

DIVISIONS OF A DIFFERENT VEIN: EXPRESSIONS OF AFRICAN AFFINITY
IN AFRO-CARIBBEAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN POETRY

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines whether Afro-Caribbean poets of the English-speaking West Indies and black American poets express differences in their sense of Africa and of being African-descended, and, if so, what the nature of those differences might be. Section I constitutes a brief overview of the slave histories in both regions, so as to suggest some political and sociological bases for the divergent literary expressions of Africa that might emerge. Sections II and III explore a range of written and oral poems, from both regions, that have Africa as a theme or a central reference. In these sections, the pattern that emerges is that West Indian poets generally employ strong and concrete topographical, political, religious and historical images of Africa, and increasingly, over the course of the twentieth century, accept and incorporate the West African component of their racial heritage, whereas black American poets show a vague sense of Africa as a place, refer more often to North Africa (and specifically Pharaohic Egypt, via parallels between the Mosaic era of the Old Testament and the American slave period) than to West African, and, overall, only connect their experiences of being “black” in America explicitly to their West African origins at a couple of points in their poetic history—during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Power era of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The conclusion suggests that acknowledging and understanding these poetic divergences, as well as the attendant and underlying historical and social divergences, might help ease the tensions that are currently mounting between the black American and West Indian peoples.

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Introduction

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"Poets should study their poems."—Martin X, "Proverbs"¹

Although the bulk of this paper will comprise readings of selected poems about Africa by African-American writers and Afro-Caribbean writers from the former British West Indies, the original impetus for it lay well outside the domain of poetry, in experiences and observations that brought to my attention the fact that African-descended Americans and Caribbeans often have difficulty getting along. I noticed this dynamic first in my own problematic encounters with various West Indians, as a person whose primary culture is black America (though I am also of Scottish, Irish, Dutch, Cherokee and Creek lineage, and hold Canadian citizenship as well as American), but I soon learned that my experiences were shared by my black American-descended friends and colleagues, as well as the black Americans with whom I became acquainted in my years as a writer on NBA basketball and PGA golf. That such a range of black Americans seemed to have more or less antagonistic interactions with Afro-Caribbeans and, as much to the point, continued to have interactions at all, suggested to me that a strong attraction mechanism and an even stronger repulsion mechanism were at work in this social relationship as a whole.

The simplest accounting is that we are drawn to each other by visual identification and

¹ Gwendolyn Brooks, ed. *A Broadside Treasury* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1971) 155.

repelled from each other by fundamental incompatibilities. While this encapsulation is probably accurate enough in essence, it is unsatisfactory on a number of counts. To start with, it doesn't explore the basis or implications of the visual identification, which to my knowledge is predicated on the perception that we share a racial category or heritage (as I hope to make clear in this paper, the word "category" better represents the American conception of race, the word "heritage" the Caribbean) and which in turn raises the largely unexamined assumption that we share a number of largely undefined characteristics and/or experiences. Nor does it explain the nature or extent of the incompatibilities. At least as importantly, it fails to suggest a resolution to the problem. Though there is, to my mind, no inherent reason for black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans to learn to like each other, I feel that inasmuch as the dissension between us is a symptom and signifier of each population's internal wounds and struggles, we must for our own sakes first acknowledge and then address it. And inasmuch as these issues of identity are not unique to us but are shared, in various configurations, by countless other cultural and racial groups, it is important that we discuss and try to understand them.

The enormous racial freight of black-white relationships, and therefore black-black relationships, in America, has undoubtedly contributed to the discourse-chill on this continent regarding inter- and intra-black dynamics. In the ostensibly safer sphere of economics, however, scholars have been examining monetary causes of the American-Caribbean dissension, and usually drawing some tentative social inferences, since Thomas Sowell noted in a vanguard 1978 essay that West Indian immigrants to the U.S. make more money and achieve higher social status than do native-born American blacks and further speculated that the ultimate source of the disparity might be that "slavery in the West Indies was qualitatively different from the U.S.

case[,] which resulted in a less psychologically crushing burden for West Indians."² Using Sowell's findings as a springboard, a number of economists have delved into the area: Matthijs Kalmijn, for instance, wrote an article on the subject for the journal *Social Forces* in 1996;³ Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro published a book about it in 1997;⁴ and UCLA Ph.D candidate Jason DeFay is currently writing his dissertation on the socioeconomic status of a specific set of Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the Southern California area.⁵

More and more, though, the matter is spilling into other spheres of discourse in the United States, both public and academic-cultural, literary, philosophical and historical forums. Behind this overspill lies a great increase in contact between the two groups since the 1990s, when West Indians began immigrating to the United States by the hundreds of thousands (especially Jamaicans to New York: there are now more than half a million Jamaicans living in New York City alone). Malcolm Gladwell, a Jamaican who lived in Ontario for much of his life before moving to New York, notes the nature of the rub quite baldly in his 1996 *New Yorker* article "Black Like Them": "They [Jamaican blacks] make substantially more money than American blacks. They live in better neighbourhoods. Their families are stronger."⁶ He also

² Thomas Sowell, "Three Black Histories" in *Essays and Data on American Ethnic Groups*, T. Sowell and L. Collins eds. (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 1978) 76.

³ Matthijs Kalmijn, "The Socioeconomic Assimilation of Caribbean Blacks." *Social Forces* 74 (1996): 911-930

⁴ Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁵ Jason DeFay, "The Garifuna Community of Los Angeles: Ethnicity, Economic Success and Political Organization." Diss prospectus. U of California at San Diego. 1999. <<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/groups/scr/defay.htm>.>

⁶ Gladwell 75.

notes the potential of the socioeconomic disparity to suggest that American blacks have exaggerated, if not invented, the oppression and racism against them. "It is tempting," writes Gladwell, "to use the West Indian story as evidence that discrimination doesn't really exist—as proof that the only thing inner-city African-Americans have to do to be welcomed as warmly as West Indians . . . is to make the necessary cultural adjustments."⁷

Money is not the only source of conflict, though, nor even necessarily the main one. There are problems of deep-rooted attitudes—for instance, as social historian David Lowenthal notes, "To this day British West Indians in the United States stereotype American Negroes as descendants of slaves, in contrast with their own presumed legacy of freedom."⁸ And there are, in concert with these attitudes, vastly different, even antipathetical, philosophies on how to think about, overcome and represent the legacies of slavery and racism with which both groups have struggled—a matter that constitutes the central emotional reality for American blacks and still a very important one for Afro-Caribbeans, and about which both groups have passionate feelings. To put it in reduced terms, the philosophical rift (which, again, is far from unique to members of the African diaspora) is basically between the doctrines of self-reliance, a strong work ethic and accommodationism on the one hand and political and legal redress on the other. In black cultural studies this split is known as the "Booker T.-W.E.B." division, after famous 20th-century accommodationist Booker T. Washington and lawyer-activist William Edward Burghardt DuBois. The philosophical rift began as an active feud between the two men in the early 1900s,

⁷ Gladwell 78.

⁸ David Lowenthal, *West Indian Societies* (London: Oxford UP, 1972) 45.

and though, as French scholar Jean Wagner notes, Washington's approach "was on the decline even before the death of its author in 1915,"⁹ his line of rhetoric remained a cover for white Americans' denial of their own oppressive and racist attitudes, as well as becoming a major source of dissension between middle- and working-class American blacks during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Even at mid-century the debate still had enough currency that Dudley Randall's 1948 satiric verse about it became his most-anthologized poem:

"It seems to me," said Booker T.,
 "It shows a might lot of cheek
 To study chemistry and Greek
 When Mister Charlie needs a hand
 To hoe the cotton on his land
 And when Miss Ann looks for a cook,
 Why stick your nose inside a book?"

.....

"I don't agree," said W.E.B.
 "For what can poverty avail
 If dignity and justice fail?"

.....

Speak soft, and try your little plan,
 But as for me, I'll be a man."

"It seems to me," said Booker T.—

"I don't agree,"
 Said W.E.B.¹⁰

It is important to note briefly at this point a matter on which I shall expand later: since the freed

⁹ Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States* (Chicago: U of Illinois P) 151.

¹⁰ Dudley Randall, "Booker T. and W.E.B." *Modern and Contemporary Afro-American Poetry*, ed. Bernard Bell (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1972) 69-70.

West Indian slaves and successive generations on most islands in the British West Indies formed the racial majority and, fairly quickly, the dominant society, the credo of a strong work ethic and conscious social self-betterment was not attached, as it was in the United States, to accommodating (i.e., forgiving, learning to co-exist with, and accepting the continued discrimination of) a surrounding white population. Thus the "get over it and get on with it" type of philosophy was not only more practical but far less psychologically damaging for West Indians than for black Americans, many of whom soon agreed with W.E.B. DuBois' that white laws and attitudes constituted serious, perhaps insurmountable, obstacles to their social and economic advancement. One of the misunderstandings that creates the most acrimony between black American and West Indian individuals, in my experience, is that West Indians often do not take into account the restricted scope for self-determination that black Americans had in the immediate post-emancipation period (and which still constrains them today), and so perceive black Americans to be lazy or lacking in self-reliance.

The grievances between black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans are by no means unidirectional from American to Caribbean, however. West Indian peoples suffer financial, political and cultural damage at the hands of American economic imperialist policy on a scale that trivializes the wage gap between first-generation Jamaican-Americans and native-born American blacks. However oppressed and dispossessed African-Americans may be, they are, after all, citizens of the most powerful country in the world and participants in its destructive system of consumerism and materialism. During a 1998 interview with me for a magazine article, Trinidadian-Canadian filmmaker Selwyn Jacob related his experiences with black Americans at the African Film Festival, where their response to African countries' attempts to

preserve their own cultural and cinematic industries amounted to, "Hollywood is the best at making films: why don't you just let us do it?"¹¹ In short, West Indian grievances echo the grievances of many populations in many countries around the world: they perceive the United States and its citizenry to be imperialistic, xenophobic and condescending. Hence while Afro-Caribbeans tend in general to be drawn to black Americans as blacks, they tend to feel hostility toward them as Americans.

For both groups, then, contact with each other creates a pull between racial and regional identity; questions of allegiance and representation, already problematic, reach new levels of entanglement. The power disparities behind the conflict strike a chiasmatic pattern in the two groups' current terms of self-definition: for African-Americans, the sign of nationality on the right hand of the hyphen expresses their power, the racial qualifier on the left the source of disempowerment; for Afro-Caribbeans, social dominance lies in the indicator of race on the left hand of the hyphen, and regional impoverishment on the right. Although it is certainly fruitless and probably destructive to speculate whether socially oppressed black Americans or economically oppressed West Indians have it worse, it is worth noting that the converse side of these power relations—black Americans' citizenship in a rich and globally powerful country and Afro-Caribbeans' social and racial domination in their own region—provides the platform for mutual condescension, stoked by mutual incomprehension.

The dissension between black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, with all the important implications of their causes and effects, has been little studied in literary fields. Only very latterly

¹¹ See Pamela Swanigan, "Choosing the Road Taken," *New Trails*, Spr.-Sum 1998: 20-21

have literary academics begun to realize that, as post-colonial theorist Sneja Gunew writes, "[traditional] areas of study are now crossed by the tensions between differences *within* [the questions of cultural minorities and diaspora], . . . which to some extent render such [previous] models irrelevant."¹² In 1996, leading black cultural studies scholar Houston A. Baker, Jr., similarly noted that "identities—even 'black' and 'postcolonial' themselves—begin to fail under more finely nuanced social analyses."¹³ These belated recognitions of fairly self-evident distinctions—and especially Baker's suggestion that dismantling such a baldly monolithic term as "black" amounts to introducing "nuance"—reflect, I think, that the fields of post-colonial, minority, diasporic and "world" literary studies, in their attempts to construct counterhistories to traditional histories, began at a point when the histories they were countering still lumped black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans together as products of "New World slavery." The undifferentiated sociological and historical views began to receive correction only slowly, around 1950,¹⁴ and (comparative studies by such scholars as Orlando Patterson and Sidney Mintz notwithstanding) to this day have not been fully rehabilitated.

The blanket historical view found its way, naturally, into the realm of literary academia, expressing itself in such statements as those of Jean Wagner—"Negroes from North and South, from the United States, the West Indies, and Africa learned in close proximity that the selfsame

¹² Sneja Gunew, "Hauntings by Otherness: Theory's Home, Post-Colonial Displacements, and the Future of Comparative Literature," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 22 (1995): 401.

¹³ Houston A. Baker, Jr. Foreword. *British Black Cultural Studies*, eds. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara and Ruth H. Lindeborg (Chicago: U of Chicago P) 7.

¹⁴ See Sidney Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (Chicago: Aldine, 1974) 67.

destiny ruled over them all"¹⁵—and Lloyd Brown: "Cultural and psychological similarities link all Blacks who are in contact with the white world."¹⁶ In poetic circles, undifferentiated tomes such as *3000 Years of Black Poetry*, *Poetry of the Negro*, and *The New Black Poetry* reinforced the idea that all people of African origin automatically produced literature of sufficient similarity that anthologizing them together was a matter of common sense.

In North America and Britain, and to a lesser extent in the West Indies, revisions made within historical circles transferred to cultural spheres either not at all or too late to provide the first wave of counternarratives with a realistic incorporation of the "tensions between and differences *within*" diasporic groups. It must be said, as well, that the newer fields of literary studies show a remarkable resistance to what might be termed "inter-other" distinctions and an equally remarkable rubrical plasticity towards the apparent end of maintaining former confluences of non-European peoples and cultural productions. No sooner had the categories of "Commonwealth studies" and "post-colonialism" served to separate Caribbean people from black Americans than its modification into "minority literature" re-included them—even while retaining Afro-Caribbean writers, who are by far the racial majority on most islands of the former British West Indies, under such ingenious rationales such as Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd's contention that the concept of "minority" extends to any group that has been marginalized and has had to struggle against a dominant culture (as a further instance, the Indian

¹⁵ Wagner 155

¹⁶ Lloyd Brown in *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Stewart Brown (Brigend, Mid Glamorgan, Wales: seren press, 1995) 193.

population of India).¹⁷ Self-defeatingly broad categories such as “world literature” and “ethnic fiction” continue to bend conceptual boundaries in such a manner as to throw black Americans and African-descended Caribbeans together by default.

