

WORLD WAR II AND THE BLACK FOLK
IN ELLISON, HIMES AND PETRY

"NOW IS THE TIME! HERE IS THE PLACE":
WORLD WAR II AND THE BLACK FOLK
IN THE WRITINGS OF
RALPH ELLISON, CHESTER HIMES AND ANN PETRY

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in the Writings of Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes and Ann Petry

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation proposes that the work produced by black writers between the end of the Depression and the end of World War II, specifically that of Ellison, Himes and Petry--and to the degree that it influenced the others, that of Wright--comprises a distinct period in African American literature. Their work is characterized by a concern with the implications of the war for the self-determination of African Americans within the United States and for people of colour worldwide. In addition, these writers explored the effects of the war effort, particularly of the second Great Migration of black Americans from South to North, on the cultural and political strategies of African Americans as a whole.

These migrants, the majority of whom had been employed as agricultural or domestic labourers in the South, entered into industrial occupations and left service work in private homes in unprecedented numbers. In their prewar role within a neo-feudal southern economy characterized by white power over the labouring black body, these workers were seen by many contemporary commentators, and particularly those aligned with the American Left, as conforming to a socio-economic category of the "folk." In the South, the black folk had developed strategies for survival and resistance, many of which

were contained in their folklore. As these migrants entered into industrial relations of production and a concomitant working-class consciousness in a war-driven economy, African American writers, intellectuals, and workers were faced with the question of the degree to which this folk "past" was usable in the present. In the work of Ellison, Himes and Petry, the figure of the black folk in the urban-industrial environment, as it e/merged with the working class, became the embodied site for an examination of the massive cultural and political shifts engendered by World War II. In addition, each of these writers employed black folklore as a strategy in the struggle for African American self-determination within the United States during the war.

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Introduction

In September 1942, nine months after America's entry into World War II, Chester Himes published an essay in *Opportunity* whose title, "Now Is The Time! Here Is The Place!," captured the urgency and drive behind the African American struggle for equality on what he described as the "*second front for freedom*": the United States itself (272, emphasis in original). The tone of Himes's essay is in marked contrast to that of W.E.B. Du Bois's famous editorial in *The Crisis* of July 1918, his response to President Wilson's call for national unity in the war effort (Perrett 143). Du Bois advised African Americans, while the war lasted, to "forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens" (*Reader* 697). From the beginning of World War II, however, African Americans responded to the irony of fighting for democracy abroad when many of its freedoms were denied to black citizens at home with a strategy of confronting the nation with its own racial, or racist, contradictions. This found popular expression in the African American Double V Campaign with its slogan, "Victory over discrimination at home. Victory over the Axis abroad."

This generation, in fact, approached World War II with an awareness of what Du Bois himself articulated at the end of the Great War. Less than a year after his 1918 call

to arms, Du Bois detailed the treatment of black soldiers in the American Army in his never-completed history of the conflict, a part of which was published in *The Crisis* of May 1919 as "An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in The Great War." During World War I, the vast majority of black soldiers were prohibited from combat and limited to performing manual labour in segregated Service and Supply units under the command of white officers whom Du Bois described as often no better than "'nigger' drivers" (*Reader* 701). The only African American unit to go into combat under American command, the 368th Infantry Regiment of the all-black 92nd Division, was pulled back from the front and considered to have "failed" in its duty, a perception which contributed to the prevailing stereotype of African Americans as unfit for combat. Du Bois pointed to the performance of African American soldiers under French command in the 93rd Division as evidence that many of the problems the 368th encountered were due to American racial prejudice. He also argued that American field strategy was inadequate in dealing with the Germans: "It is worse than unfair to...discredit...Negro troops and company officers who did all that was humanly possible under the circumstances" (*Reader* 726). Nevertheless, during World War II the attitude of the American military toward its black soldiers remained rooted in racist misconceptions of African American soldiers as inferior in combat to white troops, and that to utilize them in that capacity would be bad for (white) morale. Throughout World War II, African American soldiers continued to be

concentrated in service units. Those who did fight entered into combat roles late in the war because of resistance on the part of military officials. With the exception of the "mixed units experiment" during the Battle of the Bulge in 1945, in which a small number of black troops were attached to white companies, African American soldiers fought in all-black divisions.

During and after World War I, racial violence increased in the United States. It reached a fever pitch in what James Weldon Johnson described as the "Red Summer" of 1919 when riots broke out across the country. Du Bois captured the increasing militancy and frustration of returning black soldiers and civilians when he wrote that African Americans now have "a new, clear vision of the real, inner spirit of American prejudice. The day of camouflage is past" (*Reader* 732-33). His statement of black will and intent to both critique and "reconstruct" the state of the American project of democracy defines the literary strategies of the African American writers who are the subject of this study: Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes and Ann Petry.

The writing produced by black writers between the end of the Depression and the end of World War II is only beginning to be recognized by literary critics as an expression of a distinct period in the African American literary tradition. Bill Mullen's recent work on the wartime magazine *Negro Story*, intimates the direction literary criticism might take when approaching the work of the late 1930s and the 1940s. Mullen undertakes a radical rereading of the literary production of an era characterized by an African American political and cultural activism which was centred on the implications of the war for black

citizens and people of colour worldwide. Extant chronologies of the African American literary tradition, however, have tended to conflate this period either with the proletarian or naturalistic writing of the 1930s or with the integrationist texts of the 1950s and 1960s.

In *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. marks "the great divide" in twentieth-century African American literature as occurring in the late 1930s when Zora Neale Hurston took issue with Richard Wright's naturalistic "fiction of obliteration" (182) and opposed it with what Gates describes as the "authority of the black vernacular tradition" (183) and its sign, the black "folk."¹ He aligns the later writing of Ellison and James Baldwin with this vernacular "tradition" (182). Gates, however, largely ignores the ideological debate among other African American writers during the war period, including the writers who are the subject of this study, all of whom, whether explicitly or implicitly, had to account for the presence, and the significance, of the black folk and the vernacular within an *urban and northern environment*. This is in contrast to Hurston who, as Charles Scruggs writes, focused on "an already existing and coherent village" of the rural folk in the South (215-16).

Similarly, in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987), Bernard Bell devotes a chapter to "the triumph of naturalism" (185) in African American writing of the 1940s. His chapter on the writing of the 1950s, and the black recovery of "myth, legend and ritual" (187), begins with a discussion of political moves toward integration in the United States. The issues surrounding World War II, and the importance of the postwar evaluation of its impact on African Americans by black writers, is lost in this chronology.

As well, the folk only "reappear" in his discussion of the later writers: his implicit assumption is that in the work of the writers of the 1940s, this figure is unimportant or, in the case of Wright, unqualifiedly rejected (165).

In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984), Houston Baker, Jr. looks forward to the 1950s and 1960s, rather than backward to the 1930s in situating the writing of the 1940s. By implication, he includes the writing of the war period within the category of "Integrationist Poetics" (68). Baker, like Gates, locates Wright at the centre of this literary shift. However, Baker focuses on Wright's later writing, particularly the final few pages of Wright's essay "The Literature of the Negro in the United States." In the wake of the 1954 Supreme Court decision on school desegregation, *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education*, Wright speculates on the impact such social changes might have on African American writing. As Baker writes, Wright predicts that "equality of *social* experience would translate...into a homogeneity of *represented* experiences" (68, emphasis in original). Baker finds his earliest evidence of a burgeoning integrationist aesthetic in the editors' introduction to the influential anthology *Negro Caravan* (1941), specifically in its dismissal of *formative* blackness in the African American literary text (Baker 70). However, the earlier and substantive part of Wright's "Literature of the Negro in the United States," written in 1945, focuses on the black folk as the coerced migrants of American democracy, seeking a place where they could "live as free men" ("Literature" 85), and whose folk forms express their liminal status within the United States. This aspect of Wright's essay clearly delineates the issue of African

American "separateness," one which had particular implications in the context of World War II, as well as limns out the contours of the debate over the black folk during this period.

Ann Petry's first novel *The Street* (1946) is included in several literary chronologies of African American women writers. Petry's work is often linked to Wright's "naturalism," Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists* (1980), for example, focuses on Petry's feminist revision of *Native Son* (1940). Gloria Wade-Gayles, in *No Crystal Stair* (1997), examines the depiction of domestic labour in the novel, as does Trudier Harris in *From Mammies to Militants* (1982). Although Hazel Carby does not discuss Petry's fiction, she locates her work within a tradition of black women's writing which takes as its subject "the fictional urban confrontation of race, class and sexuality" (*Reconstructing* 175), a construction of the tradition which Bill Mullen also emphasizes in his discussion of a postwar African American women's writing "committed to a radical structural critique of American racism, classism, and sexism" (12). However, with the exception of a brief but informative history of the impact of the war on black women in Wade-Gayles's text (17-22) and Mullen's more general discussion of African American attitudes toward World War II, Petry's fictional treatment of the conflict and the "place" of black women--including the folk--on the war's domestic front, is all but ignored.

By viewing the writing of World War II as a particular African American literary response to issues raised by the conflict, many of which revolve around the figure of the black folk, constructions of the black literary tradition must account for, or be accountable

to, the political intentions of the writers of the period and the implications of their representation of the folk as well as of their use of folk forms. While protest and the naturalistic depiction of black experience are evident in the work of the writers who are the subject of this study, their writing also portends the use of black folk forms and the radical nationalism of the proponents of the Black Aesthetic of the 1960s, who were themselves responding to a protracted period of racial violence at home and abroad. At the same time, the wartime writers' radical critique of the failure of American democracy to include African Americans suggests a more nuanced reading of the "divide" between this period and that of the so-called "Integrationists." The affirmation of what Ellison describes in *Invisible Man* (1952) as "the principle" (462) of American democracy, which is present in even the most bitter of these writings, is a profoundly radical, and reconstructive, black rhetorical and political act.

The impact of the economic and cultural shifts of the war years on African Americans has been well documented by historians, particularly those interested in the activities of the American Left during this period. Many African American writers, including Ellison, Wright, and to a lesser extent Himes, were associated with the American Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s. In order to provide an historical context for the literary texts and the nonfiction writing of the war period, I have relied on the work of literary-/historians George Lipsitz, Barbara Foley, and Nicholas Natanson. As well, I have drawn on Neil Wynn's richly-detailed study of African American involvement in the war effort.

I have approached the wartime writing of Ellison, Himes and Petry, and to a lesser extent that of Wright whose literary and theoretical vision, as Farah Griffin argues, dominated this period (10), as a cultural record of an African American literary and political response to the issues of race and the state of the American democracy which World War II brought to the fore. This project covers the period from the final years of the Depression, when these writers began their careers, to the immediate postwar period when they undertook an evaluation of the impact of the conflict. In the work of these writers, this period emerges as one that is defined by two distinct yet overlapping issues. Overall, their work is concerned with the implications of the war for African Americans and people of colour worldwide, specifically the degree to which its outcome would ensure the right to self-determination. Within this global perspective, these writers focused on the effects of the massive changes associated with the war within the United States itself: specifically increasing black migration to the cities of the North--and in the case of Chester Himes to a new destination, the industrial centres of the Pacific Coast--and the concomitant entry of black workers into the industrial workplace. These issues converged on the figure of the "folk," the representative of both the migrant, rural African American and his or her avatar, the emerging, urban working class.

Between 1941 and 1945, at least one million African Americans migrated from southern rural areas to cities in the South and, most significantly, to industrial centres in the North and on the West Coast (Guzman 134), the first wave in what has come to be known as the second Great Migration. This relocation produced a significant shift in the

patterns of work for black Americans. In 1940, 47 percent of African American men worked as farm labourers, primarily in the South. Four years later, this figure had dropped to 28 percent as black men entered into industrial occupations, including semi-skilled and skilled work (Murray 1946-47, 99). Increased economic opportunity had an equally significant impact on African American women. They filled six hundred thousand of the one million new wartime jobs for African Americans (Murray 1946-47, 99) and by the end of the war a total of two million black women were working in paid employment (Wynn 56). Black women also left farm work, but the most significant shift in employment occurred in their movement out of their "traditional" work as domestics in private homes. Increasingly, they performed personal service work outside the home and, as a shortage of male labourers developed midway through the war, entered industry in unprecedented numbers. By the end of the war, 18 percent of black women were factory labourers (Anderson 83). As was the case during the first Great Migration in the years surrounding World War I, black writers, intellectuals and migrants themselves struggled with the implications of this massive economic, social and political shift.

These internal changes, and the possibilities for self-determination that entry into industry appeared to offer African Americans, were played out against the backdrop of an increasing awareness, engendered by the war, of the position of people of colour globally. In the broadest sense, the idea/l of self-determination had a distinctly anti-colonial thrust, one which was, in turn, directly linked to the position of African Americans within the United States. As Chester Himes wrote in "Now Is The Time! Here Is The Place!," black

Americans "are the vital, imperative question which must be answered to all minority groups, all subject races, the world over" (272). This view of racialized colonial relations had a particular resonance in the context of a war against a racially-different enemy, the Japanese, whose own imperial ambitions challenged the assumption of white supremacy which underpinned Euro-American colonial endeavours, and in light of such phenomena as the burgeoning movement for Indian independence from Britain. Surrounding this, of course, was an awareness of the racist ideology and systematic violence of the Nazi regime, a fact which cast a hugely ironic shadow over America's own racist practices.

Within the borders of the United States, African Americans pushed for access to defense jobs as a means of economic self-determination even before America entered the war. A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement tapped into a grass-roots militarism when, in 1941, it began organizing a massive march of African American workers on the nation's Capital to demand equal access to employment. It was called off in June of that year when President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, legislating against discrimination in federally-contracted defense plants, a move which the president of the black newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier* described as, at least potentially, "an economic Emancipation Proclamation" (qtd. in Wynn 46).² For Ellison, Himes and Wright these jobs were material evidence of the black man's entry into "modern," working-class consciousness and his inclusion within the American democracy itself. Ann Petry's focus on the domestic role of black women, both as an economically-determined place within the white household and as a self-engendered site within the African American community,

challenges her male literary peers' association of black women with "premodern" and therefore "preconscious" productive and reproductive labour.

For black men and women the workplace was a racially volatile space during the war. Discrimination and segregation continued despite Executive Order 8802. Black men often had to resort to wildcat strikes to increase the number of black workers hired and promoted while they themselves were subject to "hate strikes" on the part of white workers who walked off the job, or became violent, in an effort to maintain their economic privilege. Black women workers, too, were often segregated on the job. White workers in female-dominated industries also participated in hate strikes, not however to protect economic prerogatives like their male counterparts, but to maintain social distance between the races (Anderson 86). Lutie Johnson, the protagonist of Petry's *The Street*, experiences a form of social ostracism in her civil service job, an area of employment also made more accessible to African Americans by Executive Order 8802.

The prevalence of these forms of racial discrimination, and the slow entry of black Americans into war jobs--it was only when a worker shortage developed in late 1942 that African Americans made significant gains in the work place (Wynn 48)--contributed to rising racial tensions in America's increasingly overcrowded cities. These conditions exacerbated black resentment at the segregated military and the fact that black soldiers, most of whom were stationed in the South where the majority of Army bases were located, were subjected to racial violence from both white soldiers and civilians. As James Baldwin wrote in *Notes of a Native Son*, African Americans felt relief when their sons and

husbands "were being shipped out of the south, to do battle overseas....even if death should come, it would come with honor and without the complicity of their countrymen" (101). These tensions, and the efforts of some white Americans to maintain a racist status quo, led to the "Red Summer" of 1943. The most serious violent confrontations during this period erupted, in the order of their occurrence, in Los Angeles; in Detroit, where twenty-five African Americans died, seventeen at the hands of white police officers; and in Harlem, where white-owned businesses were looted after a white police officer shot a black soldier in a hotel bar.

Finally, African American political activity during the war demanded the fulfilment of the peculiarly American form of self-determination: democracy. Ellison expressed this idea in its most abstract and revisionary terms in his review of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), the decade's most influential sociological treatment of American race relations. In his study, Myrdal argued that the democratic rhetoric of the war would highlight the glaring, if repressed, "moral" contradiction between the nation's founding principles and its racist practice. Myrdal located the impetus for change within the national "white" psyche, which, he claimed, when it actually confronted its "dilemma" would bravely opt for the inclusion of black Americans within the nation's project of democracy. In turn, this would permit the disappearance of the cultural markers of "blackness" in America, which he understood to be largely pathological reactions to the oppressiveness of white racism. To Myrdal's formulation of African American identity and the nature of American democracy, Ellison

countered that the only *truly* democratic "solution will lie in the creation of a democracy in which the Negro will be free to *define himself* for what he is and, *within the larger framework of that democracy, for what he desires to be*" (*Essays* 329, emphasis added).

It is within the context of these converging African American political and cultural projects that I examine the treatment of the black folk and folk culture in the work of Ellison, Himes, Petry and, to the extent that it influenced the others, Wright.

In Chapter I, I detail Wright's theory of the black folk and that of Ellison whose views first reflected, then diverged, from those of his friend and literary colleague. However, what is common to their initial shared construction of the black folk is their agreement that this group is defined by two features: their "traditional" economic role as rural labourers and a concomitant state of folk consciousness both of which are, as Wright argued in "Blueprint For Negro Writing" (1937), "imbedded deeply in Southern soil" (338). The war-driven migration of the folk to the cities and factories of the North marks a transition--or rupture--in the consciousness, culture and political strategies for survival and resistance associated with life in the South. Ellison would differ from Wright in his eventual insistence that the black folk are, in fact, a malleable and adaptive body capable of consciously reshaping their folk knowledge within the working-class conditions of the urban-industrial environment. However, both writers understood that black "history," as it is embodied in the cultural formations of the folk, was itself under a form of "revision." As Charles Scruggs writes in his study of the representation of the northern city in twentieth-century African American fiction, the black writer must confront the fact that the

"past...has been buried or lost, not once but twice, first in the Middle Passage and then in the Great Migration" (222). In the specific context of World War II, the writers who are the subject of this study confronted the question of whether or not the folk past, to the extent to which it could be reconstituted at all within the urban environment, was "usable" in the fight for democratic and economic "reconstruction."

The movement of African Americans to the North and the West coast in search of both work and racial "liberation" had profound implications in the midst of a war for what Roosevelt labelled the Four Freedoms--freedom from want and fear, and freedom of speech, expression and worship--a distillation of what Gunnar Myrdal described as the "American Creed" which underwrites the nation itself. As Ralph Ellison expressed it, with pointed reference to the war, African Americans are the "displaced person[s]" of American democracy" (*Essays* 325). Therefore, though I have drawn on the work of Hazel Carby, Charles Scruggs and Farah Griffin on the forms of the African American migration narrative--whether in historical writing, fiction, or oral forms such as the blues--my emphasis is on the implications of this mass movement within the context of the "war for democracy" both within the United States and abroad.

The socio-economic category of the black folk--those men and women rooted in the soil of the plantation, the neo-feudal economy of the South --"migrated" into the black literary text as a "discursive category" (Carby, "Politics" 77): a mobile signifier of a material historical process. Throughout the war years, however, the sign of the folk was subject to a process of literary re/presentation which reflected the efforts of African

American writers to come to terms with the effects of the black migrants' rapid entry into the urban-industrial environment. The figure of the folk and its urban avatar, the emerging black working class, are the literally embodied sites of "the social conditions of transformation" (Carby, "Politics" 77) that the cities and factories--and in the case of Petry's feminist revision of the work of her male peers, the domestic place of black women--represent. These locations are what might be called the discursive sites in the literary text where the black working-folk confront the veracity of the war's democratic "promises." The writers who are the subject of this study employ figures of the folk and folk expression itself as intrinsic elements of their rhetorical strategies: as ways of critiquing the failure of these promises to fully materialize and, most importantly, of asserting a "separate history"³ of a black will to resist and transform American racist practices and the "right," as Ellison asserts above, to *self*-definition within the American democracy.

In my examination of the work of Ellison, Himes and Petry, I have employed what Houston Baker describes in *The Journey Back* as the "anthropology of art" (xvi): a methodology which necessitates the "imaginative reconstruction" of the specific cultural context of a literary text (xvii). In his later work, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*, Baker elaborates on this practice, specifying that the critic must work to situate the text within "the interdependent systems of Afro-American culture" as well as within an interdisciplinary field of knowledge (109). In this study, I have relied heavily on the nonfiction writing of each of these writers as well as that of Wright--whether

journalism, critical essays, book reviews or theoretical statements--in order to situate the literary production of the period within an historical and cultural context as they both witnessed and interpreted it. In reading across genres, I have been influenced by Hazel Carby's view, as she expresses it in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, that such a strategy highlights the link between African American political and literary interventions into contemporary social formations (7).

In keeping with this practice of contextual situatedness, I have focused on the debate between Ellison and Wright, the primary theorists of the black urban folk during this period, as the theoretical perspective from which to view the work of Himes and Petry. I have deliberately left Zora Neale Hurston, the writer most often associated with the African American folk in our cultural consciousness, out of this initial theoretical configuration for two reasons: she did not directly address the issue of the war in her writing and, as Hazel Carby argues, her construction of a primarily rural folk has the rhetorical effect of locating them "outside of history," of displacing them from the contested and transformative spaces of the urban environment which is at the centre of the work of the other writers ("Politics" 77).⁴

The first chapter focuses on Ellison's and Wright's developing theories of the folk, from the publication of Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" in 1937 to Ellison's assessment in 1945 of Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* (1944), and situates their work within the frame of the American Communist Party's views on folk culture and black nationalism. Both writers eventually distanced themselves from the Party, in part because

of its apparent abandonment of the black struggle for equality after Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. Although both Ellison and Wright retained a non-sectarian--if shifting--Marxist perspective on the significance of the urbanization and proletarianization of the black folk, Ellison diverged from Wright in his exploration of the political implications of vital black and urban folk forms within the context of the war's impact on African Americans. Ellison found evidence of black political will in the shifting and "partly urbanized, somewhat distorted" expressions of the black folk ("Recent" 22) on the streets and in the dance halls and factories of the city: in music and dance, in the style of pastiche which created the zoot suit, and in wartime folktales which expressed anger at the racist treatment of black soldiers and workers. At the same time, these forms were evidence of a complex and not yet fully articulate/d process of cultural adaptation which signalled the metamorphosis of the folk and not, as Wright predicted in *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), their death on the city pavements (91). Ellison's nonfiction writing of the period, including several important essays which are still available only in their *New Masses* venue, represent a neglected period in Ellison's development as both writer and theorist, as well as an important record of a particularly rich and volatile period in African American cultural production.

Chapter II focuses on the work of Chester Himes. His first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), tells the story of a black war worker employed in a segregated and racially tense shipyard in Los Angeles. Himes is the only African American writer to have written extensively about the experience of black migrants to the Pacific Coast region, an

written extensively about the experience of black migrants to the Pacific Coast region, an area which until World War II had not experienced a major influx of black workers. While the protagonist of Himes's novel, Bob Jones, is directly affected by the racial tensions between black and white workers, his fear is compounded by the fact that he has witnessed both the internment of the Japanese Americans in 1942 and the zoot suit riots of June 1943, when white military personnel and civilians attacked Mexican Americans who sported what critics such as George Lipsitz recognize as defiant symbols of class and ethnic identity during the war (*Rainbow* 85). In Himes's novel, the particular racial and ethnic mix of California and these acts of white racism, particularly as they are implicated in white fear and resentment of the Japanese enemy abroad, are a synecdoche for his vision of a postwar world which continues to be made up of "ruler and subject races, ruler and subject nations" ("Now" 272). In addition to discussing "the four furious essays" (Himes, *Black* 7) Himes wrote during this period, I also examine several representative short stories which chart his own growing disillusionment with the war. Though initially hopeful that the conflict was a "People's War," a term which connoted both anti-imperialism and an allegiance to democratic notions of equality, his self-described "bitter novel of protest" (*Quality* 75) registered his anger at the failure of the goals of this enterprise to materialize within the United States. Ultimately, it is the absurdity of racism--a view of the American condition which increasingly dominates Himes's perspective--which triumphs over the nation's equally absurd and arbitrary declaration of democratic principles.

toward the black folk, the southern migrants who work in his shipyard crew and who are crowded into segregated neighbourhoods around Central Avenue and in Little Tokyo, an area forcibly vacated by the Japanese Americans. His racial fear, and his angst at failing to achieve his own confused, democratic dream of living like a "simple Joe" who was "without distinction, either of race, creed or colour" (*If* 153), cause Bob Jones to misread their signal act of defiance: a wildcat strike orchestrated around the collective telling of black folktales in defiance of the white foreman who has replaced him on the job. In several of the short stories which I discuss in this chapter, Himes employs a strategy similar to that of the crew: he uses black folktales to both parody and critique America's racial contradictions. These tales serve as rhetorical templates which structure the war-related content of Himes's stories. In addition, Himes draws on the strategies of resistance which these folktales embody. These early stories portend the direction of Himes's later work, specifically the nine novels which comprise his Harlem Domestic Series, in which he draws on black folklore and other vernacular forms such as the blues, expressions of what he describes in *My Life of Absurdity* as "the American black's secret mind itself" (158). In these novels, Himes constructs Harlem as a black territory of the imagination--he wrote that he "*never meant [it] to be real*" (*Absurdity* 126, emphasis in original)--which stands in an absurd and parodic relationship to "white" America. My examination of Himes's work traces his developing aesthetic of the absurd and his use of black folklore as a response to the events of World War II.

My final chapter examines the work of Ann Petry, specifically her first novel, *The*

Street (1946), and her novella *In Darkness and Confusion* which, though not published until 1947, is about the Harlem riot of 1943. Petry's novel was the most widely-circulated text written by a black woman during the war period: it sold over a million and a half copies shortly after its publication (Holladay 13). Her writing is an important feminist corrective to the work of the male writers, whose focus on the entry of black men into industrial work places and "modern" consciousness implicitly, or in the case of Wright explicitly, relegated black women to a premodern consciousness which the male writers associated with the domestic sphere itself. For Wright, the domestic place of black urban women--as this place is defined by their productive and reproductive labour--is a vestige of the feudal folk life of the South. As he wrote in *12 Million Black Voices*, black women are "the most circumscribed and tragic objects to be found in our lives....their orbit of life is narrow--from their kitchenette to the white folk's kitchen and back home again" (131). Wright views black women, therefore, as outside the "sphere of conscious history" which the "male" spaces of the factory represent for him (12 147). Within the context of the economic war on the domestic place of black women and children--one which has clearly genocidal effects in Petry's work--she "rewrites" the domestic sphere as Wright understood it. For her, the domestic place is a revolutionary and consciousness-creating location within the black community.

From this perspective, Petry critiques the displacement of black women from this self-engendered location by the need to labour as domestic workers in the white bourgeois household, a situation which exposes their children to a modern form of the "profound

natal alienation" which, as Orlando Patterson argues, characterized the condition of slavery (38). Petry radically shifts the place from which male writers of this period viewed the war's impact on African Americans, particularly its failure to ensure the economic emancipation of black women. In Petry's configuration of Harlem, African American men are unable to find work in the racialized and gendered economic order of the urban environment while black women become the city's domestic migrants. This economic assault on the black "home" amounts to what Himes described as a "private" or white man's war ("Now" 272) on the domestic front.

Petry's work also presents a very different view of black efforts at negotiating an often hostile urban environment. Unlike the male writers who are the subject of this study, Petry was born in the North and was two generations removed from life in the South. Her protagonists are also first- or second-generation urban northerners. Her fictional treatment of the city does not assume a continuity of folk experience implicit in the work of the male writers, however tenuous, or in the case of Wright, unnecessary this link might be. This is further emphasized in her novel's insistence that the city's domestic war on black women has the effect of weakening or severing matrilineal ties. However, Lutie's grandmother emerges as an ancestor in *The Street*, a complex and often ambivalent representation who nevertheless performs one of the primary functions of this figure in African American literature: she is "a site of negotiation for the construction of a new self" (Griffin 8). In Petry's text, she is also emphatically a *domestic* site. Petry's novel functions to replace the grandmother's folk knowledge within a "new" urban context in a rhetorical

manoeuvre analogous to Ellison's more systematic and theoretical efforts to recontextualize black folk culture within the city environment.

In both of Petry's texts, the figure of the zoot-suiter reappears. However, in contrast to the work of Ellison and Himes, these are female figures displaying a style which is a sign of racial and class identity *and* of the defiance of gender expectations. In *The Street*, Petry associates these figures with the dis/placement of black women within an urban economy of consumer desire--"sad-looking girls just up from the South, or little girls...who had seen too many movies and didn't have the money to buy all the things they wanted" (252). However, in *In Darkness and Confusion*, the character Annie May wears a zoot outfit as a sign of her revolutionary insight into the implications of her prescribed place as domestic labourer, and as an assertion of the female Self as a resisting subject. She is the female embodiment of the "profound political meaning" that Ellison associated with the zoot suit in his *Negro Quarterly* editorial of 1943 ("Editorial Comment" 301).

Each of these writers approaches the critical issues of the war from widely divergent perspectives. However, what is central to their work, and to my analysis of it, is the fact that figures of the black folk, and the urban working class, are embodied "sites" which register each of these writers' attempts to explain, and speculate on, the meaning of the war and the massive cultural and political shifts it engendered for African Americans. While each of the following chapters situates the work of a particular writer within a broad social, historical and literary context, collectively, they converge to present a "reconstruction" of a distinct period in African American cultural and intellectual production.

NOTES

1. Gates discusses the Hurston-Wright debate in *The Signifying Monkey*, 182-84. See also V.P. Franklin, 208 and 436n30.
2. Letter from Ira Lewis to Franklin D. Roosevelt, 28 June 1941, 93: 5, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, qtd. in Wynn 46.
3. Charles Scruggs uses this term to describe the "forcible" physical, political and cultural separation of African Americans, from slavery until the present, from most of the rest of the American population. Historically, this fact has been both the reason to advocate accommodation to the majority culture or, alternatively, to affirm this condition as a source of national identity and power (222). In the context of my study, this separateness is more closely aligned to Du Bois's view of double-consciousness: of being black *and* American.
4. Hazel Carby discusses this in several of her critical essays. See particularly "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston."

CHAPTER I

Flying Home: Ralph Ellison and the Black Folk

Well, airplanes flying across the land and the sea
Everybody's flying but a Negro like me
Uncle Sam says your place is on the ground
When I fly my airplanes I want no Negroes around
The same thing for the navy when ships go to sea
All they got is a mess-boy's job for me...

Waring Cuney, quoted in Wright, "The Literature of the Negro of the United States," 92

Hitler's gonna reach in a few months and grab and then things'll start. All the white folks'll be killing off one another....Then there won't be nobody left but Sam. Then we'll be fighting it out among ourselves. That'll be a funky fight. Aw hell yes! When Negroes start running things I think I'll have to get off the earth before it's too late.

Ralph Ellison's interview with a Harlem musician in June 1939, quoted in Banks, 257

Birds of Passage (*Invisible Man* 354)

In Wright's "The Literature of the Negro in the United States," the substantive part of which was written in 1945 when the author was still a Marxist, if not a Communist,¹ he finds evidence of the black writer's ability to give "social and political direction" to the angry outpourings of the black masses--what Wright describes as their "torrid moods of meanness"--in the "bitter, fighting lyrics" of Waring Cuney, quoted above ("Literature" 92).² To Wright, Cuney's poem is a "literal" inscription of the otherwise "transient" oral

expressive forms of those who constitute the vast majority of the black population: the migrant folk, not yet bound to work in industry, who "drifted from city to city, ever seeking what was not to be found: jobs, homes, love - *a chance to live as free men*" ("Literature" 85, emphasis added). These migrants shared the condition of their post-Emancipation forefathers who, by decree, were "[s]undered suddenly from the only relationship with Western civilization [they] had been allowed to form since...captivity": labouring on the land of white owners (Wright, *I2* 35). Wright understood this to be the condition of black men; black women, because of their past "enforced intimacy with the Lords of the Land," were more closely bound to stable, domestic roles within the neo-plantation household (*I2* 37). Those black men who left the "new kind of bondage" of the South--sharecropping (*I2* 36)--were, like their ancestors, between two worlds and two world views. According to Wright, this experience of liminality, of itinerancy, is reflected in "original contributions in terms of [the] form and content" of black folk expression ("Literature" 84).

These "Forms of Things Unknown" (Wright, "Literature" 85)--these *subliminal* expressions of African American experience--are distinct from the "narcissistic" bleating of the members of a stable, black middle class intent upon claiming its humanity "in a language that their nation had given them," a political and rhetorical strategy which, Wright argues, produces only emotional and intellectual paralysis in the face of racial exclusion ("Literature" 84). In/formed writers like Waring Cuney, however, inscribe the e/motive energy of black folk expression--this discourse of the margins--through a

conscious shaping and a shaping consciousness. The black writer must literally translate the "broken speech" of the black masses ("Literature" 89-90)--the linguistic traces of the slave economy and its contemporary reconfigurations--into literary "script," or what Houston Baker describes in reference to the strategic language use of the black modernists, into forms of "negotiable discursive currency" which can circulate abroad (*Modernism* 24). For Wright, the expressive forms of the rural black folk and their newly-urban avatars, like black nationalism itself--which in this context Wright understands to be the awareness of, and a response to, the "peculiar" forms of African American racial experience--were "the reflex expression[s] of a life whose roots are imbedded deeply in Southern soil" ("Blueprint" 338). Like the scrip(t) which was "paid" to the black sharecropper, folk forms and the "national" racial experience they embody are signs of the black man's enforced economic displacement from "the world-wide forces that shape and mold the life of Western civilization" (Wright, *I2* 117). When the black labourer enters into "modern" factories and the class consciousness this environment produces, the folk forms of a national, black expression will be rendered obsolete.

Wright's choice of Cuney's poem to illustrate the marshalling/ martialling of diffuse folk energies into coherent protest by a black writer is an anomaly in the context of his perspective on black nationalism. Cuney's lyrics explicitly address an issue which pertains to race, not class, in the United States: the segregation of the military during World War II. However, as Wright argues in "Literature," black nationalism emerges when America fails to function as a colour-blind state: "Negroes are Negroes because they are treated as

Negroes" (104). Although Wright concludes the section of the essay written in 1945 with a vision of black workers "mak[ing] a wholehearted commitment to a new world" of international, revolutionary class-consciousness (98), his inclusion of Cuney's poem points to what he makes explicit in his introduction to Horace Cayton's and St. Clair Drake's *Black Metropolis*, also published in 1945: that the Left, and specifically the American Communist Party, "tries to anchor the Negro problem to a patriotism of global time and space" when, in fact, it is rooted "in American culture as a whole" (xxix). By 1945, Wright had formally broken with the Communist Party (Fabre, "From *Native*" 203), in part, over its apparent abandonment of the black struggle for equality during the war. When Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, many Communists adopted the view that too militant a defense of black rights could jeopardize the war effort.³ However, as Wright's essay demonstrates, he had not rejected what Ellison himself would describe in a 1945 letter to Wright as "the quickening effects of Marxism" as distinct from "the repressive effect...[of] CP sectarianism" (qtd. in Fabre, "From *Native*" 207).⁴

Ellison expressed his views on the American Communist Party's position on African American activism leading to, and after, America's involvement in the war in his review of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944). The review was written in 1944 but not published until it was included in his collection *Shadow and Act* (1964). Ellison argues that the Party's "shamefaced support" of the Jim Crow Army (*Essays* 334) was proof that it had inherited what Myrdal described as the nation's indigenous "moral problem" of race: despite its

allegiance to Marxist internationalism, the Party's actions demonstrated that it was unable to acknowledge the schism between theory and practice, between a professed belief in equality and the actual treatment of black Americans (*Essays* 335). Ellison questions the "scientific knowledge" of an American Communist Party which, like the Roosevelt "New Deal administration's perpetuation" of a segregated military, failed to maximize its own political interests by allying itself with black Americans during the war (*Essays* 334).

Despite Ellison's criticisms of the Communist Party itself, his review of Myrdal's text is essentially a leftist critique of the sociologist's views, particularly his dismissal of American class struggle and "the economic motivation of anti-Negro prejudice" (*Essays* 337). In Ellison's view, Myrdal's emphasis on the moral problem of race and his "running battle with Marxism" (*Essays* 337) did not permit an analysis of the material and political manifestations of American racism. Ellison implicitly acknowledges the Communist Party's position on the southern Black Belt as an interior colony or "nation within a nation"⁵ in arguing that *American Dilemma* is a "*blueprint for a more effective exploitation of the South's natural, industrial and human resources*" (337, emphasis in original). Ellison reserves judgement on the form this "exploitation" might take, however, arguing that in the wake of a war which appears to have engendered a resurgence of democratic thinking, the nation may realize a "positive" form of "exploitation" in promoting democratic change in the South. Alternatively, "exploitation" may take the form of "a more efficient and subtle manipulation of black and white relations" (337) which functions instead, as it had in the past under the auspices of institutions such as

Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, to reconcile the conflicting American "moralities" of democracy and capitalism (330).

Ellison's review is critical of the American Left for refusing to acknowledge the moral and psychological complexities of the fact of race in America. It is critical of the Right--Myrdal was working under the auspices of the Carnegie Foundation, a fact Ellison took as evidence of a capitalist "reengineering" of postwar America--for its refusal to admit the existence of class conflict. Ellison, however, shifts the ground upon which both of these groups have erected their ideological approaches, the definition of the African American as a national "problem," by introducing the concept of black culture as a form of experiential knowledge which is in/formed, but not determined, by material and historical circumstances. As he would later define culture in "The World and the Jug" (1964), it is "that 'concord of sensibilities'" which a group develops, over time, *in response to* both their "American experience" and their particular "social and political predicament." (*Essays* 177). In invoking this fact of African American life, Ellison asserts that black cultural forms are powerful and self-generating expressions of the group's social energy and political will.

In Ellison's review of Myrdal's text, this perspective is most apparent in his critique of the sociologist's "sterile concept of 'race'" (*Essays* 340). In *American Dilemma*, Myrdal presents "blackness" as a deviation from the norm of being white and American. The manifestations of "blackness" are, in fact, the result of the oppressive mechanisms of "white" American society, a situation which produces an African American "culture" of

reaction:

In practically all its divergences, American Negro culture is not something independent of general American culture. It is a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture. (Myrdal 928, emphasis in original)⁶

In contrast, Ellison argues that "blackness" is the product of a process of cultural accretion, of improvisation, of *self*-creation. While Ellison agrees that black culture may contain reactive and "negative" elements, in its positive manifestations it is the product of a conscious strategy of assemblage or pastiche: a version of what he describes in "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" (1978) as "an *American* compulsion to improvise on the given" (*Essays* 507, emphasis added). In response to Myrdal's *American Dilemma*, Ellison argues that African Americans have always demonstrated the ability "to *create themselves* out of what they found around them" (*Essays* 339, emphasis added). Thus, while Myrdal counsels the assimilation of blacks into what he calls "American culture"--something which can only occur when *white* Americans have resolved the "moral dilemma" of race--Ellison points out that black culture is not only *American*, but that elements of it are constituted by the conscious rejection of what Myrdal describes as American "higher values" (339) and the concomitant assertion of "counter values" (340) in the face of such cultural phenomena as, for example, "lynching and Hollywood" (339).

Ellison would make clear his position on this apparently incongruous yoking in "The Shadow and the Act" (1949), an essay which examines the link between the nation's underlying need to "view Negroes as less than men" and the reproduction and

reinforcement of this perspective in the representation of African Americans in film: "The anti-Negro image is a ritual object of which Hollywood is not the creator, but the manipulator" (*Essays* 305).⁷ The treatment of black soldiers during the war, to which Ellison acidly refers in a 1942 letter to Richard Wright as ensuring "the *indiscriminate* rights of Negroes to die" in an American Army which segregated and discriminated against them (qtd. in Fabre, "From *Native*" 202, emphasis added),⁸ was the most pressing example of this peculiarly *American* pathology. The "rejection" of this aspect of American experience created what Ellison describes in a 1946 book review as "a problem of identity" for the African American during the war: the need "to evaluate his life, to define himself and consciously to possess his experience" within this national context ("Stepchild" 25). Ellison turns to the forms of black culture as expressions of this process of self-definition.

In his review of *American Dilemma*, Ellison employs a metaphorical description which encompasses both the immediate, "organic" function of black culture as giving expressive form to that which "has been secreted by living" and its "historical" function as the repository of that which makes black "lives more meaningful" (*Essays* 340). Ellison's call for a "deeper science" capable of uncovering and interpreting this process in contemporary black life functions to critique the taxonomies of race and class which he outlines in his review, neither of which is sufficient "to analyze what is happening among the masses of Negroes. Much of it is inarticulate" or, as Wright expressed it, "unknown" (*Essays* 340). To acquire a "science" capable of articulating the culture of the black masses, specifically the newly-urban folk, a method which in turn is

capable of employing that culture's energy and incipient directives for political work, defines Ellison's project during the last years of the Depression and throughout World War II.

The term "folk," as used by professional folklorists, has historically denoted groups or individuals who are "traditional, peasant, working class, rural, poor, self-trained, or marginal" (Shuman and Briggs 123): those outside what are deemed to be the centers of economic and political power. For Ellison and other Left black writers of the 1930s and 1940s, most notably Richard Wright, the black folk were largely defined by their role as agricultural and domestic labourers within the neo-feudal Black Belt, the American South. As Ellison explains in "Richard Wright's Blues" (1945), the black folk were the "most brutalized section" of the population of an area which comprised "a major part of the backward third of the nation" (*Essays* 137). This economic construction "migrated" into the literary text as a "discursive category" (Carby, "Politics" 77). As *sign*, the black folk represented a constellation of unstable and often contradictory social conditions and cultural attributes, particularly as this figure was the embodied "site" for the literary exploration of the implications of the real-world migration of the black folk from the rural South to the urban North.

To the American Left, specifically the Communist Party, the southern Black Belt was a vestige of the preindustrial feudal past where social relations of production were characterized by what Marx described in "The Fetishism of Commodities" as personal dependence: the "groundwork" of the feudal society is "personal labour power"

undisguised by relations of production between commodities, the embodied products of labour (Marx 342). Orlando Patterson explains this relationship in terms of relations of power which are "direct--or nearly so--and...frequently transparent" (18). Power is understood to be *power over persons*. Ellison describes this feudal relationship in his review of William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941). White economic control over the labouring black body is punctuated and reinforced by episodes of racial violence which "spring from the conflict of interest between black men and white rulers" ("Transition" 88). In *12 Million Black Voices* Wright explains this relationship in similar terms. In the South, "[white] men spoke to you, cursed you, yelled at you, or killed you" (100).

The urban-industrial environment was, in contrast, "a world of *things*" where "cold forces hit you and push you" (Wright, *12* 100, emphasis in original). The folk, like the three brothers in Attaway's novel who leave their "'natural' sharecropper setting" to labour in a Monongahela Valley steel mill, are confronted with power which is concealed: violence and coercion are in the form of "giant inhuman machines" and the "impersonal brutality" of industry (Ellison, "Transition" 88). What concerned Ellison and Wright, particularly in the context of a war which had the effect of both accelerating black migration from South to North and the entry of African Americans into industrial employment, was the extent to which black folk life and folklore, which as Ellison wrote in "Harlem Is Nowhere" (1948) had been "tested in life-and-death terms against...daily experience with nature and the Southern white man" (*Essays* 324), was "usable" in this urban-industrial environment.

In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright forecast the disappearance of the folk in this new environment: a "Death on the City Pavements" (91) which, because the folk were unable to adapt to the "new form of mob violence" which was the northern ghetto, would take the form of physical extinction, (206) or, on a more abstract level, the intellectual and psychological paralysis of those migrants who failed to make the transition to a critical "modern" consciousness. To acquire this critical capacity the folk must undergo the dissolution--the death--of folk consciousness in "the vortex of modern urban life" (117), an experience which gives rise to a "new" form of working-class consciousness. In contrast, Ellison developed a theory of the folk which projected the group's survival and their ability to transform themselves and their cultural production in the *present* environment. What the folk were in the process of *becoming* in the city was the central topos, and trope, of Ellison's early writing.

As Michel Fabre argues, the early period of Ellison's writing career illuminates the "ideological and artistic dilemma" inherent in his movement away from the perspective of a Communist "fellow traveller" to that of a writer who, by the end of the 1940s, had "essentially aesthetic and cultural interests" ("From *Native*" 199). Ellison's earliest nonfiction writing focuses on the role of the writer as a cultural worker who, as he wrote in 1941's "Recent Negro Fiction," is charged with "creating the consciousness of his oppressed nation" (26). By 1944, Ellison had shifted his perspective on black "national" consciousness. In his review of *American Dilemma*, Ellison describes African Americans as *workers of black culture*: improvisatory strategists who "take it and create of it 'the

uncreated consciousness of their race" (*Essays* 340, emphasis added).⁹ This transition from a class-based analysis of African American experience to an emphasis on black cultural nationalism is reflected in Ellison's changing views on the place of the black folk and their cultural expressions in contemporary American life.

