

*Black Arts and Beyond: African American
Novels, 1960s–1970s*

James Baldwin, who had once critiqued Richard Wright for sacrificing humanity to protest, dedicated his 1964 play *Blues for Mr. Charlie* to the memory of Medgar Evers, his widow, and his children. One reviewer characterized *Blues* as having “fires of fury in its belly, tears of anguish in its eyes and a roar of protest in its throat.”¹ Baldwin’s shift in tone was one instance of the increasing radicalization that would emerge in much black expression of the 1960s–1970s. Similar sentiment could be found in the journals *Liberator*, *Soulbook*, and *Umbra*, as well as television shows such as *Soul!* and *Like It Is*.² Nonfiction works such as Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1968), Malcolm X’s *Malcom X Speaks* (1965), Bobby Seale’s *Seize the Time* (1968), and Kwame Touré’s (*Stokely Carmichael*) and Charles Hamilton’s *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (1967) were circulated through independent book stores, word of mouth, and cemented a philosophy that called for an immediate end to second-class black citizenship. Even the middle-of-the-road *Ebony* magazine in August 1969 produced a special issue “The Black Revolution.” Accompanying the cover, a black and white Van Gogh style portrait of a serious-faced, dark black man, was the following caption: “The Black Revolution, which is currently redefining deeply rooted values in a society built largely on the assumptions of black inferiority, and which is the subject of this special issue, is typified by the Afro-wearing young man on the cover. Fiercely proud of all that is entailed in being black, he and his peers – both male and female – have found their black identity and with it an inner strength which rules out forever a return to that traditional brand of race relations that characterized lives of their elders” (4). One cannot help but hear overtones of the New Negro movement in *Ebony*’s description of the time and thinking, as did Henry Louis Gates that this constituted another black renaissance:

The third renaissance was the Black Arts Movement, which extended from the mid-’60s to the early ’70s. Defining itself against the Harlem Renaissance and deeply rooted in black cultural nationalism, the Black Arts writers

imagined themselves as the artistic wing of the Black Power movement. Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal and Sonia Sanchez viewed black art as a matter less of aesthetics than of protest; its function was to serve the political liberation of black people from white racism. Erected on a shifting foundation of revolutionary politics, this “renaissance” was the most short-lived of all. By 1975, with the Black Arts Movement dead, black culture seemed to be undergoing a profound identity crisis. (“Black Creativity” 74)

Writers of the period might well be called the newest of the New Negroes, but Gates sells short the artistry and influence of their works. While many exhibited a stridency of tone and mission, the attention paid to their political content often eclipsed consideration of their craft.³ Certainly phrases such as “whitey,” “the man,” or “ofay,” conveyed outrage, but this body of writing was more than the angry literature of an angry time. Painting the novels with the broad stroke “black nationalist” elided their many inventive distinctions. Not always receiving their due are the rigor of craft, the invention of language, the juxtaposing of imagery, the aesthetic reimagining of history, and the resituating of the art–politics debate. What might be termed an *ars poetica* for black creators of the time would include the criteria that literature not be separate from struggle and that it come from a black idiom. Novels at this time exhibit both and critique the framing of political speech as artistic weakness as an arbitrary, racialized practice undermining a mode of expression.

Larry Neal, often seen as articulating the aims of the Black Arts Movement in much the same way that Alain Locke articulated the New Negro Renaissance, disdained the idea of protest because it implied pleading with whites for rights that should be inalienable. Rather than protest, he felt that an “aesthetic concerns the shape of one’s being in the world” (“A Nation of Flowers” 9, LNP 7, 3). Neal, who coined the term “Black Arts Movement” after seeing Amiri Baraka’s poem “Black Art,” never intended the term to connote a “fixed ideological position in art.” In an unpublished essay titled “Origin of Black Arts Movement,” he asserted that there were never any real “tenets” (LNP 7, 10). Considering a black aesthetic meant revisiting questions that black creators had raised before: Was there something within American culture that was distinctly African in origin that made African American expression different from other forms? Does considering this possible uniqueness lead to isolation that stifles creative expression? For Neal, as for others, the starting point for considering these questions was within the community of creation.

Novels of the 1960s and 1970s embraced much of the Black Arts philosophy, particularly its desire to no longer explain blackness to white America,

but to portray blackness to black America. In describing the philosophy of the art co-op AFRI-COBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) artist, Napoleon Jones-Henderson describes the aims of many creators to treat blackness not through struggle but through positive affirmation: “We began to agitate for the concept of a new aesthetic, a new sense of purpose, a new reason for making . . . positive images of Black pride, Black self-determination, weapon images in/for the struggle to heal the minds and Souls of Black Folk throughout the Diaspora . . . Aesthetics, as a functional instrument in the struggle, demanded that we look into our culture for the finest and most cherished elements of ‘beauty,’ ‘good,’ ‘love,’ ‘family,’ ‘music,’ and ‘spirituality’” (102). Jones-Henderson’s language is instructive. “Weapons,” clearly places art in the midst of “war,” the struggle for developing black worth within a dominant culture, and “functional” stresses that art must be of value to the community.

The many artist-led organizations that arose during this period, personified the philosophy that the artist should not be alienated from his or her community. Among them were Baraka’s Black Arts Repertory Theatre-School in Harlem; the Organization of Black American Culture in Chicago that listed among its organizers Hoyt Fuller, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), and Angela Jackson; and the Umbra Workshop in New York that included Ishmael Reed, Askia Touré, and Calvin Herton.⁴ “For us, by us, near us,” the popular rallying cry for art during this time had multiple resonances. On one level, it meant that art should be geographically accessible to black communities; on another level, it suggested art should be rooted in the aesthetics and philosophies of black traditions. Dramatic and dance performances in community theatres, poetry readings in artspace or at protests, and organizing workshops were all means of making art part of daily black life. Murals vivified this philosophy. Most famously, in 1967, at the creation of the 30 × 60 foot *Wall of Respect* in Chicago, poets, musicians, artists, dancers, and rhetoricians all gave performances as OBAC (Organization of Black American Culture) artists painted what would become a symbol of collaboration. Black photographers Bob Crawford and Beuford Smith provided a visual record of the period.

This era also saw the continued development of black presses to address the unmet needs of a readership. Poet Dudley Randall founded Broadside Press in Detroit, while Haki Madhubuti created Third World Press in Chicago. These were joined by The Third Press in New York, Naomi Long Madgett’s Lotus Press in Detroit, and Drum and Spear Publishing in Washington, DC. Dudley Randall observed, “My strongest motivations have been to get good black poets published, to produce beautiful books, help create and define the

soul of black folk, and to know the joy of discovering new poets. I guess you could call it production for use instead of for profit” (Parks 89–90). While major white firms still published the bulk of black novels the establishment of these outlets became linked to aesthetic mission. These houses hoped to offer a different lens through which black America could look at itself and the world of which it was a part.

At first read, the optimism of Black Arts discourse, the Wall of Respect, and the newly established black presses seem absent from novels in which sex, drugs, and debasement are the crucible through which characters must pass to emerge to a better black self. Cries for unity do not seem reflected in contrasting novelistic visions: where some exhibit explicitly nationalist content, others question nationalism and separatism; where some suggest that art must be a useful political tool, others suggest that the vision of the artist is paramount; and where some writers viewed the separation of art and politics as facilitating racist and bourgeoisie values, others viewed the period as a time when literary rigor gave way to protest. Philosophies vary as naturally they would since the writers themselves are a diverse group, and it is precisely this diversity that is not acknowledged in terms such as “black nationalist protest.”

For many, Amiri Baraka personifies the politics of the moment, but his novel also personifies the period’s engagement of form. *The System of Dante’s Hell* (1965) appropriates the structure of Dante’s *Inferno* to explore the relationship between the black artist and western, white civilization. It employs the quest of a black “innocent,” and avers that the alienation and confusion of being black and a black artist make Dante’s hell enviable. Where Dante explores the state of the soul in death, for Baraka’s character LeRoi (also called Roi and Dante), the soul is in a living inferno. Using the urban landscape of Newark as a background, Baraka’s circles of hell are reserved for, among others, neutrals who are in a purgatorial vestibule because they have done nothing to advance the black situation, heretics who deny responsibility and enlightenment, and the incontinent who cannot think beyond self-sensuous desire. The influence of the experimental early 1960s Greenwich Village art scene is also evident in the novel, though Baraka has said he wanted the work to move away from the formulaic avant-garde of poets such as Allan Ginsberg and Charles Olson (Benston 304–306). Its language reads like a faceted prose poem deeply entrenched in jazz rhythms. It bends linear plot into segments representing LeRoi’s states of mind/hell and defies any desire for resolution. The nod to Dante is not one of inspiration, but rather one of critique, questioning the appropriateness of traditional, western artistic forms to the African American artist.

