tod Clifton, an ex-Brother, by a policeman, represents a chance for the Brotherhood to reassert themselves in the leadership of the community. The Brotherhood offers no counsel, but chastises the narrator for taking the initiative by organizing a public funeral and burial. The Brotherhood is aware of the tensions that will explode in the community, and plan to take advantage of the situation and rebuild their power base, rather than circumvent or channel those energies into constructive arenas. The narrator is caught in the ensuing riots, no longer a part of the Brotherhood, but effectively cut off from the political direction in which the community is moving. Ras' ideology seems to be carrying the day, and the narrator is not yet ready to accommodate any violence, other than for self-defense. Caught in the middle, fleeing Blacks and Whites, the narrator's last refuge is underground.

The extended family plays no part in "contribut(ing) to the unity of the symbols, the elimination of chaos, the making of peace among disparate views, and the creation of an opportunity for harmony and hence balance" in *Invisible Man*.¹³ When other community members, or interactions with other community members, would help the narrator to resolve some of his difficulties, this does not happen. He is a narrow-minded, individualist who cannot accommodate a multiplicity of viewpoints or exist in harmony with others, their actions, or their ideas. Likewise, the oral tradition, specifically the sharing of stories does not facilitate conflict resolution in the text. Though much of *Invisible Man* is written in an oral mode, where verbal means are more effective as means of communication, these transfers of information merely exchange knowledge rather than facilitate transcendence. The many instances of spiritual or jazz music are uplifting and moving, yet they are inadequate to the task of helping the narrator resolve his problems.

HOW CHARACTERS RELATE TO THE SUPERNATURAL:

Spirituality and Ancestral Communion/Legacy in *Invisible Man*

The spiritual context in *Invisible Man* is minimal. Spiritual music, the blues, jazz, and folk religious musical traditions of African Americans occasionally move the narrator. However, spirituality as it is used in this research—referring to the supernatural or ontological concerns—is essentially absent from this novel. Beyond the references to Black spiritual music, and his obligatory appearance in the school chapel, there is no evidence of the narrator engaging in religious rites, behaviors, or consciousness. Even his speech at Tod Clifton's funeral lacks any spiritual or religious foundation. His argument that Clifton lived, and died, and is now in a box could be construed as making an ontological statement about the lack of a spirit, or afterlife. However, it is more of a rhetorical ploy than an ontological statement.

The most pronounced example of a spiritual consciousness is Ellison's treatment of the narrator's grandfather. The grandfather leaves a deathbed message to his son and the other progeny,

“Son, after I’m gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country ever since I gave up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ’em with yesses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction, let ’em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open”....

“Learn it to the younguns.” (*Invisible* 19–20.)

This message causes quite a stir in the family, because the grandfather had seemed a meek, quiet man, who was a model of good conduct, at least to the White people of the town. The narrator appears to be following in his grandfather’s footsteps. He, too, is praised by the local Whites. He delivers a graduation speech about humility being the very essence of progress. As a direct result of his grandfather’s words, he believes in the efficacy of this formula but not its philosophy. He lives throughout the text as a man who chooses not to make waves, to do what he is told or expected to do by Whites. His address to the crowd at the eviction is an obvious departure from this formula, yet it is framed in nonviolent and non-threatening ideologies, “We are a law-abiding people” (*Invisible* 232–247). Like repetition and improvisation in African American oral traditions, this phrase or a variation is repeated more than ten times during his speech. He attracts the attention of the Brotherhood, and ends up with a job, a position as spokesman for the Harlem community. The Brotherhood also believes in the ways of words, speeches, and policies rather than direct action.

The grandfather’s legacy remains as a constant goad, or curse. The narrator does not see how doing what “they” want or expect can lead to their death and destruction. He sees and experiences how it can lead to a grudging, limited, acceptance, and success in their world, by their terms. It takes him almost the whole novel to see the resistant, trickster mode his grandfather exemplified. Though the narrator professes to wonder if his grandfather was in the room laughing at him, or makes some other kind of reference to the figurative presence of his ancestor, those instances do not represent a sense of ancestral communion. They clearly demarcate the intensity of his legacy. This legacy, from the grandfather’s perspective, was designed to “eliminate chaos, make peace among disparate views, and/or create opportunities for harmony and balance.”¹⁴ Yet the narrator is unable to find such utility in either his words or the behaviors he recommends.

The narrator never finds the harmony or balance of his grandfather’s methodology. Instead of finding peace, the narrator seems to be a catalyst for violence. From the battle royal to mayhem at the Golden Day to the explosion at the paint factory to Clifton’s murder to his final confrontation with Ras in the midst of a riot, the narrator does not intentionally instigate violence, nevertheless it occurs. He retreats from the chaos of a race riot into an underground chamber. Yet this is not peace. Neither does the isolation provide an opportunity for harmony or balance. The quiet of secluded time and space in his cave provides a period of intense reflection that yields a level of comprehension. However, that comprehension is still only a state of incomplete understanding. The real answer, if one can truly exist, is not in an act of cognition as the word “understanding” might imply. Instead, an act of creation is needed. He says, “Step outside of the borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos—ask Rinehart, he’s a master of it—or imagination” (*Invisible* 498). The symbol of the grandfather does not signal harmony,

balance, or peace. Instead, he contributes to the narrator's chaos, and only shows up during periods of distress. Even in the Epilogue, the narrator is not able to offer a definitive reconciliation with or understanding of his grandfather's words.¹⁵ He seems unable to imagine his grandfather as a positive and beneficent factor in his life.

The grandfather's presence in the novel is not benign. At least the narrator is unable to use it for positive purposes. Instead, his presence is more a harbinger of difficulties. The narrator does not learn to utilize such warnings. At the end of the first chapter, after the narrator survives the battle royal and receives a scholarship to the state college for Negroes, he feels secure from his grandfather's curse. Yet, that night, he has a nightmare featuring his grandfather. In the dream, the old man warns him about the futile years he'll spend chasing an education, represented by a series of envelopes with the state seal on them. The final envelope has the message, "Keep this Nigger-Boy Running."¹⁶

While driving Norton around campus, Norton initiates a discussion about fate that stimulates the narrator to think about his grandfather.

I didn't answer. I was thinking of the first person who'd mentioned anything like fate in my presence, my grandfather. There had been nothing pleasant about it and I had tried to forget it. Now, riding here in the powerful car with this white man who was so pleased with what he called his fate, I felt a sense of dread. (*Invisible* 41.)

Directly after this, the narrator takes Norton to Trueblood, which initiates a series of events leading to his expulsion, ultimately to New York and underground. While sitting in his room, after being expelled and essentially sent to New York by Bledsoe, the narrator again senses his grandfather's presence, "And now to drive me wild I felt suddenly that my grandfather was hovering over me, grinning triumphantly out of the dark. I simply could not endure it" (*Invisible* 131). The narrator refuses the warning, proceeds to pack his bags and leaves for New York in one day rather than the two Bledsoe had given him to stay on campus.

After being in New York for a while, the narrator again dreams of his grandfather. He wakes up depressed, though he perks up when he receives a letter from a Mr. Emerson.¹⁷ Very happy to have a job opportunity, the dream about his grandfather does not seem premonitory. Yet, again disaster soon falls upon him. This time in the form of the fateful interview with Emerson that propels the narrator into the job at the paint factory. The narrator causes an explosion that lands him in a hospital at the whims of surgeons who perform electroshock and a lobopressure.¹⁸

The grandfather's presence does not signal any difficulties with the narrator's initial interactions with the Brotherhood. However, in chapter 18, things begin to go sour and he receives another letter. This time an anonymous warning that he is progressing too fast. When he calls Brother Tarp to ask about the letter, he imagines seeing his grandfather in Tarp's eyes. The narrator is unsettled by this image, but comes to the conclusion that the letter is of little concern. However, by the end of the chapter, the narrator has lost his appointment in Harlem and has been moved uptown to discuss the Woman Question. Again, rejection of ancestral communion, specifically ignoring the non-corporal, supernatural, or spiritual presence that delivers a message, sets up a negative chain of events. The narrator and Brotherhood's absence from Harlem allows Ras' ideology to

ferment and foment violence in the population. As a result of the ensuing riot, the narrator is forced into an underground exile or hibernation.

This rejection of ancestral communion is by no means accidental. When he accepts the broken leg chain from Brother Tarp, the narrator thinks about his grandfather's watch he could have been given, had he remained or returned home. He respects Tarp's gesture, but does not accord the same kind of respect to his grandfather.

I felt that Brother Tarp's gesture in offering it was of some deeply felt significance which I was compelled to respect. Something, perhaps like a man passing on to his son his own father's watch, which the son accepted not because he wanted the old-fashioned time-piece for itself, but because of the overtones of unstated seriousness and solemnity of the paternal gesture which at once joined him with his ancestors, marked a high point of his present, and promised a concreteness to his nebulous and chaotic future. And now I remembered that if I had returned home instead of coming north my father would have given me my grandfather's old-fashioned Hamilton, with its long, burr-headed winding stem. Well, so my brother would get it and I'd never wanted it anyway. (*Invisible* 337–338.)

It is the joining with his ancestor that the narrator does not want. Brother Tarp functions as a surrogate of sorts. He also provides a portrait of Frederick Douglass for the narrator's office, which he appreciates. He is aware of Douglass because his grandfather had mentioned him. Yet, he even denies this positive manifestation of his grandfather, "I sat now facing the portrait of Frederick Douglass, feeling a sudden piety, remembering and refusing to hear the echoes of my grandfather's voice" (*Invisible* 328–329).

HOW CHARACTERS RELATE TO THEIR OWN BEING:

Identity and worldview issues in *Invisible Man*

All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naive. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer.¹⁹

From its first paragraph of the first chapter, *Invisible Man* documents one man's search for himself. The narrator is confronted by characters that question his identity. The previous section discusses how the narrator denies his ancestral and family identity. He likewise denies membership in a broader category outlined by racial characteristics.²⁰ If they make references to his African, Black, or Negro identity he responds negatively to them. First, the veteran M.D. specialist from the Golden Day, notes that he has African

features, but really doesn't understand who he is, or what he is doing, or what is going on around him. The vet castigates him with a wealth of invective, referring to the narrator's ignorance and lack of understanding. The narrator is labeled "...a walking zombie!...invisible, a walking personification of the Negative.... The mechanical man" (*Invisible* 86). Yet the most damning words had already been uttered for, in the beginning of that passage the vet accuses the narrator of possessing "a good distended African nose." This is not the narrator's self-image. He envisions himself as "a potential Booker T. Washington" (*Invisible* 21). He is given, or assumes, an identity at the college consistent with his imagination. His impending expulsion is all it takes to fracture that identity. "Here within this quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever known, and I was losing it" (*Invisible* 91).

The narrator seems to respond positively to the blues-singing street peddler, but directly after his interaction with him, the narrator denies membership in the group with him. "...he was a man who could whistle a three-toned chord. God damn, I thought, *they're* a hell of a people! I don't know whether it was pride or disgust that flashed over me" [italics added] (*Invisible* 156). The use of the word "they" implies someone else, whereas the narrator's use of "we" would signify rather than disclaim group membership. The peddler had asked the narrator, "Why you trying to deny me?" and the narrator had seemed to recognize and join in the spirit of their interaction. Yet, the narrator after all does deny the man. He goes on to deny his southern background by resisting the offer of pork chops and grits at the diner. (*Invisible* 156–157) This act of "discipline" suggests that he really did want the pork chops and grits, especially when, upon entering the diner, he initially responds, "I could feel the odor of frying bacon reach deep into my stomach..." (*Invisible* 156). By ordering orange juice, toast and coffee, and not ordering the offered pork chops or even the bacon, the narrator again denies something that is obviously within himself.

Next, the narrator encounters Emerson, who questions not only the narrator's identity, but a dehumanizing society, "Who has an identity any more?" (*Invisible* 165) This interview leads to a position at Liberty Paints, where the narrator helps cause an explosion. While being treated with "lobopressure" and electroshock in the hospital, the narrator is repeatedly asked "What is your name?" He is also asked about his mother and trickster characters, Bre'r Rabbit and Buckeye the Rabbit. He acknowledges to himself a childhood that included Buckeye the Rabbit, but offers no satisfactory responses to the doctors' questions, even when that seems to be the key to his release. "There was no getting around it. I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I'll be free."²¹ Identity and freedom are linked in this sentence, but the narrator is never able to resolve this conflict.²²

Ras the Exhorter/Destroyer is the primary antagonist who challenges the narrator's racial allegiance and self-image. He refuses to kill Tod Clifton because Clifton is Black. Instead, he argues and tries to convince Clifton to leave the Brotherhood and join him. Clifton rejects Ras' plea, but the words cut into both Clifton and the narrator. The claims of Blackness and African identity are a rhetoric the narrator finds it easy to deny. He is impressed with Ras' sincerity but Clifton is moved.²³ The extent to which Clifton is moved is expressed by his faster assessment of the Brotherhood's manipulations of their Black membership. Once the Brotherhood leaves Harlem, Clifton interprets their neglect

as malignant and goes on the street selling Sambo dolls. This satirical commentary on how he (as well as the narrator) had been used is a statement of his identity. He does not join the Exhorter's forces because of Ras' words, but he becomes cognizant of the problems within the Brotherhood. Clifton as Sambo is a more realistic representation than the narrator as a trickster figure.

