Black Magnolias

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Reading Narratives: Mississippi's First Black Autobiography
by Willie J. Harrell, Jr.

"The tendency of the spirit of slaveholding is, to kill in the soul whatever it touches. It has no eyes to see, nor ears to hear, nor mind to understand, no heart to fell for its victims as human beings."
Extract from Weld's "American Slavery As It Is," Appendix to *Henry Watson's Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself, 1848*

"My master always was a cruel man, lashing his slaves without mercy. This shows one of the many ways in which the licentious slaveholder inflicts pain on poor slaves; robbing them, by force, of their virtue, then lacerating their backs for having allowed themselves thus to be forced."
Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself, 1848*.

Introduction: "The Slave Narrative and 'Artistic Value'"

For thousands of Mississippians, slavery was a reality. It was real for those who protected it. It was real for those who lost their lives fighting to see it come to an end. It was real for those who felt it vital to Southern prosperity and affluence. Most importantly, however, it was real for those who were the victims of its tyranny: those such as Henry Watson, a former Mississippi slave who left behind his account of life in Mississippi's "peculiar institution." Watson's pilgrimage is embedded in his narrative and offers literary scholars and historians an in-depth view of slavery in Mississippi. His account, however, along with thousands of other similar narratives left behind, has drawn very little interest from scholars and historians. Reading these narratives, they suggest, becomes problematic because as Marion Wilson Starling argued in 1981, in *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History*, most of the more than 6,000 narratives left behind by former and ex-slaves are "admittedly low in artistic value" (294).

Notwithstanding "artistic value," I believe that all slave narratives are important to American studies because of what they tell us about the slave's everyday life from the first-person experience. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, H. Porter Abbot suggests that readers habitually "think of [narrative] as art" (1). Therefore, I contend that if literary values are the only way to categorize the few proficient, well-crafted narratives that exist, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, then lesser-known narratives should be read under new aesthetic quality. Furthermore, if not having "artistic value" means being characterized by having sketchy, disorganized and muddled endings, Raymond Hedin, in his essay "Strategies of Form in the American Slave Narrative," has argued that:

The disconnectedness of slave life-the jarring dislocations that resulted from the owner's power to buy and sell at whim, the slave's consequent inability not only to control his movements but even to predict them or to keep track of separated friends and family members-was one of the cruelest and most pervasive aspects of slavery; to expose it accurately was one of the narrator's purposes. The narratives are therefore filled with

loose ends, with incidents whose outcomes remain unknown. (29)

Even Harriet Jacobs, in the Preface to her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, acknowledges that her work contains "deficiencies in considerations of circumstances" (1). What I offer, then, is to juxtapose these lesser-known works with more widely known narratives in such a manner as to construct meaning and place them higher on the slave narrative hierarchy. Among these works produced, Black Mississippians have fashioned, in my opinion, some notable works.

Lesser-known slave narratives should be considered as a form of art and studied under the light of "artistic value" simply because all slave narratives have meaning. However, to delve deeper into the narratives' structure and understand this meaning--especially that of the lesser-known narratives--I suggest that students of the genre must first bring their own knowledge of reality into as close an understanding as possible with the existing beliefs in the time that these works were written: the oppressive reality of slavery. What then becomes problematic is placing lesser-known narratives into the same classification as Douglass, Jacobs, and William Wells Brown, just to name a few. I hope to construct meaning of some of these lesser known slave narratives, and align them into context-historical and literary-within American arts and letters by calling attention to the art of said works. How I define meaning in these lesser-known slave narratives, depends upon my interpretation of them. Everything, I argue, in a slave narrative signifies some importance in the development of the slave's life. For today's reader to take such an approach, however, will entail an exploration of what Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg called "an alien milieu" (83), and will depend upon an examination of Mississippi's historical scholarship.

Chapter I: "Establishing Labor: An Essential Element in Maintaining Mississippi's Economy"

In the early 1700s, the French introduced slavery to the Mississippi Territory. Enthusiastic English colonists, who later settled in the region, prospered from the established system by purchasing slaves, by selling them, and by abusing them for their labor. When the Mississippi Territory was established just around the turn of the century in 1798, the area dubbed as Natchez, which would later become the cultural center of the Old South, held the majority of the territory's population, containing about 5,000 whites and about 3,500 slaves. Between 1820 and 1861, however, Mississippi's slave population increased 225 percent. One of the most prominent slave markets in the area was located in Natchez, which was a superb site for a slave market because of its position in the Southwestern corner of the state on the Mississippi River (about 170 miles North of New Orleans, LA and 290 miles South of Memphis, TN, where slave markets also existed). The Natchez market, referred to as "Forks of the Road,"[1] was located about a mile east of downtown Natchez, at the intersection of Washington (now St. Catherine Street) and Liberty roads, and would perhaps soon became the South's second largest slave market.[2] Slaves where also sold at the Adams County Courthouse, at Natchez Under-the-Hill after the boats docked, and in various auction areas throughout the town (McCallum, "An Adams County"). A great deal of the slaves traveled their journey by

way of The Natchez Trace, the 450-mile roadway that linked Natchez to Nashville, Tennessee. The Trace also served as a gateway to the one of the busiest slave markets in the South. Others where taken by steamboat to other markets in the area, either at Memphis, Vicksburg, other areas of the Mississippi Delta, Baton Rouge, or New Orleans.

The trip was a treacherous journey for all those involved. Many slaves did make it to their destination. Either shock or disease took hold. Williams Wells Brown, a former slave born near Lexington, Kentucky in 1814 who later became a conductor on the Underground Railroad, wrote in his *Narrative of William W. Brown, An American Slave: Written By Himself* that it was not uncommon to witness:

> A drove of slaves on a southern steamboat, bound for the cotton or sugar regions, is an occurrence so common, that no one, not even the passengers, appear to notice it, though they clank their chains at every step, and it was not an infrequent occurrence to have on board gangs of slaves on their way to the cotton, sugar and rice plantations of the south. On landing at Natchez, the slaves were all carried to the slave-pen, and there kept one week, during which time several of them were sold. (32-33, 39)

Brown claimed to have made several trips on the Mississippi River between St. Louis and the New Orleans slave market. Before he escaped from slavery on 1 January 1834, this unusually well-traveled slave had seen and experienced slavery from almost every perspective, an education that he would put to good use throughout his literary career.

Mississippi, however, entered the Union in 1817 and accepted slavery as its economic and agricultural (peculiar) institution. On Jan. 9, 1861, Mississippi became the second state to secede from the Union. Upon acquiring its statehood, Mississippi had a population of about 40,000 whites and about 30,000 blacks. By 1860, just 43 years later, Mississippi's population had escalated to approximately 791,000, with blacks comprising 50 percent of that total population ("History and Background of Mississippi Slavery"). Only the Southern portion and a narrow streak up the Mississippi River to the Yazoo River, just north of Vicksburg, were able to be developed and settled. Losing claim to their country by 1835, the rest of the state had belonged to the Chickasaw and Choctaw kingdoms. An increasing flow of newcomers, however, to the Southern and Eastern sections of the territory began to arrive and occupy this newly acquired land. Quickly, those who possessed the assets procured the best lands and established plantations, where the Black population became the most prominent. Unfortunately, for Black Mississippians, their status was firmly set in place: to serve as another man's chattel. These newcomers felt that labor was essential to maintaining their economic conditions. They also felt that blacks would work only as slaves in their new agricultural market ("History and background of Mississippi Slavery"). White Mississippians believed that blacks' "incompetence" was the essential ingredient to the "understanding-and defense-of slavery" (Oshinsky, "Worse Than Slavery").

For the most part, Mississippi slaves lived in towns, serving in an assortment of professions from house servants to mechanics, from draymen to hostlers, from laborers to

washwomen, to even apprentices. Working in such positions came with its advantages. For example, while working as a waiter at a hotel, Henry Watson learned about the North. He overheard some northerners, while dining, talking about how different opportunities were in the North than in the South. Watson then began to think about his "delicious freedom" (36). Working in such positions also came with it disadvantages. Watson contended that "Slavery has made labor dishonorable to the white man, and, as they must have means of living, they generally resort to gambling for support" (26). He, therefore, learned how to gamble "in order to gain money from those who had the chance of making more than" he made. A free Black man and Watson were found to be the "principals" of a gambling ring. Gamblers in early American literature normally are punished for such a crime. Therefore, for his punishment, Watson received "sixty lashes" (27) for his "nefarious business" (26). After he recovered from his flogging, Watson "resolved never to gamble again" (27). The free Black man "was sentenced first to have his left ear cropped, to be tarred and feathered and put in a boat full of holes, and set adrift down the river" (27).

Along with its substantial number of slaves, however, Mississippi had a sizeable number of free blacks. Around 1840 the census listed its greatest number of free blacks living in Mississippi at about 1,336. William Johnson, a free black, left behind his diary. Johnson was born into slavery in 1809 in Natchez, and in 1820, Johnson's master kept his promise and freed him, after freeing his mother and sister. In 1830, 21-year-old Johnson purchased his brother-in-law's, James Miller, barber shop for $300. Johnson had also keep a small business in Port Gibson, Mississippi, about 45 miles north of Natchez. In 1835, Johnson began to carefully maintain records that subsequently evolved into his personal diary. In his diary, Johnson made notes of everyday events that occurred in Natchez, in addition to his personal and business expenditures and trips. Johnson kept his diary until his death in 1851. The work, *William Johnson's Natchez: The Ante-Bellum Diary of a Free Negro*, was originally published in 1951, celebrating the 100th anniversary of Johnson's death. In his Introduction to Johnson's diary, republished by the Louisiana State University Press in 1993, William L. Andrews refers to it as "the lengthiest and most detailed personal narrative authored by an African American during the antebellum era in the United States." Andrews contends that Johnson's dairy has "evolved into an extraordinary record of social, economic, and political life," and that nothing like it "exists in the history of antebellum southern or African-American letters" (ix).

In 1860, however, the number of free blacks in Mississippi had dropped to about 775. Perhaps some left Mississippi for a better life in the North. Perhaps some were remanded to slavery. Whatever their situation, the majority claimed homestead in the Southwestern counties (such as Amite, Pike, and Wilkinson), with about 255 in Adams County, where Natchez is the county seat. During its last years, around 1860, blacks in Mississippi's "peculiar institution" numbered about 437,303, with about 353,901 whites. The slaves were owned by 30,943 slaveholders, who owned, on average, 14.1 slaves each. Most of them were working age and were working as field hands. Relatively small numbers had received special training as artisans or house servants ("History and Background of Mississippi Slavery").

To tell their stories of the harsh life they suffered, former and ex- Mississippi slaves, as did countless others, wrote their narratives after they had acquired their freedom, either through escaping, emancipation, or manumission. In their works, the narrators "define and create their identities" in an effort to relate the patterns and implications of their experiences in slavery (Andrews, "Documenting the American South"). More important, by telling their stories, their narratives soon represented the efforts of former and ex-slaves to abolish an institution which was progressively crucial to the continued affluence of their White, Southern audience (Foster 3).

Chapter II: "Telling Their Stories: The Most Immoral Form of Slavery"

Annette Niemtzow suggests that slave narratives imply a paradox: "the slave happily ceasing to be a slave, describes his or her slave self to preserve it just as it is about to cease to be." Their primary motivations were to persuade White readers to the hatred of slavery and to the love of abolition (96). Not seeking to defend slavery, they sought to recreate the representation of themselves and other blacks who tolerated and suffered it and emerged with their individual self. However, *Judith Butler, in The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, asserts that "no subject emerges without a passionate attachment to those on whom he or she is fundamentally dependent" (7). Butler's assertion confirms Frederick Douglass' declaration that "I entertain no malice toward you personally," as he writes to his former proprietor Thomas Auld. "I am your fellow-man, but not your slave," he concluded his 8 September 1848 letter "To My Old Master, Thomas Auld" (Frederick Douglass Reader 107).

There is no doubt that countless other slaves felt the same. One method that slave narrators used while telling their stories was to assert that their experience was the most immoral form of slavery. For example, Charles Thompson, in his *Biography of a Slave; Being the Experiences of Rev. Charles Thompson, a Preacher of the United Brethren Church, While a Slave in the South* with *Startling Occurrences Incidental of Slave Life* painstakingly conveys this message. "Young and slave as I was," he wrote while describing his separation from his mother, "I felt the pang of separation from my loved and revered mother; child that I was I mourned for mother, even before our final separation, as one dead to me forever" (18). Thompson also reveals an aspect of slavery that seems to be void in most narratives: the perspective of the child as a slave. As a slave child, Thompson tells readers that at the age of nine with the separation from his mother, he attained his "first view of the curse of slavery." He wrote:

> So early to be deprived of a fond mother, by the 'law,' gave me my first view of the curse of slavery. Until this time I did not know what trouble was, but from then until the tocsin of freedom was sounded through the glorious Emancipation Proclamation by the immortal Abraham Lincoln, I passed through hardship after hardship, in quick succession, and many, many times I have almost seen and tasted death. I bade farewell to my mother, forever, on this earth. Oh! the pangs of that moment. Even after thirty years have elapsed the scene comes vividly to my memory as I write. A gloomy, dark cloud seemed to pass before my vision,

> and the very air seemed to still with awfulness. I felt bereaved, forlorn, forsaken, lost (18).

To accentuate that the form of slavery he experienced was the most immoral, William Webb juxtaposes Mississippi slavery to Kentucky slavery and declares that slavery in the state of Mississippi was worse than any "State [he] had lived in yet" (7). While in Mississippi, Webb lived in "Italia County." Readers learn that in Mississippi, he:

> Witnessed things I never expected to see. I have seen men and women tied down over a log, with their feet on one side and their arms on the other side, and they would whip them from their head to their feet, and their flesh was cut till they had to rub them with salt and red pepper to keep the flies from blowing them. I have been around the plantations and seen men and women, with the worms crawling in their flesh, and many of them died from the effects of their cruel whipping and want of attention. From day break till 8 o'clock, you could have heard the bull whip cracking, and the groans of the sufferers (4).

Many Kentucky slaves, however, lived in Louisville; Henderson and Oldham counties along the Ohio River; and Trigg, Christian, Todd, and Warren counties in the tobacco-growing south central section of the state. Few slaves lived in the mountainous regions of Eastern and Southeastern Kentucky; they served primarily as artisans and service workers. Unlike in Mississippi and Alabama, with their large cotton plantations and longer growing seasons, Kentucky slavery operated with greater diversity and on smaller plantations. In addition to providing the much-needed labor force to raise and harvest Kentucky tobacco and hemp, Kentucky slaves worked in salt mines, in iron works, and on bridge and road construction. In Kentucky's urban centers, slaves worked in the better hotels and performed all the household chores in the homes of the white elite ("Kentucky and the Question of Slavery"). Of this comparison, Webb wrote:

> In the State of Mississippi, if a man was caught out without a pass from his master, he was punished. When it got so bad about our going out at night, I thought that a crowd of us men would get together and try to put an end to it. Then I began to think how much better the State of Kentucky was than Mississippi. It seemed as though people were free in Kentucky, when compared to Mississippi (8-9).

However, upon his arrival in Kentucky, Webb wrote that he informed slaves there that he "came from Mississippi." When he did this "they looked down on" him (19). He later declared that the slaves informed him that there "was only one plantation in Kentucky where the slaves were treated cruel." He thought that he "could remedy that" through moral suasion, and thought that he could make that "plantation good" (21). Moral suasion, Margaret Washington suggests, was used as an argument to end slavery. Those who employed it argued that slavery was "wrong for moral reasons; that it was wrong for religious reasons; and that the ideals on which the nation was founded were perverted by the institution of enslavement" ("Modern Voices"). Early in his career,

Frederick Douglass also believed in moral suasion as a means of promoting emancipation. In his autobiographies and his newspaper, the *North Star*, Douglass revealed the cruel nature of slavery to the American public. Other leaders, like White abolitionist John Brown, for example, did not believe that moral suasion would ever liberate slaves, or that political action would abolish the institution. His 1859 attack on the United States Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry was manifested through his belief. The actions of Brown and his men brought national attention to the problematic issues concerning slavery.

Later, however, Webb felt "at home" when he arrived at the cruel plantation. He began to offer religious instruction to the slaves in hopes to "deliver that plantation from its cruel treatment" (22). After about two weeks of visiting the plantation and offering prayer services to the slaves, Webb later declared that the master "did not think the same as he did two weeks ago. He had a heavy burden on his mind for the last week, and his mind became a trouble to him" (24). Webb's act of telling, or speaking about his experiences, along with countless other narrators, associates him with finally having control over his own identity and his destiny. And it marks him, and others, as an individual. Henry Watson, who had not felt slavery in full force until he was brought to Mississippi, was born around 1813 about 13 miles from Fredericksburg, Virginia. Watson, like Maryland-born Frederick Douglass, had "no correct account" of his age (5). Separated from his mother at about the age of 8, he tells readers that "this cruel separation brought on a fit of sickness," from which the slaves on the plantation "did not expect [he] would recover" (6).

