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“ The House Nigger in Black American Literature ”

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by

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L I S T O F C O N T E N T S

	<u>Page</u>
Acknowledgements...	(iv)
Abstract	(v)
1 Introduction	1
2. The House Nigger in Black American Literature Black American Literature	18
3. Ralph Ellison: The Case of a Good House Nigger	77
4. <u>Invisible Man</u> : A House Nigger Masterpiece.	102
5. Conclusion	139
6. Footnotes	1
7. Bibliography	1

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A B S T R A C T

MARGARETTA wa GACHERU

THE HOUSE

NIGGER IN BLACK AMERICAN

LITERATURE

This dissertation has emerged out of a deep admiration for the writings of many dedicated Black American poets and playwrights, prose writers and essayists who are attuned not only to their own community's aspirations and social plight, but to those of many Third World people as well. Men and women like Richard Wright and Malcolm X, George Jackson and Angela Davis have all expressed, with eloquent passion and political alacrity, the most pressing problems of millions of Black Americans as well as Third World people. Writers like these have employed their literary gifts to inspire and educate, not only to entertain their appreciative audiences.

Yet even as sensitive, socially penetrating and politically astute literature exists in Black America, there is also another style of Black writing which is antithetical to it in its artistic objectives and its social content. It is this style of writing that will be explored in this thesis under the title of "The House Nigger in Black American Literature". We have taken the title from a turn of phrase made by the late brilliant Black American leader, the late Malcolm X, who identified the man who was a social 'slave' to the political and economic system that oppressed the majority of American Blacks as a 'house negro'.

✓ The 'house negro' or 'house nigger' is the man or woman who, during the days of Southern slavery, worked within the white master's house and identified with the white man's interests in opposition to those of the Black majority. According to Malcolm, the house nigger still exists today as a type of thinker although orthodox Black slavery has legally passed away. He is the kind that encourages Blacks not to resist oppression, but rather to endure their present plight in hopes of better days to come in some mystical after life. He is the kind to compromise with his oppressors and to collect cheap short-term gains rather than to stand committed to a larger cause - the liberation of Black people. And above all, the house nigger is a cynic who does not understand that his shattered dreams and disillusionment with life is a matter of fate - the forever consequence of racism in a white man's world - but the function of a social system that can be changed with the will and determination of Black working people.

The 'house nigger' lived and moved in Kenya during the days of the Mau Mau War and he was called specifically a 'Home Guard'. He exists even now in South Africa where certain Blacks choose to serve the apartheid system by speaking out on behalf of Bantustans and continued 'separate but equal' development. And the house nigger even lives in the literary world where artists write with a view of retaining the status quo, even when it oppresses the Black majority. He is seen espousing either outright racist views or implicitly reactionary attitudes. But in the realm of Black thought, he plays an especially insidious role as he may seem to some to be a proponent of cultural liberation just because he is a Black person. But in fact, his writing style actually conceals and mystifies the underlying causes of racial injustice. It does little to clarify or clearly articulate the root causes of racial and economic oppression. In other words, he may appear to be black people's friend when in reality he is their enemy, as he implicitly serves the interests of the white ruling class.

It is this writer who we wish to unmask through a careful analysis of the attitudinal content of what we will term a 'house nigger' literary tradition in Black American literature. Examining samples of over a hundred years of Black writing, we shall then focus upon the work of one particular present day writer, Ralph Ellison, who we feel expresses in his novel, Invisible Man, most of the reactionary attitudes of the house nigger. And we shall see them most clearly manifest in his approach in Black history which he represents in negative and nihilistic terms.

As a means of establishing a framework within which to work, we shall look first at the writing of several Black political thinkers, including the late and great revolutionary leader from Guinea Bissau, Amilcar Cabral, and the well known Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Both men fall within the category of what Malcolm X termed the 'field negro' or field nigger, meaning the man who stood outside the white master's house, out in the field, and chose to identify with the masses of Black working people. Both men saw the Black revolutionary or 'field nigger' writer as having a special part to play in explaining the nature of political, cultural and economic oppression to fellow Blacks through their art, and so demystifying the dynamics of racism as it was and still is used to foster a fatalistic outlook on the Black experience.

By contrast, both Ngugi and Cabral saw the house nigger as someone who employed his artistic gifts to instill a cynical and cyclical view of Black history. He further encouraged Blacks not to resist either racism or the socio-political system of imperialism. Rather he implied, through his writing, that Blacks should endure their fallen fate and await a better day in the afterlife. It was the house nigger's call to foster fatalism and fanciful escapist flight as the one means for Blacks to survive in a racist and stratified society. His style was cynical not affirmative, highly individualist not communal, and often esoteric not analytical; as the house nigger was less concerned with advancing social change than in 'making it' in the terms of the dominant culture.

Our ultimate goal will be to advance literary criticism of Black writing beyond the negritude view that an artist's race is sufficient criterion by which to tell whether he is a supporter of black people's struggle for cultural, social and economic freedom or not. We will hold that the writer's class position must be analysed as well before one can accurately assess whether he is a 'friend or foe' of Black people.

Thus, we will recognise not one, but two images and antagonistic social visions, revealed in Black American literature. Our view is that both have been shaped by what Ngugi describes as, "... the different person's perception of the nature of American society." These two sets of images implicitly express the way the artist views himself vis a vis his own Black history. In other words, we feel that when the Black writer feels positively towards his past - from his people's early days in Africa, through their difficult times in the slave-ridden South, and into the present - then he is more likely to understand the detrimental role that the political and economic system of capitalist imperialism has played in shaping Black history. He is also more likely to see that literature has an important role to play in reclaiming the Black man's past and creating a radical awareness of the need for social change in the present and future.

But when the Black writer feels that it is necessary to negate his history, even to the point of feeling shame and humiliation in having to claim it as his own heritage, then we feel that not only does he misunderstand the concrete facts of his past. His art is also quite likely to reflect this mystified view such that he will

either consciously or unconsciously foster futile and fatalistic attitudes. As such, his style of writing is not the kind that is conducive to creating radical and realistic awareness of the need for social change among Black people.

Our thesis is based on the belief that it is important to understand and unravel these two separate antithetical traditions of Black American writing since we feel that without one's understanding the historical fact of how Europe essentially robbed and underdeveloped Africa and the entire Black world, Black people will continue to accept racist myths about the insignificance of their noble past. And once they are weakened by a racist ideology, which has been fashioned by the white ruling class and reinforced by the house nigger, they may feel so inadequate that they will remain resigned to their prescribed second class position rather than rise up and resist the racist ruling class oppression.

In this thesis, we will try to disentangle the two strains of black American writing by focusing first and foremost on the house nigger tradition which we feel is full of 'foes' in sheep's clothing. The house nigger lives and looks superficially like Black people's friend, but actually he serves the interest of his white master. In exposing his various means of distortion, we trust that we can advance the literary criticism of Black writing beyond merely appreciating an artist for his 'negritude'. Our contention will be that a writer's Blackness, without consideration of his class position, must now be seen as insufficient criterion of proof that his art is one which ultimately serves the interests of Black people. We will try, by

carefully reasoned argument and literary illustration, to explain the point that both his colour and his class must be taken into consideration if we are to know whether he is finally 'friend or foe' to the majority of Blacks.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The arts and history are often thought of as two very separate spheres of knowledge and inquiry. In many universities in the world, the faculties concerned specifically with the arts, such as literature or graphic design, are separated from the faculties devoted to history. And in numerous urban centres, arts museums are often situated at opposite ends of towns from the historical institutions.

In this inquiry however, we shall not make so radical a distinction between traditions of the arts and history. Instead, we shall begin from the premise that culture and history are derived from the same source, and develop from the same material basis. They are both the result of human beings interacting within and upon their material environment in the course of daily life. Explained perhaps more clearly by the west African freedom fighter, the late Amilcar Cabral, art and

... culture are, perhaps, the products of this history (of a people) just as the flower is the product of a plant, or because it is history, culture has as its material base in the level of the productive forces and the mode of production.¹

From this perspective, culture and the arts are not something set apart from either a people's daily activities or from their history. Art is not merely made up of ideas and the imaginative activities of individuals who create outside the context of society. Nor do artists stand outside, or above social reality. Rather, culture and art are the products of a com-

munity, generated as people respond to both the material and spiritual exigencies of daily life.

Objectively speaking, both the artist and culture are integral elements of any human society.

But the two conceptions of culture and history, one that they are integrally linked, the other that they are separate and distinct constitute two antithetical views about the nature of human experience. As we have read, researched and analysed a wide range of Black American literature, we have found both sets of views reflected and reinforced in novels, poetry, essays, and plays constituting two opposing traditions.

The Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, had a unique way of describing these diametrically opposed social views as witnessed in Black American literature. In 1976, in an essay entitled, "The Robber and the Robbed", he wrote the following:

... There is not one Black consciousness in (Black American) literature. There are in fact two opposing consciousness, two images, two opposing trends in literature, and thought shaped by the different personal perceptions of the nature of society. Now the images we have of ourselves in relationship to ourselves or the images we have of ourselves in relationship to ourselves and the place we occupy in and

of the labour power which alone with instruments of labour acting on nature produces wealth or whether we are merely the owners of the means of production hiring the labour power of others: whether in other words we are the robbed or the robbers.²

As Ngugi understands it, the perspectives of Black American writers as revealed through their literature is the clearest indication of their relationships to other people, including the majority of Black American people. The writers' social vision, implicitly revealed in their writing, is the clearest indication of their class position as well. Or in the language of Ngugi, it reveals whether they are one of the robbed or robbers.

The idea that there are two trends and traditions in Black American literature is an important departure from the way a small band of critics have come to interpret and analyse Black literature, especially after the 1960s. Before then and especially in the sixties, it was generally believed that there was only one significant stream of radical Black thinking which was discussed under terms like Cultural Nationalism or Negritude, or Black Aesthetics. Whatever its name, it was a broad-based movement which had its cultural roots in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, when men like Alain Locke were writing about 'the New Negro'. Locke and others seemed never to doubt that their writing expressed and reflected the interests of all Black Americans. This view can clearly be seen in the following:

With this renewed self-respect and self-dependence, the life of the Negro community is bound to enter a new dynamic phase, the buoyancy from within compensating for whatever pressure there may be of conditions from without. The migrant masses, shifting from the countryside to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap, but more important,

the same thing happens spiritually in the life-attitudes and self-expression of the young Negro, in his poetry, his art, his education, and his new outlook, with the additional advantage, of course, of the poise and greater certainty of knowing what it is all about. From this comes the promise and warrant of a new leadership.³

Coupled with this concept of the 'New Negro' or Black Nationalist taking a leadership role in the Black community is the thought that all Black people have a common enemy. It is the racism, most often expressed by the dominant white culture, and by white racists. Black oppression being understood as the outcome of a racist system, Black artists did not necessarily understand the historical, economic, or objective basis for racism. Instead, they often simply saw it in idealistic terms. Their response was understandably idealistic as well.

It was exemplified writings like that of Langston Hughes in his essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain".

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear of 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 coloured 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.⁴

If Black cultural nationalists of the sixties sounded quite a bit more militant than Hughes did, it was because they frequently felt that racism had become so deeply imbedded in the white system that only a Black Revolution would destroy fully and finally. One black writer of the later period was to convey the feeling shared by many Black nationalists about racism and the Black Revolution.

... all art must reflect and support the Black revolution, and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid, no matter how many lines and spaces are produced in proportion and symmetry and no matter how many sounds are boxed in or blown out and called music.⁵

If Black Power proponents did not fully understand the objective, economic and historical basis for racism and oppression, if they frequently got caught up in idealising, and consequently mystifying the elements that made up the nature of negritude and the Black historical experience, nonetheless, their affirmation of a collective cultural pride was strengthening and uplifting to the consciousness of many Blacks. Their emphasis on instilling a solid sense of identity especially based on an awareness of African history and Black American 'roots' in the African continent, was also important and potentially advancing of a really revolutionary outlook.

But because Black nationalism was based on the thought that all Black-American people had one common enemy which was racism and whites, it was a movement that did not take into account the contrasting class relations between Black people themselves. It did not generally address itself directly to the view that there were two types of Black American thinkers and two opposing trends in literature. As such, it did not explore the

which was racism and whites, it was a movement that did not take into account the contrasting class relations between Black people themselves. It did not generally address itself directly to the view that there were two types of Black American thinkers and two opposing trends in literature. As such, it did not explore the question of who were the true friends and foes of the Black community. It did not specifically understand that there might also be two classes of people in the Black community: the agents of Robbers and the Robbed as well. And as such, it did nothing to establish any other criteria than a writer's negritude by which to assess an artist's true and objective relationship to the Black community.

This inquiry hopes to begin moving towards developing such criteria. Feeling strongly that because the arts themselves have a social role to play in creating or containing social, class and cultural awareness, we feel it is essential to understand what kind of commitment Black American writers really have. No longer, we feel, is negritude alone a sufficient basis to understand the meaning of Black Revolution. And because we feel that new criteria must be developed by which to discern an artist's social vision and class position vis a vis the larger Black community, we shall conduct a small survey of a number of Black American writers, and some of their better known works. Our main target will be Ralph Ellison and his major work, Invisible Man.

One idea which we feel is essential to include in assessing a writer's social vision and class position is to understand his perception of Black history. Again, we feel that it is revealing to understand whether a writer sees history and literature intimately and inexorably bound, or whether he sees them as

it as unrelated episodes, is likely to see the present and the future too in terms of hopeless fate, mystery or mere accident. He is also likely to see the conceivability of controlling or creating meaningful change.

Another important thing about the way a writer understands Black history has to do with the specific nature of that history itself. As we know, for the last five centuries, that history was consisted mainly of the battles of oppressed and exploited African people against European imperialism. African history as a whole has been emphatically shaped as Ngugi wrote in his Homecoming by

...European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism. Our Culture (as well as) modern literature has grown up against the gory background of European imperialism.

The Black writer who appreciates the role that imperialism has played in his past is much more inclined to understand the casualty and consequences of racism, especially as it has been invented, amplified and exploited by the imperialist himself to keep the African ignorant of the influences and economic self-interests that have operated to his disfavour.

For instance, in The Black Jacobins by C.L.R. James, the origin of racism and the economic self-interests of the slave holders were discussed from an incisive historical view point. As early as 1879 on the island of San Domingo, slave owning whites were describing African

slaves in racist, denigrating terminology. One memoir James obtained from the island's archives described 'Negros' in what we know now as stereotyped, racist language. They were said to be "... unjust, cruel, barbarous, half-human, treacherous, deceitful, thieves, drunkards, proud, lazy, unclean, shameless, jealous to fury, and cowards." But James was to reveal that the expedients of economics were the real base and beginning of this sort of racist mythology.

It was by sentiments such as these that they strove to justify the abominable cruelties they practised. And they took great pains that the Negro should remain the brute beast they wanted him to be. The safety of the Whites demand that we keep the negroes in the most profound ignorance. I have reached the stage of believing firmly that one must treat the Negroes as one treats beasts.⁷

"The safety" of the white ruling class has historically been an important reason for theories of racism. For as long as one could keep an entire people ignorant of their revolutionary and human potential, their intimidation assures the safety and stability of slave master's way of life. Or as Amilcar Cabral put it in his speech on "Identity and Dignity".

In order to escape...the dilemma of cultural resistance... imperialist colonial domination has tried to create theories which, in fact, are only gross formulations of racism.⁸

The Black writer who understands that racism is only one element in an entire exploitive ideological constellation will be in a much better position to articu-

late the real terms of Black people's oppression and their potential for genuine revolution. He will be more inclined to see racism as one very crucial tool in the white ruling class enemy's arsenal of ideological and economic warfare. And he himself will then be better equipped to under his own cultural work within the context of a larger revolutionary commitment, in terms of his serving the interests of the Black working class community.

This is, of course, not necessarily the case. A writer may understand the totality of Black history and still choose to identify with his white master's interest. But it is the case all the same, that the social vision revealed in a writer's art bespeaks an outlook which either serves the interests of the master or the enslaved people, either the robber or the robbed. Depending on the nature of that vision, he is either perpetuating ignorance and black oppression by obscuring the nature of the struggle, the enemy, and the black historical experience itself; or else he is clarifying the terms of the struggle, identifying the enemy (which historically has been imperialism and foreign domination) and revealing working people themselves as the true makers of history. For the field nigger writer, his work is clear; he must challenge the whole idea that the master's culture is superior and awaken Black people to their own dignity and the desirability of social change in his writing.

But perhaps the most important reason of all for taking the Black writer's perception of his history as the first criterion by which to judge his stand vis a vis

the Black community, has to do with the impact that imperialism itself has had upon Black culture and history. In a word, it has been terribly destructive. Thus, the writer who displays an awareness that imperialism made an intentional assault on a people's culture and history when it seizes control of their land, labour power, and productive forces generally is a self-conscious and clear-sighted writer. He is one who understands the larger struggle with which the majority of the Black people operate. Rather than arguing, as some Black writers do, that Black people have no history or that their history is inferior to white people's, the Black writer who is a true friend of Black people understands history within the context of imperialist domination. Amilcar Cabral again was most articulate in his explanation of this social phenomenon in his speech, "National Liberation and Culture"

The principle characteristic, common to every kind of imperialist domination, is the negation of the historical process of the dominated people by means of violently usurping the free operation of the process of development of the productive forces.⁹

The Black writer who begins from the premise of negation, that Black Americans either have no history prior to their coming to America, or have a history of which there is nothing to be proud, may have an exquisite command of the English language. His style may be vivid, evocative, and involving. But ultimately, without the analytical tools to understand how foreign domination has distorted, disfigured, and even destroyed accurate Black historical awareness, that writer serves to reinforce and even consolidate the

imperialist's hold on the consciousness of Black people. He is no better than an empty-headed "native" in Franz Fanon's sense of the term. In the Wretched of the Earth, Fanon described some of the effects of cultural imperialism as they appeared during classical colonialism.

Colonialism is not satisfied with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all its form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.¹⁰

But what is even worse than the Black writer being simple 'empty headed, is that he either consciously or unconsciously works in the service of the white ruling master. Without an accurate appreciation of his history, he is not only deprived of a complete concept of himself, since he too is denied the understanding of the past achievements of his African ancestors. He is susceptible to feelings of insecurity, thinking that his own history is somehow inferior to that of whites. He is thus very often prey to trying to prove himself in white men's terms and to identifying with his history and his culture. Usually this means he also looks down upon his own Black community. In this way, he plays right into the hands of the white master class. As Ngugi understood this phenomenon, this kind of Black writer helps to let the ruling class live in peace.

If the robbers of wealth are able to instill images of defeat, unsureness, division, inferiority complex, helplessness, fawning, abject humility, slavishness in the minds of the robbed, then they can eat their loot in comfort and sleep in peace. Thus, it has always been in the interests of the robbing minority to

control the minds, the consciousness of the working majority, ...the true producers of wealth ... by all the educational, literary, communicational, cultural, aesthetic means at their disposal.¹¹

The Black writer who participates in this nexus of 'educational, literary, communicational, cultural, aesthetic means' is nothing more than an enemy of the Black American majority; for in the place of dignity, his work "instills images of defeat". Instead of self-confidence, his characters are uncertain, suffering from feelings of inferiority and helplessness. And in place of self-respect, he projects images of men and women who are slavish, abjectly humble and obsequious. What is more, with his distorted and disjointed notion of Black history, he leaves his readers without any hope of interpreting or understanding the historical basis for their present social situation. Like the man Baako in Ayi Kweh Armah's novel called Fragments, history itself has no underlying unity, no clearly perceivable motive force, and no pattern in the past by which to penetrate the social mysteries of the present.

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The larger meaning which lent sense to every small thing and every momentary happening years and years ago had shattered into a thousand and thirty useless pieces. Things have passed which I have never seen whole, ¹²only broken and twisted against themselves.

Baako's own ennui, alienation, and confusion frustrates his efforts at attaining the larger meaning of Black history. Unable to understand the influence that foreign domination has had upon his self-knowledge and social awareness, he seems to operate in a cultural and historical vacuum, oblivious to imperialism's larger implications.

But not all Black writers are so unconsciously manipulated by the matrix of "the educational, literary, communicational, cultural, aesthetic, means" at the ruling class master robber's disposal. Others, like the Black intellectual that Langston Hughes' character Simple sees, is much more self-conscious about mouthing ideas of Black mediocrity. For Simple, this kind of Black intellectual is a firm believer in the superiority of the robbers' culture and "civilisation" over and above his own.

"It being Negro History Week," says Simple, "Joyce took me to a pay lecture to hear some Negro hysterian ... speak ... and he laid our Negro race low. He said we was misbred, misread, misled, also losing our time good-timing."

Simple's description is of the Black intellectual who feels justified in talking down to fellow Blacks. Having assimilated the racist thoughts of the ruling robber class, the "Negro hysterian" does not identify with Black people. Rather he feels a strong affinity for the supposedly superior culture of the robber class of white people.

This kind of Black intellectual is clearly estranged and alienated from the majority of Black people. And yet because he is Black, he might be judged, according to Negritude standards, as a spokesman for Black people as a whole. He certainly speaks about a subject that merits the attention of the Black community, that of Black history. But the real issue is, from what point of view does the Black intellectual write and speak about history?

✓ The Black writer who eagerly assimilates the robber's historical outlook, cultural influence, and some of the petite bourgeoisie privileges is one who the great Black American thinker and activist, Malcolm X described as a House Nigger. He is the man disinterested in seeing any fundamental changes in the existing social order, however racist, exploitative or oppressive that order may be to Black people. Instead, he is satisfied with getting a few "crumbs" off the master's plate, a couple of choice bites out of the national pie. Identifying with the white ruling class master, his culture, and his concept of history, he rejects his Black past entirely.

✓ Amilcar Cabral once again had his own way to describe House Niggers which amounted to essentially the same thing as what Malcolm X meant, only that in place of the images derived from the slave's experience, Cabral spoke specifically from the point of view of Africa's colonial experience. What was more, Cabral also saw the way in which both the House Nigger and the new petite bourgeoisie elite in Africa were self-conscious creations of a ruling class whose need is to have African and Black American spokesmen to articulate the master's class interests.

...In the effort to perpetuate exploitation, the coloniser ... provokes cultural alienation of a part of the population. As a result of such a process .. it happens that a considerable part of the population, notably the urban or peasant petite bourgeoisie assimilates the coloniser's mentality, which considers itself culturally superior to its own people and ignores or looks down upon their cultural values. 14 ~

Sometimes, the sense of cultural superiority that the colonised Black writer feels towards the Black com-

munity may be subtle and even subliminal. Yet it is a tendency all the same that can be seen in quite a bit of Black American writing that needs to be identified and unveiled for what it really is. It is all the more insidious an influence because the very educational system which many Black American writers have gone through has encouraged and enforced assimilationist attitudes. That is, the values of the dominant or ruling or "robber" class are also the ones that tend to prevail in the educational system. Thus, Black working class students have been taught about "universal values" and "objective" facts about their own past which really reflect a class perspective and self-interest that is antithetical to the genuine needs of the majority of Black people.

It was Karl Marx in his masterpiece, Capital, who observed that

✓ "...the more a ruling class is able to assimilate the most prominent men of a ruled class, the more solid and dangerous is its rule."¹⁵

In the remainder of this paper, we shall examine some of the writing - primarily novels, but also some plays and poetry - of quite a few "prominent men" and women artists of Black America. Our selection of writers is not necessarily all-inclusive, but we have tried primarily to pick those Black writers that we feel fit into the one trend of Black American literature reflective of the "House Nigger" tradition.

We have made this selection for two reasons. First, we have wanted to devote our most detailed attention to the writings of Ralph Ellison, and most specifically to his novel, Invisible Man. This is because we feel that this work, more than almost any other in Black American literary history has been wholly misconstrued and misinterpreted. Ellison has gain prominence, privilege

and prestige for a well-written work of art, and for the fact that his book is said to be one, if not the finest novel ever written by a Black American. From a Negritude or cultural nationalist point of view, Invisible Man has been endorsed as an outstanding of Black soul or the Black aesthetic. But from the analytical perspective that recognises two, not just one, social visions seen through Black American writing, it is our contention that Ellison's outlook is much more like that of the House Nigger. As such, Ellison, as we perceive him, is less of a friend and more of a foe of the majority of Blacks.

