

My Song in Bolder Notes Arise: The African American Long Poem Tradition

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FOR MY MOTHER,  
Sandra M. Watson  
*Dharma*

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### **Abstract**

The long poem, a genre that includes some of the most revered texts in the Western literary tradition, has been called “potent” and “central” by critics. Yet there has never been study dedicated to the centuries-old tradition of African American long poems. Today, although there are black poets who receive critical acclaim for their long poems, such as Rita Dove, Tyehimba Jess, and Robin Coste Lewis, few people know that their work comes out of a black tradition of long poems as well as an Anglo-American tradition, or that black long poems did not begin in the twentieth century.

This project employs close reading, poetry theory and criticism, and genre theory to investigate the ideological and historical dimensions of the black long poem, a body of work in dialogue with the Anglo-American long poem. African-American theory and criticism, especially George Kent’s notions of “exile rhythms,” “existential tensions” are used as heuristic metaphors for this study because they help to illuminate the central preoccupations of black long poems across time: African American history and black subjectivity. Exile begins with capture and the Middle Passage; its rhythms reverberate throughout enslavement, Jim Crow, lynching, and in other forms of oppression. Existential tensions represent the psychological pressure experienced by the black subject under the weight of exilic history.

The focal poets of this study include eighteenth-century poet Phillis Wheatley, and from the nineteenth century George Boyer Vashon, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Alberry Allson Whitman. The primary twentieth-century poets under consideration include Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Amiri Baraka. The project illustrates how long poems grapple with exilic history and existential tension in their home-building or home-seeking quests.

This dissertation argues that a deeper knowledge of the black long poem, especially its history, will contribute to a richer engagement with contemporary black long poems, because they have much in common despite their surface differences. In this study, I place poets in dialogue with each other who are rarely paired, eliciting new insights into poems that once seemed familiar.

## INTRODUCTION / TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN LONG POEM

The overweening, defining event of the modern world is the mass movement of raced populations, beginning with the largest forced transfer of people in the history of the world: slavery. . . . Nationhood—the very definition of citizenship—is constantly being demarcated and redemarcated in response to exiles. . . .

“Home,” Toni Morrison

And it is also in Homer that we find the image of the marginalized poet, subject to the whims of patronage (such as Phemius, who is told by Telemachus, now by Penelope, and now by the suitors, what to sing) or physically marked by the sign of his outcast and yet privileged status (such as the blind bard Demodocus, who performs for Odysseus and the Phaiakians). It is perhaps only historical accident, but again and again one encounters poets in the tradition of literary epic who likewise write from the margins and whose poems thereby hinge on the thematics of exile and estrangement.

*Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community*, Beessinger, Tylus, Wofford.

This was always, and remains  
a foreign land.

“Stellar Nilotic 2,” *Wise, Whys, I’s*, Amiri Baraka

This land will not always be foreign  
How many of its women ache to bear their stories

“The Winds of Orisha,” Audre Lorde

Gwendolyn Brooks’ expression “furious flower” has been called a “stunning metaphor for African American poetry because it implies a literature that is both rageful and resolute in its beauty.”<sup>1</sup> The term foregrounds the rhetorical and aesthetic power of black verse that extends from Phillis Wheatley to twenty-first century poets who have crafted a tradition of African Amer-

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<sup>1</sup> Joanne V. Gabbin “Introduction: Essays and Conversations in African American Poetry,” 1.

ican poetry. Brooks envisions verse that is well crafted and “train[ed]<sup>2</sup> while also “Rowdy!”(494)<sup>3</sup> and committed to the liberation of black people. Casting African American poets as restless disturbers of the poetic peace, to paraphrase nineteenth-century activist David Walker, Brooks raises the question at the heart of much black poetry: How can a poet create “pretty flowers under [the] blood,” (490) and weight of history pressing down on black Americans? And what is the internal or psychological response to that history?

Brooks articulates a related concern in her long poem *In the Mecca* (1968) when she writes, “Art hurts. / Art urges voyages” (442). While the poet was undoubtedly referring to audience reception of art objects in general, and perhaps the psychological journey occasioned by the creative process, this meta-textual moment also suggests a way of thinking about long poems, a genre chosen by some of the most accomplished African American poets in their quest to compose aesthetically challenging and ambitious texts out of African American history and the subjectivity forged in that experience. Brooks’ declarative lines offer an opening, a means for sketching a definition of this broad genre increasingly constituted and invigorated by the poetry of subjugated people and their previously marginalized poetic practices.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, the phrase “Art urges voyages” may prod readers to journey back into the past. Turning our gaze backward in American literary history reminds us that Phillis Wheatley, for most of her life enslaved, was an early participant in the attempts to write an American epic for a young nation.

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<sup>2</sup> Brooks, “To Black Women” from *Family Pictures* (1970), 502. All citations to Brooks’ poetry are to the editions reprinted in Brooks’ collection *Blacks* and are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout her oeuvre, and in her poem “Young Africans,” Brooks uses flowers as a metaphor for black people and poetry. The narrator of “Young Afrikans” says, for example, “If there are flowers flowers / must come out to the road / ... / knowing where whips and screams are.”

<sup>4</sup> Lynn Keller “The Twentieth-Century Long Poem,” 534-63.

This dissertation is the first genre study of the African American long poem from its eighteenth-century roots to its full flowering in the contemporary era. It is also the first literary history to include women in a project devoted to the genre. I argue that the tradition of black long poems begins with Phillis Wheatley's public declaration to write a classical epic. Wheatley's longest neoclassical poems, although not the length or scope the *Odyssey* or the *Aeneid*, were epic in ambition, especially considering the circumscription of the poet's life. The enslaved poet's call for a black-penned epic was first answered in the genteel, but politically-driven poetics of the nineteenth century. Subsequent groups of poets from the Harlem Renaissance, post-World War II era, and the contemporary period, continue to answer Wheatley's transhistorical call. The black Modernist poems from the mid-twentieth century established aesthetic pathways and carried thematic preoccupations from the start of the tradition, roads that are still traversed, albeit sometimes rerouted, by African American poets writing in the genre in today.

This introduction not only begins with a discussion of Wheatley as the progenitor of the black long poem, arguing that she establishes a line of descent that other black poets follow, but it also begins to define the black long poem as a member of the generic family of American long poems with its own preoccupations. This is not to say that black long poems do not share characteristics with the Anglo-American long poem writ large, but my definition of black long poems emphasizes the characteristics that make them a unique category. The American long poem, traditionally a public and exalted genre, is a broad category that allows for black poets to explore their primary preoccupations by making use of varied source materials, and, indeed, hybridity is a key characteristic of the genre. From the wellspring of Anglo-American poetic forms and conventions, and the incorporation of black vernacular forms during and after the Harlem Renaissance black long poem recurs to a specific set of concerns. Since Wheatley, the central preoccupations

pations of black long poems are black history and subjectivity. In defining the black long poem, I turn to critic George Kent's historical and humanist critical lens to explain the characteristics most prominent in this verse. I adapt his terms "exile rhythm" and "existential tension," in my definition of the black long poem to examine the consistent return of black writers to the Middle Passage and its imagery, enslavement, and the iterations of discrimination that remind black people in the Americas of both their history and their difference. Finally, my definition of black long poems acknowledges how these poems bear witness to black history and exult in black resistance (often violent), while in search of maintaining hope in a brighter future. In other words, the central quest for these poems is the search for home, the hope that, in the words of poet Audre Lorde that by "bear[ing] their stories," black tales of the tribe, America might "not always be foreign."

In the first poem, in the very first book of poetry published by an African American, Wheatley reaches back to Homer, the start of the literary tradition in the West as she initiates black writing in America. I am therefore suggesting we should no longer tell the story of the African American literary tradition without taking the long poem into account because epic desire and ambition is there from the start. Wheatley writes in her poem "To Maecenas":

While Homer paints lo!

.....

O could I rival thine and *Virgil's* page,

Or claim the *Muses* with the *Mantuan* Sage;

Soon the same beauties should my mind adorn,

And the same ardors in my soul should burn:

Then should my song in bolder notes arise,  
 And all my numbers pleasingly surprize;  
 But here I sit, and mourn a grov'ling mind  
 That fain would mount and ride upon the wind (9-11)<sup>5</sup>

In the lines above, from *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1774), Wheatley announces her desire to write in the “bolder notes” of Homer and Virgil. Maecenas was a wealthy patron of Virgil, and Wheatley’s persona announces that she will “claim” and “rival” the artistic and cultural authority of ancient Greek and Latin narrative verse. In this poem, which on the surface seems a conventional paean to her muse or imagined benefactor, Wheatley’s New World poet-narrator articulates her commitment to an epic project. So sincere is her commitment that she warns the Roman patron Maecenas, “I’ll snatch a laurel from thine honour’d head / While you indulgent smile upon the deed,” effectively sanctioning her literary endeavor. Despite the self-deprecating tone of the line, “here I sit, and mourn a grov’ling mind,” the poet writes in daring and direct opposition to the racial hierarchy of eighteenth-century Europe and America, which associated blackness with mental and cultural inferiority.<sup>6</sup> Her epic strivings, the desire to write in the most exalted of poetic genres, is made explicit. This idea would continue to reverberate in black poetry, and black writers have continued to experiment with longer verse forms and to stake their claims, to “snatch” to the tradition of Western long poems and to make the genre their own.

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<sup>5</sup> All citations to Wheatley’s poetry are to *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley* and are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>6</sup> For an examination of European and Anglo-American ideas of African or black intellectual ability see Henry Louis Gates’ *Figures in Black*, 3-60.

In “To Maecenas” Wheatley expresses her desire to write a “song in the bolder notes” of classical epic and in her two longest poems, she retells the biblical story of David and Goliath, and then reimagines a scene of mythic revenge from the once-exiled poet Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Her attempts to enter the Western epic tradition, which I explore at length at the end of this chapter, mark the beginning of the tradition of black long poems in the English-speaking New World. Because Wheatley was born in West Africa, experienced the Middle Passage, and was enslaved, it is not surprising that her poetry is suffused with exile and psychological grappling with it. Throughout this project, I aim to show that traces of exile and existential subjectivity it engenders, beginning with Wheatley but remains a hallmark, the animating themes in black long poems; in fact, I argue that epic is a choice for black poets because it is inscribed by exile or exilic traces as a genre.

Whatever the reasons for Wheatley’s adoption of Ovidianism, her choice had far reaching implication for black writers of long poems. Ovidianism provided her with an authorized poetic to explore the anger and grief associated with the monumental experience of the Middle Passage, exile, and enslavement. As what Fox calls an “anti-” or “counter” discourse, it provided a means for entering the Euro-American tradition from a sanctioned, outsider position. Wheatley’s Biblical retelling, “Goliath of Gath” employs Christian discourse in the cause of black emancipation and with “Niobe in Distress” adumbrates, the black tradition; they are not long poems per se, but they establish a call for a song in bolder notes. The first responses to this formal call would be heard from a wide variety of poets in the nineteenth century, some free born, others born enslaved, but all committed to telling the tale of the black tribe.

A diverse group of black poets answered Wheatley’s call—her desire to write in the “bolder notes” of long poems, and this project will investigate the ways in which these writers,

and the poems they composed, entered the tradition she inaugurated. To this end I will blend biography and close readings, specifically generic exegesis, to produce a literary history of the black long poem. The scope of my study is broad, traversing four primary periods after Wheatley: the nineteenth century, the Harlem Renaissance, the post-World War II period, and the contemporary era. From the nineteenth century, my focal texts include George Boyer Vashon's *Vincent Ogé* (1853), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869), and the recently remembered Albery Allson Whitman's *Twasinta's Seminoles; or, Rape of Florida* (1884, rev. 1885), ambitious long poems written during slavery, Reconstruction, and the post-Reconstruction eras respectively. The works by these poets thematically foreshadow two seemingly very different long poems of the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance, James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* (1927) and Jean Toomer's *Blue Meridian* (1936). The Afro-Modernist "Middle Passage" (1945) by Robert Hayden and Gwendolyn Brooks' *Annie Allen* (1949) represent mid-twentieth century black long poems while Amiri Baraka's most ambitious long poem *Wise, Whys, Y's: The Griot's Song, Djeli Ya* (1995), positions itself as an inheritor of experimental post—World War II poetics and two black long poems of the nineteen sixties, Langston Hughes' *Ask Your Mama* (1961) and *Melvin Tolson's Harlem Gallery: Book I The Curator* (1965).

Lynn Keller's critical study *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems By Women* (1997) is the first book to discuss black long poems within the broader discourses of long poem studies, genre studies, and its primary object, genre itself, with its laws, its inscribed ideologies, and its prescriptions. *My Song in Bolder Notes Arise* takes its cues from Keller's critical approach and Smaro Kamboureli's work on Canadian long poems. Kamboureli's *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem* (1991) examines contemporary Canadian poetry in the context of its nineteenth-century antecedents. The often radical surface differences between nineteenth-century and twentieth-cen-

ture African American long poems obscure what has remained consistent in the poetry over time. Most nineteenth-century black long poems for example, are clearly inspired by the courtly muses of Old World Europe in that they are overwhelmingly narrative, musical/metrical, didactic, and quite earnest in the way that a poem by Joel Barlow, Longfellow, or Whittier might be. Many twentieth-century black long poems on the other hand, mirroring the shifts in mainstream Anglo-American poetry after and during Modernism, emphasize newness, irony, dense allusion and parataxis. Although these differences are striking and worthy of attention, it is more interesting to think of these stark shifts as occurring within a larger dynamic of continuity and change, a process that Amiri Baraka calls “the changing same,” in African American expressive culture.

While “break[ing] the pentameter” may have been “the first heave” toward a newer and more modern poetry in the Anglo-American poetic tradition (of which black poetry remains a significant constituent), one really new moment in the black verse tradition emerged from the simultaneous rejection of archaic diction and meters and the formal artistic embrace of the African American vernacular tradition (the spirituals, sermons, blues, and jazz) and the ideologies (Kent might say “values”) informing them. The strivings encoded in these oral forms are what has remained consistent (the “same” of Baraka’s model) over time. As previously stated, a significant element of this process has been identified by critic George Kent as the “existential” quality of the work, with its attendant “exile rhythms.” The existential tensions and exile rhythms in black long poems help define a uniquely black and thoroughly American “tale of the tribe,” to adopt M. Bernstein’s concept. Resonating in the poetry of Langston Hughes, Melvin B. Tolson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Gayl Jones, and Harryette Mullen, this collective tale centers on (African) American subjectivity, the re-membering of history, and the philosophical ideas of freedom and home.

These concerns echo the preoccupations of other African American genres, especially the slave narratives, and the novels and drama that build on them. Yet it is important for literary historians to examine how these ideas (of exile, subjectivity, history, the Middle Passage) are engaged specifically in African American long poems, in part to reveal how this genre, customarily linked to white male authority and to history, has been transformed, critiqued and invigorated by black poets. It will be equally important to expose the gaps in black literary history, where long poems have received scant attention. This project will assume the validity of Robert Stepto's critical assertion that some concepts in African American expressive culture such as the notion of freedom, and I would add the idea of home, born of exile, are "pre-generic."<sup>7</sup> Stepto asserts that what we call African American literature is not merely about chronology, but is instead "authors and texts" in search of "their own literary forms—their own admixtures of genre—bound historically and linguistically to that shared pregeneric belief."

Black long poems employ source material that occasionally overlaps with, but often differs from, the Anglo-American tradition in its importation of the slave narrative, post-Reconstruction rhetoric, and black vernacular forms, especially African-American speech and music. This is evidenced by, to cite just a few examples, the fascinating differences between Jack Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* (1959) and John Berryman's *The Dream Songs* (1964),<sup>8</sup> on the one hand and Melvin Tolson's *Harlem Gallery Book I, The Curator* (1965) and Langston Hughes' *Ask Your Mama* (1961) on the other. This project will also employ the "metadiscursive" or critical realm of genre studies where Tzvetan Todorov (especially in his analysis of Bakhtin and his circle), Fredric Jameson, Anne

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<sup>7</sup> See Robert Stepto's "Preface" in *From Behind the Veil*, xv.

<sup>8</sup> Aldon Lynn Nielsen's *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* illustrates the racism in Berryman's *The Dream Songs*, which informs its minstrelsy—an indictment that extends to the primitive exoticism permeating Kerouac's work. One goal of Tychimba Jess' book-length *Olio* is to, in its own words, "blacken . . . the voice of the poet Mr. John Berryman's 'Henry' from *The Dream Songs* and liberate [so that he may] him(self) from literary bondage!"(71)

Cranny-Francis, and Susan Friedman among others, have argued for an understanding of genre that acknowledges its historical and ideological foundations. Thus, when Todorov describes genre as a "socio-historical as well as formal entity," in dialogue with preceding and subsequent discourses, he also articulates a framework for understanding African American long poems where racial and social consciousness, textuality, and history intersect. This signals one of the most important touchstones of this project, the importance of identifying the aesthetic, political, and historical contexts of the poems under consideration.

In order to interrogate these issues, and to expose readers to some truly remarkable, engaging, and sometimes difficult poetry that rearranges the Eliotic "ideal order of existing monuments" still dominating both African-American and mainstream literary studies, I will examine three nineteenth-century black long poems and three modern and contemporary poems that "respond" to their political, philosophical, or aesthetic "calls" across time. I build from Craig Werner's understanding of the West African based, black American process of call and response, a mode of analysis I am adapting to the African-American poetic tradition. Call and response begins with an individual who elicits a group response that can "affirm, argue, redirect" or "raise a new question."<sup>9</sup> This will serve as the overarching framework for establishing connections between the nineteenth-century and the twentieth-century poetry, while also providing a method for discussing the twentieth-century African American long poems themselves.

My own response to the broad call of the African-American tradition in long poems has led me to ask the following questions: Why did some black poets during the nineteenth century choose to write long poems, then called by Edgar Allen Poe "artistic anomalies"? Why do contemporary African American poets continue writing in this tradition despite the critical neglect

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<sup>9</sup> Werner, *Higher Ground*, 12-13.

of their predecessors, and after Bakhtin and other critics have asserted the primacy of the novel over poetry in general, and the epic in particular? And what social function do African American long poems perform? My reading of African American long poems of the nineteenth century—all hybrid texts written from within or against the epic grain—reveals that black poets engaged this broad genre to lay claim to the Western literary tradition from the apex of that tradition as they defined it. In other words, early black poets wrote long poems to signal artistic seriousness, intellectual equality, and ownership of the most exalted of Western poetic forms, all of which challenged the socio-political status quo during slavery, Reconstruction and the post-Reconstruction eras.<sup>10</sup> These writers also chose the long poem over the novel because they were artists committed to poetry<sup>11</sup> and because poetry, with its concentrated language, repetition, or rhyme, was both pleasurable and memorable to readers. The mnemonic function of verse was especially useful to an audience that included those unable to read, an illiteracy enforced during slavery and maintained through various forms of racial discrimination after the Civil War. Later, from the early twentieth century to our contemporary moment, black poets have remained committed to expansive verse forms because they want to tell stories that require them to push beyond the brevity of shorter lyric poetry. Instead of turning to the novel to tell the long black story of struggle, the residence to oppression, and black joy, these modern and contemporary writers have also chosen to tell their tales of black history and subjectivity. Similar to their longer-verse writing predecessors, these poets display a poetic mastery that attends a well-crafted long poem.

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<sup>11</sup> Of the three nineteenth-century focal poets in this study, only Frances Harper, who experimented with several genres, wrote a novel. Her *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted*, was published in 1892, two decades after her long poem.

There aren't many black long poems of the nineteenth century,<sup>12</sup> but I'd argue there are enough to warrant more critical interrogation of poems such as James Madison Bell's *The Day and the War* (1864), Elymas Payson Rogers' *The Repeal of the Missouri Compromise Considered* (1865), poems that recur to the oral roots of the epic tradition. Even the less meritorious poems exemplified by James Ephriam McGirt's "Avenging the Maine" (1899), deserve some investigation because they still reveal how early black long poem writers grappled with issues of genre, representation, subjectivity, and history. Despite the small corpus of black nineteenth-century long poems, the poets of this chapter, Vashon and A.A. Whitman, if not always their long poems, are now receiving critical attention. Ivy G. Wilson's *At the Dusk of Dawn: Selected Poetry and Prose of Albery Allson Whitman* (2009), for example, will bring A. A. Whitman, the most accomplished and prolific practitioner of the genre, and once widely acknowledged to be one of the preeminent black poets before Paul Laurence Dunbar, to a new generation of readers and critics. A newly discovered Vashon poem "In the Cars," recently published in *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism*, with responses from poetry critics Evie Shockley, Aldon Nielsen, and Keith D. Leonard, may inspire a closer inspection of Vashon's *Vincent Ogé*, which has yet to receive a published, full examination. Harper, on the other hand, has been spared anonymity because of her historical significance and well-known activism, but also because of feminist recovery scholarship. Early work such as Frances Smith Foster's *A Brighter Coming Day* (1990) and Melba Joyce Boyd's *Discarded Legacy* (1994) are studies in this vein, while more recently, Reginald A. Wilburn's chapter on *Moses* in *Preaching the Gospel of Black Revolt* (2014), reads Harper's blank-verse long poem through the lens of a literary ancestor she shared with Wheatley, John Milton.

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<sup>12</sup> There are a few long poems that were written in the early twentieth century that share linguistic and Romantic properties with the focal poems of this chapter. Two notable poems are Robert E. Ford Brown's 8600-line *Brown's Chapel: a Story in Verse* (1903) and Maurice Corbett's *Harp of Ethiopia* (1914). Both have been ignored by critics and literary historians of Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem Renaissance era.

### THE LONG POEM: GENERIC HYBRIDITY, DEPTH, & HISTORY

In the broadest sense, I define the long poem by its generic hybridity as well as its conscious engagement with longer-form antecedent traditions, such as epic or lyric sequence, but also by scope and depth of inquiry and historical engagement. My understanding of the genre builds on Lynn Keller and Smaro Kamboureli's description of the long poem as a hybrid genre, and to borrow from Raymond Williams' analysis of culture, in long poems there is an interplay between dominant, residual, and emergent generic elements. While some poems foreground an epic mode, others might emphasize a more meditative, internal quest. Extended verse writers may provide narrative excursions, spatial quests, or they may accentuate physical and psychological transformations. Some of these journeys emphasize philosophical, mythical and historical discourses, while others call attention to the representational possibilities and limitations of language. The tradition of long poems is replete with examples of these sometimes disparate, but often overlapping voyages. Homer's episodic ur-journey, *The Odyssey*, highlights the spatial wanderings of Odysseus in Circe's Aeaëa and the Underworld, for example, or Thrinacia and Calypso's island, which serve as metaphors for the hero's psychological voyage as he engages in his *nostos* or "homeward journey" back to Ithaca. Odysseus' son Telemachus has been on his own journey in this epic, a quest into manhood and a shift as meaningful as the physical transformation of the mythical Echo from nymph to disembodied voice in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Literary historians and critics have argued that the long poem remains a central poetic genre, a measure of poetic ambition, because of its concern with significant philosophical, aesthetic, and historical questions. Susan Stanford Friedman's "When a Long Poem is a Big Poem: Self-Authorizing Strategies in Women's Twentieth-Century Long Poems" characterizes the long

poem as a “‘big poem,’ that is, a poem that situates itself within a long tradition of poems that ask very big questions in a very long way—historical, metaphysical, religious and aesthetic questions.” She continues, saying, “Big long poems go far, tunnel deep, and fly high. They have scope.” Quoting Victor Li’s description of the genre, Friedman adds that long poems are “‘potent, important,’” and also notes the genre has “scope” (722). Lynn Keller observes that the long poem, a capacious form, provides the textual space for poets to “reach beyond [an] inward perspective” allowing for the incorporation of “sociological, anthropological, and with particular frequency, historical material.”<sup>13</sup> Echoing both Keller’s understanding of the long poem as a “form of expansion,” and Peter Baker’s notion in *Obdurate Brilliance: Exteriority and the Modern Long Poem* (1991) that longer poetry can be a generic antipode pushing up against “against [the] interiority” of the post-romantic lyric, Scottish poet Tom Scott states, “The long poem can tell a complex tale, spin out a metaphor for hundreds or even thousands of lines, keep four levels of meaning in counterpoint at the same time, deal with complex action or actions, plot or mythos, combine many kinds of poetry in one complex poem [...] The long poem, indeed, is to poetry much as the symphony is to orchestral music.”<sup>14</sup>

Scott’s comparison between the symphony and the long poem is apropos because it foregrounds the artistic impulse towards more ambitious forms, and it highlights the artistic quest for a “developed” and “extended” generic expression that can meaningfully engage the vicissitudes of being in the world by combining elements of both epic historical framing and internal expression in complex ways. In the wake major composers such as Mozart, or Beethoven from the classical world or John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk from the jazz world, subsequent composers

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<sup>13</sup>Keller “The Twentieth-Century Long Poem,” 534.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in William Oxley’s “The Rebirth of the Long Poem in Our Time,” 43.

have had to create within a tradition of monumental aesthetic and intellectual achievement. This same tension is particularly resonant in the “medium” of the word, for those who contribute long poetic forms write into a literary context brimming with the “greatness” of precursor texts. With their literary pedigree, extended verse forms can provide a formidable challenge for even the most accomplished poets. Long poems synecdochically stand for “high” art in the West, whether we are speaking about the Homeric epics, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*; Virgil’s ; or Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in the ancient world; or Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*; T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”; Charles Olson’s *The Maximus Poems*; or William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson* in the twentieth century. Casting a shadow at least as wide as the long poems preceding and following them are *Beowulf*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, and Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” In many of these works the dialectic between exteriority and interior expression is more or less apparent.

The long poem is a hybrid genre, so when Jacques Derrida in the “Law Of Genre” asserts, “genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres. I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them”<sup>15</sup> he is calling attention to the way in which genre serves as a policing mechanism. Derrida’s tongue-in-cheek prescription, with its undeniable similarity to the discourses of racial purity, and the long poem, with its insistence on generic mongrelization, is an antidote to monological rigidity an obsession with purity. The heterogeneity, hybridity, and generic interplay<sup>16</sup> of long poems call attention not only to the dominant, residual and emergent forms embodied in the texts, but also to the artistic processes of creation (namely open and closed processes) that become some of the genre’s defining characteristics. Lynn Keller identifies a “partial list

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<sup>15</sup>Jacques Derrida “Law of Genre,” 55.

<sup>16</sup> Keller, *Forms of Expansion*, 3.

of formal varieties” that she places under the broadly defined rubric of the term long poem. She includes “Narrative poems, verse novels, sonnet sequences, irregular lyric medleys or cycles, collage long poems, meditative sequences, extended dramatic monologues, prose long poems, serial poems [and] heroic epics” (3). The goal of this capacious definition is to allow for a more appropriate critical understanding of the will-to-long-form so prevalent in modern and contemporary verse, a will sometimes obscured by the dominance of lyric poetry in anthologies, college courses and MFA programs since the 1970s. Keller’s project is, among other things, a canon intervention where she argues for an expansion of the range of poetry given “the respect and status” affiliated with “the epic or lyric sequence,” the primary forms of long poems studied.<sup>17</sup>

Equally significant, as intimated previously, are the responses of longer poems to precursor texts and verse traditions. Baraka’s *Wise, Why’s Y’s* directly recurs to the collage “verse epic,” which encompasses poems such as Pound’s *Cantos*, Olson’s *The Maximus Poems*, and William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson*. In *Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and Modern Verse Epic* (1980) Michael Bernstein stresses the overt didacticism and emphasis on communal heritage and community health in the modern and contemporary epic poetry influenced by Pound. Bernstein suggests that the primary voice of the epic, the “spokesman” of the poem, “ought to be the voice of the community’s heritage ‘telling itself’” (14). Verse epics repeat what has been most fundamental to epic across time and place, namely that they are politically potent, and “encyclopedic,” and that they “center around deeds of significance to the community.”<sup>18</sup> While the centrality of community, as a local or national collective, remains a core epic element, in the modern verse epic, a more “open” or process oriented approach to poetic creation is favored, over a more “closed” formal structure.

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<sup>17</sup> Keller, *Forms of Expansion*, 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> Beissinger et al., *Epic Traditions*, 3-4.

Baraka's long poem self-consciously positions itself as inheritor of Charles Olson's epic and "projectivist" or process oriented project. At the same time, however, *Wise, Why's Y's* also swerves toward black music, and to Hughes' approach to the incorporation of that music in his long poem *Ask Your Mama* (1961), in order to craft its communal hero. Often, the hero of Baraka's poem, a voice that undermines the official histories of the American nation, seems indistinguishable from the black vernacular tradition (and its mores). With its collage style, dense allusiveness, and heteroglossic mix of erudite and blues voices, Melvin B. Tolson's *Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator* (1965) is also indebted to the verse epic tradition of long poems. His earlier and equally heteroglossic long poem *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953) is a highly formalized ode to African (Liberian) history in eight sections modeled in part on Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930), itself a rebellious assertion of hope in opposition to T.S. Eliot's highly influential long poem *The Waste Land* (1922).<sup>19</sup> "The Anniad," on the other hand, the center poem in Gwendolyn Brooks' long poem *Annie Allen*, recalls and rewrites<sup>20</sup> the classical epic tradition symbolized by Vigil's *Aeneid*, by rejecting the glorification of masculine conquest in favor of an exploration of the costs of that ethos for the black female subject. Both *Wise, Why's Y's* and "The Anniad" are set on an epic grid,<sup>21</sup> but revise the tradition (a move inherent in epic), a gesture that Jeremy Downes has coined "epic recursion."

Since epic poetry has often been associated with history and its telling (Pound famously defined epic as a "poem including history"), it is not surprising that beginning early in the tradition of African American long poems—and here I am speaking about those long poems indebted

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<sup>19</sup> Lynn Keller, "The Twentieth-Century Long Poem," 541-42.

<sup>20</sup> See Gertrude Reif Hughes' "Making it *Really* New: Hilda Doolittle, Gwendolyn Brooks, and the Feminist Potential of Modern Poetry."

<sup>21</sup> Friedman, "When a 'Long' Poem Is a 'Big' Poem."

to the epic tradition—the “Muse of History” has been one of its primary inspirations. History intervenes in more discursive, meditative, and linguistically experimental long poems as well. New World or African-American history, such as the enslavement of African Americans in the American South, the Haitian Revolution, the Seminole Wars, the mid-twentieth-century Freedom Movement, or seventeenth-century Brazil are just a few subjects African American poets have explored in long poems since the nineteenth century. Without a doubt, this desire to tell the tale of the black tribe, with history as muse, remains of primary importance to black long poems. With history as the ballast for black long poems written since the nineteenth century, poets in later periods, during and after the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance, began to find inspiration in the presentation, refashioning, or exploration of black vernacular culture as well.

#### EXILE RHYTHMS & EXISTENTIAL TENSIONS IN BLACK LONG POEMS

Exile is a broad and ancient predicament that continues to weigh heavily upon the lives of vulnerable people. Edward Said has called it an “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home,” an “essential sadness” that can never be surmounted,” neither through political activism or heroic literature.<sup>22</sup> Communities from within the Global South, including, for instance, parts of Asia, contemporary Africa, and Central and South America, continue to experience dislocation and loss. Native Americans and their descendants, sometimes mixed-race and called Hispanic or Latino, have been exiled from their own lands for centuries, and currently their movement is forced or circumscribed by exploitative economic and political forces in the United States itself. In this project, I am defining exile as forced

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<sup>22</sup> See Said’s “Reflections on Exile” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, p. 173.

removal from one's homeland, a dispersal that may continue across generations. Exile is an experience that lingers in memory and leaves an imprint on the subjects under its influence.

Although exile as I have defined it is not unique to African Americans, the unique characteristics of what Toni Morrison calls the "largest forced transfer of people in the world: slavery," conducted through the brutal physical journey from Africa to the New World, or the Middle Passage, and the aftermath of these historical occurrences in the Americas, are the exilic experiences black New World poets engage in their long poems. Black long poems are written as balm or to bear witness to the "essential sadness" of exile, but unlike Said's reading of the literature of exile, I find moments of joy that surmount the grief and pain of dislocation, a transcendence that Said finds impossible. Writers of black long poems also explore the corresponding psychological and metaphysical dimensions of exile. Unsurprisingly, the Middle Passage is a specific centuries-long historical occurrence that haunts many black long poems. In "Fixing Methodologies: *Beloved*," Barbara Christian defines the Middle Passage and asks some significant questions about it:

[The Middle Passage] is the four-hundred-year holocaust that wrenched tens of millions of Africans from their Mother, their biological mothers as well as their Motherland, in a disorganized and unimaginably monstrous fashion. Yet, the Middle Passage has practically disappeared from American cultural memory.

Have African Americans, How could African Americans, How are African Americans recovering from this monumental collective psychic rupture? (364)

This dissertation asserts that the Middle Passage has not disappeared from black cultural memory, despite any efforts to suppress its recollection. Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990) is one of the many black long poems to contemplate the suffering, community, and resistance that emerges from collective psychic rupture from an African homeland. Walcott's poem, and I would argue

most black long poems, are animated by this rupture or its historical aftermath. *Omeros* connects the Middle Passage to the poetic imagination when it says of black people, in the New World “But they crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendor” (149).

I have adapted these concepts from George Kent’s 1981 essay “Aesthetic Values in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks.” Although he is addressing Brooks’ oeuvre, he later suggests that the framing around his subject might be used to think about other black poets’ “creative and imaginative engagement . . . [to] the range of circumstances stirring the mind of the artist to action.” I agree with Kent and would add that his terms are also valuable tools for interrogating black long poems. Kent found in exile and in existential philosophy a way of contemplating how black poets confront history, especially the legacies of slavery and its aftermath and the black subjectivity those legacies, in part, create. His terms are slippery and generative by design, and Kent suggests that readers not be “overtaken by excessive rigor,” understanding his “broad headings” as “conveniences for discussion”; therefore, he is careful not to define his terms too stringently. When I speak of exile rhythm or exilic history, I am speaking of black history beginning with the commodification / theft / sale of African people from Africa to the New World, through the Middle Passage and slavery and its legacies of suffering and forms of resistance to those historical circumstances. Exile posits an African homeland first. It haunts. Rhythm measures time. It is inherently in time and, hence, historical. The geological definition of rhythm, that it is an accretion of sediment, is another useful way of thinking about exilic history. Rhythm can be cyclical, repetitive, or it can signify breaks in what had been a consistent pulse. Rhythm is crucial to poetry too, because is connected to the human heartbeat, the human breath.

Existential subjectivity or tension, on the other hand, is the psychological effect of exilic history. Tension in relation to psychological state is “a strain produced by anxiety, need, or by a

sense of mental, emotional . . . disequilibrium.”<sup>23</sup> It follows then that the concepts or themes of exile and existential tension or subjectivity provide very effective metaphors to imagine the black new world subject, the subject in exile, and the psychological pressure of black subjectivity. I find existential subjectivity expressed in the focal poems of this study, and my interest in examining it is in agreement the philosophy that finds interest in the interior landscapes of the subjects who populate literary texts because, in part, I believe they are cultural means for grappling with or making sense of a difficult world. The ontological metaphors tension and rhythm provide rich and evocative and are useful heuristic concepts that encompass temporality, repetition, and overarching pattern, as well as, oppositional interplay, psychological pressure, and potential energy. An existential tension is one that pivots on being in the world, a world informed by the “monumental psychic rupture of the Middle Passage,” and the subsequent historical occurrences it spawned. It is a way of naming the psychological pressure produced in the cauldron of black history in the New World, but it also predicts the potential of an intervention into that state. There is always some form of resistance. One form of resistance is cultural production, specifically, the composition and publication of long poems. The idea that black poetry grapples with exile and enacts a quest for home, come from the poets themselves. Audre Lorde’s “Winds of the Orisha” (1976) insists, for example, “This land will not always remain foreign / How many of its women ache to bear their stories.” Langston Hughes’ subject in “Let America be America Again” (1938)<sup>24</sup> proclaims that although “...torn from Black Africa’s stand I came / To build a homeland of the free.” Both poets illustrate a grappling with the exilic state of black America through the corresponding activities of telling tales and building freedom.