In slave narratives, Black narrators present stories that are deplorable and some even indescribable. These stories, at the very least, are about bloody and vile lashings and bleeding flesh with blood dripping. At about 14 years old, readers learn that Watson gained a new master: Mr. William McNeil, of whom Watson soon found out that "there was something pleasing in the manner of my new master, so different from that of my old one" (21). Watson ended up in the hands of McNeil's mistress who-born and raised in Louisiana had witnessed "punishment all her life"-suppressed evil tendencies. Readers are told that "the first month or two, everything went on quite smoothly" until "the cloud grew black," and "the storm commenced, her temper soon burst forth in all its fury" (23). Sophia Auld, one of Douglass' mistresses, also turned on him when he was a young boy. Sophia, who had never owned a slave, began to teach Douglass to read. When her husband, Hugh Auld, found out, he forbade Sophia from teaching Douglass because he felt that a literate slave would press for a better life. Not to mention the fact that teaching slaves how to read was against the law. The role of slave owner, however, eventually poisoned Sophia's-"the kind and tender-hearted woman" (50)-respectable and courteous nature, and she began to treat Douglass like a piece of chattel. Israel Campbell also witnessed a mistress who was "the most unprincipled" (8). Early in his autobiography, Campbell revealed that his master was "a devoted Christian" (7), but that his mistress: Would swear, rant and beat the slaves as if they were brutes, and could never be pleased by an one-not only the slaves but her husband would feel the weight of her wrath if he dared to interposed a word in behalf of the slave, or remonstrate with her about her wickedness (8).

In Douglass' situation, the male master was initially the cruel one whose tendencies shaped his mistress' debauchery. In a reversed role of wickedness, however, Watson's mistress soon "exerted her wicked influence over her husband, who was turned into a mere automaton, moving at her will," and soon became a "cruel man, lashing and goading the slaves as she bid him" (24). Campbell's mistress, however, would "traverse the field" and "pounce suddenly upon [slaves], and appease her wrath by applying the lash" (10).

Douglass, readers find out, learned to read and write despite the laws. Although schools were unknown to him, Douglass learned to spell from and old Webster's spelling book and to read and write from posters on cellar doors. When he was 12, he saved up 50 cents from shining shoes to buy his first book, Caleb Bingham's *The Columbian Orator* (1797).[3] He would even make deals with poor White boys while on errands to exchange food for reading lessons. However, Douglass would later conclude that at times he felt "Learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out" (*Narrative* 53). Charles Thompson utilized a similar technique while getting an introduction to arts and letters at an early age. Thompson reasoned that if he was given permission to study the same Bible as the White children, why could he not study other lessons with them as well. He was given the opportunity to accompany two of his master's daughters to school and act as their "waiters, or personal servants" (33), which he claims was customary during the day. He proposed to the young mistresses that he would do the work for them that the school-master assigned. In return, however, he requested to be allowed "to study their lessons with them." Thompson was not given the opportunity to study inside the building, but was allowed to "take a book and sit outside of the school-house and study" (34). Readers learn that Thompson got his "first idea of what a book contained by the pictures in a spelling-book" (36). Thompson began to fell that his education afforded him to:

> Deserve[d] freedom to worship God according to the dictates of [his] own conscience, and to teach others the way of everlasting life. I felt that if I was made after God's own image, and that no one had any right to a property in me as a mere chattel, all human laws to the contrary notwithstanding (44).

Thompson would later discover that he "knew it was unlawful for me to know to write, and I dreaded the consequences of my rash act" (41). As Douglass' former master explained to his wife Sophia, an educated slave would press his way for a better life. When compared to other evil masters in Douglass' *Narrative*, however, Henry Watson's mistress "seemed to take delight in torturing,--in fact, she made it a pastime" (23). Douglass' first master, and most likely his father, was Captain Anthony. Douglass describes him as a cruel master; his first exposure to the sheer brutality of slavery was seeing Captain Anthony flog his Aunt Hester. Captain Anthony, "who was not a humane slaveholder" (21), would "tie up a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood." Douglass wrote:

> No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cow skin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it (22).

Captain Thomas Auld, who zealously became a Christian whose newfound piety caused him to treat his slaves with even more cruelty, and using Scripture to justify his barbarity, hired Douglass' labor out to William Freeland. Douglass describes Freeland as the best master he had before he became his own master. Freeland neither beat nor starved his slaves, or indulge in shows of religious piety.

For former and ex-slave narrators, the art of telling what happened, or of telling what did not happen, is neither difficult to acquire nor easy to forget. To them, telling their stories meant that they were the intellectual equals to whites. One of the greatest challenges they had to overcome was to tell their stories with structural validity and realism. While inventing these genuine methods, they asserted their freedom, and finally took control of their destinies.

Chapter III: "Religious Instruction: To Begin the 'Work of Self-Regeneration'"

It is remarkable that the former and ex-slaves who were able to find presses for their stories turned to serviceable professions. Interestingly, the ministry and anti-slavery societies attracted many newly freedmen. At the end of his *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass put into words expression which characterizes the ex-slave's interest in abolition. He assured his readers that he "took right hold of the [anti-slavery] cause" after reading William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*.[4] He felt that he "could do but little; but what [he] could, [he] did with a joyful heart, and never felt happier than when in an anti-slavery meeting" (119). At an 1841 meeting in Nantucket, Douglass tells readers that he:

> Felt strongly moved to speak, and was at the same time much urged to do so by Mr. William C. Coffin, a gentleman who had heard me speak in the colored people's meeting at New Bedford. It was a severe cross, and I took it up reluctantly. The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down. I spoke but a few moments when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease (119-120).

Here, Douglass takes the dramatic step which transformed him from "inhibited slave to

energetic activist" (Hedin 29). Many other former and ex-slaves felt the same as Douglass, that they "could do but little." What they could do, however, would be done with "a joyful heart." And in doing so, some became delivers of God's message, as they interpreted it. Israel Campbell turned to the ministry. Like Nat Turner,[5] signs were revealed to Campbell while working alone in the fields. A voice spoke to him and said: "You must preach the gospel." Subsequently, he heard another voice say: "Hell may rage and events may spite, but Christ will have his own delight." He began to ponder the messages and "how I was going to comply with its demands" (87). Campbell then "commenced the duty" afforded him. He would find it "pleasant to wait on the Lord" (91). And wait he did. Campbell was later called to preach and took delight in doing the will of God.

However, by the time Mississippi achieved statehood in 1817, the state was attracting Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and other Protestant evangelical faiths at an extraordinary rate. By the time of Nat Turner's August 22, 1831 insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia,[6] Mississippi's economy had boomed, and so had evangelicalism. Nat Turner led a rebellion in 1831 that forced Virginians to reconsider the institution of slavery in the Old Dominion. In spite of events like Turner's rebellion, White missions resulted from southern evangelical preachers' rejection of their hostility toward slave religiosity. Four years later, however, six whites and more than a dozen blacks died in mob lynchings within ten days after the rumor of a planned slave insurrection spread throughout Madison County, Mississippi. This hanging spree, called "the most violent case of mob retribution in the history of the old South,"[7] may have been caused by collective efforts to reassert old values, but it also arose out of a more complex system of community organization. Madison was newly settled with little county-wide integration of institutions or social networks. While the thrust for the first killings came from the efforts of a newly arrived planter to establish his leadership, the governing circumstance was the locals' ability to find villains to blame in outlying communities who were outside the protective reach of the local network of personal relationships. Charles Thompson feared that slaves' "ignorance would create an insurrection which would result in their own destruction" if he was not punished for disobedience. He concluded that the "poor, ignorant slaves on the plantation" (48) would assume that they could also get away without being punished.

However, as the growing Protestant faiths became wedded to patriarchal standards, slaveholding, and southern political tradition in Mississippi, seeds were sown for the war that would erupt three decades later.[8] In his travels throughout the South seeking a safe haven for blacks, Martin Robison Delaney was confronted by such southern traditions. He fictionalized his findings in his novel *Blake; or, The Huts of America*. His protagonist, Blake, repeatedly dismisses Christian principles as his "oppressors' religion," and he offers slaves means to "stand still" and plot in secret until the signal for the insurrection comes. In a parody to Delaney's *Blake*, Webb, with himself as the grand master, also planted seeds, not for insurrection, but for acceptance of what he called "free life" (15). While in Mississippi and Kentucky, he frequently convened with slaves and set up camp meetings. Webb becomes the professor of religion by evangelizing slaves to "say every morning, peace be with us to-day, Oh! Lord" (25).

Webb makes himself a prophet: "Slaveholders down in Mississippi are very uneasy, and by what I saw, I think there is a great light coming, and it will be here sooner than we expect. This is my purpose, to warn [the slaves] to be ready to receive [their] prize that is coming" (26-27). Perhaps he was echoing David Walker's advise to slaves in his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*[9] when he wrote: "I hope the residue of the coloured people will stand still [my emphasis] and see the salvation of God, and the miracle which he will work for our delivery from wretchedness under the christians!!!!!!" (66).[10] After reading the Bible for himself, however, Charles Thompson "found that I was commanded to 'do,' and not stand still [my emphasis] and wait for others to 'do'" (39).

Thompson offered readers a different approach to his religious instruction. He wrote:

> Why was I so faithful and dutiful to my slave master? Simply because I was doing my duty to God and acting in obedience to the commands of Christ; for my book taught me to do good and shun evil--to the revealed will of God no matter what position I might be place in as a slave I loved to the will of the Master in heaven; as a responsible human being I could do no less...I found out for myself, by searching the Scriptures clandestinely, the great truths that Jesus taught.(38-39)

Here, Thompson justified his willingness to be subservient to his earthly masters. While at the same time, between the lines, he created qualities that were stereotypical of the eighteenth-century slaveholder and slave. On the surface, the slave feigns placid obedience to the master. Yet beneath the lines, the slaves articulate subtle rebellion against their master's position. The master, on the other hand, overtly represents the typical interests and beliefs of his aristocratic class. Both profess Christianity, but their views of God and theology differ vastly. As Thompson began "searching the Scriptures" for himself, it led him to "began the work of self-regeneration" (39). By telling his own story, he began to identify himself as an individual capable of controlling his situation.

Religious instruction of slaves was a particularly distorted subject. Some masters encouraged their slaves to participate in religious meetings. On the other hand, there were those who discouraged such impractical gatherings. Prayers where held on many of the Mississippi planters' estates. At any rate, slaves accepted or denounced religious instruction they were given, some even violently.

Chapter IV: "For the 'Tastes and Capacities of My Colored Readers': Appealing to a Double Audience"

To read nineteenth-century slave narratives is to be reminded, as Raymond Hedin suggests, that the Black American written narrative tradition began "enclosed" in some ways by literary forms bestowed to it by whites (25). Therefore, slave narrators realized that they had to appeal to both White and Black audiences. In his "Notes on Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*," Gregory Jay suggests that whatever aesthetic or literary qualities nineteenth-century slave narratives possess, it usually originates in an intention to persuade the audience (mostly if not exclusively White) of the evils of slavery and the

slave trade. This means, he continues, the text will exhibit W.E.B. Du Bois' "double consciousness" from the start, as the African-American speaker/writer literally appeals to dual audiences. Jay continues:

> The values, beliefs, and interests, of the white audience will shape the manner and content of the text, since the white audience controls the means of legal, political, and social change. The necessity of understanding, if not of identifying with, the white audience pushes the African American writer toward incorporating white perspectives, to the point of blurring the line between rhetoric and assimilation.

In the Preface of his *Biography of a Slave*, Thompson gives a notable example of appealing to both audiences. Thompson wrote that in publishing his story he:

> Hope[d] to do good not only to my own race, but to all who may read it...white as well as colored, I look for help in the sale and circulation of my work, yet I am satisfied I will received commendable patronage from members of all Christian churches everywhere. (iii)

However, he asserted that his story was written to better suit his "tastes and capacities of my colored readers." And in doing so, he "used simple and plain English language, discarding the idiomatic and provincial language of the southern slaves and ignorant whites, expecting thereby to help educate the blacks in the use of proper language" (iv). It is not clear which audience Thompson expected to assist with the "sale and circulation" of his work. Most narrators looked to their White audience for such procedures, since they where the ones who manipulated "the means of legal, political, and social change" (Gray). Harriet Jacobs, born in 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina, appealed to an altogether different audience. Her desire was to "arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage" (1). That audience, I believe, were free White women who were not dedicated to the abolitionist's movement and who were not involved in any other community activities. These women, it seems, would be the ones better suited for her purpose: to add her voice to the collective and "convince the people of the Free States that Slavery really is" (2).

Many narrators wrote their stories at the influence of White advocates. Through their art of telling, some narrators even pleaded for White sympathizers to participate in someway. Charles Thompson, born in Atala County, Mississippi, asked his audience to partake in his endeavor. At the onset of his *Biography of a Slave*, Thompson pleaded with his audience, no doubt his White audience, to: "Put yourself in my place." He asked:

> Feel what I have felt, and then say, God is just; he will protect the helpless and right the wronged, and you will have some idea of my feelings and the hope that sustained me through long and weary years of servitude…Imagine parting with your dearest child, never to see it again; to be thrown into life-servitude in one part of the country and your dear child in the same condition six hundred miles away. Although my mother was black, she had a soul; she had a heart to feel just

> as you have, and I, her child, was being ruthlessly torn from her by inexorable 'law.' What would you have done if you had been in her place? She prayed to God for help (18-20).

His act of pleading at the onset of his narrative sets him apart from the other narrators discussed. For Thompson, audience participation is vital to his telling of his story, that's why he does so immediately. Some of his White southern audience, however, probably became infuriated by his narrative--and countless other narratives authored by former and ex- slaves--because they could now read about the many ways their "contended slaves" realized that they were entitled to freedom and equality (Johnson, *Africans in America* 372). Again, Thompson also beckoned for his audience to participate in his quest. Upon his first attempt to escape, Thompson pleaded with his audience to "put yourself in my place as I was then situated, and draw your own conclusions." He felt that running away was not a criminal act because he was "one of God's children, escaping from a worse than Egyptian bondage," which he felt that he "rightfully owed allegiance to God and my country only" (44-45). So, he ran away. He concluded that in doing so, he felt "every bit an outcast" (46).

These American tales of suffering and accomplishment gave Black narrators a voice that was uniquely theirs. Their narratives simultaneously provided them with an influential and prominent language that made slavery and its horrors real. (Andrews, "Documenting the American South"). Not only did these slave narratives highlight the horrors of slavery, they also self-consciously served to demonstrate Black humanity.

Conclusion: "To Judge Slavery Justly and Objectively."

Slave narratives were born from the former and ex-slaves' denunciation of their masters' authority and from their rejection of their status as slaves. However, as Toni Morrison indicates in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, "silence from and about the subject was the order of day" (51). Perhaps many felt as Henry Box Brown did, "impelled by the voice of [his] own conscience" (i) to tell their own story. Thus, in their condemnation of slavery, some freed not only their physical bodies, but most importantly their silenced voices. There are literally millions of their untold stories that will never be released from the shackles of slavery because they were not recorded or written. The ones that were, however, are of some value today. These lesser-known narratives should also be read symbolically or allegorically. It seems clear that the meaning of all slave narratives' art form lies in the understanding of the psychology which motivated its authors to construct them. This is an attempt to shed some light on those issues. What I am offering is not a definitive statement with what ought to be done with these narratives. However, this assumption should be examined closely in the context of each narrative. If we look closer at them, we will find even more enlightenment into the slave's world. It is my belief that slave narrators, lesser-known ones, or the more proficient ones, all ask the reader to do one thing: judge slavery justly and objectively on the information that they delivered.

Notes

[1]"Forks of the Road" was sometimes referred to as "Niggerville" because it was "the most important slave-trading center of the Natchez area" (72). Quoted in William Johnson's *Natchez: The Ante-Bellum Diary of a Free Negro* (1951). Eds. William Ransom Hogan and Edwin Adams Davis. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993). Johnson noted in his records that on October 31, 1835 "A Mr. Simington Died at the Forks of the Road." Simington was a "Negro trader" (72).

[2]The Deep South's largest slave market existed in New Orleans, LA. Some historians argue that the second largest market existed in Richmond, Virginia, followed by Natchez, then Charleston, South Carolina. The statistics are unclear. However, to meet the growing demands of cotton, slaveholders developed an active domestic slave trade to move surplus workers throughout the South. Natchez played a vital role in this development, since Mississippi was the number one cotton producing state.

[3]The *Columbian Orator* contained short extracts from speeches by leaders such as George Washington, William Pitt, and Cicero. It also contained plays and poems commending nationalism, courage, education, temperance, and freedom. In the text, Bingham also stressed voice tonation and gestures for public speakers. See John Blassingame's *Introduction to The Frederick Douglass Papers. Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*. Vol. 1; 1841-46. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), xxii.