Similarly to Baraka, William Melvin Kelley signifies on western traditions in literature. With a title taken from Thoreau's statement and a character named after Shakespeare's Caliban, the artistic influences on *A Different Drummer* (1962) are evident. Kelly began his literary career writing with a hope to go beyond the divide of black and white and to focus on black individuality. His engagement of Thoreau's concern with the individual and the ways society forces him or her into conformity appears throughout his canon and is given a racial dimension. Tucker Caliban, the descendant of an African chieftain who has led many successful slave revolts and even attempted to kill his own baby son rather than see him sold into slavery, hears his African ancestors, and knows they would have resisted the world of exploitative sharecropping in which he finds himself. Like Caliban he repudiates an authority demanding gratefulness for small, condescending kindness, and he makes a personal choice that sets in motion a chain of events, inspiring other black sharecroppers to mount their own rebellions. Kelley uses flashbacks and multiple voices to create layered narratives, in which no character knows more than his or her circumstances would allow. The result is a mosaic of perspectives throwing light on the singularity of Tucker's decisions.

Kelley's second novel *A Drop of Patience* (1965) contrasts individual freedom with multiple forms of institutional constraint. Ludlow Washington, a blind black boy, is abandoned in an institution designed to warehouse rather than care for the disabled. His blindness, on the one hand, provides a degree of liberation because he cannot see color and does not handicap himself by perceived slights; on the other hand, it deprives him of being able to see the color code so important in a southern society. Only his music keeps him from the insanity his situation threatens to impose. Because of his musical talent, he is released to a black bandleader to play with his group, but seeming liberation turns into a different sort of trap in his new surroundings as Ludlow's understanding of his own music making is discordant with the style the band contract demands. Kelley's dexterity in writing passages of syncopated repetition almost onomatopoeically represents Ludlow's gift and desire for freedom for both his music and himself.

Kelley's next novel *dem* (1967) employs satire and is dedicated to "The Black people in (not of) America." The othering in the lowercase title reverses the us/them dichotomy that white American culture imposes to alienate blacks. A series of episodes whose actions seem unrelated are linked by their analysis of American moral bankruptcy. In one, a Korean war veteran and young executive kills his wife and children during a domestic argument, then proceeds to mow the lawn. In another the central character, the white, upper

middleclass Mitchell accuses his housekeeper of stealing, more to exercise his white male privilege by devaluing another than to seek justice. The episode that most tellingly reveals Kelley's critique of racial and class legacies occurs when Mitchell's white wife Tam has conceived by superfecundation, the twinning that results from sex with different males. Bored with her upper-middle-class marriage, she is reminiscent of Betty Freidan's "the problem that has no name."⁵ In addition to her husband, Tam has a black lover, as is clearly evident in the appearance of one of her twins. Her husband Mitchell begins a search for the father of the black twin and ends up in Harlem, a world alien to him, unable to comprehend the multiple literacies of its residents. Eventually he encounters Calvin Coolidge Johnson, who, unbeknownst to Mitchell, is the man he seeks. Coolidge inverts the history of white slaveholders, forcing black men to accept as their own, children fathered by the masters. As Mitchell comes face-to-face with shouldering the responsibility of raising another man's black child he queries, why me? Cooley's response is why my great-grandfather? (205). The novel *dem* portrays a dominant culture in the dystopia of its own creation.

Kelley's depiction of America's endemic violence and racism reflects a growing militancy in his works. Like many writers, living as an expatriate allowed him to see the United States in a clearer fashion. His time in Paris amid blacks from all over the world and his travel to Jamaica led to an appreciation of diaspora, a desire to learn more about Africa, and to his most experimental work yet, *Dunfords Travels Everywheres* (1970). Kelly was taken with African oralities, and thought that these could serve as a base for a new novelistic language. Inspired by *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and his sense that James Joyce's experience of being an Irish writer in an English culture was akin to being a black writer in white America, Kelley forms a language blending Harlem vernacular, pidgin English, and Bantu to signify a common diasporic tongue. He uses it in the dream sequences of his dual protagonists Chig Dunford, a Harvard-educated black who relates more easily to whites than blacks, and Carlyle Bedlow, a Harlem resident comfortable only in the circles of the underworld. A Janus-faced duo, they travel through worlds of secret societies, covert operations, and the lower deck of an ocean liner that has a slave hold. Chig and Carlyle seek answers to who they are and what connection they share. The episodes of their odyssey provide the knowledge they seek, yet the information comes through the language of their dreams, one that they cannot interpret once awake when they return to a world of standard English. Artificially imposed modes of expression must be disavowed, the novel suggests, if one is ever to find the voice to tell one's own story.

Kelley exemplifies a cadre of writers within the Black Arts period seeking newer ways to frame black agency, even when drawing the direst circumstances. They privilege instrumentality, however fragile, over determinism. John Oliver Killens is another example, and his regionalism counters perceptions of Black Arts era novels as being urban-centered. All are set in the rural South, and his “nationalists” are for the most part Southern heroes. His novels reclaim the image of the South, making the world below the Mason Dixon Line not a place to disown, but rather a space with histories instructive to present-day black activism.

Both *Youngblood* (1954), Killens’s first novel, and his third, *‘Sippi* (1967), made use of cadences of orality, and a crucial element in *‘Sippi* would be the power of a folktale. Both are rooted in a black rural Southern world he knew well growing up in Macon, Georgia and listening to the stories of his grandmother, Georgia Killens. Using this cultural history as a base, he demonstrates the power of family and community in finding agency. From depicting Joe Youngblood who teaches by example when he refuses to allow his employer to cheat him of his wages, to the more communal act of a young teacher Richard Myles who at great personal cost celebrates Jubilee Day, *Youngblood* radicalizes images of Southern family and community and frames both as necessary to the survival of a healthy black psyche. *‘Sippi* extends *Youngblood*’s focus on individuals exercising social power to the struggle for voting rights after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Killens makes use of several folk stories. The legend recalling how a black breaks segregationist custom by walking through the front door acts as a Greek chorus throughout the work. The power of the spiritual to cohere community is shown. The refrain, “no more Mister Charlie, just Charlie, no more Miss Ann, just Ann, and no more Mississippi, just ‘Sippi,” taken from a story popular in the 1960s echoes through the experiences of various characters.⁶ Folk commentary in Killens reminds that the past is the foundation of even the most militant future action.

In *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1963) and *The Cotillion; or One Good Bull Is Half the Herd* (1971), both nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, Killens engages questions of class and community. In *And Then*, a war novel, law student Solly Saunders believes in American ideals and expects rewards for his hard work. He is transformed in World War II by fighting both a German enemy and racists in his own army. His future development hinges on his choosing between materialistic self-advancement or promoting community solidarity. *The Cotillion* (1971) satirizes a northern black middle class who amid the turmoil of the 1960s seeks to hold onto meaningless assimilative traditions. Killens weaves the urban vernacular

he heard while living in Harlem and Brooklyn into his prose. His belief in the ‘each one teach one’ philosophy that influenced many 1960s activists produced two young adult books, *Great Gittin’ Up Morning: A Biography of Denmark Vesey* (1971) and *A Man Ain’t Nothing but a Man: The Adventures of John Henry* (1975). His last novel *The Great Black Russian: A Novel on the Life and Times of Alexander Pushkin* (1989) uses the Russian black aristocrat and revolutionary as a representation of 1960s black revolutionary spirit. Killens has said that being black in a racist society forms the core of any black person, and that this was the locale from which he wrote. He sought to place what he termed the “idiomatic” essence of black life in all his novels (“Rappin,” 103).

Killens interpreted community in a literary sense, and was dedicated to supporting other black writers. Along with Rosa Guy, journalist Walter Christmas, Willard Moore, Jean Carey Bond, and Sarah Wright, he started the Harlem Writers Guild. Its goal was to develop and lead to publication works by writers of the black diaspora.⁷ Many were served by the interdisciplinary space of the Guild including Audrey Lorde, Paule Marshall, Julian Mayfield, Terry McMillan, Sidney Poitier, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Lorraine Hansberry, and Wright, herself, who authored *This Child’s Gonna Live* (1969), a stream-of-consciousness relation about a Depression-era family and their battles with out-of-wedlock pregnancy, religious hypocrisy, and white vigilantism.

How place shapes human understanding was a central concern of Killens as well his Guild cofounder Rosa Guy. Where he examined how segregation encroached on blacks in rural locales, she and peers Alice Childress and Nathan C. Heard, showed that northern urban spaces were equally confined by segregation. Areas too easily written off as ghettos had been drawn in earlier novels as immutable, primarily to explain black pathology to a white readership; in these 1960s novels, however, the ghetto is a cautionary space where a black community can see its faults and the practices necessary for transformation.