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<sup>23</sup> "tension, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2018. Web. 15 April 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Hughes, *Collected Poems*, 189.

Although I have been discussing America as the primary symbolic landscape where exile rhythm and existential tension are explored, it is important to note that the black long poem's *nostos* traverses other symbolic landscapes—in the Caribbean, South America and Europe—all a part of the world of the African diaspora. C.L.R. James identified this world as the revolutionary world of Black Jacobins, a people whose subjectivities, forged as they were in slavery, exile and fragmentation, were the first modern people. Black poets born outside of the United States proper, who share the historical experience of the Middle Passage, enslavement, and colonization,<sup>25</sup> contribute to these discourses of an essentially Afro-diasporic exile. Without denying the specificity of Caribbean or South American history, it is not surprising that Edward Kamau Brathwaite's trilogies, Grace Nichols' *Is a Long-Memored Woman* (1983), or Trinidadian-born, Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008) illustrate some of the same existential tensions and exile rhythms<sup>26</sup> found in any number of African American long poems. Moreover, the most important African American long poems of the nineteenth century, and several black poems under consideration in the twentieth take place in the Caribbean, Central America, and Africa, a testament to the diasporic nature of the genre. Exile rhythms are particularly salient in the long poems that have been written by new world Africans during and since the nineteenth century, works that often "hinge on the thematics of exile and estrangement" and *enslavement*. George Boyer Vashon, Francis Harper, and A. Whitman embrace this thematic as do focal long poems since the post-WWII era published by Hayden, Brooks, and Baraka, and all continue to prod American cultural

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<sup>25</sup> In Pan-African discourse, there is a belief that African-Americans, although physically located in Global North, experience the subjugation of a colonized group. Du Bois called this political predicament being "A Negro Nation Within A Nation." Journalist Chris Hayes has recently explored this situation in his 2017 book "A Colony in a Nation."

<sup>26</sup> Aleid Fokkema's "On the (False) Idea of Exile: Walcott and Nichols" rejects the "romantic" theme of exile as postulated in post-colonial criticism where a "poor [migrating] chap is ... at a loss and has to struggle to find his or her identity." Fokkema insists that "Real exile means a complete loss of the home" (102) an assertion that underscores my yoking of exile rhythms to Africa and the Middle Passage, where an actual homeland was lost.

memory centering their narrative frames around African-American subjectivity, history, and the quest for home.

The exile rhythms and existential tensions evident in the African-American long poem tradition were given classic expression a century ago in W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, a collection of fourteen essays that combined historical, sociological, psychological and autobiographical material. *Souls* is obviously not a long poem, but it articulates the preoccupations of many black long poems that preceded the text and have followed it. In the final chapter of *Souls*, "The Sorrow Songs," for example, Du Bois connects black artistic production and the dislocations wrought by the Middle Passage and enslavement, a link I find specifically in African American long poems from the start of the tradition to the present. He interprets the spirituals created from "the siftings of centuries," as an expression of an urge for freedom "more ancient than ... words." In "The Sorrow Songs," Du Bois conflates his voice with a collective black voice, and his genealogy becomes the genealogy of all black folk. He tells us of his "grandfather's grandmother" a "black, little, and lithe" woman who endured captivity, the Middle Passage, and slavery in the "harsh...winds" of the North. This ancestral figure stands at the crossroads of Africa (a site of pre-double-consciousness in the way that Du Bois articulates it) and America. She represents those born in Africa whose ethnic identities faced systematic assault and constant re-negotiation in the New World. Du Bois tells us that with a "child between her knees" this enslaved matriarch "looked longingly at the hills" and sang:

Do bana coba, gene me, gene me!

Do bana coba, gene me, gene me!

Ben d'nuli, nuli, nuli, nuli ben d'le. (157)

These orally transmitted lyrics anticipating the A-A-B blues form are most likely from the West Africa; in fact, this poignant moment between mother and child embodies the “suffering, survival, and social communication” fundamental to the form and its outlook.<sup>27</sup> Du Bois admits that although the words probably signify “little” to the child, there is something in this “primitive African music,” the “wail” or singing, that conveys the depths of the displaced African’s despair. Reminding us that his ancestor was “seized by an evil Dutch trader” and sold into a lifetime of servitude in the “Hudson and Housatonic” valleys, and it is safe to surmise that for this unnamed grandmother, like the collective voice in Amiri Baraka’s *Wise, Why’s Y’s*, America “was always” and would “remain/ a foreign land.” Not surprisingly, Du Bois hears in great-great grandmother’s song “the voice of exile” (158).

DuBois identifies exile rhythms in the lyrics of a spiritual he calls “a strange chant.” He quotes a few lines from the song, noting that “much of real poetry and meaning” reside in the lyrics of the sorrow songs, “soft stirring melod[ies]” sung “in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land”:

You may bury me in the East,  
 You may bury me in the West  
 But I’ll hear the trumpet sound in that morning.

Du Bois follows this with verse from a spiritual work song probably sung “in the hot moist furrow”:

Dere’s no rain to wet you,  
 Dere’s no sun to burn you,  
 Oh push on believer,

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<sup>27</sup> Graeme M. Boone, “Blues,” 84.

I want to go home. (160)

DuBois asserts that these lines, and others such as “Jesus is dead and God’s gone away,” reveal “trouble and exile” even as they “they grope toward some unseen power and sign for rest in the End” (159). Analogous to other forms of African American cultural expression (ie. slave narratives, the blues, novels, and poetry) the two lines from the first spiritual quoted above use a language of spatial symbolism to convey spiritual malaise. The speaker’s emphasis on burial suggests not only the prospect of death, but also the idea of the “underground” and perhaps even “aboveground,” depending on the speaker’s location. The East/West parallel further designates geographical place. However, these locations are as specific as they are broad because the main point here is an ontological one, a gift from the Christian faith: On “that morning” the soul (and body) will ultimately transcend “the monotonous toil” of life on earth. The third line is an obvious reference to Judgment Day, when Gabriel will blow his horn and earth-bound locations (linked in a profound way to race, the experience of slavery, identity itself) will shift dramatically. Du Bois is quite aware that through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whatever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls. Asserting the centrality and necessity of faith, as both metaphysical leap and critical practice, the same “hope in the ultimate justice of things” that Du Bois recognizes, Cornell West says in *Prophesy Deliverance!* that “The contribution of prophetic Christian thought as a source for Afro-American critical thought is...it confronts candidly the tragic character of human history (and the hope for ultimate transhistorical triumph)” (19).

Yet when the spirituals concomitantly assert that “Jesus is dead and God’s gone away,” the existential concerns of the sorrow songs are unmistakable. Many spirituals, with their emphasis on longing (Du Bois calls this “soul-hunger”), exile, death, freedom, home, and ceaseless travail are indeed existential in their emphasis. What Du Bois sees as an element of resistance in the songs, that is, the enduring hope (a metaphysical optimism) in these works, also evokes existential concerns. Recall Albert Camus’ classic retelling of the Myth of Sisyphus, the figure condemned endlessly to roll the same heavy rock back up to the top of a mountain:

At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back to the plain.

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to the stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know end. That hour like a breathing space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness.<sup>28</sup>

Camus instructs readers that Sisyphus is “superior to his fate”<sup>29</sup> because although he discovers a world where he is ultimately responsible for himself, he nevertheless finds meaning in his continuing struggle. The spirituals too find significance in that moment that Camus identifies as “the hour of consciousness.” This is the very hour the spirituals were born. If the existentialists

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<sup>28</sup> Camus, “Myth of Sisyphus,” 120-121.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

believe that human beings must recognize the absurdity of existence in a world without morality, and that the weight of this situation must be felt, then black folk in America, as much as any group in the West, embody that subject position. (This is especially true before the changes catapulted by the mid-twentieth century freedom movements.) If the existentialists believed that the “angst” and “anxiety” resulting from the knowledge of life’s absurdities and cruelties may lead to deep sorrow or despair, then the history of exile forced African Americans to confront existentialist realities.

One African American response to the existentialist predicament insists that despair can, and should, lead to deeper engagement in the quest for meaning, and that social and political action are an expression of that engagement. Cornell West notes that “Existential freedom,” and here the influence of Kierkegaard is quite pronounced, is the “grace” that “sustain[s]” people through, and liberates them from “death, disease, and despair.” It “empowers people to fight for social freedom, to realize its political dimension” (18). By way of Exodus, the spirituals warn the oppressor “Let my people go,” or face the spiritual or worldly consequences (Harper will retell this biblical story, but recall as well Nat Turner’s bloody insurrection or Harriet Tubman as the reincarnation of Moses). When being-in-the-world leads to a commitment of faith, a hope needed to alleviate some of the pain of human experience, as when the speaker of the sorrow songs weeps, “I’ve been in the storm so long / You know I’ve been in the storm so long / Oh Lord give me more time to pray,” another voice encourages the listener to keep on keeping on, for the self and for the group, exhorting “Oh push along, believer, / I want to go home.”

Home means many things for black Americans, and the desire to go “there” is yearned for repeatedly in the sorrow songs. For some it may mean “the place away from everyday toil or misery,” but more likely it signifies (simultaneously) Christian heaven. For others still, born out-

side of the New World or handed the sediments from the “sifting of centuries” between the knees of a grandparent, home may be linked to a real or symbolic Africa. For Du Bois at the beginning of the twentieth century, home, in part, entails the psychological synthesizing of the dialectic of “double-consciousness” for a truer self-consciousness, what Langston Hughes meant when he encouraged black writers to “stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.”<sup>30</sup> Or what Gwendolyn Brooks was alluding to when she wrote “take Today and jerk it out of joint / have made new underpinnings and a Head” (494).

In a most complex sense *The Souls of Black Folk* highlights the double bind intrinsic to the idea of home for Afro-America. America is the only home for the vast majority of black Americans and has been for centuries, yet it is also America that many prominent black intellectuals and poets have posited as the location of black exile. Du Bois’ construction of double-consciousness crystallizes this problematic since, in it, black Americans are torn between dueling identities, that of the “American” and that of the “Negro” (a product of American history, an interpellated subject position, always already an American). He did not say that the contention is between being an American and an African (in America). In this influential framework, indebted as many have observed to Hegel’s principle of dialectical development, the German philosopher’s explicit negation of Africa (“Africa has no history,” thesis-antithesis he asserts) may also have left its sediments. Perhaps the construction of double-consciousness merely reveals the limits of a paradigm trapped in the confines of the “thesis-antithesis” mode of historical analysis. Perhaps Du Bois purposefully built the notion of African exile, (for that is what a “Negro” is) into his definition. Being exiled from Africa, being an exile at home in America, being exiled from one’s “truer self,” these are the themes of the sorrow songs. In time, the spiritual and political strivings encoded in

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<sup>30</sup> Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” 1324.

the moans, wails, and words of this first poetry and later in the secular black music it influenced, would provide one of the primary wellsprings from which African American long poems would draw.

Houston Baker calls these oral forms of black expressive culture (the spirituals, field hollers, work songs, toasts, blues and jazz) “the script” on which African-American cultural discourse is inscribed, or alternatively, the “matrix” of black cultural expression.<sup>31</sup> (Harryette Mullen humorously interprets this wellspring of black cultural expression as the “cakewalk matrix” in *Muse & Drudge*.) With their emphases on survival, analysis, perseverance, improvisation, transcendence and humor, these black orally based forms provide the aesthetic, philosophical, and epistemological foundation on which much African American poetry, including long poems draws. In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987) Baker formulates a conceptual frame for considering African American writers and the establishment of a unique literary voice, first through “Promethian cultural appropriation” or what he calls “mastery of form” and later through a more modern and sui generis “deformation of mastery” where folk voices are boldly asserted. Baker’s concepts provide an interesting way of thinking about African-American writers and the adaptation of the Anglo-American long poem, especially if we start from the beginning of this cross-cultural intersection, a confluence located in the pen of the Senegalese-born poet Phillis Wheatley.

#### PHILLIS WHEATLEY & THE START OF THE BLACK LONG POEM TRADITION

By paying homage to Homer and Virgil in her first book, and in her longest poems, re-imagining Ovid and the New Testament, Wheatley establishes a connection between her origi-

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<sup>31</sup> See Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*.

nary poetry and the origins of Western literature. Significantly, through her attention to the Homeric epics and Virgil's *Aeneid*, she also recalls the epic tradition's topos of artistic appropriation and revision, in this case the Latin poet's revision and cultural reorientation of the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. She therefore provides an authorized model for subsequent black poets to enter the tradition of extended verse in the West by raising the possibility that members of "Afric's sable race" might one day tell their very own "tale of the tribe" and freely "mount and ride upon the wind" of the literary tradition Wheatley so ably adapted.

The desire to write "bold" and lengthy verse becomes more remarkable when we recall that Wheatley came to America as a child stolen from her parents. Wheatley laments in her poem "To the Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America, etc." that, "young in life, by seeming cruel fate / Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat." For this Middle Passage survivor, this exile, African born and female in eighteenth-century New England, the tradition of written epic must have been a daunting one to contemplate. "I less happy, cannot raise the song, / The fault'ring music dies upon my tongue," says the poet of "To Maecenas," a couplet that may have expressed the feelings of Wheatley herself, or any women of her era attempting to tread the waters of Homer/Virgil/Dante/Milton. Susan Stanford Friedman's "Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H.D. as Epic Poets," addresses the aversion or fear of epic poetry that women writers have historically exhibited. According to Friedman, epic is informed by Western literary criticism's conceptualizations of genre, where Homer and Sappho are situated as the "symbolic fountainheads of epic and lyric poetry" respectively. She further asserts that the epic's "genre norms" make it the "preeminent poetic genre of action in the public domain" since it "often centers on the 'destiny,' or 'formation of a race or nation'" (204).

Friedman's subsequent essay "When a Long Poem is a Big Poem: Self-Authorizing Strategies in Women's Twentieth-Century Long Poems," further explains women's historic relationship to the epic literary tradition:

The epic has been the preeminent poetic genre of the public sphere from which women have been excluded . . . It reflects a comprehensive sweep of history, a cosmic universality of theme, and an elevated discourse of public ceremony . . . [The] genre codes for the epic intersect with societal gender codes to identify the epic as a preeminently masculine discourse. The "law of genre" prescribed in the epic is fundamentally phallic. Within the dominant discourses of Western culture, women have been denied the authority to pronounce on history, philosophy, religion, and aesthetics. The epic has consequently been a quintessentially male territory whose boundaries enforce women's status as outsiders on the landscape of poetry (15-16).

Or, as Jeremy Downes explains the difficulty Friedman describes, "Women's involvement with epic is fraught with peril" (206). Perhaps we should say women's involvement with epic *was* fraught with peril since, as Lynn Keller's shows, "The flowering of women's long poems [some of these long poems are self-consciously epic] since the 1960s is a significant development in literary history, particularly given the scarcity—or invisibility—of long poems by women in earlier eras" (1-2). Keller's statement shows that the achievements of Wheatley, Harper, and Brooks were remarkable, especially when we consider the historical circumstances under which they writing before the 1960s: during slavery and before the mid-century Freedom Movement.

The demand for liberation and equality, which was the centerpiece of the various freedom movements of the last century, influenced the literary realm where women poets have since

aggressively intervened into discourses traditionally proscribed male (and this would include epic discourse, a genre marked “male” for two millennia). Yet it remains the case that Wheatley expressed a desire to write a long, religious, historical, and philosophical poem in British North America circa 1773, even though she must have noticed the “distinctly gendered (and racial) overtones” of the Homeric and Virgilian texts. It is also obvious that she never wrote an epic in the manner of the *Odyssey*. This is especially true when the length of epic is emphasized. Additionally, Wheatley lacked both any knowledge of female contemporaries attempting to produce these works, and female-authored epic precursor texts. Yet, in an act of subversion, defiance, and resilience, the poet would “snatch” the genre from the most patriarchal forms in the Western literary tradition, and steal it from that group who had stolen her very body, and the bodies of so many others, from “Afric’s fancy seat.”

The snatching of the Western epic tradition by Wheatley is a central subject of John C. Shield’s *American Aeneas: Classical Origins of the American Self* (2001), a book that challenges the idea that women did not appropriate the genre during the colonial era. He pays particular attention to Wheatley’s two epyllion “Goliath of Gath,” and “Niobe in Distress For Her Children Slain by Apollo, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book 6<sup>th</sup>, and from a View of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson.” Shields details some of the epic features in Wheatley’s classical and Biblical treatments:

An eight-line invocation to the Muse, long speeches, a theme in which the fate of a nation hangs in the balance, machinery of the gods (here Christianized; e.g., a cherub sent to Goliath from God), an epic simile, and epic epithets ... None of these characteristics can be found in 1 Samuel 17, the poet’s biblical source.

Wheatley’s later “Niobe in Distress” . . . exhibits the same characteristics, trans

forming this “non-epic” episode from the *Metamorphoses* into a short epyllion, or epic (219).

That Wheatley “master[ed] the form” of epic is not my primary concern, especially since Shields so convincingly argues that Wheatley’s corpus might profitably be understood as an “intertextual” long poem, an “epic writ large” as so many of her poems deploy epic conventions and strategies (218). Instead my interest is in how “Goliath of Gath,” and “Niobe in Distress For Her Children Slain by Apollo,” the longest poems in Wheatley’s extant oeuvre, push the boundaries of literary epic in the West by infusing it with other generic elements from both Christian discourse and the emergent slave narrative tradition. These inclusions forced the genre to accommodate the black subject’s yearning for freedom, equality and at-homeness in America. And in doing so, these poems point to the generic restlessness and hybridity characteristic of many black long poems from the beginning of the tradition.

In her study of early African-American women writers, *Written By Herself: Literary Production by Black Women, 1746-1892* (1993), Francis Smith Foster notes that from the beginning of the black literary tradition, whose pioneering writers were Lucy Terry (author of “Bars Fight,” the first written poem by an African-American) and Phillis Wheatley. Speaking about the only group forbidden to read or write by law, Foster observes:

African American women, like African American men, deliberately chose to participate in the public discourse despite considerable Anglo-American resistance to their doing so. They appropriated the English literary tradition to reveal, to interpret, to challenge, and to change perceptions of themselves and the world in which they found themselves (16).

Wheatley and the subsequent black poets who answered her call for a “song in bolder notes” were aware of epic’s identification as the “preeminent poetic genre of the public sphere” that “centers on the ‘destiny,’ or ‘formation of a race or nation,’” Foster’s work shows how from the start of the black literary tradition black women wrote, not only of ‘pious sentiments and domestic concerns,’ but even “more than white women writers of that time, [they] also display[ed] a particular interest in public occasions and historic events” (18). To tell the tale of her tribe in hostile circumstances, Wheatley had to tell her story obliquely. She entered by deploying biblical, classical, and generic shields in a double-voiced or subversive manner. In doing so she entered an almost exclusively white and male world of letters to create beautiful poetry and to combat the increasingly institutionalized racism and slavery assaulting the poet and her exiled “Ethiopian” community in colonial America, which Ira Berlin describes in *Many Thousands Gone* as a historical moment when America was transforming from a society with slaves to a slave society (10).

Wheatley’s revision of “Goliath of Gath” is an act of discursive insurrection. Amy Benson Brown’s *Rewriting the Word: American Women Writers and the Bible* (1999), says that these moments of transgression emerge when the woman writer’s “sense of authority is pressured, either when it is first being established or is undergoing transformation” (164). Although Brown is primarily concerned with feminist interpretations of Holy Writ, her ideas ring true for Wheatley’s biblically based and epically based poetry as well. Brown characterizes revision as any re-construction of a textual “past” from any political perspective, but the perspective is linked to “an awareness of cultural liminality, an interpretive position on the borders between the culturally sanctioned and the unimagined.” The woman writer, then, is given a “critical perspective on the center and forces her to choose a community, a territory, a home” (12). Wheatley is not only interpreting the past,

she is challenging the present moment in real time in addition to rethinking her position to Africa and Revolutionary America.

“Goliath of Gath” is written within the same discursive territory of earnest piety and political yearning found in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century sorrow songs, and in the conflation of politics, religion and epic reminiscent of Milton, a poet Wheatley considered a literary ancestor. The poem illustrates a “logonomic conflict” or “a place of friction between official and unlicensed application of scriptural authority,”<sup>32</sup> a location on the edge of the “culturally sanctioned and the unimagined.” Wheatley’s subtle paraphrase seems to be another retelling, among so many other retellings, of the story of David and Goliath, where a young, un-armored shepherd David slays the giant, armored Philistine Goliath with a sling and a small stone. Moreover, like other treatments of the narrative, Wheatley “freely embellishes” on her Biblical source.<sup>33</sup>

Careful readers have shown that Wheatley’s version celebrates David, with whom she identifies since like her, he is a psalmist (a poet / lyricist) in a land far from his place of birth (a representative exiled figure) who is marked by his color difference from most of his society (a ruddiness highlighted by Wheatley’s association of the hero with “the fair morning blufh’d with orient / red”).<sup>34</sup> Like Wheatley herself or Domodocus or Phimius from Homer’s *Odyssey*, David is at first “the image of the marginalized poet,” a servant to soldiers who is also “subject to the whims of patronage,” in this case the royal court of Saul. I Samuel 16, the verse directly preceding Wheatley’s Biblical source reads, “And it came to pass, when the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took a harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was

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<sup>32</sup> William J Sheick, *Authority and Female Authorship in Colonial America*, 114.

<sup>33</sup> *Written By Herself*, 41.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* and *Authority and Female Authorship in Colonial America*, 110-11.

well...” Wheatley well understood the servant’s duty to perform (poetry, humility) before “the court,” whether before a jury of “eighteen white men of high social and political esteem,”<sup>35</sup> assembled to authenticate her work, or before her patron, the Countess of Huntington, or Benjamin Franklin on a visit to her home.<sup>36</sup>

Yet she still manages to “rewrite marginality, exult in spiritual equality, and urge her audience to rethink its inherited ideologies,”<sup>37</sup> by creating a poem that engaged the official Protestant exegesis of her day by appropriating it, transforming it, or transcending it for her rhetorical purposes.<sup>38</sup> Sanctioned readings of the poem from eighteenth century colonial America acknowledge that the poem is about the weak overcoming the more powerful, the Americans overcoming their British colonizers or Christ’s saints overcoming sinners by using the “sword-shaped tongues” (the Word) against “tongue-shaped swords” (military prowess).<sup>39</sup> Wheatley imagines the unimaginable when she not only compares herself to the future King of Israel but when she suggests that what David desires is “Freedom in Israel.” This positions white America as the Philistine who oppresses the enslaved through military as well as discursive aggression (Wheatley maintains Goliath’s verbal taunting of Israel and David from her intertextual source). Like David who says in the poem, “*Jehovah’s* name—no other arms I bear” (156) Wheatley uses cunning, skill, and the Word to challenge eighteenth-century cultural assumptions about black intellectual inferiority and the enslavement of New World African people.

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<sup>35</sup> See Nelly Y. McKay’s “Are We Ready to Disband the Wheatley Court?”

<sup>36</sup> *Written By Herself*, 42-43.

<sup>37</sup> *Authority and Female Authorship in Colonial America*, 108-109.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 108.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

The lesson of martial resistance as a strategy in the struggle for freedom is not lost on Wheatley and hence becomes a central concern of “Goliath of Gath,” just as it was in the Revolutionary world in which the poem was composed. Like David, she pursues violence as an artistic theme and possible means of liberation (David’s stone is both a tool used for violence and a manifestation of Jehovah’s name—a weapon and symbol of the Word). The poem lingers on violence in a manner that surpasses her Biblical source. On David’s slaying of Goliath 1 Samuel 17, verse 49 says that David “smote the Philistine in his forehead, the stone sunk into his forehead; and he fell upon his face to the earth.” Later David decapitates Goliath: “he slew him, and cut off his head therewith,” (verse 51). Following David’s action “the men of Israel . . . pursued the Philistines, until thou come to the valley...” (verse 52). Wheatley’s treatment of the text says that “Just o’er the brows the well-aimed stone descends, / It pierc’d the skull, and shatter’d all the brain, / Prone on his face he tumbled to the plain” (177-79). Next David uses “Goliath’s sword [to lay] its master dead, / And from the body hew’d the ghastly head; / The blood in gushing torrents drench’d th plains / The soul found passage through the spouting / veins” (184-88). In a final act of horror Wheatley presents the Philistines in their “vain” flight as Israel “the conqu’ror swift pursu’d: / What scenes of slaughter! And what seas of blood” (190-91).

Wheatley’s “Goliath of Gath” sings of arms and man, of heroes and their embodiment of national identity. It presents an aetiological story, one of the several stories that contribute to the scriptural narrative of the origin of the Kingdom of Israel, a nation in part born out of resistance against Philistine aggression under Saul, King David and later his wise son Solomon. “Goliath of Gath” is a foundational text in the story of the African American long poem in its expansiveness and its reach for epic. It is a hybrid text that incorporates epic conventions and the lan-

guage of classical mythology, referring to the Sun, for example, as “Phoebus” in a poem about David for use within a Christian context. In the poem, classical elements are juxtaposed not only against authorized Christian discourses but also against the radical possibilities of Biblical revision, all of which create generic tension. It stretches the parameters of epic and eighteenth-century scriptural exegesis by equating a black inflected New World theology and black-authored poetry, with that of European-American theology and poetry from a Euro-American perspective, while at the same time articulating the black desire for freedom, the central theme for the emergent slave narrative tradition. Wheatley imagines that which is beyond her immediate world—liberty for her people—and uses David’s stone, signifying at once the Word and violent resistance to oppression, to symbolize the rhetorical and political strategies that might achieve that goal. She accomplishes this in a veiled or allegorical manner, and thus the poem resides in the same discursive field as the African American folktales where cunning often trumps physical strength,<sup>40</sup> or in the literal fields where the sorrow songs were sung, songs filled with the existential cries for freedom and home in a land of exile.

Another aetiological poem—doubly so because, like “Goliath of Gath” it both marks the beginning of the tradition of black long poems and posits origin as a literary theme—is “Niobe in Distress.”<sup>41</sup> To summarize briefly, Niobe is the wealthy mother of seven sons and seven daughters. This is the source of her pride, an acute arrogance that leads to Niobe’s refusal to genuflect before the goddess Latona, as she is only a mother of two, Apollo and Diana. An outraged Latona calls on her children to avenge her honor. They murder Niobe’s sons, an act intensify

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<sup>40</sup> *Written By Herself*, 41.

<sup>41</sup> Wheatley’s poem also has the distinction of being “the first serious revision of classical ekphrasis in American literature,” in this case the rendering of a painting into poetry, which Natasha Trethewey would repeat in her long poem *Bellocq’s Ophelia*.

Niobe's haughtiness since "Much she [Latona] may take, yet more than much she'll leave. / My blessings banish fear" (91-3). Niobe's fearlessness however, is crushed by the weight of her grief when her husband commits suicide and the remainder of her children, her daughters, are also murdered. She is transformed by her mourning into stone, carried by a whirlwind to her resting place on a cliff where her body, now calcified, will shed tears eternally.

Wheatley's oblique war against racial subjugation and enslavement finds one of its fullest expressions in "Niobe in Distress," which, at 224 lines, is her longest poem. What Wheatley seems to be saying is that excessive pride always presages an equal or more excessive fall, an apt maxim for this highly educated Boston slave to highlight.<sup>42</sup> It should come as no surprise then, that almost one hundred years after the publication of Wheatley's poem it was critically commended for its display of humility while Wheatley herself was lauded for "stay[ing] in her place,"<sup>43</sup> an indication that Wheatley effectively used ambiguous or double-voiced discourse to mask her rebellious agenda before an often hostile or at best ambivalent white audience who would have brooked no semblance of black pride. The poet knew her audience well, presenting the Ovid episode that Renaissance commentaries praised for its emphasis on humility, a reading that remained popular when Wheatley published her poetry.<sup>44</sup>

Ever the shrewd poet, however, Wheatley creates a poem with multiple and sometimes contradictory avenues for interpretation and in so doing she renders a poem that purports to don a mask of humility—since it is a poem about the tragic consequences of hubris—into a text that

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<sup>42</sup> In *Written By Herself* Francis Foster addresses the cultural and personal pressure placed on Wheatley to remain humble before a white audience, 42-43.

<sup>43</sup> Robinson, *Critical Essays*, 6.

<sup>44</sup> In *American Aeneas*, Shields quotes Renaissance commentaries like George Sandys who said that Niobe was guilty of "contempt both of God and man," while Anglican minister Alexander Ross admonishes Niobe for "pride and insolence, and contempt of God himself," 222.

also reveals in artistic sedition and the violent retribution of the exile. At the same time and quite significantly, “Niobe in Distress” provides a symbolic location where the rage, grief, and despair kindled by the Middle Passage, forced exile, and enslavement (personal history for Wheatley), might be expressed. In that sense it performs some of the same cultural labor as the then burgeoning slave narrative tradition.<sup>45</sup> *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, written contemporaneously with Wheatley’s *Poems*, also strongly emphasizes the psychological anguish caused by captivity, and this becomes a major motif in the black literary tradition that followed. Noting Niobe’s experience after the suicide of her husband and the murder of her fourteen children, a moment described in Ovid’s precursor text as “Diriguise malis” or “Petrified by such sadness,” Hammon explains, “By this they expressed that sad, deaf, speechless stupor which seizes us when we are overwhelmed by tragedies beyond endurance” (8). Hammon finds in Ovidianism the same metaphor for grief that Wheatley would mine in her exploration of the emotional experience of the black subject.

As its suffix suggests, Ovidianism is a theory or practice that is founded upon “a set of characteristics identifiable in Ovid, in particular the Ovid of the *Metamorphoses*” (3) according to Sarah Ann Brown’s *The Metamorphoses of Ovid: From Chaucer to Ted Hughes*. Cora V. Fox identifies the world of myth, excessive emotion, (particularly rage and grief), and bodily transformation, among other tropes and themes, as some of the most striking features found in Ovidian discourse<sup>46</sup> while Cynthia E. Garrett emphasizes “the tragic representation of rape,” and the theme

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Stepto says, “the single most impressive feature of a slave narrative” is “The strident, moral voice of the former slave recounting, exposing, appealing, apostrophizing, and above all *remembering* his ordeal in bondage,” 3. Although Wheatley’s poetry may share the rhetorical aims of the slave narrative—to recount, expose, and appeal—what is strikingly different about her work is that it is generically distinct and must tell its story from within the rigid boundaries of enslavement.

<sup>46</sup> Cora V. Fox, “Gender Politics of Renaissance Ovidianism,” 391.

of exile.<sup>47</sup> As a discursive practice, Ovidianism should be understood as a semiotic system inscribed by “a set of cultural beliefs and values attached to the subjects it constructs,” or ideology. Fox cautions us to remember that this ideological construction does not occlude agency. Rather, since Ovidianism invites opposition and “individual resistance to ideological systems.”<sup>48</sup> Despite, Ovid’s preoccupation with human suffering, *Metamorphoses* allows for the possibility for resistance (often subversive) reflecting the poet’s overarching aesthetic and political project: the creation of a substantial text to counter the militaristic, propagandistic, and narrative linearity of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, in favor of a more cyclical, emotional or subjective project.

Ovidianism may have been attractive to Wheatley because it allowed her to enter the Euro-American tradition of verse through the appropriation of a discourse of political opposition that authorized the aesthetic explorations of exile, existential despair, and resistance, however contained that resistance might be. The cloak or mask of myth was equally useful, allowing her the necessary distance from the rebellious desires of her poem, an “ironic” detached (a)morality inherent in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and subsequent epyllia.<sup>49</sup> This cloak was especially useful because it allowed Wheatley to hint at the sexual exploitation or rape of the most vulnerable women, black and white, in Wheatley’s New England. Wheatley first signals her intentions with her title: “Niobe in Distress.” During the Revolutionary War period, the term “distress” designated “the condition of the slave,”<sup>50</sup> therefore positing Niobe as a rebellious slave who chal-

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<sup>47</sup> Garrett’s “Sexual Consent and the Art of Love in the Early Modern English Lyric,” 37-58.

<sup>48</sup> Cora V. Fox, “Gender Politics of Renaissance Ovidianism,” 389.

<sup>49</sup> Jim Ellis’ essay on “Imagining Heterosexuality in the Epyllia” in *Ovid and the Renaissance Body* discusses the history of the epyllia as a genre as does the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

<sup>50</sup> John C. Shield’s adopts this from Sondra O’Neale’s *Jupiter Hammon* (202).

lenges the “tyranny of slavery” under Latona and her children Apollo and Diana, who “represent the racist white oppressors.”<sup>51</sup>

The full title of the poem, “Niobe in Distress For Her Children Slain by Apollo, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book 6<sup>th</sup>, and from a View of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson,” calls attention to Book VI of the *Metamorphoses* which is a catalogue of rape, female defiance, rage, revenge, and grief of which the Niobe episode is but one example. For instance, in the Book VI episode directly preceding Niobe’s, the mortal and very proud Arachne challenges the virgin goddess Athene to an artistic duel, resulting in Arachne’s creation of an aesthetically superior and politically engaged art object, a beautiful tapestry that testifies to the sexual exploitation of the weak by the more powerful. In another framing, episodic narrative, Philomela, who is raped by her brother-in-law Tereus, weaves that crime into her very own tapestry circumventing Tereus’ attempts to silence her by hiding her in the woods and cutting off her tongue. After reading the tapestry, Procne, Philomela’s sister, exacts revenge on her husband by serving him their son Itys on a platter.

The themes of violence, sexual exploitation and artistic rebellion, integral to so many of the stories in the *Metamorphoses*, are also present in “Niobe in Distress.” In keeping with her Ovidian inter-text and “Goliath of Gath,” Wheatley’s poem lingers on scenes of brutality and murder. Niobe’s first-born Ifmenus “cries, with shrieking breath, / While in his breast he feels the shaft of death”(114-16). His brother Alphenor is struck by an arrow, “His issuing entrails smok’d upon the ground” (144). Other male and female siblings face the same “unbodied” fate; that is, they ultimately join “the gloomy mansions of the dead” (136).

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<sup>51</sup> Shields, *American Aeneas*, 223.