The failure of literary scholars to recognize significant lines of cultural and sociological divergence within and between peoples who have historically been seen as similar or identical not only leads to deficiencies of understanding that are dismaying on principle, but also leaves us ill-prepared to comment on those divergences when they erupt in the cultural arena—as they did, for instance, in Toronto in 1992, when a group of Caribbean-Canadians (overwhelmingly of Jamaican provenance) tried to close down Livent’s Toronto production of the 1927 American musical *Show Boat*. This event was the most overt manifestation of antagonism between Caribbeans and black Americans in North America to date, and yet the extensive coverage it received—not only from Toronto-area papers but from American publications such as *Newsweek*, the *New Yorker*, *Time*, *Variety*, *Billboard*, and the *New York Times*—almost entirely overlooked or misunderstood the debate it fomented between the black American and Carib-Canadian communities, instead focussing on the perceived rift between blacks and Jews (which is actually a rift between black *Americans* and Jews, and is itself poorly understood) that was underlined when one member of the Coalition to Stop *Show Boat* referred in a negative way to the Jewish ancestry of the musical’s writers and of Livent head Garth Drabinsky. Though a number of Canadian and American publications commented on the fact that black *Americans* had never mounted such a vehement protest against the long-controversial *Show Boat* as this group of

¹⁷ Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock, eds., *Interviews with Writers of the Postcolonial World* (Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi P, 1992) 18.

Jamaican-Canadians was, they clearly didn't know exactly what to make of it. That the Afro-Caribbean protesters might be charged with appropriating black American history as much as *Show Boat*'s Jewish writers and producers seemed not to occur to them.

The *Show Boat* imbroglio seemed to me to highlight two problematic attitudes on the part of Jamaican-Canadians: the assumption that they were entitled to protest representations of a very specifically American experience, presumably on the basis of sharing racial provenance, and their ongoing, not-so-tacit rebuke of black Americans for failing to triumph over their circumstances as slave descendants had on the Caribbean islands. In her book about the experience, *Showing Grit: Showboating North of the 49th Parallel*, Stop *Show Boat* Coalition member M. Nourbese Philip claims legitimacy for the Canadian-Caribbean protest both because any challenge to the protest would stem from "an essentially colonial approach to the debate [that] implies that the United States and what happens there is the standard"¹⁸ and because

[W]hile American images like the 'coon' the 'mammy' and the 'buck' were not a part of Caribbean cultural life, Caribbean people understand only too well what *Show Boat* is all about; the fact that their history is not that of American Blacks is, in no way, [sic] a bar to their understanding the deeply racist nature of the work, hence their opposition to its message.¹⁹

This argument seems to me to claim simultaneously that Africa-Americans and Afro-Caribbean are fundamentally different because of separate histories and despite a common race, and that they are fundamentally the same because of a common race and despite separate histories;

¹⁸ M. Nourbese Philip, *Showing Grit: Showboating North of the 49th Parallel*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pouli Publications, 1993) 18.

¹⁹ Nourbese Philip 18.

Nourbese Philip thus would seem to protest both against black Americans and on their behalf. In her preface to the second edition of *Showing Grit*, she expresses dismay that her attempts at racial consciousness-raising were received with hostility by some black people, especially by non-West Indians, and professes nothing but the best intentions in the matter. That what Nourbese Philip apparently meant as a show of solidarity and education came across as chastisement and condescension indicates how far the animosity between black Americans and West Indians has spread and how deep the roots of the incompatibility are.

At this juncture in academic and public discourse, then, it seems clear that the historical and continuing overemphasis of commonality between African-descended Americans and Caribbeans is a major aggravating factor in their relationship, in that it not only plays a part in bringing them together in the first place but is central in creating expectations of compatibility that do not bear out. White dominant society paved the way for the overemphasis, of course, through its longstanding arrogation of race as the metacategory of identity (a position it still holds in the United States, if perhaps nowhere else in the world) and also through what Simon Gikandi aptly named "the colonial vision . . . [which] insists on the fixation of the identity of the dominated."²⁰ (As I have noted above, this insistence seems to have been adopted by the postcolonial vision as well.) However, both black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans contribute to the overemphasis, in different ways: West Indians with their strong tendency toward pan-Africanist philosophies and attendant conflations of the "Afrospora" (as Nourbese Philip terms it), and Americans through their incorrigible habit of projecting their own problems, perceptions

²⁰ Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992) 17.

and definitions on people from other cultures or nationalities. Since in the U.S. the concepts of "blackness," race and origin have been bound tightly together by a binarized view of black-white racial identities and a systemic hyper-racialization that, as per the 200-year-old "one-drop" rule, defines as black all those with any amount of proveable African ancestry,²¹ black Americans impose the label "black" on West Indians who would never define themselves as such,²² and West Indians, in turn, see as "Afrosporic" black Americans who have no real sense of being African-descended.

Poetry is, in many ways, an ideal forum through which to confirm and reinforce the historical revisions that have heretofore failed to make their way to the literary sphere. Its preservative properties have been long-recognized, and though for the past half-millennium these properties have been applied mostly to aesthetic qualities, their role in historical documentation and nation-building preceded and survive their aesthetic uses: for instance, W.B. Yeats's "Easter 1916" has immortalized and promoted the Irish rebellion of that date as permanently as Shakespeare's Sonnet 55 ("Not marbles, nor the gilded monuments . . .") has the unnamed subject of that poem. Poetry also has the enormous advantage of often having been written by the people it was written about. In circumstances such as those of black Americans and West Indians, where traditional historicity has been constructed by an alien and hostile people with a vested interest in distortion and defamation, this is an invaluable quality.

²¹ From around the mid-1700s to the beginning of the 1980s, laws in most American states held that a person with any traceable amount of African ancestry was legally black and subject to the attendant penalties and privileges of that designation. In 1982, a challenge in the Louisiana State court by a citizen who was 1/256ths black led to that state changing its definitions of "black" to any person 1/32nd black or more. With a few exceptions, variations on the "one-drop" rule hold throughout the United States today. For specifics, see Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You?* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997) and F. James Davis, *Who Is Black?* (University Park, PA: U of Penn State P, 1991), among others.

²² See, for instance, Gladwell 75.

Unfortunately, because of the innately politicized nature of black American and Afro-Caribbean history, the poetry (and the cultural output in general) of these two groups has itself been subjected to a particularly heavy imposition of political agendas and historical definitions and the inevitable interpretive distortions therefrom. Houston A. Baker, Jr., illuminates the saturation of politics into ostensibly non-political fields when he writes that "to be asked . . . to articulate . . . remedies for black teenage pregnancy, and to give the lowdown on Jesse Jackson's candidacy for the U.S. presidency . . . is an unfair burden for scholars of Afro-American literary criticism"²³—and then admits that a sense of responsibility usually compels him to engage in such debates anyway. These impositions must be held partly responsible for the continued aggregation of two sets of literature (and multiple subsets) that long ago achieved complete individuation. For example, in the 1930s and '40s, when poetry of the British West Indies started coming into its own, major political movements such as Negritude, black nationalism and pan-Africanism promptly cast a blanket over the literary output of the African diaspora. In the ensuing two decades, when the global status of Caribbean poets such as Derek Walcott and Edward Kamau Brathwaite had begun to consolidate a truly distinct West Indian poetic, the Black Power movement and the influence of militant poets like Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) eclipsed the new identity with a crude, all-enveloping political rhetoric.

In his 1992 Nobel lecture "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," Derek Walcott remarks on how sociopolitical projections and preconceptions can distort readings of art and how susceptible the cultural productions of heavily historicized regions are to this type of distortion.

²³ Michael Berube, "Hybridity in the Center: An Interview with Houston A. Baker," *African American Review* 26 (1992): 547-64.

He begins the lecture by describing his experience of watching a group of Indian-Trinidadians enact the Hindu epic *Ramleela*. Partway through the production, he realizes that he has been viewing the pageant "through a visual echo of History—the cane fields, indenture . . . when all around me there was quite the opposite: a delight of conviction, not loss."²⁴ However, this rent in the obscuring veil of official history shows Walcott more than the persistence of colonial vision: it also convinces him that art might be used to restore the past to the Caribbean peoples, if only artistic output could be viewed *as* part of a true history rather than *through* a false one.

For this reason and all those before it, I feel it important that works of scholarship that involve both black American and Afro-Caribbean histories or cultures should concentrate on (or at least clearly acknowledge) differentiations and distinctions, rather than assuming or focussing on commonalities, and that literary academics should take advantage of new discoveries and understandings arrived at in the fields of history and sociology, as well as vice versa. To this end, I will be looking at a selection of poems written (and sometimes sung or spoken) by black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans of the English-speaking, across the span of their histories, *as* they express distinguishing elements of that history. Since it seems logical that perspectives on the most recent point of true commonality will best show the degree and trajectory of divergence, I have selected poems that refer, to a greater or lesser extent, to themes of Africa and Africanness.

I admit that in entering this dialectical mode of examination I am more interested in the repairs that poetry might make to history than the damage history may have done to poetry, and

²⁴ Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," <<http://www.nobel.se/laureates/literature-1992-lecture.html>>

the slant of my conclusions lies in that direction. When I first examined the poetry of African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans for historical reflections and clarifications, I found that it not only upheld my sense that the two populations differed sharply in their views of Africa and being African-descended but also illuminated distinctions that I hadn't considered. The main distinction, as it appears in the poetry I have selected, is that within the "double-consciousness" said to typify "postcolonial" groups (and which both African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans do generally demonstrate, although in my opinion African-Americans cannot be considered "colonial" by any definition by which they are also "post"), there appear to be very different types of doubleness. In Afro-Caribbeans it appears as multiplicity, with African and English legacies serving as the two main components of identity. Without meaning to downplay the destructive effects of slavery, imperialism, racism and English domination on Afro-Caribbean society, I may observe that the poetry of that region shows, especially in the past 50 or 60 years, a great amount of freedom of identity along this racial and cultural continuum. By contrast, African-American double-consciousness is almost entirely bound up in dilemma, resulting in a virtual paralysis of identity as expressed in the poetry. What evolution does transpire in poetry written by American blacks is found in the emotional and intellectual response to their various dilemmic situations (the most obvious of which I assume the reader knows, and the less obvious which I shall outline in Sections I and III), rather than in those situations themselves, which have changed very little, in essence, in the past 400 years.

In choosing relationships to and perceptions of Africa and Africanness as my theme, I have exercised an American bias, or at least expressed an American obsession. A more valuable exploration of Afro-Caribbean identity might be carried out through examining West Indians'

relationship to England and English traditions, as these have been arguably greater sticking points than their feelings about African descendancy (as well as, of course, exercising considerable influence over those feelings). The gradual slowing, through the mid- to late 1900s, of what Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston saw as the West Indians' "frantic stampede white-ward"²⁵ was a key turning point in the development of their identity, and that turn away from racial self-loathing and European emulation probably explains the West Indian peoples' ability to embrace the richness of their heritage as well as does the corresponding move toward identifying with Africa *per se*.

The West Indians' initial repudiation of their African descendancy and black Americans' (continued) involuntary embrace of it are, oddly enough, inversely related to their respective senses of Africa (West Africa, specifically) as a real place and as the place of their own origin—a seeming paradox that makes more sense in the light of their historical and social contexts. As the poems I have chosen reflect but do not necessarily explain these contexts, I shall preface my poetic surveys and interpretations with a brief overview of them, paying particular attention to factors in the slave period and immediately thereafter that in my opinion have figured most largely in the spurious conflation of the two populations.

²⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, "Tell My Horse," *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. Ed. Alice Walker (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979) 220.

Section I

Africa in Afro-Caribbean and African-American History: Divergence

For the purposes of this section of my paper, I shall use sociologist Orlando Patterson's definition of slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons."²⁶ I prefer this to the many other available definitions for several reasons: it incorporates what I believe to be crucial sociopsychological factors rather than merely economic or philosophical components; it seems to apply to the greatest number of instances in global and historical societies which the people of those societies themselves define as slavery and to the fewest number where they do not; and I agree with Patterson that the more widely held "property concept" definition does not adequately distinguish between (to use one of his examples) a Barbadian plantation slave and a member of the National Basketball Association or the National Football League.²⁷

As the definition applies to the slavery of African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, I hold certain commonalities to be self-evident. First, that they were mutually taken from West African regions as part of the European slave trade to the Americas in the period between the early 1500s and the mid- to late 1800s; that they shared what at the time was held to be one of the three major racial categories, that of the Negroid; that they were subjected to the horrors and privations of the "middle passage" (the ship route, in the triangular trade pattern, between Africa and the

²⁶ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982) 13.

²⁷ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* 24-26.

Americas) and to a relatively brutal type of supervision once on New World soil; and that, as Orlando Patterson points out, the critical mark of servility in both the West Indies and the United States was hair type rather than, for instance, skin colour, language, caste, religion or economic background, because the slave population was identified visually and "nappy" hair expressed itself genetically more consistently and persistently than skin colour or other physiological distinguishers between the races (nasal-stot height, lip size, skull shape, etc.).²⁸

Beyond these elements, I consider most perceptions of fungibility, and even many of similarity, erroneous. The fact of slavery itself, so frequently cited in public and academic discourse, doesn't necessarily give the two groups any more in common with each other than with others in the 184 societies identified in George P. Murdock's world sample of slavery;²⁹ by the criterion of manumission rates, for instance, the slave-holders of Surinam share more with the Bella Coola slave-holders of northwestern British Columbia than with those of the antebellum South.³⁰

I mention this relatively minor example to break up the monolithic facade of slavery; more fundamental instances are needed to demonstrate that black Americans and West Indian slaves (and their descendants) do not, as Philip Mason puts it in his analysis of inter-Caribbean

²⁸ Although this is observable enough in itself, its anomalous status within global slave practices of slavery may not be so obvious except to those who know that in the majority of slave societies the slaves' heads are/were shaved, where the New World African slaves' were not. For further comparisons, see *Slavery and Social Death* 61-62.

²⁹ This is one of Patterson's main sources of data in *Slavery and Social Death*; see, in particular, the introduction and appendices.

³⁰ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* 271.

social structures, "resemble each other more than they resemble anything else."³¹ Of the many distinctions that exist, I will focus some of the major ones that determined enduring variances in the slaves' sense of being African: specifically, differences in the religious component of their enslavers' motives and cultures; the economic and political nature of the regions in which they were enslaved; the ratio of African to European-descended people, the mortality rates of the slave population; and the social and economic circumstances that the African-descended peoples found themselves in upon emancipation.

The importance of the first of these factors cannot be overestimated, although, perhaps because many historians and literary scholars feel inexpert on (or indifferent to) the subject of religion, it is frequently overlooked, and its implications must be constructed piecemeal from various sources. In his exhaustive study of slave society in Jamaica, *The Sociology of Slavery*, Orlando Patterson notes briefly that "one significant difference between the founding of the American colonies and the West Indies was the fact that the original settlers of the former [i.e., Puritan colonists] were religiously motivated while in the latter the religious motive was almost insignificant."³² Since religion was the dominant English social framework and the main carrier of values, beliefs and attitudes for the entire duration of the slave era in both regions, its pervasiveness in one place and near-absence in the other amounts to a radical divergence in social paradigm. Throughout the slave period in the British West Indies, religion continued to be a negligible factor; evangelists and missionaries were considered part of the abolitionist camp

³¹ Lowenthal vii.

³² Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* (London: Associated University Presses, 1967) 33.

and thus antipathetical to the planters' interests, and the black population wasn't "evangelized" to any degree until after emancipation, when Methodists and Baptists set up so-called "church communities" that were active in transforming the slave-plantation system into a rural-agrarian system of smallholders.³³

Among the effects of the relative lack of religiosity in the British West Indies is that the class system maintained partly by the church institutions in England lost one of its most important props in its island context, and the rigidity of social status that might have kept the slaves or their descendants oppressed and disenfranchised as they were (and are) in the United States never materialized. Even within the slavery period, and increasingly toward the end of the nineteenth century, African-descended people on many of the British-controlled Caribbean islands had a surprising degree of social mobility—which manifested, notably, in black slave-ownership and in the ability to gain career power and prestige for free blacks and coloureds (who at the time of emancipation outnumbered whites on many islands).³⁴

The psychological and cultural ramifications are, ultimately, probably even more significant than the social and economic ones, and there can be no better demonstration of what Afro-Caribbean blacks were spared than in the contrasting situation of American black slaves, who were subjected to the deep and often fanatic Puritanism of their enslavers even when conversion to Christianity meant automatic manumission, and certainly after that period. Robert Bone has summarized some of the religion's fundamental effects in his trenchant analysis of the

³³ See Mintz, ch. 6.

³⁴ Lowenthal 45.

mental state of black American writers:

What accounts for these interlocking planes of experience in the soul of the black poet . . . ? A schizoid tendency in Western culture, which first appeared when the white man decided to evangelize those whom he enslaved. To reduce the black man to the status of a thing, and then to save his soul: such were the contradictory impulses of a culture hopelessly torn between greed and guilt, between its lust for empire and its commitment to Christ.³⁵

We can correspondingly infer a *relative* wholeness in the black Caribbean psyche, and an absence of the religious Christian-Muslim split so evident in black American society, which arose when, as Bone further noted, "the black man's political rebellion . . . [was] accompanied by an assault on Christian values."³⁶

The diametrically different political nature of the polities to which the two sets of slaves were taken also affected in an essential way the development of slave and post-slave societies. The United States was a dominion, with the European majority forming a master-class of increasing size and cohesion; the country exhibited most of the basic constituents of nationhood well before the revolutionary movement of the mid-1700s. The slaves brought to the Southern plantations therefore had to be accommodated into an actively developing national creed, and the various implications and contradictions introduced by their presence became fundamental to the country's collective psychology. Among these were permanent philosophical cracks in American society, a civil war, a mix of denial, guilt and racial binarism, and an intaglio relationship between blacks and whites in America that has proved remarkably intransigent over

³⁵ In Wagner, xiv.

³⁶ In Wagner, xv

the past 400 years.

As much to the point, the large and cohesive European-descended population in the American colonies/states meant that the slaves were surrounded and outnumbered by the enslaving society, in a country whose vastness largely obviated its partition into free and slave states. The slave population reached its highest proportion of the overall Southern population in the 1770s, at around 40 percent; in the country as a whole it never exceeded the 10-percent mark at which the African-American population sits today. As well, more than two-thirds of American slaves worked on stratified cotton and tobacco plantations of around 25 slaves, which further increased both their sense of isolation and their rate of contact with European/white American society.³⁷ Among the many implications of these numbers are that West African cultural retentions were considerably diluted by the amount of non-African contact; that the slaves' post-bellum potential for self-definition and self-determination was severely circumscribed by the proximity, power, and size of the dominant white society; and, not least, that their artistic undertakings were restricted and modified by the need for white permission and approval.

Each of these factors was reversed for the slaves of the British West Indies. Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua, Dominica, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago and the other British-controlled Caribbean islands had been emptied of their endemic peoples, the Arawak and Carib nations (which populations died out under slavery), a century earlier³⁸ and were at the time of the slave trade's inception agricultural and economic outposts rather than settled colonies or dominions.

³⁷ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*. 1949. (New York: Macmillan, 1965) 6-7.

³⁸ Lowenthal 31.

The proportion of the Caribbean populations composed of slaves increased exponentially over the centuries: in Jamaica, from 24 percent in 1658 to 82 percent in 1834; in Barbados, from 24 percent in 1643 to 79 percent in 1810; in Saint Vincent, from 83 percent in 1763 to 95 percent in 1834.³⁹ Only in Bermuda, British Honduras and Trinidad did the proportion of slaves at the time of abolition (43, 42 and 50 percent, respectively) approximate the figure that represented the *height* of the ratio in the South.⁴⁰ As well, sugar plantations were larger and more labour-intensive than cotton plantations, and on the Caribbean islands the slaves usually worked in groups of hundreds, if not thousands.⁴¹ If white presence on the islands was low, on the plantations themselves it was minimal: the "basic and dominating element" in most British West Indian societies was "that of absenteeism,"⁴² With wealthy merchants in England constantly buying out resident smallholders, an estimated nine-tenths of the land in under cultivation in Jamaica, two-thirds in Grenada, and four-fifths in St. Vincent and Tobago were owned by absentee planters.⁴³ As Orlando Patterson writes, "In the absence of a cohesive master-class culture, relations between masters and slaves either lacked authority or were on the verge of losing it."⁴⁴ The effects of such numerical domination created, obviously, very different sociopolitical conditions for the black population of the British West Indies than for those in the

³⁹ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* 359.

⁴⁰ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* 363-65.

⁴¹ Lowenthal ch. 1.

⁴² Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery* 32.

⁴³ Lowenthal 34.

⁴⁴ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* 65.

United States: plantation society tended to mimic the slaves' various West African cultures; a low rate of contact with non-blacks enabled them to retain more African elements, including linguistic patterns and religious beliefs; and after emancipation in 1834, when the 1822 collapse of the sugar trade had already led to the abandonment of many plantations,⁴⁵ the newly freed slaves found themselves largely in charge of their islands.

The degree of African retentions in the U.S. and the British West Indies were strongly affected, as well, by the marked difference in slave mortality rates. Due to the strenuous nature of cane-cutting and the concomitantly high proportion of male slaves bought for such work (along with various other factors), the Caribbean slave populations showed the pattern of natural decrease typical in New World slavery, and the mortality rate, in turn, necessitated a constant influx of African imports.⁴⁶ Thus, while the Caribbean nations possessed less than 20 percent of all slaves in the hemisphere by 1825, they imported more than 40 percent of all slaves brought to the New World.⁴⁷ Ironically, the low level of the West Indian slaves' literal survival dramatically increased what ethnologists call their "African survivals"—that is, the cultural and societal retentions of African traditions.

In the U.S., once again, the reverse was true. The Southern states had the only slave populations in the New World that showed natural increase—and a rate of natural increase, moreover, sufficient to make reproduction the chief source of growth in the American slave

⁴⁵ Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery* 28.

⁴⁶ Frazier 6-7; see also Herbert Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 154-55.

⁴⁷ Lowenthal 42-43.

population.⁴⁸ Accordingly, though Americans imported the smallest percentage of Africans during the European slave trade, by 1825 they had the largest proportion of slaves in the hemisphere. The ramifications were manifold and profound, even beyond the basic political reality that for the British West Indies, the abolition of the slave trade in 1803 meant the imminent extinction of slavery itself (and the necessity of importing indentured servants to meet labour demands), where in the U.S. the 1808 abolition of slave importation merely meant the need to redistribute extant slave populations to the areas of greatest demand (namely, the cotton plantations of the Deep South), as the populations were self-sustaining. To Orlando Patterson, the natural increase in America altered the very nature of slavery, as "the low incidence of manumission and high rate of reproduction obviated the need to repeat the violent 'original accumulation' of slaves."⁴⁹ By the same token, it amplified the repetition of what he terms "natal alienation" (the loss of birthright and blood ties, the informalizing of social unions), as American slaves experienced this alienation, *in situ*, once as slaves and again as the parents of slaves. In this context, Africa receded rapidly as a concrete and meaningful place of origin for American slaves, while in the British West Indies, a specific sense of West Africa was continually being replenished.

By the time of the slaves' respective emancipations—the British West Indians in 1834, Americans during and after the Civil War in the mid-1860s—the African-descended populations in the two regions were thus already on sharply divergent arcs in almost every respect, including

⁴⁸ Frazier 39.

⁴⁹ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* 3.

(perhaps especially) their sense of Africa and their own Africanness. As the racial majority and dominant societies on most of the islands, the black populations of the British West Indies had the latitude to process, explore and develop their dual cultural inheritance relatively free of interference. American ex-slaves and their descendants found themselves in much the same position after emancipation as before, and with much less scope for progress than their West Indian counterparts had. The initial giddiness of being free and able to form larger groups—as manifested in, most notably, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s—gave way within a decade to the realization that the massive Reconstruction-period migration from the rural south to the urban north had done little but replace the plantation with the ghetto, that the white population in the north was essentially as antipathetic as that in the South, and that national hypersensitivity to even the slightest degree of African descendancy continued to obstruct social mobility.

These were some of the historical conditions that set the two African-descended populations, so often conflated with one another, on widely divergent paths from the time they were unloaded from the slave ships, and which show today as a set of distinctions and often glaring discrepancies in their modes of existence. The distinctions in the histories themselves have been arrived at slowly and often incidentally by historians over the past 30 years or so, leaving the vast majority of poetic interpretations of African-American and Afro-Caribbean poetry embedded in a misunderstood context and therefore outdated, as well as erroneously conflated. New historical understandings both aid and are aided by revisiting the poetry of the United States and the West Indies, and readings made with an eye to differentiation may go a small way to countering the assumptions of commonality so damaging in current-day exchanges between black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans.

Section II

Africa in Afro-Caribbean Poetry: Duality

Given the marked differences in their historical circumstances, it shouldn't be surprising that even from their infancy the poetries of African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans diverged in almost every respect. Anthologies of "Negro poetry" or "Black poetry" do their traditions a serious disservice in implying a commonality that exists in literature at least as little as in overall history. At no point in their literary histories, including during the slave era when oral poetry was dominated by work songs in both places, were the poetries of African-America and the Afro-Caribbean interchangeable; indeed, any given poem taken from any place on the time-line could probably be identified, by a reader with a modicum of background knowledge, as emanating from one region or another, with the possible exception of a handful of polemic poetry from the late 1960s and early '70s. Correspondences did exist between larger phases—work songs, dialect writing, protest poetry—but even these usually took different courses or occurred at different junctures. In the slavery period, for instance, the majority of black American work songs took the form of spirituals, whereas in Jamaica, the Barbados and so on, where, as I have noted, religion was a negligible factor, they tended to focus on local events, gossip and rumours, as well as nostalgic yearnings for Africa. Caribbean protest poetry has a more pronounced pan-Africanist slant, as well as largely rural imagery, where the American occupies itself with inner-city and specifically (northern) American issues. And the use of dialect, as we shall see, moved in completely opposite directions in the two regions during the first 50 years of the 20th century. Moreover, individual poems within these phases differ from one another, on a regional basis, in

style, subtext, implied context, implied belief system and content.

I should preface my readings of these selected poems with two caveats. First, I am acutely aware that in referring to "the Caribbean" as if it were a singular entity I am committing the same act of conflation that I decry in other applications throughout this paper. The Caribbean islands are a highly diverse set of polities, even within the subset of the former British West Indies, and the mainland country of Guyana is in many ways a world unto itself. I have tried to acknowledge this diversity by specifying the nationality of each poet and extrapolating from each poem only conclusions about the particular island she or he is writing on or about, drawing my overall conclusions from the range of poems from various Caribbean nations. Second, as regard the entire endeavour, I am undoubtedly doing exactly what M. Nourbese Philip decried in the *Show Boat* affair: taking the U.S. example as my standard. When I use the terms "more" or "less," for instance, I am speaking relative to my innate expectations and perceptions as a person whose primary culture is black America. That said, I have lived outside of the United States long enough to share Philip's annoyance at the American tendency to assume that their realities and definitions are the only ones and to project their problems onto the rest of the world. From this I hope the nature of my thesis at least partially absolves me.

In relation to black American poetry, then, I can say that even in the slavery period, work songs in the Caribbean reflected not only the different nature of slave conditions but also the stronger African retentions that resulted therefrom. In this phase as throughout the course of West Indian poetic history, poets generally refer to Africa with a high degree of specificity, mentioning countries, tribes, and place-names. One early work song runs:

If me want for go in a Ebo,

Me can't go there!
 Since dem tief me from a Guinea,
 Me can't go there!
 If me want for go in a Congo,
 Me can't go there!⁵⁰

A poem/chant from the late 1700s, apparently created at a rebellious gathering of 250 slaves who intended to take over Jamaica and slaughter all the whites, is called "Song of the King of the Eboes," as the first step was to elect a king of that tribe. A folk song from the early 1800s features "Quaco Sam"—Quaco being an African day-name for a boy born on a Wednesday—asking for a dance with his cousin "Cuba"—the African day-name for a girl born on a Wednesday.⁵¹ This kind of specificity persists in the Caribbean poetic tradition from slave songs to Walcott, from Louise Bennett to Lorna Goodison, from A. J. Seymour's *Guiana Book* to Philip Sherlock's "Land of Look Behind"; Africa seems more inclusion than allusion, more a real geographical place than the vague metonym that appears in black American poetry.

This specificity reflects the extent to which many continuities were uninterrupted by deracination and slavery on the Caribbean islands. One of the most important of these was the visual-physiognomic similarities between the African-descended population there and the people in coastal West Africa. People in the British West Indies are not necessarily darker or more African-featured than their American counterparts, for, despite the low mortality rates and the high male to female slave ratio, sexual intermixture between the white and non-white population was not only accepted but assumed on the islands (whereas in the United States it was illegal

⁵⁰ Paula Burnett, ed. *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1986) 3.

⁵¹ Burnett 370-71.

until 1967);⁵² physical and facial Africanness are, I would argue, a matter of perceptual construct rather than objective reality. One major element in that construct probably stems from the Afro-Caribbean peoples (in the former British West Indies) not having been subjected to any significant amount of religious indoctrination: they seem not to have rerouted their physical self-perception and geographical identification through the North African (i.e., Egyptian) and Middle Eastern (i.e., Jewish) filter/metaphor, via the Mosaic parallel of the Old Testament, as black Americans have. Though, as Zora Neale Houston noted in the 1930s, Moses is worshipped throughout Africa and is seen as "the fountain of mystic powers" in places where "the children of Africa have been scattered by slavery,"⁵³ he appears in his Africanized form, rather than the reverse as is seen in the U.S. (In Haiti, to take a non-British example, Moses is known as "Damballa Ouedo Ouedo Tocan Freda Dahomey.")⁵⁴ The mental/visual connection with West African physiognomy is thus left intact for the Afro-Caribbean (a fact that lends irony to the tag of "Jewmaican" that West Indian emigrants to New York have acquired by virtue of their work ethic).⁵⁵ As importantly, it means that Afro-Caribbeans were generally spared one of the most toxic elements of racial self-hatred in New World history, expressed by Zora Neale Hurston in a phrase that, as Alice Walker says, "makes one's flesh crawl": "Slavery is the price I paid for

⁵² Between the mid-1600s and the early 1800s, most of the colonies (and later a total of 33 states) passed laws making black-white intermarriage and miscegenation illegal. Many of these laws were voided by the Supreme Court in the 1967 case of *Loving vs. Virginia*; they still exist in at least 12 states. See Ernest Porterfield, *Black and White Mixed Marriages: An Ethnographic Study of Black-White Families* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1978) 30.