In his review of Roi Ottley's study of Harlem, *New World A-Coming* (1943), Ellison argues that American involvement in World War II and the fact that it engendered an awareness of the global implications of the national "Negro problem" "precipitated the first major crisis in Negro thought and action since the Emancipation" (Review of *New* 68). This was evident in what Ellison perceived to be the widening schism between the attitude of the black masses toward the war effort and that of the black leadership, whether those members of Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet" who demonstrated "impotence in the face of the crucial problems" of race (68) or, by implication, black Communists who urged the soft-peddling of racial grievances for the sake of national unity against European fascism. Ellison argues that the majority of black Americans display a marked ambivalence about the conflict and the actions of their leaders as is apparent by their gestures of support *and* their acts of dissensus: "between the war, the riots, and their support of the President, Negroes endlessly exhibit a problem of identity" (68).

In his review of the autobiography *American Daughter* published in June 1946, Ellison elaborates upon this "war-sharpened crisis" of identity ("Stepchild" 125). The war, Ellison argues, had forced "a spiritual choice" upon African Americans--any "physical" choice having been limited to "the armed forces or jail" as Bob Jones discovers in Chester

Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. However, "having made his stand with his country in [the] face of his own continuous grievances," the African American is left with only a sense of alienation, of double consciousness, derived from the fact that he remains "both a Negro *and* an American, a member of the family and yet an outsider" ("Stepchild" 25, emphasis in original). The war heightened the African American's awareness of his position on the margins of what Ellison describes in "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," written in 1946, as "the democratic *master plan*" of the nation (*Essays* 85, emphasis added). The crisis which resounds with Ellison's definition of the blues, the attitude of "self-confrontation" (Kent 96) which he describes in his review of Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) as the "near-tragic, near-comic....autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" and out loud (*Essays* 129). To Ellison, the outpouring of autobiographical texts after the close of the war was evidence of this black crisis of identity. All of them asked the questions: "Who am I? What am I? How did I come to be?" ("Stepchild" 25).

Ellison's own answers to these blues questions revolve around the figure of the black folk, a protean representation which metamorphoses from the embodiment of what he describes in his review of *Blood on the Forge* as "the naive, almost formless personalities" of the black sharecroppers in the novel (Transition" 88) to the zoot-suiters of the urban dance halls of the North who, as Ellison argues in his *Negro Quarterly* editorial of early 1943, express themselves in music, dance and in a style of dress which reflect a potent and sustained, if not yet fully articulate, will to both resist oppression and

assert a black cultural identity. The "past" of Attaway's migrants was in/deed "usable," if transformed, in the urban present. This development in Ellison's theory of the folk traces the literal trajectory of the black migrants themselves. Whatever form this figure took, however, it represented for Ellison an aspect of African *American* experience which was largely undocumented by so-called "official" histories: those narratives which record, as the *Invisible Man* observes in the novel of the same name, only "the known, the seen, the heard" (*Invisible* 353).

Ellison's "recovery" of the folk in the urban environment is a challenge to historical teleologies which require their extinction in order to fulfil a particular American "manifest destiny." This narrative may take the form of Wright's vision of black survivorship: of the black urban stranger who, as we have seen, outwits physical death on the city pavements but who then must undergo the dismantling--and the forgetting--of his folk character in the machinery of industry. As Farah Griffin writes, this black stranger "stands on the outside with an objective view of the community," the space that Wright occupies as the narrator of his "folk history" *12 Million Black Voices* (78).¹⁰

This narrative may also take the form of an American racial "pathology," as Ellison understood this phenomenon in his discussion, noted above, of the ritual manipulation of the figure of the black man in his essay "Shadow and Act." In its broadest application, the construction of a dehumanized and largely invisible black "presence" has historically supported the drive to erect a nation based on originary blueprints which delineate what Toni Morrison describes as "the architecture of *a new white man*" (*Playing* 15, emphasis

in original). In "Twentieth-Century Fiction" Ellison argues that the nation's "democratic master plan" was literally laid down on the body of the black American: the founding documents defined the slave as "a human 'natural' resource who, so that white men could become more human, was elected to undergo a process of institutionalized dehumanization" (*Essays* 85). This process continues under various guises into the present. In "Beating That Boy" (1945)--the title of which refers to the postwar propensity to discuss, but not resolve, the issue of race and democracy in America--Ellison argues that this historical fact has made it necessary for the "white American, figuratively, to force the Negro down into the deeper level of his consciousness, into the inner world" (*Essays* 149). This form of repression results in the paradox of black invisibility: the fact that, as Ellison wrote in his 1982 introduction to *Invisible Man*, the "high visibility" of African Americans actually renders them "*un*-visible" to the conflicted national psyche (*Essays* 478, emphasis in original).

"Beating That Boy" is Ellison's painful deliberation on Myrdal's American dilemma: the moral schism between the American Creed of democracy and the realities of much of black existence. However, while the sociologist counselled the assimilation of his concept of the black "stranger"--the "wronged American" (Southern 44)¹¹--Ellison focuses on the transformative and resistant possibilities of the black "unknown" and "invisible" in American culture: what African Americans as "the 'displaced person[s]' of American democracy" (*Essays* 325) have created "upon the horns of the white man's dilemma" (*Essays* 339). These forms of vernacular culture, specifically black folklore, challenge the

apparently exclusive historical teleologies of both Richard Wright and Gunnar Myrdal. As Houston Baker points out, the cultural record of a vernacular "history" proclaims that "[t]his land...is mine by right of my having been always already here" (*Modernism* 61).

Ellison's insistence on the present significance of the black folk and their urban avatars, the emerging urban, working class shaped as a discursive category by what Hazel Carby describes as "the social conditions of transformation" ("Politics" 77), also challenged formulations of America's racial dilemma, and specifically after 1944 that of Gunnar Myrdal, which focused almost exclusively on the role of white Americans in bridging the gap between the nation's democratic theory and practice. Like Myrdal, Ellison recognized that periods of national crisis such as war heightened awareness of the nation's ethical schizophrenia (*Essays* 148) and the repressive political strategies which marginalized African Americans. This real-world condition has its correlate in the consciousness of the white American who, as Ellison argues in his review of Myrdal's text, "seeks unceasingly, by means both crude and subtle, to lay to rest" the "phantom" figure of the black man (*Essays* 328). However, Ellison shifts from Myrdal's focus on the powerful, if subliminal, moral suasion this repressed figure exerts within the national psyche to a delineation of the crisis of identity and action that this situation engendered for the African American who, as he points out in "Twentieth-Century Fiction," "seems most patently *the little man who isn't there*" (*Essays* 85, emphasis added). A distant "relative" of the "little man" behind the stove at Chehaw Station, who in the 1978 essay of the same name literally embodies the "integrative, vernacular note" of American democratic and cultural

pluralism (*Essays* 507), he is in his earliest incarnation, deeply rooted in the peculiar history of black Americans.¹²

As noted above, Ellison found evidence of black efforts at the recovery of history, and the implicit challenge such a process presented to the ongoing "struggle over the nature of reality" in America (*Essays* 82), in the autobiographical "blues" writing of the war period, including what came to be recognized as one of the definitive works of the decade, Wright's *Black Boy* (1945). These texts mark a period of transition in the life of African Americans:

In the life of a people the autobiographical impulse appears at the end of an era, at a point when it is faced with a new formulation of reality. It is that moment in real life that parallels the reversal and recognition scene of tragedy, during which a people discovers its past mistakes and is moved to philosophize, to despair, to confront its life consciously. ("Stepchild" 25)

For Ellison, the nature of this "national" transition and the concomitant search for an approach to African American culture which would register its effects and its significance and counter ideologies which, as he argues in "Beating That Boy," have made the African American "the sole sacrifice of America's tragedy" (*Essays* 145)--were centred on the figure of the black folk: those whom the Invisible Man recognizes as "men of transition" (*Invisible* 355).

Harlem is a ruin (Ellison, *Essays* 321).

The most significant index of the impact of the war on the domestic front for

African Americans was the extent of black migration to America's cities, particularly in the North. Ellison had himself moved North in the Summer of 1936, leaving Tuskegee, Alabama for Harlem. By then, as James de Jongh writes, Harlem "could no longer be considered a unique location in the spiritual geography of black America" (80). The utopian promise held out by the Harlem Renaissance writers had been displaced by the effects of the Great Depression. The Harlem riot of 1935, when the rumour of the death of a black boy at the hands of a white shopkeeper touched off a night of violence against white-owned businesses, explosively signalled the Renaissance's symbolic end. Ellison's description, in "Harlem is Nowhere," of the black migrant's loss of the "myth" of the free North reflects Charles Scruggs's view that the Depression decade marks "the division between the city as dystopia and the city as utopia" for African Americans (5): "the blasting of this dream is as damaging to Negro personality as the slum scenes of filth, disorder and crumbling masonry in which it flies apart" (*Essays* 324).

In the literary sphere, Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) marked the death of the Renaissance dream: the vision of a black "city within a city" where, as Alain Locke expressed it, "a common consciousness," rather than "a common condition" of blackness as it existed in the South, could find expression in the cosmopolitan urban environment (Locke 7). The significance of the collapse of this utopian vision and what it represented for the possibilities of black urban life is exemplified by the fractured consciousness of Wright's protagonist, Bigger Thomas. As Wright stated in "How Bigger Was Born," it registers Bigger's untenable place in the urban "No Man's Land" of Chicago, his position

"between two worlds--between powerful America and his own stunted place in life" (*Early Works* 871, emphasis added). His inability to enter into the condition of the black stranger--to replace the abandoned remnants of a "stunted" folk life with a critical consciousness--dooms him to literal death on the city pavements.

Wright's Chicago is patterned after the sociologist Louis Wirth's dystopian, Depression-decade mapping of the social meaning of urban space: the city as a place of isolation, immobility and terrifying unfamiliarity (Scruggs 54). This bleak vision distinguishes Wright's world view from that of the Renaissance writers who were largely influenced by Robert Park's projection of the American city as a location which offered the possibilities of mobility and cosmopolitan identity.¹³ As Charles Scruggs argues, *Native Son's* post-Renaissance vision of the city stands in the same relationship to black modernism as Eliot's *The Waste Land* does to white modernism. African American writers after Wright had to discover for themselves what cultural fragments were left to shore against or rebuild the ruins of the black urban dream (Scruggs 64).¹⁴

For Ellison, the presence of the folk in the city, specifically the traces of their expressive forms, however transformed by the experience of migration, became one of the cultural "fragments" out of which African Americans could recreate themselves in the urban environment. To define folk culture as part of a usable past, more than any other element of Ellison's thought, distinguishes his perspective from that of Richard Wright. Even in the "Nowhere" of Harlem, Ellison finds evidence that although it "is the scene of the folk-Negro's death agony, it is also the setting of his transcendence" (*Essays* 322). By

"transcendence," Ellison does not mean rising above, or the abandonment of, folk culture in an inevitable process of urban/e "uplift." Rather, he is describing a type of almost alchemical change, the creation of a volatile amalgam of identities in a world which is so "fluid and shifting" that things fall apart and are reconstituted in new and unpredictable ways (*Essays* 322). While "Harlem Is Nowhere" is, in part, concerned with delineating the sometimes "pathological" results of such rapid change--the subject of the essay is the Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic which is, nevertheless, "an underground extension of democracy" or what might be called a "cure" for the American dilemma of race (*Essays* 320)--Ellison's postwar essay limns out the world of possibility that becomes the object of the Invisible Man's quest in Ellison's novel (*Invisible* 130).

In his *Negro Quarterly* editorial of 1943, Ellison argues that the expressive forms of the black urban masses--specifically of those men and women who were, as he wrote in 1941's "Recent Negro Fiction," the inheritors of a "partly urbanized, somewhat distorted folk culture" (22)--"conceal[ed] clues to great potential power" ("Editorial Comment" 301). This power is, however, realizable only through the efforts of a culturally-literate black leadership able to solve the "riddle" of the meaning of these forms of black cultural production and to direct this expressive energy into political action (301). Ellison found evidence of the link between black cultural and political energies in those folk forms which expressed African American attitudes toward the war effort, particularly the treatment of black soldiers and workers. While Ellison is supportive of the war effort in his editorial,¹⁵ he is critical of black leaders who refuse to acknowledge the resentment of the people,

making them ineffective in confronting the nation's wartime contradictions (301). Instead, an indigenous black leadership--"the era of subsidized Negro leadership is fast passing" (301)--must ally itself with the masses in order to learn the meaning of their "emotion-charged myths, symbols and war-time folklore" (301-02). By 1943, then, Ellison conceived of the folk expressions of the urban masses as a vital, evolving and politically-charged type of black performance.

It is in this context that I examine Ellison's involvement with the New York Federal Writers' Project (FWP), specifically his tenure with the Folklore Unit. On the recommendation of Richard Wright, who was briefly employed by the New York FWP,¹⁶ Ellison was hired by the Project in the Spring of 1938. Not the least important aspect of Ellison's involvement with the various components of the Project was the fact that it allowed him to think of himself as a professional writer: "to be *paid* for writing...was a wonderful thing" (Banks xviii, emphasis in original).¹⁷ He was one of the last writers to leave the Project when in June 1942, he became managing editor of *The Negro Quarterly*. In addition to his work on black folklore, Ellison researched the history of African Americans in New York, a project conducted under the auspices of the national editor of Negro affairs, Sterling Brown. In a 1977 interview with Ann Banks, Ellison described the experience as one that "threw me into my own history. Once you touched the history of blacks in New York...you were deep into American history" (xix-xx), a perspective on black experience which would reemerge in his novel.¹⁸ Of particular importance to Ellison's development of a theory of the black folk in urban environments was the

experience of collecting life-history narratives¹⁹ and children's rhyming games in Harlem while working with the Folklore Unit in the last half of 1939.

Benjamin Botkin, a trained folklorist, was appointed the FWP's folklore editor in 1938. He was most closely involved with the Folklore Units in New York, Chicago and New England. Although he remained in the position only until the end of 1939, when the FWP as a whole was decentralized by Congress, his influence on the work of the Folklore Units was enormous. Prior to his involvement with the Project, the folklore which Project workers collected had been primarily "traditional" lore such as ghost stories and superstitions (Banks xv) which were valued as the traces of a remote, and largely rural, past. One of Botkin's first acts as director was to rename the three branches of the Folklore Project "Living Lore Units." "Living lore" was a term Botkin had coined to describe his approach to collecting folklore, one which emphasized the "living relationship" between the lore and "its background in life," particularly urban and industrial settings ("We" 191). In a speech Botkin delivered in 1939, he stated that folklore should be understood "dynamically as part of the *process of cultural conflict, change and adaptation*" (qtd. in Banks xv, emphasis added).²⁰ The concept of "living lore" signalled a radical departure from the previous methodologies of the Project and of folklorists in general. As Jerre Mangione notes, until the Writers' Project, American folklore had been almost exclusively the preserve of scholars who regarded it as part of a distant past. Without any deliberate revolutionary intent, the FWP's mandate to produce material which provided an introduction to American culture took folklore out of the

academic realm and relocated it in contemporary culture (269).²¹

Botkin's directives for the collection of life-history narratives stressed collaboration between the Project worker and the informant ("Living" 253-54). The text which resulted was to be, as much as possible, "an independent production" *narrated* by the interviewer ("We" 196). While Ellison did not work directly with Botkin--he was, Ellison stated, "at the top somewhere" (*Essays* 810)--he was involved with the New York Unit on an ongoing basis. Botkin regularly attended staff meetings and reviewed copy (Botkin, "We" 194); he was involved in plans to collect representative samples of the New York material in a projected book, the title of which was taken from a children's rhyming game, *Chase the White Horse* ("Living" 253). However, as was the case with many FWP texts, it did not make it into print because of the sudden curtailment of the Project. Although Botkin published a standard guide, the *Manual for Folklore Studies*, which was distributed to all Project workers in the Summer of 1938, his own later writing on the Project indicates that his views on the collection of folklore continued to shift. While it is difficult to assess the degree to which these developing ideas were disseminated among the field workers, the extent of Botkin's hands-on involvement with the New York Project suggests a fairly broad influence.

Of particular importance to a discussion of Ellison's work is Botkin's concept of "folk-say," a term he coined in 1928 as an "extension" of the traditional term "folklore" in order to stress "what the folk-sayer has to say for himself in his own way and in his own words" ("We" 197). As a result of his involvement with the collection of life-history

narratives for the FWP, Botkin began to consider folk-say to be more closely akin to folk history than folk literature ("We" 198). What Botkin meant by "folk history" was a highly mediated or in/formed expression of group experience: a cultural record *and* a form of creative expression ("We" 195) which incorporated such features as "fantasy and idiom" ("We" 198). Botkin's concept of "folk history--history from the bottom up" (Introduction xiii)--involved an act of cultural re/possession, a perspective which increasingly dominates Ellison's own developing views on the black folk during this period.

While working with the Living Lore Unit, Ellison collected numerous children's rhyming games as well as five life-history narratives, all of which were recorded in the Summer of 1939.²² Ellison literally wandered the streets of Harlem, looking for people willing to tell their stories in places where, as the Invisible Man declares in defiance of the Brotherhood's (aka the American Communist Party's) "science," "[a] whole unrecorded history is spoken" (*Invisible* 379). Ellison described his method to Ann Banks:

I hung around playgrounds; I hung around the streets, the bars. I went into hundreds of apartment buildings and just knocked on doors. I would tell some stories to get people going and then I'd sit back and try to get it down as accurately as I could. Sometimes you could find people sitting around on Eighth Avenue just dying to talk so you didn't have to encourage them too much. (xvii)

In recording these life-history narratives, Ellison was clearly influenced by Botkin's instructions to Project workers to record their informants "with an ear for the characteristic phrase and rhythm of the vernacular" ("Living" 258). As Ellison explained, "I tried...to give an impression of just how the people sounded. I developed a technique

of transcribing that captured the idiom rather than trying to convey the dialect through misspellings" (Banks xx).²³ Ellison's initial, and initiatory, vernacular mapping of Harlem differs significantly from the language and the attendant world view which Wright identified as enabling his literary discourse. In his introduction to Cayton's and Drake's *Black Metropolis* (1945), Wright explains his relationship to the city of Chicago:

...I had fled [there] with the dumb yearning to write, to tell my story. But I did not know what my story was, and it was not until I stumbled upon science that I discovered some of the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted me. (xvii)

The "science" to which Wright refers is, explicitly, that of the Chicago School sociologists, particularly, as was noted above, the views of Louis Wirth. Although Wright distances himself from the Communist Party in his introduction, critiquing their strictly "class-war frame of reference" on the American dilemma of race (xxix), its "science" also clearly influenced his writing and theoretical perspective during the same period. These "scientific" methods and their accumulation of knowledge makes Chicago, as Wright explains in his introduction, "the *known* city" (xviii, emphasis in the original).

In contrast, the urban experience in which Ellison initially found himself immersed -- the cultural expressions of a black folk *measuring and adapting to* the city and the political world-at-large as exemplified by the war--had to be understood in its *own terms* as demonstrated by the method by which he documented this phenomenon. By 1943, Ellison had turned to urban and popular culture "Forms of Things Unknown," specifically the Lindy hop and the zoot suit of Harlem's dance halls, as performative evidence of the

political will and directives of the black folk. The improvisational energy of these expressive forms was both proof of the folk's survival in the city and an indication of the nature of their urban transformation. This process of change is guided as much by what Houston Baker describes as a strategic "deformation of mastery," the flaunting of the "desire" for freedom and an "active, outgoing resistance and response to oppressive ignorance and silencing" (*Modernism* 104), as it is by the "necessary" emergence of a black, working-class consciousness in the urban-industrial environment.

Ellison was not alone in exploring the links between the expressions of the folk and black political attitudes toward the war effort. Horace Cayton's article in *The Nation*, "Fighting for White Folks?," published in September 1942, cites several examples of black incredulity at the depiction of the conflict as a "People's War,"²⁴ particularly as the fight with Japan brought issues of race to the fore. What Cayton presents, implicitly, as fact--the story of a black sharecropper who declares to the plantation owner that the "Japs" have declared war on the "white folks" and the black Mississippian who comes to the conclusion that Uncle Sam is fighting the Japanese over "an 'old whore' called Pearl Harbor" (267)--are subversively parodic expressions of black discontent, if not dissensus, about the racial implications of the war at home and abroad.

Ellison's life-history narratives reveal a similar process of cultural resistance. Cayton, however, understood these expressions to be a product of a "feeling of being alien, of being isolated from the interests of the total society" (267), a type of autobiographical and "doubly-conscious blues" as Ellison understood this phenomenon in

the context of the war effort. While this perspective is evident in Ellison's black folk narratives, what also emerges is the extent to which they express a continuity of black experience and a resilient and resistant folk culture capable of incorporating and expressing black attitudes toward contemporary events. While Ellison himself wrote no actual commentary on any of the narratives he collected, his development of a theory of the folk as an evolving and politically astute collectivity is, arguably, "rooted" in these black cultural records.

One of Ellison's narratives, recorded in a Harlem park in June 1939 and published in Banks's anthology (257-60), is a running commentary on the strangeness of the city, the impending war and the historical situation of African Americans. Rich in Biblical imagery, the narrative is a jeremiad warning of the inevitable results of white racist domination, what amounts to a racial hubris which flies in the face of God's designs. The symbol of this racial "pride" is the Titanic, and particularly the fact that no black passengers were allowed aboard the ship: its sinking was, implicitly, an act of racial retribution.

As Lawrence Levine writes, the story of the sinking was a topic of African American folklore, and particularly folksong, throughout the first half of the century. Particularly relevant in this context is the fact that by the end of World War II, the tale of "Shine," a black stoker who repeatedly warns the captain of the fact that the ship is taking on water but is told to get below "where he belongs," was one of the three most popular toasts--"epic fictions" of black heroes (Abrahams, *Positively* 43)--in African neighbourhoods both North and South (Levine 428). Shine finally escapes overboard and

saves himself after a series of adventures (Levine 427-28).²⁵ Though the story of Shine appears to predate the Depression (Levine 428), there are obvious analogies between the treatment of the stoker and the treatment of African American soldiers and workers during the war, as well as between Shine's acts of heroic defiance and theirs. As Levine writes, Shine "breaks all precedents and stereotypes; he defies white society and its technology and he triumphs" (429).

Ellison's informant, a transplanted Virginian, also alludes to the historical "place" of African Americans: the fact that from the very beginning, in George Washington's cornfield no less, Africans Americans were given tools, not weapons, so that although they produced the resources they had no access to them. This situation continues: "They been carrying out what he said. God didn't say nothing. That was just man's idea and here in this country they been carrying out what old man George Washington said" (Banks 259). He ends his narrative with a fiery invocation of the coming war: "It won't bother me and you....They building navies and buying guns. But...it'll be just the wicked killing out the wicked. It's coming; God's time is coming and it's coming soon!" (260). The informant's folk strategy of representation *resounds* with political insight, will and adaptive cultural continuity. Ellison, however, would only return to the end in this beginning after undergoing an intellectual metamorphosis of his own.

Folks is always making plans and changin' 'em (*Invisible* 143).

Ellison's first published piece, a review of the historical novel *These Low Grounds* by the black writer Waters Edward Turpin, appeared in 1937 in the first, and only, issue of *The New Challenge*. The magazine succeeded Dorothy West's *Challenge* (1935-37) and was edited by West and Marian Minus. Wright was associate editor and had encouraged Ellison to write the review. As Michel Fabre notes, in the late 1930s, Ellison shared Wright's interest in the Communist Party ("From *Native*" 200). Ellison's Marxist sympathies are evident in the tone of his criticism of Turpin's work, particularly of the author's limited grasp of "the historic process as a whole...and his group's relation to it," a condition which made it impossible for Turpin to render fully the critical consciousness of his characters ("Creative" 91). He is equally critical of Turpin's failure to use "contemporary technical devices" (91). In "Recent Negro Fiction" (1941), Ellison argues that the lack of both "modern" technique and proletarian intent in black writing is a product of the enforced cultural and intellectual segregation of black writers, a condition which was only slowly being overcome within organizations such as the Communist Party-led John Reed Clubs and their 1935 Popular Front replacement, The League of American Writers ("Recent" 23).²⁶ Turpin's novel exhibits the "incompleteness" which in his later essay Ellison argues is the inevitable result of black isolation: "something is not fully formed" in black fiction ("Recent" 24). Despite his criticism of Turpin's technique, however, Ellison praises the writer's choice of subject matter, even if its implications are not fully developed: "the rich deep materials which make up the lives of the black rural folk and the urban working class". This, Ellison argues, is a literary source which the

preceding generation of black writers, "the 'New Negro' school," had neglected (90).

Ellison's review largely reflects the literary and political concerns of the editors of *New Challenge*. In its statement of policy, the editorial group allied itself with the political position of the Popular Front: they were against "fascism, war and general reactionary policies" ("Editorial" 3). They positioned the magazine at the forefront of a black, Marxist-oriented "literary movement" concerned with "the realistic depiction of life through the sharp focus of social consciousness"; this required a radical break with the literary aesthetics and the social positioning--"the false foundations" or middle-class values--of the Harlem Renaissance writers (3). In contrast, their focus on "the life of the Negro masses" required a literary practice deeply rooted in "the great fertility of folk material as a source of creative material" for the black writer (3). In Ellison's work, this theoretical formulation appears first in his review of Turpin's novel and undergoes several revisions throughout the 1940s.

What the editors of *New Challenge* only allude to in their statement, however, is the "problem" of black nationalism: the extent to which folk material expresses a racial consciousness inter-implicated with, but distinct from, that of class consciousness. For the American Communist Party, this issue defined the "Negro Question" throughout the 1930s and 1940s, from the Party's earliest emphasis on the revolutionary class content of ephemeral national forms to its wartime "evolutionary" emphasis on the experience of the black folk, and implicitly its "progress" toward modernity, as a synecdoche of American

democratic experience as a whole.²⁷ Richard Wright's theory of the folk--from his "Blueprint for Negro Writing" which appeared in print for the first time in *New Challenge*,²⁸ to *12 Million Black Voices*, published in late 1940--roughly corresponds to the Communist Party's shifting perspective on the black folk.

As Barbara Foley argues, Wright's "Blueprint," like much of the material published in *New Challenge*, was an attempt to "articulat[e] a version of Negro nationalism assimilable to Communist politics" (188). In Wright's essay, this produced an often ambivalent attitude toward black folk culture. This is evident in the apparent disjuncture between Wright's obvious respect for the transmission of a "racial wisdom" ("Blueprint" 336) which African Americans have made the repository of "a common life and a common fate" (337), and his belief that this is but "the *reflex expression* of a life whose roots are imbedded deeply in [base] Southern soil" (338, emphasis added).

In "Blueprint," Wright positions his "new" perspective on black writing in opposition to his perception of the Harlem Renaissance writers' treatment of issues of race and class. Wright argues that the use of folk material in contemporary black writing signals an end to the earlier writers' strategies of literary and political representation. This group's adherence to American middle class values, combined with their "pleading with white America for [racial] justice" ("Blueprint" 334), produced effete black writing: "humble...prim and decorous" works (333). This implicitly political strategy created a literary culture which was a strange and ironic "black" parody of the minstrel show. These texts, like their protesting but deracinated producers--the "parasitic and mannered" black

bourgeoisie (336)--entered onto the literary stage "dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior" (333). Wright, in contrast, locates the sources of his writing in a black folk culture which expresses both "racial wisdom" and the realities of the "rigorous and inhuman conditions of [black] life" (336): forms that articulate the lived experience of race *and* class. It is the "collective sense of Negro life" (337) as it is embodied in the expressive forms of the black folk--a folk which Wright perceives as still largely rural and southern--that the black writer must make the "foundation" of his writing.

While the writing of the black middle class was, according to Wright, concerned with "begging the question of the Negroes' humanity" ("Blueprint" 336), the expressive forms of the black folk continued to articulate black "life as it is *lived*" (337, emphasis in original). These folk forms were the evidence of things unseen: the revolutionary capacity of the black masses. At this stage of his theory of the folk, Wright interpreted these forms, as did other Communist Party commentators who before the Popular Front emphasis on liberal reform stressed more radical forms of change, as "inherently antagonistic to capitalist and neo-feudalist oppression" (Foley 192). Within the context of the black literary tradition itself, to utilize these forms--specifically, their radical content--in one's writing was to challenge the literary and political hegemony of the black middle class.

Wright, however, posits a gap between the revolutionary potential of folk expression and its actualization, a gap that is measured, ironically, by the nature of folk

forms themselves. As Wright argues in "Blueprint," much of this revolutionary capacity "still remain[s] in *the fluid state of daily speech*" where reborn John Henrys and other "mythical heroes in embryo have been allowed to perish for lack of husbanding by alert intelligence" (337, emphasis added). This "fluid lore" (339) is a sign that the black folk are, as Wright intimates in *12 Million Black Voices*, outside the "sphere of conscious history" (147), consigned to labour on southern soil where their "bent backs...give design and order to the fertile plantations" (12 24). To become revolutionary, the black folk, like their expressive forms, must be directed by "the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today" ("Blueprint" 339): a class consciousness which ruptures this "ordered" existence, the "design" of a feudal economy which conflates the black body *with* the black soil. As Marx argued, the arrangement of the feudal economy shares with slavery a construction of the labouring body as the "*inorganic and natural* condition" of the reproduction of the land-owning class, no different than that of cattle or tools (Marx 222, emphasis in the original). The term "inorganic" when applied to human beings invokes the fact that the labourer who is literally bound to the soil "stands in no sort of relation to the objective conditions of his labor": he is denied an active and conscious existence (Marx 222). As Wright explained this condition, African Americans in the rural environment of the South are "the instrumentalities" which allow white men to break their own bonds with the soil and become the Lords of the Land and the Bosses of the Buildings (12 16).

In "Blueprint," black Forms of Things Unknown are confined to a "kind of *terra infirma*" (Baker, *Blues* 69) of *prerevolutionary* and *prepolitical* black life. Houston Baker

uses this geographical metaphor to describe the effect of Wright's "Integrationist" mapping of black folk culture in the wake of 1954's anti-segregationist *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* decision. Wright's formulation of an "Integrationist Poetics," which he appended to his earlier draft of "The Literature of the Negro of the United States," viewed folk forms as evidence of an absence of social equality among white and black Americans, a situation to which such social indicators as the Brown decision appeared to signal an end. Ultimately, under this integrationist formulation, the "equality of *social* experience would translate...into a homogeneity of *represented* experiences" (Baker, *Blues* 68, emphasis in original). Ironically, however, both Wright's Marxist and integrationist aesthetics share a common vision of America; to borrow Wright's own description of his early, revolutionary "perspective," America was "that fixed point in intellectual space" ("Blueprint" 341) which represents what Houston Baker describes as the "immanent idea of boundless, classless, raceless possibility" (*Blues* 65). In either instance, the black folk and their expressive forms are slated to disappear.²⁹

Wright's theory of the folk as it was delineated in "Blueprint" is itself deeply imbedded in the real-life *terra infirma* of the southern Black Belt. Although intimations of a future southern black republic comprised of an interracial and revolutionary populace show through his theoretical formulation, Wright's concept of black nationalism is neither its template nor its revolutionary source. Rather, its existence functions to critique the present state of the Black Belt, particularly the social relations of "a plantation-feudal economy" which gives rise to it ("Blueprint" 338). Black nationalism is the response of a

people whose whole separate way of life--from their marginal economic existence to their Jim Crowed social institutions, the concrete and visible counterparts of black expressive forms themselves--is forced upon them "from without by lynch rope, bayonet and mob rule" (337-38). What amounts to the "Negro way of life in America" (337) is, in "Blueprint," "the reflex expression" (338) of a "*reactionary* nationalism" (345, emphasis added).

Wright understands black nationalism to be, at its base, a submerged expression of class consciousness. Only when it is actually *made* conscious, when it becomes a method of concrete analysis rather than a "fluid" response, will it be capable of supporting "the emergence of a new culture in the shell of the old...at the moment when a people begin to realize a *meaning* in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed" (337, emphasis in original). As Barbara Foley points out, Wright's "dialectic formulation" posits that black nationalism will engender a revolutionary class consciousness and that, in the end, nationalism will "be negated by the higher level of [class] consciousness to which it had given rise" (190). Therefore, the revolutionary black writer, while he "draws...upon the fluid lore of a great people" ("Blueprint" 339), must shape it from the "perspective" (341) of Marxist thought.

Transition

In the late 1930s and the early 1940s, Ellison published a series of book reviews in *The New Masses*.³⁰ As the principal publication of the American cultural left, its "ad hoc

arena of the book review" was, as Barbara Foley argues, crucial to the activity of theorizing about proletarian fiction (52). In 1940, the magazine published at least one review by Ellison each month, the most significant of which was "Stormy Weather," his evaluation of Langston Hughes's autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940). In his discussion of Hughes's use of folk material, Ellison largely reproduces the key points of Wright's "Blueprint," particularly Wright's emphasis on Hughes's translation of nationalist folk expression into class-conscious, revolutionary material. After 1940, Ellison wrote less frequently for the magazine, but his reviews became extended essays on the work of contemporary black writers. "Recent Negro Fiction" (August 1941) builds on his review of Hughes's work, focusing on the depiction of "the working class and socially dispossessed Negro and his connection with the international scheme of things" in the work of other black writers ("Recent" 22). However, his review of William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*, "The Great Migration" (December 1941), which was republished in a modified version several months later in *The Negro Quarterly* under the title "Transition," intimates Ellison's developing interest in the possibilities of an urban folk who meld folk knowledge with class consciousness: an "amalgam" of black experience.

"Stormy Weather" is Ellison's most conventionally Marxist approach--as Wright defined this "perspective" in "Blueprint"--to the development of African American writing since the Harlem Renaissance. Ellison makes Hughes the central figure in a movement away from what he perceives to be the accommodationist aesthetics of the Renaissance writers and toward a revolutionary black literature. He attacks the class interests of the

New Negro writers as the representatives of a black middle class "which had grown conscious of itself through the economic alliances it had made when it supported the [first] war," and whose work was literally underwritten by these same interests ("Stormy" 20).

In his review of Myrdal's *American Dilemma*, Ellison argues that "the war-stimulated revival of democracy" following the end of The Great War was subverted by "projecting into popular fiction the stereotype of the Negro as an exotic primitive" (*Essays* 332). While he does not directly address this phenomenon in "Stormy Weather," the implication is that black writers supported by "white faddists" contributed to the perpetuation of this anti-democratic image ("Stormy" 20). This perception, as well as the fact that Ellison implicates these same white men in "employing" African American writers to contain the very working-class militancy that the "rioting and lynchings" during and after World War I engendered, underlies Ellison's desire to delineate a black literary strategy which, in the present, is capable of marshalling/martialling the critical energy of these same black masses in "attacking the shortcomings of American democracy" (20). Implicitly, with American involvement in another World War imminent, Ellison is signalling that a similar repression of black energies for radical change will not occur again.

Ellison describes the militancy of African Americans in the wake of World War I as "nationalistic," a term which in this context invokes the class interests and, implicitly, the racist motivations of the white perpetrators of violence against a "suppressed [black] nation" (20). He argues, however, that the form which postwar black nationalism--or

racial protest against this violence--adopted was largely determined by class relations among African Americans themselves: the middle class, as represented by its writers, "sought to wed the[ir] passive philosophy" to the militant racial protest of the black working class (20). In "Recent Negro Fiction," Ellison describes the literature that this strategy produced as "racial and *narrowly nationalistic*" (22, emphasis added) in that it refused to acknowledge the significance of class as a component of black oppression. Without working class writers of their own, "the energy of a whole people became perverted to the ends of a [black middle] class" ("Stormy" 20).

In contrast, Ellison argued, Langston Hughes aligned himself with racial militancy and the burgeoning class consciousness of the black, urban masses by drawing on their expressive forms in his writing. While most of his peers "expressed the limited strivings" of the bourgeoisie, his "vision carried him down into the black masses to seek his literary roots" ("Stormy" 20). In "[t]he crystallized folk experience of the blues, spirituals, and folk tales" (20), Hughes discovered what Ellison implicitly understands to be the revolutionary *content* of his poems. Ellison is, in fact, most interested in the poems Hughes published after 1930--when his autobiography ends--because they are the product of a period when "Hughes was more the conscious artist" (20). The poems that Ellison cites as evidence of Hughes's development as a writer, as well as "the *logical development* of the national folk-sources of his art," are five of what have come to be known as Hughes's Revolutionary Poems (20, emphasis added).³¹ These poems express a range of views: from outright revolutionary Marxism in "Ballads of Lenin" (1933) to the more

temperate, Popular-Front sentiments of "Let America Be America Again" (1936) which, though it counsels working class revolution, equally emphasizes the nation's unfulfilled democratic promise. Only one of the poems, "Ballad of Ozzie Powell," refers explicitly to race. Powell was one of the Scottsboro Boys who in 1931, along with his companions, was sentenced to die after being falsely accused of raping two white women on a train in Alabama. In "Recent Negro Fiction," Ellison states that the fight to save the Scottsboro Boys--one which was largely driven by the Communist Party--was one of the Depression-era incidents which "made for the emergence of a new proletarian consciousness among black people" (22).

Race, however, does not disappear from Ellison's perspective in "Stormy Weather." Rather, he approaches race and the "problem" of black nationalism, in the same way that Wright does in "Blueprint." As Wright expressed it, black nationalism "knows its origins, its limitations...knows its ultimate aims are unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America" ("Blueprint" 338). Ellison, then, can argue that it is what "history has taught the Negro masses to reject"--economic exploitation, whether in the form of southern neo-feudalism or American capitalism--that "makes for the strength of the Negro writer" ("Stormy" 20). Ellison will reiterate the resistant possibilities of the conscious rejection of elements of "American" culture in his review of *American Dilemma*. However, while in his later review he focuses on what is "inarticulate" and unknown in black life as evidence of its transformative possibilities, in "Stormy Weather" he argues for "the recognition of the new way of life postulated by the plight of the Negro" (21): that of

the revolutionary working class.

"Recent Negro Fiction" was published in *The New Masses* a year after Ellison's review of *The Big Sea*.³² Part social history, part literary treatise, Ellison combines both elements in his discussion of the efforts of contemporary black writers to record the changing economic realities of African Americans and the concomitant proletarianization of black workers. What emerges in this essay is the degree to which Ellison initially viewed the folk as an entity stranded in a type of historical No Man's Land mapped out by "the Jim Crow retardation of the *natural flow* of the Negro folk consciousness *into the machines and institutions which constitute the organism of North American society*" ("Recent" 24, emphasis added). Although Ellison alludes to the trauma of migration and the dislocation of consciousness associated with the black American's sudden entry into industry--"the folk Negro's reaction to mechanized capitalist suffering" (23)--Ellison's statement is a hollowed-out and seemingly prescribed projection of the "progress" of--or *into*--history for African Americans. However, it would be a mistake to suggest that this statement, in and of itself, embodies the tone and direction of Ellison's essay as a whole. Rather, it is indicative of only one element of this stage of Ellison's developing theory of the folk: his adherence to Wright's Marxist "blueprint." There is, however, a tension between this view and Ellison's tentative delineation of the presence of a black folk who within the environment of the city and the factory are capable of acting *on* history.

In "Recent Negro Fiction," Ellison defines the black folk in largely economic terms. They are those Americans, who, because of the racialized economic order and their

concomitant "political and cultural segregation" (24) are "restrict[ed]...to the reflexes and responses of a peasant in the midst of the greatest industrial society in the world" (22). In this essay, Ellison only hints at the characteristics of a "fluid folk culture" (22) developed in response to the conditions of "the relaxed semi-peasant environment of American Negro life" (25). He evokes only its difference from the "tensions and disciplines" exacted by modern life (25).³³ However, in Ellison's later essays the characteristics of southern folk life, *in situ*, emerge in contradistinction to the changes occurring among the rural folk's urban counterparts.

In "Richard Wright's Blues" (1945), for example, Ellison contrasts the state of the African American in the southern environment to that of the black individual in the North. The move from South to North, in fact, affects the "entire psychosomatic structure" of the migrant (*Essays* 138). In "Harlem Is Nowhere," Ellison delineates the detectable signs of the effects of the city and the factory on the black folk: "movements...geared to the time clock," hardened speech, the "technical virtuosity of bebop" in place of the collective and "lyrical ritual elements of folk jazz" (*Essays* 325). There are, however, as Ellison writes in "Wright's Blues," less perceptible changes in the "inner world" of the folk, the "invisible" expansion of intellect and emotion--"mutations effected in their sensibilities"--by the *relative* freedom of the North (*Essays* 138).

These changes are the result of the effects on the consciousness and the body of material conditions and social relations radically different from those of a southern environment largely defined by the black folk's "daily experience with nature and the

Southern white man" (*Essays* 324). Ellison, like Wright, describes this southern folk culture as "fluid" ("Recent" 22). He shares with Wright a concept of "fluidity" which denotes the characteristics of a largely oral people, imbedded in cyclical time, whose "peculiar" history, particularly as it is made manifest by the act of crossing the Mason-Dixon line, brings them into sudden contact with a compressed version of what Wright describes as "[t]he many historical phases which whites have traversed voluntarily and gradually" (12 145). In his undated working notes to *Invisible Man*, Ellison "translates" the concept of the folk's fluidity into the northern environment, where urban conditions produce a type of cultural "fusion:"

Its [African Americans'] tempo of development from the feudal-folk forms of the South to the industrial urban forms of the North is so rapid that it throws up personalities as fluid and changeable as molten metal rendered iridescent from the effect of cooling air. (*Essays* 343)

In the southern environment, however, this fluidity is, as Ellison states in "Richard Wright's Blues," part of "the defensive character of Negro life itself...a will to camouflage, to dissimulate" (*Essays* 143). While in this essay Ellison emphasizes the distortions these masking strategies can impose on the black psyche, including the destructive submersion of individual character, Ellison also understood, as he argues in "Harlem Is Nowhere," that this practised fluidity is an indispensable strategy for survival. It ensures "an ease of movement within explosive [racial] situations" which would otherwise entail psychic immobility or death (*Essays* 323). However, it is the transformation of this strategy,

through contact with the volatile urban-industrial environment of the North into one of *simulation* or pastiche and wilful confrontation, which becomes Ellison's proof of the black folk's ability to survive under these *new* conditions.

In a book review published in *Tomorrow* magazine in late 1943, Ellison describes the defensiveness of much of black folk culture: "the profound is constantly hidden by the trite, the sublime by the ridiculous, the humane - as in *Bigger Thomas* - by the beastly" (Review of *Darker* 55). In this review, Ellison's statement is largely a call for a literary practice capable of bridging the "psychological distance" between the appearance and reality of black life, a practice which requires the writer to undertake a "conscious study in comparative humanity" (55).³⁴ In "Richard Wright's Blues," published two years later, Ellison applies this abstract aesthetic to concrete black experience in his largely sociological explanation of black dissimulation in the southern environment.

Ellison's review of *Black Boy* was undertaken, in part, to defend Wright's text against the criticism of black Leftists who were outraged at his depiction of what Wright described as "the essential bleakness of black life in America" (Fabre, "From *Native*" 209; *Black Boy* 43). Ellison chooses to defend Wright on his own terms--a strategy which produces perhaps his most painful and angry writing on the conditions of black life--by focusing on the "pathological" effects of a southern environment whose war against black humanity takes the form of denying "the right and opportunity to dilate, deepen and enrich sensibility": it denies the black American democracy (*Essays* 133). Under these conditions, any positive elements of the social and cultural environment which African

Americans have themselves created have as little chance of mitigating the effects of the Jim Crow regime as "Beethoven's quartets would have of destroying the stench of a Nazi prison" (*Essays* 133). Ellison reads Wright's autobiographical rendering of the "blues" questions he identifies as central to African American postwar analysis--"Who am I? What am I? How did I come to be?" ("Stephchild" 25)--as a political allegory. Wright's text has a critically subversive function at the end of a "war for democracy" during which, as Ellison argues in his review, "any sharply critical approach to Negro life has been dropped as a wartime expendable" (*Essays* 128).