Although many critics now agree that the poem sympathizes with Niobe,<sup>52</sup> reversing readings that position the bold mother in the role of unrepentant sinner, Wheatley's text is more ambiguous than this, and in some ways more (a)moral. This ambiguity has implications for interpreting the violence presented in the poem. For Niobe is deeply flawed and guilty of a profound hubris, one not shaken even by the murder of her sons. In the same vein, the goddess Latona is not merely a vengeful antagonist but is instead both Niobe's nemesis and a subject with her own tragic history:

“What, shall a *Titaness* be deify'd,  
 “To whom the spacious earth a couch deny'd?  
 “Nor heav'n, nor earth, nor sea receiv'd your  
     “queen,  
 “Till pitying Delos took the wand'rer in.  
 “Round me what a large progeny is spread!  
 “No frowns of fortune has my soul to dread.      (75-80)

An alternative reading of the poem becomes possible if April Langley's argument that, “Wheatley's depiction of Niobe's distress is as much a way of talking about Wheatley's own distress over what happened to Africa's children as it is the impending doom facing America's black and white children”<sup>53</sup> during the Revolutionary War era is true. The crux of this interpretation would rest upon Niobe's slanderous evocation of Latona's forced exile, a historical circumstance shared by Africa's children and a mythical inter-text alluded to in Ovid. In the Roman version of this myth, Latona is one of the many concubines of Jupiter and a Titan (the vanquished “race”

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<sup>52</sup> There are numerous ways Wheatley shows sympathy Niobe. Besides making a connection between Niobe and colonial slave women critics have note Niobe's pride.

<sup>53</sup> See Langley's “What a Difference a “Way” Makes: Wheatley's Ways of Knowing, 73.

of gods supplanted by the Olympian deities); after becoming pregnant by Jupiter, she is cursed by his wife Juno to wander the earth in search of a sanctuary or homeland to give birth to Apollo and Diana; her search ends at the floating island of Delos (not “terra firma”) and she is later celebrated as a goddess.

Latona’s symbolic connection to Africans in the New World, especially African American women, extends beyond her exilic status. She is of a different race, an ancient group (like Wheatley’s biblically-associated Ethiopians) vilified and dominated by the more powerful. She is subjected to the sexual advances of Jupiter, yet she alone has to bear the responsibility of the results—the shame and eventual banishment—of their sexual liaison. Like the floating island of Delos where she gives birth to Diana and Apollo, she is a liminal figure, a floating signifier without anchor, a lesser Titan and a goddess, benevolent deity and brutal opponent. As a metaphor of instability, she resembles the world of the charter generation of Africans in America, a world where the social and political status of black people was yet to be codified. Her fecundity is the source of her status; after all, it is she who gives birth to the deities associated with the sun and the moon, yet it is that same fertility that fuels charges of sexual impropriety, her banishment, and Niobe’s dismissive attacks against her. Latona is not a victim, however. She is an exile who takes up arms against Niobe whose “distress” indicates not only “the condition of a slave” but also according to the O.E.D. “spiritual agony.” Despite being smiled upon by fortune, Niobe (and those she represents) neglects her spiritual obligations and commodifies her progeny, while exhibiting extreme arrogance and lording her superiority over others, the same arrogance Wheatley warned students at Harvard to avoid in “To the University of Cambridge, in New England.” Latona’s retribution against Niobe and her “sins” is more vicious than David’s decapitation of

Goliath, and suggesting that the violence in the poem might be read as a metaphoric attack on the ideology of white supremacy evident in Niobe's attack on the goddess.

This is not to say that Niobe, who is "all beautiful in woe," is not the central character in the poem. Instead, it is that Wheatley's exploration of Niobe's emotional agony is juxtaposed against her depiction of Latona's rage (or her orchestration of that rage). The story of Latona's retribution, and the connections between Latona and New World Africans, is submerged under the more dominant narrative centering on Niobe. But it is there, and it is potent. Nevertheless, it is Niobe's grief after the murder of her children that is at the poem's moral center and why the metamorphoses of Niobe, from human subject to stone object is so compelling. Unlike David's stone, which symbolizes the rhetorical and political approaches for black emancipation, the stone in "Niobe in Distress" represents the emotional costs for the black subject in slavery who was often "overwhelmed by tragedies" and pushed "beyond endurance," a burden much like the stone in the Sisyphean myth. Yet this stone weeps. This might be read as a declaration of the humanity of the black subject encased in the increasingly hardened racial discourses and the increasingly strengthened institutions supporting slavery. Or perhaps Niobe represents the completely commodified black subject.

The following chapters are each organized around the broad themes of exilic history and existential subjectivity and how each focal poet engages those metaphors in their quests to build home on the page and in the world. These chapters establish a literary history of the black long poem by looking at the historical contexts of each poem under consideration and through close textual analysis of individual works. In chapter two, I combine biography and close reading to investigate the longest poems of George Boyer Vashon, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Albery Allson Whitman. I look at how these poets combined their activism and art to write long

poems in opposition to narratives of black inferiority while imagining a space for black revolution in their textual and real-world quests for home. Each poet grapples with both history and contemporary experience and each poet enters the debates surrounding racial subjugation of their specific era of their poem's composition. I show how Vashon transports the black American desire for freedom during slavery by retelling an episode from the Haitian Revolution in *Vincent Ogé*, Harper returns to the African continent in her Reconstruction-era *Moses: A Story of the Nile* and Whitman revisits the Seminole Wars in his post-Reconstruction *Twasinta's Seminoles*.

Chapter three marks the black long poem's shift into the modern era. I survey Jean Toomer's influence on the genre through his hybrid text *Cane*, consider the importance of James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* on black speech in the genre, and consider Jean Toomer's meditative sequence, *Blue Meridian*, a poem in search of a "blue" race to ameliorate the troubles of exile. The majority of the chapter investigates Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage" and Gwendolyn Brooks' *Annie Allen*. I ponder the ways Brooks challenges Hayden's masculine epic quest to give voice to black entire black community, especially black women. Chapter four looks at Amiri Baraka's late-twentieth-century long poem *Wise Whys Ys*, considered by the poet to be his most important poem. Central to my close reading of Baraka's long poem is how he engages with received traditions from the larger experimental world, black surrealism, the traditional of black long poems and black vernacular culture.

## CHAPTER 2 / THE QUEST FOR HOME IN 19th CENTURY BLACK

## LONG POEMS

So seem the glad waves to have sought  
 From every place its richest treasure,  
 And borne it to that lovely spot,  
 To found thereon a home of pleasure;—  
 A home where balmy airs might float  
 —George Boyer Vashon, *Vincent Ogé* (1854)

His path across the desert, longing once more  
 To see the long-lost faces of his distant home  
 —Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869)

The captive can his home no longer see;  
 So sinks in unsupported grief the mind,  
 When exiles dragged away, must leave their hearts behind!  
 —Albery Allson Whitman, *The Rape of Florida* (1884)

George Boyer Vashon's *Vincent Ogé*, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Moses: A Story of the Nile* and Albery Allson Whitman's *Twasinta's Seminoles; Or Rape of Florida*<sup>54</sup> are nineteenth-century African American long poems that take history, subjectivity, and the quest for home as their central preoccupations. Black American history begins with forced movement from Africa and the history, what I have called exile rhythms, that followed: the Middle Passage, enslavement, and government-sanctioned racial oppression among other “wrong[s].”<sup>55</sup> Black subjectivity must con-

<sup>54</sup> *Twasinta's Seminoles; Or, Rape of Florida* (1885) is a revision of a poem titled *The Rape of Florida* (1884). The poem was revised because there were mistakes made in the binding of the first edition leading to repetition of previous stanzas making the plot difficult to decipher.

<sup>55</sup> The word “wrong” connotes criminality, sin, and transgression and is repeated six times in James M. Whitfield's *America and Other Poems* (1853), and four times in *Vincent Ogé*, a poem composed the same year as *America*. The idea of Africans and their descendants being subjected to some monstrous “wrong” originally comes from Wheatley's “To the Right Honorable Earl of Dartmouth,” which addresses “. . . America in mournful strain / Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd . . .”

tinually grapple with the psychological consequences, the existential tensions, of this dislocation and discrimination, referred to in A. A. Whitman's 1884 long poem as the "grief [of the] mind" for "exiles dragged away." One response to the complexities of this painful history evident in these works—a response to the status of being in exile in one's own land, as Martin Luther King famously put it is a desire to be at home. For many black Americans, the sense of personal grief and broader social injustice connected to this historical dislocation produced a desire evident in Henry Highland Garnet's exhortation towards "resistance! resistance! RESISTANCE!"<sup>56</sup> Vashon, Harper, and A. A. Whitman embraced the charge through political and literary activism. In doing so, they contributed to the building of an "In fact . . . homeland of the free"<sup>57</sup> for their people in the tumultuous era in which they composed their verse. Home in these texts is represented in intriguing ways, at once locational and diasporic, and often a product of political action or physical confrontation. The central poems of this chapter fashioned home as not only a place for respite, but the manifestation of a Sisyphean struggle for freedom, equality, and a fuller expression of black humanity.

Unlike most black writers of the nineteenth century, the poets of this chapter turned to the long poem, a genre imbued with cultural authority and connected to nation building, to tell their tales of the tribe. Vashon, Harper, and A. A. Whitman, writing from within historical contexts of the Fugitive Slave Act and other national expansions of enslavement, Reconstruction, and the post-Reconstruction era respectively, responded to Phillis Wheatley's call for a song in the bolder notes of Western long poems, a call that dovetailed with the political and aesthetic goals

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<sup>56</sup> This bold pronouncement is from a speech titled "An Address To The Slaves Of The United States" delivered by Henry Highland Garnet's speech at the National Negro Convention in Buffalo in 1843.

<sup>57</sup> See James Madison Bell's 950-line *A Poem Entitled the Triumph of Liberty*, 106.

of many black American nineteenth-century writers.<sup>58</sup> The demand for a heroic response to white supremacy, the longing for freedom, and the quest for home are ideas that energized the long poems of these poets who chose this genre as discourse of liberation particularly suited to both political resistance and artistic achievement,<sup>59</sup> which Phillis Wheatley had already exhibited and modeled in her longer verse. The eighteenth-century poet's transhistorical call for a song in the bolder notes of long poems was heeded by these poets each of whom chose in their own unique ways to tell a tale of the tribe that might uplift their sable race in an America Toni Morrison appropriately calls "this strange House." Contributing to the larger discourses of black resistance and liberation, including oral poetry and addresses, essays, slave narratives, and literary fiction, the focal poems of this chapter challenged American culture of the nineteenth century at a time when the ideas of black inferiority, blackness as a mark of servitude, and the black subject as non-American reigned. According to Judylyn Ryan "'blacks,' 'slavery,' and 'subservience,'" were conflated in the white American imagination and codified in the racially hierarchized legal system. The free-born Vashon and Harper wrote their poems in an era when as free black people they could no longer vote, live, or travel as freely as had folks during Wheatley's era. The attention to skin color or the "taint" of African ancestry interpellated these poets into what Kim Blockett calls "slave-classed" subjectivity where "difference and stereotype became reasons to de-

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<sup>58</sup> Black poets, in this sense, shared the artistic goals of the larger nation. Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) dreamed of an American epic to rival those of Greece and Rome. Daniel Bryan's *The Mountain Muse*, (1813), Richard Emmons' *The Fredoniad*, (1827), Walter Marshall McGill's *The Western World* (1837), and *Columbiad* (1807), originally published as *The Vision of Columbus* (1797) by Joel Barlow ponderously re-imagined Homeric and Virgilian epic for an American audience and a newly emerging nation.

<sup>59</sup> In the "Preface" to the influential *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1921), James Weldon Johnson summed up the still dominant belief that black political aspirations could be advanced by black artistic achievement. Or, as Emerson declared in his essay "The Poet" (1837), "man is only half himself, the other half is his expression." See also Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South*, and Dickson D. Bruce *Black Writing from the Nadir* for this perspective.

value” African Americans in “increasingly rigid and codified patterns of racial discrimination.”<sup>60</sup> This circumscription began during the preceding era but reemerged in different forms across the century when Vashon, Harper, and later A.A. Whitman were composing their verse. The long poems of these writers challenged this culture of subjugation through the creation of characters who personified heroic resistance and leadership to confront white supremacy and the violence of the antebellum, post-Civil War, and post-Reconstruction historical period of black American history. In this way they are reminiscent of Du Bois’ description of activists—which these writers were—during the era of *Black Reconstruction* (1935) when “black Prometheus” bound to the Rock of ages by hate, hurt, and humiliation . . . yet lives and fights” (670).

The poems of this chapter are sometimes didactic, sentimental, and for the contemporary reader nurtured on novels or contemporary lyric poetry, hard to meet on their own terms; there is no 21st-century equivalent of the, two hundred and fifty-seven Spenserian stanzas, replete with anastrophe, as is the case with *Twasinta’s Seminoles; Or, Rape of Florida*. Furthermore, there may be some frustration with Vashon, Harper, and A. A. Whitman’s use of white or near-white “black” characters who also embody the seemingly unexamined ideologies of nineteenth-century masculinity and femininity. Finally, these poems are thoroughly invested in, and indebted to, the “courtly muses of Europe,” having less in common with Whitman (Walt) and Dickinson than with the widely maligned poetics of the metronome of Longfellow and Whittier. I am in agreement with poetry scholar Keith D. Leonard, however, when he encourages more patience with these “assimilationist” poetic strategies, and when he urges readers to see the use of “appropriated pre-existing genres” as acts of political resistance, fraught though they may be to contempo-

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<sup>60</sup> Kim Blockett’s “Disrupting Print: Emigration, the Press, and Narrative Subjectivity in the British Preaching and Writing of Zilpha Elaw, 1840-1860s” *MELUS* (Fall 2015) 40 (3): 97 considers the “slave-classed” black subject as one who, although free, lives in an antebellum context and is therefore subjected to peculiar racial discourses. The quotes from Judylyn Ryan came to my attention through Blockett’s essay.

rary readers. In *Fettered Genius: The African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2006) Leonard persuasively argues that “the cultural assimilation of poetic mastery [of European genres or forms] was the abolitionist poet’s greatest act of resistance” (21). Leonard’s statement illuminates Vashon’s antebellum *Vincent Ogé*, Harper’s Reconstruction *Moses* and A. A. Whitman’s four long poems written from the end of Reconstruction to the start of the twentieth century, including his fascinating *Twasinta’s Seminoles; Or Rape of Florida*. These texts clearly participated in “antiracist aesthetic practice of the African American formalist tradition” originating with Wheatley (50), yet Leonard omits them from his ground-breaking and influential literary history.

To more fully tell the tale of African American long poems of the nineteenth century, I aim to show the ways in which black history, black subjectivity, and the quest for home are explored in the central poems of this chapter. These are subjects that have remained central to black writers of long poems from the beginning, not surprising since it is a genre that traditionally hinges on the thematics of exile and estrangement, concerns that are particularly resonant for poets engaged with the black experience in the United States. The poems will be discussed by order of publication date, beginning with a brief biographical sketch of the author in his or her historical context. My analysis of the poems that follow will foreground the crucial idea of finding a home through resistance, which, on the one hand, is built and imagined in the political or martial attempts to build a land of freedom and equality, but also in symbolic locations outside of the United States: in Haiti for Vashon, for Harper, Egypt and in A. A. Whitman’s long poem, in liminal, peripheral American spaces, especially the unregulated maroon communities in tropical Florida. In these acts of home making, nineteenth-century black long poems, despite their surface gentility, made it new, especially by introducing black political desire in the violent eras preceding and following the Civil War into poetic forms that had been almost exclusively European-

American. I will show how these “songs in bolder notes” transform the long poem traditions they enter by incorporating evolving political discourses into longer poetic forms, including those of black liberation and by placing black subjectivity, in slavery and in freedom, at the center of their narratives. The retelling of the Haitian Revolution, the primary subject of Vashon’s *Vincent Ogé*, for example, weds the conventions of epic to the black discursive preoccupation with that Caribbean revolt with its implications for the slave-holding aristocracy and the people it enslaved in the United States. The long poem also connects discursive European engagement with the idea of black-revolt in “Plantation America,” the swath of slave holding nations encompassing the *Americas* from the Southern United States, the Caribbean and South America. Along those same lines, Harper’s experimental *Moses: A Story of the Nile* expands the purview of the nineteenth-century American long poem by combining epic with feminist, salvific history. Harper retells Exodus, the Ur-exile narrative of the West, which allows her to “snatch” the epic tradition—with biblical sanctioning—just as Wheatley had modeled a century before, transforming it into a vehicle for black liberation. Harper recurs to her literary ancestor and returns to ancient Egypt to create a Moses who leads his people on a homeward journey. Whitman refigures the long poem tradition by placing the history and heroism of people of color, specifically black and Native Americans in political and martial coalition against the American government, at the center of his narrative. My brief reading of *Twasinta’s Seminoles; Or Rape of Florida* will examine two features of the poem. The first is its depictions of the slave who seeks freedom becoming first a fugitive later a Maroon member in a community of Seminoles, but always an “exile.” The second is the way the poem occasionally erupts into paroxysms of black political desire. In these moments of emotional surplus and narrative disruption, the formal structure of the Spenserian stanzaic form shows the American epic tradition one capacious enough to include black feelings and black thoughts about

life in Post-Reconstruction America, as well as poetic explorations of black subjectivity and history.

GEORGE BOYER VASHON'S *VINCENT OGÉ*: REVOLUTIONARY HAITI AND THE  
QUEST FOR HOME

George Boyer Vashon grew up in an environment of political activism. He was born to Anne Smith and John Bathan Vashon, a distinguished mixed-raced abolitionist, entrepreneur, and confidant of Frederick Douglass, Martin Delaney, and William Lloyd Garrison. Despite growing up in this rarified political milieu and distinguishing himself as Oberlin's first African-American graduate, Vashon was not protected from the indignities of racial discrimination and hostility to his professional aspirations. This meant that although he studied law under a former Presidential cabinet member in Pittsburgh, the poet and pioneering college professor was denied the right to sit for the bar in that Western Pennsylvanian city since, as a man of color, he was not a citizen. Undaunted by the refusal to allow him to sit for the bar in Pittsburgh, he sat for the bar in New York, becoming the first African American admitted to the bar in that state. Presaging the emigration of many black artists and intellectuals who would find refuge outside of the United States, Vashon fled America, his journey set in motion by the circumscription and discrimination encountered because he was both free and black at the same time and thus, "slave classed" in antebellum America. The experience of marginalization and alienation led him to temporary exile in Haiti for thirty months between 1848 -1850, an experience he drew upon in the composition of *Vincent Ogé*.

In the decades leading up to and during Vashon's stay in Haiti, several legal precedents designed to keep African Americans as circumscribed as possible reached their apotheosis in the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, one of the most pernicious laws in American history.

Briefly, the Fugitive Slave Law mandated that all American citizens and policing apparatuses aid the institution of slavery by sending escaped slaves back to their former servitude. In practice, free black people were sometimes sold into slavery on the word of any white citizen. The law was obviously an untenable psychological and physical threat to all free African Americans, but it was a uniquely challenging existential threat for the small, precarious free black community of which Vashon was a prominent member. The racial antagonism of the early to mid-nineteenth century may have precipitated Vashon's years in Haiti, but it also contributed to his active resistance against discrimination when he returned to the United States, spurring him to a prodigious career of racial uplift as well as unprecedented professional accomplishments for a black man during his century. In response to the Fugitive Slave Act, for instance, he helped organize a vigilante aid committee and became a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Following the political passions of his father and perhaps because of his experience in Haiti, Vashon became a spokesman for the anti-emigration cause by participating in the black convention movement and through his contribution of articles to the Frederick Douglass Paper. Although an attorney by training, Vashon spoke several languages and became a professor of belles-lettres and mathematics at New York Central College, followed by an interval as a teacher and principal in the segregated public schools of Pittsburgh after his return there in 1854. He served as a professor of mathematics, modern languages, and Greek at Alcorn State in Mississippi after completing his tenure as solicitor for the Freedom's Bureau after the Civil War and being turned down in his efforts to become a United States minister in Haiti. In Washington, D. C. he became the first African-American professor at Howard University Law School.<sup>61</sup> His resistance to the oppression of Americans of African descent was also illustrated through his writing of letters and essays. But

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<sup>61</sup> See Paul N.D. Thornell's "The Absent Ones and the Providers: A Biography of the Vashons," and James G. Hallin's "George Boyer Vashon."

undoubtedly, one of his most enduring contributions is undoubtedly the composition of his long poem *Vincent Ogé*.

*Vincent Ogé* was one of the nineteenth century's most artistically significant answers to Wheatley's call for a sophisticated long poem formally and thematically. Joan R. Sherman, in her seminal *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (1974), calls Vashon's poem an "epic" and gives it her highest praise when she calls it "surely the most imaginative poem by a black man of his century" (61). The poem adopts epic conventions in its presentation of a hero who represents the tribe; its scope is broad and the ideas it explores are "potent important," public, and historical. The poem begins in medias res, uses stylized and elevated diction, and at times its lines follow the iambic hexameter of traditional epic. Additionally, the poem alludes to the classical epic tradition in references to the *Odyssey*. If *Vincent Ogé* transgresses the conventions of the heroic as John C. Hall contends, however, those "violations" are primarily in its depiction of an eighteenth-century with two black, cerebral heroes, Ogé and the narrator who speaks for the community. Moreover, the poem makes central a subject new to the Western heroic mode in its affirmation of the black political desire for freedom and full humanity in a world that denied those rights.

Significantly, the poem legitimizes black violence (although it does not display it) to thwart oppression and enslavement through its valorization of the Haitian revolution, a slave revolt that left indelible marks on the development of Black Atlantic nationalism. Stephen G. Hall's views the legitimization of the Haitian Revolution in Vashon's poem as a contribution to the black-authored "rhetorical war" of historical writing against the "intractable dilemma" of racism and slavery in antebellum America, a war that used the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue "to enact a powerful new conceptualization of the possibilities of democratic promise based partly on the

leadership of free black men and women” (87). Vashon joined this war of ideas with leaders such as James Theodore Holly, Henry Highland Garnet, and Frederick Douglass who, despite the fragility of the Haitian Republic under political and economic threat from European and American powers and the internecine feuds, rallied African Americans to participate, through emigration or other means, in the building of fledgling black democracy to assist Haitian and by extension black American freedom and equality.<sup>62</sup> Although Vashon departed from other intellectuals on the idea of large-scale black American emigration to Haiti, the conceptualization of full black participation in American democracy imagined through the Haitian Revolution animates *Vincent Ogé*. Coming as it does within the historical context of heightened white American fear of black insurrection following that revolution and the earlier uprisings of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner, a fear that contributed to the expansion of the draconian laws against the literacy of slaves and expulsion of literate free blacks throughout the South, the poem is all the more subversive and astonishing. Its themes of black resistance, black power, and existential despair—black feeling in an absurd world, were outside of the bounds of epic as Americans had conceived and written it. Vashon’s poem made explicit what Wheatley could only express obliquely: The demand for the end of slavery under the threat of real-world violent retribution.

Having just argued that *Vincent Ogé* expresses black political desire of antebellum America, a literary participant in the “rhetorical war” that marshaled the Haitian Revolution as a tool for black liberation, I want to now complicate this point by troubling the tidy, even if partially true, narrative above. The reality is that by the 1850s white European and American politicians and their Black Atlantic counterparts were well aware that the problems in Haiti went beyond mere internecine squabbling, a historical truth that has implications for understanding the Haiti pre-

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<sup>62</sup> See Leslie M. Alexander’s “‘The Black Republic’ The Influence of the Haitian Revolution on Northern Black Political Consciousness, 1816-1862.”

sented in *Vincent Ogé*. Gregory Pierrot’s “Writing Over Haiti: Black Avengers in Martin Delany’s *Blake*,” documents that by the middle of the nineteenth century Haiti was known as much for its repeated cycles of slaughter and mayhem as it was for its democratic *potential*, a binary that led to two ideologically-based (and race inflected)<sup>63</sup> narratives that still vie for dominance: Haiti as “heroic” versus Haiti as “horrific” (181). The horrific narrative was rooted in a Western “ontology” of black intellectual, cultural, and political inferiority, which made the idea of organized black revolt and revolution “unthinkable” for many in the West outside of the black Atlantic (176). The overdetermined narratives of the Haitian Revolution were further informed, according to Pierrot, by the trope of the “black avenger,” a figure in the West at least as old as Aphra Behn’s seventeenth-century, British novella *Oroonoko*, a character he defines as a “‘black Spartacus’ who would redeem his race and punish slaveholders” (181), but who is ultimately scripted as an “individual against the mass, the courageous prince against the cowardly common slave.” Pierrot further critiques the notion of the black avenger because it “emphasizes the hero in order to deflate the collective” (176). So while it remains true that Haiti stands metonymically for black political yearning for freedom and the possibilities of black leadership in *Vincent Ogé*, Vashon had to wrestle with the complexity of Haiti, its leadership (often compromised and understood through centuries-old prisms of race and black revolt), its violence, and its thralldom to European colonial power in his telling of the tribe. Vashon addresses these complex issues of representation in his epic through his exploration of black subjectivity, history, and the quest for home.

While the historical and rhetorical contexts of Vashon’s long poem are complex, the narrative of *Vincent Ogé* is straight forward. It tells a tale for the black tribe by recounting an early episode of the Haitian Revolution, one of the most important events in African diasporic history,

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<sup>63</sup> Pierrot makes a distinction between British understanding of the Haitian Revolution through the lens of the “black avenger narrative,” a reading of “singular” nobility the French rejected.

through the travails and execution of its hero, the eponymous Vincent Ogé. I have made this subtle shift in preposition from Michael Bernstein's interpretation (adapted from Ezra Pound) of verse epic as a "tale *of* the tribe" to a "tale *for* the tribe" to underscore the poem's home-building, political purpose, a purpose that is inseparable from the antebellum context in which it was composed. The poem tells the story of Vincent Ogé, a *gen de couleur libre* or *affranchis*. He is a man of lofty aims who, if a lesser man, would "...joy his life away forever" (105) in Haiti. Because he is a serious man whose "brow / Is brightened not by pleasure's play" (87-88), he is ultimately drawn to "Freedom's call" and heroic "deeds of daring" since "...Life is a changeful thing, / and pleasures swiftly pass away" (106-107). He joins with other men to fight for the "rights bereaved" of free men of color encouraged by the strong words of his mother. After a military effort filled with "gallant actions," the "heroic band" of "kindred spirits" is conquered and sent to prison where Ogé becomes a "martyr" upon his murder. Although the poem doesn't say this, the historical, biracial Ogé explicitly left the majority, the black enslaved, out of his petition for equality to French authorities although he secretly planned to lead them in an insurrection to fight for the rights of the *gens de couleur*, a naive proposition.<sup>64</sup> In opening the door to black liberty, however, Vashon suggests that Ogé's relinquishing of his status and comfort, a liminal "slave-classed" position between black slave and white free, recalls what Robert Stepto would later define as the "articulate kinsman." Vashon's hero, although different from the archetype as defined by Stepto, is, nevertheless, "willing to forsake highly individualized mobility" for "the most oppressive environment, a loss that is only occasionally assuaged by the newfound balms of group identity,"<sup>65</sup> an immersion into group abjection that results in the hero's death. In the end, the narrator deems

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<sup>64</sup> See Tom Ott's "The Road to Revolution," in *The Haitian Revolution: 1789 - 1804*, 28-46.

<sup>65</sup> Stepto, *From Behind the Veil*, 169.

Ogé a “noble soul” who has dealt “one decisive blow” against oppression, ensuring that history will record his name alongside that of Haitian revolutionary L’Overture.

Vashon uses formalist strategies and generic conventions in his brief epic to explore the themes of home, history, and subjectivity to serve a dual purpose. It is an aesthetic choice for a poet grappling with difficult and politically sensitive historical material and its representation, and at the same time a refutation of black intellectual and political inferiority, an intervention into white supremacy through its mastery of an exalted genre. *Vincent Ogé’s* 359 lines are written primarily in iambic tetrameter, although as previously mentioned there are moments when the poem shifts into the iambic hexameter of classical epic. The poem is divided into ten sections with stanzas of varying lengths ranging from nine lines to the longest, complete at eighty-eight. The rhyming patterns throughout the *Vincent Ogé* also vary. The lines are dominated by terminal rhyme, most notably couplets, but the poem also includes the abab rhyme scheme. Alliteration, internal rhyme, assonance, apocopated rhyme and repetition are other techniques used throughout the text. These poetic devices and conventions are used in support of Vashon’s major themes beginning with the invocation of his muse. The major theme explored is that of home, which encompasses the poem’s understanding of both black subjectivity and history. As previously discussed, the idea of home for Vashon is two fold, at once a product of political struggle and engagement, and a symbolic location beyond intense psychological pressure and physical toil. Part one of the poem begins:

There is, at times, an evening sky—  
 The twilight’s gift—of sombre hue,  
 All checkered wild and gorgeously  
 With streaks of crimson, gold and blue;—

(lines 1-4)

*Vincent Ogé* invokes its muse, the polychromatic evening sky, a figure of inspiration different from Calliope, the epic muse of Homer's *The Odyssey*, or the Holy Spirit of Dante's *Paradise Lost*. This difference, rather than making Vashon's poem unique, places it within the tradition of tropological revision, a reimagining of the muse that is one of the hallmarks of the epic tradition.<sup>66</sup> What is unique, however, is the use of the muse for black home-building through the generative possibilities Vashon brings to a seemingly innocuous aspect of the natural world. For although not immediately apparent, Vashon introduces this new muse of black liberation by weaving the elements of the pre-Christian sacred from classical antiquity and the imprimatur of Christian authority in this sky muse. The colors of the sky are provocative, a "crimson, gold and blue" that seems to allude to Exodus 39 of the Pentateuch, the chapter where God's direct will is evoked ten times as he directs Moses to create the "ephod," out of those same colors. These priestly vestments or sacred objects are shrouded in mystery, linked to a more ancient oracular divination system. Symbolically then, the poet-narrator and the poem itself is sanctified and authorized by God's will and ancient, prophetic wisdom. *Vincent Ogé's* invocation is, at the same time, reminiscent of Phillis Wheatley's "hierophantic solar worship," the poet's method of invoking and fusing the West African sun gods and goddesses of her ancestors with Phoebus Apollo, and Aurora<sup>67</sup> one example of the myriad ways syncretism informs the long poems of Vashon, Harper and Whitman. This is speculative, but it may be the case that Vashon's poem is acknowledging

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<sup>66</sup> Jeremy Downes, *Recursive Desire*, 9.

<sup>67</sup> John C. Shields' *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation: Background and Contexts*, 138 and DuBois' *Souls of Black Folk* remind us that African Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth century carried Africa, its ways of knowing and being, into their cultural productions.

Wheatley's sun evocations when he declares that "So glorious" is his multicolored sky that it "strikes the soul with awe," surpassing even the "brilliant . . . sheen" of the rising sun. Whether Vashon was addressing Wheatley's poetry or not, his allusion to Exodus presents readers with an epic vision that brings together the ur-exile slave narrative of the West, a story so resonant that its telling has been repeated in black sacred music, folk stories, sermons and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's long poem *Moses: A Story of the Nile* while at the same time imbuing the poem with an oracular and prophetic voice. In addition to calling on the sky muse to sanction and authorize his poem, Vashon uses figurative language to announce the rhetorical purpose of the poem through the key metaphor at the end of the stanza below:

We turn aside with inward pain  
 And pray to see that sky again,  
 Such sight is like the struggle made  
 When freedom bids unbare the blade

(lines 11-14)

Home building, an affirmation black agency, subjectivity, and liberation, animate these early lines and the poem more generally. The poem's narrator has witnessed a sky "shrouded" in the "deepest gloom" (10) of night, after which he draws a parallel, a simile, between the anticipation of seeing the wondrous sky of twilight again—despite "inward pain" and grief—and the "struggle" to "unbare the blade" in the fight for freedom and equality. The crux of this simile is that "inward pain" or the internalized historical suffering that comes from forces outside the black subject cannot (or must not) extinguish hope for a more egalitarian future; the poet/narrator insists, however, that political struggle, Sisyphean and in the shadow of antebellum laws like

the Fugitive Slave Act, must inform that hope. “Freedom,” personified, demands confrontation by use of the blade, synecdoche for war. “Blades” here also suggest actual weaponry or the weaponry of language of which *Vincent Ogé* is exemplified by Vincent Ogé. The image of the sheathed blade further suggests the possibility of agency and (male) power, the word blade both phallic and consonant with the word black, which it intimates, and inclusive also of the homograph “aid” or rescue. The poet reworks the idea evinced from the sheathed or shrouded blade in an extended series of metaphors that speak to the masked pain of the black soul under the weight of New World history (and the threat of its eruption) four decades before Paul Laurence Dunbar would contemplate the idea of masking at the end of the nineteenth century in a formal poem like “We Wear the Mask,” or in the dialect-written “When Malindy Sings.” Michael Harper’s observation in *Vintage Book of African American Poetry* (2000) that *Vincent Ogé* was not only noteworthy for its early use of “the heroic mode as a lens through which to view black history,” but for its “prophetic warning of the racial conflict that would explode on the world stage for the next 150 years” (29) was undoubtedly sparked by the metaphors of disguised or hidden existential suffering and psychological and physical pressures imaged in the poem as a “reptile” that “slumbers” in a “pent abode” (154-55); a “heart that conceals the anguished groan” leading to “madness” (156); “molten fires” (160) beneath the “hushed volcano” (159); “Passions” that only “seem at rest” (161); and a “brow serene and high” that “Appears” without “sadness” belying the “fire” of “vengeance, hatred” and significantly, “despair” (163-65).

There are other ways the line “When freedom bids unbare the blade” contributes to the exploration of home and how it has been denied in *Vincent Ogé*. The line might be understood as a critique of the idea of freedom as practiced in revolutionary America and France. Vashon looks back to Wheatley’s Revolutionary era (and perhaps, again, to her poetry) extending her cri-

tique of the country through the personification of freedom to speak of black yearning. The poem takes seriously the tripartite French motto “liberty, equality, fraternity,” so compelling to the black Jacobins of Haiti that it became the rallying cry and motto for that Republic too in spite of France’s continued economic exploitation, a theft backed by a threatening European military. The idea of freedom itself is scrutinized and unpacked in this line as well, especially when personified freedom is imagined as one who “bids,” revealing the economic and ideological underpinnings of the concept as practiced by slavers and others (nations, regions, families) who were enriched by the slave trade. Bidding conjures images of the auction block. The narrator warns readers to beware of white American “freedom” yoked as it is to buying and selling African and African American bodies, which continued at least until the last documented slave ship *Clotilde* illegally dropped anchor in Mobile, Alabama four years after the publication of *Vincent Ogé*. Just as hope is embedded in political activism and struggle, Vashon’s lines imply that enslavement and white superiority are inscribed in French and American notions of liberty, equality, and brotherhood and that freedom for New World black men and women may one day come from the blade that until now has been sheathed. *Vincent Ogé* the poem and historical personage present a two-front assault, a home building against that which would render the black subject outside of freedom in the West and an attack on slavery and the notion of black inferiority the fed it. The poem exposes the enemy, the “wretches, steeped in crime and blood” (19) who have denigrated black people, “a form of God” (20), and presages Du Bois in its calls for black people to “cleanse their souls from every stain” (18) cast upon them.