[4]In the very first issue of his anti-slavery newspaper, the *Liberator*, nineteenth-century America's foremost social agitators, abolitionist, and visionary William Lloyd Garrison stated, "I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. . . . I am in earnest-I will not equivocate-I will not excuse-I will not retreat a single inch-AND I WILL BE HEARD." And Garrison was heard. For more than three decades, from the first issue of his weekly paper in 1831, until after the end of the Civil War in 1865 when the last issue was published, Garrison spoke out eloquently and passionately against slavery and for the rights of America's Black inhabitants. For more information on Garrison and the *Liberator*, see Henry Mayer's *All On Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

[5]While still a young child, Turner was overheard describing events that had happened before he was born. In his *Confessions*, Turner reveals this, along with his keen intelligence, and other signs marked him in the eyes of his people as a prophet "intended for some great purpose" (7). On May 12, 1828, Turner had the last of his three vision: "I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first...And by signs in the heavens that it would make known to me when I should commence the great work, and until the first sign appeared I should conceal it from the knowledge of men; and on the

appearance of the sign...I should arise and prepare myself and slay my enemies with their own weapons" (11). For more information on Turner's rebellion, see *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*. Ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg. (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996).

[6]Turner's rebellion lasted almost three days. Resulting in the executions of over 100 African-American rebels, Turner and his revolutionaries killed approximately 57 whites. Some call this rebellion the "First War," the Civil War (1861-1865) being the second. Turner's rebellion was significant in that it was more violent than any other slave uprising and reshaped the debate over slavery in the United States in ways that led to the Civil War 30 years later. The uprising intensified both the antislavery movement, and the corresponding proslavery forces. It reinforced the notion held by some abolitionists that slaves would be willing to fight if outside forces organized and armed them. Proslavery forces began to endorse reducing the number of free blacks through colonization. Turner's rebellion also disproved the myth of the contented slave and proved that African Americans would die to end slavery.

[7]See Christopher Morris' article, "An Event in Community Organization: The Mississippi Slave Insurrection Scare of 1835," *Journal of Social History*, 1988, 22(1): 93-111.

[8]See Randy J. Sparks' *Religion in Mississippi* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2001). Exploring the dissonance between Mississippi's powerful evangelical voice and its social and cultural mores to reveal the striking irony of faith and society in conflict, Sparks traces the roots of evangelical Christianity in Mississippi, and he shows how the evangelicals became a force of cultural revolution.

[9]David Walker's Appeal is arguably the most radical of all anti-slavery documents. It caused a great stir when it was published in Boston, September 1829, with its call for slaves to revolt against their masters. Walker, a free black, was originally from the South. The goal of the Appeal was to instill pride in its black readers and give hope that change would someday come. It spoke out against colonization, a popular movement that sought to move free blacks to a colony in Africa. America, Walker believed, belonged to all who helped build it. Copies of the *Appeal* were discovered in Savannah, Georgia, within weeks of its publication. Within several months copies were found from Virginia to Louisiana. Walker revised his *Appeal*. He died in August of 1830, shortly after publishing the third edition.

[10]*Robert Levine, in Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), tells us that the phrase "stand still," was regularly adduced by proslavery preachers to encourage slave obedience. It has its sources in the moment of emancipation in Exodus when Moses at the Red Sea convinces the fleeing Israelites not to return to slavery but rather "to stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord," (194) which comes from Exodus 14:13.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: Most of the more than 6,000 slave narratives published are out-of-print. William L. Andrews at The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and colleagues have compiled a database that extends these narratives, and countless others, well in the twenty-first century. The works that are listed in my references page as "Electronic Edition" are courtesy of the UNC-Chapel Hill Academic Affairs Library. For more information and a list of the available authors and works highlighted in the project, "Documenting the American South," visit their homepage at http://docsouth.unc.edu/.

Testifying and Reflecting Race:
The Poetry of Patricia A. Johnson
by Lenard D. Moore

Patricia A. Johnson, born and raised in Elk Creek, Virginia, has been heating the airwaves/soundwaves with her vibrant poetry for a few years and with time her voice will become important in the discourse on history and race in Appalachian literature. In this essay, I will focus on selected poems from her book *Stain My Days Blue* (1999), to demonstrate how Johnson employs history and race. The poems that will be examined are "Somebody's Child," "In The Downtown Of A Town In Idaho And All I Wanted Was A Loaf Of Bread," "In A Place Where," and "The Kink Fell Out Of My Hair." Although Johnson is the recipient of the prestigious 1999 BMa Sonia Sanchez Poetry Award, this essay, hopefully, will also demonstrate why Johnson is a writer who should be included in literary history.

The book's title *Stain My Days Blue* suggests that there are problems surfacing within the persona's continuing struggle while confronting racial identity. Johnson engages these problems to reveal the constant reality of racial disharmony. Perhaps, she seeks understanding of the persons who are causing the problems. While the reader knows that it is difficult to rid one of such horrible stains, Johnson knows that to create racial harmony she must explore the impact of race on people. However, theme of racial disharmony appears to be the major conflict in the fifty-seven poems that comprise *Stain My Days Blue*. So Johnson presents her own testimonies to the forefront in collection of poems while reflecting racial oppression--a stain that continues to soil the South.

The title of the seventh poem "Somebody's Child" refers to the person or persons who intruded sacred grounds to burn Black Churches. The poem attempts to expose the implications of this horrific crime in a very moving way:

It's a sign of the times,
They're burning Black churches in the South.
They're burning Black churches in the South.

Thin haired deacons shake their heads
On bended knee at the prayer bench
Grey-haired sisters press their fists
To grim lips and hum

The old Negroes pray
Forgotten prayers
Of freedom, faith, fortitude
They wear out their knees
Refuse to wag their tongues
Or shake their fists

Somebody's child couldn't stand

To hear a sister hum her woes
"Precious Lord, take my hand" (8)

Johnson exposes a lack of human values of the person or persons who intruded the sacred grounds and burned Black churches throughout the southern landscape. In contrast, the "Thin haired deacons" and "Grey-haired sisters" demonstrate their faith; spiritually their actions represent emotion-charged values. Although I quote sixteen lines here, the poem "Somebody's Child" is seventy lines long and covers three full pages. The persona does not know who the fire-setter is; but he or she knows that "Somebody's Child" is charring Black churches. The entire poem, however, relies on the concrete. At the same time, the poet exposes a moral problem with the actions of "Somebody's Child." Consequently, a major strength of Johnson's poetry surfaces as revelation. Johnson's exploration of such revelation and collective history is her way of testifying and uncovering meaning.

In "Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature" Houston A Baker, Jr. frames the process for critical evaluation of black poetry: "The array of values and beliefs--the cultural codes--that allows a black reference public to make such a normative judgment constitutes the inner life of the folk" (Mitchell 292). His statement informs us that it is important to take black culture into account when attempting to examine black poetry. And if the critic uses such approach, then he or she can understand more clearly the meanings that exist in Patricia A. Johnson's poetry. What is moving is how culture determines the way the deacons and sisters react to the situation in "Somebody's Child." It is not surprising that they did not seek revenge.

Black culture does, however, consist of a religious tradition. Thus the response to the situation is to pray. However, the poem progresses with the church family's probing into the charred remnants:

Looking through the smoke,
I wonder whether you see
How of a time, the walls folded up
To become the cloak that hid the run-away,
Shield that protected the unjustly accused,
Sword that defended the helpless

Sifting through the ashes,
I wonder whether you see
How of a time, church pews
Became Monday morning school desks
Preachers, political activists (9)

In these two additional stanzas of "Somebody's Child," the syntax is fluid. And yet, the sentences are long. Naturally, the attentive reader might rightfully assume that such long sentences elevate the tension in this particular poem. Despite knowing from the opening stanza that the persona is shocked into disbelief, the repetition and poignant details evoke a sense of urgency. However, the situation of which Johnson records in this poem is not

one that mainstream knows; it is a situation that blacks in the South know all too well. This is a bitter history that the persona speaks of so revealingly.

The way in which Johnson weaves history, religion, race, and place engages the reader intellectually. In addition, she engages her readers emotionally. In fact, religion has been explored so revealingly in Appalachian literature. Here, too, such a theme is so central to Johnson's poetry. Indeed, Johnson is acutely aware of word ordering in her poetry. As in nature, time and space become of prime importance. For example, "the smoke" precedes "the ashes" in the poem "Somebody's Child." Certainly, any reader knows that Johnson's depiction of details is in perfect word ordering. Then, too, Johnson demonstrates how skillfully she can employ rhythmic and performative techniques. Yes, she knows full well that rhythm helps to create meaning. There are a number of literary elements that Johnson uses to establish the rhythm within the poem. For example, in the above two stanzas, she effectively employs the alliteration of "w," "m," and "p." She also employs repetition throughout the poem. For example, the poetic line "They're burning Black churches in the South" musically reinforces the disturbing message that seemingly resonates throughout the South, which Johnson knows and records without distortion.

Johnson's depiction of the grim continues in the poem "In The Downtown Of A Town In Idaho And All I Wanted Was A Loaf Of Bread":

> "Hello, sister!"
> A tiny, white raccoon-eyed woman
> Beamed from across the store.
> "Welcome!" she said,
> Scampering toward me
> "It's sad they don't call you
> Nigra or nigress anymore."
> She sat her favored
> Two liter bottle of liquor
> On the counter, said
> "Nigger-ress is a compliment
> And you're tan not black"
> I tried to ignore her,
> "I love your hair."
> But she reached out,
> Flipped my braids and walked away. (13)

Speaking as a victim, the female voice demonstrates a contrast of nonviolence to the persecutor's racist comments and outrageous actions: "I tried to ignore her, […]" As in the previous poem "Somebody's Child," this poem, too, invokes the ongoing breakdown of race relations. Like Nikki Giovanni in much of her poetry, Patricia A. Johnson is not afraid of truth telling. It is apparent, however, that Johnson knows the healing cannot take place until the ugly form of racism is exposed down to its nakedness. Therefore, she understands her role as a writer.

In "The Creative Process" James Baldwin discusses that role within the creative process: "The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place" (Ervin 111). And yet, Johnson does not lose sight of her purpose. She peels back the guises of racism. So, while exploring this poem, the reader wonders whether or not the persecutor really means it when she says: "I love your hair." The poem's two subsequent lines announce a symbolic attack on the black woman with the persecutor flipping her braids and walking away. What does such encounter imply about Idaho? That a lack of nurturing race relations does not only exist in the South? To Johnson's credit, she reveals a strong black woman who knows how to prevent a squabble. Her persona knows that such friction probably would have turned into something disastrous.

While Johnson employs strong verbs, such as "Beamed," "Scampering," and "Flipped" to lend power to "In The Downtown Of A town In Idaho And All I Wanted Was A Loaf Of Bread," she also incorporates other techniques. For example, the capitalization of the first letter of each word in every line of the poem amplifies the meaning. In addition, it denotes an unignorable importance. The persona, however, very well knows the negative connotations of the persecutor's actions upon the black woman in the poem. If one examines the imagery closely, he or she might witness how black and white truths are seemingly at odds. Later, in the poem, the persona reveals that the black woman is at peace with herself:

> I stepped into the sun
> Out of a deep dark hole in Idaho
> I thought, how things have changed.
> I did not care to strike her,
> Teach her, forgive her.
> I was not bothered
> By the exchange,
> I did not care. (14)

Clearly, Johnson knows the tradition of African American literature. Consequently, she has created poetry that speaks for the collective. Therefore, like Giovanni, she writes poetry that can only invigorate Appalachian literature. Of course, one must understand that Johnson's poetry hinges on a sense of place. One can hear the sincerity in her poetic lines. It is pertinent, however, to note how the persona insists "I stepped into the sun/Out of a deep dark hole in Idaho/[…]" to find light into the natural world, though the store embodies a dark bleakness of racial harmony in Idaho. As a result, the essential experience in Idaho is negative for the black woman, herself. It may be said that this persona somehow speaks for black men, too. In fact, earlier, the collective is mentioned in this essay. So Johnson knows precisely what words to use to structure her message. Of course, the narrative element that she employs in this poem tells the reader how the persona really feels about the horrific experience. The poem relies upon first person point of view to good effect. And in the poem "In A Place Where," Johnson continues to

contrast horrific events with the beauty of the natural world:

> crepe myrtle hangs
> brushes the ground
> japanese beetles
> ride each other's back
> the leaf eaten
> away beneath them
> hills and mountains
> carve out the sky
> random pieces
> in a rag quilt
> queen anne's lace, ragweed
> sweet peas and joe-pye weed
> choke the roadside
> there are no signs stating:
> wild flowers, do not pick
> in a place where
> crows big as cats feed
> in fields dotted
> with wagon-wheel hay bales
> cattle, flies sipping
> from their eyes
> seek shade from trees
> along the fence line
> in a place where
> you drink a breath and
> hay, manure, magnolia
> clover and wild primroses (16)

One can notice how the speaker marvels at the richly colorful landscape. Although the witness of this landscape is apt to pick the wild flowers, she does not bother them. In fact, the wild flowers have symbolic meaning. As Johnson shows the reader someone who appreciates the natural world, one would also like to witness "[…] a place where […]" such beauty decorates the landscape. In fact, one would like to know the exact locale. This pictorial scene is, as the speaker later informs us, "in rural Grayson county Virginia" and is where she calls home. The botanist, happily, would like to study the plant life of this particular place. Patricia A. Johnson's understanding of this place is vast. The success of "In A Place Where" depends upon detail after detail as the poem progresses:

> ride the intake of air
> a dirt road is swallowed by pines
> smoke rises above silver maples
> the smell of hog killing
> hangs in the air

heavy shoes crunch gravel
down and up an incline
to the trailer
offset by trash
circled by weeds (17)

To only examine the details in this poem would limit the enrichment; however, it is, in fact, meaningful to point to the way imagery blooms, in a Johnsonian way. It is interesting to know that the summertime, however, is central to the sense of time as well as the sense of place in the poem. It is Johnson's keen eye that informs her large mind. In addition, the verbs "hangs," "eaten," "carve," and "choke" foreshadow the rest of the poem, especially the last stanza. The poem moves from light to dark, from beauty to grim, with an inhuman heart toward humanity:

on a mattress
in the front yard
crumpled and headless
a Black man burns
July 25, 1997; G.P. Johnson
was burned alive and decapitated
in rural Grayson county Virginia
in a place where
I call home. (17)

Here, the concluding stanza reveals how mankind turns on itself. This stanza also transcends into a striking parallelism. The poem's final stanza is concerned with how two white men committed a hate crime. Although the two white men are not mentioned in the poem, one would know that they are alluded to, due to the highly publicized crime. "Johnson" is the only word that one sees that relates Patricia A. Johnson to the "Black man" who "burns/July 25, 1997 […]." The scene is carefully depicted, so intensely dark and resonantly grim.

According to Patricia A. Johnson in a telephone interview, "G.P. [Garnett Paul] was my third cousin. I babysat him. He lived next door." Consequently, she dedicates her *Stain My Days Blue* to him. Garnett Paul Johnson (1957-1997) had a very short life. Except for what the poem reveals, the reader does not know anything about G.P. Johnson's life, nor does the reader know anything about the two white men's lives. But the speaker seems to wonder how such a horrific crime could happen in the place that is home for her. Surely she wonders how could such a tragedy happen to her cousin. Johnson's descriptions are on the mark. And the way she uses lower case letters, except for "Black," "July," "G.P. Johnson," "Grayson," "Virginia," and "I," is very effective. The capitalized words lend an illusion of headlines on a newspaper.

In the stanza that precedes the final one, however, there is "the smell of hog killing" in the rural Virginia air. Then, in the final stanza, the line "a Black man burns" implies the awful smell of human flesh sizzling and rising in the rural Virginia air. As

noted in the previous paragraph, Johnson is aware of parallelism, and, most effectively, knows how to employ it in her poetry. Nevertheless, despite the harsh realities that Johnson documents, she gives the reader a peek into mortality. She skillfully employs parallelism, revealing how, like animals and insects, humans turn against themselves. For instance, note how nature has turned on itself earlier in the poem: "cattle, flies sipping/ from their eyes […]."

In "The Kink Fell Out Of My Hair," Johnson is again drawn to the horrible hate crime and death of her cousin:

> They killed G.P. and the kink fell out of my hair
> He was my cousin, blood brother, bond of felicity.
> They said, "Another nigger dead; white folks don't care."
>
> Here a Negro not knowing his place is rare,
> Been trained since slavery to smile, nod, and agree.
> They killed G.P. and the kink fell out of my hair
>
> Four white people and broken black G.P. unaware
> That party was his garden of Gethsemane.
> They said, "Another nigger dead; white folks don't care."
>
> Trussed like a pig, doused in gasoline, set afire.
> White cross or clothesline T, it was a gallows tree.
> They killed G.P. and the kink fell out of my hair
>
> Reeling in the blaze, only his body for pyre,
> A maul extinguished his plea, "Why don't you shoot me?!"
> They said, "Another nigger dead; white folks don't care."
>
> Like rain in the desert, dissipates, so did his air
> They hewed him, hacked his head off, then watched TV
> They killed G.P. and the kink fell out of my hair
> They said, "Another nigger dead; white folks don't care." (37)

The way the reader sees Johnson's reaction to her cousin G.P.'s death and how he died is a plea to the world for justice. This poem, a villanelle, demonstrates that Johnson is very skillful in the weaving of facts. In a villanelle, however, there is the repetition of the first and third lines throughout the poem. Thus, the poem relies upon a set pattern. And yet, the repeating lines should be pivotal in expressing the poem's message. Of course, Johnson is aware of this fact. For example, the opening line, "They killed G.P. and the kink fell out of my hair [,]" reveals the emotional state of Johnson without her having to say a word about mourning. That opening line, in fact, reflects the mood. It is therefore not surprising to realize that it takes a lot of agony for one's hair to alter itself. Nevertheless, the third line reveals the attitude of the murderers:

They said, "Another nigger dead; white folks don't care."