In the Summer of 1945 when "Wright's Blues" was published, Ellison was on sick leave from the merchant marines. He was working on a novel about a black military pilot, a Tuskegee flyer like the pilot in his earlier story "Flying Home" (1944), who is interned in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp.³⁵ He is the only African American soldier in the camp and, ironically, as the officer of highest rank he is by convention of war the prisoners' designated spokesman. In an application for a writing fellowship which Ellison submitted to the Julius Rosenwald Fund in the early 1940s, he laid out his plans for the novel: as camp administrator, the pilot works to create "a functioning democracy" for his fellow prisoners--including white, racist southerners--but in the end, dies after he refrains from joining them in an escape that he had helped plan (qtd. in Fabre, "From *Native*" 205).³⁶ As Ellison explained in his 1982 introduction to *Invisible Man*, the pilot "affirm[s] the transcendent ideals of democracy and his own dignity, by aiding those who despised him" (*Essays* 475).

Although the circumstances leading to the pilot's death are not made explicit, Ellison's Rosenwald application alludes to the pilot's position within a system that "warrants" his death in order that it can continue to function: "For the democrat, life in a prison camp is a forced regression and a form of death, thus he *must* be killed off" (qtd. in Fabre, "From *Native*" 205, emphasis in original).³⁷ In *12 Million Black Voices*, Richard Wright describes the situation of the African American under the de facto martial law of the Jim Crow South in similar terms. At its most extreme, any protest would be met by the "token-death" of a member of the community: "it does not matter who, the innocent or guilty." On the less spectacular, day-to-day level, the violations of Jim Crow work to deny the African American the state of democracy by exercising a literal "white supremacy" over the black, labouring body: "And we cannot fight back; we have no arms; we cannot vote; and the law is white" (12 43).

The situation of the pilot in Ellison's projected novel is prefigured in "Flying Home" (1944). On a practice run--not yet permitted to go into battle overseas--he crashes his plane into an Alabama cotton field. His plummet from the literal heights of his democratic aspirations, symbolized by the freedom of flight, to southern soil and the danger of sudden, random racial violence, is also his figurative descent into the American "heart of darkness": the concretization of what Ellison describes in his review of *American Dilemma* as the South's masterful, proto-fascist "political technology" of racist "ideological manipulation" (*Essays* 335). It is against the backdrop of the repressive mechanisms of "the backward third of a nation" (*Essays* 137) that Ellison explains the

central conflict in Wright's *Black Boy*: its "drama...lies in its depiction of what occurs when Negro sensibility attempts to fulfil itself in the undemocratic South" (*Essays* 133). Like Wright, Ellison knew that overt attempts to assert democratic values, to violate the elaborate system of taboos which are the South's "laws," often engender a violent response.

The absolute power of whites over black bodies engenders a defensive response among African Americans that, Ellison argues, induces the "pre-individual state" of southern black life (*Essays* 134). In keeping with the allegorical structure of his essay, Ellison argues that the rigid maintenance of a black collectivity, "an undifferentiated mass of...people" to which the black individual is subsumed, functions to preserve this "imprisoned" community from violent retribution, and individual members from insanity, by suppressing any attempt at "reach[ing] out for that social and human equality which the white South says he cannot have" (*Essays* 140). Thus, in an allusion to Wright's statement in *Black Boy* that under the conditions of southern life African Americans are "somehow in...but not of" Western civilization (43), Ellison can argue that Wright, in fact, knows that this form of black "life is a *by-product* of Western civilization" (*Essays* 143, emphasis added). In the southern environment, the "impulse toward individuality" (*Essays* 139), which both Ellison and Wright perceived to be the impetus behind modernity and democracy itself, is repressed by the black community's will to survive:

This pre-individual state is induced artificially, *like the regression to primitive states noted among cultured inmates of Nazi prisons*. The primary technique in its enforcement is

to impress the Negro child with the omniscience and omnipotence of the whites to the point that whites appear as a human as Jehovah, and as relentless as a Mississippi flood. (*Essays* 134, emphasis added)

Under these conditions, the community survives by literally hiding out in the open: by strategies of dissimulation and camouflage. There are intimations of what Houston Baker describes as the black mastery of form, the subversive manipulation of the minstrel mask to disguise black *intention*, in this delineation of the survival strategies of the folk. They were, as Ellison wrote in "Harlem Is Nowhere," methods for "confronting and accepting (for day-to-day living, at least) the obscene absurdity of his predicament" in the South (*Essays* 324). However, what concerns Ellison most in his review of *Black Boy* are the distortions of personality and expressivity--"the shifting guises of humanity under pressure" (*Essays* 143)--that Jim Crow conditions produce, particularly the "impulse toward self-annihilation and 'going-under-ground'" (*Essays* 144).³⁸

Given Ellison's view of the South, it is not surprising that what he admires about Wright's autobiography is the author's ability to convert these survival strategies "into a will to confront the world" in the form of the book itself (*Essays* 144). Ellison's evaluation of the impact of Wright's autobiographical blues on the black reader, while a statement of the text's literary function, is also implicitly his prescription for the political and social conditions which will transform the folk's "fluid" state into one that is actively revolutionary: "Freed...of fear and the threat of violence, their lives have at last been organized, scaled down to possessable proportions" (*Essays* 144).

In "Recent Negro Fiction," Ellison links the black writer's developing technique, his "creat[ion of] the consciousness of his oppressed nation" ("Recent" 26), to the working-class, organizational activity of the black masses. In engaging in such action, African Americans step outside the boundaries and power relations of a literally black and white world by admitting, and organizing, around the perspective of class, whether in largely-integrated unions such as the Congress of Industrial Organizations or in the fight against the southern poll tax. At the same time, to "possess" black experience entailed "an awareness of the connection between world events and Negro lives" (23). This Marxist internationalism, however, has a particular significance in its disruption of the imposed "political and cultural segregation" of much of black life (24).

In keeping with its emphasis on working-class struggle, "Recent Negro Fiction" posits that proletarian fiction is the model for translating this black political energy into literary form. That this often necessitates a literal "translation" of African American experience into revolutionary, class terms is illustrated by the fact that Ellison cites a passage from Wright's "How Bigger Was Born" in which Wright explains the process by which, while a member of the Chicago John Reed Club, he would listen to white writers describe their responses to American life and "*translate* what they had said in terms of Bigger's life" ("Recent" 24; *Early Works* 862, emphasis added). Ellison introduces this quote with the observation that such "attitudes, assumptions, and aims toward American civilization...were inarticulate in the Negro's folk consciousness" ("Recent" 24).

"Civilization," as Ellison uses the term here, refers to the signal condition of modernity:

entry into working-class consciousness and solidarity. There are, then, definite parallels between the black worker's efforts to master the machinery of American industry and the black writer's efforts at "mastering the culture of American civilization through the techniques and disciplines provided by his art" ("Recent" 25).

Despite his emphasis on black "progress," Ellison continues to locate black folk culture, and particularly its oppositional character, at the centre of the black writer's project. "Recent Negro Fiction," however, marks a significant shift from the treatment of black folk culture in "Stormy Weather": Ellison begins to explore the impact of the city on the folk and the implications of the form, rather than the content, of black folk expression.

The first element of this shifting perspective signals Ellison's (re)situation of the folk in a new context. As a whole, black folk culture existed in "Negro streets, [and] slums," far removed from "the shallow, imitative culture of the educated middle class." It was this "partly urbanized, somewhat distorted folk culture" to which the conscious black writer must turn as the source of "a new proletarian literature" ("Recent" 22). Ellison also observes that black folk culture found expression in the popular culture venues of the urban environment: the "cabarets, and dance halls" frequented by working-class blacks ("Recent" 22). While the implications of this approach to folk culture are not fully explored in this essay, Ellison implicitly understands the culture of the folk to be capable of surviving, if transformed by, the transition to the urban North. In his *Negro Quarterly* editorial of 1943, the dance hall becomes a site for expressing black resistance to the meaning of the Jim Crow Army and for "creating" the consciousness of the race.

Ellison also moves away from his earlier emphasis in "Stormy Weather" on the proletarian content of national folk forms to a focus on the revolutionary capacity of folk forms themselves. Just as the body and the consciousness of the folk were subjected to "the grinding impact of the depression" ("Recent" 23) and the grinding toil of industrial labour itself--a recurring metaphor which graphically renders the effect of the aforesaid "*natural* flow of the Negro folk consciousness into the machines" of American life ("Recent" 24, emphasis added)--their expressive capacity underwent a rearticulation. A fluid folk culture, transformed by a burgeoning "working class awareness" (23), becomes the "literal" base of the African American's working-class organizing: the language of "the mighty protesting roar of the black masses" (23). Ellison's choice of words to describe the qualities of this "conscious" use of folklore, and specifically of black vernacular English, is significant. In "Stormy Weather," Ellison described the source of Hughes's revolutionary poems as the "*crystallized folk experience* of the blues, spirituals and folk tales" (20, emphasis added). Ellison's emphasis was on its intrinsically oppositional and largely class-based content. In "Recent Negro Fiction," however, Ellison shifts his perspective to the per/formative elements of black folk culture, arguing that for the black writer and, implicitly, the black activist the "speech patterns" of the "new language" of black, working-class consciousness and action "had long been present in Negro life, recorded in the *crystallized protest* of American Negro folklore" (23, emphasis added). Mobilized by the same forces that had acted on black folk consciousness itself, "this protest was receiving intensification and amplification as a result of the folk Negro's reaction to

mechanized capitalist suffering" (23).

Ellison first described the effects of this black language of protest as it defined a *political* discourse, in the essay "A Congress Jim Crow Didn't Attend." Written for *The New Masses* in May 1940, it describes events at the Third National Negro Congress convention. Michel Fabre's examination of Ellison's letters to Wright on his attendance at the convention indicate that although Ellison was already disillusioned with the Communist Party, and particularly its leadership--the National Negro Congress was a Communist "front" organization--he exalted in the revolutionary capacity of the black folk themselves (Fabre, "From *Native*" 202). Ellison *hears* this potential in the vernacular speech of a black female sharecropper and union organizer from Arkansas, whose address he carefully transcribes in the same idiomatic manner he used for his FWP life-history narratives. Ellison also describes the language of Owen Whitfield, who had led a group of dispossessed sharecroppers on a protest march, as that of a man who "speaks with the skill of the Negro folk-preacher, in terms and images the people understand," a marked contrast to A. Philip Randolph's "speech from above."³⁹ In these instances of orature, Ellison finds evidence "that the age of the Negro hero had returned to American life" (*Essays* 24).

Ellison's review of William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* is his most radical departure from Wright's construction of an "obsolete" black folk. In "Transition," the figure of the folk appears as the product of cultural fusion in the urban-industrial environment of the North. Attaway's proletarian novel details the fate of three brothers

who, during World War I, leave Kentucky and their work as sharecroppers to work as labourers in a northern steel plant. Ellison published a review of the novel, "The Great Migration," in *The New Masses* just before the bombing of Pearl Harbour. It was republished in the first edition of *The Negro Quarterly* several months later, with added commentary on the situation of black workers who were now "stepping hesitantly into the cloudy pool of a second war-born experience" ("Transition" 87). In *The Negro Quarterly* version of the review, Ellison's critique of the novel as "simply a lament for the dying away of the Negro's folk values" (90) and the destruction of folk consciousness under the impact of the "disintegrating process" of the mill (89), is framed by commentary which establishes that it was the black folk's ability to *survive* the forces of industrialization, albeit in an altered state, from which "the Negro acquired the consciousness out of which he acts today" (90). Ellison argues that American involvement in the present war effort has made it essential that African Americans be able to distinguish between "their potential allies and...their natural enemies" in the same way that the brothers were faced with the choice between becoming union men or strikebreakers (91). In the current war, this becomes the distinction "between two types of Western man: the democrat and the fascist" (91).

In "Recent Negro Fiction," Ellison had made a similar point in his discussion of a recent strike at Ford's River Rouge plant in Detroit. Writing about the fact that a group of African Americans had been convinced to vote against the union, apparently swayed by "Negro underworld characters who were used in Ford's fascist-like attempts to break the

union," he argues that this manipulation reveals the vulnerability of "demoralized and *culturally dispossessed Negroes*" (26, emphasis added). In this essay the condition of cultural dispossession refers primarily to the African American's position on the margins of a Marxist conception of American modernity: the acquisition of a "new," critical and working-class consciousness commensurate with the industrial environment. Under these conditions, it is the writer's responsibility to equip the black worker with the "techniques and disciplines" necessary to acquire such a consciousness--instrumentalities that the writer himself demonstrates in his own work (25)--in the depiction of working-class struggle. Ellison employs the metaphor of war to describe the impetus behind the writer's task: "this is a difficult and necessary achievement if his people are to fight their battle with any sense of equal participation" (25).

While this perspective is still evident in "Transition," if mitigated by the fact that Ellison now makes this "battle" a necessary part of a Double V strategy of victory at home and abroad, a more complex figure of the folk emerges from the brutal encounter with industry. Whereas in "Recent Negro Fiction," Ellison emphasizes the "struggles" of the "*new consciousness* of the Negro people...to be born" (24, emphasis added), Ellison focuses on their "*rebirth*...on a higher level" of consciousness in "Transition" (90, emphasis added). What enters into the "crucible of steel" (90) which in *Blood on the Forge* is the literal "machinery" of consciousness, is "the naive, almost formless personalities" (88) of the black folk. What emerges, however, is a type of hybrid individual who has undergone "fusion with new elements" (90). This figure "blended of

old and new, was better fitted for the problems of the industrial environment" (90-91). In Attaway's novel this figure of the folk emerges only as a *prototype*. Ellison argues that the brother who actually becomes a strike breaker is motivated by the same "intense desire to live and maintain a sense of dignity" that emerges in "the most conscious American Negro type, the trade unionist" (91). However, this type reemerges in Ellison's *Negro Quarterly* editorial as the not fully articulate/d but defiant zoot-suiter and Lindy-hopper of the Harlem dance halls.

On another level, "Transition" implicitly addresses the situation that concerned Ellison in his proposed war novel: the dangerous position of the democrat in a proto-fascist environment. The machinery of industry, while a threat to the physical and psychic survival of the black individual, is also the mechanism of his liberation in the same way that, as Ellison wrote in "Harlem Is Nowhere," the city is both "the scene of the folk-Negro's death agony...[and] the setting of his transcendence" (*Essays* 322). The African American's entry into the industrial environment signals a break with the feudal past as it survived in the economic organization of the South; it marks his passage out of an environment where, as was the case for Ellison's imprisoned pilot, the only resistance possible for the democrat is death.

The concluding paragraphs of "Transition," the lengthiest addition to *The New Masses* version of the review, most clearly indicates the effect that America's entry into the war had on Ellison's views of the working-folk. Although he supports the war effort, he points out the contradictions of fighting a war for democracy when America's own

fascists are intent on denying African Americans "the techniques of modern living" (92). Ellison, in fact, conflates the "techniques" of democracy and of industrial work. To deny the African American full participation in industry is to deny him access to democracy. Ellison's perspective reflects, in part, a belief "that black emancipation was part of the progressiveness of the American democratic experience" (Foley 192), a stance characteristic of the wartime resurgence of the Popular Front emphasis on democracy, and not socialist revolution, as the alternative to fascism (Eagleton 53). Wright's invocation of the American "common road of hope" in *12 Million Black Voices* is his metaphorical mapping of this idea of democracy (146). However, on a more concrete level, the factory represents a physical and "conscious" break with the undemocratic past. As Houston Baker writes, "wage labor and gainful employment were radically modern against a backdrop of exploitative impoverishment and barbarous enslavement" (*Modernism* 102) whether in the antebellum past or the neo-feudal present of the war years.

In "Transition," Ellison states that African Americans have always maintained their belief in a democratic *future*: "For by the very logic of the hope by which Negroes have lived and suffered since Emancipation their path has been that of the true democrat" (91). While the democrat works to master nature, which for the black American means "acquiring the techniques through which Western Civilization reached its highest development," the fascist works to master all people different from him (91), an attitude which, by implication, invokes the racist strictures of the American South. The liberating capacities of the factory for the black "democrat" is apparent in Ellison's *New Masses*

article on the National Negro Congress convention. Paraphrasing Andre Malraux, whose work greatly influenced him during this period, Ellison writes that the factory is "for the workers what the cathedral formerly was, and that they must come to see in it not ideal gods but human power struggling against the earth" (*Essays* 19).

Richard Wright also cites Malraux in his introduction to *Black Metropolis* (1945), though in less effusive terms than Ellison, positing that the "slums and sweat-shops" of the black worker will become "his modern cathedrals," the site of a "new consciousness that can guide him toward freedom" (xxxi). Charles Scruggs argues that this postwar emphasis on the factory signals the shift in African American formulations of the relationship between so-called Western Culture and black culture. The image of the "cathedral" represents the institutional centre of the urban black community--of a black city culture--and emerges, as a result of the first Great Migration, in the work of the Harlem Renaissance writers. However, as Scruggs points out, despite their generally pluralist perspective on culture and the meaning of this institutional centre, "something of elite culture, still privileged, lingered about the allusion" in the work of the Renaissance writers (59).⁴⁰ In the configuration of the factory as "cathedral," Wright and Ellison distance themselves from the implied goal of racial "uplift" that it represented for many of the Renaissance writers. Instead, it signals a reorientation toward black experience as "part of a new democratic culture, one set in the common life" (Scruggs 62). In Ellison's work of the period, the dance hall is also a site for the expression of a "common life" among African American migrants to the city.

In this idea of the industrial workplace as a democratic space, Ellison's configuration of the "reborn" and conscious folk becomes particularly significant. In a very real and material way, Ellison rewrites the legend of John Henry, the black labourer who dies in his attempt to do more work than a railroad steam drill. As Lawrence Levine writes, John Henry is "the most important folk hero in Afro-American lore" (427), in part because his fate came to symbolize the displacement of black farmers and workers by machines throughout the twentieth century (Levine 424).⁴¹ In Wright's "Blueprint," the figure of John Henry is, paradoxically, a sign of the African American folk's *potential* for the mastery of the machine. New "mythical heroes" will arise out of the African American's entry into industrial occupations, the same process of "modernization" by which the culture which produces these heroes will be rendered articulate ("Blueprint" 337).

In his editorial in *The Negro Quarterly*, Ellison implicitly acknowledges the "traditional" meaning of the legend of John Henry but focuses primarily on its implications for understanding the world view of the preindustrial folk, those who were not yet "politically conscious" ("Editorial Comment" 296). Ellison argues that John Henry's heroism embodies an attitude which the folk, of necessity, immortalized in legend and song: that of a black man who would rather die than compromise his principles. Such an attitude is that "of one who, driven into a corner, sees no way of asserting his manhood except to choose his own manner of dying" (296), a situation which, again, invokes the position of the black democrat in the virulently undemocratic South. However, Ellison

insists, such an attitude became obsolete "on the day John Henry's great heart was burst in his struggle against the machine" (296). In part, John Henry's fate marks the ascendancy of a complex, "political" world in which power was no longer measured by (or over) the body. At the same time it signals the necessity of the *black mastery* of this complexity.

Much in Negro life remains a mystery

In the Summer of 1942, Ellison left the Federal Writers' Project to become managing editor of *The Negro Quarterly*. Angelo Herndon, a former Communist labour organizer, was the editor. Herndon had published the first issue of the periodical in the Spring of 1942.⁴² From the beginning, as is evident in the unsigned "Editorial Comment" published in the Summer 1942 edition, the journal focused on the implications of black "cultural and psychological nationalism" during the war ("Editorial Comment" v). Broadly defined, this nationalism was an expression of the unifying idea behind Roosevelt's Four Freedoms and, more explicitly, the Atlantic Charter: "All peoples must be allowed to define themselves!" (iv). The editorial also challenged national black leaders, whether members of the Communist Party or Roosevelt's Black Cabinet--as well as white leaders--who ignored or minimized the issue of Jim Crow in the military and defense plants. Nationalism, in this specific context, expressed the black political goal of "full participation as *equals*" in a conflict that the editorial clearly hoped would be an anti-colonial People's War (ii, emphasis in original). The editorial pointed out that African American anger with the racial status quo was a powerful, if repressed, locus of black political energy, one

which was withheld from the war effort. This attitude of detachment, while a measure of the nation's failure to confront its own racial contradictions, was equally an index of the degree to which many black Americans were alienated from their leadership: "The danger in Negro nationalism is that it remains unarticulated, while at the same time the people are *demanding expression through action*" (ii, emphasis added).

In his *Negro Quarterly* editorial of 1943, Ellison incorporates both the cultural and political definitions of black nationalism into his analysis of African American attitudes toward the war effort. His goal, "[b]y way of group self-examination" ("Editorial Comment" 295), is to identify those "psychological" manifestations of nationalism among African Americans that impede organized political action on their exclusion from the war effort. Such action, in turn, must be motivated by an understanding of "*their own stake in the defeat of fascism*" and the furthering of democracy (297, emphasis in original). In order to accomplish his goal, Ellison turns to black expressivity, specifically the "somewhat distorted, partly urbanized folk culture" of the black masses ("Recent" 22)--the *cultural forms* of black nationalism--as clues to mobilizing and marshalling/martialling black political energy. For Ellison, these urban "Forms of Things Unknown"--"wartime folklore" and the flamboyant dress and dance steps of the cabarets and dance halls ("Editorial Comment" 301-02)--represent the "problem of self-knowledge" (302) which must be at the centre of any black political act. Only in solving the "riddle" (301) of the meaning of these forms can the black leader be guided in his strategies as well as in the consolidation of "the power potential of the group" (300).⁴³ This approach ensures that

black interests will not "always be 'expendable'" (300) to the interests of others, whether Capital or Labor (302). In the improvisational energy of black cultural forms Ellison finds evidence of the direction of African American political energies; together they affirm "that the main task of the Negro people is to work unceasingly toward creating those democratic conditions in which it can live *and recreate itself*" (298, emphasis added).

The psychological attitudes which inhibit progress toward the goals of black political nationalism are associated with two fixed positions on the war: that of an "unqualified acceptance of the limited opportunity for Negro participation in the conflict" (295) or an "*unqualified rejection*" of the war effort as a whole (296, emphasis in the original). By implication, the first position is associated with the views of the American Communist Party on the "Negro problem." However, more disturbing to Ellison is the fact that it is also evidence of a frustrated nationalism among black Americans themselves, "what might be termed a 'disintegration of the sense of group personality'" (295).

In contrast, the second position expresses a vociferous black nationalism which is, nonetheless, self-defeating: it is unable to negotiate the complexities of a situation which requires that African Americans fight against fascism both at home and abroad. Instead, proponents of this view interpret black exclusion as evidence that this is *only* "a white man's war" and advocate the complete withdrawal of black support for the war effort. It is the second position that Ellison equates with the legend of John Henry in that "[i]t conceives of positive action for the Negro people only in terms of death--or passivity, which is another form of death" (297). This attitude, though it appears to be the opposite

of the first, is actually "a mere *inversion*" and is as "blind" in its acceptance of the racial status quo (297, emphasis in original).

Ellison, however, posits a radical form of black nationalism which is deeply implicated in "the problem of identity" that he will later define as the central issue of the war experience for African Americans, as well as the impulse behind the "blues" autobiographies of the period ("Stepchild" 25). This form of nationalism is "scientific enough" to transform the first two fixed positions "into strategies of struggle" ("Editorial Comment" 298). He points to the recent resignation of William H. Hastie, a black civilian aide to the Secretary of War, over "the window-dressing air school at Tuskegee"⁴⁴ as an example of this strategic conversion (299). Hastie employed elements of both "fixed" strategies of refusal and acceptance: his resignation "employ[ed] 'the contradictory tactic of withdrawal for the purpose of closer unity' in the war effort (299). Hastie transformed 'the sentiments of the Negro masses' into action and this, in turn, 'has made his name meaningful among thousands of Negroes, bringing eligibility for that support which is the basis of true leadership' (299).

Ellison's model of black leadership is a critical alternative to the strategies of those black leaders "who, in all crucial situations, capitulate to whites" (302). It locates the source of political power with the black masses: those who most clearly embody "the Negro people's group personality" (298). Wright had found a model for his aesthetic "blueprint" in the improvisational political strategies of the black working class whose "emphasis upon tendency and experiment, a view of society as something becoming rather

than as something fixed and admired...points the way for Negro writers to stand shoulder to shoulder with Negro workers in mood and outlook" ("Blueprint" 335). Ultimately, such strategies necessitated the "extinction" of the folk. Ellison, however, inverts Wright's "perspective" in his effort to trace the outlines of a black political strategy in the cultural improvisations of an African American folk who were undergoing metamorphosis, and not death, on the city pavements. As Larry Neal writes, Ellison's editorial "turns Marxism on its head, and makes the manipulation of cultural mechanisms the basis for Black Liberation" (40).

The difference in the perspectives of the two writers is most apparent in their divergent views on perhaps the most "urbanized" and certainly the most visible of folk forms, dance, specifically the Lindy hop. It was, as Farah Griffin notes, one of the first dances created by black migrants to the cities of the North (81). In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright associates the southern ritual of dancing on a Saturday night at "the crossroad dancehall...to an old guitar and piano" (73) with the same "naive, casual, verbal, fluid folk life" (127) expressed in church on Sunday morning. The black folk are no more "ashamed" to "slow drag, ball the jack, and Charleston" than they are to sway to the rhythm of a preacher's sermon until they lose "all notion of time" (12 73). While Wright acknowledges the importance of the function of these ritual activities--the communal rites of youthful celebration and the affirmation of faith in a "free" future--he argues that the expressive forms associated with the dance hall and the church are "unable to unify our fragile folk lives in this competitive world" (12 75). They are, essentially, expressions of a

premodern existence. Even in the South, "movies, magazines, and glimpses of town life" (1275), and the attendant attraction of the northern cities, mark a transition in the life of the folk which, of necessity, consigns these forms to an unusable past.

In "Richard Wright's Blues," Ellison elaborates on his contemporary's reading of the expressive forms of the black body, particularly the degree to which they register the distorting effects of the southern Jim Crow regime. Ellison argues that in the South, the intellectual capacities of most African Americans are forced into "a *physical* form" (*Essays* 138, emphasis in original). This occurs, in part, because of an environment which both denies the African American intellectual resources and a "safe" outlet for the expression of his full capacities. As Ellison argued in his review of Hughes's *Big Sea*--taking the author as his example--the acquisition of "heightened consciousness" in the South "is in itself a revolutionary act" ("Stormy" 21). However, more disturbingly, Ellison intimates that because Jim Crow acts primarily on the black body, over which whites exercise their power, it registers and expresses what the intellect, in an act of self-protection, cannot. Therefore, the physical quality of black expression--"frenziedly erotic" music and dance, "religious ceremonies violently ecstatic" and "speech strongly rhythmical and weighted with image and gesture"--is an expression of repressed cognition and an extreme form of dissimulation (138). It is not, as Ellison is quick to point out, evidence of the "primitive simplicity" of African Americans (139). The physicality of these cultural forms is evidence of the African American's "complexity," of his efforts to mediate the contradictions associated with his abject position in a highly industrialized and ostensibly democratic

society:

The American Negro is a Western type whose social condition creates a state which is almost the reverse of the cataleptic trance: instead of his consciousness being lucid to the reality around it while the body is rigid, here it is the body which is alert, reacting to the pressures which the constricting forces of Jim Crow block off from the transforming, concept-creating activity of the brain. (139)

As indicated above, Wright was ambivalent about the place of the dance hall and the church in southern black life. Wright's ambivalence toward these venues of folk life increased when they were transplanted to the North, where they remained central to the life of the black migrant community. Griffin writes that although Wright saw them as "safe places where black people act and speak freely," they lacked revolutionary potential because they could not "offer an analysis of the oppression that has created their necessity" within this environment (78-79). In the city, the vitality of the church and the dance hall reveals "the paradoxical cleavage" between work in the consciousness-creating environs of the factory and life in the *northern* Black Belt "within the orbit of the surviving remnants of the culture of the south" (Wright, 12 127).

In addition, the "violent forms of [the] dances" (12 128) and the "wild, raw music" (129) of the urban folk--as well as their "invention of slang" and their colourful clothes (129)--are not, in Wright's estimation, legitimate and self-engendered "nationalist" expressions of black urban experience. Rather, they are the distorted product of a black "hunger for expression" (129) which is denied the *forms* of modern life: industry, finance, education, fine art (128). For Wright, the "remnants" of black folk life are, in the urban

context, expressions of thwarted desire. The divergence of these forms from the "modern" and the "mainstream" do not signal revolutionary capacity, as folk forms had in his "Blueprint for Negro Writing." Rather, they are forms of *urban* dissimulation, a response to an environment which denies black Americans access to expressive forms which would allow them "to react to life with an honest and frontal vision" (12 130).

Although Ellison admired *12 Million Black Voices*,⁴⁵ his editorial in *Negro Quarterly*, published a little over a year after Wright's book appeared, presents a profoundly different view of the social and political meaning of the cultural expressions of the black folk. The city does not warrant the folk's "extinction." Rather, as he argues in "Harlem is Nowhere," its "fluid and shifting" realities, while they exact a psychic cost, offer new possibilities for the reshaping of the black Self (*Essays* 322). It is this perspective which underlies his concept of the political forms of black nationalism: of the African American creation of "those democratic conditions in which *it can live and recreate itself*" ("Editorial Comment" 298, emphasis added). To Ellison, this function fulfilled the African American's "historical role...of integrating the larger American nation and compelling it untiringly toward freedom" (298). There is a definite teleological cast to Ellison's declaration: a sense that, as Charles Scruggs argues, the "separateness of black history," the buried, lost or "invisible" black past, is "potentially redeemed by an affirmation inherent in the invisible origins of the nation itself" (207).⁴⁶ However, Ellison's editorial explicitly links this political perspective to black cultural nationalism and this radicalizes his position in the specific context of the wartime pressure on African

Americans to suppress their historical grievances and political activism for the sake of "national unity." Ellison makes this relationship clear in his critique of black leaders

who frustrated and impotent before the complex problems of the Negro situation, would resort to a primitive form of magic and solve the whole problem by simply abolishing the word *Negro* from the American language. It never occurs to them that no matter what name they give themselves that name will mean no more than they can *make* it mean. ("Editorial Comment" 297-98, emphasis in original)

This perspective underlies Ellison's urging of black leaders to "obey the impetus toward Negro self-evaluation which the war has made a necessity" (300) and to turn toward the cultural expression of the black masses as a form of "self-knowledge" (302). Such knowledge "is the basis of its [African Americans'] self-confidence and morale in this period of confusion" (298) even if utilizing this knowledge requires "detective work:"

Much in Negro life remains a mystery; perhaps the zoot suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the Lindy-hop conceals clues to great potential power - if only Negro leaders would solve this riddle. (301)

The zoot suit appears in the work of all three writers who are the subject of this study as one of the war era's most powerful symbols of what Stuart Cosgrove describes as the "point of intersection" between the politics of identity and the political act as well an expression of "the pleasures of identity and difference" among American minority groups (20). It plays a central symbolic role in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, one which has its inception in Ellison's wartime writing. While waiting at the subway station, on his way back to the Brotherhood offices after witnessing the murder of Tod Clifton, the Invisible

Man watches three zoot suit-wearing black men stride along the platform. Their appearance--conked hair, pork pie hats, outrageously padded shoulders and peg leg pants which balloon at the waist--invoke the contours of African sculpture "distorted in the interest of a design" (*Invisible* 354). This observation leads the protagonist to ask himself what or whose design is in effect. The implications of this question bring him literally face-to-face with "physical" evidence that the historical teleology of The Brotherhood cannot account for the existence of these "men of transition" (354): "What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole?" (355).

As Charles Scruggs notes, the zoot-suiters are also Ellison's answer to Wright's Chicago School configuration of the city as the fractured and unfamiliar site of black *dislocation*. The "distortions" these men effect are efforts to claim, familiarize and reassemble physical manifestations of their urban experience, their eclectic style an effort at "integrat[ing] a diversity of sources into a single amalgam" (Scruggs 130). The zoot suit is physical evidence of the intersection between a fluid folk culture and the urban-industrial environment, a phenomenon which produces a type of cultural fusion which, as Ellison's working notes for *Invisible Man* state, "combine[s] enough potential forms of Western personality to fill many lives" (*Essays* 343).

In Ellison's review of *Modern Negro Art* in late 1944, he explains in concrete terms the impetus behind the aesthetics of the zoot suit. Ellison uses the phrase which recurs in his novel to describe its appearance: its "anatomical distortion...vaguely suggests that of

primitive African sculpture" (Review of *Modern* 92). In his review, Ellison makes a distinction between the sources of the plastic arts and those of music and literature for the black artist. He argues that while the black musician and writer can "follow the path outlined for them by folk art...the standards of [plastic] design...are set by the owners of the machines of mass production" (92). The black sculptor, however, can learn from the strategies of the black urban folk individual, who lacking a "national costume" of his own nevertheless assembles the zoot suit out "of what he has found around him in the larger American culture...*to create something new which expresses its attitude toward the American scene*" (92, emphasis added). The importance of this perspective is clear in the context of Ellison's review of Myrdal's *American Dilemma*. This strategy of cultural assembly or pastiche is a black strategy of survival and a way of constructing black identity: historically, have not African Americans "create[d] themselves out of what they have found around them?" (*Essays* 339). This, in turn, has implications for the construction of history itself. As Charles Scruggs writes, in Ellison's work the zoot suit is "symbolic of the social potential for unpredictable change, an affirmation, perhaps, of history's devious complexity" (11).

In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright explains the attraction of the dance hall for the black folk: there they "plunge into pleasure to obliterate the memory of...slow death on the city pavements" (126). The Invisible Man's description of the zoot-suiters in the subway, the fact that "they seemed to move like dancers in some kind of funeral ceremony" (*Invisible* 354), while an acknowledgement of the reality of Tod Clifton's death is also,

implicitly, an ironic allusion to Wright's perspective. While Ellison understood, particularly with respect to the treatment of African Americans in the war effort, that elements of these expressive forms indicated "resentment, self-pity and indignation" at their circumstances, ("Editorial Comment" 302) he was far from Wright's position that they are evidence of the fact that black Americans have been "excluded, left behind" (128) or counted out of modern life and American democracy. These emotional states are, Ellison argues, but "temporary" conditions which can "through a skillful and wise manipulation...become transformed into positive action" by a literally *informed* indigenous black leadership ("Editorial Comment" 302).

As is apparent from his analysis of the "profound political meaning" of the zoot suit ("Editorial Comment" 301), Ellison steps outside the boundaries of Wright's view of black culture as largely reactive, a perspective that Gunnar Myrdal also maintains. While Wright views the Lindy hop and the boogie-woogie music that accompanied it⁴⁷ as symptomatic of the frustrations and despair of black life in the city--even while black music attracts white listeners who identify with its expression of modern angst making black Americans, as Farah Griffin notes, "model men" (82)--Ellison speculates "that its symmetrical frenzy... conceals clues to great potential power" ("Editorial Comment" 301).

In his autobiography, Malcolm X, a zoot-suiter and consummate Lindy-hopper during the 1940s, describes the dance hall scene as he experienced it in Boston's Roseland Ballroom. While the band, urged on by the spectators, played a "wailing" blues, the dancers Lindy-hopped. In contrast to the white dancers, who "danced as though

somebody had trained them...the same steps and patterns over and over, as though somebody had wound them up" (50), the black dancers *improvised*: "nobody in the world could have choreographed the way they did whatever they felt" (50). While not wishing to impute Malcolm X's views to Ellison, his description of black dance invokes what Larry Neal argues is central to Ellison's perspective on black culture during the same period: "the *meaning* of that culture's presence and its manifestations as they impinged upon 'white culture'" (37, emphasis in original).

Ellison's delineation of the representational strategies, both cultural and political, of a people engaged in self-creation--in realizing "the uncreated consciousness of their race" (*Essays* 340)--is analogous to what Houston Baker describes as the deformation of mastery: the overt and "distinguishing" display of an indigenous identity (*Modernism* 51). The same "raw" and "wild" music and dance that Wright understood to be an expression of the marginalization of African Americans is, from this perspective, a defiant, vernacular declaration of black identity. As Baker writes, this requires an understanding of "economics" which, while incorporating an awareness of "a historically and materially grounded 'slavery' as the Afro-American's point of commencement" in America (*Modernism* 63), moves beyond this "determined" state to recognize what might, in this context, be termed a "separate history" of African American opposition to economic forms of "mastery." These acts of cultural insurgency are deeply imbedded in the northern, urban environment, distant geographically and psychologically from the southern "roots" of the mastery of form. However, they are not distinct; rather, the deformation of mastery

is an urban reconfiguration of the same political will and energy to survive and thrive expressed in the mastery of form. The deformation of mastery recognizes, and creates, cultural forms as symbolic currencies within an economy of robust, and not as Wright believed, thwarted black desire as well as forms of "active, outgoing resistance and response to oppressive ignorance and silence" (Baker, *Modernism* 104). In the midst of a war on two fronts--and specifically for black inclusion within the American "democratic master plan"--this "deformative" cultural practice has, as Ellison understood, "profound political meaning" ("Editorial Comment" 301).

Ellison's development of a theory of the folk during the 1940s touches on many of the central issues which their real and figurative presence invoked for the black artist. While I have constructed a type of linear narrative which reflects both the trajectory of Ellison's thought and the historical conditions to which it was a response, there are many elements of his thinking which resist this form; therefore, my endnotes are a type of alter/narrative which addresses this fact. Ellison's movement from a Marxist-oriented perspective to a more clearly nationalist view of African American cultural production is not typical of the other writers who are the subject of this study, although they too responded to these intellectual currents. However, Ellison's work, along with that of Richard Wright, limns out the contours of the debate over the folk, and the impact of the war on African Americans as a whole, during this period: a highly contentious discursive realm into which the works of Chester Himes and Ann Petry also enter.

NOTES

1. Although "The Literature of the Negro in the United States" was not published until 1957 in *White Man Listen!*, most of the essay was written in 1945 when Wright was on the Isle d'Orléans in Québec, a location which figures prominently in the work. Wright's introduction to Drake's and Cayton's *Black Metropolis* (1945), was also written there (xxxiv). Only the last few pages of the essay--after Wright abruptly breaks from his discussion of the influence of Marxism on black writers--are concerned with the implications for black cultural expression of the 1954 anti-segregationist Supreme Court *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* decision, giving rise to what Houston Baker describes as Wright's "Integrationist Poetics" (*Blues* 68).
2. In "Literature of the Negro," Wright or his editors have misspelled Waring Cuney's name as *Warren* Cuney. Cuney, Wright and other black, leftist writers were the founders of the short-lived *New Challenge* (1937) (V. Franklin 201).
3. The degree to which the Communist Party did, in fact, desert the African American struggle for equality, and the related issue of the Party's position on the issue of black nationalism, are the subject of debate among contemporary historians. Recent texts have begun to revise past views that Communist Party policies had a primarily negative impact on black political and cultural activism during the war. See Gerald Horne, *Black & Red* (1986); Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?* (1982); George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight* (1994); George Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (1983). For more "traditional" and generally negative views on the Communist Party see: Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967); Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (1984); Wilson Record, *The American Negro and the Communist Party* (1951); James O. Young, *Black Writers of the Thirties* (1973).
4. Ralph Ellison, Letter to Richard Wright, 18 Aug. 1945, Richard Wright Archive, Yale University, qtd. in Fabre 207.
5. For a detailed account of the development of the Black Belt thesis, see Foley 170-193. In its earliest and most basic formulation, Communist Party theorists posited self-determination for those southern states with a majority black population. An initial bourgeois-democratic revolution and the establishment of a black republic would, in turn, make it possible for a socialist revolution to occur. This scenario did not exclude white workers; rather, the Party emphasized interracial class solidarity. However, as Foley points out this strategy assumed that "'nation' was tantamount to a 'class'" (182), a perspective which had the effect of either obfuscating the historical experience of race and racism or, alternatively, of relegating race consciousness to a form of "black chauvinism."

6. David Southern writes that the section (Part X) in *American Dilemma* in which this quotation appears was "mainly drafted" by Myrdal's associate Arnold Rose, "but with coaching from" the sociologist (67).
7. Ellison describes a lynching in excruciating detail in his most powerful early short story "A Party Down at the Square," written sometime before 1940 (Callahan xxii). Narrated by a white northerner visiting the South and witnessing the event, it is visually--almost cinematographically--vivid.
8. Ralph Ellison, Letter to Richard Wright, 2 Apr. 1942, Richard Wright Archive, Yale University, qtd. in Fabre 202.
9. In a letter to Wright on August 18, 1945, Ellison invokes James Joyce in connection with this phrase ("From *Native*" 204). As Robert List writes in his study of the influence of Joyce on Ellison's concept of cultural nationalism, this is an allusion to a line spoken by Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (List 14). In *Invisible Man*, this phrase is "rewritten." The protagonist contemplates a teacher's admonition to "creat[e] the *uncreated features of his face*. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. The conscience of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record..." (286, emphasis in original).
10. Wright modelled his conception of the stranger after that of the Chicago School sociologist Robert Park. In his essay "Human Migration and the Marginal Man" (1928), Park explored the possibilities for transformation that the internal mobility of the city presented: as an urban cosmopolite, the marginal man is an "emancipated individual....[who] learns to look upon the world in which he was born and bred with something of the detachment of a stranger" (Park 351). As Farah Griffin points out, the stranger cuts all ties with the past as it is embodied, in the African American text, by the southern "folk" ancestor (6-7).
11. David Southern outlines Myrdal's response to Melville Herskovits's study of African survivals among African American communities in *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941). Myrdal denied the importance or prevalence of such cultural features and felt that emphasizing them worked against white acceptance of African Americans and promoted nationalistic tendencies among blacks. See *American Dilemma*, 753 and 930. In his efforts to increase white guilt over the nation's racial contradictions, Myrdal worked to ensure that the black American was not "viewed as an unassimilable alien but as a wronged American" (Southern 44). This attitude suggests the impetus behind Myrdal's perspective on African American cultural "deviations" as a whole.

12. Aspects of "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" have become central components of theories of black vernacular culture. See Baker, *Blues* 12-13 and Gates, *Signifying* 64-65. This, despite the fact that the "little man," as he appears in the essay, is only "figuratively" black: in a gesture which Ellison implies is indicative of American cultural and democratic "improvisational" pluralism as a whole, he *assumes* an "Afro-American identity, costume and mask" (*Essays* 498). The essay demonstrates the limitations of Ellison's emphasis on culture as a de facto substitute for history at this later stage of his intellectual life.

Compare, for example, the significance of Tarp's shackle as historical artifact in *Invisible Man* (311-14) to the significance of the cultural artifact, a Prokofiev manuscript which finds its way to the Tuskegee Institute, a fact which "*the arrangement of society beyond the campus notwithstanding*...spoke eloquently of the unstructured possibilities of culture in this pluralistic democracy" (*Essays* 513, emphasis added).

13. As noted above, Park's concept of the "stranger" influenced Wright's views on his relationship to the black folk, particularly as it characterizes his bifurcated narrative perspective of identification with, but objective detachment from, the African American folk in *12 Million Black Voices*. The degree to which Wright, as narrator, actually embodies the possibility of physical and intellectual movement in the text itself further distinguishes this figure from the black masses. See Scruggs 50-54 and 73-74 for a discussion of the differences in the cityscapes of Park and his student Wirth.

14. Ironically, Ellison's "discovery" of Eliot's *Waste Land* in the Tuskegee Library in 1935 (*Essays* 210), apparently prompted his early interest in the use of black folklore and vernacular language in literature. As he explained in a 1973 interview, "I discovered the folklore because I had become a literary person" (West 247). Ellison discusses this "dual heritage" in *Essays*, 111-12. See Ellison's interview with Richard Kostelanetz, 90-91, for his initial reaction to Eliot's use of folklore in *The Waste Land*. As Charles Scruggs points out, however, Ellison somehow overlooks the fact that Eliot used popular culture and folk forms, and particularly vernacular speech, to "ironically measure the degradation of contemporary society" (212).

15. Shortly after the publication of this editorial, Ellison enlisted in the merchant marine, "a more democratic mode of service" than that of the segregated Army (*Essays* 476). Ellison had earlier espoused the Communist position, in light of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, of non-participation in the war, as is evident in his *New Masses* essay, "A Congress Jim Crow Didn't Attend" (1940). In the essay, he inserts a specifically black meaning into the Communist call for non-intervention--which was captured in the slogan "The Yanks Aren't Coming"--when in reference to a recent act of racism, Ellison writes that he is "a *black* Yank and was not coming" (*Essays* 15, emphasis added). In "In a Strange Country" (1944), the protagonist--a merchant marine on leave in Wales, who has just been attacked by a group of white American soldiers--expresses his surprise at being named without

reservation as an American by the Welshman who intervenes in the fight and describes him as one of the "Black Yanks" ("*Flying*" 139, emphasis in original). In this story, the phrase expresses the protagonist's ambivalent love for his country and his own conflicted black and *American* identity.