Near the end of the novel the narrator is confronted by Ras again.²⁴ This time, he has been stripped of his illusions about the Brotherhood. Yet he still refuses to join Ras. He condemns both the Brotherhood and Ras. As a ploy to save himself, or a legitimate revelation too late to help him out of the predicament his past put him into, the narrator considers claiming brotherhood, but not solidarity, with Ras' forces. After unsuccessfully pleading his case and arguing against Ras and then having run a spear through Ras' jaw, the narrator wants to pursue peaceful coexistence. "Look, men, give me a break, we're all black folks together...let's stop running and respect and love one another" (*Invisible* 485). Sensing that he will not be believed, the narrator flees, seeking safe haven with Mary.

Racial allegiance is only one aspect of the narrator's identity crisis. To the extent that he remains nameless, he also lacks a clear personal identity. Jack-the-Bear, Jack-the-Rabbit, and Bucky or Buckeye the Rabbit are the only names the narrator accepts by applying them to himself. Yet he does not understand the role these figures play, or he would be able to come to grips with his grandfather's deathbed legacy. However, he readily accepts the Brotherhood's name, although it is never divulged in the text itself. However, the role as the Brotherhood's mouthpiece that he plays and accepts is clear, and also a statement about the narrator's lack of identity. Throughout the novel, Ellison also refuses to give the reader a name to call the narrator. The narrator's anonymity alone would attest to a person without an identity. Not accepting his obvious racial and cultural characteristics is a further demonstration of the narrator's poor self-awareness.

The exact names the narrator is born with or given by the Brotherhood are not directly relevant to the purposes of this analysis, his namelessness throughout the text is the important factor. The narrator assumes the names of animal trickster characters, or remains a nameless person who accepts the roles and identity put on him by others. He does not have a personal, autonomous identity. He wants to be a leader of his people, yet cannot relate to them on a personal or political level. The narrator's lack of community consciousness and experiential engagement is most definitively presented in the narrator's relationship, or lack thereof, with Mary Rambo. She helps him get back on his feet in a literal physical sense, but also in a social and economic manner. Mary is there for the narrator when he is recovering from his travails in the hospital. She also supports him by providing room and board until he finds the job with the Brotherhood. The narrator is isolated even before he goes underground. Mary provides connection to his roots and the community lacking in the other areas of his life. Their relationship was more than a social or business affair.

Other than Mary I had no friends and desired none. Nor did I think of Mary as a "friend"; she was something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face. It was a most painful position, for at the same time, Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some

newsworthy achievement; and I was torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive. (*Invisible* 227.)

Ambiguity and confusion dominate the narrator's existence. He lacks a sense of love for his grandfather, but is nevertheless driven to understand his deathbed words. Throughout the text, the narrator is as confused about his grandfather's message as he is unsettled by his presence. The Prologue documents the narrator as a creature in conflict, living in darkness and loving the light, and trying to make sense out of his situation. "I have been boomeranged across my head so much that I now can see the darkness or lightness. And I love light" (*Invisible* 10). Ambiguity and confusion continue through the novel, even in the Epilogue. He does not really *know* what his grandfather meant. The narrator sums it up, "So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love" (*Invisible* 502). Yet, this ambivalence provides a venue for Ellison to pursue concrete thematic goals. In Stepto's terms, the pregeneric myths of freedom and literacy are central to *Invisible Man*. But the most enduring theme in *Invisible Man* is the narrator's search for an identity. This search incorporates knowledge of his society and his place in it that the narrator gains from his experiences. For the "invisible man," who plays with images of light and dark, denunciation and defense, love and hate, the real conundrum is not "What did I do to be so black and blue?" The real issue is Who am I? What do I want to do? What do I want to say? Or, to reiterate a previously referenced passage, "When I discover who I am, I'll be free."

In a narcotic dream sequence in the Prologue, the narrator hears an old-slave-woman-singer-of-spirituals tell her story of hate/love for her master-father-of-her-children. She hated him and loved him, but she loved her freedom even more. So she killed him with poison. The narrator does not understand, "Old woman, what is this freedom you love so well?" Her response precisely frames the pregeneric myths, "I guess now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head" (*Invisible* 14). Yet she/Elison is already moving beyond the idea of literacy as access to the written word, learning to read and write. For her, as well as the narrator, the search is to find and articulate the words to say what is going on in their mind. The narrator's search puts him in various positions as a speaker, rather than a writer: his graduation speech, his speech at the eviction, his work with the Brotherhood. Yet the old woman is ahead of the narrator, she accepts the ambiguity and knows that what is in her head are her own thoughts—even if she doesn't understand them and they hurt when she tries to express them.

Near the end of the same sequence, the narrator expresses the desire to achieve the kind of transcendence Asante refers to; unity, peace, harmony, balance. "I was sore and into my being had come a profound craving for tranquillity, for peace and quiet, a state I felt I could never achieve" (*Invisible* 15). He has learned that his identity is linked to others around him, but they do not determine his identity. Instead, he must assess who he is or wants to be and how he fits into the community. This is impossible to do from his underground cave of light.

From an Afrocentric perspective that also values names as a significant part of the oral tradition and community membership, the narrator in *Invisible Man* fails to make an identity statement. The novel, in its rejection of ancestral communion, the extended family, and shared stories, is also deficient in the other categories used in this analysis. The text uses the oral tradition in a variety of ways, but none of them lead to

transcendence, harmony or peace for the narrator. This text is extremely valuable to this analysis, not for its successes—and *Invisible Man* is clearly a successful novel on so many levels—but for the failures of its protagonist. The novel treats many components of Afrocentricity with its peripheral characters in a positive manner that to label it a complete failure in this analysis is a grave injustice.

The character of Mary is only one example. Bledsoe, Lucius Brockway, Tarp, and even Ras represent a sense of community and history. To the extent that these characters are not well developed, they nevertheless provide a thematic counterpoint to the narrator's ambiguity. The reasons for their ideologies are clear and consistent within their own lives, even when they are at odds with others. Each one offers different lessons to the narrator. While Bledsoe plays a political game of self-masking, the character that suggests the most promise from a trickster standpoint is Rinehart. Rinehart successfully navigates in a cross-section of the community. He is a hustler, numbers runner, pimp, general bad man, and preacher. The potential contained in Rinehart's many activities/identities represent forces the narrator to reconsider his place in society. People will accept the identity projected for them to see. The narrator's explication of the situation—that the real person is invisible, obfuscated by others' expectations—is not a resolution to the central conflict of being who you are rather than who they want you to be. Black people, who exist as a community in a society dominated by others' expectations and perceptions, cannot forget the most important lesson of this novel: self-perception is the most pertinent determinant of who you are. This, too, is stressed in opening paragraph of the first chapter, "... I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man!"²⁵

CHAPTER 8

A Review of Contemporary African American Novels

This project focuses on Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as representative African American novels. The methodology developed in Part I is applied to each novel individually in the first three chapters of Part II. This chapter will review the novels in a comparative framework, comparing each to the others, as well as to other contemporary novels. Emerging Afrikan survivals, as related to Asante's Afrocentric markers, are the foremost analytical strategy. The concluding chapter will address other aspects of this literature that are significant to literary criticism, in general, and specifically to those who attempt to understand developments in the field of African American literature.

The various novels under review here do not exist in isolation. The longstanding canon of Western literature remains a considerable influence on African American writers. Undoubtedly, this literature derives from mostly White and mostly male Europeans or Americans and dominates academic, critical, and popular institutions. As conscious, active, participants in and consumers of the material and intellectual cultures encompassed by American society, African Americans have multiple cultural legacies. American culture itself is largely becoming a hybrid amalgam of global influences, though U.S. culture also affects other societies in a more powerful manner. Nevertheless, there is a significant and growing bulk of African American literature that creates its own traditions. The analysis of Afrikan cultural survivals in an Afrocentric matrix suggests a few of these traditions. The critical framework developed in Part I will also be applied to other African American novels. Though these other novels will not be subjected to as rigorous application of the methodology, the presence of the emerging paradigms is clearly evident. This discussion will demonstrate that the factors in this research are not limited to the novels in question, but, in fact, could be applied to a large portion of contemporary African American novels.

THREE TROUBLED MEN

The primary male characters created by the three novelists this research covers each, in his own way, is in a position to use his ancestors as a guiding light. More than the access to a predecessor, each character also has a potential supportive community that could offer assistance with major personal conflicts. Various means of collecting or receiving information are available in these characters' worlds. Ellison's narrator has access to radio, phonograph and diverse print media. Milkman and John Washington have a larger variety of print and audiovisual media in the societies in which these novels are set, yet neither man makes much use of them. All three men are literate. The narrator and John

Washington are even well educated. However, each unique community has some avenue of orally transmitted wealth that could benefit the protagonist in his individual conflict/search. The manner in which the authors manipulate the oral tradition bears heavily on the outcomes of the novels.

None of the men in these novels are truly alone. Their families and extended families differ substantially, as do their choices of how to interact with them. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman has a diverse extended family that involves blood relatives, Pilate, Reba, and Hagar. More distant kin figure into the picture when he goes to Virginia, as long-lost cousins provide the information about common ancestors that helps him in his quest. His father and Aunt Pilate are also part of this community where they grew up. The residents' memories of his relatives, more so than any of Milkman's personality characteristics, account for his eventual acceptance into the community. Milkman also has an extremely close relationship with a boyhood friend, Guitar. Guitar is also a part of another extended family, the Seven Days. Many of the Days are significant and highly visible members in the daily life of the community, in particular in that most iconic institution, the barbershop.

Neither of the other male protagonists under review here, nor John Washington have that same kind of longevity in a personal relationship as those Morrison develops in her characters. They are not exactly loners, but they have no close personal friends in their adult lives. John Washington, in *The Chaneyville Incident*, has no childhood or significant adult friends, except for his significant other, Judith. He does have a relationship with a father figure, Old Jack Crawley. This is the extent of his family, extended or otherwise, as John and his mother are barely civil with each other. The narrator in *Invisible Man* develops no real friendships and is estranged from his family. Yet, in the short-term, his involvement and immersion in the Brotherhood is a source of support similar to an extended family. Certainly Brother Jack and Brother Tarp are father figures, while Clifton is a "brother" figure.

The last category, identity and worldview, offers the greatest differences between the three novels. By the end of their novels, Morrison's and Bradley's characters readily accept their Blackness, the African aspect of their identities. John Washington, the history professor knows, in a very rational manner, that he is Afrikan. He has the benefit of years of academic training to give him such knowledge. In *Song of Solomon*, Guitar and the Seven Days believe in their community and accept responsibility toward each other as an extended family. It takes a crisis for Milkman to arrive at the conclusion, but he finally understands the need to develop positive, helpful relationships with members of one's community.

Both John and Milkman go on active searches for specific knowledge of their ancestral heritage. Extended family members provide each man valuable clues imbedded in the stories they tell about his ancestors. John Washington benefited from Old Jack's relating to him one of Moses' favorite stories and some of their exploits together. Both Jake, Milkman's great-grandfather, and C.K., John's great-grandfather, exhibit an Afrikan belief system. Jake believes he can fly, and leaves a legend of his escape, his flight, supposedly back to Africa. This legend is the key for Milkman to escape his final conflict with Guitar, who seeks to take his life. Old Jack passes down to John a folktale about the twelve runaway slaves who choose to commit suicide rather than be returned to slavery.

As Bradley develops the plot, this story exemplifies the belief that death is not to be feared and one's ancestors are not lost when they pass on.

In *The Chaneyville Incident*, C.K., Moses, and John all share an Afrikan spiritual philosophy of immortality beyond corporal death. John knows of this belief system, but is unable to incorporate it into a rational set of circumstances to explain C.K.'s disappearance. His final conflict is resolved when the catalyst of finding C.K.'s grave stimulates his imagination to formulate a "story" of C.K.'s life and corporal death. John accepts his father's suicide, and his great-grandfather's fate. In doing so, this frees him to once again participate in his own life. Like Milkman, who found a model in the legend of Solomon and Jake, John interpolates his ancestor's life and death according to the legend of twelve runaway slaves who preferred suicide to slavery. This helps him to understand why his father, Moses, chose to commit suicide in his search for C.K. While Washington does not follow his ancestors' lead by committing suicide, he draws solace from accepting their fates.

In *Invisible Man*, the narrator's life is tied up in seeking to understand his grandfather's last words. He never accomplishes this goal. Yet, his attempts to do so are limited by a strict reliance on personal and individual experience. He interacts with many people who might offer clarification, if not an outright solution, but chooses to never divulge his grandfather's words. His parents and other relatives didn't talk about them, so he has only his interpretations, experiences and conclusions to rely on in the attempt to understand their elusive meaning. The veteran M.D., Brother Tarp, Mary Rambo, even Bledsoe or Clifton, have the potential to make viable suggestions about what they might mean. These people have a wealth of experiential knowledge and might even know how to apply his grandfather's deathbed message to real life situations. Even though some of these people offered him personal stories and lessons, the narrator seems never to truly learn. Lacking the community resources, as represented by extended family and story lore, Ellison's narrator eschews the parts of his life, those Afrikan cultural survivals, that might lead to resolving his problem.