Certainly, this line, too, is pivotal in the poem. This poem progresses like a movie: the details unfold minute by minute, frame by frame, and depend upon conflict. Johnson achieves a melodious effect with her conventional word order.

When considering villanelles, one might immediately think of Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." But there is an African American tradition. Rita Dove's "Parsley," Carolyn Beard Whitlow's "Rockin' a Man, Stone Blind," and Gerald Barrax's "Cello Poem" are great contemporary poems, for instance. Dove and Barrax weave villanelles as sections into their poems. Like them, Johnson uses variation. She employs twelve syllables per line rather than ten. In comparison, she also employs alliteration to good effect with "blood brother, bond" and "hewed him, hacked his head [,]" among other descriptions in the poem. In addition, Johnson uses end rhyme quite well, too, though she relies mostly on masculine rhyme to present her subject. The end word of each line seems to be the right ones used for greater emphasis. If the reader, for example, meditates on "hair," "felicity," "care," "rare," "agree," 'unaware," "Gethsemane," "afire," 'tree," "pyre," "me," "air," and "TV," he or she cannot help from being greatly affected by the images that these words conjure. No one, however, can dispute that "The Kink Fell Out Of My Hair" is a poem, which articulates the tragedy of G.P. with great measure. This poem is symbolic of the inhumanity which, seemingly, prevails in society. Even the title of the poem alerts the reader to turn his or her ear toward the powerful message.

One can see how G.P. enters Johnson's poetry and remains as a figure throughout *Stain My Days Blue*. However, "The Kink Fell Out Of My Hair" is a significant testament that Johnson writes formal poetry, too. She also writes haiku and tanka. "In a muddy ditch" and "my mouth waters," to list only two, are good examples of haiku in the book. "Witness" and "Sweet Freedom [,]" among others, are good examples of tanka in the book.

Although this essay mainly focuses on four poems, there are others such as "There Was No Mixing Of The Races," "Justice Naps At A Slot Machine In Vegas," and "Response To A Compliment From A White Friend" that are splendid depictions of contemporary history and race or racial disharmony. In fact, "Justice Naps At A Slot Machine In Vegas" alludes to the horrible hate crime inflicted upon James Byrd in Jasper, Texas. And one can understand how certain events move Johnson to write her compelling poetry. Yes, she is a poet who knows her responsibility to the community. She is not afraid to explore honesty and move the reader to tears.

Finally, it is also pertinent to mention that there are poems such as "Cornmeal Mush" and "Snow Cream [,]" which directly reflects upon Patricia A. Johnson's Appalachian heritage. *Stain My Days Blue* becomes very inclusive, then, when the reader begins to examine Johnson's subjects. It is clear that she is trying to find meaning in this world. It is also clear that she tries to help the reader find meaning, too. Johnson of course is a vibrant voice in American poetry, locating meaning, while describing Appalachia. Her

book is a testimony of existence itself; it is a collection of poems that claim contemporary events as its impetus. And it is highly conceivable that this book can help to bring about a collective change.

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The Power of Kwanzaa
by Asinia Lukata Chikuyu

In 1990 a coalition of community-based organizations and individual community activists came together to host the first Annual Community Kwanzaa Celebration. Building on the Afrikan-centered Life Principles that are at the heart of the Kwanzaa Holiday, the coalition felt it was time for Afrikan people to return to a sense of community-family. The idea was that through this celebration of the Black Life Principles and Black Love a positive metamorphosis would begin in the Black community. By celebrating the Nguzo Saba {the Seven Life Principles of Kwanzaa} the coalition hoped that the community would strengthen its character and cultivate a blossoming future for generations to come. With the Nguzo Saba as the foundation, the coalition felt this was the opportunity for the Black Community to translate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Mountain Top Speech into a motivational stimulus that would guide the community to say:

> "Well, we don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with us now. Because we've been to the mountaintop. And we don't mind. Like anybody, we would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But we're not concerned about that now. We just want to do God's will. And He's allowed us to go up to the mountain. And we've looked over. And we've seen the promised land. We may not get there together. But we know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And we're happy, tonight. We're not worried about anything. We're not fearing any man. Our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

The dream of the coalition was that Mississippi's Black community would openly and honestly begin a self inspection, or self-check, that would culminate in the community accepting the fallibility of its people and fully embracing the Afrikan Life Principles of Kwanzaa as our source of redemption. By embracing the Nguzo Saba, Mississippi's black community would begin to espouse the concept "I AM WE," which characterizes The "Power of Kwanzaa" manifested by the end result of us internalizing each of the seven life principles of Kwanzaa -

Umoja = Unity which means to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and race.

Kujichagulia = Self Determination which is to define ourselves, create for ourselves, and speak for ourselves.

Ujima = Collective Work and Responsibility which is to build and maintain our community together and to make our sister's & brother's problems our problems and to solve them together.

Ujamaa = Cooperative Economics and Familyhood which is to build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses and profit from them together.

Nia = Purpose which is to make our collective vocation the building of our community to restore our people to their traditional greatness.

Kuumba = Creativity which is to do as much as we can to leave our community more beautiful than we inherited it.

Imani = Faith which is to believe with all our hearts in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders and the righteousness and ultimate victory of our struggle.

As one of the original members of the Community Kwanzaa Celebration Committee, I brought wholeheartedly into the ideology and philosophies of loving my black self that the Kwanzaa Holiday personifies. Foreseeing the transformation of Jackson becoming Jacktown (majority of the population being Afrikan American), the time seemed ripe for the Black community to build its character in preparation for Black Leadership in Jackson. This community character building process would be accomplished through the embracing by the black community of the common Afrikan celebration practices of the ingathering of the people; reverence for the creator and creation; commemoration of the past; re-commitment to our communal cultural ideals and the celebration of the good of our culture, heritage, and community. This character building process would serve to mend the broken spirit of Mississippi Afrikans (in America) who have had to endure and have survived the indignities of slavery; the humiliation of Jim Crow; the outrage of blatant discrimination; the degradation of prejudice; the disfigurement of our souls via the denial of our basic human rights, not to mention our civil rights; and the debilitating hurt of a lack of access to our true culture and heritage. The community character building is The Power of Kwanzaa.

Through the Annual Community Kwanzaa Celebration, and the offshoot mediums and related celebrations that have grown out of Jackson's ten years of the Community Kwanzaa Celebration, i.e., the *Community Kwanzaa Monthly Newsletter*; the Quarterly Karamu Celebrations, the Kwanzaa Awareness Presentations and the Kwanzaa Rites of Passage Seminars for Youth; the black community can continue the healing process needed for them to collectively become one big happy family bonded together by Black Love. Since "America's greatest crime against the Black man was not slavery or the lynching, but that he was taught to wear a mask of self-hate and self-doubt," according to Brother El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, the heeling that we need most is self-love and self respect. The Kwanzaa Holiday promotes these concepts in us through the Nguzo Saba. And once we begin to love and respect ourselves again, we can heed the advice of Medgar Evers who admonished us - "Let no man say that it is somehow unfair or unethical for Negro citizens to push for their rights as citizens. If it is legitimate to lobby and to use political pressure to secure wider markets and fatter profits, what is so wrong with using political power to secure human rights? The answer is "nothing" and Negro Americans should proceed on that basis." Guided by the life principles of Kwanzaa, we can do Medgar proud by expressing our love for self through the collective upliftment of our community built on the foundation of the Nguzo Saba. That is "The Power of Kwanzaa."

Through Kwanzaa we reaffirm our spiritual values, our culture, and our community spirit as people of Afrikan descent. People of Afrikan descent come together for seven days to celebrate our efforts during the passing year and our commitment in the coming year as Africans in America:

To promote peace and love in the community that will foster "unity" in our community, like the communal love that was seen in the Million Man March. The event displayed the message of unconditional Black love of over a million Black men for themselves and their communities. Even in our literature, "umoja" has remained a reoccurring theme because of our understanding of its importance. Usually, it resonates in plots rooted in female protagonists, such as Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* or in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* where women produce the strength of our communities from finding strength in themselves. However, unity has also remained a reoccurring theme in our literature with male protagonists, such as Ernest Gaines' *A Gathering of Old Men* and C. Liegh McInnis' "Circle," from *Scripts: Sketches and Tales of Urban Mississippi*. In A Gathering of Old Men, Gaines presents us with a collective of men who come together to use their collective talents to improve their situation. In "Circle," McInnis illustrates how fragmented unity--the dividing of the Black collective into smaller, warring groups--is tearing at and weakening the strength of the whole. Even a film like *The Five Heartbeats* allows us to see the power of male bonding, friendship and working together to achieve a common goal.

To establish our own identity and have "Self Determination" or control over our community is exemplified by *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or by Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-education of the Negro*. Each provides a blueprint for the race to construct a world that has its best interests at hand, which can only come through the controlling of self and all of the institutions involving the self. Also, revisit the *Eyes on the Prize* video series. Especially review the "Is This America" episode (#5) which includes James Chaney's funeral segment. It is there that Dave Dennis vocalizes the ultimate Kujichagulia sentiment when he states, "he can watch me go up there and register to vote, and he can watch me take some kind of public office in this state. And he can sit down as I rule over him as he has ruled over me for years."

To demonstrate an ability to solve the problems of our brothers and sisters as a show of "Collective Work and Responsibility" towards the upliftment of our community, return to *Eyes on the Prize*. "Ujima" is illustrated in the manner that the protesters looked out for each other and how the work in the movement was delegated, which each person knowing his respective duty. Tavis Smiley echoes this in *How to Make Black America Better*, especially when encouraging us to be compassionate and concerned about others as a strategy. You can also turn to any of the slave novels to understand that long before Africentrism became hip, Africans dislocated in America never lost the culture and practice of "ujima." Look specifically at *Clotel* by William Wells Brown or at *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker Alexander; in both cases we have examples of slaves crossing the white man's arbitrary separation and borders to aid in the protection and

survival of other slaves.

To channel our dollars into those stores, shops, and other businesses that will reinvest in our community, exercise "Cooperative Economics," which must be balanced with building strong "Familyhood" values in our community. Both Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* are excellent examples of these principles because they involve families struggling with the issue of poverty and the manner in which that struggle causes them to reexamine their humanity/morality. In both cases, the family recognizes that strong families and the principles that are taught and passed on in the construct of family are more important that riches. Additionally, remembering this point, causes our protagonists to make better business decisions. And Ahmos Zu-Bolton's "The Family Tree" from his Ain't No Spring Chicken drives home the notion that strong heritage can protect us against the oppression of capitalism.

To direct our struggle towards a righteous and just conclusion or "Purpose" encourages and motivates us to continue our struggle for basic human rights and dignity. Ralph Ellison clearly shows us what happens to a man and a race when it has no or does not know its "nia" in *Invisible Man*. Even if we look at the narrative structure of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life*, Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, and James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, we see that the stories are driven by protagonists who have well defined goals--purposes. Even more contemporary novels continue to wrestle with the issue of "nia." In Reginald Martin's *Everybody Knows What Time It Is*, one of his central protagonists, Zip, whose names stands for zero (nothingness), only becomes of worth when he finally gains a "purpose," which he only gets when he learns his heritage. And in Percival Everett's *Erasure*, we are given a writer who loses his way because he loses his "purpose." Another excellent example of "nia" is outlined in *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: An Anthology of the Mississippi Civil Rights Struggle*, and the *Encyclopedia of Black America*, edited by W. Augustus Low and Virgil A. Clift presents a national perspective of "nia."

To increase the flow of "Creativity" throughout our community that will allow us to improve the quality of our lives and our community, we must constantly challenge ourselves to use our talents for the good of our community. The history and legacy of black writing is one of resistance, renewal and affirmation. Particularly, the black writer is always re-writing the false history and image of his people. Alexander's *Jubilee* was in direct response to *Gone with the Wind*'s false portrayal of Southern history. The slave narrative and the slave novel are meant to move the African American to the center of the narrative, providing are more eclectic and truthful American narrative, which returned the African to his humanity. For art, as Du Bois' asserted, is propaganda, so our artists have been forced to create and refashion a world that celebrates them and not demonize them. Accordingly, the poetry of Black people in all of its periods has been the most perfect blend of art and politics, from the slave era poetry of George Moses Horton, to the Reconstruction poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, to Langston Hughes' Harlem Renaissance to Amiri Baraka's Black Art's poetry. Even today, our art continues to entertain by creating positive images. In the continual midst of the perversion of our image in this new age, we continue to find art, such as *A Man Called Hawk*, *The*

Brothers, *The Wood*, *Love Jones*, and *Remember the Titans*, that fuels our struggle to tell the truth about who we are. *In Defense of Mumia*, edited by Tony Medina, presents the contemporary use of creative powers to impact social and political change. A work, such as Spike Lee's *Mo' Better Blues*, which concentrates on the struggle of the Black artist for his work to be meaningful as he attempts to survive in the matrix of personal and societal conflict. And these works must be grounded in the treaties of such works as Miles Davis' *Autobiography*. And of course, there are the countless books and magazines that come along and contribute to making Black life better, including Alain Locke's *New Negro*, Hoyt Fuller's *Negro Digest/Black World*, Larry Neal and Baraka's *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, *African American Review*, *Callaloo*, Henry Louis Gate's *Norton Anthology of African American Review*, Patricia Liggins Hill's *Call and Response: The African American Literary Tradition*, Jerry Ward's *Wade in the Water: 250 Years of African American Poetry*, Kevin Powell's *In the Tradition* and *Step into a World*, Medina and Louis Reyes Rivera's *Bum Rush the Page*, and countless others.

To believe in the leaders, who are earnestly working for the betterment of the whole community; to believe in the teachers, who are teaching us to love ourselves first; and believe in ourselves and our ability to have "Faith" that our struggle is righteous in His eyes, we merely need to turn to our African tradition of putting God first in all that we do. There is a T-shirt that I wear that strengthens the "imani" of all who read it. It simply says, "Black Man--Have Faith, Pray, and Believe in Yourself." Another source of increased faith for me is *Daily Motivation for African American Success* by Dennis Kimbro and *Black Pearls* by Eric V. Copage. Recently, I have found personal inspiration in Black art, especially in the print entitled *Day of Atonement* by Jayu L. Bakari and in the print of a shackled black man with the key to freedom in his mind (artist unknown). Both of these prints get me fired-up to believe deeper in myself and in my people and help me to better recognize the "Power of Kwanzaa." Poems such as Alexander's "For My People," Hughes "Mother to Son," Nikki Giovanni's "Ego Trippin'," and Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" all show how a people full of self-love because they are able to see God in themselves are able to withstand the evils of white supremacy, as echoed by Shange, when her collective characters assert, "I found God in myself."

With the Nguzo Saba as our foundation, Black Jackson, and all of Black Mississippi, can become the America of our dreams by practicing the Nguzo Saba all year round. Our community can flourish by using the Seven Life Principles of Kwanzaa in our daily lives. The Power of Kwanzaa is how it bonds us together despite our own diversity i.e., light-skinned, dark skinned; rich, poor; educated; unlearnt; brother or sister. The Community Kwanzaa Celebration brought together The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and the Nation of Islam; the NAACP and the Urban League; Women for Progress and Men for Progress; Adhiambo School and our Rastafarian brothers and sisters; Anderson United Methodist Church and the Mississippi Mass Choir; native Afrikans and Afrikan-Americans; Jackson State and Tougaloo College; North Jackson and South Jackson (i.e., Jacktown). Using the Nguzo Saba, Mississippi's Black community can bring to fruition the ideas of Woodson, Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Harriet Tubman, and even James Weldon Johnson who prayed:

> "...God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, Thou who has brought us thus far on the way. Thou who hast by Thy might, led us into the light, keep us forever in the path, we pray. Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee, Lest our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee; Shadowed beneath Thy hand, may we forever stand, true to our God, true to our native land."

The "Power of Kwanzaa" is its power to lift-up and advance our struggle and community through the collective efforts and energies of us all. The Power of Kwanzaa is its ability to teach us to be "bigger than" the boy who the tries the hold us down as a community. The "Power of Kwanzaa" is its ability to make us immune to the torments of our oppressors and to make us smart enough not to fall for the simple tricks used to divide and control us. The "Power of Kwanzaa" is its ability to improve the plight our of community as a whole without expectation of personal gain because through Kwanzaa we put the We ahead of the me. The "Power of Kwanzaa" is its influence over us to make us begin to believe in ourselves as an individual and as a people able to govern ourselves and determine our own destiny. The "Power of Kwanzaa" is you and me together as family, working together to raise the standard of living in our community to that which we were accustom to as the founders of civilization that we are. The Power of which I speak of can only manifest itself when we do come together to adopt and celebration Kwanzaa and the Nguzo Saba as a part of our daily being.

