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### An Intellectual History of Black Literary Discourse 1910-1956

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## Abstract

### An Intellectual History of Black Literary Discourse 1910-1956 Shayne McGregor

2022

This dissertation examines the first forty-six years of black literary discourse in the American twentieth century. Beginning with Benjamin Brawley's *The Negro in Literature and Art* (1910), I begin the dissertation by identifying black literary discourse's original goal. In the parlance of the time, the goal of black literary discourse was to solve the "Negro Problem." I then discuss how other critics and artists further into the twentieth century like James Weldon Johnson and Sterling Brown expanded on Brawley's ideas in ways that attempted to uncover the underlying philosophical thought that underpinned the Problem. By the 1930s, a competing conceptual model that identified the organizing principle of black oppression differently would enter the field. The writers of *New Challenge* (1937) would argue that economic oppression was the organizing principle that should be at the forefront of black literature's focus. These different conceptual models mirror the difference in thinking between the left and far left among black intellectuals after Harlem Renaissance. Each camp had its own set of ideas with respect to art, and these ideas would evolve in significant ways between the 1930s and the early-to-mid 1940s.

The late 1940s would see different rhetoric emerge that was concerned with ambiguity and individualism. This would lead into the 1950s, a decade that began with the writers of *Phylon* championing works of black literature that leaned toward obscurity. Additionally, we also see within the pages of *Phylon* an investment in the figure of the

black literary scholar. Ultimately, the argument of this dissertation is that through these changes in black literary discourse, we see a shift in the relationship between literature and the broader social order. At the beginning of the twentieth century, literature was seen as a tool that could enable social change. Benjamin Brawley's *The Negro in Literature and Art* makes this clear. However, by 1956, at the time Arthur P. Davis published "Integration and Race Literature" (1956), there was a sense that literature was instead a reward of social change.

An Intellectual History of Black Literary Discourse: 1910-1956

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

Of

Yale University

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Shayne McGregor

Dissertation Directors: Joseph North and Robert Stepto

May 2022

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## Introduction

The history of literary discourse in the United States is conventionally understood as a series of debates between different literary camps over a wide range of philosophical, aesthetic, political, and moral interests. In Joseph North's recent study, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (2017), he argues

up until the crisis decade of the 1970s—literary studies was not unified under a single paradigm, but rather split between two rather different paradigms sometimes thought to be competing with one another and at other times thought to be complementary. The field's central axis of dispute was between literary 'scholars' and literary 'critics,' the key distinction being between those who treated the study of literature as a means by which to analyze culture and those who treated the study of literature as an opportunity [to] intervene in culture

While North takes a paradigm approach to understanding the history of literary discourse, earlier scholars, like Chris Baldick, Vincent B. Leitch, and Richard Ruland, took the more conventional "schools and movements" approach—understanding the basic movements of twentieth-century literary discourse as centered around different schools of thought vying for visibility and relevancy (e.g. Marxists vs New Critics). In either case, the main idea in recent and canonical scholarship is that the bulk of literary discourse's history in the American twentieth century is marked by an ongoing dialogue between different literary camps. In general terms, so goes the history of Anglo-American literary discourse.

African American literary discourse demands a different approach to understanding its development throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The "scholar" vs "critic" distinction falls apart when applied to most of African American literary history in the twentieth century, and this is because for most of the twentieth

century, the black literary critic was often also an artist and teacher, and sometimes also had a college degree. More than that, however, the distinction falls apart because the black literary critic wielded literary discourse to both analyze and intervene in culture. If there was an axis of dispute in African American literary discourse, it wasn't on the grounds of literature's ability to intervene in culture. Rather, it was about how exactly black literature would go about doing that. As a result, the conversations within African American literary discourse were oftentimes very specific, even early on. This is because there was already an agreed-upon set of assumptions. The questions generated from these conversations could be reduced to three big questions. 1. How would literature intervene in culture? 2. What specifically within culture was literature intervening in? And 3. Why was it important that literature serve an intervening role? These are the questions that organized most of the literary debate in the first half of the twentieth century. Interestingly, these questions demanded a conception of literature's relationship to the broader social order as one that viewed literature as the means through which a better world is created. This conception of literature, and the questions by extension, would change by the time the United States entered the 1940s and 1950s.

The argument of this dissertation is that, from the early twentieth century through the mid-century, there existed a shifting relationship between black literature and the social order it existed within. In the first half of the twentieth century, the role of literature generally oscillated between viewing literature as a tool toward a social end, such as racial equality, and viewing literature as a reward due to the advances made in pursuing those social ends. In chapter one, I examine the first twenty-seven years of black literary discourse, starting with Benjamin Brawley's *The Negro in Literature and*

*Art* (1910) and ending in 1937 with Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing." In the twenty-seven years between these two texts, I also examine James Weldon Johnson's preface to the *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1921) as well as essays from Sterling Brown and other well-known critics of the period. Even though the years I'm examining are well-trodden territory in some ways, particularly because it includes the Harlem Renaissance and its aftermath, what this chapter offers that's distinct is a view of black literary discourse from the 1910s. For this reason, Johnson's preface in *The Book of American Negro* can be seen as a text that is responding to ideas that had already been set forth ten years earlier as well as a text that's inaugurating an artistic movement in the Harlem Renaissance. This chapter is also valuable because it offers a through line from which the 1930s in black American literary history can be viewed.

The 1930s in black literary history is an important decade because of the number of critical texts that were published during the period. These texts included Wright's "Blueprint," several novels from Zora Neale Hurston, and several publications from Sterling Brown. But in black literary scholarship there is no clear way to read the 1930s other than to say it's the decade in which, because of the Great Depression, literature took on a markedly more class-conscious stance. In my attempt to add nuance to this conversation about black literature in the 1930s, I argue in this chapter that the work of Sterling Brown and Richard Wright during this period can be read as paralleling each other in that they're both responding to the decade of the 1920s, but their responses ran opposite of each other.

Chapter two builds on chapter one in that it focuses on the next thirteen years in black literary discourse, paying particular attention to the two camps that emerged during

this decade. On one side I identify a leftist camp of liberal black literary critics (emblemized by the work of Sterling Brown), and on the other side, I identify as a far-left camp of black literary critics (emblemized by the work of Richard Wright and the other critics of *New Challenge*). The difference between left and far left at this moment is critical to understanding the differences of opinion in literary thought. These differences played out on the printed page in two main ways. The first is in the construction of black literary history. Before the far-left critics, who were generally published within the pages of *New Challenge* and the published proceedings of the American Writers' Congress, could make an argument for how and why they viewed and valued literature, they needed to preface their opinions with an overview of black literary and social history. Wright does this in "Blueprint," but so did every major black critic of the 1930s and 1940s. Even if their overview amounted to a paragraph or two, many critics of the 1930s and 1940s felt the need to historicize, contextualize, and generally reframe what they had inherited from the 1920s, the 1910s, and even the nineteenth century. The work of the liberal critics, such as we would see in *Negro Caravan* (1941), were interested in black literary history as well, but they were also interested in valuing art in ways only art could be valued. *Negro Caravan* is organized by genre as opposed to chronology. In this way, we can see that by the early 1940s, there was a growing gap between these two camps. On the one hand, the far-left critics, who by the early 1940s were emboldened by the success of Wright's *Native Son* (1940), had a very distinct sense of black literary and social history and were supported by politically radical groups such as the John Redd clubs and the League of American Writers. On the other hand, a liberal group of critics, who

emphasized art's unique properties as art, were being generally supported by academic institutions.

Other than this, the other way we can track the development of black literary discourse along these lines is through the use of the specific language terms used by both groups of black critics. For example, Sterling Brown was interested in black literature's ability to offer "truth." Brown's investment in "truth" stems from a concern with black representation in literature. Conversely, Wright and the far-left critics were interested in literature's ability to offer "perspective" as well as the idea of "interpretation." One of the most interesting things that I've come across in doing the research for this dissertation is Wright's review of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Water Turpin's *These Low Grounds* (1937). In the review, Wright states that both books are difficult to evaluate because "neither of the two novels has a basic idea or theme that lends itself to significant interpretation" (22). This is fascinating because before 1937, the word "interpretation" was not a common word in black literary discourse, and if it was used, it often wasn't used in reference to literature. While other critics praised Hurston's *Their Eyes* specifically because of its use of dialect speech, which evoked Johnson's earlier comments on Paul Laurence Dunbar and the question of how to represent black speech in poetry, Wright would seem to be changing the entire field on which literature is valued and evaluated by adding the word interpretation.

By the late 1940s, black critics would begin to combine the language of the liberal and far-left critics in ways that would have the effect of creating a new relationship to literature. Whether it was in solving the "Negro Problem," or breaking down the global economic order, the 1930s and early 1940s was still a period marked by a belief that

black literature had an active or assertive relationship to the greater social order. By the late 40s, we begin to see a take on literature, most famously seen in James Baldwin's "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949), that focuses on three different things. The individual, ambiguity, and literature's distinctness from the realm of the social.

Chapter three spans the years from 1950 to 1956 and is almost entirely focused on the work published within the pages of the academic journal *Phylon*. At this point in the twentieth century, black literary discourse would lean even more heavily into aspects of literature related to craft. The far-left writers and critics of the 1930s and early 1940s were also interested in craft, but whereas they were interested in craft to the extent that craft could enable "perspective," for example, the 1950s investment in craft reflected a broader interest in ambiguity and obscurity. This is how the 1950s related to the late 1940s. The other thing that makes the 1950s distinct is an interest in the role of the "scholar" as well as of "scholarship."

Whereas the "we" Sterling Brown uses in "Our Literary Audience" (1930) in general represented a system of black reading that only includes readers and artists, Edward Blyden within the fourth issue of 1950's *Phylon*, a special issue on black literature, would propose a new model for black literature that transforms the two-party system into a tripartite system that included writer, reader, and scholar. The professional scholar was seen as important to the growth of black literature as well as to what both Alain Locke and Edward Blyden would refer to as "cultural maturity." Throughout this time, conversations around the growing realities and implications of integration were mounting. By 1956 Arthur P. Davis would write about what he called the Integration Crisis and its relationship to black literature. He would state that "The Integration

Controversy is another crisis, and from it we hope that the Negro will move permanently into full participation in American life—social, economic, political, and literary” (145). What started out in 1910 as having a direct bearing on the Negro Problem, by 1956 was being cast in the reverse in that literature was seen as one of the rewards of coming social change. In the roughly forty-six years between 1910 and 1956, there was at least one complete shift in the relationship between black literature and the broader social order.



## Chapter One:

### An Intellectual History of Black Literary Discourse 1910-1937

Focusing on the lived reality of black creative writers in the early twentieth century, Kenneth Warren argues in *What Was African American Literature* (2012)

Black writers knew that their work would in all likelihood be evaluated instrumentally, in terms of whether or not it could be added to the arsenal of arguments, achievements, and propositions needed to attack the justifications for, and counteract the effects of, Jim Crow. As James Weldon Johnson observed in 1928 ‘I judge there is not a single Negro writer who is not, at least secondarily, compelled by the desire to make his work have effect on the white world for the good of his race.’ Writers also knew that their work would likely be viewed as constituting an index of racial progress, integrity, or ability.

Warren and the quoted James Weldon Johnson are referring to the practice of literary creation. “Black writers,” as used by Warren, and “Negro” writers, as used by Johnson, refer to black creative writers in the United States who at the very least were aware that their work would be taken up as an instrument for racial progress. What makes Warren’s statement particularly interesting is that it can also be applied to black literature’s counterpart, black literary discourse<sup>1</sup>. From the early twentieth century onward, black literature was seen as one instrument in the fight for racial equality. Black literary discourse, as it existed in print form, was an additional and complementary

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word “discourse” here as a catch-all term to refer to the collective body of thoughts and opinions on a specific topic. Given this, black literary discourse in this dissertation refers to the collective body of thoughts and opinions related to black literature. I use it as a way to capture, if somewhat improperly, the idea that the thoughts, opinions, debates, and conversation on black literature can be solidified into a body of knowledge that can be charted and outlined. Relatedly, I don’t use the term “black literary criticism,” at least not until the third chapter, because of its primary association with the university. In other words, it’s too narrow a term to capture what I’m looking at, especially when you consider that much of the published black literary discourse in the early twentieth century in large part wasn’t sponsored by university presses or institutions related to the university. Literary criticism is also a specific mode of writing that black mid-century critics saw as distinct from the decades of writing on black literature that had preceded them. This point, however, will become more relevant in my third chapter.

instrument, and the growth of a black literary discourse alongside black literature in the early twentieth century was helped in major part by the fact that many of the century's major black creative writers were also practicing critics of literature. Black literary discourse is connected to the history of black literary production, and this is generally understood. But it also has an intellectual history of its own that can be traced from the early twentieth century through mid-century. How it developed alongside black literature, why it made certain arguments, and how those arguments changed over the course of the first half of the twentieth century will be the organizing questions of this dissertation.

Warren's overall thesis, that African American literature "was a postemancipation phenomenon that gained its coherence as an undertaking in a social world defined by the system of Jim Crow segregation" (1) marks the twentieth century as a productive place to begin in detailing the history of black literary discourse. Like black literature, black literary discourse was also a post-emancipation phenomenon that did not rightly begin until the early twentieth century, roughly around 1910. The 1910s, a decade in American history that not only started with the release of the first issue of *Crisis*, but also saw white American writers trying to create a literary tradition of their own via Van Wyck Brooks's "On Creating a Usable Past" (1918), was also a decade that saw the introduction of black literature into the world of belles-lettres discourse via Benjamin Brawley, a black Harvard University-trained historian, and his book *The Negro in Literature and Art* (1910).

Born in 1882 in South Carolina, Benjamin Brawley was a poet and teacher-critic who earned his bachelor's degree in 1901 from Morehouse College, a second bachelor's degree from the University of Chicago in 1906, as well as a M.A. from Harvard in 1908.

Brawley studied both history and literature, training under scholars such as William E. Dodd, Ernest De Whitt Barton, John M. Manley, Bliss Perry, William Allen Neilson, and George Lyman Kittredge (Parker 166). As a poet, Brawley was relatively minor. He scored some success by publishing in Morehouse College's student journal and even had his poem "My Hero," a poem dedicated to the life of Union Civil War soldier Robert Gould Shaw, appear toward the end of James Weldon Johnson's *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922). However, most of Brawley's public recognition would come as a teacher of black literature and history. In 1913 Benjamin Brawley would enter the mainstream press and the historical profession with the publication of *A Short History of the American Negro* (1913), published under the MacMillan Company, but in 1910 Brawley published a pamphlet on black literature. This pamphlet was roughly sixty-pages in length and covered who were then the most well-known creative writers of African descent in the United States, including Phillis Wheatley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles Chesnutt, William Stanley Braithwaite, and W.E.B Du Bois. In doing so, Brawley formally initiated black writing into the world of literary discourse debate.

The first part of my contention in this chapter is that early African American literary discourse from the publication of Brawley's *The Negro in Literature and Art* in 1910 through the end of the 1920s was mostly cohesive as far as outlining a specific goal for black literature. This goal was helped in part by the fact that there were not many people writing seriously about black literature in the early part of the twentieth century, and for that reason, it was easy for the discourse around black literature to be almost monolithic. Whereas Warren would argue that African American literature lost its cohesion following the formal end of Jim Crow, a detailed look into the literary discourse

of the twentieth century reveals that whatever cohesion was established at the onset of a black literary discourse in 1910 was quickly lost as the 1920s gave way to the 1930s. It's not that black creative writers by the 1930s were no longer interested in resolving Jim Crow, but specifically within the field of literature, black creative writers from the 1930s onward developed differing opinions on the fundamental value and political agency of literature as it existed in an ever-changing global social order due to the ramifications of two global wars and the growing realities of integration in the United States. As an example, there were times in the early twentieth century when literature was seen as a tool toward social change and there were other moments closer to mid-century when literature was seen as a reward of social change. Critical to understanding these changes, however, is an understanding of the grounds on which black literary discourse established itself and the arguments it put forth in the 1910s.

While the 1900s and 1910s saw watershed moments in the academic study of black history in the formation of Carter G Woodson's Association for Negro Life and History as well as black social and political visibility in the formation of the NAACP and National Urban League (groups in part founded and led by black scholars in the social sciences), the study of black literature at this moment was lagging by comparison. Brawley seemingly understood the uniqueness of his project on black literature, and this can be seen in the language of the preface to the 1910 pamphlet in which he writes

In the following pages an attempt has been made to test in the light of critical principles the literature so far produced by the Negro people of America, and to review their achievement in every department of the fine arts.

The words “attempt” and “test” suggest a cautious approach to the subject of black literature, a subject that by 1910 was dominated by rhetoric that was either blatantly racist (e.g. Thomas Jefferson’s “critique” of Phillis Wheatley in *Notes on the State of Virginia* in the eighteenth century) or, at best, mildly patronizing (e.g. William Dean Howells’s review of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *Majors and Minors* in the nineteenth century). Understanding this, Brawley, by way of historical training, wanted to give a fair and honest assessment of the major black writers since Phillis Wheatly with his goal being that such an assessment would contribute to solving, in the parlance of the time, the “Negro Problem.” He continues in his preface

Much that has been written on the Negro Problem...is, from the standpoint of polite literature, absolutely worthless; so that comparatively little of the writing on this large subject has been considered. The endeavor has been to direct attention to poems, novels, short stories, and purely artistic performance generally, rather than to matter that belongs primarily in the field of Economics or Sociology

The “Negro Problem,” which, describes the problem of black alienation from and degradation within a purportedly democratic American society, served as the focal point for black literary discourse’s first argument. But Brawley wasn’t the first person to make the connection between black arts, literature, and political advancement. Even in the years predating Brawley’s 1910 publication, there were other people, institutions, and publishing organs making the connection visible. As stated by Abby and Ronald Johnson in *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of Afro-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (1991)

The Journals at the beginning of the twentieth century—*Colored American Magazine*, and *Horizon*, along with *Voice of the Negro*—documented a stage in Afro-American Culture. They were race periodicals, involved first in political and social occurrences and then in

black literature. In their literary function, they published the work of young poets and fiction writers, most of whom had no other outlets for their efforts. Concerned with politics, the editors favored creative work which harmonized with the broader emphases of their publications

What makes Brawley stand out during this period was his primary interest in literature, as opposed to the early black periodicals that saw literature as secondary, as well as his success at producing a take on black literary history in the form roughly resembling a monograph. Additionally, his thoroughgoing research into specific black writers and his belief in black literature as being capable of resolving “the Negro Problem” created the sense that black literature was important for reasons beyond entertainment and could constitute its own field of study similar to fields like economics and sociology.

As Henry Louis Gates puts it in his introduction to the 1988 reprint of J. Saunders Redding’s *To Make a Poet Black* (1939), much of the early work in the field of black literature “were inclusive and documentary, rather than inclusive and critical. The great service that they performed was to preserve the names of authors and their work” (xiii), and Brawley’s *The Negro in Literature and Art* is generally no different, except I would revise Gates’s argument to say that the work Brawley performs is not simply akin to filing and sorting, which is to say detached from any critical reflectiveness. Rather the decisions Brawley makes of who to include in his pamphlet as contributors to black literature and art, his statements on their work, and other included topics do reflect an aesthetic point of view that’s encased within a political stance, and it’s an important starting point to consider because this is the point from which other takes on black literature in the twentieth century would branch.

Each chapter of Brawley's text, which includes "Folk-Lore and Folk Music," "Phillis Wheatley," "Paul Laurence Dunbar," "Charles Waddell Chesnutt," "W.E. Burghardt DuBois," "William Stanley Braithwaite," "Other Writers," "The Stage. Orators. Readers," "Painters" "Sculptors," "Distinguished Singers," "Composers and Musicians," and an "Appendix," largely amount to overviews of the lives of specific black authors and creatives as well as plot summaries of their major works, with some aesthetic judgment peppered throughout. Brawley's aesthetic point of view is first seen in the book's title. "Literature" (e.g. poetry, short stories, novels) and "Art" (e.g. fine art, music, etc.), while understood as distinct, needed to be considered together in order for a relevant argument to be made about the inherent worth of the contributions made by African Americans in the United States in an effort to solve the "Negro Problem," not about literature proper.

In order to make this argument, Brawley offers his readers a critical take on certain authors. Writing in the mode of a historian, Brawley states of Phillis Wheatley's poetry

In spite of her earnestness however, her verse shows serious weakness. It must continue to find a place in the history of literature as one of the most successful of the American imitations of Pope; more than that one can hardly claim for it...her ambition knew no bounds, her thirst for knowledge was insatiable, and she triumphed over the most adverse circumstances

Similarly, Brawley would state of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry

as beautiful as his work sometimes is, there is in it, almost none of the powerful and condensed phrasing of the supreme masters of the craft, nothing equal to Shakespeare's 'unfolding star,' Milton's 'iron tears,' or Browning's 'more black than blackness.' It is for us, however, to enjoy his flute, and not blame him because his instrument was not a trumpet.

and while Brawley loved Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* because it was "marked by all the arts of rhetoric, especially by liquid and alliterative effects, strong antithesis, frequent allusion, and poetic suggestiveness" (30), he viewed William Braithwaite, a contemporary of Du Bois and of himself, as lacking.

[Braithwaite is] at present the foremost of the poets of the race...[but] as one turns the leaves, he is impressed more and more with the fact that the foremost poet of the race has absolutely refused to voice the Negro's strivings. In the whole book there is not a single poem to reveal the fact that Mr. Braithwaite is identified with the Negro people

Brawley's comments on Wheatley and Dunbar, while seemingly harsh, need to be understood in the context of a literary critic using nineteenth century aesthetic standards to judge poetry produced by black Americans. Because of his academic training, Brawley can't make the claim that Wheatley's and Dunbar's poetry is at the same level of quality as that of the poets he studied. What Brawley is implicitly claiming, however, is that whatever flaws their poetry contains is not due to inherent racial weaknesses. While Wheatley's poetry might not be that good from the standpoint of a nineteenth-century aesthetic point of view, they were successful imitations of Alexander Pope, and she was extremely ambitious and overcame the realities of slavery on her way to becoming a poet.

According to Brawley, Dunbar's poetry is subpar not because of Dunbar's blackness, but because his instrument was a "flute" and not a "trumpet," which is to say Dunbar didn't have access to the training and time that good craft demands, unlike his white predecessors. Despite this, however, Dunbar's poetry was still, as Brawley put it, sometimes beautiful. Reframing Wheatley's and Dunbar's perceived shortcomings as one of circumstance as opposed to racial inferiority was important to the extent that it



modeled how black literary printed discourse when done properly could be attuned to the literary qualities of a piece of art without attributing those qualities to one's racial makeup. Recall that in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson stated of Phillis Wheatly that "religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Whately[sic]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism" (150). In Jefferson's racist construction, Wheatley's blackness inhibited her from becoming a poet. Brawley is both refuting this statement and arguing for the positive qualities in Wheatley's as well as Dunbar's poetry.

With this said, quality was not the final standard by which Brawley judged creative work by African Americans. Black literature needed to also have some frame of reference to black life in the United States. Notably, this aspect of Brawley's aesthetic vision is only applied to those writers writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, hence his criticism of Braithwaite's poetry. For Brawley, W.E.B. Du Bois and Charles Chesnutt were good examples of how this could be achieved. As stated earlier, Brawley thought highly of Du Bois's use of figurative language in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chesnutt, on the other hand, is referred to as the "foremost novelist and short story writer of the race" because "he [Chesnutt] possesses a mastery of the short story as a literary form, an art the requisites of which are completely uncomprehended by many of the younger aspirants for literary fame" (22). In particular, Brawley thought Chesnutt's short story "The Wife of his Youth" "a simple work of art whose intensity is almost overpowering" (22), in part because it told a story shrouded in tragedy and mystery that was unique to African American history. Brawley writes

A very fair colored man who, just before the Civil War, by the aid of his Negro wife, makes his way from slavery in Missouri to freedom in a Northern city...After the years have brought him business success and culture, and he has become the acknowledged leader of his social circle and the prospective husband of a very attractive young widow, his wife suddenly appears on the scene. The story ends with Mr. Ryder's acknowledging before a company of guests The Wife of his Youth.

But stories like "The Wife of his Youth" were also considered good because, as Brawley states, "such stories as these, each setting forth a certain problem, working it out to its logical conclusion, excluding extraneous matter and...selecting the title from the concrete means used in working out the theme, reflect great credit upon the literary skill of [Chesnutt]" (23). Brawley was a fan of the straightforward plot construction of Chesnutt's story. This is significant because the process Brawley saw Chesnutt going through in his construction of "The Wife of his Youth," and that he thought other black writers were failing to emulate, mirrors what Brawley would have wanted to happen with the "Negro Problem." In the same way that Chesnutt's short story offered a problem and followed it to its logical conclusion, the "Negro Problem" could similarly and ideally be set forth and followed to its logical conclusion. It's significant that Brawley refers to it as a "logical" conclusion as opposed to a morally right conclusion. This choice of language on Brawley's part will become more significant by the time black literary discourse enters the 1920s, but it's important to highlight here because Brawley's construction of the idea short story is one that evokes the setting of a scientific experiment that involves a control group, and this seems especially the case when you consider Brawley's idea that a short story "excludes extraneous matter." Overall, Chesnutt and Du Bois, in Brawley's eyes were good writers because they stuck to a certain standard of creative writing, including adherence to and demonstrative mastery of literary form and figurative

language, while at the same time centering an experience in their writing that could be recognized as black.