The chapter preceding our discussions of Ellison, the artist, and the Invisible Man, has been written with the intention of revealing such a trend of House Nigger literature as it has emerged through Black Americans' writing over the past century. It will allow us to see that Ellison himself has a place in an historical continuum, and should be seen as such. He is indeed part of an historical tradition of Black American writing - the tradition of the House Nigger.

The other reason for selecting the literature that follows is that we hope to rectify the widely-held misconception that literature must have a negritude orientation to serve the real interests of the Black American community. By selecting literary works of certain Black American artists whose ultimate commitment to Black liberation is questionable at best, we hope to open up wider discussions about what might constitute a new and truer criteria for determining the value of literature in terms of its genuine cultural contribution to the Black struggle against imperialism. In the last analysis, we concur with Amilcar Cabral once again when he evaluated the ultimate value of the literature of negritude.

Negritude ...is not and cannot in itself be an act of struggle against foreign domination...It is of no historical importance unless it brings not only real involvement in the struggle for independence, but also complete and absolute identification with the hopes of the mass of the people, who contest not only the foreign culture, but also the foreign domination as a whole. Otherwise, (it) is nothing more than an attempt to find short-term benefits -knowingly or unknowingly a kind of political opportunism.¹⁶

As we are aware that "political opportunism" can have its cultural counterpart, we hope that this type of inquiry will be of some value, both in terms of enlarging upon the discussion as to what is the best criteria for assessing Black literature's revolutionary potential, and in terms of unveiling the opportunists for what they are.

THE HOUSE NIGGER

IN BLACK AMERICAN LITERATURE

The enslavement of African people on Southern plantations of the United States gave rise to two separate and very different styles of living, working, and thinking among the slaves. On the one hand, some slaves worked inside the house of the white master, catering to his personal needs, and consequently enjoying certain privileges and benefits by being so close to their bosses. As the one-time slave, William Wells Brown explained in his autobiography, being so close to the slave master meant that the slave might be able to taste some of the same sweet fruit of the field workers' labour as the white man's family did.

My master had family worship, night and morning. At night, the slaves were called in to attend; but in the morning, they had to be at their work, and master did all the praying. My master and mistress were great lovers of mint julep, and every morning, a pitcherful was made, of which they all partook freely, not excepting little master William. After drinking freely all round, they would have family worship, and then breakfast. I cannot say but I loved the julep as well as any of them, during prayer I was always careful to seat myself close to the table where it stood, so as to help myself when they were busily engaged in their devotions. By the time it was over, I was about as happy as any of them.¹⁷

Obviously, a slave like Brown enjoyed being so closely identified with his master, with his mint julep, and with his morning prayers. He depicted a scene essentially of racial harmony where his master trusted him sitting next to his pitcher of liquid "prayer" and even

pouring a glass or two for himself. It was just this kind of minor pilfering which became the house nigger's privilege, and which made him feel like he was a better man (after having tasted a tiny morsel of the white master's good life) than his Black brother, who worked outside in the field.

Unlike the field nigger, Blake, the fugitive slave described in the novel, Blake by Martin R. Delany, who was out on the plantation quietly planning a "general insurrection of the slaves in every state, and the successful overthrow of slavery", Brown sounds like the last one who could ever consider staging a slave revolt. He seemed quite satisfied instead with his few creature comforts, and had no desire whatsoever to alter in any way the prevailing structure of social relations, or he and his master's class positions.

The extent to which a man like William Wells Brown assimilated the white master's outlook on Black culture and Black history is best seen in his novel, entitled Clotel or The President's Daughter, which is a book based on the story of the mulatto daughter of one of early presidents of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was a man who is said to have written the famous "Declaration of Independence", even as he had slaves - economic dependents - of his own.

The novel first and foremost brings out the fact that Brown the writer was an integrationist. He believed that the way for Black Americans to make it in that society was by dissolving all cultural, historical, and racial differences, by negating the Black experience itself, and by imbibing as many of white society's attitudes, values, and mores as possible.

This kind of racial self-hatred, implicit in the integrationist view, was revealed in Brown's assessment of Clotel's highest aspiration. It was to be "kept" by a rich white man in the same way that a white woman was. This was the epitome of acceptability and respectability for the assimilationist-minded house nigger female. Her dream, as Brown revealed it, was no different from any other house nigger slave woman.

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Indeed, most of the slave women have no higher aspiration than that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some white man. And at negro balls and parties, this class of women usually cut the greatest figure.¹⁸

Brown described this immoral standard of conduct with approval. He also seemed to feel that Clotel had made it as far as beauty standards were concerned since her complexion was almost white in colour. For him, her good fortune was that she could "pass" for white. She could therefore successfully negate the African aspect of her ancestry, her culture and her history, as long as no one found out about her other non-white half.

Living with the constant fear of discovery, with the house nigger's shame, self-doubt and anxiety of being an African, Brown portrayed one of the early "tragic mulatto" heroines whose outlook on life was hopelessly conditioned by white society. She had no appreciation of her African past and no strong sense of identity. Instead, she was stuck in a vicious cycle of negation, a historicity, and ultimately of tragedy.

Clotel's one big dream in life was to secure the love and share a life with a white man, which she believed she nearly did until the man finally left her to wed a white woman of a similar social class standing. But instead of recognising the cynicism and insincerity of the house nigger's outlook on life, Clotel resorted to suicide rather than identifying herself as Black, and appreciating the genuine values of her own people. She took her life on Washington's Long Bridge, trapped and resigned to the folly of life itself.

On came the profane and ribald crew, faster than ever, already exulting in her capture, and threatening punishment for her flight, for a moment she looked wildly and anxiously around to see if the deep foamy waters of the Potomac, and before and behind the rapidly approaching step and noisy voices of pursuers, showing how vain would be any further effort for freedom. Her resolution was taken. She clasped her hands convulsively, and raised them, as she at the same time raised her eyes towards heaven, and begged for the mercy and compassion there, which had been denied her on earth; and then, with a single bound, she vaulted over the railings of the bridge, and sunk forever beneath the waves of the river.¹⁹

If Brown worked to convey a certain semblance of dignity to her death, it is a sentiment that seemed to be ill-founded specifically because Clotel denied her own identity as that of a Black person. Her stoical decision to die certainly seemed to be based on the half-baked, house nigger notion that the only alternative to assimilation and passing as a white person was death and nothing else.

Brown's specific views of Africa and African history were even more accessible in his portrait of Clotel's mulatto brother, George, who like her, was almost white in complexion.

...he obtained a situation as porter in a large house in Manchester, where he worked during the day, and took private lessons at night. In this way he laboured for three years and was then raised to the situation of clerk. George was so white as easily to pass for a white man, and being somewhat ashamed of his African descent, he never once mentioned the fact of his being a slave. He soon became a partner in the firm that employed him and was now on the road to wealth.²⁰

It may be too much to expect a man like Brown to understand the historical and economic basis for racism in his society. But all the same, Brown did seem to feel that in passing for white, George had a better opportunity to get rich. His set of values were supremely individualistic, and utterly forgetful of his relation to the Black community. What is perhaps the worst aspect of this house nigger view is the shame and the feelings of guilt that the Black person must feel. But such feelings also serve the interests of the white ruling class since they frustrate the Black man's potential for coming to terms with his true enemy, imperialism and the class system itself. Without reflecting these important insights in his writing,

Brown was no better than the worst house nigger, and as such, a foe - not a friend - to the Black community. But he was not alone in his misconstruction and misconception of Black history. Rather, he was just one of the first Black writers in a long line which we call "house niggers".

Charles W. Chesnutt was another one who, like Brown, could not conceal his condescension towards the Black community and towards Black history in his writings. In one novel which had broad similarities to Clotel, Chesnutt portrayed another mulatto woman in The House Behind the Cedars. She too had to decide between three alternatives, either to renounce her Black heritage and identity for the chance to live with a white man; to live the difficult alternative of being a Black person in a predominantly white society, or to do as Clotel did and simply commit suicide. As a novelist there is little doubt that Chesnutt was a much more skilled writer than Brown. But in either case, the integrationist argument was strongly voiced, if only more vividly and vibrantly so in Chesnutt's work.

For Rena there was little doubt that the key to happiness was in her integrating fully into the white society. What is more, Rena's fear of being found out for who she was, a person of African descent, was only equivalent to the author's own. He in fact concealed his Black identity, passing as a white writer for many years. The anxiety which he revealed as hers no doubt was shared by the writer himself.

It had not been difficult for Rena to conform her speech, her manners, and in a measure her modes of thought, to those of people around her: but when this readjustment went beyond mere externals and

concerned the vital issues of life, the secret that oppressed her took on a more serious aspect, with tragic possibilities...under the influence of doubt and fear acting upon love, the invisible bar to happiness glowed with a lamentable flame that threatened dire disaster.²¹

The "dire disaster" that Rena feared above all was that her true identity would be discovered. Other white people around her might find out that she was really an African slave. Here in Chesnutt's writing was an impeccable portrait of a house nigger heroine who was so heartily convinced that assimilation and learning to play the part perfectly of a white woman was the key to love, happiness and the good life, that she was ready to pay any price. Her sense of self-hatred was so profound, so total, that she had lost all appreciation for her Black culture and history. Rena was the "tragic mulatto" personified.

When Rena's white lover Tryon finally did discover her unspeakable secret, that she was descendant from African slaves, her life was shattered. Her subsequent behaviour was in keeping with the house nigger tradition in that when she was left by the man she thought loved her, she never thought to look more deeply into the racist structure of social life around her. Neither did she question the kinds of social relations that put race, class, and social influence above human values like love. Instead, she seemed to submit to the prevailing racist views of the dominant white racist culture.

Rena's final decision to go and work with poor Black people seemed to be less of an act of solidarity, than a sign of simple resignation and defeat. Her action implied that now, she had finally learned her proper place which was that of a subordinate. She had adjusted

her expectations to a kind of social and economic apartheid situation, such as existed in America at that moment.

The self-denigrating desire on the part of house nigger writer to negate or "forget" his African heritage was a recurrent theme throughout this literary tradition. Chesnutt's character of Rena's brother made the blatant statement that his history was best forgot. Slavery was a social phenomenon not to be understood, analysed and attacked as part of a larger oppressive economic and cultural experience, that of imperialism. Rather the house nigger tried to pretend it never happened. As such, he did the damage of perpetuating the mystification of the social forces that caused so much heartbreak and misery in the past.

What a poor soul it is that has not some secret chamber, sacred to itself; where one can file away the things others have no right to know, as well as things that one himself would fain forget. We are under no moral obligation to inflict on others the history of our past mistakes, our wayward thoughts, our secret sins, our desperate hopes, or our heartbreaking disappointments. Still less are we bound to break out from this secret chamber the dusty record of our ancestry.²²

Rena's brother certainly felt himself the victim of something, but that something seemed to be within himself. The house nigger so completely internalised the ruling class thought that he actually believed his plight was self-inflicted and that his problems were personal. So totally had he imbibed the house nigger mentality of self-hatred that he associated his own ancestry with his own "past mistakes", "wayward thoughts", "secret sins", and "desperate hopes". He perceived his oppression at a mental level, in terms of thoughts and sins devoid of any political or historical appreciation of his predicament.

No!

This aspect of individualism and idealism are two prominent features of the house nigger mentality which will recur over and again in the literature. The critical point to be made here is that these elements of thinking run counter to appreciating either of the concrete and practical problems of history, or the collective experience of Black American people. Instead the house nigger feels overwhelmed by his despair, unworthiness, and sense of impotence. As such, he is unable to understand the economic basis of racism, slavery and imperialism. Discrimination seems unjust, but it is still accepted as a fateful and eternal fact of Black life.

With the negation of Black culture and history, the house nigger finds solice in just one thing. That is tasting a tidbit off the master's table. It is a 'privilege' only achieved by assimilating the white man's dominant social values, or better still passing as a white person. Chesnutt himself chose to conceal his racial and historical identity from his reading public. Like Rena's brother, he had the "privilege" as a pale skinned mulatto to choose between being black or white. The lawyer of Patesville in The House Behind the Cedars probably expressed Chesnutt's own view of himself best.

You have the somewhat unusual privilege, it seems of choosing between two races, and if you are a lad of spirit, as I think you are, it will not take you long to make your choice. As you have all the features of a white man, you would at least, in South Carolina, have simply to assume the place and exercise the privileges of a white man.²³

The lawyer's straight forward racist stance may seem rather callous, unsentimental and cynical. But it was the way that the house nigger thought. His concerns were individualistic, opportunistic, and unabashedly

egotical. His outlook was simply, every man for himself, without any real concern for the rest of his Black people. His idea was to "make it" within the prevailing system of things, without ever challenging the causes of racial oppression or slavery itself.

Nonetheless, there has often been an element of ambivalence in the house nigger writer who, whether he liked it or not, had historical ties to the Black majority. One way in which this tendency was manifest in Chesnutt's style was in his understanding of how education estranged a Black person from the non-literate Black masses. It was an awareness which was to recur in the writings of many of Black artists, the way that education alienated the Black from his peasant or working class background.

Chesnutt's own appreciation of the way that Rena's education had estranged her from her cultural and class past revealed a peculiar knowledge of what has since been called a colonial mentality. It allowed him to write about Rena with compassion and sympathy.

Her early training had not directed her thoughts to the darker people with whose fate her own was bound up so closely with, but rather away from them. She had been taught to despise them because they were not so white as she was, and had been slaves while she was free. Her life in her brother's home, by removing her from immediate contact with them, had given her a different point of view - one which emphasised their shortcomings, and thereby made vastly clearer to her the gulf that separated them from the new world in which she lived, so that when misfortune threw her back upon them, the reaction brought her nearer than before. Where once she had seemed able to escape from them, then were now it appeared her inalienable race. Thus, doubly equipped, she was able to view them at once with the mental eye of an outsider and the

sympathy of a sister; she could see their faults, and judge them charitably; she knew and appreciated their good qualities.²⁴

In a moment of profound insight, Chesnutt clarified certain truths about the house nigger's educational experience. An important part of it was learning to despise your one's own kind, and consequently, oneself. Being taught that you are superior to those with whom you actually share a common ancestry was part of being trained to be a subservient friend to the white master and an enemy of the Black mass.

One African female writer who imbibed the slave master's education and Christian religion, was Phillis Wheatley. So thoroughly imbued with a sense of Christian mission was she that slavery itself became for her an important vehicle for bringing "heathen" people to a place of potential redemption and salvation. As such, Miss Wheatley can hardly be surpassed as one of the greatest apologists for slavery. In her best-known poem, entitled "On Being Brought From Africa to America", her condescension towards Africa is clear. Africa was "the land of error, and Egyptian gloom", devoid of any redemptive attributes or qualities. For her, all that had value, light, and virtue began when enslaving profiteers came and tore African people from their homeland. From this perspective, she suggested that the slave trade itself was some kind of joy-ride bringing Africans into the "promised land".

In Miss Wheatley's writing can be clearly seen just how Christianity can mystify black people's consciousness, and obscure the facts of their own history, as well as the concrete, material forces involved in the slave trade. In her writing one once again hears the house nigger's notion that the African past was somehow associated with feelings of shame and humiliation. In her

work, one explicit reason for this was because Africa was "pagan". But in any case, her notions negate any kind of positive historical consciousness at all.

Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,
 Taught me benighted soul to understand
 That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too.
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye;
 "Their colour is a diabolic dye."
 Remember, Christian, Negroes, black and as Cain,
 May be refined, and join the angelic train.²⁵

Christianity had clearly played a crucial part in extinguishing any appreciable understanding of African history in the writings of Phillis Wheatley. Imperialism too had wholly mystified the Black experience. She clearly was oblivious of the fact that although her assimilation of the dominant racist culture might have made her "blessed" in the white Christian master's house, she could still, in hindsight, be perceived as a cursed for of the Black masses.

But one of the biggest foes of the Black mass was a man who has been depicted erroneously in history books since the turn of this century. He has been described as one of the greatest modern leaders that Black Americans have ever had. Booker T. Washington was a slave like every other Black person prior to the Emancipation Proclamation. But his well-known autobiography, entitled Up From Slavery portrays a kind of rags-to-riches tale of how any hardworking person can make it into the middle class. What makes his part in Black American history so important to understand is that even as Washington acted as a supposed spokesman for the Black community, he was in fact, a full fledged house nigger, acting in the service of the white ruling class.

Like Phillis Wheatley, Washington felt strongly that Africa stood for all things dark, disappointing, inferior and pagan. But what was worse, he openly espoused the most racist way of thinking, explicitly stating that the African slave trade and slavery itself were the greatest things that ever happened to Black people. Apparently a persuasive proponent of the status quo, Washington argued for stability, conservation, and resignation of any radical, rebellious, or revolutionary attitudes. The most articulate Black apologist for slavery in his day, Washington was actually worse than worthless as a representative of Black people's interests. He was their outright enemy whose political speeches were nothing less than criminal in content and intent.

this is emotional

In the following passage, he comes out clearly as a real mystifier of the truth about African history and about imperialism. He negates any notion that African cultures had any value or integrity. The good life began for Black people, suggested Washington, when they got on the slave's ships.

...when we rid ourselves of prejudices, or racial feeling, and look facts in the face, we must acknowledge that, notwithstanding cruelty moral wrong of slavery, the ten million Negroes inheriting this country, who themselves or whose ancestors went through the school of American slavery, are in a stronger and more hopeful condition, materially, intellectually, morally, and religiously, that is true of an equal number of Black people in any other portion of the globe. This is so to such an extent that Negroes in this country, who themselves or whose forefathers went through the school of slavery, are constantly returning to Africa as missionaries to enlighten those who remained in the fatherland...Ever since I have been old enough to think for myself, I have entertained the idea that notwithstanding the cruel wrongs inflicted upon him, the Black man nearly got as much out of slavery as the white man did. 26

From our point of view, Washington's words were not merely shocking or racist. They were not only ignorant observations of a man who had not even a clue of what he was talking about. But for us they reveal him for who he really was, a puppet spokesman for the white ruling class and a mouthpiece for the most reactionary views ever to openly intrude themselves on the Black community.

One feels immediately impelled to ask, where did Washington get such flagrantly racist ideas if not from his white masters. Where did he get the thought that Africans lived at a lower moral, material, intellectual or spiritual level than their American counterparts who have undergone centuries of slavery and severe social oppression. Where, of course, but from his insidious white masters, who decided that a Black "spokesman" was required right at a moment when important economic and social changes were taking place in the country. The white master was at the time faced with the problem of a potentially militant new Black proletariat. The Emancipation Proclamation had been announced and Blacks were departing swiftly from the dismantled southern slave plantations for the North. As such, they posed an explosive threat to the smooth-flowing operation and stability of capitalism. If this new emerging class of Black workers were to get enlightened in the ideas that they would really need to make revolutionary changes in the society, then the ruling class would truly be in trouble. So the class quickly created a trade school called Tuskegee to pose as an alternative education to one which could really educate and enlighten Black workers to the nature of Black oppression. They created their own Black administrator for it too. They fed Washington with their ideas and values, giving him certain privileges and power so that he would propagandise the Black community with the house nigger's attitudes.

For instance, saying things like "the Black man nearly got as much ^{surely} slavery as the white man did" was obviously absurd since the Black man was never even free to sell his own sweat and labour under slavery. They were simply ~~he gave away~~ stolen from him by the white slave master. And to imply that the Black man, woman, and child's compensation came in the form of feeling morally and mentally superior to Africans was not simply a vicious lie. It was also mystifying and condescending. His words were openly racist and ignorant about African people as a whole.

What was worse about a man like Washington, beyond his being an outright apologist for imperialism and slavery was that he was an outright liar as well. His portrait of the slave community hearing the news of its emancipation was a flagrant untruth.

Was it any wonder that within a few hours the wild rejoicing ceased and a feeling of deep gloom seemed to pervade the slave quarters? To some it seemed that, now that they were in actual possession of it, freedom was a more serious thing than they had expected to find it... Besides, deep down in their hearts there was a strange and peculiar attachment to "old Master" and "old Missus", and to their children which they found hard to think of breaking off.²⁷

Washington never suggested that emancipation itself was incomplete, that the proclamation was a mere political gesture or just a piece of paper. It did not give the ex-slave an education or specialised skills, land, economic or political power. Nor did it provide even a little bit of money with which to start off a new life. If there was a small grain of truth in what he said

about some feeling of "deep gloom" that the ex-slave had, it must have had more to do with the concrete and practical inadequacies of "emancipation", than with former slaves wishing to remain as they were.

In line with the "logic" of the house nigger, Washington never suggested that the ex-slave's "wild rejoicing" could have come from his feeling of triumph, after having struggled, fought, resisted and finally won a serious war against racist and imperialist oppression. Instead, he talked about strange notions like the slave's "peculiar attachment" to his beloved master, the attachment not meant to suggest the slave had been stuck with an oppressive bond under slavery. Instead, he meant that Blacks had felt an emotion of love and devotion for their slave masters.

But the best statement of B.T. Washington's house nigger mentality is to be found in his best-known "Atlanta Exposition Address".

It was in this speech that he came out even more explicitly as an arch-conservative and an enemy of Black working people. It was here, more clearly than anywhere else that he counselled Blacks to stay down low and be grateful that the factory owner was now going to walk over them. It was a speech which was heralded as his greatest success.

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly, and the progress in enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forces. No race that has any thing to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracised. It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it

is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercises of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity ^{to earn} a dollar in an opera house. ²⁸

Washington mouthed the motives of enlightened capitalist factory owners when he said that "no race that had anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracised." For this was the very crux of the Emancipation Proclamation itself: the fact that Blacks could now make a larger contribution "to the markets and the capitalists" as labourers and wage slaves in the northern factories than as penniless slave peasants still bound to the land. But to do away with all the "questions of social equality" in one grand sweep was to stretch his point a bit too far. His message to Black people was not that they merely acquiesce and adjust to the prevailing economic system. It was that they totally submerge any sense of integrity or identity to the dominant racist system, submitting to any and every dictum, doctrine and directive of the white ruling class.

If Booker T. Washington fooled many people during his heyday into believing that he actually represented the interests of the majority of Black American people, then there was at least one Black man who would not be deceived. Dr. W.E.B. DuBois saw through Washington's whole ruse of lying to Black people, and worked hard to expose Booker T. for the flagrant flagilater of Black self-interests that he was.

In Dr. DuBois' collection of essays, Souls of Black Folks, he stated explicitly how "Mr. Washington's programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro race". Placing Booker T. within an historical context, DuBois could clearly see that the so-called Negro leader was really "a compromiser" who did not represent the Black majority.

Booker T. Washington arose as essentially the leader not of one race but of two, a compromiser between the South, the North, and the Negro. Naturally the Negroes resented at first bitterly, signs of compromise which surrendered their civil and political rights.²⁹

If others mistook Washington as someone in the vanguard of the Black community, DuBois did not. Instead of being a new wave kind of thinker DuBois saw that, "Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission." In the final analysis, DuBois the brilliant historian and sociologist understood that, Booker T. was no better than a capital traitor to Black people. He was in essence, a house nigger.

The Black community, as Dr. DuBois saw it, was in need of effective leadership, But it needed men and women who would claim, "First, political power; second, insistence on civil rights; third, higher education of Negro youth."¹⁵ But these were just the things that Washington was asking Black people to forget while they came to "cooperate" peacefully with the white ruling class in both the South and the North.

DuBois, with his acute sense of timing and historical awareness, found the policy and programme of Washington wholly untenable and despicable. But in 1903 when he wrote his tract against Washington, he too was a man who still suffered from what he personally would describe as "double consciousness".