⁵³ Hurston, "Tell My Horse," in Walker, 220.

⁵⁴ Hurston 219.

⁵⁵ Gladwell 77.

civilization."⁵⁶

A poem such as Philip Sherlock's "Jamaican Fisherman" illuminates both these outcomes—the relative lack of self-hatred and the continuing strength of the visual/physiological identification between West Indians and West Africans—as much by the implied context of its creation as by its content. Granted that throughout the Caribbean, to differing degrees, the ideas of colour, race, and origin, which North Americans usually consider as a single entity at least regarding black people, have separated from each other and reconnected with other aspects of identity such as social status in complex ways;⁵⁷ nevertheless, Sherlock's poem overlays his modern-day Jamaican fisherman and African king of ancient times with a simplicity and lack of ideological fervour that suggests a good deal of psycho-racial freedom on the poet's part and that of the surrounding culture (in the wide or immediate sense). This is, I have found, a common quality in Caribbean poetry about issues of race or heritage: the musing and frequently amused tone, the ideological relaxation, the apparent premium on poetic rather than political achievement, say as much about racial attitudes as the words of the poem. Much of this must, of course, be attributed to the individual poets, and there are some exceptions; Vera Bell's guilt-ridden "Ancestor on the Auction Block" comes to mind, as do some of Lorna Goodison's more propagandistic poems about African politics (for instance, "Africa on the Mind Today," from *Turn Thanks*). As well, the strong and enduring influence of certain English poetic traditions must be taken into account, especially (due to the odd patterns of historical attachment caused by

⁵⁶ Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Coloured Me," in Walker, 153.

⁵⁷ Much has been written on this subject. See, for instance, Lowenthal 32-51.

colonial status and independence) late Romanticism and early Anglo-modernism, neither of which encourage a polemic style. Those factors acknowledged, it can be said that as a whole Afro-Caribbean poems about Africa, race and especially colour are free from the almost invariable anger one finds in black American poetry on the subject—or, for that matter, in much Caribbean poetry about issues that have caused a more chronic frustration, such as sexual politics.

"Jamaican Fisherman" could be taken as a textbook example of the effects of that island having inherited England's literary aesthetic but not its class structure or full set of racial attitudes,⁵⁸ in that it bears the unmistakable formal and stylistic imprint of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias," yet approaches the matters of blackness and Africanness with calm affection. Like Shelley's sonnet, Sherlock's poem depicts an observed scene, offering no explication; it opens with an onlooker noting the titular figure's regal bearing:

Across the sand I saw a black man stride
 To fetch his fishing gear and broken things
 And silently that splendid body cried
 Its proud descent from ancient chiefs and kings.
 Across the sand I saw him naked stride;
 Sang his black body in the sun's white light
 The velvet coolness of dark forests wide,
 The blackness of the jungle's starless night.⁵⁹

Here, as throughout the rest of the poem, Sherlock juxtaposes the pedestrian nature of the fisherman's activities with the nobility of his aspect, his lowly lot with his royal heritage, the

⁵⁸ See Lowenthal, ch.2. Though I find some of Lowenthal's analysis questionable, in this matter he mounts a persuasive argument and is supported by the later more complex analyses of Sidney Mintz and Orlando Patterson.

⁵⁹ Burnett 154.

broken state of his "things" with the wholeness of his body, in such equilibrium as to exempt it from easy inclusion with either Shelley's "the mighty are fallen" message or the "black is beautiful" agenda that would, 15 years later, make the regalized African physique a common motif in black American poetry and street culture. Even as the contrasts mount—the "splendid body" is housed in a "wretched hut," and the possessor of that body appears to be unaware, possibly stupid, as he "carelessly lounge[s] away"—the balance of these references makes it impossible to determine whether Sherlock is using the African past to redeem the Jamaican present or to show its degradation. With its conclusion suspended and explication absent, the poem reads as a commentary on how physiological retentions can both transcend and collapse time and space, re-establishing a bridge across even the most violently caused rupture.

Physiological fungibility is not the only unbroken strand of the African-Caribbean continuum that "Jamaican Fisherman" illustrates: the poem's rural setting adds to the visual-physical parallel and makes its simplicity possible. The coastal existence, the reliance on the ocean for a living, the attire (or lack of it) suitable for manual labour, the physical strength that results from it—all these exist as preconditions for the poem, and although Sherlock's onlooker relocates his subject from the sand and the "sun's white light" to the "dark forests wide" and "the blackness of the jungle's starless night," nevertheless his mode of living renders him compatible, in both aspect and situation, with traditional images of historical West African village life. For black Americans attempting the same overlay a decade and a half later, the demands on imagination and the degree of metaphorization would be made much greater by the necessity to superimpose the rural African archetype/stereotype on their own highly urbanized surroundings and sensibilities. As a marker of Jamaica's historical direction, then, Sherlock's poem expresses

the freed slaves' post-emancipation movement from large plantations to smallholding lives, which was the first and perhaps most important step toward the African-descended population's becoming, in Derek Walcott's words, "a people who possess the land in thought and share it."⁶⁰

There is, indeed, a thread of thought (though a perhaps half-facetious one) that the islands and Africa, Afro-Caribbeans and Africans, are so much the same place and the same peoples that the task at hand is not making connections but drawing distinctions. Marc Matthews' humorous oral poem "Guyana Not Ghana" underscores this both in its ostensible agenda of differentiating the Caribbean country from the African one and in the speaker's eventual admission of failure to do so. Beneath the humorous attempt to clear up a common place-name confusion sits a deeper contemplation of the African-Caribbean affinity, which, in this poem, ultimately overrides the speaker's efforts to separate them. As in Sherlock's case, the very latitude Matthews gives himself (and which, judging by the light tone of the poem, his imagined audience accepts in him) to wrest a Caribbean identity out of an African one bespeaks considerable freedom of self-definition.

Matthews begins his wonderfully rhythmic, slant-rhymed poem with a litany of local Guyanese place-names: "Buxton, Fyrish, Cove-an-John, Bush lot, Mahaica"—cities and communities whose ethnic diversity of names exists nowhere but Guyana. Then, as if assured of his country's individuality, he asserts, "No, ah said, Guyana, not Ghana."⁶¹ He repeats the process with a list of personal names—names that reflect English slave culture, French

⁶⁰ In Robert D. Hamner, ed. *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott* (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1993) 15.

⁶¹ Burnett 48.

colonization, East Indian indenture—and then a number of local quotidian rituals and experiences, ending with the same assurance:

Pompeii, Tanta doux, Bhagwandeem car for hire
 Sai John, Saturdee night, sweet shop, gas light,
 shinin on shame-face in de trench water.
 No, I said, Guyana, not Ghana.

But partway through the inevitable enumeration of Guyanese foods that follows—"black puddin, corn pone, swank, cuss-cuss an sugar / jinghi seeds, back-dam mettagee"—the speaker is diverted from his taxonomic project by a memory of his own more fundamental conflation of his home country and Africa. Mixed with amusement at his limited childhood grasp of geography is an adult awareness of transplantation, echoes of exile.

buxton spice, no mango sweeter

.....

is in Buxton, ah say, de first girl ah love,
 five years old; she was from Africa

Pass Plaisance? ah ask, no, she say, further
 Georgetown was far

she say pass dat
 days an nights she spen' on de water
 Africa to the Brazilian border
 ah believe her

Though this is all he mentions of the African girl, we can infer that her physical similarity to the other girls he sees, her ability to talk to him—perhaps even, paradoxically, the effort of stretching his mind to comprehend the vast distance between the two places, to imagine a place even beyond Georgetown, and the resulting wonderment at so great a distance producing so little a

difference—reinforce the psychological overlap rather than the individuation he has been building toward. As he resumes his dreamy enumeration of his favourite Guyanese foods, sitting in a classroom where "de English teacher" is talking to "John Bull potagee daughter" (an English-Portuguese girl), all the foregoing specificity seems nullified by the thought of the African girl.

I was dreaming of . . . jamoon, rum and coconut water

.....

ah said: Guyana could a been Africa
but for brazil and a heap o' water.
No, ah said, Guyana, not Ghana.

Many of the characteristics that appear in "Jamaican Fisherman" and "Guyana Not Ghana" can also be found in Louise Bennett's famous riposte "Back to Africa": levity, moderation, freedom of opinion, and a pragmatic take on racial identity. Again, I point out that I read these through African-American eyes, and to me the freedom to acknowledge racial admixture in a light-hearted manner, to poke fun at racial dogma and, especially, to claim a sense of current nationality that overrides but does not seek to extinguish past heritages, seem expressions of inconceivable liberty, privilege and cultural wealth. "Back to Africa," perhaps more than any poem I examine in this paper, exists in a separate paradigm from anything a black American could have written and underscores the nominally paradoxical but psychologically natural fact that the permission to refute or qualify feelings of African heritage allows those feelings to become real and meaningful.

In the interests of striking a tone of good-natured chastisement, it no doubt helps Bennett that in her first stanza she is uttering a common-place rather than, as she would be in the United

States exposing a felony:

me know say dat you great great great
Granma was African,
But Mattie, doan you great great great
Granpa was Englishman?

Den you great granmader fader
By you fader side was Jew?
And you granpa by you mader side
Was Frenchie parlez-vous?⁶²

Intrepidly Bennett wades into the phenotypical argument that has bulwarked eugenicists' studies on the effects of racial "tainting," bound people of African descendancy to the racial stake for centuries, and everywhere had deep implications for their lives—implications for survival in apartheid South Africa, for legal and social rights in the anti-miscegenist United States, and, in colour-coded Jamaica, for social approval and, to an extent, rank and mobility. The Garveyite conflation of race and face seems to affront Bennett's pragmatic sensibilities—and, it is, again, a uniquely Caribbean context that allows Bennett to view this as an overstatement and oversimplification made by a set of African-descended people rather than, as it was in the United States, an appropriation and subversion of an ongoing, inescapable overstatement created and enforced by white society. The conditions that permit Bennett to approach the matter from this direction probably do more to explain why Jamaican Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" creed resonated in the United States but failed to strike a chord in Jamaica than does the logic of the sarcastic syllogism with which Bennett attacks the idea:

between you an de Africans

⁶² Burnett 31.

is great resemblance!

Accorden to dat, all dem blue-yeye
 White American
 Who-fa great granpa was Englishman
 Mus go back a Englan!

In the end, Bennett says, these multiple racial legacies have created a syncretic identity
 that is rooted and specific:

de balance a you family,
 you whole generation

 Onoo all is Jamaican!

And since, as the speaker says at the beginning of the poem, "You haf fe come from somewhe
 fus / Before you go back deh!", Miss Mattie has her permission to go out into the world and trace
 her various heritages, so long as she remembers where she is from and ultimately comes back to
 Jamaica.

"Back to Africa" was one of the first West Indian poems to suggest the richness of
 Caribbean identity, to cite the confluence of bloods and cultures and histories from all parts of
 the world onto this Atlantic archipelago and presage the unprecedented scope for identity-
 formation that might exist once the constrictions of English cultural influence were dissolved.
 Louise Bennett herself, of course, played an important part in dissolving those bonds by insisting
 that poems written in "the vernacular" were as legitimate as those written in standard English.
 Her willingness to sacrifice prestige by continuing to write even serious poems in vernacular
 eventually rehabilitated the "oral" mode from its place as a forum for buffoonery (as, for
 instance, Jamaican poet Claude McKay used it in the early twentieth century, before moving to

the United States and to a strict use of standard English) to its current invaluable and intrinsic position in West Indian literature. As Paula Burnett writes, "By the 1980s there is almost no major poet of the English-speaking Caribbean who does not have the vernacular as one of the languages of his poetry."⁶³

As with other aspects of their culture, West Indians' acceptance of a diversity of linguistic legacies both adds to the richness of their identities and permits them to retain and integrate African linguistic elements rather than feel irrevocably cut off from them or incorporate them with contrived overcompensation. (As we shall see in Section III, at the same time that West Indians were beginning to accept the Africa-influenced oral patterns of their dialect, black Americans were being forced to abandon theirs in order to have any artistic credibility with white society—a deprivation that severed many of the few remaining tangible threads in their connection to Africa.)⁶⁴ More and more, as the twentieth century progressed, Caribbean poets—especially Guyanans, it seems—understood and wrote of the wealth of their heritage, and both the mixture of racial lineage and the concourse of languages were key constituents of this wealth. To Guyana's Grace Nichols, the threads of race create a living tapestry of appearance, with the physiological expression of West African genes forming the central motif:

The long line of blood
and family ties

An African countenance here
A European countenance there
An Amerindian cast of cheek

⁶³ Burnett xl

⁶⁴ Blyden Jackson and Louis D. Rubin, Jr., eds., *Black Poetry in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1974) 2.

An Asianic turn of eye

.....

The tapestry is mine

.....
Black persistent blooming.⁶⁵

To Guyanese poet Abdur Rahman Slade Hopkinson, the heritage is a chord, made powerful by the Caribbean history of slavery and bloodshed, and the artist's ability to sound this chord redeems, transfigures and transcends "the patterned sequence run / Of old imperial new fraternal war- / History, repetitious as a gun."⁶⁶ History is the predictable, "like our tourist-brochure sun"; poetry, in Hopkinson's "The Chord" as in Yeats's "Easter 1916," at least has the ability to infuse futility with meaning, if it can't save history from its own hopelessly reflexive actions:

Then label every infant hearse,
Every coffin, with a verse:
A verse, the poet's futile strength and rage.
Link, little poetess, word to singing word.

Each verse excites the Caribbean pattern.
Cued by your grieving, five
Adopted tongues, five voices cross our sea:
They're scored together in one shuddering chord.

It is interesting that even as many Caribbean poets accept and even celebrate the ethnic diversity that blends in with and enriches the African heritage, they tend to share Hopkinson's perception that African is the true language, and that the other "five tongues" (English, French, Portuguese, Dutch and Spanish) are "adopted." Despite this perception, the overall attitude

⁶⁵ Grace Nichols, "Tapestry." *Caribbean Verse*, ed. O.R. Dathorne (London: Heinemann, 1962) 174.

