Black Magnolias

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Towards A Black Southern Aesthetic: Beyond the Black Aesthetic
by Ronda Penrice

They tell me:
"wear de South
on your lapel for honor child
I earn it for you."
---Ramona L. Hyman,
African American Review,
(Volume 27, Number 1, 134)

Although recent scholarship has produced formidable attacks against understood but silent assertions of white privilege through its interrogations of "whiteness" and its fiery acknowledgments of the true African-European hybridity of American culture in general and not just African American culture specifically, Thadious M. Davis's observations in her 1988 essay, "Expanding the Limits: The Intersection of Race and Region," notes that a curious result of studies of the South has been ". . . whites in the South [have become] simply 'Southerners' with no racial designation, but blacks in the South [have become] simply 'blacks' without a regional designation" (4). So, despite the continual assertions of African-European hybridity in the South especially, beliefs that the South is the sole province of White people, White men particularly, still remain true. But while Davis's observation refers to perceptions of the South as a whole, scholar Jan Cooper's lament that "It is a shame that such separate but equal--. . . --attitudes still prevail in the discussion of Southern Literature" (58) in her very necessary essay "Zora Neale Hurston Was Always a Southerner Too" suggest that Davis's observations are particularly acute in Southern Literature. While Cooper's comment is specifically aimed at scholarly explorations of the Southern Renaissance movement that have excluded the work of Black Southern writer Zora Neale Hurston, so pervasive are her observations here that they so easily apply to Southern Literature as a whole. Although both Cooper and Davis fail to explain the exclusion of Black people in all things Southern beyond the customary charge of racism, the protest element of Black Southern writing is key. The fact that much of Black Southern writing not only speaks against racism but directly challenges the myths upon which that house is built might explain Black exclusion more clearly.

"Much of black Southern literature," writes John Oliver Killens in his introduction to Black Southern Voices, "is about the call to struggle and against the abjectness of acceptance" (2). Because as Killens notes, "The white Southern literary voice is, in large measure, a voice of complacency and contentment [as far as the Black condition in the South, in the United States, is concerned]" (2). And while some contemporary scholars of White Southern Literature may cite writers such as Lillian Smith, Carson McCullers and Flannery O' Connor as the exceptions to Killens' assessments, there can be no doubt that many Black and White Southern writers demonstrate vastly different perspectives. The noted Black Southernist Jerry Ward has argued that "The very concept of black South is based on what Lerone Bennett once called 'parahistory,' the possibility that Euro-Americans and African-Americans in the

South occupied the same space but that their perceptions of time and its significance were fundamentally different" (7-8). To validate and support his claim, Ward looks towards perceptions of cotton. "One man looks at a field of cotton," writes Ward, "envisions wealth, and sings '...one among the many ends for which/God makes us great and rich! [while] Another man looks at the same field, thinks of the merciless sun and back pains, and sings 'Nobody knows de trouble I see, Lord' (6)." These perceptions, as Ward concludes, are radically different. Thus, again, as John Oliver Killens continually asserted, much of Black Southern writing contradicts and/or counteracts the assumptions of White Southern writers, particularly early White Southern writers, whose characterizations so often painted Black Southerners as they wished them to be and very rarely as they were.

Jerrold Hirsh, in his 1989 foreword to B.A. Botkin's very influential *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*, which relies on the actual things once enslaved people said about their own conditions, discusses the negative impact that Black characterizations written by White writers from the South has had on popular culture. Hirsch observes that in poetry and fiction created by white southern authors, the words put into the mouths of Afro-American characters became the voices that reached the public forum: Comic darkies. Contented darkies Devoted darkies. Ridiculously superstitious darkies. (x) Citing Virginia writer Thomas Nelson Page's "Marse Chan," which appeared in 1887, where the character Sam, a former slave referring to slavery, declares that 'Dem wuz good ole times, marster--de bes' Sam ever see! Niggers didn' hed nothin' 't all to do...' (x), Hirsch states that "Page's darkies were the models for countless other literary, popular, and folk creations" (x). Page, it should be noted, was building upon work such as that of antebellum writer William Gilmore Simms. In novels such as *The Yemassee* (1835), *Woodcraft* (1854) and *The Forayers* (1855), Simms, according to Alan Rose, in Chapter 2, "Demonic Vision and the Conventions of Antebellum Southern Fiction" in his interesting book *Demonic Vision: Racial Fantasy and Southern Fiction*, presents Black characters who defend slavery. Rose notes that *Woodcraft* and *The Forayers* in particular were conceived "as answers to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and accordingly placed special emphasis upon the depiction of slavery" (42). In *Yemassee*, the enslaved Hector who precedes Page's Sam says in grave seriousness, "I dam to hell, mossa, if I guine to be free! . . . Tis unpossible, mossa, . . . De ting aint right; and enty I know wha' kind of ting freedom is wid black man?" (43). Such archetypes are the background for Southern fiction written by White Southern writers such as Thomas Dixon, Jr. and, yes, William Faulkner in the twentieth century; this is the tradition upon which many of their Black characterizations have been built.

Of these characterizations, Ralph Ellison, in his essay "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," writes: "Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word" (81). Ellison, who, in this essay, even takes William Faulkner to task, summarizes that "Thus it is unfortunate for the Negro that the most powerful formulations of modern American fictional words have been so slanted against him that when he approaches for a glimpse of himself he discovers an image drained of humanity" (81-82). Therefore, if the importance that a society assigns its writers stems in any part from the fact that they reflect not only their

individual values but those of their respective communities, then Black Southern writers must sit at the Southern Literature table also.

But Black Southern writers must not simply ask for a chair at the table; they must take a seat. While many White writers in general and White Southern writers in particular have presented unrealistic portrayals of Black Southerners, many Black writers have ignored those experiences altogether, even those whose origins are Southern. As a matter of fact, since the publication of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, which became a national bestseller, meaning that it reached a large white readership, Black literature has been dominated by stories about Northern cities, specifically about Northern ghettos. As John Oliver Killens observes, "even in the 1960s," in the throes of the Civil Rights Movement, a largely Southern movement, and later the Black Power Movement, a largely Urban movement, "...black writers seemed to relegate the Southern black experience to a state of unimportance and irrelevance, seemed to have thought that the only happenings worth writing about were those occurring in such Northern urban areas as Harlem, Chicago's South Side, and Detroit" (2). This, of course, is problematic, because while, as Black Southern writer Ernest Gaines has said, "So much of our literature deals with the big-city ghettos,...we existed long before we came to the big city" (Tarshis, 74).

And Gaines is right; the first arrival of Africans to what is now the United States is listed as 1619. These Africans were brought to Jamestown, Virginia, to what is now the South. Thus, the basis of Black American culture is in the South; it was formed in the South. And even though there have always been Black people in some parts of the North, the majority of the Black population in the United States has lived in the South. Even in the 1960s, after substantial migrations North, "about 52 percent of all Blacks in the United States resided in the South..." (Christian, 403). While this is not the whopping 90 percent of 1900, it is still significant, especially when one considers the predominance of Northern themes in African American literature. Thus, again, it is problematic that the Black Southern experience is so underrepresented in African American literature. But what has made this exclusion most problematic is that much of it has occurred at the hands of Southerners. Scholar Addison Gayle, Jr., who was born in Newport News, Virginia and later migrated North, responding to Killens's charge that Black writers do not write about the South, writes in his essay, "Reclaiming the Southern Experience: The Black Aesthetic 10 Years Later" "I thought immediately about my own writing and discerned an almost purposeful absence of my Southern experiences, as if, somehow, what I had known there and endured there and hated there and loved there had been obliterated by my experiences in the North; . . . (556).

Gayle goes on to suggest that the exclusion of the Black Southern voice by Black Southerners themselves in the 1960s and 1970s was "due, perhaps, to the fact that the Black Aesthetic movement was an urban phenomenon, pushed into actuality by the Black Power Movement of the 1960's to serve as the cultural arm of the Black Nationalist Movement" (556-557). And this is true to a certain extent. For, as Black people continued to move from the South to the North, from the country to the city, mainstream images of Black people began to change as well. By the 1960s, Black Northerners were not seen as "contented darkies," those were believed to be the images of Black Southerners. Of this

development, scholar Houston A. Baker, in his essay, "From the Improbable Fields Down South," observes that...the outlines of this traditional picture of passivity began to waver during the 1964 Harlem riot, and after holocausts had swept Watts, Oklahoma City, and Newark. The mass media showed stern, active, and embittered men who bore little resemblance to the passive black migrants delineated by a host of studies (110). According to Lee Rainwater, whom Baker quotes for added support:

> This focus perfectly mirrored and was perhaps also stimulated by, the shift from primarily passive images of Negroes that were congenial to traditional Southern-oriented race studies to more aggressive images congenial to studies in the big Northern cities particularly as, one by one, they were struck by ghetto riots (110).

Thus, some Black writers of the 1960s and 1970s particularly internalized the images of Black Southerners advanced by many White Southerners. "Most of your black writers who have left the South," Ernest Gaines told interviewer Jerome Tarshis, "have ignored the black peasantry, the people who work the land, as though they want to forget that completely" (74). Gaines intimates these Black writers "are ashamed of things in the past, or that they are ashamed of the people of the past" (75). But, as Thadious Davis remarks in "Expanding the Limits: The Intersection of Race and Region," non-Southern writers such as Toni Morrison, David Bradley, Leon Forrest and Sherley Anne Williams have books that deal explicitly with the Black Southern experience (7); so, that is beginning to change.

For a scholar such as Farah Jasmine Griffin, the South figures prominently in a number of works by Black artists in the twentieth century. In her book *"Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative*, Griffin argues that "the migration narrative emerges as one of the twentieth century's dominant forms of African-American cultural production" (3). The "African-American cultural production" Griffin refers to, while dominated by works of literature, is not restricted to them. Paintings by Jacob Lawrence, blues lyrics sung by Bessie Smith, even rap songs by Arrested Development, are all worthy of analysis for Griffin. Here, however, literature is the preoccupation. As to Griffin's creation of a paradigm in which to analyze such production, it seems only logical. When one considers that 90 percent of the Black population lived in the South in 1900 and just 52 percent of the Black population lived in the South in 1960, again, it appears only logical that the South figure prominently in African American work in this century. The transformation of a largely Black Southern culture to a Black Northern culture was profound.

But let us not see this assertion of the South's prominence in "African-American cultural production in the twentieth century" as a contradiction of John Oliver Killens' charge that "black writers [especially in the 1960s] seemed to relegate the Southern black experience to a state of unimportance and irrelevance..." (2). For, even as Griffin notes, although the South figures prominently, "Most migration narratives offer a catalyst for leaving the South" (4). Because these "narratives tend to represent the South as a site of terror and exploitation" (5), as one would suspect, such narratives do not often display the complexities of pleasure, even minimally, in the context of such pain. Thus, Baker's

intimation that Black Southerners are seen as passive whereas Black Northerners are seen as aggressive find support here. Returning to Thadious M. Davis' observation that some non-Southern writers had works that were either set in the South or dealt significantly with the Black Southern experience, one can turn to Farah Jasmine Griffin for further explanation. According to Griffin, writers such as Morrison identify the South "as a site of the ancestor" (5). In this scenario, according to Griffin, "the South becomes a place where black blood earns a black birthright to the land, a locus of history, culture, and possible redemption" (5). This scenario is close to what John Oliver Killens intended when he charged Black writers to write about the Black Southern experience. Unfortunately, however, Griffin's assertions, while useful for "migration narratives" are limited for narratives set in the South only. Bearing this in mind, what "Black and Southern: Considerations of Regional and Cultural Identity in Selected Works by Ernest Gaines, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison" attempts to do is recognize that within the Black Aesthetic in African American Literature, there exists a Black Southern Aesthetic.

Alice Walker, in her 1970 essay "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," proclaims that "the richness of the black writer's experience in the South can be remarkable, though some people may not think so" (18). In this essay, Walker attempts to detail what that richness is. First and foremost, according to Walker, "What the black Southern writer inherits as a natural right is a sense of community"(sic), (17). This sense of community is extremely important. Because Black Southerners, especially in times past, were so cruelly oppressed, solidarity was a key tool for survival. Thus, people with limited resources had to combine with others who had limited resources also to even get by. Therefore, a key element of the Black Southern Aesthetic has to be not only a sense of community but a truer sense of community, one that is without class pretensions, one that expresses egalitarian values. The great Civil Rights activist Ella Baker has said of her childhood, "Where we lived there was no sense of social hierarchy in terms of those who have, having the right to look down upon, or to evaluate as a lesser breed, those who didn't have" (Payne, 80). According to Baker, this attitude among her maternal grandparents especially probably came from their experiences with enslavement. More often than not in narratives written by or about Black Southern communities, "professionals" such as teachers and preachers interact freely with other members of the Black community. While one cannot say that there was no tension, one can say that such tension was not promoted. But this experience with enslavement and other forms of acute racial oppression has also resulted in another element of the Black Southern Aesthetic, something that Alice Walker terms "double vision." According to Walker, the Black Southern writer possesses a "double vision" because "...not only is he in the position to see his own world, and its close community...but also he is capable of knowing with remarkably silent accuracy, the people who make up the larger world that surrounds and suppresses his own" (19). Thus, many Black Southern writers, unlike their White counterparts, avoid the grotesque caricatures of White Southerners that mark, as aforementioned, so many characterizations of Black Southerners by White Southern writers. Because Black people, as Toni Morrison once remarked to White interviewer Bonnie Angelo, have "had to distinguish among you because our lives depended on it" (256), the average Black writer knows far more about the average White person than vice versa; and the Black Southern writer knows infinitely more than the Black writer who

lives in other parts of the United States because their livelihoods in the South have made close proximity to White people a necessity.

Also, the Black Southern Aesthetic is dependent upon a "country" or "folk" element. For not only did an overwhelming majority of Black people prior to 1960 live in the South, but they also lived in the country; they were rural people. In his entry under "Northern Cities, Blacks in" in the Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Ronald Bailey writes "In 1900, 9 of every 10 black people lived in the South and about 8 of every 10 lived in rural areas"(181). Therefore, when we speak of migration, we are speaking, as the Smithsonian's very popular 1988 exhibit proclaimed of a transformation of Black Americans "From Field to Factory." As Alice Walker notes with Richard Wright, "For the black Southern writer, coming straight out of the country, as Wright did--Natchez and Jackson are still not as citified as they like to think they are--there is a world of comparisons;..." (18). And though, these comparisons are probably most adept in the migration narrative, often Black Southern writers such as Walker and especially Gaines are able to capture the essence of Black country life because they have lived in Northern cities and have catalogued, if only to themselves, the differences thus making their vision of their rural, Southern communities even tighter. Structurally, though, the Black Southern Aesthetic is distinguishing. Often the emphasis is on a spoken story. As a result, the works of Ernest Gaines, for example, literally speak to his readers. This is, as many have noted, because the African American literary tradition as a whole is invested heavily in an oral culture. Also, building upon the ideas of community and communalism, these narratives feature "multiple voicings." Thus, as Gayl Jones observes in her chapter entitled "Freeing the Voice: Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*" in her book *Liberating Voices*, the "possibilities of other voices" is not diminished (164). The result, according to Jones, is: "There is the sense of the range and dynamics of personalities in both communities, and theories (social and political) of how people should behave do not restrict the possibilities of relationships, character, or language" (164).

Additionally, however, there is a documentary aspect to much of the writing produced by Black Southern writers as Herman Beavers observes in his chapter titled "Voices from the Underground: Conspiracy, Intimacy and Voice in Gaines' Fictions" in his book *Wrestling Angels into Song: The Fictions of Ernest J. Gaines and James Alan McPherson* (129). But Black Southern writing need not be characterized as documentary only as is the case with much of Richard Wright's work. Beavers observes that there is a dual purpose in Black Southern writing, that it is not only documentary but transcendent as well. Thus, as Alice Walker writes of the Black Southern writer's responsibilities in "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience." We inherit a great responsibility as well, for we must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love (21). For Beavers, this is the transcendent quality of Black Southern writing that "attempts to situate African American folk culture as a resistant, coherent force out of which characters are able to manifest some semblance of either self-consciousness or self-recovery" (129). The Black Southern Aesthetic, as it's been conceptualized thus far, focuses, first and foremost, upon community. Often, there is a sense of what Alice Walker has termed "double vision" which results in

accurate portrayals of not only Black Southerners but White Southerners as well. In addition, the Black Southern Aesthetic emphasizes orality. Hence, the written story reads as a spoken story or, rather, as the quality of a storyteller and not simply that of a writer. Returning again to an aspect of community that is egalitarian in nature, for Black Southern writing contains strong elements of humanism, the result in the narrative is that of "multiple voicings," meaning that there is usually a predominate voice but not a dominating one. Also, although Black Southern writing is strongly documentary, as Herman Beavers suggest, it is also and should be transcendent. Another important structural detail is the nonlinear nature of much Black writing, but Black Southern writing in particular. In the traditional narrative structure, a novel, story, what have you, there is a beginning, middle and end or, rather, a strict chronology of events. In much of Black writing, the end is in the beginning and the emphasis is not on what happens but rather how it happens. In addition, to these structural considerations, the individual is never as truly individualistic in African American literature as s/he is in literature written by White Americans. Once again, community is essential to African American literature in general and wholly indispensable to Black Southern Literature specifically.