16. Wright joined the Project in late 1937, after the failure of *New Challenge*, and left in May, 1939. He wrote the Harlem section in the Project's *New York Panorama* (132-51) and worked on "The Harlems" in *New York City Guide* (257-70) (Rampersad, "Chronology" 891).

17. African American writers, many of whom defined black writing in the 1930s and 1940s, were major beneficiaries of the Federal Writers' Project. Ellison made several references to the importance of the Project to African American cultural production generally. In "Recent Negro Fiction" (1941), he included it, by implication, among those organizations which contributed to the "emergence of a new proletarian consciousness among black people" (22), probably alluding to the Communist Party's "institutional support for the black arts" through its backing of Works Project Administration arts projects as a whole (Naison 204). In 1971, he described the Project as having given an "accelerated release" to black expressive culture and having "allowed many Negroes to achieve their identities as artists" (*Essays* 665). See also Bell, *Afro-American* 154; and Mangione 255-65.

18. Some of this material, and Ellison's research on "famous" New York trials, as well as the contributions of the more than thirty project writers who worked in the Negro Unit, were published in *New York Panorama* and *New York City Guide*. Roi Ottley had been head of the Negro Unit until his dismissal in 1939 when the Project was passed from federal to state control. Ottley took much of the collected material with him when he left and made use of it in *New World A-Coming* (1943). Ellison's review of Ottley's book, however, was critical: Ottley's depiction of Harlem was "cloaked in all the stock, anti-Negro clichés" (Review of *New* 68). In 1940, Ottley deposited the Negro Unit papers, then provisionally assembled into a book, with the Schomburg Library. It was published in 1967 as *The Negro in New York*. See also Mangione 260-63.

19. Ann Banks notes that the Writers' Project first-person narratives went under various names. Banks uses "life-history narratives" as a blanket term to denote FWP "efforts to document real people telling their own stories in their own words" (xiii).

20. Benjamin A. Botkin, *Fighting Words*, ed. Donald Ogden Stewart, (New York, 1940) 12, qtd. in Banks xv.

21. This anticipates the changes which occurred in folklore studies in the late 1960s. As Shuman and Briggs note, folklore methodology shifted from an emphasis on the text as

the record of fragments of threatened or lost cultures to contextual production or performance in the present (112). While this did not preclude "traditionalizing" practices-- "identifying aspects of the past as significant in the present" (109)--it included within the definition of folklore "the shared knowledge (in some artistic form) of any collectivity" (123).

22. Four of these life-history narratives were recorded by Ellison alone and appear in Banks's anthology. One of these, which appears under the heading "Leo Gurley" in Banks's anthology (243-45), is a tall tale about Sweet-the-Monkey. Ellison and another worker collaborated on a fifth narrative which has not been published but is available at the Library of Congress. The narrative was recorded at a union hiring hall. An African American man looking for work expresses bitterness at the fact that Irish immigrants have taken many of the jobs in the trucking industry despite the fact that "[m]y people made the...business." Recorded in May 1939, it is possible that this experience influenced Ellison's portrayal of the Irish truck driver--a union man--who helps the black victim of a police beating in "Slick Gonna Learn," published in September 1939. Although part of a novel Ellison began in 1937 and abandoned in early 1938 (Callahan xiv), the extent of Ellison's subsequent revisions cannot be determined. The story, set in the South, reflects the Communist Party's emphasis on interracial class solidarity in the Black Belt.

23. Banks chose to render all of the life-history narratives she published in her anthology into standard English, in part to avoid the sometimes awkward and patronizing transcriptions of dialectal speech (xxiv). However, at times, the elegant, idiomatic method of Ellison's originals are lost in this translation.

This idiomatic, vernacular style appears first in Ellison's fiction in his Buster and Riley stories: "Afternoon" (1940), "Mister Toussan" (1941), and "That I Had the Wings" (1943). These stories are about two young black boys who describe and master their world through "black" language. Edith Schor provides a useful analysis of Ellison's use of folklore materials and the antiphonal structure of the stories in *Visible Ellison*, 24-36.

24. The phrase "People's War" alludes to several conditions: Roosevelt's declaration that the Atlantic Charter's (1941) promise of freedom from "colonial" rule applied not only to Nazi-occupied Europe but equally to the British Empire, a stance which contradicted that of Winston Churchill; the thrust of the African American Double V campaign; and in the Communist press, solidarity among colonized peoples worldwide (Finkle 210-11).

25. Levine discusses Shine's adventures after his escape, 427-29 and the image of the Titanic in black disaster songs, 171-72 and 257-58. See also Abrahams, *Positively Black* 43-45 and *Deep Down in the Jungle* 111-23.

26. From 1929-1934 the Communist-led John Reed Clubs worked to promote the development of "proletarian culture" in the United States. In 1935, the Clubs were

disbanded and replaced by the League of American Writers. Though still affiliated with the Communist Party, the League aimed to attract non-Communist and anti-fascist liberals in a Popular Front strategy of cultural and political co-operation.

27. Barbara Foley delineates the implications of this changing perspective in her discussion of the Black Belt thesis and the Communist Party's attitudes toward the situation of the urban black proletariat, 170-93. Mark Naison analyses the Communist Party's changing perspective on black nationalism and its effect on the Party's interpretation of black cultural production within Harlem, 193-226.

28. In her biography of Richard Wright, Margaret Walker states that other members of the South Side Writers' Group contributed to the formulation of the ideas expressed in "Blueprint" (355-56n18).

29. Both of these scenarios share an "identity of difference" with one of the fundamental principles of the Black Aesthetic: that "blackness" is, as Baker writes, the product of "[t]he distinctive cultural circumstances that comprised the material bases of Afro-American culture - the 'economics of slavery'" as they are embodied by vernacular forms of culture. Proponents of the Black Aesthetic took up such forms as their creative material, as evidence of "the *authentic* or *basic* (as in the 'material base') categories of Afro-American existence" (Baker, *Blues* 84, emphasis in original). Marxist and Integrationist paradigms substituted class for race. The Black Aesthetic inverted this binary coupling, substituting race for class.

30. In a 1965 interview, Ellison described these articles as his attempt to write "what might be called propaganda having to do with the Negro struggle." He distinguished this writing from his fiction of the same period, which he argued "was always trying to be something else, something different even from Wright's fiction" (Thompson, Raphael, and Cannon 742). However, several of his early published short stories, particularly "Slick Gonna Learn" (1939) and "The Birthmark" (1940), are clearly didactic and graphically depict violence against the southern black man. Particularly "propagandistic," however, are Ellison's depictions in his previously unpublished stories of interracial, class solidarity in the South: from riding the rails together in "Hymie's Bull" and "I Did Not Learn Their Names" to efforts at organizing service workers in "The Black Ball." Most startling of all is the white narrator's description of his encounter with a white sharecropper shortly after the white population of a southern town has lynched two black men in "A Party Down at the Square." Although the narrator himself is too naive to understand the implications of his observation, it clearly reflects the racialized economics of the South: "a white cropper said it didn't do no good to kill the niggers 'cause things don't get no better. He looked hungry as hell. Most of the croppers looked hungry. You'd be surprised how hungry white folks can look" ("*Flying*" 11). Barbara Foley quotes a labour organizer who

describes the situation of white sharecroppers in the South in similar terms, 175-76.

31. The poems that Ellison cites are: "Letter to the Academy" and "Ballads of Lenin" published in 1933; "Ballad of Ozzie Powell," "Let American Be America Again" and "Elderly Leaders" published in 1936.

32. A version of this essay also appeared in the "liberal monthly" *New Direction* in the Summer of 1941. In this version, the explicit references to working class struggle and the proletarianization of African Americans in *The New Masses* article do not appear. In addition, phrases like "social struggle" substitute in the *New Direction* version (13) for "working class methods of organized struggle" in *The New Masses* article (26).

33. In "Recent Negro Fiction" Ellison argues that Wright's *Native Son* is a literary product of these "modern" forces "and marks the merging of the imaginative depiction of American Negro life into the broad stream of American literature" (25). In his review of *Black Boy*, "Richard Wright's Blues," Ellison makes a distinction between Wright and his protagonist Bigger Thomas in terms which invoke the compressed historical experience of "modern" black Americans: "Between Wright's skills and knowledge and the potentials of Bigger's mute feelings lay a thousand years of conscious culture" (*Essays* 139). However, in his later critical writing, Ellison's critique of Wright's depiction of Bigger would become representative of his divergence from the former's view of black life as a whole. See "The World and the Jug" in *Essays* 165-67 and 185-87.

34. Ellison uses this phrase again almost four decades later in his 1982 introduction to *Invisible Man* when describing his struggle to write the war novel he later abandoned. He did not want it to be protest fiction but rather a "dramatic study in comparative humanity" (*Essays* 481). In his 1943 review, he follows this phrase with his description of a methodology which would allow the writer to "translat[e]...Negro experience into Western terminology" (Review of *Darker* 55). This is a complex idea in Ellison's work. In its earliest incarnation it suggests class-consciousness, although even this must be considered within the context of the influence of Eliot and the use of myth by other modernists. In "The World and the Jug" Ellison elaborates on the "hybrid" relationship between black folklore and Western myth, *Essays* 111-12.

35. Hans Habe, a Hungarian national who fought for France, published an account of his capture by the Germans in *The Nation*. Those elements of his essay which focused on conditions for black prisoners-of-war were reprinted in Chandler Owen's introduction to the government's propaganda pamphlet *Negroes and the War* (n.d.). Ellison had read this pamphlet as he notes in his *Negro Quarterly* editorial ("Editorial Comment" 302). Habe wrote:

[T]he Negroes were immediately isolated. Barbed wire was strung around their

barracks. No white man was allowed to converse with a black. Our own shelters were miserable enough; those of the Negroes, crowded into a narrow space, were much worse. Our food, though insufficient, was princely in comparison with that given to the Negroes, who practically starved. Hundreds of them fell sick, but were not cared for. (Owen n.p.).

36. Ralph Ellison, Rosenwald Fund Application, Richard Wright Archive, Yale University, 2, qtd. in Fabre 205.

37. Ralph Ellison, Rosenwald Fund Application, Richard Wright Archive, Yale University, 2, qtd. in Fabre 205.

38. This is not a strictly negative or "pathological" condition. It also portends cultural malleability or fusion, the "amalgams" of cultural process which Ellison increasingly emphasizes in his work. However, in defense of Wright's "perspective," Ellison focuses on the tensions and contradictions this strategy builds up within the black individual. In this context, it is useful to compare the strikingly similar metaphors which Ellison and Baker employ to describe the black mastery of form. Baker describes it as a strategy which conceals and disguises and allows the individual to survive in, and manipulate, his environment like an autumn hare in "sedge-brown, October woods" (*Modernism* 50). Ellison describes the process of uncovering "veiled" black humanity "as difficult as finding a wounded quail against the brown and yellow leaves of a Mississippi thicket" (*Essays* 143).

39. Ellison first wrote about Owen Whitfield's leadership of the evicted sharecroppers in "Camp Lost Colony" in *New Masses* in February 1940.

40. Scruggs discusses the emergence and various configurations of the image of the cathedral in *Sweet Home*, 58-67. His discussion of Locke's *The New Negro* as "the summation of an Afro-American effort to understand the new phenomenon of the city" (55) during the Renaissance, is a useful overview of responses to the black folk during this period, specifically the unwillingness to confront the realities of the black urban masses or what might be called the folk in "transition." See Scruggs, 54-58.

41. Lawrence Levine details the evolution of various versions of the John Henry legend, 420-37.

42. *The Negro Quarterly* published only four issues; the last was Herndon's report on West Coast race relations. Larry Neal describes the magazine as "the last attempt on the part of Black intellectuals of that period to fashion an ideological position that was revolutionary, but yet, was not totally dominated by the white Marxist left" (38). Harold Cruse argues that it was this position, in fact, which ensured the publication's demise. See

The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, 187-88.

43. The idea of black culture as "riddle" recurs in *Invisible Man*. In the eviction scene in the novel, Ellison alludes to Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* when the white Communist observing the event refers to "*A Death on the City Pavements*...as the title of a detective story or something" (236). This points to the difference in the two writers. As Scruggs argues, where Wright saw the folk as an historical anachronism, Ellison saw them as "clues to a 'detective story' that still needs to be solved" (131). After Tod Clifton's death, the Invisible Man expresses his bewilderment at the direction the leadership should take--as well as his still strong identification with the Brotherhood--in the statement: "I was no detective, and politically, individuals have no meaning" (359).

44. William Hastie resigned in January 1943 over the fact that trained black pilots were not being used in combat. Black pilots were not actually deployed until April 1943, over a year after the first class graduated from the segregated Tuskegee Air School. Racist stereotypes were persistently invoked to explain this situation: "Negroes were cowards...mentally inferior to whites and could not perform technical functions--such as flying" (Dalfiume, *Desegregation* 24). Ellison addresses this issue in "Flying Home" 150.

45. See Fabre, 210-12 for excerpts from Ellison's letters to Wright on *12 Million Black Voices*.

46. Ellison's letters to Wright during the war years indicate that he saw black Americans as having a "manifest" role to play in the actualization of American democracy (Fabre, "From *Native*" 207). Charles Scruggs is, however, critical of this element of Ellison's thought as a whole. He writes:

What Ellison saw as the individual's heroic redefinition of cultural terms may become an impossible task when faced with a combination of received prejudice and social anomie. If, after years of travel, the city on a hill appears no closer, should we ask whether or not it's a mirage? (212)

47. Boogie-woogie music was also a unique black urban art form (Griffin 59). An amalgam of southern blues and white pianistic technique, it was, in keeping with more traditional forms of black music, "predominantly a music of rhythmic contrasts" (Jones 114). These rhythms were perfect for dancing the Lindy hop.

CHAPTER II

Freedom's Frontier

Albert Camus once said that racism is absurd. Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition. Not only does racism express the absurdity of the racists, but it generates absurdity in its victims. And the absurdity of the victims intensifies the absurdity of the racists, ad infinitum. If one lives in a country where racism is held valid and practiced in all ways of life, eventually, no matter whether one is a racist or a victim, one comes to feel the absurdity of life.

Himes, *My Life of Absurdity* 1

I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their...refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine.

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* 450

Now Is The Time! Here Is The Place!

In "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," written in 1946,¹ Ralph Ellison argues that the racist stereotyping of African Americans "is really an image of the unorganized, irrational forces of American life, forces through which, by projecting them in forms of images of an easily dominated minority, *the white individual seeks to be at home in the vast unknown world of America*" (*Essays* 97, emphasis added). Chester Himes's vision of the absurdity of American racism and its antithesis, the absurd American promise of democratic equality and freedom, reflects both Ellison's sense of the profound

and "irrational" failures of American democracy and, as Ellison expresses it in the passage from *Invisible Man* cited above, the "vast unknown" potential of a truly *democratic* American nation.

Throughout the war years, Himes struggled with this absurd vision in works of fiction which range from painfully delineated and realistic depictions of the racist oppression of African Americans--and particularly black men--to satirical presentations and absurdly parodic treatments of the machinations of American racism. Throughout this period, African American folklore appears in Himes's work as both a type of "anecdotal" evidence of black strategies of resistance to racist absurdity and, in several of his short stories, as a rhetorical template which structures his literary representation of African American attitudes toward the war effort. In two of these stories, "Heaven Has Changed" (1943) and "He Seen It In The Stars" (1944), which respectively reflect Himes's initial optimism at the war's "promise" of self-determination for people of colour and his subsequent bitterness at its failure to be actualized, he uses folklore as the allegorical frame for his contemporary political commentary. In these stories, and in elements of his other wartime writings, the reader catches glimpses of the richly parodic and ironic vision of his later work, and particularly his detective novels, in which Harlem becomes a territory of the absurd African American imagination--as Himes wrote, it "*was never meant to be real....I just wanted to take it away from the white man if only in my books*" (*Absurdity* 126, emphasis in original)--where the "irrational forces of American life" are *played out* by its black inhabitants.

The writing career of Chester Himes spans nearly five decades: from the first short stories he wrote in the early 1930s, while he was serving time in an Ohio penitentiary for armed robbery, to his last complete published work and the second of two autobiographical volumes, *My Life of Absurdity*, published in 1976.² Shortly after his release from prison in 1936, Himes found work with the Federal Writers' Project.³ He went on to publish sixteen novels--including the nine detective stories written between 1957 and 1969 that comprise what has come to be known as his Harlem Domestic Series, his best known work--numerous short stories and several nonfiction pieces. In the last two decades of his life, Himes gave numerous interviews, many of which testify to his continuing interest in the mechanisms of radical, racial "reconstruction" in the United States; this, despite the fact that in 1953 he left the country to live in Europe, returning only for brief periods.⁴ H. Bruce Franklin's argument for the importance of Himes's novels applies equally to his work as a whole: it comprises a "miniature social history of the United States from World War II through the days of the Black urban rebellions of the 1960s" (206-07).

My study of Himes's writings of the first half of the 1940s examines selected, representative short stories, his first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945),⁵ his "four furious essays" about African Americans and the war effort (Himes, *Black 7*), as well as several other nonfiction works. I trace the development of his strategies of literary and political representation and his developing "theory" of folklore--as distinct from my discussion of Ellison's theory of the folk--in the context of the events of World War II. As

Himes wrote in his earliest wartime essay, "Now is the Time Here is the Place!" (1942), he was only able to fully support the war effort when he perceived its aims to be "the freedom of all the peoples of all the world," specifically the freedom of people of colour: "the subject races" of the colonial empires as well as of the United States itself (272). His writing of the period reflects an initial optimism about, then a growing disillusionment with, the degree to which the war effort portended racial freedom.

In an interview with Michel Fabre in 1983, Himes stated that several of his early stories were intended to function as "propaganda" for "the possibility of national unity" in time of war ("Chester" 125-26). However, after four years in the largely-segregated city of Los Angeles, a witness to the internment of the Japanese Americans in 1942 and the 1943 zoot suit riots during which Mexican American men were attacked by white soldiers and civilians, Himes was disillusioned with the war's promise of "freedom" both at home and abroad. As he wrote in *The Quality of Hurt*, Los Angeles "hurt me racially as much as any city I have ever known" (73). Out of this experience came his self-described "bitter novel of protest" *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (*Quality* 75), in which Los Angeles becomes a synecdoche for both the "state" of the nation and implicitly, because of its specific multi-racial and multi-ethnic admixture, for the colonized nations of the world.

The distance between these changing positions on the war effort measures the rhetorical ground between the two poles of Himes's concept of a uniquely American continuum of the absurd. One pole represents the always potential and revolutionary capacity of the United States to make manifest the premise (or promise) of absolute

equality and its corollary freedom as constituted by the nation's founding documents. The opposite pole represents the inverse of this inscribed ideal: the nation's historical denial of the equality and freedom of people of colour and the consequent "virtual bondage" ("Now" 273) of African Americans and other minorities within the "free" project of democracy. Critics have generally focused on Himes's examination of the effects on African Americans of what, in this context, I will refer to as the racist absurd: the denial of equality and freedom. However, his exploration of the implications of the equally arbitrary and absurd American ideal of freedom, the fact that, as he wrote in "If You're Scared, Go Home!" (1944),⁶ all Americans "are equal because we *made them equal*....so we could create an ideology based on this equality" (*Black* 227, emphasis added), has been largely overlooked.⁷ It is the tension between these two realities or, more to the point, between reality and, in the case of the latter definition of the absurd, *potentiality*, that informs Himes's writing.

Himes stated that he became aware of the "surrealist" or existential writers in the 1950s, after his arrival in France. However, he denied any "literary relationship" between their concept of the absurd and his own (Fabre, "Chester" 140). Rather, he traced the roots of his depiction of the absurd, and specifically of the racist absurd, in his writing to African American experience and expressivity:

[I]n the lives of black people, there are so many absurd situations, made that way by racism, that black life could sometimes be described as surrealist. The best expression of surrealism by black people, themselves, is probably achieved by blues musicians. (Fabre, "Chester" 140).

In "Richard Wright's Blues" (1945), Ellison expresses a similar view about the capacity of the blues to articulate the absurd elements of black experience in America:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. (*Essays* 129)

In Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the protagonist invokes the blues to ask one of the most important questions in African American literature. He articulates his quest to understand his exclusion as an African American from what his grandfather calls "the principle" of American democracy (462) by appropriating the words and music of Louis Armstrong: "What did I do / To be so black / And blue?" (14). That the Invisible Man's quest, as Charles Scruggs writes, "recapitulate[s] the history of black Americans since the Emancipation" (209), testifies to the continuing effects of the failure of the nation's first attempt at Reconstruction. To answer Armstrong's "question," then, is to understand how the ideal of American democracy has become, as the Invisible Man puts it, "violated and compromised to the point of absurdity" (462) by those citizens--as far back as the founding fathers--who have selectively violated the tenets of equality and freedom. At the same time, the Invisible Man ponders the absurdity of the fact that African Americans are compelled to transcend "the given circumstance of [their] origin" in slavery by "affirm[ing] the principle, the plan in whose name [they] had been brutalized and sacrificed" (462-63). In this context, to be "black *and blue*" is, in the present moment, to engage in a radical critique of the exclusion of African Americans from the nation's project of democracy in a

black, blues voice which (dis)articulates the racist absurd. At the same time, it is to insist on the historical *presence* of those who, as Ellison's protagonist points out, "served" to literally constitute the American nation though they were written out of the American democratic text as well as to affirm, for their descendants, "the principle" of democracy.

That the mechanisms of the racist absurd as well as its antithesis, the arbitrary declaration of equality and freedom, exist in the same "principle/d" documents, points to the paradox of the nation's origin, a part of what Orlando Patterson describes as the "problem of freedom" (341). "Freedom," as defined by the absence of restraints on the will to act, could only be conceptualized when its antithesis, slavery, operated to deny this state to a body of people. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison describes the process by which Euro-Americans both engendered and negotiated this paradox by fabricating an Africanist Other as the self-reflexive "medium" which enabled the construction of a New World, white American national identity. The Africanist presence became "a metaphor for transacting the whole process of Americanization, while burying its particular racial ingredients" (47). While the literal blackness of the physical body was considered the immutable mark of racial Otherness, the figurative black "body" of the unfree and, as Morrison points out, the *not*-American (48), was politically effaced and symbolically colonized by a process of "Americanization" which rendered it "invisible," a fact inscribed in what Morrison describes as the "coded language and purposeful restriction" of the nation's founding documents (6). If in this context, race is defined as what Henry Louis Gates describes as "the difference that blackness makes within the larger political culture

and its political *unconscious*" (*Signifying* 45, emphasis added),⁸ then at the heart of the American project of democracy is a paradoxical process of *deracination*: the repression of the political and symbolic machinations by which blackness is "essential" to the creation of a national coherence based on white hegemony. This national state of denial is the source of the racist absurd in Himes's writing.⁹

In "Now is the Time! Here is the Place!," Himes argues that the legacy of the nation's problem of freedom finds its contemporary expression in the "peculiar paradox which finds this nation of Negro Americans within this great nation...forced into a fight for freedom at home" in order to give meaning to the fight for freedom abroad (273). This "fight" found its organized expression in the national arm of the "Double V" campaign on what Himes describes as the American "*second front for freedom*" (272, emphasis in original). Himes saw this national struggle as part of a global, anti-colonial fight: African Americans are "the vital, imperative question which must be answered to all minority groups, all subject races, the world over" (272). Of the writers who are the subject of this study, Himes most clearly and forcefully articulates the implications, for "independence" movements worldwide, of the African American struggle for freedom at home.

"Now is the Time! Here is the Place!" clearly points to ideological contradictions in America's position on *both* fronts in the war effort. While it expresses a fervent hope that the war will unite the races in a struggle for freedom in a "People's War," it points to America's history of racism as a threat to just such an undertaking. The conflict as "People's War" would, in Himes's view, engender a multi-racial revolutionary front in

which the aims of African Americans within the country and those of the Allied nations in the fight abroad--including their implicit promises of postwar decolonization--are components of the same progressive movement toward freedom. In this respect, elements of his essay function as propaganda, as an effort to open up a rhetorical space that portends radical, racial change in a style which evokes Andre Malraux's language of virile brotherhood in time of war: "we will learn of the peoples' will, the great spiritual power of peoples united in a single cause, the magnificent inspiration of fraternal fellowship" (272). However, competing with this aspect of Himes's essay is his moving and painful invocation of crimes committed against African American humanity which, while they serve as a "black" reason to fight for freedom, are evidence that the conflict abroad may be but "a private war" for the continuation of the global racial, and racist, status quo (272). The two apparently divergent elements of his essay come together in a question heavy with the irony of American history: "Can a person own slaves and believe in freedom?" (272).

The struggle for freedom, as it was played out within the boundaries of the United States during the war, had the potential to be resolved at either extreme of the American continuum of the absurd. At one end, is the de facto slavery or imprisonment of African Americans within racist political and economic structures, a "state" which corresponds to a literary aesthetic in which, as Himes wrote in *My Life of Absurdity*, "[a]ll of reality is absurd, contradictory, violent and hurting" (126). At the opposite end, is racial "liberation" based upon the absurd American declaration of absolute equality and freedom.

In Himes's short story "All God's Chillun Got Pride" (1944), the protagonist Keith Richards juxtaposes the condition of what Himes describes as "virtual bondage" in racist strictures ("Now" 273) with the ecstatic experience of "American" freedom:

To cut him loose from the anchoring chains of refusal, he'd go running, jumping mad. As mad as Thomas Jefferson when he wrote, "All men are created equal..."As mad as all the other running, jumping insane people who shoulder through the world as if they owned it....He'd go stark, raving mad! Mad as all free people. (*Stories* 23-24)

Throughout the 1940s, Himes explored the implications of this contradiction--the problem of freedom--in American society. His strategies of literary representation, and the black political strategies for claiming freedom based on American equality that his essays advocate, were shaped by his own changing attitudes toward the racial, or racist, implications of the war effort. In order to trace this trajectory, it is necessary to begin at the end with *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, a novel which in its dystopian and "Dostoyevskian" portrait of Los Angeles as a racial hell" is the only African American example of the great California anti-myth of 1940s *noir* writing (Davis, *City* 43).¹⁰

California on Parade (*If* 163)

Chester Himes is the only African American writer of the war period to have written extensively about the experience of black migrants to the Pacific Coast area, specifically California. Himes himself moved West in 1940, a harbinger of the tens of thousands of African Americans who would follow him after America's entry into the war.

During the first Great Migration in the years surrounding WWI, black Americans moved primarily from the rural areas of the South to the cities of the North. During the second Great Migration, however, the lure of jobs in the booming West coast centres of war production drew black workers in unprecedented numbers, part of a major shift westward of the American population as a whole: one and a half million people migrated to the state of California alone during the war (Wynn 16). The African American population of Los Angeles almost doubled (Murray, 1946/47 26) and the proportional increase in the state's black population as a whole was the highest in the nation (Wynn 61).

The Pacific Coast region played an important symbolic function for African Americans during the war. In their book on the black migration experience, *They Seek A City* (1945), Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy labelled it "freedom's frontier," a location which appeared to offer the possibility of escape from the racial problems of the Northern cities--problems exacerbated by overcrowding and economic competition during the war--and southern Jim Crow (239).¹¹ Bontemps and Conroy evoke the myth of the American West, as well as what Cornel West describes as the signal condition of New World African modernity, the movement across space "to escape the absurdity of white-supremacist treatment and to find a 'home' in a safe and free space" (xiii), to explain the impetus behind black migration to a "frontier" which seemed to promise a specifically racial "freedom": perhaps here a man might be measured by his merits, he "might even have some room to throw out his chest and breathe deeply - even let out a whoop or two" (Bontemps and Conroy 239). In *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Himes's protagonist Bob Jones expresses his

democratic aspirations in a similar image of mobility and space: in his desire to be "just a simple Joe walking down an American street, going my simple way." That to Jones "a simple Joe" is a man "without distinction, either of race, creed, or colour" (153) is both an index of the degree to which initially he assumes "freedom" is the achievement of a condition of racial "anonymity" and, in the end, a measure of the extent to which this "state" applies only to the condition of being a *white* man in America.

In 1944 Angelo Herndon published a special (and last) edition of *The Negro Quarterly* which focused on African American migration to the Pacific Coast area. Its title indicates what he believed to be at stake on this last national frontier: "The West is a Testing Ground for Post-War Racial Adjustment in America." To Herndon, the extent to which the aspirations of black men such as Bob Jones actually materialized would become "fixed law" for the rest of the nation (3); either a new pattern of race relations would be established on the West Coast, specifically the "integration" of black workers into the industrial labour force, or the established patterns of segregation and discrimination apparent in other areas of the country would "become more universal" as they moved West (5). In Himes's writing, the implications of the success or failure of the (re)construction of California for the nation as a whole during the war puts a racial spin on what David Fine argues is a defining feature of the representation of Los Angeles in American fiction: the city is either "the place of the new beginning or of the last chance" (Introduction 7).

In *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Bob Jones arrives in Los Angeles in the Fall of 1941

with the intention of testing his belief that "being born in America gave everybody a certain importance" (153),¹² an implicitly political position that serves to delineate the racial "boundaries" of this frontier space. He brings with him only his "weight, height, and gender" (153). For Jones, his masculine, and often overtly masculinist, prowess--his working clothes make him "feel rugged, bigger than the average citizen, stronger than a white-collar worker" (8-9)--is the literal embodiment of his ability to be self-determining, a situation which has profound implications for his identity as a black man in a racist society. However, when Jones begins to look for work in Los Angeles, his initial confidence in the democratic and economic promise of the West is shaken. In a city in which before the war "the only job a Negro could get was service in the white folks' kitchens," employers react to his requests for industrial work as though he were "some friendly dog [who] had come in through the door and said, 'I can talk'" (3). This image is, perhaps, an allusion to a passage from *Mein Kampf*, cited in American propaganda directed at its black citizens, in which Hitler argues that to train blacks, whom he labelled "born half-ape[s]," for skilled or professional occupations "is training exactly. As that of a poodle" (qtd. in *Negroes and the War* n.p.).¹³ Jones does eventually find work as a mechanic in the Atlas Shipyards¹⁴ and after three years in the job he is promoted to leaderman of a segregated work crew, a "key" position which makes him exempt from the military draft. As his boss explains, he has been given the job, in part, to "keep down trouble between the white and coloured workers" in the shipyard (29).

The extent to which Jones becomes alienated from his racial version of the

California Dream can be measured by his daily journey to and from work across an increasingly absurd social and physical landscape. He careens across Los Angeles in his automobile, the "proof...a symbol" (*If* 31) of his democratic and, as Gilbert Muller argues, his middle-class aspirations (*Chester* 22), and the vehicle for a quintessentially Californian, highway-culture mapping of the American ethos of mobility as freedom. However, his car is also the vehicle through which he encounters what "was racial" in America (*If* 14), as symbolized by the white drivers and pedestrians whose apparently deliberate efforts to block his way generate a desire in Jones to "push [his] Buick Roadmaster over some peckerwood's face" (14). His "drive" toward freedom is thwarted by both the obstructions of white racism and his own sense of entrapment within a cycle of hatred and fear of white people.

In May of 1940, Himes wrote a short commentary in *New Masses* on the significance of the recent publication of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. In his piece, Himes argues that race in America is an experiential category. For Wright's protagonist Bigger Thomas "[i]t was as much a part of his life to be afraid of them [white people] as it was his lot to be black" ("*Native*" 23). To be "black" is to have acquired "the knowledge...of fear" in a nation which practices "lynchings and Jim Crowism" (23); it is to know that one can always potentially *experience* the ambient "knowledge" that racist white Americans are willing and able to direct violence toward black Americans, the method by which the myth of white supremacy is enforced.¹⁵ In *If He Hollers*, versions (and visions) of this archetypal white racist American control Jones's waking life and dominate the increasingly

violent "[n]ightmares of impotency" which begin each of the five working days of the novel (Bell, *Afro-American* 174).

In a speech Himes delivered at the University of Chicago in 1948, he elaborated on the vicious nature of a cycle in which this knowledge of fear becomes a hatred of white Americans. In turn, this hatred is directed inward, a situation which further immobilizes the African American: "He hates first his oppressor, and then because he lives in constant fear of this hatred being discovered, he hates himself--because of this fear" ("Dilemma" 56). That Jones is unable to either quell his fear or act on his hatred leads him to see himself as either "a coward or a fool" (*If* 30), a situation which drives his absurd behaviour: his always abandoned attempts to seduce Madge Perkins and his plan to terrorize and then kill Johnny Stoddart, a white man who beat him unconscious after he wins money from a group of white co-workers in a game of dice.

Madge Perkins is the most graphic illustration of what Gilbert Muller describes as Himes's "style of the grotesque" (*Chester* 28). In every encounter with Jones on board the ship, Madge, a white Texan, stages a scene from her own interior "film," what might be called a type of Hollywood racial, or racist, gothic. As Jones describes it, "she deliberately put on a frightened, wide-eyed look and backed away from me as if she was scared stiff, as if she was a naked virgin and I was King Kong" (*If* 19). While Jones experiences "[l]ust...like an electric shock" (19) in her presence, he is equally repelled by the fact that she "wears" her sexuality as if "[s]he had a sign up in front of her as big as Civic Centre--KEEP AWAY, NIGGERS, I'M WHITE!" (125). When Madge refuses to assist one of

Jones's crew, declaring that she "ain't gonna work with no nigger!" (27), Jones's angry retort--"Screw you then, you cracker bitch!" (27)--is grounds for his demotion.

Several days after his encounter with Madge, Jones's department head ensures that Jones is in his office when he tells a sexually-explicit and racist "joke" involving a white man and a black woman. Jones hurriedly leaves the room: "I wanted to just take my tail between my legs and slink on out. It was a gut punch and my stomach was hollow as a drum; it took all I had to keep standing up straight" (123).¹⁶ After this incident, so that he "could keep looking the white folks in the face" (123), Jones decides to humiliate Madge by seducing her, an act which Richard Wright described in his review of the novel as designed to "to violate the symbol of her superiority--her white body" ("Two Novels" m7). However, Jones's attempts at seduction are foiled by his fear of "this woman with so much white inside her" (*If* 124) and when he isn't contemplating rape as a way to overcome this fear--an act he never realizes--he pursues Stoddart as a way to overcome his hatred and fear of white men. While Jones recognizes the absurdity of his actions, he is unable to stop himself: "[I]t was the funniest goddamned thing that had ever happened. A black son of a bitch destroying himself because of a no-good white slut from Texas. *It was so funny because it didn't make any sense*" (126, emphasis added).

Jones's confusion is, in part, the result of a sexual angst bound up with his belief that the white world conspires to deny him his "manhood" (123). His failure to seduce Madge makes him feel "castrated, snake-bellied, and cur-doggish...like a nigger being horse-whipped in Georgia" (126). However, he knows that if he is successful, his actions

have the potential of invoking punishment from the white world. To Jones, there seems to be no way out of this increasingly absurd situation. This is epitomized by the fact that the sexual "sign" that is inscribed on Madge's white body is, to Jones, no longer the explicit warning against sexual trespass noted above but a paradoxical statement which reflects his own growing sense of panic and paralysis. It "reads" like a sign he once saw: "*Read and run, nigger; if you can't read, run anyhow*" (142, emphasis in original).

Similarly, Jones's pursuit of Stoddart takes on a symbolic significance which goes beyond that of a personal vendetta. Jones hopes that by killing a white man, "a supreme being" (38), he can break out of the cycle of fear and hatred of white people. By stalking Stoddart and making his intentions to kill him known, Jones in fact trades places with his victim. He wants Stoddart to be the object of violence, to acquire the knowledge of fear: "I wanted him to feel as scared and powerless and unprotected as I felt....to look death in the face and know it was coming and know there wasn't anything he could do but sit there and take it" (35). Jones, in turn, assumes the subject position of the white male: "...I felt relaxed, confident, strong....just like I thought a white boy oughta feel" (38). Jones succeeds in killing Stoddart only in the imaginary of his dream life, but it allows him to experience, for a fleeting moment, the absurd state of the free: "...I had conquered the world and gotten past...as free, goddamnit, as Thomas Jefferson...I'm out now--*out*--I'm broken out" (197, emphasis in original).

This inversion of the roles of the white perpetrator and the black victim of violence is an implicit critique of the fact that, as Jones puts it, "the only thing white people have

ever respected is force" (89). At the same time, his views are disturbingly complicit with an ethos of masculinist violence, one that Himes himself believed to be a product of America's peculiar history of violent conquest, racial confrontation and revolution. As he explained in a 1970 interview with John A. Williams: "[A]ny country that was born in violence and has lived in violence always knows about violence. Anything can be initiated, enforced, contained or destroyed on the American scene through violence" (329).¹⁷ Jones, however, does not limit violence to "personal" encounters. He advocates violent, black "revolution" as the "only solution to the Negro problem" (*If* 89). As Himes told Hoyt Fuller in an interview in 1969, his own belief that "the Black man in America should mount a serious revolution and this revolution should employ a massive, extreme violence" dates from the publication of his first novel (18).

Himes's earlier wartime strategies for African American "revolution" de-emphasized the necessity for violence, focusing instead on what he described in his essay "Negro Martyrs are Needed" (1944) as the "*manifest will of the [American] people*" to enforce the Constitution, a situation which would, ideally, ensure that "there will be no shooting" (*Black* 233, emphasis in original).¹⁸ Jones's call for violent revolution in *If He Hollers Let Him Go* is itself qualified by his concomitant belief that the threat of such an action will force white Americans to take sides in the matter of the exclusion of African Americans from the democratic process. If enough so-called "manifest will" exists, white Americans will take sides with blacks and the revolution will prove unnecessary. If not, African Americans will inevitably lose but at least, as Jones puts it, it will become apparent

"where [they] stood" with their fellow citizens (89).

Patterns of a Race War

The loss of Jones's position as leaderman for his limited act of defiance against a racist social order is aligned with the racist absurdity of the internment of the Japanese Americans two years earlier. Jones establishes the emotional effect of the internment at the beginning of his first-person narrative, a situation which "colours" his perception of subsequent racial incidents in the city of Los Angeles. Jones describes the impact of his demotion and the now imminent possibility of military service in the same terms that he uses to describe the internment itself: "It had happened in a second; my job was gone and I was facing the draft; *like the Japanese getting pulled up by the roots*" (30, emphasis added). This condition of "rootlessness" explicitly refers to the fact that Japanese Americans were removed from their communities and "relocated" in deserted regions of the interior. Implicitly, however, it functions as a radical critique of the nation's historical paradox of deracination: the contemporary re-/creation of a silent, invisible Other--in this case, the Japanese Americans--as the antithetical racial "body" that defines the imbricated identities: white, American. The broader racial implications of the internment, which in the context of a war against genocidal regimes abroad invokes what in contemporary parlance might be called the threat of "disappearance," increasingly dominates Jones's consciousness.

Jones, like Himes himself, witnesses the machinations of racism when 110,000

Japanese Americans, the majority of whom were born in America and therefore citizens, were interned in the first six months of 1942 under the terms of Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066. To Jones, this is the outcome of an absurd process of trial by race: the arbitrary and summary execution of their "conviction," then "arrest," as well as their equally arbitrary exclusion from the definition "American." Their "disappearance" clarifies the reasons for his ever-present, if formerly abstract, sense of racial fear:

[I]t wasn't until I'd seen them send the Japanese away that I'd noticed it. Little Riki Oyana singing 'God Bless America' and going to [the internment camp in] Santa Anita with his parents next day. *It was taking a man up by the roots and locking him up without a chance.* Without a trial. Without a charge. Without even giving him a chance to say one word. It was thinking about if they ever did that to me, Robert Jones, Mrs. Jones's dark son, that started me to getting scared. (3, emphasis added)

The reaction of the people of Los Angeles to the bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1941, had already heightened Jones's sense of racial insecurity on the California "frontier." Literally overnight Los Angeles was awash with "crazy, wild-eyed, unleashed hatred...let loose in a flood. All that tight crazy feeling of race as thick in the streets as gas fumes" (4). As Mauricio Mazón points out, in the aftermath of Pearl Harbour many West coast white Americans associated the Japanese enemy with Japanese Americans: apparently "indistinguishable physically," it followed that they must also be so "ideologically" (15). However, when Jones encounters undisguised race hatred in the faces of white people looking at *him*, he realizes that this process of transference also applies to African Americans: "I was the same colour as the Japanese [and Japanese

Americans] and I couldn't tell the difference. 'A yeller-bellied Jap' coulda meant me too" (*If* 4).

While this is an objective description of the nation's wartime racial "confusion," Jones's statement is also an anguished and implicitly defiant declaration of his own shifting sense of racial identity in the wake of Pearl Harbour: a declaration of solidarity with the Japanese Americans *against* racial persecution.¹⁹ It is also an expression of fear that this is, *in deed*, a "private" or white man's war on the American second front and, therefore, an alarming portent of the state of postwar race relations within the United States and of (neo-)colonial relations worldwide.

Himes's final essay of the war years, "Democracy is for the Unafraid," was first published in the magazine *Common Ground* in 1944. It was reprinted a year later in Bucklin Moon's report on postwar race relations, the aptly named *Primer for White Folks*. In the essay, Himes posits the cause of white unease at the end of the war: "Today shortened horizons are bringing white and colored abruptly face to face, and...[white] fear is breaking out" (480).²⁰ Himes's perspective on the issues of race and power during and after World War II contributes to a critical re-evaluation of African American strategies of literary and political representation at a time when Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* (1944) and much of the contemporary writing of Richard Wright, who claimed intellectual kinship with Myrdal, described African American political and expressive culture as a reactionary divergence from "mainstream" American culture, what Myrdal described as "*a distorted development...a pathological condition*" (928, emphasis in original). Himes, like

Ellison, focused on the pathology of fear and the mechanisms of repression in white America. The important issue for Himes was not "that [the black ghettos of southside] Chicago could be the Vienna of American Fascism!" (xx), as Wright stated in his introduction to *Black Metropolis* (1945), but that "[white] dictatorship may come to the United States before we know what true democracy is like" ("Democracy" 481). *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and several of his short stories of the same period are Himes's literary exploration of this white "heart of darkness," and its implications for global racial politics, at the nation's core.

Himes examined the role that Japanese Americans played in the national psyche during the war in several nonfiction pieces. As noted above, many Americans were unable to distinguish Japanese Americans from the Japanese enemy, or to disassociate them from the racial anxiety generated by Japan's successful military forays, early in the war, into Asian territories formerly controlled by the West. As John Dower writes, these Japanese victories "challenged not just the Western presence but the entire mystique of white supremacy" upon which European and American imperialism had rested (5-6).²¹ The implications of this "challenge" within the context of American race relations are reflected in the apparently apocryphal story, recorded in Horace Cayton's article "'Fighting For White Folks" (1942), of a young black man who expresses the desire to have his eyes "slanted" so that he can fight back the next time a white man pushes him around (268). While the vast majority of African Americans supported the war against Japan, it was impossible to ignore the issues of race, and racism, that permeated the conflict in the

Pacific. The fear that this was a "white man's war" was reflected in the widely-circulated tale of the African American soldier who requests that his epitaph read: "Here lies a black man killed fighting a yellow man for the protection of a white man" (Cayton 268). As Cayton wrote, each Japanese military success, as well as such actions as the move for Indian independence from Britain, "evokes among the majority group the response of fear and the determination to keep down the dark races" (270).

This situation informs Himes's reading of the reasons for the internment: the Japanese Americans evoked both the racial fears associated with the Japanese enemy and anxiety concerning the nation's own racial contradictions. They were interned, Himes wrote in "Democracy," because they were "*Americans* of darker-skinned ancestry whose loyalty to the ideology of white supremacy is doubted" (479, emphasis added). In one of the most radical, if not "treasonous," observations that Jones makes in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, he delineates the racial and rhetorical divide between himself and his white co-workers in words which echo those of Himes: dialogue across the races is possible only if there is a willingness "to reject the theory of white supremacy and condemn all of its institutions, including loyalty and patriotism in time of war" (120). The internment of the Japanese Americans and the de facto internment of Jones in the segregated military at the end of the novel is ironic proof of what Horace Cayton described as a central tenet of Japanese propaganda: "that democracy necessarily means white supremacy" (269).

Himes's most provocative writing on the Japanese Americans was published in a Pacific coast, African American newspaper, *The War Worker*, in November 1943 (Second

Half). In his article, Himes publishes excerpts from the diary of a Nisei, a first-generation Japanese American, written in August 1933.²² The diarist struggles to acquire the Japanese language in order to become an interpreter of his ancestral culture to his fellow Americans, in part, to counteract rampant racial prejudice. His newly-acquired "hybrid tongue" (8) is a metaphor for his liminal position between cultures and histories. Himes introduces the diary as a medium for understanding the situation of Japanese Americans: the fact that they are "command[ed]...to uphold, cherish, and abide by a system of government and a way of life" which has denied them many of its "rights, privileges and opportunities" (8). Himes also makes it clear that this situation applies to other American minority groups whose "allegiance" to the nation is, therefore, not always "manifested in glowing immolation" (8).