Brawley's chapters are organized in roughly chronological order. The chapter on Phillis Wheatley comes before the chapter on Dunbar, who by 1910 had already passed away, which in turn comes before the "contemporary writers" like Chesnutt, Du Bois, and Braithwaite who were well known, still alive, and active in the field of literature during the turn of the century. Given this, it's insightful to examine how Brawley sets up his discussion on black literature by opening his text, not with a chapter that focuses on poetry before Wheatley, but with a chapter on black folk culture entitled "Folk-Lore and Folk Music." This chapter is a short introduction to understanding folklore and music in the rural south. He writes

In the life and history of the Negro people there has developed a large tradition on interesting customs, superstitions, and tales. *The Southern Workman*...has done much in the way of investigating and collecting this material. Of the writers of the race Charles W. Chesnutt was the first fully to appreciate its literary value...Important as is Negro folk-lore however, the folk-music is still more so. An exhaustive study of the familiar Negro melodies has not yet been made...As in the ballads, the sentiment of the individual becomes universal; and there is a strong tendency toward repetition, a stanza being frequently only sufficiently different from the one that preceded it afford a single slight advance in the hymn...A new edition of the songs has recently been published by the Hampton Institute Press, and it is to be hoped that this will do much to exhibit them in their purity and power

The genealogical line that connects formal black writing to black folk culture and music of the rural south is noted here. But while Brawley's opening chapter on folklore and music anticipates a future emphasis on "the folk" that would come later in the century, especially as younger critics such as Sterling Brown enter the scene, it's important to note that Brawley does not include a call for black creative writers to imbue

their literature with elements of black folk culture. Rather, folk culture, particularly the music, for Brawley was a sophisticated form all its own and served as evidence for African American cultural and intellectual ability and parity with white America. For Brawley, folklore and music at this early stage were thought to be important on their own and to be preserved as they were, instead of as seen as a throwback art form that modern literature could pull from. When comparing folk music to what was then the burgeoning ragtime scene, Brawley writes

The time and structure of the melodies [negro spirituals] has frequently astonished musicians by its accuracy; but in recent years there has been a decided tendency toward debasement. Ragtime depends for its effect upon an exaggeration of the 'rhythmical snap' that is so prominent in Negro music, and upon an excessive use of syncopation that is, the suspension or alteration of the rhythm by driving the accent to that part of a bar not usually accented. The difference between the dross and the pure gold may be seen by the comparison of a ragtime ditty with such a characteristic hymn as 'see fo' an' twenty elders on here knees.' It is, however the strong use in such a hymn as this of the effects just criticized that leads some people to say that the 'spirituals' sound like ragtime. This distinction should be insisted upon however, and more and more should the current debasement of Negro music be discouraged.

While the 1910 edition is valuable because of the way it opens the door for us to see the early shaping of a black literature discourse in terms of how it leveraged black literature in the fight against racial oppression and its main figures of study, Brawley's full argument wouldn't come to maturity until its entrance into the mainstream in 1918, now with the support of a mainstream press and featuring a frontispiece of Phillis Wheatly. In the first chapter of the 1918 edition, now entitled "The Negro Genius," Brawley expands his thinking on folk music and folklore to include the whole of black folk culture. His overall claim in the book is that there exists an innate aesthetic genius in

African Americans, and his claim in the chapter “The Negro Genius” is that evidence of an innate aesthetic genius can be found in the folk culture of the Black South. He writes

If...we study the Negro we shall find that two things are observable. One is that any distinction so far won by a member of the race in America has been almost always in some one of the arts; and the other is that any influence so far exerted by the Negro on American civilization has been primarily in the field of aesthetics. To prove the point we may refer to a long line of beautiful singers, to the fervid oratory of Douglass, to the sensuous poetry of Dunbar, to the picturesque style of DuBois, to the mysticism of the paintings of Tanner, and to the elemental sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller...Everyone must have observed a striking characteristic of the homes of Negroes of the peasant class in the South. The instinct for beauty insists upon an outlet, and if one can find not better picture he will paste a circus poster of a flaring advertisement on the walls...Red is his favorite color simply because it is the most pronounced of all colors...In some of our communities Negroes are frequently known to ‘get happy’ in church. Now a sermon on the rule of faith or the plan of salvation is never known to awaken such ecstasy

Here we see within early black literary discourse an evolving process of thought in argument that is in keeping with the period’s endorsement of biological essentialism. Whereas Brawley in 1910 would see folk culture and music as elements of black culture that sits alongside other artistic efforts such as poetry, by 1918, Brawley gave more emphasis to folklore and music as they were evidence of an innate aesthetic sensibility within African Americans, one Brawley purposefully refers to as “genius” in order to implicitly refute claims of black intellectual inferiority. This signals that at this moment, the relationship between formal literature and other folk art forms in the black American context was changing.

Brawley’s insistence in this first chapter in the 1918 edition is that African Americans have a particular aesthetic genius, one interestingly grounded in romantic language (fervid oratory, sensuous poetry, elemental sculpture, etc.), and a certain instinct

for beauty that is uniquely all their own. This unique quality, combined with their history of suffering, as Brawley sees it, will eventually allow African Americans to eventually attain heights of great achievement in the arts. Brawley goes on to state

The wail of the old melodies and the plaintive quality that is ever present in the Negro voice are but the reflection of a background of tragedy. No race can rise to the greatest heights of art until it has yearned and suffered. The Russians are a case in point.

Brawley was not alone in offering this kind of argument in the front against Jim Crow and racial oppression. The 1910s in the United States was a period in which white cultural critics were trying to make similar arguments about the uniqueness of different ethnic groups. Horace Kallen, for example, in “Democracy versus the Melting Pot” (1915), would stress the progressive potentials of essentialism.

As in an orchestra...every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization.

Even going as far as to use the same example of Russian literary history, W.E.B Du Bois would share Brawley’s thoughts in his essay entitled “The Negro in Literature and Art,” published in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* in 1913. Du Bois would begin by anticipating Brawley’s essentialist views

The Negro is primarily an artist. The usual way of putting this is to speak disdainfully of his sensuous nature. This means that the only race which has held at bay the life destroying forces of the tropics, has gained therefrom in some slight compensation a sense of beauty, particularly for sound and color, which characterizes the race... It was therefore not to be wondered at that in modern days one of the greatest of modern literatures, the Russian, should have been founded by Pushkin, the grandson of a full-blooded Negro, and that among the painters of Spain was the mulatto slave, Gomez.

Du Bois and Brawley here would seem to be of one accord. Brawley would state later in the 1918 edition of *The Negro in Literature and Art*

we do not mean to say that the Negro can not rise to great distinction in any sphere other than the arts...we do mean to say, however, that every race has its peculiar genius, and that, so far as we can at present judge, the Negro, with all his manual labor, is destined to reach his greatest heights in the field of the artistic...it is the call of patriotism, however, that America should realize that the Negro has peculiar gifts which need all possible cultivation and which will some day add to the glory of the country

The innate capacity for aesthetics within blacks in the United States is connected to the argument of their inherent worthiness for full participation within a democratic society through the idea that given the opportunity, blacks could contribute something that could be added to the “glory” of the United States. Likewise, Du Bois would end his 1913 essay by stating with respect to black artistic achievement, “so this sum of accomplishment is but an imperfect indication of what the Negro race is capable of in America and in the world” (237), a statement that makes clear how much DuBois valued black artistic production in terms of what it might signal as far as African American’s capacity to be citizens in the United States and participants on the global stage.

Note that these are not just radical claims relative to the period in which they were writing, but they are also nationalistic and integrationist in sentiment. To the extent that Jim Crow was a system that among other things limited black participation in American society, black literary discourse saw black literature as a means to break down those barriers by convincing white America of the innate ability and potential of black Americans. At this point in their careers, Brawley and Du Bois had a shared object of study, a shared belief in the inherent artistic abilities of black people (via an essentialist understanding of race), and a shared directive for black art, particularly black literature.

Taken together, the 1910 and 1918 editions of *The Negro in Literature and Art* synthesize black literary discourse before the transformations that would occur during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. It modeled a way of writing about black literature that could be attuned to the literary qualities of a piece of art without attributing those qualities to one's racial makeup. As well, to the degree that racism and discrimination against African Americans in the United States was part of the "Negro Problem," literature had the ability, within its very structure, to be an object that could serve as a model for how problems could be set forth and resolved logically. The somewhat scientific thinking here is probably why Brawley thought literature could constitute its own field of study similar to other somewhat scientific fields like economics and sociology. The other thing to note about black literary discourse in the 1910s is how it saw folklore as evidence of an innate aesthetic genius within African Americans. If this aesthetic genius within African Americans could be recognized by the American masses, the "Negro Problem" was closer to being solved. And this sentiment was largely couched in language that was integrationist and nationalistic. It's important thing to note that idea of African Americans as inherently artistic was something that actually changed within the discourse, albeit so early on, because it signals a shift that will come in the early 1920s with respect to how writers were thinking literature could dissolve the Negro Problem. Ultimately, literature proper was not the focus of black literary discourse, but literature was seen mostly as a means to an end. Black literature was indexed and its merits discussed at length in order to craft an argument about African American ability.

Brawley, after 1918, would, for the most part, leave the world of black literary discourse alone and continue his work as a historian. At the founding of Carter G.



Woodson's *Journal of Negro History*, he was hired as one of the journal's first associate editors (Meier 14). By 1931, he was invited by the Phelps Stoke Foundation to join a group of black scholars and educators, including Otelia Cromwell, Monroe N. Work, Charles H. Wesley, W. E. B. Du Bois, Eugene Jones, and Alain Locke among others, to edit an Encyclopedia of the Negro (Meier 57). As the world of mainstream and black literary discourse continued to develop in important ways through the decade of the 1920s and the early '30s, Brawley's main contribution to the field of literary discourse would come in the occasional reprint of *Negro Literature and Art in the United States* (by 1937 the book would be retitled as *The Negro Genius: A New Appraisal of the Achievement of the American Negro in Literature and the Fine Arts*) and the publication of several textbooks including *A Short History of the English Drama* (1921), *New Survey of English Literature: A Textbook for Colleges* (1925), and *A History of the English Hymn* (1932). Brawley in 1931 would join Howard University's English Department as faculty, and he would die two years later in 1939 (Parker 169).

The time between the 1918 publication of *The Negro in Literature and Art* and Brawley's death in 1939 saw major and indelible developments in the world of black literary discourse. Though Brawley was not an intensely active participant in the ongoing and evolving conversation around black literature, particularly those taking place in and centered around the country's major urban centers (e.g. Chicago, New York, etc.), Brawley was aware of the changes and the new swirling currents around black literature. In the preface to the 1921 edition of *The Negro in Literature and Art* Brawley writes

The present volume undertakes to treat somewhat more thoroughly than has ever before been attempted the achievement of the Negro in the United States along literary and artistic lines...the work is the result of studies in

which I first became interested nearly ten years ago...in the mean time...new books and magazine articles were constantly appearing...so the time has seemed ripe for a more intense view of the whole field.

The “new books and magazine articles” that were appearing leading up and through the 1920s corresponds to a period that is associated in conventional historical terms with the Harlem Renaissance. A lot has been written on this period in black literary scholarship, and it’s one that gets returned to often. One only needs to look at the span of years between Nathan Irving Huggins's 1971 book *Harlem Renaissance* and *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, Letters* (2010), edited by Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, to see how important the events of the 1920s were to black literary history. And in fact, those years were extremely important for reasons beyond the proliferation of young black writers. The rapid developments Brawley refers to here also had to do with the literary and cultural discourse that was being published in those years beginning with the publication of James Weldon Johnson’s *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1921).

James Weldon Johnson’s preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* is a canonical document in black literary history that oftentimes is thought of as a document that in some ways anticipates and in other ways launches the philosophy of the 1920s in black art and culture in the United States. However, Johnson’s preface is also part of a literary-critical tradition, and it’s this aspect of Johnson’s preface that I think has gone underappreciated. Rather than think of Johnson’s preface as something that anticipates future ideas, I want to look at how Johnson’s preface is responding to and building on the ideas of the 1910s. In this way, we’re allowed to see Johnson’s preface as both the springboard for ideas that would come later as well as the end result of a series of ideas that existed prior to 1921.

The preface to Johnson's anthology doesn't mark a turn in black literary discourse as much as it does an advancement in a particular direction. Johnson, born in 1871, was several years Brawley's senior and we can imagine harbored similar ideas with respect to racial essentialism, black art, and racial advancement. In his preface to the first edition of *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, Johnson, much like Brawley, discusses at length the careers of Phillis Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Johnson also echoes the argument Brawley made only four years earlier (both in terms of black literature's ultimate aim and African American inherent artistry). In the opening section of the preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, Johnson writes:

the matter of Negro poets and the production of literature by the colored people in this country involves more than supplying information that is lacking. It is a matter which has a direct bearing on the most vital of American problems...the status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of national mental attitude toward the race than of actual conditions. And nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art...he has the emotional endowment, the originality and the artistic conception, and, what is more important, the power of creating that which has universal appeal and influence...the Uncle Remus stories constitute the greatest body of folklore that American has produced, and the 'spirituals' the greatest body of folk song...the other two creations are the cakewalk and ragtime.

Johnson's terms are different, but the spirit of his argument in this section of the preface is in line with Brawley and Du Bois. And like Brawley, black folk culture is used as an argument for black ability. Johnson, though, is not as hard of an essentialist as Brawley, and this is perhaps due to the advances being made in the social sciences with respect to the social construction of race in the United States and the growing importance of culture as key to understanding differences between groups of people. Johnson doesn't proclaim the existence of a particular black genius that is grounded in romanticist

language. Rather, Johnson claimed for African Americans attributes (emotional endowment, originality, artistic conception, and the power of universal appeal) that are far more general in tone and not as attached to immutable racial traits. With this said, Johnson still maintains an essentialist stance. As he continues in his preface, Johnson outlines what he understands to be the quintessential black attribute that allows for black literary and artistic production.

This power of the Negro to suck up the national spirit from the soil and create something artistic and original, which, at the same time, possesses the note of universal appeal, is due to a remarkable racial gift of adaptability

In basic outline, then, Johnson and Brawley's arguments are the same.

Essentially, African Americans are inheritors of specific racial traits (adaptability in the case of Johnson and artistic genius in the case of Brawley) that allow for artistic creation, and if that artistic creation is generally recognized, then the "Negro Problem," is effectively or, at the very least, one step closer to being solved. In other ways, Johnson is more forceful than his predecessors. With respect to the work of Wheatley, whereas Brawley is almost apologetic when it comes to her poetry, Johnson directly compares Wheatley's poetry to that of Anne Bradstreet. He doesn't offer an extended explication of either one's poetry. Rather, he places Bradstreet's "Contemplation" next to Wheatley's "Imagination" and states "we do not think the black woman suffers much by comparison with the white" (18).

Johnson's forwardness is in stark contrast to the caution that Brawley's pamphlet conveyed in 1910. This change in tone is reflective of the general shift in mood that people associate with the 1920s in black American history. Langston Hughes's famous

poem written during this period, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” which includes the lines “I’ve known rivers/Ancient, dusky rivers” (4) situates the black speaker of the poem as both a speaking and knowing subject and is one that captures the sentiment of the period. But Johnson’s forwardness in his discussion of black literature was also an attempt to advance the object of black literature which was to solve the Negro Problem. Johnson does so by outlining the Negro Problem as one that was deeply philosophical and psychological. In other words, the Negro Problem is both a problem of political and social standing as well as a problem of Western thought.

Johnson, as well as Brawley and Du Bois, as 20th-century Western critics were inheritors of Enlightenment thought and nineteenth-century cultural criticism. We see echoes of certain books like Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), which argued that the role of culture (e.g. literature) in the social order should be to improve people. In the preface to *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold would state

The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically.

Enlightenment thought would also play a role in the thought process of early black literary discourse. As Henry Louis Gates would state, one of the main proponents of Enlightenment thought was the idea that for one to be worthy of full participation in a democratic society, one needed to have the capacity for reason, and one clear example of one’s capacity for reason was one’s capacity to write (44). Johnson, Brawley, and Du Bois, all being classically trained at universities, inherited these ideas. However, Johnson

by 1921 and throughout the 1920s would, more than his contemporaries, make explicitly clear how deep black literature's stakes were. Johnson writes

A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior.

And even while Johnson saw African American music and dance as important indicators of African Americans' ability to influence American culture, for Johnson (who himself was a musician who produced music for Broadway in New York), African Americans were not worthy of participation in democratic life on a global stage directly for those reasons. Rather, it was because African Americans could write great literature. Johnson's forcefulness was not just a style of the period, it was a genuine attempt to solve the Negro Problem by getting at the base of the idea that underpinned it and doing so through literature. If Brawley suggested that black literature could solve the Negro Problem, Johnson's preface is an attempt to follow the potential of that to its logical conclusion.

Beyond this, Johnson also saw black literature as offering its own advantages in the effort to solve the Negro Problem. In *Harper's Magazine* in 1928, in an essay entitled "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist," Johnson states that the production of black literature was particularly important during the 1920s in the fight against the Negro Problem. Johnson writes

A number of approaches to the heart of the race problem have been tried: religious, educational, political, industrial, ethical, economic, sociological. Along several of these approaches considerable progress has been made. Today a newer approach is being tried, an approach which discards most of the older methods. It requires a minimum of pleas, or propaganda, or

philanthropy. It depends more upon what the Negro himself does than upon what someone does for him. It is the approach along the line of intellectual and artistic achievement by Negroes, and may be called the art approach to the Negro problem. This method of approaching a solution of the race question has the advantage of affording great and rapid progress with least friction and of providing a common platform upon which most people are willing to stand. The results of this method seem to carry a high degree of finality, to be the thing itself that was to be demonstrated.

Interestingly, Johnson's description of the "art approach" as one that is "newer," and that "discards most of the older methods" suggests that by the 1920s the "art" approach, and by extension black literary discourse, was still relatively young. But not only did Johnson see black literary discourse as a newer approach, it was an approach that emphasized black agency because it "depends more upon what the Negro himself does than upon what someone does for him," requiring a "minimum of pleas," while also causing the least amount of friction or potential for violence between racial groups (210). The most interesting thing about this point is that Johnson's vision of black agency wasn't an individualistic one. Rather, it was community-based. Recall that Benjamin Brawley wrote in his preface to *The Negro in Literature and Art*, that he had planned to "test in the light of critical principles the literature so far produced by the Negro people of America, and to review their achievement in every department of the fine arts." And compare Brawley's use of the third-person possessive pronoun "their " with Johnson's use of the first-person plural pronoun "we" in his defense of Phillis Wheatly against Anne Bradstreet.

It's in this same essay that we see Johnson's thought process on how he thought black literature could counteract the ill effects of Enlightenment philosophy on American thought and culture. Johnson would state

there is a common, widespread, and persistent stereotyped idea regarding the Negro, and it is that he is here only to receive; to be shaped into something new and unquestionably better. The common idea is that the Negro reached America intellectually, culturally, and morally empty, and that he is here to be filled— filled with education, filled with religion, filled with morality, filled with culture. In a word, the stereotype is that the Negro is nothing more than a beggar at the gate of the nation, waiting to be thrown the crumbs of civilization. Through his artistic efforts the Negro is smashing this immemorial stereotype faster than he has ever done through any other method he has been able to use. He is making it realized that he is the possessor of a wealth of natural endowments and that he has long been a generous giver to America. He is impressing upon the national mind the conviction that he is an active and important force in American life; that he is a creator as well as a creature; that he has given as well as received; that he is the potential giver of larger and richer contributions.

If the specific mental attitude that affected white America, inherited from Enlightenment thought, was the belief that African Americans had contributed nothing to civilization, regardless of the quality of their literature, then the mission of formal writing was to show off the distinctive cultural characteristics that had not yet been fully recognized as contributions to American culture. And for Johnson, those contributions to American culture stemmed from black folk culture. Johnson would later state

Indeed...it is now more or less generally acknowledged that the only things artistic that have sprung from American soil and out of American life, and been universally recognized as distinctively American products, are the folk creations of the Negro.

To imbue those distinctive folk creations within black literature, essentially transforming folk culture into formal writing, was for Johnson the aim of black literature in the 1920s. And this was an advancement on the understanding that folk culture was evidence of a black aesthetic genius. While Johnson doesn't refer to folk culture as containing the genius of African Americans, he does argue that it would behoove black writers to pull from black folk culture in their creative work, and he believes this because it's a part of American culture that African Americans know better than other groups. He states "the



equipped Negro author working at his best in his best-known material can achieve this end” (208).

Ultimately, in Johnson’s view, the production of black literature helps to solve the Negro Problem by confronting the ideas of Western thought and refuting them at a deep enough level that it could begin to shake the systems of thought that undergirded racist thought in America. In order to do this, black creative writers needed “to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without” (32). But literature that pulled from the folk spirit and focused solely on racial themes was to be only temporary for Johnson. Johnson would state later in the 1920s

but, standing on his racial foundation, he [the black writer] must fashion something that rises above race, and reaches out to the universal in truth and beauty

The ultimate goal and measure of success for black literature was to enter the sphere of universal truth and beauty, which would in effect allow African American literature to merge with mainstream American literature. Johnson states

In stating the need for Aframerican poets in the United States to work out a new and distinctive form of expression I do not wish to be understood to hold any theory that they should limit themselves to Negro poetry, to racial themes; the sooner they are able to write *American* poetry spontaneously, the better. Nevertheless, I believe that the richest contribution the Negro poet can make to the American literature of the future will be the fusion into it of his own individual artistic gifts.

The fact that Johnson himself italicizes and bolds the adjective “American” suggests how important it was to Johnson that African American literature be a part of the mainstream body of American literature, which continues the trend of early black literary critics imbuing their work with nationalistic and integrationist sensibilities. While Johnson advanced the discourse in important directions, he also maintained certain

stances. The reason why it's important to keep note of this is because of how by the 1930s and 1940s the integrationist and nationalistic sensibilities within the discourse transformed into specific questions. It's also interesting to think about how by the 1920s the idea that there existed a body of texts that could be called "American" literature was still in doubt, and so Johnson's claim about black writers integrating American literature is also part of the larger story of the creation of American literature as a field of study.

While Johnson's overall emphasis was broader than Brawley's due to his explicit engagement with ideas of Western thought, Johnson's focus on imbuing formal literature with qualities evocative of the rural south allowed him to continue to push in directions different from Brawley but with a particularly narrow focus on black dialect speech in formal literature. Johnson was able to do this through a reflection on the life and career of Paul Laurence Dunbar, the most well-known black poet in the United States at that time in the early twentieth century. Whereas Brawley in 1910 generally didn't have much to say about Dunbar's dialect poetry, choosing instead to focus on Dunbar's poetry written in standard English with the reason being that the dialect poems "suffer[ed] by quotation, being artistic primarily as wholes" (17), Johnson offers a sustained treatment of Dunbar, including a discussion of their friendship, Dunbar's feelings with respect to his poetry, and where Dunbar's career would have taken him had he not died in 1906. Johnson would write

My personal friendship with Paul Dunbar began before he had achieved recognition, and continued to be close until his death. When I first met him he had published a thin volume, 'Oak and Ivy,' which was being sold chiefly through his own efforts. 'Oak and Ivy' showed no distinctive Negro influence, but rather the influence of James Whitcomb Riley. At this time Paul and I were together every day for several months. He talked to me a great deal about his hopes and ambitions. In these talks he

revealed that he had reached a realization of the possibilities of poetry in the dialect, together with a recognition of the fact that it offered the surest way by which he could get a hearing. Often he said to me: 'I've got to write dialect poetry; it's the only way I can get them to listen to me.' I was with Dunbar at the beginning of what proved to be his last illness. He said to me then: 'I have not grown. I am writing the same things I wrote ten years ago, and am writing them no better.' His self-accusation was not fully true; he had grown, and he had gained a surer control of his art, but he had not accomplished the greater things of which he was constantly dreaming; the public had held him to the things for which it had accorded him recognition. If Dunbar had lived he would have achieved some of those dreams, but even while he talked so dejectedly to me he seemed to feel that he was not to live. He died when he was only thirty-three.

Dunbar's feelings of being hedged into a particular mode of writing allowed Johnson to theorize negro dialect's appeal to white America as well as what it would take for a Negro poet to overcome those imposed limitations. Johnson writes

The Negro in the United States has achieved or been placed in a certain artistic niche. When he is thought of artistically, it is as a happy-go-lucky, singing, shuffling, banjo-picking being or as a more or less pathetic figure. The picture of him is in a log cabin amid fields of cotton or along the levees. Negro dialect is naturally and by long association the exact instrument for voicing this phase of Negro life; and by that very exactness it is an instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos...What the colored poet in the United States needs to do is something like what Synge did for the Irish; he needs to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation. He needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor; a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought, and the distinctive humor and pathos, too, of the Negro, but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and allow of the widest range of subjects and the widest scope of treatment...this is no indictment against the dialect as dialect, but against the mould of convention in which Negro dialect in the United States has been set. In time these conventions may become lost, and the colored poet in the United States may sit down to write in dialect without feeling that his first line will put the general reader in a frame of mind which demands that the poem be humorous or pathetic.

Johnson's views on Paul Laurence Dunbar's career and dialect poetry as a whole would be instrumental for literary critical debate moving forward as so many of the major creative writers in black America would look for alternative ways to express a racial spirit without falling into the trap of humor and pathos as well as the trap of minstrel association in the minds of white and black readers. It's also at this point that I believe black literary discourse formally became an internal conversation among black critics and creative writers. White America was still a focal point for black literary critics, but Johnson's theory on dialect changed the nature of the discourse tremendously from one that was aimed almost exclusively at white readers to one that included black creative writers. This is because within Johnson's theory of dialect is a challenge to black creative writers to produce literature that retains racial themes but that are different from the stereotyped dialect poetry that made Dunbar famous.

The question of how to write black poetry is one that, among other questions, would help organize the Harlem Renaissance. And, in fact, Johnson was part of a larger community of black cultural leaders in the 1920s who were interested in fostering a black literary community as well as creating a way for black writers to develop their artistic selves through the lens of race. Shawn Christian in *The Harlem Renaissance and the Idea of a New Negro Reader* (2016) in part discusses how the literary contests of the *Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines suggested a deep interest on the part of older black critics to encourage the development of a larger internal conversation with respect to race. Scott Zaluda in "Lost Voices of the Harlem Renaissance: Writing Assigned at Howard University 1919-31" discusses how in Alain Locke's philosophy class at Howard University, students were encouraged to write about race. Zaluda states

Locke asked his philosophy students questions intended to generate a secondary discourse: one created by African American voices on the topic of race. For example, on one ethics exam, students were asked to discuss 'proper moral sanctions' for 'the modern virtue of race relations.' On an exam for a philosophy course which studied social systems, students were prompted to discuss how the concept of race should be utilized as a focus and point of view in sociological analysis. For a term paper in the same course, students were told to present a critical analysis of any generalization about majority- minority group relations

The 1920s in Black America was a period in which there was a conscious effort to build a black literary community and readership, and Johnson's theory of dialect is what helped form and shape the discourse of that community at least in part. Relatedly, the other question that became prominent during this period was to whom black writers should aim their work. The struggle of the double audience was a point of discussion that would appear throughout the 1920s and even into the 1930s and 40s. In 1928 James Weldon Johnson would publish "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" in *The American Mercury*. James Weldon Johnson would state in this essay

The Negro author—the creative author—has arrived...It is unnecessary to say that he faces every one of the difficulties common to all that crowd of demon-driven individuals who feel that they must write. But the Aframerican author faces a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about—the problem of the double audience. It is more than a double audience; it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view. His audience is always both white America and black America. The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter he is immediately called upon to solve, consciously or unconsciously, this problem of the double audience. To whom shall he address himself, to his own black group or to white America? Many a Negro writer has fallen down, as it were, between these two stools.