The issue is not as simple as the narrator neglecting to use the potential knowledge of the people with whom he interacts. His grandfather's image or spiritual presence repeatedly approaches him over the course of the novel. Unlike Pavlov's dog that could learn the relationship between stimulus and response, Ellison's narrator never accepts his Afrikan identity or an Afrikan worldview that could accommodate a deceased relative in an advisory capacity. His grandfather's presence continues to create fear rather than acceptance, and generates failure instead of success. The grandfather's appearance in dreams could be taken as a warning, especially since they consistently foreshadow some disaster or another. Whether it is the narrator's fear, his rejection of ancestral communion, or simple hardheaded, stubborn, stupidity that discourages and inhibits the requisite cognitive connections to notice the pattern is not significant. What really matters is that Ellison chooses to leave the Afrikan aspects of the narrator unresolved, ineffective, and unsuccessful.

Certainly Ellison's personal rejection of Afrikan, even African American identity is definitive.¹ He rejects the American Negro identity in favor of "American". Yet, he is aware of American Negro cultural expressions and uses them, in the forms of jazz and the blues, magnificently in his work. Perhaps for him, the expressions are just there and have no conscious or unconscious relationship to personal experience. His novel, *Invisible*

Man, has surely earned its acclaim, but it is in no means a definitive text, either of the African American (Negro) or the American experience. It is too tentative and ambiguous. The narrator is not a negative example, because the novel is not self-consciously Afrikan enough to warrant the reader to view the adoption of Afrikan modes as a viable means to achieve transcendence, balance or harmony. *Invisible Man* is lacking from the Afrocentric perspective developed here.

Neither Morrison's nor Bradley's texts are ambiguous or tentative with respect to identity. Their characters grow into acceptance of Afrocentric ideology, or recognition of Afrikan cultural forms and worldviews. The novels are not narrow nationalist polemics where the characters are thinly veiled rhetorical devices. Instead, they treat the characters with sensitivity, as humans with human frailties. John and Milkman are complex individuals with problems in their love lives, careers or vocations, and their immediate family. These two men resolve their internal conflicts in a manner that the narrator in *Invisible Man* is unable to do. The clarity they achieve in their self-concept and worldview helps to bring the external conflicts in their lives into a manageable state. Their fates are by no means determined, but they do not avoid their futures. Wherever the future takes them, their Afrikan centers provide balance in a chaotic world.

TOWARD AFROCENTRICITY

Invisible Man is not an Afrocentric novel according to the guidelines developed in this project. That does not detract from its worth or any sense of quality. There are few works by African Americans in or before its time that deserve the acclaim and recognition *Invisible Man* has received. None provide a comparable multidimensional look at a variety of African American experiences or illuminate African American social and political experiences in the U.S. like *Invisible Man*. However, using it as a social document allows for an analysis to arise that the issues of Afrocentricity did not have much cultural currency either to Ellison, the author or in the society in which it was created. They existed as cultural variables, but expression of them was not viewed as rewarding or desirable. Ellison, via his narrator character, negated the potential for Afrikan survivals to provide opportunities for harmony or balance.

In contrast to *Invisible Man*, *Song of Solomon* and *The Chaneysville Incident* represent a change in the cultural value and expression of Afrocentricity. Both novels were successful in the marketplace, but that is not the sole judge of their success. They explore intricacies of contemporary African American experience. They breach issues of violence, nationalism, or economics as viable political options to accommodation, alliance, or assimilation. They explore interpersonal and intergenerational conflicts. *The Chaneysville Incident* even addresses an interracial love relationship. These two novels do not present definitive statements about these various issues, but they do assert the common theme of Afrocentric dynamics that lead to achieving a sense of harmony and balance. Afrocentricity signals the convergence of the generic or emergent myths Knowledge and Identity that suffuse contemporary African American literature.

AFROCENTRICITY IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

As stated earlier, “The point must be stressed that these three Afrocentric keys are not separate, discreet methodological components. Instead, they are expected to interact, intersect, and combine within the form and structure of the Afrikan author’s individual creative vision.”² The emergence of generic myths, Knowledge and Identity, is likewise subjected to the innovations of individual authors’ creativity. The first chapters in Part II of this project detail the interactions of Afrocentric paradigms within the texts. So far, this chapter has discussed the interactions between the novels. The current section will review and discuss how a sampling of more recent African American novels treats the Afrocentric paradigms. The reviews will be somewhat perfunctory. Each of these novels warrants closer inspection, but space concerns prohibit the kind of analysis given *Invisible Man*, *Song of Solomon*, and *The Chaneysville Incident*. However, even a cursory discussion will yield many insights into the Afrocentric directions taken in much contemporary African American literature

The sample is by no means exhaustive. Given the substantial numbers of Black authors, most will be excluded from this discussion. The list was chosen with variety and diversity in mind. Some of the authors and texts will be immediately recognized. Others may be less popular. Most of the authors have published at least one other novel and also create in other genres. This research looks at two recently published novels, one in 1977, the other in 1981. One older novel, John A. Williams’ *Captain Blackman*, and another written around the same time period, *The Salteaters*, are included. Three additional novels from the eighties (*Montgomery’s Children*, *Mama Day*, and *Temple of My Familiar*,) and four from the nineties (*Middle Passage*, *I Get on the Bus*, *Ugly Ways*, and *Somebody Else’s Mama*) round out the selections.

Toni Morrison is one of the most prolific and productive Black authors on the scene today. A series of her novels, one earlier and two later, will be analyzed as an overview to the discussion of the others. No other works by either Ellison or Bradley will be represented in this review. *Invisible Man* was Ellison’s only novel. Bradley’s first, and only other novel, *South Street* lacks Chaneysville’s power and range. Morrison’s *Sula*, *Tar Baby*, and *Beloved*, published across a span of fourteen years, unmistakably signal Morrison’s unique style. Her works are deeply symbolic. The violence in her novels is not gratuitous, but underlies the protagonists’ major conflicts. In her novels, the motif of death, or of the dead, help create an spiritual backdrop that exerts an affective pressure in her characters’ lives. Her novels feature closed, isolated communities. Yet, there is a sense of mobility because someone escapes, comes back, or passes through various communities. In most cases, these communities connote extended families, but the characters also have nuclear families or close kin nearby. These novels are largely oral—people interact with each other. The people she creates have secrets and inner turmoil, pains they share with each other, and pain they cannot.

Sula features a community dominated by strong women. Sula, Hannah, and Eva are daughter, mother and grandmother in the Peace clan. The Peace household, though not at all peaceful, is the epitome of an extended family. The Dewey’s, three young males, are “common-law adopted” into the family, and given the same name because they act the same and fit the same category as rejects from more “normal” circumstances. Likewise, a

local drunk and expatriate from the White community, Tar Baby, is brought into the extended family. Though first known as Pretty Johnnie, Eva changes his name to spite his “milky skin and silky hair.” Tar Baby is also significant as one of the most well-known of the Brer Rabbit stories. Eva’s husband’s name is BoyBoy, and their son, Ralph is called Plum. Even their community, The Bottom, high up in the rocky hills, is named for a reason. Local lore has it that upon emancipating a slave, the ex-master tricks him into taking the worthless land, by saying “that is bottom land...the bottom of heaven.” The oral tradition, stories, lies, and naming all play a major part in *Sula*. Morrison leaves perception of truth to the reader who often must sift through a variety of stories to determine what they feel is most likely. An example is that Eva Peace loses a leg for some reason, but Morrison never clarifies the real cause of her disability.

The novel is set in a close community, a community that becomes closer because of its pariah, Sula. As is characteristic of many small towns, everyone knows everyone else’s business. Though the oral tradition plays no major part in bringing about harmony or balance, it is omnipresent as the grapevine carries news and gossip. Nel is Sula’s friend, perhaps her only real friend. Helene Wright is Nel’s mother. Shadrack is the town drunk, originator of National Suicide Day, celebrated yearly on January 3. On that day in 1941, he leads a parade of townspeople through a tunnel that caves in, killing many. Though catastrophic because of the large numbers of people involved, this scene is not the most significant violence contained in the novel. Nel and Sula, childhood friends, once threw a little boy into a river where he drowned. This escapade binds the girls more tightly than any other single experience and is traumatic to Nel when she learns that Shadrack witnessed the murder. Identity issues figure prominently in *Sula*. Nel defines herself by the others in her life: she is Sula’s friend; she is Helene’s daughter, made to pull her nose into more Anglicized features; she is Jude’s wife. Yet Nel rejects this in herself, “I am me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me” (*Sula* 28).

Sula leads a wild and promiscuous life. She is blamed for many of the town’s hardships, but her death precedes the cave-in. She slept with Nel’s husband. Nel never forgives her and blames Sula for the break-up of her marriage. The central conflict of Nel’s dissatisfaction with her life is not truly resolved, but she does come to realize that it is her friend Sula she misses, rather than her husband. The catalyst for this revelation is Eva Peace’s funeral. On her deathbed, Eva Peace had spoken to Nel of the drowning and claimed she heard it from her dead son—whom she had burned. Nel is in a reflective mood and reads the names and dates on the tombstones. Though she had known so much death, it finally came to her at the gravesite, “They were not dead people. They were words. Not even words. Wishes, longings”(Sula 171). After leaving the funeral, Nel realizes the nature of her loss, and communes with her long-dead friend, “We was girls together.... O Lord, Sula...girl, girl, girlgirlgirl” (*Sula* 174). Though Nel does not commune with an ancestor, she reconnects with the spirit of her deceased friend, her sister.

Morrison’s *Tar Baby* is dominated by an extended family that includes the Streets, Valerian and Margaret. This White couple lives on an island in the Caribbean and employs Ondine and Sydney Childs, a Black couple. More than employees, the Childs are live-in help, reminiscent of slavery’s paternalistic institutions. The Childs’ orphaned niece, Jadine, is like a daughter to the Streets who pay for her private elite education. Their quiet world changes forever when Son jumps ship and ends up living with them.

Son is the antithesis of the lifestyle that Jade and the Streets embrace. He and Jade fall in love. The secret of Margaret abusing her only child comes out. Jade and Son leave the island. They live in New York, visit his people in Eloë, Florida. Son must return home to his extended family and commune with his ancestors. But this is not Jade's home, and they fall out and break up. Jade returns to the island, only to then leave for Paris. Son comes back looking for her, finds her gone, and leaves to catch her. He travels in a small boat guided by a legally blind island woman, Therese.

Jade's assimilationist tendencies and lack of Black female identity cause Therese to believe that she, "has forgotten her ancient properties" (*Tar Baby* 305). One of the novel's most celebrated and memorable images is Jade in a market, confronted by an archetypal, African beauty in a yellow dress who spits at her. This event brings her down from her self-satisfied high and causes her to question her own beauty and her identity. Her own beauty, alluring in a camera lens, has difficulty competing with market women or ex-lovers with "the best pussy in Florida." Lacking a mother, and raised as much by private schools as by her aunt and uncle, it is important for her to find a place among the women in her heritage.³

Like *Sula*, there is no real resolution of conflict in *Tar Baby*. It is an open-ended love story about two people whose search for their identity and purpose in life is tied up in loving the other. Yet, the cultural elements stand out. The women who visit Jade in the night exemplify an African framing of the supernatural. The spirit world of Isle Des Chevaliers, with its hundred horsemen and swamp women is an African legend and example of the naming tradition. The names and other namings, and the identities they imply are both extended family and oral tradition: Son, a grown man, son of Old Man; Yardman to Whites, Gideon to Blacks; Mary to Whites, Alma and Therese to Blacks. Son, who is so different than Jadine and the Streets, actually takes the time to listen to people's stories and learns who they are. Sydney and Ondine, who originally doubted Son's integrity eventually accept him and feel that he, though materially poor, has much to offer their niece. Stories, told, untold, and finally told, undergird *Tar Baby's* plot. This novel intricately interweaves Afrikan survivals and tells an enduring love story.

Beloved is already a classic African American novel. All of the Afrocentric elements are there. The legends of Sweet Home and its extended family of slaves, including Sixo, the African, Sethe, and Paul D. who came back to be a part of another extended family—Sethe's. The spiritual family of Baby Suggs, her woodland church, and the community that eventually readopted Denver, also fits the pattern. Most directly, though, the supernatural presence of *Beloved* herself reflects an Afrocentric marker. *Beloved*, a dead infant, returns to commune with her ancestors, her sister and mother. This "ghost", a spirit presence in the flesh, provides the background medium that allows the accumulated stories of Sethe's and Paul D.'s last eighteen years to come out. By the end of the novel, the problem of *Beloved* is removed, but Sethe and Paul D. still "...need some kind of tomorrow" (*Beloved* 273)

Morrison's novels display a broad range of Afrocentric markers. Her individual creative flair sets her works in communities, interweaving extended family dynamics and oral traditions. Her work is often self-consciously Afrikan, where her characters embrace their Africanness, their stories, and their ancestors. Sixo is an African, and his child will be "Seven-O." Sweet Home, the Pauls, Denver, and *Beloved* all exhibit the naming pattern of the oral tradition. Paul D. learns of Sethe's history via word of mouth, and his

story about Halle, the collar and the clabber help to illuminate the reason's for the failed rendezvous between Setthe and Halle. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison problematizes Jade's lack of "ancient properties." While undeniably a function of expected gender roles where a female is supposed to be a nurturer, that Jade rejects, there is also a focus on community and especially the extended family. *Song of Solomon* and *Sula*, in different ways, feature characters who discover an African spirituality and worldview. Morrison's impressive works exhibit a unique style, but the Afrocentric markers she uses so well are also notable in works by other contemporary African American authors.