The anonymous writer of the diary has also been rendered "rootless." He has been denied the right to speak his race, to articulate his historical identity and experience because of prejudice, and at the same time, he has been refused the identity "American." This is, in Du Bois's famous rendering, the state of double-consciousness: of being allowed no true Self consciousness, only perpetual Otherness. However, what the diary writer strives for is not a method of redress, but one of address and, implicitly, a way to assert his presence or "visibility" within the American democracy: a radical and articulate expression of double consciousness as transformative practice. Such a practice reconciles the two apparently divergent elements of the diarist's hybrid identity: his "nationalist" or racial experience and his Americanness. This is similar to Ellison's rhetorical and political effort

to reconcile these dual aspects of African American experience in his *Negro Quarterly* editorial of Spring 1943. What Larry Neal describes as central to Ellison's method also applies to this Nisei writer: an assertion of "the will toward self-definition, exclusive of the overall white society, and at the same time the desire not to be counted out of...American democracy" (39). This assertion is the inverse of the meaning of the title of Himes's novel taken from a children's rhyming game--"catch a nigger by the toe, if he hollers let him go"--that "counts out" the participants. While Jones is never able to fully accept the state of double consciousness, but continues to view immersion in the larger culture as the epitome of American "freedom," Himes, as writer, begins to explore the possibilities of African American folk expression as just such a method of "black" address in *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and in several of his wartime short stories.

Himes concludes his introduction to the Nisei's diary with a statement calculated to shock, to declare what is at stake in this process of deracination on the war's second front: "If after reading these excerpts...all of us are still consumed with our relentless hatred for [Japanese Americans]...let's take them out and shoot them..." (8). Jones's fear of just such a violent "game" of "counting out," and his awareness of the fact that his colour has aligned him with the "enemy within," paralyse him. That African Americans "replace" the internees from Little Tokyo, the downtown neighbourhood that Japanese Americans were forced to vacate and one of the few areas from which black migrants to Los Angeles were not restricted by covenants and other means, heightens Jones's fears about this process of racial transference. Several months after arriving on the "frontier" of California, he is

figuratively imprisoned by his fear of racist reprisal despite the fact that he remains, ostensibly, in the land of the free. To survive, he adopts a strategy of disappearance and silence: "All I wanted was the white folks to let me alone; not say anything to me; not even look at me" (*If* 4). The fear that "came along with consciousness" (2) every morning is so intense that he begins "[l]iving every day scared, walled in, locked up....keeping ready to die every minute" (4), an emotional state equivalent to the actual state of the internees.²³

Democracy is the Negroes' ("Now" 273)

Himes's earliest wartime stories reflect the hope that the rhetoric of the war, and African American participation in it, will engender a radical shift in the American racial status quo. As such, these early works serve as an index of the degree of Himes's disillusionment with the state of the nation by the end of the war. In his interview with Michel Fabre, Himes described his short story "Two Soldiers," published in *Crisis* in January 1943, as a "clumsy attempt at propaganda" ("Chester" 125). This story, and "So Softly Smiling," published in *Crisis* at the end of 1943,²⁴ do in fiction what the most re-/visionary elements of his essay, "Now is the Time! Here is the Place!" also attempt: to depict a nation engaged in a war for equality and freedom on both "fronts."

"Two Soldiers" is an uneven mixture of racial satire and earnest social commentary, blending parodic representations of racial stereotypes, a battle scene that as Stephen Milliken writes "could only have come from a Grade-B war movie" (57), and the

voice of a narrator intent on documenting the "conversion experience" of a white racist soldier in time of war. As Himes wrote in "Democracy is for the Unafraid," death on the battlefield "for the preservation of the same ideal" teaches a "lesson of equality" to America's soldiers, one which the nation's civilians must have the "courage" to emulate (483).

In the midst of an offensive against the German army, Private Crabtree, a white Georgian for whom "[t]he sight of a Negro in a uniform...was enough to make him go berserk," finds himself in a bomb crater "beside a nig-a colored boy" (*Stories* 61). The African American soldier, who is never actually named, assumes Crabtree's racist label "George." "George" has been ducking enemy fire in a bomb gully when six white soldiers, including Crabtree, take cover with him. He becomes the "seventh soldier" (61), an allusion to Du Bois's description of the African American as "seventh son," the embodiment of double-consciousness, of racial or "national" and American identities, who plays a prophetic role in American society (*Souls* 214).²⁵ In "Two Soldiers," Himes both parodies "George's" racial "traits," as "George" manipulates them in the face of a white world represented by Crabtree, and demonstrates his heroic Americanness in a direct affront to Crabtree's racism.

"George" and Crabtree are exaggerated versions of common racial stereotypes. Crabtree is a tobacco-chewing, cotton-chopping, squirrel-hunting, farm boy (62-3): what might be called a southern redneck. "George" speaks in a tongue-in-cheek, street-wise slang which anticipates and parodies Crabtree's (mis)conceptions about African Americans

while it subversively claims the role that Crabtree's racist moniker confers: he is a figure of the black Everyman as a type of linguistic trickster. "George" explains that he found himself in the bomb crater because he "was chasin' a fly" (61); he wishes for a quart of gin while his white sergeant hopes for tea (61-2); and he leaps out of the crater in pursuit of the German sniper who has the group in his sights with the declaration: "Well, efn it ain't Basin Street" (62).

Crabtree, angered by the fact that the "[g]oldurned coon, thinks he's good as a white man in that uniform" (62), joins "George" in his dash across No Man's Land in pursuit of the sniper. Although Crabtree has the sniper in his sights, he is "[s]o occupied...with this *private hatred* in his soul, he forgot the winning of the war" (63, emphasis added). He lets the German shoot "George" before he himself pulls the trigger. Despite being wounded, "George" saves Crabtree by shooting at a German bomber which has opened fire on the white soldier. In turn, Crabtree risks his own life by carrying the dying "George" off the field. Himes later described the "reconciliation" between the two men as "trite" (Fabre, "Chester" 125). However, Crabtree undergoes a private "revolution" in his thinking about race, carrying "George" "in his heart...for days, for weeks, for years, back to home, back to Georgia" (64).

"So Softly Smiling" focuses on a black soldier, Lieutenant Roy Squires. Initially ambivalent about the war effort, he begins to shape and define its aims in terms of a "reconstructed" postwar America in which African Americans are included in the project of democracy. While on leave from the North African front he meets a sophisticated

Harlem poet, Mona Morrison, and their subsequent courtship and marriage comes to symbolize the Lieutenant's postwar vision. Successful relationships between black men and women are rare in Himes's wartime fiction; he was primarily concerned with depicting the destabilizing effects of racism and specifically the ways in which economic discrimination against black men affected the domestic life of African Americans. In "All God's Chillun Got Pride," the protagonist's fear that he will be unable to provide for his wife within their marriage becomes representative of his untenable position within the larger racist society. Perhaps marriage "*was another practical joke* the white people were playing on him, and he would discover...that Negroes were even denied the emotion of love and the holy state of matrimony" (*Stories* 26, emphasis added). This situation invokes slavery's historical machinations against African American domestic life and points to the fact that they are reproduced in the present in new and insidious ways.²⁶

That Roy and Mona achieve marriage and are confident of their ability to be economically self-determining are indications of the degree to which this story functions as "propaganda." Their marriage is a sign of a projected future in which what Himes described in his interview with Michel Fabre as "the possibility of national unity" on the battlefield during the war ("Chester" 126) has profound implications for African Americans on the postwar "domestic front." In contrast, in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, the possibility of dramatic change at "home" is all but abandoned, a fact symbolized by the nature of the relationship between Jones and his upper-class girlfriend Alice Harrison. Their impending marriage is a sign of Jones's forced capitulation to the racist status quo.

Initially, Squires believes that as a black man he has "nothing to win" in what he perceives to be a white man's war (*Stories* 68). However, a newspaper account of a black leader's speech, declaring "that America belonged to the Negro as much as it did to anyone" generates in him "a funny feeling, maybe it was pride, or ownership" (68). This "feeling" compels him to enlist. While in the Army, as Himes explained to Fabre, Squires "ultimately realizes that his part [in the war] is as important as that of a white American" ("Chester" 126). With Roosevelt's Four Freedoms as Squires's inspiration, the war becomes a fight for African American inclusion: "*a bigger fight than just to keep the same old thing we've always had....It got to be more like...building security and peace and freedom for everyone*" (*Stories* 68, emphasis added). This process of American democratic (*re*)construction has implications on the "home front": "It's got to be building for freedom and *it's got to be so big and wide there'll be room in it for happiness, too*" (68, emphasis added). "The pursuit of happiness" finds its most direct and potent expression in the marriage of Mona and Roy.

Mona is Roy's female equivalent, literally reproducing his heroism in war on the American home front. Not only is she pregnant by the time Roy leaves to rejoin the war, she is making plans to build them a house in the country, the literal foundation of their postwar life together: "[W]hile you're building us peace and freedom and security, I'll be building....A rambling, old-fashioned, comfortable house out of old stones. I will build it with my hands" (71). In contrast, in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, when Jones imagines his future life with Alice, and particularly his role as father, it is haunted by the spectre of

racial violence: "[E]very time I came home late my children would wonder whether the white folks had killed their papa at last" (*If* 163).

In both "So Softly Smiling" and *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, the bond between the couples is described in the language of religious deliverance. Roy and Mona "had gotten over"; their marriage is "a crossing into permanence" (*Stories* 71). Alice and Bob cross "over the river Jordan into the promised land" (*If* 170). In the novel, however, Jones's pending marriage to Alice is presented as an escape from the racially-charged reality of his everyday existence. On the night before Jones proposes to Alice, he dreams about a white boy attacking a black boy with a small knife concealed in his fist. He inflicts so many wounds that the black boy slowly bleeds to death (149-50). Jones wakes to an insistent voice inside his head: "*Bob, there never was a nigger who could beat it*" (150, emphasis in original). This phrase is ironically echoed in Alice's advice to Jones, later that day, to accept his position in a racially-segregated society. Jones begins his day with the overwhelming sense "that unless I found my niche and crawled into it...I couldn't live in America" (150). In *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, the house, the garden, the planned-for legal career, which in "So Softly Smiling" are signs of the couple's hopes for a postwar world "big enough" for African Americans, are instead, as Alice explains to Jones, "goal[s] that you can attain within the segregated pattern in which we live" (168).

Roy's and Mona's stone house symbolizes permanence, the fact that "togetherness would always be" even in the face of war (*Stories* 71), a condition which portends the stability of their future domestic life together. In contrast, Bob and Alice seal their

relationship while sitting in her car at "a typical southern California drive-in" (*If* 164), a popular and highway culture promised land: a building "shining with chrome...and cars parked spokeswise....Pretty girls...showing a lot of leg and thigh in the hopes they might be 'discovered' by some Hollywood talent scout" (164). The drive-in, and particularly its link to Hollywood, is an apt metaphor for Jones's California experience: freedom is, at best, transitory; at worst, it is an illusion.²⁷

It can be known that a native-born white man, the end product of all our strivings...will seize upon an adolescent, zoot-suited Mexican [American] and derive deep feelings of pleasure from stomping his hopeless guts out upon the pavements of Los Angeles.

(Wright, Introduction to *Black Metropolis* xxvii)

The race riots which swept through many American cities in the Summer of 1943 signalled growing frustration and anger among African Americans over continued discrimination and segregation in the Army and defense plants, as well as a fierce resolve on the part of some white Americans to maintain a racist status quo. Ralph Ellison, Ann Petry and James Baldwin witnessed and wrote about the Harlem riot of August 1943. Himes was a witness to the Los Angeles riots in early June. During several days of rioting, white sailors, soldiers and later, civilians, beat zoot suit-wearing Mexican Americans--and several African Americans--stripping off or mutilating their flamboyant clothing. The riot reached its peak on June 7, the day after the first newspaper account of the violence was printed in *The Los Angeles Times*, when a crowd of five thousand

soldiers and civilians charged through downtown Los Angeles. Himes's commentary on the violence, "Zoot Riots Are Race Riots," was published in *Crisis* in July, 1943.²⁸

Although the incident which initiated the riot is unclear, racial tensions had been building in the city since the American declaration of war. Mexican Americans, like African Americans, were drawn to the war boom cities of the Pacific coast, entering into jobs previously denied them. This wartime migration brought increasing numbers of *pachucos*, zoot-suited Chicano youths who were associated in the public imagination with "secret" criminal societies (Lipsitz, *Rainbow* 85), into Los Angeles. As Carey McWilliams noted, the press, and particularly the Hearst newspapers, took the lead in promulgating this racial stereotype by headlining incidents involving Mexican Americans and pushing police to check an associated "increase in...crime" (qtd. in Guzman 236).²⁹ Neil Wynn points out that writers for Hearst publications had also been active in implicating Japanese Americans in so-called acts of espionage and sabotage (18). Mexican Americans were implicitly linked to Japanese Americans in newspaper accounts. As Patricia Guzman wrote in *The Negro Yearbook 1941-46*, the press "manipulated the widespread suspicions and superstitions abroad concerning an[y] excluded, 'strange and foreign' minority" (236). In mutilating their zoot suits, the rioters were d/effacing defiant symbols of Mexican American ethnic and class solidarity. This organized, physical violence was also, to appropriate Peter McLaren's description of the reactionary enforcement of white cultural hegemony, an action which literally "denuded, deracinated, and culturally stripped" its victims (122).

In "Zoot Riots Are Race Riots," Himes implicates both white servicemen and "the nazi-minded citizenry" of Los Angeles in instigating the riot (*Black* 224). In deliberately provocative rhetoric he draws an analogy between those groups that undermined the Reconstruction of the United States after the Civil War and the Nazi storm troopers: both are types of what might be called "private armies" in a "private war" waged by white supremacists. The riot signalled "the birth of the storm troopers in Los Angeles, the reincarnation...the *continuation* of the vigilantes, the uniformed Klansmen" of the postwar South (220, emphasis in original). On what Angelo Herndon described as the "last frontier" (3) of race relations in America, the riot was, according to Himes, incontestable evidence that "the South has won Los Angeles" (*Black* 225).

While Himes clearly recognizes that America is at war with the Japanese, his essay exposes what John Dower describes as "patterns of a race war": the ways in which representations of the racial Other are implicated in, and reproduced by, violence and conquest.³⁰ Himes argues that the rioters' actions were an expression of a complex of racial fears engendered by the war in the Pacific as they converged with fears about the presence of "alien" minorities within the United States. He makes his point in satirizing the riot as "the great battle which took place on Main Street *and points East*" when the American military "contacted and defeated a handful of youths with darker skins"; now that the zoot-suiters have been "defeated," the army can concentrate its force on the nation's "most formidable foe," the Japanese (*Black* 220, emphasis added). That Himes inverts his initial configuration of the threat posed by the Axis powers--Germany, Italy,

Japan--and places the Japanese at the top of the "list" (220), seems designed to play on the racial anxieties of white Americans.

To Himes, the Mexican Americans were a symbolic substitute for the Japanese enemy: to humiliate them gave the rioters the same "wonderful feeling" that "it seems always to give a white man...when he whips a Jap" (222). Los Angeles's white citizens, urged on by many of the city's newspapers, experienced this "feeling" vicariously: "What could make the white people more happy than to see their uniformed sons sapping up some dark-skinned people?" (225). Himes illustrates this point when he narrates an encounter on a city bus between a Mexican American couple and a group of drunken white sailors just back from the Pacific, "boasting of how they had whipped the Japs" and "fought lak a white man!" (222). One of the sailors eyes the girl and begins to brag that in the Pacific "those native gals go fuh us....uh white man can git any gal he wants" (222). Historians generally agree that competition over Mexican American women increased the tensions between servicemen and Chicano men.³¹ Himes, however, intimates the broader implications of this fact: it is representative of both the historical patterns of the American plantocracy in the South and present power relations in the Pacific and other colonized regions. The riot, Himes concludes, made the city "safe for white people--to do as they damned well pleased" (225).

As if to explore further the implications of these racialized power relations, the first story Himes published after the riot, "All He Needs is Feet,"³² is set in the South, America's "interior colony" and a place where present neo-feudal relations of power and

production are deeply-imbedded in the slave-holding past. A second story, "Christmas Gift," was written sometime in 1944 but remained unpublished until Himes selected it for his anthology *Black on Black* (1973). Both stories examine racial violence in the South--an absurdly grotesque redaction of American racism as a whole--within the contemporary context of the "patterns of a race war" abroad.

"All He Needs Is Feet" begins with a routine occurrence in the segregated South. Ward, a black man, steps off a Georgia sidewalk to let a group of white people pass. However, one of the men deliberately bumps into him, then demands to know why this "nigger...want[s] all the street?" (*Stories* 346). When Ward protests his treatment, the white man pushes him and when Ward subsequently calls him "Mr. Hitler," a fight ensues. A group of townspeople overpower Ward and by the time the local policeman arrives the crowd is so big that all he can do is "suggest" that they lynch Ward outside the city limits. The townspeople, however, decide that Ward's offenses do not warrant death. Instead, they tie his hands, soak his feet with gasoline obtained with a spectator's ration card, and set them alight. The crowd erupts in laughter as Ward runs through the town's streets. Two weeks later, while Ward is serving time in the city jail for assault, a doctor amputates his feet.

His family brings Ward, now dependent on crutches, north to Chicago. His sister provides him with money to buy leather knee pads and he gets a job shining shoes. He does well enough to buy several war bonds. One night he leaves work early in order to see the movie *Bataan*. In a brilliant twist, Himes juxtaposes the grotesque act of racist

absurdity which has resulted in Ward's disfigurement with Hollywood's cinematic construction of the heroic black soldier, an image which dominated the movie screen throughout 1943.³³ *Bataan*, the first of these films, received almost universal praise (Cripps, *Making* 76). In the movie, the actor Kenneth Spencer plays an African American soldier serving in an apparently "integrated" unit of the Corps of Engineers. Like "George" in "Two Soldiers," Spencer's character saves a white man from walking into enemy fire. In the end, however, both men die heroically with the rest of the group when they are overwhelmed by the Japanese.

Ward's response to the film both parodies the filmmakers' hoped-for response from the audience and articulates a truth which the fact of the segregated Army belied: "Just shows what a colored man can do if he tried hard enough....Now there's that Mr. Spencer, actin' like a sho-nuff soldier, just like the white men in the picture" (*Stories* 347). However, Himes's story also intimates that the film obscures the absurd realities of American racism, a situation analogous to Ward's act of shoving his crutches under his seat so that no one will stumble over them. At the end of the film, "a big beautiful American flag appeared on the screen, and the stirring strains of the National Anthem were heard" (347). When the audience, with the exception of Ward, stands and applauds the white man seated behind him thumps Ward on the head and demands that he also rise. When Ward explains why he is unable to do so, the white man hits him again "in a sort of frustrated fury" and Ward falls between the seats (347). A policeman at the back of the theatre observes the white man's actions and when he arrests him the man explains that he

is from Arkansas and "couldn't stand seein' that nigger sitting there--even if he din have no feet!" (348). Ward's patriotism is unquestionable: he is, after all, saving money to buy a fourth war bond. The irony arises from the fact that, as Himes wrote in his introduction to the Nisei's diary, American minorities are "command[ed]...to uphold, cherish, and abide by a system of government and a way of life that excludes them" by the very white men complicit in those acts of violence which undercut their willingness and ability to do so ("People" Second Half 8).

In "Christmas Gift," an African American soldier, Johnny Stevens, returns home to Mississippi on Christmas Eve. He is bitter about his experience in the Jim Crow military, one which replicated racist conditions in the South: he "had taken as much of it in the army as he had in Mississippi" (*Stories* 351). Jumping off the train as it pulls into his home town, Johnny experiences "a sudden sinking sensation of being cut off from civilization; a cold hollow fear of himself, of his inability to take it any longer" (351). He plans to stay only long enough to celebrate Christmas, then take his wife and daughter North with him.

The story actually begins with his wife Norma Jean's account of her own situation on the home front while Johnny has been at war. Wartime labour shortages made it possible for many black women to find work outside of domestic service occupations and for at least part of the three years that Johnny has been away, Norma Jean has worked in one of these jobs. However, now that the war is over, her job has disappeared and she "probably never will be able to get anything else to do but go back to Mrs. Calhoun's

kitchen" (350). That their daughter faces the same bleak choice is one of the reasons that Johnny plans to leave the state: "He wasn't gonna have Lucy brought up to work in no white woman's kitchen" (351). "Christmas Gift" is Himes's most perceptive account of the effects of the war and postwar readjustment on African American women.³⁴ This section of the story ends with Norma Jean's and Lucy's prayers that somehow Johnny will make it home for Christmas.

On his way home in the middle of the night, Johnny is stopped by two white men, one of them the deputy sheriff. Johnny struggles with his rage at their action, but maintains his composure. When their flashlights reveal the row of medals on the jacket of "the Stevens nigger!" (352), he answers to their taunts that he must have received them for cleaning out latrines--a reference to the fact that the majority of black soldiers could serve only in segregated service and supply units--by declaring that he earned them by killing the enemy. He stops himself before adding the phrase "like you" (352). However, when the younger man tells Johnny to "[s]ay *suh* w'en you talk tuh me, you yellah bastard" (352, emphasis in original), he can no longer restrain himself: "You got the wrong feller, ain'tcha? That's what *you've been callin' the Japs*" (352, emphasis added). Johnny's ironic challenge to the racist status quo provokes the two men. They put out their lights and beat Johnny to death. At dawn, Lucy coaxes her mother out of bed to see what presents Santa Claus has brought. The story ends with the suggestion that what awaits them is the horror of discovering Johnny's body.

My People, My People

When in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Jones is replaced by a white leaderman, Tebbel, he expects the members of his crew to be "sullen, resentful....ashamed of being black" (*If* 71). Instead, the crew stages a brief wildcat strike in protest.³⁵ Their boasts, jokes and exaggerated stories of confrontations with racist white Americans are topped off with the vivid telling of an African American folktale. This action stops their work and delegitimizes white authority in the person of Tebbel, whose power of signification is disrupted by their strategy of black language use. At the same time, their use of black forms of expression to assert racial and class solidarity functions implicitly to critique Jones's need to achieve the status of a "simple Joe," shorn of any cultural markers of a racial difference deeply imbedded in American history. Jones's response to their wildcat strike demonstrates his ambivalent attitude toward the working-folk who are the members of his crew.

As long as Jones is leaderman, his crew is assigned to "one stinking hole and then another" (20) while white workers are given jobs above deck in the ship's superstructure. The crew's work space, deep within the third deck, evokes the conditions of the Middle Passage: "It was cramped quarters aft, a labyrinth of narrow, hard-angled companionways, jammed with...workers who had to be contortionists first of all" (20). This arrangement of space on the ship is a contemporary reconfiguration of the African American's historical place, or "base," within the nation's racist superstructure. This mapping of African American place extends to Los Angeles's black neighbourhoods: Little Tokyo, where the

"spooks and pills had come in and taken over" from the internees (72), and those areas of Central Avenue where Jones mingles with "hustlers and pimps, gamblers and stooges" (43). To Jones, the physical boundaries of these areas delineate the racist absurd, the condition of being unable "to live in America as an equal" (154). Only after he decides to strike back at the embodiment of white supremacist power, Johnny Stoddart, does Jones feel that he is "free" of these conditions. Standing on Central Avenue, having decided "to kill him so he'd know I was killing him and in such a way that he'd know he didn't have a chance" (35), he experiences an "emancipation": "It wasn't as if I was locked up down there as I'd been just yesterday. I was free to go now; but I liked it with my folks" (43).

Jones makes several near-fatal errors in this "mapping" of African American place, however. While the spatial arrangement of the city reproduces what he later describes as the "nigger limit[s]" that the racist absurd imposes upon black Americans (151), Jones equates these "places" with an equally restricted consciousness. He mistakes his own physical and social mobility, the fact that he is an urban wanderer or "stranger" who is able to traverse the social strata of black Los Angeles, as a condition which produces a critical consciousness distinct from that of those "confined" to Central Avenue or to work below decks at the Atlas Shipyards. In this respect, Jones occupies a position analogous to that of Ellison's pilot in "Flying Home." When the pilot is aided by a black sharecropper after he crashes his plane into an Alabama cotton field--a man named Jefferson who spins out the folktale of the black man who is thrown out of heaven for defying his prescribed place--the pilot experiences an intensely painful version of what Ellison describes as his

"ambivalence before his own group's divisions of class and diversities of cultures" (*Essays* 476). Similarly, in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Jones's estrangement from his crew, and their folk "past," is evident in his reaction to their wildcat strategy.

While Tebbel stands off to one side listening, one of the crew tells a story about his job as waterboy for a gang of Irish railroad workers who consistently address him as "coon." Knowing that he cannot fight them all, he retaliates by urinating in each bucket of water he carries to them (107). Jones's crew continues its work stoppage with a round of jokes, ritual insults and boasts, each member attempting to surpass the others' verbal feats. The session ends with the recitation of a folktale in which a black man, sitting on a riverbank, pokes fun at the appearance of an alligator swimming by, only to have the creature actually speak to him. Despite the fact that the alligator's reply to the man's doubts that he can actually speak contains an implicit warning--"All us alligators kin talk. The difference between us and you coloured folks, you coloured folks talk too much" (108)--the black man rushes off to find Mr. Jones, a white man who, surprisingly, is busy ploughing his field while the black man lazes at the river. He tells Mr. Jones about the alligator's miraculous abilities. When the white man arrives at the river, the alligator says nothing and Jones, who had vowed to punish the black man if the alligator cannot in fact speak, severely beats him. As soon as Jones leaves, the alligator speaks, but only to reiterate his statement that black people talk too much.

As Lawrence Levine points out, there are several versions of this tale, the function of which was to communicate "strategies for survival" to slaves in the antebellum South,

specifically the need to remain guarded or silent in the face of unfathomable inequities in power (99).³⁶ The fact that the tale ends a wildcat strike by a group of African American workers in the era of Executive Order 8802, which some hoped would usher in black economic emancipation, invokes a level of irony analogous to the crew's metaphoric position below decks. The meaning of the folktale, however, is ambivalent in the context of a novel whose title describes the consequences faced by a black man when he speaks out against racist absurdity. Certainly, strategies of indirect communication or of silence are not solutions to Jones's predicament. Rather, it is the way in which the tale is employed that suggests an African American strategy of resistance. The crew's verbal jesting marks Tebbel as an outsider: he is rendered powerless because he literally cannot speak the language. At the same time, their work stoppage registers their disagreement with white authority's treatment of Jones while their stories reveal the absurdity of American racism.

Jones is clearly amused by the actions of his crew--they "had clowned up more than an hour" (111)--but he grants it no particular political importance. Instead, he can now "go up and talk to the union steward without blowing [his] top" (111), an ironic gesture given the point of the folktale. Although he is gratified that his crew is concerned about what has happened to him, by the time the initial story about the Irish workers is finished, Jones's thoughts already measure the extent of his alienation from the group: "[H]ere it goes. I hadn't expected anything anyway, so I wasn't disappointed. *I'd known from the first that, whatever was done for me, I'd have to do it for myself*" (107, emphasis

added). Jones finds his counterpart in Ben, the only other member of the crew who is university-educated. Ben does not participate in the strike but continues working. When the crew ends its work stoppage, Ben indicates to Jones through gesture--"twirling motions with his index finger at the side of his head" (109)--what he thinks of their actions and both men share in a chorus of "[m]y people, my people" (111).

The phrase "my people" alludes to a group of folktales the subject of which is the alleged inability of African Americans to work together on issues of common concern (Levine 330). Jones uses this expression to describe the denizens of Central Avenue (43) and Alice's upper-class friends who, in his opinion, pay too much attention to white people (89), as well as his crew. As one of Jones's men states when hearing of his demotion and pondering what action the crew should take: "Reason niggers ain't got nothing now, they don't stick together" (104). In his conversation with Ben, Jones alludes to a folktale in which a black man deliberately runs over a monkey--a figure of the "race"--and cuts off his tale: it ends with the aforementioned chorus of "[m]y people, my people" (111).³⁷ Jones dismisses the effectiveness and intention of their collective action. Ironically, he uses the same rhetorical vehicle, folklore, to do so.

While *If He Hollers Let Him Go* is clearly a "bitter novel of protest" (Himes, *Quality* 75), the rhetorical strategies behind the wildcat strike reflect a developing element of Himes's work during this period: the use of African American folklore, in a contemporary context, to both critique racist absurdity and to express aspects of black life resistant to, and resisting of, an American racist social order. My reading of this incident

is informed by Himes's theorization of the use of folklore and other forms of African American expressive culture in his later writing, specifically his detective stories. In *My Life of Absurdity*, Himes looks back at his struggle "to break through the barrier that labeled (sic) [him] as a 'protest writer'" (36). At the time, about 1955, he was working on the novel *Pinktoes* and, concurrently, the first in his detective series, *For Love of Imabelle*.³⁸ He felt constrained by what he described as "the old used forms for the black American writer [which] did not fit [his] creations" (*Absurdity* 36). His need to reconsider the rhetorical boundaries of his fiction was compelled, in part, by a reconsideration of the meaning of the absurd in African American life. In particular, he began to position his writing as rhetorically and politically situated on a "literal" middle ground on the American continuum of absurdity: *between* the realities of racist imprisonment or nonfreedom for African Americans and the nation's "vision" of equality and freedom. This territory of the imagination opened up rich possibilities for irony, parody and what James de Jongh describes as "a satiric landscape of pure rage" (200). The outer limits of the polarized configurations of the absurd form the boundaries of this black place-in-between, a site of "literalized" double-consciousness where the black writer has a clear view of both horizons of the American--and specifically the African American--experience of the absurd.

In order to arrive at this place-in-between, however, Himes had to *displace* the pathological paradigm that pervaded ideas about African American experience and cultural expression. In the mid-1940s, Richard Wright continued to be the most vociferous black

proponent of this view. His *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) had predicted that the war effort's literal production of an "identity of interests" between black and white workers on the factory floor would, in turn, portend the direction of postwar race relations within the United States (12 144). However, Wright suffered profound disillusionment with the outcome of the war for African Americans. In his introduction to *Black Metropolis* (1945), Wright threw his intellectual weight behind the conclusions of Gunnar Myrdal's just-published *American Dilemma*, pointing out that his own views paralleled those of the sociologist: it is out of "the oppression of Negroes by white people, that the Negro's conduct, his personality, his culture, his entire life flow naturally and inevitably" (xxix). In an ironic rewriting of his Communist-inspired "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), in which he positions the African American writer as a cultural worker capable of actualizing the revolutionary potential of black folk expression, Wright reconfigures the metaphor of the blueprint. He invokes the "base" conditions of a black cultural life engendered by the racist superstructure of American society: "The imposed conditions under which Negroes live detail the structure of their lives like an engineer outlining the blue-prints for the production of machines" (xx).

In contrast, Himes began to draw on elements of African American culture which expressed other aspects of black experience. As he wrote in his autobiography, this required "def[ying] the tradition of Richard Wright and treat[ing] the American black as absurd instead of hurt" (*Absurdity* 158). Himes distances himself from Wright's theory of African American culture as strictly reactive, and begins to view black culture as

expressive of a range of *responses* to American experience. While not denying the realities of the racism, Himes stretches his concept of the absurd to accommodate aspects of African American life which are more closely aligned to the absurdity of the "freedom" of self-definition:

I knew the life of an American black needed another image than just the victim of racism. We were more than just victims...we had a tremendous love of life, a love of sex, a love of ourselves. *We were absurd.* (*Absurdity* 36, emphasis added)

Himes associated the constraints of realistic or naturalistic fiction with the political agenda of the American Communist Party, with "all the protest...that the communists had filled them [African Americans] with" (*Absurdity* 158).³⁹ Like Ellison, Himes began to experiment with African American forms of expression, particularly those which reflected the myriad aspects of his absurd world view, as a way to overcome these rhetorical and political "limitations." Himes located his first detective novel within the rhetorical, and implicitly political, boundaries of African American strategies of representation: vernacular language, folklore and music. Himes wrote that *For Love of Imabelle* was written "out of the American black's secret mind itself" like "the blues of Bessie and Mamie Smith, and the [dialect] poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar" (*Absurdity* 158). Several of Himes's wartime stories reflect this shift, one similar to that which occurred in Ellison's theoretical writing of the same period. Like Ellison, Himes "turns Marxism on its head, and makes the manipulation of cultural mechanisms the basis of Black Liberation" (Neal 40).

Mistah Crow, Uncle Tom is dead

"Heaven Has Changed" was published in *Crisis* in March 1943, and "He Seen It In The Stars" in *Negro Story* in August 1944.⁴⁰ Both are political allegories which elaborate on several key issues in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. In "Heaven Has Changed," Himes explores black leadership and political change during the war, specifically strategies for African American self-determination. "He Seen It In The Stars" examines the mind, and delineates the political machinations, of the white racist in the person of Adolf Hitler. As well, it explores the future of an American democracy in which those he described in "Now Is The Time! Here Is The Place!" as the African Americans' "*most persistent enemies: Our native American fascists*" (271, emphasis in original) may come to dominate the postwar nation.

Two competing but inter-implicated conceptions of "heaven" as the projection of American race relations are present in Himes's novel: the vision of white supremacists and, ironically, the accommodationist goals of those whom Jones describes as black "collaborators" with the racist status quo. To the Texan Elsie, Madge Perkins's sister-in-law, "heaven" is the segregated South: "...God got dark angels in heaven what serve the white ones--that's in the Bible plain enough....And the sooner you coloured folks learn that, then the better off you'll be" (*If* 133). Her vision of heaven is a uniquely distorted version of a "traditional" antebellum defense of slavery, the Biblical dictum "Slaves honour thy masters."⁴¹ The races must be "different," according to Elsie, because only white people are made in God's image and, as further evidence, black people prefer to "stay to

themselves" (132). She blames the recent riots in the North on the disruption of this pattern of race relations: "That's why we ain't never had no trouble in Texas. All these riots in Detroit and New York and Chicago--it come from all this mixing up" (132).

This view of separate(d) and unequal races is juxtaposed to the "heaven" of Alice Harrison, her family and her friends. Jones rejects what he sees as the black upper class's strategy of racial appeasement, the evidence of which is the fact that people like the Harrisons have "prospered" under the conditions of American racist absurdity, the nation's racial-economic apartheid, by "adjusting themselves to the limitations of their race...[their] nigger limit" (150-51). People like the Harrisons "simply...accept being black as a condition over which...[they] had no control, then go on from there" (151). To "go on" requires adherence to the belief that one continues to make "great progress" within the "nigger limit"--a boundary as intangible as the borders of Central Avenue and Little Tokyo are real--until one day they will be permitted to move beyond it into the larger American society: "in time the white folks would appreciate all of this and pat you on the head and say, 'You been a good nigger for a long time. Now we're going to let you in'" (151).

To Jones, the Harrisons mistakenly equate upward mobility with equality--an *ascent* to freedom--when they should demand the fulfilment of what Himes describes in "If You're Scared Go Home" (1944) as the "common assent" of the American people to the principle of equality (*Black* 227). Mrs. Harrison's advice to Jones that "we've got to *earn* our equality" (*If* 52, emphasis added) unwittingly alludes to the problem as Jones sees it.⁴²

For this strategy he "didn't have anything...but the same contempt a white person has for a collaborator's out in France" (152).

The African American elite, according to Jones, follow a set of class-specific racial "commandments," the tenets of what he calls "their Jim Crow religion" (153): "Glorify your black heritage, revere your black heroes, laud your black leaders, cheat your black brothers, worship your white fathers (be sure and do that), segregate yourself" (151). The Harrisons appear to comply with the last of these three rules: Dr. Harrison "overcharg[es] poor hard-working coloured people for his incompetent services" (51) while Mrs. Harrison bemoans the disruptive presence of "Southern Negroes...coming in here and making it hard for us" (52); the family assiduously cultivates "social association" with whites (54); and, as discussed above, Alice advises Jones to aspire to her separate and unequal definition of success, to be, as Jones puts it, "nigger rich, nigger important...and go to nigger heaven" (153).

The implications of the first three "commandments," however, are ambivalent; they appear to express aspects of a positive, if nascent, black nationalism. But in Jones's view, these "rules" function to diminish the "Americaness" of blacks and reinforce their unequal and, therefore, their "unfree" status in the United States. In addition, they perpetuate the political and social hegemony of a black bourgeoisie who exploit the potentially positive aspects of "nationalist" power for its own ends, as signified by their aspirations toward "nigger heaven." Jones, however, never resolves the contradiction between his desire to be, as he puts it, "accepted as a man--without...distinction...of race" (153)--and essentially

without *history*, willing himself to "forget" that his ancestors were slaves in the same way that he believes white Americans have forgotten that "most of their ancestors were the riffraff of Europe" (152)--and his radical critique of a nation which models this American "citizen" on racial-cultural "whiteness." This archetypal American appears in its most exaggerated form as the figure of the "white father"--the white god--who guards the entrance to the American heaven just beyond the "nigger limit" and who will only admit the "*good nigger[s]*" (151): George Washington, whom Jones can only accept as "the father of [his] country--as long as [he] thought [he] had a country" (151); the president of Atlas Shipyards, the "good kind god" (70) who had agreed to Jones's promotion to leaderman because he was "considered the highest type of Negro" (202); and the putative Communist, Tom Leighton, who in the role of "a great white god" preaches the "general uprising of the masses" as a solution to the race problem (89). These figures stand for an American nation in which the founding fathers, as Ellison argues in "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," ensured that African Americans were "the human factor placed outside the democratic *master plan*" (*Essays* 85, emphasis added).

"Heaven Has Changed" is, however, a political allegory which challenges this exclusive configuration of American democracy. It is loosely structured around the folktale of the black man who is thrown out of a "white" heaven for daring to fully exercise his power to fly, the same tale which forms the core of the story which the sharecropper Jefferson narrates to the downed pilot in Ellison's "Flying Home."⁴³ In

Himes's version of this peculiarly American "heaven," the African American inhabitants organize to challenge the white father, "the Big God," and win access to democratic and economic power. "Heaven" tells the story of a black soldier who dies in battle and finds himself in a heaven: "a hot, fertile country...[with] fields of blossoming cotton stretching to the horizons" where black labourers sing spirituals while they work (*Stories* 73).

Clearly, this is not the heaven evoked by these spirituals, a place where the black person finally finds freedom. Nor is this the North, the intimation of this "free" heaven on earth. Rather, this "heaven" is modelled after the segregated South.

In *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Jones makes it clear that "freedom" without access to resources is the legacy of the failure of the first Reconstruction of the United States: "Negro people had always lived on sufferance, ever since Lincoln gave them their *freedom without any bread*" (150, emphasis added).⁴⁴ Himes points to the irony of Emancipation without work, or at least without work fundamentally different from that of the antebellum period, in his interview with John Williams: if freedom in itself was enough, then earth would be like heaven with its "milk and honey....Just to proclaim emancipation was not enough. You can't eat it; it doesn't keep the cold weather out" (346). In Himes's short story, "heaven" represents a "fallen" post-Reconstruction America.

The soldier, however, enters heaven just as it is about to undergo a significant transformation. As an allegory, events in the story parallel the changing economic and political conditions of African Americans during the war, specifically the growing militancy of black workers and the concomitant shift in the black leadership's relationship

to white power. Published early in 1943, before the worst of the riots of that year, the story is pervaded by a sense of optimism. Like "Two Soldiers" and "So Softly Smiling" it functions as a form of "reconstructive" propaganda. However, its overt and radical critique of American racial-economic segregation--the material manifestation of the denial of equality and freedom--aligns this aspect of the story with one of the dominant themes of his later wartime writing.

The African American workers in this American "heaven," like the slaves who created the spirituals, employ music to affirm the imminence of their triumph over oppression. They sing in "loud, defiant, rebellious voices" (*Stories* 73). The extent to which Himes may have intended to subvert the still popular Hollywood images of "stock Negro characters who sang either for glory or supplication" (Cripps, *Making* 74), the epitome of which was 1936's *Green Pastures*, can only be surmised. However, well into the war, this film was the measure of the degree to which Hollywood filmmakers were judged by African Americans to be "familiar only with the old rather than the new Negro" (Cripps, *Making* 74). In "Recent Negro Fiction" (1941), Ellison invokes this film, in which Biblical characters are depicted as contemporary, labouring Louisiana blacks, in his critique of Zora Neale Hurston's fiction of "calculated burlesque." Of her novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), Ellison writes: "This work sets out to do for Moses what *The Green Pastures* did for Jehovah; for Negro fiction it did nothing" (24). Himes's representation of the black labourers in "Heaven Has Changed" is more closely aligned to Ellison's construction of an emerging and politically astute African American urban

working class, rooted in a folk "past," than the stock figures of a black "folk" which (re)appeared in American film.⁴⁵

The soldier finds himself the bearer of the news that "Po Uncle Tom" has died after he encounters his funeral procession (*Stories* 73). As word passes among the workers, they erupt into joyous song and dance. "Mistah Crow," the "Little Boss Man" and the only white man on the scene (73), demands to know why they have stopped working. When they explain, and he refuses them permission to "shout" at Uncle Tom's funeral, Uncle Tom's son leads the group in defying Jim Crow with the words: "Ain't we all Uncle Tom's chillun?" (74). The allusion to Wright's first published work, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), also evokes the epigraph to the text, Wright's call for "a new word from another generation which says: -- 'Uncle Tom is dead!'" (*Early Works* 224). The workers throw down their tools and march to the church in the first of their mass actions in defiance of Jim Crow.

The workers, however, are barred at the church door by "Mistah Tradition," a chained and club-wielding monster who refuses to let them enter the church to shout. As Lawrence Levine writes, the (ring) shout's invocation of Biblical events such as the Exodus from Egypt and the fall of the walls of Jericho, and the fact that it often engendered an ecstatic state outside the "place" of bondage, was a powerful, collective affirmation by American slaves and their descendants of their eventual triumph over physical and political realities (38). In "Heaven Has Changed," the workers remain outside the church, but within sight of Mistah Tradition. Their defiant shout is both a

celebration of Uncle Tom's demise and an action designed to shake the foundations of American racist "tradition."

The soldier is admitted to the church, where he sits wiping blood from his wounds. The "Little God," a black man, preaches the sermon and praises the virtues of Uncle Tom as "a good servant" with whom the Big God has been pleased (*Stories* 74). He berates Uncle Tom's children for being unlike their "father," and for shouting at his funeral, and threatens to report their behaviour to the Big God. In the context of the war effort, the Little God's warnings suggest the counsel of those people and organizations--among them members of the Communist Party--who advised African Americans to stifle their protests about segregation and discrimination in civilian life and in the Army.

Despite their defiant attitude, however, Uncle Tom's children fear the Big God's worshippers because they "were a wild and vicious people who fought each other and killed each other and were never content to be peaceful and happy," an allusion to the war going on "below" (74). This resonates with Jones's more ironic observation, in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, that if African Americans refused to participate in the war effort until Jim Crow was abolished the "white folks would go on fighting...and no doubt win. They'd kill us maybe; but they couldn't kill us all. And if they did they'd have one hell of a job of burying us" (*If* 116). Uncle Tom's children are so fearful of the Big God and his followers that when Uncle Tom's son tries to persuade them to elect a new, young god who can guide and protect the community--a person invested with democratic "black power"--they fear that the Big God will strike them dead and refuse to participate.

Uncle Tom's son turns his back on the children in disgust and "cast[s] his eyes at maidens in an effort to forget" (75). While his relationship with a "luscious lass" is a divergence from the main plot, the sensual language which Himes uses to describe the woman, and his protagonist's physical relationship with her, suggests the "absurdity" of a black reality that incorporates the "tremendous love of life, a love of sex, a love of ourselves" that he invokes in *My Life of Absurdity* (36). There are, however, political implications to this vision of black wholeness: only when the power relations of "heaven" have been changed by the protagonist's actions, can this be accomplished by the larger community. It is the Little God's suitably Biblical act of transforming the woman into grass, upon which he deliberately tramples, that once again propels Uncle Tom's son into action.