Vashon posits political and martial home building as necessary for relieving the masked suffering of the black community, a community of thinkers (primarily) and organizers to which the poet narrator and Ogé belong. It is “We,” the narrator and his tribe as a collective entity, who

“turn aside with inward pain,” and “We” who “willingly suppress a sigh” of “wild despairing” (33) since, according to the poet, when “‘Freedom!’ . . . the rally-cry” (36) is heard and heeded through physical confrontation against the oppressor, or through psychological opening to liberation, a march towards emancipation subsumes and may ameliorate centuries of existential grief.<sup>68</sup> It is the collective—the black heroes of the tribe—who “stand like men” (17) and heed the “calls to deeds of daring” (37) before Vincent Ogé’s entrance in line eighty-six. In part six of the poem the hero “standeth not alone,” because his grievances are communal:

A brother’s there, and friends; and all  
                   Are kindred spirits with his own;  
 For mind will join with kindred mind,  
                   As matter’s with its like combined

Contextualizing Ogé from within a community informs readers that Ogé is not the “black avenger” that had dominated the European notion of the black, singular hero, a “courageous prince” who is distinct from his passive, inferior enslaved group; rather, the oracular narrative voice reveals Ogé to be a cerebral kinsman who embodies the black collective’s hopes and aspirations. He, like the narrator of the poem and by extension their community, are thinking “mind . . . joined with kindred mind,” feeling human beings, the kind of people who might organize a legitimate revolution under the circumscription of New World black life, particularly salient in a Paine-sian environment that venerated natural rights of men, a proposition of black and white equality European nations refused to accept.

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<sup>68</sup> Because *Vincent Ogé* was published by British abolitionist Julia Griffith’s *Autographs For Freedom* (1954) for an audience of black and white readers, the “We” also extends community to all committed to the destruction of slavery, or as Amiri Baraka would later say in his long poem *Wise Why’s I’s*, “John Brown was black” an expression of multiracial political allegiance.

There is violence happening in the poem, but the reader does not witness Ogé perpetrating these actions. Ogé doesn't so much act, especially violently, as much as sense, ponder and feel. When we meet him he simply "stands mid this array / Of matchless beauty" (86-7). Ogé, for example, is "saddened" . . . / As doth the lorn and mateless bird / That constant mourns... (89-91). In other moments we encounter a romantic Ogé who "was a mind that joyed / With nature in her every mood" (98-99). Ogé does not act when a "draught / Among the cordials, that, if quaffed, / Will send poison through his veins" (?) (116-18), instead he just "seems" to "know" that it is a possibility. And, when facing death "... Ogé smiles, for tis the last / He'll droop beneath the tyrant's power-- / The galling chains!" (93-95). The collective political strategizing and characterization of Ogé and his compatriots in Vashon's long poem undermine and supplant ideas, still dominant at the time, that ignore or misconstrue black interiority and intellectual capability and aesthetic sensibility. Vashon seems to be warning white American supporters of slavery that they are repeating the same mistake as the French sixty years earlier, which is to say, the refusal to acknowledge full black humanity.

Vashon, like Harper and A. Whitman, situates his narrative—the home of the poem—in a symbolic space outside of the United States proper. His poem embraces historical analogy and the epic tradition to vivify his celebration of a homeland of black freedom or equality while simultaneously deepening his critique of America (where at-homeness was denied) during the antebellum period of its creation. By choosing Revolutionary Haiti to tell the tale for his tribe, Vashon faced a dilemma in representation, however, which necessitated some way of handling the received competing narratives of "heroic" Haiti, a land of black homebuilding, collective political and martial daring and respite from the "hardship, toil, and pain!"<sup>69</sup> of slavery on the one

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<sup>69</sup> George Moses Horton, "On Liberty and Slavery" in *The Hope of Liberty* (1829).

hand, and the “horrific” narrative of Haiti, a land still grappling with the legacy and brutality of slavery and racism and the resulting inter and intra-racial violence on its road to independence. (The horrific version of emancipated Haiti story, which tended to ignore the legacies of colonialism and slavery, and instead focused on black barbarism, was favored by white supremacist nations.) Vashon, not surprisingly, tries to balance heroism and horror, favoring a depiction of the island that uses affirmative, even sacred terms: Haiti as Arcadia and Eden. In the third section of the poem, for instance, a section that emphasize the idea of home, the narrator rhapsodizes “If Eden claimed a favorite haunt / Most hollowed of that blessed ground” (56-57) “The loveliest home in that fair isle” (61) would be Haiti, a distinction he makes between the Dominican and Haitian sides of the island of Hispaniola.<sup>70</sup> Haiti is bathed in “radiance” (62), “a home of pleasure;— / A home where balmy airs might float / Through spicy bower and orange grove” (77-80). The beauty of Haiti escapes representation through language; it is a place “For which words find no picturing” so the narrator compares his mimetic task to that of a “gifted Greek” painter creating a “crowning work of art” about “his ideal Queen of Love” (65-68). Although the poet insists that language is not capable of describing this black Arcadia, he borrows European epic discourse to speak of Haiti’s perfection. It is an island “Where earthquake stays its demon force, / And hurricane its wrathful course; / Where nymph and fairy find a home, / And foot of spoiler never come (82-85). Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen* and *Arcadia* are alluded to in this section of the poem, most obviously in its references to the Queen of Love, nymphs and fairies, medieval “bowers” and the personification of the Western wind or floating zephyrs. Spenser’s cele-

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<sup>70</sup> Vashon was named after Haitian president Jean-Pierre Boyer, who conquered Santo Domingo two years before the poet’s birth, uniting the island of Hispaniola. Haiti followed the exploitative governance of their former colonial masters (with the exception of freeing slaves) prompting the Dominicans to declare independence from Haiti ten years before the publication of *Vincent Ogé*. Vashon appears to side with the abolitionism of Haiti, hence its superiority to the Dominican side of the island.

bration of the Queen Elizabeth 1 and virtue becomes in *Vincent Ogé* a celebration of a black and free homeland. The poet continually exclaims Haiti's beauty where "waves dash brightly on thy shore, / Fair island of the southern seas! (38-39), "A vision in a poet's dream!" (45). But this homeland is built through revolutionary struggle so there are always those outside exploitative forces, "tempting fiend with guileful taunt" (58), which demands confrontation.

Haiti as a "Fair island," a land of nymph and fairies, an imagined homeland free of the weight of (black) New World history is an unstable narrative strain in *Vincent Ogé* by design. If we return to lines quoted above, it appears as if the narrator is calling attention to the tension between the imagined versus the historical Haiti, and therefore it advocates for the continued, pressing need for revolutionary struggle. Surely, for example, the poet narrator is aware that hurricanes in Haiti sometimes unleash their "wrathful course," just as Vashon was aware of the "devastating" earthquake that hit Haiti a little over a decade before he wrote *Vincent Ogé*.<sup>71</sup> Vashon is destabilizing his European borrowed epic discourse, which allows the reader to question the "foot of spoiler never come" and lines that seem to praise Columbus as "That daring soul who gave to Spain / A world—last trophy of her reign!" (42-43). This idea is posited for the purpose of critique, much as the idea of Haiti as a ". . . gem / The glory of that diadem!" (54-55) a colonial prize to fill French and Spanish coffers much like "Golconda's radiant spoil" (53). Vashon's use of Spenser extends the sixteenth-century poet's epic condemnation of the Catholic French and Spanish for enslaving native born Indians and Africans in the Caribbean and allows the poet to place his poem within the epic tradition of historical allegory, calling attention to colonial exploitation and the history of Hispaniola as well as the contemporary subjugation of black people in the continental, antebellum United States.

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<sup>71</sup> Stephan Palmié and Francisco A. Scarano, *The Caribbean: A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, 30

Although essentially ignored by critics for decades, *Vincent Ogé* is an important African American long poem not only because it is one of the first published after Wheatley's call for a song in the bolder notes of epic before the Civil War but because of its treatment of black subjectivity, history, and the quest for home, issues that would preoccupy African American long poems for the next century and a half. *Vincent Ogé* is an early example of assimilationist formalism, presaging the work of important black poets who would follow his early example in their long poems. Vashon turns to the Haitian Revolution, one of the most important episodes in New York black history, to tell the tale for his tribe. Like Wheatley before him, and without a body of African American antecedent texts, Vashon adds a black voice to the Western tradition of epic to insist on black liberation. He asserts black collective power and agency, including the intellectual war that devalued the Haitian Revolution, a touchstone for early black nationalism. Of the antecedent texts Vashon mines to authorize his early black long poem, two that stand out are Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, whose stanzaic form would later be appropriated in Whitman's post-Reconstruction *Twasinta's Seminoles, Or, Rape of Florida*, the final poem I will discuss in this chapter, and the Biblical story of Exodus, a story retold in *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, an experimental long poem written by Frances Harper and the next poem under consideration.

#### FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER'S *MOSES: A STORY OF THE NILE*

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper led an extraordinary life of political and literary activism. She worked with the Underground Railroad and travelled with its agents throughout the United States lecturing about social justice, civil rights, and racial reconciliation. Her work, whether clandestine or public, was dangerous, her lecture schedule, demanding. Harper also supported her political networks financially from the sales of her poetry, a tidy cumulative sum given her documented generosity and immense popu-

larity as a writer.<sup>72</sup> In a letter to William Still, lifelong friend and “master conductor” of the Philadelphia station of the Underground Railroad, Harper gave voice to the homelessness and existential grief her activism generated:

I might be so glad [to give up lecturing] if it was only so that I could go home among my own kindred and people, but slavery comes up like a dark shadow between me and the home of my childhood. Well, perhaps it is my lot in life to die from home and be buried among strangers; and yet I do not regret that I espoused this cause of human rights, and I hope the consciousness that I have not lived in vein will be a halo of peace around my dying bed; a heavenly sunshine lighting up the dark valley of the shadow of death”

*Still's Underground Railroad Records* (1871) argues that Harper’s “yearning for home” and her position as an “exile” was not connected to hopelessness and a desire for death but, on the contrary, were what motivated her political work. Harper’s goal was to create an America of “heavenly sunshine” to brighten the lives of those under the dark shadow of slavery and oppression, and her allusions to both Exodus 23:9 and the 23rd Psalms were essentially optimistic in the face of despair and alienation. Melba Joyce Boyd’s “Orphaned and Exiled” the first chapter of *Discarded Legacy: Politics in the Life of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper* (1994), argues that Harper’s early life, despite its advantages—being born to free parents in 1825, for instance—led her to write poetry haunted by human suffering and estrangement (34). After losing her parents, the poet attended her uncle’s school, the William Watkins Academy for Negro Youth, where she studied classical literature, Greek, Latin, rhetoric, elocution, and the Bible.<sup>73</sup> The school had a political agenda

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<sup>72</sup> Frances Smith Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, 11-14.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

that was Christian, egalitarian and staunchly anti-emigrationist.<sup>74</sup> This foundation, with its emphasis on home building in the United States, would leave its mark on one of the most remarkable careers of any American, male or female, of the nineteenth century.

Many studies, following William Still's biography, refer to Harper as an exile—one subjected to, in some manner, forced movement and home seeking. This framing illuminates a life where movement was precipitated initially by the Fugitive Slave Law, which as I argued earlier, rendered all black Americans in some sense homeless in the land of their birth. After the Civil War, Harper journeyed for the civil rights for African Americans, especially the newly emancipated, and furthermore championed the temperance movement and women's suffrage; her activism always had a black feminist core, however, focused on the particular existential and material concerns of black women in a country where they were often excluded from nineteenth-century notions of race and gender. Exile and home seeking, their sediments, traces and contemporaneity, permeate Harper's writing. Is it any wonder then that *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, the poem that most stands out in her poetic oeuvre in length, experimentation, and depth of inquiry takes the quest for home and the black history and existential subjectivity it encompasses, as its central thematic concerns?

*Moses: A Story of the Nile* is a major achievement in African American literature, a striking statement in the long poem tradition written before the full flowering of the longer verse in black writing that would emerge almost a century later. Harper's epic is also important in literary history as the first major black long poem written after slavery. The poem is generically restless in that

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<sup>74</sup> William Watkins was a prominent antislavery activist and anti-colonialist / anti-emigrationist once writing that it was preferable to “die in Maryland, under the pressure of unrighteous and cruel laws than be driven like cattle to the pestilential clime of Liberia” an assertion that revealed the widespread distrust of the white run, and often indisputably racist American colonization Society. Web Archives of Maryland (Biographical Series) SEE MLA CITATION

it is an amalgamation of slave narrative (in this case a group ascent narrative),<sup>75</sup> dramaturgy, feminist biblical revision, and pious religious epic—a full throated response to Phillis Wheatley’s call for a song in bolder notes. At more than 700 lines of predominantly blank verse and including two ballads, Harper’s long poem appropriates the formalist tradition to speak directly to the concerns of the antebellum black population, issues located in the gap between the end of chattel slavery and the desire that America might become home for African Americans. By giving voice to the concerns of her tribe, Harper, like Wheatley and Vashon before her, opens up new channels of epic discourse. I aim to show how *Moses* explores the same central concerns as the longer poetry of George Boyer Vashon and Albery Allson Whitman, issues that continue to energize the African American long poem today: the quest for home under the weight of African American history. In Harper’s poem, home is built through political struggle and sacrifice, physical conflict, and coming to terms with black history (the African past, slavery, the Middle Passage, and the recent Civil War) for the purpose of physical, political and spiritual liberation, since, as *Moses* illustrates, slavery takes its toll on the black interior as much as it burdens the physical body. Harper tells her tale *to* the tribe in order to fortify her African American audience at a moment when the hope and optimism of Radical Reconstruction, supported by the deployment of federal troops to the South, was vitiated by disorientation, disorder, and organized white resistance to changes in the antebellum racial order.<sup>76</sup>

*Moses* is comprised of two distinct parts, each employing very different generic conventions. The first section of the poem, the biblical narrative proper, is written predominantly in

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<sup>75</sup> Stepto, *From Behind the Veil*, 135.

<sup>76</sup> W. E. B. DuBois describes the difficult circumstances in the South following the Civil War in *Black Reconstruction* as a time of “disorder and social upheaval” because black Americans, seen as the cause for the war, were at the mercy of a battle-hardened white enemy (599). Nevertheless, African Americans experienced sweeping changes in the post Civil War era. The 13th and 14th amendments, the Freedman’s Bureau, and increase literacy and mobility for African Americans before were first steps towards the long march towards equality and citizenship.

blank or heroic verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, a form of prosody that has signified the tension between political orthodoxy (because it is composed in traditional meter) and the politics of liberation (because it is free from the strictures of rhyme) since at least the seventeenth century.<sup>77</sup> This dialectic is played out in the ideological framework of Harper's poem, which venerates traditional notions of motherhood and Christian piety, but through a radical, black female lens marshaled for Harper's home building project. In addition to blank verse, Harper uses enjambment, anaphora, and shifting caesura among other poetic techniques. Many of the episodes of Exodus are retold in Harper's poem: Moses is found on the river as a baby; he is reared in Egyptian monarchy, a privilege he rejects; he leads his people to freedom after the plagues are visited upon the Egyptian people; the Egyptian army is defeated after the parting of the Red Sea: and the Hebrews, through Moses, receive the Decalogue.

The story of Moses is a historical allegory that collapses time and conflates the Exodus journey of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt to their still developing freedom at the border of the Promised Land. Beyond its importance as sacred text about exile and slavery, Exodus may have appealed to Harper because the chosen people are not quite free at the end; instead, like the Sisyphean black struggle, a journey from the 1600s to the 1869 Reconstruction era of the poem's publication, the tribe of the poem is in what Anna Julia Cooper called an "embryonic stage" of development,"<sup>78</sup> a people on the precipice of what they hoped would become a true belonging to American democracy. The reimagining of Exodus tells a tale *of* and *to* the black tribe, a didactic retelling of salvific history that "accounts for the experiences of African Ameri-

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<sup>77</sup> See the "Introduction" of Henry Weinfield's *The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the Crisis of Modernity* for his discussion of the ideology of blank verse, 1-21.

<sup>78</sup> *Voice from the South*, 297.

cans viewed from the perspective of the Bible that make sense of their conditions of living,”<sup>79</sup> especially the post-Civil War period of the poem’s publication. In an 1892 speech “Enlightened Motherhood: An Address,” Harper recalls the historical context of *Moses*’ composition, a moment of American history characterized both by radical progress in black political life and by white opposition, as epitomized by the Ku Klux Klan first ascendancy, to that progress. The talk addresses the legacy of African American exile, a history that pressed down upon the black community after slavery:

It is nearly thirty years since an emancipated people stood on the threshold of a new era, facing an uncertain future . . . an ignorant people, to be taught to read of the Christian law and to learn to comprehend more fully the claims of the gospel of the Christ of Calvary. A homeless race, to be gathered into homes of peaceful security and to be instructed how to plant around their fire sides the strongest batteries against sins that degrade and the race vices that demoralize. A race unversed in the science of government and unskilled in the just administration of law, to be translated from the old oligarchy of slavery into the new common-wealth of freedom. . . .”<sup>80</sup>

Harper’s recollection of the post-Civil War era emphasizes the vulnerability of the newly freed African American community, a memory that yokes black history to the quest for home in America. The Afro-American journey, the poet suggests, is a movement from homelessness to the “peaceful security” and warmth of the hearth, from the uncertainty of state-imposed ignorance to the illumination that emerges from a spiritually undergirded political freedom. Harper’s con-

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<sup>79</sup> Eddie Glaude, *Exodus!*, 4.

<sup>80</sup> Harper, Frances E. W. “Enlightened Motherhood,” 285.

ceptualization of emancipation is rooted in hearth and threshold, where home serves as sanctuary protecting individual black people and black families from that which degrades them from within and without. It is only from within a sanctified home, under the tutelage of the more socially and politically enlightened—especially the black mother—that black folk might walk through the threshold into a new era. Harper presents a homebuilding project that is internal and spiritual in its remaking of the black subject, and external in its overthrowing of oligarchy (a term with both caste and economic connotations), a remaking of America into a just and equitable “common-wealth of freedom” for black men and women. *Moses* does rhetorical and symbolic heavy lifting for Harper in its textual return to Africa, more specifically to Egypt. In the broadest sense, the return to Africa itself is a symbolic locational balm for existential wounds caused by black American exilic history (the homelessness of Harper’s speech) akin to Vashon’s use of the Haitian landscape in the symbolic geography in *Vincent Ogé*. But Harper’s symbolic geography also addresses a different set of concerns, all related in some way to the overall home building project of Harper’s long poem. The return to Africa in *Moses* positions the poem within the hotly contested discourses of Egyptology during the nineteenth century, which from its inception buttressed arguments for white supremacy, American slavery, and the subjugation of black people after slavery. According to white pioneers in the field, the ancient Egyptians were civilization-building white people who owned black slaves. For nineteenth-century African American black nationalists and Pan Africanists demanding an entrance into the common-wealth of freedom in the United States, the notion that the ancient Egyptians were white enacted an erasure of blackness from the African continent, an idea that robbed black people of a history already distorted by the Middle Passage and slavery and defied logic, necessitating a vigorously challenge. These intellectuals, artists, and activists argued for an aetiology of New World blackness rooted, at least

in part, in classical Egypt, an origin narrative of racial greatness employed during and after Reconstruction to dismantle the interiorized white supremacy of former black slaves while building a home of freedom and equality in the world.<sup>81</sup> Harper's poem enters this conversation by wedding Egyptology to a biblical, folk-inspired discourse that presents Egyptians and Hebrews as both "olive"-skinned people, a sameness that posits "colored" people in an ancient sacred text (much as Wheatley before her when the earlier poet wrote about biblical Ethiopians in the previous century). Simultaneously however, Harper rejects any easy romanticization of Egypt / Africa by insisting that it represents "the old oligarchy of slavery." This provides a symbolic way for the poet to claim Egypt-in-Africa while waging a subtle critique of black emigration to Africa, a political stance Harper was known for, in the context the post-Civil War period when a black return to an African homeland was still a political solution—albeit increasingly diminished one—in the minds of black and white allies and adversaries.

*Moses* is replete with imagery of contrasting homes (the word home itself is repeated 13 times), a critique of the unearned leisure in the homes of the corrupt, ruling class of Egypt versus those inhabited by the "slave-classed" Hebrews. The free elite live amongst the "fairest flowers" and "obelisks that r[i]se in lofty grandeur." In these "proud palaces," "fountains toss . . . on the air their silver spray," and well-to-do Egyptians dwell in "splendor, light / And pleasure." These descriptions of Egyptian homes and landscapes are enlivened through alliteration, while the enslaved Hebrews live in "Bondage-darkened huts," "darkened huts"(4), "lowly homes" and "lowly huts" thrice repeated. In these lines, Harper depicts the physical home—palace versus hut—not only to comment upon the material circumstances of the poem's characters, but also to illustrate the influence of these material realities on the subjectivities they create. The ruling Egyptians live

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<sup>81</sup> See Scott Trafton's *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania*, which analyzes the dueling ideas about Egypt and what these differences suggest about race, nationhood and identity.

in light and pleasure and are proud while the Hebrews are characterized by what poet James Whitfield once called “delve and toil” in his poem “America” (1854). The quest in the poem is for the Hebrew people to resist the “dark” physical bondage and existential suffering to build homes of “peaceful security” under enlightened Judeo-Christian inspired governance while resisting the sin and vice of the oligarchs who inhabit “proud palaces.” In addition to imagining home and black subjectivity through the representation of actual homes, Harper’s long poem shows that the building of home—as a democratic common wealth—can only take place through political struggle and sacrifice. Although biblical Exodus begins its first fourteen verses with a catalogue of male progenitors emerging from the “loins” of Jacob (KJV, Ex. 1 1-14) locked in a battle with an unnamed Egyptian Pharaoh, Harper’s allegorical tale of the black tribe begins with an assertion of homebuilding. It renounces this erasure of women at the start of Exodus<sup>82</sup> while affirming the ideals of unity, leadership and especially sacrifice as cornerstones in any effort to build a homeland of the free in verse and politically. Consider the opening lines of *Moses* where the eponymous hero converses with the royal, Egyptian mother who adopted him:

MOSES.

Kind and gracious princess, more than friend  
 I’ve come to thank thee for thy goodness,  
 And to breathe into thy generous ears  
 My last and sad farewell. I go to join  
 The fortunes of my race, and to put aside  
 All other bright advantages, save

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<sup>82</sup> Exodus 1 1-14, writes the stories of Jacob’s wives, concubines, and daughter Dinah out of this foundational story of exile, slavery and freedom. Dinah’s erasure may have been potent to Harper because she became a figure for the female American slave vulnerable to rape. Harper’s nineteenth century audience would have been well aware of Dinah’s symbolism. Echoes of Dinah, of slave vulnerability, appear throughout *Moses*.

The approval of my conscience and the need  
Of rightly doing.

PRINCESS.

What means, my son, this strange election?  
What wild chimera floats across thy mind?  
What sudden impulse moves thy soul? Thou who  
Hast only trod the court of kings, why seek  
Instead the paths of labor? Thou whose limbs  
Have known no other garb than that which well  
Befits our kingly state, why rather choose  
The badge of servitude and toil? (3)

Although *Moses: A Story of the Nile* begins in medias res, a convention signaling epic, the poem is not a song of men or arms, nor is it inspired by the ancient gods and goddesses of classic epic or the natural wonder that roused Vashon's *Ogé*; rather, the muse of Harper's poem can be characterized by a verb: to sacrifice. Sacrifice as a political component of home building and seeking is expressed in the first stanza of Chapter 1 of the poem, when Moses' renounces the "bright advantages" of race and class privilege, citing the moral obligation to identify with and ameliorate the sufferings of his oppressed people. This double vision of "rightly doing," which is to say the sacrifice of privilege and the privilege of sacrifice, is a duty and honor that both precipitates and attends the quest for home in Harper's revisionary long poem. Harper presents a Moses who "put aside all other ends and aims" to follow his conscience, the internalized voice of God telling him to seek the Promised Land, a movement from a grandson of the Pharaoh to a shepherd in

Midian. The hero claims that the “earnest purpose binding all his soul” is to find a path from the slave state of Egypt to freedom and salvation beyond its empire and that this emancipatory journey is can only come through his leadership and faith (4). Furthermore, Moses is said to have made a vital choice “twixt Israel’s pain and sorrow / And Egypt’s pomp and pride (35). He therefore casts his lot with the god of the oppressed and God’s chosen nation, a lesson for Harper’s black and white post-Civil War audience, a journey where the outer trappings of wealth reflect moral bankruptcy while poverty reveals spiritual and political enlightenment.

Harper’s larger tale frames several embedded didactic narratives of sacrifice, which serve her overall homeward-bound political purpose. For instance, Moses extols the privilege of sacrifice and faith in “a brighter coming day” beginning with his recounting of his Hebrew mother’s stories of selflessness, which in turn tutors Harper’s audience. Specifically, he tells Charmian that in spite of the “present pain” of slavery, Jochebed “would lead us through / The distant past: the past, hollowed by deeds / of holy faith and lofty sacrifice” (13). Jochebed tells Moses the story of Abraham, who is willing to sacrifice his son as a symbol of faith, “a burnt offering upon Moriah’s mount” to God. Harper’s retelling focuses not so much on the terror of the impending sacrifice itself in these lines, although she describes “the uplifted knife” that glittered in the morning / Sun, an enjambed line whose homonymic suggestion of morning / mourning and Sun / Son (of God) is reminiscent of the African helio-theism of Wheatley also suggested in the flickering sky of *Ogé*. Her primary emphasis is, instead, on the reward that comes after sacrifice, characterized in a series of metaphors and biblical tropes including “the music of a thousand / Harps,” “peace / Beneath . . . vines and palms” and perhaps most strikingly for her post-Civil War audience, broken chains and “a great Deliverance” (11), a story Harper’s newly emancipat-

ed people would recognize as their own, and also, perhaps, a meta-comment on Harper's ambitious long poem itself, "the music of a thousand / Harps."

The idea of sacrifice and political struggle in the quest for home is further explored in the second stanza of the poem, where the character Charmian voices the belief systems of oligarchy and the stain of racial superiority, in some ways gendered, so that Harper might critique it. Moses' adoptive mother is blind to the needs of the people oppressed by her monarchy. The poem employs anaphora to express this ruling-class bewilderment with the thrice repeated "What . . .?" and mesodiplosis, the repetition of word in the middle of the sentence with the question "why . . .?". Moses' adoptive mother reveres power and comfort and is therefore dismayed by her son's impulse to "seek . . . paths of labor" with the enslaved Hebrews. She highlights the magnitude of Moses' sacrifice with the repetition of what he is giving up: being a king. King here is both a plural noun, perhaps a statement of the transracial gift of noble lineage Moses is abandoning, and an adjective, kingly, the instantiation of power and sovereignty adorned by "the crown of Egypt on his brow, / the sacred Leopard skin"(12) of her father the Pharaoh. The princess considers her son's renunciation of the Egyptian empire a "chimera." Harper's use of this word is twofold. It amplifies the Egyptian elites' lack of moral imagination through its questioning and delegitimization of Moses' choice to join his Hebrew family (by questioning his mental faculties), while at the same time its use ties Harper's poem to the classical epic tradition of Homer's *Iliad*, the first instance of the word in literature. Princess Charmian's response to Moses' rejection of his aristocratic life—as much a result of the maternal suffering and shock as elite consensus, throws Moses' heroism—his activism—into sharp relief, in part because her questions reveal an inability to understand her son's choice. The poem describes Charmian as a woman who "had known life only / By its brightness" (12),—a criticism Harper had made elsewhere

about white American women—but it does not, however, demonize her.<sup>83</sup> Her depiction of this white female figure is more subtle, and from the very first lines of the poem, Charmian is presented in sympathetic terms. In another example of “rightly doing,” Moses praises this soon to be daughter of his political opposition as “gracious,” good and “generous,” a consonantal alliteration that reaffirms her fundamental decency. The poem highlights the munificence of Charmian’s own sacrifice, that she risks her standing in the court by saving Moses in the face of her father’s decree to ethnically cleanse all male infant Hebrews, a tale told in Charmian’s first-person account. Harper subtly counters Charmian’s depiction of her own sacrifice, however, by the poem’s use of the word “gracious,” from the Hebrew root “chanan,” connoting a type of kindness bestowed to inferiors,<sup>84</sup> an attitude on display in Chairman’s descriptions of the Hebrew people.<sup>85</sup> Harper places Jochebed in the breach between Charmian’s act of graciousness to Moses and her supremacist attitude towards his people when the undercover Jochebed, identified specifically by her “Hebrew race,” appears as a wet nurse to feed Moses. In this moment, Harper seems to suggest the primacy of black women and black motherhood in the transmission of a black liberatory ethos. At Jochebed’s breast, we are told, Moses “nestled . . . like one at home” (7). Moses is not home yet though, a deferral implied in the simile “like at home.” Nevertheless, at his mother’s breast the seed for the journey home is transmitted through story telling and milk (a foreshadowing of the Promised Land) pointing to home as a place of external and internal “peaceful security.”

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<sup>83</sup> Foster, *Written by Herself*, 135-137.

<sup>84</sup> "gracious, adj. and adv." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2018. Web. 25 April 2018.

<sup>85</sup> Alice Rutkowski’s “Leaving the God Mother,” argues that Harper’s poem challenges white women as represented by abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. For Rutkowski, *Moses*, and the poem that accompanies it, are aesthetic vehicles for ridding Reconstruction-era activism of white female maternalism lingering after emancipation, an attitude visible in Moses’ adoptive mother Charmian.

*Moses*, like Wheatley's "Goliath of Gath" and Vashon's *Vincent Ogé*, embraces and explores physical confrontation as a justifiable means of liberation, but it is more interested in giving voice to the pent up rage and frustration of enslaved people than in the act of violence itself. In Harper's long poem, warfare would have had special resonance because of the recent Civil War and the Federal troops sent to the South to protect the recently freed slaves from the violence Du Bois details in *Black Reconstruction*. Harper recurs to the violence of Wheatley's earlier poem in a way Vashon's poem did not dare, perhaps because *Ogé* was written in the shadow of the Fugitive Slave Act, without the biblical sanctioning of a "white" and "legitimate" war to cloak its meaning within a martial zeitgeist. Because the story of Exodus is so ubiquitous, Harper uses poetic language to heighten, foreground and luxuriate in a biblical (black) insurrection, but also to bear witness to the physical and psychological tensions inside the black interior.

There are two moments of violence or physical confrontation and its context I would like to focus on in the poem, the first, in "Flight into Midian.—Chapter III" when Moses kills an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the second in "Chapter VI" when Egyptian soldiers sent to kill the Hebrews are drowned the Red Sea. Although the violence in "Flight" is more in dialogue with the violence of Wheatley's "Goliath," in that the poem permits representational black violence to erupt, it is what precedes and justifies the violence that is most interesting. Harper uses a metaphor of masked rage, reminiscent of "the unbaring of the blade," image so effectively employed in *Ogé*:

'Twas eventide,

And the laborers were wending their way

Unto their lowly huts. 'Twas a sad sight,—

.....

We bear our lot in hopeless pain, we've bent unto  
 Our burdens until our shoulders fit them,  
 And as slaves we crouch beneath our servitude  
 And toil. But there were men whose souls were cast  
 In firmer moulds, men with dark secretive eyes,  
 Which seems to say, today we bide our time,  
 And hide our path in every nerve, and only  
 Wait a fitting hour to strike the hands that press  
 Us down. (19)

This section of chapter three begins with the archaic phrase “’Twas eventide,” the moment from twilight until after sunset harkening back to *Ogé* as previously mentioned. The darkening of the sky is, as it was in *Ogé*, a metaphor for the Dunbaran mask, the “dark secretive eyes” that protects the body and psyche of the subjugated. Earlier on the same page the poem reminds the audience of the history of the slave past, its perpetual grind and brutality. The poem observes that during slavery “Day after day a cry of wrong / And anguish, some dark deed of woe and crime” (one of the many direct allusions to James M. Whitfield’s “America” (1854)) occurs, a crime the donned mask hides. These crimes are “burdens” of the physical body, synedochically presented as “shoulders” that carry the weight of “cruel tasks,” which force the slave to “crouch beneath . . . servitude.” This crouching to servitude is also psychological, however, an existential anguish, an internalization of Egyptian (white) supremacy that can lead to despair and longing for home that Langston Hughes, Melvin B. Tolson, and Gwendolyn Brooks would address in their long poems. But there are heroes—men of “firmer moulds”—who do not bow to enslavement psychologically,

men with free minds who, and Harper's language is gendered male here, "bide [their] time" and "Wait a fitting hour to strike the hands that press / Us down." The enjambed "strike the hands that press / Us" is telling. First, the poem speaks in plurals here; there is more than one hand or a group that oppresses our group or "Us." Secondly, the enjambment and the word "press" pushes against the Hebrew people, forcing "Us down" into slavery and down the page itself. Like Ogé, Moses is the representative heroic figure for the black man who will strike using his intellect. He not only strategizes as to the proper moment to strike, but he also earnestly negotiates with the Pharaoh who he repeatedly warns to "let / the oppressed go free" (23). Moses is not afraid of physical confrontation to complement his patience and intelligence in achieving freedom and home for his people though. Immediately following the lines that echo the blade unsheathed in *Ogé*, Moses comes upon officers of Pharaoh who "smite [...]with rough and cruel hand" an elderly slave. Moses responds by murdering with one "heavy blow" the abusive soldier, the narrator of the poem celebrating Hebrew life under "One tyrant less" (21). The poem describes the dead agent of the state in the most cursory terms, testifying only to his "whitening lips," the tension released from his now dead body, and his ignominious burial beneath the sand of Midian. Moses' act of murder is justified by the previous explanation of suppressed mental rage and anguish and the physical suffering of the Hebrew community. Moreover, the murder of the Egyptian soldier is a necessary moment because it not only justifies the Union Army's action in the recent Civil War, it also illustrates the possibility for future heroic physical confrontation with the oppressor in the journey from "the lowly huts" of Egypt to the Promised Land beyond Mt. Nebo where Moses will later be laid to rest.