Abraham Blackman is a war hero in John A. Williams' *Captain Blackman*. He is injured in the Vietnam War and falls in and out of consciousness. While not on missions with his troops, Blackman has initiated a school, similar to the night schools of slavery, where he teaches prohibited knowledge to Black soldiers. He teaches them about the long generations of Black men who have fought and died for the United States. He dreams, or relives as himself, various other soldiers' experiences in the many wars in which the U.S. has participated. While going back through time, Blackman does not exactly commune with ancestors in the strict sense of the word. Yet, possessing such a symbolic name, Blackman is descended from every one of the Africans who fought for the U.S. over the centuries. His extended family is his troops and fellow soldiers, along with the host of unsung Black soldiers. Balance and harmony are achieved at the end of the novel when, this time battling in the future, *Captain* Blackman defeats his nemesis, *General* Whittman. This final conflict is mostly tactical. Blackman takes over the U.S. military and its nuclear arsenal. Harmony is literal in the novel's last lines, mockingly sung by the pilot in a commandeered jet, "All de world am sad and dreary, ebrywhere I roam, oh darkies, how my heart grobes weary..." (*Blackman* 336).

When Velma Henry, the protagonist in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salteaters*, has a mental breakdown and attempts suicide, she is brought before Minnie Ransom. Minnie is the local healer, called on by the owner of the public mental health clinic for difficult cases. The healing session is attended by some observers from the medical profession who desire to learn from this "alternative" approach, and a spiritual support group of twelve that includes M'Dear Sophie, Velma's godmother. Velma is also a member of the performing arts group, The Seven Sisters. Her husband, James, is also called Obie, short for Obeah.⁴ The action takes place over a period of two hours, but most of the novel consists of flashbacks in Velma's mind and narrative details about what is happening with the audience, others in attendance, and significant members of Velma's extended family.

Minnie is supported by the twelve, but her own spirit Guide, Old Wife, also participates in the mental/spiritual place where Minnie and Velma attempt to re-center Velma. Fred Holt, the bus driver, and Sophie, her godmother, are in deep reverie about lost kin at the same time that Velma is healing with Minnie. Various other people come in and out of the story, but the central theme is growth, progress and mental health in the community as a whole. Velma is gifted with the same power as Minnie and part of her healing process is for her to come to accept the responsibility that comes with the gift.

This novel is self-consciously Afrikan. The spiritual world of healing and loas, the drumworld of dream-eye speak directly to an African cosmology. The onlookers are divided into believers and non-believers. The unbelieving Blacks are targeted for faulty conditioning at the hands of a Western society rooted in rationalism. Even Velma's dual

belief system is noted. She will fight the knowledge that cannot be documented or subjected to figures and digits. When Velma is healed, she understands how to *read* the drumbeats, but does not know how she knows. Her healing process is literally felt by others in the community. Some think it is an earthquake, others an omen for a number to play. Velma senses her own spirit guides, Minnie, Old Wife, and Sophie. Even more so than the spiritual dimension of the novel, the text itself is a picture of community and extended family. Believers and non-believers are part of the community, and Velma's story and fate are also theirs. The oral tradition is extant in the call and response banter of signifying, the ranking and the stories the people tell about one another, and the underlying musical motif of music, song and dance. The imagery, themes and plot all suggest its Afrocentric nature.

Norman, the main character in Richard Perry's *Montgomery's Children*, hears voices, and also talks with animals. The voices represent ancestral wisdom that he has to pass down to an heir from the local community. Norman has the potential to be the community healer, like Bambara's Minnie Ransom, but the knowledge is not to be used actively, only preserved and passed on. "Norman was aware that he was descended from African people..." (*Montgomery's* 32). "Ain't no reason to be scared, Gerald. Death ain't dying. It's just a passing stage. I'm here to tell you" (*Montgomery's* 107), Norman tells Gerald. He then goes on to state, "In the olden days...colored people used to fly" (*Montgomery's* 108). These quotes alone attest to the novel's self-conscious African identity. The Black people in Montgomery do not die. That is, not until the old knowledge is forgotten and Norman fails in his job by not choosing the right heir. In a scene similar to Nel visiting the Peace's gravesites in *Sula*, Gerald goes to the cemetery to commune with a deceased friend, Iceman. This session helps him to fit the pieces of his life together and prepare him to seek harmony and become Norman's healing conduit. Norman has one last chance to correct his mistake and tell the renewed Gerald about his African legacy, but again, he makes the wrong choice and sends Gerald away. Norman attempts to perform his lifelong goal, to fly. After taking off, he fails again and falls to his death.

Montgomery's Children has no happy ending. But its message is clear: forget your ancient properties, and die, or remember and know them, and you will fly away living forever. Perry combines the myth of the flying Africans with a worldview of spirits and a unity of mind, body and nature in a stimulating and thought-provoking novel. He takes the same folktale of the Flying Africans that Morrison uses in *Song of Solomon* and builds a similar myth and moral. Belief and action in harmony with the surrounding environment are the keys to eternity. To not know and to not believe are the bane of African people in a Western society. Gerald and Josephine suffer from a lack of knowledge about their pasts. Too late, they learn the necessity of trying to live in harmony. Like Ellison's narrator, Norman and his whole community suffer because of their inability to use human resources wisely.

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* uses a doubtful protagonist with a negative fate to demonstrate the viability of Afrikan knowledge and belief. Mama Day (Miranda) is the community's healer and herb woman. Her extended family consists of her sister, Abigail, and her granddaughter Cocoa. They own Willow Springs, an island off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina where their family has lived, died, and been buried for generations. Their ancestors are the subjects of local legends. The legends tell of people who love strongly and cannot leave the place where they knew their lovers, like Ryna in

Song of Solomon. Cocoa marries a city boy, George, who, after five years of marriage finally comes to visit the island. An old nemesis works roots on Cocoa, who could waste away to death. Meanwhile a hurricane has demolished the bridge to the mainland, effectively stranding George and Cocoa on the island, blocking their access to modern physicians and medical facilities. George's love can save Cocoa but he has only two options: follow Mama Day's advice, based in herblore and spiritual healing, or stick by her side and will her to live. The problem is that he does not believe in the efficacy of Mama Day's knowledge, and, though Cocoa's life can be bought with his love, the price is his own life in exchange. George is told the solution that will save them both, but his disbelief prevents him from taking it. Like Ellison's narrator, his rootedness in Western culture prohibits him from making the cognitive leaps that can lead to more successful actions. Cocoa lives and George dies.

Few books demonstrate the African worldview in as direct a manner as *Mama Day*. Naylor crafts her mental, physical, and spiritual landscapes with an almost unparalleled intensity and depth. Their enslaved African ancestors are kept alive in the island's oral lore and naming practices. The people are the living repositories of their history. Everyone on the island knows Mama Day's personal strength, as well as her skills and powers as a conjurer. She is the spiritual center of the community. Only George doubts her knowledge and its effects on their lives. George's valiant foolishness results in his death. For George, no harmony or balance is possible between his Western ways and the traditional African world of Willow Springs.

Alice Walker's masterpiece *Temple of My Familiar* fits the Afrocentric markers as well as the emerging generic myths. Perhaps more than any novel reviewed, or written, this text explores the intricacies of many people finding their identities in conjunction and with the help of others. Walker's complex narrative is actually a series of people's stories interwoven in a multicultural tapestry. Suwelo, Little Louis before changing his name, goes east to his Uncle Rafe's house. His uncle's long-time friends, Hal and Lissie, who actually formed the nucleus of an extended family with Rafe, befriend and adopt the younger Suwelo. They teach him about life, in general, their lives in particular. In the process, Suwelo discovers who he really is. Arveyda, a musician of Native American ancestry, first falls in love with Carlotta who has his child, and then has an affair with Zede, her mother.

The Temple of My Familiar's narrative power is diffuse and dispersed across many characters and many storylines. Fanny, Suwelo's lover and ex-wife, unites the strands of the narrative. She does massage, and Carlotta is one of her clients, and also one of Suwelo's ex-lovers. Fanny is directly connected to Africa by her parents who are Olinka.⁵ The older women, Zede and Miss Lissie, provide the spiritual foundation and the bulk of the oral histories which flow throughout the narrative. Arveyda gives others happiness by touching their spirits with his music. Zede helps him to return to his roots and move deeper into himself. His two lovers prepare him for Fanny. When he and Fanny meet and eventually make love, "Arveyda feels as if he has rushed to meet all the ancestors and they have welcomed him with joy" (*Temple* 408).

Miss Lissie, whose spirit was complemented by Rafe, epitomizes the idea of ancestral communion: she is all her ancestors. Miss Lissie can follow her ancestral line back to when animals and people communicated. She remembers being in the trees and being the first White person. She remembers being a lion, one of her favorite incarnations. "For I

was a lion. To whom harmony, above everything, is sacred" (*Temple* 367). Suwelo, who sees his uncle's life from the papers he left, does not really *know* his uncle until Lissie and Hal share their memories, and lives, with him. Walker further stresses the oral tradition in that Miss Lissie leaves a tape for both Suwelo and Hal to listen to her final message for them. In it she explains her various selves and a philosophy that unites mind, body, nature, and every human into one large organism of extended kinship. Suwelo, in learning to know the three older people, his immediate ancestors in the extended family, learns his own identity in conjunction with others he knows and loves. His relationships with Fanny and Carlotta, even without his being around them, begin to undergo changes, as he evolves from a self-centered man into a more sensitive human being.

A similar theme of personal evolution into a better human being guides Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*. Rutherford Calhoun, the protagonist, escapes an ill-fated romance and gambling debts by stowing away aboard a ship he later learns is a slaver. After he is discovered, Calhoun, a free Black man, is allowed to join the crew. They reach the African coast where they take on an unusual cargo, an ancient tribe, the Allmuseri, and a large cage containing their God. Members of the crew plot mutiny against an insane captain. When Calhoun is forced into the God's presence during a storm that also will act as cover for the mutiny, he goes crazy. Meanwhile the ship is breaking apart. After the shipwreck, Calhoun is rescued by Zeringue, the scoundrel who holds his gambling debts. He is eventually re-united with the woman he jilted, but now he is ready and able to return her monogamous love.

The novel makes little use of an extended family, except that sailors, like soldiers, by necessity form a quasifamilial bond. The novel's message about personal and communal identity comes out in one climactic scene. Rather than taking an oral form of transmission, the crucial knowledge is delivered in a direct spiritual connection with the Allmuseri's God. When Calhoun sees it, the God takes the form of his long-lost father, whom Calhoun hates for running away and deserting the family. In a direct ancestral communion, the God shows Calhoun his father's life of degradation, powerlessness, and despair. When he runs away to find freedom and dignity, Calhoun's father is caught by patrollers and killed. This event, seeing God and communing with his father, weakens Calhoun's body, turns his hair white, and loosens Calhoun's hold on sanity, as well as tempering the hate that has fueled his antisocial behaviors. Afterwards, he is literally a new man, physically and emotionally.

Reginald McKnight's *I Get On the Bus* displays the common plotline of the unbeliever who meets a negative fate because he refuses to believe, even in the face of overwhelming evidence. Like George in *Mama Day*, Evan Norris does not accept the truth of the herbal medicines, spirits, spells, and the alternate realities he experiences. The Afrikan survivals in this novel are clearly self-conscious. Evan has left the U.S. for the Peace Corps in Senegal. He discusses his identity issues with his girlfriend Wanda, his mother, and his father. Yet the idea of an extended family evades the reader. Similar to Ellison's narrator, Evan clearly does not seem to belong in any of the various locations he occupies over the course of the novel. Neither does he get along with anyone for too long. He is an African American returned "home" to Africa, but Evan Norris has no appreciation for anything African. He whines and complains to almost all the characters in the story about the things he does not understand or like. Most people recognize his character faults and try to help Evan mature and progress along developmental lines

similar to Cross' or Thomas' theories. Yet, he rarely takes their advice. No sense of balance or harmony is achieved. By the end of the novel, Evan has succumbed to the forces he does not understand.

Tina McElroy Ansa's *Ugly Ways* puts a unique twist on the idea of ancestral communion. Three sisters return to their hometown to attend their mother's funeral and burial. What the women, Annie Ruth, Betty, and Emily do not realize is that Mudear is still with them in spirit. She was a difficult person while living and her daughters suffered from her acid tongue and heavy-handed domineering ways. Mudear's spirit is no less negative, though dead. She lacks the corporal presence to effect her wishes, but Ansa outlines her personality with clarity, wit, and even humor. The lack of harmony and balance in the household is hardly funny. Mudear's ugly ways have scarred her daughters, and their return home is traumatic. As they prepare for the funeral, the pregnant Annie Ruth decides to go the funeral home to confront her mother and tell her off at last. The other sisters intend to stop her and follow in another car only a few minutes behind.

Though *Chaneyville Incident*, *Montgomery's Children*, and *Sula* feature funeral or cemetery scenes, nothing in those texts prepares one for the image of three grown women fighting in the funeral home in front of their mother in her casket. They overturn the casket and their mother ends up in their laps on the floor. Annie Ruth takes advantage of her proximity and begins to tell her things she could not say while her mother was alive. The other two sisters join in the cathartic moment and tell Mudear what a poor mother she was to them. The novel ends as Mudear surveys the people who have come to her funeral to pay their last respects. She gives notice that she will remain a presence in her children and grandchild's lives. Just because she is dead and told off does not mean she is gone. This novel is told from the perspective of a deceased woman, Mudear. Her legacy to her children is one of antipathy and neglect. Her children finally gain the self respect and self-confidence to confront her in her casket. This story reflects an Afrikan spirituality by the fact of mothers and daughters remaining in communion in spite of the mother having passed on.