He draws up a petition calling for the election of a new god. The document is passed around only at night, signed by candlelight, and discussed at secret meetings, an activity which suggests both the slave population's historical quest for literacy and the contemporary fight against extra-legal Jim Crow "institutions" such as the southern poll tax. When the petition is presented to Mistah Crow he replies, "Who-ever heard of Uncle Tom's children voting?" (75). His response leads to a second mass protest. This time, the children march to the Big God's "big manor house" where they gather and shout "OLD JIM CROW HAS GOT TO GO!" (76). The parallels between the office of the Big God and that of President Roosevelt, the workers' march and A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement--a political mobilization that produced Executive Order 8802--are

inescapable. However, although the Big God agrees to let the workers hold their election, he refuses to get rid of Jim Crow.

Uncle Tom's son, of course, becomes a candidate. There are, nevertheless, some members of the community who are not Uncle Tom's children, but "relatives" who want to retain the incumbent Little God. They call themselves the "Old" while the members of the opposing camp call themselves the "New." Uncle Tom's son promises to get rid of Jim Crow and to ask the Big God for the tools of economic self-sufficiency in a second attempt at "Reconstruction": "forty acres and a tractor and a home for everybody" (76). In addition, like Lieutenant Roy Squires in "So Softly Smiling," he intends to ensure "the right for everybody to pursue happiness" (76). In contrast, the incumbent Little God pursues a "cast down your bucket where you are" strategy of reform⁴⁶ combined with a call for racial "appeasement": the people "must be patient and wait....violence and rebellion were not the ways of the Lord, and he has been waiting for old Jim Crow to just get up and go of his own accord" (76-77).

The split between the Old and the New is primarily along generational lines and, by implication, between "rural" and "urban" constituencies. Uncle Tom's children are primarily "young jitterbugs"--the name which white Americans gave to the Lindy hop, a dance which they copied--whose dancing and swing music are associated with the city, while the "relatives" align themselves with the traditional spirituals (76). The Little God, in fact, forbids any jitterbugging in heaven. The New respond by proposing a contest to see which musical form makes the people happiest. Uncle Tom's son goes a step further,

suggesting that the outcome of the contest will also settle the election.

When the vote is held, the spirituals win. Controversy erupts, however, when the New accuse the Old of stuffing the ballot box. The dispute becomes so violent that the Big God intervenes. Acknowledging the children's dissatisfaction with the Little God, and recognizing that gods must be responsive to the demands of their worshippers, he makes a proposal. The Little God, "being old, was wise in the ways of men," will be retained. However, the Big God will appoint Uncle Tom's son as the Little God's assistant as he was "young and spirited and courageous" (77). This rapprochement is similar to that which ends "Flying Home" when, as Ellison wrote, the pilot, "[a] man of two worlds," makes his peace with the sharecropper Jefferson and thus acknowledges "their common origin in slavery" and by implication their collective folk history (*Essays* 477).

The "heaven" that this alliance makes possible is full of "happiness and joy" (77). Old Jim Crow is banished to hell. The people sing spirituals and the swing bands play while the young people dance. The maiden who was turned into grass becomes a woman once more. Heaven is, then, the implicit promise of a postwar world in which the anti-democratic "viciousness" of white Americans is no longer directed at African Americans and where black Americans possess the "tools" for economic self-determination: "Peace grows and flourishes on the people's forty acres and they harvest it with their new tractors and sweep their homes with new brooms and dress their children in pretty clothes" (78).

One night the soldier returns to earth. The members of his former regiment, preparing to advance into battle, are "glum and morose" (78). They explain to him that

they are not afraid to die; rather, they are afraid that the heaven that awaits them "must be really a drag" (78). The soldier reassures his still-living fellows that the "heaven" that will materialize as a result of their participation in the fight is nothing like the old, "unreconstructed" place of folk legend. Preparing to launch into the tale of all that he has experienced since dying, he explains, "You guys don't know nothing, heaven has changed" (78).

"Heaven Has Changed" projects one possible outcome of the war for "Uncle Tom's children." "He Seen It In The Stars," published a year and a half later, explores the war's legacy of racial fear and violence for America's "*native American fascists*" ("Now" 271, emphasis in original). Hitler's Germany is described through the eyes of a black man, Accidental Brown, the avatar of the many who have been the victims of America's own racist absurdity. The meaning of what Bill Mullen describes as this "brilliant allegory of native and foreign fascism" (9) is signalled by the title of the film--and its ironic echoes with Himes's collective name for the resisting African Americans in "Heaven Has Changed"--that is playing in the movie theatre when Brown falls asleep and "dreams" of the wartime epitome of anti-democracy: *Hitler's Children*.

Accidental Brown is "a hard-driving slave [working] as a boilermaker's helper" at Cal Ship (*Stories* 105). "Slave" is an African American vernacular term for work, but Himes exploits both its historical connotations and the rhetoric of slavery in defeat that was invoked in the war against Hitler in his story.⁴⁷ In "Democracy Is For The Unafraid," which Mullen suggests decrypts the allegory of "He Seen It In The Stars" (9), Himes

argues that if white Americans do not resolve their fear of other races, and begin to work toward accepting what he understood to be an inevitable postwar (and post-colonial) shift of political power in a world where people of colour are the majority, it "will drive them first to destroy the Negro in America" in an effort to restore the global racial status quo (480). In "Negro Martyrs Are Needed" (1944), which delineates strategies of black leadership aimed at ensuring equal enforcement of the Constitution, Himes warns that any "revolutionary" activity on the part of African Americans has the potential of engendering a counter-revolution to restore white supremacy in which "[m]any Negroes will be shot. Many will be imprisoned. The remainder will be literally enslaved" (*Black* 232). While Himes's statements are deliberately provocative--appropriating the rhetoric of the war to expose America's own racist contradictions--they also recognize the potential power of what Ellison described as "the unorganized, irrational forces" of American racism (*Essays* 97).

Hitler's Germany clearly resembles the United States in its treatment of the dreamer, *Accidental Brown*. Himes evokes the legacy of America's slave-holding past, drawing parallels between events in the story and the history of African Americans. When Brown "wakes up" he is, in fact, floating in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and what follows is a (re)version of the "Middle Passage." The crew of a Nazi submarine picks Brown out of the water; the commander is thrilled to have captured "one of the American slaves" (*Stories* 105). Brown, who just this once can understand the German language, has been listening to the crew's conversation and when he is asked who he is, replies that

"he was the personal slave of the President of the United States, which made him the President of the other slaves, and that if they harmed him they would be held accountable" (106). The commander is ecstatic. He will take Brown to Berlin, present him to Hitler, and in the process acquire a medal or two.

However, when Hitler comes face-to-face with Brown, under conditions which suggest the slave block--Brown is "chained and haltered, hungry and raggedy, red-eyed and unshaven"--he is horrified and orders everybody shot (106). There is no place for a black man in Germany, despite German propaganda which, as John Dower writes, walked a rhetorical thin line between characterizing the treatment of blacks in America as evidence of the nation's hypocrisy and as proof of the validity of their own racist dogma (5). Goebbels, however, suggests that the nation's "waning morale" could be bolstered by informing the people that German soldiers have raided the Capitol of the United States, escaping with military documents and the President's slave (106). In the interest of German propaganda, a sign reading "*Behold! The President of the American Slaves!*" is hung around Brown's neck and, chained to the back of "an official automobile," Brown is dragged through the streets of the city in an ostensible lynching (106). The car stops in a public square near the industrial district and German workers are given five minutes to "come and view the exhibition" (106).

The workers, however, have been subjected to propaganda which describes *all Americans* as slaves and they conclude that Brown must *be* the President of the United States. When ordered back to work they refuse to go, believing that if the President has

been captured the war will soon be over and "the American slaves will be working for us" (106). Some of the workers have already stretched out and gone to sleep. Bill Mullen points out that the stories Himes published in *Negro Story* feature protagonists who are black and working class and who, therefore, fight against both race and class oppression (9). In this instance, however, when the significance of Brown's race is lost to the German workers, the meaning of class, specifically as it cuts across national and racial boundaries, is foregrounded. That the German workers believe that victory means freedom from the need to labour--while it entails the exploitation of the labour of others--is an inverted type of class solidarity, a recognition that all workers are similarly exploited even if this fact is obscured by the "patriotic" necessity to labour for, and the racist dogma perpetuated by, the war.

The significance of class is further emphasized by the fact that Goebbels again saves Brown from execution by assigning him another task. He must run through the streets of the residential districts each night, when the day shift workers are returning home, lugging a placard which reads "DER FUEHRER NEEDS BABIES FOR THE NEW ORDER!" (106). While this appeal is implicitly linked to white supremacist ideology, it equally demonstrates the extent to which productive and reproductive labour are exploited by the regime in power. This situation is made particularly ironic in that an American "slave," a descendant of those whose labour was super-exploited, has been assigned the task of furthering (or "fathering") the fascists' agenda. That the German workers take out their anger on Brown, "jump[ing] on him at every corner," is an

indication of their resentment and suggests at least one of the reasons for their waning morale (106).

Sick of repeated beatings from the workers, Brown sits down on the palace steps and prays, "Lord, if I got any wings coming to me, now is the time I need 'em" (107), invoking the Sea Island tale of the slaves who escape their master by flying back to Africa.⁴⁸ Hitler, descending the palace steps just as Brown turns his eyes skyward, asks through an interpreter what he sees in the stars. Brown, leaping up to continue his run through the city streets, makes up the excuse that he is watching some planes. Moments later, Allied bombers appear and strike Berlin.

Hitler is so impressed by this latter-day Joseph that he invites Brown up to what is left of his observatory to advise him on what else he sees in the stars. Brown tells Hitler that he sees four men, including the President of the United States, all of whom are "planning and scheming" against him (107). Unknown to Hitler, the other three men Brown "sees" are General MacArthur, Mayor Bowron of Los Angeles and Humphrey Bogart. Convinced that Brown is lying, however, Hitler orders him to be imprisoned, beaten for ten days and then executed. But on the ninth day, after word of the Teheran summit reaches Berlin and appears to confirm Brown's prediction, he is released from prison and flown to Hitler's castle in the Alps.

Brown "play[s] crazy" (108) at the castle, hoping that he can avoid harm by being sent to an asylum. He walks about the palace with his head cocked to one side, pressing his finger to his lips when anyone speaks to him, as if listening for something. After a

week, Hitler and an interpreter visit Brown in his room. Hitler is convinced he can hear what he assumes that Brown has been listening to: the Allied march across Europe towards Berlin. Several days later, Hitler, who has been reduced to the embodiment of paranoia and fear--"trembl[ing] like a man with the ague"--screams at Brown that Allied troops are within view of the castle. As he points at the blank wall of Brown's room, it suddenly dissolves and waves of American soldiers can be seen coming up the mountainside. Brown awakes from his dream yelling "*Come on, Yanks! Come on and get 'im!*" (109, emphasis in original).

For Himes, the Nazi regime is a particularly grotesque example of the fact that, as he writes in "Democracy is for the Unafraid," "[white] [f]ear may easily become the greatest tragedy of this historic period" (480). In a postwar and "post-colonial world" in which people of colour will demand their human rights, the consequences of this fear are far-reaching. Pointing to what he perceived to be evidence that the fear of white Americans' was on the rise, the most potent example being the treatment of African American soldiers in the military, he poses the question: "[A]re we seeking the defeat of our 'Aryan' enemies or the winning of them?" ("Democracy" 480). In his earliest wartime writing, his commentary on Wright's *Native Son*, Himes examined black American fear and hatred of white Americans. He ends this period of his career, true to this chapter's epigraph, with an exploration of the absurd consequences of white racist fear.

Have you ever been to Los Angeles? ("So Softly Smiling" 68)

If He Hollers Let Him Go traces the absurdity of American racism to its bitter end.

Jones stumbles upon Madge asleep in a room on board the ship. She responds to his rejection of her advances by yelling "rape," a deliberate attempt to, as she tells him, "get you lynched, you nigger bastard" (*If* 181). Jones is subsequently badly beaten by a gang of white workers, leaving him unconscious and bleeding "like a hog" (185), an incident which evokes his dream of the black boy who is killed by countless cuts from a white boy's knife. When Jones regains consciousness, he convinces himself that he can fight the charges: "This wasn't Georgia" after all (184). But when the company guards call in the police to have him arrested, he suddenly realizes what he is up against: "The whole structure of American thought was against me; American tradition had convicted me a hundred years before" (187). Jones, like the Japanese Americans, has been tried and convicted solely on race.

Jones runs from the guards, hoping to escape "the phoney formality," the absurdity, "of an American trial" (187). Finding his car, he drives off, heading for Las Vegas. However, after speeding through Los Angeles, out of money and almost out of gas, he realizes he will be caught before daybreak. His last ditch attempt to find some meaning in this absurdity is to finally kill Johnny Stoddart: "I'd...let them hang me for it. All they could ever do to me then would be to get even" (194-95). However, he is stopped by the police because he is "a black boy in a big car in a white neighbourhood" (195). The police discover that he is wanted for rape and find the pistol he has stashed in

his glove compartment.

He dreams, while in prison that night, of successfully ending the life of Johnny Stoddart. However, his euphoria, this brief if absurdly distorted "madness" of the free, is ended when he is captured by the "biggest [white] man I ever saw in the uniform of a Marine sergeant" (198). The Marine is a grotesque manifestation of the white American male as "simple Joe," both a figurative (mis-)representation of the "freedom" to which Jones had aspired and, ironically, his racial nemesis. When Jones tells the Marine that he is on the run because he killed a white man for calling him "nigger," the Marine replies: "I always wondered...whether you ever wanted to kill us like we wanna kill you" (199). A highly-decorated war hero, the Marine has killed "a lot of sonabitches I ain't even seen until after they was dead" and "raped all kinda women" but he "ain't never got to kill a nigger" (199). After commending Jones for killing a white man and "raping" a white woman all in one night, he draws back his fist "big as a house" and aims to kill (199).

The next day Jones is called before a judge and the president of the Atlas Shipyards and informed that Madge has dropped the rape charge because, as the president puts it, the charge would "create racial tension among the employees and seriously handicap our production schedule" (201).⁴⁹ Jones knows that Madge has been found out, but no white man will publicly admit that she has lied. Jones is, however, unable to avoid the charge of carrying a concealed weapon, the gun which he has had at hand since Stoddart attacked him. The judge offers Jones the "choice" between what amounts to two types of de facto internment: prison time or service in the segregated military. Jones

chooses the military knowing that, as Himes wrote in "Democracy Is For The Unafraid," the majority of African American recruits were trained on bases in the South where they were "booted and lynched by white civilians" and soldiers like the Marine. This fact was, to Himes, evidence of white fear (480). To add irony to injury, as his co-worker Ben had expressed it to Jones, when a black man is forced to fight in the Jim Crow army, "he's fighting against himself" (*If* 120).

On his march to the induction centre, Jones is joined by two Mexican Americans, implicitly linking the action taken against him to that perpetrated against the zoot-suiters in the riots a year earlier. All three men have been exiled from the "American street[s]" of Los Angeles where Jones had hoped to walk as a "simple Joe" (153). The Mexicans, wearing the "bagged drapes" characteristic of the zoot style are "brown skinned, about [his] colour" (203). They also have "Indian features" (203), a fact which invokes yet another layer of America's patterns of a race war. In response to their enquiries about his condition--the fact that with his swollen face it "[l]ooks like this man has had a war"-- Jones replies, "I'm still here" (203). While a declaration of survival and defiance, it is also a potent reminder that the nation's "problem of freedom," the national paradox that in Himes's California also portends the future of global race relations, remains unresolved.

During the war years, Himes, like Ellison, began to explore the rhetorical and political possibilities of folklore and other African American expressive forms in his writing. However, despite Himes's belief in the possibilities of the absurd American declaration of equality and freedom, he never exhibited Ellison's confidence in the

unfolding potential of the American project of democracy or the "reconstructive" power of what Ellison describes in "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" (1978) as "the idealistic action of the American word as it goads its users toward a perfection of our revolutionary ideals" (*Essays* 493). Instead, Himes contemplated the best method of *black* revolution and wrote nine detective novels which used African American expressive forms to expose, parody and critique the absurdity of American racism.

The difference between these two writers is particularly apparent in the Invisible Man's invocation of the story of his "mentor" Frederick Douglass--or who he was before he took the last name by which he came to be known--a shipyard worker like Bob Jones. When Frederick escaped to the North, he was denied work as a ship's caulker--skilled work he had performed for years in Baltimore--because of his race. However, as the Invisible Man explains, this was not an obstacle to freedom; rather, Frederick *Douglass* "became himself, defined himself. And not as a boatwright as he'd expected, but as an orator. *Perhaps the sense of magic lay in the unexpected transformations*" (*Invisible* 308, emphasis added). In contrast, Himes maintains his vision of the absurdity of American racism, what Ellison described as the expression of the "irrational forces of American life" (*Essays* 97), as it worked to undermine the democratic absurd; "unexpected transformations" rarely occur. In Himes's postwar fiction there is no certain democratic "future," only the hope that, as the detective Grave Digger Jones puts it in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965): "[S]o much nonsense must make sense" (107).

NOTES

1. The essay was published in 1953. However, Ellison prefaced it with a note explaining that he had made very few revisions to the original 1946 version because he wanted it to remain a record of "what a young member of a minority felt about much of our writing....not long after the Second World War" (*Essays* 81).
2. *Plan B*, edited by Michel Fabre and Robert E. Skinner, was published in 1994, ten years after Himes's death. It was reconstructed around two short stories, "Tang" (1967) and "Prediction" (1969), both of which Himes published separately in his self-selected anthology *Black on Black* (1973).
3. In 1937-38, Himes worked as a labourer for the Works Project Administration in Cleveland, Ohio before he was transferred to the Ohio Writers' Project. It is difficult to document the work he produced for the Project. However, he may have contributed to one or both of its publications on Ohio (Fabre et. al., *Bibliography* xvi).
4. Himes lived in France, and particularly Paris, for most of the 1950s and 1960s, associating with the community of expatriate African Americans, among them Richard Wright. He spent the last fifteen years of his life in Spain. He made trips to the United States in 1962 and 1972 (Muller xiv-xv). As H. Bruce Franklin points out, Himes's work was virtually ignored by American critics after he left for Europe. However, when several of his novels were published in the United States in 1964-65, in the midst of repeated outbreaks of racial violence, critics became interested in Himes's literary exploration of the violent phenomena occupying the national agenda. Franklin provides a useful bibliography of the critical work on Himes produced during the 1960s and early 1970s in *Prison Literature*, 209-10.
5. Himes's second novel, *Lonely Crusade* (1947), tells the story of Lee Gordon, a black man hired by a labour union to organize African American workers in a California aircraft plant during the war. Although Fabre et. al. point out that the book garnered largely favourable reviews (*Bibliography* xvii-xviii), Himes was bitter about its critical reception: "The left hated it, the right hated it, Jews hated it, blacks hated it" (*Quality* 100). This perception led to Himes's decision to leave the country as soon as possible (*Quality* 103). *If He Hollers Let Him Go* explores many of the themes of *Lonely Crusade* but displays a more dispassionate critical insight into issues of race in America.
6. This essay remained unpublished until Himes included it in his anthology *Black on Black* (1973).

7. The best examination of Himes's use of the absurd is that of Gilbert Muller. Muller's definition of an American tradition of the absurd as one which "attempt[s] to subvert the evils of society" (*Chester* 1) elicits perceptive readings of Himes's work. However, Muller does not explicitly address Himes's position on America's "absurd" promise of freedom. In addition, by locating Himes's strategies within a Euro-American tradition, he largely ignores the African American sources of Himes's aesthetic. See also the work of David Cochran and Robert E. Skinner ("Streets") on the absurd in Himes's detective fiction.

8. Gates is describing the semantic and political confrontation between the "discursive universes" of African American vernacular discourse and white American linguistic expression (*Signifying* 45). Toni Morrison's work on the Africanist presence in America examines the "white" discursive and political strategies employed to mediate, or efface, this peculiarly American relationship of identity and difference.

9. In his review of Bucklin Moon's *Primer for White Folks*, "Beating That Boy" (1945), Ellison discusses the "nightmarishly 'absurd' situation" of postwar America (*Essays* 145). He argues that while the African American continues to affirm the principles of democracy, he is unsure of the motive will of the ship of state: "he must cling to the convoy though he doubts its direction" (145). Ellison discusses in detail the semantic and political evasions of the founding fathers in "Perspective of Literature" (1976), particularly 771-81 in *Essays*. See also Marjorie Pryse, "Patterns" 121-23.

10. See Mike Davis, *City* 36-46 and David Fine's Introduction to *Los Angeles in Fiction*, 1-10, for a discussion of the genre. As Fine writes, the *noir* writers of the 1930s and 1940s, "[w]riting against the myth of El Dorado,...transformed it [California] into its antithesis: that of the [American] dream running out along the California shore" (7).

11. Many African American migrants to the West coast were from Texas, Louisiana and Oklahoma (Bontemps & Conroy 239). Walter Mosley's Ezekiel Rawlins, the protagonist in his detective series, migrates to California from Texas during the war. In the first of the series, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), Ezekiel remarks: "California was like heaven for the southern Negro....The stories were true...but the truth wasn't like a dream. Life was still hard in L.A. and if you worked every day you still found yourself on the bottom" (27). See Muller, "Double Agent," on Mosley's depiction of California, and particularly 293-94 for a discussion of the relationship of his work to that of Himes.

12. The wording of this phrase is problematic in that the rights of citizenship--of equality and freedom--are essentially deemed to be "birth" rights. One explanation for this qualification is the fact that until 1952, Japanese Americans born in Japan--the Issei generation--were denied American citizenship. That this distinction is made in the novel does not, however, imply an acceptance of this fact by Himes, or implicitly, by his protagonist.

13. In the Office of War Information's publication *Negroes and the War*, this passage is juxtaposed to Roosevelt's praise of the progress of African Americans since Emancipation. As Thomas Cripps notes, it also figures prominently in the black filmmaker Carlton Moss's propaganda film, *The Negro Soldier*, made for the War Department in 1944 (*Making* 110).

14. During the war, the percentage of blacks and other minorities employed by the shipbuilding industry increased dramatically. The massive Kaiser Shipyards, where Himes found employment as a skilled worker, "offered the major employment to nonwhite workers on the West Coast" (Murray, 1946/47 101). Angelo Herndon saw the shipbuilding industry as the predictor of the state of postwar race relations, a prospect he found "far from encouraging" (4). Robert E. Skinner examines the impact of racism on labour relations in the industry ("Black Man"). Mike Davis documents conditions for black workers during the war--and the racial killing of a black man and his family in 1945--in Fontana, California, the site of Kaiser's massive steel mill (*City* 397-401).

15. The risk that a black man takes in acknowledging, much less expressing, his fear of white men is formidable. As the protagonist of "All God's Chillun Got Pride" states, "No Negro can tell another...how scared he is. They might discover that they are all scared, and it might get out. And...then they wouldn't have but two choices; one would be to quit, and the other would be to die" (*Stories* 24).

16. After a similar incident of "joke"-telling occurs in "All God's Chillun Got Pride," the protagonist quits his job as a waiter at a country club "where all he had to do to earn his...tips every night was just to be a nigger" because he fears he might violently challenge such drunken "exhibitions" of white supremacy (*Stories* 27). However, "during his wearing of the proud uniform of a soldier" in the American Army his pride "went priceless" and it lands him in the guard-house (28).

17. In his interview with Williams, Himes argues that only the African American male has been taught "that it is Christian to turn the other cheek and to live peacefully" (330). Peter Rosen explores the troubling implications of this stance and the degree to which it influenced Himes's anti-Communist, anti-Semitic and often anti-female views, groups he saw as a threat to a black masculinity largely defined by the capacity to do violence. Of particular interest in the context of the war are several references in Himes's work to a speech by Noel Parrish, a white military commander associated with the Tuskegee flight school (Southern 121). Quoted at length in *Lonely Crusade*, Parrish urges African Americans to put aside the fact that they "have not been particularly encouraged to be heroic in the past" (105) in order to "prove first of all that we are capable of the dignity and nobility of manhood" (106). Himes refers to this speech again in "A Letter to *Commentary*," 474 and in Williams, "Chester Himes," 312. In *If He Hollers*, Jones

expresses his angst at his racist exclusion from the "heroic" endeavours of white soldiers in his invocation of a film, *A Guy Named Joe*, the title of which suggests one of the components of his desire to be just a "simple Joe" (74). This figure comes back to "haunt" Jones in his dream of the racist and homicidal Marine who appears at the end of the book.

18. Ironically, Himes's advocacy of a strategy of organized (and passive) resistance in a response to the violation of Constitutional rights--a strategy similar to that of Martin Luther King, Jr.--prompted the Federal Bureau of Investigation to open a file on him (Fabre & Skinner, Introduction x). Himes struggled with the idea of black revolution throughout his writing life. In his *Saturday Review* article on his first novel, "Second Guesses" (1946), he reiterates the non-violent position of Constitutional enforcement expressed in "Negro Martyrs." This view is also implicit in his bitter, but still hopeful speech of 1948, "Dilemma of the Negro Novelist." However, by the late 1960s, Himes no longer advocates "principled" moral suasion on the part of African Americans. Instead, only a violent black revolution that threatens the workings of the American *economy* will be successful in forcing racial change. Himes expresses this view in his interview with Williams ("Chester" 324) and it is a dominant theme in his short story of the same year, "Prediction" (1969): in the wake of a bloody attack by a black man on a parade of white New York police officers "the capitalistic system had an almost fatal shock" (*Stories* 425).

19. George Lipsitz documents incidents of African American protest over the internment in "Frantic to Join" 335-38. See also Okihiro, 60.

20. In the final chapter of *American Dilemma*, which Myrdal himself wrote (Southern 39), the author points to the fact that white people are a minority and, therefore, are vulnerable in a rapidly shifting postwar world. However, he appears to underestimate the power of white supremacy, arguing that "[i]f white people, *for their own preservation*, attempt to reach a state in which they will be tolerated by their colored neighbors, equality will be the most they will be strong enough to demand" (1018, emphasis added).

21. Dower is quick to point out, however, that Japan's own theories of racial hierarchy resulted in the oppressive, and often violent, treatment of other Asians during the war (6-8). Although African Americans overwhelmingly supported the war effort, the war with Japan brought America's own racial contradictions to the fore. See Dower 173-79 and Wynn 103-06 for a summary of contemporary black attitudes toward the racial implications of the war. Richard Wright's writing on African American perceptions of the Japanese in "How Bigger Was Born" remains one of the most pointed expressions of black American alienation from a war effort which excluded them as *equal* participants. He describes the photographs of Japanese generals appearing in American newspapers and posits black readers who "dream of what it would be like to live in a country where they

could forget their color and play a responsible role in the vital processes of the nation's life" (*Early Works* 860).

22. It is impossible to verify the authenticity of the diary or how Himes obtained it.

23. H. Bruce Franklin argues that the imprisonment of African Americans is essential to the enforcement of the racial, or racist, status quo in the United States, a country whose modern prison system "arose as a corollary of emancipation" (xi). He provides an account of the development of the prison system, and the connections between it, slavery and debt peonage, in Chapter 2 of his book. He focuses specifically on Himes on 177-78 and 206-32. Of his own period of incarceration Himes wrote, "Nothing happened in prison that I had not already encountered in outside life." "Outside," however, was where "society began punishing [him] for being black" (*Quality* 61). All of this has obvious parallels to Ellison's and Wright's construction of the South--or any anti-democratic region of the United States--as a "prison" for African Americans.

24. Although this story was published after the riots of 1943 which, I argue, marks a turning point in Himes's attitude toward the war effort, he included it as one of his efforts at propaganda in his interview with Fabre ("Chester" 126). It may, in fact, have been written earlier.

25. Du Bois writes that "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in the American world." Though he is not granted "true self-consciousness" but only a vision of "himself through the revelation of the other world," he draws on this double consciousness in order to assert his identity as both "a Negro and an American" (*Souls* 214-15).

26. Although "All God's Chillun Got Pride" takes place in the Depression, black men in Himes's work consistently fear economic marginalization. Himes described the effect that this had on his own marriage, particularly when his wife could find well-paying work in Los Angeles when he often could not: "...I was no longer a husband to my wife; I was her pimp" (*Quality* 75). As George Lipsitz argues, Himes's "uninterrogated assumptions about the need for men to possess and protect women" undermine his ability to formulate "an oppositional critique of the ways in which racism becomes sexualized" (*Rainbow* 37-38).

27. Himes had gone to Hollywood when he first arrived in California in the hope that a draft version of the prison novel he was working on might become a screen play. Himes discusses segregation in the movie industry in his interview with John Williams, 320-24. His prison story was published in 1953 as *Cast the First Stone* and, in an unexpurgated version, as *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* (1998).

28. The title of Himes's essay appears to be a response to the tone of many of the statements by military and civilian authorities in the wake of the riot. In *The Los Angeles Times* of June 9, 1943 the Navy's Admiral Bagley characterized his sailors' actions as "self-defense against the rowdy element" (qtd. in Mazón 72). Presumably, he was referring to the widespread rumours that gangs of *pachucos* had attacked servicemen and, in some instances, raped their girlfriends (Guzman 237). Mayor Bowron and the city's Police Chief downplayed the violence, the latter stating that "some people have chosen to call it riots: I don't think it should be classified as that" (qtd. in Mazón 80). In general, the city's newspapers described the riots in terms of a military operation, casting the zoot-suiters as the enemy (Mazón 78-80).

29. Carey McWilliams, "Zoot Suit Riots," *New Republic*, 21 June 1943, qtd. in Guzman 236.

30. See Dower, 147-80. In brief, Dower argues that images of the Japanese and the racist tone of much of America's wartime propaganda were rooted in the inter-implicated and "prototypical race words...[and] war words" which historically have characterized Euro-American encounters with nonwhite peoples (148).

31. See Lipsitz, *Rainbow* 83-84 and Mazón 64-65.

32. "All He Needs Is Feet" was published in *Crisis* in November 1943. Several bibliographers, as well as Himes in his anthology *Black on Black*, have mistakenly listed the date of publication as 1945.

33. During 1943, four films appeared which featured heroic black characters: *Bataan*, *Lifeboat*, *Crash Dive*, and *Sahara*. *Lifeboat* featured a civilian and the three others, black soldiers. Thomas Cripps argues that these films, however flawed, "arose organically from a nutrient broth of historic black grievances stirred in with goals arising from the culture of a war against fascism" (*Making* 27). Cripps details the mixed reactions of African Americans to these films in *Making*, 74-80. See also Ellison, "The Shadow and the Act" (1949), for his discussion of the effect on black audiences of several important postwar films featuring African Americans. Ellison writes that "when the action goes phony, one will hear derisive laughter" among blacks, while white audience members sob in "profound emotional catharsis" (*Essays* 308). One of these films, *The Home of the Brave* (1949), featured a black soldier haunted by the death of a white soldier soon after the white man has called him a "yellowbelly nigger." The black soldier had wished him dead. Ellison writes that the film's refusal to address "the racial element...in his guilt" was a "manipulation of the audience's attention away from reality to focus it upon false issues" (*Essays* 306).

34. Himes published two other stories about African American women workers during the war: "The Song Says 'Keep on Smiling,'" published in *Crisis* in 1945 (*Stories* 86-90) and the satirical "Make With The Shape," published in *Negro Story* in the same year (*Stories* 110-13).
35. See Lipsitz, *Rainbow* 70-95 for a discussion of black wildcat strikes for fair employment and white hate strikes aimed at denying jobs and promotions to black workers during the war. During the war, white workers, as well as black and white workers together, also went on strike to demand the improvement of working conditions. These strikes sometimes took on a carnivalesque quality: Lindy-hopping on the job or cutting off the neckties of company supervisors. Lipsitz writes that these actions "expressed an important rebellion against work, authority and hierarchy" (*Rainbow* 22). It is this spirit which pervades the actions of Jones's crew.
36. See Levine, 462n36.
37. See Dorson, 183 and Levine, 330 for a complete version of this tale.
38. *Pinktoes* was published in the United States in 1961 and was published in France, as *Mamie Mason*, in 1962. *For Love of Imabelle* was published in America in 1957. It was published in French translation in 1958 with the title *La Reine des pommes*. In 1965, the novel was republished as *A Rage in Harlem*.
39. Himes became involved with the Communist Party in Hollywood. As he told John Williams, the "material for writing *Lonely Crusade* came from these experiences" ("Chester" 321). Evidence of his growing disillusionment with the Party is scattered throughout his writings. "Now is the Time! Here is the Place!" (1941) implicitly includes Communists within those groups he indicts for "deserting" the African American fight for equality at home for the sake of national unity (273). The short story "In The Night" (1942) portrays a group of white Communists unable to fully incorporate race into their revolutionary prescriptions. Jones's implicitly cynical attitude toward the Communist (and Jewish) union organizer in *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (112-15) becomes the full-blown acrimony of Lee Gordon in *Lonely Crusade*. See also Michel Fabre's interview with Himes, 28 and that of John Williams, 320-21. Fabre also notes that although Ellison did not like *Lonely Crusade*, he admired Himes because he had "accomplished the task of showing what a Negro writer could do when really striking back" at the Communist Party ("From *Native*" 207-08).
40. Bill Mullen's article discusses the importance of *Negro Story*, specifically its publication of stories which were "militant contemporary left critiques" of American society, to a critical reevaluation of African American literary production during the war years (8). See also Johnson & Johnson, 135-39.

41. In Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, Eliza, whose "liberal" mistress has educated her in religion, tells her husband that "I always thought that I must obey my master and mistress, or I couldn't be a Christian" (61). The passage to which she alludes is in Ephesians 6:5: "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ." In *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B. Du Bois is critical of this Christian counsel of obedience, as well as what he describes as the "deep religious fatalism" of hope for freedom in the afterlife that it engendered, both of which are "painted so beautifully in 'Uncle Tom' (344).

42. In *The War Worker* (First Half), Himes refers to a *Negro Digest* article by Eleanor Roosevelt in which she advises African Americans not to be too "demanding" but to "prove [their] quality and [their] ability...knowing that in the end good performance has to be acknowledged." Himes "wanted to take a running two-headed dive" at Roosevelt for her statement (6). Mrs. Harrison refers to the article in this scene of the novel.

43. Dorson reports a version of this tale in *Negro Folk Tales*, 178-80, in which the only black angel in heaven gets so lonely that he flies back and forth to earth to drink with a friend. When he gets thrown out of heaven, he gives up his wings but tells God that he "was a flying black bastard while [he] did have them" (180). In Ellison's "Flying Home," Jefferson's version of the tale reflects the situation of the Tuskegee pilot: black angels are required to fly with only one wing. Sterling Brown published a poetic version of this tale, "Slim Greer in Hell," in Botkin's *Folk-Say IV* (1932), 246-49. Slim is sent to "hell" by Peter to report on conditions there. When Slim returns to heaven, and naively tells Peter that hell is like Dixie, he is thrown out with Peter's scathing words ringing in his ears: "Where'n hell dja think Hell was / Anyhow?" (249).

44. Jones goes on to further qualify his point, suggesting that *some* African Americans have access to bread while *none* have true freedom, the first condition separating the black bourgeoisie from the majority of black workers in tenuous, war-driven jobs (*If* 150).

45. See Bogle, 67-69 and Cripps, *Making* 8-10, for a discussion of *Green Pastures*. In 1944, in the wake of Hollywood's quartet of war films featuring more positive depictions of African Americans, (see note 31 above), *Tales of Manhattan* was released. A throwback to the depiction of black Americans in *Green Pastures*, it was roundly criticized. Paul Robeson, who starred in the film, offered to picket his own movie. Cripps cites an undated letter from an African American soldier to the film critic Hedda Hopper in which he replies to her wish for "an old time *Green Pastures* flavor" in film with his assertion that "the last of the 'Green pastures' and 'Uncle Toms' are gone" (*Making* 76; 318n35).

46. This was a central image in Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Speech of 1895.

47. For example, in the Office of War Information pamphlet *Negroes and the War*, Chandler Owen holds up the example of the concentration camps and the forced labour of prisoners and others under the Nazi regime as evidence that "white or black, conquered people became slaves under Hitler" and goes on to argue that "[b]ecause we have known the weight of chains, because we have known the helplessness of bondage, we can be a mighty force in this nation's fight for freedom" (n.p.). In "Now is the Time! Here is the Place!," Himes explains to his readers why black Americans are motivated to fight in the war: "If you have never been enslaved, mentally, spiritually, in ambitions, dreams, and desires; *if you have never lived Jim Crow*, you might not understand" (273, emphasis added).

48. See Grant in *The Book of Negro Folklore*, 62-65.

49. In the Summer of 1943, two major riots broke out over the hiring and promotion of African Americans in shipyards in Alabama and Texas. In both cases, they were started by the rumour that a black man had raped or killed a white woman.

CHAPTER III

Fables of the Reconstruction

Black gal, black gal, got some work for you
Tell me white folks, what you want me to do
Got a big house to clean and scrub
Dishes to wash, floors to mop and rub

"Abstraction of social content from Negro songs - mostly Blues" Lawrence
Gellert, WPA Manuscript, June 7, 1940

Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) was the first best-seller by an African American woman. The novel sold over a million and a half copies shortly after its publication (Holladay 13). *The Street's* enormous success and its naturalistic portrayal of black urban experience have prompted many of Petry's critics to compare her text to Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), overlooking or minimizing the implications of gender in the novel.¹ In the last decade, however, critics have begun to resituate Petry's work within the context of postwar black *women's* writing. For Hazel Carby, Petry's work is central to a twentieth-century black women's tradition concerned with "the fictional urban confrontation of race, class and sexuality" that begins with Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and re-emerges in the postwar era (*Reconstructing* 175). More recently, Bill Mullen includes Petry within a group of African American women writers who, in the postwar period, carried over a

Depression-era literary radicalism that, he argues, Wright's bleak picture of black-radical/Communist alliance in *Native Son* had seemingly quashed (12).²

Despite the most recent critical "radicalization" of Petry's work, some feminist critics find her portrayal of black urban women, particularly *The Street's* protagonist Lutie Johnson, troubling. Much of this critical ambivalence is centred on the fact of Lutie's isolation from the other inhabitants, and particularly other women, of Harlem. Barbara Christian writes that "*The Street* is different from most novels by Afro-American women in that its female characters are so cut off by everyone and everything" (64). Marjorie Pryse, one of only a few critics who examines the implications of the presence of the black folk in *The Street*,³ focuses on Petry's depiction of the economic and political forces which operate to "systematically alienat[e] children from their 'mothers'--that is, from their roots" as embodied by the folk. She argues that the only hopeful "pattern" which emerges in the novel is "a motherhood not of biology but of human connection" as embodied in a *male* figures of the folk, the conjurer Prophet David ("Pattern" 129). This discursive displacement of material reality, however, renders Lutie's efforts to *act upon* the fact of her biological motherhood as hopelessly naive and, in the end, harmful to her son Bub. Pryse's reading, in fact, distorts the central issue of Petry's work. Petry delineates the material operations of an urban economics which function to isolate and alienate African American women from each other, their matrilineal ancestors and their children, and to displace them from a domestic site constituted by their productive and reproductive labour. This occurs because African American women are literally *incorporated* into an

economy of domestic labour within the white bourgeois household. *The Street* and Petry's novella *In Darkness and Confusion* (1947) are radical, feminist critiques of the failure of what I will call the "emancipatory" democratic promises of World War II to literally materialize for many black women.

As a writer, Petry was confronted with Richard Wright's depiction of the domestic place, of "home," and domestic black women themselves, as "remnants" of a preconscious southern folk life transplanted to the urban North. In his *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1941), the domestic place as constituted by the productive and reproductive labour of African American women is constructed as a premodern and, therefore, nonrevolutionary site within the black community. Wright locates revolutionary consciousness--the ability to analyze and ultimately resist one's oppression (Griffin 78)--within the "male" space of industry, the concrete manifestation of the forces of the modern world. Black men engaged in war boom industrial occupations were marching "forward" into "the sphere of conscious history" (12 147), while black domestic women remained confined to the narrow orbit of white kitchens and tenement kitchenettes (12 131), the historical margins of urban-industrial space and "modern" consciousness.

Wright links domestic labour and the prerevolutionary form of folk consciousness with the economic and social arrangement of the white southern plantation household, a configuration that is reproduced in the northern environment when black women perform domestic labour in the homes of the "Bosses of the Buildings." Similarly, the reproductive

labour of African American women is associated with the social arrangement of the southern black household which, as Houston Baker argues, Wright saw as the outcome of a history of white male exploitation of the black female body deeply rooted in the experience of slavery. This "nationalist" narrative--this peculiar "form" of racial experience as embodied by black women and children--must, of necessity, be "forgotten" if white and black men are to "cross class and racial lines" (12 144) in revolutionary, proletarian brotherhood within the "male" spaces of the urban-industrial environment (Baker, "Richard" 108). That this perspective creates a seemingly unbridgeable rupture in the continuity of African American experience as it is embodied by the mother, is signalled by the title of the last chapter of *12 Million Black Voices*, "Men in the Making" (141). This chapter is narrated from the perspective of "the *first-born* of the city tenements" (142, emphasis added)--the first-born *men*--a rhetorical manoeuvre that literally displaces, and effaces, the migrant generation of black women and their female children, who are confined instead to domestic oblivion and stricken from Wright's "historical" record.⁴

As Farah Griffin argues, Wright's version of the experience of the African American migrant to the urban North was dominant throughout the Depression and into World War II (10).⁵ It is within the context of Wright's literary hegemony that I reread Petry's writing of the 1940s as a powerful, feminist revision of Wright's conceptualization of both the black female domestic and the black mother. In addition, Petry presents another view of the migrant experience itself. Although Lutie is a northerner, her movements across the social landscape of the city are as psychologically dislocating, and

as consciousness-trans/forming, as the movement of black male workers from South to North which forms the focus of *12 Million Black Voices*.

Petry reconstructs the domestic place, as it is constituted by the labour of black women whether inside or outside their own homes, as revolutionary: a site, like Wright's factories and unions, for the creation and transformation of consciousness and history. At the same time, she depicts the literally regenerative power of black motherhood as essential to the survival of the African American community as a whole. Although under slavery the black woman was subject to white male exploitation of both the productive and reproductive forms of her labour, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues, motherhood was a site of collective resistance: it literally embodied the power to defend the humanity of the black child (17). Petry reclaims this function in her wartime fiction in opposition to Wright's construction of black motherhood as the sign of an unusable past.

Petry's project necessitates the reclamation of the folk, particularly as its "history" is embodied in the figure of the black mother. In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright conflates folk wisdom with motherhood itself in the figure of the black Mammy. He consigns both the "fluid" oral forms of black folk expression and the female body which "retain[s]...the burden" of this folk history (12 37) to a state of *prehistoric* and *prepolitical* (un)consciousness. In *The Street*, this folk experience as it is directly "related" to Lutie is embodied in the words and the continuing presence of her grandmother. Lutie, however, must undertake a series of urban migrations across the social landscape of the northern environment before she is able to reclaim her grandmother's wisdom. Petry, in fact,

recontextualizes this knowledge *through* the experience of her protagonist, transforming and further radicalizing it in the process. This process is not continuous, nor without contradictory implications of its own, but it is part of the reclamation of the domestic place as a site of conscious, revolutionary activity. Rereading *In Darkness and Confusion*--Petry's fictional account of the Harlem riot of 1943--and *The Street* within the context of Wright's vision, and the impact of World War II on African American women, delineates Petry's radical reconstruction of the domestic place of black women.

Ann Petry was born in the predominantly white town of Old Saybrook, Connecticut in 1908 and died there in April, 1997. As a young woman, she trained as a pharmacist and worked in the family drug stores in both Old Saybrook and Old Lyme, Connecticut. In 1938 she and her husband moved to Harlem. Petry published her first short story, a brief and formulaic romance "Marie of the Cabin Club," under the pseudonym "Arnold Petri" in the (*Baltimore*) *Afro-American* in August 1939. She continued writing fiction while working for two Harlem newspapers. From 1938 to 1941 she sold advertising for the *Amsterdam News*. From 1941-1944 she worked as a reporter for Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s militant weekly, *The People's Voice*, "cover[ing] everything from teas to fires, with births, deaths, big shots, and picket lines interspersed" (Greene 78). For part of 1942, she was editor of the women's pages and wrote the social column, "The Lighter Side," for which she often covered events related to the war effort.