Continuing Egyptian suffering at the hands of God and Moses is highlighted in the moment described above, in the famous "Let my people go" chapter, and when they are drowned in

the Red Sea as the Hebrews walk their way towards freedom, a death in water I believe symbolically alludes to the trauma of the Middle Passage. Following epic conventions, Harper details the army chasing the Egyptians using lofty descriptive language to describe the mightiness of slave-enriched empire. Pharaoh's armies pursue the Hebrews "With proud escutcheons blazoned to the sun." The chariots carrying the soldiers are "ivory, pearl and gold" with "banners floating / On the breeze" and "glittering" armor (33). The pomp and power of the Egyptian army is juxtaposed against the vulnerability of the Hebrews who stand in middle ground, between the army and the sea. Harper describes the Hebrew response to this fearful moment, the closest allegorical moment to the post-Civil War era for African Americans. She acknowledges their "fainting hearts," and "hopeless terror," their "agony," "dread," and finally "bitterness" and "anger" (33) that freedom would be so perilous. Yet, Harper tells her audience that what is most required at this moment of existential despair and fear is the leadership of a Moses and the need to fully commit to the claims of the gospel--that is, to have faith in salvation and deliverance provided by a loving God. With the Egyptian army at their back Moses twice says "Stand still" in what seems to be defeat and with his utterance compels the tribe to stand in complete and "earnest faith in God." To emphasize the importance of this idea, Harper once again uses the power of repetition, the "s" sound mirroring the "s" sound of the sea as waves lap against the shore of the Red Sea. The narrative voice of the poem imagines this moment of crystallized hope and faith as a gift that makes possible what follows: the vanquishing of the Egyptian empire and deliverance. Again, the violence against the Egyptians is embedded in the larger idea of the Hebrew quest for home, but like the murder of the single Egyptian soldier, Harper does not shy away from it. In the narration of the destruction of the pursuing Egyptian army, the poem mirrors the language of the Hebrews caught between the sea and the army. When the waves of the sea begin crashing



ported by water into freedom and a new subject identity, is the opposite of the historical passage across the Atlantic Ocean from a more “whole” or freer identity into one of bondage that Africans experienced during forced migration to the New World. The poem points to this connection when the “secret-loving sea” opens up at Moses’ behest to reveal an ocean floor “laid bare” with “coral caves and an “iris-tinted / Floor;” two examples of “God’s own wondrous masonry” (34). I can’t help but wonder if secret beneath the sea also suggests the hidden history of “black ivory,” the human bones of the Africans who perished during the transatlantic slave trade, a subject black poets including Robert Hayden, Amiri Baraka, and M. NourbeSe Philip made central in some of their long poems. Moses’ sister Miriam connects the walk through the sea to escape Egypt to the childhood event when “The Nile flowed by her; she was watching by the / stream / A little ark of rushes where her baby brother lay” (35), a moment she “rescued” her younger brother from slavery and death and, therefore, facilitated his transformation from a threatened Hebrew male child to a new life and freedom at the Egyptian court. “MIRIAM’S SONG,” a ballad that departs from Exodus and ends this chapter, is set off from the rest of the poem through its use of ballad form. It is also an opportunity for a woman’s voice to puncture the male biblical narrative while illustrating again, as it did when Jochebed passed down Hebrew history and culture, the heroism of the woman tribal storyteller as repository of folk knowledge. The ballad, described as an all female celebration of “music, dance and song” accompanied by “cymbals,” begins:

A wail in the palace, a wail in the hut

The midnight is shivering with dread

And Egypt wakes up with a shriek and a sob

To mourn for her first born and dead (35)

These lines are ambiguous although the homeward focus (palace and hut) remains constant even though the genre shift. We are told this is a song of jubilation, and if that is true, Miriam is merely celebrating what the poem calls “Triumphs . . . sweet and glad.” But the Hebrew poet appears to straddle her happiness with a need to analyze the current moment’s new freedom for her people, exemplifying the tutelage Harper insisted was most necessary for a vulnerable and homeless people after the war. She complicates class identity in Egypt in the opening line by associating both “the palace” and “the hut” with the Egyptian people. At the start of the narrative, “the hut” was the domain of the enslaved while “the palace” was reserved for the Egyptians elite (poor Egyptians absent the soldier class, were invisible). This could perhaps be a way of addressing black Americans about the complexity of race and class intersections in the post-Civil South, a warning about the competition that would emerge between competing, impoverished groups. At the same time these are lines of interracial unity, ostensibly a way of saying *we have all suffered*. Exodus begins with Miriam saving Moses from Pharaoh’s dictate to kill all Hebrew first born males. But now, just as the Hebrews have suffered, so must Egypt after the physical confrontation with God’s chosen people. In *Moses*, faith and its reward, we are told, is a gift not only to the Hebrew people in the past, but to their allegorical counterparts, African Americans in the 19th century, which is made clear when narrator says that God’s intervention in the lives of the faithful extends from Biblical time to “all the coming hours of time,” a transhistorical assertion which must have buoyed Harper’s Reconstruction audience in their attempts to build a homeland of the free after centuries of enslavement. *Moses*’ use of assimilationist poetics and the genre of the long poem is one contribution to the quest for home in the United States, an idea that it thematizes,

just as Vashon's *Vincent Ogé* did during the antebellum era. The final, central poem of this chapter, Albery Allson Whitman's *Twasinta's Seminoles, or, Rape of Florida* (1885), also appropriates conventional European forms in his long poem, and it too examines African American history, subjectivity and the quest for home.

#### EXILES, MAROONS & THE QUEST FOR HOME IN TWASINTA'S SEMINOLES

Albery Allson Whitman, once known as “Poet Laureate of the Negro Race,”<sup>86</sup> was born a slave in Munfordville, Kentucky in 1851. Like the other poets of this chapter, Albery Whitman writes his songs—the tales of his tribe—in the bolder notes of epic, but to an audience increasingly removed from the fetters of physical slavery. Whitman is a singular figure in the history of the African American long poem having written five surviving poems in the genre. In the influential *Drum Voices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry* (1976), Eugene B. Redmond calls Albery Whitman not only “A complex and brilliant poet” but also “the most important in the [nineteenth] century until Dunbar” (100). Other poetry scholars, including Benjamin Brawley in the early twentieth century and more recently Ivy. G. Wilson, agree with Redmond's appraisal although they would add Frances Ellen Watkins Harper to the small circle of important poets between Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar.<sup>87</sup> Whitman, like Harper and Vashon, dedicated his life to racial uplift, the quest to build a homeland of the free under the rhythms of exile, and like those earlier poets, Whitman's quest for home was as much a personal journey as it was tribal and political. When

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<sup>86</sup> See Joan Sherman's chapter on Whitman in *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century*, 114.

<sup>87</sup> Most critics, even Whitman's admirers, acknowledge that his verse is “technically weak and diffuse, marred by careless versification, burdened with overblown rhetoric and didactic digressions” as Joan Sherman has written (116). But other critics, including those who read Whitman's poetry after the Black Arts Movement, find much to ponder in the tension between Whitman's desire for assimilation in his politics and poetics and his seemingly willful (or unconscious) un-mastery of European narrative conventions.

Harper spoke of the homelessness and vulnerability of the free black population after the Civil War, she was speaking about African Americans like the teenaged Whitman, orphaned during slavery and journeying after its demise to make a new life for himself in an America teetering between the promise of Reconstruction and the increasingly violent backlash against it. Whitman worked with his hands in the Midwest until he secured the intellectual life he desired, first as a teacher in Ohio and Kentucky and then as a “general financial agent” of Wilberforce University under the leadership of Daniel Alexander Payne. His true calling, though, despite very little formal education, was poetry, specifically long narrative verse written on an epic grid.

Whitman’s life and publishing history spanned tumultuous moments in American (black) history. Although born in the shadow of the Fugitive Slave Act, the poet was on the cusp of adulthood and then a young man during Reconstruction. His first book of poems, published two years after the publication of Harper’s *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, was called *Essay on the Ten Plagues and Miscellaneous Poems*.<sup>88</sup> Despite naming Longfellow, Bryant, Byron and Spenser as his literary ancestors, and even without knowledge of the generic qualities of Whitman’s *Essay*, it is possible that Whitman’s foray into poetry, an interpretation of an episode in the biblical Exodus and therefore the themes of exile and homeward questing, may well have been inspired by Harper’s popular *Moses*. His next two long poems *Leelah Mislead* (1873), a poem about seduction and a woman’s fall inside the white upper class and *Not a Man, and Yet a Man, with Miscellaneous Poems* (1877), a one-hundred-and-ninety page epic quest for freedom through the journey of an “oc-toroon” Rodney, were composed during Reconstruction and show a concern with the intersections between of race, gender and human value in the United States. Whitman’s final two long poems, *The Rape of Florida* (1884), revised as *Twasinta’s Seminoles, Or, Rape of Florida* (1885), and *An*

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<sup>88</sup> See Ivy Wilson

*Idyl of the South: An Epic Poem in Two Parts* (1901), a poem promoting black-white reconciliation in ottava rima, were written during the post-Reconstruction era, known not only for its physical violence (including lynching) and legal segregation (*Plessy vs. Ferguson*) but for the spirited cultural and political responses to those attacks on black people. In this “nadir” of American history, black men voted in large numbers and politicians still ran for congress, black entrepreneurs built businesses, and African American educators founded still-existing institutions such as Spelman and Tuskegee. It is from this socio-political environment that Whitman composed *Twasinta’s Seminoles*, a poem that displays Whitman’s commitment to home building, black subjectivity, and history a set of conceptual anchors that begin with Wheatley and continues in the long poems of Vashon, Harper and Whitman.

*Twasinta’s Seminoles* is an epic quest for home preoccupied with black history and the psychological ramifications of that history, especially the heroic responses to slavery and its legacies. Like *Vincent Ogé* and *Moses*, home building is a political and martial project. Whitman’s poem unfolds against the backdrop of the Seminole Wars, a three-part conflict between the Seminoles, their mixed-race and black allies, known historically as black Seminoles, against the United States Army. Called both “Maroons” and “exiles” in the poem, the black Seminoles aided and often lead the fight against the United States Army from about 1817 to 1858, one of the longest wars in American history.<sup>89</sup> *Twasinta’s Seminoles* tells this story in an epic of 251 Spenserian stanzas. Spenserian stanzas are eight iambic pentameter lines and an alexandrine (twelve syllables that follows an ababbcbcc rhyme scheme), a formal choice Whitman considered indexical to both

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<sup>89</sup> Kenneth Porter, *The Black Seminoles*, 106.

racial progress and poetic mastery.<sup>90</sup> Whitman's use of the Spenserian stanza serves the same ideological function it does in Vashon's poem, that is, it is a form linked to the critique European (and white American) slavery and the Christianity that supported it. The poem loosely centers around Atlassa, a Seminole hero, Ewald, the mixed-race heroine and Atlassa's lover, and Palmecho, the Seminole chief. The story has the plot devices of a heroic tale including a love sub-plot, reversals, kidnappings and much derring do. *Twasinta's Seminoles* begins with the disruption of an edenic natural world marred by the invasion of white men who want to steal Seminole land in Florida, an existential threat to the black Seminole maroon community whose freedom is at risk; it ends with the Seminole community finding earned respect, peace and home outside of America, across the southern border in Mexico, a symbolic landscape that has much in common with Vashon's Haiti and Moses' final resting place in Harper's long poem. My brief interpretation of the poem will focus on the poem intersections with epic discourse, which it opens up to black feeling and thought and Whitman's characterization of black subjectivity, in slavery and through his depiction of the transformation from slave to black fugitive and later maroon (the self liberated black Seminole). The second is the poem's repeated plot disruptions, paroxysms of black political desire where an "apocalypse of sentiment" overwhelms the narrative. Although Whitman names Atlassa is the primary hero of the poem, his centrality is often displaced by the narrative voice—a co-hero and home building voice—that demands freedom and equality for black Americans. I begin with a section of *Twasinta's Seminoles*' "Preface," and its "Invocation" because they express Whitman's ideas on poetry and politics a set the tone and tensions for the poem as a whole:

I am a colored man, and as such, I accept the situation,

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<sup>90</sup> On writing in Spenserian stanza's Whitman says, "Finally: in essaying the 'stately verse,' *mastered by only* Spenser, Byron, and a few other great poets, I may seem to have 'rushed in where angels fear to tread.' To this view of the matter, I will say by way of defense: some one of my race is sure to do everything that any one else has ever done, and as none of my race has ever executed a poem in the 'stately verse,' *I simply venture in*" (10).

and enter the lists with pointed lance. I disdain  
to whine over my ‘previous condition.’ I despise the  
doctrine of the *slave’s allowance*. Petition and com-  
plaint are the language of imbecility and cowardice —  
the evidences of that puerile fear which distinguishes  
the soul. The time has come when all ‘Uncle Toms’  
and ‘Topsies’ ought to die. *Goody goodness* is a sort  
of man worship : ignorance is its inspiration, fear its  
ministering spirit, and beggary its inheritance. Genius,  
in a right good soul, is the highest impress of the Divine  
Image on clay. It alone can have the respect of God  
and man. (8)

Twenty years after emancipation, Whitman’s “Preface” turns the sheathed blade of Vashon and Harper into a pointed lance, a metaphor for the poet’s art and his “manly” stance towards a world of both possibility and hostility. This marks a meaningful, if only slight shift, for the nineteenth-century black long poem because the poet maintains its function as a vehicle for home building, while also asserting the genre as an expression of artistic “Genius,” a recursion to Wheatley’s proclamation that she would “snatch a laurel” from Homer and Virgil. That Whitman employs the word genius in the introduction of *Twasinta’s Seminoles*, a word not included in the poem’s first edition,<sup>91</sup> speaks to his sense of the poem as both an exemplary work of art as

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<sup>91</sup> Both versions of the “Preface” are invested in a larger home-building project. The first “Preface” focuses on institution building, specifically the black college Wilberforce and its founder Daniel Payne. The second “Preface” turns to a different dimension of home building—first, a revolution of the interior or psychological landscape of black people, the second a renewed call for black “Genius”—a poetic excellence that presages arguments against “Goody goodness” that Langston Hughes and other writers would champion during the Harlem Renaissance.

well as a tool for racial uplift. The poet's racial consciousness is on display in the poem as well, especially in its attack on prior, influential representations of blackness in literature, which he presumably will subvert. Whitman challenges the docility of Harriet Beecher Stowe's popular characters Uncle Tom and Topsy, a strain of Stowe criticism that would have been familiar to black Whitman's audience in the 1880s, which suggests a "type"<sup>92</sup> in both the literary and extra-literary sense. The poet seeks to purge these "Toms" from the the black tribe, a definition of heroism by negation. Whitman's rhetoric is an attempt to rid black America of taint of the slave past. He praises it as "Adversity," a "school of heroism" (8) but seems most interested in how the institution intersects with or suppresses black masculinity. The poet attempts to end its lingering power by discharging through language what must be jettisoned: petition, complaint, cowardice, and beggary. At the same time, Whitman is foreshadowing the model of heroism his characters will exhibit in *Twasinta's Seminoles; Or, Rape of Florida*.

The muse of *Vincent Ogé* is the flickering sky at sunset, and in *Moses*, the idea of sacrifice; in *Twasinta's Seminoles* the muse is William Cullen Bryant, who represents "robust manliness," the exploration of the natural world, and an "apocalypse"<sup>93</sup> of sentiment," attributes invoked by the poet to inspire him to paint in verse an American history "in colors true" both "right or wrong,"<sup>94</sup> that might in turn inspire and embolden his "sable" tribe during the 1880s. In the first

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<sup>92</sup> Note that Whitman pluralizes Stowe's characters from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into stock types of "good" black people, an idea Whitman rejects. The attack on the "Topsies," for example, echoes Harper's complex rendering of Egypt, which is to say, it is way of doubling down on America as a homeland since Topsy is a figure associated with white-sponsored black emigration back to Africa (Liberia).

<sup>93</sup> Based upon the poem, I take the word apocalypse to mean, from the Greek, an uncovering or revelation of feelings.

<sup>94</sup> Part of the true telling of American history is telling the truth about Native American people, fellow people of color. Whitman attempts to change the image of Native Americans from William Cullen Bryant's preponderance of "darkness, decay . . . death" and ultimately, extinction, to a people who embody valor, racial inclusiveness who create a commonwealth of freedom. Whitman, however, cannot escape the overdetermined tropes of Native Americans already inscribed in the American long poem from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's popular *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), a poem he admired and appropriated into his own work. He is, nevertheless, embracing a sense of shared humanity.

five cantos of Spenserian stanzas, including the invocation of Bryant, the poem introduces “that too soon forgotten race / That flourished once, but long has been obscure,” (12) the Seminoles, their “proud Maroon” friends, and the landscape where they work in harmony, the “wild meadows stretched in bloom-sweet sheen” of Spanish Florida. The narrator is suggesting that his will be a song of revelation, a story in verse to reveal what has been hidden in American history, namely a time when white men intruded upon a once “delightful valley of the isle / . . . / Which roused the Seminole and fierce exile / To more than savage daring” due to “wrong’s leagued numbers” (13). This introduction and summary, a martial home-building exercise, expands traditional epic invocation (with echoes of the biblical Garden of Eden), because it highlights black subjectivity and cross-cultural alliance above a singular heroic and his exploits. Whitman follows the invocation with an image of a slave, not yet fugitive or Maroon, an image necessary to establish the internal resiliency of the black people in America:

The negro slave by Swanee river sang ;  
 Well-pleased he listened to his echoes ringing ;  
 For in his heart a secret comfort sprang ;  
 When nature seemed to join his mournful singing,  
 To mem’ry’s cherished objects fondly clinging;  
 His bosom felt the sunset’s patient glow,  
 And spirit whispers into weird life springing,  
 Allured to worlds he trusted yet to know,  
 And lightened for awhile life’s burden here below. (13)

This “negro slave” is the ideal Romantic poet whose memories are recollected in a tranquil, natural world. The language of the stanza also sounds much like Whitman’s description of his life as a slave in Kentucky, a non-threatening, yet “dignified” message for audiences, both black and white, in the post-Reconstruction era that simultaneously removes the shame associated with slavery for African American readers. The song sung by the river is aesthetically pleasing because, in part, its truth is reflected in nature itself. The stanza is striking in its use of interspersed past and present participle verbs where an immediacy is accessed through ringing / singing / clinging and springing, while at the same time a historical sense, a history of the black subject in slavery, is evoked through the use of past tense verbs. The song is a “mournful” one, sung at sunset, an outward expression of his enslavement, but there is also hope, a strange whispering of a brighter coming day. The sunset of Vashon’s poem and Harper’s *Moses* may be inter-texts here, and Harper’s poem seems to inform the description of the physical home as an illustration of slave-classed subjectivity which contributes the masked suffering of the weary:

The drowsy dawn of many a low-built shed,  
 Beheld his kindred driven too their task ;  
 Late evening saw then turn with weary tree  
 And painful faces back ; and dost thou ask  
 How sang these bondsmen ? how their suff’rings mask ?  
 Song is the soul of sympathy devine,  
 And hath an inner ray where hope may bask ;  
 Song turns he poorest waters into wine,  
 Illumines exile hearts and makes their faces shine (13)

The stanza above connects exile, suffering and hope as intrinsic components of black subjectivity during slavery. The slave's song is one of vernacular expression, translated by the narrator into Spenserian verse, an idea Whitman's "Preface" implies when he tells readers that as a slave he "began to *try* sayings of poetry before [he] knew what writing was" (10). Whitman's use of the word "exile" is key in this passage, and he seems to suggest that even when illumined by a divinely-inspired hope, exile remains imprinted on the heart (a word signifying both body and soul) of America's bondsmen. The implication is that the only solution for this existential condition is to seek freedom and home, for the narrative immediately pushes the slave into flight after his song is overheard by "a gang / Of hounds and men," a moment that evokes the Fugitive Slave Act, which forces the slave to hide, pause, and reflect on the "deep pangs of his wounded spirit" (14). This representative moment of one of Whitman's gifts, the revelation of the interior, psychological and spiritual hurt of an America slave within epic discourse, by a poet who was once enslaved himself. Hearing a call from the heavens above to seek freedom sparks the slave's movement. There is an internal shift taking place, a metamorphosis from slave to fugitive hero which will lead later to "Maroon." The poem marks this new independence in the language of heroic journey:

"Fly and be free ! A whisper come from heaven,  
 "Thy cries are heard ! " the bondman's up and gone !"  
 To grasp the dearest boon to mortals given,  
 He flies frantic, unaided and alone.  
 to him the red man's dwellings are unknown ;  
 But he can crave the freedom of his race,  
 Can find his harvests in the desert sown,

And in the cypress forest's dark embrace  
 A pathway to his habitations safely trace (14)

The epic quest is now begun as the unnamed slave answers the supernatural call to adventure. There is no refusal of the call because his trials as a slave—"Adversity"—have already begun to prepare him for many of the tribulations he will encounter. The quest is to secure the freedom possessed by the "red man," but note that this freedom is linked to the location of American Indian "dwellings," still unknown. That is why the fugitive pathway is toward Native American "habitations." Home and freedom are the fugitive's boon. The change in subjectivity, from slave to fugitive, occurs after the slave escapes "the savage hounds" when "some kind Seminole shall guide" the fugitive and protect him from the still active bounty hunters and their dogs. The subject position of this black man truly changes though when the fugitive, now "in a flow'ry home, shall be the red man's guest (15), becomes a Maroon and black Seminole. The poem stresses that metamorphoses is possible when black men are allowed to be powerful actors in the world—Maroons whose identity is born of self liberation and community—just as in *Vincent Ogé*, where the heroism expresses was communal in orientation. The Seminole Indians model a communal ethos or *communitas*, standing together with black folk outside of white America:

The poorest negro coming to their shore  
 To them was brother — their own flesh and blood, —  
 They sought his wretched manhood to restore, —  
 They found his hidings in the swampy wood,  
 And brought him forth — in arms before him stood,—  
 The citizens of God and sovran earth, —  
 They shot straight forward looks with flame imbued,

Till in him manhood sprang, a noble birth,  
 And warrior-armed he rose to all manhood's worth (22)

This stanza maps a moment in the poem's homeward journey that salves some of the wounds of exile. It begins with "The poorest negro," an example of "wretched manhood," and ends with a restored warrior, now a proud Maroon. There is much to consider here, including class, masculinity, the bonds of family, and the offer of home that the Seminole Indians extend to African Americans. Although Whitman insists in his "Preface" that the adversity of slavery cannot diminish manhood, these lines undercut the rugged, individualist narrative that introduces the poem, especially since the narrator of the poem acknowledges a need for restoration. The poem mirrors *Moses* and Harper's essay on black homelessness and the quest it necessitates as well. The stanza's emphasis on nobility, as in *Moses*, is turned on its head, anchoring it in character and communal striving and giving, instead of monetary "worth." The Seminole Indians are a model of heroism for the dispossessed African American, standing as they are on their own land, "citizens of God and sovran earth." These words are haunted by exile, however, with the African American loss of a homeland and the history that followed. Seminole land, before the army repeatedly arrives to take it, fills that chasm,<sup>95</sup> but Whitman's audience knows that the Seminole Indians will also have their land, their sovereignty, expropriated, and their very bodies "removed" from various "lands" by the United States Army too, a foreshadowing of what will come and a reminder of what black Seminoles or their ancestors have already experienced. The poignancy of this passage is further supported by the poetic devices employed to intensify the themes of the stanza. The rhyme pattern follows the Spenserian formula with the slant rhyme of the word "im-

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<sup>95</sup> In *The Black Seminoles* Kenneth Porter reports that Africans and their descendants often lived independently and sovereign in the liminal territory between the white world and the larger Seminole tribe. They paid tribute in the crops produced by farming the land, 5-7.

bued” standing outside of the “b” rhymes, blood / wood / stood. There is a ceremonial quality to the Seminole-led process of masculinization, a baptism and rebirth for the black man now initiated into a new warrior culture and home amongst the Seminoles. The beginning of each line begins with the consonant “t” or the word “And.” The lines starting with “And” symbolize addition, of joining of a new community and new subject position while the consonant “t” is dominated by the fricative “th” sound, which is produced from air being pushed through a contracted passage connoting rebirth. On the other hand, the “th” sound is anaphoric, visible in the thrice repeated “They,” which asserts and remembers the Seminole contribution to the long struggle for home building in America. The prominent dashes seem like arms reaching out to new brothers, further supporting the notion that the Seminoles are welcoming “their own flesh and blood.”

There is moment in the poem, primarily in Canto II, when the narrative flow and generic conventions must stretch to allow for narrator’s frustrations and urgency, a new black voice of Post-Reconstruction, to express its desire for true at-homeness in America. Coming early in the poem, it seems as if he needs to get this off his chest. Consider these lines where the narrator shows an “apocalypse of feeling.” The following example reveals the narrator’s hope that masterful art can change the world: “Is manhood less because man’s face is black? / Let thunders of the loosened seals reply! / . . . / Genius ride forth! thou gift and torch of heav’n! / . . . / The trampled hordes of caste before thee shall be driv’n! (28). At times he attempts to persuade the audience of his fundamental Americanness, moments where the narrator puts in poetic language what Whitman has already articulated in poem’s “Preface.” *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) has left its imprint in these iambic lines. The narrator says nonchalantly, “I never a slave—a robber took / My substance—What of that? The law my rights—And that? I still was free and had my book—All nature” (34) he says, exuding the American cool descended from the

literary picaro. In this same vein, the narrator yearns to prove his democratic bona fides as a modern man who embraces new truths and new sensations and is as American as Benjamin Franklin. “The world cares little whose grand sires were kings,” he says, continuing, “I’d rather be a squatter on the plains / And know that I possessed industry, pluck and brains (31). The narrator holds special disdain for the Toms and the Topsies. He excoriates those who “would beg / . . . / Let him be cursed ! a self-manacled slave ! He’s a pollution to the mind’s domain — / A moral garbage scattered on the plain —” (32). Finally, the narrator abhors racism, which he declares in the starkest of terms, but within a perfectly metronomic Spenserian stanza:

I envy not the man whose want of brains  
 Supplies a roost for race-hate’s filthy brood !  
 The little eminence his soul attains  
 Is more the pity when ’tis understood,  
 That he, perhaps, has done the best he could !  
 Tread not upon him just to see his squirm !  
 Pity, forsooth ! to crawl is his best good  
 And tis his natural way, I do affirm ;  
 So let him crawl his fill, he is a harmless worm !

*Twasinta’s Seminoles* is an important poem, as a historical artifact for those interested in the nineteenth century, American slavery, and the Post-Reconstruction era or the literary history of the black long poem. Whitman was ahead of his time in highlighting black Maroon culture, a historical formation only now receiving any analysis in an academy which has predominantly viewed it through the lens of Caribbean and South American responses to slavery. His poem enters the American long poem tradition and refigures it by placing the history and heroism of people of

color, specifically the Seminoles, Indian and black, in political and martial coalition against the American government, at the center of his long narrative poem. Whitman explores the Sisyphean struggle for an “in-fact homeland of the free,” at times gentile and assimilationist, strident and militant, and always responding in verse to the political needs of his complex era.

In 1901 Alberry Allson Whitman published his final long poem, the epic *Idyl of the South*, a tragedy about a mixed-race Octoroon. Although the poem was published in the twentieth century, it is still a nineteenth-century poem that follows the same stanzaic formulas, sound patterns and Romantic themes of *Not a Man, and Yet a Man* (1877), *Twasinta's Seminoles* and Whitman's other long poems. A few years later, Robert E. Ford published *Brown Chapel: A Story in Verse* (1905), a 307-page book-length poem about the A. M. E. church Reverend Ford pastored for five years on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Canto XI, “The Run-Away,” a typical stanza begins, “Twas Monday afternoon when Stone / in road-cart with the Rev. Small / Drove off to town, after they's shown / Themselves in making many a call” (130). Although Ford's poem is now a footnote in literary history, known primarily for its length, it should be recognized for its efforts to bring everyday black (American) speech, as in the phrase “making many a call,” into the African-American long poem. Ford's poem, nevertheless, remained wedded anachronistic words like “Twas,” the kind of borrowed discourse that remained a dominant force in black long poems until the Harlem Renaissance, when Jean Toomer and James Weldon Johnson would open up the genre to black vernacular culture.

CHAPTER 3 / POST-WORLD WAR II BLACK LONG POEMS: ROBERT HAYDEN'S "MIDDLE PASSAGE" & GWENDOLYN BROOKS' *ANNIE ALLEN*

Before the turn to Afro-Modernism of the mid-century black long poem, Jean Toomer and James Weldon Johnson revolutionized black speech and incorporated black vernacular culture into the genre. In this chapter, I will survey three texts from these writers as a prologue to my discussion of the focal texts under consideration, Hayden's "Middle Passage" and Brooks' *Annie Allen*. Langston Hughes called Jean Toomer's experimental *Cane* (1923) "the finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of Robeson, it is truly racial" in his 1926 Harlem Renaissance essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." Hughes was one of many admirers of the poem when it was published. *Cane* has been called a novel or short story cycle and more recently, according to Wesley Beal, "a network of forms."<sup>96</sup> I begin this chapter with *Cane* because it influenced poets such as Hughes and Amiri Baraka, leaving an imprint on the long poems these long poem practitioners and many others in the genre; indeed, Baraka's *Wise Guys* itself might be called "network of forms." Yet *Cane* is not a long poem although it weaves poems into its text and its prose is at times lyrical. Toomer's poem resembles Harper's *Moses* and Baraka's long poem because it incorporates dramatic form, verse, and prose. Its place in the history of the black long poem, then, is as an inheritor of Harper's hybridity. Because it rejects archaic diction of the past, it is a model of modernist generic restlessness pointing toward the future. *Cane* opened up the possibility of incorporating black vernacular culture into a hybrid poetic text. The parataxis later employed in black long poems, and evident in *Cane*, would not fully emerge until

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<sup>96</sup> See "Network Form as Network Politics" in *Networks of Modernism: Reorganizing American Narrative*, p. 55.

Hayden's post-World War II long poem "Middle Passage," a poem recognized as an important precursor of black poetry in the mid-twentieth century to the contemporary era. *Cane* is not the only text to mark a significant turn from the poetics of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927), a book-length suite, intervened into the problem of bringing black voice into a longer verse forms. Johnson found a way to mediate between the voice beholden to "the courtly muses of Europe" or the genteel stylings of Longfellow and Whittier, and the mostly ineffectual attempts to capture black voice through the equally metrical, unfailingly rhymed, and poorly spelled dialect poetry. Here is a stanza from James E. McGirt's "Avenging the Maine" (1901) at the turn of the century:

Sing , O Muse! the avenging of the Maine,  
 The direful woes, the fate of Spain.  
 A heinous deed t' our ship they wrought,  
 Untimely death t' our crew they brought. (11)

On the opposite side of the spectrum was dialect verse, which Johnson grappled with as he experimented with folk material and voice. Here is his "YOUS SWEET TO YO MAMMY / JES THE SAME / (Lullaby),"<sup>97</sup> first published in 1917:

She yo' eyes, ma little pickaninny, go yo sleep  
 Mammy's watchin' by you all de while;  
 Daddy is a-wukin' down in de cotton fiel',  
 Wukin' fu' his aitle honey child. (70)

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<sup>97</sup> Johnson's dialect verse is included in *Fifty Years & Other Poems*.

Compare “YOUS SWEET TO YOU MAMMY” to “LET MY PEOPLE GO,” from *God’s Trombones*, a return to Harper’s *Moses*:

And God said to Moses:  
 I’ve seen the awful suffering  
 Of my people down in Egypt  
 I’ve watched their hard oppressors,  
 Their overseers and drivers;  
 The groans of my people have filled my ears  
 And I can’t stand it no longer;  
 So I’m coming down to deliver them (47-48)

This is a plain-spoken God, “I’ve seen the awful suffering,” who uses double negatives “And I can’t stand it no longer,” and intervenes into slavery for his “people” against the “oppressors.” The transformation of Johnson’s verse in ten years is remarkable, and his experimental poem influenced black long poems that followed by presenting a model for direct speech in a recognizable black voice without orthographic distortion.

In her 2011 Hopwood lecture Elizabeth Alexander calls Toomer’s *The Blue Meridian* (1936), an epic. Toomer’s long poem does not follow epic conventions nor does it nod to them; instead, it is a meditative sequence that seeks oneness and harmony with the universe. Home in this poem is an America that is “spiritualized by each new American.”<sup>98</sup> Toomer’s speaker wants to give birth to “a new people / Born of elevated rock and lifted branches, Called Americans.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> “Blue Meridian,” in *The Collected Poems of Jean Toomer*, p. 50.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

The poem's quest is to free human beings from the weight of history, to critique and transcend the racial order into a new "blue or purple" race.<sup>100</sup>

Robert Hayden also expressed discomfort with racial labeling. Like Toomer he wrote one of the most important black texts of the twentieth century, in Hayden's case a black long poem. As a younger poet Hayden set out to write a "black-skinned epic, epic with the long black spear,"<sup>101</sup> a linear narrative project he later abandoned but evolved into a set of poems including "Middle Passage." Following the arc of the classical epic, specifically the Homeric narrative of nostos, Hayden's poem begins with the historic black exile from which it takes its name, includes a heroic descent into a symbolic hell or underworld, and details challenges at sea. By the end of the quest, the hero returns home. Hayden's 1945 poem, first published in Du Bois' journal *Phylon* and later revised and republished in *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962) is part of a corpus of black long poems written in the post-World War II period that announced a major shift in the genre from its "long foreshadowing" in the eighteenth century and the innovative modernist poetry created during the New Negro Renaissance.

at midcentury, then, inherited the innovations of the Modernist long poem and new ways to imagine vernacular culture within Modernist practice. Hayden's "Middle Passage" (1945), Gwendolyn Brooks' *Annie Allen* (1949), Langston Hughes' *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), and Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1954), explored exile rhythm and existential tension, but unlike their verse predecessors, there were models of black expression and new poetic techniques available in their quests to make America an "in-fact homeland of the free" and to revitalize re-

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> The full quote from Stephen Vincent Benet's fifteen-thousand line *John Brown's Body* is as follows: "Oh, black-skinned epic, epic with the black spear, / I cannot sing you, having too white a heart, / And yet, some day, a poet will rise to sing you. Hayden began an epic poem in response to the lines above to tell the truth and challenge the misperceptions about black history called at first *The Black Spear* and later *Fire Image*."

curing themes. To examine the black long poem after World War II, my primary focal texts are Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage," and Gwendolyn Brooks' *Annie Allen*, post-World War II long poems<sup>102</sup> that incorporate Modernist techniques, and with subtlety, African American vernacular culture. This careful handling of vernacular material says much about the mainstream literary culture of the forties, which was dominated by the biases of the New Critical establishment, some of which were racial in nature. My aim in this chapter is to highlight Hayden and Brooks' pioneering, intertextual work, which was experimental when published, in a study on black long poems for the first time and to situate their texts within that tradition. Furthermore, I posit that "Middle Passage" and *Annie Allen* are antecedents to Black Arts poetry, not in their poetics, but in their dedication to black freedom.

My discussion of black long poems at midcentury will begin with an examination of the first version of Hayden's "Middle Passage," the earliest of postwar modernist black long poems, which is now virtually unread. The poem is a training ground for black male heroism, a rite of passage. Although once available to postwar audiences, this 1945 poem was subsequently replaced by its still widely-anthologized 1962 revision. Carl Plasa, the most recent critic to debate the merits of the *Phylon* version of "Middle Passage," asserts that the poem's eleven-line elegy for Africa, removed after the *Phylon* version of the poem, is one compelling reason to return to the original, in part because it introduces readers to new material. Additionally, Plasa believes that this "less polished" version presents "equally compelling form."<sup>103</sup> Vera Kutzinski, on the other hand, finds the inclusion of epic conventions in the first poem, including a reference to Homer,

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<sup>102</sup> I consider "Middle Passage" to be a long poem, even though its *Phylon* version is only 311 lines, shorter than "The Waste Land." My conclusion is based on its epic ambition and its engagement with the modernist twentieth century long poem.

<sup>103</sup> "Doing the Slave Trade in Different Voices: Poetics and Politics in Hayden's First "Middle Passage," 557.

and the excision of these elements from later versions of the poem, as reasons to consider both revisions of “Middle Passage.”<sup>104</sup> A key reason not to lose the first version concerns the poet-narrator’s identification with the African diaspora illustrated by the poem’s communal lyric voice. This “us” and “we,” who mourn black existential suffering and African participation in the transatlantic slave trade is a voice adapted in *Annie Allen*, but it is removed from the later, more “objective” iterations of Middle Passage. Jon Woodson, writing about the place of “Middle Passage” in literary history emphasizes Hayden’s relation to literary modernism: “Had Hayden refused to accommodate the demands of high modernist practice, African American poetry would have remained aesthetically archaic, removed from contemporary poetry discourse, and a further demonstration that blacks were culturally retrograde.” Although I would challenge Woodson’s assertion that Hayden’s achievement spared African Americans from white supremacist notions of black cultural inferiority, an idea that still has currency, both he and Brooks understood that mastering Modernist techniques was an aesthetic counterpart to the political fight for racial equality. I am interested in how Hayden’s ground-breaking long poem enters the fray political? and how Brooks’ *Annie Allen* responds to a similar set of cultural and political concerns, in part through her engagement with the *Phylon* version of “Middle Passage.” To explore this intertextual exchange, I first examine elements of Hayden’s poem—its motifs, central image, construction of heroism, and narrative voice—and then I consider how *Annie Allen* grapples with, adapts and at times transforms these predominantly masculinist elements of his epic.