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is, a sort of seventh son, both with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in the American world - a world which

yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of looking at one's self through the eye of others, of measuring one's self by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength keeps it from being torn asunder.³⁰

At this time, DuBois still perceived the class conflict at the level of ideas. He thought in Negritude terms of American versus Negro.

He did not yet have a clear understanding of the role that imperialism had played either in his own experience or in Black history. As such, he could only express his alienation as a mulatto, men, who had been schooled within the white master's educational and class system, except in terms of "double consciousness". He is feeling amounted to almost the same sort of mental fragmentation suffered by Baako in Ayi Kwei Armah's novel, Fragments.

But DuBois was in a perpetual process of change and revision of thought, ever striving to understand the nature of the Black historical experience and his role as a conscious and competent Black person. The development of a revolutionary field nigger can clearly be traced in the detailed writings of Dr. DuBois. He began as an integrationist and assimilationist, but he moved progressively towards a clearer knowledge of the social, economic and historical forces operative in society. This thesis shall not go into this kind of detail, tracing that development of the field nigger DuBois. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that he, in the early years, was very much a house nigger, (albeit an enlightened one), but one who broke out and

went far beyond many of the revolutionary Black writers who are working even today.

One reflection of his house nigger mentality was his first feelings of superiority towards the Black community. It was a facet of his thought that is evidenced in his early idea of "the talented ten". This was the elitist view that only an exclusive few of educated Black men and women could, by virtue of their integration into the white society, be effective representatives and spokesmen for an otherwise ill-equipped Black majority.

Ironically, it was Chesnutt who first saw through DuBois' early guise of liberality and exposed him as the house nigger that he was then. In one of his better-known short stories entitled "The Web of Circumstance", Chesnutt characterises those house niggers who are effective at aping the white master's ways, and who set themselves above and apart from the Black majority.

"The Blue Veins (said that their) purpose was to establish and maintain correct social standards among a people whose social condition presented almost unlimited room for improvement. By accident, combined with some natural affinity, the society consisted of individuals who were, generally speaking, more white than black.³¹

Chesnutt's sweeping satirical observations were not far from the way that the early DuBois saw himself and a few Black intellectuals. His distance from the Black community was definite and pronounced, a point which might partially explain his dislike for a man like Marcus Garvey. For unlike himself, Garvey was able to galvanise the entire Black community around his pragmatic programme of going back to Africa. DuBois, on the

other hand, had a much more limited audience and appeal, which was inevitable in so far as he addressed himself primarily to other educated Black people. Many of them were members with him in the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, an integrationist group, whose main appeal was to an emerging Black middle class.

The majority of Black Americans at the time were largely illiterate; but in the "talented ten" fashion, DuBois did not adequately appreciate the impact of imperialism on either their history or their culture. As such, Black culture was invisible to him as he was still seeing out of the "double consciousness" of the house nigger.

But even as an integrationist, DuBois had a progressive edge and was able to see the question of Black and non-white people's liberation in global and centennial terms. One of his most often quoted statements relates to his prophesy for the twentieth century which still holds true, even today.

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line, the question as to how far differences of races - which show themselves chiefly in the colour of the skin and the texture of the hair - will hereafter be made the basis of denying over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilisation.³²

The fact that DuBois was already thinking in international and historical terms meant that his development into a much more progressive person was almost inevitable. From an observation such as this, it is clear that he was deeply involved in an intellectual and social struggle to understand the concrete forces involved in the formation of racist behaviour and oppression in the global community.

Towards the end of his life, DuBois would deliberately add a "Retrospect" to Souls of Black Folk, indicating the extent to which he had revised his thought, and how far he had gone into the field nigger camp. The earlier attitude of condescension was transformed into a deeper feeling of humility and self-awareness. One cannot help but feel that even his "two warring selves" were reconciled within a complete and cohesive social vision of a revolutionary struggle.

Perhaps I might end this retrospect simply by saying: I still think today as yesterday that the colour line is a great problem of this century. But today I see more clearly than yesterday that at back of the problem of race and colour, lies a greater problem which both obscures and implements it: and that is the fact that so many civilised persons are willing to live in comfort even if the price of this poverty, ignorance, and disease of the majority of their fellowmen; that to maintain this privilege men have waged war until today war tends to become universal and continuous, and the excuse for this war continues largely to be colour and race.³³

Fifty years after DuBois had first assembled the essays included in Souls of Black Folk, he no longer told about America versus "Negro". Instead he wrote about privilege versus poverty. The fundamental issue was still race and colour, but now he understood that they cannot be clearly understood outside the context of seeing class privilege and comfort. Previously, DuBois had been one of those who was "willing to live in comfort" himself, identifying his own self-interests with "so many civilised persons" who were relatively close to the master class. But as he came to understand the role of imperialism and its relationship to Black people's history and culture, his attitudes radically changed.

Not all of his contemporaries and followers made such progressive changes in their outlook on the Black community or in their character as did DuBois. Quite a few were content to "make it" into the "talented ten". In the 1920's especially, there were quite a few idealists, integrationists, and house niggers writing and speaking to, at and occasionally, for the Black community. Subsequently, they have been seen as a cultural movement called the Harlem Renaissance. DuBois himself certainly played a part in its formation, as a leading intellectual and catalyst for progressive Black thought. Marcus Garvey, (who addressed himself directly to the Black mass) also played an essential role in inspiring Black initiatives, self-awareness, and historical consciousness. He appealed primarily to the disgruntled Black masses who either had migrated from the South to the North in search of jobs, or had recently returned from the First World War to a racist America.

The Black community was certainly aroused in the 1920's, if, for no other reason than the intense racial oppression experienced during that post-war period. But there also had now emerged a new class of Black proletariat who were developing a different kind of political and social awareness.

It is questionable whether the Harlem renaissance writers or Black poets like Claude McKay really voiced the vital concerns of the Black majority. Their writing often reflected assimilationist views, meaning they were not necessarily the best friends of Black working people.

The Caribbean poet, Claude McKay completed much of his major writing just prior to what is generally termed the Harlem Renaissance, although his best know poem, entitled "If We Must Die", is often thought of as a classic piece of poetry from that period. The fact that no less an imperial leader than Winston Churchill could quote the poem just prior to his country's entry into the Second World War, suggests that the poem speaks in universal and lofty tones, not in language that might be used by black revolutionaries specifically. The poem was emotional and evocative, but it did not reflect any specific aspect of the black historical experience. Instead, it was angry and quite idealistic.

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
 Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
 While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
 Making their Mock out of our accursed lot.
 If we must die, O let us nobly die,
 So that our precious blood may not be shed
 In vain; then even the monsters we defy
 Shall be constrained to honour us though dead.
 And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow.

What though before us lies the open?
 Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
 Pressed to the wall, dying but fighting back.³⁴

The utter stoicism and fatalistic brand of dignity displayed in McKay's "masterpiece" was not terribly different from the sort articulated by Booker T. Washington, Both espoused the cause of dying nobly - Washington in the name of factory-life's fulfillment and the (once) almighty American dollar, McKay for who knows what? Both had an idea that the Black community was the "accursed lot" which should be grateful to serve a worthy ruling class and, if need be, even die on its behalf. Both did their own unique part in mystifying the misery of the Black past, one as an idealist, the other as an overt spokesman of the robber class.

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Gosh!
 He didn't suggest about!
 He suggested honor in the
 face of death! Don't
 misunderstand
 and
 victims

Of this poem, for instance, one could well ask who was "the common foe"? What was McKay suggesting that "we must die" for? McKay the avowed idealist never meant to be concrete or specific. But in taking such an historical view communal experience in general he does just as much to obscure the nature of the Black struggle and the enemy as Booker T. ever did.

In his autobiography, entitled A Long Way From Home, McKay was still more explicitly an integrationist. He was emotionally aroused and filled with self-pity as he saw with DeBois' sort of "double consciousness".

Poor, painful black face, intruding into the holy places of the whites. How like a spectre you haunt the pale devils. Always at their elbow, always peering through the window, giving them no rest, no peace. How they burn up their energies trying to keep you out. How apologetic and uneasy they are - yes, even the best of them, poor devils - when you force an entrancy, Blackface, facetiously, incorrigibly, smiling or disturbingly composed. Shock them out of their complacency, Blackface, great, unappeasable ghost of Western civilisation.³⁵

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What is so disappointing about a man like McKay is that his anger and militancy were sorely misplaced. He mockingly made angry fun of "Blackface", the ardent integrationist who was unwelcome within the white community. Yet he almost seemed to give advise as one who had already gotten in and found white people uncomfortable in his presence. He seemed in a sense to speak as the early DuBois, as one whose perception was "always looking at one's self through the eye of others". It was only that, instead of the war between the "Negro" and the "American", McKay's, war was between the painful Black face and the entirety of "Western civilisation". Reading McKay, one feels his

No!
 He is implicating himself
 as having been a
 colonizer himself, having
 involved himself in the
 22

frustration, fiery futility, and facetiousness, but it all seemed to be caused by his desire to fit in more effectively into the white master's house, not to goad anyone into challenging the racist class system itself.

These same sentiments, of the indignant integrationist who is not allowed to taste a bit off the master's table, was also evident in McKay's other poetry. In his poem, "The White House", he voiced a kind of individualism that implied a disregard for the interests of the Black community. His personal discontent might drive him to defy the law. But what McKay made laudable here was his "superhuman power" that allowed him to be absolutely law-abiding. For all his pent-up emotions, he would never really shake up the racist system.

Your door is shut against my tightened face,
 And I am sharp as steel with discontent;
 But I possess the courage and the grace
 To bear my anger proudly and unbent.
 The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet;
 A chafing savage, down the decent street;
 And passion rends my vitals as I pass,
 where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.
 Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,
 I find in it the superhuman power
 To hold me to the letter of your law.
 Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate
 Against the potent poison of your hate.³⁶

Into the furnace let me go alone;
 Stay you without in terror of the heat.
 I will go naked in - for thus tis sweet -
 I will not quiver in the frailest bone.
 You will not note a flicker of defeat;
 My heart shall tremble not its fate to meet.
 My mouth give utterance to any moan
 The yawning oven spits forth fiery spears;
 Red aspish tongues shout wordlessly my name.
 Desire destroys, consumes my mortal fears,
 Transforming me into a shape of flame.
 I will come out, back to your world of tears,
 A stronger soul within a finer frame.³⁷

As if he was Shadrack, Meshack or Abednigo, McKay conveyed a metaphysical concept of his hellish enemy. "You" was undefined, though from what we have already read, it would seem certain he referred to white society with its "world of tears". Again, he projected a one dimensional and static view, such that just one world and one "fate" seemed to await the Black American. What is more, suffering, for him, was experienced by the individual not the community. Individual exposure and vulnerability were actually admirable traits in his mind. He seemed to see them as baptismal experience. The assimilating process was, in a sense, a purifying phenomenon. ~~NOY~~

✓ In McKay's autobiography there was one essential point to that which was fundamental in the black historical experience and Black culture. It was explained when he referred to the Black race in terms of its "group soul".

Well, whatever the white folks do and say, the Negro race will finally have to face the need to save itself. The whites have done the Blacks some great wrongs, but also they have done some good. They have brought to them the benefits of modern civilisation. They can still do a lot more, but one thing they cannot do: They cannot give Negroes the gift of a soul - a group soul.³⁸

In sweeping generalities McKay mentioned "some great wrongs" which might have been a reference to the historical facts of African slavery, colonialism and racism. Or it might have reference to specific segregationist practices which he found poetically so detestable. Either way, it seems clear that he was unprepared to enlighten us fully factually on the plight of the "Negro race", leave alone on the nature of imperialism. Like a Washington or a Wheatley, he

he seemed adamant about "the benefits of modern civilization". But he failed to give us clearcut ideas of what were the real "benefits", or what was the "civilization". Whatever they were, he was eager for more.

But equally mystifying is the meaning of McKay's term "group soul" which he felt free to discuss as a great asset of Black people. But he did not clarify either its constituent parts, its historical derivation or its virtuosity. In the final analysis, McKay was one of the finest mystifiers of the house nigger sort.

Another Black American poet who followed close on the heels of Claude McKay was Countee Cullen, an artist considered by many to be the most important poet of the entire Harlem Renaissance period. His first book of verse, entitled Color came out in 1925 and served to establish his name as a poet of real merit, comparable only to lyric giants like John Keats, to whom he incidentally dedicated one of his poems, "Apostle of Beauty".

Yet for all his style, grace and lyricism, Cullen was more comparable to Claude McKay when it comes to analysing his art in relation to the Black community. In fact, he was no less a mystifier of the Black experience than his predecessor. Rather he was more so insofar as for him, history ultimately evaporated in his metaphysical system. It lacked substance and was without importance, since as an idealist who patterned his perceptions after the mystics of the east, the concrete practicalities of the past, and the present were finally forgotten. Cullen's poem "Nothing Endures" clearly conveyed the notion that history itself got gracefully negated in Cullen's cosmological and poetic presentation.

Nothing endures,
 Not even love,
 Though the warm heart purrs
 of the length thereof.

Though beauty wax,
 Yet shall it wane;
 Time lays a tax
 On the subtlest brain.

Let the blood riot,
 Give it its will;
 It shall grow quiet,
 It shall grow still.

Nirvana gapes
 For all things given;
 Nothing escapes.
 Love not even.³⁹

By his sheer master of metre, melodic phrase, and lyric language, Cullen stood out above all the Harlem Renaissance poets as one of the most artistic and literary. But he also revealed himself as one more house nigger, no matter how finely atuned and refined his poetry was. This is true insofar as Cullen seemed to feel ⁽¹⁾he could dispense with Black history all together, and write poetry from the most lofty and ahistorical position. In "Nothing Endures" all historical experience was swallowed up in one gulp leaving Nirvana only "gaping." Far beyond the point of Christian endurance and pacifism, Cullen even dispensed with the value of discussing even "the human condition." Rather ⁽²⁾he was resigned to his fate, to a static and unchanging condition. From this positin there was certainly no point whatsoever in struggling against exploitation or oppression of any form. And as such, imperialism, and racism were conveniently cast off as serious concerns, even as his "riotous blood" which he claimed "shall grow quiet. It shall grow still"

Cullen's quietism was part and parcel of his cyclical vision (his individualism and his personalism, all of which were revealed in the following portion of his poem, "Soonest."

What I am saying now was said before,
 And countless centuries from now again,
 Some poet warped with bitterness and pain,
 will brew like words hoping to salve his sore. ^{cent.} 40

Typical to the house nigger mentality, Cullen could not look at time in any other terms than of stasis and repetition. No progress was to be achieved, not even by the sensitive Black artist. Instead, he used his words to "salve his sore." But clearly, the sore need not have its source in history or in the particularity of the Black experience. Instead, it was felt by any poet who would be "warped with bitterness and pain," not by racism or the oppression experienced by a working person.

(C) Cullen was one of the first Black artists of the twentieth century to feel he had arrived at the point where he need not discuss or treat the topic of racism and Black oppression at all. He qualifies as one of the new breed of "American Negro" writers who universalised and utterly idealised all historical particularities. Herbert Hill in his anthology of "new breed" Black literature, Soon, One Morning, appreciated this ahistorical approach in this introduction.

The greater part of contemporary American Negro writing is characterised by a determination to break through the limits of racial parochialism into the whole range of modern writer's preoccupations. Though the Negro writers in a variety of ways have abandoned the literature of simple and unrelieved protest, and have made the creative act their first consideration. They continue to confront American society as Negroes, but increas-

without the conflict between social and literary aspirations that marked the work of Negro authors in the past. Now most often they use the concepts of "Negro" and "race" as universal symbols in a new concern with the problems of individual consciousness, identity, and alienation.⁴¹

Now, according to Hill, the concrete experiences of both in the present and in the past, was "parochial" and passe as far as being serious subject matter and stuff of the new Black American writing. "Race" was now seen as merely a "universal symbol" in the more individualistic exploration of themes such as "identity and alienation." But in just this way, the house nigger artist intends to taste the treats of literary success and acceptability in white ruling class literary circles. But it is in this way also, that he leaves the majority of the Black community out of his writings. The new breed of house nigger writing is consciously committed to exploring their own individual thoughts and feelings only, and not the concerns of the Black community. What is more, the "first consideration" of the house nigger writer is spelled out by Hill explicitly as simply art for its own sake, and not art in service to the Black community. "The creative act" is what counts now, not people's culture or history. "The greater part of contemporary American Negro writing" therefore is antithetical to communicating the concerns of the Black majority.

ntee Cullen was one of the first of this supposedly style of "American Negro writing." In fact, the difference between Cullen and earlier house nigger writers is essentially a formal distinction and not a difference of content. The house niggers before him were

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153
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② also fateful and cynical about life and change. His predecessors also negated Black history and the creative dimensions of black American culture. They also treated the themes of identity and alienation, the latter theme which Dr. DuBois described as "double consciousness." But few before him had done so with such style or such introversion as Cullen. Few had been able, example, to write of their personal experiences in the privileged terms of silk and gold.

I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth.
 And laid them away in a box of gold;
 Where long will cling the lips of the moth,
 I have wrapped my dreams in silken cloth;
 I hide no hate; I am not even wroth
 Who found earth's breath so keen and cold;
 I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth,
 An laid them away in a box of gold.⁴²

Obviously, "For a Poet" was not for the larger Black community. And obviously too Cullen's "first consideration" in writing such a poem had to be art for art's sake, "the creative act" as it were, rather than art expressive of a social commitment and progressive, public concern.

Ironically, one of Cullen's most frequently quoted poems is about Africa, entitled "Heritage." This might seem to be a contradiction of all we have said about the writer insofar as he is treating an important dimension of Black American history as the central theme of this lengthy poem. But on close examination, one will see that, in fact, Cullen had assimilated the master's images of the continent, much the same way that Phillis Wheatley had. He saw it in static, stereotyped, and uncivilised terms.

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 153
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What is Africa to me:
 Copper sun or scarlet sea;
 Jungle star or jungle track,
 Strong bronzed men,, or regal Black
 Women from whose loin I sprang
 When birds of Eden sang?
 One three centuries removed
 from the scenes his fathers loved
 Spicy grove cinnamon tree,
 What is Africa to me

.....

Africa? A Book one thumbs
 Listlessly, till slumber comes.
 Unremembered are her bats
 Circling throughout the night...

.....

Quaint, outlandish heathen gods
 Black men fashion out of rods,
 Clay need brittle bits of stone
 In a likeness like their own,
 My conversion came high priced;
 I belong to Jesus Christ,...
 Heathen gods are naught to me...⁴³

Echoes of Wheatley come through in the convert Cullen's understanding of Africa, wherein his ancestors were governed by "quaint, outlandish heathen gods" and from which he was saved. If slavery was the "high price" he had to pay for his own conversion to Christianity, then it still seemed as if it was worth it to him. Africa itself apparently had no history, according to Cullen who suggested that its content could fill one book, at best. But if it did, he personally would not read it eagerly, but rather "listlessly". Cullen seemed convinced, as his elite education had taught him, that Africa was a place where nothing really memorable took place. It was all "unremembered" and as such, not valued for very much, and clearly not a place that Cullen wished to identify with.

Another Harlem Renaissance poet, playwright and novelist is Langston Hughes, whose understanding of his

African heritage was radically different from that of Cullen's. Hughes made a mighty identification with the continent, and even drew a well-defined connection between his experience as an African as well as a Black American. He did so in terms of the rivers that ran through both continents. In his well-known poem, "I've known rivers," there is none of the condescension consistent in the writings of Cullen.

I've known rivers
 I've known rivers ancient as the world and older
 than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young
 I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to
 sleep
 I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe
 Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've
 seen its muddy
 bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers,
 Ancient, dusky rivers
 My soul has grown deep like the rivers.⁴⁴

(2) In contrast to Cullen's negation of African history and his relationship with it, Hughes' appreciation for the continent was poignantly expressed through the image of rivers. Clearly, a member of that unspoken minority which Herbert Hill did not write about, Hughes did not relinquish his racial awareness to mere abstraction. Rather, rivers were at once symbols of the continuity of Hughes' own experience as an African and as Black American. At the same time, they were specific places on two separate continents. As an important "Negro" writer of not just the twenties, but the thirties, forties, fifties, and sixties as well, Hughes made an immense contribution to American negritude. And he did so with humour, profound insight, and self-awareness.

Among the many insights that Hughes revealed in his lifetime of writing was the tragic sacrifices that the house nigger had to make if he really were to succeed in integrating into the white master's society. In one of his best known short stories, entitled "Passing", Hughes made it clear that the house nigger, who tasted the titbits from the white man's table and thought the privileges were worth the price, was a man who had lost both his pride of history, and his place in the Black community. He also could easily lose any sense of honesty, and familial love. In Jack's letter home to his Black mother, the privileges he gets for passing seemed at first to compensate for the price.

Like "the majority of American Negro writers" who do not feel the need, according to Hill, of talking about race in any real sense anymore, Jack was satisfied to be an integrationist. "Since I've made up my mind," he wrote, "to live in the white world, and have found my place in it (a good place), why think about race any more; I'm glad I don't have to, I know that much." But after seeing and ignoring his Black mother on the street the night before as he walked with his white fiancée, he wrote to apologise.

But, Man, I felt mighty bad about last night. The first time we'd met in public that way. That's the kind of thing that makes passing hard, having to deny your own family, when you see them.⁴⁵

As a mulatto himself, Hughes must have known the experience of passing for white. At the intellectual and cultural level, the house nigger himself is always aspiring to pass as a white man in terms of his having assimilated the dominant white culture. Hughes was obviously a writer who achieved success in white literary circles, though even as a young man, he displayed great distaste and ambivalence for the racist

world of white America. His dropping out of the acclaimed Columbia University after only one year was suggestive of his displeasure with the dominant and implicitly racist education system. Even so, there was a sense in which Hughes was not absolutely clear on the social and economic forces that operated in and through Black American history and culture. If this were not so, he more than likely would not have asked the well-known question which eventually led to Lorraine Hansberry writing a play which was to stay on Broadway for quite some time.

What happens to a dream deferred?
 Does it dry up
 Like a raisin in the sun?
 Or fester like a sore -
 And then run?
 Does it stink like rotten meat?
 Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?⁴⁶

The "dream deferred" was unlikely to be anything other than the one called "American Dream". It was the prevailing American myth that everyone being equal, everyone had a chance to make it in the society, of rising "from rags to riches." It was a dream that had been assimilated by every good house nigger. It meant individual, as opposed to communal achievement, success, and happiness. And was the dream that inspired Booker T. Washington to give his "Atlanta Compromise" speech; It was also the dream that led W.E.B. DuBois to work so arduously with the NAACP. Hughes himself was much more of a realist and a field nigger than Booker T., and was somewhat closer in his thinking to the older DuBois. This would seem to be the case because Hughes did at least pose the possibility that the dream might very well "explode."

Lorraine Hansberry, on the other hand, seems to fall into line behind Countee Cullen as one of the new "majority of American Negro" writers that Hill described. In her Broadway play, the title of which she took from the Hughes poem, "A Raisin in the Sun," the dream was not "American," and certainly not African. Rather, it was "human", in her mind. Drawing directly from real-life dilemmas faced by Black American working people, she seemed to find the theme of race itself a "parochialism" and she proceeded to universalise the implications of Black people's social problems. In so doing, she played the part of the house nigger in that in her supposed transcendence of racial and class questions, she served to obscure the social, economic and historical forces that impinged upon the larger part of the Black community.

Her play was all about a very tangible trouble suffered by most black working people, the problem of poverty. But the way in which she portrayed it suggests that her characters had all assimilated the individualistic values of the dominant class in society. It is the one which esteemed competition over cooperation, and encouraged the attitude of every man for himself.

Faced with the facts of economic oppression, the Younger family had come into a small sum of money when Walter Younger died, leaving a ten thousand dollar life insurance policy to his wife. The conflict in the play revolved around the fact that every family member competed for the largest share. None considered the family first, before or above his own personal self interest. Instead, each child was out to grab as much of the policy payment as he or she could. Everyone had the ambition to get rich quickly.