In December 1943 Petry published "On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon" in *Crisis*. Told from the perspective of a black male war worker, it recounts the

circumstances surrounding the death of one of his children in an apartment fire. His wife, the first of many women in Petry's fiction who are ambivalent about their prescribed role, had left the children alone when she went to meet a lover. Several days later, racked with grief and anger, the man murders his wife, and while on his way to work, commits suicide beneath the wheels of a subway train. While standing on the subway platform, the protagonist turns away from the tracks whose shine reminds him of the carefully polished spittoon which sat in his apartment window, reflecting the world both inside and outside on its shiny surface: it had been destroyed in the fire. He turns his gaze toward a poster on the wall, only to be confronted with the "shine of metal" in an ad for coca-cola: "[a] silver punch bowl...brass candlesticks that fairly jumped off the table. A family was sitting around a table. They were eating" (368). In juxtaposing these images of shining metal, Petry implicitly contrasts the material conditions of a black family whose whole world is literally reflected on the mirror surface of a spittoon with an image of excess, and black invisibility, generated by a mass consumer culture. When the noon siren goes off, its unrelenting noise and memories of the fire drive the man to leap and "the wheels gr[ind] his body into the gleaming silver of the tracks" (369).

Petry's story attracted the notice of a Houghton-Mifflin editor who encouraged the author to apply for the company's literary fellowship. At the end of 1944 she submitted several chapters of her novel-in-progress to the publisher and was awarded the \$2,500 prize. *The Street* was published two years later. The success of the novel and the attention paid to her professional and personal life overwhelmed her. In a 1992 interview

Petry explained:

I was shocked that suddenly my soul was no longer my own. I was a black woman at a point in time when being a writer was not usual, and I was besieged. Everyone wanted a part of me. (Fein C16)

Petry moved back to Old Saybrook where she lived and worked for the rest of her life.

However, while living in Harlem, Petry was active in efforts to mitigate the continuing economic effects of the Depression, as well as problems arising from the war effort, including high rents and rising food prices. In 1942, while working as women's editor at *The People's Voice*, Petry helped to launch a women's civilian defense group, "Negro Women Inc." The organization, however, appears to have focused primarily on the local economy. Its aims were to "help women get their money's worth for everything from hats to groceries to furniture" (Petry, "Ann Petry" 268) and, as Petry notes in several references to the organization in *The People's Voice*, to protest discrimination against African Americans and to fight for the rights of women in Harlem.⁶

Petry's journalistic and political interests in documenting and protesting conditions in Harlem are reflected in her fiction. Barbara Christian points to the "voluminous use of external detail....the tone of the commonplace" in Petry's descriptions of the economic struggles of black women in *The Street* (64). I would like to extend Christian's insight into Petry's work by arguing that both her novel and *In Darkness and Confusion* document what Himes described as "a private war" ("Now" 272) against the commonplace of women, as mothers and workers, within Harlem. Himes used the term "private war" to

describe World War II as a battle for the racial-economic status quo, a "white man's war." In Petry's fiction, this private war manifests itself in the form of a genocidal economics which results in physical death, or in the reproduction of what Orlando Patterson describes as the essential experience of slavery, social death. The state of social death is marked by the enslaved individual's physical and symbolic displacement from his or her community of origin and his or her subsequent introduction, as a "nonbeing," into the economic "community" of the master; it is a form of "profound natal alienation" (Patterson 38). In Petry's Harlem, the "private war" on the domestic front of African American women, the first line of defense against the "natal alienation" of their children, takes the form of a battle over their role as domestic *workers* and the "place" of black motherhood.

*I could fly a plane if I had a chance (Wright, *Native Son* 460).*

12 Million Black Voices was published just before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour and America's subsequent involvement in the war. In a letter that Wright sent several weeks later to Archibald MacLeish, the head of the Office of War Information, he stated that he wanted to "be helpful in winning the war"--which he described as the "national democratic cause"--and in "clarifying and popularizing the administration's war policy among the Negro people" (qtd. in Cripps, *Making* 29).⁷ Neil Wynn argues that in the context of the Communist Party's new-found enthusiasm for American involvement in the war after the German attack on the Soviet Union, Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* was

his "contribution to the war effort" (103). Wright's invocation of the "identity of interests" created between black and white workers during the Depression in the final chapter of his text is the harbinger of a similar melding of interests necessitated by the crisis of war (12 144). This underlies Wright's figuration, in *12 Million's* final pages, of the "common road of hope" on which all Americans have travelled and which has "brought [them] into a stronger kinship than any words, laws, or legal claims" (12 146). Black women, however, are not "fellow travellers" on this "common road" because they are excluded from the process of modernization, the "sphere of conscious history," that Wright implicitly aligns with the war plants themselves (12 147).

In this context, Petry's wartime writing functions as a critique of what Wright described as the "guiding Marxist concept" of *12 Million Black Voices* (qtd. in Natanson 246).⁸ Wright's Marxist "perspective" places black domestic women, whether workers or mothers, on the margins of historical change. Petry's reclamation of the black domestic place as always potentially revolutionary equally functions to expose an urban domestic economy of black women's labour that displaces African American women from the *conscious* domestic sphere of motherhood and home where, as Patricia Hill Collins writes, they *work* to "strengthen the political and economic position of their families" (54).

In contrast to Wright's construction of black women and the "place" of the domestic as essentially ahistorical and nonrevolutionary, Petry's domestic women manifest both a class aspect of consciousness--an analysis of their function as producers --and what Mary O'Brien describes as the "reproductive, generic aspect of

consciousness" that women literally embody (15).⁹ In Petry's work, this generic element of consciousness seeks a "home," a community-engendered sense of place, for Harlem's children. It is also implicated in Petry's critique of the African American woman's *economically-determined* domestic place within the white, bourgeois household and her concomitant displacement or alienation from her own home and community. Like Wright's factories and unions, the domestic in Petry's work is a revolutionary site where an analysis of, and a resistance to, black women's racial, economic *and gender* oppression takes "place." In turn, Petry calls into question Wright's assumption that there is, or can be, consensus on a "national democratic cause" while the private war on the domestic front of black women continues unchecked.

As discussed in Chapter I, Wright viewed the dance hall and the church as urban "safe spaces": sites where African Americans were able to talk and act freely among themselves but which remained outside conscious, revolutionary history (Griffin 78-79). They were "surviving remnants of the culture of the South" (12 127), of folk life, which therefore could offer no analysis of their necessity as sites of black survival/s in the urban North. Although domestic work performed by African American women within the white household replicates the social and economic relationship between *blacks and whites* in the South, the white household is by extension also a "remnant" of the plantation economy which functions to deny the worker a critical consciousness capable of analysis and resistance. For Wright, this economic arrangement reproduces the semi-feudal conditions, and the "premodern" consciousness, of the black worker in the southern plantation

household: "Our work inside the homes of the Bosses of the Buildings does not differ greatly from the work we did in the homes of the Lords of the Land" (12 117).

Black motherhood is equally a nonrevolutionary "safe space," particularly as Wright understood it within the context of the southern economy. According to Wright, black women, collectively embodied in the archetypal figure of the "Mammy," were the "arbiters in our domestic affairs until we men were freed and had moved to cities where cash-paying jobs enabled us to become the heads of our own families" (12 37). Wright attaches no critical nuances to the word "Mammy," stating only that these women "enjoyed a status denied us men," a result of the "enforced intimacy" of black women "with the Lords of the Land" during slavery. To Wright, black women were the stable entity in the antebellum South's intersecting economies of labour and desire. In contrast, African American men were coerced migrants, sold from one plantation to another, forced "to mate with whatever slave girl we chanced upon" (12 37). Wright argues that Emancipation did not radically alter this arrangement. Rather, black women continued to have a "more stable" relationship to the world, as they carried what Wright understood to be the "remnants" of the pattern of economic organization under slavery into their own households: "Their authority was supreme in most of our families inasmuch as many of them had worked in the 'Big Houses'...and had learned manners, had been taught to cook, sew, and nurse" (36). Black men, in contrast, travelled the South or drifted North in search of jobs (12 36).

Although Wright did not present himself as an "historian," his misrepresentation of

the "domestic" place of enslaved black women is disturbing. As Angela Davis writes, the construction of the black woman as Mammy is a myth which obfuscates the reality of slavery. In the deep South, the majority of slaves, male and female, were field workers (5). In addition, Wright's construction of the black female domestic worker -- like that of the white household's stereotypical configuration of the "loyal" Mammy -- functions to obfuscate the fact of the black woman's material displacement from her home and community. Hortense Spillers argues that feminist critics must work to re/inscribe the experience of women in slavery by recognizing the material reality of the brutality visited upon them, and the implications of these acts for their female descendants, as the basis of our "praxis and theory" ("Mama's" 68)

For Wright, black Mammies "became symbols of motherhood, retaining in their withered bodies the burden of our folk wisdom" (12 37). This knowledge was, of necessity, no longer relevant to the urban-industrial environment, the new home of African American "men in the making" (12 141). Wright, then, displaces "home"--the domestic place as it is constituted by the labour of black women--with a vision of the city and the factory as spaces where "we men...were struggling to be born" (12 93).¹⁰ In these masculine spaces, the "strange birth" of slavery (12 9), which in Wright's text stands for the African American's irruption into a history which was not of *his* own making, would be rewritten. In "Recent Negro Fiction" (1941), Ellison also employs the metaphor of birth to describe the black writer's struggle to represent in fiction the developing consciousness of the black, urban, and implicitly male, working class. Of the recent, and

"not fully formed" work of Waters Edward Turpin, whose earlier work he had reviewed in 1937, Ellison writes:

...Turpin's relation to his material is that of an obstetrician (sic) attempting with obsolete instruments to aid a birth he sees only cloudily through blurred vision. The new consciousness of the Negro people struggles to be born: Turpin has approached it...with faltering hands and near-sighted eyes. (24)

As Houston Baker argues, the machinery of industry literally replaces the black mother in Wright's work and in Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) ("Richard" 105). This is also true of Ellison's earlier, war-driven focus on the transition of black *men* from agricultural to factory labour and, as he wrote in his review of Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*, the "rebirth" of the black (and male) folk within the urban-industrial environment ("Transition" 90). As Baker writes, the factory is the site for the *reproduction* of "a potentially productive black [male] urban modernism" ("Richard" 105).¹¹ In Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, the reproductive labour of black women, like the productive labour of black female domestic workers, is "beyond the boundaries of the modern world" (12 135).

The factory and the union are the sites where the African American male worker can literally enter into the critical consciousness of the urban stranger, the perspective from which Wright observes and narrates African American life in *12 Million Black Voices* (Griffin 72). As Robert Park described it, this perspective is that of the "emancipated individual....[who] learns to look upon the world in which he was *born and*

bred with something of the detachment of a stranger. He acquires...an intellectual bias" (351, emphasis added). In Wright's text, the gender implications of Park's configuration are carried over into the industrial workplace where black Americans are subject to the forces which break down their folk characters and "liberate" them into modern, working-class and revolutionary consciousness:

It is when we are handling picks rather than
mops...swinging hammers rather than brooms...pushing
levers rather than dust-cloths that we are gripped and
influenced by the world-wide forces that shape and mold the
life of Western civilization. (12 117)

African American women are literally left out of this process. In fact, they are the literal embodiment of that folk life which Wright argues must be allowed to die if black men are to be *reborn*: a "death that enabled us to cross class and racial lines, a death that made us free" (12 144). Wright's "history" is, in fact, an "elegy" for the dying of the old folk life (Baker, "Richard" 96), one which consigns black women to a form of *living* "death on the city pavements" (12 91).

I'm a stranger / Don't drive me away /
If you drive me away / You may need me some day (12, 75)

By situating Petry's work within the historical context of the war, its radical, if sometimes tentative, interventions into contemporary social formations are most apparent.¹² However, to argue the revolutionary potential of the domestic place, to understand it, like the literary text itself, as a site of transformative intervention in the

process of history produces contradictory implications of its own. In Petry's work, and particularly in *The Street*, motherhood embodies both the revolutionary and reactionary aspects of the urban safe space. As Farah Griffin writes, the safe space can engender and support resistance, or it can create complacent subjects whose only aim is to exist within the power structures which oppress and confine them (9). Lutie's relationship to her son Bub exhibits both aspects of Griffin's definition. However, Petry makes it clear that motherhood defines black "place" within city "space." Yi-Fu Tuan makes a distinction between these two configurations: "place" is that which is valued and known, stable and secure, while "space" represents openness and freedom but also threat. Each "site" is most clearly delineated when one views it from a location within its apparent opposite (Tuan 6). Petry inverts Wright's perspective, which is located within his own construction of male, urban-industrial "space," by choosing to view the city from the domestic "place" of black women, specifically from the perspective of a projected "safe *place*" for their children.

Petry also subverts Wright's figuration of the African American woman as the stable, even pathologically inert, entity in black life by creating urban women who are the city's *domestic migrants*. Petry's women literally embody the "migratory voices" of the black domestic, those women who, in Wright's work, remain "Forms of Things Unknown" (Wright, "Literature" 84; 83), *female* figures of, and from, an unusable and "untranslatable" past within the urban-industrial environment. In Petry's work these women are the city's "strangers," crossing class and racial lines in their coerced migrations

from job to job, white household to white household. In contrast, the men of *The Street* are the fixed entities:

[H]ere on this street the women trudged along
overburdened, overworked, their own homes neglected
while they looked after someone else's while the
men...swung along empty-handed, well dressed, and
carefree. Or they lounged against the sides of the buildings,
their hands in their pockets while they stared at the women
who walked past... (65)

But the female stranger, unlike the male stranger in Wright's work, must go "home" again as part of her effort to mobilize the revolutionary potential of the black domestic place.

"Home," however, is itself a site on which the forces of the "private war" on the domestic front converge.

What underlies Petry's writing of the 1940s and early 1950s is the historical memory, or as Sethe describes it in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the "rememory" (36)--the continuous manifestation of history on the landscape¹³--of the nation's most divisive and transformative conflict, the Civil War. I read Petry's novels as a cycle of texts which reproduce the events of the Civil War, specifically Emancipation and the failure of Reconstruction to create an interracial democracy, in the context of World War II. During World War II, the fight against racist and imperialist ideologies abroad was brought home with a Double V campaign that demanded "*a second front for freedom*" (Himes, "Now" 272, emphasis in original) against the manifestations of these ideologies within the nation. In addition, Executive Order 8802, considered by some black leaders to portend an "economic Emancipation Proclamation" (qtd. in Wynn 46),¹⁴ appeared to offer black

Americans the "tools" to participate *en masse* in an urban-industrial economy and the assurance of an improved standard-of-living. *The Street* and *In Darkness and Confusion* are concerned with the effects of the failure of this second democratic and economic "Reconstruction" of the nation on black women and children.¹⁵

Throughout World War II, and particularly before Pearl Harbour and America's entry into the war necessitated at least the illusion of what Wright described as a "national democratic cause," the African American press drew explicit parallels between the racist policies of Nazism and Southern segregationist "traditions." In the North, the devastating effects of the Depression persisted in many African American communities long after white Americans had reentered industrial plants as war workers; this situation was depicted as an economic form of racism. Russell Lee's 1941 Farm Security Administration photographs of south side Chicago, inspired by Wright's depiction of the city in *Native Son*, are a powerful example of how this view of black experience intersected with New Deal politics.¹⁶ The product of a politicized aesthetic, several of these images make explicit visual analogies between the war ravages of Nazism and the condition of many poverty-ravaged black American neighbourhoods.¹⁷ In *12 Million Black Voices*, Lee's photographs illustrate Wright's statement that many urban black communities "look as though they had been subjected to an intensive and prolonged aerial bombardment" (114). Under these conditions, life is "daily warfare" (12 123). Ellison echoed Wright's sentiments, while focusing on New York, in "The Way It Is" published in *New Masses* in late 1942. In Harlem "[t]he struggle for existence constitutes a war in itself" (*Essays* 318).

Ironically, the war abroad provided Wright and Ellison with a suitable metaphor to describe conditions for many African Americans at home. For many white Americans, however, this situation became an issue only when the 1943 riots focused their attention on the war's domestic front. As Petry wrote in *Holiday* magazine in 1949, the Harlem riot of 1943, following so soon after the violence of 1935, "seem[s] to have permanently rubbed out...[the] hackneyed description of Harlem - [as] the dwelling place of a dancing, laughing, happy-go-lucky, childlike people" ("Harlem" 110).

Petry's Harlem is also an urban war zone, subject to control through the threat of violence from outside the community and racked by violence, particularly between men and women, within. In *The Street*, a World War I veteran who speculates that "[t]here'll be trouble when them colored boys" fighting in World War II come back to conditions similar to those they left behind (338), is challenged by another who argues that the white authorities "could clean this whole place out easy if colored folks started to acting up" (341). The conditions which the soldiers have "left behind" are a product of the machinations of a genocidal economics. Lutie describes streets like hers as "the North's lynch mobs....the method the big cities used to keep Negroes in their place" (323). She observes that on the street, black women must make do with the "leavings, the sweepings...the dregs and dross that were reserved especially for Harlem" (153). Ultimately, despite the fact that "the people went on living and reproducing....Even the strongest heritage would one day run out" (153-54). At the end of a war against racial genocide abroad, Petry implicates the nation in a type of covert action against African

Americans at "home."

Petry's writing functions as an historical palimpsest which inscribes the experience of black, urban and working-class women onto the historical text of slavery. The struggle over the "power to define and defend motherhood," which as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues "emerged as the battleground over the irreducible minimum of...social identities" in slavery (17), is reproduced in wartime Harlem. Petry's work reflects both the prevalence of the woman-centred household in Harlem¹⁸ and the transformation of the urban environment into "a much more female universe" as men left for war (Walsh 64). Black women were often left alone to defend their families against what Ellison described in "The Way It Is" as the city's "offensive against them" (*Essays* 319).

Moreover, the displacement of African American women from the realm of the domestic as it is constituted by their own community, to one constituted by the economic arrangements of the white bourgeois household, translates into a "*theft of the body*" analogous to that which defined the condition of slavery itself (Spillers, "Mama's" 67, emphasis in the original). As Houston Baker, drawing on the work of Yi-Fu Tuan argues, if one's "place" is "constituted and maintained...by another then one is not a setter of place, but a prisoner of another's desire" ("Richard" 87). The contemporary economic inscription of the domestic black woman is implicated in racist "dictates" that specify that her body, as well as her labour, is always accessible to white men, a situation which points to the historical articulation of white male economic control and the violation of the black female body under slavery. It is this economic order of things, as it is "rememoried" in

Petry's Harlem, that threatens social death: the severance of "the ties that bind people into society, effectively leaving isolate[d] individuals to fend for themselves" (Fox-Genovese 9). In *The Street*, these threatened individuals are the "countless children with doorkeys tied around their necks....*seeking their mothers* in the homecoming throng surging up from the subway" (324, emphasis added). The struggle of black women to maintain the ties that bind them to their children, and bind together the African American community as a whole, is revolutionary activity. Petry *replaces* Wright's Marxist perspective on the socially necessary labour of production with a focus on the "primordially *necessarily social labour*" of reproduction (O'Brien 16, emphasis in the original) and women's work.

Shortly after leaving her job with *The People's Voice*, Petry worked as a "recreational specialist" ("First Novel" 39) in a Harlem after-school program. As Petry explained in an interview, many of the participants were doorkey children "who had no place to go"; it was this which prompted her to write *The Street* (Diamant 22). In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison equates the physical state of having "no place to go" with the metaphysical state of "being put *outdoors*," a condition distinct from that of being put *out* with *some place* to go; to be put *outdoors* necessitates a confrontation with "the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact." This state is, however, but one small step *outside* the everyday "peripheral existence" of African Americans in the United States (18, emphasis in original). In Petry's work, having no place to go is equivalent to social death, a form of "nonbeing" (Patterson 38). The struggle of African American women to retain a sense of "place" for their children, of "being" *in* community, characterizes the war for the

domestic.

In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby argues that black women were, and are, compelled to address ideologies which have excluded them from constructions of womanhood, motherhood and sexuality associated with being *white* and female, particularly as they were constituted by the nineteenth-century "cult of true womanhood."¹⁹ These ideologies construct the black woman as the abject Other who constitutes the boundaries of the "place" and subjectivity of the white woman. The dialectical relationship between constructions of white *woman* and black Other "bring coherence and order to the contradictory material circumstances of the lives of women" (Carby, *Reconstructing* 24). As Petry demonstrates, these material differences, particularly as they result in the economic and domestic displacement of black women and their children, have a profound impact on the survival of the African American community.

Hortense Spillers returns to the beginning of the project of slavery, the slave trade itself, to come to terms with what she describes as the "symbolic order...an 'American grammar'" of race and gender, or more accurately, of race and the *undetermined* gender of black women ("Mama's" 68). Spillers argues that slavery functioned to displace black women and men from the realm of the domestic as it was constituted by the assumption of a common origin, "an essential metaphor" literally inscribed in a patronymic which "situates those persons it 'covers' in a particular place" ("Mama's" 72). Removed from the African *homeland*, African names literally unregistered by those who engaged in what George Lamming describes as "commercial deportation," the ship's hold was, in the

Middle Passage, a "deep hole of temporary *placelessness*" (Baker, "Richard" 91, emphasis added). This effacement of African markers of domestic "place" was the initial step in the process of the commodification of the black body. Gender itself was subsumed under the category of race as bodies, male or female, became interchangeable quantities within the hold.

Petry reproduces this arrangement of physical space in the urban landscape of *The Street*. Harlem's tenements are towering, vertical slave ships. The names which appear over and over again on the tenement mailboxes--names such as Johnson and Jackson--are "generic" markers of *African* American displacement in the United States. Others invoke the legacy of slavery: "Henry Lincoln Johnson lived here, too, just as he did in all the other houses she'd looked at" (6). Some names "are scratched out and other names substituted," inscriptions which materialize in Lutie's vision of the tenement landlord filling the hallways with "row after row" of cots for innumerable, and interchangeable, tenants (7). Petry's description of the interior spaces of Harlem's tenements in *Holiday* magazine is similar: they are made up of countless "cubicles just big enough to hold a bed, a bureau and a broken chair or two" ("Harlem" 116). Petry's "tropological" way of perceiving material reality as "[a] *metaphorical* extension of the economics of slavery" (Baker, *Blues* 28, emphasis in original), aligns the slave trade with the city's capitalist structures of dominance. If, as Spillers argues, the slave ship is the absolute antithesis of the domestic ("Mama's" 72), then Petry's conflation of the Harlem tenement with the vessel's hold aligns the *ungendering* project of slavery with that of the city.

For African American women under slavery, this *ungendering* project had its locus in the experience of motherhood, in the slave woman's powerlessness to determine reproduction's overlap with the project of culture and community. Spillers argues that the slave woman did not reproduce "mothering" or "sex-role assignments" granted free women ("Mama's" 79); rather, as was the case for women in *African* slavery, the act of giving birth was *displaced* and became a process which reproduced the relations of production, the slaveholder's rigid hierarchy.²⁰ Spillers cites Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) as an American example of the displacement of motherhood under slavery: "Women are considered of no value, unless they reproduce their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals" (Jacobs 49). Jacobs's observations support Spillers's argument that for slave women gender and motherhood are inter-implicated. If gender is "an *outcome* of a certain political, socio-cultural empowerment within the context of the United States," specifically the right to "own" and parent one's children, then "dispossession" results in "the *loss* of gender, or one of the chief elements in an altered reading of gender" ("Mama's" 77, emphasis in original). To be considered only the reproducer of capital, of property, is to be denied a subject position from which to reclaim the gendered Self and the place of motherhood within the project of community. For black women, "motherhood and female gendering/ungendering appear so intimately aligned that they *seem* to speak the same language" ("Mama's" 78, emphasis in original), what might be called the language of the *commonplace*.

In this context, motherhood is aligned with the subject position "woman," the

liberated female subject, who is able to define her "place" and that of her children. Black motherhood is a form of "primary narrative," a term Spillers uses to distinguish between the meaning of the *flesh* of the slave as opposed to the social construction, the social inscription, of the enslaved black *body*. The flesh is the "site" of the primary narrative, the place where the reality of slavery is actually registered ("Mama's" 67). In a radical reading of the flesh, it is the place where a counter-narrative to discursive strategies which function to efface slavery's reality is literally inscribed. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison's *reinscription* of the theft of Sethe's breast milk, the scars on her back and the murder of her baby, her own flesh and blood--forms of things unknown, these "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (199)--is in stunning opposition to Schoolteacher's taxonomy, his record of Sethe's "human characteristics...[and] her animal ones" (193) at the ironically named Sweet Home plantation. Sethe makes "fine ink" for Schoolteacher (149), material evidence of the fact "that definitions belonged to the definers - not the defined" (190). The black woman's fight to claim, to "define" her child in the flesh--to repudiate the social death that is slavery and its contemporary "rememories"--is to *reconfigure* the domestic as a place where a literally regenerative primary narrative can be written.²¹

In *The Devil Finds Work*, James Baldwin cites a passage from Charles Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities* in which a poor man wishes that the "miserable race" of the indigent might be allowed to die out, its women made barren. In response, Baldwin writes that *because* "[t]he children of the despised and rejected are menaced from the moment they stir in the womb...[they] are therefore sacred in a way that the children of the saved are

not" (17). He argues that every black child learns the narrative of the community's survival and carries into the future both a "record" of this narrative and the certainty of one day overthrowing the oppressor:

It was not *we* who were supposed to *die out*: this was, of all notions, the most forbidden, and we learned this from the cradle. Every trial, every beating, every drop of blood, every tear, were meant to be used by us for a day that was coming - for a day that was certainly coming...not for us perhaps, but for our children. (16-17, emphasis in original)

In Baldwin's text, black children bear the "rememory," the figurative traces of the slave system and its subsequent reconfigurations. The child is, in this context, the word made flesh, the "site" of the African American community's primary narrative of survival and resistance.

In Darkness and Confusion

The title of Petry's novella alludes to a passage in *12 Million Black Voices* in which Wright invokes earlier episodes of urban racial violence between blacks and whites: "They kill us and we kill them. We both feel that we are right. This is what life comes to when men's minds are snared in darkness and confusion..." (123). *In Darkness and Confusion* was published in 1947, although it was actually written shortly after the 1943 Harlem riot. Petry had submitted her story to *Crisis* in late 1943 or early 1944 but James Ivy, the magazine's editor, rejected the manuscript because of its length (Ivy, "Ann" 48). Despite the delay in its publication, Petry's story is the earliest sustained account of the

riot by an African American writer. In Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), the protagonist plunges into his hole in the ground on his way to confront those he holds responsible for the riot, The Brotherhood. James Baldwin would write about the riot in his autobiographical essay "Notes of a Native Son" (1955). Although, as *The People's Voice* reported, one hundred of the five hundred people arrested for looting during the riot were women ("Known Facts" 2), they are virtually nonexistent in both of these accounts. Ellison's report on the riot for the *New York Post* on August 2, 1943, granted women only a minor role: "As the night went on, women began to participate, bringing mattresses away and clothing for their children. And at 6 a.m. the kids came out to search within the rabble (sic)" (4). In contrast, *In Darkness and Confusion* focuses on two black women--both of whom are domestic workers and one a mother--as active participants in the riot. Their actions, like all such acts of dissent, reveal and challenge "a power structure that obscures real conflicts through false claims of consensus" (Lipsitz, *Rainbow* 73) from the *gendered* "perspective" of black domestic women.

The narrative consciousness of *In Darkness and Confusion* is male, that of Wil Jones. However, he records the actions of Pink, his wife and the mother of their son, and his niece, Annie May, during the riot. Petry "revolutionizes" Wright's conflation of the consciousness of black women with the material conditions of the domestic place itself--"the kitchenette...[and] the white folk's kitchen"--and his description of black women as "the most *circumscribed and tragic objects* to be found in" black life (12 131, emphasis added). In *In Darkness and Confusion*, Petry's domestic women are mobile subjects; they

move their revolutionary consciousness out of the kitchen, where as mothers and workers it has been formed, and into the streets as active agents of historical change.

In a scene based on the historical facts of the Harlem riot of 1943, Wil witnesses the shooting of a black soldier in the Braddock Hotel by a white police officer, an action which for many Harlemites, as Langston Hughes wrote in an editorial in *Crisis*, was conflated with that of "Dixie cops shooting down [black] men in uniform...of the Army of Democracy" on southern military bases ("Harlem Riot" 263). The rumour that the soldier had died--he was in fact only wounded--sparked the riot. This event occurs several days after Wil learns that his own son Sam, stationed with an Army unit in Georgia, has been sentenced to twenty years of hard labour for wounding a white military policeman who had shot him "when he wouldn't go to the nigger end of a bus" (286).²²

As news of the shooting in the bar spreads, Wil joins the angry crowd making its way through Harlem, as yet uncertain of its purpose, and meets Pink on her way home from church. When he tells her of Sam's fate--he had withheld the news because of her poor health--Pink's present grief echoes with her remembered anguish at the death of their last child, who had died at birth in the Harlem Hospital. Wil recounts this event as the crowd pauses in front of the hospital waiting for news of the soldier. At the death of their baby, the white nurse had said with "cold contempt... 'You people have too many children anyway'" (284). With this conflation of Sam, the soldier and the dead infant, the "offensive" against black motherhood and the Army's assault on its own black soldiers, Petry aligns the two "domestic" fronts on which African Americans fought during the war.

Enraged at her son's fate, Pink breaks several store windows and begins looting, shedding her church clothes in the process. The crowd follows her lead. The streets of Harlem "had become the world that had taken her son, [her children,] and she was wreaking vengeance on it" (294).

Pink's anger culminates in a single act of defiance, a moment of symbolic violence. Annie May's anger, however, takes the form of a protracted struggle for the reinscription of the place of the black female body on "the street." She is representative of many young women in Harlem: "Too thin. Too much lipstick. Their dresses were too short and too tight. Their hair was piled on top of their heads in slicked set curls" (264). Annie May is a "zoot girl" who, like the male zoot-suiters, defiantly declares her racial identity as well as her resistance to her prescribed economic place. In addition, she refuses her prescribed gender role.²³ Like her female peers, Annie May refuses to get to work on time, losing one job after another. Her uncle intuitively understands the meaning of her defiance in terms of his own "domestic" role: he works as a janitor and stock clerk in a drug store. She looks at him with "open, jeering laughter in her eyes...as though she thought he was a fool for working so hard" (256). Her "zoot suit" is the sign and expression of what Stuart Cosgrove describes as "a refusal: a subcultural gesture that refused to concede to the manners of subservience" (4). Annie May is the *female* embodiment of the "profound political meaning" that Ellison associated with the zoot suit in his 1943 *Negro Quarterly* editorial ("Editorial Comment" 301).

Annie May stays out half the night "[p]robably...out dancing somewhere" (256),

haunts the movie houses, "talked too loud and laughed too loud....[and] stared hard at every man who went past" (264). Her uncle calls her "A Jezebel" (257). She is one of the few women in Petry's fiction who have not been "put *outdoors*" of marriage, family or work by the actions of others, usually men. She asserts a degree of independence that reflects the changing configuration of the city during the war. For many women, urban and industrial centres became places where they were able to escape the surveillance of men, a fact which radically altered their relationship to both private and public space (Walsh 64). Annie May's relationship to city space also reflects the fact that, as a shortage of black male workers developed midway through the war and black women began to take their place in industrial occupations, domestic workers found themselves in demand (Hartmann 90). This situation makes Annie May's urban "migrations" from job to job possible.

Annie May's movements across the city are not the coerced migrations of the majority of the women in *The Street* who work "in the white folks' kitchens...then...come home and cook and clean for their own families half the night....trudging along overburdened, overworked" (65). Instead, she literally embodies "the power of movement" which Hazel Carby identifies as the central trope of the "Classic" women blues singers of the 1920s and early 1930s ("It Jus" 335). These women, who had themselves exercised their power to move during the first Great Migration, constructed themselves as sexual subjects, in the public realm, through song ("It Jus" 331). Annie May's refusal to be effaced as a sexual subject is closely linked to her refusal to accept her place as

domestic worker within the "private" household of a white employer. Like Malcolm X's zoot suit which, as George Lipsitz, drawing on the work of Robin D.G. Kelley, argues repudiated his work-day uniforms of soda jerk and pullman porter, Annie May's dress reclaims the "work body for the pleasures of display and dance" (Lipsitz, *Rainbow* 85).²⁴

In the end, Annie May's defiance takes the form of a symbolic act of violence against the figure of a white woman, a store dummy. Wil observes her in a store window, her "ferocious" hands clutching its waist, its "pinkish torso...faintly obscene" (289). She throws the dummy above the heads of the crowd and as it smashes on the ground they erupt in laughter. Wil realizes that Annie May's prescribed place within Harlem is analogous to that of his son in the American army:

She had never had anything but badly paying jobs - working for young white women who probably despised her. She was like Sam on that bus in Georgia. She didn't want just the nigger end of things, and here in Harlem there wasn't anything else for her. (289-90)

He realizes that both Annie May and Sam are fighting back on the war's domestic front.

Wil last sees Annie May among a group of young people being herded into a police wagon. She has been arrested for stealing a fox-fur coat. While this theft is another act of defiance, a way "to squeeze out of life a little something for herself" (290), there is also an element of defeat in Annie May's action. In the midst of the Harlem riot, Ellison's *Invisible Man* encounters a scene which bears an eerie, if inverse, resemblance to Annie May's destruction of the store mannequin. Hanging from the lamp-posts are white female bodies "[h]airless, bald and sterilely feminine" (*Invisible* 447). For a brief moment,

the Invisible Man is paralysed with fear, (he has been in vague pursuit of his white lover, Sybil), then realizes that the figures are store dummies and that he has passed a group of black boys wearing their blonde wigs. He is "devastated by the humour" of it (447), this carnivalesque and grotesque parody of a lynching in which the black man escapes from the scene of the crime with a gendered and sexual "momento." In a very real way, the city in the midst of the riot has become a huge, darkened "movie theatre" where these young men *act on* a form of spectatorship which is possible only within its four walls. As bell hooks writes, the cinema provided a place for African American men to engage in "phallogentric politics of spectatorship"--the forbidden male gaze--when viewing white women on the screen (118). In Wright's *Native Son*, for example, Bigger's "senses hungered" for the movies and while in the theatre "he could dream without effort" (*Early Works* 457), including "dreams" about white women.²⁵ For a brief moment in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the city as "theatre" is no longer "an imaginative space of phallogentric power that mediated racial negation" (hooks 118) but a literal one.

Annie May, who like many women during the war regularly attends the movies, would have experienced the looking relations of the darkened theatre in a profoundly different way than did African American men. As bell hooks argues, black women on film were largely constructed as an "*absence*, that denies the 'body' of the black female so as to perpetuate white supremacy and...*a phallogentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at and desired is 'white'*" (118, emphasis added). Petry's work further complicates hooks's position by presenting the city's mass culture as a literal projection of an imagined,

inaccessible world, a material version of what Baldwin described as the cinema's "language of our [American] dreams" (*Devil* 34). The difficulty for black women as urban "spectators," then, is that they must mediate both racial *and* gender negation. Annie May's fur coat, which hides her "zoot suit," suggests an ambivalent identification with the white, female embodiment of her racial-economic displacement.

In *The Street*, a far more ambivalent representation of the figure of the zoot girl appears. In the novel, these women are residents of Mrs. Hedges's brothel. They stand out from the married women who have been "put outdoors," and on whom Mrs. Hedges also preys, because they have been seduced by the city itself: "There were always lonesome, sad-looking girls up from the South, or little girls who were tired of going to high school, and who had seen too many movies and didn't have the money to buy all the things they wanted" (252). As the situation of these women demonstrates, the wartime city and the "power of movement"--the trip from South to North and the mobility the city itself offers--pose specific dangers for black women. As Hazel Carby writes, the women blues singers of the first Great Migration also included warnings in their songs that the northern city was not the "promised land" ("It Jus" 335). Petry's incorporation of a material "reading" of what might be called the women's blues of the second Great Migration functions, like all blues, to "create *an atmosphere for analysis to take place*" (S. Williams 125, emphasis added).

In *The Street*, an advertisement Lutie sees posted in the subway reminds her of the two years she spent as a live-in maid with the wealthy Chandler family. Lutie's

interpretation of the advertisement maps the place of African American women within the city's domestic economy in a literally graphic rendition of the analytic capability of the black woman's blues. The advertisement depicts "a girl with incredible blond hair" standing close to a "smiling man in a navy uniform" in "a miracle of a kitchen" (28). In the "small private world" (28) that this picture represents Lutie had "cleaned another woman's house and looked after another woman's child while her own marriage went to pot" (30). What remains invisible and unknown in the advertisement is the labour which black women have "invested" in this picture of American life. The economic order this picture represents, its "tricks and white enamel" as Lutie describes it (56), keep these black women running. The advertisement has particular significance on the war's domestic front when, as George Lipsitz argues, the realities of wartime sacrifice compelled politicians, propagandists, advertisers, and I would add movie-makers, to depict the postwar world for which the nation was fighting as "free of fear, filled with material abundance and comfort, and firmly grounded in family ties and romantic affection" (*Rainbow* 46). The advertisement's implicit message forms the ironic backdrop of *In Darkness and Confusion* and *The Street*. The emancipatory promises of the war have failed to have any impact on the domestic front of Harlem. The projected "reconstruction" of America does not include black women or men.

Ultimately, Wil realizes that black people "don't belong anywhere.... There wasn't no room for Sam in a bus in Georgia. There ain't no room for us here in New York. There ain't no place but top floors. The top-floor black people" (291). The war against

the common^{place}, the Harlem community's shared stake in the place of the domestic, becomes a metaphor for the continued "displacement" of the black community as a whole within the project of American democracy.

Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child (Folksong)

The Street begins with Lutie Johnson renting an apartment at the very top of the stairs in a tenement on 116th St. in Harlem. She, too, is a "top-floor" black person, and as Barbara Christian writes, the first literary urban black mother (*Black* 65). Lutie is charged with creating a safe place for herself and her son Bub in "a much-involved and perfected kind of hell at the top - the very top" (*Street* 6). This reading of her domestic place makes ironic her statement that the apartment represents "just one step farther up on the ladder of success" (26). This image is, however, appropriate to Lutie's situation, to her drive to find a way to climb over the "wall"--a recurring image in the novel--which separates her and Bub from "places that were filled with sunlight and good food and where children were safe" (155). This vision of the domestic place is Petry's rewriting of what Hortense Spillers calls the "territory of the sacred" in naturalistic fiction of the period: those places which for male writers of the genre are identified by, and with, the architecture of the city or the technology of planes and trains, access to which is prohibited for the "pariah" class ("Cross-Currents" 254).

Similarly, Petry reconfigures the moment when the excluded Other experiences what Wright describes in "How Bigger Was Born" as a "painful and unwarrantable

nakedness" when confronted with the "sacred"--in his case the city's monumental architecture (*Early Works* 863)--as the moment when the black woman confronts the city's "hell" and experiences the body itself as the site upon which the city's structures of dominance act. In the opening scene of *The Street*, Lutie is figuratively undressed by the "violent assault" of the winter wind (1), its "cold fingers" exploring her face and neck and unpinning her hat as she reads the "For Rent" sign outside the tenement (2). Lutie pits herself against a city figured as a powerful, hostile and masculine entity built "brick by brick," like the wall that separates her from the safe place of the domestic, "by eager white hands" (324).²⁶

Petry's masculine city concretely manifests what Angela Davis argues is one of American racism's most enduring features: "the assumption that white men - especially those who wield economic power - possess an incontestable right of access to Black women's bodies" (175). This "right" of access, she points out, is deeply rooted in the economic order of things under slavery when "[r]ape...was an uncamouflaged expression of the slaveholder's economic mastery and the overseer's control over Black women as workers" (7). This historical articulation between white male economic control and the violation of the black female body is "remembered" in Petry's contemporary urban landscape.²⁷ The city conspires to make Lutie's body and her labour, as domestic worker and mother, always accessible. While the "wall" that separates her from the safe place of the "sacred" is impenetrable, the tenement apartment is an almost literal "black hole," an implosion of space and time in which the walls push against her and a "creeping silence"

exists beneath the communal noises which permeate the building (144).

At the end of the novel, Lutie returns to the tenement building after she has been told by the band leader Boots Smith, at the instigation of his employer, the white bar owner Junto, that she will not be paid for singing at the Casino in a job she hoped would be her way out of the ghetto. Angry and frightened at what the future holds for Bub, she is paralysed by her situation. Frozen on the tenement stairway, she is surrounded by the competing sounds of innumerable radios. Petry makes Lutie's confrontation with language itself, on the stairway of the *commonplace*, the moment when she is confronted with what Wright described, in reference to the male space of the factory, as "the vortex of modern urban life" (12 117). She overhears an aural representation of the city in transition, a montage of "confusing" sounds: the jingle "Buy Shirley Soap and Keep Beautiful"; the swing record "Rock, Raleigh, Rock"; "the sounds of a revival church... 'This is the way, sisters and brothers. This is the answer'" (312). To these are added the "angry violence" of a fight within the building (313). The domestic place is permeated by competing discourses, none of which is capable of articulating or transforming the *commonplace* into a safe place for Bub, or of inscribing motherhood as a "primary narrative" of black resistance. However, Petry's documentation of Lutie's resisting struggle reclaims the domestic place as revolutionary in contrast to Wright's construction of "black mothers [who] sit, deserted, with their children about their knees" (12 109) on the margins of history.

Petry's Harlem is a complex, multi-layered representation of African American

"place." Her initial inspection of the apartment on 116th Street is Lutie's entry into the concrete manifestation of what James Baldwin describes in "Everybody's Protest Novel" as America's "theological terror" of race, of literal and figurative blackness (*Notes* 18). Baldwin argues that the protest novel actually affirms the very racial constructs it deplors in its configuration of a type of Manichean world in which "black equates with evil and white with grace" (17). There is no escape from this construction of reality because the protest novel implicitly accepts that "the oppressed and the oppressor...share the same beliefs...depend on the same reality" (21). The only "choice" the black American can make within this "reality" is a form of racial "death": to be granted "grace," like Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, and in the manner of the hymn, be washed whiter than snow (21) or, like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, to accept a racial "theology" which "admits the possibility of his being sub-human" (23).

Baldwin develops this argument further in "Stranger in the Village." The cathedral of Chartres becomes a metaphor for the place of the black man or woman within Western civilization, the grotesque, material manifestation of Stowe's and Wright's "theology." However, Baldwin envisions an escape from racial inscription--literally written in stone on the cathedral's facade, "the obscene, inescapable gargoyles," the "devil" of the West (*Notes* 174)--by voluntarily accepting this "place." Baldwin is obsessed with "the slippery bottomless well" below Chartres "down which heretics were hurled to death" (174). It is a harrowing vision of the existential, yet regenerative "void"--and an abstraction of the hole/hold of slavery--the place where, as he writes in *Everybody's Protest Novel*, "the

foundations of society are hidden" (*Notes* 20). In Baldwin's view, the African American cannot escape exclusion from the "sacred." Rather, he must assume his place underground. He "must accept the status which myth, if nothing else, gives [him] in the West before [he] can hope to change the myth" (*Notes* 174). This marks a shift from a theology of terror which compelled Wright to state in "How Bigger Was Born" that "if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him" (*Early Works* 881), to an assumption of a "black man's burden" more closely aligned to Ellison's rejoinder to Wright: "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe....I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone...a mind. I am invisible...simply because people refuse to see me" (*Invisible* 7).

In *The Street*, Lutie Johnson is a liminal figure operating between Wright's naturalistic nightmare and Baldwin's and Ellison's subversions of the American theology, the symbolic order, of race. In the scene in which she first inspects the 116th Street apartment, it is the figure of Lutie's grandmother who first invokes, then subverts, the American "theology" of race as Baldwin defines it. Like Baldwin in his essay "Many Thousands Gone," Petry is aware of the "dark and dangerous and unloved stranger" within every black American (*Notes* 42), a figure which stands for both the internalization of the American theology of race and an expression of rage at this racialized--and gendered--order of things. As Baldwin writes, a "paradoxical adjustment" (*Notes* 42) to this situation compels the African American to both contain and exploit this "stranger within." This "lends to Negro life its high element of the ironic" and requires a strategy for reading the

African American literary and social text which recognizes this fact (*Notes* 43).

The "old song" that Lutie's grandmother used to sing and that Lutie hums under her breath as she inspects the apartment invites a reading which situates her within Baldwin's ironic "underground" world: "'Ain't no restin' place for a sinner like me. Like me. Like me.'...The humming increased in volume as she stood there thinking about the apartment" (*Street* 17). In humming the song Lutie demonstrates an awareness, if at a subliminal level, of her "place" within the American theology of race, a place which is concretized on the urban landscape in the form of the tenement building itself. In *The Street*, the kitchenette--the domestic "place" as it is defined by the economics of the city--is analogous to Chartres's abyss. Petry, however, complicates Baldwin's construction of the abyss as a metaphorical birth place of black identity, one which also underlies Ellison's conceptualization of the underground location of his protagonist in *Invisible Man*, by insisting on the *material reality* of birth and black motherhood: the fact that for Lutie "[a]ll the responsibility for Bub was hers. It was up to her to keep him safe, to get him out of here so he would have a chance to grow up fine and strong" (194).