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Etheridge Knight: A Memoir
by Ahmos Zu-Bolton II

In late1968, I was serving time in Germany as a Medic on a slave ship called the U.S. Army. It was pure slavery because I was drafted, involuntary servitude …style slavery. I worked at the plantation hospital, under the banner of the 549th Medical Company. The Head Nurse at the hospital was a stiff-lipped no-nonsense Black woman name SFC (that's Sergeant First Class for civilians) Lois Knight. I tried to stay out of Sergeant Knight's way. I saw her chew out a white medic one morning for not washing his hands before touching a patient. She called him every name in the book, then she made up some new ones. The poor white dude just stood there at attention while she ran the dozens on him and his whole bloodline. An hour later she was screaming in the face of a black medic who made the mistake of whistling at her. I tried to stay a long ways out of that sister's way.

One night they put me on CQ, which meant I had to answer the phone from midnight till morning revue. The phone didn't ring much that time of night, so I was making use of the typewriter at the main desk when in walked Sergeant Knight. She marched right over to me and looked over my shoulder, I froze. "You typing a poem?!" She asked and stated at the same time. "My brother is a poet," she continued as I turned to look at her. "He just published a book," she said and became a human being before my very eyes. She was no longer the meanest shit-talking SOB wearing a bra in the whole damn Army, Lois Ivy Knight was a beautiful down-home Black lady with a brother who done just published a book of poetry! We made small talk for a couple of minutes, then Lois said good night and walked lady-like out of the office, leaving me to my typing. The next day I found a package in my mailbox, with a note from Lois….er, Sergeant Knight. "This is a loan, please return. L.K." the note read. It was paper-clipped to a book – I stared at the cover, *Poems From Prison* by Etheridge Knight, Broadside Press – the year was 1968, and it would take me over 10 years to return that book (and her note, which I had been using as a bookmark) to Lois Knight.

In 1970 I was wandering down Sunset Blvd. in Los Angeles when I stopped by a bookstore that carried a lot what we use to call "underground" publications. They had an "Afro-American" corner, where I would always hangout to see what was happening. It was there that I found an anthology called *Black Voices from Prison*, edited by Sergeant Knight's brother, Etheridge. I remember carefully counting out my meager funds and buying the book. I remember feeling guilty because I still had Lois Knight's book and I had no idea where she was at, probably still in the Army. I remember carrying the anthology around with me, reading it in snatched, the way I always did in those days. I remember wondering for the first time about the prisons we all endure.

I always considered *Black Voices from Prison* Etheridge Knight's way of giving something back. After his release from prison he reached back to the cells to offer other inmates the publication spotlight where he had found a home. The anthology also contained my 3 favorite early Etheridge Knight poems: "The Idea of Ancestry," "He Sees Through Stone," and "Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital of the Criminal

Insane." "This poetry is a major announcement," Gwendolyn Brooks said of Knight's work, and during the early 70s Etheridge turned that announcement into productive years. He held teaching positions at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Hartford, and Lincoln University. His poetry was starting to appear in magazines and anthologies all over the country. His marriage to poet Sonia Sanchez had produced twin sons. In 1972 he received a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1973 he released another book, *Belly Song and Other Poems*. In 1974 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship, and took off for Africa. By the time1974 rolled around I had made my way to Washington DC. I was caught up in literary labors at Howard University, the glory of the DC poetry scene, and had gotten use to seeing Etheridge Knight's name in print. At the time I had no idea that brother Etheridge was continuing his battle with drug addiction, and was drifting in and out of treatment centers. I did hear that his marriage to Sanchez had ended, and that knowledge made me real sad, though at the time I had met neither of them.

The same day that my friend E. Ethelbert Miller handed me a copy of *Belly Song*, Alan Austin called and we closed the deal for me to become co-editor of *Black Box*, a magazine on tape. Etheridge Knight had resigned after editing the first 2 very promising issues, and I was left to finish his chores. I quickly made them my chores, and though I still had not met Etheridge, I was starting to think that there was something almost mythical about the way our careers intersect. We were two Mississippi born poets, both ex-Army Medics (his war was Korea, mine was Viet Nam), both interested in continuing the oral tradition in African-American literature. I talked with Etheridge Knight on the phone for over an hour before I agreed to co-edit *Black Box*. He gave me his blessings and agreed to do a special issue tape for the magazine. He also told me that his sister Lois was out of the Army and living in Texas. He promised to send me her address. *Black Box #3* would feature Sonia Sanchez and white poet Robert Bly. During my years with the magazine we would feature the voices of Lance Jeffers, Alvin Aubert, Sterling Brown, Lucille Clifton, Michael Harper, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Ethelbert Miller, Ishmael Reed, Quincy Troupe, Adesanya Alakoya, Mississippi's own Jerry W. Ward, and a host of other folk I can't remember right now.

Meanwhile, Etheridge was a whirlwind of literary activity. He turned his trip to Africa into a barnstorming tour. I remember Stephen Henderson saying that they were treating Etheridge like royalty over there. Dr. Henderson was Director of the Institute for the Arts & Humanities at Howard and seemed to be in touch with everybody. He was also editing an anthology called *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, which would become a classic. He said Etheridge's poetry had "elephant balls," while I was busy reading *Belly Song*. I always felt that B*elly Song* was, in many ways, Etheridge's signature book. Etheridge thought he was getting out of prison, but what he found in the outside world was something so akin to prison that he went deep into his gut to produce theses "belly songs" for his tribe to sing. Etheridge Knight had found his voice, now he wanted a choir, but what he got was a bittersweet ovation. While at Lincoln University, in Jefferson City Missouri, thirty minutes down the highway from where I am writing this, brother Etheridge emerged from his blues one night to pen the following poem:

My life, the quality of which
From the moment
My father grunted and comed
Until now
As the sounds of my words
Bruise your ears
IS
And can be felt
In the one word: DESPERATION

But you have to -feel for it"

This theme of "desperation," is a recurring cry in much of Knight's poetry, as are the twin themes of failure and rehabilitation. Knight might not be of the "confessional school of poetry," but he has visited the campus many times. Which brings me to two of Etheridge's "Missouri Haiku," from the same time period:

"Boone County"

"A blue pick/up truck
Roars past; Sun shines on shotgun
Leering in window"

"Mizzu"

"ROTC March:
Drum roll and die. White
blossoms Float in Summer air."

I stared a long time at those quick images: "Boone County" where I live, and "Mizzu," a code word for the University of Missouri, where I teach. Then I realized how familiar the images were, and I realized why. That "shotgun/ Leering in window" could've been in any place in Mississippi, and that ROTC student being trained to "drum roll and die" could've been studying at Ole Miss, in the middle of Faulkner country. I understand both images as a native Black male Mississippian, and that's a powerful memory.

1980 found me on Galveston Island. Galveston is a blue-collar vacation spot off the coast of Texas. I was running a publishing/distribution company called Energy BlackSouth/ Energy Earth Communications. One of the books on our poetry distribution list that year was *Born of a Woman*, by Etheridge Knight, fresh off the press from Houghton Mifflin Publishers. Etheridge emerged out of the 70s as, what Ethelbert and I use to call, "a brand name poet." He was like the old LeRoi Jones, with as many white fans as he had black folk from the 'hood. His poetry was called "major" by both sides of the track. He had been "poeting" (a term I think he invented, he used it enough) for years, and *Born of a Woman* only added to his mystique.

Energy BlackSouth/ Energy Earth had staged a successful Hoo-Doo Poetry and Culture Festival #3 on Galveston Island, and the next fest was scheduled for Austin Texas. I could make the drive between Galveston and Austin in my sleep, because my old VW Van knew the way. Kristen Mullen was Site-Coordinator for the Austin Fest and she was putting pressure on me to get her the names of the scheduled poets. Somehow, Etheridge Knight's name came up, and I remembered him telling me in one of our few telephone conversations that his sister Lois was living in Austin. The gods smiled on me as I found a Lois Knight listed in the phone book, and smiled again when Sergeant Knight's voice answered the phone. To make along story short I returned Lois Knight's book to her my next trip to Austin, about 13 years after she left it in my mailbox, on German soil. She was amazed that I still had it, and more amazed that I still had the note. So Lois called up her brother Etheridge and we arranged for Etheridge Knight to appear at the 4th Hoo-Doo Poetry and Culture Festival, and Book Fair…

…Etheridge read at the Martin Luther King branch of the Austin Public Library. Before the reading he and I wandered into the park behind the library to share some quiet time and smoke our cigarettes (it should be noted that Etheridge died of lung cancer). We talked about many things, the Army, Black Box, the national poetry scene, the last we were in Mississippi, our trips to Africa, how I almost made it to his Southern University reading in Baton Rouge, where we would've met, how he was on his way to SBCA in Tougaloo but the car went on strike, we would've met there, we missed each other in Atlanta because I was a day late and he left a day early – we tried to fill fifteen minutes with a lifetime of conversation as if we knew this might be the first and last time we meet, and it was…

Etheridge Knight knocked them out at Hoo-Doo Fest. He read with wit and wisdom, speaking in his tongues of sass and anger, of blues and of a passionate warrior of words, preaching love. Etheridge was *poeting, in* our best oral tradition, and his chant left us delighted and sober. The next day a group of Hoo-Doo folk joined in a reception for Etheridge at Lois Knight's home, on the outskirts of North Austin. Etheridge Knight was a gentleman, more than generous with his time, with his songs of continuing struggle, and his embrace of the culture that gave him voice, despite his lingering demons.

> *"I died in Korea from a shrapnel wound, and narcotics resurrected me," Etheridge is often quoted as saying. "I died," he continued, "in 1960 from a prison sentence & poetry brought me back to life."*

The last time I saw Etheridge Knight he was poeting in Austin. The next year Levi Frazier and his theatre group out of Memphis Tennessee staged a choreopoem of Etheridge's poetry at the 5thHoo-Doo Poetry & Culture Festival. The show was called *Knight's Song* and the festival was held in New Orleans. It turned out to be the final fest in the Hoo-Doo series.

By the time the University of Pittsburgh Press released *The Essential Etheridge*

Knight in 1986, I was living in New Orleans and running the Copastetic Community Book Center. I remember reading the book (we carried it in our poetry section), but I apparently didn't read it carefully, because in the spring of the year 2001, my wife Ywenboui took a course on the Black Arts Movement and one of the required readings was *The Essential Etheridge Knight*. While glancing at her copy of the book, I read the dedication page. Etheridge had dedicated the book to his family. After the list of names, his mother, his brother and sisters, he wrote "and in memory of my father, BuShie, my brother, Charles, and my sister Lois Ivy Knight." *in memory of*...

When Etheridge Knight died in 1991 I thought about writing this memoir. Telling how Etheridge and I met after years of knowing each other, telling how he became *my Ilu, my Talking Drum* (because in many ways he was the first Black poet I ever knew, if only through his sister), telling how I would've never experienced Black Box had he not been so gracious in passing the baton, and telling part of the story of how a black man born in Corinth Mississippi, dropped out of "the white man's high school," and became an internationally celebrated poet. Along the way he helped a black man born in Poplarville Mississippi, to know *poeting*…

It is done now, but I thought this writing would bring closure to my Etheridge Knight saga – now, somehow, I feel there's more...

Chapter Eight: BAM and Black Music
from *The Magic of Juju: An Appreciation of the Black Arts Movement*
by Kalamu ya Salaam

The Cutting Edge. Although all of the fields of artistic production were deeply affected by BAM, Black music remained the cutting edge and in many ways predated BAM in its revolutionary stance. During the BAM era, Black music (gospel, blues, jazz and popular), which consistently has been referred to as the "leading" African American cultural expression, also introduced major innovations and developments which affected all of popular culture in America.

For example, gospel music was revised and popularized by artists such as Rance Allen, Edwin Hawkins, D.J. Rodgers, Andrae Crouch and above all, The Staple Singers who completely revolutionized the form and content of contemporary gospel. During the BAM decade, gospel music could be heard on the "soul" and "Top 40" radio stations right next to the popular music of the day.

On the blues scene there was the development of a bevy of progressive young blues artists who were knowledgeable of and often proficient in traditional as well as contemporary blues styles. Chief among such blues artists was the charismatic Taj Mahal who eventually combined blues with reggae. Perhaps, the most inspirational of the blues trends was epitomized by B. B. King's highly political anthem "Why I Sing The Blues." In jazz the developments are too numerous to mention. Suffice it to say that artists such as John Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders, Gary Bartz, Doug and Jean Carn, Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln, McCoy Tyner and literally thousands of others produced music which explicitly commented on current political events and consciously infused non-Western and Africa elements into the new jazz.

In rhythm and blues, or "funk" as it was then called, one could not miss the message in the music--a message that was implicit in the double entendre of a number of lyrics (e.g. Issac Hayes' remake of "Our Day Will Come") as well as explicit in songs like Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Going To Come," Aretha Franklin's "Respect," Curtis Mayfield's "We're A Winner" and "Keep On Pushing," the Isley Brother's "Fight The Power," the O'Jay's entire album, *Ship Ahoy* (which opened describing the middle passage), and James Brown with "the" anthem of the period "(Say It Loud) I'm Black And I'm Proud."

James Brown is key to appreciating the radical changes that took place within music during the BAM era. He was the most popular artist during this period--his string of 16 number one R&B hits was matched only by Aretha Franklin. Although some may argue that Ms. Franklin was personally more popular, no one can seriously argue that she established an entire genre of music as Brown did in establishing funk, nor is Franklin's music copied and sampled as much as is Brown's music. Writing in the epilogue to Brown's autobiography, *James Brown, The Godfather Of Soul*, critic Dave Marsh proffers a strong case for Brown's supremacy.

As a singer, James Brown found his metier in the shout, not so much the gospel kind as the field holler. His cracked and rasping yell in "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," "I Got You (I Feel Good)," "Night Train," "Cold Sweat," "I Can't Stand Myself (When You Touch Me)," "Please Please Please," "Out of Sight," and "Get Up, I Feel Like Being Like a Sex Machine" doesn't just declare a man exulting in his search for and discovery of a new identity, but proclaims a new order of American popular music, one based on the triumph of polyrhythm over the restrictions of conventional Western harmonics and melodies...I once joked that one day in 1967, James Brown grew weary altogether of the tyranny of chord changes and so he banished them and thus begot "Cold Sweat." Looking back over his career now, I fail to see the humor. It's no joke, just the truth, the bare facts of what the man did--and if you don't think it amounted to much, try turning on the radio. You will hear a myriad of recordings in which everything is subordinated to beats--beats generally far less complex and subtly interwoven than those in the great James Brown hits (of which there are far more than those listed in the previous paragraph, perhaps three or four times as many). Beats heard today are often fragments taken directly from James Brown records a decade or more old. ...By critical acclimation, he is now quite clearly seen as the most influential American popular musician of the second half of the twentieth century. (My only qualm is whether "American" is too restrictive.) I would argue that as a radical innovator within popular music, only Louis Armstrong indisputably stands before him in the century's first half. [Marsh / pages 277-278]

As is frequently the case in African-American history, Brown was aesthetically progressive, radical even, and politically conservative. On the one hand, Brown produced a rhythm-based music which offered an explicit and widely influential challenge to existing standards of popular music. On the other hand, Brown endorsed Richard Nixon for President and was a strong advocate of assimilation as a solution to our people's problems. A particularly poignant example of Brown's view is contained in his autobiography.

A lot of people at that time besides Rap [Brown] and me were looking for ways to get justice. Not too long after that Apollo engagement [where James Brown and Rap Brown had a brief meeting] Otis Redding called me in Cincinnati.
"Bossman"--Otis always called me that--"I've got an idea I want you to help me with."
"What's that, Otis?"
"I want us to form a union of all black entertainers. We can start by getting all the singers and musicians that we know, and then we can get actors and dancers and the rest later on."
"What do you want to do that for?"
"Well, it would give us all more leverage in the business. No more getting messed over by the white promoters and managers and people in the record business."
"Naw, Otis," I said. "I don't want to go that way. You remember when the musicians union was like two separate unions, one for white and one for black? We just wound up second-class citizens. I don't think we ought to risk going back to that."
"It wouldn't be like that, Bossman. If the big stars stuck together, they could see to it that a lot more black entertainers got work and got treated fair."

"I can't do it, Otis. I don't believe in separatism. I think that's going backwards, and I don't want to be part of that." [Brown / page 176]

Brown acknowledges that his conservative political views, particularly his endorsement of Richard Nixon, often were the object of severe criticism from the Black community.

"The attacks on me and on other Afro-Americans who endorsed Mr. Nixon became vicious... Less than a week after I endorsed Mr. Nixon I did a show in Baltimore. There were pickets outside the arena discouraging people from coming to see my show. Usually I sold out all thirteen thousand seats there, but that night only about two thousand five hundred people showed up. I was disappointed. People just didn't understand. Even Mr. Neely, a Republican himself, said to me one time, 'I don't think endorsing Nixon was a very smart thing to do.'" [Brown / page 230]

The BAM era was not a period when one could divorce art from politics and simply be an entertainer--what side were you on vis-a-vis the struggle was a major question of the day that affected everyone. Brown's political conservatism notwithstanding, his peerless musical innovations stand as a major development incorporating BAM aesthetic principles, and even occasionally, as in the case of "Talking Loud and Saying Nothing" or "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)," also incorporating political principles consistent with BAM objectives.

Family Reunion
by C.W. Roberson

I have entitled this piece "Family Reunion," although it is essentially about racial reconciliation. Racial reconciliation is necessary for my family reunion to take place.

When I was given a choice between two subjects, and one was racial reconciliation, I thought, "Piece of cake." I was wrong. I got about three-quarters of the way through and couldn't get any further for some time. I was stuck, totally. The more I tried to write this piece, the more I remembered some of the words C. Leigh McInnis has written me on this subject, from the opposite point of view. Words about self-determination, the need for blacks to intermingle with and get support from those mostly likely to love and accept them--other blacks. Words about the need for African Americans to rid themselves of the self-hatred created by generations of self-serving white attitudes. His words were of such passion and eloquence that I can't summarize them without diminishing them, and I apologize for that. I hear his words in my mind, and I understand. Were I black, I might agree, but I don't know. I can only speak from my heart and from my life experiences.