Rosa Guy draws on her experience of migration from Trinidad to the United States, and her work in factories to support herself and her son while writing, to examine the challenges of the dispossessed. Her first novel *Bird at My Window* (1966) uses montage to involve readers in piecing together the reasons why the main character Wade Williams is straitjacketed and in the prison ward of a New York City hospital. From the outset, it is clear that he is constricted by more than the jacket. A fight between him and his brother Willie Earl has resulted in his sister Faith’s near death, and his mother blaming him as the cause of the trouble places him in virtual exile

from the family unit. Willie's search for maternal acceptance and fraternal vindication is told through memory and dreamscapes that are interjected into the linear flow of the narrative. The social issues prominent in black discourse of the 1960s are the subject of the flashbacks: the importance of family, education, and community. Wade and his family deteriorate because their urban community deteriorates. In its decay, they see themselves, and the novel not only sheds lights on failing conditions, but also suggests actions to remedy them. Guy's later novels include *A Measure of Time* (1983), about a self-made woman's rise amid the Harlem Renaissance and *The Sun, the Sea, a Touch of the Wind* (1995), the story of artist Jonnie Dash who goes to Haiti to recapture her spirit, but instead falls in with a group of decadent expatriates. The larger part of Guy's work after *Bird at My Window* consists of young reader and children's books, some of which won a Parents' Choice Award, an American Literary Association's (ALA) Best Book for Young Adults award, and The Coretta Scott King Book Award.⁸

To term Guy's novels "young adult" is a misnomer, for their realism is hard-hitting, and their aim to present a model for constructing a healthy racial psyche within a devaluing dominant culture is evident. In a trilogy that includes *The Friends* (1973), *Ruby* (1976), and *Edith Jackson* (1978), she tackles female growth and questions of sexuality. *The Friends* juxtaposes two families, the Caribbean Cathys and the African American Jacksons, and examines black ethnicities and their cultural divergences. The second book in the trilogy takes on a subject few black novels and even fewer young adult novels at the time addressed, lesbianism. Phyllisia's older sister, Ruby, the more compliant daughter, becomes involved with the beautiful and revolutionary-minded Daphne. The sensuousness and naturalness that surrounds Guy's treatment of the relationship, as well as Daphne's decision to sacrifice sexuality for social aspiration, mark new territory. The third novel in the trilogy returns to Edith. She and her three sisters are living in a foster home after the abandonment of her father. To facilitate moving them out of foster care, social workers split them up among different families. The novel details the varying impacts of the girls' environments on their outlooks and outcomes.

Alice Childress, another Harlem Writers Guild member, was very much part of leftist activism in New York, writing for Paul Robeson's *Freedom* and the Marxist journal *Masses and Mainstream*. Her involvement earned her an FBI file, and for much of the 1950s publishers would not print her work. Childress, also a dramatist, winning an Obie for her play *Trouble in Mind* (1955), carries the techniques of drama over to her fiction. *Like One of the Family* (1956) is actually a series of witty monologues in which

Mildred Johnson, a domestic, recalls her life and thoughts to her best friend, Marge. The collection of segments do not have the plot sequence of a novel; rather they cohere through a voice that sheds light on history, culture, and character while giving insight into the meaning of a friendship that restores the humanity that domestic work takes away. Childress also wrote realistic fiction for young adults. *Rainbow Jordan* appeared in 1981, and *Those Other People* (1989) powerfully renders young reactions to homosexuality, child molestation, and mental illness. Other Childress novels include *A Short Walk* (1979), a work encompassing black female cultural history from 1900 to the end of World War II in the life of a single woman, protagonist Cora James.⁹

The Childress work that most shows her concern with the state of the black community in the 1960s–1970s is *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* (1973). The novel employs multiple narratives to portray the bleakness of the principal character Benjie Johnson's community. Set after the Civil Rights movement, it is evident that little has changed materially in the lives of young men like Benjie. Once a bright student, he sates feelings of inadequacy by gang associations and drugs. Angry and desiring approval, he spirals into heavier drug use and theft; however, the work offers Nigeria Greene, a black nationalist teacher dedicated to his students, and Butler, an honorable maintenance man dating Benjie's mother, as life buoys. The nationalist concern for black men is evident in Childress making these characters vital to communal transformation. It is Butler who holds out the saving hand. The novel ends with him waiting to accompany Benjie to a counseling session, and stressing the role of choice, Childress leaves open the question of whether Benjie arrives.

The life confined by ghettoized space that Guy and Childress paint fictionally was very much Nathan C. Heard's actuality. He learned to write in the New Jersey State Penitentiary. Prior to incarceration, baseball biographies of Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth, along with soft-core pornography, was the extent of his exposure to "literature"; but while incarcerated he began to read and to study the techniques and thoughts of Jean Genet, Norman Mailer, Samuel Beckett, Chester Himes, and James Baldwin. Literature literally and figuratively saved Heard. When his mother showed the draft of what would become his first novel to his lawyer, the latter passed it to a publisher. *Howard Street* (1968) appeared a month before Heard left prison. Its tense realism contributed to sales of over one half million copies. He went on to teach creative writing at Fresno State College, then at Livingston College at Rutgers University, and later he would be a speechwriter for Newark mayor Kenneth Gibson. *Howard Street* might be termed

a progenitor of 1960s urban writing. Other works within the tradition include Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story detailing a young man's escape from the drug use and the violence that mired Harlem, and Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), the memoir of a Puerto Rican-Cuban man whose experiences with street gangs and heroin addiction lead to prison and ultimately his transformation. Heard details the stagnation within Howard Street in Newark, New Jersey, an area that could be representative of many impoverished black city communities. From its opening scene of sex between a prostitute and her john, thorough the descriptions of fights and shoot-outs with police, the novel calls to mind pulp fiction; yet, its deep psychological investigation of characters makes it a novel Nikki Giovanni would characterize as a classic for the sheer power of its technique and perception (71).

The only chance characters on *Howard Street* have of escape is to not believe that the street defines them. Though it recalls the determinism of *Native Son*, its exposition is intended for the world it depicts, not the white world around it. In a bar scene where the local wino, Jackie, a former basketball star with a college scholarship and a former head of the local Boys club, has a debate with a young, crusading white civil rights worker there to assuage his guilt, Jackie observes that only the people within a community can make the changes necessary for its betterment. Howard Street itself is major character, an area whose namesake bar's clock has stood at 1 o'clock for over twenty years. Time changes nothing, and with little variety, residents, known as "the streeters," do the same thing, drink, have sex, and hustle. Intra-racial struggles occur amid a populace that includes a black middle class contemptuous of its less fortunate peers. Power struggles erupt between pimps, gangs, and corrupt black police officers, all compensating for their essential powerlessness. Gay queens whom the novel derisively refers to as "fags" suffer abuse and in turn sometimes become abusers. What might be sensationalist voyeurism is turned into poignant portraits through back-stories explaining the cycles trapping the characters. The work is a call to action to change the conditions of too many like communities.

Heard went on to write *To Reach a Dream* (1972), the story of Bart Enos, a pimp living off his girlfriend while dreaming of a bigger move up; *A Cold Fire Burning* (1974), the story of interracial love between a working-class black man, Shadow, and a liberal white woman social worker, Terri, against the backdrop of 1970s politics of race and gender; and *When Shadows Fall* (1977), a sensationalized tale of drug-dealing. His last novel was *House*

of *Slammers* (1983), an exposé of prison life that H. Bruce Franklin, in his book *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America* (1998), would characterize as the most important novel yet published about the American prison (280). All Heard's novels portray harsh realities but all have a fine-tuned attention to character and narrative voice.

The setting that Nathan Heard used in *Howard Street*, what is now called the Central Ward, would be the site of the Newark rebellion of 1967.¹⁰ The violence influenced another writer, who dealt with it through satiric treatment. At the time an editor at the Newark weekly *Advance*, the riots a river away from his Greenwich Village home inspired Ishmael Reed's *The Freelance Pall Bearers* (1967). The naïf Bukka Doopeyduk lives in HARRY SAM and works as an orderly in a psychiatric hospital. HARRY SAM is named after Harry Sam who presides over the corruption of his world while living in Sam's motel on Sam's Island that sits in the Black Bay, a body of water polluted by Sam's own excrement, the result of a gastrointestinal disease that keeps him on the toilet spewing out his waste through large statues of Rutherford B. Hayes. The allusion to a president whose election was only effected by the Compromise of 1877 is one of many ways the novel questions the nation's moral ethics. The egocentric naming is indicative of the one-way thinking that fuels totalitarian corruption. Reed's style of blending African American forms with traditional literary conventions, of referencing vernacular culture such as hoodoo, of sly allusions to multiple literary works and traditions, of mixing typographical style in the print of his novels begins here. He molds the coming-of-age form to show that within the ecosystem of HARRY SAM only perpetuation of power not transformation of injustice is possible. Everything is fair game for Reed's satire. Conjure and the post-riot Newark social initiatives are both skewered through mail order hoodoo lessons offered via the Mojo Retraining Act (4). The meaninglessness of political speech is represented through nonsense words, "Blimp Blank Palooka Dookey" (27). Lyndon Johnson's penchant for bathroom interviews inspires the portrait of SAM on the toilet and enhances the novel's condemnation of the US role in Vietnam symbolized by SAM's pedo-canibalism. Reed's narrative voice is a composite of the fantastic and deeply historical.