Hayden’s is a cinematic poem, and although short in length, is “potent-important” in the way that places it in conversation with the epic tradition. Its hero Cinquez is singular because he returns to his home in Africa, a black nostos which is precipitated by strategic planning and a

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<sup>104</sup> “Changing Permanences: Historical and Literary Revisionism in Robert Hayden’s “Middle Passage,” 181.

successful rebellion against his putative enslavers. *Annie Allen*, on the other hand, is a book-length long poem with an epic poem at its core. Its focus is on one woman's life within one community in Chicago as representative of America's black people; Annie's heroism is almost completely internal with more of an emphasis on the psychological dimensions of black female experience, but it also explores the influence of violence and racism on black men. Changing the voice of the epic poet-narrator into the voice of the wise mother and griot, Brooks also transforms the heroic mode itself, which Hayden embraces, from its moorings in violence and masculinity into a heroism rooted in black female experience. Hayden's dominant mode of narration assembles historical voices dominated by white men, especially court depositions and letters, and the poet-narrator himself, who at times appears to merge with Cinquez. Prayers, allusions, the names of slave ships, and the voices of the dead<sup>6</sup> also comprise the poem's voices. Hayden uses these voices, combined with a mythic construction of an African-male hero to write a poem about the transatlantic slave trade and heroism. In contrast Brooks' provides on-the-ground reportage of a young black woman within a community, underpinned by an ancient, female-centered myth. This centering on black female subjectivity, the dive into her existential consciousness, differs sharply from the masculinity presented in Hayden's poem, Tolson's *Libretto* and Hughes' *Montage* at mid-century. Yet, interestingly, there is a silent queen in the original "Middle Passage" who is jettisoned in the poem's revisions. Where Hayden replicates the masculinist myths undergirding the most influential classical epics, Brooks turns to the Demeter and Persephone myth, particularly to Ovid's "counter-epic" version from *Metamorphoses*, to authorize her quest, to forge a connection between her poem and Phillis Wheatley's revisionary mythmaking in her retelling of Ovid's "Niobe in Distress," and to give a voice to black women in the black long poem at midcentury.

“MIDDLE PASSAGE”: BLACK MODERNISM IN THE HEROIC MODE

Hayden began “Middle Passage” at a time when the story of the *Amistad* had all but disappeared from American historiography, and his poem not only brought contemporary Anglo-Modernism into black poetry, influencing his contemporaries, but it modeled scholarly and archival-poetic interest in the historical Middle Passage. Hayden’s research and archival work, in fact, anticipated renewed interest in the event two decades before the Freedom and Black Power Movements made it a centerpiece of their historical recovery work.<sup>105</sup> The story that Hayden learned about was as follows: Cinqué and his followers overthrew the *Amistad*, a schooner that attempted to transport a predominantly Mende group of people, initially illegally procured from a “slave-trading ‘factory’ on the Gallinas Coast” of Sierra Leone, from Havana to plantations in Puerto Principe Cuba.<sup>106</sup> After the insurrection, and sparing two crew members, Cinqué and his fellow West Africans demanded to be returned to Sierra Leone, only to be fooled when at night the remaining white crew steered them instead to the coast of Long Island.<sup>107</sup> Eventually, they ended up in a Connecticut prison for the murder of the *Amistad* crew, and the Spanish government demanded they be returned to Cuba as slaves. Their case was persuasively argued by John Quincy Adams before the Supreme Court, which found the Mende not guilty because they were captured after the international slave trade was made illegal, and so were considered legally free. The verdict allowed those who survived to return to Sierra Leone.

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<sup>105</sup> Robert Hayden discussed the challenges of his archival research for “Middle Passage” in the forties in an interview in his *Collected Prose* 169-170.

<sup>106</sup>See Marcus Rediker’s *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Rebellion*. Rediker offers a comprehensive history of the insurrection and the Sierra Leonean people who led it.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

“Middle Passage” takes the Amistad rebellion and the story of the historical Middle Passage as its lodestars. It depicts the central journey of the transatlantic slave trade by carefully choosing historical documents to reconstruct the past since the Amistad Africans came to the Americas on an illegal slaver that left almost no records. The name of the ship that carried Cinqué and the community of West Africans to Cuba, whether the *Teçora* or *Tesoura*, or *Tesouro*, remains suggested in oral history, but unknown.<sup>108</sup> Hayden’s poem reaches the same conclusion as the oral histories from several of the Amistad survivors: their Middle Passage journey was typical in its brutality and disregard for black life, with hundreds of Africans shackled together in iron chains, with limited food, and frequent physical violence. Captive Africans, sometimes from rival tribes, were placed below deck in almost airless conditions so cramped that some survivors arrived in the New World permanently disabled.<sup>109</sup> Because the Mende metaphor for death is “crossing the waters,” historian Marcus Rediker wonders if the “pervasive” death experienced on the “*Teçora*” called the *Bellaç* in “Middle Passage,” was made even more terrifying and experienced as a “living death,”<sup>110</sup> a motif Hayden employs throughout his poem:

Middle Passage:

Voyage through death

to life upon these shores.

(248)

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

Hayden invokes what has become a Middle Passage trope three times in the poem, the image of sharks that consume living and dead African flesh as they accompany slave ships across the Atlantic Ocean. The poem quotes a white crew member who remembers sharks as “our grinning tutelary gods” a metaphor for “Ill luck,” (248) including sickness, bad weather, and mutiny.

Melvin Tolson allusion to “Middle Passage” in *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* echoes Hayden’s typography in the use of the colon after the phrase “Middle Passage:” and the inclusion of the image of sharks following slave vessels. Tolson memorably adds his poetic imagination to the definition of the Middle Passage:

This is the Middle Passage: here  
 Gehenna hatchways vomit up  
 The debits of pounds of flesh.  
 This is the Middle Passage: here  
 The sharks wax fattest and the stench  
 Goads God to hold His nose! (152-54)

Tolson, like Hayden, defines Middle Passage as a floating grave or hell itself. Brooks, I will later show, imagines the Middle Passage, instead, as the difficult birth of black America.

Hayden researched the Middle Passage for years and struggled to find a form to capture the magnitude of death, the “pounds of flesh” in the underworld of ships holds and sea bottoms, and the grief, rebellion and resistance during the transformative journey from being “African cap-

tives” as they passed through the status to that of “Atlantic commodities” to “American slaves.”<sup>111</sup> His task was daunting. No one had attempted to represent the largest forced transfer of human beings in history in a long poem. How was he to make poetry out of the degradation of Africans and the experience of on a slaver? “Middle Passage” remembers Africa and Africans, the journey to the Americas, and those who resisted slavery during the successful Amistad rebellion by adapting the Modernist techniques of parataxis involving the use of multiple, often unnamed voices that Hayden adapted from T. S. Eliot’s Pound-edited *The Waste Land* (1922) with only a hint of the vernacular material he had successfully employed in the prize winning “O Daedalus, Fly Away Home.” In addition to using *The Waste Land* as a model, Hayden appropriated the juxtapositioning of incorporated historical documents from Pound. The paratactic construction of the poem, which omits logical transitions, serves as a reflection of the sense of dislocation, fragmentation of the self, and loss of bearings in an absurd world that had lost all logic. At the same time, Hayden was aware that the collage result of parataxis derived, in part, from a chain of aesthetics that includes African art. Hayden’s use of Hart Crane as a model for the way he imbued Cinquez with mythic significance has been observed as well.<sup>112</sup> To write a poem of African American beginnings Hayden found it necessary to assemble the voices of the enslavers, their laws, and religion as he framed his indictment of those in power for past injustices, and by extension, the injustices of the pre-Civil Rights present. African or black heroism and resilience would be heard and experienced as catharsis by black Americans. Despite the suffering of the poem’s black figures, the poem asserts that the human desire for freedom was never extinguished, even

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<sup>111</sup> Stephanie Smallwood’s historical study *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (2007) describes transformational steps from African captive to object and finally black American slave. Smallwood uses the black American term “Saltwater Negro,” coined during enslavement, to show the depth and importance of the Middle Passage in the making of African American identity.

<sup>112</sup> See Woodson’s “Consciousness, Myth, and Transcendence: Symbolic Action in Three Poems of the Slave Trade,” 155.

on the post-Middle Passage journey of the *Amistad*; the continued hope for freedom ignites the poem's rebellion. The representation of resistance in the poem, however, did not prevent Hayden from excoriating those Africans complicit in the slave trade, embodied by the figure of the "Anthracite King"; Hayden assembles, (a troubling assemblage to some critics),<sup>113</sup> white voices from history to show African culpability in the mayhem and grief, the legacy of trauma, bequeathed to New World Africans, and their descendants, who survived the slave trade:

"Have seen the nigger kings whose greed and vanity  
 turned the wild black hides to gold for us.  
 And there was one—King Anthracite we called him—  
 fetish face beneath French parasols  
 .....  
 "And for tin crowns that shone with paste,  
 red calico and German-silver trinkets,  
 would have the drums talk war and send  
 his spearman on the sleeping villages                   (250-51)

The *Phylon* version of "Middle Passage" introduces the overarching themes of exilic history and the existential psychological experience of living within that history into the modern black long poem, linking it to those of the past thematically, while charting fresh territory technically and compositionally. Part one of the poem reveals the Middle Passage as a voyage into or as exile

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<sup>113</sup> Harryette Mullen, for example, observes that Hayden's poem "eloquently illustrates the limitations of reconstructing the history of the subjugated from the writings of the dominant culture," in "Themes and Variations on Robert Hayden's Poetry," 173.

itself; part two presents European attitudes towards Africans and their existential responses, unintelligible to the European slavers; and part three shows Cinquez's heroic rebellion against exilic conditions. The eleven-line elegy, which was excised from subsequent revisions, deserves attention because it is to this text that Brooks, responds, and it is this section that makes the longing for Africa, the starting point for what I have called exile rhythm, explicit instead of implicit as it is in later versions. The elegy, which I quote in its entirety below, positions the poet-narrator as a descendant of Middle Passage sufferers and survivors:

It was long after the burnished riding of those conquering kings,  
the poems, the sacred images in bronze,  
the jewel dark wisdom of that fabulous queen.

It was long, long after that they came with guns, disease,  
in ships with death for figurehead,  
stained sails and Christ spread-eagle in the cordage.

Long, long after . . .

And we had forgotten our sires' plumed and charioted splendor,  
our past an ivory image buried under jungle leaves,  
and our god false to us, our kings betraying us.

In this elegy, the poet-narrator in exile mourns for a lost Africa. Composed of three tercets, and one three-word line, the poet's words are a subtle gesture to three-line blues form. The first blues-like stanza remembers an Africa before its devastation by the slave trade and colonization, an idealized Africa of "conquering kings," "sacred images in bronze," and a "fabulous queen," who possessed "jewel-dark wisdom," most likely queen-mother Idia of Benin in the sixteenth century.<sup>114</sup> The next tercet recalls European arrival in Africa with guns, sails and Christianity, establishing its ironic tone by describing a slave ship which had "Christ spreadeagle in the cordage" sanctifying the vessels that came to do Africa and its people irreparable harm. The final tercet speaks of two painful realities of history that diasporic Africans confront: a repression of African history, "our past an ivory image buried under jungle leaves," and the complicity of African traders and their rulers "our kings betraying us," or "our god false to us," a refrain in the poem, spoken by the narrator, signaling a crisis of faith and god's universe turned against, his people, the vanquished. The poet-narrator returns to the continent of Africa at the start of section two and apostrophizes "her," wielding a stern rebuke: "O Ancient mother made the whore of greed, / of death the glittering concubine;" (250). Although these lines were later removed in a later revision, no doubt related their emotional excess and what would later be called sexism, this is the poem and sentiment Brooks engages in *Annie Allen*.

The themes of exilic history and existential consciousness in "Middle Passage," are reinforced by the motif of death and resurrection, emblematic of exilic history with its seemingly endless cycles of racial subjugation, resilience or insurrection. After the poem's elegy, section one of "Middle Passage" begins with the poet-narrator's ironic catalogue, an epic convention used to

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<sup>114</sup> Hayden appears to reference the kingdom of Benin in these lines, noted for its bronze sculptures and the "fabulous queen," Idia, known today for her keen mind, warrior attributes, and the ivory mask on display at Metropolitan Museum of Art, perhaps referred to in the poem in line "our past an ivory image buried under the jungle leaves." <[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pwmn\\_3/hd\\_pwmn\\_3.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pwmn_3/hd_pwmn_3.htm)>.

attack the religious hypocrisy evident in Christian-named slave ships. The poet-narrator further describes the “Teçora” as a place of “horror,” with an electrified and fiery atmosphere, an expressionistic reflection of the narrator’s interior view, specifically, his feelings about slavery. The poem provides a differing perspective of the Middle Passage, incorporated from a contemporaneous captain’s journal, a perspective that exposes the dangers of written history when narrated by the conquerors:

*Jesus, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy*

Sails flashing to the wind like weapons,  
 Sharks following the moans, the fever and the dying;  
 horror the compass and compass-rose.

Middle Passage:

Voyage through death

to life upon these shores.

“Tenth April Eighteen Hundred

Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says

Their staunchless moaning is a prayer for death,

ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves.

Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter

To the waiting sharks; sang as they went under.”

*Desire, Adventure, Tartar, Ann:*

Standing to America, bringing home

black gold, black ivory, black seed.

The descent into the underworld, the “Voyage through death,” is incomprehensible to the ship’s captain despite the “staunchless moaning” of his captives, and in spite of being surrounded by insanity and suicide. (The willful disregard of human suffering would have had special salience in the postwar publication context.) For some Africans, millions historically, the death experienced during the Middle Passage was a literal death. For others, however, represented by the poet-narrator, the descent into hell was a voyage leading to life upon the American shores of enslavement and generations later, a pre-Civil Rights’ hope for liberation. For the survivors of the Middle Passage in Hayden’s poem, though, there remains the hope of both resurrection (resilience and insurrection) and a homeward return. The motif of resurrection is signaled by the first name in part one of the poem, *Jesus*, who represents resurrection, but *Jesus* is also the name of a slave ship like those of *Esperanza* or hope, and *Mercy*, an ironic commentary on the system that permitted the murder, torture and extracted labor of generations of Africans and their descendants under the guise of faith and benevolence. These names also implicate the intersection of the state (a Navy with “Sails flashing . . . like weapons), the Christian church and mercantilist interests that came together in mutual support of a trade that enriched them while engendering the Africans’ “prayer for death.” The phrase “Voyage through death / to life upon these shores,” repeated once exactly and again with the revised second line “voyage whose chartings are unlove,” provides an ironic comment and perhaps, in a poem that primarily speaks through white men’s voices, another gesture towards the blues. Death in the poem is both physical a metaphor. Africans physically die, but they are also dying the “social death,” which Orlando Patterson notably defined as a state of non-being, or existence as a non-person / object outside of the established so-

cial order; both a slave and an exile.<sup>115</sup> This positions the enslaved, when physically alive in the hold of the slave ship, as being both alive and socially dead, or alive but on the brink of death, a liminal state “Middle Passage” imagines this liminal state in physical terms:

A charnel stench, effluvium of living death  
 spreads outward from the hold,  
 where the living and the dead, the horribly dying,  
 lie interlocked, lie foul with blood and excrement  
 and stink like animals.      (251)

Whether the captive Africans are physically dead, metaphorically dead, or in a liminal state of “interlocked” life and death, Hayden’s poem shows physical resurrection on the slave ship during the Middle Passage—in this poem conceived as itself and act of rebellion or insurrection, and an expression of the inextinguishable desire for freedom that fuels it. The first moment of African rebellion comes in a quote from the journal written on the *Amistad* with the simple phrase, “Blacks rebellious.” This rebellion takes many forms including death by self-starvation or shark consumption, forms of suicide that in economic terms lower the profit from slave trade and offers a costly freedom and release for the Atlantic “commodity.” Part three of the poem describes Cinquez and his warrior band in detail, again, through a European or European-descended voice quoted in the *Amistad* court deposition: “then suddenly a low and savage / snarl—it was no human sound, *verdad*— / and they had leapt upon us with machete / and marlinspike.” Admitting that the white crew was “no match” for the Africans, in a violent reversal of black suicide or

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<sup>115</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, 144.

murder, white “butchered bodies” are “dispatched” into the ocean by “heathen slaves.” Again, the slave merchants indict themselves in their labeling of innocent captives. The poem ends with a symbolic resurrection, which Hayden calls the timeless will:

The deep immortal human wish,

The timeless will:

Cinquez its superb Homeric image,

life that transfigures many lives,

Life that defines our history upon these shores.

Borne from that land—

Our gods false to us, our gods betraying us—

Like seeds the storm winds carry

To flower stubbornly upon these shores.

Cinquez is the ultimate epic hero, his nostos, like Odysseus returned home, fulfilled. The hero of Hayden’s poem travels by ship, defeats his enemies, and returns home to Africa, the classic pattern of the masculine epic hero. The timeless will, the will to be free and fully human, animates these lines and is a form of potential insurrection in the endless cycle of oppression that will always require a response; it’s the long Sisyphean struggle for black freedom. Vera Kutzinski observes that Hayden’s poem transforms the Middle Passage into a “*rite of passage*.”<sup>116</sup> Before Cinqué’s capture in Sierra Leone, he was a rice farmer; after the Amistad rebellion, he was a rev-

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<sup>116</sup> Vera Kutzinski’s “Changing Permanences,” 181.

olutionary, a change requiring both physical bravery and psychological transformation. In the end, Hayden creates a mythic figure who is both transfigured and a vessel of transfiguration for his community, foreshadowed by the Christ early in the poem, himself a figure of transfiguration and resurrection. Cinquez is the antithesis of the slave vessel and the ideology it represents, the goal of which is to change his Mende community into exiles and slaves. The metamorphoses that Cinquez facilitates, Hayden suggests, reverberates beyond the *Amistad*, to those “Borne from that land,” betrayed by Africans and Europeans, but now living “upon these shores” in the Americas.

The last couplet of the poem announces the birth of a flower after its seed has been sown in an inhospitable land, hence its need for stubborn endurance. This image is best understood in the context of its earlier usage in the poem: “*Desire, Adventure, Tartar, Ann: / Standing to America, bringing home / black gold, black ivory, black seed*” (248). Hayden uses diacope, the repetition of the adjective black, to emphasize the African foundation of much European and American wealth. In this context the phrase “black seed” stands out as symbol of procreation, yoked to the slave ships named *Desire* and *Adventure*. Black seed, because of the hereditary laws governing slavery, is white wealth. Black seed, or any “seed” carried by enslaved black women foreshadows the sexual exploitation described in a court deposition quoted in the poem. Beyond the “fabulous queen” in the prologue-elegy, there are “shrieking negresses” and “wenches.” The fullest descriptions of a black women in the poem quotes a court deposition:

The crew and Captain lusted with the comeliest of  
 the heathen girls kept naked in the cabins;  
 that there was one called Guinea Rose,  
 and they cast lots and fought to lie with her (249)

Black women, beyond the “fabulous” queen known in history as a warrior with political acumen, alluded to without reference to those qualities, are “naked,” “heathen,” and “shrieking” repositories for white male physical and sexual abuse in “Middle Passage.” The male association with “seed,” on the other hand, may also be understood differently when viewed from the woman’s perspective. In this case, seed or semen also increases white wealth when the mother is black, assuring white domination in perpetuity. But this is not true when the mother is white, so black seed can be a threat to the established racial hierarchy. Before emancipation, Martha Hodes’ research finds that the primary (but not only) anxiety around black men and white women’s sexual unions was that it did not *necessarily* produce white wealth because the law was more ambiguous about these offspring.<sup>117</sup> So black seed within the patriarchal institution of slavery was more potentially damaging. By extension, black seed also signifies black male power and virility. Returning to the final two lines of the poem where we find the image of the seed again, this time it will “flower stubbornly” carried by “storm winds,” those historical forces, or exilic history, that strikes and weighs upon the black New World subject. Viewed from this perspective, black history, the Middle Passage, slavery, and Jim Crow, the dominant political ideology and practice when the poem “Middle Passage” was first published, is a rite of passage. The seed is then a symbol of latent possibility, seemingly inert, but capable of resurrection. Hayden’s long poem explores the Middle Passage, a voyage that carried Africans into a history of exile and existential consciousness, and his poem opened up new ground for the further examination and artistic intervention into “life upon these shores” at midcentury, particularly the aspects connected to black women

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<sup>117</sup> Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South*, 1-6.

## ANNIE ALLEN: A BLACK WOMAN'S LONG POEM AT MIDCENTURY

Four years after the publication of “Middle Passage,” Gwendolyn Brooks published the long poem *Annie Allen*, a long poem written on an epic grid that explores “life upon these shores” through an exploration of exilic history and the existential subjectivity, specifically that of a black woman it produces. My reading of *Annie Allen* as a single poem follows Betsy Erkkila, Jenny Goodman, and Evie Shockley who have effectively argued that the volume is a single poem in three parts with a center epic. The poem’s constitutive elements, including sequences of individual poems in the first and final sections of *Annie Allen*, narrate the life of the eponymous heroine from birth through adulthood.<sup>118</sup> *Annie Allen* is not a classical epic nostos like “Middle Passage,” for there are no physical battles and heroic trials at sea, and there is no actual return to a physical home as occurs in the poem it adapts and critiques; its search for home is at first internal, but gradually Annie finds her voice, merging with the wise mother and griot figure<sup>19</sup> who has narrated the poem thus far. The poem’s presiding narrative voice, manifests this merging when it exhorts the black community to “Rise” and “combine” (140). In the poem’s last section, the newly emerged and wiser Annie ascends from an epic Underworld to encourage her people to build a homeland of the free on these American shores.

In what follows, I examine the themes and motifs present in Hayden’s “Middle Passage” that are reimagined in *Annie Allen*. Specifically, I consider the shift from the masculine, violent heroism Hayden’s text celebrates, to a journey towards a heroism and home building rooted in

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<sup>118</sup> See Betsy Erkkila’s “Race, Black Women Writing, and Gwendolyn Brooks,” 186-206, Jenny Goodman’s “Revisionary Postwar Heroism in Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Annie Allen*,” 159-180 and Evie Shockley’s *Renegade Poetics* 27-54 for their claims that *Annie Allen* is one unified whole. Shockley departs from Erkkila, however, in her belief that the center poem, “The Anniad,” is not a mock epic as has been previously asserted by many scholars. Drawing upon the Brooks’ semi-autobiographical novel “Maud Martha,” essentially “The Anniad” in prose, Shockley persuasively argues that the inability of critics to imagine Annie as questing epic figure is in part due to her status as a young, working-class black woman and a misreading of voice.

the experience of a black woman who represents all African American people. *Annie Allen* weaves a female-centered myth into her poem about black female subjectivity, one born under the pressures of exilic history, a history Brooks recounts and that Annie's existential consciousness reflects. I argue that Annie's quest critiques the masculinist epic tradition that lies behind Hayden's poem, where women are solely constructed by historical discourses about race and gender that leave them without any agency.

In this explanation that Brooks turns to the Demeter and Persephone myth, from to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,<sup>119</sup> to authorize her quest. Her version of the modernist "mythical method," defined in T. S. Eliot's "Ulysses, Order and Myth," as a "continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" allows Brooks to imbue her working-class hero with epic significance. My reading of *Annie Allen*, examines the larger themes of Brooks' poem, that of exilic history and existential subjectivity, by focusing on the gendered nature of the heroism she presents. By employing Ovid's version of the Demeter and Persephone myth, a narrative symbolic of cyclical death and rebirth, Brooks recasts Hayden's motif of death and resurrection in female terms, even as both represent the long black struggle for freedom. The Demeter-Persephone myth pivots around the consumption of seeds, and thus provides a mythic underpinning to Brooks' reimagining of a central image and concept in Hayden's poem. The Demeter and Persephone myth, which Bruce Lincoln calls "unquestionably the most important myth of the ancient world to focus on the lives of women" and a symbolic rite of passage,<sup>120</sup> gives a voice to Annie and the black enslaved women and unnamed queen who are mute in "Middle Passage." By adapting the Ovidian ver-

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<sup>119</sup> For the purposes of clarity, I will use the more familiar Greek names Demeter, Persephone, Hades and Zeus in my discussion of Ovid's myth.

<sup>120</sup> Bruce Lincoln, "The Rape of Persephone: A Greek Scenario of Women's Initiation," 223.

sion of the myth, Brooks answers Wheatley's call for a song in the bolder notes of classical epic, asserting a line of descent that begins with Wheatley's epic strivings.

*Annie Allen's* narrative voice can be characterized as that of a wise mother and a griot who exhort the community to "build an in-fact homeland of the free," a reflection of the burgeoning midcentury Freedom Movement, in which unheralded black women played significant roles. In the first two sections of the poem, the griot / wise mother figure narrates Annie's life in the third person. The poet-narrator is omniscient and observes Annie's inability to see the ideological and historical forces influencing her life. This presiding voice, which by the end of the poem will merge with Annie's and speak for the community—much as the poet-narrator voiced community concerns in the original "Middle Passage"—boldly claims the responsibility and capability of fulfilling the community's desire and need for "a Teller in a time like this" to confront exilic history, "an enormous business" too profound to reconcile "all alone." This voice guides people in search of wholeness, uncertain of "the way back home"; the speaker channels central concerns at the heart of the black long poem tradition when she ponders, "One wonders if one has a home." This question without a question mark, is a rhetorical question or perhaps an assertion of black existential homelessness. The use of the indefinite pronoun "One" universalizes and distances the narrative voice from the community while at the same time implying a communal connection; the word also can mean "we" as well as "any." Similarly, the title *Annie Allen* announces Annie as a representative figure for black people in the United States. The eponymous heroine's first name evokes the pronoun *any* through slant rhyme, and her last name contains the pronoun *all*, an invitation to *all* black people to enter the poem, and an early example of the communal summoning Brooks would later express as the aim of her poetry: to "successfully 'call' . . . all black people: black people in taverns, black people in alleys, black people in gutters, schools, offices,

factories, prisons, the consulate . . . black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones.” Conversely, *any* and *all* may also refer to a broader claim to a larger American readership, the type of readers or critics who would in 1950 award *Annie Allen* the first Pulitzer Prize for poetry to an African American.

*Annie Allen* is separated into three sections: “Notes from the Childhood and Girlhood,” “The Anniad,” and “The Womanhood.” The suffix “hood,” which connects these sections by end rhyme, connotes both condition and class but also the black vernacular shortening of the word “neighborhood,” the primary, often oppressive landscape of the poem and the subtle appearance of black vernacular expression in the poem. “Notes from the Childhood and Girlhood” includes a series of eleven poems about young Annie which make a distinction between the larger community “Childhood,” or all children, and “Girlhood,” girl children in particular. This signals this section’s preoccupation with gender and the ideologies that influence girls and young women, ideologies that exacerbate the double-consciousness that attends existential subjectivity. The middle poem of the volume, titled “The Anniad,” literally writes Annie’s name into the epic tradition. In keeping with the logic of my earlier reading of the title, the poet brings her community “Any” into the epic tradition with her, a democratizing gesture. “The Anniad,” is the epic center of *Annie Allen*, comprised of forty-three, seven-line stanzas, which is suggestive of Chaucerian rhyme royal. Brooks’ use of the seven-lined Chaucerian stanza connects the center poem to Ovid’s retelling of the Demeter-Persephone myth. In Ovid’s myth, unlike other well-known versions, Persephone ingests precisely seven seeds, an image that recalls the seven-lined stanzas of the section, occurs in “The Anniad,” the Underworld of Brooks’ long poem. The form of “The Anniad,” closed, highly compressed, and metrical, might also be said to mirror the constriction of the Underworld and her neighborhood. In Ovid’s myth, however, unlike in other

versions, Persephone eats the seeds without Hades insistence, suggesting some pleasure in the confines of the Underworld and, by extension some delight in closed poetic form.

“The Womanhood,” the final section of the poem contains fifteen meditations on black life in America at midcentury. This third section is written in traditional forms such as sonnet and ballad, ending with the less formally structured “Men of careful turns,” a Civil Rights poem that anticipates the Black Arts Movement. Overall, the long poem’s arc is from birth and innocence to maturity and wisdom. After an invocation of a misunderstood poet-soldier and ancestor, “the birth in a narrow room” begins:

Weeps out of Western country something new.  
 Blurred and stupendous. Wanted and unplanned.  
 Winks. Twines, and weakly winks  
 Upon the milk-glass fruit bowl, iron pot,  
 The bashful china child tipping forever  
 Yellow apron and spilling pretty cherries. (83)

“The birth in a narrow room” introduces Annie as a representative for her people, while the word room stands synecdochically for the word home, the poem’s ultimate quest. This early poem describes her humble beginning, her delivery in a narrow room in Chicago where there are tears during the birthing process. There is an umbilical cord that “Twines” while infant Annie “weakly winks,” taking in her environment. The poem catalogues primarily domestic items, including fruit bowls, peach cans, and iron pots. Young Annie loves fairy tales and “prances” through her childhood enamored with chivalric romance. Although “the birth in a narrow room”

describes Annie's birth and early years, the poem alerts readers to broader interpretative possibilities that will connect Annie to "all" black people, suggested by the repeated word "winks." "Winks" is capitalized in the third line of the stanza and indented. The first time the word appears, it is followed by a period, forcing a full stop. "Winks" begins the shortest line of the stanza, marking its significance and difference from the rest of the poem. While "Winks" and "weakly winks" describe the young Annie's attempts to adjust her eyes to her new world, the omniscient griot-narrator may be winking at the reader, encouraging deeper contemplation of Annie's world, even if young Annie lacks the interpretive tools to do so herself. A closer look at these early lines reveal they not only announce Annie's birth, but also evoke the Middle Passage, a painful birth for black Americans.

This interpretation hinges on the homophonic relationship between the words "birth" and "berth." A berth in a narrow room—where there is weeping—brings to mind the grief and cramped conditions of a slave ship's cargo hold during transatlantic slave trade. Middle Passage survivors described the slave hold as a place where captives could spend as much as sixteen hours a day in berths, some of which had a height of only eighteen inches in order to pack the maximum amount of human cargo to maximize profit.<sup>20</sup> Annie comes out of her mother's womb, a tight watery space, as Africans emerged out of ship's holds all over the New World. Later in the poem Annie wonders, "How can I breathe!", an experience of suffocation expressed in accounts of the journey to the Americas by Middle Passage survivors.<sup>121</sup> The watery and tearful atmosphere of the poem is enhanced by the proliferation of two sounds: the liquid "n" and soft "w" or "weh," which connects Annie's birth and the black New World birthing process during the Middle Passage. That the enslaved and their descendants "Weep out of Western country

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<sup>121</sup> See for example Olaudah Equiano's account of the stifling conditions and "unfit air" experienced during the Middle Passage in *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 58.

something new” is one way of describing Annie’s people. Their forced work and cultural creations are “Wanted” to enrich the capitalist West but “unplanned” in the way June Jordan described Middle Passage in her essay on Phillis Wheatley: “rupture, by theft, by travel like mismatched clothing packed down into the cargo hold of evil ships sailing.” During the period when the slave trade was illegal but still flourishing, Africans would be rushed onto ships built for maximum speed, sometimes yoking tribal enemies together, “like mismatched clothing.” Finally, a ship’s rigging looks like an umbilical cord.

In the second stanza of “the birth in a narrow room,” Annie’s thoughts highlight a system that treats black Americans as abstractions to be economically exploited. She wonders, “How can I breathe! / I am Not anything and I have got / Not anything (83). An early review of *Annie Allen* chastised Brooks for the “awkward locution” of the phrase “I have got / Not anything” a misreading that fails to imagine the phrase as one written to emphasize deprivation.<sup>2</sup> Yet Annie’s sense of self suggests something more profound than economic suffering. She expresses a completely empty sense of self when she says, “I am Not,” where the copula “am” links the pronoun I to “Not anything.” This lack of personhood reveals pressure of white supremacist values. In a poem with echoes of the Middle Passage, Annie is experiencing social death where she stands outside of the established social order. She is a daughter of that journey in the pre-Civil Rights North when segregation and discrimination remained obstacles for black people; the lack she describes presumes that it is something she’s garnered, a wage of “Not” for her blackness.

I have been reading this early poem through the prism of race and the history of the slave trade, which was fueled, in large measure, by economic exploitation. But Annie is a black woman, and throughout the poem, Brooks makes visible the systems of male dominance, those ideological narratives and cultural constructs that pass to Annie. It is as if the mother’s immunities that wash

over Annie during her journey through the birth canal have also made her more susceptible to idealized femininity or cultural constructions of romance, a reading supported by the poem “Maxie Allen.” Maxie, for example, encourages her daughter “To thank her Lord and lucky star / For heart to hanker for romance.” She also encourages gratitude for Annie’s “eye that let her see so far” (84) although Annie is blind to systems of oppression that stoke her feelings of worthlessness. The “Twine[d]” umbilical cord, which I noted for its similarity to a ship’s rigging, is a useful image for thinking about Annie’s multiple subject positions and the intertextuality presented in this poem and the volume as a whole. Annie is a working-class woman subjected to the dominant ideologies of race and gender of her day that positioned her as inferior. Specifically, she is overwhelmed by the idealization of domesticity, chivalric romance, and European notions of beauty, ideas that prove to be very damaging to her as a young woman. The enjambed third and fourth lines show that at the very moment Annie comes into consciousness, she encounters a “milk-glass fruit bowl [and] iron pot.” The juxtaposing of these mass-produced objects, one smooth, delicate and white, the other rough-hewn and black and reminiscent of iron shackles, illustrates the wide-scale sale and ideal of white femininity forced upon Annie at birth as well as the legacy of enslavement, also a birthright. The fragile white beauty symbolized by the milk glass is American, but its origins are in Europe, just as the origins of the glass in the Allens’ narrow room are copies of the Venetian original. Even as a child Annie has internalized a destructive hierarchy of beauty, and she knows that she is on the bottom of it, but as a child she encounters this reality as neutral and natural, so she “prances, nevertheless with gods and fairies.” This phrase also points to Annie’s connection to the Demeter-Persephone myth as do the fruits and seeds that proliferate in this poem and in the volume as a whole. In “the birth in a narrow room,” there is a fruit bowl and there are “pretty cherries.” Amongst the “elms and grapevines”

there are “old peach cans,” and “old jelly jars.” In other poems we find “strawberry jam,” “cranberries,” “berries,” “Buxom berries,” all evoking the seeds in the Demeter-Persephone myth.