The "Power of Kwanzaa" is manifesting itself in many communities throughout Mississippi and getting stronger everyday. For example, in Crystal Springs Reverend Noah Moore is working to increase Black Consciousness (Kujichagulia) in the community, while Telly "Black" Funches is working to assist the youth in the community with creative self expression (Kuumba) and rejuvenating the communal spirit of love black (Umoja). In Kosciusko Sister Reverend Katherine Robinson is working to raise the level of self-worth, self-identify and black love (Kujichagulia, Ujima and Umoja) of the brothers and sisters in her community. In Port Gibson Baba Hannibal Afrik and Dr. Demetri Marshall are bringing the Power of Kwanzaa out through the New Afrikan Scouts they have organized and the spirit of Kujichagulia they promoting in their community. In Biloxi warriors are in a heated struggle to sensitize all of Mississippi to the deeply hate-filled, highly insulting and totally offensive symbolism and racism of the rebel flag of Mississippi by promoting self-express (Kujichagulia) amongst the field brothers and sisters in Biloxi. And course, Jacktown bring the Power of Kwanzaa out everyday. With the initiation of *Black Magnolias* and through Mississippi Vibes, the collective poets are manifesting the Kuumba of Blackness all over Jacktown. Seven All Arts Café adds to that self-express and Kujichagulia by continuing the open mike café atmosphere. The Malcolm X Grassroots Center and New Afrikan Voices radio talk show teaches on all the principles Kwanzaa, with an emphasis on Kujichagulia, that is raising the consciousness of our people to new levels. Of course, Views from the Black Side and the Jackson Advocate have been espousing the Power of the Nguzo Saba (Kwanzaa) to our community for years.

These are just a few of the sources of strength and black love throughout Mississippi that wakes us up to the "Power of Kwanzaa." These sources, and others, wake up the spirit of Kujichagulia and Umoja in us thus allowing us the enunciate our concurrence with the ideologies and philosophies of Kwanzaa. Our main source of acquainting ourselves with the Power of Kwanzaa remains the Annual Community Kwanzaa Celebration. Hundreds of Afrikan in Jackson celebrate Kwanzaa each year. We hope that you and your family will join us this year as we share "Love for one & Love for all"

Celebration Schedule 2002

Date & Time	**Principle**	**Host**
December 26, 6:30 pm - 8:30 pm	**Umoja**	Community Kwanzaa Committee
December 27, 6:30 pm - 8:30 pm	**Kujichagulia**	Malcolm X Grassroots Movement
December 28, 6:30 pm - 8:30 pm	**Ujima**	Seven All Arts Café
December 29, 6:30 pm - 8:30 pm	**Ujamaa**	Community Kwanzaa Committee
December 30, 6:30 pm - 8:30 pm	**Nia**	The Nation of Islam
December 31, 6:30 pm - 8:30 pm	**Kuumba & the Karamu**	Mississippi Vibes
January 1, 6:30 pm - 8:30 pm	**Imani & The Elder Tribute**	Jackson's Black Firefighters

We hope that you and your family will be a part of the Community Kwanzaa Celebration held nightly at the Medgar Evers Community Center, 3159 Edwards Avenue. Doors will open at 6:30 p.m. each night, with the ceremonies beginning at 6:30 p.m. For more info call the center at 960-1741 or the Kwanzaa Coordinator, Brother Lukata, at 979-2464 {daytime} or 957-2969 {evening}. In the communal spirit inherently manifested in our festive Kwanzaa Community Celebration, we want you to be an active part of this year's celebration. This year you can sing a song, dance or recite a poem during the Kuumba {Creativity} Celebration or help us pay tribute to our Honored Elder at the Imani Celebration. You can even co-emcee one night of the Celebration. Anyway that you wanna contribute, simply call Brother Lukata at 957-2969 or 979-2464 and get penciled-in. HARAMBEE {Let All Pull Together}!!!

Poetry

We Are Without Fathers
by Jose Torres Tama

We are without fathers or elders
to guide our crossing into sound masculinity.
We are orphans at the bridge of manhood.
We are junkyard dogs in a car crash night.

We are without fathers.
We are without elders.

We are volatile in the face of compassion.
We are these hard metal weapons that shroud our fear.
We are these semiautomatic extensions
standing bare for castration from a cradle in the wilderness.

We are with fathers.
We are without elders.

These bullets are my friends.
They ricochet through me,
piercing holes wide and open that spill out a man
full of shrapnel in his heart.
These bullets are my friends.
For lack of more profound rituals,
I am dying before you.

We are with fathers.
We are without elders.

These bullets are my friends.
They are all I have against flashlights seeking me out.
These bullets are my friends.
I can count on them through the Hades of another night.
These bullets are my friends.
They are my Lord, my saviour.
And we are everywhere you want to be,
doing what we do best to get a piece of the rock.
So just wait ‘till we get our Hanes on you.

And What if After So Many Words/God Fear America
by Jose Torres Tama

And what if after so many words,
and what if after so many words,
and what if after so many words,
I remain knee-deep in redneck Aryan urine
flowing putrid through the bowels and veins of televangelists,
who proclaim Jesus rides shotgun with a rebel flag
hiding guns and ammo in a Chevy pickup truck,
and who have put together an infomercial
announcing the second coming
will be brought to you by Hamburger Helper.

And what if after so many words,
and what if after so many words,
and what if after so many words,
I am sinking in the quicksand rhetoric of Christina politicians,
who have jailed my genitals with censorship litigation
and have torched my NEA award-winning charcoal drawings of
Virgin Marie Barbie in a red bikini, riding a Harley,
whose only crime was coming onto Crucifixion Ken
through the twelve stations of a technological cross
with an LED display that reads "Jesus Buys More and Saves."

And what if after so many words,
and what if after so many words,
and what if after so many words,
the righteous priest, an artist in his bare time, draws trust
from his altar boys bleeding, transforming their sacred wine
into haunting memories with just a drop of water for their sacrifice,
while his male order army of ordained disciples
bomb another clinic to rescue unborn lives,
killing more mother goddesses in the process of patriarchal explosions,
which sound like screams from thunder up above.
God save American on the evening news
because the curfew is enforced by fear.

We Are Coming
by Jose Torres Tama

I am night boiling over in dark water
like the young Negro widow clutching
a violet handkerchief from Woolworth's
in January when all linens are cheap.
Husband and son with bullets in the way,
newsmen with an appetite for blood.
I hold back the tears with her face.

We need a choir of great golden voiced shamans
offering benedictions not salt across the wound.
We need an army of magicians
to produce a thousand barrels of glue
with their slight-of-hand and piece back
these broken men and women,
buried in a soil of dry hope.

There are bodies sleeping like flat tires
on every street corner, we act the blind man.
The universal pain rattles against windows
set up to protect your naked hour of retreat and apathy.
Vultures are out for a chase and a victim.
Sangre, sangria agria y rebentada por quinientos anos
de colonizacion y otros docientos de esclavitud.

Quicksand reverie and the anesthetic flow
of political speeches,
ink is invisible when the gavel strikes.
My brothers and sisters, who sway from the hips down,
sun burning in our groins,
we are standing on a paper constitution
that has no truth for the dark one.

The American native, walking in circles,
is looking for his land.
It was cut up in one inch squares
for tax owed to the law
and sold to happy good credit tourists,
who buy genuine spirits with American Express.
Their laughter is deep from the waist up.

Another black man in a candy store
leaves his lungs at the cigarette machine.
Smoke rises from the calm of dawn.

Silent stares are stained with blood.
Your white women leave the castle with a ghost song
to breed new hybrid children
and point them to the sun.

Bread and Jam and Cullered Man
by C. W. Roberson

Bright as sunshine
Black as night

White lightening
Black magic

You are my sunshine
In the still of the night

White as snow
Black as tar

Yellow Sun
Dark moon night

Cottonball Clouds
Deep black velvet

Bright as a new copper penny
High yeller

In the pink
Healthy tan

Vanilla
Chocolate
Strawberry
Lemon
Olive
Milk
Caramel
Rice
Honey

Brandy
Gin
Bourbon
Vodka

Bread &
Blackberry Jam

Biscuit &

Gravy

Salt
Pepper

Loaf bread
Pumpernickel

Light meat
Dark meat

Let the sun shine in
Things that go bump in the night

Purple heart
White bone
Red blood
Brown liver
Yellow pancreas
Blue veins

White man, red face.

'Daddy, you tole me we wuz gonta see a cullered man, and wuzn't nobody there but Mr. Henderson. I ast you where he was, but you wudunt say. Why didya tell me ta hush, Daddy? Daddy, why wuz Mr. Henderson laughin' when he turned 'round? Daddy, daddy, I wanta see the cullered man. Puleeeze, Daddy, I wanta see him! Where IS he? How many colors does he got? Like my crayon box? Daddy? Daddy, why doncha answer me?'

WE
by Lenard D. Moore

in the web of these words
in the cymbals clashing
in the beat beat beating
in the drum

of the sacred ground
of the unlocked plots
of night-skinned ancestors
of the surging silence

under the eye-colored sky
under the witness tree
under the stiff cotton clothes
under the fertile skin of ourselves

like the drum roll
like the earth call
like the clouddrip of water
we

Homage to my Students
by Lenard D. Moore

My students' pens scratch words
into their notebooks.
Their hands rhythm.
The air-conditioner
and professor
are the only generators of sound.

My students' necks bend crane-like.
They carry the tradition of letters;
brown faces gleam, look like gems.
They stencil lore based on a photo
I flash as if a card
in front of them.

My students' ears tilt
toward the photo
as if the woman framed in it
were speaking about symbols
to heal the raw sores of the past.
They are grabbling for grace, glorious.

October Gray
by Marcus Uganda White

my heart knows things,
things that my mind won't acknowledge;
knows things as the rain knows when to fall;
knows things as when the sun comes;
knows things as when tragedy rages forth;
after peace and harmony have failed, briefly.

my heart knows things,
things that time harnesses close to quiet
after all the rebel yells thin out over distance;
after all the boyish charm loses value in war;
after all the southern comfort passes away far
from where I hold my head down and moan, sometimes.

my heart knows things,
things that the river of history carries down through time
as lost loves spread from land to land;
as a brother's bloody hands and a sister's forbidden love;
as father's sins and mother's labor all the days long
in the republics and democracies where peace is seemingly gone.

Who Stole my Urban Subtlety (4 Jam Master Jay)
by C. Liegh McInnis

Who stole my urban greeting--
a stone face bent backwards at d neck
w/a sudden elevated snap?
Who stole my understated point--
my one quarter smile,
my slight tilt of d head,
hand stretched outward & freely
2 espouse another's w/a
slap, a clutch, & a pop.

Who stole d beat from my box?

Who stole my man n d moon--
my knight n blue jean & leathered armor,
wearing a black brim cuirass
w/a wireless sword,
marchin' n time w/boots by Adidas?

Who picked from my pocket
what [i] had 4 my pleasure?
Who ate off my plate
my meal pieced 2gether w/samples
of remnants dat were 1st cooked by me,
leavin' me w/mpty utensils.

Who stole d colors of my rainbow
only 2 resale me red as crimson & purple as lavender
& black as a mangled mesh of perversion?

Who stole 1 of my rivers,
runnin' thru an ocean of despair--
my conductor of sound,
weavin' his colorful tapestries,
my musical troubadour of nfinite tones,
my drum-major of d ghetto?

Who stole my Hollis nite light,
my security blanket of
grooves dat protected me from
d Boogie Man of Poverty?

Who stole d wind pushin' d river
d beat pushin' d rhyme?

Will Fisher Price make a
My First Turn Table?
Does Parker Bros. have a
Run-DMC kit w/Jam Master Jay
Accessory ncluded?

Who will wipe Chuck D's heavy tears
weighted w/d salted Truth dat Black men die early.
Who will find d Sandman who caught us nappin',
snatchin' like d perpetual predator dat he his
our flickerin' hope of ordered noise.

Who is supposed 2 warn Paul Revere--
d dj/poet on horseback ridin' thru d streets
nformin' us of d attackin' hard times dressed as
Red Coats, budget cuts & people who talk 2 much.

Who stole d cornerstone of d church--
d organ player whose fiery fingers
beckoned us 2 cum as we r
& conjured God n ways 2 deep 4
non-spiritual critics who carry funk compendiums?

Who stole our us
& left more Blues than Bluesmen...

The beauty of Run-DMC was that they confirmed the beauty of their people. They caused us to remember that your humanity is not defined by your conditions but by your reaction to your conditions. Today, too many young African American artists act like they are the first generation to be poor, oppressed and hated, and their ideology, expressed through their art, wants to justify the loss of their own humanity on their situation. Run-DMC's legacy demands us to understand Paul Laurence Dunbar, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes--demands us to understand that Black people have refused to allow their oppressor's inhumanity to define us. In fact, the proof of our humanity has been our humane reaction to our inhumane conditions. As Hughes wanted to make himself a world, so did Run-DMC choose to rework and refashion a world for their benefit and not for their detriment. However, the real tragedy is that my words only come after Run-DMC loses its heart. Instead of giving him his flowers while he was alive, once again another Black Knight will fall without us having used his light to refashion the world that we need.

Black Diamond (4 Claudette)
by C. Liegh McInnis

Black diamonds don't never need no polish;
dey jus' shine like a new day breakin' over d last
or like d flames of Truth ncineratin' a stack of lies.

[i]'ve known pyramids,
seen dem n d eyes of Black girls
who kno' dat God loves 'em 'cause
dey hair is a crown of righteous wool;
it consummates their head like an onyx sunrise.

Ain't never no shame n d smile of a Black girl
'cause gold knows it's been thru something
2 b as brilliant as it is.

Black girls love like 2day is d final moment n time--
a love dat can hold all d "adams & all d eves"
a love dat fills our aged cups w/sonorous self-esteem
a love dat smothers us w/a cotton comforter of quilted antiquity
a love dat repels d world's white lies.

Black girls grow up 2 b d air n our lungs
Black girls grow up 2 b d water n our bath
Black girls grow up 2 b d tears n our eyes
Black girls grow up 2 b d fire n our stoves
Black girls grow up 2 b d prayers on our lips
Black girls grow up 2 b d amen n our nite
Black girls grow up 2 b d pollen n our Spring
Black girls grow up 2 b d hands n our back

[i] knew a little Black girl
who as a woman
dusted d mendacity of fanaticism off her Sunday dress
raised herself un2 d world's cross
so dat [i] might b saved from it's gory fangs--
washed from my mind d filthy falsehood of
Mammies & Jezebels
& fed me Raven Madonnas
who bathed n d rich bottoms of d Sunflower & d Mississippi

[i]'ve known pyramids...all my life
& on their walls r d images of
Sable Matriarchs...4 whom dey were built
as a testament 2 Earthy Ebon Mothers
who continuously birth Nature's kaleidoscopic panorama
dat navigates our way home.

Narrative

Young Tigress
by Michael Sayer

I

Young tiger is on the
prowl through her community.

Can she be seen as dangerous
if her community is made of tigers?

Older head tigers become fearful
that they will lose the lime
in their light

in the shadow of the young mother
fighting to make her community
safe for her cubs.

II

A woman of principle is a mirror
in which those who would go along
to get along cannot see their reflections.

Young tiger is a jagged razor against
Reverend Truly Fearfull's other cheek
as he grooms for a smooth fit as community leader.

To young tiger Jesus embraced the cross
to enable her to overcome the fear of risk to
her body in the fight for integrity of the spirit.

Her Jesus stormed the temple to
challenge and oust the moneylenders,
not to form an advisory committee
to look into the problem and report back.

For young tiger Christ did not bear the cross
to save the people, but to demonstrate that
people can make any sacrifice to save themselves.

When Jesus posed faith as the light for Heaven's pathways,
she thought, He was not calling for submission
to still another temple

authority, but enlightening us that good works as acts of love reveal true commitment.
Young tiger carries Jesus in her heart
but has never received a direct answer
from God or Jesus

to the questions she raises for them
every day in her prayers about how or where
to find the strength to go on.

In the middle of dream-filled nights young tiger clutches her soaked pillows as if they were the mast of a ship on storming seas.

She finds it a terrible burden to try to be faithful to the soulforce of her Jesus while having to rely on her own imperfections.

III

Young tiger, a middle child among her ten brothers and sisters,
grew up on Mr. Bigg's plantation in the country where

the man provided hard work, wages, housing, law and order,
and a farm church with an "our time will come in heaven" preacher included,

all incorporated in a Devil's bargain whose terms were
non-negotiable, signed and sealed in the blood of her ancestors,

a cultural matrix that continues to be enforced by social contract guardians stationed in the schools, boards of aldermen and supervisors, the banks, and the city election commission, all wearing suits and ties or dresses and heels, and

in the garden clubs comprised of young blonde debs, au natural or commercially rinsed, and their older blue-haired parents and aunts, bound in dresses, high heels, and expensive-looking hair arrangements shaped by black women who service them, a sanctum where the teachings are passed between the generations about how to guide the men who front the power, and

by street soldiers dressed in smartly creased law enforcement uniforms highlighted with sleeve patches and adorned with guns, clubs and mace looped along wide leather belts, and their wannabe counterparts in boots and jeans, the bunch of toughs who patrol in gun-rack pick-up trucks, and

all of whom are buttressed by black-robed interpreters of the social contract who owe their status to the guardians, from whose families and councils they have emerged.