Freedom of expression is the subject of Reed's second novel, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), a western told in ballad form beginning with the incantatory, "Folks. This here is the story of the Loop Garoo Kid" (9). Each paragraph is a verse within the ballad of Loop, a conjurer helped by Chief Showcase, a tech-savvy Native American flying a helicopter. Showcase is not on horseback and is a figure designed to undo the romanticizing of

Native Americans as a people of the past. Together they battle the neo-socialist realist gang who call Loop a “Crazy dada nigger” (35) and resent his forays into the abstract. For them novels must liberate the masses; for Loop novels can be whatever they want to be. In this tension, Reed engages the art versus politics debate. Loop’s other nemesis is political corruption in the figure of Drag Gibson, a mascara-wearing cattle baron sought out by the citizens of Yellow Back Radio to subdue their defiant children, a plot line that recalls the stifling of student dissent in the 1960s. The novel’s title implies an analysis reducing something into comprehensible units and a reformulation. Yellow Back Radio is scrutinized to see what has led to its deconstruction. The title also indicates Reed’s debt to popular culture, as Yellow Back refers to the yellowed pulp that was the material of western magazines and paperbacks. Reed makes use of the myth of the west to critique it and what it has been used to facilitate: the ethos of manifest destiny, Native American removals, and making the terms “white” and “American” synonyms.

Mumbo Jumbo (1972) continues Reed’s attention to novel form. That he sets it in the 1920s cannot help but suggest the Harlem Renaissance, as well as suggest the ways in which that period became an artistic marker for black expression. Conventions of the detective novel – a murder, clues, final resolution – drawing and photographic images, time travel, typographical markings in the text, lyrics, clippings from actual newspapers, footnotes that imitate scholarly research, all reveal how the battle between western and non-western world views have characterized human history and art, how one group’s knowledge and cultural products are another’s mumbo jumbo. PaPa LaBas is a hoodoo detective whose name and being incorporate west African atavisms in the Americas. Jes Grew, an Africanist spirit that causes people to break out in song, dance, and have visions, is a liturgy in search of a text, and Papa LaBas seeks to reunite both. Attempting to counter him and destroy Jes Grew to retain its own cultural supremacy is the Wallflower Order of the Knights Templar. In the novel, the traditions of hoodoo, the blues, and early jazz are enlisted to counter a hegemony that asserts its superiority even while appropriating the creations of its presumed inferiors. The many anachronisms rupture the idea of linear time to show the parallels of repeated histories.

All of Reed’s novels focus on form. *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974) uses the detective story to consider the self-defeating divides within black community; *Flight to Canada* uses the slave narrative form to examine the freedom of the writer and the difficulty in asserting one’s voice to tell one’s story; *The Terrible Twos* (1982) again uses the detective figure to satirize the

Ronald Regan administration's vision of America; and *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986) uses a frame story as Ian Ball, a black playwright who has been "sex-listed," attempts to construct a work that will satisfy Jews and New York women who he feels control the publishing world. Mythology, in this case the Danish creations Black Peter and St. Nicholas, shape *The Terrible Threes* (1989), a sequel to *The Terrible Twos*, into a critique of capitalistic systems. In postmodern fashion, *Japanese by Spring* (1993) blends fiction and non-fiction to satirize academic tyranny. Reed himself is a character within the work *Juice!* (2011), a compendium of television transcripts, courtroom documents, and Reed's own cartoons that eschews chronology to tell how the career of a struggling African American cartoonist is upended by the O. J. Simpson trial.

Reed bucks convention in both writing and publishing. He found fault with the way black writers were historically treated by publishers: the 1920s, he felt, decided that only one writer among many could be a star at a time; in the 1940s the Communist Party placed its imprimatur on writers it felt were appropriately political; in the 1960s black nationalist writers demanded that all blacks be portrayed in a positive way; and in his time feminism influenced who would appear in print (J. D. Mitchell, n. pag.). Resenting not only strictures on what a book should be, but also those dictating what will be published, he founded several small presses, among them I Reed books and Ishmael Reed Publishing Company, to support writers who might not find a home elsewhere.

One literary influence Ishmael Reed cites is Charles Wright (J. D. Mitchell, n. pag.). In the 1950s, Wright worked as a messenger in New York and wrote a weekly column for *The Village Voice*. His experiences served as a base for his first novel *The Messenger* (1963). The work is picaresque, as Wright uses the figure of a messenger to render moving stories of the fringes of New York City, its prostitutes, drag queens, stock traders, lonely wealthy, drug addicts, as well as its famous, Tallulah Bankhead, Julie Harris, and Eli Wallach. Charles, a good-looking well-built black man who is often mistaken for Puerto Rican, describes himself as a "minority within a minority" (88) because of his ambiguous appearance. He sells himself to men in order to subsidize his meager income as a messenger. An avid reader and an appreciator of the art of Chagall and Picasso, Charles wants to be a writer but having to live in New York as a squatter is sapping his talent. His redemption, he feels, can only come through leaving New York, and he purchases a ticket to Mexico, but the novel is intentionally ambiguous as to whether Charles departs or not. *The Messenger* is dedicated to Billie Holiday and Richard Wright, figures

popularized as symbols of artistic suffering and intellectual anger. Both elements run throughout the work as Charles searches for something he cannot define. The novel's voice swings between romanticized descriptions of city sounds, sights, and smells, and pulp reportage of the city's ugliness. Its vignettes are told in an episodic manner, taking place in New York, Los Angeles, and Charlie's small hometown of Sedalia, Missouri. It is an impressionistic work, and when the reader stands back from the "dots" the picture of his despair at never having enough money, his alienation, loneliness, and frustration with racial politics of the United States become clear.¹¹

Wright's *The Wig* (1966) is more in keeping with novels reflecting the growing black anger of the 1960s. The protagonist Lester Jefferson uses "Silky Smooth," a hair straightener he hopes will not only give him hair the color of burnished gold, called a "wig" in the slang of the times, but will also confer the privileges of whiteness. The traditions of mock heroic epic are employed to highlight the stupidity of Lester's odyssey: he is not noble, but seeks heroism through the cowardly act of trying to be what he is not; he does not attempt a heroic quest for the greater good, but rather seeks only his own material furtherance. Ultimately, he loses both self-love and the love of another. His castration at the end of the novel signals the interest many 1960s novels written by black men will take in black masculinity. Explorations of black anger and art are intimately intertwined with sex and the white female figure. Masculinities in these works are frequently hypersexual, but just as often are struggling, constricted, and ineffectual. Men seek to fulfill the masculinist ideal surrounding them in their society yet are prevented from doing so by the very society manufacturing that ideal. Black masculinities, which include the marginalizing of queerness to assert manliness, are used to question ideas of race, nation, and people. Hal Bennett, Cecil Brown, and Clarence Major all intensely and sometimes graphically explore social potency through sexual potency.

George Harold Bennett settled in Newark upon leaving the south, and at sixteen became a writer for the African American newspaper *Newark Herald News*. His short fiction won him a Pen Faulkner award in 1973, and notice from *Playboy* magazine as one of the most promising new writers of the 1970s. His novelistic techniques have overtures of Faulkner, a writer he cites as an influence. Most are set in the same locale of Burnside, Virginia (modeled after Buckingham, Virginia), and characters appear in multiple novels. His first, *A Wilderness of Vines* (1966) holds up a satirical mirror to intraracial race prejudice. At the close of the Civil War, lighter-skinned blacks own the area's tobacco plantations and darker skinned blacks work in the fields. Lighter skinned orphaned girls are protected in a home run

by Miss Whittle, who displays them to prospective marriage suitors, while the darker skinned ones are subject to sexual abuse in the homes of black ministers. Representations of the extremes to which characters filled with self-hate will go lead to a blend of futuristic fantasy and realistic satire that is uneven and often awkward, but foreshadows two major themes of Bennett's novels, self-hate and the representation of black sex in American culture.