Knowing who will be reading this piece in an afro-centered magazine, and who will be rightly judging it as something written by a "white" person, his words become more immediate and alive to me as I struggle to write something real and unburdened with the hypocrisy that sometimes creeps into words of the best intentions.

C. Leigh, although the most eloquent, was hardly the first person I'd heard explaining why black and white "should" have separation, why racial reconciliation is unneeded and unwanted. I've heard both those and other, different reasons from both blacks and whites. I can't agree with separatism, sensible as some of the arguments are.

Sensible or not, my desire for racial reconciliation is a desire whose roots are deep and spread in many directions. I can't tell anyone else, black or white, how they need to think on this subject, I can only offer my own (sometimes selfish) reasons why I will continue work to bridge the sides of the color divide. Each of you will have to settle the matter in your own heart, but my heart is committed, and I will not deny that commitment.

I need to reconcile with my family, and my sense of both blacks and whites as part of my family is very strong. It reaches back to the beginning of time, but becomes particularly strong in the span of the last three centuries.

What an artificial construct racial identity is. For, did we not all come from Adam? And did Eden not exist in Africa? In the recesses of time, human life came from Africa and spread through the world; we are truly all of one family; we carry the same human blood in our veins, the same DNA in our genes. In the more recent history of humans, which of us can claim racial purity (if separate racial purities were a possibility in life that sprang from a common source)? In a biblical sense and a very real scientific

sense, we are all family, a very large family.

It comes much closer and dearer than that to me, though; and also to millions of Americans, both "white" and "black," (as society has endeavored to label us and divide us). During those years in which European-Americans held African-Americans in bondage, no matter what was written, no matter what was said, no matter what was purported to have been believed about whites and blacks being different species, different races, or different branches of the human species, individuals proved time and again that we are all the same - simply humans. Individual humans lusted after, and sometimes loved one another, irregardless of color. Individuals produced progeny from couplings across all the human constructs of race. If some "white" parents did not accept their progeny as their own, it was their terrible and grievous error and their deep loss whether they realized or acknowledged it. Many of their mixed progeny coupled with "whites" and their progeny, in turn, had more "white" than "black" in their immediate heritage. Some escaped or, if free, moved, and passed for "white" in a new area. After the Civil War, this undoubtedly became even more common. There are multitudes of so-called "whites" with African heritage, and they probably don't even realize it. I also doubt there are many descendants of slaves in this country who do not have European blood in their veins. Whether any of you, or any of my "white" neighbors wish to acknowledge it or not, this is no less true. In all the myriad ways in which "whites" and "blacks" mingled and co-mingled in the first three centuries on this continent, we became family, again.

Let me get more personal with this line of thought.

I spent the first 30-odd years of my life in joyful surety that no matter whose ancestors were guilty of owning slaves, mine were not, by virtue of having been too poor. Then I found that I was suffering from the same misconceptions many other poor white southerners are prone to, perhaps because it's so difficult to acknowledge the truth to ourselves.

My uncle began to research our genealogy in an effort to qualify his wife, sisters and daughters for D.A.R.(Daughters of the American Revolution) and U.D.C. (United Daughters of the Confederacy) membership. When he printed his first genealogy book, it shook my world, my sense of self. Although they did not hold many slaves, probably not more than 3 or 4 at a time, my ancestors numbered among the slaveholders. Even though I don't try to apply today's morality to them, I was deeply disappointed and saddened at the loss of my family's perceived innocence. This was a keen pain to bear.

Even so, only in the last 10 years or so has the sense of my extended family began to work it's way into my mind. An occasional encounter with a Roberson in a newspaper whose face was dark would cause me a giggle as I thought of clipping it to send to my Uncle for inclusion in the ongoing genealogical project that had become his obsession . . . my uncle who was raised in the psychic darkness of rural white Mississippi in the beginning of the last century. After the laugh, though, came the ruminations on the real connections between me and these "other" Robersons.

I've read that former slaves frequently took on the last names of their previous owners after being freed, but that there was often a blood connection as well. It's something that assumes greater and great importance to me as the years go by. Then, I read the fascinating story that was in the Clarion Ledger this summer. It was about a "black" family reunion. A family member had tracked their genealogy back to their "white" family (and that family traces back to George Washington). A contact for genealogical information was established. An invitation from the "white" family, originating in Virginia, was issued to the "black" family to come to their next "white" reunion. Although, admittedly, not all the members of either side of the family were overjoyed at the prospect, just the idea of the invitation was strange and wondrous to consider. I wept as I read that story.

Since then, I've been doing what some people may consider to be odd in spare moments. I've been searching the web for my "other" family. Recently, I found a "Reconciliation" web page from Pennsylvania which is the product of someone named "Roberson." It was obvious to me (from reading the page) that this person was "black" in orientation, so I immediately wrote a "looking for family, do you have any connections in Mississippi" e-mail, with no mention of my melanin quotient. He replied negatively, but asked if I had any relatives from N.C. Aha, I do, indeed! I wrote back, telling him that I was white (hoping he wouldn't think I was a total nutcase), and we have agreed to keep in touch. Most likely anyone with the odd spelling we employ is connected in some way, whether by blood kin or by close association in the past (my way of avoiding some nasty words).

As I write this, a fear intrudes into my thoughts. I'm afraid you're thinking - oh, just another patronizing white liberal, some guilt-ridden white matron. Maybe, maybe not. Fears like this one keep us from talking to one other. I've taken a deep breath and stared down my own fears, don't toss me aside yet. Let me continue.

I grew up in a very "white" world, and have lived in a somewhat white world most of my life, finishing high school before integration became a reality. I have moved back and forth between the "white" world and the alternate "black" world as much as I have been allowed. As much as the self-protection infused in each African-American from childhood has allowed me. Fear has been a difficult barrier to cross at times. I've probably soaked in more from the soul, jazz, blues and rhythm and blues than from individuals; this music is the life-giving water the thirsty sponge of my soul absorbs, and I know that the well is black.

The need for racial reconciliation between African Americans and European Americans is something that I could define (but with what authority, from my white place in this world, other than as one human to another)? I can only speak of the perfect unity I see in the world beyond humans, the unity of nature that each of us moves toward. Or I could speak of the foolishness of human eyes and perception, that so easily detects the smaller differences among us and misses the enormity of our similarities, nay our sameness; the sameness and variety of one lily to another, a chickadee to a sparrow, one cat to another.

When "white" southerners, of a more conservative bent than I, talk of southern heritage, southern identity, they have a strong tendency to leave out most of that heritage, that identity. Usually, I believe they sincerely don't recognize the intertwined nature of the relationship between black and white in the old south, the cross-pollination that went back and forth between black and white cultures - the intermingled culture of shared foods and recipes, the influence of the African's attempt to speak the foreign English language, thrown as they were thrown with Africans of other tribes whose languages were just as foreign. Where else did the southern drawl/dialect originate? And the music, the literature (even when oral) flew back and forth and influenced one another to the point that it is impossible in many cases for anthropologists to separate the origin from the end. I read black folk tales in some of Zora Neale Hurston's anthropological works that were basically the same tales told me at bedtime by my father, who heard them from his parents. Who can say where these tales originated, with black or with white?

Some of these white southerners (I call them Neo-Confederates) want to talk about what they are pleased to call an Anglo-Celtic cultural dominance that they claim once held sway in the south, a dominance they are working to reinstate. Such ignorant and/or purposely misleading claims infuriate me. The culture of the old south is an amalgam of Anglo, Celtic, African, and Native American cultures; indeed, I believe that the defining influence, the most enduring influence is that of the African.

These people provide another reason why I believe that a reconciliation and a joining together of African-Americans, Native Americans and moderate to liberal whites is an urgent necessity. The growing numbers of Neo-confederates in organizations like the League of the South (LoS) and the Southern Party, joining the old hardliners like the Council of Conservative Citizens (a.k.a. the white-collar Klan or CofCC) is alarming at the worst and a serious concern at the very least. So many whites in positions of power are aligned with one or more of these groups, some of which vehemently deny being racist, while calling for Anglo-Celtic dominance.

Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi has been a keynote speaker for the most virulent of the three, the CofCC, as well as writing articles for their publications. Another keynote speaker was former Mississippi Governor Kirk Fordice. Present and former governors of several southern states have been CofCC members. Many media figures belong to one or more of these neo-confederate groups, some openly, some more quietly (for example, Charlie Reese, nationally syndicated columnist, is a member of the LoS). These people are gaining a strength and influence that will negatively affect equality in justice, housing, economics and education. We cannot afford to lose what gains have been made. We cannot afford a halting of further progress.

The need for better educational opportunities for black children so that they match those of white children cannot be ignored. The need for social justice, equal treatment before the law; the need for respect from his/her fellow humans that all humans have; the need for economic opportunities across this foolish color divide devised by man, in defiance and perversion of God's word, these needs must not be ignored. I want these

things for my family - all of my family.

All of these needs can (and will) be met by African-Americans, in time, on their own, if a new threat from white recidivists is not allowed to overtake these efforts. A dialogue, and new understanding between friends without regard for color will help join the efforts of blacks, moderate whites, and other minorities into a stronger, more potent brew, with whites acting not as benefactors or patrons, but as brothers and sisters working to bring these basic needs to fruition for everyone.

It's an old cliché' that one must have money to make money . . . money, or property, or other possessions valuable to humans. This is a truism that resonates with cold truth. Control of money and property has been held by segments of the European-American population for so long that it's difficult for blacks, other minorities and poor whites to climb out of the pit of poverty. We're trying to climb out of the same hole, and rather than help each other, we're fighting each other for the best toeholds. Meanwhile, wealthy, powerful whites see everyone coming up out of the pit as a hand reaching for some of their property. They correctly perceive that the best way to keep it all for themselves is to push one into the other and set us fighting among ourselves. Over the many years this has been happening, It must have been very amusing for those on terra firma to watch the squabbles of those of us below them, as they scheme to set us one against the other, and thus remove the threat they perceive from all of us.

Let me conclude with a remark on self-determination. I've been told by an African-American that what whites really need to do is not to help blacks, but just stand out of the way so blacks can help themselves. That whites just need to concern themselves with handling their own white brethren. I can accept that. My job in the scheme of this thing, as I see it, is to stand out of the way of blacks and try to prevent other whites from standing in the way of blacks. And between you and me, I have the harder job of the two.

But while I'm standing out of the way, can I embrace my family members as they go by? Whether reconciliation is in your plans or not, if your last name is, or has been, Roberson, and you don't mind recognizing one of your paler relatives, write me at uppityww@yahoo.com. I'm ready for a REAL family reunion, I hope you are, too.

Pap Smear
by Natasha Ria El-Scari

Until just a few months ago, that sight, sound, and mere mention of those words would make me absolutely irrational, nauseous, and down right scared. The control the pap smear had over my life was unreal. I would pleasantly make the appointment and tell myself I would go, only to get on the table with my legs open, burst into tears and go home, defeated, again, and again, and again. Like a child that really knows that those vegetables are gross, I found strength in my fear to refuse the pap smear. I went through my entire pregnancy, birth, nursing, and post nursing to never having a successful pap smear. It was something that haunted me to the point that I would just be uncomfortable lying on my back. "Tasha," my mother would say so matter-of-factly, "you are not just living for yourself anymore, you have Mu and the baby to think about." I cried and tried to get sympathy from everywhere but the advice, however harsh or sensitive, was the same, "Get the damn thing or get cancer and die." Ironically, breast exams, rectum smears, and all the other procedures that go along with a woman's annual never really bothered me. I could handle all of those things but I just couldn't handle the speculums entering me, cranking me open, scraping me, cramping me, and pinching me. My breaths would get short at the very thought of it. I had listened to regular women tell me that once I had my baby I would easily be able to take the "discomfort" of a pap smear. I was advised to go to a woman, definitely go to a man, go to someone old, go to someone new, go to someone gay; I had tried them all, still no luck. One experience was so horrible that the gay white female doctor told me that I should never come back to her and that she recommended that I seek psychological help. Another divorced, single, feminist, mother, and surviving abused person cried with me because the Demerol didn't do the job either.

It is important to understand how I became this way. See, I had a chance to experience racism within the health care system long before I knew what either of them was. I started bleeding when I was six, I am sure my mother panicked but never showed it. I tell people six because that is the number that sticks out for me. I remember being in Ms. Powell's second grade class with pads in my purse, so I know that I was very young. I was instantly given a pap smear to get to the root of the problem. Mind you, this is 1982, and the last thing on anyone's mind was the psychological health of a six-year old bleeding Black girl. In fact, this was a wonderful opportunity to try something rarely or never done before. It destroyed me completely. More than anything I remember the pressure, I remember the intense pain, and I remember my mother unknowingly assisting in my betrayal, my rape. It is hard for her to help me jog the memories because she feels I am blaming her when really I am mourning the loss of my innocence at the hands of the duck lips and a black man that cocked the gun that help the lips open wide. I blame the supposed professional that made a poor decision.

There was a pinch. Like a church pinch. Like a don't-clown-me-in-the-grocery-store pinch 100,000 times magnified. I remember feeling the intense pain and pinching and never really having my legs open like that that I became light headed and the screaming just helped me to float away. At least it felt like I screamed, it could have been a cry, it could have been both. It was absolutely horrible. I died. I know a part of me was

murdered. I couldn't breath, I was being held down, I wanted to submit but I couldn't; my youth, my fear, nor my defense would let me and I suffered greatly for trying to protect myself. "World's of Fun, think of World's of Fun…," as if a roller coaster could be compared. Mom wasn't on the roller coaster because she was scared of them so why couldn't she understand my fear of being open yet suffocated by him. Did they think this would make me better?

My cunningness and refusal to return to that sheer pain kept me consistently convincing myself and others in ways I would have never imagined. I would make sure that I found a way out of the procedure. It was getting old though. My usually mild mannered husband really wanted me to get it done and I knew that I wasn't making a smart decision. "What do you need to do to make yourself get it, Natasha," he asked in desperation as I told him why I could not. I didn't have a direct answer but I thought about it for a while. I knew that I needed strength, I knew that I needed to find a person that could really deal with my issues. Besides, I had spent so long not facing it surely I could use my mind to deal with it.

I called a large women's clinic and asked the receptionist who was the best. Thrown off by the question she told me she couldn't answer the question. "Look, ma'am, I don't think you understand…I am about to be 25 and I haven't had a successful pap smear in over six years. I won't tell anyone but you need to tell me who is the best, the most sensitive, or it will be another six years before I make this call again!" The receptionist whispered a name so low that I had to try to figure out who was on the list. "Who," I whispered back. She said it lower but also slower. It was a man, a young doctor, and he had a nice smile, he would see all my insides, great, "I'll take him." I whispered even lower. The weeks that followed that call where very emotional. I was preparing for war; I was hurting, and I was angry, and I was scared. I didn't sleep well but started praying and talking about it more to my friends and family about what to do.

On the day of the appointment my mother accompanied me to give her support. "Do you want me to go in with you?" "No, I think I can handle it." I knew I had to face it alone. We made small talk until finally, I was called back. My friends agreed to pray for me at the same time so that the room would be "clear." I cried as soon as I entered. I prayed to all the African women I ever knew, heard of or could mention that made me think of both sensitivity and strength. I started with the ancestors, then to the elder women, the younger women, the little girls. I called their names out loud in hopes that their strength would enter the room and help me to do what I needed to do. The more I prayed the less I cried. The doctor entered. I instantly started crying again. I was shaking. I tried to be very intellectual and explain all that happened but I could tell he was scared to. He mentioned his doctor wife and what she told him about pap smears to reassure himself probably more than me. He held my hand, we talked and he explained everything. He was smart, he decided that he would talk to me with my clothes on first and then give me a chance to undress. He was criticized by his more seasoned colleagues because, hey, this is an HMO after all. But the real opinions matter at the front desk, right?

He told me to breath, but I held my breath instead so I wouldn't feel it was being

taken away from me.

There was a sister above me, his nurse, she asked about my hair, I tried to tell her quickly so I could get back to my prayer, he explained what he was doing, Fannie Lou Hamer, he entered Sojourner Truth, I took a breath, Lucy Hawkins, he opened, I do others people's hair too, really, yeah, Juanita Gibson, Wilma Gibson, the mutilated, the healed, the loved, the diseased, he scraped, I breathed, he did whatever else they do down there and then to my stomach, I jumped and said another name…he let them go they suctioned out of me, my face was dry...It was actually over I actually did it, It was actually over.

It was as if someone had given me $10,000.00. I was so happy, I was wide eyed and kept saying, "Is that it, you did all of it, are you sure?" I couldn't believe I really did it. I was amazed, I am still amazed, I felt a weight lifted off me. I purified myself by the fire of experience. I had freed myself by facing the thing that kept me in fear for so long.

Next year, I will probably face the same fear, but at least I will know that I can do it--call on all the sisters to help me, and I will breathe once; it is over in relief, in release.