Hansberry herself seemed quite cynical about the values conveyed through her characters, such as the rugged individualism, selfishness, and greed. Yet she never actually challenged the prevailing racist social order which reinforced this type of "robber" mentality. On the contrary, she did not ever suggest that there was another approach to living. Instead, greed and selfishness were, to her mind, elements of "human nature." Her outlook was cynical, fatalistic and static, and as such, her writing provides no real service at all to the Black community. Instead, she seemed to have assimilated the social values of the prevailing social system which, of necessity, was one dimensional. As such, she saw few, if any, possibilities, for social change, and was consequently quite cynical.

A later play entitled, The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window, also reveals Miss Hansberry's disillusionment with the prevailing political and social system. It too was about the inability to change so-called "human nature." Sidney was a white Jewish liberal who, having become disenchanted with the hypocrisy and corruption of electoral politics and politicians, had decided to give up social involvement altogether. In a conversation with his Black American friend David, he bitterly complained about how he felt that all political activity was futile.

Look, I'm not a neophyte. You wanna see my scrap book? Since I was eighteen I've belonged to every committee to save, to abolish, prohibit, preserve, reserve, and conserve that ever was. And the result ...is that the mere thought of a "movement" to do anything chills my bones. I simply can no longer bear the spectacle of the hatchery of power-driven insurgents trying at all costs to gain control of the refreshment committee.⁴⁷

Sidney's reactionary outlook was steeped in self-righteousness and fatalism. He sounded more like someone who took to public involvement when it was the popular and proper thing to do, but never had any serious commitment or social analysis. As such, his "committee" work never had much conviction or content, which was why he could relinquish playing his part. For example, when he suggested that the pursuit of power and gaining social control was inevitably corrupting, he failed to see the stakes that were involved. His anarchism and antipathy for social movements suggested that positive change and organised affirmative action programmes were all absurd and meaningless. In fact, Sidney stated explicitly that life itself was "absurd." But this kind of cynical individualism is antithetical to the real needs of the Black community. His position, that political involvement was passe may sound chic and sophisticated; but it ultimately reflected an outlook of an enemy of the majority of Black people who need to gain tangible control over their lives.

Sidney's friend David was an example of a type of Black American who felt the need to gain control over his life, but whose subjective feelings of victimisation and oppression were so strong that he seemed overwhelmed by his sense of alienation and self-pity. Unlike Sidney, David had an acute awareness of history, especially the history of African slavery. But for David, slavery seemed to be a symbol for a so-called universal dilemma, the crisis of identity and alienation. He did not display an awareness of slavery as one critical component of a larger, more concrete and comprehensive economic system. Instead, he interpreted his feeling of victimisation in very fateful, escapist and personal terms.

A commodity...Don't you understand Sidney?...Man, like I am spawned from commodities...and their purchasers. Don't you know this? I am running from being a commodity. How do you think I got the colour I am, Sidney? Haven't you ever thought about it? I got this colour from my grandmother being used as a commodity, man. The buying and the selling in this country began with me. Jesus, help me.⁴⁸.

At one level, David displayed a powerful perception of the kind of crass, cruel and inhuman conditions that Black people have historically suffered at the hands of the white slaver, master, and robber class. But, at another level, he did not seem to understand the dynamics of change as they were manifest in the past, or as they operate now. He seemed to have no real pride in his past or in remembering his history. Rather, his grandmother's enslavement was something of which he seemed ashamed. As such, his kind of historical consciousness made him want to run away and hide. It was ultimately the kind of crippled consciousness that submitted to the feelings of self-torture and self-pity. His fearful escapism, constituting no threat to the system made him no more than a house slave.

In David, Miss Hansberry exposed the alienation, isolation of the house nigger at a number of levels, including that of his sexuality. But again, the social source of David's alienation was obscured by the personal interpretation of his problems. He suffered because he was a homosexual, said Sidney, not because he was from the Black working class and as such, was alienated from the means of production. The white liberal Sidney never explained that as a Black "wage slave", David had only his labour to sell to stay alive.

David, you have now written fourteen plays about not caring, about the isolation of the soul of man, the alienation of the human spirit, the desolation of all love, all possible communication. When what you really want to say is that you are ravaged by a society that will not sanctify your particular sexuality.⁴⁹

If David had been misunderstood and mishandled by the dominant racist society, then Sidney's assessment of David was hardly a radical departure from what he received from other well-meaning whites. His problem was not so much that he was alienated with a racist, mystifying social system, according to Brustein. Rather, David's plight was much more personal. It was sexual, said Sidney, who saw David's homosexuality, not as an effect, rather as the cause of his anxieties and his isolation.

Hansberry hardly concealed the fact that David's character was comparable to one real life Black American literary personality. In fact, the similarities between David and the Black American writer James Baldwin were numerous. Like David, Baldwin was a prolific and masterful artist who consistently developed the themes of "the alienation of the human spirit, the desolation of all love, all possible communication" in both his fiction and his non-fiction. Also like David, Baldwin indulged in a "particular sexuality," that of homosexuality, and wrote at length about it.

The similarities of both Baldwin's and David's views, and the degree to which each had assimilated the dominant culture's values exposed the house nigger mentality. Both perceived black people's historical experience of slavery in abstract, idealistic and symbolic terms. In so doing, the concrete and historical

specificity of African slavery, was lost in a symbol. As such, both obscured the real economic and social forces that operated and still operate in Black American society.

Both were individualistic in their view, and terribly personal in their choice of literary themes. But even what is more relevant to our discussion is the fact that both spent much of their literary careers "running away from being a commodity," as Miss Hansberry wrote. Both refused to rise up and resist the exploitative influences in their lives. Resigned and not resistant to the present set of social, class, and racist forces that intruded in every aspect of black American life, they were both escapists, more concerned with running than with standing up and fighting. Definitely discontent with the white racist society in the States, both Baldwin and David were incapable of either challenging or confronting the racist system that had historically used both Africans and other working people into human commodities.

From the days of writing his first book, Go Tell it on the Mountain, (which he wrote while living in exile in Paris in the fifties) all through his later novels, essays, and autobiographical writing, James Baldwin consistently conveyed some of the most compelling and creative insights that a Black American writer has committed to paper, either before or since him. But the one overwhelming and unfortunate limitation in his work has always been his tendency to mystify, idealise, and universalise the problems of Black people. Though one of the most gifted of all Black American artists, he tops the list of Hill's new "majority of American Negro" writers for his tendency to treat the particularities of the black historical experience in symbolic terms.

For instance, in one of his collection of essays, entitled The Fire Next Time, Baldwin described the problem of Black oppression in terms of a universal quest for love.

Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live with. I use the word "love" here merely in the personal sense, but as a state of being, or a state of grace - not in the infantile American sense of being made happy, but in the touch and universal sense of quest and daring and growth. And I submit, then that the racial tensions that menace Americans today have little to do with real antipathy - on the contrary, indeed - and are involved only symbolically with colour.⁵⁰

Baldwin had become a minister in Harlem when he was a mere fourteen years old. But, he gave up the Christian "calling" before he was twenty to take up writing as a full-time occupation. Nonetheless, one cannot fail to note the religiousity, mysticism, and idealism in his writing, all of which leaves much to be desired as far as his being able to clarify in concrete terms the nature of the Black American oppression. For example, to explicitly state that racial tensions in America were not really about race, but rather about our fear of loving, is to tell us almost nothing about any of the Black community's problems in clear cut terms. On the contrary, one comment like this makes Baldwin look like a first class house nigger, and little else. In fact, he seemed to talk nonsense by saying that love is not about "being made happy," but about "quest and daring." Then, to dispense with "racial tensions" in such grand and lofty generalisations was to make history wholly forgettable. It was a way of negating both the plights and the potential of Black people for bringing about genuine social change.

Baldwin's writings were, in fact, filled with this sort of esoteric and emotional language. All were meant to transcend the so-called "parochial" problems of race and class conflict. But the tragic mulatto in Baldwin tended to intrude upon his work in the form of his self-pity and fatalistic frustration towards his daily experiences of racism.

In the Fire Next Time, Baldwin wrote at length about how "life is tragic" without ever making mention of the particularities of the black experience. Death was the ultimate tragedy, explained Baldwin. History and the material realities of life were never, however, mentioned.

Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves into totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to be that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death - ought to decide, indeed, to earn one's death by confronting with passion and conundrum of life. One is responsible to life. It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and in which we shall return.⁵¹

Just as Countee Cullen in his poem, "Nothing Endures" negated black history, by making it a mere speck of transient experience in light of larger ultimates like 'nirvana', so James Baldwin treated history in a similar style. In broad, sweeping statements he reduced all the complexities and contradictions of human life, including the black experience, down to one problem

alone: that of death and "terrifying darkness," All other human concerns were more or less distractions and diversions from the central confrontation with one's mortality. The confrontation, for Baldwin, was not between the robbers and the robbed, the house niggers and the field niggers, or even the masters and the slaves. On the contrary, it was first of all between life and death. It was an individual dilemma, according to him, and not collective's question. Then too, it was not a problem related to historical and concrete forces which could be scientifically studied or analysed. Rather it was a question of "the conundrum of life" itself. Baldwin could not be more concise than that.

Utterly idealistic in his interpretation of "the human condition," he always wrote in terms of such broad universal generalisations. Black people have not been historically imprisoned, exploited and oppressed by imperialism, according to Baldwin. Rather they, along with other humans, imprisoned themselves "in totems,, taboos, ...races, armies," in order to avoid facing up to their mortality. Slavery seemed to be a psychological, not a social problem. For Baldwin, it was something willed. It was essentially self-inflicted, and not socially, historically or economically imposed. By these terms, it could also be dissolved with an individual decision, with an act of will, and not through a political and social struggle. As such, it was a problem that not only Black people face, but for Baldwin, it was the concern of all humans.

To say that Baldwin, either consciously or unconsciously wrote on behalf of the robber class and culture, is to speak in frank and fair terms. For hardly has a black American written more fluently of the futility of working for social change. Not that Baldwin was

deliberately writing against revolution; but for him, public or organised social action was pointless. Liberation, if he actually believed in its possibility, could only come from within. It was individual act and responsibility, he said. "One is responsible to life." Freedom was no longer a race, or class question, but a personal, individual and "human" consideration.

If at that stage of Baldwin's writing, he was the epitome of the house nigger, it was essentially because he had assimilated the undialectical ahistorical outlook on the dominant culture. Not only did his individualism preclude a penetrating and persuasive view of the larger Black community. But his cyclical way of seeing ("It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and in which we shall return.") failed to reflect the dynamic potential for change, endemic in the Black community.

What finally forces Baldwin out of the picture as a Black writer who can teach Black people progressive ideas about the past, present and future is his mystical outlook on life. Ultimately, life in general, and social life in particular, have no lawful underpinnings, and therefore, they are not accessible to analysis, or genuine understanding. All was finally unfathomable for Baldwin. And this is why, however brilliant and beautiful, vibrant or vivid may be his style as a writer, in the final analysis, his work is devoid of meaningful content, except in its being counterproductive. As such, although many negritude critics had identified him as an articulate exponent of the thoughts and feelings of the Black community, he hardly qualifies as anything else than a house nigger, and thus, as an enemy of the black majority.

One of the best statements that Baldwin ever made to expose himself as a real enemy of social analysis, and subsequently of social change, was in his often quoted essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel" in Notes of a Native Son. Again, he spoke of enslavement and oppression in existential terms, as more of a state of being than an historically-conditioned aspect of social life.

Now as then, we find ourselves bound, first without, and then within by the nature of our categorisation, and escape is not effected through a bitter railing against this trap; it is as though this very striving were the only motion needed to spring the trap upon us. We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed. Society is held together by our need; we bind it together with legend, myth, coercion, fearing that without it we will be hurled into that void, within which, like the earth before the Word was spoken, the foundations of society are hidden. From this void - ourselves- it is the function of society to protect us; but it is only this void, our unknown selves, demanding forever, a new act of creation, which can save us "from the evil that is in the world." With the same motion, at the same time, it is this toward which we endlessly struggle and from which, endlessly we struggle to escape.⁵²

The bane of Baldwin is his idealism which beclouded any kind of comment he might have made about society. For him, its very foundations were enshrouded in mystery. He seemed to think that it was held together because of "our need." From his lofty lookout somewhere below house nigger heaven, Baldwin could not conceive of the cold reality that people need things like food and shelter before either "legend, (or) myth." His interpretation of society was utterly unscientific and mystical. Such comments as "it is the function of society to protect us" revealed the confusion of the man's outlook.

Again, Baldwin described oppression and enslavement in universal and explicitly Christian terms. They were the consequences of "the evil that is in the world." Black working people would clearly never get a concrete idea of who their historical and class enemy was by reading Baldwin! Nor would they get a well-reassured notion of their struggle since struggle for Baldwin was a perennial state of being, it was a "human condition" from which he wanted "to escape." To escape from who or what is never spelled out in concrete terms, though he compounded the confusion, by describing it as a "cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth."

This fateful condition which just one more manifestation of Baldwin's house nigger outlook on life which universalised and idealised very concrete and particular aspects of Black American life. For his colour was clearly "bequeathed... at... birth." But without an appreciation or pride of his past, the Black man's colour was only conceived of as a cage. It is just this sort of ahistorical view which did such dire disservice to the Black community. The Black experience was distilled out of being, such that Baldwin's idealism itself became the most convenient means of escaping. But as he clearly conveyed in his work, even idealism led to a deadend, insofar as the "struggle to escape" was perennial and endless. It led nowhere except into that house nigger trap of cyclical consciousness.

What makes it most important to unrobe a house nigger like Baldwin, who has so heartily imbibed the outlook of the robber class, is that he seemed to stand out as another spokesman for Black people at large when, in fact, like Booker T. he was not. He had aligned his interests with those of the ruling class but his collaboration was clearly exposed in the following paragraph.

What may be confusing, however, to the uncritical ear, would be that he spoke out of his personal experience in universal terms. He wrote that the robbed and the robbers both depend upon the "same reality" and share the same beliefs. And he did so persuasively, (with such poignant English) that it must have made his former slave school master proud.

It must be remembered that the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality. Within this cage it is romantic, more meaningless, to speak of "new" society as the desire of the oppressed for that shivering dependence of the props of reality which he shares with the Herrenwolk makes a truly "new society impossible to conceive. What is meant by a new society is one in which inequalities will disappear, in which vengeance will be exacted; either there will be no oppressed at all or the oppressed and the oppressor will change places. But finally, as it seems to me, what the rejected desire is, is an elevation of status, acceptance with the present community.⁵³

One of the most reactionary observations yet to come out of the Black American house nigger literary tradition, Baldwin sounded only as bad as Booker T. Washington in proclaiming the need for maintaining the status quo. For Baldwin, social change was not merely "romantic" and "meaningless." It was "impossible to conceive." Arguing for such stale ideas as "there will always be robber and robbed, so why bother," and "the master and the slave have so much in common anyway," Baldwin was a full-fledged assimilated and enemy of the Black mass who undoubtedly could not agree with what

Baldwin thought. Indulging in whole-hearted mystification, Baldwin disposed of any notion that the oppressed and the oppressor participated in a class conflict, and that, in fact, the two groups were in a state of war. How he could actually state with a straight face that a rich man and a poor man, a non-worker and a worker, a ghetto-guy and a suburbanite, had a great deal in common since that was what was really "impossible to conceive"!

All Baldwin himself argued for was what any good house nigger wanted. It was a small piece of the pie, and the realisation of the good old "American Dream," "an elevation of status, (and) acceptance with the present community." Like Claude McKay, he just wanted to get into "The White House" and do so by not rocking the ruling class' boat.

In one of Baldwin's best known novels, Another Country, he explored this theme of seeking "an elevation of status, acceptance with the present community." But intentionally or not, he did more in this novel to expose the perversity and moral impoverishment of his sellout stance. Another Country was a nihilistic, cynical and confused non-comment on Black America life. It displayed the decadence, degeneration, and denigration of morals that prevailed in the dominant racist culture. What was passed off in the literary market places in the mid-1960s as an authentic Black American masterpiece was really a prosaic and pathetic prose writing by a fully-assimilated house nigger.

The interracial, intersexual, and interclass relationships that were exposed in Another Country, between the Black American Rufus Scott, and his two lovers, Vivaldi and Leona, were impelled by an assortment of their sexual relationships. At another level, they were all looking for a means of escaping the racism and

exploitation of the dominant society. Each in his or her own way was searching for "another country" where love was the panacea for all their social, sexual, and personal problems. Yet Baldwin himself did not connect class, racial or cultural backgrounds. On the contrary their personal involvements seemed to take place in suspended animation, since Baldwin did not bother to situate them in a social nexus. If Rufus, for instance, was from a working class ghetto, that was only understood as he struggled to escape it and to "elevate his status" in society. Or that Leona was from a southern white ex-slave owner background seemed significant only as Rufus used her as a symbol of racial oppression. As such, he brutalised her as a means of personal revenge.

All of Baldwin's characters were entangled in abnormal and self-flagellating affairs. Yet each, in his or her own way, seemed resigned to his personal plight and impotence. Baldwin's constellation of characters were a sorry lot, who seemed prone to pure masochism as a way of life.

One of the sorriest characters in Another Country was Leona who, having been rejected by her rich white Southern husband got involved with Rufus on the rebound. The fact that Rufus beat her both mentally and physically was something she withstood in a resigned manner. But her attitude of resignation, expressed to Vivaldo, was not very different from that of all the victims in the novel.

"Why," asked Leona, wearily, "do people take anything? Because they cannot help it, I guess. Well, that's me. Before God, I don't know what to do." She began to cry again.⁵⁴

Like most of Baldwin's cast, Leona was steeped in self-pity. Yet in her self-indulgence and lack of self-awareness, she displayed a more serious brand of ignorance. She had no cognisance of the social, economic or historical forces that had shaped her own and Rufus' experience. But Leona was not alone in this respect. All the novel's characters were oblivious to the roots causes of the social and sexual violence permeating their lives.

It is Rufus, however, who found his personal alienation most painful to bear. Mystified by his overwhelming sense of loneliness, rage and lovelessness, he was unable to see himself in an historical or social context. As such, he finally committed suicide as a kind of ultimate escape. He sounded defiant as he had his last argument with God, but his action was more in keeping with the tragic mulatto tradition. His action displayed the same kind of futile individualism and cynicism that one saw in early books like that of Chesnutt's when Clotel jumped off her bridge.

He stood at the centre of the bridge and it was freezing cold. He raised his eyes to heaven. He thought. You bastard, you mother-fucking bastard. Aint I your baby, too? He began to cry. Something in Rufus which could not break shook him like a rag doll and splashed salt water all over his face and filled his throat and his nostrils with anguish. He knew the pain would never stop. He could never go down into the city again. He dropped his head as thoughts of someone had struck him and he looked down at the water ...there was nothing around. Him, only the wind. All right, you mother-fucking God almighty bastard. I'm coming to you.⁵⁵

Even in death, Rufus was seeking an escape from the exploitation, racism, and alienation that he had come to sadly accept in his life. He had sought relief in "another country" where love might reign supreme; but when that failed him, he resorted to the Christian notion of salvation in "another country" called "heaven" by committing suicide. Where else did he think he was going, after all, with a statement like "...you motherfucking God almighty bastard. I'm coming to you."

Rufus never came to blame a "motherfucking" political and economic system that had been exploiting Blacks for centuries. Instead, he lived and died mystified, feeling unloved and estranged from his own working class Black community. But sadly enough, this creation of Baldwin's imagination never understood the reason why.

Eldridge Cleaver, in his collected essays entitled Soul on Ice went to great lengths to explain how a Black writer like Baldwin had fully assimilated the white robber ruler's way of seeing things. For Cleaver, Baldwin's assimilation was expressed in the writer's false awareness of his African history. Baldwin's own ambivalence as a Black man and a writer stemmed from the sort of shame and self-doubt derivative of his false historical consciousness.

On the autobiographical notes of Notes of a Native Son, Baldwin is frank to confess that, in growing into his version of manhood in Harlem, he discovered that since his African heritage had been wiped out and was not accessible to him, he

would appropriate the white man's heritage and make it his own. This terrible reality, central to the psychic stance of all American Negroes, revealed to Baldwin that he hated and feared white people. Then he says: "This did not mean that I loved black people, on the contrary, I despised them, possibly because they failed to produce Rembrandt. The psychic distance between love and hate could be the mechanical difference between a smile and sneer, or it could be the journey of a nervous impulse from the depths of one's brain to the tip of one's toe. But this impulse in its path through North American nerves may, if it is honest, find the passage disputed; may find the leap from the fibre of hate to that of love to taking on its meager store of energy, and so the long trip back may be completed, may end in a reconnaissance, a comprise, and then a lie.⁵⁶

Cleaver chastised Baldwin severely for his ignorance, for his self-hatred and his "racial death-wish," which was how the former described the impulse towards integration. He was sharp and masterful critic of not only Baldwin, but also of the American racist system, U.S. imperialism, and even the Pope. But it seemed that Cleaver was not so committed a field nigger as a book like Soul on Ice would make us believe. For in spite of his being a brilliant and incisive social critic, and despite his brief flirtation with dialectical and historical materialism, Cleaver, upon his return to the U.S. after several years of living in exile renounced his early radical stand. He became, first, a men's fashion designer, and then a devoted born-again Christian. For a man who had had such acute social and historical insight, and who had seemed to have such a strong commitment to social change, his subsequent behavior was very strange. One cannot help but wonder whether Cleaver only took a survivalist's tack while he still secretly held on to some of his progressive ideas

or whether he really reverted to being a good house nigger who had conscientiously chosen to renounce resistance and revolution. If Cleaver had chosen to survive for the time being while not forsaking all of his early radicalism, then one logical explanation for his pious pose might be found in this early understanding of the robber's techniques of racist coercion.

One tactic by which the rulers of America have kept the bemused millions of Negroes in optimum subjugation has been a conscious, systematic emasculation of Negro leadership. Through an elaborate system of sanctions, rewards, penalties, and persecutions with, more often than not, members of the black bourgeoisie acting as hatchet men - any Negro who sought leadership over the black masses and refused to become a tool of the white power structure was either cast into prison, killed, hounded out of the country, or blasted into obscurity and isolation in his own land and among his own people.⁵⁷

Perhaps having understood all this, Cleaver chose to lay low until such time when direct action in the Black community was ripe. If not, (and it does seem unlikely then it certainly seemed that Cleaver chose the path of least resistance. He chose personal salvation, political quietism and integration over social action. But, in this respect Cleaver was certainly not the first Black leader to choose the path of integration and opportunism as a means of survival.

Amilcar Cabral was one of those leaders who "refused to become a tool of the white power structure" and was subsequently killed for his radical stand. Until he was killed in 1974, he held firmly to the view that any Black political person who did not identify fully with the Black masses was nothing more than what we have called a house nigger. And any Black who did not call

into question the influence of both foreign culture and "foreign domination as a whole," was bound to become an opportunist like Cleaver mostly became. The path was virtually unavoidable as far as Cabral was concerned.

A man like Cleaver, who had lived in exile for many years, in Europe, China, Cuba and Africa, had undoubtedly lost touch with his own Black community. As such, he might easily have fallen prey to alienation and hopelessness, the kind that can subsequently lead to the opportunism of the house nigger. But what made his altered social awareness so unfortunate and so unforeseen was that his rare quality of social insight and field nigger perspicacity. At the time of his writing Soul on Ice, he was able to essentially prophesy his own reversion to a house nigger mentality. Or rather, he was able to analyse the way in which the false consciousness and self-hatred of the house nigger could finally drive him into an acquiescent stance of an integrationist.