⁶⁶ "The Chord," Dathorne 103.

toward the various strains of language seems to be as much of exploration and enjoyment as of loss. In "Epilogue," Grace Nichols makes her feelings in this matter explicit: "I have lost my tongue / from the root of the old one / a new one has sprung."⁶⁷ The freedom and encouragement to write in the vernacular no doubt alleviates the sense of being stripped of a linguistic heritage; as well, the variety of African-derived personal names and place names ensures African languages' inclusion in the chord and the tapestry. A.J. Seymour, in his "Name Poem," envisions the intermixture as a sounded beauty, which wakes "if but a wind blow." He meditates on the unlikely but euphonious blend of Amerindian and African in the place-name "Kwebanna on the Waini": "Guiana, Waini are cousin water words. . .," and "The Demarary, Desakepe and Courantyne / Flow centuries before strange tongues bewitch / Their beauty into common county names."⁶⁸ Unlike Marc Matthews in "Guyana Not Ghana," Seymour takes this uniquely Guyanese blend of linguistic provenances to demonstrate a certain universality—an infinitude of resources for the poet and for the people. Where Hopkinson sees them as the crashing together of a blood-dimmed tradition, Seymour finds "Beauty about us in the breathe of names / Known to us all, but murmured over softly / Woven to breath of peace."

Interestingly, it is the West Indies' pre-eminent poet, Derek Walcott, who on the face of it seems to have the most trouble integrating racial and linguistic legacies, and who for most of his career seems to treat the African and English elements of Caribbean society as binaries to an almost American degree. It is no accident that Americans of mixed black-white heritage have

⁶⁷ Dathorne 174.

⁶⁸ Dathorne 203-04.

adopted as their motto the two lines from Walcott's 1962 poem "A Far Cry From Africa": "I who am poisoned with the blood of both, / Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?"⁶⁹ Like Americans along the spectrum of white to black, Walcott posits the matter of racial heritage as an either/or situation, and seems to wrestle with issues of culture and language along racial lines:

I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?

It should be noted that Walcott's international stature may have done much to obscure the fact that few other contemporary Caribbean poets, if any, perceive the dual heritage in the dilemmic terms that a cursory reading of such a poem might derive, and that the status of "A Far Cry From Africa" as Walcott's most-anthologized work may in itself have led many readers to believe that issues of race and origin in the West Indies are much the same as in the United States.

That said, any reading beyond the most superficial will reveal that "A Far Cry from Africa" is not primarily about racial miscegenation but a tension quite foreign to Americans: between a real sense of being African-descended, which includes a working knowledge of Africa's history and condition, and a real sense of the English literary tradition, which includes a strong sense of formal, stylistic, stanzaic and metrical continuity. It is fair to say that black Americans in general have very little of either feeling, as the bond to Africa was severed during the slave period and to England during the Revolutionary War. In this poem, then, as well as in

⁶⁹ Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems, 1948-1984* (Noonday Press, 1947) 18. One instance of how Americans of mixed blood have adopted these lines is Scott Minerbrook's *Divided to the Vein: A Journey into Race and Family* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996).

the longer poem to which it might have been an epigraph, "The Fortunate Traveller," we see two of the most crucial commonalities between the former British West Indies and many countries in sub-Saharan Africa which have emerged in the latter half of the 1900s and from which African-American poets are excluded: their shared colonial pasts and present-day struggles with the effects of both imperialist England and imperialist America.

The very real degradations of colonialism and imperialism on Walcott's native St. Lucia and the Caribbean region, rather than racial binaries, are the source of the conflict in "A Far Cry from Africa," as well as, quite probably, the source of Walcott's meta-patriotic concern for Africa. In "A Far Cry from Africa," Walcott's strong sense of a real rather than fictional Africa, and his literal rather than symbolic use of it, come through in his easy, authoritative shifts from thematic generalities to concrete images. From the opening supernal view of the "tawny pelt / Of Africa," Walcott telescopes down through history and geography to the renowned/infamous tribe that best captures the extent of African resistance and British suppression, the "Kikuyu, quick as flies," who "batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt". The "statistics" and "salients of colonial policy" in the first stanza individuate to "the drunken officer of British rule" by the fourth. The birds that occupy this "paradise" through which "corpses are scattered" are a particular species, the flushed-out and displaced white ibises. (Compare the accuracy of this image to that in American poet Bob Kaufman's "African Dream," of "memories . . . sealed, / Burned in the eyes of tigers"—an exclusively Asian animal that has never existed on the African continent.)⁷⁰

Where Walcott extends his theme to the general, he does so through time, not space,

⁷⁰ Bell 129.

retaining the continent of Africa as his relevant locus and using it as a reflecting lens by which he shunts between the colonial and contemporary periods and shines the light of imperialism's ideology back on its European spawning grounds. From his post-colonial vantage-point, Walcott eliminates ideological double standards and, re-viewing European and African history, discovers a series of equivalencies: Africa's "savages" are "expendable as Jews" (this being an ironic reverse phrasing of his real point, of course); the "brutish necessity" that dismisses Africa's "separate dead" considers the casualties of the Spanish civil war equally a "waste of our compassion"; the Darwinian rationale for Europeans' derogation of Africans meets its time-future self, the Darwinian rationale for the Europeans' (specifically the Nazis') destruction of other Europeans, as "the gorilla wrestles with the superman."

These depictions indict the "drunken officer" and his ilk, but they do not explain the other half of the dilemma, the love of the drunken officer's language that complicates the speaker's rage against the British. Despite the suggestion of a blood-call in the words "divided to the vein," the crux of this conflict resides in the poem's form, in the deft, absorbed use of English prosodic elements: echoes of Hopkins in the explosive consonantal alliteration of "Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries," a nod to Tennyson in the pentametric *In Memoriam* envelope of the fourth stanza, overtones of Yeats in the "Second Coming" imagery of the second stanza's opening. The soft tetrameter iambs of the first line, halting mid-second to shift fiercely to the accusatory trochee of "batten," and the four knelling stresses of the poem's shortest line, "I who have cursed," illustrate Walcott's skill with the forms he loves, forms he has adopted and adapted and turned into his life. These are what he would betray if he decided to choose "this Africa" over those who slaughter its people with impunity.

Almost 20 years after first defining the divide, Walcott, still preoccupied with it, explores one possible outcome of making the choice he didn't make, that of taking the side of the African people over the English tongue he loves. In 1981's "The Fortunate Traveller," he establishes as narrator a character who is, like Walcott, deeply implicated in the English literary tradition: a Sussex don who teaches "the Jacobean anxieties: *The White Devil*."⁷¹ Webster's macabre writings have prepared him but ill for the visions of horror that confront him when he travels through the land of famine; the continual reminder that "one flies first-class, one is so fortunate" only compounds his sense of complicity, and he relinquishes his professorship to become a black-market procurer for African countries. "I loved my Duchess," says the narrator wistfully. "The white flame of her soul blown out between / the smoking cypresses. Then I saw children pounce / on green meat with a rat's ferocity."

To those who know him, the decision to leave his cosy life and act as one of the "roaches, / riddling the state cabinets, entering the dark holes / of power, carapaced in topcoats" is inexplicable. His lover sends him pleading letters, to which he responds in his mind, "Margo, / I cannot bear to watch the nations cry." His African beneficiaries are overtly suspicious of his motives, disbelieving that anyone such as he would give up his job and risk his life simply to assuage his guilt.

They spoke the stilted French
of their dark river,
whose hooked worm, multiplying its pale sickle,
could thin the harvest of the winter streets.
"Then we can depend on you to get us those tractors?"
"I gave my word."

⁷¹ Walcott, *Collected Poems* 456.

"May my country ask why you are doing this, sir?"
Silence.

Surely part of Walcott's purpose in highlighting the skepticism of Margo and the Africans is to bare his own credibility gap, to acknowledge all those who discount his own dilemma as an abstract or incidental one. But, as he shows later in "The Fortunate Traveller," his depth of feeling for Africa is not contrived: it extends from his love of and concern for his Caribbean home and the people in it. "I have no fear of phantoms, but of the real," he says, before drawing connections from the "white palms" of a Haitian gekko to the African children across whom "famine sighs like a scythe," from the "Tantum Ergo of black choristers" in St. Lucia to Albert Schweitzer playing his harmonium in the African jungle.⁷²

Nor, he argues, is his sense of complicity a matter of liberal guilt looking for a place to happen. His tidy job tilling the "dank acre" of the sixteenth century has made him a member of the oblivious class and a perpetuator of the sanitizing language that turns "the hungry of this earth" into

compassionate fodder for the travel book,
its paragraphs like windows from a train,
for everywhere that earth shows its rib cage
and the moon goggles with the eyes of children,
we turn away to read.

To amplify the consequences of fictionalizing Africa, Walcott brings into the scenario—always in the background, occasionally in the foreground—the most problematic of texts about Africa, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In picking up on Conrad's sepulchral use

⁷² I am not sure what to make of the conflation of the poet's background with the narrator's here. Is the "Sussex don" a native St. Lucian? Is he visiting St. Lucia? Or perhaps it is a change of voice from narrator to writer, though the tone suggests otherwise.

of "whiteness" Walcott seems to be acknowledging the novella's anti-imperialist intent, but he also underlines its damaging effect as the core of the body of stereotyping literature. Here, as in "A Far Cry from Africa," he turns the imperialist ideology back on itself, taking the debate over evil from Africa back to the land of the superman, to ask who the "savage" is and how we can assign proportionality to genocide.

Through Kurtz's teeth, white skull on elephant grass,
the imperial fiction sings. Sunday
wrinkles downriver from the Heart of Darkness.
The heart of darkness is not Africa.
The heart of darkness is the core of fire
in the white centre of the holocaust.
The heart of darkness is the rubber claw
selecting a scalpel in antiseptic light.

Making a decision and taking action seem to expiate the narrator's guilt sufficiently that, unlike the paralysed narrator of "A Far Cry from Africa," he can move beyond self-indictment to point to other, larger colluders in the African disaster. In the poem's apocalyptic ending, he turns his reflective ray on the breadbaskets of the new sites of imperialism (as they were at the time the poem was written) and foretells the insects' revenge on the countries that have turned a blind eye to "the small countries plead[ing] through the mesh of graphs."

The drawn sword comes in strides.

.....

In loaves of cloud, *and have not charity*,
the weevil will make a sahara of Kansas,
the ant shall eat Russia.
Their soft teeth shall make, *and have not charity*,
the harvest's desolation,
and the brown globe crack like a begging bowl.

In themselves, and specifically in their emphasis on the political rather than the cultural,

"A Far Cry from Africa" and "The Fortunate Traveller" reflect the post-WWII emergence of regionality rather than race, economics rather than appearance, as a source of Caribbean affinity with Africa—perhaps even the main source, by the current day. In their intimate knowledge of both colonialism and the Western mentality, West Indians—West Indian artists and intellectuals in particular—adopted a care-taking attitude toward Africa and its issues; indeed, C.L.R. James goes so far as to credit the Caribbean for Africa's emerging nationalism and independence, saying, "The recognition of Africanism, the agitation for the recognition of Africa, the literary creation of an African ideology . . . all were directly the creation of West Indians."⁷³

Needless to say, this re-alignment (perhaps *real* alignment would be more accurate) of the Caribbean psyche from historical to economic, from sharing New World conditions with Americans to sharing Third World conditions with Africa, constitutes not just a divergence from the position of black America but an opposition to it, as black Americans are citizens of the new imperial power. Certainly in Jamaican James Berry's sardonic "Fantasy of an African Boy," the dry description of

walled-round gentlemen
 body guarded
 because of too much respect
 and too many wishes on them⁷⁴

does nothing to exempt any black American with the means to participate in America's consumerist society. Like Walcott, Berry speaks not "of phantoms, but of the real"; judging by

⁷³ Paget Henry and Paul Buhle, eds., *C.L.R. James' Caribbean* (Durham: Duke UP, 1992) 181.

⁷⁴ Dathorne 16.

the fact that the boy is identified as African only in the title, the poet seems to be using him to stand in for unmoneyed people in the undeveloped world, making him African in order to manipulate the stock associations the west holds with that word. Berry's confidence in using an African as speaker, and his success in playing out the subtleties of amusement, sarcasm, desperation and detachment within the African position, speak to the poet's sense that the West Indies and Africa share an understanding through their common economic status, as does the absence of the stereotypes and exoticizing that almost invariably enter texts about Africa when written by outsiders. These are nowhere evident in the boy's ironic-innocent remarks on

we people
without money, in daylong
yearlong sunlight, knowing
money is somewhere, somewhere

In fact, the tonal split between sarcasm and seriousness, which extends through the first three stanzas, undoes such stereotypes by creating the balance of ambiguities that forms real people. The "daylong / yearlong sunlight" is both a Western myth about Africa (and, notably, the Caribbean islands) and speaks of a brightness to unmoneyed life that is beyond the reach of money or the comprehension of those who have it. The same double commentary infuses the boy's dry dig at how "such millions and millions / of us don't manage at all / without it, like war going on," and becomes even more pronounced in the third stanza, which tells of emotional plenitude and material paucity, raising images of malnourished African children, the myth of the childlike African, the real capacity for happiness in poverty, and the real limits poverty places on that happiness. As his people grow up and go hungry, the speaker says,

our heads alone
stay big, as lots and lots do,

coming from nowhere joyful,
going nowhere happy.

The ironic split takes a different course for the remainder of the poem, though, when the boy remarks on the disastrous effects of not having this abstract entity. In a series of contrasts, he plays money's essential uselessness against its strange omnipotence, its contrived nature and concrete effects:

We can't drink it up. Yet
without it we shrivel when small
and stop forever
where we stopped
as millions and millions do.

Money can't be read, he continues, yet without it there are no books; it can't be ground for medicine, yet without it "flesh melts from our bones." By the end of this section, in the penultimate stanza describing the "walled-round gentlemen / overseas minding money!", the "bigtime gentlemen body guarded" take on corpulent opulence simply through the connotations of satiety in the words "round," "big," and "body."

By using Africa to embody the West Indian condition, James Berry complete the transference of perceived identity-constitution from that of West Indians containing some amount of African heritage to the West Indian residing within the African. This transference is largely a matter of where specific poets place themselves and their societies on the African-European continuum, but it also represents a fairly consistent direction of identity representation overall—which makes it a success for Edward Kamau Brathwaite, the great Barbadian Africanist whose lifelong focus on Africa's relationship to the West Indies has immeasurably aided and accelerated all the connections I have thus far mentioned in this section. It was Brathwaite who

named Africa the "submerged mother" of the West Indies;⁷⁵ in his essay "History of the Voice" he outlines the African linguistic retentions that make Caribbean language patterns inimical to such inherent components of standard English as the natural tendency to pentameter;⁷⁶ he has made Africa and its connection to the Caribbean the main content of many of his major works; and his strong orientation toward Africa has for decades provided the chief counterbalance to Derek Walcott's European leanings.