The New African American Mississippi Writers (Part I)
by C. Liegh McInnis

At this moment in history, the contemporary Afro-Mississippi writers are at a crossroads in their collective futures, much in the same manner that the beginning of the 1970s found the canon of African American writers at a crossroad in their futures. These current Afro-Mississippi writers both benefit from and are bound by the legacy of great Afro-Mississippi writers such as Margaret Walker Alexander, Richard Wright, Etheridge Knight, Jerry W. Ward, Ahmos Zu-Bolton, Nayo Barbara Watkins and Julius Thompson. On the one hand, there is a long legacy and tradition from which to pull for inspiration and guidance. But on the other hand, contemporary Afro-Mississippi writers are chained to past images, notions and beliefs held by the world outside Mississippi. An excellent example of this is the recent vote over the Confederate Flag. To the outside world, the vote to keep the Confederate Flag as the symbol of the State is a clear signal that Mississippi is still in the past, thus it expects Mississippi's writers to remain in the past, pontificating over the same old issues. The truth of the matter, however, is that Mississippi is what it has always been, the axis and center for change in America. To paraphrase Malcolm X, you can not be concerned with what is happening in the world if you are not concerned with what is happening in Mississippi. The contemporary Afro-Mississippi writers are called upon, once again, like their ancestors of the past, to deal with the complex and perplexing issue of moving forward while remaining contextualized in the past. Added to this task is the job of dealing with one of the most complex issues of America. How do we deal with the growing urbanization of the South, and what does this growing urbanization say about who we are today as it relates to who we were in the past. It will be the Afro-Mississippi writer of today who will take up this issue in literature, forcing this discourse into the mainstream of Mississippi, Southern and American consciousness. At the forefront are several major issues facing the contemporary Afro-Mississippi writer: the issues of universality, no major local journal, the lack of doctoral writing programs at the State's HBCUs, the continued marginalization of African American writers in the English Departments of Mississippi Universities, the lack of readership, the problem of forced identity, and crafting a strategy to fight against their assigned four boxes. What these contemporary Afro-Mississippi writers have on their side is the diversity in their voices and the multitude of genres in which they write. By the end of the next twenty years, these contemporary Afro-Mississippi writers will be judged for how well they either carried or dropped the torch of their legacy.

I was once asked by a non-Mississippi literary critic, "If I were from somewhere else, would I be a more noted or popular writer?" My immediate answer was a simple no. It is not your region that causes you to write well or become a good writer. It is your skill--your ability to articulate your specific and particular message and relate that specific and particular message to a larger racial or geographic message. As I began to probe a bit deeper into how I felt about the question, I realized that it was a question that I truly could not answer because it is, for me, too inconceivable to fathom. I am a Mississippian. That, and that alone, makes me a Mississippi writer. You do not have to be born in Mississippi to be a Mississippi writer. To be a Mississippi writer, some of your

time and work must be invested into discussing Mississippi from the standpoint of someone who has lived there. In short, if what happens in Mississippi has an immediate and definite affect on you and your work, you are a Mississippi writer. If I were to move, I would still be a Mississippi writer. I would just be a displaced or traveling Mississippi writer because my sensibilities would be the same. I would merely be practicing those sensibilities in a different location or commenting on how those sensibilities make me different from others indigenous to my visiting areas. Furthermore, if we were to change history all together and have me born somewhere else, I would be a different person and a different writer. If this is too literal a translation and discussion of the question, allow me to answer it this way. There is no one out there saying, "I don't want to publish anyone from Mississippi." At least, I do not *think* so. However, because many of the major journals are elsewhere, the aesthetics (both cultural and political) driving the journals often run counter to what it means to be a Mississippian. It is not enough for a national journal to publish a Mississippi writer writing about something happening in New York, especially if the writer is not showing how that New York happening directly impacts or relates to something in Mississippi. In this case, though, the State of Mississippi must do a better job of nurturing its writers so that it can magnify its issues, relate its issues to the world, and be in control of its identity. America's perception of Mississippi writers is two fold. America has a vision of Mississippi that the Meccas of mass media (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and now Atlanta) have been unwilling to change because it is easy and lucrative to continue to hold Mississippi as a backward, poorly educated, and technologically inferior region so that any time is needed a movie or a book or some three minute news spot about country towns, they can come to Mississippi. More specifically, Mississippi continues to be the place where the rest of America (black and white) gauges and measures the development and evolution of their own racial relationships. In a recent cartoon drawing satirizing Mississippi's 2000 Confederate Flag Vote, the other Southern States were thanking Mississippi for allowing them to appear as "racially progressive." In another satire, a cartoonist reinterpreted Dawin's Theory of Evolution with Mississippi as the ape. While the Confederate Flag Vote makes it convenient for other states to assert how far they have progressed, the truth is that the only difference between Mississippi and the other States is that Mississippi's Confederate Flag Vote went to a popular vote and the other Southern states voted on this issue in the legislature. Had the Confederate Flag Vote gone to a popular vote in the other Southern States, the results would have been similar. This is supported by the fact that during a rally for the Confederate Flag, which saw some 10,000 white people on the steps of the State Capitol, it is estimated that over half of the participants were from other States. So the issue is not merely whether or not Afro-Mississippi writers have any additional obstacles, but whether or not we are being truthful as to what, specifically, those obstacles are and what, specifically, needs to be done to deal with the obstacles.

So, Mississippi is not the lowland of humanity and racial progress; it is merely the most truthful mirror, reflecting America's image. To be a Mississippi writer, in the truest legacy of Wright and Alexander, is to reflect the truest image of the world by reflecting the truest image of Mississippi. As for me, specifically, I do not think that it would be possible for me to live, think, act and write in the same manner if I lived else where. In

the same manner that Wright had the courage to tell the truth of Mississippi Hell in *Black Boy* and the truth of the white liberal fallacy in *Native Son*, so must the new Afro-Mississippi writers be able to analyze the present so-called middle-class gains as nothing more than window dressing for a black mass that is still in poverty and still under and mis-educated. It has been Mississippi writers who have carried the task of always telling the truth. It was Wright who had the courage to dispel the fallacy of the North as Negro Heaven. At the same token, it was Alexander who refused to follow the crowd as she promoted humanism over violence and revenge. In both of their works, there is a complexity and a desire to deal with issues of truth in all of its complexity and not in the easy manner of black and white, good and bad. They were able to disrobe Antebellum romanticism, interject value and humanity into poor black life, and force us to deal with the "doers of evil" in all of their manifestations rather than prescribe the moniker or definition of evil doers to one group or "type." Their handling of the complexity of white supremacy and race struggle becomes the core of what is Mississippi literature and the truest commentary of the peculiar and unique icons and relationships that the South has produced. That is the beauty of regional art. That is the beauty of reading writers who do not live where and how you live. It is the good (useful) artist who can articulate the uniqueness of his existence and still encase it in the realm of universal humanity.

The Problem of Forced Identity

The Mississippi writer's biggest problem is the problem of forced identity. I was motivated to write my first collection of fiction because I had not read any fiction dedicated to the lives of Mississippians twenty-five and under living during the nineteen-eighties and nineties. Most, if not all of the fiction and poetry being published from the South, especially Mississippi, during the nineties, save the writers of Atlanta and possibly some of North Carolina, was still discussing the nineteen sixties and earlier. Even *Satisfied with Nothing*, a wonderfully insightful and entertaining book by Earnest Hill, was quite impressionistic when it came to being placed in a certain time frame. It has been dubbed the *Native Son* of the nineties because it employs excellent literary techniques, it speaks directly to *Native Son*, and was written in the nineties. But, it is not a particular or certain reflection of the ideologies and changes of the nineties as *Native Son* is of the nineteen-forties. This is true for far too many works by Southern writers because too many literary critics tie all literature of the South to *Black Boy*'s evolution to *Native Son* after the experience of enduring the *Ethics of Living Jim Crow*, which, of course, emerges directly from *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker Alexander. Yet no one seems to want to read the new South's *Outsider*, which is not surprising when you understand that nobody wanted to read or face *Native Son*'s evolution to the *Outsider*. And all of this is to make little mention of Etheridge Knight, the poet about whom Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* states that "His [Knight's] *Belly Song and Other Poems* (1973) is one of the most significant volumes to emerge from the Black Arts Movement."

Knight's emergence signaled a new day and evolution in Southern literature, which articulated the complexity of the South--how do we deal with the new-old issues, especially when the rest of the world wants you to stay stuck in the past because it is

stereotypically convenient for them. So, Knight is marginalized, not because of his talent, but because the rest of the world and Mississippi has problems assimilating him into their prescribed notion and categories for Mississippi literature and Mississippi writers. Gates continues, "Knight was an inspiration to all those who felt poetry should be a functional and communal art with a strong oral artist in the middle of the circle" (Gates and McKay 1867). The problem is that Knight was intensifying the heat in Wright's work. Where Wright's Bigger Thomas committed violence against white American as an accidental act of defiance and rebellion, Knight's retaliation was violent and calculated. For this reason, he is marginalized by both white and black scholars. Thus, I did not know Knight's work as a student at Jackson State University, the urban university of the State. It is probably because Knight's work removes from the presence of Wright's and Alexander's work those editors who made their work palatable to whites and upper class Negroes. Knight should have been the bridge from Wright and Walker to my generation, but his voice was silenced even by Mississippi literary scholars for being too dark, cafe'ish, urban, and raw, making Mississippians realize that the Civil Rights Movement, which may have begun in the South, had not given African American Mississippians the right to their own voices. Knight's blues does not just cry; it ejaculates razor sharp tears that cut the fallacy of Negro improvement to the bone as seen in "The Violent Space (or when your sister sleeps around for money)".

> "In the beginning you were the Virgin Mary,/ And you are the Virgin Mary now./ But somewhere between Nazareth and Bethlehem/ You lost your name in the nameless void./ '*Oh Mary don't you weep don't you moan.'*/ O Mary shake your butt to the violent juke, Absorb the demon puke and watch the white eyes pop, (Run sister run the Bugga man comes!)/ And what do I do. I boil my tears in a twisted spoon/ And dance like an angel on the point of a needle./ I sit counting syllables like Midas gold./ I am not bold. I cannot yet take hold of the demon/ And lift his weight from your black belly,/ So I grab the air and sing my song./ (But the air cannot stand my singing long.)" (Hill 1485).

There is some hope in Knight's poems, but not much. The connection that the speaker has to the truth of the past and the truth of the present is a dim, fragile, and strained connection. And this is Knight's message--that black people are holding on to their past by a thread, which is weakening beneath the weight of neo, urbanized Jim Crowism. And yet, Knight also knows that his salvation will only be found in solving the roots of his people's problems, as seen in "A Poem for Myself (or Blues for a Mississippi Black Boy).

> "I was born in Mississippi;/ I walked barefoot thru the mud/...But, when I reached the age of twelve/ I left that place for good/...I been to Detroit & Chicago/ Been to New York city too./...Said I done strolled all those funky avenues/ I'm still the same old black boy with the same old blues./ Going back to Mississippi/ This time to stay for good--/ Gonna be free in Mississippi/ Or dead in the Mississippi mud." (Hill 1487).

Knight is echoing Wright that to be black in Mississippi is the same as being black

anywhere in America. The solution is not to run from it but to face it, which is what Mississippi writers do best; we face it, as Wright, Alexander, and Knight did.

Along with Knight, the other bridge from Wright and Alexander to my generation is Dr. Jerry W. Ward, poet and critic. His poem "Don't Be Fourteen in Mississippi" is exactly the kind of combining of historical foundation with new urban rage that marked Knight's work. The problem for Ward became his immense success and notoriety as a critic as well as his lack of post-seventies vernacular. The insight and the anger are beautifully combined in Ward's work, but far too many un or under-trained critics associate the Black Arts Movement merely with anger, profanity (as linguistic liberation), and condemnation of a Eurocentric world. This misguided and narrow understanding of the Black Arts Movement not only minimizes the complexity and artistic depth of the work of these writers, but it also narrows the scope or spectrum of writers whose work should be associated with the Black Arts Movement. Ward's work is more retrospective in that it laments more the eroding of black culture than it does condemn White America for causing that erosion. For Ward, the tragedy is in the loss of history, culture and self-awareness, which are the only forces that can save black America. In this Ward becomes more of a nationalist than any of us. His focus is on African American life rather than the outside influence. His goal has been to show black life as something beautiful, valuable, and not needing to be assimilated to be of value. Thus, his largest hurdle is that he is a Mississippi writer in a State that refuses to teach courses on African American Mississippi writers because black literature, as black culture, is seen as only an appendage to white culture. Consequently, writers and scholars like Ward and Julius Thompson who reject the appendage mentality and placement are most marginalized by Mississippi's white scholars and the black scholars who are seeking acceptance and affirmation from white scholars. Dr. Ward is an accomplished, well published poet, editor and critic to whom I was not introduced until I had left Jackson State University and sought him on my own. Why was his work not taught to me at JSU? I was told that it was because we want to give our students the same "standard" information that the world has. When will black writers become "standard" information, especially writers who embrace Africaness and a black aesthetic as their center? This is the problem for the new African American writer's of Mississippi because they will need a past on which to balance their blueprint for the future of Negro writing. Just as Wright, Alexander, Knight, and Ward, the current Afro-Mississippi writers will have to digest the past and use it to mold an identity for themselves, rather than allow the antebellum shadows and northern publishers assign their identity.

Four Boxes

There are generally four boxes into which African American Mississippi writers of the nineties are placed. Some Northern writers want to read Mississippi writers when they feel a need to reconcile their Northern existence with their inherited but forgotten southern sensibilities. Secondly, other Northern writers read Mississippi writers purely for history. They look not for art, only documentation. The two are different in that the former is allowed to be a bit more philosophical than the latter, which is resigned to being merely literary science no matter how much artistic training and imagination the author

has. Thirdly, there are the Southern writers and readers who so desperately want to be a part of the African American Mississippi cannon that they spend their time copying and mimicking their Mississippi ancestors thus producing nothing new, imaginative, or timely. Finally, there is the Mississippi writer who is so ashamed of being a Mississippian that he submerges himself in the culture of other places, so much that no one knows what he is saying. It reminds me of young brothers from Clarksdale or Crawford or Bobo or Hot Coffee or any other one gas station, former plantation Mississippi town who speak with a New York accent after spending the summer watching Black Entertainment Television's Rap City or MTV's Yo' MTV Raps on the piped in cable. In addition to this, there are also young writers such as the Martin triplets who, with their combined collection of poetry, attempt to breathe new air and life into that down home Mississippi sensibility of God, religion and family. Because a work such as this speaks to those sensibilities which have been etched into the hearts and minds of most African American Mississippians, it is obvious that the work and the brothers will garner popularity. The negative affect is that not only will the Martin brothers be rewarded for their craft and accomplishments, a book of this nature by such young writers will be used to stifle the alternative young voices of those African American Mississippians who are not "church" folk, do not turn the other cheek, and frequent the speak easies, juke joints, cafes and coffee houses of their generation. The new African American writers of Mississippi are not out to purposely distance themselves from the heritage of Mississippi, but to show the complexity and multilayered quality of this heritage. They merely wish to address the lives and reasons of those who stayed, as well as the new-old ills (The Modernization of Jim Crow). They want to refashion the verse, vernacular, imagery, and icons to address the old ills which have been refashioned. Mississippi is still the worst State on civil rights, education, health care, and economics. The new African American writers of Mississippi merely want to address the new tricks of oppression as well as celebrate the successes and condemn the failures of the "New Negro" of the South.

The New Afro-Mississippi Writers

The works of Charlie Braxton, Jolivette Anderson, David Brian Williams, and Marcus "Uganda" White best escape the above mentioned four categories and exist as African American Mississippi literature of the nineteen-eighties and nineties. This is not to say that they ARE the African American Mississippi writing scene. This is to say that they have freed ourselves from the shackles and limitations of the past and are now focusing our energies on articulating their present existence as opposed to merely wearing the clothes of our ancestors.

Charlie Braxton

Charlie Braxton, a graduate of Jackson State University (JSU), the school where Dr. Margaret W. Alexander taught and developed several programs and courses, is the most accomplished writer of the group. A native of McComb, Mississippi, he is a published poet, playwright, and one of the most noted Hip Hop journalist in the country, as well as having studied directly under Dr. Jerry W. Ward. In the work of Charlie Braxton you have the well traveled Mississippi writer who has influenced writers

from other areas and has, himself, been personally and directly influenced by writers from other areas such as Amiri Baraka, James Baldwin, Haki Madhubuti, Kalamu ya Salaam, Tony Media, and Kevin Powell. Yet, Braxton has managed to balance his inherited Mississippi lineage and heritage from Wright, Alexander, Knight and Ward with his love for the work of African American writers from other areas. Braxton is and remains a Mississippi writer.

The first example of Braxton's ability to bridge the urban and rural worlds of Mississippi is through his two plays, *Bluesman* and *Artist Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. *Bluesman*, on the surface, is a traditional, Mississippi, rural piece. Underneath, it is a piece about traveling distances, which is taken from the metaphor of the traveling bluesman. The traveling bluesman was in search of urban America, a place where he could sing his blues and get paid. Essentially, *Bluesman* is a story about evolution, how a group's sensibilities are affected by time and how that group is able to survive by remaining who they are by returning to the "one," which is the heartbeat of the music and the people. However, the transition in *Bluesman* is also the transition in *Artist Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, where black people have forgotten where the "one"--their heritage--is. *Artist Doesn't Live Here Anymore* abandons the rural setting to discuss the class conflicts between rural people dislocated to the urban areas of Mississippi to find work. Artist and his wife are torn because their ideologies are torn between the rural and the urban--the traditional and the current. And, just as the reality of the so called new Mississippi, a permanent barrier exists between Artist and his wife. Braxton's two plays, set in the late seventies and early eighties, represent the ideological and economic transitions of Mississippi to a more urbanized world, where African Americans who have not successfully dealt with the oppression of plantation life are not ideologically ready to deal with the new urbanized oppression. At the core of both plays is the problem of using old, unsuccessful solutions to address new problems, especially in regards to individual and collective identity. In essence, Braxton is discussing "double" "Double Consciousness." Of course, Du Bois was talking about being a black soul in a white world. Braxton has troped this by being the ultimate outsider, a southern black soul in a changing urbanized world. This motif also lies at the core of many of Braxton's poems and in his music criticism of Southern Hip Hop groups trying to fashion a place for themselves in a "perceived" Northern and urban culture and genre.