IV

Young tiger's mama was high-spirited and vocal in overseeing
the household, paced her turf with a searching eye, and

growled from under her do-rag at any young jackals or old buzzards
that threatened her cubs.

Mama did not hesitate to cuff-scold her cubs
when they got out of line with each other or into difficulty in the community.

Papa was quiet, diligent and reserved as a tractor driver
and all-purpose mechanic for the plantation, and

brought home the injuries to his physical body from
the long hours entangled with the machinery of cotton production.

Papa resisted the accumulated abuses to his spiritual self routinely delivered by Mr. Bigg and his family without specific thought to this most valued farm hand.

Gran' mama, who was no longer able to move about, inhaled the essence
of things and saw her very large self in this skinny middle cub.

She held court draped in a flowing print house dress while seated
on her throne in a living room of worn stuffed chairs and wide couches.

Her Eminence revealed to the young tiger nestled at her feet
stories that laid bare the wisdom of the elders.

She needed to plant in the mind's eye of her pre-adolescent protégé
the insight and will to take responsibility for the family, and

the skepticism to visualize a landscape dotted with hobbling traps intended for an unfettered young tiger and often well hidden in the webbing of human relations.

V

While still a child in her own right young tiger nurtured and protected her brothers and sisters, and her parents.

Not long after puberty she put her long thin mahogany neck and small shoulders under the double yoke of breadwinner and sparkling student.

With her social life aborted by the chemistry of responsibility, young tiger emerged as an elder head within the family culture, run ragged and drained by her inability to say "no".

Young tiger possessed an aquifer of love for her family and the African community, steady composure under pressure and a big heart that understood but did not judge, which

she expressed through large dark brown eyes framed in wide black eyebrows.

As a child-elder she envisioned the family escape from the cotton fields into town so that it could have a home of its own.

She worked two jobs to help underwrite the mortgage, while using college grants and loans to subsidize four years in a state school not intended for an African farmhand's daughter.

VI

Young tiger's own little cubs did not yet stray far from the den when some parents first came together to resist the abuse of their children by school district teachers.

The superintendent saw his schools as gardens of Eden where independent thought, inquiry and self-respect among the children were original sins against his commandments.

Teachers were no longer carpenters of young minds, craftsmen of insight, but overseers instructed to gatekeep pathways to the future.

Teachers had become false prophets who punished the question "why?" as the blasphemy denounced as "defiance of authority".

Children were being untimely ripped asunder from the schoolwomb, cast into the wilderness of the dropout where streets without exits channeled innocents toward the Hell of the concrete cellblock.

But young tiger kept her mind on family and her feet on rungs of the ladder of staff ascension in the state's correctional system.

VII

Young tiger believed that a white farmer's soul was sculpted of clay turned on a devil's wheel, dipped in glazes of hegemony and dominion, kilned in the fiery heat of avarice and greed, and brought to glossy finish with a soft brush made of golden strands of hubris.

Young tiger had listened to the stories told by the elders while they cooked at the stove or sat at the kitchen table.

She knew that white folks considered politics to be their business and that black folks were not supposed to pay it any mind.

But she also knew that black communities, toiling together, were rolling back the boulder of terror that had been pushed in front of the cave of reconstruction where the aspirations

of her people were supposed to have been forever laid to rest by white politicians and the KKK during the crucifixion of 1877.

Without stepping off the ladder, young tiger became active in elections that brought young black men and women into public office.

VIII

When doing political work young tiger felt within herself and saw in community an incoming tide of powerful energy, courage and self-respect.

But the stories shared by parents and students made her chest hurt where the blood shot along the channels of her heart.

Hide-the-hand gatekeepers in the classrooms and their mentors in the school administration exhibited more creativity and determination in maintaining pressure against the families than in their charade in the classrooms.

She counted the number of sunsets it would take before her children would be in school facing the same conditions.

Her passionate voice and diligent efforts in these newly forming councils became an asset to her community.

But, young tiger thought, working for the state prison while openly fighting school officials at the same time would be as secure as a chicken wishbone in the hands of two children at Sunday dinner.

Young tiger, angry that she had to choose, but determined to be the one to take the initiative, stared down the fork she saw in the road, took an awesome deep breath which she slowly let free, and left the safety net of state employment.

IX

In the crystal ball of her mind's eye she sees her babies' futures being determined by people who despise them for the work she is doing to protect them.

With reason fashioned into her sword and prayer strapped across her heart as a shield, young tiger walks onto the battlefield to support the other parents and students becoming young tigers.

In the social half-light of a grocery store aisle a black teacher, eyes darting to detect an unwanted ear, exhales a whisper to young tiger that reveals yet another schoolhouse perfidy, then shoots a sideways "I'll deny it if you tell I said it" glare, and in a further caution to protect her flank protests too much that the white superintendent and the white majority board have openly threatened her job if she is caught talking with young tiger or

her co-workers on or off school grounds.

One school principal tries to have young tiger arrested on a charge of trespassing for coming onto the school grounds to support a parent who came to see the principal about her child.

Young tiger's minister berates her for careening on the less than righteous path of adversity and confrontation since change, fundamental change, is so much to ask of white folks who are so accustomed to having things their way.

He wants to know why they can't all just sit down together, and as a matter of fact, he would be willing to arrange such a meeting if she could see a different, more amicable way, and shouldn't she be spending more time with her children, anyway, and stop the needless meddling in matters which when you really think about it are none of her business?

Since young tiger began to attract a large number of parents and students to community meetings, the mayor and the school superintendent have appointed to prominent advisory committees a "been there done that" older model tiger.

Older model tiger has known young tiger since she was a cub, still lives in the neighborhood, and when their swords cross tries to pull rank on young tiger by slashing at her with, "I been doing this work since you were a baby."

Older model tiger now sprinkles "I wish I could tell you but I really can't, but you know what I mean, don't you?" rumors about young tiger's personal life to spread discredit in community like manure on a pasture.

Young tiger's mama and sisters miss her doing for them what they have declined to learn or are unable to do for themselves, and pout that she is neglecting them.

X

Friends tell young tiger she is a "good mommy", but she sees herself as a "scared" one, struggling against overwhelming odds,

a mother who worries every nosebleed and ear infection, and makes her way in the middle of the night to her babies' room to make sure they are all right and to tuck them in again.

She encourages her children in their homework, finds books to push the edges of their curiosity, and provides some of the schooling at home to fill gaps left by the alternately hostile and indifferent teachers.
When lost for a moment in the dark corners of exhaustion, young tiger remonstrates that she is a country girl who misses her sewing, that this work is not what she wants to do, that she is bone tired and fantasizes escape to a faraway island sanctuary off the coast

where there are no telephones.

The phone rings and young tiger paces back and forth while a desperate parent pleas for help for her child who has been beaten by a teacher armed with a paddle and mindless permission from the principal, has been suspended for nine days and threatened with expulsion for a year, all for making a scene in the classroom when the teacher called the child's mother "nothing more than a first of the month mailbox mama" in front of the child's entire third grade class.

Young tiger grabs her jacket and car keys, rings her sister who lives up the street to ask her to come watch her babies because she has to go up to the elementary school to be with a parent during her meeting with the principal, and bounds out the door onto the street.

# # #

"My Uncle Milton – who worked at the edges of life where ordinary citizens are forbidden to go and from whom I learned that pride does go before the fall"
by Mike Sayer

My uncle Milton, who had been employed by the United States to create weapons of mass destruction, came home from the Second War with no job and no place to stay. So he slept on the couch in the living room of my parents' apartment in Brooklyn. At the time I must have been too young to have much of a memory because I only remember being told about it.

What I do remember on my own is that my uncle Milton had a broken finger in the middle of his right hand. The first joint was bent at a forty-five degree angle instead of pointing straight ahead. He had broken it playing football as a young boy and it healed that way, he explained to me, as he displayed it for me to admire. He let me touch it, too. When he played my sister's black baby grand Steinway piano his crooked middle finger would hit the key next to the one it was supposed to hit. So he learned to adjust his playing to account for the misdirection of his finger, which he said was not all that easy to do. He let me lean against him when he sat at the piano to play bits of different classical pieces for me. He made me laugh when he made musical jokes with the way he manipulated his crazy finger on the keys.

Sometimes he wore his crisply pressed khaki Army uniform with the gold buttons, which was impressive. At the age of five or six, shortly after the war was over, I had great difficulty wrapping my mind around the meaning of war, what my uncle Milton's role was, and why my Dad didn't get to go. Earlier, during the war, and this is one of my earliest memories, I could not comprehend why my uncle Charlie, one of Milton's brothers, who was training to be a pilot in the Air Force, never came back, and why my grandmother, who in the Yiddish tradition was referred to as "Bubby", stood at her bedroom window with her two hands holding her face, unable to stem the tide of heartbreak that rolled down her cheeks, and when I tried to ask what was wrong she exhaled pain that I did not hear again until soldiers began to fall in our southern war of nonviolence in the sixties and kids about my age started to come home from Vietnam in black body bags.

We knew that uncle Milton worked during the Second War in Los Alamos, New Mexico. But I didn't know what he did and he said he couldn't tell me. Although he never did tell me, later on it wasn't hard to figure out that he worked on building the atom bomb. I figured that my uncle was very smart to have been chosen to do that. All that, and he didn't wear glasses.

My uncle Milton had a shock of wavy brown mane. Every hair stayed in its appointed place. He had a big dimple in each cheek and a small cleft in his chin. His twinkling eyes highlighted a constant smile that could ease from warmth to mischief and back again in an eye blink. Milton looked more youthful than his still young years, cut a muscular build for a lean man, and loved to tell jokes, play funny word games, and laughed all the time. He was an athlete, too. When I was in my twenties he tried to teach me how to play competitive, New York style handball using the real black ball and

leather gloves. Late in life he contracted some kind of immune system deficiency that caused him to lose every hair on his body, including his eyebrows. He entered a thoughtful calm when he described to me the technical elements of the malady, but smiled and laughed the whole time he showed off the different parts of his body that proved he did not possess even a solitary defiant wild hair. "See, I told you."

At the end of his life cancer stormed and pillaged his castle, leaving him bound to a wheel chair. He ignored the encouragement from the physical therapist and resisted the enervating struggle to take baby steps with a walker during therapy in the rehab center of a veteran's hospital in Washington, DC. Worse, the cancer and the painkillers vied for control of his brain centers. His conversation in the hospital room appeared on the surface to be a disjointed jumble of random words that left the nurses and my aunt Edith confused and numbed. For reasons that I cannot explain, I had some savant processor in my own mind that sorted his sentences and paragraphs into an almost coherent complaint about a specific government level conspiracy that he claimed had taken place. He struggled to give me the analytical key and warned me to be especially careful because whoever possessed the information would be in danger. But every time he got to a certain point in the telling he returned to the beginning of the story and started over. So I never got to understand where the story led. Sometimes he would abruptly switch gears to tell me ever so briefly that he was in great pain, that the indignity of his condition was too much to bear, that it was time to die because the afterward had to be better than the before, and then, all of a sudden, he would make me a gift of that great smile and tell me he was glad to see me, how was I doing?

At some point after the Second War my uncle Milton went to work for NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. I think it was in the early nineteen sixties he told my Dad and me that he built weather satellites, but that he couldn't talk about that, either. Except of course, that the interesting thing about weather satellites, he said in his raspy, Brooklyn voice, framed by the sparkling twinkle in his eye and a wry ready to laugh at the edge of his smile, is that the satellites he built can see everything all the way to the ground. So, he noted for me, using his straight index finger to direct my thinking to an imaginary point on the checkered squares of the linoleum kitchen tile, if there were teeny clouds hovering on the ground the satellite could see exactly where each cloud was, its shape and size, lots of little details about each cloud, how many of those clouds were actually gathered in any one location, and because the satellites take pictures throughout the day every day, whether the tiny clouds on the ground had been there the day before, whether they had moved, and whether they continued to be there the day after. Of course, he noted, his eyes flashing little lights like a Christmas tree stuffed with gifts, if there were no clouds in the sky, then all they would be able to see was all that detail about what was actually on the ground, disappointing as that might be from a weather standpoint.

This was new and very impressive stuff that the government could do. I asked my uncle Milton whether the satellites were intended to look at things other than weather. He looked me in the eye and smiled. Then he looked away with a serious mien. Then he sighed ever so slightly. Then he looked back at me and chuckled. He said, "We don't do

that. We are not supposed to do that. And if we did do that I couldn't tell you that we did that. But I suppose it would be possible if we wanted to do that." Eventually, my uncle Milton became the director of personnel at NASA.

For a long period, while he was head of personnel for NASA he lived with my aunt Edith and my two cousins, Steven and Matthew, in a modern single family brick home in Palos Verdes, California, a planned community perched on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific. During the early cool of a Saturday morning during the nineteen seventies, when he was off work, before he had his morning shave and shower, and wearing his puttering around off-day clothes he used when he worked in his garden, my uncle Milton decided to walk along the tree-lined sidewalks of this upper middle class subdivision to a downtown store to buy a newspaper. There he was, he told me, an unshaven, somewhat disheveled looking adult male who was not driving. It didn't take long for the police, arriving from different directions in several police cars, to surround him to demand to know his identity, his purpose in being there, that he had no business just plain walking down a street, and to let him know in no uncertain terms that his conduct was on its face, at best, suspicious, and that he was a mighty suspicious looking fellow, to boot, given the neighborhood and all (which was not exactly how they put it). The officers' styles varied from arrogant hostility to restrained anger. My uncle Milton, not a person to be shy, coy, or intimidated, told them who, in fact, he was, the title of his job, and his goal to buy a newspaper.

The police were unmoved. They said my uncle Milton had an attitude. They wanted identification, proof as it were. But my uncle was in his garden clothes and did not have his wallet or any other identification on his person. The police arrested my uncle for vagrancy less than a quarter mile from his home. When he did not return home for more than two hours, my Aunt Edith got worried and started calling. She found out that he was at the police station lock up. She did what she had to do to get the police to back off, release her husband, and withdraw the charge. My uncle Milton laughed throughout his telling of this story, even as he wanted me to be sure that he understood that this kind of abuse of his civil liberties was bad for him, but would have turned out much worse had he been poor, black or Mexican in southern California, and that, in the end, he was lucky that he had both position and some money.

When I was about six years old my parents had a small tabletop dial radio in a dark brown plastic case that sat on top of a gray adult-high cabinet that held canned goods. The cabinet stood next to our first refrigerator, recently acquired through a special deal that my Dad struck with the landlord, who lived on the fifth floor on the other side of the building. From time to time my Dad provided advice and counsel to the landlord about business matters. In return, the landlord made improvements to the apartment in exchange for small increases in the rent. Our first refrigerator cost two dollars a month. My Dad explained to me that in the long run the landlord would get paid in rent more than the refrigerator cost. But, the landlord had to put out the initial cost for the refrigerator and would be responsible for any repairs or maintenance, since the refrigerator belonged to the landlord.

I was not in favor of the new refrigerator. Before the refrigerator came we had a genuine light stain large grain hardwood iron latch icebox. Every few days the ice man came to the apartment. This hunk of a man lugged on his shoulder a huge block of ice that he manipulated in the jaws of his ice tongs. I used to run downstairs to watch him cut the ice blocks in the back of his wagon. I tried to convince my Dad that the ice box was beautiful and the refrigerator was ugly, with its bright white metal frame and battleship gray circular compressor stored on top. My Dad defended his decision by explaining that it now cost more each month to buy ice than it cost to pay the landlord for the new refrigerator. My Dad told me that the refrigerator would put the ice man out of business before long anyway, because so many people were switching and then we would need a refrigerator anyway. In the meantime, my Dad said, the ice man's costs would remain the same and he would have to raise his prices to his remaining customers to cover the loss of customers who bought refrigerators. My Dad felt bad about this, he said, because the ice man was a decent hard working fellow who was being done in by the invention of new machinery. I not only lost the visits from my ice man, but the landlord removed the ice box and replaced it with a plain wooden cabinet painted with a dull gray finish.

A few years later, whenever I walked down Avenue M past where Brot's kosher butcher shop used to be with huge gold Hebrew letters on the window and sawdust on the floor, I would wonder how he was doing. Mr. Brot was a short, barrel-chested man with thick black hair, and muscular forearms. When his shop was there he was always standing behind the wooden chopping block counter wearing a white butcher's apron stained with the blood from the sides of beef that hung behind him on huge hooks that sparkled as they swayed under the light from the bulbs in the ceiling fixtures. The rainbow of aromas from the beef blood, sawdust and chicken "dressing" produced in the backroom full of cages filled my nostrils, took my breath away and made my eyes water sometimes. On a lucky day I could hear an occasional rooster crow.