In *The Street*, the grandmother is an ancestor figure, one whose stories and prescient knowledge, and particularly her ability to recognize personal "evil," "had been handed down and down and down until, if you tried to trace them back you'd end up God knows where - probably Africa" (15-16). Although she embodies some of the characteristics of the ancestor as Toni Morrison understands this figure in African American literature--"advising, benevolent, protective, [and] wise" ("City" 39)--she is

silent on matters related to "racial connection, [and] racial memory over individual fulfillment," which Morrison also sees as essential to the ancestor's function (43). This apparent schism, however, rather than disqualifying the grandmother from the role of ancestor, suggests a more nuanced and contextualized reading of her role in Petry's text. Morrison acknowledges that in the fiction of many African American writers the city is constructed as a place where the ancestor cannot survive ("City" 39). In *The Street*, the city's "displacement" of the ancestor takes the form of a protracted offensive against black women as a community, and most dangerously, of a war against motherhood and the domestic place as it is constituted by these women. The economics of the city function to sever matrilineal ties and, therefore, to disrupt the transmission of black women's collective knowledge of the *commonplace*: a form of gendered "social death." When Lutie was seven, "[s]treets like 116th Street or being colored, or a combination of both...had killed [her] Mom off when she was in her prime" (56). Lutie's domestic employment with the Chandlers takes her out of the domestic environment of her own family and isolates her from other workers.²⁸ During the four years, after leaving the Chandler household, that Lutie works in a laundry and goes to secretarial school at night, "she had lost track of all her friends" (76). While her grandmother's wisdom endures, Lutie lacks any female context in which to deploy it.

After years of writing entrance exams, Lutie finally acquires a clerical job with the civil service, probably made possible by Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802 which also legislated the "fair employment" of African Americans in federal government services.²⁹ In

an office located downtown where she is continually subjected to "hostility in the eyes of the white women who stared at her on the downtown streets....[and] the openly appraising looks of the white men" (57), Lutie also experiences a subtle form of the social isolation that many black women experienced on the job during the war. As Karen Anderson points out, "the desire to maintain social distance" between the races in jobs previously dominated by white women--in contrast to the efforts of white male workers to prevent the hiring or promotion of black men--prompted many white female workers to ensure segregated working conditions (86). While this attitude, and its formal structures, are not explicitly referred to in Petry's novel, Lutie often eats her lunch alone and only participates in "confused and incomplete snatches of conversation and that was all" (*Street* 395).

Although a "stranger" among this group of predominantly white women, Lutie acknowledges their common experience of isolation: they too went home and "cleaned their apartments and washed clothes and cooked food, and then it was time to go to bed because they had to get up early the next morning" (396). The economics of the city function to isolate women, black and white, from one another. Under these conditions the *commonplace* is also the site of a specifically female form of alienated labour. Lutie's isolation from a black or women's community, and her apparent quest for "individual fulfilment," must be understood within the context of these wartime racial-economic conditions.

Lutie's effort to climb "up," or over, the wall which separates her and Bub from the safe place is, in part, a response to the failure of the war to "emancipate" African

American workers, specifically men. Although Lutie enters into domestic employment during the Depression, when her husband cannot find work, the Harlem that Lutie returns to in 1940 and lives in until 1944 is not significantly changed by the war and the concomitant need for black labour. Instead, throughout this period

[t]he women work because the white folks give them jobs - washing dishes and clothes and floors and windows.... because for years now the white folks haven't liked to give black men jobs that paid enough to support their families. And finally it gets too late for some of them. *Even wars don't change it.* (388-89, emphasis added)

This fact contextualizes what may appear to be a "conservative" placement of black women within the domestic place. The immigrant Mrs. Pizzini's advice to Lutie-- "It's best that the man do the work when the babies are young....Not good for the woman to work when she's young. Not good for the man" (33)--is, under these circumstances, a feminist corrective to Wright's preoccupation with the marginal position of the black *male* worker in the city. In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright argues that while other im/migrants eventually move out of the "transition area" of American cities -- those areas on the perimeter of the industrial zone (101) -- and join "in a common stream of human unity as it merges with the great American tide," the African American is left behind in this liminal space (12 102). In Petry's fiction, black women occupy a similar position within the domestic economy of the city. As Lutie observes, "That's what's wrong. We don't have time enough or money enough *to live like other people* because the women have to work until they become drudges and the men stand by idle" (186, emphasis added).³⁰

Lutie's need to escape from the female equivalent of Wright's "transition area" in order to ensure the survival of her son compels her to take the job with the Chandlers *and* to leave it two years later. Patricia Guzman, the editor of Tuskegee's *Negro Year Book, 1941-1946*, provides a contemporary account of why black women left domestic employment as the war effort changed their economic circumstances. She writes that women long-regarded domestic service "as a blind alley occupation, too closely identified with the work patterns of the slavery period." As a wartime labour shortage developed, "[a]mbitious young women will continue to steer clear of it as long as any other type of employment is available" (139).³¹ Lutie's efforts to do just what Guzman describes after her tenure with the Chandlers raises the issue of class mobility within the black community. In this context, Ellison's commentary on the position of his pilot in "Flying Home"--"[a] man of two worlds" (*Essays* 477)--is suggestive of Lutie's situation. Ellison's airman, aspiring to live in the "modern" world but unable and ultimately unwilling to detach himself from the "past" world of the black folk, becomes a "stranger." This condition fuels the protagonist's "conscious struggle for self-definition and for an invulnerable support for his individual dignity" (*Essays* 477). Petry positions her protagonist in a similarly liminal place within the northern city and invests this location with as much terror as the cotton field in the South into which the pilot crashes his plane.

Within this city space, Lutie's grandmother is an ancestral presence closely aligned to the sharecropper Jefferson, who in Ellison's story mediates between the pilot's two worlds. Jefferson rescues, protects and then instructs the pilot through the medium of his

folktale of the flying black man. Jefferson forces the pilot to confront his situation as an African American man in a racist world while offering him strategies for survival in the form of what Wright described in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" as "racial wisdom" (336). As Farah Griffin writes, this is one of the essential functions of the ancestor in African American writing: he or she is "a site of negotiation for the construction of a new self" (8). In Ellison's review of Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*, this process of negotiation is analogous to the creation of a new African American "alloy": the melding of class consciousness with the wisdom of the folk, itself the model for Ellison's delineation of an ongoing process of cultural amalgamation and improvisation among urban African Americans. In *The Street*, Petry explores gender-specific aspects of folk knowledge, particularly that of the grandmother, as they intersect with a material reading of the situation of her protagonist.

When Lutie was a child, "...Granny had always been there, her rocking chair part of the shadow, part of the darkness, making it *known and familiar*": a safe place (404, emphasis added). The song which Lutie associates with the physical presence of her grandmother functions as a counter-narrative to the one which defines Lutie as "a sinner" without a "restin' place"--a coerced migrant, an urban "stranger"--at the beginning of the novel. As a child Lutie, unlike Bub, had never been alone in the house and had drifted off to sleep with the words of her grandmother's song in her ears: "Sleepin', Sleepin', Sleepin' in the arms of the Lord" (404). This is the domestic place that Bub longs for and Lutie struggles to provide. When Bub is left alone because Lutie must go to work, "the house

[is] frightening and cold." When Lutie is with him, "it [is] warm and friendly and familiar" (214), a place distinct from the city space that Wright, influenced by Louis Wirth, constructed as isolating, immobilizing and nightmarishly *unfamiliar* in *Native Son* (Scruggs 54). In Petry's Harlem, the children are born into the "terrifying plane of consciousness" that confronts the southern migrant to the city in *12 Million Black Voices* (99). When to save money, Lutie turns out the lights before she goes to work at the Casino and leaves Bub alone in the dark, the 116th Street apartment becomes a world where "[t]here was nothing around him that was familiar or that he had seen before....He was there alone, lost in the dark, lost in a strange place filled with terrifying things" (218). Without the familiarizing presence of the mother, the domestic place is filled with the unreadable and the unknowable in the same way that Wright's city moves by "signs" the migrant does not understand: "[H]ere in the North cold forces hit you and push you. It is a world of *things*" (12 100, emphasis in original).

It's The Richest Damn Country in the World (*Street* 43)

Lutie's entry into domestic service, and the subsequent experience of being "put *outdoors*" of her marriage, initiates a quest for economic security during which she assumes various roles and identities: laundry worker, civil servant, singer. In this process of metamorphosis, Lutie develops an increasingly "critical gaze" which, as bell hooks writes, "'looks' to document...that is oppositional" (116): the perspective of the black woman as "stranger." What Lutie documents in her journey across the social landscape of

the North is the extent of her own displacement from a *black* domestic place and the implications this has for the African American community as a whole. What she hopes to achieve in the end, however, is "home."

In the course of her "travels," Lutie becomes a type of trickster figure. As John Roberts writes, the trickster in African and African American folklore "solve[s] the problem of how to live with chronic shortages of basic necessities and within a rigid social hierarchy" (30) by subverting and circumventing the power of those who control the quality of his or her existence (37).³² The Chandler household is a microcosm of the city's structures of dominance, of the impenetrable racial-economic walls that mark off scarcity from plenty; it reproduces Roberts's description of the environment in which the trickster must survive. Lutie gazes upon the Chandlers' world in the same way she views the "sacred" urban spaces "filled with sunlight and good food and where children were safe" (155), as if "through a hole in a wall at some enchanted garden" (41).

The Chandler household invokes the antebellum world of "masters and slaves, owners and owned, privileged and non-privileged" that Trudier Harris argues has historically defined African Americans' relationship to space, and specifically the configuration of the domestic place as it is constituted by economics, within the United States (16). This arrangement, as it is reproduced within the white bourgeois household is, as we have seen, Wright's rationale for positing the "premodern" consciousness of African American women employed as domestic labourers. Harris, however, argues that black women have always made conscious choices about their relationship to the

"domestic" economy: "The professional black domestic, just as she has her heritage of an externally defined sense of place, also has the *historical mechanisms for dealing with that definition*" (16, emphasis added). The black domestic worker negotiates the domestic place as defined by her employers, and avoids a sustained "displacement" of her own identity--one which she often masks or represses in her role as domestic--by maintaining her own cultural references and by separating "the circumstances of her existence in the white woman's house from her conception of herself" (Harris 16).

Lutie struggles to extract what she needs from her employer--the means for the economic survival of her family--while striving to maintain a critical distance from the circumstances of the Chandlers themselves. This task is made particularly difficult because, as discussed above, Lutie's own sense of place, of "home," has been made unstable by the severance of matrilineal ties. Lutie, in fact, oscillates between adopting the Chandlers' philosophies and critiquing and subverting them, a process that ends only when she is able to finally identify the source of her oppression: the invisible economics of the city made visible in the embodied figure of the white bar owner, Junto, at the end of the novel (418). This realization is a measure of the degree to which her experience, her travels as female stranger, have transformed her grandmother's prescient knowledge of personal evil--"Some folks so full of it you can feel it comin' at you - oozin' right out of their skins" (20)--into a sustained analysis of systemic forms of racism and sexism, "forms" which the Chandlers' ideology are designed to keep "unknown."

Lutie's train ride from New York to Lyme, Connecticut crosses a social landscape

that is both an illustration of Depression-era America and another manifestation of historical "rememory." From her train window Lutie observes that "near the cities the houses were small and mean-looking...built close to the railroad tracks. In Bridgeport the houses were blackened with soot and smoke from the factories" (35). Her observations echo those of W.E.B. Du Bois who, surveying the southern Black Belt at the end of the nineteenth century, wrote that "[t]he size and arrangements of a people's homes are no unfair index of their condition" (*Souls* 304). Her description of the landscape demonstrates a critical consciousness of the economic determinants of the meaning of place. This perspective also informs her nightmare vision, while living on 116th Street, of countless Harlem residents transformed into rats and running through the streets with tenements chained to their backs (*Street* 191-93), an urban in/version of the hole/hold of slavery. In crossing these spatial and social boundaries, Lutie enters into the condition of "stranger."

In marked contrast to these arrangements of the physical and social landscape, the Chandler house sits in the woods at the end of a private road, "its white paint almost sparkling in the sun and the river very blue behind" it (37). When Mrs. Chandler asks if she would like to tour the inside of the house, Lutie's response indicates the degree to which she is capable of transforming her identity, of mapping herself onto the social landscape. She replies, "'yes, ma'am so neatly and so patly" having decided she would keep the job "by being the perfect maid. Patient and good-tempered and hard-working and more than usually bright" (37). Lutie's domestic persona conforms to what Donald

Bogle identifies as a key element of the representation of the black servant in American films of the Depression era: as figures of loyalty and stability they "reaffirm[ed] for a socially chaotic age a belief in life and the American way of living itself" (36). Lutie's conscious response to her prescribed place within the Chandler household, this strategy of masking is one of the ways in which she will keep the job "as long as was *necessary*" (*Street* 37, emphasis added).

Lutie's remark that the Chandler house is "a miracle" (38)-- "like something in the movies" (39)--is both an expression of the vast material difference between her world and that of which she is now a part and an index of the degree to which Petry subverts this "cinematic" representation of American life, the contemporary version of what Barbara Christian describes as the "public dream" of the southern antebellum household. This antebellum "dream" was supported by an ideology which, with its figuration of the white "lady" and the "contented and loyal mammy," attempted to resolve the material contradictions of these racialized versions of womanhood and motherhood (Christian 11). Lutie, like James Baldwin who describes his experiences watching film in the autobiographical *The Devil Finds Work*, begins to learn to read "the world's intentions for me and mine" (Baldwin 8) as a critical "spectator" both inside and outside the world that the Chandlers "project."³³ By the end of *The Street*, Lutie recognizes that the "technicolor world of bright lights and vast beautiful rooms" on the screen of the Harlem movie theatre, the projection of the American Dream, has "nothing" and *everything* "to do with her" (412).

Petry subverts the public dream of the slaveholder's household as it intersects with popular cultural "rememories" by inverting stereotypes of black and white women which, though rooted in the antebellum past, continue to circulate. The stereotype of the black woman as the embodiment of an illicit and destabilizing sexuality--a belief which engenders the "now-I-wonder-look" among the white male guests of the Chandler household (45)--was reproduced on film. Well into the 1940s, when a black actress was not seen on the screen in the role of maid, she was most likely to appear as a "whore" (Bogle 122). However, in the Chandler household, it is Mrs. Chandler who assumes the latter role, paying "more attention to other women's husbands than she did her own" (*Street* 44). Lutie, in turn, assumes the role of mother to Henry Chandler, Jr.--Mrs. Chandler "was always pushing him away from her" (39)--the privileged and "sacred" prerogative of the white woman (Carby, *Reconstructing* 26).

Petry also subverts the figure of the maid, and particularly the image of the stereotypical "mammy," which is equally a part of the antebellum public dream. As Gloria Wade-Gayles points out, the filmed image of the black domestic in the 1940s was one of a "submissive, devoted, [and] older" woman--a version of the myth generated under the slavery regime as its own perverse justification--despite the fact that historically, the mammy under slavery was, like Lutie, young and attached to *her* family (Wade-Gayles 23). Petry's subversion of these stereotypes in the figure of Lutie Johnson actively intervenes in, and subverts, contemporary American social formations, themselves "rememories" of slavery, particularly as these were projected, and reinforced by, the

American cinema.

Although Lutie as "stranger" within the household of her employers is aware of their contradictions, she is drawn to their peculiarly American philosophy, a pastiche of Benjamin Franklin's aphorisms, "Outsmart the next guy....Retire at forty," and rhetoric which portends a "private" imperialist war: "Richest damn country in the world"; "Always be new markets. If not here in South America, Africa, India--Everywhere and anywhere--" (*Street* 43). Initially, Lutie is uncertain of this "world of strange values" (43). However, while in the Chandler household, and at several critical moments after she returns to Harlem, Lutie lapses into complete identification with it. As John Roberts writes, this is one of the dangers of the trickster strategy. Meeting one's needs by exploiting the close proximity to those with wealth and power puts one at risk "of accepting...the illusion of shared identity that the masters [are] all too capable of creating" (42). For Lutie, its most damaging element is the belief that all one needs to succeed in America is *individual* hard work, a proposition which, as Barbara Christian writes, also echoes "one of the major tenets of many [Harlem] Renaissance writers - that you can make it if you try" (65). There are moments in the novel when Lutie's insistence on this strategy of individual "uplift" approaches the absurd. She endures nearly two years of working exhausting days in the laundry and going to secretarial school at night because she "would remind herself of all the people who had got somewhere in spite of the odds....She would think of the Chandlers and their young friends - 'It's the richest damn country in the world'" (55).

Keith Clark writes that this aspect of Lutie's character points to a reading of *The*

Street as satire. He compares Petry's presentation of her protagonist to Swift's strategy, in *Gulliver's Travels*, of "ridicul[ing] his protagonist for his own ideological and rhetorical purposes" (503). In Lutie's case, her mistake lies in her refusal to "read the black 'book of life'" in place of Benjamin Franklin's advice (503). This fact, he argues, supports Addison Gayle's view that *The Street* is essentially "a mock-heroic epic" (Gayle 193). This reading, however provocative, does not take into account what is Petry's most subversive strategy: the fact that the Chandlers' philosophy sends Lutie on a quest for an America which the emancipatory promises of World War II appear to make *almost* manifest. She recognizes her exclusion from the principles which literally constituted the nation, as well as the fact that African Americans continue to be the invisible, underground people beneath what might be called, in reference to Baldwin's conceptualization of Chartres, the American democratic edifice, only when her own American dream of a domestic safe place for her son literally collapses.

On her way back to the 116th St. tenement after she leaves her unpaid "job" as singer with Boots's band, her emotional state is a perverse abstraction of the solid, material reality of Harlem itself. She feels as if she has been "buried under brick and rubble, falling plaster and caved-in sidewalks" (307). The vision of the possibilities of America that she invokes to mark her descent into the abyss is not that of Benjamin Franklin, however, but that of Thoreau, and his defense of building "castles in the air"--themselves a challenge to the status quo--that concludes *Walden Pond*:

The trouble was with her. She had built up a fantastic

structure made from the soft, nebulous, cloudy stuff of dreams. There hadn't been a solid, practical brick in it, not even a foundation. She had built it up of air and vapor and moved right in. So of course it had collapsed. It had never existed anywhere but in her own mind. (307-08)³⁴

While Franklin is associated with the founding, and the founding documents, of a nation which as Toni Morrison writes, "*decided* that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom *and* mechanisms for devastating racial oppression" (*Playing* xiii, emphasis in original),³⁵ Thoreau, and his opposition to slavery, points to the era of the Civil War and Emancipation. The continuing domestic war against African Americans points to the failure of the "second" Emancipation and Reconstruction of the nation that World War II portended. In this context, the "genre" of mock-heroic epic applies not to Petry's text but to the nation itself.

Lutie's moment of recognition on the tenement stairway marks an escalation of the city's "offensive" against the domestic place. When she discovers Bub shining shoes on the street corner, her first reaction is to slap him. Lutie's rage is, in fact, displaced; she is actually striking out at an economic order of things which works to ensure that Little Henry Chandler is "doing his home work in that big warm library in front of the fireplace. And your kid is out in the street with a shoeshine box" (*Street* 67). As was the case under slavery, Bub has "inherited" the "condition" of his mother and Henry Chandler, Jr., that of his father. Lutie tries to explain to Bub why she reacted so violently to his attempts to earn money, money that she has told him repeatedly that they need:

It's the way you were trying to earn money that made me

mad....colored people have been shining shoes and washing clothes and scrubbing floors for years and years. White people seem to think that's the only kind of work they're fit to do. The hard work. The dirty work. The work that pays the least. (70)

This incident forces her to confront her role in transmitting the Chandlers' "philosophy," the contradictions inherent in their emphasis on "mak[ing] money and sav[ing] money" (70) in a world in which Henry Jr. will never need to follow his parents' "advice." At the same time, Lutie attempts to explain to Bub why the world is this way. However, instead of explaining that "[i]t must be hate" that makes white people "wrap all Negroes up in a neat package labeled 'colored'; a package that called for certain kinds of jobs and a special kind of treatment," she elects to explain this fact to him in terms of their domestic place: "[I]t's for the same reason we can't live anywhere else but in places like this" (72).

What Lutie fears most is resignation to the way things are on the street, the inability to exercise any resistance to the city's genocidal violence. The state of Harlem's women is the index of this condition: "The street was full of young thin girls...with a note of resignation in their voices, with faces that contained no hope, no life" (188). But it is not, as Wright saw it, a "premodern" state of female consciousness which engenders this. Rather, it is the peculiarly "modern" state of the city itself, its genocidal intent.

Although *The Street* contains a catalogue of violations against (and among) African Americans, Lutie Johnson's response to the knifing of a young African American

man by a white store owner is the novel's most chilling, and historically-imbedded account, of the city's protracted war against the children of the African American community.

While *In Darkness and Confusion* is an account of the 1943 Harlem riot, the boy's death is a fictionalization of the events which led to the riot of March 1935. At that time, a rumour that a young boy, an apparent shoplifter, had died at the hands of a white storekeeper sparked a night of violence and looting which left four people dead. In the novel, the boy's death does not lead to a riot but to a state of siege between the white business owner and the black community.

Petry juxtaposes the horror of the boy's killing with Lutie's enjoyment of a brief, idyllic moment: all of Harlem is out on the street enjoying the first warm sun of spring, the children playing on skates and scooters. However, Lutie encounters a crowd of people locked in a "strangely arrested silence" (195). They are gathered around the dead body of the boy, his shoes so worn that "he must have walked practically barefooted on the pavement" (196). Worse than the boy's death and his obvious poverty, however, is the reaction of his sister. Her face registers only a barely perceptible reflection of "hate or sorrow or surprise" followed "by a look of resignation, of complete acceptance....she had lost the ability to protest against anything - even death suddenly like this in the spring" (197). It is Lutie who becomes angry and demands to know the circumstances of the boy's death: the white bakery owner had stabbed him after an apparent holdup attempt.

The next day, the white newspapers report that a "burly Negro" had been killed in the course of a robbery and Lutie tries "to follow the reasoning by which that thin ragged

boy had become in the eyes of a reporter a 'burly Negro'" (198-99). Lutie decides that

it all depended on where you sat how these things looked. If you looked at them from inside the framework of a fat weekly salary, and you thought of colored people as naturally criminal, then...the Negro was never an individual. He was a threat, or an animal, or a curse, or a blight, or a joke. (199)

The papers' distortion of events reflects Petry's own experience with the depiction of Harlem in white-owned newspapers during the war. In August 1942, writers for *The People's Voice* reacted angrily to the fact that the *New York Daily News* and other downtown papers reported that "vice violations" in Harlem had prompted the Army and Navy to declare the area out of bounds to white servicemen (Garlington 2). Ollie Harrington's cartoon in the same edition of the newspaper depicts a white newspaper seller as a puppet holding a paper in each hand: one which reads "Harlem Crime" and the other "Harlem Vice." Hitler hovers above, pulling the strings, making explicit the connection between Hitler's racial "policies" and what the Chicago sociologist Louis Wirth identified as "the corporate powers that control the city" through media (Scruggs 54), those with the fat weekly paycheck to which Petry refers above.

In *The Street*, as news of the boy's death spreads, the potential for racial violence grows. Police guard the vandalized bakery with the message "White man, don't come back" chalked on the sidewalk (199). Lutie observes that

it was like a war that hadn't got off to a start yet...both sides were piling up ammunition and reserves and were now waiting for anything, any little excuse, a gesture, a word, a sudden loud noise - and pouf! it would start. (200)

The measure of Harlem's losses in this war on the domestic front is the violence visited on its children. When Bub is arrested for mail fraud, the victim of the tenement superintendent's displaced aggression against Lutie, he becomes yet another casualty. The men on the street who see Bub wrestled into a police car can do nothing to prevent it: "each one was left with an uneasy sense of loss, of defeat" (384).

Bub's arrest signals the absolute displacement of Lutie's motherhood and the domestic place by a street which has become "mother and father and trained your kid for you, and it was an evil father and a vicious mother" (407). In the end, Lutie abandons Bub. She flees to Chicago after she murders Boots Smith when he attempts to rape her, leaving her son without her familiarizing presence. Earlier in the novel, Petry's imagery portends Bub's fate. To be left alone in the dark in the 116th Street tenement "made him feel as though he were left hanging in space and that he couldn't know how much space there was other than that his body occupied" (215). The invocation of a lynching conflates this act of violence with the economics of the city--Harlem's streets are the "North's lynch mobs" (323)--and the "rememory" of the motherless hole/hold of the slave ship.

Although Bub's fate suggests Lutie's absolute defeat by the forces of the street, her assumption of the collective consciousness of the women in the waiting room of the children's shelter where Bub is placed after his arrest, is a measure of her triumph. Lutie acquires an intellectual bias, a critical gaze, which incorporates both the class and genderic, or productive and reproductive, elements of consciousness. At first, Lutie thinks

that only black women are waiting to see their children at the shelter and wonders if it is "because the mothers of white children had safe places for them to play in, because...[they] didn't have to work?" (408-09). However, she realizes that three of the women are white, though "foreign-looking," and that "[p]erhaps...we're all here because we're all poor. Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with color" (409). For Lutie, it does, of course, have to do with colour and the "whiteness" of these women is qualified by their ethnicity. However, as she waits "she felt as though she were bearing the uneasy burden of the sum total of all the troubles these women had brought with them" (409). Lutie is able to "cross class and racial lines" (Wright, *I2* 144) in a place where mothers are gathered, a "movement" Wright and Ellison posited could happen only in the spaces of the factory and the union, the "home" of modern men. Most importantly, Lutie's grandmother as a figure of ancestral motherhood, as "Mammy," belongs in this domestic place. When Lutie returns home from the shelter, she "rememories" her grandmother's presence in wholly positive terms as the woman who rocked her and sang to her, "Sleepin'...in the arms of the Lord" (404). This is in marked contrast to Lutie's earliest invocation of this figure as a woman tied to a past that had no validity in the present, whose uncanny prescience of evil was mere "nonsense" (15) even if it was tied "probably [to] Africa" (16). Lutie has come full circle; she has picked up the ties that bind women to women, and women to their children, albeit only after her own epic, if often also "misguided," journey across the social landscape of the northern city. She has, by the end of the text, *replaced* her grandmother's wisdom, to draw on Wright's metaphor, within a sphere of conscious *women's* history. It

is, then, no accident that Lutie assumes her grandmother's prescient ability. After her visit to the Shelter, "[s]he was smelling out evil as Granny said. *An old, old habit*. Old as time itself" (413, emphasis added).

When Lutie actually confronts the object of her unease in the flesh, the white man Junto, it precipitates a series of events which leads to her murder of Boots Smith and her subsequent flight to Chicago. The full implications of Lutie's reevaluation of her grandmother's wisdom, and the radical possibilities of what might be called conscious domesticity, are never fully realized in the novel. Instead, her flight from Harlem is framed by her memory of a white teacher who had told her that it was no use "to teach your people to write" (435). As a larger, historical rememory, the teacher's words evoke the defining power of white men like Schoolteacher in Morrison's *Beloved*: it captures the horror of Lutie's ultimate inability to fully inscribe motherhood and the domestic place as a black primary narrative of resistance.

The Street and *In Darkness and Confusion* are important feminist critiques of the American nation's wartime democratic promises, particularly as these failed to "emancipate" African American women from strictly economic definitions of domestic labour. In addition, they represent a corrective to Wright's Marxist-oriented contribution to the war effort, *12 Million Black Voices*, and his conflation of black domestic women with a folk "past" that was unusable in the urban "present." Petry constructs a very different urban environment than that of either Wright or Ellison, who despite their widely divergent views on the viability of the black folk in the northern city, assumed that there

was a continuity of experience and expression in the move from South to North, even if the presence and implications of this "history" remained largely "unknown," or in the case of Wright, unusable. Petry's work, in contrast, does not assume this continuity, in part because her protagonists are urban, working-class women several generations removed from the South³⁶ but, more importantly, because the city as Petry constructs it works to isolate and alienate African American women and children, as well as black men, from their community. Her fiction poses the question, from a black women's perspective, that Charles Scruggs sees as increasingly dominant in postwar black fiction: "[H]ow is the [black] 'village' to 'begin' in the chaos of urban ghetto life?" (216).

NOTES

1. For a useful summary of early critics of *The Street*, see Pryse, "Pattern" 130n3.
2. Carby's reading of *Native Son* diverges from Mullen's in her emphasis on the central importance of Wright's implicitly radical depiction of urban "conditions of aggression and antagonism" ("Politics" 90).
3. Keith Clark also examines the folk, and Lutie's relationship to them, in his work. However, almost all of the recent critical work on *The Street* cited in my bibliography, implicitly or explicitly, reflects Hazel Carby's emphasis on reading the text as a study in race, sexuality and the emergence of an African American working class distinct from the folk. By foregrounding the issues of the war years, as well as Petry's discursive category of the folk, I bring these two apparently divergent streams of criticism into relationship with each other.
4. "Men in the Making" opens with a picture of black women, young and old, marching in front of the White House in an anti-lynching demonstration. This is a particularly ironic instance of what Farah Griffin points out are the recurring "tensions between the written and photographic narratives" in Wright's text (31).
5. Griffin defines Wright's dominance in terms of sales of his work, its critical reception, and the degree to which he influenced other writers (10).
6. Petry seems to have been involved with "Negro Women Inc." until 1946, when she left Harlem ("First Novel" 37). This organization was the women's auxiliary of the People's Committee which, as Charles Hamilton writes, was the electoral machine behind Powell's bid for New York City Council in 1941 (115-116). An earlier configuration of the People's Committee, the Greater New York Coordinating Committee, had been involved in the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns of the 1930s; see Hamilton 92-104. Petry's group appears to have emphasized these types of strategies with the addition of a specific commitment to issues affecting women. Ellison provides a description of economic conditions in wartime Harlem in "The Way It Is" (1942), 318-19.
7. Letter from Richard Wright to Archibald MacLeish, 21 Dec. 1941, OFF, alpha. file, "Negro" folder, entry 5, box 40, RG 208, National Archives, Suitland, Maryland, qtd. in Cripps, *Making* 29.
8. Richard Wright note, n.d., Papers of Richard Wright, Miscellaneous Notes on *12 Million Black Voices* - Folder 919, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Library,

qtd. in Natanson 246.

9. It is important to note that O'Brien makes it clear that "[w]omen do not need to bear children to know themselves as women, for women's reproductive consciousness is culturally [or historically] transmitted" (50).

10. This is one instance in *12 Million Black Voices* in which Wright's use of the pronoun "we" is definitely gendered male. Wright's "we" is an unstable configuration which, as Nicholas Natanson writes, moves between "an encompassing voice and an obviously male voice, between a cross-generational...and an obviously parental voice," without any acknowledgement of the implications of the shift (247).

11. Baker cites Wright's depiction of black male experience in the city: "It seems as though we are now living inside a machine; days and events move with a hard reasoning of their own." ("Richard" 105-06; *12* 100). This "productive" concept of time is in marked contrast to the cyclical "seasons of the plantation" (*12* 147) which Wright appears to conflate with the "natural" cycles of women's reproduction. As Baker points out, Ellison's *Invisible Man* is literally ripped from the womb of a machine in the hospital scene of the novel of the same name. In a brief preface to a story fragment titled "Out Of The Hospital And Under The Bar," which was the original version of this episode, Ellison points out that it is Mary Rambo "a woman of the folk, who helped release the hero from the machine." In this context, Ellison's statement that he excised the scene because "considerations of space made it necessary that I *reconceive the development*" (243, emphasis added) has the ring of irony.

12. This approach is modelled on the work of Hazel Carby, who places African American women's texts within the discourses and contexts in which they were produced to create a cultural history of black women's often conjoined political and literary interventions in the world around them (*Reconstructing* 7).

13. In *Beloved*, the ironically named plantation "Sweet Home" occupies a literal "place" in Sethe's memory and on the landscape, "out there, in the world." Her daughter Denver "can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over...it's always going to be there waiting for [her]" (36). Sethe's "rememorying" is, to an extent, analogous to Houston Baker's use of Hayden White's method of "tropological" thinking in order to examine the "*metaphorical* extension[s] of the economics of slavery" into the present (*Blues* 28, emphasis in original).

14. Letter from Ira Lewis to Franklin D. Roosevelt, 28 June 1941, 93: 5, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, qtd. in Wynn 46.

15. Petry's two other novels continue to trace these concerns. *Country Place* (1947) is both a jeremiad which warns against postwar America's moral and material malaise and the depiction of a utopian "experiment" in democracy within the household of a New England town's matriarch, a figurative "city on the hill" inherited by her multi-racial and multi-ethnic servants. *The Narrows* (1953), traces the collapse of this utopian dream when a dangerous amalgam of racism and McCarthyism--Petry subversively conflates the two--is unleashed on the African American community of another New England town, the "frontier" of black migration from the South.

16. In late 1940, Edwin Rosskam, a Farm Security Administration photo-editor, convinced that organization's head, Roy Stryker, to support a collaboration between the agency and Wright which focused on *Native Son's* Chicago locale. Russell Lee became the principal photographer on the project (Natanson 143-44). Natanson details the Wright-Roskam collaboration on 243-55.

17. See Natanson, 148-50.

18. In a 1946 *Ebony* article, Petry states, "In my novel, Lutie is a symbol of the plight of so many Negro women who have had to support families without being able to depend on the income of the male member of the family. Most Negro women, in fact, have a pitiful heavy load to bear" ("First Novel" 37).

19. See Carby, *Reconstructing*, particularly Chapter 2. In brief, the cult of true womanhood constructed white women as examples of "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter 21).

20. Spillers turns to sources on women in African slavery in order to reconstruct the experience of the slave woman in the Diaspora, this "disquieting lacunae" in the historical record ("Mamma's" 73). She cites several essays from *Women and Slavery in Africa*, ed. Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1983).

21. This is not to lose sight of the fact that what is written on the body cannot always be given voice. As Fox-Genovese argues, *Beloved* is a text which also fills in the historical lacunae of the slave woman's experience of motherhood. She points to the example of Harriet Jacobs who, Fox-Genovese argues, was unable to reveal the depth of her personal anger and the effects of slavery on her identity because in the literal and figurative struggle to defend motherhood, "it understandably appeared threatening to expose the worst horrors [of slavery] for fear that they confirm the worst consequences of enslavement" (17).

22. In the South, public transportation to and from military bases was a site of frequent and often violent racial confrontations. Jim Crow seating was rigidly enforced by both

military and civilian policemen; this often meant that African American soldiers were not able to leave the base, or were forced to break curfew upon their return, because white soldiers were seated first. It was not until July, 1944 that the War Department arranged bus service between bases and neighbouring towns solely for military personnel. It was to operate on a first-come, first-served basis with no segregation (Wynn 30).

23. Patricia Adler describes the Mexican-American *pachuquitas*, the female equivalents of the *pachuco* zoot-suiters, in much the same way as does Petry: "short, tight skirts, sheer blouses, and built-up hairdos" (136). Charles Scruggs notes the appearance of zoot girls in the film *Stormy Weather* (1943) (11). Ellison also alludes to them in the same review in which he discusses the aesthetics of the zoot suit, referring to "the dark-toned stockings and the original coiffures affected by a certain type of Negro girl" (Review of *Modern* 92). Stuart Cosgrove provides a startling account of the clothing that several Los Angeles *pachuquitas* "gangs" wore, "openly challenging conventional notions of feminine beauty and sexuality" (15). Petry's description of the zoot girls who are resident with Mrs. Hedges in *The Street* is an amalgam of all of these (252).

24. Lipsitz is paraphrasing material from Robin D.G. Kelley, "The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics during World War II," ms, 1991.

25. In Wright's original version of the novel, Bigger and his friends masturbate while viewing the white actress in the film they go to see at the beginning of the novel. This is followed by Mary Dalton's appearance on the screen in a type of newsreel about the rich and famous (*Early Works* 472-76). When Harper and Brothers submitted their page proofs to the Book-of-the-Month Club, the Club requested this scene be toned down. See Arnold Rampersad's "Note on the Texts" in *Early Works*, 911-13.

26. The city is constructed as feminine only once in the novel. Boots Smith, returning from his job as a pullman porter, is longing for his lover, Jubilee. On his trip back to the city "a soft, warm night...lay along the train like a woman's arm as it roared toward New York" and her "street had that same soft, clinging warmth" (*Street* 267-68). When he arrives, however, Jubilee is with a white lover, a denial of "access" which prompts Boots, at the end of the novel, to attempt to rape Lutie before his white employer Junto does.

27. As Farah Griffin notes, in *12 Million Black Voices* Wright draws similar parallels between the labour of black men and the crime of lynching under the sharecropping system (33): "[m]ost of the flogging and lynchings occur at harvest time...[when] [i]t is time...to settle accounts with the Lords of the Land" (*12* 41-42).

28. Min, who works part-time as a domestic in a white household and then does her prescribed domestic work for her husband Jones, is as isolated as Lutie: "She [too] didn't have any friends that she visited" (112). As Susan Hartmann points out, the Congress of

Industrial Organization's efforts to unionize domestic workers during the war were unsuccessful (90).

29. Women particularly benefited from the inclusion of the federal civil service in Executive Order 8802. They entered into government jobs in increasing numbers throughout the war (Quarles 218).

30. Patricia Hill Collins points to the interlocking stereotypes, and related social expectations, of the black mammy and the black matriarch as ways in which American culture attempts to negotiate the contradictions inherent in the African American woman's place within an economy of domestic labour:

[B]ecoming the ideal mammy means precious time and energy spent away from husbands and children. But being employed when Black men have difficulty finding steady work exposes African-American women to the charge that Black women emasculate Black men by failing to be submissive, dependent, "feminine" women. (75)

31. Patricia Hill Collins writes that after the Civil War, African American women also sought to leave domestic employment, "not to duplicate middle-class white women's cult of domesticity but...in order to return the value of their labor to their families and to find relief from the sexual harassment they endured in the marketplace" (54-55).

32. Keith Clark points out that Min and Mrs. Hedges are also trickster figures who employ a strategy of improvisation and subversion in order to survive in the city. However, my reading of the text differs from that of Clark, who argues that Lutie must be excluded from this definition by virtue of her "superciliousness and naivete" (503) as well as her reluctance to employ folk wisdom, specifically that of her grandmother (500-01).

33. Scruggs writes of Baldwin's critique of American film and his position "both 'inside' and 'outside' of mass culture": "He is inside because...he does begin understanding his life in reference to Hollywood's stories....He is outside by the fact of his 'calculation,' and his judgement of what the movies present as 'truth' against his own experience" (214). In Baldwin's assessment of the place of African Americans within American and Western culture, Scruggs argues that movies came first and Chartres later, and "then mainly for its symbolic value" (214). Petry--like Wright, Ellison and Baldwin--had "an absolute passion for motion pictures" (Petry, "Ann Petry" 266).

34. Petry wrote that although New England had "no particular influence" on her writing, "I have been influenced by Thoreau....Before I began writing *The Street* I studied *Walden* and made notes" ("Ann Petry" 267). The passage from *Walden* to which Lutie alludes in *The Street* is the following:

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor....*If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.* (216, emphasis added)

35. See Marjorie Pryse, "Patterns" 121-22 for a discussion of colonial allegory and particularly the operations of the nation's "deistic foundation" in *The Street*.

36. Petry was, however, very aware of her family's southern roots. In a brief autobiographical piece, she cites a nursery rhyme that her maternal grandfather, who escaped from a plantation in Virginia just before the Civil War, used to sing to her: "Run, little baby, run / or paterrollers / goin' come, / run, little baby run." This, she writes, illustrates the "difference between me and most third or fourth generation New Englanders" ("Ann Petry" 255).

CONCLUSION

The treatment accorded the Negro during the Second World War marks, for me, a turning point in the Negro's relation to America. To put it briefly, and somewhat too simply, a certain hope died, a certain respect for white Americans faded. One began to pity them, or to hate them.

(Baldwin, *Fire* 68)

While Baldwin's bitter assessment of the treatment of black soldiers represents one aspect of the war experience for African Americans, significant changes did occur in American society as a result of black political activism during this period. The historian Richard Dalfume describes the political activity of the 1940s as the "'forgotten years' of the Negro Revolution" that culminated in the 1960s ("Forgotten" 299). As Neil Wynn points out, African Americans retained their economic foothold in industry until after the Korean War when, ironically, "peace" reduced the impetus, and the need, to employ African Americans. This fact, Wynn argues, gave rise to the "return" of black militancy, as it was demonstrated during the war, in the struggles of the 1950s and 1960s (122). In the late 1940s, President Truman began the process of putting civil rights on the national agenda, although none of his initial proposals became law until a significantly watered-down Civil Rights Act was passed in 1957. However, by 1948, Executive Order 9981 had

laid the groundwork for the integration of the armed forces. As well, as George Lipsitz writes, in the immediate postwar period, mass demonstrations and wildcat strikes were tactics used by diverse groups of American workers to assert themselves, a "strategy of popular power [which] came from the efforts of black people during the war" (*Rainbow* 72). Clearly, African Americans shaped postwar America in significant ways and, as Dalfiume argues, their political activities laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement of a generation later.

The process of historical reevaluation that Dalfiume undertook over thirty years ago in response to the events of the 1960s is ongoing, as the work of Lipsitz, Natanson, Naison and others demonstrates. This model of historical revision, however, has only recently begun to (re)structure the work of critics of the African American literary tradition. The writing of the war period, particularly as it reflects the political and cultural context within which it was produced, remains largely "forgotten" in extant chronologies of the African American tradition. In this project I have undertaken to examine the implications of defining these texts as the product of a distinct period marked by the intersection of the issues of black self-determination and the place of the black folk in the urban-industrial environment, issues which World War II brought to the fore. In (re)situating these texts *between* literary periods, as they are traditionally defined by the realistic or proletarian texts of the 1930s and the integrationist texts of the 1950s and

1960s, the critic of African American literature is confronted with the need to read the tradition, and the discursive category of the folk, in new ways.

Overall, the figure of the folk is a highly contested representation during the late 1930s and early 1940s, one which ranges from Wright's model of obsolescence or "extinction," to Petry's alienated female ancestors and Himes's *black* and not so simple working "Joes," to Ellison's thriving, if not yet fully articulate/d, zoot-suiters and Lindy-hoppers. These representations reflect the historical currents and cross-currents of the period and the perspectives of a group of writers who constructed the folk as a discursive category which signified and embodied their own divergent views on African American "history" and the nature of the American project of democracy. This fact calls into question approaches to the African American literary tradition which implicitly view the folk as a relatively static construction that signifies a limited, if not fixed, range of meaning. The figure of the folk does not represent one "stream" of the tradition as the work of Henry Louis Gates and, to some extent, that of Houston Baker posit. Rather, this figure is an amalgam of competing and often conflicting significations, representing what Hazel Carby describes, in reference to Ellison's views on Langston Hughes's work of the period, as a "response to the social conditions of transformation" that the city, and by implication the war itself, engendered ("Politics" 77).

The nature of this "transformation" is apparent in the use of African American

folklore, and specifically its radical recontextualization within the urban-industrial environment, in the work of Ellison, Himes and Petry. In various ways, each of these writers uses folktales, and other folk forms such as the blues, to critique and "reconstruct" wartime America as well as to position African Americans in relation to a "majority" culture which often renders them invisible or unheard. As such, these forms are an assertion of African American self-determination.

While the writers who are the subject of this study are the "canonical" authors of this period, their work takes on new and broader significance within the context of their nonfiction writing on the war, the place of the African American folk and the e/merging working class. Ellison and Himes produced significant essays, as did Wright, and Petry's journalistic perspective permeates her fiction. This cross-genre reading provides critical insights into their strategies of political and literary representation, strategies which, as a whole, are representative of a particularly rich and volatile period in African American cultural production.

However, work remains to be done in uncovering and analysing neglected sources produced during this period, specifically the work of African American women writers. As Bill Mullen's recent work on the wartime magazine *Negro Story* demonstrates, its female editors and contributors voiced the particular concerns of black women during this period. A systematic and comprehensive examination of the work of women writers

published in other (African) American venues is necessary to delineate the full range of responses to the issues raised by the war effort.

The black folk became a significant presence in African American literature in periods which were marked by each of this century's major wars: from the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance, to World War II, and in the Black Arts and Black Power movements during the years surrounding the Vietnam War. The themes and issues which this project raises could be extended into both the earlier and later periods as a way of further exploring the continuities, and ruptures, in the representation of the folk and the use of folklore in African American writing of the twentieth century.

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