Braxton's poem, "Torn Between Two Worlds: Jesus at the Crossroads," stands on the bedrock of black Christianity (which has always been something different than white Christianity), and shows the evolution of young African American Mississippians frustrated with the whole notion of the inertia of the Black Southern Church and its inability to address the concerns of African Americans falling prey to the urbanization of the State. "And it came to pass that the son of man was called down to the crossroads where the Loa of the dead and the spirit of the undead meet in the sweet by and by" (Speyer and Park 72). This first line sets the mood not only for this poem but for Braxton's work and the evolution from the rural to urban of the poets who follow him. The whole notion of the crossroad has always been a heavy icon in the blues and for Mississippi. The literal crossroad is the intersection of Highways 61 and 49, which intersect in Clarksdale, Mississippi. This intersection is important because it is the place

where the old meets the new. It is the place were you leave the plantation and head into the city. Both 61 and 49 run from Delta to urban. 61 runs from Cleveland, Mississippi to the heart of downtown Memphis, Tennessee, and 49 runs from Clarksdale, Mississippi to the heart of Jackson, Mississippi. The question that Braxton is asking is "Where are black people going, and will their traditional beliefs get them to spiritual/cultural/political salvation, especially if they fail to realize that their beliefs and their culture is as much African as it is Euro-Christian?" Braxton continues this transformation in the final lines of this poem with "... yes, Jesus went down to the crossroads to dance between two worlds his holy body breaking to the beat of a music loud enough to shake awake the black saints of old" (Speyer and Park 72). This line is laced with symbolism of the duality of Mississippi and its transformation. The "dance between two worlds" echoes what Ray Charles has always said about secular and spiritual music, "The only difference is that they say 'Lawd, Lawd,' and we say 'Baby, Baby'" (Charles, 1996). The two worlds are not just spiritual and secular, they are urban and rural. When Braxton has Jesus' "holy body breaking," he is obviously referring to break dancing, a form of dance indigenous to the Hip Hop culture. This is meant to be representative of the influence of urban America on southern beliefs and sensibilities and vice versa. Above all, we must ask why is Jesus at the crossroad. Man is typically seen at the crossroad. What decision must Jesus make? Braxton alludes to this by using African icons such as Orishas and Elegba. The decision is one that African American Christians must make, particularly in understanding that Mississippi culture is soaked with African culture. As Braxton, himself, addresses the issue, "There is more retention of African culture in the State of Mississippi than anywhere else in America beside the Carolina islands. Yet, African American Mississippians have been so Christianized and, more specifically, Europeanized that we act more African than anyone else but don't realize it for our denials. Our conscious denials are killing us because subconsciously we attempt to reconcile ourselves to 'it' even though we don't know what 'it' is. We are looking for a dirt road on a paved city street" (Braxton, "Personal Interview," 1998).

Braxton follows "Jesus at the Crossroads" with "I Dream of Jesus." "Last night I dreamed I saw Jesus pimp strolling peacock-proud down Crenshaw Blvd., looking for lost souls in the valley of the damned" (Wideman and Preston 273). This is not traditional southern literature. It has always been acceptable for African American Mississippi writers to take on White oppression, but it is not acceptable for African American Mississippi writers to question the role of Christianity in that oppression or the failures of Southern African Americans to take Christianity to the streets in the manner of the Nation of Islam. Usually, black writers have sought to contextualize black life within the Judo-Christian framework. Braxton reverses this process by contextualizing Judo-Christianity within the framework of black culture. Rather than re-cast the Old Testament Israelites as African Americans, Braxton puts Jesus in Compton, a heart of black culture and struggle. His point is the same as Frantz Fanon's that black people need a religion that speaks to their culture rather than trying to bend their culture to someone else's religion--especially a religion that says it is acceptable for blacks to be oppressed. With these two poems, Braxton is giving voice to a section of African American Mississippians not heard since Knight. Simultaneously, Braxton is making a connection to the past and refashioning the past for the new battles. Also, Braxton further attests that Sterling D.

Plumpp's *When the Mojo Calls I must Come* should be given the credit for unearthing the African layers of African American Mississippi Culture and the innate tension between African sensibility and Christianity. "Many of the Mississippi writers of my [Braxton's] generation think that I removed the veil of African American Mississippi culture to reveal the African foundation in our work. But, it was Plump who first voiced this African-Mississippi connection in a real and consistent sense" (Braxton, 1998). Braxton is, in affect, rebuilding the bridge back to Wright and Alexander through Knight, Plump and Ward, but doing so in a manner that addresses the issues of his time and not of theirs.

David Brian Williams

David Brian Williams is the Northerner who relocated to Mississippi in order to attend a Southern, historically black college or university (HBCU), JSU. Since Williams' family is originally from Mississippi, he and his work represents the return of African Americans to the South. A poet, actor, lawyer, lighting and sound man, he was able to make a smooth transition because his family, namely his father, mother, and uncle (the late poet, Otis Williams) held firm to their Mississippi roots and sensibilities of Grenada, Mississippi--a Delta town. Along with Braxton, Williams represents the urban expression of the deep South. He is a Northerner who, after graduating from JSU, attended law school in Boston and then returned to the South to practice law and write. His poems "Say Blood" and "Neo-Negro Middle-Class Revolutionaries" speak directly to the left-over problems and issues of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as expressing the discontentment of the new generation with the unfinished CRM--a CRM that is held hostage by old hand Negroes who are more loyal to the theory of integration and the democratic party than to the needs of black people. "I heard you say while talkin' among the brothers that the sixties wuz coming back. I say you're wrong. You implied that we are ready to re-pick, re-afro, re-dashiki, re-boycott, re-sit in, re-burn, re-do, what you Colored people keep trying to forget. What you pseudo intelligent nanonitwit superspade klansman in disguise who act like you don't know that Ole Miss still don't want yo' black ass keep tryin' to forget...why fight with old stale Molotov Cocktails when fresh lasers burn even hotter" (Williams, *Mirages*, 3-4). The juxtaposition of African Americans who "sit-in" and "boycott" with African Americans who attend and work at the University of Mississippi turns a keen eye on the present day issues, contradictions and complexity of Mississippi life with which the new Afro-Mississippi writers must deal. This complexity is heightened and more even more keen when we understand that the two Negroes are one and the same, which leaves the current generation confused, wondering if the goal of protesting and being killed in the streets was to merely work for white people and to cut deals of economic accommodation when it is beneficial for the black middle-class, regardless of how it affects the black working-class and poverty stricken. In reaction to the lawsuit of the Ayers case, the State's College Board decided to increase minimally the number of African Americans enrolled and employed at the white universities rather than fund the HBCUs equally. This action by the college board effectively widened the gap between Mississippi's black middle-class and black working-class, but it also placed a gap between Afro-Mississippians at white universities and Afro-Mississippians at HBCUs so that they effectively neutralize each other when HBCUs attempt to gain equal funding or programs. It will take poems such as these to

shed light on this complex issue. In "Neo-Negro Middle-Class Revolutionaries," Williams is both questioning and calling the current generation to take up the call of the struggle of African Americans.

> "Lawd, have mercy, the new, neo Negro has started a revolution/ to get free from the bondage of self and every thang associated with/ the Tom-Tom Continent and its beat that knocks down the facade of whiteness./ They free to work for slave wages/ as long as they get to sleep next to the zip code of mas'sa./ They free to send their children to public outhouses/ that are fumed with the leftover shit of abandoning pale curriculums./ They free to hate their darker halves who always trying to follow them/ like lingering shadows of Uncle Ben./ They free to freely work at iron plantations/ for a gold watch and some mo' hand-me-downs./ They free from the soul mirrors that shine a blinding reflective light of their Africaness./ They free y'all...They free to be slaves?" (Williams, *Mirages*, 77).

Of the group, Williams is the most balanced with one foot firmly planted in Mississippi's blues poetry tradition and one foot striving in Mississippi's new tradition. His poems, "Simple Love," "Check One" and "I Want to Have Chu'tch," speak the dimensionally of the African American experience. Williams is, as his uncle was, a juke joint poet. He has the ability to take a poem such as "The Hoochie Coochie Man" and rework it in a manner that it speaks to African Americans of the nineties and beyond. When he does a poem such as "Birdland," which is an ode to the club, The Crystal Palace, where great artists such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie and others performed in the historic Farish Street District of Jackson, Mississippi, or even the arousing "Be Afraid," which contains sexual imagery that Mississippi poets have traditionally thought of as taboo for their work, he is simultaneously paying homage to the past and defining his generation in all of their cafe' and church diversity. Finally, as one of the babies of the Shop Poetry Readings of the seventies which boasted regular and special appearances of such names as Dr. Jerry Ward, Leo Kayam, Cassandra Wilson, Richard Brown, Sonia Sanchez, Terri McMillan, Furahah Saba, Chinua Achebe, Amiri Baraka, Brian Ward--actor on the television series Sea-Quest who was a founding father of the Shop along with Brian and Ramona Ward, Teddy Edwards, the late Freddie Waits, Al Fielder, as well as many of the students and products of Dr. Tonea Stewart of *In the Heat of the Night* and *A Time to Kill*, Williams' re-establishing of the jazz and poetry readings at the Birdland Cafe in the historic Farish Street district is taking poetry and jazz to those whom the academicians have forgotten. An area of drugs, homicides, and theft, Williams has established a weekly Sunday night reading where young men, who would at any other time and place attempt to kill each other, can come and enjoy the music and literature of their people. In this, he is continuing the notion that the black aesthetic is first and foremost concerned with helping people live healthy, well-developed and fulfilled lives.

Marcus "Uganda" White

Marcus "Uganda" White is a native of Grenada, Mississippi (a Delta boy) and, like Charlie Braxton, a student of Dr. Jerry W. Ward, having studied at Tougaloo College. White is representative of so many of the good Tougaloo poets in that his work

weaves the rural and the urban in such a manner that it effectively shows the complexity of being a Mississippian from walking on urban streets that at any turn may run into cotton or soybean fields. White's work speaks of the new juke joints which, in truth, are not really that different from the old juke joints, but he delivers his characters in such a manner that you understand that what is happening in their lives was put into motion by a Civil Rights Movement that was left unfinished and died from a lack of attention. As a poet, he is probably the most polished and academically sound of the group. He can do in four lines what it takes others several pages to say. His poems "As Black as They Are" and "Problem 54" are able to epitomize the new Mississippi in a way that informs us that the rage of the new Southern Negroes will not be quieted by spirituals. When the little boy on the playground of "Problem 54" wants the teacher to "come to the playground during recess so that [he] could teach her the words that Jimmy taught [him] like bitch and fuck," you understand that the irreverence that black elementary children have for school and teachers is not because they are innately vile and wild but because they sense that they exist in a public school system that does not want to teach them. "She wasn't teaching me no math either. She was teaching me racism, the hands on approach." White's work deals with the modern Jim Crowism of "Zero Tolerance" and "Senate Bill 2259" and their negative effects on black children who hate school because it hates them. And yet, "As Black as They Are," recalls the humanity of Alexander, where White is combating white supremacy by embracing a love for black people. Again, he exemplifies the complexity that is needed to deal with these complex issues. At the core of "As Black as They Are" and White's short stories is a landscape populated with black blues and jazz that creates a people who are affirming their beauty through their constant struggle.

Other Mississippi Voices

Along with White there are several other emerging Tougaloo and Jackson State Poets, too many to mention here. But I would be remiss if I did not mention Michael "Diallo" McClendon, Colleen "Diamond" White, and Kamelia "Queen" Muhammad. McClendon's "The Blues" and C. White's "The Dwelling Place" assert that black people will only be free when they return to and embrace their African selves. C. White's "The Dwelling Place" takes a love story and uses the male/female journey for romantic love as a metaphor for the African American's journey for identity, clarity and peace. Their combining of Afrocentrism with Mississippi tradition only works to bring home the work of a Jolivette Anderson. All of these writers are definitely influenced by and motivated by W. E. B. Du Bois' notion in his essay "The Criteria of Negro Art" that "all art is propaganda" (Gates and McKay 757). McClendon, along with M. White and Derrick Johnson established one of the most successful open mic poetry settings in Mississippi, Southern Vibes which has been re-named Mississippi Vibes. This setting takes place every Saturday night from 8:30 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. As much as it is the work and talent of all of the above mentioned writers that drive Mississippi Vibes, it may be their desire to maintain a writing community until both Mississippi and the Nation open up to these new voices, which may truly be their lasting impact on their respective genres. Johnson, a modern day civil rights lawyer and businessman, puts it best when he states, "It was our intentions to develop a place that would be the center of a Mississippi Black Arts Movement. We wanted a place where young African American professionals could come

and enjoy their culture, exchange ideas, and network. We didn't have this in Mississippi on a regular or consistent basis." (Johnson, 1998). Johnson is right in understanding that artists need a home. This home for artist is a necessity for community and cultural development because artistic centers are designed to reinforce and affirm the values and standards of a community, teach the young their history, and act as a catalyst for social impact. Of course, the emphasis is on the place being a "cultural center" and not an entertainment center--where the emphasis is usually on leisure, folly and profit, which is where the African American middle-class is usually found. Despite the lack of support and patronizing of the African American middle class, all of the artists mentioned in this essay have been dedicated to keeping alive the tradition as well as creating something that is uniquely their own. However, until the local African American middle class opens up to the new expressions of their local artists, the voice of the African American Mississippi arts movement may never rise above a whisper. The reluctance of the local African American middle class to get behind these new writers speaks volumes to the local as well as national limited perceptions of what art is and what art produced by African Americans from Mississippi should be. Additionally, it seems that the African American middle-class does not want to be associated with anything that may ridicule or rattle the cages of their sources of economic nourishment; therefore, they avoid any art that my challenge or question the current *status quo*, which is the job of all art.

Howard Ramsey, II--staff writer for the *Mississippi Link* and editor of *Spirits on High*, *Souls on Fire*, and *Black Thoughts* and co-founder of New Visions Press (TN), Nayri Miller--author of *Ascensions*, and NaTasha Ria El-Scari (a Tennessean and two Northerners) are three writers who had a profound impact on the current Mississippi writing scene. They are mentioned here for two reasons: the quality of their work as storytellers disguised as poets--the manner in which their ghetto tales show their uncanny, organic relationship to plantation tales--and the manner in which they allowed their Northern tales to embrace their Southern heritage. They represent the urbanization of the South, the manner in which third and fourth generation Northerners, because of the prodding of their mothers and fathers and grands, returned to the South to be influenced and to influence. Now that all three have relocated back to the North, they stand as ears and bridges to the North for emerging African American writers from the South. They are going back to impregnate the North with Southern sensibility in the same manner as their parents and grandparents did. Their lives and their work will represent the continuing, unbroken cycle that Mississippi and Southern culture continues to be--the essential fabric to American life.

Jolivette Anderson

Jolivette Anderson is a Louisiana poet and actor who relocated to Mississippi to work with a local theater company, New Stage Theater. Her books and CDs--*Love and Revolution*, *Past Lives, Still Living: Traveling the Pathways to Freedom*, and *At the End of A Rope*--allow her to take her place in the long legacy of powerful African American women writers from Mississippi. Along with her wit and knowledge of history, Anderson brings to the table the influence of and competition with popular culture. An instructor at Tougaloo College and with the Young People's Project, Anderson

understands the need and ability of a poet's work to entice, attract, and recruit young people whose ears and eyes are filled with Hip Hop. With the incorporation of a full-time band when she travels, Anderson, as Braxton and Williams, makes no apology for going after the younger generation. Having opened for Patti LaBelle and Brian McKnight, Anderson is taking her Southern literature to the masses with no hang-ups or apprehensions because her goal is to embed as much Africentrism into the bowels and rhythms of Hip Hop as possible. Anderson's scholarship of African and African American culture is her biggest asset, but her ability to take an unflinching look at the African American existence is her biggest weapon. She is that shade of Black that seems to be able to simultaneously invigorate, scare, and anger various segments of Afro-Mississippians in much the same manner as Malcolm X. Always centered in her work is the need for African Americans to embrace their African heritage and deal with the schizophrenia that exists because they refuse to do so. This concept often puts many readers at odds with her work. Most enjoy her passionate and insightful work about the struggles of African American womanhood, mostly because they see that part of her work as non-threatening. That is only because they have not looked beneath the surface to find her commentary on the ills of a misguided patriarchal society where women will only save the world if they reject the Eurocentric, patriarchal model where man leads and rules through violent domination and control. Accordingly, most readers want the beauty and elegance of her work and her dramatic performances, but they are often put-off by her stanch rejection of white middle-class values (which most African Americans have embraced) and her need to write about and speak about the need of African Americans to engage a more African centered lifestyle.

As a student of Egyptology and other African and African American cultures, Anderson is a poet who, through the icons and imagery of her work, celebrates African American culture as the glue and base of American culture. Her work affirms Malcolm X's statement, "You can not be concerned about what's happening in Mississippi if you are not concerned with what's happening in the Congo." She weaves Mississippi and African culture so well that it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. African American women flock to hear her tales of broken hearts, struggles of female sexuality, and the black woman as the mother of the Earth. Her lyrical and poetic *Cane*-like piece *Past Lives*, *Still Living: Traveling the Pathways to Freedom*, with introduction by Haki Madhubuti, succeeds as *Cane* succeeds by equally combining several forms and genres and becoming a bridge between the past and the present. Its use of traditional spirituals with icons of the sixties all undercut by her life story as a metaphor for the present danger and evolution of African Americans acts as a "talking book" for the lives of African American Mississippians in this new age. Accordingly, in a time when "Neo Soul" is popularized by sisters such as Erykah Badu, Angie Stone, and Jill Jones who all want to show that the Soul in Soul Music is African, Anderson is affirming Braxton's notion that it is the understanding of their Africaness that will save African Americans. Like a new age griot, she calls on various ancestors and Egyptian Gods to give her the strength to tell the stories of her Mississippi. And as host of the very popular Saturday night open mic reading, Mississippi Vibes, she incorporates educational sections into the night to ensure that they are educating as well as entertaining. She, as all of us, feels the constant pressure from many of the academicians to come out of the juke joint and the

cafe' and into the university. But, until the Mississippi university becomes better enabling of the celebration and promoting of modern African American writers, she is inclined to stay in the streets and deal with the current issues of her people...