Self-hatred takes many forms; sometimes it can be detected by no one, not by the keenest observer, not by the self-hater himself, not by his most intimate friends. Ethnic self-hatred often takes the bizarre form of a racial death-wish, with many and elusive manifestations. Ironically, it provides much of the impetus behind the motivations of integration.⁵⁸

One of "the many and elusive manifestations" of a house nigger's self-hatred was for Cleaver, born-again Christianity. For others like Baldwin, and, as we shall soon see, Ralph Ellison, it could be a cynical sort of individualism which expressed its self-pity and self-destruction in taking the avenue for integration.

One of Baldwin's boldest self-denunciations of Blacks was made in his Notes of a Native Son in which his assimilationist attitude towards Black American history was crystal clear. In fact, so crushing were his negative remarks on his African heritage that it is plain why Baldwin became such a darling of the dominant American literary scene.

I know, in any case, that the most crucial time in my development came when I was forced to recognise that I was a kind of bastard of the West; when I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa. And this meant that in some subtle way, in a really profound way, I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral of Chartres, and to the Empire State Building, a special attitude. These were not really my creations, they did not contain my history; I might search in them in vain forever for any reflection of myself. I was an inteloper; this was not my heritage. And at the same time I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use - I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle or the tribe. I would have to appreciate these white centuries, I would have to make them mine - I would have to accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme - otherwise I would have no place in any scheme. What was the most difficult thing was the fact that I was forced to admit something I had always hidden from myself, which the American Negro has had to hide from himself, as the price of his public progress: that I hated and feared white people. This did not mean that I loved Black people; on the contrary, I despised them, possibly because they failed to produce Rembrandt, in effect, I hated and feared the world. And this meant, not only that I thus gave the world an altogether murderous power over me, but also that in such a self-destroying limbo I could never hope to write.⁵⁹

The fact that in his later writing, Baldwin came out with the comment that "... the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past," seemed small compensation for such a damning, pathetic statement as the preceding quotation.

For in it Baldwin revealed that he had scant knowledge of history either African or European. As men like C.L.R. James and Eric Williams made plain in their powerful writings, The Black Jacobians and Capitalism and Capitalism and Slavery respectively, the Shakespeares, Bachs, and Rembrandts of Western civilisation could never have thrived and conceived their great works of art without the material base constructed from the profits made from the Atlantic slave trade.⁴⁶ In the same respect, the Empire State Building in America would not have been built without the wealth very largely generated from working class Black people.

But Baldwin seemed to do his best to mystify any continuity or connection between African, European and American history. His ignorance of history established the basis of his own self-hatred and "self-destroying limbo." He evoked an equivalent pathos to that expressed by Claude McKay who also felt that he "was an interloper" amidst white folk. He too felt a sense of urgency, that if he did not somehow acquire a place in the white world, he would "have no place in any scheme" at all.

This is the same feeling that we get from Ralph Ellison too, whose celebrated novel, Invisible Man was all about the "self-destroying limbo" which he termed "invisibility". But one major difference between Ellison and Baldwin, it might seem, is that Baldwin's "bastardisation" was a much more overwhelming and immobilising experience than that of being a nonentity.

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Whereas Ellison wrote an entire book about it. Ellison seemed less overcome by American racism than Baldwin.

He seemed less enervated by scathing self-hatred. But he may have been merely more hardened by life in racist American society. Or perhaps he was simply more concerned with pursuing art for its own sake and making his "first consideration," as Herbert Hill put it, "the creative act." In the following two chapters we shall try to assess Ellison's actual motives for writing his one and only novel. We shall also be concerned to clarify the way that Ellison conceived of Black American history. We shall also examine how he fits into the tradition which we have termed that of the house nigger.

RALPH ELLISON: THE CASE OF A GOOD HOUSE NIGGER

Ralph Ellison is often referred to in anthologies and books on American literary criticism as one of the finest writers in the Black American world, not to mention the United States as a whole. Dr. Roger Whitlow, for instance, in his book, Black American Literature: A Critical History, described Ellison's award-winning novel, Invisible Man, as "probably the finest piece of fiction ever written by a black American."⁶⁰ In 1953, just one year after the novel's release, it received the American National Book Award for Fiction. And in 1965 a Book Week poll of critics, authors, and editors judged it as "the most distinguished single work" published in America since 1945.

Our perspective on Ellison is rather different from that of the well-established Book Week pollsters, the more assimilationist-minded anthologists, and even the new "Black aesthetics" critics of the 1960s. Though we do concur with certain Black aesthetists, such as Addison Bayle, Jr., who feel "...that Ellison,...like Brown, and Baldwin, remained wedded to the concept of assimilation at a time when such a concept has ceased to be the preoccupation of the Black writer."⁶¹ Gayle is one of the most clear-sighted Black American critics of the sixties, and one of the first to suggest that Ellison, though often understood to be a negritude artist, is actually a house nigger in disguise.

On the first reading, Invisible Man, by Ralph Ellison, does not appear to be a novel in the assimilationist tradition. Ellison is a student of Black literature and history, and his novel illustrates a remarkable grasp of the Afro-American's historical past. No other writer has presented so well, in fiction, the vicis-

situdes of "The Age of Booker T. Washington" - an age that is fundamental to an understanding of black nationalism.⁶²

But initial appearances can be deceiving, as Gayle implied. It will be our contention that, after the second and third reading, Ellison clearly falls into the assimilationist category. It is just because Invisible Man "illustrates a remarkable grasp of the Afro-American historical past" that we feel it is crucial to look more deeply than just "the first reading" to assess exactly how he interpreted that past. Did he look at it from a ruling class point of view, like a loyal Black assimilationist? Or did he see it from the point of view of the Black working class? Gayle was of the same opinion, as we are, insofar as he felt that "the assimilationist aspirations are as strong in Ralph Ellison as in Black writers of the past."⁶³

In his book of collected essays, entitled Shadow and Act, Ellison exposed himself for the assimilationist that he really was. In the first place, in his own mind, his background was "mixed", meaning that his bloodlines were blessed with a few white lines.

When I began writing in earnest, I was forced, thus, to relate myself consciously and imaginatively to my mixed background as American, as Negro American, and as Negro from what in its own belated way was a pioneer background.⁶⁴

This was Ellison's clever way of saying that he was born into both white and the Black American cultures. In a sense, he meant that he was born "integrated." But this was only the beginning of Ellison's vagaries especially related to his view of Black American history. For on the one hand, he seemed to write about the Black experience, but in no way did his work serve to clarify the essential meaning of the Black experience

of the past. Instead, his writing was mystifying. It suggested a negation rather than an affirmation of African history.

One of the first peculiarities that one perceives about Ellison's view of his background is that it was not explicitly associated with slavery. On the contrary it was that of a "pioneer." Born, as he put it, in the "free" state of Oklahoma, Ellison suggested that his ancestors were free and not slaves. But that meant essentially that he only read back one or maybe two generations, and then dismissed all that came before their procreation. This will be an important point to understand about Ellison's image of himself as we strive to place him within the traditions of Black American literature. For it will figure firmly as a factor explaining his alienation from the larger Black community and his affinity for the "free" white man.

Another aspect of his background which he felt made him different from, and, as he suggested, superior to other American Blacks, was his having been brought up in an urban environment. The rural experience was, of course, the slave's experience. As such he preferred to emphasise the point that he was unlike his Black school classmates who regularly made contact with their rural roots, which he seldom did.

I had none of the agricultural experience of my mother, who had grown up on a farm in Georgia, and although in twenty minutes you could move from Oklahoma City into deep farm country, I shared none of the agricultural experience of many of my classmates. I was of the city, you see. But during the fall cotton-picking season certain kids left for the fields. Now, most parents wished their children to have no contact with the cotton patch, it was part of an experience which they wanted to put behind them. It was part of the old South which they had come West to forget.⁶⁵

One of the "many and elusive manifestations" of the self-hatred ethnic death-wish which Eldridge Cleaver wrote about in Soul on Ice was evidenced here in Ellison's idea that all Black Americans "come West to forget." Here we see that history was not something to be remembered, understood, and drawn upon for inspiration. Instead, rural life and all that it represented to Ellison was ruled out, as not having anything much to do with him.

Suggested in this stance was that slavery was something for Black Americans to be ashamed of, as if the condition itself were their fault. This was, of course, a useful component of the house nigger consciousness as far as the ruling class was concerned since it arrested Black people's need to understand their history.

If the robbers could convince the robbed that the theft itself was their fault, then nobody looked for retribution, since the robbed ones have no one to blame for their losses but themselves. If the robbers could only convince the robbed to forget about all that they lost, then the robbers could continue to enjoy the fruits of their past pillage that had been of the African continent. They would be undisturbed by anyone asking for justice, or fighting to get back for what had been taken from them. The Black American writer who supported this view, and reflected the idea in his writing that slavery was a personal problem of the Black American, and not a political, economic or social one was the robber's real friend. And if he wrote that slavery was something that Black people ought to feel ashamed of, and not angry about, then that writer was also an authentic enemy of Blacks. This is who Ralph Ellison is for us.

In one short story, entitled "Flying Home," which Ellison wrote and published in 1944, he conveyed both his attitude towards Black American history and his condescension towards the Black working class.

Todd was a young Black American pilot who had struggled to "make it" in the white men's world, since the pilot profession was largely barred to the average Black American. In a circumspect and clever way, Todd had worked his way around racism and the potentialism of his white pilot officers, but he felt fervently that he had to prove he was just as good or better than all of them.

But when his plane went down in an Alabama plantation and he was confronted with his own feelings of failure and frustration he found himself alone with an old Black peasant. The old field hand was portrayed as if he just stepped out of a Southern slave plantation. Todd's hostility towards the old man was unguarded, but it spoke reams for the pilot's own feeling of self-hatred.

He watched the old man, hearing him humming snatches of a tune as he admired the plane. He felt a furtive sense of resentment. Such old men often came to the field to watch the pilots with childish eyes. At first it had made him proud; they had been a meaningful part of a new experience. But soon he realised they did not understand his accomplishments and they came to shame and embarrass him, like the distasteful praise of an idiot. A part of the meaningful of flying had gone then, and he had not been able to regain it. If I were a prizefighter I would be more human, he thought. Not a monkey doing tricks, but a man. They were pleased simply that he was a Negro who could fly, and that was not enough. He felt cut off from them by age, by understanding, by sensibility, by technology and by his need to measure himself against the mirror of other men's appre-

ciation lay with his white officers; and with them he could never be sure. Between ignorant black men and condescending whites, his course of flight seemed mapped by the nature of things away from all needed and natural land-marks. Under some sealed orders, couched in ever more technical and mysterious terms, his path curved swiftly away from both the shame the old man symbolized and the cloudy terrain of white men's regard. Flying blind, he knew but one point of landing and then he would receive his wings. After that the enemy would appreciate his skill and he would assume his deepest meaning, he thought sadly, neither from those who condescended nor from those who praised without understanding, but from the enemy who would recognize his manhood and skill in terms of hate..⁶⁶

Like Baldwin, Todd hated and feared white people. But like Baldwin, he despised Black people all the more for their not having invented any sophisticated technology, symbolised in his airplane. Ultimately, it had to be the much-hated white man, his so-called "enemy", to whom he looked for approval, recognition, and even the terms of his own identity, and manhood. He could only see the Black peasant in terms of "ignorance" and "idiocy". He was merely an image of his own humiliation and shame that he associated with black history. As such, even though he hated the white man, he had assimilated his values and his social vision to the point where he saw the ex-slave as contemptible in the same way as did his white officers. In his own mind, Todd identified with neither the Black symbol of his past, the old man, nor with the white pilots, the images of white mastery and dominance. He felt there must be some other top dog somewhere, perhaps at the finish line whose approval would finally confirm his aspirations. After his fulfillment of that old, over-cast "American Dream", "the enemy" (who could be no one other than the whitest robber of all) would give him

the satisfaction that he thought he needed and wanted - the recognition of "his manhood and skill in terms of hate".

If this third or "middle way", beyond both black and white culture sounds slightly confused, mystical and other-worldly, that is because it was. Ellison was unable to give a clear and concrete statement of whom the true friends and enemies of Black working people were because he did not really know. In effect, this made him an enemy himself, since, as we perceive it, the writer-friend is one who clarifies, not mystifies, the Black American experience.

The old Black man was the one who ultimately came to Todd's rescue when the rich white farm owner, (the classic symbol of the southern slaver), attempted to put Todd literally into a straight-jacket. But Ellison seemed not to mean, with the image that the Black peasant has redemptive value to the house nigger who was out to "make it" in the white world. Rather, he seemed to suggest that the entire and only quest that the aspiring Black American assimilationist could respect - that of achieving success on the terms of the dominant white world - was finally fated to fail. Even so, one never got the sense that Todd cared to renounce his quest for white acceptance. Nor did his attitude towards the Black man alter in its condescension. On the contrary, the fact that he was forced to identify with another Black was something he was resigned to. He had to suffer as a Black in the white men's world. This sense of bitter futility and cynical individualism seemed to permeate all of Ellison's writing. It was what earmarked him as an enemy of Blacks. In fact, the basis of Todd's failure, Ellison seemed to say was that he was forced, against his will, to be identified with Black people.

Ellison himself might deny that he was an enemy of Blacks. In an interview published in Harper's magazine in 1967, he summed up what he felt was the thread running through his short story and through all of his subsequent writing. "At first reading," it might not sound like the words of any enemy; but one can still detect a subtle note of his conscious condescension.

If I cannot look at the most brutalised Negro on the street even when he irritates me and makes me want to bash his head in because he's goofing off, I must still say within myself, "Well, that's you too, Ellison." And I'm not talking about guilt, but of an identification which goes beyond race.⁶⁷

In fact, Ellison displayed no love here for the "most brutalised Negro on the street." Rather, the author assumed that the ordinary Black person would irritate him. Like Langston Hughes' "Negro hysterman," his image of the Black person on the street was one who was "misbred, misread, misled, also losing our time good-timing". Or as Ellison put it, he was usually "goofing off". This was nothing other than the white robber's idea of the ordinary "Negro on the street", imbibed and regurgitated by Ellison.

But if, at some level, Ellison identified with this "most brutalised Negro," it was as a "modern writer" of the kind that Herbert Hill spoke. He was determined "to break through the limits of racial parochialism." As such, the brutalised Black man was seen as a "universal symbol" of the dehumanising influences of modern life. The oppression that Black people suffered historically was seen as "parochial" and even irrelevant in light of the larger, more universal problems, the ones which go "beyond race." He found it virtually impossible

because racism was itself endemic in the American culture and social system. Be that as it may, Ellison had been effectively assimilated into the dominant culture to the point where, rather than proposing change of the structure or system itself, he internalised the problems, blaming both Black people and himself.

Unlike a thinker like Dr. DuBois, who believed strongly that the major problem for the twentieth century to confront was the one of "the colour line," Ellison would just as soon have avoided the topic, except for the fact that he could not. His "background," his Black history was what made him bitter and cynical, not the society or the racist system. He even blamed other Black intellectuals who, following the line of Dr. DuBois, tried to confront "the colour line." He had learned the lesson of individual pride to such an extent that he could not even cope with an elitist, assimilationist idea like "the talented ten." He wished "to avoid" identifying with Black people altogether, be they "brutalised Negroes on the street" or "Negro Renaissance" writers. Instead, he preferred to deal with them in abstractions and in a historical dose. This is what one concludes on reading part of another essay in Shadow and Act.

This was no matter of sudden insight but of slow and blundering discovery, of a struggle to stare down the deadly and hypnotic temptation to interpret the world and all its devices in terms of race. To avoid this was very important to me, and in light of my background far from simple. Indeed, it was quite complex, involving as it does a ceaseless questioning of those formulas through which historians, politicians, sociologists, and an older generation of Negro leaders and writers - those of the so-called "Negro Renaissance" - had evolved to describe my group identity, its predicament, its fate and its relation to the larger society and the culture which we share.68

The attitude of "ceaseless questioning" of any formula, dogma, or doctrine is unequivocally a positive one. The essential issue as it related to Ellison, however, is one of what criteria to use when being critical. Was it criteria established by the dominant class and culture which had interests in retaining the status quo? Was it one which encouraged the type of query that ultimately discouraged one from challenging the established social system? Or was it criteria which was revolutionary in outlook; one which ultimately was concerned with serving the interests of the majority of Black American people?

Ellison apparently followed the former line, and not the latter. His "insight," however "slow and blundering," was individualistic and antagonistic towards Black people. He openly admitted that his central intent was to avoid his racial, cultural and historical "background". But even as his hostility towards his Black background was blatant, there was another, more insidious level at which Ellison's attitude was antithetical to the interests of blacks. It can be understood as the qualitative difference between "ceaseless questioning" and outright avoidance of iconoclastic thought. Ellison wished to avoid coming to terms with the popular history of Black people. In so doing, he implicitly sanctioned and reinforced the continued ignorance of their heroic historic struggles and their resistance to racist oppression.

Frederic Douglass understood the importance of Black American slaves' overcoming their ignorance. From personal experience, he came to see the revolutionary potential of knowledge itself, and of confronting - not avoiding - his enemy. His autobiography exposed an awareness that the enemy was not the slave master only.

It was also ignorance and cultural confusion as well. Being taught to read by his white master's wife, the young slave quickly learned the revolutionery potential of reading itself. He came to see that reading was a major means to overcoming ignorance.

Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further (in reading), telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master - to do as he is told to do. 69

In contrast to Douglas's startling insight into the white man's means of keeping the field nigger ignorant, Ellison's own hatred of the Black man made him acquiescent before his mental malevolent machinations. His own anxiety and cynical despair offered an implicit support to the white man who was intent to keep the nigger ignorant of his history and his people's culture. Ellison might have seemed to be involved in a higher, more "human" and universal inquiry - that of understanding "the human truth" over and above the truth of Black history. But actually, he was busy idealising Black people's oppression out of being. What was worse, he did so out of a sense of humiliation and shame for his racial and historical back-ground." This is implicitly stated, again in Shadow and Act, where he explained how he weaned his way into the world of literature and writing.

Here the question of reality and personal identity merge. Yes, and the question of the nature of the reality which American fiction and thus the human truth which gives fiction viability. In this quest, for such it soon became, I learned that

nothing could go unchallenged, especially that feverish industry dedicated to telling Negroes who and what they are, and which can usually be counted upon to deprive both humanity and culture of their complexity. I had undergone, not too many months before taking the path which led to writing, the humiliation of being taught in a class in sociology at a Negro college (from Park and Burgess, the leading textbook in the field) that Negroes represented the "lady of the races." This contention the Negro instructor passed blandly along to us without even bothering to wash his hands, much less his teeth. Well, I had no intention of being bound by any such humiliating definition of my relationship to American literature. Not even to those works which depicted Negroes negatively. Negro Americans have a highly developed ability to abstract desirable qualities from those around them, even from their enemies, and my sense of reality could reject bias while appreciating the truth revealed by achieved art.⁷⁰

At one level, Ellison appeared to be a self-conscious writer who was keenly aware of what he was doing as an artist. On another level, he was blind to the implications of what he felt. For instance, he criticised his Black instructor for passing on racial biases and bogus, assimilationist attitudes towards blacks "without even bothering to wash his hands, much less his teeth." Yet this affected attitude of purism towards another house nigger was, amazingly, hypocritical. For whatever "humanity and culture" that the Black majority had was hardly expressed or appreciated in Ellison's own writing. Paradoxically, he claimed to have "no intention of being bound by any such humiliating definition" such as the one which the dominant culture had of "Negroes." He claimed to be writing as part of, not a Black tradition, but of broader American one. If he refused to accept humiliating stereotypes, he also refused to be assessed as a Black man altogether. In this way, he never challenged the prevailing racist

myths. Instead, he merely wished to concern himself with "reality and personal identity" and with "human truth" in his very avoidance of the issues and of confrontation with the accepted racist attitudes, he acquiesced to the textbook treatment of Blacks. His very accommodation was "lady-like" insofar as the stereotype of the "lady" was acquiescent, non-protesting, pleasantly compliant. Ellison, in his acceptance of being a mere addendum to American literature was exceedingly accommodating - even fulfilling the stereotype of the female.

But if Ellison attempted in one instance, to be "ceaseless" in his questioning of racist stereotypes he was still inconsistent in his blind appreciation of "achieved art". What made an artist's work "achieved" or unachieved was not spelled out by Ellison. But it was obvious that the achievers were those who were acceptable and acknowledged by the dominant robber culture. So after dismissing the "Negro Renaissance" writers outright, he looked for his "own voice" within American and European literary traditions.

When I began writing in earnest, I was forced, thus, to relate my true relationship to that body of American literature to which I was most attracted and through which, aided by what I could learn from the literatures of Europe, I would find my own voice, and to which I was challenged by way of achieving, myself, to make some small contribution, and to whose composite picture of reality I was obliged to offer some necessary modification.⁷¹

Ellison, like Baldwin and other house niggers before him, was dazzled and star-struck by the genius, mastery, and artistic superiority of the white Western literacy master. In fact, so overwhelmed was he by the white men's superiority that it seemed that only he, among Blacks, could create "achieved art." The only admirable aspect of Black American people, as far as

Ellison could tell was that they did have "a highly developed ability to abstract desirable qualities from those around them." That is, the one redeeming quality he found in being a Black man was that he had that one "highly developed ability," and he used it to assimilate a house nigger mentality.

Ellison had, in fact, begun at an early age to develop his "ability to abstract desirable qualities from those around" him. He began young to assimilate both a feeling of superiority towards his fellow Blacks and who has for him an insidious social disease called the "Negro problem", and an affinity for the tastes, and attitudes of the dominant culture. In secondary school, Ellison explained in Shadow and Act, he and his small group of "Negro" friends from his "free state" of Oklahoma were already abstracting themselves from what they understood to be Black culture. In its place, they sought to identify with white aristocrats.

Contrary to the notion currently projected by certain the "Negro problem" which characterises the Negro American as self-hating and defensive, we did not so regard ourselves. We felt, among ourselves at least that we were supposed to be whoever we would and could be and do anything and everything which other boys did, and do it better. Not defensively, because we were ordered to do so; nor because it was held in the society at large that we were naturally, as Negroes, limited - but because we demanded it of ourselves. Because to measure up to our own standards was the only way of affirming our notion of manhood.⁷¹

As an adolescent, Ellison began to identify "anything and everything which other (white) boys did" with his own "notion of manhood." He quickly imbibed the "boy's" style of individual competition and "oneupmanship" such that all his role models became white and American or European - never Black. They all derived from European - never from African history.

Hence it was no more incongruous, as seen from our particular perspective in this land of incongruities, for young Negro Oklahomans to project themselves as Renaissance Men than for white Mississippians to see themselves as ancient Greeks or noblemen out of Sir Walter Scott. Surely our fantasies have caused far less damage to the nature of reality, if for no other reason than that ours were expressive of a more democratic ideal. Remember too, as William Faulkner made us so vividly aware, that the slaves often took the essence of the aristocratic idea (as they took Christianity) with far more seriousness than their masters, and that we, thanks to the tight telescoping of American history, were but two generations from that previous condition. Renaissance Men, indeed!⁷³

Ellison was not oblivious to history by any means. Rather, it was only that the history and culture with which he identified was the one of the aristocrat, the old slave master, and the ruling class. It was not however, an historical view that took account of the way, for instance, that "Europe underdeveloped Africa." It did not lead one to readily understand how the rise of the European Renaissance itself came right on the heels of Europe's inauguration of a profitable, but plunderous African slave trade. Rather, it was an historical view which saw the black man as he was assessed by white representatives of ruling class like the reputable southern American white writer, William Faulkner. Ellison obviously loved to make self-mocking associations between himself, (one of "the slaves") and a masterful white fellow southern writer like Faulkner. He took great pride, in such far-fetched fantasies. He was shameless in the seriousness with which he took the master's culture as his model humanity and civility. With all due deference, Ellison would explain in another passage from Shadow and Act how the white middle class world embodied all the "desirable qualities" that he ever dreamed of as a child. They defined for him at an early age the nature of that old American Dream.