Brooks’ Demeter-Persephone plot is structural, submerged beneath the exquisite prosody of “The Anniad.” My reading of *Annie Allen* through the prism of the Demeter-Persephone myth, is influenced by Tracey L. Walters’ interpretation of Brooks’ poetry in *African American Literature and the Classicist Tradition*. While Walters excavates the voice, trials and temporary triumphs of Persephone in the middle poem “The Anniad,” the Demeter-Persephone myth provides the architecture of the poem as a whole. When Maxie Allen feeds her daughter Quaker Oats and Cream-of-Wheat, the image associates, however tenuous, between Maxie with the grain and harvest goddess, Demeter. The first section of Brooks’ *Annie Allen*, underlines the connection between Annie and Persephone. Consider for example the poem “the ballad of late Annie.” Annie, Persephone-like, is fertile. She is coming of age and starting to daydream about men and marriage. The word “men” / “man” is repeated four times, the word “marry,” twice. As “Late Annie in her bower lay, / Though sun was up and spinning. / The blush-brown shoulder was so bare, / Blush-brown lip was winning” 90). A bower can be an outdoor dwelling or a leafy shelter, establishing a link between Annie, nature and Persephone. Persephone’s tale begins in a valley where she picks flowers forever associating her with nature, but more importantly, her return from the Underworld heralds the return of spring. The poem approaches Annie as if she were both regal and already dead, perhaps foreshadowing her future reign as Queen of the Underworld. The harsh plosive b sounds of ballad, bower, blush, brown and bear contrast with the soft of liquid l’s, for example the word “late” twice repeated, lay and lip, and the fricatives sun, spinning, shoulder, and so. These sounds represent an aural conflict between Annie’s unexamined acceptance of chivalry (she wants her lacquered-lover to bring her melted opals, pearl-leaf; she lay in a “bower”

another word for medieval ladies' chamber) and her more action oriented and independent consciousness. The sound conflict is that it represents the duality of Persephone's life in the Underworld versus her life on the earth's surface. Significantly, "the ballad of the late Annie" is poem number seven in the volume, recalling the seven pomegranate seeds that tie Persephone to Hades.

Walters has unearthed the mythic Persephone in "The Anniad," noting Annie's / Persephone's "virgin[ity], fertile[ity], and innocence" (72). At the same time, she details the correlation between Annie's lover "Tan Man" and "Hades," Lord of the Underworld. The link is unmistakable, including, his symbolic rape of Annie. Tan Man "eats the green by easy stages, / Nibbles at the root beneath / With intimidating teeth" (100). Those long e sounds unify the deed. He dominates Annie, who is "sweet and chocolate;" he is arrogant and perpetually unfaithful. Reading *Annie Allen* as a long poem, opens up the interpretive possibility of viewing "The Anniad" as a journey to the Underworld from conventional epic. Annie is emotionally abused and lacks the ideological resources to dismantle her patriarchal nightmare. She is a woman "Shorn" who "genuflects" in "the indignant dark" (109). Ultimately, however, after years of suppressed rage where she has had to "Tam[e] all that anger down," her lover dies and Annie is left "tweaked and twenty-four" (109).

Annie's experience mirrors that of Persephone throughout the poem, and Brooks relies on Ovid's specific version because its mythic method provides not only "continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity," but a mythic structure for critique. Take for example the song of praise for Mother Earth Demeter sung by the muse of epic poetry Calliope. These opening lines, from Ovid's retelling, celebrate Demeter for being "the first to give us the earth's fruits and to nourish us gently, / and the first to give laws: every gift comes from [Demeter]. / Would

that I *could* sing a hymn that is worthy of her, for surely she deserves it.”<sup>122</sup> These lines, although not quoted in the poem, are evoked by the mythical method Brooks employs, thus wielding a critique against the silenced and unheralded woman of the “Middle Passage,” and black women generally, deepening Brooks’ commitment to black women. In Ovid’s retelling, Demeter searches “all over the earth and deep in the ocean” for her daughter, and stops feeding humankind because she is overwhelmed by grief and rage. The ocean returns to the black tradition in the form of the Middle Passage, the deep ocean search, an acknowledgement of the “black ivory” or African bones, the remains of black people.

Annie’s experience doesn’t end in the Underworld. As in conventional epics the motif of death and resurrection foreshadows her ascent. There are themes of death and death-related concepts and images throughout *Annie Allen*. The poem begins with an invocation of a dead soldier, and continues with the Middle Passage evocation in “the birth in a narrow room,” a dead bird in “Sunday chicken” (87) “bowel-work,” and “coffin” in the poem “old relative” (88), and the title “the ballad of late Annie” (90). In “do not be afraid of no,” variations of the word die appear four times. “The Anniad presents “hectacombs,”(101) and the death of Annie’s lover (109) In “The Appendix to the Anniad” there are “(‘thousands—killed in action’) and a “Coquettish death.” Dying children and “graves” in recur throughout “the children of the poor” sonnet sequence. A pigeon is “starved to death” in “the ballad of the light-eyed little girl” (121) and “A light and diplomatic bird” dies as well (123).

In the poem “the rites for Cousin Vit,” the theme of death and resurrection asserts itself explicitly. Vit’s name suggests that she is “Too vital” even though she is dead. Vit is a family member, a part of the black community who has a “right,” another pun, to live. Vit “Is.” She “Must

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<sup>122</sup> See Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, trans., Charles Martin, New York: Norton, 2004, pp. 174-181.

emerge.” Cousin Vit is an irrepressible woman, so “She rises” (125). The idea of ascent, or rising competes with death imagery in *Annie Allen*, symbolic of the long political struggle for human dignity in Annie’s community, a dialectic of death and rebirth. As Annie’s mythic corollary, Persephone is a potent symbol of death and resurrection. She rises, (a word used in five poems) initiated into womanhood, but by choice, returns to the Underworld, towards struggle. Annie too rises out of the Underworld. Born in a narrow room at the beginning of the long poem, she has combined with a wiser voice, a repository of communal wisdom, creating a new “I.” In the last poem of the volume, Brooks writes:

Open my rooms, let in the light and air.  
 Reserve my service at the human feast.  
 And let the joy continue. Do not hoard silence  
 For the moment when I enter, tardily  
 To enjoy my height among you. (139)

Annie’s demand for an open room, although expressed in genteel language, is nevertheless a fierce demand for liberation. A daughter of exile, she insists on a room—a home on these shores—where she and her people can experience freedom or “light and air.” No longer a child confined by a “pinchy” or narrow room where she struggles for breath, Annie is a mature woman insisting on human rights for all black people. Her heroism is a heroism for all because it stands for the eradication of the internalized forms of white supremacy and male domination that constitutes a part of black existential subjectivity. In that sense, *Annie Allen* is Gwendolyn Brooks’ tale

of the tribe, a critique of the traditional masculinist epic and the assemblage of black women's voices silenced in the *Phylon* version of "Middle Passage."

CHAPTER 4 / A POST-BOP LONG POEM: AMIRI BARAKA'S *WISE, WHY'S, Y'S: THE  
GRIOT'S SONG DJELI YA*

there really was and is

an Africa

an African

an African in

Americas

There is no slavery

but that which

destroys us

Tho it be a chain

on our arm

or brain

“The Stranger (14)” from *Wise Why's Y's: The Griot's Song, Djeli Ya*

Amiri Baraka's tale of the tribe, *Wise Why's Y's: The Griot's Song Djeli Ya* (1995), was considered by the poet to be his most “definitive statement,”<sup>123</sup> a long poem that synthesized his hetero-

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<sup>123</sup> Poet Kalamu ya Salaam asks Baraka in an interview in *African American Review*, “In terms of your writing, what is your *Kind of Blue*, your *Love Supreme*?” Baraka responds, “*Why's* actually says that in a lot of ways.” Given Baraka's veneration to John Coltrane's album, Baraka is stating that this is his most important achievement in poetry.

geneous and decades-long ideological concerns and multi-cultural aesthetic practices. The song of this griot or djeli is preoccupied with the central themes of many the black long poem tradition: exile rhythm or black exilic history and existential tension, the pressure experienced within the black self as a result of New World history. Phillis Wheatley and earlier black long poem writers provided Baraka with a model for “snatching a laurel” from the Anglo-American tradition of long poems, and the poet embraced this project of a once-fraught inheritance. From the multicultural West, Baraka adapted Dadaism, Afro-Surrealism and the jazz-influenced Projective mode of writing championed by Charles Olson. Although Baraka had been working within Modernist modes since the mid-twentieth century, earlier long poem writers of African descent, especially black writers after the post-World War II era, cleared a path for his experimentation in the genre, and his late twentieth-century long poem shows their influences.

The central concerns in *Wise* are sounded in the poem’s fourteenth canto “The Stranger (14),” in the title itself and in the complete epigraph. An engagement with existentialism is evident in the lines through the citation of Camus’ Algerian-set novel *The Stranger* (1942), and later in the poem, Sartre’s gloss on it. Over the course of Baraka’s career, from his affiliations with the Beats and Black Mountain schools of the fifties and sixties to his Black Arts and Third-World Marxist periods, the poet grappled with the crisis of black exilic history and its effect on the black interior. But it is his work with the long poem, a genre the poet did not attempt to write in until later in his career, that he most fully engages black exile and the psychological ramifications of black history from within a genre in which exile is already deeply inscribed. This chapter explores the compositional strategies, source materials, and approaches to language Baraka brings to bear as he crafts his *nostos*—the homeward journey—of the black diaspora. Baraka creates new symbols and bends language to affirm, and sometimes contest, writers who had already written their

songs in the bolder notes of long poems. The quest in *Wise Why's I's* remains remarkably similar to that evident in those preceding poems: to transform this strange American house into something closer to a home.

*Wise* straddles textuality and vernacular performance in its quest for home. The work of placing Baraka within a tradition of the African American long poem has been started by Kathy Lou Schultz, the only critic to date to devote a book chapter or single article to *Wise*. In *The Afro-Modernist Epic and Literary History, Tolson, Hughes, Baraka* (2013), Schultz observes the importance of the quest for home in *Wise*. (167). While she sees Baraka creating a home through jazz improvisation, I would emphasize an even more complex homebuilding project: one cultural and music oriented, the other political and in keeping with the black long poem from its start in the eighteenth century.

Indisputably one of the most consequential black poets in American history, Baraka brings the African American tradition of long poems and Anglo-American long poems together with black vernacular culture to confront black history and its legacy and influence on black subjectivity. Baraka transforms African drumming and African-American music—the spirituals, the blues, but especially jazz—into language, to tell the story of the long black struggle for freedom and equality and to document the vital artistic project at the center of the quest for *at-homeness* in America in the black long poem. The spirituals, blues, and jazz are employed in the poem as “impulses,” enacting a vernacular-based hermeneutics and mode of being that mark resilience, joy and defiance in the face of history.

Baraka's interest in the image as a means to project ideas in poetry is well documented. Werner Sollars and others have documented his relation to Baraka's Dadaism and Afro-Surrealist imagery in his critique of capitalism and a commitment to African diaspora. The poem's vision

of the tribe is not bound by nation state; instead, black people in the New World are connected by shared exilic history and culture. Nonetheless, the specific events of black U. S. history propel the poem's movement through its examination of the cultural responses to not only a shared Middle Passage and enslavement, but to the abandonment of Reconstruction in the American South and the tragic "nadir" that followed, especially Jim Crow and lynching. Baraka connects those historical events to their dehumanizing corollaries in the twentieth century, and celebrates resistance, both political and in vernacular artistic responses. Ultimately, it is black music that defines heroism in his long poem.

*Wise* repeatedly asks the trenchant question "Why?"<sup>124</sup> to make sense of exilic history in its forty poems, the number of cantos representing the days of the Middle Passage as well as the number of acres promised and denied after slavery.<sup>125</sup> It asks questions about historic oppression and the continuing sources of black suffering in its quest to create at-homeness in the United States, called in *Wise*, a "foreign land." *Wise* interrogates the homebuilding project itself; it insists on questioning the political methods used to confront exilic history and its legacies. Baraka praises heroes and castigates enemies as he seeks psychological wholeness for the tribe. The poem asks why Africans sold other Africans; why so many perished in the Middle Passage and why so many survived; why black people were exploited in slavery and who reaped stolen profits; why Reconstruction was abandoned and why America remains mired in a cycle of racial and economic turmoil; and why black folks and their multi-racial allies—political activists, revolutionaries, and

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<sup>124</sup> Baraka credits James Baldwin for pushing him to ask this question, and the poet was in the early stages of the poem's composition when he delivered Baldwin's eulogy. He said: "Jimmy was wise from asking whys giving us his whys to go with our own, to make them into a larger why and deeper Wise" *Baraka Reader*, 452.

<sup>125</sup> In an 1997 interview with Chris Funkhauser on PennSound, Baraka says he wrote forty poems "because that was . . . the forty acres and a mule and also it was supposed to be forty days and forty nights, that trip from Africa to the Western world on the slave ship."

creative luminaries all—continue to “Sing! / Fight!”<sup>126</sup> in the long struggle for freedom and equality. Unifying the political and cultural realms in the poem is the “Wise One” John Coltrane, the poem’s primary, but not only, griot-hero. Coltrane’s aesthetic interrogates exilic conditions and existential subjectivity, envisioning African-American syncretic forms, which foster spiritual transcendence and communal restoration and catharsis<sup>127</sup> for those who can hear its soundings. *Wise* is an attempt to capture and perform this resonance in poetic form and through language.

Throughout this chapter, I will consider the ways Baraka’s poem answers Phillis Wheatley’s call for a song in the bolder notes of the long poem, one populated with a contemporary black accent. The poet takes up Wheatley’s politically-engaged aesthetic and the black long poem as its own tradition—with its own centuries-old thematic concerns—and brings it into focus. My reading of Baraka’s long poem responds to the critical approach scholarship that bifurcates contemporary black poetry into “political” versus “literary” categories, which I believe is a remnant and veiled debate about the literary value of the Blacks Arts Movement and its legacy, a debate that has outlived its usefulness. The introduction of the most recently published Norton Anthology of African-American contemporary poetry, *Angles of Ascent* (2013), is emblematic of one side of this argument. In the opening of the anthology, editor Charles Henry Rowell defines exemplary recent black poetry as verse that “write[s] of self,” not “what it means to be black in America” (xlii). His objection is that a poetics that interrogates black identity (as opposed what Rowell refers to as a more “cosmopolitan” identity) inevitably leads to the “pitfalls of tribal warfare existentially” bound as it is by “the fetters of narrow political and social demands that have nothing to do with the production of artistic texts” (xliv), an attack no doubt on the more trou-

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<sup>126</sup> Baraka, “In the Tradition,” *Baraka Reader*, 302.

bling proscriptions of the Black Arts Movement. According to Rowell, Gwendolyn Brooks, Melvin Tolson, and Robert Hayden are the “Precursors” of the best contemporary black poetry, creators of a mid-century literary poetry seemingly free of politics and social demands as Rowell tells it. His assertions about the nature of black contemporary poetry, however, is contradicted by his chosen group of literary ancestors, all of whom established their reputations through, in large part, the publication of long ambitious poems that confront “what it means to be black in America.” Even Hayden, the least overtly political of the three poets, is best known for his epyllion “Middle Passage.” Hayden’s masterful representation of the voyage that marks exilic history is one that Baraka, who Rowell would position as his ideological adversary, is forced to reckon with in *Wise Why’s Y’s*. Hayden’s presence in Baraka’s poem is a testament to the rhythms of exile in longer black verse, an inherently political theme. Baraka himself calls the Middle Passage and subsequent black experience in the New World “a historic documented rhythm,” which produces an “Existential” subjectivity in African American people. In other words, for Baraka, echoing Dubois, Langston Hughes and others, writing has everything to do with “what it means to be black.” Consider the salience of the being-black-in-the-world and historical investigations of theme Tyehimba Jess’ *Leadbelly* (2005), a long poem about the eponymous bluesman, Kevin Young’s *Ardency* (2012), a poem that revisits the Amistad rebellion and “Middle Passage, or Brenda Marie Osbey’s *History and Other Poems* (2013), which interrogates slavery in New Orleans.

In explaining his views of black experience, Baraka conflates three entities: his poetics, black people and black music. In his essay “Rhythm” the poet describes black Americans as a people born on the “cross” as well as the “flows” from Africa to an “experience dissociated from the African past” who are themselves “Existential as Improvised and Spontaneous. Experimental and deeply Traditional” (Loc 483). This description of black Americans is also Baraka’s vision of

an ideal poetics whose attributes— improvisatory, spontaneous, experimental and traditional— underpin his most important poem. *Wise* brings together Negro spirituals, gospel, blues, and jazz, musical forms as well as modes of inquiry and engagement theorized, as such at least since DuBois observed “Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave,” a response to “trouble and exile” (165). This black folk song lies at the foundation of blues, jazz music, and the gospel impulse or gospel vision. The main compositional technique and hermeneutic strategy in *Wise* is grounded in the blues and the freer jazz or post-bop jazz of the 1960s. As Schultz reminds us, the poem might be thought of as musical score (165), a technique Baraka appropriated and revised from Langston Hughes. Building on Hughes’ experiments with the blues and jazz form in poetry, Baraka reimagines the older poet’s techniques to write lines that echo black music’s sonic and formal properties. The poet invokes musicians and songs as well, repeatedly asserting music’s symbolic, representational power and calling upon the black musical tradition extending from the PRE-HERE African drum to the time-bending Afrofuturism of avant garde jazz pioneer Sun Ra and his Arkestra.

This analysis builds on Craig Werner’s use of blues, jazz, and gospel “musical impulses,” itself derived from the writing of Ralph Ellison and Baraka’s *Blues People*. Werner makes a distinction between musical form and musical impulse by defining the latter as a mode or approach to the suffering and absurdity of black life in America. He quotes Ellison’s famous conceptualization of the blues as “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” in *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (2006). Werner has also defined the blues in his *Higher Ground: Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield and the Rise and Fall of American Soul* (2004) by

turning writer Albert Murray’s memorable ontological description of it as “the most fundamental of existential imperatives: affirmation, which is to say, reaffirmation and continuity in the face of adversity” (11). The jazz impulse, on the other hand, is one of “innovation” and “envisioning new possibilities that would transform the burdens and brutal experience of life into something better,”<sup>128</sup> while the gospel impulse, or what Werner also calls the “gospel vision” is one of that foregrounds “redemption.”<sup>129</sup> Like the blues and jazz impulses, the gospel vision provides an emotional and intellectual space to face “the burdens of history” by “testif[ing] to the value” of the self and community. It “holds out possibility that tomorrow will be different, better”<sup>130</sup> and in that way the gospel impulse, like gospel music, is a modern music linked to the sacred music of the enslaved, the Negro spiritual. Gospel, blues and jazz impulses are musical metaphors and interpretive strategies used to make sense of a world where black lives don’t seem to matter. They are complex approaches to facing the realities of exilic and existential experience, asserting, in primacy of feeling and an orientation to addressing the weight of history pressing down on the black soul—from chattel slavery to police brutality—as well as more personal economic and emotional struggles that are part of being human. Crucially, they do so with a sense of humor and with limited resignation.

This orientation to the world is inscribed within Baraka’s long poem. As a post-bop text, *Wise’s* hybridity—a mirror of post-bop’s heterogeneity—encompasses the blues, jazz, and gospel musical forms and impulses. As the prefix “post” announces, post-bop is a response to bebop, a post-World War II style of jazz that emphasized improvisatory phrasing and frenzied pacing over

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<sup>128</sup> Higher Ground, 215.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

the melodic, accessible, and commodified swing music it rejected. Bebop was counter-cultural and oppositional, but once its style became somewhat prescriptive and less popular with black audiences, many jazz musicians began to “make it new” by absorbing its lessons while at the same time returning to the folk phrasings, the recognizable elements of blues and gospel music, that had become less discernible in the technical dexterity and harmonic innovation of bebop. Hard bop, a return to the blues and gospel traditions, is historically influenced and a significant post-bop jazz form, but there are others pertinent to *Wise*, especially: modal jazz, a “revitalization of the relationship between improvised melody and its harmonic foundation”<sup>131</sup> where modes replace chord progressions as the backdrop for improvisation. Free jazz, a radical reappraisal of all preceding jazz conventions, envisioned based on collective improvisation. Post-bop jazz is a music that recurs to the blues and gospel traditions in its newer jazz phrasings, and with it, the sediments of a historically-influenced perspective on “life upon these shores.” Baraka’s long poem embraces post-bop jazz as a means of telling the black story through what the Art Ensemble of Chicago defined as “Great Black Music.”<sup>132</sup>

#### A BLUES PEOPLE’S JAZZ POEM: EXILIC HISTORY, PERFORMANCE IN *WISE*

*Wise Why’s Y’s* stands at the intersection of black musical performance and the tradition of black long poems. Although the poem was not published in its entirety until the mid nineties, its theoretical underpinnings were articulated decades before in Baraka’s most influential work, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963), a collection of essays exploring the interrelated-

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<sup>131</sup> See Scott Deveaux’s “The Modality of Miles Davis and John Coltrane,” 377.

<sup>132</sup> “Funk halo” is a generative term. Since funk is a hybrid music composed of various types of blues-based and African-derived music and a word that connotes malaise, music under its halo signals the hybridity of the long poem as a genre as well as the existential subjectivity the poem explores. At the same time the term references the poem’s physical characteristics on the page.

ness of black music, black identity and black history. *Blues People* argues that the blues and blues-based music are a form of resistance against the historical forces of white supremacy. At the same time, the blues and jazz express the internal shifts within black people across time. In *Blues People*, specific forms of the blues and blues-based music, called at one moment in *Wise* “music under / funk halo,” are shown to reflect the internal metamorphosis that occasions historical changes from “The African / The Slave” to the “The African / American,” a psychological voyage or “mind transportation” as “profound as a Mo / fo” (69-70). As Baraka began composing *Wise* in the eighties, he added a new introduction to *Blues People* for an anniversary edition that addresses the challenge of writing a long poem that might capture the profundity of the music. That is, Baraka's anniversary edition of his book articulates the difficulty of representing black history and vernacular performance through language or poetic discourse within the expectations of the long poem as a genre. The newer introduction responds to these challenges by appending to the idea of black music as the “creative orchestration” of black experience and black identity itself, to the simile of black folks imagined as “text, as tale, as story, as exposition, narrative.” Baraka synthesizes these frameworks into figures of the African-descended griot, the djeli ya who sings the tribal tale textually, a tribal text Baraka calls a communal “libretto” (ix).

Baraka characterizes his poem as a libretto not only because a libretto is a text that accompanies music (significantly often sacred music), but because it provides a bridge between the music of black people and the textual narration of their lives. Specifically, it unites the African American vernacular musical tradition to the tradition of black long poems. Consider the introduction of *Wise*. Echoing *Blues People*, Baraka suggests that music and history are to be core components of the poem that follows, and it immediately announces itself as a poem “in the tradition” of Melvin Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953) and Langston Hughes' *Ask Your*

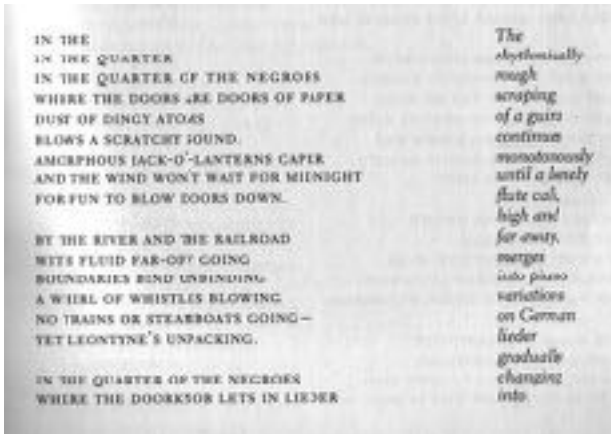
*Mama* (1961).<sup>133</sup> Baraka situates *Wise* within the tradition of *Libretto*, in part, to declare its status as a descendant of the (African) American twentieth-century long poem, one whose construction depends upon the thematics of exilic history and existential subjectivity, and whose structure is dependent on music. Without a doubt, the musical scaffolding of the Do-Re-Mi diatonic musical scale that structures Tolson's poem is a source of inspiration for Baraka's long poem, but this scale is not African in origin; instead, it is the poem's density of allusion, historical sweep, linguistic punning and play, and the very notion of the *Libretto* as a Diasporic tribal tale set to music, that animates *Wise*. Baraka's long poem then, may have been informed in many ways by Tolson's 1950s poem, but in terms of structure it is the idea of musical marginalia that *Wise* more directly appropriates. Baraka uses this dense and allusive practice, a practice akin to Tolson's footnotes, to "saturate"<sup>134</sup> his poem with both exile rhythm and existential tension, providing an emotional and experiential depth—a meta-commentary of black feelings<sup>135</sup> and a historical context in dialogue with the tale being told. The figures below illustrate Baraka's adoption of Hughes musical method of composition:

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<sup>133</sup> Baraka places the poem in the tradition of the West African griots in the title. Kathy Lou Shultz's work on *Wise* devotes a section of her reading to the griot tradition, while Jean-Philippe Marcoux's *Jazz Griot's* opens the door to further exploration. *Wise* is also positioned as an inheritor to Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems* and William Carlos Williams' *Patterson*. I only touch briefly on these elements as they are outside of the scope of this chapter.

<sup>134</sup> Henderson, "The Form of Things Unknown."

<sup>135</sup> The word "feelings" is used in several ways in Baraka's poetry and prose. At times it is used as a synonym for emotions. On other occasions he associates feelings with cultural forms that emerge in opposition to the dominant ideologies of white supremacy and capitalism. Over his career, Baraka stressed that feelings are best expressed in art that is both popular and advanced (critical of class exploitation). See the late essays "Jazz Criticism and Its Effect on the Music" and "Bopera Theory" in *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music*.



These examples show typographic and linguistic similarities and differences, even as both continue the thematic exploration of exilic history and the desire for home. Both Hughes and Baraka, for instance, print the main text of their poems against left margin. On the right side of the page, each poem has a music reference. Both *Ask Your Mama* and *Wise* embrace Afro-Latin Caribbean musical traditions to include a broader definition of blackness or African Diaspora, for Hughes the Dominican, percussive instrument guira, for Baraka the Latin-jazz composition “Caravan.” The poems invoke musicians including opera soprano Leontyne Price in *Ask Your Mama*, and musician-composers Juan Tizol and Duke Ellington in *Wise*. Water is a key element in each poem; Hughes’ ancient river and Baraka’s Atlantic ocean, waterways that suggest black journeys as does “Caravan,” the song in Baraka’s margin. Both poets speak, in oblique and direct ways, about black history, slavery and home, the last word in Baraka’s canto and the first image, “THE NEGRO QUARTERS” in *Ask Your Mama*. There are differences evident in these poems as well. Instead of placing musical citation—a stage direction in Hughes’ poem—in a vertical column down

the margin of the page as Hughes had done, Baraka situates it in the upper right hand section of the page. Hughes' all-capitalization typography is strikingly different from Baraka's whose phrasings and references "blacker" than the more assimilationist positing of opera and German lieder. Although also enjambed, the lines in *Ask Your Mama* are longer than Baraka's sometimes one word lines. Overall, however, Baraka poem owes a lot to Hughes' long poem, but I would like to examine the structure of Baraka's poem more closely. Canto 13, "Why's 13," is an example of the way *Wise* narrates black history:



Visually, the elevated music and composer citation, “(Mr. Pinetop’s Boogie) / PineTop Smith” is an epigraph of sorts, positioned as if it were the sun saturating the text beneath with its life-giving musical rays. The arresting center image on the page is key to understanding this poem. The word “Scream” has an exclamation mark and competes with the sun with its own ra-

diating power. Or it may be a visual representation of sound, in the case the vernacular oral tradition imagined as the sound of the primary griot-narrator John Coltrane's saxophone.

Coltrane was known for making his saxophone "scream," the wail of his people. This word image alludes to Haki Madhubuti's tribute to Coltrane *Don't Cry, Scream* (1969) and the tradition of Coltrane poems more generally, from Michael Harper's "Dear John, Dear Coltrane" to Sonia Sanchez's "a/coltrane/poem," and most of all to Baraka's famous poem "AM/TRAK," which humorously address Madhubuti (then named Don Lee), chiding him for "retrograde" cultural nationalism after Baraka had abandoned that political philosophy for Marxism. Perhaps then the image is also an amoeba, Baraka's claim to an originary jazz poetics. This idea of the sun and its connections to "son" and "song" references, is repeated throughout the poem, which, as discussed in the first two chapters of this project, can be traced to Phillis Wheatley's repeated sun imagery and to the Du Bois chapter on the sorrow songs in *Souls of Black Folk*, or perhaps Coltrane's "scream" is a flower, blooming under the rays of boogie woogie, an early "funk halo."

Also significant is the consistent positioning of the musical citation, below each poem's title. The musical reference is therefore inside of the tale, on the lines between the title and poem, but also outside of it. Perhaps this positioning is a visual representation of creative expression that finds its roots in the black story, yet is also beyond those confines. From a different perspective, the placement of the musical citations may show the syncretism and dynamism of black American music, always pulling from without and reaching from within in a constant state of renewal.

Whatever view is most persuasive, and perhaps both are, the oppositional forces of textuality (the poem itself) and performance (the musical citations) pressurize every poem in the volume. The dialectic of textuality and performance is further emphasized in the musicality (and /or vernacularity) of the poetic text and the textuality that attends each musical citation. Subordinating the

musical citation to the poem's title, and placing it within the poem, further suggests a refusal to privilege either black music or black text. In doing so *Wise* presents a novel, alternative approach to mediating the problematic of transforming black music into language, vernacular performance into textual performance.

The interconnection between sound and text is also evident in the homophony of the title *Wise Why's Y's* itself and in the homonymic riffing on it throughout the forty-poem volume. The verbal play is in service of the themes of exile rhythm and the existential tension black people grapple with. It would be possible to write an essay about the titles themselves and the way they illuminate (or obfuscate) the poems they name and the manner in which each one expresses or develops the larger themes of the poem. Take the examples, "You Wants To Know Y? (30)," "At the Colonial Y They Are Aesthetically and Culturally Deprived (Y's Later) (31)," or "WAR (A Y-er) # 34." Each illustrates of the textual play that mines the gap between text and meaning, while highlighting colonial struggle across the diaspora and the importance of cultural resistance. "GARVEY/Y's 21," speaks in the collective voice of Harlem's people in 1919 with their "Red wearing / Green needing / Black being," lines that evoke at once Pan-Africanism and the dream of African return, economic exploitation and the ontology of blackness. Garvey is embodied through his pomp, the "Relishes" (81) or "sparkle" of his epaulettes and iconic bicorn hats of his organization, the United Negro Improvement Association, which drew its power from the black hope for "Somethin / make us / stronger" (82). Garvey's failure highlights the bind of the diaspora—home but not home. "A NOTE TO PRESIDENT PASADOEKKEOH! & His Wise Ass Reply (16)" is only tangentially about Ronald Reagan "(A RAY GUN)." Its broad gaze takes in the "official" discourses of discipline, cultural appropriation and violence, while "W

WHY—EE-EE-EEE! (32)” is a title of musical mimicry, a wail to reflect the impatience of Freedom Movement strategist and activist Fannie Lou Hammer.

The homophony and punning evident in *Wise* constitute just one element of Baraka’s continued engagement with early and mid-twentieth century avant-garde aesthetics, especially the Projectivist poetics of Charles Olson and the Black Mountain school, Surrealism, and to a lesser extent, Dadaism. What most interests me, however, is the manner in which *Wise* combines these early and mid-twentieth century linguistic techniques with a Hughes-inspired black musical evocation, a saturation of black experience Baraka sustained in a poem of considerable length. The Projectivist ideas first espoused in Charles Olson’s “Projectivist Verse” (1950), an essay re-published as a pamphlet by Baraka’s Totem Press in 1959, influences the jazz aesthetic of *Wise*. Not surprisingly, Olson’s poem is open in its form, a form determined by its black historical content, while its lines are based upon breath measure and varied in length. In a speech given a year before his passing, as the title “Charles Olson and Sun Ra: A Note on Being Out” signals, Baraka makes explicit the connection between the mid-twentieth-century avant-garde poetics and experimental jazz that underpin his long poem. After citing Sun Ra and Olson as the “perfect mentors of the most advanced [avant-garde and popular] artists of the sixties and still at this moment,”<sup>136</sup> he champions Olson’s commitment to the “ear” or sound, a re-articulation of the importance of the aural from his 1959 essay “How You Sound?” The notion of the poem as a score was singled out by Baraka as a point of connection between Hughes, Tolson, and Olson at the same time. “Charles Olson and Sun Ra: A Note on Being Out” continues Baraka’s decades-long attack on “academic poetry,” those poems that come “contained in a box of dead preconsideration,” found in “English Departments” where “The Tories / [are] still in control / of the culture” (106), a

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<sup>136</sup> Olson Conference 2013

stance at work in *Wis̄e*, which takes seriously Charles Olson’s precept that a poem should be a “high energy construct” instead of, say, a sestina or sonnet. *Wis̄e* is brimming with kinetic energy in its exploration of African American history, propelled by enjambment, percussive accents, as well as swift image and “perception” progression. “You Wants to Know Y” (30)” is a high energy construct through the energy generated by breaking the syntax so that one is pulled from line to line:

What you must  
 deeg  
 can it be sd  
 you  
 can  
 is that  
 BeBop is  
 scat  
 is  
 African  
 American Bloods  
 Speaking still  
 pure African  
 Shoo be do bee  
 Wheeee  
 African  
 & Flying  
 (Cross oceans!)  
 Home. (98)

Baraka’s Olson-inspired poetics claims bebop, the jazz that energized so much of the poetry in Donald Allen’s influential 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry* and aesthetics after WWII, including the work of Olson, in his long historical poem. He asserts the music’s centrality as an element of the Projectivist method of composition, harnesses its energy, and counts in the genre’s measure when he “ponder[s] for the Bob-Trillionth time” (112). The poem makes explicit mention of BeBop and scats in “pure African / Shoo be do bee / Wheeee,” the only thing pure in the

poem. For certainly, the composers of the poem's cited music, Puerto Rican Juan Tizol and Duke Ellington, are not "pure" in any essentialist sense—and that's beside the point anyway—since what carries the diaspora away from "The Madness / of the Gods," in this "foreign land" is found in the bebop scat moment. The 'Wheee' is, of course, "we" fused into a kind of singularity here, of a joy capable of catapulting myth and consciousness "Flying / (Cross oceans!).

"You Wants to Know Y" (30)" propels itself towards Baraka's main destination in this poem and the volume as a whole: "Home." Home is both a spatial metaphor—a site of black subjectivity beyond double-consciousness—and a declaration of desire for the same "in-fact homeland of the free" imagined by verse propagandist James Madison Bell in the nineteenth century. It is a place to find respite from exile rhythm and existential tension. I agree, then, with Kathy Lou Schultz's interpretation of *Wise* as a jazz poem in search of home.<sup>137</sup> Schultz finds home in *Wise* at the moment of the jazz "break," a time in a jazz performance when there is an opening for "individualized expression riffing off of and away from the compositional line." She further highlights the importance of the jazz break in *Wise* by quoting Albert Murray's understanding of it as a moment of individual improvisation 'when you write your signature on the epidermis of actuality . . . how you come to terms with the void.' The break is the point of 'the greatest jeopardy' and 'greatest opportunity,' which, for Schultz, is a moment of home creation for the African American community as Baraka's fashions it. While I agree with Schultz's emphasis of improvisation in *Wise*, and even the yoking of home and improvisation, I think that the idea of home in the text doesn't end there. Schultz argues that "the creation of home in *Wise* is not a

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<sup>137</sup> While I remain indebted to Schultz's characterization of *Wise* as a jazz poem, I do not consider Baraka to be working in the tradition of epic per se. Although I would agree that his poem is written on an "epic grid," an idea I discussed in the introduction, it is not an epic, which may explain why Schultz details the numerous ways in which the poem departs from the older genre. Baraka is self-consciously working in the tradition of the twentieth century long poem; hence, Baraka's poem benefits from literary forbears and antecedent texts that had already grappled with issues of, for example, bardic voice and narration (which Baraka reimagines and reinvigorates in *Wise*).

physical location but a state of being that is improvised through collective performance” (187), and much in the text points in that direction, especially in the poem’s musical ekphrasis. Yet, Baraka’s preoccupation with home—an obsession that is a defining characteristic for any exiled people or person—must also be built upon revolutionary struggle, of which cultural processes, even one as sublime as jazz improvisation, is but one vital component.