David Haynes' *Somebody Else's Mama* revolves around the living. Miss Kezee is Paula's mother-in-law. She is just as evil as Mudear and recovering from an extended illness. Her son, Paula's husband, Al, is running for mayor of their small town. He becomes even more distracted and insensitive than usual, leaving the running of the house and care for his mother to Paula. Paula is going through a guilt trip because she lived in another area and did not go back to take care of her own mother before she died. But Miss Kezee does not make anything easy on Paula, or anyone else. Miss Kezee is a master of invective and spares no one her acid tongue. This novel does not hinge on any oral traditions beyond signifying and invective. The extended family is evident in the relationship between Miss Kezee and Paula. Though the two never approach a peaceful coexistence, Paula achieves harmony by learning to grin, bear it, and care for somebody else's mama.

THE SOULFIELD OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVELS

The novels reviewed in this chapter all demonstrate some form of self-conscious Afrocentricity, though they exemplify Afrikan survivals to varying degrees. The clearest pattern is the emergence of ancestral legacy and communion as the means by which the characters resolve conflict or achieve a sense of harmony and/or balance in their lives. The individual artist's creative vision expresses itself in diverse ways. Sometimes the ancestor is living and present. Most of the time they have passed on. Often the authors present alternatives to Western scientific rationalism by imbuing their worlds with spiritual consciousnesses that acknowledge herbal or shamanistic healing practices. Not all are believers, but those who doubt and do not act in line with the Afrikan cosmos suffer dearly and die like George or Evan. Characters like Perry's Norman can make fateful mistakes in judgement, even when they believe.

Death is a central character or part of the setting in many of these novels. The scenes in cemeteries are natural because the dead can be found there. Funerals denote the rituals whereby the dead are honored. Yet African American literature takes the dead into other walks of life, and more importantly, into significant cognitive and conceptual spaces. Ancestors may have passed on, but they still live in the minds of their extended families, progeny, and loved ones. More than just memories, ancestors are presented as having conscious wills and as having the power to affect and influence the lives of the living.

People in these contemporary African American novels are social beings. More than mere interactions with others, their lifestyles incorporate close-knit kinship or extended family dynamics. Such relationships do not simply exist in idyllic bliss. Often the central conflict involves the protagonist coming into a state of harmony or balance with the broader community that the extended family represents. Though a conflict may be between lovers, the stories are rarely so simple as "and they lived happily ever after." One of the antagonists in *Middle Passage*, Zeringue, participates in the slave trade. His fate is left in the hands of one of his henchmen, an exslave. Morrison leaves the fate of Son and Jade up in the air, likewise with Bradley's John and Judith. Guitar and Milkman are awaiting resolution of their conflict. The various characters in *Temple of My Familiar* become better people, but their fates are not clear.

Novels are ultimately stories in written form. The oral nature of these stories takes many shapes, but always transcending mere storytelling and/or dialogue. More than a style of communication, orality denotes a storehouse of knowledge unavailable in any other form. The authors of many contemporary African American novels engage the novel form to elaborate on the theme of the importance and relevance of the oral tradition even when subsumed in a more technological society. Names and naming practices assume a characteristic Afrikan flavor in many African American novels. The significance of names often links issues of identity with place and the stories that make names more than mere labels.

Miss Lissie remembers Africa, her lives as a lion or a primate in the trees at the beginnings of human time. Evan retreats from the U.S. on a hiatus to Senegal. Willow Springs in the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands is and has been a corner of Africa

in the New World. Richard Perry and Toni Morrison use the folktale about the Flying Africans around which to build a novel. David Bradley lectures about African worldview and history. Rutherford Calhoun takes a ship back to Africa and returns with a God. These authors self-consciously designed Africa into their texts. All the texts demonstrate some form of ethnic or national identity. The cultural manifestations like orality or spirituality, and death concepts guide the characters' behavior patterns. Whether it is Captain Blackman who saves the world from America's nuclear nightmare, Mudear who will continue to get into her children's business even after the grave, or the many characters that remember and consort with ancestors, contemporary African American novels make substantial use of Africa and its cultural imperatives as a creative foundation.

CHAPTER 9

Conclusion

The previous chapter demonstrates the application of an Afrocentric critical theory that uses Afrikan survivals in the analysis of the focal novels and a sample of other contemporary African American texts. As a genre of expression, the Black novel has not been a static entity. Its development continues and expands, revising both Western canonical texts and African American literary patterns. The contemporary African American novel crosses old boundaries, creates new opportunities for creative expression and merges diverse cultural heritages. This research documents and explicates one of the stages, emergent myths, and proposes a methodology for explicating the Afrocentric nature of recent texts. As Cross and Thomas suggest about the psychology of the Black personality, and as Gates proposes about the development of Black critical perspectives, the thematic content in Black writing also undergoes developmental change.

This Afrocentric theory analyzes the thematic content of what the novels say and also how the authors choose to deliver their messages. In addition to the Afrocentric analysis, in this conclusion, the texts will be subjected to a critical approach that continues a line of thought initiated by Robert Stepto and expanded in Part I of this document/project. Stepto's constructs, pregeneric myths of Freedom and Literacy, have developed over a historical period and now are revised to emergent myths of Identity and Knowledge. The movement of Freedom to Identity and Literacy to Knowledge is germane to an Afrocentric analysis, but also has the potential to stand on its own as a critical lens. The Afrikan identity that emerges in contemporary African American literature comes from a people who are continuing to throw off some of the mental shackles of three hundred years of slavery. Their Afrikan selves often coexist with a Westernized cultural perspective and experience. This perspective is altered by the recovery and reconstruction of Afrikan history, cultural artifacts, and the cultural and philosophical awareness undertaken by scholars and non-academics.¹

The novels will be reviewed briefly in an effort to suggest future research applications of an Afrocentric critical theory. As society, especially its intellectual and academic appendages, embraces multiculturalism more often and more vigorously, Afrocentric analysis becomes a part of the larger arenas of American or Cultural Studies. This research illuminates American cultural realities and cultural expressions within the larger milieu of cultural pluralism. The changes in social structures, identity formation, and communication patterns wrought by urbanization, the technological revolution, integration, and cultural cross-fertilization warrants attention from many disciplinary viewpoints. The field of literary criticism benefits from historically situating texts and attempting to correlate political and social movements with paradigms of cultural expression.

Cultural amalgamation includes a significant amount of assimilation balanced by a resistant ethnic pride. The heritage of the United States' democratic society is one of consistent dissatisfaction with the status quo by many of its members, especially those

deemed to have minority status. Social freedoms and upward mobility have not been enough. Immigrant groups have arrived in the U.S. and many members have found the American dream inadequate as an identity structure. As assimilation into the melting pot or salad bowl of U.S. society proceeds, many people reach back to retain and/or maintain ethnic cultural expressions. Octoberfest, Saint Patrick's Day, Cinco de Mayo, Chinese New Year, and Kwanzaa are among the secular holidays celebrated in the U.S. that keep a specific ethnic heritage strong, yet also expose a part of a cultural heritage to a larger multicultural group. Of course, many non-secular holidays also preserve ethnic roots and traditions. Like the popular holidays Kwanzaa or Juneteenth, contemporary African American literature often contains elements of one subculture's efforts to reclaim or retain a lost heritage.

TOWARD IDENTITY AND KNOWLEDGE

Ellison begins to address the generic myths of knowledge and identity that are so central to an Afrocentric exegesis. He expands beyond the frame of freedom and literacy. His narrator wants, needs, specific and usable knowledge of how to be free, how to accomplish his goals in spite of the obstacles of White dominated society. A passage in the Epilogue discusses the real meaning of his grandfather's words, to affirm the principles on which the country was built, but not to affirm the men who have exploited those principles.² The many questions the narrator poses in both the Prologue and Epilogue point to his need for knowledge. His search for an identity is intimately linked to the need for knowledge, in the same manner that freedom is connected with literacy in earlier Black literature.

At the end of the novel, Ellison's character is still searching for the knowledge and the identity that will complete him. The narrator has not resolved the conflict with his grandfather or moved into a sense of harmony or balance within the narrow band of his subculture or with the broader society in general. He is literate, as well as articulate. However, he lacks the knowledge to cope in a society that pulls him in multiple directions. His identity is never stable enough to say, "This is me. This is who I am." The one attempt he makes to assert a personal identity results in him biting into a rotten yam. When he says, "I yam what I yam," he learns a galling lesson. The glory of reminiscence recollection and reclamation of lost or forgotten cultural background demands retribution. If indeed one is able to go back home again, the sweetness of memory is a bitter pill to swallow.

John Washington and Milkman also learn of the problems associated with going home again. For John, his return signals the reopening of old wounds. He seeks to know what his father did in his attic and why he died in an untimely manner. His friend, Old Jack, dies the night after he comes back. Jack's memories of and stories about John's father, shared in his and John's last hours together, are keys to understanding Moses Washington. The door opens, like a Chinese box, onto another ancestral conundrum, C.K. Washington. C.K.'s legacy, a disappearing act, pushes John to the limits of his reasoning ability. Ellison's narrator says, "Step outside of the borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos—ask Rinehart, he's a master of it—or imagination" (*Invisible* 498). When a reasonable and rational approach to the reality of C.K. and Moses' decisions

fails, John steps into imagination and there finds his source of harmony and balance. The legend of the twelve runaways is no longer just a myth, it assumes the proportions of Truth. John finally knows what happened to his ancestors. His knowledge allows John to step beyond their lives, into one of his own with Judith. C.K. and Moses are not “dead”: wherever they are, they will be there waiting for him when he gets there.

Milkman also uncovers an ancestral legacy. He starts back to Virginia to find long lost family gold. There is no gold, but the stories about his ancestors create questions. He finds the answers he seeks, and knows himself to be one of “those flying Africans” of Solomon’s tribe. Milkman also learns what it is to be a part of a larger humanity and becomes sensitive to the needs and realities of others. Milkman must still deal with Guitar, who desires to kill him. The ending of Morrison’s novel is ambiguous, but Milkman’s conversion is not. At last, he knows who he is and where he comes from. Even if Guitar kills him, Milkman is ready to fly back to Africa.

Morrison’s and Bradley’s self-conscious use of Afrikan worldviews frame their characters’ identities. This self-consciousness is significant from Asante’s critical perspective. All three of the markers are evinced in the texts: how one views him/her self, how one views others; and how one views the supernatural. In particular, the cognizance of Africa as a cultural and ethnic locus of origin symbolizes the manifestation of social and political changes. Seeing themselves as Africans facilitates the characters’ personal growth and well-being, rather than being a source of shame. Their character’s positions in relationships with others whose shared knowledge actualizes their transcendence pushes the Afrocentric goals of harmony and balance rather than individuality and control.

Ellison has no comparable end in mind, or at least achieves no similar transcendence. His story is about a man out of touch with himself. The other novels are about men who get in touch with themselves. Ellison’s narrator is unsuccessful in political, as well as social life. His actions result in fights, explosions, riots, and other forms of civil unrest. Ellison’s narrator seems to bring violence and chaos to the people he tries to help. His desire to be an educator or Bledsoe’s assistant fails when he is kicked out of school. His attempts at community leadership and activism within the Brotherhood fail when he realizes he has been their pawn. Analysis from an Afrocentric perspective does not merely note his failure to achieve those goals, it also must question why he pursues those goals rather than alternatives.

In addition to the characters’ personal achievements, Bradley and Morrison create individuals who exhibit a level of successful community activism and engagement. C.K. Washington died trying to save twelve runaway slaves. Moses Washington, before he died, set up trusts that provided for rent control for the Hill’s Black residents. Pilate is active and respected as a healer in her community. The Washingtons and Pilate appear to get results. Guitar and the Seven Days, whose methodology can be questioned on moral grounds, nevertheless pursue the laudable goal of retribution for the senseless deaths of Black people. Even Milkman finds it in himself to help the hunting party catch and skin a bobcat, as well as help a stranger load a heavy box on a truck. Men and women love in these novels. The people they love are not always the ones who love them back, and not always those who love them do so in a positive manner, but the characters exhibit genuine affection, affinity, or even lust. Some characters have ambition, while others may hold guilt, hate, or bitterness. The characters express a broader range of human experience than merely seeking after freedom or literacy. In a final analysis, literacy and

freedom, also knowledge and identity, are but steps on the road toward fulfilling human potential.

The journey will not end with identity. The human being is not so easily satisfied. Given the range of potential afforded in the U.S. democratic meritocracy, many goals remain for African Americans to attempt and achieve. In spite of, or perhaps because of, this society's institutional shortcomings and the obstacles created by Status Crow, African American authors are inspired to keep pushing for liberation and equality. Such agitation and documentation does not contradict the progress made along a wide spectrum of opportunities that is also evident in the literature. African American novelists will reflect a wider experience and new myths beyond knowledge and identity will evolve. More individual voices and individuality will become apparent as the Black middle class expands and their experiences add new patterns to the fabric of U.S. society.