As a kid I remember working it out this way: there was a world in which you wore your everyday clothes on Sunday, and there was a world in which you wore your Sunday clothes every day. I wanted it because it represented something better, a more exciting and civilised and human way of living; a world which I encountered in fiction, in the movies, and which I glimpsed sometimes through the windows of great houses on Sunday afternoons when my mother took my brother and me for walks through the wealthy white sections of the city. I know it now for a boy's vague dream of possibility. I wished I was part of it, with all the shopwindow displays of elegant clothing, furniture, automobiles - those Lincoln and Marmons - and of course, music and books. And for me, none of this was hopelessly beyond the reach of my Negro world; really, because if you worked and you fought for your rights, and so on, you could finally achieve it.⁷⁴

Ellison obviously displayed a double-standard in his appraisal of the Black and white worlds, as he interpreted humanity or, he said, "the human truth." For vis a vis his knowledge of "Negro America," he felt "that nothing could go unchallenged." But that same critical faculty was not nearly so strong when he assessed his relationship to "the wealthy white" world. His superficial Sunday afternoon encounters with white society led him to believe that the dominant culture was not just more civilised and chic, but also more human than the Black community. In this passage, one can see how Ellison imbibed bourgeois values even as a boy. If the man grew cynical in his later life, it was because he was such a "true believer" as "a kid."

The extent to which Ellison assimilated the great American myth of "rags-to-riches" was made transparent in this passage as he proclaimed, (just like his house nigger predecessor, Booker T. Washington, did) that "if

you worked and you fought for your rights, and so on, you could finally achieve it". Yet paradoxically, he also seemed to side with fellow Blacks who needed to fight for their right. But at no time did he try to explain why he felt that he, as a Black man, had to fight. Nor did he explore deeply why he felt Blacks did not also possess "desirable qualities"? And he certainly did not explore the the historical causes of what he described as "Negro intelligence." Instead, black history was a blind spot and dark alley in his mind. He deplored his African and slave past. He preferred identifying with white American culture as his one means of survival. Being Black was, for him, almost worse than being dead. Indeed, he made one statement in Shadow and Act that specifically expressed what Eldridge Cleaver clearly described as an "ethnic death wish."

...as Americans we have accepted this conscious and ceaseless struggle as a condition of our freedom, and we are aware that each of our victories increases the area of freedom for all Americans, regardless of colour. When we finally achieve the right of full participation in American life, what we make of it will depend upon our sense of cultural values, and our creative use of freedom, not upon our racial identification.⁷⁵

It was as an "American," and not specifically as a Black, that Ellison wrote of freedom and of struggle. As such, the struggle was suitably vague. The enemy was ill-defined. And the victories were mystifying. It was just this type of terminology that siphoned off any historical or cultural specificity that might have been granted to a Black American majority. For Ellison so broadly defined ideas like freedom and "full participation in American life," that real Black issues became nothing more than euphemisms for integration.

The house nigger Ellison had sold-out any real concern for black working people's liberation in his quest for personal liberation.

If Ellison had the appearance of being a perennial optimist and idealist, then one only needs to look to a short essay like "The Way it is" to see the other side of Ellison, the cynic. In this descriptive essay which portrayed his encounter with a Black American woman, Mrs. Jackson, one can clearly see how Ellison was full of contradictions. The optimist and the American dreamer now had turned into a cynic and social critic. The believer in American social progress, freedom and victory now conveyed a static and futile sense of the Black experience.

There is a quiet courage about Mrs. Jackson. And yet, now and then the clenching and unclenching of her work-hardened fingers betray an anxiety that does not register in her face. I offer to wait until after she has eaten, but she says no, that she is too tired right now and she would rather talk than eat.⁷⁶

What might appear to evidence a genuine concern on Ellison's part for the concrete conditions of Black American life was nonetheless diminished by the fact that he never situated Mrs. Jackson in a specific place or time. Nor did he expose any of the real economic or social issues involved in her life. Instead, she seemed to be just one among many Black American women with the "Negro problem" which wearied her and made her anxious. What was more, all that he had said previously about American freedom and full participation in the social life were completely reversed as he assessed her circumstance.

So there you have Mrs. Jackson. And that's the way it really is for her and many like her who are searching for that gate of freedom. In the very texture of their lives there is confusion, war-made confusion. And the problem is to get around, over, share of necessary war sacrifices than other Americans have to bear. But they do ask for equal reason to believe that their sacrifices are worthwhile. And they do want to be rid of the heavy resentment and bitterness which has been theirs for long before the war.⁷⁷

Again, like Booker T., Ellison asked so very little for Mrs. Jackson. She only required "equal reasons to believe" that the American dream could come true one day. Again, the tone of resentment and bitterness in his writing reminds us of someone like Claude McKay who felt angry because he believed he had been lied to. The integrationist dream was not coming true, even though Ellison once believed seriously that there was "freedom for all Americans, regardless of colour." Even as a man like McKay, could not take us far beyond the anger and "confusion" of a nigger who felt he had been tricked and trapped by the white robber master, so Ellison gave no indication that he ever renounced the dream. Nor did he ever try to clarify the issues involved in black liberation, racism, or Black American history.

As much as Ralph Ellison would have liked to dispense with the "Negro problem" and the question of race altogether, the force of circumstance of the black American's social and historical situation made its total avoidance an impossibility. In Ellison's case then, the issue, when he was finally forced to address the "Negro problem" of racism in American, became whether he could deal with it from an intelligible, historical, or concrete point of view. The answer as revealed in Shadow and Act was obviously no. Racism, as Ellison saw it, had no objective or rational basis. It was for him like "an irrational sea" which the black man had to sink in or swim.

For the racial situation has become like an irrational sea in which Americans flounder like conveyed ships in a gale. The phrase rotates like a gyroscope of irony of which the Negro maintains a hazardous stability as the sea - tossed ship of his emotions whirls him willy nilly along; lunging him toward the shoals of bitter rejection (of the ideology that makes him the sole sacrifice of America's tragedy): now away toward the mine strewn shores of hopelessness (that despite the war democracy is still discussed on an infantile level and him self in pre-adult terms); now smashing his flush against waves of anger that threaten to burst his seams in revolt (that his condition is so outrageously flagrant); now teetering him clear on a brief, calm, sunlit swell of self-amusement (that he must cling to the convoy though he doubts its direction): now knocking him erect, like a whale on its tail, before plunging again into the dark night of the one lone "rational" thing - the pounding irrational sea.⁷⁸

For a man who, at one moment, believed there was hope of "freedom for all Americans, regardless of colour," Ellison, at another moment, wrote in terms of bitterness, rage, and fatalism. The American dream had been transformed by force of the black circumstance, into an American tragedy. It was a tragic tale where in the black man "threatens to burst his seams in revolt."

There was little, however, in such a tirade to shed light on who was the true enemy of the Black American working majority. On the contrary, Ellison only eluded to "the racial situation" in American in substantial irrational, and ahistorical terms. His observations were not even based on solid ground. They were to be found drowning in a deep amorphous "sea." Nothing was stated here to bring a brighter light on the true meaning of racism or Black American oppression. His terms of despair were rather "hopelessness" and

"rejection." They were ideological, not understood in terms of economics or history. Thus, when Ellison finally addressed the issue of racism, he left one feeling impotent and uncertain about its concrete basis. In fact, one barely feels better off with Ellison's views than with a white racist like those of the Chancellor Harper of the University of South Carolina. Speaking in 1838, the outright advocate of slavery Harper spelled out in clear terms his and his class' justification for black oppression.

Man is born to subjection... The proclivity of the natural man is to domineer or to be subservient... If there are sordid, servile, and laborious offices to be performed, is it not better than there should be sordid, servile and laborious beings to perform them.⁷⁹

In Chancellor Harper's case, one at least knew exactly where he stood. He simply believed in his heart that men were not created equal, and he justifies Black slavery on that basis. Ellison, in contrast, was metaphysical and mystical in his explanation of slavery, and so, his perspective was much more annoying. He was esoteric in his view that the institution came about by some sort of "magic rite," as if there was no historical explanation for it. The only difference then, between the Harper and Ellison is that one was honest in his outright racist stand while the other was dishonest with all his metaphysical airs. Both men's notions served to justify slavery, but Ellison's are more destructive in the long run since he was and still is perceived as the Black man's spokesman. Even as Booker T. Washington emerged at a crucial moment in Black people's history, to lead them down a primrose path back into another form of economic enslavement, so Ellison, in his arrival on the scene after world war

two again distracted black thinking people, from seriously tackling the real social and economic issues. Ellison would again explain that the entire problem of racism was internal and psychological, not political, historical and economic.

Colour prejudice springs not from the stereotype alone, but from an internal psychological state; not from misinformation alone, but from an inner need to believe. It thrives not only on the obscene witch-doctoring of men like Jimmy Bynes and Malan, but upon an inner craving for symbolic magic. 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.

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 anti-democratic 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.⁸⁰

If one accepts Ellison's idea of "colour prejudice", he also might suppose that, as "social instrumentality," it did not have any social causality whatsoever. Nor would it necessarily have an historical, political or economic basis. Indeed, for Ellison, racism was essentially an issue of psychology and social beliefs, or witch-doctoring, and even of symbolic magic. What was more, no one could really be held responsible, for it, since racism itself did not seem to have a specific underlying economic motive. Instead, "the prejudiced

individual creates his own stereotypes, very often unconsciously." And it it was "unconsciously" conceived, then no one was actually a genuine enemy of Black people. From Ellison's point of view the, no one was maliciously, mercenarily, or even masterfully holding prejudicial ideas towards Black American.

Still further along this remarkable apologist path, one might even be led by Ellison to feel actual sympathy for the white American who was behaving in a racist way merely as a means "to resolve the dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain undemocratic practices". If one were to accept this line of thought, one might feel that the white American was as much a victim of circumstance as the Black American was.

By this type of reasoning, Ellison was able to hold onto his "sacred democratic beliefs" and even his American dream. Certainly, it allowed him to retain his respect for his great white literary heroes, like Hemingway and Steinbeck. Both men wer racists from even Ellison's point of view, but he still admired them for their "achieved art" and their power as polished writers.

Either like Hemingway and Steinbeck (in whose joint works I recall not more than five American Negroes) they tend to ignore them (black people), or like the early Faulkner, who distorted Negro humanity to fit his personal versions of southern myth, they seldom conceive Negro characters possessing the full, complex ambiguity of the human.⁸¹

In spite of his pet-white writers reflecting racist stereotypes in their fiction, still Ellison was ever-able to forgive them "for art's sake". For above and beyond any vague sense of social responsibility to Blacks, Ellison's ultimate commitment was always to the "achieved art." As Herbert Hill put it, his first consideration was for the creative act, and little else. But it was in this very commitment and consideration that Ellison exposed himself as the supreme house nigger who was unable to ever shed any clear, sharp light on the concrete, historical, or cultural conditions of the mass of Black Americans. An artist who chose "to avoid" the racist issue whenever possible, and when not, to apologise for white racism, Ellison ultimately contributed very little to Black people's awareness of their past, their present, or their potential for social change in the future. And as such, the man must ultimately be understood as enemy of Black people. For where the need had been for Black writers to make contributions in the tradition of social realism, Ellison's only added to that of the house nigger. His "pervasive idealism," the type discussed by Emanuel and Gross in their book Black Symphony: Negro Literature in America, was the distinguishing feature in his style which finally placed him in the house nigger tradition.

The distinguishing quality of Ralph Ellison's work particularly of the essays he has published since Invisible Man - is a pervasive idealism. In his various essays, interviews, and public statements, Ellison assumes a confident and optimistic attitude and urges the writer "to explore those qualities which are of value beyond any question of segregation, economic, or previous condition of servitude. The obligation was always there and there is much to affirm.⁸²

We shall now examine the ways in which this "pervasive idealism" prevailed in Ellison's one and only novel, Invisible Man, in order to assess and explicate exactly how this best-known black American novelist may be understood as a house nigger.

INVISIBLE MAN: A house nigger masterpiece

In 1952, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man came on the American literary scene like a storm. It was subsequently to earn numerous awards and establish a substantial reputation for the author all over the world. Ellison was transformed overnight from an aspiring writer into, what Addison Gayle, Jr. described as "a dangerous man to disagree with,"⁸³. For not only was Invisible Man acclaimed as an effective fictionalised autobiography, the odyssey of a Black American southern school boy who went North to continue his education and to look for work. It was also appreciated as a symbolic account of Black American history, tracing the Black experience from the Emancipation era through Reconstruction, into Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, and up into the North where a working class Black man was exposed to every influences from trade unions and the Black nationalist movement to the Communist Party.

But at another level altogether, a number of critics perceived Invisible Man as a novel within which race was merely "used symbolically." From their point of view, the protagonist's central problems were neither political, historical, nor economic. They were primarily philosophical. This was Herbert Hill's interpretation as he wrote in his Black literature anthology, Soon, One Morning.

This novel is indeed a magnificent contribution to American letters. It contains brilliantly and powerfully written episodes in which race is used symbolically. In Invisible Man, Ellison evokes a world which perhaps only an American Negro can fully apprehend, a lunatic febril world where love and hate,

pity and cruelty, are brutally intermingled, Ellison's work utterly transcends the traditional preoccupations of the Negro writer. Ultimately he is concerned not with race but with men.⁸⁴

Ellison's self-proclaimed purpose for writing his one and only novel was exactly as Hill interpreted it. He had meant to transcend "the traditional preoccupations of the Negro writer." If it appeared that he was fundamentally concerned with race and with Black American history, as it might certainly seem at "the first reading," then one only had to recall what Ellison wrote in Shadow and Act. There he stated that he "had no intention of being bound by any such humiliating definition of my relationship (as a Black man) to American literature."

Invisible Man deserves to be looked in this context since we see it as a book through which the author attempted to disentangle and disassociate himself from racist, "humiliating" stereotypes. His primary goal, as he wrote was to transcend those stereotypes and thus to establish himself on equal footing in the world of (white) American letters. In this respect, he would strive to speak about "the human condition," and not specifically about Black American history. In Shadow and Act, he elaborated on his point.

After all, it's a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality. Each section begins with a sheet of paper, each piece of paper is exchanged for another and contains a definition of his identity, or the social role he is to play as defined for him by others. But all say essentially the same thing. "Keep this nigger boy running." Before he could have some voice in his own destiny, he had to discard these old identities and illusions; his enlightenment couldn't come until then. Once he recognised the hole of darkness into which these papers put him; he had to burn them. That's the plan and the intention; whether I achieved this is something else.⁸⁵

Another way of describing Ellison's intention in writing Invisible Man is to say that he wanted to create a literary rationalisation for his own integration into white society. This is why, we will argue, the novel reflects a house nigger point of view, which neither challenged racist institutions at their root nor compelled blacks to call for serious social changes. Integration is all the house nigger ultimately wants and it was something that the book's protagonist proposed in Ellison's "Epilogue" as his logical end following his purgation of pain and suffering. He disclaimed all ability to actually control his own life. He had no choice, he would say, but to be integrated and submerged in the racist dominant culture.

Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many - This is not prophecy, but description. Thus one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the black striving towards whiteness, becoming quite dull and grey. None of us seems to know who he is or where he's going.⁸⁶

One can instantly see the reactionary character of this line of thinking. Ellison seemed to advise abstaining from efforts at controlling one's life experience, be it in the realms of culture, politics or economics. Life itself, he explained over and over again, was "an absurd joke" and history a cruel game, not something to be rationalised, analysed and understood. And though at the end of the novel, his protagonist vaguely suggested that "...there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play", all the same, he had already stated quite clearly that "humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat."

The defeatism of Ellison's social vision has often escaped literary analysts who interpreted him only in philosophical terms, as an existentialist. Those critics accepted Ellison's idea of invisibility as something equivalent to the dehumanisation and impersonalisation stereotypes was considered something of a hero. These kind of critics were inclined to identify with the invisible man as he introduced himself in the novel, as if he were a sort of modern-day everyman.

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance; of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorted glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything and anything except me.⁸⁷

These existentialist critics would not take issue with Ellison's explanation that his protagonist's problem of invisibility was primarily psychological, related to other "people's refusal to see" him. They would probably not be at all perturbed that "invisibility," as the protagonist understands it, was not perceived as an historical, or social problem, but one which was endemic to the white person's psyche.

The invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.⁸⁸

We take instant issue with this explanation of racism made by Ellison's nameless invisible man, because as we see it, this sort of bio-psychological view of the black man's experience of racism was not only fatalistic and mystifying. It was a main factor that

exposes the static nature of the author's own social vision, which was explicitly revealed at the end of the novel when, from deep down underneath the public pavement inside the invisible man's manhole, he concluded that, "This is the way it's always been only now I know it".

Wholly negating an historical or social explanation for racism, the invisible man implied that the real problem confronting not just the Black specifically, but every man generally was that of the human mind's tendency to stereotype. Racism, as such, was an issue of psychology and attitude, not something specifically related to the concrete facts of economic exploitation or Black history. The means of dealing with the Black men's dilemma was, as such individual and idealistic. It would be found within one's imagination not within society at large. For the protagonist, the imagination existed separate and outside of history, somewhere within the amoral realm of "chaos."

Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos — ask Rinehart, he's a master of it — or imagination. That too I've learned in the cellar, and not by deadening my sense of perception; I'm invisible, not blind.⁸⁹

This view coincides with that of the house nigger, which is that the arts as well as the imagination exist separate and distinct from history, and that the individual can somehow exist outside, and above (or below) both society and history. It is a pernicious point of view which pervays an abstract notion of an individualistic, ahistorical resolution to the problems of the Black American community, but Ellison's invisible man would ultimately advocate this kind of "division" and indivi-

dualistic nonconformity as the only way out of the Black man's dilemma. As he said in his Epilogue, "...only in division is there true health."⁹⁰ As such, it was not within but without society and history, (as if there were really such a realm) that the mystical invisible man would try to reside. After going through a series of cyclical episodes derived from Black history, he would arrive at this defeatist conclusion - that the Black American man would only ever find a home and place to establish a relatively comfortable place for himself alone and separate from the racist world. In fact, his eventual observations were practically foregone conclusions as he never sought answers to larger social or historical problems in the first place. He only ever wanted to find an individualistic niche for himself in life. That is why he went underground in the beginning. He wanted somewhere to hide and he wanted a safe vantage point from which to tell his sad story of the youthful "invisible man" coming to manhood, by learning the way that others perceived him, which was no better than a nonentity.

The point now is that I found a home - a hole in the ground, as you will. Now don't jump to the conclusion that because I call my home a 'hole' it is damp and cold like a grave; there are cold holes and warm holes. Mine is a warm hole.⁹¹

His underground abode offered the invisible man, a means to escape racism, as well as somewhere to ignore the social and economic forces operative in Black history. He wanted to believe that the individual could find his "salvation" in another life, at another level of human experience than the one that the majority of black working people existed at. For him,

the great bane in being a black man was not an economic incentive evidenced in the slave trade and system. Rather, it was basically the individual being forced by circumstance to conform to the dictates of "the group" and of society as a whole. As he wrote in his "Epilogue", "Whence all this passion towards conformity anyway?"⁹²

In these respects, Ellison wrote a novel which obscured the robber-robbed relationship which began for blacks from the time that African people were first kidnapped from their continent and thrown into slavery. From start to end, his work completely concealed the real enemy of Black American people. As he wrote in his book of collected essays, Shadow and Act, his protagonist went through a series of episodic cycles, each supposedly resembling what had actually taken place in black history, only to ultimately "understand" the nature of "reality." That "reality" was a static realm where nothing changed, and power remained with the robbers and their few house nigger lackeys. In this respect, there was never a serious alteration or transformation in the protagonist's social vision as he travelled through time and place. His illusions about power and the way the class system operated were ostensibly shattered. But he never relinquished his desire to assimilate all that those in power might parcel out to him, or to integrate as fully as possible into that robber-dominated society.

As he saw it, there was really nothing else to do. He saw no alternative but to leave alone any salvation - in a working class Black culture. And certainly, he saw nothing positive in a revolutionary attitude towards Black culture. At best, all he could find was "a warm hole" where the escapist could hide tem-

porarily. Other than that, Ellison's message was plain: the Black man was, first and last, defeated by virtue of the nature of "reality," not by the robber's exploitation of his creative labour forces. As such, his attitude of expediency and opportunism were essential intellectual tools for the Black man who wished simply to survive in what he saw as a "white-dominated" world. Out of his cynicism and house nigger airs, he in essence said that he wished he had not been born Black. But as even his biology was a matter of fate, being Black made the assimilated Invisible Man work all that much harder at an individualistic solution. He strove that much harder for "achieved" success, always a "true believer" in the old fashioned American Dream. This was what he implied in his "Epilogue".

I started out with my share of optimism, I believed in hard work and progress and action, but now, after first being 'for' society and then 'against' it, I assign myself no rank or limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of times. But my world has become one of the infinite possibilities.⁹³

For all his disillusionment, for all the shattered dreams that Ellison seemed to associate with Black American history, he never doubted the validity of the great hope of "rags-to-riches" achievement. In fact, it served as almost a sort of religion for Ellison who never really let it go. He actually seemed to relish the role of ideological Black knight, (straight out of the age of chivalry), charging out into the American literary world to defend the so-called American democracy and esteem, for the individual who fought "against the trend of the times".

That treacherous "trend of the times" was the one which Ellison apparently felt was bent on destroying American "freedom" - something which the novelist never doubted had enduring, even eternal value to the majority of Black Americans. It was the trend which he felt was essentially an impersonal, and historical force intent on swallowing up the individual and his "private enterprise" in one large tyrannical whole, and subjugating him under the authority of the collective will. Ellison was explicit on this point in Invisible Man when he wrote:

Whence all this passion towards conformity anyway - diversity is the word. Let man keep his many parts and you'll have no tyrant states.⁹⁴

In effect, Ellison was preaching anti-communism. But we shall explore this point at length in a later portion of this chapter. For the moment, suffice it to say the author's static outlook on society was a fair gauge to measure his foe-like attitudes towards the Black majority. But even in this respect, we shall elaborate further on the point that Ellison's views were quite reactionary. Over and over again, he spoke explicitly of history and society in such static terms.

Even at the novel's outset, he warned his readers against any notion that history could point to the prospect of progress for Blacks. He cynically stated that even the best laid plans of mice and Black men were bound to go amiss. Any activity that they might want to initiate was bound to fail. Like a boomerang, it was to come back at them as an aggressive assault. In this he suggested that the Black man - even the one most mystified by his American dreams, was fated to an impotent existence wherein all his actions were bound to be self-destructive. This was what he seemed to say in the first pages of his book, where he identified quite clearly with the dominant culture (like any good house nigger would) but then went on to explain what a destructive environment that racist realm really was.

...Broadway.. Or the Empire State Building..are among the darkest (spots) of

our whole culture (an important distinction, I've heard) -which might sound like a hoax, or a contradiction, but that (by contradiction, I mean) the world moves: Not like an arrow, but a boomerang (Beware of those who speak of the spiral of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy).⁹⁵.

Over and again, Ellison underscored the view that history was a hazardous arena to even contemplate, leave alone to operate in. 'Outside history' was ultimately where our invisible man would situate himself; but before he got there, he would have to go through a number of harrowing experiences. They would all logically lead him to conclude as did Halley, the black professional who was committed in Invisible Man to any insane asylum, that "The world moves in a circle like a Roulette wheel."⁷⁰

The invisible man would first and lastly feel that life was just as chancey, chaotic, and uncontrollable as "a roulette wheel". That was why the war-torn veteran of that "world", the one-time professional doctor and resident in the asylum, the Vet, would sound like one of the wisest men or rather, the most well-assimilated house niggers in Ellison's book. It was he who gave the invisible man his first clue as to how to bring some order and law into his life. Learn the rules of the white man's game, he said, and then beat them at their own show. Meeting the protagonist as he was on his way up North, assimilation was the essence of what the Vet told the younger Black man.