For Johnson, the black creative writer, like Dunbar who was held back in his career because of white conceptions of black life, was at a disadvantage when writing exclusively for a white audience. At the same time, writing for a black audience also proved difficult for the black creative writer. Johnson states

When he [the black creative writer] turns from the conventions of white America he runs afoul of the taboos of black America. He has no more absolute freedom to speak as he pleases addressing black America than he has in addressing white America. There are certain phases of life that he dare not touch, certain subjects that he dare not critically discuss, certain manners of treatment that he dare not use—except at the risk of rousing bitter resentment. It is quite possible for a Negro author to do a piece of work, good from every literary point of view, and at the same time bring down on his head the wrath of the entire colored pulpit and press, and gain among the literate element of his own people the reputation of being the prostitute of his talent and a betrayer of his race—not by any means a pleasant position to get into.

For Johnson, the only way out was to write for both audiences, but even with that as the solution, Johnson understood the near impossibility of merging the two audiences at that time during the late 1920s, and, in fact, he believed that it would actually take time, not necessarily talent, for the Negro artists to eventually be able to produce work “free from outside limitations.” Johnson would state

instead of black America and white America as separate or alternating audiences, what about the combination of the two into one? That, I believe, is the only way out. However, there needs to be more than a combination, there needs to be a fusion. In time, I cannot say how much time, there will come a gradual and natural rapprochement of these two sections of the Negro author's audience. There will come a breaking up and remodeling of most of white America's traditional stereotypes, forced by the advancement of the Negro in the various phases of our national life. Black America will abolish many of its taboos. A sufficiently large class of colored people will progress enough and become strong enough to render a constantly sensitive and defensive attitude on the part of the race unnecessary and distasteful. In the end, the Negro author will have something close to a common audience, and will be about as free from outside limitations as other writers.

The discourse around black dialect speech on the one hand and the question of to whom black literature should be directed were related conversations. They were related because writing for a white audience meant potentially falling into the trap of minstrel association in the reader's mind while writing for a black audience meant having one's work scrutinized in unfair ways. However, the conversation around audience was also

connected to a sense of achievement. Johnson would state “when a Negro author does write so as to fuse white and black America into one interested and approving audience he has performed no slight feat, and has most likely done a sound piece of literary work” (208). This is significant because recall that at the beginning of Brawley’s preface he states that he is primarily interested in the “achievement” of black creatives “in every department of the fine arts.” Even Johnson, in outlining the art approach to the Negro Problem, understood it as one that revolves around “the line of intellectual and artistic achievement by Negroes” (210). The word “achievement”, when used by Brawley and Johnson, is explicitly in reference to group achievement. Similarly, when Langston Hughes writes “I’ve known rivers,” there’s an implied “we” in Hughes’s use of the first-person singular pronoun. However, even as Johnson continues to use the “we” pronoun, there is in his discussion of achievement an implied “I” within the “we” by the late 1920s. What I’m getting at here is that even though the same word of achievement is being used between Brawley in 1910 and Johnson in the late 1920s, what achievement means in the context of a publishing market interested in publishing the work of black writers is slightly different. There remained an interest in the collective achievement of black creatives, but alongside that, there was also a keeping track of the achievement of individual black authors. Johnson’s discussion of Paul Laurence Dunbar and his claim that had Dunbar lived he, as an individual, would have achieved some of his personal dreams as a writer sheds light on this. Though this point will become more important as literary discourse enters the 1930s.

Overall, Johnson’s arguments in the 1920s would go on to influence many of the younger black writers of the 1920s. If the “Negro Problem” was one of national mental

attitude than of actual conditions, literature, then, had a supreme role in the fight for racial equality. A supreme role that depended less on “pleas, or propaganda, or philanthropy” and more on what black writers could do for themselves. Whereas white American literature was fighting for curricular as well as global and local recognition, Johnson, by way of the preface and his other writings, had attempted to elevate African American literature as well as the African American artist to greater cultural and political visibility. Johnson was not alone in his efforts. Jessie Faucet and Du Bois as editors of *Crisis* and Charles S. Johnson as editor of *Opportunity* magazine as well as other twentieth-century black literary magazines, big and small, were instrumental in giving the black artists both a platform and a sense of purpose. If, as Kenneth Warren argues in *What was African American Literature*,

no writer of this period [the early twentieth century] could operate indifferently either to the expectations that African American literature ought to contribute demonstrably to some social end or to the belief that novels, poems, or plays constituted proxies for the status or the nature of the race as a whole

It was in large part due to the combined efforts of Johnson and others as they helped outline a directive for black literature from the 1910s through the end of the 1920s. Together they imbued black literature with a high level of importance with respect to social and political impact, and if Langston Hughes, at 24, could write grandiosely of his role as an artist in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” it’s likely because of Johnson’s elevated stance on literature. Hughes would write

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either.



We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

Much has been written about Johnson's preface, and while contemporary scholars of race in the United States might take issue with Johnson's oversimplified and outmoded theory of racism, the impact that his take had on artists of his period cannot be ignored. As Johnson stated, and as younger artists of the period might've felt "it is the individual Negro artist that is now doing most to effect a crumbling of the inner walls of race prejudice" (211). Overall, through Johnson, we can see the 1920s as a period in which literary discourse tried to solve the Negro Problem through an upending of Enlightenment thought, and in doing so it produced at least two questions. 1. What should be done with black dialect speech in formal writing? and 2. To whom should black literature be aimed?

Johnson's concern with dialect speech in black literature, its ties to the minstrel stage, and his concern with Enlightenment thought are all tied to the more general problem of black representation in media and, indeed, the period dubbed the Harlem Renaissance was also one characterized by an intense need, at least among the older generation of scholars and critics, to control the image of black life in the United States across various mediums, the printed word being one. This is why so many of the period's canonical documents, including the Special Survey Graphic issue of 1925, edited by Alain Locke, could be so polymorphous in their internal structure. The inclusion of art, poems, short stories, as well as essays was an attempt at a broad and sweeping change in terms of how African Americans were represented. It's this fundamental value of black literature, the ability to represent, within the discourse of the 1920s that would come into even greater focus and scrutiny by the early 1930s. There was some anticipation of this happening in the middle 1920s. In 1926 *Crisis Magazine* released a questionnaire

containing seven questions all of which had to do with the black artist's responsibility to the race within their art. The questions read

1. When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray?
2. Can any author be criticized for painting the worst or the best characters of a group?
3. Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?
4. What are negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?
5. Does the situation of the educated Negro in American with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least as sincere and sympathetic as 'Porgy' received?
6. Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artist from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?
7. Is there not a real danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social class?

While older black critics including Jessie Fauset and Benjamin Brawley answered in ways in line with the directive they helped establish, the most prophetic answer came from a young Langston Hughes. In answer to these survey questions, Langston Hughes would state

I think like this: what's the use of saying anything—the true literary artist is going to write about what he chooses anyway regardless of outside opinions. You write about the intelligent Negroes; Fisher about the unintelligent. Both of you are right. Walpool pictures the better class Englishman; Thomas Burke the sailors in Limehouse. And both are worth reading. It's the way people look at things not what they look at, that needs to be changed

The sentiment of Hughes's final sentence, "it's the way people look at things not what they look at, that needs to be changed" (qtd. Gates 332) would charge literary debate within black literature from the 1930s onward as representative concerns gave way to concerns regarding the interpretive power of literature. The full brute of Hughes's sentiment wouldn't come to full fruition until the end of the decade and the publication of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). But the 1930s, a somewhat undefined period in black literary history, I contend remains somewhat undefined because it is the first decade in which black literary discourse becomes polyvocal in a way that makes the polyvocality of the black literary discourse in the 1920s seem monolithic. By this, I mean that it is a decade in which different black critics were saying very different things about black literature and they actively referred to each other in terms of their respective schools of thought. Interestingly, the differences between these two growing groups had everything to do with how differently they saw the fundamental value of literature. Literature's value was still in its ability to fight against Jim Crow and represent black people differently, but how that fight needed to develop and what the previous generation of black literature had done in advancing the fight against Jim Crow was up for debate.

By the 1930s, James Weldon Johnson would not change his views on dialect in black literature even after the stock market crash of 1929. In his preface to the second edition of the *Book of American Negro Poetry*, published in 1931, Johnson writes

The statement made in the original preface regarding the limitations of Negro dialect as a poetic medium has, it may be said, come to be regarded as more or less canonical. It is as sound today as when it was written ten years ago; and its implications are more apparent. It calls for no modifications, but it can well be amplified here. The passing of traditional dialect as a medium for Negro poets is complete. The passing of traditional dialect as poetry is almost complete...It is now realized both by

the poets and by their public that as an instrument for poetry the dialect has only two main stops, humor and pathos...several of the poets of the younger group, notably Langston Hughes and Sterling A. Brown, *do use* a dialect; but it is not the dialect of the comic minstrel tradition or of the sentimental plantation tradition; it is the common, racy, living, authentic speech of the Negro in certain phases of real life.

By 1931, Johnson saw the literary ambitions that he had outlined at the beginning of the 1920s as coming to fruition, and this was thanks in major part to the work of Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, two poets who through their poetry, transformed dialect from one that was characterized as humorous and pathetic to one that, as Johnson saw it, was authentic. Johnson would go on to celebrate the work of Sterling Brown even more in his introduction to Sterling Brown's *A Southern Road* (1932). In it Johnson writes:

Mr. Brown's work is not only fine, it is also unique. He began writing just after the Negro poets had generally discarded conventionalized dialect, with its minstrel traditions of Negro life (traditions that had but slight relation, often not relation at all, to *actual* Negro life) with its artificial and false sentiment, its exaggerated geniality and optimism. He infused his poetry with genuine characteristic flavor by adopting as his medium the common, racy, living speech of the Negro in certain phases of *real life*. For his raw material he dug down into the deep mine of Negro folk poetry. He found the unfailing sources from which sprang the Negro folk epics and ballads such as 'Stagolee,' 'John Henry,' 'Casey Jones,' 'Long Gone John' and others'

Sterling Brown would spend the early 1930s carrying Johnson's mantle and would end the decade as one of the premiere critics and poets of African American literature. Brown would push Johnson's ideas in ways similar to how Johnson pushed the ideas of Brawley and his contemporaries. But Brown, being a young poet, also absorbed the spirit of Langston Hughes's final sentence in his answer to the questionnaire in the 1925 issue of *Crisis*.

In one of Brown's more famous essays, he would schematize the problems with black representation in American literature. In his essay published in 1933, "Negro Characters as seen by White Authors," Brown would state

The Negro has met with as great injustice in American literature as he has in American life. The majority of books about Negroes merely stereotype Negro character. It is the purpose of this paper to point out the prevalence and history of these stereotypes. Those considered important enough for separate classification, although overlappings do occur, are seven in number: (1) The Contented Slave, (2) The Wretched Freeman, (3) The Comic Negro, (4) The Brute Negro, (5) The Tragic Mulatto, (6) The Local Color Negro, and (7) The Exotic Primitive.

Beyond just categorization, Brown would echo Johnson's concern with exposing the false grounds on which racist representations of black characters are based. Brown continues by stating

It can be said, however, that all of these stereotypes [in literature by white authors] are marked either by exaggeration or omissions; that they all agree in stressing the Negro's divergence from an Anglo-Saxon norm to the flattery of the latter; they could all be used, as they probably are, as justification of racial proscription; they all illustrate dangerous specious generalizing from a few particulars recorded by a single observer from a restricted point of view-which is itself generally dictated by the desire to perpetuate a stereotype. All of these stereotypes are abundantly to be found in American literature, and are generally accepted as contributions to true racial understanding

By calling it a "dangerous specious generalizing from a few particulars recorded by a single observer from a restricted point of view-which is itself generally dictated by the desire to perpetuate a stereotype" (180), Brown is able to go even further than Johnson as far as describing the problem of American racism. If Johnson identified the problem with American racism as the problem of Enlightenment or Western thought, Brown is describing the problem of Western thought as one that is dependent on a narrow point of view, which actually stems from a "desire" on the part of the oppressor to

continue their oppression. This task of describing, getting closer at the central organizing idea of racial restriction in the 20th century would be tracked by other black creatives and critics of the 1930s, such as Richard Wright, but it's first important to outline how Brown thought point of view could be fixed, and he did so by continuing the conversation of the 1920s about black audience. This is because, for Brown, the problem of point of view was too sided.

In Brown's "Our Literary Audience," published in 1930 in *Opportunity* magazine, Brown begins the essay by calling out black readers. Brown writes

We have heard in recent years a great deal about the Negro artist. We have heard some excoriations from one side, and flattery from the other. In some instances, we have heard valuable honest criticism. One vital determinant of the Negro artist's achievement or mediocrity has not been so much discussed. I refer to the Negro's artist's audience, within his own group. About this audience a great deal might be said. I submit for consideration this statement...that those who might be, who should be a fit audience for the Negro artist, are taken by and large, fundamentally out of sympathy with his aims and his genuine development.

Here Brown issues a challenge to black readers. He thinks that black readers are out of sync with black creative writers because there is a desire on the part of black readers to see within black literature an idealized self that runs counter to the stereotyped images that paraded through popular media during the 1920s, including in American literature. He describes the problem of black audiences as one that is connected to point of view.

Brown continues by stating

we look upon Negro books regardless of the author's intention, as representative of all Negroes, i.e. as sociological documents. We insist that Negro books must be idealistic, optimistic tracts for race advertisement. We are afraid of truth telling, of satire. We criticize from the point of view of bourgeois America, of racial apologists...and now if we are coming of age, the truth should be our major concern...propaganda, however legitimate, can speak no louder than the truth. Such a cause as ours needs

no dressing up. The honest, unvarnished truth, presented as it is, is plea  
enough for us, in the unbiased courts of mankind...Let the truth speak.  
There has never been a better persuader

Beyond using the third person plural pronoun, “we,” Brown’s take on what’s required  
from black literature is substantially different from Johnson’s in that what Brown is  
calling for is a different kind of political agitation in literature that doesn't see itself as  
political agitation. And this different kind of political agitation can be unconscious of its  
own action because it is the “truth.” as opposed to “idealistic, optimistic tracts for race  
advertisement” (70).

“Truth” is a term that reveals itself again and again in African American literary  
discourse, particularly after 1930. Though it is not always defined, it is constantly used as  
a justification for what literature must do. “Truth” is a word that Brown does not define  
in his discussion on black readership, but it’s one that carries Brown’s argument in terms  
of what black readers should expect from black writers and what black writers should  
explore and defend in their literature. And according to Brown, part of the reason why  
black readers were unable to accept the “truth” in print as well as other mediums of art in  
which blacks were portrayed, was because of their “point of view” as one that is of  
“bourgeois America.” Brown expounds on this idea by stating

One doesn’t wish to be pontifical about this matter of truth...it surely is  
not presumptuous for a Negro, in Twentieth Century America, to say that  
showing the world in idealistic rose colors is not fidelity to truth. We have  
got to look at our times and at ourselves searchingly and honestly, surly  
there is nothing of the farfetched in that injunction...we are coward. We  
have become typically bourgeois. Natural through such an evolution is. If  
we are all content with evasion of life, with personal complacency, we as a  
group are doomed. If we pass by on the other side, despising our brothers,  
we have no right to call ourselves men.

Brown's criticism of a burgeoning bourgeois black society speaks to a growing class awareness among black writers. The economic depression that Americans had been experiencing after 1929 threw differences in class realities into even starker contrast. And Brown is arguing here that it is part of a black bourgeois sensibility to seek idealized visions of the black self in opposition to the stereotyped self perpetuated by white America. But this sensibility hampered black literature's ability for social impact because it wasn't also telling the stories that were reflective of a peasant class experience (i.e. the whole truth), when the only thing black literature needed was to tell the truth because "there has never been a better persuader" (72).

While it's interesting to note that Brown is acknowledging class, specifically calling out a black bourgeois sensibility, as something that has bearing on the production of black literature, it's also interesting to note that Brown's line of "natural though such an evolution is" (77), suggests that Brown himself didn't see being bourgeois as the problem so much as black bourgeois sentiment. With this in mind, it would be easy to say that Brown was even further left politically than Johnson was relative to the 1930s, but within "Our Literary Audience" is a particular kind of leftist thinking that is very different from the more radical forms of leftists thinking in black literary discourse that would come from other critics and writings, and we know this because of who Brown chooses to direct the problem of black readership, at black readers, as well as how he chooses to explain the topic. In describing his target audience, Brown writes

we are not a reading folk (present company of course forever expected). There are reasons, of course, but even with those considered, it remains true that we do not read nearly so much as we should. I imagine our magazine editors and our authors if they chose, could bear this out.



Even as Brown uses the third person plural pronoun “we,” Brown’s language suggests an interest in the individualist success of Negro artists. This appears earlier in the essay when Brown states that his primary focus in writing “Our Literary Audience” is the “negro artist’s achievement or mediocrity,” and recall that the word “achievement” itself began to mean something different between the 1910s and the 1920s. It’s seen again toward the end of the essay when Brown quotes Walt Whitman by stating “without great audiences we cannot have great literature.” But it also comes from how Brown uses the parenthetical statement “present company of course forever excepted.” This statement is a joke within the essay that is meant to lighten the fact that part of where Brown understands the problem of a narrow black point of view is in the lack of reading done by African Americans as a whole. Brown’s focus on individual artistic achievement among African Americans as well as individual sage wisdom in the form of Whitman’s quotation, combines to reveal a literary leftism in Brown that rarefied literature as an object.

Other black critics in the 1930s, who were from very different class backgrounds than Brown, would also identify a problem with respect to black literature but they would point in an opposite direction as to the source of the problem. These other critics would come by way of a magazine, *Challenge*, which launched in 1934 and was started by Dorothy West. *Challenge* was initially meant to be a direct successor to the aesthetic and even political goals that characterized James Weldon Johnson’s branch of the Harlem Renaissance. This is signaled both by letters West wrote to Johnson in an attempt to solicit a forward to the magazine’s first issue as well as the forward itself. In his forward to the magazine’s first issue, Johnson’s hope for black artists of the mid to late ‘30s was

akin to what he hoped for black artists of the '20s, which was to "bring to bear a tremendous force for breaking down and wearing away the stereotyped ideas about the Negro, and [...] creating a higher and more enlightened opinion about the race" (qtd. Sherrad-Johnson 108). Signaling a shifting of the times, Johnson would go on to use Brown's language of "truth" by continuing to state that "to do this they need not be propagandist; they need only be sincere artists, disdaining all cheap applause and remaining always true to themselves." (qtd. Sherrad-Johnson 108). Following in the spirit of Johnson and the preceding decade, Dorothy West would write in the magazine's first issue: "It is our plan to bring out the prose and poetry of the newer Negroes. We who were the New Negroes challenge them to better our achievements. For we did not altogether live up to our fine promise" (qtd. Durham 19). West's use of the contrasting terms "new negro" and "newer negro" signals continuity between past and present, and the hope for "better achievements" in spite of the perceived failure to "live up to our fine promise" suggests that despite the stock market crash of 1929, and despite the deaths of Harlem Renaissance notables like Wallace Thurman and Rudolf Fisher in 1934, the energy and spirit that characterized the Harlem Renaissance was still in effect, even if it was now being led by a much younger cadre of artists.

However, by 1937, when the name of the magazine was changed to *New Challenge*, the periodical would become a hub for a literary discourse that was very different from what had existed prior. The writers of *New Challenge*, including Richard Wright, Marian Minus, Ralph Ellison, Frank Marshall Davis, Edward Bland, and Theodore Ward, were responding to the United States and a world that by the 1930s had gone through a lot of changes due in large part to the Great Depression, and these

changes would leave an indelible impact on humanistic thought and by extension, black literary discourse. In writing about the general change in political sentiment that occurred during this period among American writers, Lawrence Jackson, in *The Indignant Generation* (2011), would emphasize the impact of the stock market crash of 1929 and the federal government's response to the Great Depression as reasons for American writers' new relationship to formal literature. He writes

The wide-scale intervention by the federal government into the American economy and the increasing prominence of communists and left-wing political groups signaled a passionate, rambling renewal of the liberal pledge to individual rights and social welfare, and one that increasingly saw culture as utterly subordinate to economics and politics.

Even notable liberals like John Dewey, famous throughout the 1920s for his theories on cultural pluralism and a key source of influence for both Du Bois and Alain Locke, had to admit that there needed to be a change in the relationship between cultures and economics. Jackson continues by stating

In a 1935 lecture at the University of Virginia, John Dewey redefined the crisis in American liberalism and in the process secured culture to economics and considerably reduced the power of ethnic distinctiveness. The marriage between culture and economics prepared the way for a new term: social liberalism...Dewey hoped to convince his audience that it had become necessary for classic liberals to become social liberals. He argued for the poverty of the classic position, which took the term in practice to mean nothing more than a laissez-faire government approach to business regulation, relying on the theory that the only condition necessary for free action was the absence of constraint...social liberalism 'signifies liberation from material insecurity and from the coercions and repressions that prevent multitudes from participation in the vast cultural resources that are at hand' Dewey told his listeners.

The spirit that would lead Brown, West, and others to advance the critical discourse of their predecessors in the 1930s, would be challenged by the burgeoning sentiment growing in the literary fields of Chicago. Influenced by the state of the then

economic environment as well as race, the *New Challenge* critics attempted to revise the critical discourse of their predecessors and create a new schema for black literature.

These critics were vanguards of black “proletarian literature.” With new thinkers in the fold, *New Challenge* published in the editorial section of the magazine’s first issue

we are not attempting to re-stage the ‘revolt’ and ‘renaissance’ which grew unsteadily upon false foundations ten years ago A literary movement among Negroes, we feel, should, first of all, be built upon the writer’s placing his material in the proper perspective with regard to the life of the Negro masses. For that reason we want to indicate, through examples in our pages, the great fertility of folk material as a source of creative material.

We want *New Challenge* to be a medium of literary expression for all writers who realize the present need for the realistic depiction of life through the sharp focus of social consciousness. Negro writers themselves and the audience which they reach must be reminded, and in many instances taught, that writing should not be *in vacuo* but placed within a definite social context... We want it to be an organ for young writers who are seriously concerned with the problems facing them in their defense of existing culture and in their sincere creation of higher cultural values

Typically used as a literary mission statement, the editorial section of these magazines were places where one could find lines being drawn in the sand of the imaginary literary battlefield. However, for a group of people who were openly and unashamedly critical of their predecessors, it’s interesting to note how the raw material of folk culture remained key to their literary endeavors. The major difference though lies in what they thought folk culture would be useful in producing. Whereas Johnson and others wanted folk culture to be transformed into formal literature that could run counter to stereotyped views of black people, Wright, Minus, and others wanted folk culture to be transformed into class consciousness. The writers of *New Challenge* had a different perspective on what made folk culture valuable, and in fact, similar to Brown, “perspective” was at the center of the issue these writers had with black literature of the

preceding decades. The line “A literary movement among Negroes...should...be built upon the writer’s placing his material in the proper perspective” (393) not only evokes what Langston Hughes had stated almost ten years earlier within the pages of *Crisis*, “It’s the way people look at things not what they look at, that needs to be changed,” but it’s also critical to understanding the exact nature of the literary debate that occurred within the 1930s. Importantly, the *New Challenge* critics by and large earned their literary chops through exposure to leftists, communist-leaning, or explicitly communists, literary groups like the Federal Writers Project, the League of American Writers, and the John Reed Clubs.

The use of the word “perspective” is important not just because of the way writers were able to think of perspective as connected to how one views the world, but it was also an avenue for writers to discuss craft within literature and this would become a feature of literary discourse throughout the 1930s. Critics such as Sterling Brown would discuss form as well. In his 1931 book *Outline for the Study of Negro Poetry*, which includes a note in its first edition “prepared to be used with *The Book of American Negro Poetry* edited by James Weldon Johnson” (Brown). Brown in different moments would ask students to think about a poem’s formal features. With respect to Dunbar’s “A Negro Love Poem,” Brown would ask students to pay particular attention to the poem’s form<sup>2</sup>. Brown writes

‘A Negro Love Poem’ a. the refrain was a frequent exclamation among Negro waiters. b. notice the form of the poem; the rhyme scheme. c.

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<sup>2</sup> The first stanza of “A Negro Love Poem” reads “Seen my lady home las’ night,/jump back, honey, jump back./Hel’ huh han’ an’ sque’z it tight,/ Jump back honey, jump back./ Hyeahd huh sigh a little sigh,/ Seen a light gleam f’om huh eye,/An’ a smile go flittin’ by--/ Jump back honey, jump back”

Notice the idyllic quality of the poem. d. Notice the fidelity of dialect. e. Read aloud.

But craft was particularly important for the *New Challenge* critics in that they understood there to be a specific relationship between perspective and craft and class consciousness. Wright offers an explanation of what he means by perspective in “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” an essay that appears in the first issue of *New Challenge* that appeared in 1937. This essay which developed and codified the general arguments of the Chicago cadre of creative writers, included as one of its headings “The Problem of Perspective.” In this section of the essay Wright states

What vision must Negro writers have before their eyes in order to feel the impelling necessity for an about face? What angle of vision can show them all the forces of modern society in process, all the lines of economic development converging toward a distant point of hope? Must they believe in some ‘ism’?

But even if Negro writers found themselves through some ‘ism,’ how would that influence their writing?...Must they write ‘propaganda’?

No, it is a question of awareness of consciousness; it is, above all, a question of perspective.

perspective is that part of a poem, novel, or play which a writer never puts directly on paper. It is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people. There are times when he may stand too close and the result is a blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things.

Of all the problems faced by writers who as a whole never allied themselves with world movements, perspective is the most difficult of achievement. At its best, perspective is a pre-conscious assumption, something which a writer takes for granted, something which he wins through his living...It means that a Negro writer must learn to view the life of a Negro living in New York’s Harlem or Chicago’s South Side with the consciousness that one-sixth of the earth’s surface belongs to the working class. It means that a Negro writer must create in his readers’ minds a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil.

Rather than focusing on the issue of achievement among black writers, Wright takes issue with the concept of achievement as a whole. For Wright, the standards by which a piece of literature was successful were much broader than individual black achievement. Literature worth producing in Wright's eyes needed to show "all the forces of modern society in process, all the lines of economic development converging toward a distant point of hope" (103), and this was an issue that Wright took up with other black writers as opposed to black readers.