Already movements toward new myths can be suggested. Oppression and discrimination remain an ugly blight on the U.S. socioeconomic and political landscape. The emergent myth of Identity, a people knowing who they are, could be replaced by a new social configuration. As a need for knowledge wanes and the public increasingly recognizes Afrocentricity as a viable cultural option, Acceptance and Power may become common thematic paradigms. Acceptance acknowledges that American individuals and institutions are increasingly more comfortable with its citizens of African descent sharing its prosperity. Power pushes the concept of Black peoples' participation in American institutions to a fruitful harvest. Acceptance extends the idea of an Afrikan self or group identity to a larger arena beyond the notion of simple tolerance or a convenient demographic label. It may be possible, at last, if only in African Americans' literature, for us to "... be both African and American."³

Notes

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. Gender is not a direct issue in this study. Certainly the novels by the males, Bradley and Ellison, can be legitimately criticized as being problematic from a gendered or feminist perspective. Yet the point of focusing on male protagonists is not to excuse the authors for their presentations, but to facilitate comparisons. Karla Holloway's insightful *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992) analyzes literature by African and African American female authors with respect to ancestral presences. Her study essentially excludes male authors and their creative works from analysis. My study will demonstrate how their works can and do fit into some of the dynamics she proposes. My goal is not to challenge Holloway—because I do believe that there are significant distinctions between the literature by Black males and Black females—but to show that there are also some things in common, and those things spring from a developing African consciousness in African American populations.
2. Gerald Early, *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation*, (New York: the Penguin Press, 1993).
3. Marimba Ani's definition of political is also relevant to this discussion, partly because she uses it in her definition of nationalism. Political behavior is that which “issues from an awareness of group definition as distinct from other groups. We think politically when we assess our group interest in relation to the interests of other groups and determine whether those interests are compatible with or in opposition to ours. We act politically when our behavior and strategies reflect those assessments. *Cultural identification and ideological commitment are bases for political consciousness.*” [italics added] Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African-centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1988), 6. Politics, in Ani's definition, is also significant in that it links cultural identity to manifest group behavior. For the purposes of this study, her definition is further support of the idea that group identity will be reflected in behavior. It helps us to understand that the national consciousness and awareness of Africa by African Americans during the sixties should be reflected in cultural expressions like novels. It is important that the reader know that Ani does not argue from a linear logical model: she believes in the interrelatedness of ideas. She is not suggesting a cause and effect relationship between culture, identity and behavior. Rather they are linked in a closed chain, each reinforcing the other. African survivals were already a part of the African American experience, yet the consciousness-raising of the sixties made their expression more acceptable, as well as more direct and less subtle. This study looks at some of those previously ignored, inhibited or subdued cultural manifestations as they came to be celebrated in more contemporary Black literature.
4. Though often excused for being creatures of their times, nineteenth century intellectuals like de Tocqueville and Jefferson invested significant effort in understanding democracy. However, their results failed to include “the negro” as worthy of inclusion in the democratic family of man. This is seen in Jefferson's hypocritical ownership of slaves and de Tocqueville's infamous chapter 10 of *Democracy in America*, Trans. George Lawrence, Ed., J.P.Mayer, (New York: Anchor Books, 1969).

5. Though Du Bois does not use the term “neoslavery,” his *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880*, (New York: Anthenum, 1971) details the hopes of Emancipation and the Freedmen’s Bureau’s efforts on the ex-slaves’ behalf. The last two chapters, entitled “Back Toward Slavery” and “The Propaganda of History” indicate the reversals of many of the socioeconomic and political gains by Blacks during the reconstruction era.
6. This accounts for the ambivalent “lure and loathing” in Early’s title. White American Eurocentric culture, in particular the elements of or leading to socioeconomic prosperity both real and imagined, has been a consistent lure to African Americans to reject Africanness and embrace “the American dream,” in other words, to assimilate. This is Eric Lincoln’s “push of powerlessness or...pull of privilege” (206). Conversely, there is a loathing or self-hatred implied in a conscious or unconscious rejection of self. Again, Lincoln says, “Self-loathing is a counterfunctional to survival and to the will to survive. It must therefore be considered abhorrent to any natural human disposition...a learned response, a dysfunctional contaminant...et the metaphor cuts both ways, especially in contemporary society. There is a lure to Blackness—either in the creation of a cultural comfort zone, or (as in Shelby Steele’s conceptualization) to allow Blackness to become a crutch, absolving one from the responsibilities and stresses of direct confrontations with an indifferent, ambiguous, or hostile mainstream controlled mainly by Whites or the agents of White supremacy (to apply bell hooks’ elaboration of what is usually called racism.) The lure is evident in shirking the responsibility of cooperating with checking the actions of a well-meaning, though all too often patronizing, group of White liberals. There is loathing as well, because much of what passes as Blackness (but is not necessarily, because Black has undergone a continuous propaganda) is counterproductive, ignorant, obscene, or embarrassing. More importantly, certain behaviors that should have no value judgement attached to them are seen in those negative lights simply because they are not like or endorsed by the mainstream. When a more conscious, or enlightened, assimilated, or respectable, Black tries to distance him/herself from such behaviors with excuses that *they* are low class, or no class, or use Zora Neale Hurston’s phrase, “my race but not my taste” the result is either a rejection of self or a rejection of the larger community.
7. See Lawrence W.Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: AfroAmerican Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Leon F.Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980); Herbert G.Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750–1925*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); and Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the South*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
8. Please see Mehlville J.Herskovits *The Myth of the Negro Past*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 297–298, for the extended passage that articulates these ideas of African survivals.
9. Leopold Senghor, Senegal’s President, also poet, spearheaded the movement that has been widely criticized for its focus on genetic predetermination of cultural traits. Many try to include Africanity in this faulty construction. Africanity suggests that African cultural patterns survived the onslaught of hegemonic Eurocentrism, and were adapted to New World situations.
10. The Black Arts Movement was essentially a movement to direct African American artists to consider the larger (rather than individual) political concerns of the African diaspora in the belief that cultural similarity and comparable political situations warranted concerted and cohesive action. Art was seen as a weapon to be used in political arenas.
11. For theoretical constructions and applications of Africanity, see Wade Nobles, *Africanity and the Black Family: The Development of a Theoretical Model*, (Oakland: Black Family Institute, 1985), and “African Philosophy: Foundations for Black Psychology,” in Reginald Jones, ed, *Black Psychology*,. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972).

12. The most accessible and concise discussions of these aspects of Karenga's work appear in his *Introduction to Black Studies*, 2nd Edition, (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1993), 112, 226–230.
13. This list is derived mainly from Nobles' "African Philosophy: Foundations for Black Psychology." However, it is broadened by the thought of Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Black Experience & American Culture*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1970); Zora Neale Hurston, "The Characteristics of Negro Expression," In Gates, Henry Louis Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1997), 1019–1032; and even Ralph Ellison (who would cringe at the thought of any suggestion of Africanisms in Negro American culture—nevertheless his expressions of Negro American cultural traits fit into notions of an African-rooted cultural style.) Their thoughts on the expressions of African Americans' unique "style" are particularly relevant.
14. See Houston Baker, *The Journey Back*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press), 162–163.
15. Almost every essay in his two collections contain evidence that Ellison is not only self-consciously American, but advocates against writers who focus on *racial* presentations rather than *human* presentations in their works. He denies any presence of Africa in Negro culture—it is "inspired by North American experience." If it is fair to distill his thought to any one message, I believe Ellison himself would accept two major themes: 1) The Negro writer's first allegiance is to producing literature that is art, and 2) The Negro's identity is within a pluralistic America, not Africa.
16. Of course, another dissertation could be developed out of the kinds of evidence, both from real life and literature, which would document this consciousness. The second and third chapters, in their discussion of the methodology used in this project, detail my philosophy of historical change.
17. Yet, I must be realistic. This is the ongoing dilemma of "lure and loathing." For a substantial number, the civil rights movement, integration, and affirmative action are/were desirable as opportunities to escape the ghetto in a physical or socioeconomic sense, as well as in a cultural sense. Assimilation, for them, is a one-way, don't look back ticket into the American (White) mainstream.
18. For this discussion, see Haki Madhubuti, *From Plan to Planet*. (Chicago: Broadside Press, Institute of Positive Education, 1973), 13.
19. See *Black Man of the Nile and his Family*, (Baltimore: Black Classics Press), 47. ben-Jochannan also cites other names: Ethiopia, Corphye, Ortega, and Libya.
20. See Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, (New York: Vintage Books), 103.

NOTES TO CHAPTER Two

1. Murfin, Ross C. "What is the New Historicism," in *The Awakening: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism*, Nancy A. Walker, ed. (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1993), 196.
2. Murfin references Jerome McGann's *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory*.
3. Ralph Ellison, "On Initiation Rites and Power" In *Going to the Territory*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 46.
4. Ralph Ellison, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," in *Going to the Territory*, 13.
5. See Holloway (1992).

6. Ani's idea of "uniting *with* one's ancestors" is a crucial consideration in the three focal novels, especially the more recent two, *Song of Solomon* and *The Chaneysville Incident*. This idea will be explored further later in this text.
7. See Levine (1977), in particular chapters two, three, and six.
8. See footnote number 3 in chapter one for an elaboration of Ani's concept of political behavior.
9. See Litwack (1980), 538–545.
10. It is unfair to suggest that *Invisible Man* is autobiographical and to assert that the narrator's identity problems are Ellison's, but his criticism speaks very loudly for itself. Ellison consistently describes himself as a Negro American and an American writer, while denying Africa.
11. Americans' lack of a solidified identity is an important consideration in *Invisible Man*. In particular, the characterizations of Sybil, the younger Norton, or the White men at the battle royale denote some of the contradictions inherent in being a White American interacting with Black Americans.
12. For many Blacks in the mid-sixties, especially the younger generations, the failures of the Civil Rights Movement—that is, the refusals by institutional structures like the police, courts, militia or school systems and many individual Whites in more social situations to accept Blacks' rights and the continued oppression—pointed to a lessening of identification with the United States and a greater awareness that as Black people, they had more in common with each other and may never be accepted into the U.S. mainstream. Thus Black and African *nationalist* consciousness coalesced in people increasingly reticent about embracing U.S. domestic and international policies.
13. The Civil Rights and Black Power movements cannot be easily separated into distinct temporal frames. While it can be easily argued that the Black Power movement grew out of a segment population who had become more and more disenchanted with the non-violent rhetoric and strategies of the Civil Rights movement, the ideologies of Nation of Islam and the numerous riots of the early sixties suggest that Black militancy had been a significant factor in Black politics long before Stokely Carmichael popularized the term or the Black Panther Party for Self-defense made headlines in the two years prior to King's assassination in 1968. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960's*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) focuses more on SNCC and the Civil Rights movement. It could hardly ignore the developing militant rhetoric but it does not cover it as in depth nor does it go into the 1970s and the aftermath of militant radicalism as does Clayborne Carson, et al. eds. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).
14. The push for Black Studies spearheaded a widespread assault on mainstream academia to be more inclusive. Chicano/Latino studies, women's studies and more recently Asian American studies and Native American studies have been accommodated by major universities, in significant part because of the influence and presence of Black studies entities on campuses across the country. Public school curricula have also been targeted so that all of the groups who have contributed to U.S. history and culture are represented in the texts, regardless of ethnicity, race, gender, sexual preference or physical ability.
15. Mary Frances Berry, and John W. Blassingame, *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press). See chapters 10 and 11.
16. Chapter XXIII deals specifically with the "Black Revolution." Chapter XXII presents a broad range of social and artistic ramifications of the developing consciousness (in particular, see pages 424–428). Chapter XXIV looks at the pervasive political activism that existed in the Black community in and after the Civil Rights era.
17. See Clayborne Carson, et al, eds., *Eyes on the Prize*, 191–192.

18. Wole Soyinka. "The African World and the Ethnocultural Debate" In Molefi Asante, and Kariamu Welsh Asante, eds. *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity*, (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1985), 36–37.
19. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 51. See the introduction and the rest of chapter two for an excellent explication of the meaning and relevance of this term to the understanding of Black linguistic phenomena. Gates' work lays a foundation for traversing the bridge between Black speech and Black writing. He is not the first to do this, but his elaborate exposition provides those interested in the criticism of Black literature with the ideal term, especially as it is borrowed from both Black popular speech and European academic vernacular. "There are scores of revised words. But to revise the term *signification* is to select a term that represents the nature of the process of meaning-creation and its representation. Few other selections could have been so dramatic, or so meaningful" (*Monkey* 47.)
20. This issue of signification on Africanisms will be discussed further in Chapter Three and the chapters on each novel. But the example of Ralph Ellison must be acknowledged here because his criticism so self-consciously valorized *Americanity*/Americanness that it denied all issues of Africinity/Africanness—even when they were so obviously present.
21. Dorothy Pennington. "Time in African Culture." in Asante and Asante, 123–124. This warning also applies to any of the paradigms of Afrikanity.
22. The c/k significance discussed in chapter one is crucial here. Many authors are consciously, actively reaching to African forms and symbols; their works involve emergent Afrikanity. But other authors also exhibit or utilize African cultural survivals within their texts, and although not as self-consciously as someone like Ishmael Reed, for example. These patterns nevertheless document meaningful social change.
23. "Situated identity" is an identity that has grown out of specific situations or group experiences and is based on experiences that, while not exclusive to that community, are somehow representative and significant to the group. In this sense, then, novels can be also used to chart the development of feminist or gay identities (to name only a few other examples,) once reliable "cultural" markers are determined.
24. Much like anthropologists whose work with other cultures helps expand and clarify their concepts about their own culture. See Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight," In Mukerji, Chandra and Michael Schudson, ed. *Rethinking Popular Culture*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991). Also Ani's critique of European cultural thought helped to clarify my conception of Africinity and Afrikanity, hybridized African cultural thought in a Eurocentric environment.
25. Early's *Lure and Loathing* is particularly enlightening here. Though certainly not "scientific" or statistically reliable, I took a "sample" of the 20 essays written for this book. In only one of them, written by Stanley Crouch, is the term *Negro* used exclusively and rather than "black" or African American, which seemed to be the most popular options among this select group. Only one of the essayists, Itabari Njeri, chose to capitalize Black. In a couple of cases, Negro is used disparagingly. In a few other cases, Negro is used when referring to a work or timeframe when that was the operant term.
26. A scene in April Sinclair's *Coffee Will Make You Black*, (New York: Hyperion, 1994) set in the 1960s, glosses a middle-aged mother who, literally overnight, becomes aware that people—her children included—have changed and are now using Black to describe the population previously known as Negro. This was a total revelation to her. One of the ways the previous generation used to keep children from wanting to drink coffee was to scare them away with the comment, "coffee will make you black." Of course, no child in that time wanted to be black, even if they couldn't help it. This incident in Sinclair's book and the cultural phenomenon it represents is so significant that it becomes the name of her novel.