Part II to be published in the Spring Issue.

Poetry

Every Once In a Long While: A Chant
by Ahmos Zu-Bolton

I am come forth to represent:
represent my friend, my kin
where I'm going, where I've been
all my righteous ways, and lawd lawd
all my sins

I'm the kinda brother who just wanta
lend a revolutionary had, take a stand
be my own cottonpickin' man, join a culture band
and try to liberate this godforsaken land

I come forth to represent
to testify, to blow your mind
with my poem kissing your sky, my ancestor poem
learning to fly, preaching
America was built on Black slave labor, and some crackers' lie
but I still gotta believe that we gon be free
when we get our reparation
by 'n by 'n by

I come to represent
some old school hip-hop,
in my hood it's understood
that this struggle is our golden rule
is a classroom in our diaspora school

I am old enough to represent,
to remember, memory blessing me I remember
J. Philip Randolph and Jackie Robinson, I remember
1954 and little Stevie Wonder, I remember Sputnik
and bomb shelters and the young Martin Luther King,
I'm old enough to remember Medgar Evers
and rumors that Malcolm X
was gonna come to the south

...and I remember an old Mississippi midwife
named Easter,
who told the story of being a mere child
when she watched a whiteman drag his colored maid
out to the front yard,
and kick her in the stomach

where she was with child

Easter told how the woman
turned trembling to her other side
so as to protect the life
growing in her belly

"ain't no nigger gonna be born
into this world with my blood
in its veins," the white man screamed, tho
the deed was done

then he jumped over the woman
to kick her in her stomach again
till she coughed up her Jesus-prayers
and threw up her first blood

"You gon have that operation,
or ain't you?" He yelled down at her,
blood draining from his face,
blood running down her legs,
blood in the Mississippi dirt

"Please Mr. Charlie, Sir,
I can't kills me own child,"
she cried out loud,
then cried out louder

"Please sir, please
don't makes me do it"

But the white man
was full of himself,
he had drank a whole bottle of kick-ass
and was outraged at her sass

"then I will beat it outta you," he screamed
turning blue in the face

He drug the woman to a tree
and tied her wrist together, then
threw the other end of the rope over
a branch, pulling it 'til her feet were barely
touching the ground

Then he found the old bullwhip
that is soggy with the liquid history of slavery,

and he ripped the clothes from the woman,
and he beat her bloody across her naked stomach
till she was crying and screaming Jesus Jesus please
come save me, please Jesus please
and her whole body started trembling and went into convulsions
till the baby dropped from between her legs, lifeless
to the blood soaked ground
like a natural Southern baptism

The woman looked down at the child
and let out a scream heard all around Mississippi,
as her body gave one final shiver, and her life
followed the child like afterbirth
into the dust and the blood...

I remember Mama Easter
staring into the fireplace as she told her story,
he eyes deep
and alive with a mirror
of that horror...

I come forth to represent
Mama Easter, to represent
her story, to represent
that old colored maid
and her lifeless child

So you see
I got a whole lotta blues and a whole lotta pain
in the stories and the poems
of my old school game.

The Family Tree from *Ain't No Spring Chicken*
by Ahmos Zu-Bolton

For Alice Marie Pittman McGee Taylor
"Nanny"
my grandmother

This old oak tree
was born
during slavery times, just like my grandmother's
mother.

This old oak knew my grandmother's life
from glorious birth to jubilation's sad death,
from life to afterlife.

Thru good times and hard times thru
richer and poorer and church and 18 children and
a love big enough to smother them all.
This old oak knew grandchildren and nieces and
snotty-nosed nephews and
strange children who just seemed to
drop by the house
and stayed.

We all swung from the branches
of that old oak tree
and flew free for a moment
thru aeronautical Louisiana air space
and landed in grandma's bosom.

Old tree, old oak,
where w plotted our first protest march:
"we gon meet at the tree"
Russell told me
"pass it on,"
"we gon meet at the tree"
I told Carl Ray
"pass it on" and on and on...

13 teenagers
planning to change the world,
13 young black men
caught up in the fire of their times,

"pass it on" said Buli Ali,

and the only grownup present
was that old oak tree.

Old oak, old landmark tree,
giving us cool shade in the summer
of our public revolutions,
giving us roots
for our private revelations.

This tree is my grandmother's
burial ground,
an oaken tombstone reaching
for sky.

I built my first treehouse
in that old oak, stole my first kiss,
carved my name in the bark of that tree:

"Ahmos loves Lillie Mae"

And it faded with sun and rain and years,
years that transformed from colored
to negro to black,
african-american years
that disrobed before us,
baptized us with history's shadows
and family stories.

So, when the white men came
asking, no, demanding
that grandma
cut down her tree,
'cause it interfered
with their telephone wires,
told her to
cut down our playground,
what Blackjack called
our watusi nest of shango
(I never knew what he meant
'til I got my first taste of mojo
in that treehouse)

demanded that grandma

cut down our totempole street tree,
our family tree, cut off a piece

of black children growin' up,
chop off our history.

Grandma looked them up & down,
we all stood on the porch,
razor fists in our pockets and two, three tornadoes
on our breath,
my quivering lips wanted to holler,
my jungle blood was in a fever
the earthquake in my heart
wasn't masquerading,
not this day
not with grandma out there,
not when she got her dentures in
and standing there looking
dem young white fools
up and down.

But just when we were gonna attack dem crackers,
my grandma, who done cleaned mo' white folks kitchens
than you can shake a stick at,
grandma, who wet-nursed their younguns,
grandma, who knew all the ghosts
in their closet,
grandma puckered up her lips
and spit a big wad of snuff juice
at their feet.

The white men looked at their shoes
and then at grandma,
she smiled, a sad smile
and said quietly

"no"

The word must have echoed
and thundered in their ears
'cause what little color they had
drained from their faces.

"Now Alice," one of them said
with yesteryears on his tongue,

"Alice, it's the law and you knows
you gotta obey it..."

With that I screamed
"don't you talk to my grandma that way
and don't you call her by her
familiar name"
and I started off the porch, 'til
Russell grabbed me by the arm
and Robert Earl had me by the leg.

Grandma turned and looked at me
and smiled again, "hush
Junior," she said,
"be still. Mr. James here didn't mean
no harm. He knows me, knows that
when I says something
I means it."

And then she turned back
to the white men: "now youall
just run along now, and go tell your boss
that this tree was here long before
dem telephone wires,
this here tree
was born during slavery times,
this tree
grew tall during reconstruction
stood tall as white men in white sheets
rode by with blood on their lips
and evil in their pants.

"This tree
endured hurricanes
and long summer heatwaves,
it babysit my children,
locked its roots
deep down in this black earth
and endured.

"So yes sir Mr. James sir,
this tree was born during slavery times,
but its free now

"And as long as it's standing on
my land, it can shake its leaves
and spread its wings
anyway it damn well please.

Now
you go tell, that Miss Alice Marie Pittman McGee Taylor
says to
pass it on,
pass it on, pass it
on and on
and on...

I Did not Ask to Be a Palestinian (for Atef Al-Dabbour)
by Jerry W. Ward

They afflicted us, taunted us, condemned us,
determined us to be out of place like roaches.
We must leave their lebensraum.

Before the fall our family was happy,
counting days in olives and figs.
Our home had pitas baked in love,
bulging with lamb and spices.
Oranges and mint tea quenched our thirst.
Sleep was sweet. Our land knew peace.

History is cruel.
Two thousand years it sleeps;
it awakens to terrorize,
to swarm like a legion of locusts
intent on genocide-missions,
to ravish, to leave us
merely skeletons inside barbed wire
or merely traumatized eyes
or merely brave souls in famished flesh.
History merely blasphemes: *God chose to put you out of place*.

My parents weep and sicken unto death.
Dreams of happiness smash
against nightmares: beasts are eating my people.
Salaam, *salaam*, why have you forsaken us?
My unborn nephews will never know
quite why their names are out of place, disidentified.

Once my tongue confessed
that dispossession is rancid wine in an open wound.

They asked:
Why not request reparations?

And I replied:
How can I,
blessed by Allah,
ask for money
kissed by Yahweh?
But they still don't understand.
I did not ask to become Palestinian.

Jasper (in memory of James Byrd)
by Jerry W. Ward

Written out into history

Ah, Jasper, you are stone
a relic of Texas richly sinned,
most American

Jasper,
your rednakedness
leaves a trail of green blood,
Jasper, the blood is ebony green;
Jasper, the blood has a name

You, Jasper, are the real deal,
the daemon stone of whiteness

Ah, Jasper, once
touchstone of new testament

double conciseness
amber waves of memory

hard, cold emerald eyes
when breath congeals and dies

as you defile the father
rape the son,
violate the holy ghost

doubled consciousness so biblical
now so severely lynched

Jasper, your well-fenced vulgar silence
reveals how it was, damn sure was,
how it is, damn sure is, grave segregated from grave
as if the dead cared, as if the dead languished in boneflesh prison,
as if the dead should lose virgin prejudices in carnal conjunctions,
as if the dead remembered their black-mothered whiteness
in the womb of an ancient holy land.

But Jasper, as if I'd stoop to reason with you,
you Jasper redneck, brainwater baby,
you Jasper redneck, you haunting impeachment at its finest:
we who have bled rivers, had our innocence fried
in jesting irony, been ravished by broom, corkscrewed,
dragged, sliced, diced, and torched, profiled as dartboard
for racist ritual, gagged and drowned -- we neither stoop or kneel.

You Jasper,
must be taught the body in pain
is three screaming miles of red blood, ebony red blood,
flesh scrapped alive into decomposition

waste matter birthed of a body in pain
Jasper, male mother of madness,
shall anoint your face

You, Jasper,
must be taught
the cost of Klan-colored pain

your life rewritten
into a history of grounded revenge

the daughters of the hanged man
the sons of the tortured woman

witness, try and execute
grind your green to dust

as children condemn
the confederated flag of your name: Jasper, America

we murder our mercy,
we shall not forgive in forgetting

Mr. Woods (the day after)
by James E Cherry

Prowling hallowed Southern greens trampling
upon "all caucasian clauses" of privileged American
society, driving, wedging, putting pass a blur
of pale panic stricken and awe-struck faces,
tearing down pillars of white supremacy with the
swing of one ferocious club leaving the last bastion
tottering for a final fall, displaying brilliance through
intelligence each shot meticulously measured, calculated
with the precision of an assassin, graciously, slipping
into a 42 long sport jacket in the massa's cabin
(by the way, red black and green has never looked better),
setting dazzling new standards with youth, 12 shot leads
and eighteen under pars, articulately, paying homage
to lineage and forerunners who possessed the talent
but never the opportunity to tee off for eighteen
championship holes or become accepted by peers over
segregated clubhouse beers.
Lawd have mercy. What are white folks gonna do now?
The greatest golfer in the world,
is a nigger.

HARGROVE
by James E Cherry

Blue notes bend, stretch, flatten rising
like thick plumes of smoke caught in
multicolored lights. A stage for a pulpit
finds you preaching the precepts of swing,
the pianist, drummer and bassist ex
horting you to levels of pentecostal fervor,
communicants worshipping in tongues of
snapping fingers, feet that syncopate amen.
Your voice is distinct amongst the
brassy swagger of the hot trumpet's
blast or the fluglehorn's cool
seductive breath, like whispers
caught in the throats of lovers. Rivers
of chords water rich fertile melodies, riffs
as intense as African suns, nurture the soil
of rhythm, birthing flowers of song
in lush gardens of bebop.
The proselytes, on their feet, offer alms
of thanksgiving and applause that crescendo
and lodge, becomes twisted among the intricate
designs of your dreadlocks. Out of reverence,
you bow and pay homage to the ancestors.

TUSKEGEE
by James E Cherry

I rolled up my sleeves and
government doctors sucked
blood thru needles they stuck
into my veins. Told
me I had it bad.
Bad Blood. Told
me this and told me that.
Told me everything but
truth with Nurse Rivers
yessiring and thats righting every
lie digging my grave wider and
deeper.
But I shouldve known better
the White government sending White
doctors wearing white coats to help
Black me. The same government
hasnt in 400 hundred years recognized me
as a human being. I shouldve known better
as I rolled down my sleeve 40 years later
hurt confused angry and inspired to
tell my children and their children or anybody
thatll listen: Beware the White man
bearing hypodermic needles and a smile.

Barefoot in the Delta
by Jolivette Anderson

july. 2001. sun and mosquitoes. moon and mosquitoes. missing. missing. missing. we were not always, missing

tears. like you have never seen. moans like never in your most fearful of dreams. out of me. came flying and breathing and wailing out of me.

who will cry for me?

tears of not too long ago, would slide down my brown face, some lover done me wrong some lonely hung around too long but this feeling / it hung from a tree/ and it shouted RE-MEMBER- ME. so i wept - like jesus/ i moaned like mary and gave this delta back the pain it has given me.
we.
barefoot i walked in the night/ stepping on grass burned by the sun/ walked to a tree/ dressed in blue/ while sister G. blew cigar smoke over my head/ while mama T. asked yemoja to bless me/ cause my feet they be tired and swollen and my body was just scraped from a glass wall cause something some bodies threw me /pushed against this wall /i fall in the name of jesus/ as the choir sang/ but i had some poor little lost negroes tongue in my hand/ it had been ripped out and he /she/ we be silent screaming

who will cry for me?

all the times i cried cause some man did me wrong. cause lonely hung around 2 seconds too long and love moved out then moved in next door/ this blues is the life and death of my soul/ even though i know / i don't live here and we really never die/

i walked barefoot in the delta and i cried.
i cried for ancestors known and unknown
i cried for the cotton and the wheat and the trees
i cried out at the trees that kept crying to me saying
let go of the pain so you can fight with sworded tongue
these crackers trying to wipe out all that we have done
don’t run child/ no more run nigger run
stand and fight
stand and fight
with fist or gun

wailing barefoot in the mississippi delta

walking the history

screamed the pain of the delta
from the soles of my feet
i run with the tongue of the ancestors in my head
telling the stories of the living and the dead
the dead who did not die

cause for all of the emptiness
the missing people from the fields
i could see them walking
i could feel them enter me
through the soles of my feet
and when i
i say, and when i
when i get ready
i will shout each and every name
every name of the ones who lived and died
cause my soul look back and
wanders
barefoot
in a mississippi delta summer
(to be continued)

Barefoot in the Delta (pt. 2)
by Jolivette Anderson

i didn't like the lesson/but i learned the lesson/ and
i will not be doomed to repeat it
the cipher elevates my consciousness
the essence of my being

ain't gonna let nobody turn me round
keeping my eye on the prize
hold on

walking with my head down
looking at my big mississippi feet
stomping across hot concrete
dried like kentucky fried
grass so dry
it crunches under my feet
one step at a time i am reminded

in silent protest

with rope as belt around my waist
thinking about raynard johnson
and the countless others whose names i do not know
sister angles from chocolate brown to coconut cream
grab me
hold my
cause spirit done took control of me
as i give them their shit back
them, this Delta that screams at me in my sleep.
when the skies pour open and the rains begin to cleanse me
thunder so loud it wakes me from my sleep
a dream i was having about running from white men in sheets
barefoot
in the delta

glad to be awake to hear the rain falling
sad to be the conduit for the grief that spirit called me
to address
had to get it out so I may help educate the rest

this art, this artist thang

it ain't no joke

you pull on every experience you ever had
no matter how joyful or sad
cause if you keep it in
you begin to break and fall away
so holy ghost got me
and my body begin to shake
i rained tears for the blackness
that envelopes my skin
i rained tears for the soil
that holds the ancestors
i rained tears for the people who
try to wipe away my peoples name
we all got to share in the losses and the gains
so up jump the rhythm
of bones rattling in the earth
them bones clanking together saying
this child is the child of our birth
she be the one who knows the soul
so while she barefoot
run the message through her soles
she gonna tell our stories

sat and talked to a tree
said i am so sorry
sat and talked to the red clay
said i am the new day
sat and talked to ignorance
got mad and walked away
talked to myself
said no more running today
or any day

take those big mississippi feet
walk the path the ancestors blazed
feel each bullet, each rope, each burn mark from being dragged
feel each riff, each note, count each bar of the 12 bar blues
till somebody is healed
somebody is healed
somebody tells our truth

who will cry for me?

this delta beautiful delta
mama margaret talked about you

you shake and rumble
yet remain meek and humble

i cry for you
i cry for me and the work i must do
i cry for the ones who refuse
the ones who refuse
the ones who refuse
to be the balm that heals the scars
from wearing too tight shoes

walking barefoot in the delta
finally understanding what made
the delta blues

(to be continued)

Astral Traveling or Just Day Dreaming
by Kenneth Earl Stiggers

While the folks up front
mingle, giggle and socialize,
kissing each other's egos,
stroking each other's behinds,
I retreat to deep, drifting thoughts,
and walk within, step by step
towards salvation,
meditate and discover
new worlds suspended in the space
of subconsciousness.