As opposed to Brown's use of a joke in "Our Literary Audience," which obscures Brown's interest in individual artistic success, Wright's questioning of "Must they believe in some 'ism?'" reflect the essay's interests in calling the reader's attention to organizing systems of thought that they might not have been aware were impacting them. At the same time, in referring to all these systems by their suffix, "ism," Wright highlights the constructed-ness of those systems of thought, almost in a sense that they are fake. As well, in Wright's use of the word "ism" there's a lightheartedness in the writing that we see echoed in Brown's essay, but both instances of lightheartedness are toward two different ends. Wright seems to be even acknowledging Brown's position when he offers his own view of black literary history. Wright states.

One would have thought that Negro writers in the last century of striving at expression would have continued and deepened this folk tradition, would have tried to create a more intimate and yet a more profoundly social system of artistic communication between them and their people. But the illusion that they could escape through individual achievement the harsh lot of the race swung Negro writers away from any such path. Two separate cultures sprang up: one for the Negro masses, unwritten and unrecognized; and the other for the sons and daughters of a rising Negro bourgeoisie, parasitic and mannered.

Today the question is: Shall Negro writing be for the Negro masses, moulding the lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of the Negroes; humanity.

The weight of Wright's message here is worth noting. What Wright is doing here is historicizing both black literature and black social mobility. In other words, he is encapsulating all of black literary discourse. Wright would later in the essay state

At best, Negro writing has been something external to the lives of educated Negroes themselves. That the productions of their writers should have been something of a guide in their daily living is a matter which seems never to have been raised seriously.

Wright wants black literature to be for the Negro masses, as opposed to an unspecified black reader. Wright's contrasting image of the Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men working on Wall Street makes clear that the power of perspective in literature resides in its ability to make clear a relationship between the fictive world within its pages and real-life economic and social forces as well as to empower the consciousness of peasant-class people. As opposed to James Weldon Johnson, Sterling Brown, and others who believed in the project of American literature via the production of black literature with racial themes, Wright was more interested in the project of class revolution. And part of the reason Wright didn't believe in the achievement of individual black writers, is because he understood the motivating force behind a class revolution, and by extension Jim Crow, to be centered around the movement and thinking of oppressed people, not in upending of racial stereotypes. The value of literature for Wright lied in its ability to act as a motivating force to the Negro masses in the same way that folk culture had done for African Americans in the antebellum South, not in the success of the individual black writer. Wright would write on Negro folk culture, as well as the Negro church,



There is...a culture of the Negro which is his and has been addressed to him; a culture which has, for good or ill, helped to clarify his consciousness and create emotional attitudes which are conducive to action: 1) the Negro church; 2) and the folklore of the Negro people...there are millions of American Negroes whose only sense of a whole universe, whose only relation to society and man, and whose only guide to personal dignity comes through the archaic morphology of Christian salvation...in a folklore moulded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complete expression. Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth...all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed.

And it's through these two institutions that black masses were in a better position to make a social impact than black creative writers were. Beyond perspective, the value in literature was also in its ability to close the gap between the lower and working classes so as to form a strong front against class and racial and economic oppression. Wright states

The workers of a minority people...lacking the handicaps of false ambition and property, they have access to a wide social vision and a deep social consciousness. They display a greater freedom and initiative in pushing their claims upon civilization than even do the petty bourgeoisie. Their organizations show greater strength, adaptability, and efficiency than any other group or class in society...how can the enervating effects of this long-standing split be eliminated?...An emphasis upon tendency and experiment, a view of society as something becoming rather than as something fixed and admired is the one which points the way for Negro writers to stand should to shoulder with Negro workers in mood and outlook.

Wright's belief that an "emphasis upon tendency and experiment, a view of society as something becoming rather than as something fixed" (98) is the ideological standpoint from which black writers of the 1930s into the 1940s would produce and value literature. Similar to Brawley and others who understood the structure of literature to be one that could mimic the resolution of the Negro Problem, the tendency toward different writing techniques in fiction was seen as preparing Americans to think differently about the world they lived in. The other important thing to note is that Wright is outlining a

relationship to literature that is different from what had come before. Whereas Brawley, Johnson, and Brown, saw literature as a means to a social good which was the end of the Negro Problem, Wright sees literature's goal as the movement of people in offering a clear perspective on where they were in the larger social order. Wright is somewhat reducing the role of the black writer. He still thinks writers are important, but at least from "Blueprint," revolution doesn't come from producing literature, it comes from mobilizing people, but literature does have a role in the effort to mobilize people. Wright's tendency to historicize, and his belief in class strife as the central focus of literature as opposed to a definitive "Negro Problem," will prove important for black literature discourse as it leaves the 1930s and enters the 1940s. This work is important because it helps us to define the 1930s in a way that is distinct from the 1920s. While leaning in two different directions, black literary discourse in the 1930s is learning from itself and deciding where to go.

## Chapter Two:

### An Intellectual History of Black Literary Discourse 1936-1949

Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" was part of a major shift happening across the board in black literary discourse. Though Wright's statement to black writers in "Blueprint" can be read as a piece that captures the general sentiment of a new and emerging black literary focus, focusing solely on Wright's "Blueprint" as representative of black literary sentiment of the late 1930s runs the risk of losing the various ways black literary discourse had changed during the mid-to-late '30s into the 1940s. While we understand the 1930s as a period that is generally more leftist, we don't understand the particular ways that that manifested.

It is my contention that by the mid-1930s through the 1940s, black literature had a somewhat established history, and black literary critics were familiar with it and had opinions on that history. This resulted in many black literary critics prefacing their arguments on black literature with a historical overview either of the body of black literature that had been produced up to that point or of the history of blacks in the United States in order to justify the direction they thought black literature should take. These historical overviews sometimes weren't essay or book-length treatments of black literary or social history. Often, they were preludes (a couple of paragraphs) to a larger argument. Throughgoing historical overviews, similar to Brawley's *The Negro in Literature and Art*, would continue to be produced, such as J Saunders Redding's *To Make a Poet Black* (1939) and Hugh Gloster's *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (1948), but by and large, differing visions of black literary and social history were ubiquitous throughout much of the decade's printed discourse.

The difference in these differing visions and the ideas they contained with respect to the ultimate goal of literature resulted in two significantly different yet related conversations around black literature. For example, building on what they started in *New Challenge*, Wright, Minus, Ellison, and others wanted to transform Negro folk culture into a working-class awareness. They built on this through a particular conception of black literary history, as well as an interest in craft within the literature. In doing so, they produced their own sub discourse within the field of black literature that maintained its own trajectory through the decade. Likewise, those critics who were primarily interested in a liberal and primarily integrationist, as opposed to radical, take on black literature had by the '40s grown into a cadre of critics who were mostly operating within and around academic institutions, and, as such, their own conception of black literary history developed into a sub discourse of their own which maintained its own trajectory through the decade. Due to the growing realities of integration, the end of the decade, 1949, would usher in even further changes for black literary discourse as differing class-based opinions of literature had to confront a new emerging social reality distinct from the one that many black writers had known their whole lives.

These differing opinions on black literature weren't exclusive to each other, and particularly toward the end of WWII, there were times when the trajectories crossed into each other as black critics started to reference the arguments of other black critics. As well, while this growing gap in where black critics and creative writers were trained resulted in black literary discourse splitting mostly along lines that revolved around class, this is not to say that class differences within black literary circles had a one-to-one effect on their opinions of literature. J. Saunders Redding, for example, who grew up in a

middle-class black family in Delaware, in *No Day of Triumph* (1942) would harshly criticize the black bourgeois for their hand in perpetuating racial oppression by way of their conformity. It was more about class affinities than actual class backgrounds, though differing class backgrounds played a role in the initial split.

As part of this first group of back radical writers is Eugene Clay. Collected in the published proceedings of The American Writers Congress held in 1935, Eugene Clay, who in 1942 would graduate with a doctorate degree from Columbia University and during this period was teaching at Howard University, would publish “Negro in Recent Literature.” Clay would begin lambasting the whole group of black middle-class intellectuals. Clay writes

Despite the deepening changes occurring in America, most Negro intellectuals have remained indifferent to the increasing leftward movement in American thought. Most of them have continued, undismayed, trying to solve their individual problems within the orbit of capitalism. They, have, furthermore, been unable to understand the real tradition of the Negro people...The Negro intellectual neither knows of this tradition nor has any realization of the misleading roles played by Booker T. Washington and Dr. Du Bois. He does not see the class nature of literary careers of talented writers such as Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar.

Here Clay is declaring black literature to be a body of texts that can be primarily understood through the lens of class. Though scholars might disagree with his mentioning of Du Bois and others as figures who were swayed by capitalism and didn't understand class struggle or how their own literary careers were informed their class backgrounds, it remains true that Clay and his like-minded contemporaries understood class realities and class struggle as central to the history of literary output in black America, and he associates black-middle class literary output with academic training. In relation to this last point, and in order to give some explanation of the class nature of black literature,

Clay offers a version of literary history that appears repeated in different ways throughout the 1930s and 1940s in the printed discourse of black radical critics. Clay writes

In this period after the World War, during which European countries were on the verge of proletarian upheavals, these intellectuals knew nothing of the social and political character of the events about them. While the Negro people were being Jim-crowed and lynched, the Negro intellectuals acted as if oblivious of their plight and did not protest. About this time the Negro was 'discovered' the 'Harlem tradition' was inaugurated. The social basis for this discovery is not hard to find. The American bourgeoisie had prospered in the redivision of spoils and profits...these "new Negroes" prided themselves on the fact that they could act, sing, paint and write as well as their white-skinned patrons. When the crisis came the Negro intellectuals should have been among the first to awaken from the lethargy which enveloped the country. Many of them had become de-classed and pauperized, many were forced to stop their studies because of 'poor returns on investments'; retrenchments had taken away university positions...They [black middle-class writers] must realize that all 'Negro Problems' are rooted deep in the economic system of the United States, in the perpetuation of the old slave system in the Black Belt, in the oppression of the Negro people as a national minority as well as the whole character of capitalist exploitation of the working masses. Then they will understand the reasons for Jim Crow and Judge Lynch, then they will know that the salvation of the Negro intellectual lies in his identification with the revolutionary working-class movement throughout the world.

Clay associates black literature and institutions of higher learning with bourgeois sensibilities. Clay wasn't alone in this. Langston Hughes who anticipated this new class-conscious tendency in black literature would, in a poem entitled "Letter to the Academy" published in *International Literature* in 1936, similarly identifies the academy, specifically its literary wing, as an opponent in the fight for global revolution. Hughes would write

But please—all you gentlemen who are so/  
wise and old and who write better than we do/  
...and/whose books have soared in calmness and/  
beauty aloof from the struggle to the library/  
shelves and the desk of students and who are/now classics/  
.../  
The subject of the Revolution/

We want to know what in hell you'd say?

Hughes's line of "gentlemen who are so/ wise and old and who write better than we do" is a humorous recognition of the somewhat judgmental stance those in literary circles would have of people on the outside of those circles. Recall Sterling Brown's statement of "we are not a reading folk" and while there are reasons for that "it remains true that we do not read nearly so much as we should." In this instance, Hughes is flipping the judgment. Ending the poem with the question, which metaphorically doesn't allow for a response is significant because the response is self-evident.

Returning to Clay's essay, we see Clay using the language of "The Negro Problem," the same language that was used a generation ago to properly aim black literature. However, Clay is making a judgment on that term by placing quotation marks around it. By placing quotation marks around the term, Clay is signaling that a readjustment is needed in black literature, and, as well, it signals that by this time in the early twentieth century, the term "Negro Problem" was somewhat antiquated as the issue undergirding the Problem wasn't Enlightenment thought as was Johnson's assumption, but it was an economic order that was international in nature and that was supported by the labor of working-class people. As far as the creative writers of the period, Langston Hughes was someone Clay championed. Clay would state on the poetry of Langston Hughes

The most notable example of one who has made the decisive step to the left is Langston Hughes. In his collection of stories, *Ways of White Folks*, there are definite advances in revolutionary perspective. Hughes has not followed in the retrogressive paths of his 'new Negro' renaissance colleagues. His works from 1926 to 1931 were links in his evolution...one could anticipate that Hughes would go further to the left than Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Rudolf Fisher or Wallace Thurman

Specifically, Clay would look at Hughes' *Father and Son*, one of the stories from the collection *Ways of White Folks*, and his poem "Revolution," Clay would state

In *Father and Son*...the author states his belief in the knowledge that the union of white and black workers will be the single force which will smash American capitalism. 'Crucible of the South, find the right powder and you will never be the same again—the cotton will blaze and the cabins will burn and the chains will be broken and men all of a sudden will shake hands—black men and white men like steel meeting steel.' Most of Hughes' poetry is excellent in style and technique. At times the triteness which was noticeable in his earlier work is evident. Often there is a note of forced striving for effect in his handling of revolutionary themes as in this poem which appeared in the *New Masses*... 'great mob that knows no fear/Come here!, And raise your hand/ Against the man...

What attracted Clay to Hughes is his partly Hughes's use of class unity as a theme as opposed to a racial theme, but it's also Hughes's "style and technique," which Clay thought was generally good, but it could also be sometimes "trite" as Hughes strives to attain a certain effect that could come off as forced. This is important to note as it reveals the strong concern black critics of the period across the board had with craft. Clay would even criticize Richard Wright's poetry on the basis of their arrangement and their banality. Quoting from Richard Wright's "Everywhere Burning Waters Rise," which begins "Everywhere/on tall smokeless stackpipes/.../the cold dense clammy fog/of discontent is settling" Clay would state

At first sight, the poem seems to contain a profusion of images and to suffer from schematism and cliches. On rereading, one is struck by the complete absence of the usual identity of subject matter with race. Is this desirable? Of course it is, especially in a poem where the subject is workers and not just Negro workers. The revolutionary poet has no need to specialize or ever be racist enough to ignore other problems.

For Clay, craft and theme were valued at the same level. In his mind, Wright's poem could have technical flaws but still be celebrated in its ability to express, much like Hughes, multiracial themes. Interestingly, Clay doesn't believe in a body of black



literature that focuses exclusively on racial themes, and Clay's interests in a kind of black literature that isn't specifically racial suggest that black radical critics were still interested in integration, but it needed to be an integration that was the result of a class revolution. Taken together, Clay's views of Hughes and Wright also suggest a de-emphasis on a style that leans heavily into literary convention. His criticism of Wright's "profusion of images" which results in his leaning into "schematism" and "cliches" as well as Hughes's sometimes triteness were seen as holding the literature back even as they both were pieces about class realities in the United States. Eugene Clay wasn't a minimalist with respect to literary form, but he was someone who didn't think class-conscious literature was helped by the preachy expressiveness, or romantic hortatory, that sometimes found its way into literature.

Eugene Gordon's "Social and Political Problems of the Negro Writer" was published in the same collection of essays, and he would similarly begin with a literary and social history of African Americans that begins in the antebellum period of the United States. Gordon would state

The Black Belt nation exists by virtue of semi-feudal methods of production on plantations in that zone at the present time. The Negro question exists by virtue of the difference between the economic and cultural level of the masses of white and the economic and cultural levels of the masses of blacks. Out of these differences grow the problems confronting the Negro writer to-day. The national psychology, which lies like a pall upon the Negro people as a whole, finds expression in the works of the petty-bourgeois Negro writer. These works are deeply 'race conscious,' or petty-bourgeois-nationalist conscious; they are working which protest the oppression of the Negro people from the point of view of such upper-class Negro writers as W.E.B Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece...The Dark Princess*; Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry (not all of it, however) and his novels; Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream, The Conjure Woman, and The House Behind the Cedars*. These works reflect a sentiment of that section of the Negro upper class which, having hoped to be accepted, with its cultivation and its polish, opened-

armed into the white upper-class, shows its anger and despair in acrimonious condemnation of *all* whites. None of the writers of this school—represented today by such persons as Jessie Fauset, James Weldon Johnson, and DuBois—at first fought for the liberation of the Negro people as a whole...the genteel upper class...were chiefly interested in getting special rights for themselves. These facts are implicit in their works

Significantly, Gordon would refer to his literary predecessors as a group via the term “school,” and the writers he lists, many of whom are the same writers Brawley discusses in *Negro in Literature and Art*, signals a clear continuity between the frame of references black writers and critics shared between the 1910s and the 1930s. But Gordon would identify two problems affecting black writing and both problems were connected to what black writers of the 1930s thought were important as far as literary craftsmanship. Gordon would state

The dearth of radical Negro writers is traceable to several causes, among the most important of which have been, and are now, lack of time to learn *how* to write (and to write), owing to the sharpness and bitterness of the struggle to exist; the fear of so offending publishers as to block up all avenues of expression to themselves; the fear of retaliation from the ruling class if the writings are published

Gordon would end his essay with a call to action. It wasn't enough for black literature to reflect folk culture. The literature also needed to be produced by writers who were intimately familiar with the social and cultural environments that produced that culture.

Gordon would state

These are problems whose roots are buried in economic reality, and whose solution can be simplified through the creation of a body of literature the aim of which is preparation to seize and to hold political power. The situation that faces us calls for Negro writers who have been developed in the blast furnace of Black Belt class struggle, and in the class struggle outside that zone. The Negro writers from the middle class have been largely disappointing; they have veered right and left, with their ears, however, attuned to the voice of bourgeois authority. Negro writers from the rank-and-file workers are arising slowly, but they have had no time to

learn how to write; conditions for their creation and nurturing have been lacking. The task for us in the movement, therefore, is to help encourage the young writers already sprung up, and to draw nearer to use the friendly writers who are developed or who show promise of development.

Interestingly, even while Eugene Gordon's and Eugene Clay's views on black literature would drastically differ from their literary predecessors, Gordon's use of the term "development" at the end of the essay suggests that regardless of how each "school" saw black literature, there was a sense that black literature still needed to "develop" into something. In other words, they saw it as an ongoing project with a specific telos.

Eugene Clay would continue to publish in the decade. In 1937, he would outline his thoughts even further and even build on the ideas of Eugene Gordon by publishing an essay in the first issue of *New Challenge*, entitled "Problems facing the Negro Writer Today." Published alongside Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing," and after claiming that the "The problems of the Negro writer, whether he wills it or not, are bound up with the fight against fascism and the protection of the cultural rights of minority groups," despite being "denied in strong terms by those individualistic writers" (394), Eugene Clay Holmes would state that there had only been a handful of black literature produced in the decade of the thirties, specifically three novels, that is worth reading. He writes

There has been a scarcity of literary output by Negro writers in the last year or two. This is true of those whose fiction and verse has pursued a militant and class conscious position, and as one would expect it to be, of the world-weary, our-burden-is-hard-school... There have been only three novels by Negroes of any scope, Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder*, George Lee's *River George*, and O'Wendell Shaw's *Greater Need Below*. The verse of Richard Wright, Sterling Brown, Frank Davis, Owen Dodson, and Langston Hughes has appeared only sporadically.

After also mentioning the works of other lesser-known writers like James Saxon Childer and Hamilton Basso's, Clay writes "Our purpose will be to show by examples

what part this literature has played and can play in the struggle going on around us”

(394). He begins by discussing Arna Bontemps’s *Black Thunder* (1936). *Black Thunder* is an important book to consider in black literary history because it is a novel that gets referenced throughout the 1930s and is one of a number of books that enters the discourse as a cultural and artistic touchstone. There were other writers such as Zora Neale Hurston who would also become important during this period, and I will go into a discussion of Hurston later. The plot of Bontemps’ novels revolves around the fictional retelling of a slave revolt in 19th century Virginia by an enslaved African American named Gabriel. The revolt fails because of a storm that halts his plans of destroying the plantation just long enough for him and the other enslaved to be found out. Of Bontemps’ novel, Clay writes

Bontemps has done an extremely valuable and pioneering job in his historical novel, *Black Thunder*. He has delved into the revolutionary traditions of the Negro people, extracted from them the story of the heroic struggles of Gabriel, and limned this glowing tale into an unforgettable account of folk courage. In doing this he has not only enriched the field of the Negro novel, but he has shown Negroes themselves that they are worthy subjects for depiction rather than for the purple romancing which has been their literary lot for so long.

But the novel’s handling of black revolutionary traditions isn’t enough to convince Clay that Bontemps’ novel is without flaw. In fact, Clay’s main issue with Bontemps’s novel has to do with the fundamental issue of how it understands the movement of history. Clay states

He [Bontemps] might have printed Gabriel more convincingly, as a product of the forces of the time rather than in terms of only personal action. The essential thing is that the story has been told. A new field has been opened and it is writing of this kind which will reflect the true traditions of an oppressed people, give that people a more correct view of itself as a folk, and add to that culture writers should be called upon to defend.

Does history move forward due to personal action or does it move forward due to forces external to the individual? Clay's penchant for radicalism and interest in Marxist revolution would lead him to prioritize a model of literature that follows the former. Whereas Clay's critiques of Wright's and Hughes' poetry were largely aesthetic and centered around technique, what Clay takes issue with here is a deeper level critique of the philosophy that Clay thought undergirded *Black Thunder*, one that centered around personal action, which Clay might've associated with a bourgeois sentiment given his earlier critique of "individualistic writers."

It's interesting to consider Clay's criticism of *Black Thunder* in relation to Brawley's criticism of Charles Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) which he includes in the 1910 edition of *The Negro in Literature and Art*. Recall that Brawley celebrated Chesnut's work in a general way because of Chesnut's mastery of the short story as a form. Particularly he appreciated Chesnut's setting forth of a certain problem and pursuing that problem to its logical conclusion, excluding extraneous matter (23). Both Chesnut's and Bontemps's novels were fictional retellings of historical events that both feature tragic endings. In the case of *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnut's novel ends with a race riot between whites and blacks in North Carolina that results in the main character, Dr. Miller, saving the life of a sick white child who can't receive any medicine because of the riots initiated by the child's father. What we see here between an examination of Brawley and Clay is not just a deeper interest in craft, we also see new visions of what a novel's form should try to capture. Brawley appreciated the short story's ability to work out problems. Clay appreciated the short story's ability to show how problems worked, and the main problem for Clay was the problem of economic

oppression which was the result of social forces. Both approaches are similar in that they are both focused on molding literature to fit a specific goal or need. They both might be characterized as dominant, or to use a gendered term, masculine approaches to viewing literature, and this aspect of the history of black literary discourse will come into stark relief when Zora Neale Hurston's prolific writing in the 1930s makes her work a literary and cultural touchstone in black literary discourse.

The way in which Hurston's work enters the discourse in the 1930s has to do with Clay's specific criticism of O'Wendell Shaw and George Lee, two white writers. He states of Lee's *River George* that

Lee, whose *Beale Street* attracted a deal of attention last year, knows his South. Had Lee stuck to portraying one locale, say the sharecropping country he seems to know so well, he might have been more successful...His depiction of the sharecroppers' and waterfront workers' struggle is realistic enough, but the characters never seem to be real. The picture is too many-sided. Lee defeats his purpose in employing too many pencils at once time. Much in both novels can and will serve socially valuable purposes. Their drawbacks serve as lessons, the results of which supply a needed clarification of the American scene.

Clay's criticism of Lee's characters, that they weren't "deep enough," even though he "knows his South," would reverberate deeply with the camp of far-left black writers, and this criticism of depth would appear in a lot of the printed discourse of the period. While the black radical writers of the 1930s and '40s did believe in James Weldon Johnson's mantra that the black writer should work in materials that he knows best, they took issue with the assumption that all black writers knew folk culture. Just because a black writer might know folk culture in a general way, doesn't mean they know how to portray the psyche of that culture responsibly and justly within the literature. They understood this to be a difficult task. Recall that Richard Wright understood perspective to be a difficult

thing for the black writer to capture. He states “There are times when he [the black writer] may stand too close and the result is a blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things” (103). Clay states that the characters in Lee’s *River George* “never seem to be real,” partly because the scope of their lives “is too many-sided” (395).

The importance of character complexity was an aspect of craft that far-left writers thought other black writers should prioritize, and in Clay’s case, he at least saw very little of that being done in black writing by 1936. To get a deeper look into how black writers of this camp saw the particular importance of character development, it’s important to look at Marian Minus’ and Richard Wright’s review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1934) by Zora Neale Hurston, which is published in *New Challenge* and *New Masses* respectively, and how their use of the term “interpretation” in relation to black literature.

In the opening line of Wright’s review, titled “Between Laughter and Tears,” Wright, who is also reviewing Water Turpin’s *These Low Grounds*, states that it is

difficult to evaluate Waters Turpin's *These Low Grounds* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This is not because there is an esoteric meaning hidden or implied in either of the two novels; but rather because neither of the two novels has a basic idea or theme that lends itself to significant interpretation

While Wright’s review is mostly remembered today as a scathing critique of Hurston’s novel, it’s important to note that Wright is reviewing both Turpin’s and Hurston’s novels, and in reviewing both books Wright’s use of the word “interpretation” here is quite significant. Before 1937, it was not common written practice or even common parlance to associate the word “interpretation” with black literature, even among black critics.

Sociologists like Charles S. Johnson or Kelly Miller might use the word “interpretation”

in their sociological work to give meaning to the often chaotic and unpredictable lives of the black masses they were studying, but the task of the black literary critic specifically as seen in the discourse of the previous two decades was generally to 1) argue for black intellectual parity and 2) discuss black representation in contemporary fiction. The idea here was that doing so would aid in the fight against racist stereotypes in both literature and mainstream American thought. In one outlier example of a critic using the word interpretation with respect to the black artist and their art, Alain Locke would subtitle his 1925 anthology, *The New Negro* with the line “an interpretation.” But we might think of this subtitle as being used in the sociological and philosophical sense since the point of the anthology was to declare to the world the arrival of a new kind of black person in the twentieth century.

The Harlem Renaissance was animated and organized around questions of representation and the key debates of that period revolved around how that mission of representing the race was to be played out, specifically at the level of the characters that appeared in American literature. This is how Brown and others were able to schematize racial stereotypes in literature. By the time Wright published his review of *Their Eyes* in *New Masses* and released the first issue of *New Challenge*, Wright was pushing for a different view of black character life in print. Wright continues in his review by stating

Miss Hurston can write; but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley. Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes. Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears.