- This statement/phenomenon is consistent with the findings of negative self-esteem in Kenneth Clark's doll studies.
27. I was first exposed to this term in Russel Potter's discussion about the criticism of violence and misogyny in the rap music lyrics. He describes them as "both the most effective and insidious form of broadcasting...not discrete and occasional instances of media hype, but rather part of an ongoing ideological process..." Russel Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 90–91.
 28. Molefi Asante, "Racism, Consciousness, and Afrocentricity." in Gerald Early, ed. *Lure and Loathing*, 143.
 29. Molefi Asante "Racism, Consciousness, and Afrocentricity." in Gerald Early. *Lure and Loathing*, 141.
 30. Near the end of *The Chaneyville Incident* Judith asks if John will kill himself so he can follow his father's footsteps. She already had questioned him by asking if he was "going native" by returning to live in a shack without the amenities of "civilization." *Song of Solomon's* Milkman knows he is psychologically troubled, but in learning of the "unbelievable" story of Solomon (Shalimar) who could fly, he learns of a way to escape his earthly problems. The story of Solomon had challenged the Eurocentric part of his consciousness and belief system, but Milkman's revelation was to reject that consciousness for the oral tradition of his African ancestors and to fly. This point will be elaborated upon in later chapters.
 31. Though certainly documentable, this project is neither the space nor time for elaboration on the subject of how these diverse authors represent an expansion of Black thought since the sixties. The sheer numbers of Black people who are writing now would make such an endeavor unmanageable, except in the context of an anthology. Yet, I feel it is significant, in historically situating myself as a literary critic, in the discussion of "the colors of the lenses I wear," to document that the reading of these and comparable authors suggests that a more radical—not to be confused with the concept of "militant"—thought/word/writing is coming out of the African American community. It is this general perception which preceded and influenced my analysis of Afrocentric expressions in contemporary Black fiction, specifically novels. If I had not widely read Black writers, I could not have had the analytical handles or intellectual components to make such a connection. And the reader cannot be allowed to misconstrue this statement to imply that I am satisfied with my exposure to Black writing (or American writing or any other identifiable category of writing.) While in high school in the early seventies, I had the fantasy of reading *everything* written by Black people. Of course, I didn't think it was a fantasy then and the corpus of Black creative writing was relatively small. This was before I was really aware of the quantity of African writing—and the diverse languages Africans wrote in. Soon after entering college as a premed, I abandoned the dream of a literal accomplishment of this goal. In the quarter century since then, I have only become more aware that for each book I read, dozens are published that I would want to read. (I acknowledge that there are also scholarly articles and much worthy popular journalism to be read.) Yet, it is necessary for a scholar to immerse herself or himself in some body of literature. I have drenched myself in a swimming pool of Black literature and swum a few lengths. Alas, that there are lakes and rivers I'll never know. However, in my particular wetness, I feel confident about my critical assertions.
 32. See William Cross, "The Thomas and Cross Models of Psychological Nigrescence: A Literature Review." *Journal of Black Studies*. 24.1 (1978b):13–31, and William Cross, "Negro to Black Conversion Experience: Toward a Psychology of Black Liberation." *Black World* 20.9 (1971):13–37.
 33. See Cross (1978b) for the best explication and comparison of the Thomas and Cross models.
 34. To extend the works of Cross and Thomas is not the purpose of this study. To attempt to do so would involve a completely different methodology and a group of subjects. However, I

- recognize that this project, its Afrocentric and Afrikanity terminology, and the suggestion that cultural expressions are evolving imply that the Cross/Thomas categories and theories also can continue to be developed. See Beverly Daniel Tatum (1992) for an example of an extension of racial identity development theory into a pedagogical arena.
35. The essays in Early's *Lure and Loathing* detail the varieties and spectrum of African American identities from Crouch's bald assimilationist Eurocentrism to Asante's self-conscious Afrocentricity.
 36. Again Harold Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1967) is a superb documentation of the problems associated with literacy and political (in Ani's sense) engagements.
 37. The contemporary slang term *word* (though it has been around long enough to enter the mainstream, and as an Ebonics usage, it is no longer "popular") is often used as a response to signify understanding or intensity of meaning conferred by the initiator of the discourse.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 43. Hereinafter referred to parenthetically as *Figures*.
2. Michael G. Cooke, *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). The years in parentheses are publication dates taken from Cooke's bibliography of primary works of Afro-American literature. See also "Contents", page vii.
3. There seems to be a surprising lack of critical attention given to *The Chaneyville Incident*. Perhaps it is unreasonable to believe that others would have to see the text as being as significant as I believe it to be. I nevertheless suggest that it is under-recognized and warrants more criticism than it has heretofore received.
4. See chapter 2 and reference footnote 6 in that chapter for details of Marimba Ani's presentation of ancestor communion in which she discusses the ways that African philosophy collapses temporal phenomena in an alternative to Western concepts of linear time.
5. Mary Helen Washington details some of these historical paradigms of Black women's literature, in Mary Helen Washington, "The Darkened Eye Restored" In Henry L. Gates Jr., Ed., *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, (New York: Meridian, 1990), 35.

Women talk to women in this tradition, and their friendships with other women—mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers—are vital to their growth and well-being. A common scene recurring in at least five of the eight fiction in this collection is one in which women (usually two) gather together in a small room to share *intimacies* that can be trusted only to a kindred female spirit. That *intimacy* is a tool, allowing women writers to represent women more fully." (emphasis added)

6. Further analysis of Cooke's discussion of *Chaneyville Incident* yields a fatal misreading of the text. He intimates, in two separate instances that Judith is John Washington's wife. This is simply inaccurate and cannot be excused by the nature of their relationship as live-together lovers. In fact, it is a critical obstacle in their relationship. At one point in the novel, Judith challenges John to make a *commitment* to her—not necessarily an engagement or marriage—as she feels the biological clock ticking and would like to have children, but is willing to wait—as long as she knows that John will be with her. This certainly indicates their

- closeness, but is hardly a discussion a husband and wife, who in theory will be with each other “until death do us part,” would need to have. Divorce is not mentioned in this passage.
7. The label of the extension of Stepto’s pregeneric myths as “emergent” myths rather than generic myths is enhanced because it avoids direct connection with this conception of generic narratives.
 8. See the first chapter for an elaborate discussion of the various means and modes of authentication.
 9. See the discussion that begins on page xxv.
 10. See Houston Baker, Jr., and Patricia Redmond, eds., *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 25.
 11. This summation of Gayle’s argument (including the block quote) uses phrases from the last two pages of the preface in Addison Gayle, ed., *Black Expression*, (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), xiv-xv, except where indicated.
 12. Du Bois’ “Of the Sorrow Songs” (1903) and Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” first published in 1926 are the oldest pieces in the anthology.
 13. Toni Cade, “Black Theater,” in Addison Gayle, Jr., *Black Expression*, (New York: Weybright and Talley, Inc.), 134–143. This quote appears on page 135.
 14. James Emanuel. “The future of Negro Poetry: A Challenge for Critics,” in Addison Gayle, Jr., *Black Expression*, (New York: Weybright and Talley, Inc.), 100–109. This quote appears on pages 102–103.
 15. Some of the pieces have no publication or copyright date, but clearly antedate the sixties, like J.A.Rogers’ essay on jazz. Other than that, selections by Du Bois, Hughes, Wright, and two by Locke form the bulk of “traditional” Black criticism.
 16. Addison Gayle, Jr., ed. *The Black Aesthetic*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), xvi-xvii.
 17. *Aesthetic*, 180–181. This article was deemed important enough to have been included also in *Black Expression*, 258–263.
 18. Perhaps this is why so much Black aesthetic theory is rooted in African American music and musical forms: Music is probably the only Black artistic arena where there already existed a substantial field of cultural productivity as well as criticism. There is also the idea that Black people are more oral and less literary. If a field of criticism is to relate to the Black masses (one of the expressed goals of Black Aesthetics), applications to a familiar music that can be heard on the radio or played on a home component system will certainly have more *popular* appeal than one based on mostly out-of-print books which may or may not have been read. He also notes that so few Black critics are in the academic mainstream either because their radical social theories or their status as artists/activists kept them from desiring, obtaining or maintaining academic appointments in the nation’s prestigious institutions of higher learning. Given a blossoming crop of Black publications that welcomed their writing, neither did they attempt to publish in the mainstream academic journals.
 19. See *Aesthetic*, 75–77. Except for the bracketed numbers, this text is directly quoted from “Afro-American Literary Critics: An Introduction.” in Gayle, Addison, Jr. *The Black Aesthetic*, 59–77.
 20. This is a perspective shared by Gates, as well as Kimberly Benston.
 21. See Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, (New York: William and Morrow Co., Inc., 1972), 10. He provides short definitions of these terms. The rest of the essay develops these three aspects of Black poetry.
 22. See Henderson (1972), 30–31 for the citation and an introductory discussion of Black speech and music as poetic referents.
 23. See Henderson (1972), 31–61. In this section he details his conceptualizations of the vocal and musical patterns that are found in Black poetry.
 24. At a conference at UCLA in April of 1983 where Henderson presented a paper discussing his views of Black poetry with special emphasis on the soul-field and mascon images, I specifically asked him about the applicability of his ideas to other forms of literature. His

- response was guarded. While he suggested that they applied, he also recognized that he had not developed the theory with direct textual exemplary evidence and was therefore somewhat hesitant about wholeheartedly embracing the idea that they could be expanded beyond poetry. This, he felt, was work for other scholars to continue. Indeed, though he is not often enough cited as a significant influence by many contemporary critics, Henderson's work is a seminal foundation for their theories. The ways in which Henderson's work bolsters much contemporary Black criticism will be discussed later in this chapter
25. Even the most cursory review of the poems in this anthology supports both a structural and thematic use of call-and-response techniques. Many of the poems use one voice calling and another, or a chorus, responding. These calls and responses are manifested in the physical layout of the poetry on the written page and in its implied modes of delivery. While to revise Henderson's theories is not one of the expressed purpose of this research, such an endeavor would parallel this one. Though Callahan's focus is specifically fiction rather than poetry, and he gives no evidence of reading or knowing Henderson's text, his discussions of the folklore and storytelling legacies of African American culture are very consistent with Henderson's.
 26. Presented in a paper delivered at UCLA in April, 1983.
 27. This image is revised in an important passage in *The Chaneyville Incident*.
 28. The importance of this concept will become evident in the review of Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Signifying Monkey*. The theory of the Soul-Field is directly comparable to the use of the terms signify, signifiers, and signified.
 29. See the discussion in Henderson (1972), 62–66.
 30. In reviewing Gates' section on the Black Aesthetic, I shall try not to succumb to the desire to critique his interpretations, readings, misreadings and a highly selective focus that conveniently ignores the variety and range of Black Aestheticians' ideologies.
 31. Hereinafter parenthetically referred to as *Monkey*.
 32. In trying to describe the earthy, yet mythical and metaphysical properties of the Signifying Monkey or signifying, I have combined two broadly diverse phrases that represent the cultural accomplishment inherent in signifyin(g); one from music, the other from U.S. popular culture. Osibisa, a West African "fusion" band whose music defies even that label, describes their music as "criss-cross rhythms that explode with happiness." Of course, Superman is able "to leap tall buildings in a single bound." Accomplishing a fusion of Black Arts philosophy with formal mainstream critical theory is indeed a superhuman feat. Gates' *Signifying Monkey* remains the most significant individual book length text of Black literary theory yet produced.
 33. This quote serves as an example, "But the most important source is the living speech of the Black community, both urban and rural, which forms, as it were, a kind of continuum of Blackness—at one end instantly identifiable in all its rich tonal and rhythmic variety, at the other indistinguishable from that of the whites." (Henderson 32). This quote also documents the inclusion of more assimilated forms of Black speech patterns into the category of "Blackness" which extends the parameters of the Black Aesthetic beyond those usually accorded to it.
 34. See Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*.
 35. Much of this analysis of Gates' *Signifying Monkey* and its relationship to the theorizations of Baker and Henderson stems beyond the texts to presentations and dialogues given by each of them at a conference on Black literature at UCLA during April of 1983. Henderson elaborated extensively on the soul-field and mascon images. Baker's presentation developed an argument linking the blues and Black vernacular to Black literature. The then "Skip" Gates presented his work on the Signifyin(g) Monkey. While it appeared each scholar was attempting to carve out his own unique niche in Black literary criticism, it was also evident that their ideas supported each other and would not have been as effective in the absence of the presentations by the other two.