While I wander through God's universe,
I think of music and hear
a divinely influenced cosmic orchestra
of harmonies, melodies, rhythms
that play back like a movie sound track
as I elevate to another plane called...
CONTEMPLATION,
my mind is ASTRAL TRAVELING.

A quick moment,
my spirit approaches a destination.
I rest...and ponder on
THE GREAT BEYOND OF
IDEAS AND THOUGHTS,
CONSTANTLY MOVING,
GENERATED FROM WITHIN...

Then, God's sun brightens my void,
radiating colors of orange-yellow,
and I'm a soul...ASTRAL TRAVELING.

I try to reach out
so that you can be with me,
inside my dreams,
where the past transforms into
a library of images,
where visions are real
to the future...

and, In this state of movement,
I seek fellowship in thought
with ONE who has the master plan.

ASTRAL TRAVELING...
where heaven equals
condition of the mind,
in accord while in discord,
peace in the midst of chaos,
knowledge conquering ignorance,
silence filtered from the noise--
a gift of CREATION to use IMAGINATION
as a means of RECREATION.

Now, the journey ends for a moment
when you touch my shoulder and ask,

"WHAT YA THINKIN' 'BOUT, baby?"

And, I reply, "ASTRAL TRAVELING....."

There Is Blood on My Shirt from ***Mirages***
by David Brian Williams

There is blood on my shirt
Ooh baby the vibe was tight
C. Liegh was counting them body parts
Rhonda was telling us that people make the world go round
Nellie was thumpin'
Rufus was bumpin'
EB was groovin'
People make the world go round
I had just told the girl with the Michael Jordan jersey
and the really tight daisy dukes
To be very afraid cause she would be reachin'
for shit that wasn't there
We hit
We grooved
We rocked
We stopped
Then it happened
The human stampede
pushin'
screamin''
shoutin'
Yelling
SCREAMING

There's blood on my shirt and
People make the world go round
The stampede turned over
tables and chairs,
people ran and pushed
and pushed and ran
What the hell is happening
Pow Pop pop pop pop pop pop
Oh shit somebody's shooting
The wall of screaming humanity
pushed me outside
I kissed concrete, gravel, glass, and dirt
Grabbing Shay and Monica placing them under me
I heard them coming toward us
pop pop pop pop PowPowPOWpop
Girl you stay your ass right here

I've got you
I gotta go she said I gotta go

Shut up before they come over here and shoot us too
People make the world go round
POW I jumped
POP I jumped
Seventy-four times
POP jump
Pow jump
Seventy-four times

There's blood on my shirt and
People make the world go round

It's not fun when Vietnam comes alive in your livin' room.
You can forget things
that mattered just moments ago
Oh shit I left my piece in the car
Why didn't I bring my phone
Where are my friends
Gunshots shouts then silence
The deafening quiet
The heart wrenching silence
And nothing matters
And I have blood on my shirt
And people make the world go round

Rhonda, holed up in the kitchen
Nellie and EB stuck in a corner
holding sax and bass up in front of them like crucifixes
Rufus, herding people to and fro like a cross
between an usher and a linebacker
C. Liegh on the floor in the bathroom
with seven women in miniskirts not caring how cute they were
Me outside kissing concrete, gravel, glass and dirt
SCARED
The revolving door question is "Why?"
Spinnin' in my head like a broken compass.
Why did they shoot
Why did a young brother have to deleted like a virus infected file
Why did 5 people's bodies have 2 b scared like plantation brands
Where did the girl in the Michael Jordan jersey
and the tight daisy dukes

pull her gun from
And why did she look like a marine
as she pulled it cocked it and shot it all in the same motion

Why Why Why
The vibe was really tight
The music caressed our eardrums
The poetry inspired and excited
The night was smooth as velvet
The air was perfect

But, I have blood on my shirt
I don't know whose blood
People make the world go round

But
We shall not be moved
The beat goes on at Birdland every Sunday at 9:00
With police protection
I have blood on my shirt
and People make the world go round

I Want to Have Chu'tch from ***Mirages***
by David Brian Williams

Call: Praise the Lord
Response: Hallelujah

I want to have chu'tch like we usta have chu'tch
Like back when there were no Lexuses and Benzes and
No Eddie Bauers and no Range Rovers in the parking lot
and when the only Cadillacs outside
belonged to the preacher and the funeral director.
You know back when the church mothers wore white dresses
lace around their collars and those funny little doily hats
Back when if your children were running up and down the halls
any adult would snatch them, make them sit down, be quiet,
and start reading verses out of the bible

Call: Praise the Lord
Response: Hallelujah

I want to have chu' tch like we usta have chu'tch
Correction: I don't want to have church or service
or "church service"
I want to have chu'tch
you know *chu'tch*
Where the A-flat, the E-flat and the C
were always out of tune on the piano
and the drummer never had all the pieces of the drum set
at the same time, but he could still play.
Chu'tch, where the guitar player and the organist always smelled like stale
cigarette smoke from playing blues in the club all night.
Chu'tch, where you didn't have to have a record deal
just to lead a song at the 11:00 service.
Chu'tch, where Cousin Cassie and Areva made the choir robes every year
and each one was a li'l different
though they were all made from the same pattern.
Chu'tch, where Deacon Beamon couldn't read or write
but could count the offering in his head quicker
than they could get it collected.
Chu'tch, when every Sunday everybody prayed
that Deacon Black would not lead the devotional prayer
'cause that man would count the blessings bestowed
on every person in the continental United States--
One at a time.

And three days later when he got through,

we would all thank the Lord
that he got finished befo'
the turn of the century and the pies gettin' cold.

Then you heard it: chu'tch.
The gravely, sweet potato pie voice affirmin'
"I love the lord he heard my cry"
From the back of the church rolling through the congregation
Like the mighty Mississippi River rolling through Cairo,
Like the River Jordan
running up and down the aisles and up into the balcony.
Then you felt it
The spirit of the Lord coming down like rainwater in a summer storm

Call: Praise the Lord
Response: Hallelujah

I want to have chu'tch like we usta have chu'tch
you know *chu'tch*
like when the one window air conditioning unit was over the front door and
it dripped water on everyone who walked in
while it never worked.
Chu'tch, like when you looked out over the congregation and saw all of those
funeral home fans (with the pictures on the back of Black people who didn't
look like any Black people you knew)
moving up and down in unison
and where all the older women wore those big COGIC hats
where the front of the hat moved every time one of the fans moved
and Sister Sullivan would dance out of her wig
every time the Choir sang "Call Him Up."
And Pastor Roberts sang the longest...slowest...version of "Amazing Grace"
ever known to man
before the alter call
where weary bodies laid down their secular burdens with sanctified prayers.
For it was real as payin' bills with lint line pockets.
It was sincere as a mother's love for a prodigal son.
It was Chu'tch, not church.
It was filled with the spirit of
black love laid like jelly over the peanut butter of hard times.
It was anointed

Call: Praise the Lord
Response: Hallelujah

I want to have chu'tch like we usta have chu'tch
Like when we needed new pews

Brother Allen built them.
When the washing machine broke
Brother Ollie fixed it.
When we needed any work done in the chu'tch
the members did it for the fee of love and the contract of covenant.
I want to have chu'tch where people work
because they love the Lord not because they are getting paid.
I want to have chu'tch like when we ate dinner as a congregation
twice a month in the too small fellowship hall,
and the members cooked 'cause "take-out" was what you took home with you.
And, MMM-MMM, Aunt Dessa cakes affirmed that God was near.

Call: Praise the Lord
Response: Hallelujah

I want to have chu'tch like we used to have chu'tch
Where the anointing was heavy with the oil of David,
Where we didn't fuss if the sermon was 5 minutes or 45 minutes
Where we knew each other like the intimate leaves on our cherished family tree
Where we loved each other like one analogous body
Where we prayed for each other as spirits connected to one mind
Where we worked side by side with each other like a spirit filled army
Where we were filled with the Holy Ghost
Where we were the village, a family, a human foundation...
Where every child could say on demand,
"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son
That whosoever believeth in him shall not perish"
inspired by the threat of a backhand or the reward of Ms. Lucy's candy.
I want to have chu'tch where we are assembled in his name
and not 'cause this is the place where the Uptown Negroes go.
Where we raise each other like farmers nurturing their crops.
Where we teach each other like Shepherds tending their flock.
Where we are saved by the blood of Jesus Christ
and not by the color of the new pews.
I want to have chu'tch like we usta have chu'tch

Call: Praise the Lord
Response: Hallelujah

and Amen

Check One from ***Simple Love***
by David Brian Williams

Remember the time
finding that special someone
was as simple as a note:
I like you;
do you like me?
yes
no
check one.
Then you pulled her braids,
and she chased you all over the playground

You didn't have to go through all the games people play
and the tension on your feelings.
You didn't have to worry about
what someone has
what someone does
what someone wears
or where someone lives.
It was very simple.
I like you; do you like me?
yes no check one.

It should be simple to get together.
It should be simple not contradictory;
you say you want a lover
who is your best friend;
you say you want
someone who is sensitive
someone who cares about you
and everything about you.
You say you want someone who
you can talk to about anything and everything
someone who has your best interest at heart
someone who wants
to share everything with you
someone who understands you
someone who
you can take walks in the park with or just kick it with
someone who loves you unconditionally;
you say you want all these things in a man

and when you find that man

you put him in the dreaded "friend zone";
then you call that man
you don't even have a home phone number for:
"yeah baby put #14 in my pager
so I'll know it's you"
Then you complain
that there are no good men out there.
You look everywhere
but right in front of you
to your friend who possesses
all the qualities you say you want.
It should be as simple as
I like you;
do you like me?
yes
no
check one

Remember the time when love was so simple.
You know I prayed to GOD
to send me someone special,
someone who is intelligent
who also has some common sense
someone who believes in GOD
and who tries to live according to the word.
I asked him to make her fun loving
Active, simple, hardworking and talented.
I also added it would be helpful
if she liked to cook sometimes.
I even asked him
to make her not think I was too corny
for admitting that I prayed for her.
Then we talked,
and I said maybe he sent me you.
Remember when love was simple.
I like you; do you like me? yes no check one.

We don't have to waste a lot of time
with overly expensive dinners
when I'd rather cook for you.
We don't have to worry about me
forcing myself into a suit and tie

when I prefer blue jeans.
tennis shoes and a tee shirt.
And why should I buy an expensive car

when I need a truck. A real truck.
To impress you?
I don't want to impress you with things;
I want to impress you with me.
I don't want to impress you with my money;
I want to impress you with the fact that I get up and go to work every day.
I don't want to impress you with the fact that
I have several degrees;
I want to impress you with how well I listen.
I don't want you to be impressed
with where I've been;
I want you to be impressed
with where we can go together.
In fact, I don't want to impress you at all.
I just want to tell you something simple.
I like you;
do you like me?
yes
no
check one

Missionary Music (for Koko Taylor)
by Sterling Plumpp

From back seats behind mirrors
She brings a woman's legacy:
Spots of some lowdown Soing-So's
Deeds in my mother's memory
Are rinsed in her blues, her blueing of
Existence, little school girls come home
In her lyrics after slick talked "good
Mornings" hoodwink dreams, their heads
High or determined as someone smoking
TNT, blues: missionary music for pain.

There is something about women
In trouble or in love and trouble
She defines. Oars to paddle from
The middle of the sea.

She is boat, oars, and paddler:
Way out of depths of pain.

Queen of the blues
Empress of the blues
Queen of the blues
Empress of the blues.

She is. Her throne
Is her blues.
Her crown, garlands of pain
She takes from some poor
Girl's heartaches

Every time she ushers out
Blues through Wang Dang Doodle
Pores of imagination

Singer (for Odetta)
by Sterling Plumpp

She steps out of imagination
Swinging a hammer, Lord, Lord
Swinging a hammer, Lord
A-steel driving paths, Lord, Lord
Steel driving paths, Lord

She takes one grain of sand
Flings it against the sky and
Over her head I can hear
Freedom in the air, Lord, Lord
Freedom in the air, Lord

Some call her folksinger
I call her folk
Singer of
Curvatures of roads in hearts
When there is darkness, Lord, Lord
Singer in the dark, Lord

She sings
Episodes of "John Henry" or
Vignettes of "John Riley"

She sings "Special Delivery Blues"
And a mailman picks up a package of
My mother's blues mailed COD somewhere, Lord, Lord
Mailed COD somewhere, Lord

She sings

And I know "ain't no grave
Gonna hold my body down

She sings

And "before I'll be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave
And go home and be free"

She sings

And I know the oppressors

"may run on for a long time,
run on for a long time but Great God Almighty
gonna cut'em down"

All the Pretty Horses
All the Pretty Horses
All the Pretty Horses

Gallop from Paradise
When she sings
Gallop for joy
Because of what her songs
Brings, Lord, Lord

Because of what her song
Brings, Lord

BeBop from ***Horn Man***
by Sterling Plumpp

Be-Bop is precise clumsiness.
Awkward lyricism
under a feather's control.
A world in a crack.
Seen by ears.
Von Freeman's
tenor Apocalypses/beginning
skies fussy about air and protective
of trombones on Jacob's Ladder
strung from basses
in a corner of handclaps.
Drums praying over evil
done by trumpets
and dances in fingertips.
Be-bop is elusive hammerlocks
a piano accords crescendos
in blue moanings.
Lingers in beats marching
across faces of sense.
Harmonic nightmares obeying
pianissimos of tones
erupting from barks of Powell.
Be-Bop is unexpected
style punching music
with garlic in tempo.

Billie's pain
and a cup of insinuations
drunk by laughter
before tears arise.

XVII. Seventeen from ***Ornate with Smoke***
by Sterling Plumpp

King
marches to get the right
to vote but Satchmo
laughs to get the right
to voice and Bird takes flight
to get the right
to voyage where

Trane is a milky way precinct
captain registering soloistic
exploits on tenor axes but Dizzy

sails around the Cape of King
cotton mouth debts to give
flogging with his loggings of what salt
pork endeavors done done for brown
eyes and crowder peas

Out of the parenthesis of sleep
I lease a dog
on bad axe that cries militancy
boxing air with double
bladed jabs into facades of
deliverance.

Tears running down
my face represent a museum of ruins
I find in cries along 43rd and the Big
Dipper filled with way out
troubles where each riff
I breathe is a tour
guide for dreamers who long
geographies of silence

But Bird rises against kitchenette
skies to say no
body will every name them
either

But I ain't yet convinced
and got some knick
knacks for them

If We Don't Make This Constant Music
(for James Brown & Gary Tyler, inspired by the music
of Jean Lee & Archie Shepp) from ***A Nation of Poets***
by Kalamu ya Salaam

O-AHHH-OWL
It's too / too
too / too
too / too, too-too
Funky in here
Too funky
It's too funky
too / too
Much too funky in here

Too funky in here
Weird in here
Here being the city, street, land, country,
The state your ass is in right now
Can't you hear all the wrong changes going down?
Can't you see all the strange shit passing for normalcy?
Can't you feel how damn funky donkey stupid wacked
Our world has been man made by corporate designers
And dull but dangerously deadly bureaucrats wielding state power?
Can't you hear the static in here, i mean inside my/your/our
Heads? all these excedrin headaches and migraines ain't because
The atmosphere is cool, its cause the twentieth century
Is ending up strange, strange like music w/no beat, out
Of tune, out of synch with the real world of us, it's too
Too funky in hear, have you ever been to a hearing?
ALL RISE, Come in with yr hands up
Yr pockets turned inside out
Put your heart on the table
Yr nuts too, Cut that womb out!
Where is all your money going?
Do you really want to pay for the criminal justice system?
All rise, alright, naw, not alright, unless by all rise
They mean a real up rising like in revolution
But naw they don't mean that when they say "all rise," what
They mean is get down on your knees, kiss our ass, play our games
And beg for another chance to pay taxes and vote for fools

"The State versus James Brown"
Do you know why?
Do you know why the State
is against James Brown?