Play the game; but don't believe in it - that much, you owe yourself. Even if it lands you in a straight jacket or a padded cell. Play the game, but play it your own way - part of the time at least. Play the game, but raise the ante, my

boy, learn how it operates, learn how you operate - I wish I had time to tell you only a fragment. We're an ass-backward people, though. You might even beat the game. Its' really a very crude affair. Really Pre-Renaissance - and that game has been analysed, put down in books. But down here they've forgotten to take care of the books, and that's your opportunity. Your're hidden right out in the open - that is, you would be if you only realised it. They wouldn't see you because they don't expect you to know anything, since they believe they've taken care of that. 96

The one effective game plan in life, according to the Vet, was controlled and conducted by the white enemy of the Black man as well as all the Black people he described as "ass-backward." The only way to get on in this world was to play by the white man's well laid down rules. This essentially meant integrating into mainstream America or the dominant white class society. It implied also not making any efforts to rock the enemy's boat. The wise Black should rather try slip through the white gate, like every good house nigger opportunist, and make his way through that world alone.

If the Vet's venerable words were really "wisdom", then so were all the assimilationist expressions we have already analysed in this dissertation. The one difference between them and the Vet's was that he was possibly more explicit in his style of cynicism. It was rich in exposing the colour of Black people's enemy. But the Vet never drew a venomous picture of the class of the black majority's antagonist. His bitterness was broadly aimed at whites, but he never called into question the nature of their class. The enemy was simply "the force...(of) white folks."

'They? Why, the same they we always mean, the white folks, authority, the gods, fate, circumstances, -the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more. The big man who's never there where you think he is.'⁹⁷

It was just this sort of vague and nebulous reasoning which supported Ellison's own cynical and defeatist outlook on society and history. For the enemy was seen to have power and social "strings" which were fateful, circumstantial, classless and transcendental. From this perspective, there was no social force on this earth which could match, leave alone defeat this enigmatic and ostensibly omnipresent authority. Of necessity, this meant that all oppressed people, be they Black or otherwise, were doomed to defeat, to being hit by that boomerang or reflex force encountered in society.

This was the same light, in which Ellison exposed the whole of Black American history, from Black Emancipation up to the present. Even the very form of the novel was shaped as if it were a boomerang, with the "Prologue" and the "Epilogue" providing the cyclical shape of the protagonist's literary odyssey through time and space. At the outset, the invisible man wrote from within his warm hole beneath the New York city pavement. And in the end, he was still situated in his comfortable abode. The bulk of the novel's dramatic content however, was in the form of a flying flashback, beginning twenty years earlier and coming right round to the present again.

At issue in the next few pages of this chapter will be the quality and kind of "flash" light Ellison actually used to look back and appraise the Black American experience. For it was well and good for the invisible

man to introduce to a complete cavalcade of Black American historical figures. But if the social vision through which they were seen was actually that of the house nigger, then it was practically a foregone fact that there would be distortions to Ellison's account of Black past. Simply because he employed history as his format, theme and motif for his book did not necessarily mean that he wrote about Black history in order to affirm it.

For instance, the fact that the invisible man's grandfather laid down his gun during the period of southern Reconstruction, as the elder informed his grandson on his death bed, told us next to nothing about the historical content of that period, except that there were good house niggers, even back then. It exposed nothing of the struggles that black people experienced in their fight for true democracy. It revealed nothing about the sabotage and subterfuge employed by rich white robbers as they sought secretly, to assure that black freemen remained in slave-like circumstances even after being officially "emancipated," (except that house niggers were playing their subversive parts). Instead, Ellison only evoked an image of a Black man who would die long after he has given up his gun, and even longer after he has given up his will to resist. The old man simply died already having accepted his defeat.

Grandfather was the epitome the house nigger integrationist who the invisible man would ultimately respect as a sort of Black prophet who realised many years back that all resistance to Black oppression could only end in defeat. In the last pages of the novel, Grandfather was portrayed as something of a house nigger hero because, "He accepted his humanity just as he accepted

the principle."⁹⁸ Whatever that "principle" was was left unclear, in the ephemeral realm of ideas. Ostensibly, it (the principle) was more important and humanising than any armed struggle which the ex-slave, his grandfather, had once been involved in.

Grandfather himself admitted that he had lived like a "traitor" to Blacks. He saw himself as a "spy" for the whites, working surreptitiously ever since he put down his gun during Reconstruction. But even so, he argued like a Voltairian "Candide" for "the best of all possible worlds." Late in the book, long after the protagonist was disillusioned by his encounters with the robbers' "reality which clubbed (him) into the cellar,"⁹⁹ the young man would catch "the hint" of what his elder actually meant. In the end, the old man's advice would make sense to him. Integration would become his own manner of survival in the hostile racist society.

I never told, you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I gave up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome em with yeses undermine em with grins, agree em to death and destruction, let em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.¹⁰⁰

The way in which 'grins' and 'agreements' could substitute for positive action against an enemy in wartime was left a mystery for the invisible man to resolve. But it was an unexpected remark coming from a writer like Ellison who quite clearly abhorred violence, and took great pains later on in his book to discredit Ras the Destroyer, his representation of a rash cultural nationalist and maniac caricature of Marcus Garvey.

More pertinent is the point that Grandfather's practice became a paradigm model for how the house nigger could slip through life and still survive among white people. But the old man embodied only one version of the slave. He voiced the views of the house nigger, not those of the Black freeman who continued the fight out in the field, like Malcolm's "field negro".

The invisible man encountered several "field niggers" in the course of the book, one being in the shape of the southern sharecropper. He was a man whose set-like existence was reminiscent of the South's feudal past. He met him while still at school studying at his Tuskegee-type Institute when he was chauffeuring one of the school's rich white donors, Mr. Norton, around the outlying campus grounds. But, predictably enough, Jim Trueblood embodied none of the integrity, alacrity or self-respect that Malcolm implied belonged to the true field nigger, and none of the gutsy gumption that we saw belonged to grandfather. Instead, Trueblood had seemed to languish too long out in the field after he was legally free. As such, he was portrayed as a wretched, uncouth and ignorant figure whose one redemptive feature was his foolish and flagrant honesty. His story of incest with his own daughter only served to confirm the superior upper-class view that peasants, like all working class people, are uncivilised and crude.

At the same time, the fact that both the Black man Trueblood and the white school patron Norton had once had illicit affairs with their daughters, did nothing to upgrade the image of the Black character. Instead, the exposure of the white patron's perversities would only lead to the boy's dismissal from the Institute. Having shown the phony philanthropist too much of "the other side of life," it was for the protagonist to pay

the price. His job was supposed to be that of "a walking zombie" for the white patron as the Vet in the Golden Day Bar put it. He was supposed to play the part of the good house nigger, but in this task, he had failed to measure up.

That Jim Trueblood's tale would create so much consternation for Norton was unforeseen by the protagonist. But Norton's nausea in having to see his perversations mirrored in the Black peasant's own life had punishable consequences for the invisible man. They ultimately compounded his eventual disillusionment with life. In the case of Mr. Norton's encounter with Trueblood, the invisible man had merely got himself into an unforeseeable bind which he did not know how to get out of gracefully. In fact his situation was comparable to the "tight spot" that Jim Trueblood got himself into when he slept together with both his daughter and his wife in the same bed! What was more, Trueblood's "tight spot" of being caught in limbs was the same one that Ellison implied every Black man was stuck in in the mainly white American society.

The philosophic implications of Jim's genuine dilemma were essentially the same as those of Grandfather's. Both found they had to "live with your head in the lion's mouth." The analogy is crude, but the two views compliment one another. In both instances, "life is not to be controlled, but to be lived," as the invisible man himself concluded at the novel's end. In both cases, no real changes were expected out of life. The dilemma became only "to move without moving" or to get what you wanted from the robber world without getting caught. It was essentially an integrationist line of thought which was both opportunistic and ahistorical in outlook.

What seems significant about Ellison's peasant character, Jim Trueblood, and about another working class black character, Lucius Brockway, is that both men were portrayed as almost imbecilic, uncouth, and uncivilised. One feels that Ellison, in his patronising way wanted his readers to find his representatives of that class, just as contemptible, reprehensible, and crude as the writer himself found them.

The invisible man met Lucius Brockway much later in the book after his arrival in the North, when he went for a job in the Liberty Paint factory. Lucius was what is commonly known as a "scab". Or rather he was a worker who refused membership in the local trade union in order to retain employment. As such, he was at once a sell-out to the white factory owner working against the interest of workers, and at the same time, he was a man who almost got the invisible man killed, so fearful was he that his job might be jeopardised by this new black worker.

But if Lucius was an old man who has no empathy for his fellow Black when he felt his job was threatened, then his hostility was only comparable to that of the trade unionist with whom the invisible man came in contact later. The one difference between them was that Lucius was more understandable and more insidious.

Ellison's heavy-handed portrait of the hard-hatted workers not only conveyed his distaste for the working class, but also his antipathy for any kind of collective action at all. His anti-union attitude also seemed to imply that the individual had more to fear from "the group" than a particular privileged ruling class when it came to potentially losing his autonomy and his freedom. Like a good house nigger, Ellison's character espoused the view that the group, and in this case,

especially the union's interests were antithetical to that of the individual. The invisible man said as much when his union membership was being discussed by the members.

I stood trembling, afraid that they would ask me to join but angry that so many rejected me on sight. And worse of all, I knew they were forcing me to accept things on their terms, and I was unable to leave.¹⁰²

Unions did not exist to protect the interests of house niggers like the invisible man. On the contrary, they could only deprive them of their freedom, individuality and integrity.

But, long before the invisible man ever met up with trade unionists in the North, he had received powerful lessons on preserving one's "pride and integrity," from his old alma mater's president, Dr. Bledsoe. Bledsoe's cynical style of playing power games was the first in a series of startling disheartening revelations about "reality" that the young boy would steadily acquire.

You let the white folk worry about pride and dignity - you learn where you are and get yourself power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people - then stay in the dark and use it.¹⁰³

Dr. Bledsoe is the first to deflete the young invisible man's lofty American dreams and to surprise the still-believing Black boy, with his Black elitist opportunism. He did it first with vile and vitriotic language, and then with his dismissal of the invisible man from school in a sneaky underhanded manner. Bledsoe had learnt how to play by the white man's book. He understood the full meaning of Black integration into

the white world meant being opportunistic, expedient, and anti-black, if the situation called for it. Bledsoe's own climb to higher eschelons in the white power structure had been at the expense of the majority of Blacks. As such, he was no better than an enemy of Blacks.

Let the Negroes snicker and the crackers laugh. Those are the facts, son. The only ones I ever pretend to please are big white folk, and even those I control more than they control me. This is a power set-up, son, and I'm at the controls. You think about that. When you buck against me, you're bucking against power, rich white folk's power, the nation's power - which means government power!¹⁰⁴

With eyes wide open, Dr. Bledsoe knew exactly what he was doing and for whom he worked. If he sounded sassy and cynical, it was specifically because he had wholly imbibed the house nigger attitude to life.

He eagerly took his tiny titbits off the white robber's plate while he left the rest of Black people hungry, and hurting like our protagonist. Bledsoe had become one of the emergent class of the Black bourgeoisie, one of the new Black elite who earned small privileges for serving the white robbers well, by keeping the Black masses down under lock and key.

Initially, the younger invisible man had aspired to be like his school president in all ways. This accounts for the anger and self-pity he felt once he realised that Bledsoe had kicked him out of the Institute. Ellison never made clear whether Bledsoe's model was ever relinquished by the worldly-wise invisible man once his anger abated. Certainly, the things that Bledsoe had got by playing the white robber's game - the fame, fortune, and fine women - were still what the younger fellow sought to achieve success.

...he was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but two Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and creamy-complexioned wife. What was more, while Black and bald and everything white folks poked fun at, he had achieved power and authority; had, while Black and wrinkle-headed, made himself of more importance in the world than most southern white men. They could laugh at him but they couldn't ignore him.¹⁰⁵

If Bledsoe was the epitome of house nigger achievement, then the invisible man had not altogether willing to relinquish his respect for him, however vindictive and angry he might have felt towards his onetime Black idol. For Bledsoe had taught his young student far too many things for the fledgling house nigger to give up all his awe and his greed for the good life. In any case, one of the most important lessons that Bledsoe had taught, (apart from the fact that an entrenched house nigger could be treacherous towards his own kind if it ensured preserving his own power and position) was something about the white American robber power structure, and about how expedient the white robber could be, employing token Black house niggers like Bledsoe in order to keep the system functioning efficiently.

These white folk have newspapers, magazines, radios, spokes men to get their ideas across. If they want to tell the world a lie, they can tell it so well that it becomes the truth; and if I tell them that you're lying, they'll tell the world even if you prove you're telling the truth. Because it's the kind of lie they want to hear.¹⁰⁶

The one grave omission that Bledsoe made about white power in America was the power was not just a question of colour, but also of ruling class. It was an

omission which Ellison never rectified in the entire novel since class was not a serious question for him, just as it never is for any house nigger. Not surprisingly then, his character Bledsoe never drew the critical distinction between power possessed by all whites and power possessed by a certain, specifically class of whites.

Bledsoe did make one thing plain to the invisible man however, and that was that on no uncertain terms was he interested in social change in any form. He was only concerned with retaining his own power and position, within the existing racist social structure.

...you listen to me: I didn't make it, and I know that I can't change it. But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am.¹⁰⁷

Bledsoe was a token house nigger "boss" who stooped to stand at the service of the white capitalist, even as earlier Black American leaders had done, man like Booker T. Washington and even the older assimilated ex-slave Frederick Douglass had done. To assume that Ellison's invisible man aspired for anything else would be to misunderstand him entirely. For all his hatred of what Bledsoe did to him, he essentially shared the house nigger's sentiments to the end. For he too believed that Blacks had essentially done nothing to make America powerful and "great". Both men would discount all the sweat and blood, the multi-million men loss of human life of African slaves who were ripped from their continent for centuries. Both men clearly had very little regard for the Black slave's contribution to American "nation building," and even less affinity for the Black community as a whole. And, both

ultimately believed in the status quo, they would never beat the system (as when Bledsoe said, "I know that I can't change it,") - so it was better to join it by any means necessary, even when that meant renouncing all positive ties to the Black community.

That the invisible man's assimilationist ideology never changed, (anymore than did that of Dr. Bledsoe) was obvious by what Ellison wrote in the novel's "Epilogue". There one could see that however painful his experiences had been out in the cold cruel racist world, he had only exchanged his naivete for a more incidious form of cynicism. There had been no qualitative change in his outlook on life. Instead, he had come a full circle like a boomerang. Indeed now, he held Dr. Bledsoe in higher regard than ever before since it was he who showed him how the house nigger could "survive" within the white master's world - a place he would continue to describe as "reality." In the end, he would write,

My God, what possibilities existed! And that spiral business, that progress goo! Who knew all the secrets; hadn't I changed my name and never been challenged even once? And that lie that success was a rising upwards. What a crummy lie they kept me dominated by. Not only could you travel upwards towards success but you could travel downwards as well; up and down, in retreat as well as in advance, crabways and crossways and around in a circle, meeting your old selves coming and going and perhaps all at the same time ... Hell, and hadn't Bledsoe tried to tell me what it was all about?¹⁰⁸

For all his earlier indignation at the unscrupulous conduct of a house nigger like Dr. Bledsoe, the invisible man ultimately saw that "There seems to be no escape"¹⁰⁹ from following in his footsteps. That was because his view of reality was ahistorical and static, as something one-dimensional, and ultimately "controlled solely by white men."¹¹⁰ Within this world view, Bledsoe's way of achieving success was no more despicable or immoral than anyone else's. The man who had said he would "...wait and plan and lick around ...(and) act the nigger"¹¹¹ could thus not be blamed, said the invisible man finally and fatefully. It was not Bledsoe's fault, he ultimately argued against himself, since racism itself was simply a sad 'fact of life'.

Without ahistorical perspective that accurately assessed the role of capitalism and slavery in Black experience, racism would only ever be an ill-fated accident of biology. For the invisible man, it would end as a "soul-sickness," an illness like A.I.D.S., to which the Black person had no immunity.

I'm not blaming anyone for this state of affairs, mind you; nor merely crying mea culpa. The fact is that you carry part of your sickness within you, at least I do as an invisible man. I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me. It came upon me slowly, like that strange disease that affects those black men whom you -see turning slowly from black to albino, their pigment disappearing as under the radiation of some cruel, invisible ray. You go along for years knowing something is wrong, then suddenly you discover that you're as transparent as air. At first you tell yourself that it's all a dirty joke, or that it's due to the "political situation." But deep down you come to suspect that you're yourself to blame, and you stand naked and shivering before the millions of eyes who look through you unseeingly. That is the real

If there were any doubts that Ellison exposed a house nigger attitude throughout the whole of Invisible Man, then a passage such as the aforementioned must dissolve any delusion of that kind. For once he defined Black people's problems as internal and organic, he rendered all possible solutions or concrete social and economic resolutions impossible. In short, the Black men could only acquiesce and conform to a cruel, unjust social order. All attempts to, for instance, make a revolution or work for radical social change, were now ridiculous and unnecessary.

The social ramifications of Ellison's point of view, were made plain, when the invisible man, after coming North and not finding a job, arrived at the scene of an eviction of an old Black man and woman. Fancying himself a first-class orator, he stood arrogantly before an angry crowd of blacks and sported platitudes on pacifism and self-constraint. He asked them Lenin's rhetorical question, "What is to be done?" and then he proposed that they do "the wise thing, the law-abiding thing."¹¹³ This, in effect meant that they should not wage war in the streets, nor beat up white policemen, nor even leave the old couple's belongings outside since it was against white ruling class law to block public streets with "debris" (his derogatory term for the old people's cherished belongings). In this instance, when a politically-minded person could have taken the eviction as a proper moment for revolt, the invisible man instead counselled the crowd to hold a "big prayer meeting" in short, to keep quiet.

'Sure,' I called, 'take everything'. Take it all, hide that junk! Put it back where it came from. It's blocking the street and the sidewalk, and that's against the law. We're law-abiding, so clear the street of the debris. Put it out of sight! Hide it, hide their shame! Hide our shame!¹¹⁴

If in this instance, the invisible man seemed superficially to identify with the Black community, it was only in a negative and subversive sense. The couple's household-full of evicted things obviously had been accumulated over their whole lifetime. In this sense, they had not just sentimental but also symbolic value, as remnants of Black history. But for the contemptuous invisible man, they were nothing more than "junk" and "debris". They were reminders of the "shame" and humiliation that he associated with Black American history. His suggestion to "hide it, hide their shame," was essentially the same thing as saying that there was nothing in the Black American past to be proud of and certainly nothing to fight for.

But Ellison's patronising style of writing was not only mystifying. It was imbued with sarcasm and sadistic irony, irony which would be epitomed by the "Brotherhood" representatives who would just happen to be on hand when the invisible man mobilised the Black community for retreat. These men, we were led to understand, perceived themselves as practitioners of "the science of history" which the writer scoffed. Arriving when they did, Brother Jack and his companion did not hear the reactionary content of the invisible man's message. They only saw people move after he spoke. As such, they took him to be a potential activist, which was one of Ellison's ironic twists, and one obviously meant to make the Brotherhood look not just manipulative but also foolish.

Ellison seemed to write this section into his book to suggest that fate had a more forceful hand in human life than so-called scientific "law" or historical perspective. Even more, he obviously meant to attack communist ideology with such insidious and subtle language. He would proceed to use the weapon of his pen to insult and undermine both Marxism and Black Cultural Nationalism.

At this juncture, it is useful to recall that 1952 was not only the year that Invisible Man was published. It was also the time in American history that the history books call the "Red Scare," when it was politically wise to despise communists. Ellison's portraiture of the Brotherhood, an organisation which could be none other than the Communist Part USA, was made out to be just as dispicable and "scary" as it would be. For not only was the Brotherhood given to doing everything in an apparently conspiratorial, seditious and dryly "scientific" style. As the invisible man interpreted it, it was also an organisation full of opportunists and racists and undemocratic dogmatists who intended to run ram-road over the black community in the interests of their subversive ideology.

Ellison's outlook on the Brotherhood was wholly unsympathetic as was made plan when the invisible man went to work for it. Having neither social commitment nor political conviction in anything that the Brotherhood did, he only wanted a job and an opportunity to exercise his one hobby of oratory, He did not understand them, though he began immediately to judge and condemn them for their dishonesty and racist hypocrisy.

...how far could I trust them, and in what way were they different from the trustees? Whatever, I was committed; I'd learnt in the process of working with them, I thought, remembering the money.115

Never did it cross the invisible man's mind that the Black community was a genuine political priority which the Brotherhood had made after a deep and scientific analysis of society. Nor did he appreciate the fact they were prepared to train a young, inexperienced man like him to play a meaningful political role in their movement and in his own black community. On the

contrary, the invisible man's "hidden agenda" was always to discredit organisations or movements which proclaimed their purpose as that of acting "in history." For him, all such groups automatically displayed condescension towards anyone outside their organisations. In the end, it was only his individuality and his identity that had meaning to him. "Making history" meant next to nothing in his mind as his own "reality" was his imagination and slipping through life in opportunistic style.

This was the lesson that the invisible man had learned from his Grand-father whose integrationist thought was what he pondered as he placed Jack, the leader of the Brotherhood, at the top of his list of exploiters and racists.

...did he (Grandfather) mean that we should affirm the principle because we, through no fault of our own, were linked to all the others in the loud, clamouring semi-visible world, that world seen only as a fertile field for exploitation by Jack and his kind, and with condes cension by Norton and his, who were tired of being the more mere pawns of the futile game of "making history."?116

For the invisible man, the Brotherhood was the very embodiment of white paternalism, exploitation, and racism. Indeed, if there were problems that Black people faced, he was ready and willing to place them at the Brotherhood's feet, to trace them all back - not to society, or a certain class of white people - but to groups like this leftist political association.

The worst sin that the Brotherhood was guilty of, at least as far as the invisible man was concerned, was its pretensionness and hypocrisy. It was "making

history," it would claim, which sounded almost obscene to our invisible man. But why the Brotherhood's goal and hopes were any more hypocritical or perverse than any other "futile game" that someone like the Vet had described for him, our protagonist never made clear. Partly, his hostility seemed to be caused by his own lack of conviction and misunderstanding of what "history-making" really was. For clearly, the invisible man had little faith in the cause for which the Brotherhood stood, - ostensibly the liberation of black working class people. Instead, his chief concern was getting a pay check, in having a job which promised upward mobility, and learning a new line of "business."

...to hell with this Booker T. Washington business, I would do the work but I would be no one except myself - whoever I was, I would pattern my life on that of the Founder. They might think I was acting like Booker T. Washington; let them. But what I thought of myself I would keep to myself. Yes, and I'd have to hide the fact that I had actually been afraid when I made my speech. Suddenly I felt laughter bubbling inside me. I'd have to catch up with the science of history business.¹¹⁷

The opportunistic and cynical invisible man clearly did not care very much about "the science of history business." Instead, he saw his role vis a vis the Brotherhood as comparable to that of the Founder of the southern Black Institute and his white patron Norton. If the Brotherhood cast him in the role of later-day Booker T. Washington, as its subservient Black spokesman, then he would be even more opportunistic than Bledsoe. Looking out for himself and himself alone, he would pretend to play its game for all it was worth. But he would never plan on falling prey to what he felt was the Party's paternalism. His aim was to be "free" in the same way as the Founder was, using all the power and privilege that whites like Jack gave to him, to rise over and above the black community.

In a sense, however, he was too much of an anarchist and individualist to climb up the ladder of Brotherly success in the same way as Bledsoe had done in Norton's organisation. For although Jack could not have more "authoritarian" towards him than Norton had been towards Bledsoe, Jack's dominance and demand for Party discipline were inimicable to our protagonist. He simply could not conform to any system of "law", no matter how "scientific" or systematic it was supposed to be.