Any analysis of West Indian poetry that purports to deal with African themes must, of course, include some of Brathwaite's work. By the same token, however, it is difficult to know exactly how to incorporate so massive an element as Brathwaite's view of Africa into an analysis such as this. Even to explore in full a couple of his poems, a sliver of his sociocultural analyses or a small number of the implications of his linguistic theory could easily occupy an entire doctoral dissertation. As well, the overtness of his agenda to show and strengthen the Caribbean-African bond somewhat co-opts academic attempts to analyse his motives and beliefs.

Although many of Brathwaite's poems would fit into and enrich this thesis, the ones that seemed to me to offer the most intriguing exploration are passages from the first section of his opus *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, published by Oxford University Press in three parts: "Rights of Passage" (1967), "Masks" (1968) and "Islands" (1969). In these poems Brathwaite traces the history of New World blacks from African life through the slave period up to modern times, and, because his focus had not yet shifted from promoting pan-Africanism in the sense of

⁷⁵ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (Mona: Savacou Publications, 1974) 17. See also, among others, Maureen Warner-Lewis, "Africa: Submerged Mother" in *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite* 52-61.

⁷⁶ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice* (London: New Beacon, 1984).

inter-black solidarity to trying to apply the pan-African model to the West Indies in the interests of creating a pan-Caribbean identity, Brathwaite attempts here what he may not have at a later date (when the political climate, the historical understanding, and Brathwaite's personal focus had all changed): to depict New World slavery as a single entity, interchangeable between the two regions. The result is an interesting example of a poet's work actually stemming from, rather than just being interpreted through, an erroneously conjoined history, and of a Caribbean writer trying to imagine a black American point of view without fully understanding that it is a matter of imagining someone else's history, not part of his own.

Reading the poem in light of contemporary knowledge, and especially in the context of this paper, Brathwaite's throughgoing West Indianness emanates from virtually every line: whatever the desired perceptions of the Black Power/Black Pride movement of the time, this is a past imagined not by a generic New World black person but by a distinctly Caribbean one. Specificity, the hallmark of Caribbean poetry about Africa, runs through the portrayal of the West African village in which the trilogy starts, a village dried by drought and then burned by "flame, / that red idol . . . our power's / founder," leaving the African slave-catchers to find the villagers

Helpless like this
 leader-
 less like this
 heroless

click lock
 your fire-
 lock fore-
 arm fire-
 arm flashed

fire⁷⁷

Brathwaite specifies also the African warriors who might have countered the conquerors had they not themselves already been overcome—"Prempeh imprisoned, / Taiwah dead, / Asantewa bridled." And in the poet's conception of what the slaves in the ship's hold might have thought arise two more uniquely West Indian characteristics: a richly envisioned sense of the land and life that have been lost, rather than general expressions of deracination, and the mitigation of loss in a sense of hope, an anticipation of re-rooting, that appear to be Brathwaite's genuine perception of what happened next. The positive and voluntary participation of African-descended peoples in the creation of new nations *did* eventually occur, but only in the West Indies.

It will be a long time before we see
These farms again, soft wet slow green
again: Aburi, Akwamu,
mist rising

.....

our blood, mixed

.....

will create new soils, new souls, new
ancestors; will flow like this tide fixed

to the start by which this ship floats
to new worlds, new waters, new
harbours⁷⁸

What the newly captured slaves really were thinking and feeling no one can definitively say, of course, and Brathwaite's conception is as valid as anyone else's—probably even more

⁷⁷ Brathwaite, "New World A'Comin'," *The Arrivants* (London: Oxford UP, 1986) 9.

⁷⁸ *Arrivants* "New World A'Comin' " 11.

accurate than most. However, every instance of what Homi Bhabha calls "imagining interrupted spaces"⁷⁹ is necessarily shaped by the experiences and surrounding culture of the imager, and Brathwaite's versions of both Africa and the middle-passage experience bear the optimism and security of someone for whom the slave history gave way to a sense of nationhood, belonging and self-determination. This Caribbean imprint works well in the poem until, for some reason, Brathwaite chooses as his emissary of the New World slave experience an American named Tom. Then the disjuncture between imagination and experience jars, both in what the poet is expressing and how he expresses it. As I have indicated in Section I, it is unlikely that in the heavily evangelized, Americanized and de-Africanized plantation setting of the South a slave would be thinking in terms of

the paths we shall never remember
again: Atumpan talking and the harvest branches,
all the tribes of Ashanti dreaming the dream
of Tutu, Anokye and the Golden Stool⁸⁰

or mourning the children left behind in Africa instead of the ones sold out from under him in America. It is unlikely that an American slave would concern himself primarily with the impact of the slave trade on Africa's future, as when Tom imagines his offspring

caught leader-
less. . .
taught fool-
ishness and use-
lessness and

⁷⁹ Cited in Brian Fagen, "Passages from the Middle: Coloniality and Postcoloniality in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*." *African American Review*, Winter 1996: 632.

⁸⁰ *Arrivants*, "Tom" 13.

sorrow

and hopes they will learn

not green alone
not Africa alone

.....

but Cortez
and Drake
Magellan
and that Ferdinand
the sailor
who pierced the salt seas to this land.⁸¹

It is even more unlikely, as I shall explain in Section III, that a black American writer of any era, would imagine his or her history either in those concrete, African-oriented terms or in those rhythms. It is indeed one of the more disconcerting elements of this section, for a reader accustomed to black American modes of describing black American experience, to hear the experience set in the quick, consonantal, almost *Fox In Socks*-like verse that Brathwaite uses as Tom's voice:

the bottom lands
where the quick
cassava grows
where the sick
back dries, where no one knows

if he lives or dies⁸²

⁸¹ *Arrivants*, "Tom" 14-16.

⁸² *Arrivants*, "Tom" 12.

Black American language patterns, with their long, rolling phrases, sustained vowels, luxurious images and heavy use of repetition, reflect the different historical degrees of interaction with English-speaking people and religious influence, which gave rise to blues, not reggae, and rap, not dub. Thus, in both language and content these passages from *The Arrivants* misrepresent the experience they mean to portray and so constitute a real, if well-intentioned, brand of appropriation. At the time of the poem's writing, of course, it would have been considered traitorous as well as strange to apply such a term to a black person's depiction of another black person's history, especially if both were from the Western world and products of New World slavery. Even a decade or two ago the idea would have seemed an overreaching of academic paranoia. But despite his apparent belief in the pan-Africanist cause, and though he was writing his poems when the black solidarity movement was at its strongest, Brathwaite nevertheless introduces the idea of difference between Caribbean and American identity when he abandons the Tom persona and, assuming that of an emigrating West Indian, finds the U.S. a completely foreign land, "Canada, the Panama / Canal, the Miss- / issippi painfields, Florida" equally alien.⁸³ The same area for which he professed intimate knowledge and affection when inhabiting Tom's body is more convincingly written of as unknown and hostile terrain:

the Mississippi mud is sticky:
men die there

.....

In New York

nights are hot

⁸³ *Arrivants*, "The Emigrants" 51.

in Harlem, Brooklyn,
along Long Island Sound⁸⁴

To adequately support what these passages suggest—that Brathwaite writes in fetters when he writes of America and writes free when he writes of the Caribbean—would require a deeper analysis than the cursory overview I have presented here. But Brathwaite himself goes some way to explicating it when he criticizes the black American preoccupation with race ("Our colour beats a restless drum / but only the bitter come") and has his homesick Caribbean emigrant say, "We who are born of the ocean can never seek solace / in rivers."⁸⁵ He even presages the growing opposition between Caribbean and American allegiances when the emigrant returns to his island

to find Jack
Kennedy invading Cuba

black riots in Aruba
and Trinidad

refusing thirsty U.S. marines water⁸⁶

Already the contrivance of black solidarity was coming apart under the strain of economic and political disparities; it is interesting that Brathwaite could have been so evidently alert to these strains and still written out of assumptions of unity and interchangeability. Perhaps he, like so many, thought that the divergence of African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans began after the slave eras. Such beliefs make less sense now that the extent of incompatibility is being

⁸⁴ *Arrivants*, "South" 53-54.

⁸⁵ *Arrivants*, "South" 57.

⁸⁶ *Arrivants*, "O Dreams O Destination" 60.

felt on a more quotidian basis: philosophical-political-existential clashes such as those represented by the Toronto *Show Boat* scenario run too deep to have arisen from fledgling antipathies, and bespeak departures of long standing.

Section III
Africa in African-American Poetry: Dilemma

The-ness froze him
 In a dance
 A-ness never
 Had a chance.

—James Emanuel, "The Negro"⁸⁷

As it pertains to relationship to Africa as a place and African descent as a felt identity, the history of black American poetry differs sharply from Afro-Caribbean in two major ways. The first is that it does not show a consistent incorporation of Africa, as motif or subtext, in any of its phases. In fact, it is my belief that if references to Africa were sheerly a matter of a genuine identification as African-descended and/or an innate affinity with Africa itself, such references would be virtually absent from black American poetry. But, of course, it is not. Race relations in the United States keep black Americans' "blackness"—which is not a definition of literal colour but a manifold concept involving perceived African origins—always at the forefront of their sense of identity, trapping them into continual proximity with a heritage from which, as we saw in Section I, they are historically and culturally almost completely disconnected. Even at that, however (and the latter-day labels of "Afro-American" and "African-American" notwithstanding), the inescapable knowledge of "blackness" has only translated into an attempted synonymy with "Africanness" to any degree twice in the history of black people and black poetry in the United States: during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Power/Black Pride movement of the late 1960s and early '70s. In both cases, Africa was a graft

⁸⁷ Brooks 44.

that didn't take.

Neither the attempts nor the failures were, in my opinion, to the discredit of black Americans. Although in retrospect many of the cultural and poetic appropriations of Africana seem contrived (and did even at the time), black Americans do have, through their daily sense of otherness and social disenfranchisement, a painful sense of deracination and a powerful desire to establish some kind of continuum, and it is natural that this should take the form of reaching back/over to the place from which they were violently and involuntarily uprooted. A successful psychological extension to Africa was, however, as impossible as it was natural. To begin with, black Americans, by and large, only know as much about Africa as do any other Americans, which is to say nearly nothing. Beyond this, embracing their African ancestry caused for many a sense of collusion with the racism against them, since it meant not only emphasizing the racial aspects of their identity but suggesting, by its strongly retrospective slant, that they were "uncivilized," "tribal," "unevolved." For this latter reason, significant numbers of black Americans took the risk of using potential collusion as subversion only when they were, as a general population, persuaded that they would never be seen as more American than black and that as long as they were seen as black they would never really be seen as Americans. Hence we get the two upwellings of "Africanness" not during times of hope, as in the Reconstruction or the civil-rights '50s, but in the 1920s, when Booker T. Washington's concessionism had failed and bitterness was beginning to set in in the new ghettos of the north, and in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when black leaders such as Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X had been shot and black men were being used as cannon fodder in the Vietnam War.

The nature and severity of the distress caused to black Americans by the dual pressures of

patriotism (the necessity of being American) and racism (the impossibility of being American) can only be fully comprehended if one takes into account how highly nationalistic America is, the extent to which being American entails repudiating previous or other national identities, how acutely racialized American vision is and how deep anti-black sentiment runs. The patriotism/racism bind is, however, only one of a rather phenomenal number of contradictions and paradoxes relating to their African descendancy with which black Americans live, and these contradictions in concert create what I view as the second major distinction between their poetry about Africa and that of Afro-Caribbeans. For almost every element in history and culture that gives West Indians a feeling of duality or multiplicity, that same element is for black Americans a matter of dispossession and dilemma in the most negative and painful sense. Thus, if the history of Afro-Caribbean poetry reflects an exploration of the identity continuum and experiments with methods of integration, the history of African-American poetry can be seen as an ongoing negotiation for a more comfortable jail cell. Paralysis of identity is a key main theme of black American poetry, and the central point of immoveability is their paradox-entrenched African origins.

Much of the time the feeling of entrapment is not sourced in the poetry but comes out as undefined statements of confinement. "I know what the caged bird feels, alas!" wrote Paul Laurence Dunbar in the 1890s:

When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;

 When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
 And the faint perfume from its chalice steals-

I know what the caged bird feels!⁸⁸

Three decades later, Langston Hughes was expressing much the same sentiment in his famous "Harlem"—"*What happens to a dream deferred?* Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"⁸⁹—and three and a half decades after that, in the late 1960s, Larry Neal wrote bluntly, "America is the world's / greatest jailer / and we are all in jails."⁹⁰ Meanwhile, keeping the theme of jail and/or frustrated paralysis at the forefront of black American writing, Maya Angelou took for the title of her first and best-known book the refrain from the last stanza of Dunbar's "Sympathy," "I know why the caged bird sings," and in the late '50s Lorraine Hansberry titled her now-classic play *A Raisin in the Sun*. Some of the lack of explication in the above poems might be attributed to the American national determination to live the unexamined life; some may also come from the difficulty of articulating dilemmas without seeming pedantic. In truth, though, the paradoxes that bind black Americans (and whites, as well) into racial immobility are so numerous and all-pervasive that only a poem of epic length could accommodate them.

To outline each of these paradoxes through individual poems could be done, but it would occupy a great deal of space and distract from my main thesis. It is more productive to enumerate briefly and superficially a few paradoxes/dilemma most responsible for fixing black American identity, before examining in more depth those that surface in poems explicitly about African heritage. The most obvious self-contradiction is that the United States was founded on a

⁸⁸ Dunbar, "Sympathy." *The Poetry of Black America: Anthology of the 20th Century*, ed. Arnold Adoff (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 8.

⁸⁹ Bell 42.

⁹⁰ Brooks 19.

libertarian philosophy and a slave economy; it is this congenital schism, in my opinion and probably that of many others, that made denial one of the hallmarks of American national psychology. For Orlando Patterson, who sees the co-existence of slavery and liberal societies as not only natural but inevitable,⁹¹ the more fundamental contradiction lies between the purported exaltation of wage labour and the economic dependence on unpaid slave labour. Parallel paradoxes established themselves when the religious and philosophical conservatism of John Calvin and Thomas Hobbes (the former whose tenets of predetermination already contained a large element of self-contradiction) continued alongside a revolutionary brand of politics, which concurrence fragmented the American sense of authority and probably contributed as much as anything to the double bind of racism and patriotism that I mentioned earlier.