In some ways, Wright is returning to James Weldon Johnson's old argument. Wright's argument about the narrow orbit between laughter and tears is evocative of James Weldon Johnson's preface to the *Book of American Negro Poetry*, in which Johnson claimed that negro dialect generally only evoked humor and pathos in the minds of white readers. Different words, but the same meaning is implied. However, Wright is applying Johnson's logic to the characters in Hurston's novel and not dialect speech. While there is no printed record of Johnson's opinion of Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes* was met with generally favorable reviews, and those reviews frequently mentioned Hurston's masterful use of dialect throughout to bring her black characters to life, and we can imagine that Johnson would have felt that the novel was a success for this reason. Sterling Brown in his review of *Their Eyes* "celebrated Hurston's attention to black peasant workers and her formidable ability to invent and reproduce the southern vernacular idiom" (qtd. Jackson 79). Brown would state that Hurston's novel was "chockful of earthy and touching poetry" (qtd. Jackson 79). But by the late thirties, it would seem that capturing an authentic black speech pattern was not enough, and, indeed, even during the year of Hurston's earlier work, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, released in 1934, certain black writers would challenge Hurston's novel on the grounds of its usage of dialect speech. One critic, Andrew Burris, would state in his review of the novel published in *Crisis*, that Hurston uses "her characters and the various situations created for them as mere pegs upon which to hang their dialect and folkways" (qtd. Gloster 155).

Marian Minus's article, "Present Trends in Negro literature," published within the pages of *New Challenge*, takes a deeper look into this issue of black characters in literature. Minus, like Wright, mimics the language of James Weldon Johnson. She

writes: "No literature can approach greatness if it is not the integrated reflection of the heritage from which it springs" (9). The main difference here is that for Minus, as suggested by Eugene Clay's and Eugene Gordon's earlier essays, is that the heritage to which Minus refers is the heritage of racial uprising in the antebellum South, echoing both the belief that black literary discourse had split into different schools as well as the need for global coalitions. She states that for the black creative writers "his only identification with any group or school must be in terms of the fact that he is a member of a world-society" (11). Entering into Hurston's novel, Minus writes

While Miss Hurston has consistently presented the efforts of her characters to live without showing their relation to the whole of southern life and practices, this sometime understatement and more often avoidance implies much of what the writer with no aversion to being called 'social conscious' would make explicit

Minus gives more credit to Hurston than does Wright, but she leverages the same critiques as Wright. She continues by stating

There are many things, apparently incidentally, which are pellets of meaning. For example, only a few lines are devoted to the 'saws' in the Florida everglades, but we are given insight into the undifferentiated attitude of many American Negroes toward the West Indian Negro. Life and work in the glades reveal the strong caste feelings within the Negro group itself. The caste-color relationship is shown through Mrs. Turner's...attitude toward 'common niggers' and an awareness of the meaning behind her expression, 'ah never dreamt so many different kins uh black folks could colleck in one place'...Miss Hurston's characters say these things, but she makes no attempt to interpret them. They pile up as a result of spatial inbreeding within the boundaries of the South where tradition is imposed and static. They are the active residue of plantation attitudes passed from white to black regarding the status of mulattoes

Like her contemporaries, Minus had a deep concern with how labor was depicted in literature and of craft, particularly with respect to plot, and while Minus credits Hurston for even including it in her novel, Minus faults the book for not going further into their significance beyond "only a few lines" (10). But Minus's biggest issue is with

the character of Tea Cake, one of the protagonists of Hurston's novel. When referencing the scene at the end of the novel where Tea Cake is tasked with clearing out the dead bodies in the aftermath of the hurricane, Minus writes

There is bitterness in his [Tea Cake's] reaction to his compulsory activity, and one wonders that there is no elaboration of thought or action to involve change which would vitiate the habit of employment without consent... Here one wishes that Miss Hurston had allowed Janie and Tea Cake to be less in love for enough paragraphs to show more fully the depth of this bitter reaction

It's not that Minus didn't care for the appearance of the love story that motivated the plot of *Their Eyes*, but it's that Janie and Tea Cake were in love too long for the readers to get a chance to see the other emotions that naturally would result from non-consensual labor and that make up the larger human condition. Recall Eugene Clay's aversion to romantic hortatory and preachy expressiveness. Overall, by interpretation, Minus and Wright both mean the deep exploration of certain topics within the text. Because Minus makes a distinction between what Hurston's characters say and Hurston herself, "Hurston's characters say these things, but she makes no attempt to interpret them" (10), it's interesting to think about how in terms of literary craft, Minus as well as Wright are implicitly having a conversation about the merits of different styles of narration. Hurston's novel was written from the perspective of one character, Janie, speaking from her memory of her life following her leaving her grandmother's home. This technique naturally prioritizes the individual and wouldn't allow for the kind of deep interpretation into the lives of certain characters that Minus and Wright would have wanted. It's interesting to note here that *Native Son*, Richard Wright's celebrated novel of the 1940s, is written in third-person.

As a point of contrast, it's interesting to take a look at how Hurston, who was still writing critically on black literature in the 1930s, thought of Richard Wright. In a 1938 issue of *Saturday Review*, Hurston would publish a review of Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*. Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* is a collection of short stories that revolve around the violence of living in the Jim Crow South. In Reviewing Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, Hurston would write

For though he has handled himself well, numerous Negro writers, published and unpublished, have written of this same kind of incident. It is the favorite Negro theme just as how the stenographer or some other poor girl won the boss or the boss's son is the favorite white theme.

Here Hurston is critiquing Wright's craft in a similar way that Wright critiqued Hurston's. Recall that Wright refers to Hurston's use of dialect speech as voluntarily continuing the tradition that "was forced upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh" (25). In the same way that Wright thinks of Hurston as continuing a faulty tradition in black literature, Hurston notes that Wright's subject matter is similarly not something that hasn't been seen before in the world of literature, and while her critique isn't as harsh as Wright's, her comparing his use of the theme of violence to that of a love theme, how "stenographer...won the boos or the boss's son" shows how she thinks of Wright's theme as overdone.

With respect to the second story in Wright's collection, entitled "Down by the Riverside," a story about a black family escaping a flood in Mississippi and includes the death of a white man at the hands of the black protagonist, Mann, in self-defense, Hurston states that what is new about Wright's novel was the wish-fulfillment theme. Even though the hero suffers, he still "gets his man." She writes

In the second story there is a flood on the Mississippi and in a fracas over a stolen rowboat, the hero gets the white owner of the boat is later shot to death himself. He is stupid, blundering character, but full of pathos. But then all the characters in this book are elemental and brutish. In the third story[“Long Black Song”], the hero gets the white man most Negro me rail against—the white man who possesses the Negro woman...there is a lavish killing here, perhaps enough to satisfy all male black readers

Interestingly, Hurston leverages the same critique against Wright and his characters that Wright leverages against her through the idea that Wright’s characters are full of “pathos.” But the other significant thing that is happening here is Hurston’s reducing, or reframing, Wright’s and his contemporaries’ ideas into their simplest forms, not in a negative way, but in a way to get at the truth of what’s being described and the stakes of the conversation. Wright and his contemporaries were doing something similar in their own criticisms. If Wright was offering one view of black literary history in reducing or reframing, the events of the 1920s as one that was based around inter and intraracial class affinities and differences, Hurston is reframing Wright’s leftist ideas around literature not as a solution but as a deep-rooted desire of the black male ego to enact violence against white America.

She ends her review by summarizing the last three stories in *Uncle Tom’s Children* in the following way.

In the other three stories the reader sees the picture of the South that the communists have been passing around of late. A dismal, hopeless section ruled by brutish hatred and nothing else. Mr. Wright’s author’s solution, is the solution of the PARTY—state responsibility for everything and individual responsibility for nothing, not even feeding one’s self. And march!”

Hurston’s reduction of Wright’s ideas within literature to those that are simply advertisements for the communist party, specifically her line “state responsibility for everything and individual responsibility for nothing,” speaks to the dichotomy that has

been running through black literary discourse since the beginning of the 1930s. It's the dichotomy between a bourgeois sensibility and a class-conscious sensibility. It's also the dichotomy between a focus on individual artistic achievement and collective class revolution through literature. It's also the dichotomy between explaining external social and political forces through something like third-person narration and the capture of the folk-mind as was done through the narration offered in Hurston's *Their Eyes*. It wouldn't be giving either writer, Hurston or Wright, enough credit to say that they were both wrong in their interpretation of each other. However, the differences between Wright and Hurston do capture a tendency in black literary discourse since the early thirties to reduce and reframe both the literary history of black writing and the ideas implicit in the literature itself.

The sea change that would emerge in the mid-thirties would continue to grow well into the forties. As the mid-to-late thirties gave way to the beginning of a new decade, the distance between black radical critics who were trained by leftist-leaning organizations like the Federal Writers Project, the John Reed Clubs, and the League of American Writers, and black liberal critics who were trained in the academy continued to grow. For every Arthur P. Davis and Darwin T. Turner, who would earn advanced degrees in English in the 1940s at Columbia and the University of Chicago respectively, there was a Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison who honed their skills and literary outlook via communist-leaning literary communities. Additionally, by 1940, two of black literary criticism's best contributors, James Weldon Johnson and Benjamin Brawley, had passed away, leaving room for other, differently-trained black literary thinkers to take the lead. And the writers who did so were mostly publishing with other, newer, publishing outlets.

*Crisis* and *Opportunity* radically shifted their publishing policies following the great depression. Both magazines would largely become house organs for their respective institutions.

By the early 1940s, other journals like *Negro Quarterly*, and *Phylon* would take the place of these magazines as the hub for black literary debate. Other left-leaning literary magazines like *New Masses*, where Wright's review of Hurston was published, would also be a site for literary discussions of black art. Specific publications like Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and the Sterling Brown-led anthology, *Negro Caravan*, would introduce and carry the weight of the discourse's attention for the entirety of the decade. *Negro Quarterly*, while short-lived, published essays on literature of the period and thought seriously about literature's relationship to what was then the present day.

Lawrence Jackson would write of *Negro Quarterly* as

The most important early 1940s magazine of black American writing and critical thought...the magazine seemed a kind of comfortable revival of Popular Front high-brow aesthetic policies, combined with a political point of view looking toward Africa and Asia. Unaffiliated with a paternalistic institution or editorial board...the journal showed political savvy, an international range, spunk, and an intensity that wouldn't be duplicated for another twenty years.

Published in *Negro Quarterly* in 1942 was an essay by Edward Bland entitled "Social Forces Shaping the Negro Novel." Edward Bland was a member of the South-Side Writers Group of which Richard Wright and others were apart. Continuing the tradition of black writers prefacing their arguments with a discussion of black literary history, Bland would state of the black creative writers of the twenties:

for this class, literature was a medium through which the black man could state his case to the world and exhibit those details of Negro life that would redound to the credit and goodwill of the race. Writing became a

function of changing the world through what became explicit propaganda; and the primary consideration governing its subject matter and presentation was the welfare of the race. Literature, then was, not privileged to deal with *any* phase of Negro life according to its (literature's) own dictates, traditions, and integrity. Art had no autonomy superior to the highest claims and interests of the race...their object was not to entertain or to throw the searchlight of understanding on the riddle of existence, but to make other Americans see their suffering.

By the 1940s, the 1920s, a period in black literary history that was nearing twenty years old, was still an important part of the discourse. Writers were still trying to understand and unpack what it meant to be a black writer during the period of the 1920s and, by extension, the 1940s. However, what makes Bland's telling of black literary history stand apart from Eugene Clay's earlier depiction of black literary history, in which Clay focused mainly on the failure of black intellectuals to "realize that all 'Negro Problems' are rooted deep in the economic system of the United States, in the perpetuation of the old slave system in the Black Belt" (211), Bland is pinpointing where black artists failed historically, and where they failed is seemingly in their understanding of art was too narrowly focused.

His statement that "art had no autonomy superior to the highest claims and interests of the race" as well as pointing out that the "primary consideration governing its subject matter and presentation...literature was...not privileged to deal with any phase of Negro life according to its (literature's) own dictates" (243) reveal a thinking about literature that wants to emphasize how distinct literature is from a viewpoint that sees its "function," to use Bland's words, as purely connected to the social and physical suffering of a people. He thinks of literature as having its own "autonomy" as well as "dictates" and "integrity." His critique is still in line with Wright's and others to the degree that he wants to say that the writers of the 1920s failed to throw a "searchlight of understanding



on the riddle of existence” (243), which is akin to what Wright, Minus, and others had to say about the historical failure of black writers to show a relationship between the economic world and the social world of African Americans in the United States. As well, the very title of Bland’s essay “Social Forces *affecting* the Negro Novel,” implies a direction of force that starts from the outside and works its way inside toward the black novel. However, the biggest difference has to do with the fact that Wright and Clay both criticized the black intellectual class as bourgeois, which is to say they criticized them from a political standpoint first and then used that as an explanation for their failures in literature, particularly in the realm of literary technique. And technique was important because they saw literary technique as a way to reveal larger connections between a global economic system and the lived reality of African Americans in the United States. Bland is critiquing them from an art-first perspective. He would go on to outline all the ways in which black writers were failing in their craft. He would state

They appear so uninstructed in the lore of their craft as to be unable to intelligently execute their intentions. Their works reveal a general inadequacy of control over the processes of writing, show little knowledge of foreshadowing and foreshortening, flashback, point-of-view, dialogue, tone, understatement or characterization, and little skill is displayed in integrating these devices to meet the fullest demands of theme. Thus, the progress of the action in their novels could not be modulated skillfully at crucial points; and, in the larger sense, the authors were unequalled to the task of manipulating the several elements of writing in ways hospitable to the structural and philosophical needs of the story.

But in answer to the question of “Why were these authors such poor technicians?” he would state “their lack of concern with technique was due to a far broader complex of cultural and historical factors” (243).

Bland is borrowing from both the discourse of Johnson in the 1920s as well as the discourse of economics in the 1940s to offer a narrative of black literary and social

history that combines the economic language of the far-left black critics as well as the grand historical language of the black liberal critics. In detailing the history of the black middle-class, Bland connects their history to the larger social history of Western civilization. Bland writes

Arriving late upon the Western scene, the Negro middle-class stepped into a middle-class dominated world it never made. Ages before it attempted to press its claims upon Western Civilization, the white middle-class had wrested control of society from the feudal lords and had so stamped its image upon Western society that its desires were seldom subject to the control or frustration of other men. Feeling itself master of the human setting, only the power of Nature...were recognized as superior to its own will. Consequently there arose within this class a consciousness of the Universe as a dual environment of Man and Nature; in the world it had made, Nature was its sole adversary...On the other hand, the Negro middle-class, emerged within this world as its creation rather than its creator, could make no similar estimate of the dual nature of the human setting. For the middle-class Negro was an urban product and a city dweller; his contacts with Nature were seldom of a crucial or determining kind. As teacher, doctor or lawyer, his basic desires and interests were rarely affected by the chance reverses and disasters of the physical world. Even as a business man he found his enterprise advantageously located in the niches of the total economy, fairly well protected from nature-produced catastrophes. Thus his consciousness was not weighted with the qualities of Nature's omnipotence and omnipresence. Instead, the middle-class Negro was dependent upon the *social* environment for his larger awareness.

Because Bland views the black middle class as an exclusively urban group, their separation from nature makes it to where, artistically, they are unable to pull from the primordial drama between man and nature that has served as the backbone behind most of Western literature. Bland writes that the black novel has "spurned the larger interests of the mind as seen through the major traditions of the West" for this reason and because of their being socially excluded they "were not exposed through that avenue to the motivations from the larger culture that would have made them more conscious craftsmen" (244). As well "there was no general way of life among Negroes whose

disintegration or disturbance might bestir such an interest in writing methods” (244) that might have enabled black writers to delve into the realm of the mind as deeply as Bland and the other far-left critics of the 1940s would have desired. Contrasting the black middle class, is the black lower classes, and it’s in the black lower classes that Bland saw the potential for quality literature to be produced, and this is due to the black lower classes having a relationship to nature, albeit that is based on their oppression. Bland writes

The lower-class Negro feared for his physical security, was defenseless before the unwelcomed attention of whites interested in his wife or daughter, lacked proper sustenance for his dependents and was hardly able to educate his own...the Negro’s experience as farmer in the South and as worker in the North alienated him from organized labor and dulled any love he might have had for the soil. He owned neither factory nor union card and the earth he tilled was not his own, but the means whereby he was oppressed and exploited. Nowhere was there enduring meaning to be captured or conserved. Life on the land and in the factory symbolized repugnant and estranging ways of existence.

Bland’s argument, centered as it is around the black middle and lower classes, is one that continues the tradition of black writers of the 1930s and 1940s reframing black literary and social history through an economic lens. However, it’s also somewhat ironic in its argument and, in fact, it signals a shift that would occur in the late 1940s and solidly establish itself in the 1950s. It’s ironic because even as Bland is still critiquing from a far-left perspective, his critique is largely an arts-first critique of black writing. It’s able to be a largely arts-first critique because even in Bland’s outlining of the black social and literary history, in which he borrows from the language of Johnson, there is no sense of moral failing on the part of the black middle classes. People within history in Bland’s outline are largely not autonomous.

While Clay would state that “while the Negro people were being Jim-crowded and lynched, the Negro intellectuals acted as if oblivious of their plight and did not protest” (211), and Wright would say “the illusion that they [black middle classes] could escape through individual achievement the harsh lot of the race swung Negro writers away from any such path[deepening the folk tradition]” (270), Bland thinks of the black middle classes as “arriving late upon the Western scene, the Negro middle-class stepped into a middle-class dominated world it never made” (244). In fact, literature is the thing in Bland’s construction that has autonomy. In outlining this line of thought Bland is allowing for a different relationship to literature that didn’t solely see literature as a function or leverage toward something else. Rather, Bland’s ideas allow for a relationship to literature that sees it as having an autonomy all its own that should be respected. Ultimately the irony comes from the fact that even as Bland is offering a far-leftist reading of Western social history, in doing so he is giving literature more power than his contemporaries like Wright and Clay likely would have given it.

Proponents of *Native Son* would feel emboldened by its success. If the 1936 issue of *New Challenge*, the articles in the *American Writers’ Congress*, and *Negro Quarterly* taken as a whole, was a statement about the necessity of changing the directive of black literature, then *Native Son* could be taken as that statement’s proof of concept. And the numbers at which *Native Son* succeeded, which would make Richard Wright one of the few American writers who could earn a living solely from his fiction, would suggest that Wright and his collaborators had tapped into something pertinent that would allow them to dominate literary discourse from the late thirties into the early forties.

Published in 1940, *Native Son*, would strike a chord in the world of black and white American literary discourse, and in a way that some at the time felt was unprecedented. In a personal letter to Wright, J. Saunders Redding wrote “there is no doubt that *Native Son* did more to win the Negro writers genuine respect...than anything yet done” (qtd. Jackson 130). In depicting the story of Bigger Thomas, a black male who is enraged, confused, and fearful of the social and physical conditions under which he lives and which results in his accidentally killing a young white woman, *Native Son* galvanized the black critic community, and was heralded as a perfect example of what proletarian literature could look like. Part of it was due to Wright’s supreme craftsmanship, but within that praise was also the idea that Wright was resolving some major historical problems within black literature.

For example, writing in 1949, J Saunders Redding in “American Negro Literature” would state of Richard Wright

Wright is a new kind of writer in the ranks of Negroes. He has extricated himself from the dilemma of writing exclusively for a Negro audience and limiting himself to a glorified and race-proud picture of Negro life, and of writing exclusively for a white audience and being trapped in the old stereotypes and fixed opinions that are bulwarks against honest creation. Negro writers traditionally have been impaled upon one or the other horn of this dilemma, sometimes in spite of their efforts to avoid it.

Not only did *Native Son*, at least in the eyes of Redding, solve the issue of the double audience that was discussed at length during the twenties, but it was through Wright that Redding could claim that black literature had a bright future ahead of it. Redding would state

Facing up to the tremendous challenge of appeal to two audiences, Negro writers are extricating themselves from what has sometimes seemed a terrifying dilemma. Working honestly in the material they know best, they

are creating for themselves a new freedom. Though what is happening seems very like a miracle, it has been a long, long time preparing. Writing by American Negroes has never before been in such a splendid state of health, nor had so bright and shining a future before it.

Echoing Redding's statements, Ralph Ellison in "Recent Negro Fiction," published in 1941 in *New Masses*, would write that *Native Son*

represents the merging of the imaginative depiction of American Negro life into the broad stream of American literature. For the Negro writer it has suggested a path which he might follow to reach maturity, clarifying and increasing his social responsibility

But as the far-left black critics of the early 1940s were arguing for a different directive for black literature, emphasizing craft in numerous ways, and outlining their own narratives of black literary history, the black liberal critics, the ones who were more solidly working in and around academic institutions and had inherited the dictates of black literature from the 1920s with less antagonism, would constitute questions around black literature that largely didn't appear in the work of the black radical critics. As well they would reframe black literary history in a way that was distinct from the black radical critics. A year after Wright published *Native Son*, Sterling Brown, Ulysses Lee, and Arthur P. Davis—Davis and Lee were both Students of Brown at Howard University—would publish *Negro Caravan* (1941). *Negro Caravan* was a massive anthology that was meant to be used by college students of black literature. They state the anthology "should be useful, not only to students of American literature, but also to students of American social history" (vi). The anthology also billed itself as offering a "mosaic," offering a view of "many classes of Negroes, from many sections, undergoing many sorts of experiences" (vi). And in fact, comprehensiveness was central to editors' goals. They write "comprehensiveness seemed a necessity for one of the aims of the book, namely a more accurate and revealing story of the Negro writer than has ever been told before" (v).

On the one hand, the black radical critics were interested in a project of reframing and reducing in order to get at the value black literature could offer American society. On the other, there remained a sense that stemmed from the 1920s that the field of black literature needed to be expanded more. In essence then, on the one hand, there were attempts being made to condense, while on the other hand, there were attempts being made to expand the field.

The other important to note from *Negro Caravan*'s preface is the somewhat new category of "student" that's being discussed. Sterling Brown had already mentioned students as an audience he was interested in reaching back in the 1930s when he published *Outline for the Study of Negro Poetry*. But at this point, even the category of student is expanding in the sense that Brown and others were thinking about the multiple kinds of "students" a comprehensive review of black literature might serve including those of American social history and of American literature. While Wright and others could be said to be writing to an audience of black creative writers or to a more general casual reading audience, Brown, Lee, and Davis wanted to fill the role of speaking directly to a student audience. This is significant because it creates the sense that there exists specialized information regarding black literature that is specifically geared toward students of literature.

In *Negro Caravan*. Sterling Brown, Lee, and Davis state early in the anthology's introduction why an American literary body that includes literature written by African Americans is important. They state in the anthology's introduction

In the twentieth century the literary popularity of Negro life and character has not abated. It is likely that Thomas Dixon, aided by David Wark Griffith in *The Birth of a Nation*, and supported by their latest disciple, Margaret Mitchell, in *Gone With the Wind*, has done more than historians

and social scientists to implant in the American mind certain inflexible concepts of Reconstruction...it appears to be a literary truism that racial and minority groups are most often stereotyped by the majority...creative literature had often been a handmaiden to social policy.

It is for this reason, they would go on to state that “Negro life and character in American literature have been narrowly grooved, in a way to reinforce, whether consciously or not, American social policy toward the Negro” (4). In this way, Brown, Lee, and Davis are evoking Johnson’s belief that the production of black literature could weaken black stereotypes and by extension American social policy. Brown would even retread his own work by stating again the different black stereotypes one can encounter in American literature. However, what makes the introduction to *Negro Caravan* particularly important to the 1940s is the liberal integrationist claim that Black literature is a part of the American literary mainstream. Toward the end of their introduction, Brown, Davis, and Lee would make state

In spite of such unifying bonds as a common rejection of the popular stereotypes and a common ‘racial’ cause, writings by Negroes do not seem to the editors to fall in a unique cultural pattern. Negro writers have adopted the literary traditions that seemed useful for their purposes. They have therefore been influenced by Puritan didacticism, sentimental humanitarianism, local color, regionalism, realism, natural, and experimentalism. Phillis Wheatley wrote the same high moralizing verse in the same poetic pattern as her contemporary poets in New England. While Frederick Douglass...is much closer to them [Garrison and Theodore Parker] in spirit and in form than to Phillis Wheatley...Francis E.W. Harper wrote antislavery poetry in the spirit and pattern of Longfellow and Felcia Hermans...and so it goes.

Beyond similarities in literature across racial lines, their chief cause of objection to the belief that “negro” literature could constitute its own canon was the belief that setting black literature apart from the main body of American literature would eventually



lead to “a double standard of judgment” which they understood as “dangerous for the future of Negro writers.” Brown, Davis, and Lee expand on this by stating

‘A Negro novel,’ thought of as a separate form, is too often condoned as ‘good enough for a Negro.’ That Negroes in America have had a hard time, and that inside stories of Negro life often present unusual and attractive reading matter are incontrovertible facts; but when they enter literary criticism these facts do damage to both the critics and the artists.

The question of black literature’s position within the larger body of American literature would seem to have been a question largely contained to black liberal critics who happened to work mostly in and around the academy. The question of whether African American literature should be considered a part of the larger body of American literature was not a question that appeared in the work of Wright, Clay, Gordon, Minus, and the other far-left critics I’ve mentioned. At the heart of the *Negro Caravan’s* argument is a belief that merging the body of American and African American literature would not only remain true to literary history, because, as they mention, Frederick Douglass had more in common with other white writers than he did to Phillis Wheatley, but it would also remain true to creating and maintaining a standard of judgment for African American literature that went beyond being “good enough for a Negro” (7). The likely reason why the far-left critics weren’t concerned with this particular question is that they had their own standards of judgment that I’ve outlined in this chapter that stemmed from the global perspective they tended to have, which runs counter to the nationalistic tendencies needed to give emphasis to the question of whether African American literature should be counted as part of the main American literary body.

It’s in *Caravan’s* organization that we begin to see how differently black literature was being imagined by the black liberal critics in the 1940s. *Negro Caravan*, unlike

previous anthologies, was organized by genre as opposed to chronology as was the case in the writing of Brawley and Johnson. The sections within *Caravan* were “Short Stories,” “Novels (Selections),” “Poetry,” “Folk Literature,” “Drama,” “Biography,” “Essays,” “Social Essays,” “Cultural Essays,” and “Personal Essays.” The primacy of short stories and novels in this anthology, as opposed to the priority given to poetry by Johnson and others, says something about the ascendancy of those genres in particular during the period between the 1930s and the 1940s.