I could see that the sides of beef had blue letters or numbers stamped on them. Brot had a blue number stamped on his forearm from when he was in the concentration camp. I couldn't take my eyes from it. I asked my Dad about it and he explained to me how Brot came to have a number. I had many nightmares about it.

I was tall enough to see over the top of the butcher block, but was eye level with the beef when he whacked it with the cleaver. What if he let go of the cleaver? It would hit me between the eyes. I stood slightly behind my bubby or my Dad when we waited for service.

No matter how crowded the store, and perhaps especially when the store was filled with impatient customers, my bubby and Brot would re-visit what had become a routine argument. Bubby would ask for a cut of beef, then demand, "A lean piece cut for me, please Brot. Don't give me the fat, I don't want it."

"The fat she doesn't want," Brot would announce with a mocking cackle, projecting his voice to make certain his workers and any customer in the store would hear it. "It makes it taste good, the fat!" He lifted the side of beef from the hook and placed it

on the counter block. "The fat comes with the meat. I just cut the slices for you, my dear Mrs. Reiter." He slammed the cleaver and the meat fell from the side onto the block. "I give for you special the best cut. Look at it. It's beautiful, no?" He scooped up the cut and slapped it onto a piece of butcher paper on the hanging scale to weigh it.

"The fat I don't want, please!" Bubby insisted. "Cut it off before you weigh it. I didn't come here to buy fat."

Brot's eyes twinkled with the spirit of the joust. "The slice you can buy with the fat, or not buy it if you don't want it. My dear woman, that's up to you. If you buy it, as a courtesy to you, because it is you, and at no extra charge, I trim the fat for you. Or, you can cut if off yourself when you get home. Which would you prefer?" Then he announced the weight and the price, and with his hands on his hips he waited for my bubby to make the next move. Pausing as long as she felt she could get away with, Bubby gave an almost imperceptible nod as if she were in the front row at an auction. Brot started to trim the fat with a thin curved knife.

"Don't take too much off," she snapped.

Brot wrapped the meat and wiped his hands on his apron.

"You take advantage of an old woman," Bubby said in a huff, trying to get in the last word. She paid him grudgingly, slowly peeling crumpled dollar bills one at a time from her tiny black purse with gold trim and a crossover snap on top, and then smiled. They exchanged some friendly words in Yiddish, which I took to mean that she would see him next time and they would fight again about the fat.

My Dad was opposed to supermarkets. My Dad liked the way each street had a string of individual shopkeepers who competed for the loyalty of the customers. Each shop had a personality shaped by the owners and their employees. Part of the enjoyment of shopping was the opportunity to schmooze with the shopkeepers, who in their role remembered your children, your family crises and asked after you if you were ill and hadn't been around in a while. If you didn't like one store, you could go to another. My Dad hated that the new supermarket strategy threatened to put people like Brot out of business because the small shopkeeper can't compete with the lower prices provided by the supermarket.

The A&P came to Avenue M. It was our first supermarket. It offered Brot the butcher a choice. Brot could become their official kosher butcher with a butcher shop inside the supermarket, or they would find someone else and drive him out of business by offering kosher cuts at lower prices. Brot felt that he couldn't survive in a battle with a giant company and took the offer. My Dad told me that he had many a conversation with Brot and that Brot hated giving up his independence to work for the supermarket. He no longer controlled his destiny. He was an employee. They had used him, a popular local businessman, to attract his customer base and to promote this new idea of a supermarket, one place where you could buy everything. It wasn't too long before the store eased him

out of his position and replaced him with a younger, less experienced, lower paid worker who didn't understand how to relate to the customers. My bubby refused to buy meat from the supermarket and made my Dad promise that when he brought meat home it wasn't from A&P, but from the remaining hold out local kosher butcher. She believed the supermarket lied when they said the meat was kosher. My Dad said that Brot probably would not have survived in competition with the supermarket, but he would have had his dignity. The other butcher who held out eventually went out of business, too. My Dad didn't live to see Wal-Mart.

I couldn't reach the radio on top of the cabinet unless I stood on a chair. That small radio carried to me the whole world that existed outside my parent's third floor apartment in the middle of Flatbush. I got to hear Joe Louis fights because my insistent pleading was apparently more persuasive to my Dad than his ambivalent disapproval that I was up so late. The radio linked me to the Lone Ranger, Tom Mix, Superman, Batman and Robin, the Shadow, the Green Hornet, Kit Carson, the FBI and Gangbusters. I loved the stories, but it was the music background and bridges that adorned and connected the different scenes and directed my emotions that gripped me. I also got to hear Walter Winchell, Gabriel Heater, and other great radio voices that brought news of the world that my father would patiently clarify for me, when I asked. It was during a program on that radio that I first heard about the concentration camps. The whole family was at the dinner table. So I asked what was the meaning of that story. My bubby, who was born in Hungary, or perhaps Rumania, depending on the decade in which the particular political map was drawn, and who came to America in the late 1890s, didn't want to talk about it. But my Dad provided me with an explanation appropriate to my age. It placed a burden on my soul that has never been lifted.

Sometimes, when no one was in the kitchen, I would stand on a chair to eat of the forbidden fruit and turn the radio dial by myself. One time, because I could be clumsy, I lost my balance and pulled the forbidden fruit from the tree as I fell off the chair. Without looking back I tore out of the kitchen, down the hallway to the bedroom I shared with my sister and my bubby, slipped into the walk-in closet, closed the door and took a seat in the pitch dark on the low shoe shelf under and behind all of the dresses, skirts, blouses and coats that hung on a long pole from one end of the closet to the other. I felt hot in my tomb. It smelled good because it held the bouquet of my bubby and I knew if she could, she would protect me. But she was at the park across the street.

While I sat in silence, trying to breath without making a sound, I noticed my Bubby's numerous large round colorfully decorated commercial cookie tins in the corner shelves that were filled with the many things that my Bubby would consider a sin to throw away, such as old buttons, odd sheets of stacked paper, loose pieces of string each now neatly tied and separated by color schemes, and partially used spools of thread she used for sewing on the cast iron push pedal sewing machine that sat in the corner of the bedroom. My bubby was very old country.

When she had a cold she would keep a Kleenex in the cleavage of her dress or the cuff of her sleeve. When she had to blow her nose she would remove the Kleenex, take

care of her business, and neatly stuff the tissue back in her bra or under the cuff. I loved to tease her. I would say, "Bubby, that tissue is used. It's not clean. Throw it away. There are plenty more." She would give me a dismissive look and disregard my injunction. She would say, "On trees money does not grow. Wait till you have to work. You'll learn."

Bubby saw the radio as Satan's messenger because it brought into our mostly kosher home blasphemous commercials about pork, ham, shrimp and clams from the un-kosher world run by what my bubby called *the goyem***.** When I would sing along with the commercial jingles she would shake her head and mutter under her breath about the world going to hell in a handbag. This was an image I often tried to form in my mind, but never succeeded in doing.

Notwithstanding that the radio bore evil messages, it also connected Bubby throughout the day to entertainment. When I was home from school because I was sick or pretending to be sick I would lie on by bed and she would sit in her chair knitting a sweater or a scarf in very soft angora-like wool while we listened to daytime soap operas that were entirely in Yiddish. I learned to be able to tell from the music whether a joyful or very sad section was about to begin, and then from the voices, especially the wailing and crying, that something terrible must be going on. It never failed that at sometime during the program Bubby would cry, too, but she would never explain the situation to me. I asked her why she listened if it made her so sad, but she gave me such a gentle look that I came to believe that she listened because it had such an effect on her. After her program we would go into the kitchen and she would make matzoh brye for me, Bubby's version of French toast, made with pieces of matzoh rather than bread. Unfortunately, she intuited that the matzoh brye was a major reason I liked to stay home from school because it was the only time that she would make it for me. So, she stopped making it and I stayed home less.

At night we would listen together to the Lone Ranger, Gangbusters, the FBI, Jack Benny, Baby Snooks, a very scary program called Lights Out!, and a comedy session in English that consisted of a panel of famous Jewish joke tellers, all of whom apparently worked the Catskills as stand up comics. When I was younger I would snuggle with her in her bed until it was time for me to go to bed and then I would get into my own. When I was real young, around four or five, I slept with the electrolux vacuum cleaner and a tool box in my bed, but maybe I should just leave that alone since I don't really remember why.

In my hideout I met dread face to face. My mind careened from how could I have done that to I wish I were dead, although I did not really know what that meant, to praying to God that I would never be bad again if He would make a miracle to rescue me from the wrath to come that I assumed had to be worse than anything God might have to offer. I did not want to be found, but worried what would happen if I got hungry or had to go to the bathroom.

I assumed that I had broken the radio and that my parents would be furious. I wasn't really afraid of my mother, even though she could hurt me on the inside and the

outside. If I disobeyed the rules and injured myself in the process, she would get a sarcastic smile on one side of her mouth, look down at me kind of sideways, and, in her version of "God will get you for that", would remark triumphantly, "It's the law of natural punishments!", as if she were Mother Nature's messenger to disobedient children. Sometimes she would roll her left hand into a fist, gesture at me with her small diamond wedding ring, and then klop me on the head or arm with the sharp edge of the stone. It was humiliating, as I think it was intended to be. I stopped talking to my mother when I was twelve. She complained. I wouldn't explain.

My father came at me differently. He might be very upset on the inside, but he did not get angry on the outside. His eyes got intense, but he didn't raise his voice. He didn't hit me. He asked me questions. Questions that placed me in the center of the situation. Questions that indicated that I had choices, and therefore, that I had responsibility. Questions that showed that I knew right from wrong generally, and in this kind of situation, specifically. Questions that showed that I had previously been instructed by my parents or some other appropriate adult what I should do or not do in this kind of situation, or in situations sufficiently similar that I should be able to reason that this conduct was not appropriate. Questions that revealed which choices I had made and whether they were appropriate under the circumstances. I had to answer each question clearly before we could proceed to the next question. "I didn't know" or "I don't understand" was not a figure of speech that was available to me as an out, since my father could always show me that, in fact, I did know. The process was slow, patient and inexorable, like the placement of stones upon the chest of the accused during the Inquisition. If I died, then I was innocent.

My Dad, who grew up in Springfield, Massachusetts, had trained as a child to become a Talmudic scholar. His family was grooming him to become a rabbi. My older sister said he was a closet Calvinist. He took the secular road and became an economist, school teacher, union organizer and political activist instead.

I sat as far back in the closet as I could. I tried not to shake. I could tell from the footsteps that people were looking for me. I knew they must have found the radio. Someone opened the closet door. I held my breath. I could see two shoes and the voice said that I was not in there. The closet door was closed again. Voices and footsteps went in every direction. "Where can he be?" "He wouldn't go outside without permission." Then it got very quiet. The closet door opened again very slowly. I held my breath again. I could see my father's shoes.

My father, in a very quiet voice, said, "Michael." I was only called Michael when I was in deep trouble. Otherwise, I was Mike, Michaela, or "Reknits", which was "Stinker" spelled backwards. "Are you in there?" my father asked. I didn't answer. I couldn't answer. My throat was full of tears all lined up and ready to roll. My teeth were clenched to keep my mouth closed. If I uttered anything the tears and wails would have all tumbled out of my eyes and mouth. My chin was on my knees and my arms were wrapped around my legs. I was holding on for dear life.

My father did not pull back the clothing on the rack. Rather, he bent over and looked under the clothes. I could see his face, which was so sideways it seemed almost upside down. Actually, it is hard for someone to look too scary when he appears to be upside down and the blood is rushing to his forehead. I tried to pull my feet back, but they were already as far back as they could go. In a moment he eased inside my cave and sat down next to me behind the dresses and skirts. For a while we just sat there side by side.

He said, "We couldn't find you. We were worried about you. Are you okay in here?" I shook my head up and down. I couldn't let go of my legs and I couldn't open my mouth. "Are you hiding?" my father asked. I shook my head up and down. "Are you hiding from me?" he asked. The floodgates opened. Tears flowed like a mighty river. Sounds issued from my throat that I couldn't control. I was lost.

My Dad put his arms around me and rocked me ever so slowly. "It's okay," he said finally. "It's only a radio." I said between gasping breaths, "But I broke the radio. I know I wasn't supposed to touch it. I was wrong." My Dad squeezed me and said that it was still only a radio and that we all make mistakes and we learn from them and it is not the end of the world and everyone will be okay and I am welcome to come out whenever I want and I could stay in the closet as long as I want, but if I wanted to come out now we could all have supper together, seeing as how I had been in there so long I must be hungry, which I was.

He took out his handkerchief and wiped away my tears, which had soaked my face and my tee shirt. He held my little hand in his big hand and we got up together. He hit his head on the clothes rack pole and we both laughed. We walked out together into the bedroom. I had to narrow my eyes because the sudden light hurt. I stopped and withdrew my hand from his, took a deep breath and drew myself up. I let my Dad take the first steps and then I followed.

Bubby, whose name in English was Regina, came to live with my family because she had no other place to go. The genesis has never been entirely clear to me. But in every version that I heard I came away with the impression that there had been some real tension between my mother and Bubby and that they had fights and did not always get along. Supposedly, my mother was not favorable to the idea of her mother moving in with the family. At the same time my Dad, a generous spirit, opened the doors of our home and insisted that she stay, notwithstanding my mother's grumbles. So Bubby came to live with us and extended the family.

Whenever Bubby became unhappy because of some adult tension to which I was not privy, Bubby would assume a grim visage and threaten to leave, although she had no place to go. Bubby and my mother apparently would really argue about hurtful things, but the bouts were never held when I was in earshot. Then, Bubby would literally throw herself out of the house.

During the eviction process, Bubby would hold down both sides of the

conversation, appearing to verbalize my mother's hostile thoughts and then answer them one by one, alternating between sarcasm or worse in the Hungarian language and bitter irony in Yiddish, knitting them together with back of the hand snide remarks in English to make sure that my mother did not miss the point. My mother, whose name was Florence, just stood there, her arms crossed over her breast, bracing herself against the buffeting waves of discontent. She was very quiet, except for an occasional half-hearted comeback in English. Her eyes were intense with adrenalin and the skin was drawn taut over her high cheekbones, even as my mother attempted to appear unfazed.

Our apartment building was on 19th Street, between Avenues L and M, where trees and bushes lined the one lane street that ran in front of five brick apartment houses that ranged from six to eleven stories high, and a dozen brick and wooden siding single-family homes. Bubby shuffled slowly in her one inch heel, plain black leather, old lady shoes along the light gray concrete sidewalk toward Avenue M, the main thoroughfare, where each block contained a grocery, dairy, vegetable and candy stores, fresh meat and fresh fish markets, and a pharmacy. She held her right arm crooked behind her lower back to symbolize the pain she had to endure in this forced march. Bubby would stop as many people as she could to ask them if they knew of a place for her to stay, now that she was homeless, having been cast into the wilderness by her oldest daughter.

Bubby always came back to the apartment because she couldn't walk much past the street corner and she got tired easily under the emotional strain of this performance. My mother was not satisfied with the victory implied by Bubby's return. Florence felt that "the walk", as it came to be known, held my mother up to ridicule in the neighborhood. How people thought of my mother was a matter of intense anxiety for Florence. No balm of reassuring kind words that my Dad applied ever so softly to alleviate the umbrage seemed to help my mother. To add injury to the insult, my mother resented Bubby wallowing in the marshes of defeat. After each confrontation Bubby seemed to achieve the ironic glory of the underdog from the inevitable failure of her umpteenth attempt to leave. My mother felt that she had not done anything to deserve this. How did she wind up being the bad guy? After all that she and my Dad had done for her mother, who after all, had no other place to go when they took her in. For days Florence would take lancing swipes at Bubby in English, but as best as I could tell Bubby didn't bleed from these cuts. Rather, to Bubby it seemed to confirm that she was right to have tried to leave in the first place. So she would ignore Florence. My mother complained that she couldn't win and she just hated that.

In her later years, when cataracts robbed her of clear sight, my bubby became convinced that my Dad who had been chosen by his family to be a rabbi, but who sought a different path in the world of secular teaching, and who had opened our home to his wife's mother when she had no other place to go, was secretly hoarding un-kosher fish in the back of the freezer compartment of the refrigerator. Every few days she would launch the accusation and unload the freezer to expose my Dad's infidelity. Although she never found any un-kosher fish, or any fish at all for that matter, she never stopped believing that some day he would be too clever and she would be there to catch him. My Dad just smiled, his eyes bright with a touch of mirth mixed with irony, and shook his head. But

my bubby had her man, even if it was not quite as she suspected.

Dad would never have disrespected my bubby by breaking his word to her about the rules of the house, even if he could have gotten away with it. My Dad lived by his code without regard to what anyone else thought, because for him it was a matter of honor. His word was his bond. One of the very few times I heard him express outrage and show real hurt was when the Internal Revenue Service called him to audit. I was still a young child. He was livid when he came home from the IRS sessions. The IRS man had questioned the purity of his intent and impugned his integrity in the preparation of his tax returns. This particularly galled my Dad because, as a Keynesian economist, he believed in income tax as a social policy device, and that each citizen should embrace the payment of taxes as a moral duty to ensure that the government had revenue sufficient to fund all of the social programs that had been created during the Roosevelt years. At the same time, my Dad believed in a graduated tax to ensure that the duty to pay was related to the ability to pay, so that the rich, who most profited from the organization of society, in return, should pay the steepest rates.