In *The Black Wine* (1968), David Hunter uses sex to compensate for self-loathing fueled by comparison to his biracial sister, Clair. The connection between sex and identity is even more explicit in Bennett's best-known novel, *Lord of Dark Places* (1970). Indirect discourse fuses multiple voices into a third-person narrative that tells the story of Joe Market. His father Titus makes him into a false idol for the sake of Titus's invented religion, the Church of the Naked Disciple, a belief system he claims is designed to give blacks a nonwhite-based religion that envisions them as something other than a human evil. Titus encourages followers, male and female, to worship the handsome Joe's body, and to partake visually and sexually of his penis, for a price. By blending religious references with explicit and slangy sexual descriptions, Bennett creates a dissonance that gives the novel a satiric surreality. When Titus is raped and murdered by southern police, Joe is witness and narrowly avoids becoming a victim. He escapes by plunging into a river, and when he emerges from this baptism, he goes North. Racial circumstances are uncomfortably similar there, and Joe enters a picaresque odyssey in which the Nixon administration, the polices of the war in Vietnam, and black nationalism all come under Bennett's satirical swipe. Joe is still the black male sex object engaging in multiple sexual performances with males and females, often as a transaction.

The focus on Joe's sexual organ reflects Bennett's concern with the ways in which the United States has traditionally used representations of black sexuality to sustain white dominance. Many scenes portray black males and females as mired in their own sexual perversion: Titus is the issue of an aunt and her nephew; Titus regularly performs oral sex on Joe; father and son share prostitutes; a father prostitutes his son. In an era stressing the beauty of black people, the love between them, and their unique spirituality, Bennett's portraits contrast markedly showing instead a people who have accepted the negative imagery projected onto them by white society, and who find recourse only through sexual prowess. His novels exhibit the sexism that made advocacy for sexual equality subordinate to advocacy for racial equality. The black male is figured as an emotional child in need of black women to give him back self-regard. Bennett's engagement of phallic

myths continues through his later works *Wait Until the Evening* (1974) and *Seventh Heaven* (1976) because he sees part of a black writer's mission as assisting the race in rising above the internalization of imposed definitions of black as filthy, a task he felt most black writers Baldwin and Wright included, were unable to solve within their novels (Newman 362). Bennett would go on to write additional novels penned under the name of Harriet Janeway, and a popular series under the name of John D. Revere.

Bennett was not unique in his intense focus on black male sexuality. Amid frank and sometimes amusing scenes of sexual acts, Cecil Brown in *The Life and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger* (1969) weaves a novel in which the development of the fictitious character (whose life details are very similar to Brown's) satirizes racial perceptions and hierarchies. Unlike his namesake, the nation's first president, the protagonist George Washington is disconnected from his national origins. Born in a southern society the son of a "cussing" father who ends up in prison, George has the status of rebel outsider from birth. Now in Copenhagen he is part of a circle of black expatriates seeking to move beyond the "tired" categories of black and white (58). In their own ghetto abroad, they are distanced from the growing racial unrest in the United States, allowed to stay by a "home-sick" American embassy that relishes having a replication of the ghettos they have created at home. The expatriates get information on events in the United States only through reports in Danish newspapers, and their main concern is having sex with white women, an act they vaguely conceive of as protest. George is a work of self-invention, rarely using his given name, making up handles appropriate to the circumstances in which he finds himself. For him, nothing is phony if it is functional. The contempt white America has shown him gives him license to live by his own rules. In need of money, George goes to the US embassy to run a scam on the officials. There he meets an embassy official, a mature woman who supports him as her lover. The novel graphically details his sexual exploits and pairs this with his cultural insights into the hypocrisy of a world that devalues black culture yet appropriates it. A series of extremes (the white daughter of a diplomat having incestuous sex with her father and fearing her own desire for the act to happen again, an episode of sadomasochism, the suicide of his lover), culminating with news of the killing of Malcolm X, force a reconsideration of his role as a gigolo, and triggers his desire to return home. In circular fashion the novel ends as it begins with George contacting the embassy, this time to seek passage home, but whether he transits and changes or finds himself in a perpetuating cycle is unresolved.

Race and sex play prominent roles in Brown's characterization. White females are vehicles through which black males trapped in absurdist racial dynamics seek humanity. The one black female in the work is the beautiful Pat, who terms herself a bad whore because she rarely gets financial reward for her sexual acts. She is more of a token than a meaningful addition to the work. She is there to remind black men that black women, too, can be beautiful, to provide a black nationalist reproductive counterbalance to the interracial relationships. She also is there to remind George that while hiding from overt American racism in Copenhagen, there is a cultural essence he misses. Ultimately George feels that to love a white woman is a weakness, just as for a man to love another man is. His homophobic stance and the stance he begins to express about interracial relationships represent his desire for grounding, to know the border between black and white, to know the border between male and female. At the end of the novel, unlike characters who seek freedom from labels, he expresses the desire for a fixed identity.

Brown's work, like Ishmael Reed's, foreshadows traditions of black post-modernism: it encompasses multiple conventions, among them, narrative, play scripts, and manipulation of typography. His work is one of reference, and asides to other writers are plentiful. His character development, for instance, depends on readers being familiar with Bigger Thomas who is framed as the antithesis to his character George Washington. They are two different kinds of native sons, and their contrast condemns the way Bigger is made to live in fear and masochism.¹² Brown's George is more akin to the other heroes the novel alludes to, Tom Jones and Julien Sorel.¹³ Brown employs sharp satire, literary analysis, and folklore. His love of and respect for black oral traditions is evident in all his works including *I, Stagolee* (2006) set in the 1890s, and fictionalizing the story of St. Louis pimp Lee "Stagolee" Shelton's murder of political gang member Billy Lyons. *Days Without Weather* (1982) uses the traditions of black comedy to tell of an African American comedian's struggles in white Hollywood.

Known more for his music than his novels, Gil Scott-Heron also uses sex to explore black masculinity. Written when he was only nineteen, the four main characters in *The Vulture* (1970) manifest different ideas of the black masculine in a novelized morality play set against the backdrop of a deteriorating Harlem of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Spade, a dealer by desperation, Junior, a virtual innocent, Afro, the activist who seeks to empower the community by any means necessary, and IQ who straddles two worlds, each in his own way navigates a wasteland decimating black males. Heron broadens his perspective to contrast nationalist violence

and accommodationist ideas in his second novel *The Nigger Factory* (1972). Making use of much of his own experience while attending Lincoln College, the novel tells the story of Earl Thomas, the elected student body president of the historically black Sutton University who faces off against the militant members of Members of Justice United for Meaningful Black Education. The group's acronym, MJUMBE, is Swahili for messenger. Heron's novels capture the various philosophical ideas of late 1960s black culture and depicts black male adjustments to changing cultural times.

Clarence Major's use of sex to represent racial politics is at once explicit and nuanced. With the first page of his first novel *All-Night Visitors* (1969), the reader is confronted with the frank sexual description that will run throughout his works. The protagonist Eli Bolton has no idea of his origins. Is he the son of a white mother who was raped by a black man, as the warden of his orphanage tells him, or is he the son of a white mother traveling through Italy and becoming pregnant? The nebulosity that surrounds his antecedents matches the nebulosity surrounding his self-conception and poses the question of how to establish a healthy black male psyche in a society that consistently perverts black maleness. The segments of the novel move back and forth in time, each offering a small insight into Eli.

Explicit almost pornographic descriptions are the only ways that Eli is able to express his perceptions, at least initially, and these passages are rendered with a tone of desperation rather than eroticism. His sexual organ, the spelling of which mutates phonetically depending on his state of mind, is who he is. Sexual metaphors are how he filters his place in the world. Eating a salad is orgasmic. Fellatio characterizes the materialism of one love interest. The racism of white soldiers appears through savage descriptions of their raping and then killing Vietnamese girls during the war. As Eli grows, as he comes out of his isolation and realizes his responsibility and connection to others, the sexual explicitness disappears. The descriptive language becomes less harsh and more sensuous, focusing less on organs or physical acts and more on their psychological effects. The novel closes with the humane act of Eli inviting a woman and her children thrown out of their apartment by her husband on a stormy night to stay in his apartment while he is at work. What emerges in *All-Night Visitors* is not a vision of black masculinity, but of multiple forms of black masculinities.