They say because he was a drug addict
Addicted to drugs
And running from the police
And they had to shoot the tires out from under him
So what else is knew
In America, very few, very few
Very, very few of us are not
Addicted to something like
Sucking on a R. J. Reynolds ten or twenty times a day
Swallowing thick lifts of Folger's to get a charge
Maladjusted on Domino white
Naw, they took James Brown away
Not because of dope
But because of the aural omnipotent
Rhythmic magic bodacious boasting majesty
Of our Godfather, our keeper of the flame

I'm bad / huh
I'm back/ huh
I'm Black / huh huh

And I got soul

Bad / huh
Back / huh
Black / huh huh

And JB, like all the rest of our ancestors,
He got stole / sold into a hell hole just to prove
To all the rest of youse out there that no matter how bad, how
Black he was, white is still right, or wrong really, though
Not weak, but strong, strong enough to be wrong and
Make the world believe they right, and make too many
Of us answer back, "Yes Sir, Yes Sir Mr. Charlie
You right, you white" or at least not say a mumbling word or at
Most say that, i.e. a mumbling word that is, just a mumbling word.
"Huh, say what? They done locked James
Brown up, ohhh, what we gon do now"
And who were they, red neck crackers who dyed
Their white robes black and claimed to be
Dispensing justice when they know it wasn't nothing but a legal
Lynching another way to castrate a Black man whose major crime
Was being Black and needing help, needing medical attention
JB was too much, too too much
Mouth for any illiterate
Georgia's son to be shooting

At the top of his soul power throat
With a dip in his hip
That won't quit
A glide in his stride
That Capt. lost in the stars Michael
Want to be white always feeling for his lost self
Pretending there's a man in his mirror Jackson
Don't get me wrong Michael is cool
But when we incarcerated what we need is some fire, some hot
Which is what Michael is not, can you imagine him saying
"Hit me one time, uh, two times" naw, they put James
Brown in jail to prove to us that they own us and can do
Whatever they want to us, yes they did, that's why they did,
And they put Gary Tyler in jail because they needn't a fall guy
To take the rap for a murder when a mob rushed the buss and if
The mob had been Black and the kids inside the bus had been white
And a shot had killed somebody who was rocking that bus
And beating on that bus, at the worse it would have been
Justifiable manslaughter, more likely self-defense
What is our defense against this madness?
The only defense we have is to stand together
To refuse to believe in the United Sates Government, it's
Criminal justice system, and all the state agents, of whatever
Color, religion or political persuasion who would have us believe
That this is the best possible of all worlds
We must be like Gary who refuses to take a fall and even
While enchained inside, he stands and sings
Strong as JB's most sacred croon:

> "I don't want nobody to give me nuthin'
> Open up the door, & I'll take it myself"

We must make our music and make this world respect our music, and
Make a world that reflects our music, we must make this constant
Music, because if we can't make this constant music
We get bent back into awkward impotence & infertility, get
Chained into a silent scream, we must make our music
Even in this strange land, imagine music and sing and sing and
Sing

Imagine yall, imagine a world as hip as our music
Black music, a black world, multi-colored by our tonal hues
A place where love is, and funk too, a hip place where
You can waltz if you want to or boogaloo, scream one minute
And moan the next, get up for the down stroke and be a Love
Supreme Stopping madness in the name of all that is righteous

A world as hip as our music, imagine that, imagine sound
A sound world, imagine, imagine who would not want to live in
A world of music and you will know what we are up against,
The deaf ones, the ones who can hear but can't hear cause
They ain't got eyes for nothing but money and adherence to
Penal codes that were hopelessly backwards before they were even
Born in some world set up to keep the majority in chains or
Indentured into servitude, can you imagine what kind of
Earless motherfucker you got to be

To put JB in jail

Well they got his body
But they ain't got his soul
They got his body
But they ain't got his soul
Never had it and never will
They got his body
But they ain't got his soul

Sing loud for James Brown
Sing loud for Gary Tyler
Carry the song on

And what are the words: Uhuru = Freedom / in whatever language
You choose to shout it, let freedom reign
Let freedom reign

One time: FREEDOM!
Two times: FREEDOM! FREEDOM!
Three times: FREEDOM! FREEDOM! UHURU

Fiction

Lore

by Sheree Renée Thomas

In the beginning God walked barefoot cross the land. She spread Her bigtoe wide cross the rich, deep earth and danced. She stomped so hard with Her rockbottom feet, the earth split right open. Still She danced. Her bigtoe sunk deep, and the sweet waters rise quick, quick. That's how we got the rivers, and the lakes, and the creeks.

Still God danced.

She shook Her wide hips and dipped so low, the air blow. That's how we got wind, from God's sweet hip sway. She danced. Cross brown dirt and redclay, Her toes digging valleys in the moist earth, heels rocking flat plains unfolding, rolling under the balls of Her ashy feet. Still God danced. Mountains forming under the high high arch of her stepping feet. Danced, the earth yielding under the weight of her pretty toes. Danced so hard She sweat, salt rolling in big drops down Her chin and her nose. Danced til she cried, salt rolling into the waters til we got the oceans and the seas.

Still God Danced. Hotfooted cross burning sands in the desert, shaking her hips, bump bump diddy rump til the earth quake and the trees sprout from seeds. Still God Danced, til her wide blacktoes touched every part of the land, soles slapped against every speck of dirt and sand. God danced til her feet were tired, so sore she had to sit, rest her tailbone down on a high bluff, wipe the sweat from her eye and spit, dip her feet in a cool sip of water, riverdeep. The black earth so thick, a rich crust caking the bottom of Her feet, til the river turn to mud and we got the Mississippi.

How Sukie Come Free
by Sheree Renée Thomas

She has many names. Aunt Nancy, Sukie Diamond, Diamond Free, but her navel name was Stella or Dinah, depending on who tell the tale. I'm telling this, and on my end of the river bottom, we called her Stella because no matter who come after her, she always managed to steal away. Now, some folk say Stella mama was a real bad seed, contrary kind of soul, always running. Say the last time she run, her whitefolks dug a hole in the ground and put her in there, belly baby-swole and all, and beat her til she couldn't do nothing but grunt. Say when she come out of that hole that night, she was spirit talking, whispering words ain't no body live long enough to know the meaning to. Saying

stee la dee nah
nah dee la stee
stee la dee nah
nah dee la stee
steeeela! deenah!
Steela! Steela!

Whispering then shouting and yelling them words, part African, part Indian, til folk turn a pot over to hold in the song, whispering and shouting til she didn't speak no more and her body come still. But her baby, that baby Stella just a kicking in the belly. Folk say they could see her little arms and legs just a waving under the cold dead flesh of her mama. Say Stella birth herself in her owntime, say she come on out kicking and swinging, too and been swinging ever since.

Say when she was born her eyes was wide open, not shuteye like most babies but bright as two harvest moons. Say she leaned back, took in her world, saw her mama tree-stump dead-the spirit still fresh on her breath-and didn't drop no tears. No, Stella didn't cry. Stella leaned back, smacked the old granny that held her, and snatched back her navel string. Say she'd bury it her own damned self. Say she'd rather carry her destiny in her own hands than trust it to some strange bloodtree, cut down 'fore its roots can grow like her mama and all her kin that come before. And some folk say she been carrying that string in a mojo band round her waist ever since.

But that night, the night Stella birthed herself, they say she looked round and saw the other's faces and said just as loud for anybody to hear, "I'll eat the clay of my own grave for I'll slave a day in this life or the next for anyman, woman, child or spirit, white, negra, or other." She say this and then she was gone.

Stella walked right down the path to massa's house, spit and set the Big House afire. Then the fields, then the tool shack that held every hoe. She kept walking til she come 'cross overseer, running crook-legged and buck-toe from all them burning fields.

Now, overseer was looking mighty 'fraid til he see Stella standing up in the row, bucknaked with the backside of a smile on her face. When he saw Stella frowning down

at him, he dug his rusty heels into the ground and puff up his chest til his black muscles gleamed neath all the sweat and dust.

"Where you think you headed, gal?" he asked, like the aim of Stella's long toes wasn't cuss clear. "Who yo' people?"

Now, overseer didn't recognize Stella, but he look her up and down like he thirsty and want a taste. At first sight, Stella didn't say nothing, but her eyes walked all over his face. Seem like she knowed he was the one put her mama in the belly hole and beat her til she spoke in spirit tongue. (What overseer didn't know was that Stella remembered what most forget, on the trip to this world from the next. She knew why she'd been sent, just not how or when or where. She reckoned she'd just put one foot 'for the next til they carried her to a place that felt like home. But when she come out that night, she knew that belly hole wasn't it.)

Finally, after a long spell, Stella say, "My mama folk come from heavy-boned ships . . ." She spit, and sparks fly. "They'se the kind the slavers couldn't half handle. . ."She spit and mo sparks fly. ". . .and if you couldn't handle my mama. . ." spit, she moving now, "...what make you think you can handle me?"

When she say this, overseer look like he grab the wrong end of a rattler. "Who yo' mama, girl?" he ask, backing up all a sudden. "Bet you know when I give you this kiss," Stella say, pressing her full lips on his rusty jaw-burnt off half his face. Overseer cry so loud, his voice seem to come from a hundred throats, distant but close like.

"*Steela! Steela!*" he cry. She watched him in silence and frowned. Seem like her name in his mouth called down the rain. Stella stood under the baptism a moment, the sky a red sinking ball afire, then she picked up her long feet to go.

When overseer come tumbling down the row, jaw looking like a big ole greasy piece of fatback, folk was ripping and running so, nobody had time to see Stella make her way down the road, through the gates and on into them woods. And that's how Sukie come free. She walked her way into freedom, carrying that navel string in her hand.

The nail ain't broke
The nail just bent
And that's the way
The story went.

Literary Hit Man
by Reginald Martin

All-purpose literary hit man and holder of interest the old fashioned way, known purveyor of techno-disco influenced verbiage and covert teller of truths, the last living speaker of the eradicated language of the here-and-now and the second coming of the script synclaviar, constantly at odds with the concept of a monowriter, genre limitations, depresso- and lethargiclit, confused publishing houses, anachronistic journals, and readers who judged entertainment on the thickness of the volume and whether the "good read" would last on a flight from Hannibal, MO to Portland, OR and through the Easter weekend, Larry Perry Dickerson, by day omnisexual catalyst of any writ-for-hire and by night ink-based polyglot inclined toward screenplays and flash fiction, removed his fingers from the Phoenician-lettered keyboard, inhaled, and sprang into the Atlanta dawn to face another workday. It was Monday. What would he do today?

"That was really good work you turned in the other day." The same refrain it came over and over again. It came at the end of the day from architectural firms whose letters had to be made literate. From elevator plants whose manuals had to managed into graphic language that had to clearly illustrate complex technical data on a communicational level somewhere between the first syllables a baby utters and The Cat in the Hat Comes Back. From the bowels of massive corporations whose animistic annual reports had to be precisely direct or indirect: direct if the rate of profit were good for the past four quarters; indirect if the managerial team had sold out the stockholders again for short term high yield, carefully covered by giving projections based on previous years' projections which were inflated in the first place. From the head minister as Larry dragged his ministerial staff kicking and screaming into pronouncing participial endings. From the law firm where three-piece suits threw briefs at him as though he were a secretary who worked for them; and when he fixed their postlapsarian Latin laxatives, they actually tried to explain to him what he had just written for them. From the editor of the medical journal who followed the "good work" comment with the addition that Larry ought to work for free because he was being exposed to a great deal of cutting- edge geriatrics knowledge. From the lover he shared with her husband who even got him to write love letters to her husband, letters so good and hot that, in 18 months, had garnered for her a diamond ring, a fur coat, and a large BMW. But at least they all paid. His lover more than most.

It all took its toll of course. At night in the Five Points stop he would scream as the car pulled into the station. "I am not a hack! I am not a pencil pusher for hire! I am a scribe for the Pentium chip age! Look at my hands! Ask my mama!" Then he'd go sit with the Nation of Islam guys and tell them he was a better writer than Muhammad just to piss them off. Back at his building he spat on her door each time he passed the manager's office because she'd hired him to teach resume writing to the entire building and then stolen his template and gone into the business for herself. After Cee Dee wrestled with him for an hour on purple satin sheets every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday night, she would always force him to write another letter for her husband, never once reading one of his screen plays as he succumbed to increasing sexual indignities in an effort to bribe her to do so. "You're a ok writer baby," she'd say, poking his hairful chest with one of her

long orange fingernails, "but that ain't your best talent. If I wanna read I'll go to Sunday School. See you on Tuesday". . . or Thursday or Saturday, it was all just one long awful day at the end which, he knew, god would say, "Take a letter Larry."

"Ah but today, today will be different," he thought to himself [each day]. Today I will pull out my Lotus report projections tracking all the jobs I've done for the past year, and I will show each company how much better corporate communications increased their profit ratios, and then one of them, yes one of them, maybe even that snot of an old folks doctor will stake me to a year's worth of office space and some equipment money, and then I will no longer be Larry the letter writer, but Larry the Litterateur. The Modern Language Association shall hear my name and tremble."

Dysfunction Junction
by Reginald Martin

Long it had gestated in each of them, this demon to get back at being born, the coming universal wish not to be--except for the intercession of The Others (another fable, not for this tale of depression and living death and lightness never-achieved because of unnecessary self-deceit), but for now a tale of easily believable woe lived at ISDN speeds, but to be believed only by those in his circle, and his one friend, who understood but could not live for him.

Right there right there in the center of the mix it started, but its antecedents who knew? But for them--for our tale's genesis--start between their legs because one had kids because one had to and for all the wrong reasons. (And I know I know what you're thinking ["Everything starts between the legs."], but my friend in this case only, trust me, it's more complicated than that; it's more human, more natural than that, than that.) For her, something that would love her selflessly, devotedly, powerlessly--preferably in her own image but not the first or the second--even in her most horrible self-degradation and intellectual and spiritual laziness; for her a boy, and then another boy cause the girl didn't come second but you had to have two in case a train ran over one or the gangs got him or the crack got her so you know how it is that it didn't matter that they couldn't even afford cable (but this before the semi-general concerns about worthiness of parenthood, affording to live as a productive eco-units, etc.) but the LORD will make a way cause He always had before (right?) for those Diasporic Africans whose ancestors had not thrown themselves off cliffs or succumb to the forces of Manifest Destiny (after all come on now Carlyle was right, right? only the Africans could live and multiply among them seemingly like yeast or roaches) and anyway one of the two had to be a separate gender cause you needed that for circle completion and to exercise doll-clothing rituals long ago saved on the hard-drive and backed up to optical storage.

And so there it was in pink, the 3rd, but that was right at the chiasmas where that son-of-a-bitch got tired of the terrestrial sameness of it all, turned on its side with the tv on and her nagging on Sunday about going to service to hear the same preacher who was popping her and her youngest uncle. And so Dad was popping her own sister who had been grabbing at his Johnson for 27 years and now received it with impetus emanating vengeance, and you needed that fourth (another boy) so late that he was (it felt like he was) extracted through the nostrils, but it kept that no-good daddy at home paying the bills (the right kinda lover for me) for at least another six years cause he was human too, regardless of what the women's shows said, he from womb not wolf or truck. And then (yes even) that fifth but betrayed by biology and now stuck with only 4 (in birth order, these):

1) an emo-artistic homeboy who would forever betray his own longings because of a lack of discipline and foresight,

2) a genius who happened to be male but who also happened to be completely different from any emanation seen on the women's shows or

COPS and thus doomed to forever assert his selfhood-ed uniqueness in a world that would never be able to perceive beyond his melanin content and manly bulge,

3) the third an iconoclast without professional training and equipped with a working womb and clitoris who would punish them all forever and mercilessly for co-enabling her, and

4) the fourth caught in the spotlight doing a *Tommy* impression but talking, hearing and seeing while listening, understanding and perceiving nothing.

* * *

And him, a party to it all cause you had kids cause you had to and that first one cause he had to and it made him a man (his mother had told him so) and it would keep her out of the streets for at least six years cause she was good and that was why he had to make that pussy his never-more-to-roam. And this first one kinda looking almost like him except the eyes being a little more intense and hateful, which made Pop feel good for about six years and this boy being otherwise exactly like him in attitude, demeanor, concepts, and values, that from the start they distrusted and hated each other with a ferocity that even feminists would have stood in awe of and they repelled each other like the opposite poles that they were the first time either one tried to assert his energy through control, and that was that for Pop cause he could probably kick his first born's ass forever but a son's blind love for his mother and Big Daddy Time answering more bells than you can count was a double-team that even in his best gin and most virile he knew he could only lose to.

And when that second one came he needed a girl to complete the circle (his wife had told him so and so did his testicles) but came out with this weird-ass boy who looked exactly like him but who was so different as to be the child of a Bosnian who had never heard Motown, this boy with the penis of a male and the emotional profile of a human being, crowded out by his school books on the dining room table while his other siblings laughed at and spat on him as they passed and his parents tried to drown out his concentration by blaring *I Love Lucy* as loudly as the volume button would turn right, this boy who forced himself a success until they all turned against him at his weakest and he had to take an alternative route, who understood the world clearer than anyone within a 300 mile radius and who spoke The Words to any and all who would listen and be healed and be not repelled by prophecy in rap and hip-hop lexicon and meter, a child to be punished over and over and over until his own self-knowledge set him free to see, a lonely boy not meant to be so until the amplitude of time drew people to him like deers to headlights.

And the third, man that third one, who came not to praise Caesar but to densely populate the house in which he paid all the bills and bust him in front of her mother with his illegitimate children lost for 19 years until the 3rd looked the boy closely in the eyes as she was on top and neighborhood reports of Dad's waning cocksmanship only

underscored and amplified by his own bad luck and ineptitude. The 3rd, who came to force the mother to move out, get an apartment, live with her, put all the credit cards in her name, and then kick the mother out back to the father, but remembering to hgeer that she would only continue to love the mother if the mother continued to pay the bills, but the mother balking and the dope boy balking even more, so she accompanied mother and let both parents split the charges, that 3rd little bundle of joy so petite and fine, but cocaine and venom for blood and unrealized and unearned security riding shotgun in her mind.

And the fourth, the fourth, what shall I say but Generation X looking swarthy with a car grandmama buys, but not enough foresight to learn how to change a flat and who thinks it's a bragging point that he won't use a condom.

* * *

---and besides, dear reader, this be not his story nor theirs but mine, alas yes mine, not theirs and not even yours, before The Others were brought forth through the power of the reflective Word, who grew up with the first two and who lived with them and loved them-- not as those who fit the description at 6 and 11 o'clock, instilling fear and loathing via video-tape stereotype, even through the suburb's drug stupor, but who knew them as human beings, though black, and who sucked the same urban air and sang from the same hymnal and who were all blessed by St. Nadine on a warm September night in the church basement and who tried to be there through thin, but who was abandoned when they were thick and envied when they were thin and didn't know when or how it had all happened to them, who watched them all (except the 2nd) replicate an error when all they really wanted was power and all they really needed was, well you know, --the L word-- and a lot of discipline, but the worst laid plans in transitional epochs yield only disaster, and I grow more disappointed--not shocked--by the nanosecond when I only occasionally sleep and in the dream phase realize that this is not made for tv two inch high characters clicked off and forgotten through the next dead day at work.

I am one of these characters. This, our only episode. And we are live.

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