The effects on the black American's sense of Africa of the contradiction that Robert Bone pointed out, between enslavement and evangelization, cannot be overestimated. The first and most corrosive effect was to sugar-coat the poison pill of racial self-loathing in terms of salvation. Though Zora Neale Hurston may have summed it up best with her "Slavery was the price I paid for civilization," she was not the first, nor the last, to express this sentiment. It lay, for example, at the heart of Booker T. Washington's hugely influential *Up From Slavery*, where he articulated it in this manner:

We must acknowledge that, notwithstanding the cruelty and moral wrong of slavery, the ten million Negroes inhabiting this country, who themselves or whose ancestors went through the school of American slavery, are in a stronger and more hopeful condition, materially, intellectually, morally, and religiously, than is true of an equal number

⁹¹ See *Slavery and Social Death*, ch. 1.

of black people in any other portion of the globe.⁹²

This idea did not die with Washington or Hurston; it is so deeply entrenched, and bounded with still-pervasive Puritan mores, that probably a good proportion of black Americans—and certainly a large number of white—would agree with it even today. In the first constitutions of black poetry about Africa, then, or at least the first written constitutions, Africa was not the beloved homeland from which they had been wrenched, but the savage wilderness from which they had been rescued. In 1778, one of the first black American poets to reach print, Jupiter Hammon, wrote in his *Address to Miss Phillis Wheatly [sic], Ethiopian Poetess, in Boston, who came from Africa at eight years of age, and soon became acquainted with the gospel of Jesus Christ*:

Thou mightest have been left behind,
Amidst a dark abode;
God's tender mercy still combined,
Thou hast the holy word.

.....

Thou hast left the heathen shore;
Through the mercy of the Lord,
Among the heathen live no more;
Come magnify thy God.⁹³

We can assume that this sentiment would not have offended Wheatley, since, as James Weldon Johnson points out, Wheatley herself seems to write about Africa with "smug contentment at her own escape therefrom." He cites as an example a stanza of "On Being Brought from Africa to America":

⁹² Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1965) 16.

⁹³ William Henry Robinson, Jr., *Early Black American Poets* (Dubuque, IA: W.C. Brown, 1969) 9-10.

'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,
 Taught my benighted soul to understand
 That there's a God and a Saviour too;
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew⁹⁴

The second effect, less pernicious but equally important in divorcing black Americans from their origins in a way that led to a psychological split, was the reorientation, via their indoctrination in the Old Testament section of the Bible, to North Africa, and specifically Egypt, as their spiritual home. Many of the most enduring slave work-songs, which tended to take the form of "spirituals" rather than centering on local gossip or nostalgia for West Africa as the Caribbean work-songs did, connect the American South to Pharaohic Egypt and the plantation workers to the enslaved Jews. "Let My People Go" and "Go Down, Moses" are only two of dozens of these sorts of songs. The reorientation emerged in written poetry as well as oral; in fact, the Mosaic identification has been the main African analogy (inasmuch as Egypt is considered a part of Africa) throughout the history of black American poetry. Note that Jupiter Hammon conceived of Phillis Wheatley not as a "Queen of the Eboes," but as an "Ethiopian Poetess." Nineteenth-century poet James M. Whitfield (whose main political agenda was to establish colonies of black Americans in Central America) incorporates the Nilotic images in his angry "From America":

Worse scenes of rapine, lust and shame
 Than Babylonian ever knew,
 Are perpetrated in the name
 Of God, the holy, just and true;
 And darker doom than Egypt felt,

⁹⁴ James Weldon Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. 1922. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931) 27-29.

May yet repay this nation's guilt.⁹⁵

Gloria Davis, writing in the 1960s asks, "Where are my people?", and answers her own question,

Tell them—
 White America, I mean,

 that my fathers,
 the Pharaohs, were black.
 Tell the white world
 let them know Hannibal,
 was my brother.⁹⁶

Margaret Walker, in "Prophets for a New Day," also invokes the only specific African names that have genuinely been passed down through black American tradition: those of the Old Testament.

As the burning bush spoke to Moses,

 So the Word of fire burns today
 On the lips of our prophets in an evil age—
 Our sooth-sayers and doom-tellers and doers of the Word.
 So the Word of the Lord stirs again
 These passionate people into deliverance.⁹⁷

Besides being a doctrine from a text that both justifies slavery and enforces anti-black racism, this Mosaic rerouting detached the black American's physiological self-image from West Africa and left it oddly suspended—partly in a miasma of visual self-hatred, partly in identification as Jewish, partly in the linguistic stasis of being forced to define as "black" an enormous range of skin colour, and an enormous racial diversity of people who were not "black"

⁹⁵ Robinson 42.

⁹⁶ Major 46-47.

⁹⁷ Brooks 150.

in a literal sense and whose ancestry was only to some degree African. As well, the long tradition of North African affinity meant that in the militant 1960s the groundwork for the psycho-spiritual shift to Islam was solidly laid. Larry Neal, Robert Hayden, Albert Haynes, Ted Joans and Nazzam al Sudan were some of the new Muslim-American poets who integrated Islam and North African images and themes into their writing.

One of the most difficult dilemmas with which black Americans have to contend, then, is the disjuncture between their involuntary quotidian hypersensitivity to their African origins—often accompanied, by virtue of the binary term "black," with a false stress on the extent of those origins—and a dim and indifferent sense of Africa as a place of origin. In "Note for a Speech," LeRoi Jones writes,

Africa
is a foreign place. You are
as any other sad man here
American.⁹⁸

One of the most illuminating expressions of this disjuncture is Countee Cullen's (in)famous 1920 poem "Heritage," and many of its more puzzling aspects achieve at least a modicum of clarity in the context of the aforementioned contradictions. It remains, however, a poem that unsnarls rather than unpacks, and the ambiguities and self-contradictions within it are impossible to resolve definitively under any light.

At the time of its publication 80 years ago, critics tended to accept the content of the poem and chastise Cullen in faintly condescending ways for "the fault of too great verbal facility,

⁹⁸ C.W.E. Bigsby, ed., *The Black American Writer vol. II: Poetry and Drama* (Deland, FL: Everett/Edwards, 1969) 73.

as though the words were married on the lips rather than mated in the heart and mind,"⁹⁹ his inflated, faux-Keatsian language, which one critic considered "surely neither instinctive in origin nor agreeable in effect"¹⁰⁰ and his "blissful unawareness that anything has happened in English poetry since 1880."¹⁰¹ More modern scholars revisit the poem partly out of the same horrified fascination that made Alice Walker examine Zora Neale Hurston's "slavery is the price I paid" beliefs; partly out of a conviction that the apparent self-loathing in "Heritage," along with Washington's *Up From Slavery* and Wheatley's religious tracts, were secretly subversive; partly out of the resurgence of Blake studies in the 1960s, which taught poetic analysts to be suspicious of singsong poetry such as the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*; and partly out of sheer incredulity that a poet of some intelligence and sophistication, who claims John Keats as a kindred spirit, could write this reductive nursery rhyme and call it poetry.

The tetrametric rhythm and storybook stereotypes do, on the first few readings, overwhelm any other qualities "Heritage" has. The semi-rhetorical opening stanza—

What is Africa to me
Copper sun or scarlet sea
Jungle star or jungle track
Strong bronzed men or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?¹⁰²

—shares more than a passing relationship with Robert Louis Stevenson's equally infamous and

⁹⁹ Alain Locke, "Colour—A Review," *Opportunity* Jan. 1926: 14-15.

¹⁰⁰ George H. Dillon, "Mr. Cullen's First Book," *Poetry* Apr. 1926: 50-53

¹⁰¹ Gerald Moore, cited in Jackson and Rubin, 96.

¹⁰² Bell 47-49.

equally long-lived "Foreign Children":

Little Indian, Sioux or Crow,
 Little frosty Eskimo,
 Little Turk or Japanee,
 O! don't you wish that you were me?¹⁰³

And Cullen's answer to himself is hardly different from what we would expect of an English boy raised on Kipling:

the song
 sung by wild barbaric birds
 Goaded massive jungle herds
 Juggernauts of flesh that pass
 Trampling tall defiant grass

 bodies sleek and wet,
 Dripping mingled rain and sweat,
 tread the savage measures of
 Jungle boys and girls in love.

And yet, perhaps Cullen is simply being more honest about his sense of African identity than most black Americans would be. He does suggest, in the poem's refrain, that Africa is far distant in time and space:

One three centuries removed
 From the scenes his father loved,
 Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
 What is Africa to me?

Near the beginning of the second stanza, he implies that he receives his images, like every other American, through second-hand written accounts; in fact, he dedicates the rest of the stanza to emphasizing how removed he is from first-hand experience, the source of affinity and caring.

Africa? A book one thumbs

¹⁰³ Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Child's Garden of Verses*. 1885. (New York, Knopf, 1992) 61.

Listlessly, til slumber comes.
 Unremembered are her bats
 Circling through the nights, her cats

What is last year's snow to me,
 Last year's anything? The tree
 Budding yearly must forget
 How its past arose or set

The countervailing message, in the very beginning of the second stanza and throughout the third, explicate Cullen's subscription to genetic transmission of cultural and physiological traits:

So I lie, who always hear,
 Though I cram against my ear
 Both my thumbs, and keep them there,
 Great drums throbbing through the air.
 So I lie, whose fount of pride,
 Dear distress, and joy allied,
 Is my somber flesh and skin,
 With the dark blood dammed within

These are neither unusual nor particularly racist beliefs, in Cullen's time or even at much later dates; Sidney Mintz, in his examination of ideas of genetic transmission, cites Malcolm X as saying in his autobiography (1966) that he couldn't dance "appropriately" until his "long-suppressed African instincts broke through."¹⁰⁴ Many of these beliefs endure today, in the United States and elsewhere, and Mintz points out that

Patterns of socially learned motor behaviour are probably not readily destroyed, even by extremely repressive conditions; and the aesthetic and creative possibilities implicit in these traditional patterns and their cognitive accompaniments may have been among the cultural

¹⁰⁴ Mintz 6.

traditions most readily maintained under slavery.¹⁰⁵

Ideas of genetic cultural transmission grate in "Heritage" mostly because of their attachment to exoticized and degrading images—which, however, Cullen candidly admits to gaining, unlike his innate impulses, from books. In these passages, it seems to me, Cullen demonstrates the crux of cyclical self-hatred for the black American: as an American, he is a participant in the stereotypes; as a black person, he is their subject; as a black American, in America, he is their application. This is a particularly cruel fallout of the conflicting pressures on black Americans to repudiate otherness for the sake of being American and having white society insist on that otherness, of having the forces of racism first strip them of all real knowledge of their racial and geographical origins and then refuse to let them escape it. Forced to focus on something they are told is themselves, and for which they have nothing but stereotypes and degrading views, they stereotype and degrade themselves.

This quality comes to the surface of "Heritage" even more in the poem's last two sections, the "turn," as it were, which introduces the dual view of Christ as the liberator who belongs to the race of the oppressor. As Robert Bone predicted, for the black American, both religion as a whole and Christianity in particular have been riven by the enslavement-evangelization paradox; the concept of white devil is closely bound with that of the blue-eyed Jesus: Gwendolyn Brooks refers to slavery as well as patriarchy when she muses, "I think it must be lonely to be God. / Nobody loves a master."¹⁰⁶ The freight that necessarily attends any concept

¹⁰⁵ Mintz 8.

¹⁰⁶ Bell 80.

of subservience and submission for black Americans Cullen himself summarizes in "Simon the Cyrenian Speaks":

At first I said, "I will not bear
His cross upon my back;
He only seeks to place it there
Because my skin is black."¹⁰⁷

Only Christ's own meekness, and the serenity in his eyes, can reach past Simon's racial hesitation to his humanity and make him do "what all of Rome could not have wrought / With bruise of lash or stone." Here is, inevitably, another dilemma of religious belief in black American life: in emphasizing the nobility of pious suffering, a writer implicitly justifies the degrading fact of slavery. In "Heritage," the religious dichotomy is rendered more vicious by the complicating factor of the surrounding African stereotypes. It is the speaker's *American* heritage of slavery and oppression, not his African descent in itself, that alienates him from a white Jesus who doesn't share with him "the precedent of pain" and so makes him

play a double part
ever at Thy glowing altar
.....

wishing He I served were black.

Out of this alienation, the speaker is compelled to "fashion dark gods, too," like the "quaint, outlandish heathen gods" of the Africans. Thus the narrator works with a self-fulfilling stereotype and becomes a character in what began as his own fiction; by the poem's turn, Cullen seems to have tacitly acknowledged that the story and its characters are being written by white dominant society, and that he himself has little choice in how closely or loosely to align himself

¹⁰⁷ Bell 50.

with Africans. Read this way, these apparently unaware passages of "Heritage" are merely a more subtle form of what many other black American poets have written about their lack of control over their identity—perhaps most succinctly phrased by LeRoi Jones in "Audubon, Drafted," speaking bitterly as a black person from the point of view of a white person: "I am what I think I am. You are what / I think you are."¹⁰⁸

Cullen's construction of a layered and self-incompatible identity, with Americanism sandwiched between an African centre and other-imposed assumptions of Africanness, captures one of black Americans' central schisms, or perhaps prisms: that the same heritage stripped from them by slavery and extorted from them by the dogmatic demands of American nationalism is continually forced back on them by racialized perceptions, whether they feel any kinship with Africa or not. Attending this bind is a chronic paralysis of response to charges and stereotypes of childishness, savagery, stupidity, unbound physicality, primitiveness; as with a teenager charged with "being melodramatic" or "overreacting," black American cannot deny these accusations with any heat—never mind responding with anything like a commensurate degree of rage—without seeming to confirm the charge. Whether Cullen believes that only "uncivilized" people feel rage or whether he is well aware of that belief's effectiveness in tying the literary hands of the black American people, he outlines the bind eloquently in the final refrain of "Heritage." What reads, on the first take, as the most vicious brand of internalized racism from this standpoint holds a not-so-veiled threat, and encapsulates the retaliatory sense of African identity that poets of the late 1960s would amplify so greatly:

¹⁰⁸ Alan Lomax and Raoul Abdul eds., *3000 Years of Black Poetry* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1970) 250.

All day long and all night through,
 One thing only I must do:
 Quench my pride and cool my blood,
 Lest I perish in the flood,
 Lest a hidden ember set
 Timber that I thought was wet
 Burning like the dryest flax

.....
 Not yet has my heart or head
 In the least way realized
 They and I are civilized.

With the collapse of the Harlem Renaissance in the late 1920s, references to Africa in black American poetry—and in some degree the poetry itself—subsided; black America entered a spiral of ghetto violence and then, with the rise of the civil rights movement, another phase of hope and conservatism. When Africa re-emerged, in the late 1960s, it was in a more militant cause and with a more sophisticated understanding of racial dynamics, but it was no more real as a place or an identification than it had been in the 1920s. Niema Rashid (formerly Niema Fuller), in his "Warriors Prancing, Women Dancing," writes in stereotyped images not notably different from Cullen's:

Warriors prancing, women dancing, while children
 sang their praise. Evening suns blaze we at pre-
 sent infant aged men and women life we laid. from
 the grass huts through our loins poured warriors
 prancing, women too were made.