In the spirit of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Major's use of explicit language challenges conventional moralities that have been used to stigmatize and marginalize black men in particular. The result is a degree of freedom from the valuations of a hostile gaze.¹⁴ His language

does not mediate between reader and character; rather, through addressing the reader as a fellow viewer, it places him or her in the scene with Eli. References, especially to Bronisław Malinowski's *Magic, Science and Religion* (1948) while Eli observes the residents of the hotel where he is a desk clerk, emphasize the reader's role in making and interpreting a novel's meaning.¹⁵ The manipulation of print typography that Major will develop fully in his other novels engages the eye in constructing import through visual cues and foregrounds the connection between the visual and literary arts. Major, also a poet and artist, characterized this novel as an "epic collage poem" and a "drawing done with words" (*Dark and Feeling* 16), and this characterization exemplifies his aesthetic sensibility, his feeling that all forms are necessary to eloquent written expression. In *No* (1973), Major structures his paragraphing to highlight the fragmented nature of the self and question whether the self can be whole. The narrator who at points observes the idea of a self to be ridiculous is called by different names. Increased or decreased indentation indicates whether the central character Moses Westby is acting as narrator or protagonist as the story of his growth in a segregated South emerges. The narrator of *Reflex and Bone Structure* (1975) similarly highlights the role of perception in constructing meaning. Admitting to being a creation of his own novel-writing imagination, he warns the reader not to trust his perspective. Gaps might exist in what one perceives of as truth.

Employing a technique similar to *All-Night Visitors, My Amputations* (1986) eschews longer narrative for episodic vignettes blending recollection and fantasy to reveal the development of Mason Willis from child to air force soldier to hoodlum, thief, and lecturer. *Painted Turtle: Woman with Guitar* (1988) uses fables to comment on the role of women and totem in Mary Etawa's traditional Zuni upbringing. The genres of dream, mysticism, and the secondary narrative of her lover Baldy mirror her self-definition. It is a novel about translation, again stressing that meaning is mediated through the forms in which it is conveyed. Even a narrative that appears to be a straightforward telling of a return to Atlanta is not. *Such Was the Season* (1987) juxtaposes language forms, vernacular and standard, to indicate tensions of perspective and subjectivity as Annie Eliza retrospectively tells about the many events coincidental with the homecoming of her estranged nephew Juneboy.

Major began his career as a visual artist rather than a writer, and the visual is evident in all his novels' aesthetics, particularly in *Emergency Exit* (1979), which pairs text and image. For him, painting provides accessible materials, but writing, the rendering of the speech we take for granted, is

harder to use as a form. He describes himself as a visual thinker envisioning colors, smells, sounds (Rowell and Major 668, 670), and his work breaks down the barriers between poetry, fiction, visual art, and text. It also refuses to construct an artificial wall between art and politics. When he became a contributing editor of the *Journal of Black Poetry*, a publication that also provided a national network for black writers and artists during the Black Arts Movement, he broke with his colleagues over publishing what he saw as a cheap aesthetic of “bull shit and propaganda” (Byerman 46); yet, he did not overlook the oppression that was part of human experience. In an essay “The Black Criteria,” he stated that a black poet should use art to cause the downfall of a decadent western civilization (15–16).

Major developed an artistic philosophy of individualism, where the creator must make his or her own choices. As such, critics such as Bernard Bell define Major in the context of modernism or postmodernism, but not the Black Arts Movement, and others mention his eschewing of political message.¹⁶ But he defies any easy either/or categorization. He points out that over the course of black literary development there have been many black aesthetics, many black arts, and they all shared the desire to express race and culture independent of perceptions imposed by the dominant culture (McCaffery 123). To make a space for work such as his, Major cofounded the publishing house Fiction Collective to provide authors freedom from censoring editors. His statements on artistic freedom and his founding of the publishing house are activist endeavors challenging the cultural and political status quo.

Many novelists of the 1960s–1970s were forced to situate themselves along an arts/politics continuum generated by a cultural discourse unconcerned with the nuances of black writing, and many of their works engage and sometimes resist this pressure. John A. Williams began his novel writing career just as the Civil Rights movement was entering its most active period, and the frustration and demands of that time are evident in the themes of his works; however, Williams’s treatment of race via exploring the psychological impact of it on the individual often led to his novels being viewed as more concerned with the artistic and personal rather than the political. His first, *The Angry Ones* (1960), has been reissued by W. W. Norton’s subsidiary Old School Books, and publisher Marc Gerald’s description of the label as one for writers too “street” to be artistic and too artistic to be “street” (Carpenter n. pag.) might characterize Williams’s writing as well. His works are rooted in frank frustration and desperation, yet are told lyrically.

The Angry Ones was completed in 1956, but did not appear until 1960. It had difficulty securing a publisher because some houses worried how

the material would be received by white readers, especially those from the South. When it did appear, it had been through complete rewrites. The cover of the Ace Books edition in 1960, drawn without Williams's approval, showed a New York skyscraper on the left side, with two head shots on the right – a black man with an angry visage and a white blonde with pouting red lips.¹⁷ In 1975 Chatham House reissued his original version. The work inaugurated ideas he explores over the course of all his novels: the tensions between interracial love and allegiance to one's race, the hypocrisy of American democracy frequently drawn through the figure of the returning black veteran, the importance of black music as an expressive form, and the reconsideration of received history. The protagonist of *The Angry Ones* Stephen Hill is a black World War II veteran working for a New York publishing house. One of his closest associates, Linton Mason, a white former college roommate and editor for McGraw Hill is the foil through which Williams contrasts Stephen's inability to rise in the business with the race privilege that greases Linton's ascendancy. The politics of sex is part of their dyad, as well, when jealousy develops once Stephen becomes involved with a white woman, a relationship that is fraught for Stephen as he considers whether it signals betrayal to his own people. Stephen grows increasingly frustrated at his inability to get ahead within the company and, his anger comes to a head with the suicide of his friend Obie Roberts, another black man whose professional opportunities are curtailed.

Williams's next novel *Nightson* (1961) takes an artist figure as its main character, in this case a musician, and equates artistic expression with personal expression. Creative production explores public and private spheres simultaneously, as it does elsewhere in Williams's novels, *Sissie* (1963), where black music is a metaphor for black memory and in *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), where writing becomes a symbolic act of personal and nationalistic freedom. His representation of the artist and creative process is also present in *!Click Song* (1982) and *Clifford's Blues* (1999). Titled after the distinctive sound in the Xosha language *!Click Song* through its paralleling of two writers careers, one black and one white and Jewish, compares the dire effects race places on the black creator as opposed to the white. His last novel *Clifford's Blues* focuses on the rarely addressed World War II history of blacks in Nazi concentration camps. Its framed narrative opens with a letter from Gerald Sanderson to Jayson Jones, asking the latter to read the diary of Clifford Pepperidge, a gay black jazz pianist living a decadent life in Weimar Germany until caught with an American diplomat and forced to spend twelve years in Dachau. To survive the worst of the concentration camp, he strikes a mutually beneficial bargain with

a closeted SS officer to “serve” him. The work is a keen examination of the dialectic of power between victims and victimizers. The diary forms the meat of the novel, but the closing frame comments on the ongoing difficulties of publishing black subject matter, as Jones’s letter notes the unlikelihood of the work finding a publisher. The scene was prophetic, for Williams had difficulty placing the novel.

Williams’s work speaks to the binary of culturally imposed pressure to craft public art for a community or to occupy private expressive space. Defying an artificially imposed opposition his artists often do both, and he frequently invokes black creative history and personages to illustrate the challenges of doing so. When reading *Nightsong* it is hard to avoid thinking of Charlie Parker, an avatar of musical innovation caught in a net of racism, addiction, and the need to create. Williams’s protagonist, instead of being nicknamed “Yardbird” or “Bird,” is Richie “Eagle” Stokes. Like Parker, he changes the landscape of jazz through the invention of what the novel terms rebop, and like Parker he battles drug and alcohol addiction, dying in his mid-thirties. The novel captures Eagle at the decline of his career. Exploited by the machinery of a white-dominated music industry, in his small way he enacts his own exploitation by manipulating guilty and greedy white liberals for handouts. He rescues from death on the streets the white David Hillary, a former college teacher, who after the death of his wife in a car accident from which he walked away, has descended into alcoholism. They both take solace in the backroom of an east Greenwich Village coffee shop owned by Keel Robinson, who in a label-defying act describes himself as “black white man” (95). He is a Harvard Doctor of Divinity and former minister disillusioned with a religion more concerned with ritual and politics than human salvation, so he makes his coffee shop into a “church” of refuge for musicians. Keel is in love with a white woman, Della a savvy social worker very aware of the impact of American race history even on personal relationships. Heel’s similar awareness places him in a double bind loving her yet hating histories of white supremacy.