For him "freedom" was defined - not in civil disobedience - but in personal defiance to any established rules, be they dialectical and historical or social and civil. As such, it was he, far more than Jack, who it seemed, to be the hypocrite by playing the Party game for private and personal gain. He was out to garner all he could get from the Brotherhood as long as he could or at least as long as he still believed that it offered him a chance to "make it" in the white world. As long as it promised him a path to fame and public influence, fortune and success, he would use the Brotherhood for the benefits it could give. He would use it to prove that he was just as clever, conniving, and crafty as Bledsoe could be. He even dreamed of the day when he would be "greater and more important" than the Founder.

I thought of Bledsoe and Norton and what they had done. By kicking me into the dark they'd made me see the possibilities of achieving something greater and more important than I'd ever dreamed.¹¹⁸

Now one could see that the invisible man had never renounced his house nigger drive to be better off than Bledsoe. If he put on the guise of being a good party man, he only seemed to do so to get back at Bledsoe - not to help Black people. He seemed almost wickedly self-righteous in his denunciation of the Brotherhood,

after he left it, for while he was within, he never left a chance to take as much as from it as he could. He would let them try to teach him "how the country, the world, really operates" according to the "science of history;" but in the end, it was all just bad "business" to the invisible man.

Here was a way that didn't lead through the back door, a way not limited by black and white, but a way which, if one lived long enough and worked hard enough, could lead to the highest possible rewards. Here was a way to have a part in making the big decisions, of seeing through the mystery of how the country, the world, really operated. For the first time, lying there in the dark, I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race. It was no dream, the possibility existed. I had only to work and learn and survive in order to go to the top. Sure I'd study with Hambro. I'd learn what he had to teach and a lot more. Let tomorrow come. The sooner I was through with this Hambro, the sooner I could get started with my work.119

The invisible man was prepared to go to work for the Brotherhood because it looked like a likely and viable means to get a piece of the white man's pie and "to go to the top." But, without his ever understanding what his tutor Hambro's course of study involved, he already had future work laid out in his mind. He would become "more than a member of a race," meaning that he was not simply satisfied being the Brotherhood's spokesman for Blacks. His opportunistic ambitions were much higher than that.

Quietly nurturing his dislike for having to be associated with "a race", the invisible man carried on playing the Brotherhood's political game even though he barely believed a word of what he said. He may have

planned on "making history" by himself, but he clearly never grasp the group's style of dialectics. Instead, when he made his supposedly famous Eviction speech, he would tell people, "Never give a sucker an even break."¹²⁰

And when he spoke out as a supposed "feminist champion," he still thought in an extremely sexist fashion. Women, for him, were always "confusing the class struggle with the ass struggle."¹²¹

Even when he spoke at the funeral of his dead friend Todd Clifton, he addressed the crowd in a cold and cynical fashion. He used language which the Brotherhood was rightfully criticised as being inappropriate for the occasion.

Clifton was a Black man who had left the Brotherhood because, like the protagonist, he was bitter about the organisation. When he died at the hands of a brutal white policeman, he was selling "black sambo" dolls. (Sambo, being a racist term used by whites to insult blacks).

In the invisible man's funeral speech, he never tried to explain the tragedy of his friend's death in terms of politics or history, or even in the context of the black community. Instead, he talked about "the true freedom" his friend had achieved, using mystical, other worldly language. It was as if he had said, it was "better to be dead than red," better Clifton died than to be one of the Brotherhood.

Todd Clifton's one with the ages. But what's that to do with you in this heat under this veiled sun? Now he's part of history and he has received his true freedom.¹²²

As if to suggest that Clifton was not "part of history" prior to his death, the protagonist had a most peculiar view of history, even beyond it being one that was undialectrical. In essence, his words were meant to work like a smoke screen to conceal anything positive or progressive that the Brotherhood might have say about "making history" while one was living.

Implicit in his funeral speech was an attack on the Brotherhood which he seemed to hold more responsible for Clifton's death than either the racist social system or the white policeman himself. For him, the Brotherhood was one more facet of the "reality" which he felt Clifton conquered through his death. Transforming the man who had stooped so low as to sell "sambo dolls" on the street into almost a Christ figure, the invisible man made Clifton out to be a martyr and noble man who, in his death, had found Christian "freedom" in some sort of afterlife. Clifton's death became "a course" for which he ostensibly fought while "resisting reality in the form of a .38 calibre revolver in the hands of the arresting officer."¹²³

In his twisted house nigger way, the invisible man transformed Clifton's non-resistance and passivity, (seen in his selling "black sambo dolls") into a form of passive resistance similar to that which his Grandfather had practiced when he laid down his gun.

This was not the first time that the invisible man seemed to preach the virtue of passivity and non-violence. In the same way as he had told the crowd of angry Black people gathered at the old black couple's eviction site to go home, he told indignant Blacks at the funeral to "keep cool," to "go home," and to "forget" about the injustice of Clifton's murder.

So in the name of Brother Clifton beware of the triggers; go home, keep cool, stay safe away from the sun. Forget him. When he was alive he was our hope, but why worry over a hope that's dead? So there's only one thing left to tell and I've already told it. His name was Todd Clifton, he believed in Brother-hood, he aroused our hopes and he died. 124

The invisible man, in his advocacy of nonviolence, advised the crowd not to remember Todd Clifton as an historic figure who once fought for their freedom or with the Brotherhood. Instead, he advised them to forget about him and forget whatever futile hopes he might have kindled in their hearts. Obviously, making reference to the revolutionary excitement that Clifton must have aroused in them while he was alive, working with the Brotherhood, the invisible man meant for the black crowd to understand that their militancy was reckless and a waste of time, that their only hope for freedom lay, like Clifton's, in an esoteric afterlife.

If the invisible man was an incessant advocate of non-violence and of the negation of black history, then he stood in sharp contrast to a character who bore a close resemblance to the Black nationalist figure Marcus Garvey. Ras the Destroyer, like Garvey, spoke out with confidence and bold bravado against the historic enslavement of Black people as well as the racist violence of the present. And like Garvey, Ras was an outspoken advocate of blood revenge against the black community's enemy - the white man and his "civilisation."

It took three hundred years of black blood to build this white man's civilisation and can't it be wiped out in a minute. Blood cells for blood! 125

All of Ellison's hatred of Black history was embodied in his portrait of Ras who was made to sound as manic and mad-hatted as they came. Ras might have been right about "three hundred years of black blood," but his righteousness was defused in the writer's reveal-

ing Ras a raucous rabble rouser who wore Ethiopian war-gear as he led an army of riotous Blacks out of Harlem into a bogus battle field. Like the Rastafarians and like Marcus Garvey who claimed Haile Selassie as the Godfather of the Black Diaspora, Ras identified wholeheartedly with Africa. Yet it was this fanatical affection for "Mama Africa" that Ellison made appear as ridiculous as possible. Ras gave no glory to the Black community's African past. Instead, he made it look as ludicrous and unlovable as Ras the Destroyer himself. If Ras was meant to be a proponent of "black pride," then the invisible man would only respond to it as dangerous, destructive foolishness.

The one count on which Ras and the invisible man concurred was their anti-white attitude which the protagonist revealed when he walked out on the Brotherhood. To him, Jack and all his white political friends were nothing but bigoted dogmatists. They were no better than the Nortons of this world, using blacks like Bledsoe for their own exploitative advantages.

The invisible man would never make a qualified distinction between the varied mind sets of white men. It never occurred to him to think that, for instance, Norton's and Jack's outlook on history was antithetic. Nor did he believe that whites representing different class interests could ever hold divergent views towards Black people. And least of all would he ever believe that he might have more in common with Norton than Jack ever could as a Communist.

None of these ideas ever occurred to the invisible man, even when he was accused by Jack of being a "petty individualist" and an "opportunist" which he definitely was. Instead, he could only insult Jack in his private mind when Jack made accurate analytic observations like

"...sometimes the difference between individual and organised indignation is the difference between criminal and political action."¹²⁶ To the protagonist, anything the white man said aroused his cynical suspicion such that he felt, "He only wanted to use me for something."¹²⁷ He never appreciated either the issues with which Jack was concerned or the ideology that he employed. He never questioned "who shall determine the direction of events"¹²⁸ since he never actually believed that men or women, be they black or white, could change the course of history. He was too much of a fatalist for that. He was so much of a cynic that he could only mock the radical white man when he observed that,

"...we stand at a terminal point in history, at a moment of supreme world crisis. Destruction lies ahead unless things are changed. And things must be changed. And changed by the people. Because Brother, the enemies of man are dispossessing the world."¹²⁹

In the invisible man's mind, Norton was a bit better than Jack for blacks because at least Norton never would suggest that they could actually get involved in "the futile game of making history." He would never build up any foolish hopes that there could be a better world in this life in the way that Jack tried to do, using the likes of Clifton and the invisible man.

The fact that the protagonist never understood Jack's perspective on the world was made plain in the former's distorted interpretation of historical materialism. He seemed to feel that just because Jack's concern was "making history," that Jack believed everyone who did not belong to the Brotherhood lived "outside of history." As such, this was realm where the invisible man wanted to run since it was only there that he could conceivably escape all the "exploitation..condescension"

and racism of the white man's world. Only "outside of history" and inside the realm of his mind could the black man survive in that savagely racist place called America.

Ellison personified this manner of imaginative escape and frivolous "freedom" in his charlatan Rinehart who the invisible man explained was "ready to do anything."¹³⁰ Rinehart would become one of the most admirable characters the invisible man would ever meet in his whole kaleiscope experience. The embodiment of anarchy and lawlessness, Rinehart dared to defy all authority. He defied all definition, convention, and law. He was a marvelous master of social charades, a mystifying performer who could never be casually classified since he had fully learned what the Vet had called "the white man's game" and played with such dexterity that he was even able to "raise the ante", and win.

Rinehart was a man who, like all the house niggers in Ellison's book, felt perfectly "free" to live above all systems of social ethics and morality. He, like they, preferred to pursue piecemeal privileges, living above all law in a realm that was rightfully called "chaos." Rinehart would fascinate the invisible man with his mystifications and acrobatic charms. He seemed to embody something extraordinary that the invisible man had to learn if he was to survive in the "real" world. In effect, Rinehart would be the man to finally teach him most about the supposed truth, beauty, and freedom of "invisibility".

His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at

home. Perhaps only Rine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was always a lie.¹³¹

If Rinehart was an amoral rascal, an ultraflexible rogue, and the epitome of the most perfectly adaptable house nigger, then his life style was nothing less than extremely appealing to the invisible man who concluded that Rinehart showed him "the way" to survive. It was by living "outside of history" and inside one's mind. It was in the chaos of anarchist thought that one could be "free" to live separate and apart from all society history, and all politics and even from the "reality which seemed solely to be controlled by white men."

It was in Rinehart that the invisible man finally announced his alliance, his idealism, his individualism and his fierce rejection for all that remained of dialectical materialism. Identification with Rinehart's wily ways exposed invisible man's secret aspiration to learn and master "the game," to "raise the ante" and then break all the rules just as every American dreamer aspired to do.

In Rinehart, he finally saw that playing "the game" posed not only a grim possibility of defeat," but also a new style of living like Rinehart. Now he saw that he too could live his life like a game of charades, playing the part, like Rinehart, of the cunning chameleon. He now saw that his "invisibility" afforded him that chance since it was from that point of view that he could explore his own imagination. And in his private mind, he could slip out of not just history, society, and the Black world, but out of his own skin as well. Disembodied, though not defeated, the invisible man finally found an impeccable path to "freedom" and a way to stay inside the white man's house! It was by affirming his invisibility and going underground.

CONCLUSION

The development of Black American literature in the last century has been one of the most dynamic and multi-dimensional achievement in recent Western cultural history. It has been reflective of the global trend and feeling of Third world people everywhere who have sought ways to creatively communicate their problems, aspirations, and idiosyncracies. Especially since World War Two when the process of decolonisation picked up pace, the world has witnessed a whole new generation of Third world writers with African and Black Diasporan artists, being some of the best and brightest, some of the most expansive, experimental and provocative.

This dissertation has not pretended to be exhaustive in its exploration of either black American literature as a whole, or the implications of the all issues addressed. It has however attempted to explore certain issues of literary criticism and to seek new and better criteria by which to assess an author's creative contribution to black literature.

One key question we have sought to ask is whether a writer is a friend or foe of the black community. We have also tried to select some of the best examples of writing by men and women who we feel might fall into the category that Malcolm X called the "house negro" or "house nigger." We have taken samples of their poetry and plays as well as their autobiographies and novels in order, to explain ways in which we felt they "fill the bill" for being "cultural opportunists" in their literary careers.

From our perspective, Ralph Ellison is one of the biggest culprits as we have tried to show in our review of his novel, Invisible Man. The book is one of the best-known works of black American literature. It has been highly acclaimed by the white "robbers" and assimilated black intelligentsia. We have also sought to explore the ways in which Ellison has served the robbers' interests with his writing. We have felt that his negative interpretation of black American history was a useful criterion by which to judge the quality of his social vision and the character of his class position. Our analysis has not only aimed at exposing Ellison, but other black American writers who we believe form a long line of opportunistic literary house niggers. Our point has been to prove that just because a writer is Black, he is not necessarily a "friend" to black people. Nor does his art necessarily serve the interests of black Americans in any fundamental sense.

Our ultimate aim has been to advance the cause of literary criticism by taking off from where negritude critics stopped at the end of the sixties. Our feeling has been that this aim could only be achieved by going beyond "race" as the sole criterion by which to judge a writer's contribution to a positive view of black people. We have tried to observe that the writer's class position and not only his race, is just as important in advancing the cause of Black liberation. In this respect, we have also tried to look at racism itself as a legacy of western imperialism, and not a fixed fact of life and history. On this ground, we have tried to show that a writer's blackness does not necessarily assure the reader that his class interests are in keeping with those of the majority of blacks. We have suggested that "race" must be coupled with "class outlook" in order to assess whether a writer is finally a friend or a foe of the black community.

We began from the premise that there are two antithetical views of Black history and Black writing, one which affirms black history and the struggles black people have faced, and one which negates the Black experience, either by insinuation or by outright insult. One view affirms Black people's contribution to history and society while the other does not see Blacks as integral, active makers of human history.

Along this scone line, the black writers themselves have seemed to hold two opposing views of themselves. One group has seen itself as part and parcel of the black community, while the other has held itself aloof, above and removed from the daily activities of Black people. One has identified with the black working class and has felt it had a responsible role to play by writing to enlighten as well as to entertain. The other however has erected its art "for its own sake." It has preferred to work removed from the working class, either up in its "ivory tower" or, as in Ralph Ellison's case, "underground," as an "invisible" artistic man. Either way, the latter group does not choose to identify with the Black mass. It preferred to feel "elite" and far superior to ordinary Blacks.

With this dialectric view of black American literature in mind, one can see that writers easily fall into one of the two categories. They fall into being either "field" or "house niggers" as Malcolm X wrote:

There were two kinds of Negroes (during slavery). There was that old house Negro and the field Negro. And the house Negro always looked out for his master. When the field Negroes got too much out of line, he held them back in check. He put them back on the plantation.¹³²

Of the two, it is the field Negro or "nigger" outlook alone that incorporates both criteria of colour and class. It is this view that allows the critic to accurately assess the identify of the Black writer, whether he is "friend or foe". It understands that the "house Negro" or "Nigger" may very well be black, but that he still identifies with his rich white master far more than he does with black working class. And it is this view that explains the way house niggers have historically been used to subvert and sabotage efforts by the black mass to win its liberation.

Having no special privileges such as those few extended to Blacks inside the white master's house, the field Negro remains a friend to the Black mass since he identifies wholly with them. This was true of Martin Delaney's slave character Blake who staged a country-wide Black revolt before Emancipation. It was true of a number of Black American writers as well. Men and women like the young Frederick Douglass, Dr. WEB DuBois, and Richard Wright, Malcolm X, Angela Davis and George Jackson, all identified fully with the struggles of the Black mass and said so explicitly through their writings. As such, although we have tried to trace a "house nigger tradition" in Black American literature, we have also been aware that there is a rich, wide and vibrant literary tradition created by men and women who one can call "field niggers."

Field niggers in Black America have always understood that an artist's Negritude views and his black skin have never been sufficient criteria to conclusively judge a writer's affinity for the black majority. As Malcolm X put it, a black writer might just as easily be a spy for the white master, watching to see "...when the field Negroes got too much out of line." The field negro has always understood that the house nigger or "Home Guard" (as he was called in the Kenyan context) was the service to rich whites, that he was used to hold back the tide of Black resistance.

The field nigger writer has always had a larger, more comprehensive and coherent view on the world, and has been able to identify his oppression as part of a larger system, not just a function of racism. For him Black history and culture have a positive content. Both express everyday elements of ordinary life, including Black people's struggles against class and racial oppression. What is more, the field nigger has been alert and attuned to the realities of social change. He has been aware that nothing ever remained static or fixed, but that everything is always in a state of perpetual flux and change. He has perceived that he had an active part to play, as a progressive agent of social change. He has seen that his writing is an effective weapon against economic, social and cultural oppression. But his artistic attack has never been against white people alone, since his analysis of an imperialist system effects the lives of both Black people and whites of the working class. He has thus looked to the root causes of racism and challenged the house niggers as well as their white masters.

The field nigger is not someone given to disillusionment or despair, unlike a man like Ralph Ellison, for instance, who in the last paragraphs of Invisible Man described himself as "a desperate man." Nor has the field nigger held any illusions about the nature of imperialist power. He has been a social realist who understands that his enemy will never willingly let go his hold on the reins of his imperial rule. As such, white rule along with its Black house nigger aids, would have to be fought as part of a larger social struggle and against economic imperialism. The field nigger writer's weapon has been his pen while his writing has been a perceived part of a larger political and cultural arsenal against reactionary force. His words are to be used to educate and infuse the Black mass with a revolutionary ardour and consciousness.

Literature has thus been seen as part of the intellectual means of advancing a life and death struggle in the service of the Black majority.

In this sense vein, the field nigger critic has had a similar responsibility and role to play insofar as he has had to use his revolutionary outlook as a means of analysing the robbers' rule in society. His work has also been to expose the illusions, the ignorance, and even the obsequious attitudes of house niggers writers like Ralph Ellison. It has been for him or her to support the black struggle for social justice by analysing everything from the class position of the black writer to the idea that "integration" into the prevailing racist social system as sufficient of itself to assure real Black liberation. It has been for the field nigger critic to identify the assimilated airs of Black writers like Ralph Ellison who finally, we feel, are foes to Blacks in their quest for liberation.

One fine example of a field nigger critic was the brilliant Black leader from Guinea Bissau, Amilcar Cabral, who explained why he felt that the imperialists's policy in Africa had failed.

...the only so-called positive solution which the colonial power put forward to repudiate the subject people's cultural resistance was "assimilation." But the complete failure of the policy of "progressive assimilation" of native population is living proof of both the falsehood of this theory and of the capacity of the subject people to resist.¹³³

It has been in Cabral's spirit of serving his people as a field nigger critic that we have sought to explore the house nigger tradition in Black American literature. We have tried to expose this tradition in Black

American literature. We have tried to expose this tradition as one element, but not the whole, of Black American literature. We have seen it exemplified by a character in Ellison's book like the Grandfather who was a "spy" for the white master and a "traitor" to the black community. We have seen the writer himself embodying such assimilationist attitudes. And we have focused specifically on Invisible Man as an excellent example of house nigger literature because it has been acclaimed by the Western press as a masterpiece of black American literature.

Finally, in our exploration of new criteria by which to judge the pros and cons of Black American literature, we have centred our attention on the concept of Black history. In so doing, we have found out the sort of service that the house nigger writer has provided on behalf of the dominant robber class culture insofar as his literature has been used to contain social change, and to confuse black people's minds, and so to consolidate the power of the ruling class. Booker T. Washington was put to this use more than a century ago when he preached to Black American people that they accommodate themselves to the new, but still racist, social and economic order in America. He advised that they leave the plantations peaceably, and quietly take their place as wage slaves within the emergent system of northern capitalist industrial production. He was all for nonviolence and for an orderly integration of Blacks into factory life. But on the issue of social equality and cultural resistance, Booker T. was nothing but a flagrant, albeit fastidious house nigger.

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly, and the progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forces. 14

Less than a hundred years later, Ralph Ellison picked up Booker T.'s gauntlet and the house nigger heritage that he left. He became one of the "wisest" of the wise, having ostensibly assimilated all of the elder's advice. But where Booker T. had been useful to the white robbers of the post-Civil War America age, Ellison has been effective in the post-World War Two days. 1952, the year Invisible Man was published, was also a peak year in the "Red Scare", hysteria in recent American history. It was a time when men like Joe McCarthey and Richard Nixon attacked the organisation and the intellectuals supposedly associated with the Communist Party U.S.A. From our point of view, Invisible Man fitted perfectly into this anti-communist campaign, such that if the robbers had actually asked a Black man to write an explicitly anti-Communist tract, they could not have been more thrilled to see Ellison's Invisible Man on the book stands.

Though never a Communist Party member himself, Ellison obviously felt he was knowledgeable enough about its activities, organisation and ideology to write with authority and competence. We have tried in our writing to debunk Ellison's air of insight and accuracy to reveal his house nigger tendencies, and to expose some of his more flagrant distortions and misinterpretations of the American left in the last Chapter of this dissertation. Ellison in fact has access to loads of ascerbic information on the workings of the C.P.U.S.A. from his association with another Black American writer, Richard Wright.

Having joined and then jettisoned out of the C.P. after a series of unfortunate incidences, Wright was ripe in his desire to destroy any Black American tendencies of others towards following in his footsteps.

From reading his autobiography Black Boy, one can understand Wright's acute feelings against American social injustice. His "field nigger" inclinations were subsequently expressed during the day of the Great Depression when he worked, first with the Federal Writers Project, and later for leftist journals like New Masses which he for a time actually edited. But his disillusionment with the American left seemed to set in soon after that when in the early 1940's, he wholly disassociated himself from any overt political involvement or left-leaning political writing. Shifting gears towards assimilation into white mainstream writing and into a house nigger style, Wright's concern now became that of communicating the complexities of "the human condition" as they were felt by the black individual. His fiery style of writing was then be employed to openly denounce the Left. And in a tract like The God that Failed, he flagrantly attacked the American Communist Party.

Ellison must have read and discussed extensively with Wright. He undoubtedly appreciated and probably employed his personal experience in Invisible Man. Even so, he never actually said so in essays like those found in Shadow and Act. Nor did he probably put Wright on the same plain of artistry as himself. For his pronounced preoccupation was not to identify with any black writer, however much he might have agreed with his ideology. His concern was to carve out a place for himself within the world of American letters, a world which he had already identified as emphatically white. Even so, all white letters were not necessarily equal to Ellison's since he never had much to say about social critics and white "field niggers" like Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser or even H.L. Mencken. He had far more in common with rugged individualists like Hemingway and southern seers like Faulkner. These

were the in-house robber writers whose elegant and eloquent style that Ellison struggled hard to emulate in order to acquire as many spoils of the "Cold War" cultural campaign that the masters and the robbers could afford to give him.

Ellison no doubt has played his "house nigger" part in defusing Black American people's determination to be liberated. But even as Amilcar Cabral wrote twenty years after the American "Red Scare," the white robber's policy of "progressive assimilation" (of a few house niggers into the system) was bound to fail. The policy could not possibly stifle cultural resistance for long, while all the field niggers were still agitating "out on the plantation." In fact, it was just two years after Ellison's book came out that a calm little old black lady named Rosa Parks set off a chain of black reaction and revolt, the effects of which are still being felt today. Rosa Parks' refused to get out of the "all-white" section of a southern bus would ignite the type of black "agitation" for social change that men like Booker T. and Ellison found so abhorrent. It was this sort of social "folly" that was subsequently to inspire the Black Power Movement of the 1960's.

As we have stated, we have hoped to have advanced the cause of literary criticism in ways that go beyond Black Power and Black Aesthetics to arrive at a more profound basis for understanding black American literature. Ours is an interpretation which hinges on a materialist understanding of history and society, and which situates literature right at the centre - not at the outskirts - of the Black community's cultural experience.

FOOTNOTES

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