In our big black Africa, behind the nature thick
 Mana and God.
 No lies, no tricks, supported by shady alibis.

.....

Now warriors prancing, dancing, singing of their
 own praise. Lost in a lie while the spirits still

the kind of Africana fragments that typified the social and cultural movements, where people were wearing dashikis and cowrie shells, wearing their hair in Afros, collecting African art, and so on; that he has to translate the African words (of unspecified origin) he uses, even in a book intended for a black American audience, also bespeaks the largely contrived nature of the attempt.

Like any concept, any art form, with an impetus in Afro-American nationalism, our poems exist primarily for and go directly to our central human needs, the people, our *shauku* (strong desire) This *kekima* (wisdom) has been personified vividly also here on the mainland since our appearance in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 Much black poetry has the disposition of West African cultural abstracts. Our ancestors are freedom fighters like the writer Ahmed Baba of Timbuktu, in the fourteenth century.¹¹²

A central thread of the Black Power movement's Black Pride corollary was the regalization of black history and physique—a worthy, if naive, effort to correct the view of Africa as an "uncivilized" continent and to reconstitute negative perceptions of African facial features and hair type, which have long been the chief wellspring of black self-hatred, into positives. As we have seen in Philip Sherlock's "Jamaican Fisherman," this can be accomplished; but in Elton Hill-Abu Ishak's "Theme: Brown Girl," as in other black American poems of agenda, the need to resort to clichéd and unrealistic images for the African-nobility component renders the effort an exercise in competing stereotypes. Ishak creates a binary between the idealized black woman in some kind of idealized African surroundings (which, interestingly, include Haiti)—"in the streets of Dakar / robed in darkness," in the Congo "beautiful . . . / breasted with Africa," and "in Haiti / crowned with bandanna & bathing in coolness"—and in equally hackneyed American inner-city

¹¹² Major 12-13.

settings: "in Detroit / face slick & hot with kitchen-sweat," "in Harlem / lonely on midnight corners," and "in Watts / swollen with the sickness / of slums and poverty."¹¹³

Although such poems support Blyden Jackson's view that the militants' "world of blackness is notably a rigid world in which the most conspicuous features are the beauty of blackness and the ugliness of virtually everything white,"¹¹⁴ in fact this dogma never really overtook poetry, or at least not most of the anthologies of the time and afterwards. Perhaps the difficulty of drawing American-African parallels with one side of the picture only vaguely conceived partly explains why the proposed takeover of poetry by the militant political agenda failed to materialize to the degree that writers such as Major anticipated and Jackson seemed to see. Perhaps poetry as a creative form tends to resist trends through its distillation of meaning. Or perhaps the movements didn't last long enough for the Black Power-black poetry alliance to consolidate. In any case, at least as much of the poetic record of Africanness from that period lampoons or criticizes Africanian affectations as support the Black Revolutionary message. Nikki Giovanni voices what seems to be a real appreciation for some aspects of African appropriation, but, despite her strong investment in black revolutionary causes, as shown in such poems as "Poem (No Name No. 3)" and "My Poem," the droll undercutting of militants and their aims is unmistakable in her "Seduction":

one day
you gonna walk in this house
and i'm gonna have on a long African
gown

¹¹³ Major 71-72.

¹¹⁴ Blyden and Jackson 91.

.....

and i'll be taking your dashiki off
and then you'll say "what we really need . . ."

.....

then you'll notice
your state of undress
and knowing you you'll just say
"Nikki,
isn't this counterrevolutionary. . .?"¹¹⁵

While Giovanni enjoys the "beautiful beautiful beautiful outasight/ black men / with they afros,"¹¹⁶ poet Don Lee find the pan-Africanist affectations of the late '60s and early '70s absurd, sarcastically depicting the "super-cool" black man whose

dashikis were tailor made
& his beads were imported sea shells
 (from some blk/country i never heard of)
his tikis were hand carved
out of ivory
& came express from the motherland.
he would greet u in swahili
& say goodbye in yoruba¹¹⁷

What bothers Lee is not only the superficiality of the belief that one can become African through accessories, but also that the belief abets black Americans' ignorance of their participation in U.S. economic imperialism. In "A Poem for a Poet," Lee underscores that the relationship between America (white *or* black) and Africa is not primarily a benign one. "Africa," he writes,

¹¹⁵ Brooks 54.

¹¹⁶ Brooks 57.

¹¹⁷ "But he Was Cool: or: he even stopped for green lights." Brooks 93.

be yr/own letters
or
all your people will want cars
and there are few roads¹¹⁸

Similarly, Edward S. Spriggs, in "For the Truth (because it is necessary)," writes something of a mirror-image "Fortunate Traveller," from the complicit American—and specifically black American—point of view, indicting his militant compatriots for concocting fanciful and destructive dreams of black liberation

in the tea rooms
of our revolution

.....

our knowledge of world revolts
—our anxious ears only half-listened
to the songs of the martinique

.....

we emerge

to pamphleteer
the anticipatory designs
of our dead and exiled poets
—without sanctions
from our unsuspecting brothers
whose deaths we so naively plot¹¹⁹

Not surprisingly, there are few *quiet* poems about Africa written by black Americans, whether in the Black Power era, before, or after. Anger, frustration, confusion and hostility have become the inevitable emotional currents in response to the continued stasis of their position in American society, and none of these emotions is known to produce moderation of voice.

¹¹⁸ Brooks 110.

¹¹⁹ Brooks 162

Margaret Danner's "Far from Africa: Four Poems" represents one of the few dispassionate poems about the African-American's ambiguous and reluctant relationship to Africa.¹²⁰ In the quartet, Danner picks up some of the same conflicts in Cullen's "Heritage," between white America's insistence that blacks blend into mainstream society and their persistence in pointing out the blackness that differentiates them; between being pressured to repudiate their African heritage and having it constantly reimposed on them. The quartet's first poem, "Garnishing the Aviary," speaks with both sadness and pride of the in-betweenness of African-Americans, who can neither claim to be African nor yet pass for American. Poising the poem (or perhaps all four) on the oblique epigrammatic query "*are you beautiful still?*", Danner calibrates the loss entailed in shedding the African plumage, the necessity of doing it, and the impossibility, at once saving and damning, of ridding oneself of it altogether.

The former preen (ludicrous now) and a downcast rage
Or crestfallen lag, are fading out. The initial bloom;
Exotic, dazzling in its indigo, tangerine

Splendour; this rare, conflicting coat had to be shed.

Still brilliant, even in the "twilight stage" of their "moulting days," black people in this poem seem to be learning to glory in their difference and hold their ground against intimidation: they "make a riotous spread / Upon the dust and mire that beds [them]," and they "do not shoo / So quickly." Danner finds hope in the next stage of assimilation, in the pinfeathers of compromise and adaptation, which

though still exotic
Blend in more easily with those on the wings

¹²⁰ Bell 88-91.

Of the birds surrounding them; garnishing
The aviary, burnishing this zoo.

Danner's is no naive view, however. In the second poem of the quartet, "Dance of the Abakweta," Danner acerbically identifies the white Euro- and Americentric frame that people such as "Mrs. Haessler from Vassar" impose on the exotic, a frame that (Danner implies) is the primary source of pressure to relinquish African traits and conform to white standards.

Imagine what Mrs. Haessler would say
If she could see the Watusi youth dance
Their well-versed initiation. At first glance
As they bend to an invisible barre
You would know that she had designed their costumes.

Mrs Haessler's relentless imposition of the "traditional" (i.e., Western) on the unknown is inescapable for the Africans in the text—she can even hear "strains of Tchaikovsky, Chopin" in the Watusi music—but through the poem's form Danner suggests that escape is possible.

Imposing Europe herself, with her Italian quatrains, Danner lets each of the first three stanzas slip to a fifth line and escape into non-rhyme. The fourth stanza, full of references to "traditional" ballets such as "Swan Lake, Scheherazade or / . . . / Les Orientales," remains primly in its envelope quatrain, but the last, straining to retain the pattern of end rhymes, has two anarchic lines that refuse to fit. Looking back at the first poem from the second, it seems that Danner is aware of the less benign aspects of assimilation and believes that sometimes the assimilated must use subversion to retain individuality.

The third poem, "The Visit from the Professor of Aesthetics," works with a mirror modality of the same theme, putting the speaker at the other end of a Mrs. Haessler-like assessment. The visiting aesthetician, a "pink and white . . . hairless mouse," has provisionally

"conceded" the narrator a capacity for sophisticated tastes and a manner of living that elevates her above the Africans whose artifacts she collects—the "Zulu Prince, carvings from Benin"—and the narrator has "planned to prove / [His] views of me correct at even every chance / Encounter." But her efforts to show that she has sanitized her Africanness out of herself fails when the aesthetician, coming early and catching her before she can "shine [her] piano till a shimmer of mother-of-pearl / Embraced it," sees the grime and grease of her store and confirms her shameful kinship with the original possessors of her mementoes, her "forlorn / Treasures garnered by much sacrifice of food." Speaking to the aesthetician, the narrator echoes Countee Cullen's religious dilemma:

I felt that you whose god is grace
Could find no semblance of it here. And unaware

That you were scrubbing, you scrubbed your hands.
Wrung and scrubbed your long white fingers. Scrubbed
Them as you smiled and I lowered my eyes from despair.

The solution to these muted conflicts, Danner implies in the last poem, "Etta Moten's Attic (filled with mementoes of African journeys)," is for African-Americans neither to repudiate their African heritage nor conform to white insistence on it, but rather to acknowledge and accept both their real separation from Africa and their inseparable ties to it. The artifacts in Etta Moten's attic are second-hand Africa; this, Danner seems to be saying, is the black American's true relationship to Africa, and it will suffice. The Ndebele rug and Watusi warriors and Ashanti chief are exotic and removed and contained, but they also restore to the speaker's world something of her own: the "incomparable tangerine" that she shed from her once-exotic plumage in the first poem. Her eyes follow the line of colour through the room as it, like the Africanness inside her,

emerges unexpectedly and brilliantly from the elements around it,

splashing high as a sunbird or fly moving
over a frieze of mahogany trees
or splotching out from low underneath as a root,

shimmering bright as a ladybug grooving
a green bed of moss, sparkling as a beetle,
a bee, shockingly dotting the snoot

of an ape.

In this semi-synthesis, Danner probably comes as close to resolving the African-American's ambiguous and deeply problematic relationship with Africa as can honestly be achieved. In fact, it is probably a good rule of thumb that, in general, poems that articulate internal and social schisms reflect the black American reality more accurately than do texts that make unequivocal statements or take unequivocal stances. That black Americans' inherent conflicts overlap in many cases with those imposed on them by white society—perceptions of African retentions being a case in point—makes it all the more necessary to define and validate the depths and dimensions of the divisions with which they live, rather than cover them up—an activity in which white American society, caught in its mirroring dilemmas, also has a strong vested interest.

Conclusion

The Task Before Us: Picking at a Sensitive Seam

In early 2000, Stephen Marley, the youngest son of Jamaican reggae legend Bob Marley, enlisted a number of rap and R&B artists to perform on remixed versions of his father's songs for a CD called *Chant Down Babylon*. Most of those artists were American, including Erykah Badu, Steve Tyler and Lauryn Hill; Hill's "duet" with Bob Marley, "Turn Your Lights Down Low," went to the top of the music video charts shortly after its release. This project did not, as it may seem, confirm assumptions of Afrosporist commonality via a natural overlap of Afro-Caribbean and African-American music but rather the opposite, as it was born out of an earlier defeat of those assumptions. As Harry Allen writes in the CD's liner notes, with more than a hint of disillusionment:

Though Black people in the United States would seem to be natural recipients for Bob Marley's message of PEACE, unity, and race liberation, in his life he never reached the African-American audience the way he'd truly felt possible. "Play I on the R&B," the defiant rasta demanded . . . "Want all my people to see we're bubbling on the Top 100" . . . Leave it, then, to the son to do the father's will . . . Stephen Marley . . . combines fresh hip-hop co-vocals with the mournful, yet hopeful timbre of his father's own voice and music . . .¹²¹

What "the son" apparently realized in the interim is that "Black people in the United States" are not natural recipients for his father's message but rather a foreign audience who find Marley's a foreign message. In order for a significant number of black Americans to identify with Marley's music, recognizable black American recording stars had to be enlisted; Marley's most generalized songs had to be chosen, and those focussing on the Rastafarian religion,

¹²¹ *Chant Down Babylon*, Tuff Gong/Island Def Jam Music, 1999.

Caribbean issues or rural themes eliminated; and the music tracks themselves had to be re-produced to temper their distinctly Jamaican flavour. Even at that, the simple fact that reggae music is the only music in the Western hemisphere to use 4/4 metre with the stress on the first and third beat rather than the second and fourth will probably ensure that the musical messenger remains alien, regardless of the message, unless life's most fundamental rhythms somehow lose their variety.

I mention this project because to me it demonstrates both the persistence of the hegemonizing forces in Western black cultures and a certain belated, albeit reluctant, concession that beliefs of sameness refuse to test out. The poems I have explored, although they all focus on what might be considered the overriding commonality of racial origin, express distinct, non-interchangeable regional identities, and the intransigence of those identities stems from different histories, different experiences of what it means to be African-descended, different views of nationhood, different positions in society. It seems remarkable, in some lights, that superficial physiological traits have obscured the scope and the fundamental nature of these differences and continue to do so.

The very persistence of the homogenized view, however, indicates that the psychological resistance to its dissolution has real and deep-rooted bases, some of which can be readily enough surmised. On the black American side, initially, there probably existed a strong need to feel less alone and less outnumbered, and more recently—over the past 30 years or so—a sharp depoliticization of the population that has maintained status quo beliefs through ignorance, indifference and lack of rhetorical sophistication. On the West Indian side, was and is a convert's zeal for ideas of Afrosportist community. On the white political and financial side, there may be a

reluctance both to lose a convenient wedge issue and to examine in any serious way the pathologies of the American national psyche. On the white academic side, one can presume a natural hesitance to intrude on "the other" once again and impose definitions and perceptions from a position of dominance.

Though these points of resistance are valid, I believe that the monocular regard that insists on conjoining all black people is a footservant of racism and must be addressed, and that the common task of coming to terms with their positions in the world is one that Americans and Caribbeans of African descent must allow themselves—or force themselves, as the case may be—to carry out in ways that are true to their own histories, beliefs and identities. While the process of acknowledging their differences and points of incompatibility will inevitably be painful to both African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, I am firmly convinced that more damage will be done if they continue to adhere to unexamined beliefs in commonality and leave the seeds of discord unattended.

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