The editors’ decision to focus on the different genres within black literature as opposed to the tried-and-true method of chronology is significant. While *Caravan’s* editors don’t offer an explanation for why they choose to organize the anthology by genre, we can imagine that whereas the black far-left critics would use time as a way to retell the history of the 1920s and even Western civilization, the editors of *Negro Caravan* were looking to reframe how students looked at literature rather than Western civilization. In *Caravan’s* construction, literature, much in the way that Edward Bland described it, had autonomy all its own and it could be categorized on its own terms. It had its own genres and those genres could speak to each other in interesting ways by being placed next to each other in an anthology. This anthology continues a trend we see during the 1940s where some writers were interested in thinking about literature in terms of literature first. It’s clear in *Caravan’s* introduction that there remained an interest in thinking socially and politically about literature, but that literature also needed to be thought of as artistic objects.

Literature as an autonomous object can be seen in Ralph Ellison’s review of Wright’s *Black Boy*. Originally published in *Antioch Review* in 1945, “Richard Wright’s

Blues” sheds light on both how Ellison was developing as a critic after his early writing days with *New Challenge* and about the period as a whole following the second World War. Given how Hugh Gloster would critique Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in 1942, an autobiography he claims “fails in at least two major ways: first, in self-portraiture, and, second, in re-creation of the times during which the author lived” (158), it’s especially interesting to see how in contrast, by the mid-1940s, Ellison would open the essay by thinking about Wright’s *Black Boy* in terms of an autobiographical literary tradition. He writes

What in the tradition of literary autobiography is it like, this work described as a ‘great American autobiography’?...*Black Boy* recalls the conflicting pattern of identification and rejection found in Nehru’s *Toward Freedom*. In its use of fictional techniques, its concern with criminality(sin) and the artistic sensibility, and in its author’s judgment and rejection of the narrow world of his origin, it recalls Joyce’s rejection of Dublin in *A Portrait of the Artist*. And as a psychological document of life under oppressive conditions, it recalls *The House of the Dead*, Dostoevsky’s profound study of the humanity of Russian criminals.

The point of this essay by Ellison is to explain the “mystery” of Richard Wright to critics of *Black Boy* who could not understand how someone who grew up as Richard Wright did could produce a book like *Black Boy* or even *Native Son*. Ellison states

In *Black Boy* two worlds have fused, two cultures merged, two impulses of Western man become coalesced. By discussing some of its cultural sources I hope to answer those critics who would make of the book a miracle and of its author a mystery.

The fact that Ellison doesn’t hesitate to claim that *Black Boy* has a place in a global autobiographical tradition says a lot about where Ellison’s thinking was with respect to the place of black literature on the global scene. This isn’t surprising because of the global thinking that many who were a part of the far-left literary communities, but what makes it interesting is Ellison’s emphasis from the beginning in connecting the

strengths of *Black Boy* to the other works of autobiography, rather than to a condemnation of U.S culture and by extension a global capitalist machine. It's implied, but it's not the focus. One significant section of the essay that's relevant to thinking about literary autonomy in black literary discourse during this period is the section in which Ellison is discussing a scene in *Black Boy* in which Wright, as a child, is recovering from a beating he received from his mother after nearly burning their house down. In this scene, Wright states that he was haunted "by a huge woobly white bags like the full udders of a cow, suspended from the ceiling above me [and] I was gripped by the fear that they were going to fall and drench me with some horrible liquid" (qtd. Ellison 137), Ellison states of this scene

It was as though the mother's milk had turned acid, and with it the whole pattern of life that had produced the ignorance, cruelty and fear that had fused with mother love had exploded in the beating. It is significant that the bags were of the hostile color white, and the female symbol that of the cow, the most stupid (and, to the small child, the most frightening) of domestic animals. Here in dream symbolism is expressed an attitude worthy of an Orestes.

The fact that Ellison would find literary significance in the color of the bags hanging above Wright's head, the symbology of the cow, as well as make a reference to Greek mythology via Orestes is an interesting critical approach especially given Ellison's history of far-left takes on black literary production and black literary history. His focus on the symbolism of the bags above Wright's head being "white" and calling that symbolically significant, subtly referencing racial hostility in the U.S, obscures the economic and social reality that Wright lived. Ellison's statement "here in dream symbolism is expressed an attitude worthy of Orestes" (135) runs counter to what Gloucester states just three years prior of Hurston's *Dust Tracks* in which he states "we are not

cognizant of the ability of the author to reproduce the spirit of the stirring years through which she has come” (158). Whereas Gloster valued autobiography for its proximity to truth in recreating historical events, Ellison here is valuing Wright’s autobiography for its use of symbolism and its proximity to other culturally important autobiographies.

Building on this idea that in the mid-to-late 1940s, we see the beginnings of a shift in black literary discourse toward literature as autonomous objects that can be valued on terms that are specific to literature, I want to continue with Ellison and examine his 1946 essay, published in *Confluence* entitled “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity.” Interestingly, the essay, which wasn’t published until 1953, is prefaced with the following note.

When I started rewriting this essay it occurred to me that its value might be somewhat increased if it remained very much as I wrote it during 1946. For in that form it is what a young member of a minority felt much of our writing. Thus I’ve left in much of the bias and shortsightedness, for it says perhaps as much about me as a member of a minority as it does about literature

Ellison’s 1953 reflection on his own writing from 1946 as being more useful as a kind of artifact of a bygone era goes a long way as in terms of delineating the 1940s and the 1950s as two distinct periods in African American literary history. As far as differences in lived reality, segregation was probably the most prominent, even though by 1953 the death-knell for segregation had not yet sounded, Ellison like others, probably saw its collapse on the horizon. It’s this concern with both segregation and literature that would make Ellison begin his essay with the following: “Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word” (81). By “word” Ellison is referring to everything from the

proverb to the novel and stage play, the word with all its subtle power to suggest and foreshadow overt action while magically disgusting the moral consequences of that action and providing it with symbolic and psychological justification.

Ellison is taking a stance toward literature that is more abstract than anything he had written previously. It was in abstraction that Ellison sought answers to the problem of black humanity in American literature and American society. This is as opposed to the earlier stance toward literature that saw it in terms that could be considered sociological.

Ellison writes

When we approach contemporary writing from the perspective of segregation, as is commonly done by sociologically minded thinkers, we automatically limit ourselves to one external aspect of a complex whole, which leaves us little to say concerning its personal, internal elements.

By this time Ellison saw the problem of black representation in literature as one in which

the American Negro (a complex example of Western man) emerges an oversimplified clown, a beast or an angel. Seldom is he drawn as that sensitively focused process of opposites, of good and evil, of instinct and intellect, of passion and spirituality, which great literary art has projected as the image of man. Naturally the attitude of Negroes toward this writing is one of great reservation.

What Ellison discusses here evokes Sterling Brown's essay on black stereotypes in American literature as well as Johnson's ideas on the problem of Western civilization. It also evokes Edward Bland's combining of the economic and Enlightenment-based arguments within black literary discourse. But the biggest difference comes with where Ellison's concerns are. Ellison is concerned with black internal reality. This is in contrast to most black literary critics who were, regardless of whether they were liberal or far left, were interested in black external reality and black literature's ability to change it. He's still concerned with complexity, but he's concerned with the complex inner workings of people. And he wants that complexity to be expressed through a take on a black Western

figure that is a “sensitively focused process of opposites” (82). Interestingly, what Ellison is not calling for here is necessarily a focus on a specific class group with black America, particularly the rural folk class as his contemporaries had done. Rather, he continues the tradition of reframing black literary history. He did this when he tried to reduce the decades of back-and-forth between white and black writers of American literature.

Ellison writes

When the white American, holding up most twentieth-century fiction says, ‘This is American reality,’ the Negro tends to answer (not at all concerned that Americans tend generally to fight against any but the most flattering imaginative depictions of their lives), ‘Perhaps, but you’ve left out this, and this, and this. And most of all, what you’d have the world accept as *me* isn’t even human.’

Ellison’s statement here is evocative of Sterling Brown’s critique of black readers in “Our Literary Audience,” the biggest difference between Ellison and Brown here, however, is Ellison’s specific use of the term “human” at the end of this imaginary back-and-forth between white America and black America in the essay. By use of the term “human,” Ellison shows a deep investment in the category of human. In some ways, Ellison is returning to the Enlightenment-based arguments of Johnson, because of his interest in identifying the problem of racism and segregation in the United States as one embedded in personal belief systems that are connected to older belief systems. But Ellison corrects Johnson as well. Johnson saw the problem of segregationist thought as within the belief systems of individuals, and all that was needed was a correction of vision. In other words, if racist thought is bolstered by racist images of black characters in literature and media, then positive images or images that present a “new” African American has a chance to disrupt those ideas. Ellison states that it’s not just a matter of incorrect thought. White Americans tendency to believe in racist ideas stems from a

social and economic need. He writes “the prejudiced individual creates his own stereotypes, very often unconsciously, by reading into situations involving Negroes those stock meanings which justify his emotional and economic needs” (85). Racist stereotypes within literature support a cognitive dissonance on the part of white Americans, writers included, that allows them to get around the hypocrisy that they live in a democratic country that racially discriminates against non-whites. He states “color prejudice springs not from the stereotype alone, but from an internal psychological state; not from misinformation alone, but from an inner need to believe” (84). Ellison would continue

Hence whatever else the Negro stereotype might be as a social instrumentality, it is also a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain antidemocratic practices, between his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not

In an attempt to reconcile the ideas of the 1920s with the economic ideas of the 1930s and 1940s, Ellison would offer his idea of what black literature should aspire to be. He states “perhaps the ideal approach to the work of literature would be one allowing for insight into the deepest psychological motives of the writer at the same time that it examined all external sociological factors operating within a given milieu” (84). In the 1930s, writers like Sterling Brown and Richard Wright would respond to the discourse of the 1920s in distinct ways, by the mid-to-late 1940s, writers like Ralph Ellison and Edward Bland were looking at ways to reconcile the ideas of those two decades. If as Robert Stepto argues in *Afro-American Narrative* (1979) that it’s possible to read African American literature as part of its own tradition because of the way black artists revoice the work of their predecessors through a shred pregeneric myth (xv-xvi), then it might also be said that African American literary discourse is in a constant process of adjusting



preceding claims within the discourse. Ralph Ellison not only revoices Frederick Douglass in his novel *Invisible Man* (1952), he also adjusts and refines the black literary thought of James Weldon Johnson as well as of Richard Wright.

Up to this point, we can think of black literary discourse as almost cyclic. In the 1910s and the 1920s the mission of black literature was thought to be one that was focused on resolving the “Negro Problem,” a problem affecting the external realities of black Americans, by changing the internal mindset of white Americans. The liberal black critics of the 1930s looked to refine this idea by schematizing the various stereotypes within American literature and thinking broadly about the kinds of black narratives that appeared on the printed page, emphasizing the idea that truth, or even black truth, was all that black literature needed to represent. On the other hand, black critics who were further left such as Richard Wright thought black literature needed to change the perspective of the black masses and the peasant class more generally because they understood the role of the creative writer to be one that focused on revealing to the black masses the complex web of social and economic relations that connected their lives to lives of other peasant peoples on the global stage and the capitalist ruling classes. By the 1940s, especially toward the close of the decade, writers like Ralph Ellison and Edward Bland would combine the economic language of the 1930s with the Enlightenment-based language of the 1920s to offer a vision of black literature in which literature's qualities as literature were just as important as the external realities literature were trying to change. In the case of Ellison, the focus of black literature needed to be the internal processes of man in addition to the external world he lived in. This emphasis given to literature's autonomy

could also be seen on the academic end in books such as *Negro Caravan* where the organizing principle of the anthology was genre as opposed to chronology.

These changes in black literary thought by the late 1940s is probably most powerfully seen in the work of a young James Baldwin, specifically his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” published in *Partisan Review* in 1949. Baldwin’s essay is mostly a critique of the nineteenth-century novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). He calls Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

a very bad novel, having, in its self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality, much in common with *Little Women*. Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel...she [Stowe] was not so much a novelist as an impassioned pamphleteer; her book was not intended to do anything more than prove that slavery was wrong; was, in fact, perfectly horrible. This makes material for a pamphlet but it is hardly enough for a novel; and the only question left to ask is why we are bound still within the same constriction. How is it that we are so loath to make a further journey than that made by Mrs. Stowe, to discover and reveal something a little closer to the truth?

While Baldwin’s essay is mostly a criticism of Stowe and the failures of white sentimentality within literature, Baldwin’s argument in this early part of the essay has a strong bearing on black literary discourse on the whole. And it does this because within Baldwin’s argument, he makes an explicit distinction between the realm of art and the realm of the purely functional or political. He states that Stowe's novel is good “material for a pamphlet but it is hardly enough for a novel” (150). Within this distinction, Baldwin uses interesting sentence construction to give it clarity. He writes “she [Stowe] was not so much a novelist as an impassioned pamphleteer; her book was not intended to do anything more than prove that slavery was wrong; was, in fact, perfectly horrible” (150) and this is then followed by the claim that that kind of material is “hardly” enough for a

novel. Through the word “hardly,” Baldwin is also creating a hierarchy in which things relevant to the world of purely functional literature or politics don’t measure up and can’t equate to the things relevant to the world of literature. Given this, it makes sense then why Baldwin would write that slavery is not only wrong but “perfectly horrible,” effectively making the statement that slavery was morally bankrupt twice. In doing this, Baldwin rhetorically guards himself against potential readers who might read him as dismissing the harsh realities of slavery by critiquing Stowe. Whereas Ellison and Bland wanted to emphasize the external political struggle and the autonomy of the literary object at the same time, Baldwin in this essay is creating a hierarchy in which the needs of art and the needs of the social world are different and that the needs of the former can not satisfy the needs of the latter.

It shouldn’t be said that Baldwin is actively ignoring political realities or is belittling the history of racial enslavement in the United States. Indeed, Baldwin by the 1960s would become a literary spokesperson for the Civil Rights Movement, and at that point class realities for Baldwin was not something he wanted to obscure. But at this early moment in Baldwin’s career, he had his reasons for writing in the way that he did. He states later in the essay

They [the black radical writers] are forgiven, on the strength of these good intentions, whatever violence they do to language, whatever excessive demands they make of credibility. It is, indeed, considered the sign of a frivolity so intense as to approach decadence to suggest that these books are both badly written and wildly improbably. One is told to put first things first, the good of society coming before niceties of style or characterization. Even if this were incontestable—for what exactly is the ‘good’ of society?—it argues an insuperable confusion, since literature and sociology are not one and the same, it is impossible to discuss them as if they were. Our passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. These categories which were meant to define and control the

world for us have boomeranged us into chaos...whatever unsettling questions are raised are evanescent, titillating,; remote, for this has nothing to do with us, it is safely ensconced in the social arena, where, indeed, it has nothing to do with anyone, so that finally we receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all...‘as long as such books are being published,’ an American liberal once said to me, ‘everything will be all right’

Interestingly, Baldwin’s critique of the far-left black critics and writers are pretty similar to the critics the far-left writers of the 1930s had of the Harlem Renaissance. While they had good intentions, they lacked in “niceties of style or characterization.” However, Baldwin doesn’t elaborate on this critique specifically. Instead, he chooses to critique the larger organizing principle that he saw at play within their work. While he understands the black radical’s position that literature should be for the “good of society,” Baldwin’s response to that is to probe that position by flipping it into a question, “what exactly is the ‘good’ of society?” (152). Without answering this question, Baldwin associates the black far-left position as a sociological one and then makes the claim that sociology and literature are impossible to discuss as if they were the same. Here Baldwin is really driving home the point that the realm of literature and the realm of politics are different and require different standards of discussion. Part of where Baldwin saw sociology as lacking was in its tendency for categorization, and categorization was something that Baldwin saw as limiting. Furthermore, Baldwin believes that books that are purely focused on the “social arena” allow for a point of view that believes simply reading books and experiencing a cathartic release will somehow result in the increasing social wellness of those living in the United States. Baldwin is weary of this particular take. Baldwin's questioning of what is good for society and his distrust of categorization and of literature focused on the social area combine to give us a sense that Baldwin was

interested in a vision of black literature that was very different from earlier visions from within the discourse.

Yet, what Baldwin saw as valuable in literature, in general, does in important ways mimic the language of the early 1930s, specifically that found in the work of Sterling Brown. This is seen in the question Baldwin poses to black and white writers in the midst of his critique of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Baldwin asks “how is it that we are so loath to make a further journey than that made by Mrs. Stowe, to discover and reveal something a little closer to the truth?” (150). As previously mentioned, black critics and artists in the United States have had an ongoing relationship with the word “truth” since the turn of the twentieth century. In the case of Sterling Brown’s “Our Literary Audience,” the word “truth” wasn’t defined. Baldwin, however, attempts to define truth and does so by stating

But that battered word, truth, having made its appearance here, confronts one immediately with a series of riddles and has, moreover, since so many gospels are preached, the unfortunate tendency to make one belligerent. Let us say, then, that truth, as used here, is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted. This is the prime concern, the frame of reference; it is not to be confused with devotion to Humanity which is too easily equated with a devotion to a Cause, and Causes, as we know, are notoriously bloodthirsty...In overlooking...his complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves. It is this power of revelation which is the business of the novelist, this journey toward a vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims.

There are several things about this extended quotation that should be pointed out. At the very least, Baldwin understands the risks he takes with trying to offer a definition for the word “truth,” and as such, he instead offers what truth “implies” rather than what

it is or means. If black literary discourse can be seen as an ongoing process of refinement and reframing previous ideas, then between Brown and Baldwin there might be said to be a specific refinement of what “truth” means in the context of black life in literary works. For Baldwin, “truth” lied in “a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment” (150), and this is evocative of Ellison’s investment in interrogating the category of the human, but it’s also evocative of Ellison’s emphasis on abstraction. Baldwin, more explicitly than Ellison, writes “only within this web of ambiguity, paradox...we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves” (150). Baldwin's line of “free us from ourselves” is interesting because it cements an arc in black literary discourse. What was started in 1910 as an attempt to direct attention to forms of “polite literature” in an effort to resolve the Negro Problem is by 1949 thought of as an attempt to free people from themselves. The direction of black literature’s focus is decidedly internal as opposed to external. And there’s also a tendency toward abstraction and an investment in the philosophical category of the human. Baldwin’s last line, that the business of the novelists is to inspire a “journey toward a vast reality” (151), speaks to an aspect of Baldwin’s specific refinement of black literary and social history.

Baldwin writes using a lot of metaphors. Baldwin uses a metaphor of a “deadly and timeless battle” between one black and white artistic imagination, represented by Wright on one side and Stow on the other, to point out and explain why American literature was in the state that it was in. He writes

Bigger is Uncle Tom’s descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are place together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle, the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses. And, indeed, within this web of

lust and fury, black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other's slow, exquisite death.

Baldwin's metaphorical vision of two competing forces runs in stark contrast to the non-metaphorical class conflict Wright and other far-left writers referred to in their own visions of black literary and social history. The fact that Baldwin uses a metaphor that includes a battle or conflict as opposed to a vision that reflects real-life conflict, as Wright did, is telling of where black literary discourse would go after 1949. By 1949, there was an emphasis on abstraction, an investment in the category of human as well as a leaning into the use of metaphors as a way to explain things in black literary and social history. The fact that this essay could be published in *Partisan Review*, which was originally founded as a magazine that centered around conversations involving labor and art, also says something about the changing relationship to literature that was occurring by 1949.

While I argue that Baldwin's essay signals a shift in black literary discourse toward more abstract ideas and a belief that *Native Son's* approach to storytelling was faulty, other critics in the discourse would continue to uphold *Native Son* as a paragon in black literature. For example, also in 1949, J. Saunders Redding would publish in *The American Scholar* an essay entitled "American Negro Literature." This essay is mostly a literary history like what had been produced earlier in the decade. But in Redding's assessment of Wright's *Native Son*, Redding maintains a celebratory spirit for the novel that he had following its initial publication. Redding would seem to be directly referencing Baldwin's take on *Native Son* when he states

Some critics have said that the wide appeal of Wright's work (it has been translated into a dozen languages) is due to the sensationalism in it, but

one can have serious doubts that the sensationalism comes off well in translation.

Redding's investment in a global perspective of literature via an acknowledgment of translation maintains his connection to the far-left black writers who had made a global perspective a priority and it also reasonably counters Baldwin's argument. As well, even though *Negro Caravan* was being celebrated in its reviews. Other critics took issue with their argument that African American literature should be considered a part of the main body of American literature. In 1949, Doxey Wilkerson would state in "Negro Culture: Heritage and Weapon," published in *Masses and Mainstream* (*New Masses* had merged with *Mainstream* magazine in 1948) the following

The Negro arts defy adequate and fundamental understanding unless they are viewed as expression of a distinct people within the general population of the United States, reflecting their special relations to the society as a whole, giving expression to their special memories, traditions and aspirations. Only in relation to the development of Negro Americans as an increasingly organized, self-conscious political entity within the American scene does the concept of Negro culture take on full meaning.

By the middle of the century, black literary discourse could be said to be an ongoing conversation on what the values of literature are and its relationship to both the external world and the internal world of the individual. However, at around the same time that Baldwin was probably still thinking through his thoughts in "Everybody's Protest Novel," another critic, Blyden Jackson, would say the following with respect to black literature. Published in the *Journal for Negro Education*, in an essay entitled "Largo for Adonis," Jackson would write

The literature does not, and should not come first, with the critics following in its wake...The critics, with their revelations, their encouragement, their warnings, their guidance, should come first, and the literature should develop behind them into a tradition which not only the artists, but the critics, have had a hand in defining and creating.



“Largo for Adonis” is largely a review of the poetry of Countee Cullen, but it is also one in which Blyden Jackson makes the claim that criticism must come first and anything amounting to a black literary tradition should follow. This was a new sentiment within black literary discourse, one that prioritized the role of the critic. What makes Blyden Jackson an interesting figure is that whereas the black critics who preceded him throughout the early twentieth century could also say they were also creative writers or working as journalists and teachers, Blyden Jackson in 1948 is entering black literary discourse as a new kind of black critic who exclusively, outside of teaching, works in the realm of criticism. For most of black literary discourse’s history, the critic as an object of discussion was not seen in much of the discourse. From 1910 till around mid-century, the critic can almost be said to be an invisible conveyer of information regarding literature either to other writers, other critics, or other students. But in the late 1940s, there was a desire to amplify the role of the critic who worked exclusively as a critic and to say they had a responsibility to influence the trajectory of literature alongside artists working primarily as creative writers. This shouldn’t be considered a third school of black literary thought alongside the two main ones that I’ve identified in the 1930s and 1940s. Those two schools of thought basically remain through the 1950s, but on either side, there is an investment in the figure of “the critic” and the critic’s byproduct, “criticism,” specifically, academic criticism.

### **Chapter Three:**

#### **An Intellectual History of Black Literary Discourse 1950-1956**

While the view that the 1950s in the United States was a period of artistic and political conservatism due to McCarthyism is generally understood, what's less understood is the way black literary discourse reorganized itself during the waves of cultural conservatism that washed over the United States following the end of the Second World War. One clear way to see how black literature and the discourse around it reorganized itself in the 1950s is to look at 1) the new terms that appeared in academic journals to describe black literature and 2) the adoption of old words in new contexts. Beyond simply showing how black literature adopted the ethos of the 1950s by way of its use of language, I want to show as well that the use of recurring terms and the adoption of new terms by different black artists and critics shed light on the period of integration and artistic advancement that black critics and artists saw themselves entering as well as how they valued the protest writings of the 1930s and 1940s.

By the middle of the century, much of the conversation around black literature continued to revolve around the major writers of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. But by the 1950s, there was a sense that the new writers who were emerging, such as Robert Hayden and others, were tackling themes different from anything seen in African American literature prior to 1950. And this tendency to focus on new and emerging talent coincided with major advancements being made in the visibility of African American literature in the United States as Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize for her poetry collection *Annie Allen* (1949). With Brooks's unprecedented achievement in the history books, what Richard Wright said in 1937 about there not

existing “any deep concern on the part of white America with the role Negro writing should play in American culture” (45), had seemingly begun to change.

Alongside Brooks, the 1950s would see a flurry of other black writers winning prestigious awards and publishing major works. A few years after Brooks won the Pulitzer, Ralph Ellison, in 1953, would win the National Book Award for his first novel *Invisible Man* (1952). That same year James Baldwin would come into his own as an artist by publishing his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). 1959 would see Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* performed in New York. It would later win the New York Drama Critics Circle award for best play of that year. Arguably, the 1950s was a period in the United States when African American literature had grown from a category that was useful as far as giving a name to a body of texts to something that had attained major mainstream market visibility.

But as the field of black literature continued to grow with new and celebrated books hitting store shelves and plays being performed, there was still a sense that the project of black literature was still lacking in specific areas. Interestingly, one place where we would begin to see the language of black literary discourse shift is in the word criticism itself. Langston Hughes, in an interview with *Pylon*, a journal originally founded by W.E.B DuBois while at Atlanta University in 1940 and that by midcentury had become the leading periodical for fresh perspectives on black literature, stated in response to the question of “are there any...points at which the Negro writer seems not to be making any significant contribution?”

Well, let me put it this way: it seems to me that there is a crying need for good literary criticism. I can't give the reasons for it, but our great deficiency is this dearth of really good critics. We have almost no books of literary criticism- certainly not recent, competently-done books. And it's

not just literary essays, and books of criticism which are lacking. There is a need for good journalistic articles and for non-fiction works in many fields. In history and in sociology the record is better than elsewhere. Frazier, John Hope Franklin, Cayton, Drake, and others, have done fine work here. I hope to see more good writing in these and other fields

By the year 1950, Langston Hughes understood black literary criticism to be one of black literature's weakest branches, both in terms of popular and academic criticism. Hughes was not alone in these sentiments, and indeed most of the pieces published in the same issue as Hughes's interview, a special issue on topics related to black literature, were concerned in at least some regard with the state and future of black literary criticism, specifically. Alain Locke, for example, who would publish a summarizing piece in this issue entitled "Self-Criticism: The Third Dimension of Culture," would go as far as to state that the lack of quality literary criticism was the result of a cultural immaturity, which in turn enabled the decline of the Harlem Renaissance and of the periods in literary history that followed it. He would write

[the essays in *Phylon*] mark a considerable step forward toward objective self-criticism. This is a necessary and welcome sign of cultural maturity. It was predicated twenty-five years ago as one of the objectives of the so-called Negro Renaissance, along with the companion aim of objective self-expression, but unfortunately such criticism was not forthcoming in any large volume. Its lack was unquestionably indicative of a certain lingering immaturity, the reasons for which it will be interesting to assess a little later on. For the moment it may be noted that the conditions which delayed it may also have been considerably responsible for the admitted shortcomings of our literary and artistic output in the Nineteen-twenties, thirties, and forties. Indeed this seems to be the present consensus of the new criticism which is so significantly emerging.