36. It seems that Martin is confusing Gates' article "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey" that appeared as the last chapter in his edited *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (1984), and later as the final chapter in *Figures in Black*, with his book *The Signifying Monkey; A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988). It matters little, as either the article or the book fit his description of Gates' ideological about-face.
37. See (*Monkey*, 32–35) for pictures of the figure, and the text of the anecdote to which the cap analogy refers.
38. Mary Helen, Washington. "The Darkened Eye Restored" In Henry L. Gates Editor. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, (New York: Meridian, 1990), 40.
39. Mary Helen, Washington. *Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds*. 1975/1980. (New York, Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1990), 4. Hereinafter parenthetically referred to as *Susans*.
40. Smith, Barbara. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." In Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, ed, *But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982) 157–175. This quote appears on 163–164.
41. Of course, as a male, I must acknowledge a certain conditioned sexism that I struggle to become aware of and to change. I can make no claims of being a feminist, my experience effectively precludes a full identification with that ideological stance. Yet that should not bar me from utilizing tools developed out of a Black feminist perspective. I support that perspective and believe it has much to offer all areas of critical inquiry. One of the most consistent and accurate feminist critiques notes that women are effectively excluded from academic discussion and criticism by males (or the criticism they produce) because males either actively disparage women's realities, or totally ignore them. I doubt if the intent of Black feminist criticism is to state that it can only be applied to work by Black feminists (many males' works have been subjected to feminist critical revisions) or applied only by Black female feminists. That seems to be buying into the same double standards that feminism struggles against.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

1. Houston Baker, Jr., and Patricia Redmond, eds. *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 72.
2. See the discussion on page 89.
3. See her conclusion on pages 162–163.
4. This already lengthy literature review cannot take the time to analyze all of Benston's valid points. This essay, to me, says more than any one single essay on Black literary criticism because of how it functions as an introductory overview of the field without claiming to represent any greater slice of literary reality than the ideas Benston presents. His appeal to be taken at face value without creating a dogmatic prescriptive argument is a lesson that few critics seem to have learned.
5. *Invisible Man*, John Williams' *Captain Blackman*, Ishmael Reed's numerous works, Wideman's *Damballah*, Perry's *Montgomery's Children*, and Thelwell's *The Harder They Come* are all example's where Black male authors' ancestral presences or spirits take various shapes but are nevertheless central metaphors.
6. Frederick Douglas' presentation of the male slave with the juju, Chesnut's various presentations in the *Conjure Woman* and other Uncle Julius tales, and the rich storehouse of African American folklore provide substantial documentations of males as conjurers. There is no legitimate reason to view this as the *exclusive* realm of Black women as Baker implies. The spirit world of ancestors, gods, and goddesses is likewise neither an exclusive perception nor creation of female authors.

7. While neither Williams nor McDowell seem to be saying this, and it is impossible to predict whether they would agree with my utilization of their arguments, some Black feminist critical tools seem to fit the task I am attempting.
8. This vocabulary will not figure directly in the manner in which my criticism is articulated. However, it is impossible to ignore that African American literature's various voices, and what they signify—the almost palpable shift in perceptual possibilities and the related difficulties of accurately perceiving them, and; the intentions that these innovations represent—have played an important part in formulating my Afrocentric critical viewpoint. Holloway's work played a significant role in developing and validating my sensibilities.
9. The Combahee River Collective. "A Black Feminist Statement." In Moraga, Cherrie & Gloria Anzaldúa. Eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 2nd Edition, (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983), 213.
10. The "living word" is even validated by the Norton Anthology's inclusion of folklore and sermons, along with the blues and spiritual music in its literary canon. The living word is further represented in the compact disc that accompanies the text: speeches, sermons, and song are canonized along with more scriptocentric expressions.
11. See *Study* 176 for Benston's discussion.
12. Who can say? Perhaps racism in some other guise would have still been a major determining factor in the lives and lifestyles of New World Africans.
13. See the discussion on 203–204. Also note that a "self-situation" as suggested by Stepto has been attempted in chapters one and two of this text.
14. See page 205 for Stepto's discussion that details his assumption that both framed and unframed tales within Afro-American narratives assume a white readership.
15. Donald Matthews argues that some of the things that being "Black" encompassed were manifested as socially inappropriate or unacceptable behaviors (per mainstream sensibilities) and that these behaviors had been engaged in, albeit by smaller proportions of the population, throughout the history of African Americans. Now some of these cultural expressions can be indulged in without the (or with reduced) circumspection and stigma. Another related idea is that the African American community has accommodated or allowed certain kinds of social transgressions *not* to negatively affect a person's reputation or "place" within the com-munity. This idea is also consistent with bell hooks and Cornel West where, in *Breaking Bread*, they discuss that African Americans become less tolerant as they move from lower to middle or upper class sensibilities.
16. This is evident in classroom discussions about *Beloved*. Many students, rooted in Western rationalism, have difficulties believing in the idea of the "ghost" that is Beloved. Yet the spiritual world implied by her existence finds a cosmological "fit" in the subconscious of many Black students who can relate to Beloved not as a ghost in the Stephen King fantasy/horror genre, but rather as an unsatisfied and yearning soul/spirit.
17. Ani has elaborated on this distinction between the African and the Western worldview. Also the uses of musical terms like blues or jazz to describe African American fiction are rooted in the literature's refusal to concede a linear point of view; the text will improvise, the plot is ambiguous.
18. This project critiques *Invisible Man*. Other texts, both older and more recent, can be subjected to similar scrutiny.

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION TO PART II

1. The whole of Ani's chapter 7 outlines a discussion of spirituality where the European norm is primarily expressed through religious ideology. She demonstrates how the concept of spirituality defined here is, in effect, *absent* from European/Western/US cultures. The

- inclusion of such normal structures points to African-based cultural influences, especially as Ani's text is an "African centered critique."
2. Octavia Butler and Samuel Delaney are definite exceptions to this statement. Likewise, the satirical iconoclasm of an Ishmael Reed will blur the boundaries of literary realism. However, such exceptions do not affect the general trends of African American authors.
 3. See pages 215–223, the beginning of the section or chapter labeled 197903071030 (Wednesday). This is a crucial passage in understanding Washington because it precedes Old Jack's funeral. This scene will be discussed more fully in chapter six. Chapter six applies this Afrocentric critical theory to *The Chaneyville Incident*.
 4. The quote comes from Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 2nd Edition. (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1993), 214, but the section running from 212–216 is directly pertinent to this discussion. A more detailed discussion is in Karenga, Maulana. "Towards a Sociology of Ma'atian Ethics: Literature and Context." Van Sertima, Ivan. (Ed.) *Egypt Revisited*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publications. 1989. The most elaborate discussion can be found in Karenga, Maulana. *The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics*. Unpublished Dissertation, University of Southern California. 1993.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

1. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 1977, (New York: New American Library, 1978), 5.
2. This parallels the social re-initiation rites Zora Neale Hurston had to go through on her return to Eatonville to collect folklore (lies.) In spite of the fancy clothes, education and big car, when she demonstrated that she could wool, signify, and sing John Henry at the toe party, the community was willing to share their stories with her. By participating in the various rituals and activities in Shalimar, Milkman had proved he belonged there, even if he had strange manners and his three-piece suit stood out.
3. See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 443–450, for a discussion of enslaved African Americans' naming practices. Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 247–251 also discusses the importance of naming behaviors. Of course, the television version of Alex Haley's classic *Roots* has provided the ultimate icon of the significance of naming in the African American tradition, "Behold, the only thing greater than yourself!"
4. Chapter 6 goes into detail about the Seven Days, and begins a discussion between Milkman and Guitar about death and dying. Later in the text, in chapter 10, specifically the passage beginning on page 223 and ending on 227, Guitar expresses his philosophy about Hagar and Macon wanting Milkman's "living life."
5. See the passage on page 161 of *Solomon*.

NOTES TO CHAPTER Six

1. David Bradley, *The Chaneyville Incident*, (New York: Avon Books, 1982), 49.
2. *Chaneyville*, 193. This line is repeated often throughout the book, in John's reveries, and in Judith's arguments. More than anything, it describes John's personality, as well as his approach to history.
3. *Chaneyville*, 284–286. This passage also contains an important reference about "ghosts."

4. *Chaneysville*, 156–158. This passage also details the deterioration of the community (extended family) because of its lack of members and people in the church congregation, especially children.
5. Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. 2nd Ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991) contains a discussion of authentication and story types.
6. *Chaneysville*, 398.
7. The text is certainly open to the interpretation that this is just a memory, rather than a true “visit” from Old Jack. However, even this interpretation does not negate the effect of this memory as serving the function of John actually being in communion with Jack’s spirit.
8. See *Chaneysville*, 410, for John’s line to Judith. The story John tells her is really how he “meets” his ancestor C.K. This parallels Jack’s words, intent, and even physical location when he tells John the first night in his shack, “You wanna know how I met your daddy?... Do you? You want a story?” *Chaneysville*, 38.
9. *Chaneysville*, 223–230. These passages detail Old Jack’s funeral and burial.
10. *Chaneysville*, 450.
11. *Chaneysville*, 399.
12. *Chaneysville*, 215–223.
13. *Chaneysville*, 119. This passage that details the trip over the Hill.
14. See the extended passage, *Chaneysville*, 284–304.
15. This story runs from page 410 through 449.
16. *Chaneysville*, 447–448.
17. *Chaneysville*, 449.

NOTES TO CHAPTER SEVEN

1. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, (New York: New American Library, 1952). 16.
2. This question is posed during the prologue with the example of Louis Armstrong’s music, *Invisible*, 15. It recurs in slightly different form in the final paragraph of the prologue, “But what did / do to be so blue?” *Invisible*, 17.
3. *Invisible*, 499.
4. The procedure referenced on page 206 does not seem to reflect real medical practices. Pressure is supposed to be applied rather than “severing” the lobe. I use the term lobopressure since I know of no other accurate term. Lobotomy would be inaccurate and imprecise.
5. *Invisible*, 150.
6. *Invisible*, 366.
7. *Invisible*, 46–65.
8. *Invisible*, 106–120.
9. The Golden Day incident is on 81–89. The bus scene is detailed on 135–139.
10. *Invisible*, 417–430.
11. The first instance occurs on 417–418, the second on 426–427.
12. *Invisible*, 95. The young woman sends the message to her boyfriend in their secret code, “The grass is green.”
13. Molefi Asante, “The Search for an Afrocentric Method,” In Floyd Hayes, ed., *Turbulent Voyage: Readings in African American Studies*, (San Diego: Collegiate Press, 1992), 34.
14. Paraphrased from Asante, 34.
15. *Invisible*, 496–497.
16. *Invisible*, 34–35.
17. *Invisible*, 151.

18. This action occurs in chapter 11.
19. *Invisible*, 19.
20. The narrator makes use of these characteristics in his impassioned speech at the eviction. Apparently it is alright to be a slow to anger and law-abiding people. The narrator's ambiguity is not surprising. Cross and Thomas would characterize him as being stuck in the Pre-encounter or Negro state of consciousness. See Chart 1.
21. *Invisible*, 212. This hospital incident is related in chapter 11.
22. The issue of freedom and identity reflect Stepto's conception of freedom and literacy and the progression to identity and knowledge. This relationship will be developed further in the next chapter.
23. *Invisible*, 320–327. Clifton feels the sting of Ras calling him a traitor and afraid to be Black. He responds by knocking Ras down. As he walks away, Clifton has tears in his eyes.
24. *Invisible*, 481–485.
25. *Invisible*, 19.

NOTES TO CHAPTER EIGHT

1. Ellison's two collections of essays, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), and *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), easily demonstrate this point.
2. The reader will keep in mind that the chapters on individual texts separated the paradigms only for ease of discussion. As representations of a particular worldview, one must view the elements in interaction to more fully appreciate their import. For example, when Old Jack tells John about his father's favorite legend, the story represents the oral tradition, Old Jack's kinship with first one generation of the Washingtons and the next, and an ontological statement.
3. Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby*. (New York: New American Library, 1982), 278–284. This is the passage where Jade and Ondine discuss their viewpoints on womanhood.
4. Obeah is a system of African spiritual, healing, or conjuring rituals related to "Voodoo."
5. The extended family of Walker's classic *The Color Purple* come into the novel via this character Fanny.

NOTES TO CHAPTER NINE

1. See the Introduction in Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*. 2nd Edition. (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1993), 3–56. See also Hikes, Zenobia Lawrence. "Afrocentric Weapons in the Recruitment and Retention Wars." *Black Issues in Higher Education*. 15.16 (1998):84. for an editorial that addresses the same phenomenon.
2. *Invisible Man*, 496–497.
3. Paraphrased from W.E.B.Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, Intro. by Saunders Redding. (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Books, 1953), 16–17.

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