My Dad kept the most meticulous records. He had little journal books with a black cover and red binding, with blue lines on the white pages. He made every entry in a simple, beautiful handwriting. His signature was so distinctive that my mother had the headstone craftsman inscribe a reproduction of my Dad's signature in the center of the tombstone. It said everything to me. I have only seen it once, at my father's funeral, but the memory of it is absolutely clear.

Line by line my Dad kept track of every penny he spent. The entries are a remarkable record of the evolution of the economy over the years. In the early 1940s, for example, my Dad paid each month twenty-five dollars for rent for our rent-controlled apartment that consisted of two huge bedrooms, a large entrance foyer, a dining room kitchen combination big enough to feed our family of five, an oversized living room and four walk-in clothes and storage closets. The building had two working elevators, an on-the-premises super, and the street on which the building was located was lined with trees and shrubbery from one end to the other. He paid one dollar when the doctor made a house call. Since he paid this amount every month he must have been paying a larger bill on a monthly payout. He kept track of the grocery bills, what he paid for each pair of shoes, a new shirt and tie, and so on.

As a result of these records he ultimately prevailed in the face of the impertinence of the revenue agents. But the real injury to my Dad was the insinuation of wrongdoing that had been made against him, of all people, and that was personal.

My Dad was a man of his word. He thought I should be, too. When I was about eleven, and not long after my father succumbed to the pressures of the culture and purchased a TV set, we struck an agreement. It was a school night. I was supposed to be in bed by eight o'clock. The Brooklyn Dodgers were playing the Cincinnati Reds. I begged him to let me stay up to watch the game.

"Out of the question," he said. "We have rules about school nights."

I bargained. "How about I watch one inning and then I go to bed?" I beseeched, with my eyebrows up, my eyes wide innocent, and as endearing a smile as I could conjure.

"Okay," my Dad agreed. "One inning and then to bed. You promise?"

I told my Dad, "Absolutely. One inning."

I kept my word. The only problem was that the Dodgers set a record for runs scored in the first inning of play by crossing the plate fifteen times. Twenty-one batters came to the plate. Instead of the inning taking about fifteen to twenty minutes to complete, at the most, the inning took about 90 minutes. It was about nine o'clock, an hour beyond my bed-time, when my father came into the living room to discover my presence in front of the TV set.

"The inning just ended," I said hurriedly in an effort to deflect his first parry.

But he looked very intense.

"We agreed on one inning," he noted sternly.

"Yes," I said. "But the Dodgers scored 15 runs and it took all this time to make three outs."

"The letter of our deal may have been one inning, but the intent was fifteen minutes," my father replied. "That's how long you argued it would take to play one inning."

I held my ground. "Yes, but we did agree on one inning and, therefore, I have not broken the agreement."

My Dad thought for a moment. Then he spoke very slowly, looking me right in the eye.

I didn't know how, just yet, but I sensed that my father was about to explain to me how I had outsmarted myself. He always wound up on the higher ground.

"You are right," he said. "We agreed on one inning. But we had two principles, didn't we?"

I had to answer in the affirmative.

"We also agreed on fifteen minutes, didn't we?" he reminded me.

Again I had to affirm.

"I trusted you to take care of the agreement without my interference, did I not?" he asked me. Affirmative.

"When it became clear that the inning was running longer than fifteen minutes, weren't you obligated to stop watching TV and go to bed," he asked again, "without my having to say anything to you." Affirmative, although my voice was much quieter than it had been at the beginning. My head was down, my eyes scrutinizing the detail work in the parquet hardwood floors. Blood was flowing from all the cuts.

"That's taking responsibility," he didn't need to point out. "You didn't take responsibility. Should I now not trust you when we make a deal?"

The sword was all the way in. "No, Dad. I'm sorry. I'll go to bed now."

Did I tell you that my Dad had wanted to be a lawyer? That's another story.

As I lay in bed I reviewed every batter in the bottom of the first inning in order to commit it to memory. I was going to relate this inning to all my friends when I got to school. I still couldn't believe that one of my heroes, third baseman Billy Cox, whose fielding stance I tried to imitate when I played third base, had made two of the three outs in the inning. I wouldn't have missed any part of this inning for the world. I may have been humbled, but I was unbowed.

Unknown to my bubby, my Dad did violate the kosher laws. But he did this only when he was away from the house. Until I left home to go to college when I was sixteen, there were only two circumstances that I can remember when I experienced eating non-kosher food. My Dad and I ate hotdogs at Ebbets Field, Yankee Stadium and the Polo Grounds. They were so good. They made the traditional kosher hot dogs at the delicatessen taste gamey. I never liked them. But I was only allowed to have one hot dog at each ball game, no matter how much I implored. My Dad even had a budget for the ball games.

When we traveled on the New York New Haven and Hartford railroad from Grand Central Station to Springfield to visit my other bubby and my father's father, whom we called Zayde, the train always stopped at New Haven. As the train slowed entering the station, the wheels grinding metal against metal along the tracks, the brakes snorting steam, and the people waiting to board coming into view, I would get very excited. I traveled this route with my Dad for years. I remember when my feet barely dangled over the edge of the blue fabric seats and when they almost reached the floor. Throughout this time the same man would come on board at New Haven carrying a large metal tray box. My blood would race when I could hear him from the next car announcing in deep, staccato bulletins that he had magazines, all kinds of magazines, sports magazines, newspapers, and good things to eat, including cheese sandwiches and ham sandwiches. We had become buddies. He remembered me and knew exactly what I wanted. Sport Magazine and a Ham Sandwich. He was my connection to the world of the

forbidden. My Dad would never have sprung for Sport Magazine at home. This man, wearing a gray uniform shirt that bore the name of the train I was on over his left breast in neat red letters, always with a smile and an inquiry as to how I was doing since I was getting so big, handed to me, personally, the illicit taste of the unclean in a sandwich of plain white store bread, a slab of pinkish ham, with no mayonnaise, wrapped in wax paper, and I loved every bite of it. Of course, no matter that I lusted for two sandwiches, I only had one because on this trip to see his parents we also had a budget. Eventually the vendor lost the franchise. I remember the first year this man no longer came on the train. A key part of the trip was missing for me. I was crestfallen. How could I travel to Springfield and not have a ham sandwich?

My uncle Milton was a man of many talents. He was not normally afflicted with the sin of hubris. One day my uncle Milton, his brother Irving the traveling slip cover salesman, and my father's brothers, uncle Joe the lawyer, uncle Ben the banker, uncle Sam the real estate broker, and uncle Dave the hotel owner were all at my parent's apartment. They couldn't all fit in the kitchen at the same time. But the radio was in the kitchen and it had stopped working. My connection to the outside world had died.

This was what we would call only a few years later, an *old fashioned radio*. It had tubes, lots of them. Every one was a different size and had little numbers or symbols stamped on the top of the tube. Each one had short metal prongs on the bottom that fit neatly into socket holes in the bottom of the inside of the plastic radio box. The problem, as it would turn out, was that most of the tubes had the same number of prongs spaced apart in the same way. The same male tube could be placed in most of the female sockets, but there was only one appropriate socket for each of the many tubes.

Since I was still very small at the age of six, I could fit in between the chairs in the kitchen while the adults drank coffee, ate little pastries or chopped liver on a Ritz cracker that my bubby made, and talked grown-up. I liked to listen and would try to follow the conversation. Whenever I was not supposed to understand they resorted to Yiddish. I developed a challenge to that practice that involved a demand for an explanation on the premise that it was not fair to conceal things from me simply because I was a child and that someday I would be a grown-up anyway, so why not let me learn now, early, what I would learn after all, later. It was all going into the same head, what difference should it make when it gets there? That argument never worked.

My Dad was quite self-sufficient. He liked to do carpentry, but was lost in the world of electricity. He had fooled with the radio the day before, but couldn't make heads or tails, as a matter of logical induction, as to how to fix it. He made a half-hearted show of inspecting the tubes, much in the way a novice car buyer kicks the tires. What a quandary!

On this day all of my other uncles gave a cursory inspection and then shrugged at the deceased, too. What did they know about how to make a radio work? You turn it on and you turn it off. It works – as long as you remember to plug it into the wall. Maybe something is wrong with the wire or the plug, but it could be a tube, could it not?

Everyone had the questions, but nobody had the answers.

Then the challenge, the test, the gauntlet was laid down. Someone, I don't remember who, uttered the magic incantation: "Milton …. You built a bomb that can blow up the world, you can fix a tiny little radio, no?"

"It's a radio," my uncle Milton noted through an eager smile, rubbing his hands together and clearing his throat, the way a batter tugs his cap and taps his cleats with the bat. "How complicated can it be?"

The grown-ups gathered around. Although I was less than a head taller than the kitchen table they were working on, I could still see what they were doing. The radio was brought from the cabinet and laid down on the kitchen table. A patient going into surgery could not have been handled with greater care. My uncles gathered around my uncle Milton the way students in a teaching hospital gather to observe the master surgeon.

My uncle Milton unscrewed the back of the radio. He set aside the hard cardboard back and sequestered the screws. The guts were now exposed. Tubes. Lots of them. During the next forty-five minutes my uncle Milton pulled out tubes and put them back. He tried to put tubes in different locations. His staff, when directed, put the plug in the wall and took it out. Nothing made it work. Conceding defeat with a shrug of his shoulders, a shake of the head, and a quizzical look on his face that he tried to conceal, the usually jovial Milton sustained a look of quiet exasperation. No smile. No glint in the eye. My Dad may have been the rational man, but he was always gracious. He thanked Milton for his valiant effort and told him not to worry since the radio may simply have up and died, having lost its life force in the way that a person can. Milton, ever the scientist, knitted his eyebrows and squinted at my Dad.

Since all of the tubes were now neatly laid out on the kitchen table next to the radio box, my Dad also asked Milton, if he would be so kind, to put the radio back together so that the radio could be taken to the radio store on Avenue M for repair.

My uncle Milton got a perplexed look on his face. He said that he should have made a diagram of the radio to show where each tube belonged, before he started pulling tubes out of their nests. Since the tubes fit into almost any socket there was no way to tell where each of them belonged. There were too many tubes to try to insert them at random. Besides, he explained, since the radio was not working anyway, there would be no way to test whether the locations were correct. Now my uncle Milton the scientist was regaining his composure, however late and lame it may have seemed under the circumstances.

As if to put to rest further debriefing on this operation, my uncle Milton commandeered a brown grocery store paper sack from the pile pushed between the gray canned goods cabinet and the white refrigerator with the gray iron compressor exposed on its top. He put the radio box and all of the tubes, cardboard backing and screws into it. Then he rolled down the top to secure the package. There was silence.

What to do? Someone said that the radio should be taken to the radio store for repair. Who would go? Nobody volunteered. Would you go? Why don't you go? I'm not the right person. What do I know about a radio? It's your radio. You took it apart, you should go. And so on.

It was like slow motion. My uncle Milton, the rocket scientist who helped make a bomb that could end all life and would later learn to make rockets that travel in outer space around the earth at 25,000 miles an hour with spyglasses so accurate that from outer space they can track people moving along the ground, handed me the paper bag. My Dad, in his most reassuring voice, asked me to take this mistake to the radio store around the corner on Avenue M. Alone. By myself. All of a sudden I was a big boy who needed to learn how to do this. I could learn how to do it better if I did it by myself. Everyone in the room trusted me, I was told, and they just knew I could do it. I didn't need to worry because everyone knew my Dad and the people in the radio store would take care of me. Just find out how much it will cost to repair the radio and come back and tell my Dad.

My uncles and my Dad were too ashamed to take the paper bag to the store themselves, since everybody in the neighborhood knew my father was a school teacher, union organizer and political party activist, and that my uncle Milton was a rocket scientist. It would make a great punch line to have the man at the radio store say, "Hey, putting this back together ain't rocket science!" But it didn't happen that way.

What did happen is that I carried the bag full of tubes, radio box, cardboard backing and screws into the radio shop. The two men behind the counter loomed over me, which is the way all adults seem when you are not only six or seven, but just about the shortest kid for your age in the neighborhood. One of them asked me what I had in the bag. I handed them the bag, pulled myself up to my full height and in my strongest voice, which unfortunately cracked half way through my little speech, asked them if they could please repair this radio that belongs to my father who lives around the corner and who they probably know, and how much would it cost. They opened the grocery bag slowly as if there might be a surprise inside. When they saw what was inside they just laughed, guffawed, and even cackled. They had tears in their eyes. They rolled down the top of the bag and handed it back to me. In words coated with sneer and wet with sarcasm, the two men, one with his arms folded and the other with his arms spread wide, asked me to tell my father, or maybe especially my uncle the big shot scientist, if one or both of them would be so kind as to come back to their little radio store to ask them to fix the radio.

This was intended to be some form of humiliation for my Dad and my uncle Milton that I did not understand then. But the two men in the radio shop could not know that it was I who felt embarrassed and ashamed because I had failed to protect my family when I was called upon by the men to do so.

If I remember correctly, my Dad decided to buy a new radio. He explained to me that it was more economical to buy a new radio than to pay the cost of labor to have the

old one fixed. The expression didn't exist then, but if it had I would have said to my Dad, "Nice save." If I remember correctly, my uncle Milton insisted on paying for it.

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Contributor's Bios

Asinia Lukata Chikuyu is director of the Jackson State University Upward Bound Program, co-founder of the Jackson Community Kwanzaa Celebration, the editor of the *Kwanzaa Quarterly*, and the co-coordinator of the Mississippi Town Hall Meetings on Reparations.

Willie J. Harrell, Jr. was born in Amite County, Mississippi. After graduating from Liberty High School in 1989 (now Amite County High School), he attended Jackson State University and received his B.S. in Mass Communications in 1997. Receiving his M.A. in English in 1999 from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, Harrell is presently a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of English at Wayne State. His academic interests include nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African-American literature with an emphasis on the Fugitive Slave Narrative and its influence on American arts and letters. Harrell's dissertation explores the influence of the American Jeremiad on blacks by arguing for the continuity of that influence in antebellum Black protest (narratives, novels, poetry, and insurrections).

C. Liegh McInnis is the author of seven books and the editor of *Black Magnolias*.

Lenard D. Moore is the Founder and Executive Director of the Carolina African American Writers' Collective and co-founder of the Washington Street Writers Group, Moore's poems, essays and reviews have appeared in over 350 publications, such as *Agni*, *Callaloo,* and *African American Review*. His poetry has appeared in over thirty anthologies, including *Trouble the Water: 250 Years of African American Poetry*, and *The Garden Thrives: Twentieth Century African American Poetry*. His poetry has been translated into several languages, and he is the recipient of the Margaret Walker Creative Writing Award.

C. W. Roberson works in web and print media; her varied past has taken her from paddlewheeler to cattle ranch. She's contributed articles to *Mother Earth News* and various other trade magazines, as well as short stories and poetry to several e-zines. She is also a founding member of New Mississippi, an organization dedicated to racial reconciliation. Please visit her family reunion web page at: http://blake. prohosting.com/uppityww/family.htm.

Michael Sayer is a native of Brooklyn, NY, but spent the early 1960s in Mississippi and Georgia in the civil rights movement, working as an attorney for 20 years for civil rights organizations and in private practice in New York and Maine before he returned to Mississippi in 1989 to help build Southern Echo as part of the work to empower the African American community. As a part of his work with Southern Echo to aid in community organizing, Sayer has aided in the establishing and publishing of *Struggles*, which is Southern Echo's quarterly newsletter. *Struggles* provides updates on Southern Echo's projects and presents literary work from members of the community that addresses their particular concerns.

Jose Torres Tama is a performance artist, writer and poet who tours across the country with solo shows that thrive on a fusion of spoken word, rituals of fire and symbolic movement. He has received a Louisiana Theater Fellowship and an award for his performance work from the National Endowment for the Arts. He is a contributing editor to *ART PAPERS*, a national arts magazine published in Atlanta, and he has written for the Chicago *New Art Examiner*, *The Mexico City Times*, and *Urban Latino* Magazine published in New York. His poetry has been published in *From A Bend in The River*, an anthology of 100 New Orleans poets and in the *Mesechabe Surregional Press*.

Ramona Ward is an assistant professor in the Theatre Department of Alabama State University. Her drawings and paintings have appeared in several journals, newspapers, and murals, and she mentors and teaches workshops. As co-founder of "The Shop" in the seventies, she helped to spearhead the Jackson Black Arts Movement. She can be contacted at rward3@jam.rr.com.

Marcus Uganda White, who is fast becoming one of the most important contemporary young folklorist from Mississippi, is one of the founding members of "Southern Vibes (later renamed Mississippi Vibes)," which is a popular open mic venue in Jackson, Mississippi. His poetry has been published in *American Poetry Annual* (1995) and in *Treasured Poems of America* (1996). He is currently serving in the U.S. Navy, stationed in Naples, Italy.