Locke's statements here are particularly interesting. Not only is this one of the first times, along with Hughes, that black literary criticism is specifically called a criticism, but the production of literary criticism is also tied to African American cultural maturity and its African American cultural maturity that Locke deemed necessary for the

growth of black culture. Via the word “maturity,” what Locke is implying here is that what African American literature needed was time. As opposed to the *New Challenge* critics who would emphasize the need for black literature to offer a different perspective or Sterling Brown who would emphasize the need for black literature to have a sympathetic black audience, or the late ‘40s writers who would emphasize the need for a focus on the individual, Locke’s idea of cultural maturity offers a take that emphasizes the role of time in the ongoing political fight against segregation. Locke’s take emphasizes a collective effort over a period of time rather than a focus on any one thing that black writers could do in a particular period.

Locke’s emphasis on time via the term “cultural maturity” is reflective of an investment in critics looking to take their time in their study of literature. This approach to the study of literature was one associated with the academy, and particularly with a particular brand of criticism known as scholarship. This is suggested by Hughes’s reference to John Hope Franklin, and E Franklin Frazier. By 1950, both Franklin and Frazier had made contributions to the field of sociology and history and were both connected to a university. Forty years after Benjamin Brawley published *The Negro in Literature and Art*, there remained a sense that black literature was playing catch up to the fields of black history and sociology. It’s particularly interesting that Hughes would state “we have almost no books of literary criticism- certainly not recent, competently-done books” (309) as this suggests a seeming investment in the academic monograph specifically. While most of the major talking points in black literary discourse prior to 1950 took place within the pages of literary journals, both academic and popular, it would seem the academic monograph, a symbol, and medium of scholarship, in black literature

had progressed little since Brawley's initial publication in 1910. As well, Hughes's use of the word "competent" is important because it suggests that a new standard in black literary discourse needed to be met in order for it to be considered proper criticism. Locke's use of the word "maturity," with its implications regarding time in the larger social order, Hughes's use of the word "competent," as well as a new focus on scholarly monographs combine to paint a picture of how different black literary discourse would be in the 1950s when compared to the previous decades. These differences and new emphases would run throughout the 1950s and would be of particular focus in the 1950 literature-focused issue of *Phylon*.

This focus on scholarship is a major change from the 1930s and 1940. Recall Langston Hughes' poem, "Letter to the Academy," in which he questions the institution's commitment to creating a more equitable world. As well, while artists like Sterling Brown and others were interested in catering their work toward students, others like J. Saunders Redding, even though published by a university press, would state in his introduction to *To Make a Poet Black*

What results are obtained from such a study, it is the purpose of this book to indicate. No apology is offered for excluding certain writers whose work, well thought of, simply has no bearing upon the important trends and developments either of thought or forms of expression... Though written with a mind for the problems of students, it is hoped that the 'odor of scholarship' attaches to it so slightly as to give the book some appeal to popular taste; for ultimately, literature, if it is to live at all, must be in the strictest sense popular.

In "A letter to the Academy" and *To Make a Poet Black*, we see two instances of pieces written during the 1930s in which there's a hesitancy to place trust in both the academy and in the scholarship the academy produces. Nonetheless, by 1950, there was a sense that the academy could be a productive site for black literary discourse.

This focus on the criticism and scholarship would lead the *Phylon* special issue to dedicate an entire section to it, a section entitled “Criticism and Literary Scholarships,” in which there contained three essays on the subject by Blyden Jackson, Ulysses Lee, and M. Carl Holman. These three essays not only speak to an investment in black literary criticism as its own genre of writing alongside the novel, the poem, the play, and other literary forms but they also stress a particular investment in “competency,” time, and prolonged engagements with literature as one would see in an academic monograph.

In Blyden Jackson’s essay, entitled “An Essay in Criticism,” Jackson produces an interesting look into how black academics of literature at midcentury understood the history and state of the field they were entering and what was needed at that current moment for black literature to progress. For context, Blyden Jackson earned his B.A. from Wilberforce University in 1930 and would go on to the University of Michigan where he would earn his masters in 1938 and his Ph.D. in 1952. By 1950, Jackson was an English professor at Fisk University before moving on to Southern University in 1954 (Miller 3). This is a person who was connected to the academy by 1950 for at least over a decade. Jackson was decidedly an academic. In his *Phylon* essay, Jackson, among other things, gives an overview of the major monographic works in black literary discourse that had been published up to that point, mostly ignoring the numerous essays that had been published throughout the century.

Significantly, Jackson here is performing a quite different exercise of anthologizing and record-keeping than had been done in previous decades. Unlike critics in the previous decades who anthologized the literature of African Americans in its various genres as well as chronicled the literary history of black America by offering

their own explanation of events during the antebellum period and into the 1920s, Jackson is offering a chronicle of literary scholarship in monograph form. By focusing on the monographs of literary scholarship instead of the debates that spanned various periodicals and historical circumstances that allowed for the creation of black literature in the first place, Jackson is able to create a sense that the field of black literary criticism is lacking in intellectual richness and variety.

Jackson's preoccupation with literary scholarship as being the default in black literary criticism begins with Jackson's own chronology. For Jackson, literary-critical history begins in 1939 with the publication of Redding's *To Make a Poet Black*, which makes sense when it's considered that *To Make a Poet Black* was the first piece of literary criticism to be published by a University Press (North Carolina UP). Of Redding's book, Blyden Jackson would state

Redding's *To Make a Poet Black* is a rapid summary, mainly historical, moving too hastily to develop adequately his thesis that Negro literature is a literature of necessity, although often enough delighting us with such trenchant obiter dicta as its characterization of Joel Chandler Harris' dialect.

Of the other critics, who would follow Redding's work with monographic pieces of their own, including Hugh Gloster's *Negro Voices* (1948) which was also published by the University of North Carolina, Jackson would state

Gloster's more recent *Negro Voices in American Fiction* is an excellent reference work, with as especially valuable bibliography, but, again, Gloster is limited by intentions patently as summary as Redding's. Sterling Brown...has found himself completely occupied with the mere job of getting Negro literature into the field of vision of a wide public. Brawley was always timid and platitudinous as a Sunday-school pamphlet. James Weldon Johnson was an executive, and his criticism, while often redeemed by his native taste, betrayed that tendency of his disposition as well as his lack of academic scholarship. There is little more to say about



Negroes' criticism of their own literature, except that here for Negro students with ability and industry is a veritable green pasture.

Jackson took issue with Redding's and Gloster's overemphasis on telling a chronological narrative of black literary history. By calling Redding's work "a rapid summary, mainly historical" and Gloster's *Negro Voices* "as summary as Redding's" Jackson is attempting to move literary discourse in a new direction. The new direction Jackson has in mind relates to his last sentence in which he states that the student with "ability" and "industry" would be able to produce the needed scholarship to advance forward the project of black literature. Jackson's use of multiple skills, particularly naming ability and industry, and his describing the person producing scholarship and advancing discourse specifically as a student, while seemingly not an issue on the surface, rhetorically narrows the scope of what literary scholarship consists of and who can produce it. Doing this effectively narrows the conversation around black literature to one that exists between a few people. Whereas the conversation in black literary discourse was necessarily small in 1910 because of the few people who were taking black literature seriously, by 1950 Blyden Jackson was actively narrowing the discourse. Jackson is able to do this by suggesting that everything that came before 1950 was categorically not critical or scholarly. For example, While James Weldon Johnson might've had good taste in literature, he was an executive, a race leader, not a critic, and Brawley's literary-historical work, while trailblazing, did not leave to Jackson's mind a big enough impact, hence why his work is described as "timid" and "platitudinous." One of the biggest actions Jackson's essay seems to be doing is actually defining what literary criticism is not in the context of black literature.

Taken as a whole, Blyden Jackson didn't think the body of literary discourse produced before 1950 amounted to much, especially when seen in relation to Jackson's goal of a student-produced criticism that revolved around ability and industry. Jackson would stress the labor necessary to produce quality scholarship later in his essay when he writes

Negroes just have not gotten around to real criticism of their own literature. We have done some good things. But all our accomplishments can be quickly demonstrated to be mere prolegomena for the hard, serious, tedious labor of giving our literature the sort of scholarly and critical framework which adds the needed marginal dimensions to the established European literatures.

As part of the goal of explicitly defining what literary criticism is and what it takes to produce it, Blyden Jackson sees the work of these early critics as absent of the "hard, serious" and "tedious labor" that for Jackson constitutes real criticism. The other interesting thing to note is that he understands the goal of black literary criticism to be one that adds to the "marginal dimensions" of an established European literary criticism, which is suggestive of his own integrationist sentiment, the broader literary sentiment of the period, as well as how much *Negro Caravan* influenced the black academic world. Nowhere in Jackson's essay is there a conviction that "truth" or "perspective" needed to be emphasized when explicating literary texts. Rather they need to be "tedious" "hard" and "serious," or using the language of Hughes in his interview with *Phylon*, "competent" and of "quality." What's missing from Blyden Jackson's critique of early literary criticism is an acknowledgment that the role black literary criticism served to fill in those earlier periods was to offer an argument about black ability through the use of black literary art. Jackson, rather, is more focused on the meaning that is created in the works themselves than what the literature signifies about racial ability.

Jackson offers what he understands to be the value of literature later in the essay when he cites a reading of Leo Tolstoy and attempts to think similarly about the short fiction of Langston Hughes. Jackson gives the example of Percy Lubbock, a literary critic of the period, who offers a reading of Leo Tolstoy's fiction. He writes

In *The Craft of Fiction* Percy Lubbock notices admiringly Tolstoy's handling of time in *War and Peace*. In that novel, Lubbock points out, we feel the passage of time in two ways. We are aware of its flow from day to day and year to year, bearing away, like a conveyor belt, the span of a person's life. But we are also aware of it as a cycle of generations, a wheel ceaselessly revolving, always taking some generation up, some generation down.

In relating this idea of time in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to time in *Not without Laughter* by Langston Hughes, Blyden Jackson writes

Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* is much less bulky than *War and Peace*. Yet in *Not Without Laughter* one finds this same double sense of time, just as one finds, virtually wherever one stops to analyze Hughes' performance here, casements opening out upon the expansive world of universal suggestion created by great art.

Here in Jackson, we see an exercise that anticipates modern literary criticism. It's a semblance of a comparative essay between Hughes and Tolstoy in which the theme of time bridges the temporal, ethnic, and racial distance between the two writers. Time was a theme that had universal implications for Jackson. In this way, it is a return to the goal of universalism first outlined by Johnson in the 1920s, but it's also slightly more than that because within Jackson, in even comparing Hughes and Tolstoy, there is an implicit assumption that the day of black art containing universal themes had arrived. It's interesting to think how at this moment "time" is both a theme that characterizes the attitude toward literature, but it's also a theme within literature that Jackson found important enough to emphasize.

Jackson's focusing on theme within Hughes was not solely out of intellectual curiosity. It's tied to how Jackson understood the role of the critic. For Jackson, it was the critic's responsibility to uphold quality literature and to give literature its value. This is as opposed to an understanding of literature that sees its value as coming from the audience, white or otherwise. In writing about Hughes and Tolstoy in the same vein, Jackson is attempting to imbue in the work of Hughes the same value that other critics would give to more universally accepted writers of literature, like Tolstoy. In this way, Jackson is rethinking the question of black literature and its audience. There's a sense from Jackson that the critic was African American literature's essential audience member. Jackson would state

the Negro writer has lacked a helpful audience in two large ways: viz. sympathetically and ethically. The lack of a wide sympathetic audience among the only extensive public available to him undoubtedly had inhibited the Negro writers effective use of symbols; and, of course, creative writing itself is nothing if not symbolic. However, eliminating the iniquities of racial stereotyping, the indispensable propaedeutic for easing the Negro writer's problem in the handling of symbols, must continue to wait upon the combined action of many forces—among them, incidentally, the services of a competent and forthright critical audience. On the other hand the lack of a critical audience is clearly a reflection on Negro literary scholarship more than on anything else

Furthermore, whereas Sterling Brown would argue that the black writers were simply lacking in an audience that was sympathetic to the aims of the black artist, Jackson is continuing the trend of using words that imply a certain kind of growth and a certain kind of training when he states that the critic must be both "competent" and "forthright." critical audience. But, interestingly, a critical audience is also needed to create and maintain itself, because one reason Jackson gives for the lack of a critical audience is the lack of black literary scholarship.

The literary critic at the beginning of the 1950s would seem to have taken on a much grander and more distinct role. In previous generations, the literary critic was often an artist himself. Even as black literary artists produced criticism or worked as teachers, the way they understood literature was largely one from the perspective of an artist. In this conception of the artist-reader relationship, there are only two parties at play. On the one hand, there was the artist with something to communicate, and on the other hand, there was the reader who took in the information being communicated. The role of critic was less of a job description and role, and more so of an action that was performed in the interest of bettering that relationship between writer and audience with the goal that doing so could improve race relations in the United States as well as discount theories of black inferiority. However, Jackson is trying to solidify the critic's role as one in which the critic has to support both the artists in his use of symbols and the reader in developing a critical taste and appreciation for the literature. In this way, black literary discourse in the 1950s is being reorganized as a tripartite conversation. Jackson still saw the role of the critic as connected to the original mission of getting the United States to live up to its democratic credo. By the end of his essay, Jackson would write "I can plainly see the development of a criticism around Negro literature as an integrative factor of no little value for the growth of democracy in America" (343), but it's significant that this call appears at the end of the essay as opposed to in generations prior, in which black literature's connection to the creation of a more democratic society would have been the organizing idea of the essay. It's also significant that Blyden Jackson specifically calls out "the development of a criticism" around black literature, as opposed to the literature itself, as critical to the growth of democracy in the United States.

In addition to thinking about the theme of time in Hughes, Jackson thought literature, in general, should focus around the black middle class, a class of people whom he thought were underrepresented in black literature. Jackson states

What we know, or ought to know, about the fictional treatment of the Negro middle class, has never been systematically assembled. There are handbooks and anthologies of Negro poetry, but no single intensive studies of separate poems of any Negro poets. And, of course, the possibilities for tracing the relations of Negro literature are, as one would expect, virtually legion.

This runs especially counter to what the writers of the 1930s and early 1940s thought. This is particularly interesting because it's not being levied as a direct response to the far-left writers of the 1930s and 1940s. The statement is made almost matter-of-factly and presumptuous through the use of the beginning words "we know, or ought to know," that it's almost as if it's intentionally ignoring the far-left criticism of the 1930s. The fact that most of the work was published in journal form as opposed to monograph form might be related to this, but, nevertheless, the statement is made too casually to be unintentional. This slight from Jackson is likely connected to the generally more conservative ethos that gripped the United States following World War II and under McCarthyism. Other writers of the period would echo Jackson's thoughts. In "What White Publishers Won't Print" (1950), published in *Negro Digest*, Hurston would state

The realistic story around a Negro insurance official, dentist, general practitioner, undertaker and the like would be most revealing...For various reasons, the average, struggling, non-morbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America. His revelation to the public is the thing needed to do away with that feeling of difference which inspires fear, and which ever expresses itself in dislike.

There was a sense by more than one writer and critic, then, that representing black middle-class life could be a way toward enabling social change because it could reveal

how similar black Americans are to white Americans. This idea comes off as retrograde when viewed against the far-left writing of the 1930s and 1940s.

What's really striking about Hurston's specific language is her use of the word "average." Her use of the word "average" as well as "struggling." "Average," which at first might signify the financial status of the black middle classes, also might signify an investment in a kind of normalcy that in the early twentieth century might have been seen as dangerous. For example, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) ends with a scene in which the nameless protagonist contemplates fearfully as to what becomes of his life now that he's passed unnoticed as a white man to live an average American life. The narrator, who passes and lives his life as a white man by the end of the novel, states at the end of *Ex-Colored Man*

And it is this this that all of that small but gallant band of colored men who are publicly fighting the cause of their race have behind them...beside them I feel small and selfish. I am an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money...I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage.

Ultimately, *Ex-colored Man* can be read as a tragic story of what one loses when they buy into their racial uniqueness for the mundane of white middle-class life. However, by 1950 there was this idea that decreasing differences at the level of mundane action was important for the growth of a more democratic United States.

In addition to ending with a statement of belief in black literary criticism's ability to contribute to the growth of American democracy, Jackson adds other reasons why the black growth of black literary criticism is important. In the essay's final sentence, Jackson writes

I would have us, indeed, feel toward the development of an energetic scholarly criticism within our own ranks a sense of knightly obligation. And I would add, for all those who see eye to eye with me, 'a fair promise of better things' - even to an increase in one's own sense of being personally alive

Jackson's referring to the growth of black literary criticism as a "knightly obligation" is also emblematic of black literary discourse taking a slightly more conservative stance as it evokes an interest in medieval Europe and their customs of obligation to state leaders and landowners. This was pretty common in the Southern United States, particularly among Southern planters and even poor whites. Additionally, his statement of "fair promise of better things" to other critics who study black literature as well as his belief that an intense study of literature will "increase in one's own sense of being personally alive" (343) combine to highlight just how different black literature is being valued from within the pages of *Phylon* in the 1950s via Jackson's essay. Literature, including black literature, was being valued at this moment for what it could do within individual people. Jackson's line of "increase in one's own sense of being personally alive" is evocative of Baldwin's "journey toward a vast reality" that allows people to free themselves from themselves. They're both somewhat vague in how they see black literature as being valuable. How does one measure one's sense of being personally alive? How does one free oneself from themselves? This commitment to individual freedom is also reflective in Jackson's belief that black literary criticism can be produced despite the poor labor conditions many black academics of the 1950s found themselves in. Jackson would state

Perhaps it may be argued in extenuation of our inertia as productive scholar-critics that our teaching loads are too great and our facilities for research too meager to permit us to do those things which we are really chagrined to leave undone...It is subjectively specious. For it says nothing about our will to change those conditions...And, above all, it says nothing



about our resolution to do as much as we can under present conditions to integrate our own literature into the national consciousness.

Jackson's line about integrating "our own literature into the national consciousness," is important because it is explicitly stated as a goal in this section of the essay. It's also connected to an understanding that the American people, black and white, were becoming more mature and it was this maturity that allowed for integration to occur. Jackson writes

All around us today the air resounds with calls to integrate the Negro into our national life. Very probably the increasingly favorable reaction to those calls is a sign that both America and its Negroes are reaching a certain maturity. Negro writers are promising to do their bit in keeping pace with the latest trend. Symptomatically, they are losing as never quite before, their exaggerated self-consciousness

Here, Jackson is making an explicit statement about what the goals of black literary discourse should be, and it's important because it's here we begin to see a relationship to literature that is almost in the reverse direction of what Johnson and others had outlined in the 1920s. When Jackson states that "Negro writers are promising to do their bit in keeping pace with the latest trend" (341), he's referring to the trend of integration. What's interesting about the structure of his sentence here is that "Negro writers" are being asked to keep pace with a trend as opposed to setting the trend which is how the critics of the early twentieth century would have understood the role of the black writer. In Jackson's configuration of black literature and its discourse, we begin to see the idea of literature as a reward of social progress as opposed to the idea that literature can enable social progress.

Moving slightly ahead in the decade, but in keeping with the idea of a shifting relationship to literature, Arthur P. Davis published in 1956 an essay entitled "Integration and Race Literature." By the middle of the twentieth century, the looming possibility of

racial integration in the United States would take center stage in the literary and cultural criticism of black artists and scholar-critics. And with integration discourse on everyone's mind, Davis would state

“Integration is the most vital issue in America today. The word is on every tongue and it has acquired all kinds of meanings and connotations...It is my belief that the concept of integration has already produced a major trend or change in our literature, and that as integration becomes a reality, it will transform Negro writing even more drastically”

Davis by 1956 was no stranger to black literature. A former student of Sterling Brown and coeditor on the monumental *Negro Caravan* (1941) anthology, Davis, by this time a firmly established member of Howard University's English Department (he had been teaching there since 1944), had picked up where his mentor had left off in terms of keeping the black literary community up to date on the current and future status of black literature. Davis was also no stranger to *Phylon*, and his claim in this 1956 essay that though there were signs of impending integration throughout the 1940s, the great number of works published by black writers remained true to what Davis called the “protest tradition.” Attempting to build upon what Richard Wright started at the beginning of the decade with *Native Son*. *Blood on the Forge* (1941) by William Attaway, *The Street* (1946) by Ann Petry, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) by Gwendolyn Brooks, *If He Hollers* (1943) by Chester Himes were all such works. With the country's “spiritual commitment” to integration, however, black writers were “faced with the loss of their oldest and most cherished tradition” (143).

Davis saw two things happening within black literature as a result of the realities of integration. On the one hand, he saw black writers finding new themes within the “racial framework.” In the case of Chester Himes and Owen Dodson, intra-racial issues (e.g. family life) rather than outside political and social forces were the focus of their

work. In other cases, black writers seemed to be forgoing black characters entirely. Relatedly, Davis saw a third group of literature being produced that included black characters but, as was the case in Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953), the "character's racial importance" was minimized (143).

Davis saw this as a celebratory moment in black writing. Though writers in their "middle years" would be at a disadvantage "because it means giving up a tradition in which he has done his apprentice and journey-man work, giving it up when he is prepared to make use of that tradition as a master craftsman" (142). Some of the older poets had disappeared from the conversation surrounding poetry, which Davis attributes to the changing racial climate. Overall, the shifting currents in black writing at midcentury signaled, at least to Davis, the coming conclusion of the ongoing project of racial integration and literary visibility within the American mainstream. As Davis puts it

the course of Negro American literature has been highlighted by a series of social and political crises over the Negro's position in America. The Abolition Movement, the Civil War, Reconstruction, World War I, and the Riot-Lynching Period of the 'Twenties all radically influenced Negro writing. Each crisis in turn produced a new tradition in our literature; and as each crisis has passed, the Negro writer has dropped the special tradition which the occasion demanded and moved towards the main stream of American literature. The Integration Controversy is another crisis, and from it we hope that the Negro will move permanently into full participation in American life—social, economic, political, and literary...when we finally reach that stage in which we can look at segregation in the same way that historians now regard the Inquisition or the Hitler Era in Germany...we shall then do naturally and without self-consciousness what the Joyces and Dostoevskys of the world have always done—write intimately and objectively of our own people in universal and human terms

Through lines such as "full participation in American life," and "universal and human terms," we see in Davis a return to many of the same ideas about literature that were proposed at the beginning of the twentieth century. One major difference, however,

would seem to be in the way Davis orients literature with respect to the reality of American life. Earlier in the century, African American scholar-critics and artists saw literature as a tool toward a social end. Recall that in 1921, Johnson stated

It [the matter of black poets and the production of literature by black people in the United States] is a matter which has a direct bearing on the most vital of American problems...nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity.

These were the same critics and artists Richard Wright condemned in “Blueprint.” However, a closer look at Davis’s sentence construction suggests a shift in that relationship. He writes that “The Integration Controversy is another crisis, and *from it* we hope that the Negro will move permanently into full participation in American life...[including] literary” (145, italics mine).

Rather than make the claim that literature was a means toward racial equality as Brawley and Johnson did in the early twentieth century, Davis claims that the then political climate around integration, which he capitalizes signaling his belief that the subject of integration takes precedence over the sphere of the literary, would eventually lead to full participation in American life across the board including in the realm of the literary. As articulated by Davis, literature as an object and the “literary” as a cultural field/sphere of influence within American society, having its own rules and institutions, takes a backseat to political struggle. The rewards of political struggle will lead to incorporation into the literary mainstream according to Davis, and not the other way around.

If nothing else, Davis’s comments suggest a changing status of the literary mid-century amongst African Americans. Not only is this conception of literature a far cry

from Richard Wright's comments in "Blueprint" and "Between Laughter and Tears," but it's even different from the early twentieth century's belief in race literature's ability to produce social change. This changing status of the literary is connected to an ascending class position that both relates to one's economic status as well as prestige by way of one's proximity to high culture. *Brown vs. Board* would've probably been more significant to Davis than to other black Americans due to his status as a professor at Howard University. Even though Davis refers to the country's commitment to integration as a "spiritual" one, rather than a real one, Davis lists the ways integration is being felt in the United States by stating

most Southern universities have Negro students, and the Supreme Court has sounded the legal death knell of segregation in public schools. The State Department and the better Northern schools are vying with each other to enlist the services of outstanding race scholars

It's hard to tell whether Davis counted himself as one of those race scholars who were being courted by Northern schools. Regardless, however, the fact that Davis makes it a point to say that it's the "better" Northern schools who are doing the recruitment combined with Davis's optimism at the future of black writing despite the impending loss of black America's most cherished tradition, suggests that the possibility of expanding black literary discourse into predominantly white universities was seen as important to its growth.

The second essay published in *Phylon*'s section on criticism was from Ulysses Lee and entitled "Criticism and Mid-Century." Lee's essay differs from Jackson's to the degree that Lee gives more credit to the criticism of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and while he admits, much like Jackson, that there are hardly any book-length studies of literature, there yet remains methods of reading black literature that, while limited, do

exist. Interestingly, citing three books of black history and sociology, including *From Slavery to Freedom* by John Hope Franklin, *The Negro in America* by E Franklin Fraizer, and *Black Odyssey* by Roi Ottley, Lee states

Despite the scarcity of book-length studies in criticism, there exist well formed ways of looking at the Negro literary artist and at the Negro in American literature... Though the works may be judged in terms of their historical significance, their contribution to the emergence of a group consciousness, or their adaptability to rather racy reportage, the accounts in these three books are in the direct tradition of literary criticism by Negroes. For criticism has generally been a handmaiden of progress, illuminating not the works themselves but the wonder that they exist, analyzing not the problems and methods of the authors but their effect, actual and probable, upon their audiences, always remembered as comprising both Negro and whites.

In some ways, Lee's take here is in line with Jackson's opinion on the history of black literary discourse via his focus on "book-length studies." But what makes Lee's essay stand apart from Jackson's is his idea that contemporary historical writing and sociological writing were in line with a tradition of literary criticism. And he is able to bundle black historical, sociological, journalistic writing with the literary discourse of the past through the idea that they each attempted to be a handmaiden to progress. In stating this, Lee is also stating what black literary criticism of the past was not, which is to say it was not "the works themselves [or]...the problems and methods of the authors" (328).