Williams’s evocations of New York’s East Village bohemia, kosher butcher shops, laundries owned by Chinese proprietors, and Russian and Polish travel agencies portray a world of artistry and poverty within a society increasingly bankrupt of humanism and concerned only with money and race. Eagle’s life embraces black musical history from New York’s famed 52nd street jazz corridor, an area he recalls Billie Holiday terming a plantation because the owners made the money while the musicians slaved (47), to the black musical migration from New Orleans to St. Louis to Chicago in an era when bebop was challenging established

forms of jazz. His music is transgressive, and he is contemptuous of the authority that does not allow him to benefit from the creativity he generates. Eagle signifies on the appropriations of the language, posture, food, and other elements of black culture that have become core elements of larger American culture without their sources and importance being fully acknowledged.

The Man Who Cried I Am (1967), perhaps Williams's best-known novel, again makes use of the artist as rebel. Told in flashback, Max Reddick recalls his life as he faces death from colon cancer. In many ways, the novel is a *roman à clef*. Though Williams had yet to meet Richard Wright and James Baldwin when writing it, knowledge of their lives suffuse the work.¹⁸ As in *Night-song* with Charlie Parker, here one cannot help but read and see the histories of Baldwin and Wright intertwined with Williams's own. He gives to his Wright-esque character Harry Ames his own experience of being awarded the Prix-de-Rome by the American Academy of Arts and Letters for *Night-song*, only to have the honor revoked when it was discovered he was black (and possibly that he was going to marry a white woman). Ames's marriage to a white woman, Charlotte, recalls Richard and Ellen Wright while revealing the impact of racial politics on the personal. The up and coming writer Marion Dawes who is portrayed as always having his hand out evokes James Baldwin, while showing the uneasy place that homosexuality (also implied in the case of Harry Ames) has in Williams's novelistic world where the term "faggot" is used to designate gay men (137). There is a scene where Dawes says to Ames that the son must slay the father, a statement credited to Baldwin (217).¹⁹ Other real-life personages weave in and out of the work, a character suggesting Martin Luther King, Jr. who is criticized for being a race leader chosen for, not by black people, and a patron who facilitates Max's career, Granville Bryant, described as the "Great White Father" (39) very reminiscent of Carl Van Vechten.²⁰ Max works as speechwriter for a president strongly modeled on John F. Kennedy who sacrifices equal rights for blacks to gain southern support. The novel also examines changing black American perceptions of Africa through its treatment of African leaders who rode to power promising to break European colonial control only to internalize the same capitalistic and race values of their former oppressors.

The Man Who Cried I Am is organized by place, its chapters titled after the cities that spark Max's memories as he recalls his life as first a poorly paid writer, then a novelist seeking to do in literature what Charlie Parker is doing in jazz, then a talented but token journalist, and ultimately the head of a news magazine bureau office. The in-between points of his life are

designated as “en route to.” Narrative form replicates jazz’s recapitulation by taking central motifs and “replaying” them at different points in different forms. Williams has said that the traditional novel form is akin to a house with four corners, not suited to the multidimensional narrative he sought to create. He envisioned himself as part of a generation of black writers – Clarence Major and William Melvin Kelley – who were breaking the form and experimenting with new modes of storytelling (“Novelist” 64).

Both Ames and Reddick become revolutionary figures as they expose the King Alfred plan, a government-sponsored international plot designed to contain and eliminate black people. The plot line is in keeping with the growing black mistrust and anger contemporaneous to Williams’s composition, and these elements gain a presence in the retributive imagery in his later works. *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* (1969) is written against the history of black churches being bombed and black youth killed by white police. The protagonist Gene Browning, mild-mannered and holding a PhD, contemplates the ineffectiveness of black gradualism and commissions a hit on a policeman who has recently killed a black youth. He approaches an ex-Don from the Italian mafia and through him hires an assassin. Browning’s act is the start of a civil war, one the novel implies is the only means of achieving black equality. It incorporates the revenge fantasy Williams sees as a trait in much of black writing: “Revenge, racial redemption, and release from white oppression in all its forms seem to be almost mythic urges for several black writers ... I like to think that my own novels *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* (1969) and, to a lesser extent, *Jacob’s Ladder* (1987) are within this tradition” (foreword, *Black Empire*, xv). *Jacob’s Ladder* through its protagonist, an African American military attaché, warns about the prospect of racial revenge through the consequences of an African nation attaining nuclear capabilities. Though not a supporter of separatist or nationalist views, Williams more and more uses extremism for cautionary effect, and nowhere is this more evident than in *Captain Blackman* (1972). Here time travel traces the experience of black soldiers from the Revolutionary to Vietnam Wars, and hallucinatory dreamscapes consider injustice. When the novel opens, Blackman is in the midst of the Vietnam War, attempting to school Afro-sporting dashiki-wearing soldiers under his charge about black military history. Once he is wounded and trapped by the Viet Cong, his imaginings mix historical fact and place to convey African Americans at war with both the enemies and the racism of the United States.

Williams was not alone in expressing growing black American disaffection through radical characters and plots in fiction. Sam Greenlee’s *The*

Spook Who Sat by the Door (1969) draws upon its author's own experiences as a United States Information Agency (USIA) officer for the State Department and alludes to the popular Ian Flemming James Bond series, replacing the potent figure of a white British spy with an African American man who fights to nullify forced societal impotency. Its main character Dan Freeman is one of twenty-three black men selected to integrate the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Rather than being a move toward greater equality, the move is actually the brainchild of a desperate politician who devises it only to secure the black vote he needs to win reelection. Freeman, however, succeeds and goes on to subvert the very institution that has provided his training. When he resigns from the CIA, he takes these skills to his old South Side Chicago neighborhood where he observes a gang called the Cobras who he feels has revolutionary potential. He mentors them, and they set in motion the revolution Freeman envisions but does not live to see.

Written while Greenlee resided in Greece in 1966, *Spook* is fantasy and wish fulfillment, written at a time when black revolutionary fervor is at its height. Having difficulty finding an American publisher, it first appeared in England. Its title at once refers to the pejorative for a black person, tokenism, a spy, and is a synonym of the verb fear. Filled with guides to robbing banks, armories, and building a Molotov cocktail, the novel was criticized as a manual for revolutionaries. The movie that came out of its adaptation was pulled from the theatre after a brief box office run. For its author it represented the desire of young black men to turn the tables on the society that devalued them.²¹ Not many have a biography that reads writer, film producer, and diplomat, and while these all describe Greenlee's life, they also describe the sources of his novels' aesthetics. *Spook* and his second work, the eerily prescient *Baghdad Blues* (1976), the story of Chicagoan Dave Burrell, a special agent fluent in Arabic yet still refused service at a Virginia drugstore when entering with his white colleagues, seamlessly blend satire and the popular spy thriller. Both novels shed light on the hypocrisy of a Cold War America desiring to stem the tide of pro-communist feelings while mired in its own racism.

The masculine worldviews of the foregoing novels are evident. As has been frequently noted, the worldviews of the Black Arts and Power movements stressed manhood, and not all proponents of this emphasis were men.²² At the time, Sonia Sanchez penned a poem "Queens of the Universe," that asserts that the job of black women is to "deal with" a country that "crackerized" and "colonized us" but they must do so "under the direction of blk/men" (29). The desire to end inequality did not always

include the inequality between black men and women. Abbey Lincoln would query “Who Will Revere the Black Woman?” and Louise Moore, Vice President of the Domestic Personal Services Workers, in “Black Men vs. Black Women” would call for black women to use “guerilla warfare” to undermine the exclusionary tactics of black nationalist vision. Some characterized the writing style of Carlene Hatcher Polite as tantamount to guerilla warfare, particularly in its head-on engagement of black sexism and its effect on female psyche.

In *The Flagellants* (1966), Jimson and Ideal are the allegorically named main characters: he, after a potentially toxic weed also called the Devil’s Snare that is used both to heal and to create hallucinations; she, after something intangible, always sought, rarely attained. Living in Greenwich Village in a city completely indifferent to them, they engage in Socratic dialogues in which the reader learns more about them than they do about themselves. At times accusatory, at times analytical, at times violent, their conversations are written in stream of consciousness revelation that entraps the reader in the flagellant dynamic that is Ideal and Jimson. The language combines the academy and the street. Polite’s sentences are looping, containing dissonant metaphors that perfectly capture the self-defeating cycle in which the couple places themselves. The plot is simple; it begins with Ideal, through flashbacks, reflecting on her life in the Bottom. She recalls her great-grandmother’s admonition (as well as the old woman’s wonderment that anyone could be expected to live up to an ideal) to always stand tall. Most of the novel shows her inability to do so in her present, as she is locked in a self-degrading spiral with her lover. Each attempts to achieve their higher self; each blames the other as being what hinders them from doing so. The drunken back and forth as they quarrel about his lack of employment, her emasculation, their mutual infidelities, perversely makes each feel alive, vindicated, human.