Lee, then, uses Wright's *Native Son* as an example to review the historical state of black literary discourse as well as what he saw as holding it back. Lee writes

The function of literature as a means of interpreting Negro life and attitudes has been central in the developing tradition. It has been generally assumed that the Negro author will use his literary gifts to good ends. If his work does not improve race relations, it is assumed that it should not harm them. Thus, Richard Wright's *Native Son* inspired heated editorial and reader discussion in the columns of the Negro press after its publication in 1940. Such discussions can be healthy signs of growing cultural maturity. But these debates were not concerned with *Native Son's*

virtues or deficiencies as a novel nor with the adequacy of its treatment of its themes. They centered about the moral right of the author to risk a reinforcing of objectionable attitudes about Negroes which might do collective harm; the debaters were disturbed that white readers might see in every Negro another Bigger.

Whereas Brawley in 1910 attempted to distinguish literature as a field of study apart from black historical and sociological writing, Lee in 1950 is bundling all that writing together in an attempt to distinguish literature again from those prior attempts and on different grounds. The other thing that makes this passage from Lee interesting is his use of the word "tradition." This is one of the first instances in the twentieth century in which the word tradition is being applied to black literary discourse. This is important because it offers a sense of how critics like Lee saw the discourse as a whole and their relationship to it. Ultimately, calling it a tradition, Lee is historicizing the discourse. While historicizing is valuable, there's a way in which historicizing also relegates just as much as it props up. Keep in mind that his reference to Richard Wright and the conversations around *Native Son* was less than ten years old at that point. But there was a sense that the future of literary discourse needed to be distinctly different from what it had been previously.

Lee's understanding of what black literary discourse should be can be captured in his critique of Benjamin Brawley's work, whom he analyzes in his essay. Lee pays particular attention to the preface of Benjamin Brawley's *The Negro in Literature and Art*, in which Brawley writes that his attempting "to review their [African American] achievement in every department of the fine arts." Of this Lee states

The key word here was "achievement" and not standards. It was not that Brawley did not have standards. It was rather that his were those of nineteenth century English criticism; too rigid application of these

standards would have dulled the "achievement" which he was anxious to demonstrate.

Lee makes a keen observation when he states that Brawley was more interested in black achievement in literature than in artistic standards. Standards, as used by Lee, signify Lee's interest in using a different set of criteria to evaluate black literature. In some ways, this evokes the use of the term "craft" by the far-left writers of the 1930s and 1940s. While we can say that the word "standards," is more evaluative whereas "craft" is more concerned with literary technique, in either case, both groups, the far-left writers of the 1930s and the *Phylon* writers of the 1950s were interested in a more nuanced understanding of literature. Like Jackson, what makes Lee's take here interesting is his framing of black literary discourse in the 1930s as one that doesn't include the far-left criticism. For Lee, the three main black literary figures of the 1930s interestingly included Benjamin Brawley, Sterling Brown, and Alain Locke. Lee states "no one in the Forties emerged to challenge the critical standing which Brawley, Brown, and Locke had achieved by the mid-Thirties" (337). In this way, what Lee is doing here is very significant. In calling black literary discourse a "tradition" and naming the major figures in that tradition, Lee, much like Jackson, can narrow the scope of the discourse to one that by the 1950s was only influenced by a handful of people and is following out of the liberal criticism of Brawley and Brown that I charted in chapter one.

In the last piece of criticism to be published in the "criticism" section of the *Phylon* special issue, M. Carl Holman's "Dialogue on Mirrors," doubles as both a piece of criticism and as a dramatic dialogue that one would find in a play. The actors of Holman's dialogue include a reader and a writer and their dialogue in its entirety is as follows.



Writer:

You do not seek compassion in a mirror,  
Only the image innocent of error;  
Did you not fear, I would not show you terror.  
It would be prettier to pose a lie;  
I etch truth's naked skull before we die.

Reader:

But terror is a mark of man, who feels,  
And, feeling, has more meaning, though he falls,  
Than minus signs on mirrors or on walls.  
Time was when your resourceful art could give  
That truth which summoned dying men to live

Writer:

Are mirrors quacks, to come to you with pills,  
Or witchmen, muttering archaic spells  
Which at a stroke must banish all your hells?  
Small wonder you can glut on tinsel dreams  
While the world drowns in blasted bricks and beams!

Reader:

Mirrors should learn a language, then, of dreams;  
Saying: the body drowns; the spirit swims.  
Your glass is mute; when it should probe, it skims.  
The brightest mirrors, claiming mere reflection,  
Register death, but miss the resurrection

While not remembered today as a canonical writer, M. Carl Holman was a celebrated black poet of the 1950s. Elsewhere in this same journal, Margaret Walker would refer to Holman as

Deeply concerned with the psychological, yet aware of our physical world, he shares a growing understanding of our spiritual problems with some of the most mature craftsmen practicing the art of poetry. He bears watching as a poet who is technically aware and intellectually worthy of his salt

“Dialogue on Mirrors” is an interesting piece that synthesizes the historical tensions between readers and writers. Interestingly, Holman’s characters aren’t racialized. This might be due to the increasing interest in making African American literature a part of mainstream literature, but its inclusion in this particular journal and this particular special issue allows it to represent the particular conversations black critics were having about and with their black readers, and it’s able to do this because the Writer in the dialogue declares to the Reader his ability to transmit “truth.” The “mirror” is a metaphor for literature itself, but in referring to literature as a mirror, Holman is implying that the nature of literature is to reflect the reader back to themselves. This carries even more significance when you consider the black writer and the black reader also share a social standing. Overall this dialogue is about the writer’s artistic impulse to deliver “truth” and the reader’s need for something more than artistic works that register “death.” The Reader’s last point about “The brightest mirrors, claiming mere reflection,/ Register death, but miss the resurrection,” not only evokes the religious tone found in Baldwin’s “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” but it also understands the human condition as one that was redeemable. Because the Reader character offers a point of view that’s similar to those of the latest trends in black literary discourse, it’s possible to view this character as the black literary critics of the period, and not the general reading public, responding to and critiquing their immediate predecessors, the black far-left writers who produced literature in a way that was understood to be leaning too much in history and sociology. The fact that the Reader character has the last say in the dialogue signifies that perhaps we’re meant to side with the Reader, which makes sense given how close in proximity the Reader’s thought process is to the writers of *Phylon*. However, because it’s a dialogue

and not a soliloquy, it does not seem like we're meant to pick a side but simply to see the entire field. In this way, Holman's dialogue, in an artistic way, offers a synthesized reading of the history of the discourse that leans toward the perspective of the black liberal writers but doesn't call on the reader to pick a side.

Beyond *Phylon's* issue on criticism, there were other essays printed within the special issue that have bearing on how black literary discourse tried to reorganize itself. One such essay was published by Margaret Walker. Walker's essay, entitled "New Poets", mirrors the tendency initially set out by the black writers of the 1930s of writing historically about the literature and literary community that they themselves were apart. Walker, like her predecessors, interestingly doesn't look at the twenties in the United States as a success, but part of a bigger problem. For Walker, the bigger problem is the relationships between white patrons and black artists. This relationship hampered black artistry. Here Walker summarizes the sentiment toward the 1920s that was significant among intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s. She writes

During the Twenties we spoke of the New Negro and the Negro Renaissance...Rich white patrons or 'angels' who could and did underwrite the poetry of Negroes by helping to support Negroes who were interested in writing poetry did so as a fad to amuse themselves and their guests at some of the fabulous parties of the Twenties...they indulgently regarded the poetry of the Negro as the prattle of a gifted child. Negro people as a mass showed little appreciation for poetry and offered very little audience for the Negro writing poetry... isolated from the literary life of white and confused by the segregated pattern of economic and political life, it was only natural that the point of view of these writers were limited. They lacked social perspective and suffered from a kind of literary myopia.

Walker, perhaps more than any other contributor to the special issue of *Phylon*, discusses the 1920s in a rhetorical style evocative of the 1930 far-left critics. But her interest here

isn't in the way literature can change social opinion in the same vein as the far-left critics.

Rather, she's interested in the fact that

Negroes writing poetry have gone a long way toward achieving full literary status as American writers; and they have thus attained a measure of integration into contemporary schools of literary thought

“achieving full literary status” is an interesting way to phrase what Walker saw as happening in American literature. This is because by calling it “literary status” she’s offering a rhetorical play on words that recalls one’s “legal status.” This “language-term” by Walker is implicitly connected to the idea that by the 1950s African American writers were trying to integrate the field of the literary instead of the field of the broader society which further pushes the reversed relationship between literature and the social sphere that is occurring within black literature at midcentury.

Walker does defer from her predecessors from the thirties by extending black literary and social history through the period in which they were writing, focusing mainly on the New Deal, and how that led to the development of a new group of black Americans, but interestingly Walker doesn't describe this new group in class terms. Rather, she writes that what ties this new group of black Americans together is their “genuine appreciation for the creative arts and a recognition for all cultural values” (350).

Walker writes

Any literary development of the Negro in the Thirties was directly due to his social development. During the Thirties the Negro people made great social strides. The New Deal opened many avenues of opportunity and development to the masses of Negro people. The economic standards of the Negro race rose higher than ever in the history of his life in this Country. As a result of free art for all the people a cultural renaissance in all the arts swept the United States. This created a new intelligentsia with a genuine appreciation for the creative arts and a recognition for all cultural values

This is important because what Walker is doing is reframing black literary and social history in a way that enables the midcentury relationship to literature to be seen as one that is a logical conclusion due to changes in the social and economic order as opposed to conforming to the more conservative ethos of the 1950s. The new group Walker describes is notably classless, but the tie that binds this group of black writers together is their “genuine” appreciation for art as well as their recognition for “all” cultural values which also happens to evoke what Johnson and others wanted for black literature in the 1910s and 1920s and for that reason could be read as black literary discourse fulfilling the goal that it had originally set out to fulfill. But Walker’s flattening of intraracial class differences and the return to an investment in displaying the similarities between black and white Americans, as shown through the writing of Hurston and Blyden Jackson, also can be read as a conservative turn that is in reaction to McCarthyism.

Her ultimate aim is the analysis of “new poets,” emerging in the 1950s, but in order for her to fully explain where black poetry is by midcentury and how it got there via the poetry of the 1930s and 1940s, Walker employs a close reading of black poetry that’s somewhat different from other critical attempts of understanding black poetry that had preceded it. In fact, close reading, at least as it is understood by today’s standards, was never quite the focus within pieces of literary criticism prior to 1950. For example, James Weldon Johnson implored his readers in his preface to the *Book of American Negro Poetry* to see and judge for themselves the differences between Phillis Wheatly’s and Anne Bradstreet’s poetry. After quoting from both poets, Johnson writes “we do not think the black woman suffers much by comparison with the white” (18). This style of

criticism is likely what Lee was referring to when toward the end of his own essay he critiques Hugh Gloster's *Negro Voices in American Fiction* as a study that "is largely of the themes, attitudes, and social and historical background of the works examined [and] for that reason the book is more valuable as a starting point for future criticism than for its own critical qualities" (336).

Even as Johnson was being somewhat sly in his comparison of Bradstreet and Wheatley, there's still the fact that Johnson wanted his audience to do the critical work on their own and come to the same conclusion he did. In other printed pieces of literary discourse that would come after Johnson, such as was seen from Eugene Clay, we would see references to craft-related terms in specific poems by poets such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, and those terms were used as an avenue to begin thinking about how effective they were in furthering a social revolution, Walker wants her readers to do something else. Walker calls on her readers to "contrast the tone of the poems of the Twenties with examples of the poetry of the early Forties reflecting as they did the social consciousness of the Thirties" (126). Here, she's asking her readers to compare the poems of the Harlem Renaissance to the poems of three other poets, including herself. She cites from Robert Hayden's "Speech" from *Heart-Shape in the Dust*, Melvin Tolson's "Dark Symphony" and her own "For My People." After quoting from each of these poems, Walker writes "in each of these illustrations of poetry published during the early Forties may be detected the note of social protest, a growing perspective beyond the point of view of race, and a militant attitude not evidenced in the poets of the Twenties" (349). The fact that Walker specifically refers to the "tone" as a particular aspect of the poem is important, especially when contrasted with what James Weldon Johnson wanted

of his readers because it is a kind of proto literary-critical and historical argument. The focus on tone in Walker is used as a way to understand a poem and the period it emerges from on a deeper level, which is distinct from Johnson's or Clay's thinking about craft and form in literature.

But Walker's interesting incorporation of "tone" into her essay is used not just as a way to describe the poetry of the 1930s and early forties, but it's used as a control from which to compare the poetry of the late forties and into the year 1950. Walker pays particularly close attention to Gwendolyn Brooks's *A Street in Bronzeville* and Owen Dodson's "Conversation on V." Through Brooks and Dodson, Walker is able to show how themes and topics in black poetry moved away from the "note of social protest" and into other areas. She writes

These new poets of the late Forties also remind us that there are other factors in the writing of poetry that are equally as important as perspective. They focus our attention on craftsmanship with their return to an emphasis on form. The new poetry has universal appeal coupled with another definite mark of neo-classicism, the return to form. They show an emphasis placed on technique rather than subject matter, and a moving toward intellectual themes of psychological and philosophical implications which border on obscurantism. These poems are never primitive, simple, and commonplace.

The two things that stand out about Walker's thoughts on the shifts between the poetry of the early forties and the late forties are 1. Her statement that there exists something within the poetry of the late forties that are "equally as important" as perspective and 2. Her observation is that among poets of the late forties, there's a tendency toward "obscurantism." The former point is in direct contrast to Richard Wright's idea in "Blueprint" that perspective needed to be the focal point of black literature. While Walker is not totally negating this idea from Wright, she is offering the

idea that believes perspective to be one of the many things that literature needed to prioritize. For Walker, those things included craftsmanship and a return to “an emphasis on form.” This is an interesting point because as mentioned in chapter two, craftsmanship was a priority for the far-left writers of the 1930s. However, when Walker discusses form, Walker is talking about a kind of preoccupation with form that prioritizes form itself above its content. This isn’t something the far-left critics of the 1930s would have argued for, but in an atmosphere that prioritizes ambiguity and individualism as we saw within the work of Ellison and in Baldwin toward the end of the decade of the 1940s, it follows that what started as an interest in form’s ability to shape economic relations and social thought shifted into an interest in form itself. Walker saw a potential drawback to this. She writes “currently, the new poets, however, are so concerned with form that they are often interested in form to the exclusion of everything else and thus are in danger of sacrificing sense for sound, or meaning for music” (351).

Walker saw the new interest in form, an interest that made the far-left interest in form seem not an interest at all, as a positive advancement in black literature even as she warned against leaning too heavily into it. One of the most celebrated works of poetry at that time was *Annie Allen* from Gwendolyn Brooks and Walker actually defends it from critics who would think of it as an obscurest text. Walker writes

Such a charge has already been leveled at Annie Allen when the book was mentioned in a recent issue of *PHYLON*. It was then stated that the poem, ‘the birth in a narrow room,’ has too many elliptical or truncated lines. This seems a minor technical matter of not too great importance since it does not actually destroy the meaning of the poem. The lines under question follow:

Weeps out of western country something new.  
Blurred and stupendous. Wanted and unplanned.  
Winks. Twines, and weakly winks



Upon the milk-glass fruit bowl, iron pot,  
The bashful china child tipping forever  
Yellow apron and spilling pretty cherries.

Does this make sense? Obviously when one reads the entire poem in terms of the title, the poem does make sense, and that should be all that really matters.

Walker's close reading of Brooks is interesting because she is insisting that readers take the titles into account when reading poetry, particularly poems that rely heavily on their form. This particular take from Walker speaks to a new kind of black sense-making within black literary discourse. As black poems delve deeper into form and become more obscure, methods of reading and analysis must become broader and the beginnings of that can be seen within Walker as she tries to offer a way to read Gwendolyn Brooks by way of the title of her poetry in addition to the content of the poem itself. Walker continues in her discussion of *Annie Allen* by stating

In addition to these conventional forms she includes several poems written in free verse as well as occasional lines of blank verse. In regard to types she includes short lyrics, ballads, and sonnets written with veteran aplomb. As a whole, *Annie Allen* is a fine delineation of the character of a young Negro woman from childhood through adolescence to complete maturity, but with slight racial exceptions it could apply to any female of a certain class and society. The entire volume is tinged with a highly sophisticated humor and is not only technically sure but also vindicates the promise of *A Street in Bronzeville*. Coming after the long hue and cry of white writers that Negroes as poets lack form and intellectual acumen, Miss Brooks' careful craftsmanship and sensitive understanding reflected in *Annie Allen* are not only personal triumphs but a racial vindication

Walker's use of personification in writing that *Annie Allen* "vindicates the promise" of Brooks's *A Street in Bronzeville* continues the trend of critics thinking of literature as possessing a certain level of autonomy. This is emphasized when later in the same quotation Walker uses the noun form of the same word, "to vindicate," with respect to Brooks herself. Walker states that *Annie Allen* is not just a reflection of a personal

triumph for Brooks but of “racial vindication.” The difference between the verb being applied to literature and the noun being applied to Brooks is reflective of a relationship to literature that has shifted. This is the case because even as *Annie Allen* is thought of as performing an action, enabling something, its action is only in relation to another piece of literature, a piece of literature that is in its own family tree, *A Street in Bronzeville*.

Whereas most of the *Phylon* critics were future-oriented in their thinking with respect to black literature, focusing mostly on what black literature needed to be in the new decade of the 1950s via a reframing of recent black literary and social history, other critics like Ann Petry were doing other kinds of important reframing. Ann Petry, someone who was known for having contributed to African American literature in the 1940s through her 1946 novel *The Street*, writes in her 1950 essay “The Novel as Social Criticism,” reframes ancient primordial history to both reflect on the state of then-contemporary literary criticism as well as what a pure literary criticism might look like. In “The Novel as Social Criticism,” Ann Petry offers her view into the origin and practice of storytelling in the lives of people. She opens the essay by stating

After I had written a novel of social criticism (it was my first book, written for the most part without realizing that it belonged in a special category) I slowly became aware that such novels were regarded as a special and quite deplorable creation of American writers of the twentieth century. It took me quite a while to realize that there were fashions in literary criticism and that they shifted and changed much like the fashions in women’s hats. Right now the latest style in literary circles, is to say that the sociological novel reached its peak and its greatest glory in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and having served its purpose it now lies stone-cold dead in the market place. Perhaps it does. But the corpse is quick with life. Week after week it sits up and moves close to the top of the best-seller list. It is my personal opinion that novels of this type will continue to be written until such time as man loses his ability to read and returns to the cave. Once there he will tell stories to his mate and to his children, and the stories will contain a message, make a comment on cave society; and he will, finally, work out a

method of recording the stories, and having come full circle the novel of social criticism will be reborn.

Looking at Petry here is valuable because what Petry does is reveals the constructedness of shifts happening in the world of literature. In comparing trends in literary criticism to fashions in women's hats, Petry is making a statement about literary criticism's frivolity. In keeping with this point, Petry writes

A professional patter has been developed to describe the awareness of social problems which has crept into creative writing. It is a confused patter. Naturalism and realism are terms that are used almost interchangeably. *Studs Lonigan* and *USA* are called naturalist novels but *The Grapes of Wrath* is cited as an example of realism. So is *Tom Jones*.

The development of professional verbiage, an extension what the scholarly work being done in the academy, what Petry refers to as a "confused patter," is important to note because in dismissing the confusion that literary criticism enables, Petry is able to think about "social criticism," which she counts her work as, as not another "fashion statement," or because of its theoretical viability, but as part of the human need to tell stories. This is highlighted by her example of storytelling in cave societies. In this way, Petry is able to reframe social criticism, not simply as one that simply offers an "awareness of social problems," but instead as one that is an inextricable part of what it means to be human. She continues by writing

Its rebirth in a cave or an underground mine seems inevitable because it is not easy to destroy an old art form. The idea that a story should point a moral, convey a message, did not originate in the twentieth century; it goes far back in the history of man. Modern novels with their 'messages' are cut from the same bolt of cloth as the world's folk tales and fairy stories, the parables of the Bible, the old morality plays, the Greek tragedies, the Shakespearean tragedies. Even the basic theme of these novels is very old. It is derived from the best known murder story in literature. The cast and the setting vary, of course, but the message in *Knock on Any Door*, *Gentleman's Agreement*, *Kingsblood Royal*, *Native Son*, *The Naked and the Dead*, *Strange Fruit*, *A Passage to India*, is

essentially the same; And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother: And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?

In making that statement that all stories—from those told in the bible, to folk tales, to modern-day novels—are all connected by their desire to convey a message, Petry is taking a stance that is grounded in prehistory. In this way, it's interesting to consider how in response to the shifting social currents of the 1950s, the critics and artists publishing in *Phylon* were very future-oriented with respect to their thoughts on literature, while Petry in this essay wants to consider a timeframe that goes back much further. The *Phylon* critics wanted to consider what black art needed to become, while Petry wanted to consider what art, as a practice, always was meant to be. In this way, Petry is attempting to get closer to what a truer kind of literary criticism could look like.

## Conclusion

The mid-century was a period in black literary discourse in which critics and artists were trying to reframe and reassess where black literature had succeeded, where it needed to grow, and what was necessary for that growth. The use of specific language terms among critics situated the new home of black literary criticism squarely within the academy. As well, by midcentury, the tradition of reframing black literary and social history continued in an attempt to offer an explanation for the rise of a new commitment to literary form, literature's autonomy, as well as the individual. In turn, the rise of each of these things is reflective of a new relationship to literature that is a reversed version of what was being outlined in the 1910s and 1920s. Whereas DuBois would famously state that "all art is propaganda and ever must be" (259), William Gardner Smith in "The Negro Writer: Pitfalls and Compensations," also published within the pages of *Phylon*, would state

Too often... in Negro novels do we witness the dull procession of crime after crime against the Negro... One might even say that the chronicles of offenses constitute truth; however, they do not constitute art. And art is the concern of any novelist

Both uses of the third-person present-tense indicative version of "to be" through the phrase "art is," and the unyielding nature of its connotation convey just how different the 1950s were from the 1910s as far as their conception of what the relationship to art should look like. Should propaganda be the focus or should art be the focus? It's not that black artists were less concerned with the fight for integration and broader racial equality, but black critics and artists saw themselves by midcentury at a historical juncture that to them was unprecedented and they saw it as an opportunity to revel in the success of black literature's cultural growth and new needs, which was marked mostly by black literature

and literary discourse's attention to form and craft as well as its proximity to academic institutions.

Black literary discourse began in 1910 through Benjamin Brawley's *The Negro in Literature and Art*. What started out as a cautious attempt to "test" literature by black Americans in the light of critical principles, by 1950, had transformed into a discourse organized around different questions and interests. Brawley and his contemporaries saw black literature as a means to solve the Negro Problem. By the 1920s, James Weldon Johnson leaned into that goal originally outlined in the 1910s, and advanced Brawley's ideas by reducing and reframing the Negro Problem to one of American mental attitudes, which Johnson understood as an inheritance of Enlightenment philosophy. While Johnson identified the problem with American racism as the problem of enlightenment or Western thought, Sterling Brown by the 1930s would go even further than Johnson in that in his own writing, Brown described the problem of Western thought as one that was dependent on a narrow point of view, which stemmed from a desire on the part of the oppressor to continue their oppression.

Point of view, or rather perspective, is a concept that would also be taken up by another group of critics who were further left than even Brown. Wright and other critics, such as Marian Minus and others, would emphasize perspective in a similar way as Brown does point of view, but rather their goal was to shift the discourse from one that was largely organized around questions of black representation within literature to one of interpretation, in which artists via their literature could show the relationship between the black masses and the upper classes. This was because for Richard Wright and his contemporaries, the Negro Problem was a problem of a total global economic order, and

the answer to this problem didn't lie in literature. Rather it lay in a social revolution led by the black masses and that literature could align itself in that effort by writing directly to the black masses and revealing how their lives are connected to the upper classes. Recall that Langston Hughes, a poet Wright and others of the far-left looked up to in the 1930s, wrote "it's the way people look at things not what they look at, that needs to be changed." The writers of the far left saw craft and an understanding of black literary and social history through the lens of Marxist philosophy as important to achieving their goals within literature and within the broader social order.

Starting in the late 1940s there's an attempt to think more broadly about literature. In the case of James Baldwin and others, the direction of black literature's focus became internal as opposed to external. There was also a tendency toward abstraction and an investment in the philosophical category of the human, as well as a strong belief in the autonomy of literature. These new tendencies were reflective of a change in the greater relation to literature. Rather than seeing literature as a means toward a social end, art became an end goal in of itself. And in the case of Arthur P. Davis, integration was seen as a historical moment that would enable different things in the social sphere, literature being one of them. These new tendencies occurred alongside a newfound focus on the "critic" or "scholar" as an interpreter of black literature and the academy as a home base for black literary discourse.

Overall, one way to think about black literary discourse is as a constant reframing of previous thoughts and ideas within the discourse. If, as Robert Stepto writes in *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, it's possible to read African American literature as part of its own tradition because of the way black artists revoice

the work of their predecessors through a shared pregeneric myth (xv-xvi), then it's possible to think of black literary discourse in a similar way due to the shared language-terms among black critics between 1910 and 1956 as well as the fact that black critics in the early-to-mid twentieth century were frequently, via black literary history, reframing a literary and social history they inherited through their chosen profession as artists and critics. All the while, black artists were explicitly trying to get a grasp of black literary history even as they were also producing black literature. This is significant because it gives scholars of black literature a starting point for how a shared discourse around black literature developed. It's also significant because it offers an origin story for how certain questions that have entered the discourse (such as James Weldon Johnson's theory of dialect) and how others were connected to broader social and political investments. For example, we can see the organization of *Negro Caravan* around genre as stemming from an interest in seeing black literature merge into the American literary mainstream. We can also see Benjamin Brawley's interest in the form of Charles Chesnut's short stories as stemming from an idea literature could mimic the resolution of the Negro Problem. We can also see this in the far-left critics an investment in craft as a means of showing one's relationship to the greater economic order. Ultimately, it's in studying literary discourse that we get a sense of why literature is valuable. Every figure mentioned in this dissertation to varying degrees dedicated their life to literature. And I got the sense from reading their work that that choice wasn't made haphazardly. Their choice stemmed from the idea that literature could leave an indelible mark on the world or, at the very least, the individual. Their work is a lasting reminder of why the study of literature is so important.



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