The accusations between Ideal and Jimson comment upon the larger issues of black interpersonal relationships gaining traction in 1960s–1970s discourse. They discuss the figure of the black matriarch, made a household image by the Moynihan Report, and how, as a black woman, Ideal recapitulates the stereotype. The impact of black male phallic power and the idealized white female on black female self-image surrounds every argument. *The Flagellants* does not offer a direct critique of race history, but rather a vivid illustration of the personal costs of this history. Through Jimson and Ideal every debate of the Black Power era is personalized, and in particular the place of the black woman in relationship to black men. While showing the difficulty of the couple finding a healthy way of loving,

the novel suggests that black people face the same challenge in finding a healthy way to love themselves and counter the societal myths engendering self-hate. Some felt Polite's focus only on a black woman trying to understand her own complicity in a self-destructive relationship was self-indulgent, lacking conventional character development and interplays of incident; but such assessments inadvertently highlight Polite's innovation. She creates a modernistic novel that through its own form replicates the confusion of her characters.²³

The Flagellants was composed while Polite was in Paris, a place she migrated to seeking not greater racial freedom but less distraction. Her second novel *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* took Paris as its setting in portraying the inquiry into the death of a black nightclub dancer. The novel attempts, not always successfully, to show the tension between being an artist and being an entertainer, and questions whether spectacle is killing black art. Written ten years after *The Flagellants*, though not as widely recognized, the narrative style recalls rapid-fire spoken word poetry. Polite's novels foreshadow the ways forthcoming black women writers will break the binary of black sexism and white feminism that marginalizes black women.

Black novels written through the 1960s and 1970s were composed against increasing black engagement with international politics. The 1955 conference of African and Asian nations held in Bandung, Indonesia, gave voice to a broad condemnation of colonialist and imperialist practices, and this condemnation resonated with blacks in the United States. Then named Cassius Clay, Muhammad Ali's conscientious objection to army induction vivified ethical questions as to whether black soldiers should fight other people of color in a "white man's" war. *The Crisis*, *Freedomways*, and even the more broadly circulated *Ebony* covered liberation movements in Africa and the Caribbean. When in 1959 a visiting Fidel Castro, mistreated by more than one hotel in downtown Manhattan, moved his delegation to the Teresa Hotel in Harlem, the global reach of activism for social equality manifested itself in very concrete ways. His presence there brought home to many black Americans that their struggle for freedom was part of a broader international one.²⁴ In less than ten years, Egyptian president Gamel Abdel Nasser (who visited Castro while the latter was in Harlem) ended British control of the Suez Canal; the Congo achieved liberty from France; and Jomo Kenyatta and the Mau Mau struggled against the British for Kenyan independence. The ongoing Algerian war for independence and continued anti-apartheid activism influenced black ideas, and discourses of black American liberation referenced the speeches of Patrice Lumumba,

Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro. Martin Luther King, Jr., the embodiment of the Civil Rights Movement's established guard, observed that "violence is as wrong in Hanoi as it is in Harlem" (King n. pag.). Black activist philosophies had gone abroad. In addition to expatriates in Europe, a repatriate community of writers and artists formed in Accra, Ghana. Their vision for a new United States was decidedly Pan African, and their rallying cry was "A Mali in Mississippi; a Ghana in Georgia."

When Ghana gained its independence under Kwame Nkrumah in 1957, and when he offered citizenship to W. E. B. DuBois in 1961, the lure of Ghana proved irresistible to a generation for whom repatriation replaced freedom rides and participation in building the infrastructure of a recently liberated African nation replaced sit-ins. An overview of this community shows it to be a mix of activists agitating for international justice. They were artists, sociologists, and, of course novelists. Much like Harlem during the New Negro Renaissance, post-colonial Gold Coast, renamed Ghana after an ancient empire that included today's Senegal and Mauritania, was a place to be "theorized," to be "thought" of as a site for rebirth. "We, the Revolutionist Returnees, . . . would sit together over Club beer discussing how we could better serve Ghana, its revolution, and President Nkrumah," writes Maya Angelou, one of the repatriates. "Time was a clock being wound too tight, and we were furiously trying to be present in each giddy moment" (78).

This community of Afros as they were called hosted Malcolm X, Louis Armstrong, and Che Guevara as visiting guests. The unofficial president of the community was novelist Julian Mayfield. After 1954 Mayfield spent much of his time writing while living in Puerto Rico, the homeland of his wife, Ana Livia Cordero who would later establish a women's clinic in Accra and be Du Bois's personal physician. In 1958 he returned to the United States and became part of a coterie of writers having a tremendous impact on 1960s African American literature. One of the central participants in the Harlem Writers Guild, he worked with James Baldwin, John Oliver Killens, Paule Marshall, and Maya Angelou, among others, and published two novels, *The Hit* (1957) and *The Long Night* (1958). An activist and an actor, Mayfield appeared in the Broadway productions of *Lost in the Stars* (1949) and was a member of the Committee for The Negro in Arts which fought discrimination in the theatre. Mayfield became involved in the armed defense movement started by Robert Williams, and along with Amiri Baraka and John Henrik Clarke he arranged for the smuggling of weapons to Williams in Monroe, North Carolina.²⁵ Wanted by officials for his involvement, Mayfield left the United States and ultimately settled

in Ghana where Nkrumah appointed him press secretariat and editor of *The African Economist*.

Much of the writing produced in Ghana was autobiographical – Ed Smith’s *Where To Black Man* (1967), Leslie Alexander Lacy’s *Rise and Fall of a Proper Negro* (1970), Maya Angelou’s *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1991), and Pauli Murray’s *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* (1987) – and were written in hindsight. Though its duration was short, 1961–1966 when Nkrumah was ousted, and its output modest, it did for novelists of a new generation what Paris had done for an earlier one: gave them the knowledge that United States was not the global center. It provided a powerful draw for modern discontents seeking a model for the new black world they sought to build, and it personified the philosophical change in black American perspectives moving beyond the traditional civil rights paradigms. Ghana embodied a black agency that fit perfectly with the budding “black is beautiful” moment of the 1960s that freed many black Americans from internalizations of inferiority.

Clarence Major recalls telling Ralph Ellison, “I’m doing a piece on the black novel and you’re in it.” Ellison’s response was, “but I’m a Negro” (*Dark and Feeling* 22). The humorous exchange illuminates a shift in conceptions of identity over the score beginning in the 1960s. For many, riots in cities as geographically varied as Newark, New Jersey; Buffalo, New York; Detroit, Michigan, and Tampa, Florida, fostered dissatisfaction with what the term Negro signified. A growing awareness of international anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist initiatives influenced people to call themselves Afro-American or black. Novels of the 1960s–1970s captured the turmoil of this era and its major shifts in domestic and international affairs. While they heavily engaged politics, they did so through far more artistic means than has generally been acknowledged. Their dissonant forms were perfectly in keeping with social expressions of desperation, anger, and futility and signaled that black writing no longer had to carry what Toni Morrison called the burden of other people’s social expectations, no longer had to work out someone else’s agenda (“Interview” 455). The only agenda of consequence was a black one marking out the space for exploring new cultural meanings.

In a gesture reminiscent of Du Bois’s 1926 “The Negro in Art – How Shall He Be Portrayed: A Symposium” published in *The Crisis*, Larry Neal drafted a “Black Writer Questionnaire” to appear in *Negro Digest*. The questions it posed to writers moved beyond Du Bois’s attempt to characterize how and by whom blacks should be portrayed in literature, and instead

stressed introspection on the way the American literary canon impacted black psyche. Among Neal's questions were "Which books, which were 'required' reading in high school or college, failed to impress you most?"; "If *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* were 'required' reading in school, do you recall having negative reactions to the novels?"; and "At what point in your educational career were you introduced to Negro History?" (LNP 7, 14). Neal's query was exemplary of an attitudinal shift as concern for how blacks were perceived was replaced by concern for how they perceived themselves.

The 1960s–1970s lay the groundwork for sweeping changes in how black history and culture were understood. Many black studies programs were founded during this period and encouraged the institutional recognition of black creative work. The stage was set for rethinking college curricula and publishing criteria as a body of scholars and writers emerged to challenge the humanities to look beyond western traditions.

It is interesting that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, an era in which the terms non-essentialism, hybridity, and post-racial, are ever-more present in cultural discourse, there is has been a renewed interest in a period arguing for a dedicated cultural space for blackness. Hip-hop artists cite Amiri Baraka as a progenitor and channel the presence of Toni Morrison.²⁶ The resurgence of black arts iconography and thought is perhaps testament to the continued frustration over unchanging social practice and the enduring desire for validation of racial identity. A black worldview might call deeply to those still seeking a philosophy through which modern blackness might function.