The beautiful struggle, the Sisyphean freedom movements characterized by *Wise*, demands that home be created in the “physical location” of the United States, just as Phillis Wheatley, George Boyer Vashon, and Francis Ellen Watkins Harper had proposed in various, sometimes oblique guises. Baraka inherits and speaks in the exilic voice pioneered these earlier poets. His long poem demands home, in the contested physical location that is America, through political agitation and artistic creation (and the combination of both) as those poets of longer forms before him. The dialectic of activism and artistic creation in *Wise* is visible in “REPRISE (Not),” the second section of “Individualism As A Tourist (Y’s 17):

the Slave Narratives, blk  
& white abolitionists  
Fred Douglass, Walker’s *Appeal*  
Nat & dem

(White John  
was Brown!)

Hostilities, actual canons  
& deaths, politics  
as usual (53)

This poem continues Baraka’s engagement with T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). The musical citation of the poem is “(Eccentricity) / James P. Johnson . . . 1918” suggesting, through the synchrony of Eliot’s essay and Johnson’s composition, that the musician too had an “historical sense” of the “presence” of the past, the siftings of centuries carrying

black history and the musical forms that voice that experience. To extend the connection between Eliot and Johnson further, as one of the most innovative piano players of his era, the jazz musician who composed “The Charleston,” Johnson was aware of “ideal order” of black music before him, a history that informed his “really new” compositions and performances.

“Individualism As a Tourist (Y’s 17),” shows the relationship between political activism, black experience, and history (content) and form. Responding to a slightly modified aphorism from Robert Creeley (via Olson) that “form can never be more than an extension of content,” Baraka wrote in “The Jazz Avant-Garde” (1961) as “Form is determined by the nature of matter . . .” (Psalidas)” (*Black Music*, 81) “Matter” includes “Hostilities, actual cannons / & deaths, politics / as usual,” the poet’s attempt to push the reality of history through language while creating a poetry of political palpability as he had done in his poem “Black Art.” In that poem Baraka’s calls for “a black poem,” a political poem of “live / words of the hip world live flesh & / coursing blood” (*Reader*, 219) that might help create “a Black World” or home for African Americans in an alien land. In the quote from ‘Individualism As a Tourist’ above, Baraka cites slave narratives, Nat Turner’s 1831 slave revolt, and John Brown’s doomed raid on Harper’s Ferry as instances of creative artistry and political activism alongside the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 that enflamed Harper and Vashon. Baraka asserts that building a home in American necessitates the need to “Sing / Fight.” Baraka also refers to Walker’s 1829 “*Appeal*,” a work whose subtitle makes it clear that liberation is sought in the United States. The poem’s speaker, a persona of a “lone slave” representing the many, is “Darting toward a jumble / of color / & syncopation” (55) as he travels across time imagining Duke Ellington, surviving “1876-1915” that “nadir” of black American history. But he also is “thinking / about / organization” in the shadow of the nadir, “some kind / of Renaissance!” (56).

Extending his engagement with avant-garde aesthetics, which includes Projectivist poetics Baraka crafted a kind of Afro-Surrealism, a mode of Western modernism from into his poetic vision. Partially derived from the work of the group Ted Jones once called “Three darker brothers / Born Beat and hipper-than thou / Kaufman/Jones & [Ted] Joans,”— I would add Aimé Césaire and Henry Dumas—Afro-Surrealism represents a “vital intersection” of Surrealism, pan-Africanism, third-world Marxism and jazz.<sup>138</sup> Baraka shared this anti-racist, anti-imperialist orientation with Negritude poets, black Beat poets, “supersurrealist” Jayne Cortez and other black experimentalists. In his essay “Henry Dumas: Afro-Surreal Expressionist,” Baraka identifies key elements of his term. Afro-Surreal Expressionism is defined by:

1. “morality . . . magical resonating dream emotions and images; shifting ambiguous terror, implied revelation.”
2. “real life . . . constructed in the weirdness and poetry in which the contemporaneity of essential themes is clear.”
3. “strange, exuding a fantastic aura of ancient mystery and a quality almost Biblical”
4. “a kind of black liberation motif”
5. the dynamism of . . . imagery—plus an electric persona of black folklore, history, language, custom.”
6. “a mythological lyricism, strange yet *ethnically* familiar!” (164-165)

*Wise* was in the early stages of composition when this essay appeared. My interpretation of the poem will show how key Afro-Surrealist ideas were to Baraka’s long poem.

Although *Wise* is primarily a linguistic or literary artifact, the comprehension and interpretation of individual poems, groups of poems, or the volume as a whole is deepened by “hearing” the specific songs cited. Readers with a rich knowledge of the spirituals, the blues, and jazz are rewarded since they “hear” the music internally while the poem is being read; those without an encyclopedic knowledge of the black musical tradition, or the cited songs, can turn to a con-

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<sup>138</sup> Kathryn V. Lindberg’s “Mister Joans, to You: Readerly Surreality and Writerly Affiliation in Ted Joans, Tri-Continental Ex-Beatnik,” shows how Baraka’s Afro-Surrealism comes through Kaufman and Ted Joans and early Césaire.

temporary archive such as YouTube where all of *Wise's* songs have been posted in the order that they appear in the poem.<sup>139</sup> Sometimes an element may be more dominant and at other times less so. I aim to explicate several poems in the volume, beginning with the prelude, under the broad headings of gospel, blues impulse and music, always recognizing that forms and impulses are interrelated. The overlapping core principles of call and response and repetition may gesture towards any of the musical forms, and at the same time, these principles underpin the ethos of the musical impulses. When poems present more than one important musical impulse or element, I will address how a subordinate element may be in dialogue with a more pronounced one, I each case I will address how musical element or impulse, and the use of intensified figurative and poetic discourse, speak to exile rhythm and existential tension.

On a metaphorical level, as a hard-bop long poem, *Wise* might be thought of in terms of the rhythm section of a jazz ensemble, which Gary Giddins and Scott Deveaux's *Jazz* (2009) describes as the instruments most responsible for "working to create a supple and unified underpinning" of the jazz performance. The rhythm section's sound, especially the bass, is "the neutral backdrop for every other rhythmic gesture." The bass "plays a crucial harmonic role" since "Whenever a new chord appears on the . . . musical score that serves as the basis for the jazz performance," the bassist "is responsible for playing that chord's root" (36). Thus, music and history, exile and existential subjectivity, are akin to the bass in *Wise*, "a supple and unified underpinning." Other instruments of the rhythm section "contribute to the rhythmic foundation" too. For example, the piano and other instruments can "provide a variable layer, constantly adding to the rhythms." The pianist must also pay careful attention to the "rhythmic gestures" of the drummer in his freedom to determine the "voicing" or "arrangement of notes." The drum-

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<sup>139</sup> See Greg Dandele's "Songs in Amiri Baraka's *Wise Why's Y's*," <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLxIIQqa6Zw6XLtdLmPM6vKVXwY7iSbHMx>

mer plays “a more or less constant ‘ride’ pattern” with his right hand while playing “thunderous” punctuations or responses “while accenting the back beat on the high-hat symbol with his left foot” (37-38). This rhythmic activity, including the harmonic “arrangement of notes” of the pianist, and the improvisatory phrasings of the drummer, has an analogue in Baraka’s poetics. This analogy extends to the moments in the poem where Baraka turns to previous jazz poems (even his own) in an effort to bring a jazz soloist effect and ethos into the poem, especially when evoking or paying homage to Coltrane.

*Wise* begins not with music or lines of identifiable poetry, but with, instead, a set of stage directions<sup>140</sup> that suggests the creative process or verbing. Every poem in the volume, “is meant to be visualized” by a painter or illustrator such as Tom Feelings, known for his drawings of Africa, and African American experience, especially the Middle Passage. Immediately following this incorporation of the plastic arts, the poem describes some future performance, “a long improvisation, not yet completely transcribed.” This performance marks a symbolic attempt to forestall the codification of the process of improvisation—a core tension in the poem—and an early indication that the “dynamism” and “electric persona” of African American culture. “It is called, in its entirety,” the poem continues “*PRE-HERE/ISTIC* Sequence.” *PRE-HERE* is an undisclosed location in West Africa or at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. It follows, then, that the improvisational sequence, is both “*PRE-HERE*” the noun and “*ISTIC*” an adjective-forming suffix. This informs the reader that in the aftermath of African exile and the Middle Passage, the improvisation performed is from a culture no longer African, but *AFRICAN/ISTIC*. Note also the equal

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<sup>140</sup> Baraka calls *Wise* a score in “Amiri Baraka Analyzes How He Writes,” 226, a trait Meta DuEwa Jones sees in earlier poetry, which she describes in “Politics, Process & (Jazz) Performance: Amiri Baraka’s ‘It’s Nation Time’” 245. Jones finds “explicit recital cues” within, especially parenthetically, and outside of the text in Baraka’s poetry.

rhyme between the words **HERE/ISTIC** and *heuristic*, another means of pointing back to the foundational query of the poem: *Why?*

*Wise's* prelude sets the stage for the textual / oral dialectic the poem continually seeks to synthesize by imitating the conventions of a dramatic script, an early example of the generic restlessness at work throughout the poem. It is, however, the musical accompaniment—the characters' theme songs—that add depth to the representation of black experience. Baraka links the difficult history of becoming black (mind and body transportation) during and after the Middle Passage through drum rhythm. In doing so, the poem enacts his belief that “The Afro-American flows from Africa to cross where and become themselves or that experience dissociated from the African past . . . that passage is a historic documented rhythm.” Here is the prelude in its entirety:

DAT—Africa	(Drums-RWalker)
Deuce—Ghost (Snake Eyes)	(“Space Spy”— Moncur)
TREY—My Brother the King	(3/4 solos & Dun Dun)
FO <sup>2</sup> —Railroad of African Bones (Box Cars)	(Under water African Funeral Music)
FI <sup>2</sup> —I Ain't From Here	(Wade In The Water Afro-Xtian Lament)
WHY's Intro: <b>NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLE I SEEN</b> Traditional (Trombone Solo)	

These lines offer numerous avenues for interpretation,<sup>141</sup> but music and history are central and intertwined in this elegiac, hybrid passage, a combination of drama conventions and a game of dice or craps. There is much to mourn here: the complicity of Africans in the slave trade symbolized by “Ghost (Snake Eyes)” a symbol of betrayal; the tragedy of the Middle Passage where a “Railroad of African Bones” rests on the ocean floor; and the forced acculturation of African people in the New World where “I Aint From Here” is accompanied by a song pleading for God’s intercession. Unlike in the other poems of the volume, music is located on the right column of the page (although not in the margins), an acknowledgement of Hughes’ *Ask Your Mama* as a literary antecedent. Although not named, the precursor text that most haunts the start of Baraka’s poem, is Hayden’s original “Middle Passage.” The lament of being sold by “My brother the King,” echoes Hayden’s refrain “Our gods false to us, our kings betraying us.” Additionally, a spoken-word jazz improvisation of the poem called “Black Ivory,” alludes directly to the lines “Standing to America, bringing home / black gold, black ivory, black seed” from Hayden’s poem.

The historical drama starring “FO’,” “Deuce,” and other characters, rests upon the spiritual “Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen,” written in the shape of a table. Dolan Hubbard reminds us that “Du Bois opens *The Souls of Black Folk*” with the same affirming spiritual, which “sets the tone for [his] meditation on history” as a “master song” and “leitmotif” for his exploration of a people that “Through their music . . . critiqued a system” that rendered them dark and invisible,<sup>142</sup> Indeed, Du Bois begins the first thirteen chapters of his book with musical nota-

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<sup>141</sup> Kathy Lou Shultz was the first to make the connection between the opening lines and a game of craps, where both “Snake Eyes” and “Box Cars” are terms for rolling a two or twelve. She also states that the dice metaphor may well be “suggest[ing] Stéphane Mallarmé’s experimental method in *Un Coup de Dés (A Throw of the Dice)* (1897) (169).

<sup>142</sup> “Introduction” to *Souls of Black Folk: One hundred Years Later*, 16.

tions from the sorrow songs, a gesture that certainly influenced the structure of Baraka's long poem. The table constructed of "NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLE I / SEEN," with its troubled "I" at the line break, rests upon the historical "sifting of centuries," those exilic conditions and the musical responses to them. Given the trajectory of Baraka's writing, it is logical that he would begin his poem with the spirituals, since the aetiology of black music and culture he espoused was grounded in the spiritual realm. In "The Changing Same (R & B and New Black Music)" (1963) Baraka describes the foundation of black American cultural expression, in terms that remain compelling despite the masculinist phrasings:

The slave ship destroyed a great many formal art traditions of the Black man. The white man enforced such cultural rape. A 'cultureless' people is a people without memory. No history. This is the best state for slaves; to be objects, just like the rest of massa's possessions.

The stripping away, gradual erosion, of the pure African form as means of expression by Black people, and the gradual embracing of mixed Afro-Christian, Afro-American forms is an initial reference to the cultural philosophy of Black People, Black Art.

*(Baraka Reader, 187-88)*

The prelude to *Wisé* summons the spirit, history, and culture of a people through drumming. African drumming is performed here by an African American, an illustration of persistence of African music and its transmission of cultural philosophy or impulses, even in its syncretic "Afro-Xtian" form. Baraka makes it plain that the syncretism of African American music took place "under the threat of death," yet he nevertheless finds power in creation of spiritual

music created through worship services in “hush arbors” or “clandestined gatherings”<sup>143</sup> in “WAR (A Y-er) #34,” he imagines a that place “By daylight a seared / forest, church of the night /give way to lash rhythm” (111) of the “Ghost (Snake Eyes).” The citations of the poem are primarily folk in origin, written by those black and unknown bards who James Weldon Johnson heralded for touching the sacred fire of poetry and song. There is the African American drummer, “the 3/4 solos & Dun Dun,” “Under water /African Funeral Music,” “Wade in the Water,” and the foundational spiritual “Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen” given more importance through its differing, capitalized, typography. The song “Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen” immediately brings to mind its following line, “Nobody knows my sorrow,”<sup>144</sup> a direct recognition of the specificity of the long black struggle. It also suggests Du Bois’ chapel on the sorrow songs, evocative of black history.

The gospel impulse comes to *Wise* primarily through the sorrow songs. Although the spirituals are not gospel music, they are its progenitors, shaping the ethos of the spirituals informs both gospel music and the gospel impulse. Cheryl J. Sanders’ *Saints in Exile* (1996) describes the ethos of the spirituals and its connection to gospel music: “Negro spirituals,” are “communal,” Christian hymns composed by black people “from the crucible of slavery.”<sup>145</sup> These sacred songs, according to Sanders, are suspicious of white Biblical exegesis, so they offer an alternative based upon the black exilic experience in America, similar to Francis Ellen Watkin Harper’s *Moses: A Story of the Nile* and Phillis Wheatley’s “Goliath of Gath.” Sanders explains that Negro spirituals

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<sup>143</sup> See Cheryl J. Sanders’ “Negro Spirituals,” Kindle, Loc 1161.

<sup>144</sup> In some versions of the song the second lines is “Nobody knows but Jesus.” Even with this line, the specificity of the black American experience remains at the center of the lyrics.

<sup>145</sup> See Cheryl J. Sanders’ “Negro Spirituals,” Kindle, Loc 1161

are a primary source in the development of gospel music,<sup>146</sup> and still “a vital force” influencing the genre. It is from the spirituals that gospel gets its *communitas*, African Christian liturgy, vernacular expression, and the “good news” of hope at the foot of the cross “against a backdrop of deprivation and suffering.”<sup>147</sup> In *Souls* Du Bois argues that the faith at the core of the spirituals—and by extension at the center of gospel music—manifests “a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence” (122). In *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (1998) Craig Werner finds immense power in the “gospel impulse” of African Americans, which, even if it only “half-remembers the values brought to the new world by the men and women uprooted from West African cultures,” maintains “the connection between the spiritual and material worlds; the interdependence of self and community; the honoring of the elders and the ancestors; the recognition of the ever-changing flow of experience” (28). Werner describes the gospel impulse as a “three-step process: (1) acknowledging the burden; (2) bearing witness; (3) finding redemption. The burden grounds the song in the history of suffering that links individual and community experiences” (29-30). The gospel singer “testifies to the burden and the power of the spirit in moans or screams or harmonies so sweet they can make you cry,” Werner rightly attests. Gospel music bears witness to the burdens of history and names the Devil be it “sex, money hypocrisy or capitalism” or other evils (30).

Like Du Bois, Sanders and others, Werner emphasizes the importance of hope in the gospel impulse, “the possibility, that tomorrow may be different, better. With the help of the spirit and your people . . . you can get over, walk in Jerusalem, dance to the music” (31). This dance is a

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

communal one, a reflection of the collective ethos of a music created under the burden of black American history.

The prelude and later poems in *Wise* acknowledge the burdens of historical exile and its effect on black people in the New World, introducing principles of the gospel impulse—acknowledging and bearing witness to black history—that extend through the poem. *Wise* bears witness to African American history through a music, especially, but not only through its use of rhythm, while employing the imagery and themes of Afro-Surreal Expressionism to testify to the experiences of black Americans. The words and numerous individual syllables, starting with “DAT,” mimic the sonic properties of drumming, evoking musicians and songs, just as a drummer might play a specific sacred rhythm, or a akpwon (singer) chooses a specific song to call forth an Orisha (African deity)<sup>148</sup> R. Walker, the first musician named is, significantly, a drummer, and it is to the rhythm of the drum that the multi-voiced, unembodied griot begins to tell the tale of the tribe. The second musician named, avant-garde jazz pioneer Grachan Moncur III, is the composer of the spooky and netherworld-like “Space Spy,” a highly percussive theme song for “Deuce—Ghost (Snake Eyes),” a term Baraka uses to personify late stage capitalism and white conspirators in the enslavement of African people. Portia K. Maultsby’s “Black Spirituals: An Analysis of Textual Forms and Structures” describes the “Striking rhythmic quality” of the spirituals and their “marked similarity to African songs in form and structure,” rightly suggesting that the percussive nature of these lines is another way of bringing the spirituals into the language of poetry. “Space Spy,” from the Afrofuturistic album *New Africa* (1969), sounds like it was recorded underwater. It is a dirge that evokes the blues form by clustering its piano strikes in groups of three, but with an interval between the first strike and the two that follow. Its mournful trombone references a jazz

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<sup>148</sup> See Mary Ann Clark’s “Santería” for her discussion of “Orisha-centric” religious practices, 351-361.

funeral from the time when the dirge and sacred songs were the primary musical genres performed on the march to the cemetery.<sup>149</sup> The trombone punctuates the composition and mimics the sound of weeping. Cymbals proliferate like waves crashing against the hulls of slave ships-ships. Baraka knows that there are no words to capture black existential subjectivity so he allows the music to speak in the gaps and the silences of unbearable, unspeakable memory.

Percussive effects in subsequent lines continue the lament of black complicity in the transatlantic slave trade, again echoing Hayden's "Middle Passage." This time the poet returns to the humor he is known for. "TREY—My Brother the King" from line four is exposed by the "Dun Dun," the Yoruba "talking drum," and the instrument on which TREY's theme song is played. The two-strike sound of "Space Spy" recalls the dun dun sound of the television show *Law and Order*, a demotic referent that suggests guilt and African complicity in the slave trade.<sup>150</sup> Because it tells a historical tale, the dun dun stands synecdochically for the griot too. The words "King" and "brother" are used ironically, an extension of the critique Baraka continued to wage against the strand of black nationalist rhetoric that posits black Americans as descendants of African kings and queens, an idea the poet had critiqued since the early seventies as "subjective mystification" begetting "spookism."<sup>151</sup> By mimicking the sounds and tones of human speech, the dun dun represents the act of translation, a mirror of Baraka's transcriptions of the drum in this poem, and *Wise's* project of musical transcription more generally.

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<sup>149</sup> See Brenda Marie Osbey's, "One More Last Chance: Ritual and the Jazz Funeral" for her reflections on changes in New Orleans jazz funeral.

<sup>150</sup> Because of Baraka's career-long, Dadaist-inspired interest in demotic culture, it is conceivable that the two strike sound also alludes to the television show *Law and Order* with its ubiquitous "dun dun," once known as the "Most Recognizable Sound on TV." Hilary Greenbaum says that "The sound is intended to be reminiscent of both a jurist's gavel and a jail-cell door slamming. Judgment and imprisonment are major themes in this section and long poem as a whole. See "Who Made That Sound?" *The New York Times*, March 28, 2011.

<sup>151</sup> Quoted in James A. Miller. "'I Investigate the Sun': Amiri Baraka in the 1980s," 185.

Baraka's insistence on the treachery of African involvement in the transatlantic slave is underscored in performances (all different to some degree) of the not yet transcribed improvisations that begin *Wis̄e*, improvisations that are sometimes verbal, musical or both. In one performance, Baraka drums a rhythm on the dais and apostrophizes Africa in a reconfiguration of lines from the penultimate poem in *Wis̄e*, "So The King Sold The Farmer # 39," similar to the harmonic substitution<sup>152</sup> of a jazz musician:

Africa

Africa!

Mighty, ancient, beautiful Africa

Creator of the human being

Of speech

Of music

Of the dance

Ancient, mighty Africa

Beautiful Africa

But when you put your hand on your sister, made her a slave

Watch out Africa

Watch out Africa

The Ghost gon get you

When you put your hand on your brother and made him a slave

Watch out Africa!

Watch out Africa

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<sup>152</sup> In *Jazz*, Giddins and DeVaux describe harmonic substitution as "harmonies that replace existing chord progression. Baraka is using this technique in his spoken "improvisation" above.

The Ghost gon get you

Ah!

He continues in the voice of a slave in the hull of a slave ship, asking and then answering an ancestral question: How did I get here? The immediacy of the slave voice, embodied and present through Baraka's voice, is haunting:

How did I get here on my back in the dark with the wind and water blowing in my ears?

*How'd I get in the dark?*

How did I get here in the dark with the wind and water blowing through my ears?

Watch out! Obatala! Shango! Save me! Save me . . . Save me!

How did I get here on my back, in the dark, with the wind and water blowing in my ears?

My brother the King sold me to the Ghost

My brother the King sold me to the Ghost

In Baraka's verbal improvisations, Africa is extolled for its gifts to humankind but also indicted for its "Kings'" collusion with transatlantic slave traders and the act of selling African "Farmers" (a less exalted ancestral figure). The greed of those Africans who sold their brothers and sisters results in a "Railroad of African Bones / (Box Cars)," eliciting not only train imagery (itself a blues trope), and resistance (the underground railroad) but the mid-twentieth century genocide of Jews in Europe. Baraka returns to the holocaust repeatedly in *Wise*, using the Leninist frame of history as a "Spiral. Infinity / Stood up on its / head / (tail)" (67) to make clear the connection between the underlying economic and political conditions that led to the extermina-

tion of Africans and Jews in different historical periods. The theme for this genocide imagery is “(Under water / African Funeral / Music),” which along with the “Railroad of African Bones / (Box Cars),” is a clear example of Afro-Surreal Expressionism where the sound evocation of drumming at the bottom of the ocean is “strange, exuding a fantastic aura of ancient mystery.” The strange imagery extends to the tracks made of the now fleshless African bones, a terrifying concept made even more so by the specter of some future, monstrous train coming to ride those bones as well as a metaphor for the relationship between African bodies and the rise of capitalism that C. L. R. James and Eric Williams had long ago demanded we acknowledge.

If “Africa” is one of the primary characters in this play / canto, then its principal characteristics, according to Baraka’s definition in parentheses, is the drum, a catalyst for rhythm and dance, in addition to its use by the djeli or griot in the dissemination of history and the values.<sup>153</sup> The percussive nature of this poem, through the spirituals, avant-garde jazz or in more traditional African drumming, is reflected in the stressed syllable and onomatopoetic scat / word “DAT.” Although percussive sounding, the short “a” vowel sound signals the striking of a hi-hat or crash cymbal, again a return to “Space Spy” and the subterranean cemetery of the Atlantic Ocean. At the same time “DAT” is the black vernacular “That,” a pronoun indicating a thing observed, a thing to be highlighted—in this case “Africa,” recalls the poet’s earlier days as Beat writer when the speaker of “Notes for a Speech” from *Preface to a Twenty Volumes Suicide Note* (1961) mournfully claims “African blues / does not know me.”<sup>154</sup> Africa’s other feature is its people, in particular, its artists, figured in this first line as RWalker or *our* Walker. This Anglo American name is rich in

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<sup>154</sup> In “Notes for a Speech,” the last poem from his first collection *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961) Baraka (then Leroi Jones) was yet to experience Africa as a source for soul replenishment found in his later work. “He says, My own color / is not theirs. Lighter, white man / talk . . . Africa / is a foreign place,” *Baraka Reader*, 14.

interpretive possibility, designating not only the drummer R. Walker, but David Walker, the author of the *Appeal in Four Articles*, a hero who returns again in “Y’s 18 (Explain The Blues).” Walker is an early nineteenth century writer who draws black people “into / eternity” to speak of “all / we have / feel,” (60) the desire for freedom and home that transcends genre and time. The verb “walk” is also an indication of movement or journeying. The unification of the ideas of movement or journeying, drumming, artistry and Africa is buttressed by the balance of syllables (four) in each line, each resting on the stressed first syllable, “DAT” and “Drum” respectively. Stressed syllables (perhaps a symbolic representation of emotional stress, or tension, or maybe even violence) dominate the beginnings of all but one phrase unit in this section. For instance, if read vertically, and the poem’s arrangement in columns certainly invites that, the stressed syllables become even more pronounced with the words “DAT,” “DEUCE,” “TREY,” “FO’,” “FI,” and “WHY’s” and in the second column, “Drums,” “Space,” “3,” “Under,” “African,” “Music,” “Wade,” and “Water.” The rhythmic proliferation of stressed syllables and trochees is disrupted only when the solemn, iambic word “Lament” appears. Coming before the “WHY’s Intro” at the end of this section, this rhythmic shift, and the word itself, underscores the mournful tenor of the poem.

Baraka presents a more contemporary Afro-Xtian exegesis, interpreting and employing Lamentations to add not only a Biblical (mythological) dimension to his tale but to exemplify his own gospel vision, a sweeping vision looking back from the late twentieth century to an African past. Baraka turns to Lamentations because it presents a theology centered around the destruction of a nation and the Babylonian exile that follows. In other words, it is a biblical poem documenting exile rhythms: “After affliction and harsh labor / Judah has gone into exile. / . . . / She finds no resting place.” It also testifies to existential tensions when speaking of a feminized Judah

whose “priests groan, / her young women grieve, and she is in bitter anguish (Lamentations 1 , 3-4). Elizabeth Boase’s “Constructing Meaning in the Face of Suffering: Theodicy in Lamentations” characterizes the experiences that give the book its meaning, which suggests why it is alluded to in the prelude poem, “Wise 1,” and beyond:

The experience of suffering brings disjunction and discordance, and in the existential crisis which follows severe suffering human beings—both individually and in community—struggle to construct meaning . . . The book of Lamentations represents one example of a community’s struggle to construct meaning in the face of the severe suffering which followed the destruction of Jerusalem in 587.6 BCE. Within these poems we hear the cries of the suffering, a suffering which encompasses not only the physical pain and distress, but also a loss of coherence and the collapse of the very traditions which helped to form the community.

(449)

The shift in rhythm at the word “Lament,” the last word before the poem’s musical introduction, endows the prelude with a “quality, almost Biblical,” another hallmark of Afro-Surreal Expressionism. The word, both a descriptor of genre and synonym for mourning, is also a signifier of the responsibility of the poet / griot to acknowledge the burden of, and testify to, African American history. The accretion of images, music, and the word “lament,” as well as “Afro-Xt-ian” spiritual symbolism, taps into a deep reservoir of the Judeo-Christian understanding of suffering while at the same time honoring African American Biblical exegesis and African spiritual practices. Choosing to end the poem with the word “lament” is, I believe, an invitation to contemplate the poem through the lens of the biblical book of Lamentations, the mournful five poems that respond to the catastrophe that befell the tribe of Judah. The prelude poem itself, and

the long poem in its entirety, support this reading. The short lines of the poem, many consisting of a single word, intensify and concentrate meaning, so that each word, including the word “lament,” takes on increased significance. Additionally, *Wise* is a hybrid work that speaks to new historical conditions that arose from the largest forced migration in human history, and the rupture it imposed, to testify to slavery and exile. As Carleen Gandolfo has similarly noted, *Lamentations* is a book of mixed genre in this case “*qinah* (or dirge) and lament,” which comes in response to a radically new historical context.<sup>155</sup> Baraka’s long poem combines the funeral dirge, funereal drumming, the spirituals and avant-garde jazz, which when combined with the poem-wide linking of black and Jewish suffering, mark points of connection that align along the spiral of history. Similarly, Harper chose the Exodus story to express black political and spiritual desire during Reconstruction, that brief period “Between slavery & fascism / only a deep breath” (*Un Y’s / (28)*, (95).

To a lesser extent, however, hope and ultimately redemption, the third principle of the gospel impulse, is marked by the belief in God’s intervention. In “Wade in the Water,” God troubles the water on behalf of the enslaved and dispossessed. “Wade in the Water” finds correspondence in *Lamentations*, especially *Lamentations 3* (the most hopeful section of the biblical book), even if, like Wheatley’s Ovidian “Niobe,” the book as a whole is primarily an extended disquisition on suffering and grief. In *Wise*, the seemingly inchoate hope at the start of the poem emerges most potently when faith in God is merged with, or supplanted by, political, Sisyphean struggle. It is in the fight for an “in-fact homeland of the free” that Baraka’s tribe finds redemption and deliverance from the sin of the Middle Passage, slavery and other historical “crime[s] and

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<sup>155</sup> See Gandolfo’s “Form Criticism: Reading Form Dialogically,” 65-66.

wrong[s].<sup>156</sup> “Wade in the Water,” it should be remembered, is a double-voiced spiritual. It provided directions for masking the scent of the runaway slave by bodily immersion in water during the flight to freedom, even as it called on God’s assistance or spiritual baptism. It follows, then, that when the song references Moses, it is the same doubled figure found in Harper’s poem—Moses of the Bible and the black woman Moses—Harriet Tubman,—another instance of the “Sing! / Fight!” ethos of the poem.

*Wise* underscores the principle of redemption through the citation of, and saturation by, gospel music and the spirituals. “Wise 9,” highlights the redemption or recuperation from historical sins and psychic communal rupture through its incorporation of its musical reference “(God Don’t Never Change) / Rev. Pearly Brown.” It also emphasizes this message through the skillful use of repetition (itself a gloss on the cited song and black vernacular forms more generally). Baraka initially addressed this version of the song, “God Don’t Never Change” in “expressive language” in *Home: Social Essays* (1966). What most captivated Baraka about the song was not only its use of expressive lyrics, but what those lyrics reveal about the singer’s (a hence his people’s) orientation to the world. Baraka describes the singer and the language of his song as “a precise thing,” and he insists that Rev. Brown “does not mean ‘God does not ever change!’ He means ‘God don’t never change!’” Baraka maintains that “The difference” between these two statements, one black vernacular speech the other standard English, resides in the “quality of existence” and “its manifestation as a *tone* and *rhythm* (his italics) by which people live.” In “Wise 9” the oracular griot of the poem, perhaps an amalgam of Rev Pearly Brown and others, establishes the setting of the poem in the early twentieth century after the war for “liberation / to end / slave times” and during an era of “. . . cities / of light and newing” (20).

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<sup>156</sup> James M. Whitfield’s “America,” a 160-line poem that argues black America experienced a “baser thrall,” and “darker gloom” than the ancients of Babylon and Egypt.

“Wise 9” then begins to expose those who have most harmed Baraka’s community, one way of testifying to black exilic experience:

So what these faces laws hover  
 these swine wind law death people  
 these death tie rebs return to crow  
 these slavemaster corpse leap off the flo  
 these sheet face coward monster haints  
 these death word carriers and slave lovers

“Wise 9” interweaves anaphora and consonance, rhetorical figures of repetition, with black vernacular speech to name those responsible for the political, physical, and spiritual death of black people from Reconstruction through the early twentieth century. The ideas of faces that “hover,” a “death . . . reb” who “return[s],” a “corpse” who “leap[s] off the flo,” and a “haint” are all poetic renderings of ghosts as well as metaphors for the Ku Klux Klan. Additionally, Baraka uses these devices to show how African Americans found redemption or deliverance from the difficult experiences that followed the Civil War, especially the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Anaphora is the primary method for exposing the enemy of the tribe. The brief third stanza poses questions about the definition of liberation and who gets to define it: “who they / who say / what free / gone be” (20). The repetition of “who say” is answered as those whose “laws hover” over the African American population. The poem repeats the pronoun “these” in every line of the stanza. In the first line, the word “these” is in the middle of the sentence, followed by the anaphoric lines which are anchored by the same pronoun “these,” a word of specificity and indication, or in this case indictment. The specificity of naming “these” people is followed by phrases that eschew

punctuation and linking verbs. Instead, the dense language of the stanza links Baraka's notion of the "Ghost—Snake Eyes" from the prelude poem, to the ghosts' culpability in black deaths.

In addition to anaphora, the poem uses consonance to identify the enemy. The "s" sound, a repetition of the "s" of Snake Eyes, is dominant. The word "So" begins the stanza, followed by "swine," a derogatory term for a racist, "slavemaster," "sheet face" or Klan member. A "[S]lave lover," might be a person who supports the institution of slavery, or it may be a person responsible for the sexual coercion or rape of slaves. The hard "c" sound further indicts those who create the conditions for black death as "carrier[s]" of the infectious disease of white supremacy, purveyors of Jim "crow" laws. The poem equates "Ghost" with a culture of death manifested in "coward[ly]" and "corpse" like bodies. The "d" sound from the word death and forms of the word "die" proliferates, a return to the prelude poem with its game of dice. The word death is used three times in this six-line stanza, and it, or a form of the word die, is repeated seven more times in this 39-line poem. It is in the use of the word death and its cognates that Baraka employs place most effectively. This stanza, and the poem itself, uses black speech to tell the tale of the tribe, which begins in the second stanza with the phrase "we free," which is the political and spiritual counter point to the various forms of black death at the poem's center. In some ways the poem might be considered as much an exploration of "who say" as it is an interrogation of the historical "why" of black American history. That is to say, although Baraka names the enemy, for example as "death tie rebs," he does not cede agency to the enslavers and their descendants regardless of their hovering or overarching laws. This is clear from the first word of the stanza: "So," modifies the entire stanza that follows. From this perspective, the poem asserts that the quest for freedom and equality could not be extinguished by "haints" despite their efforts. It also

indicates that redemption can be found beyond the Klan, Jim Crow laws, and death after “PRE-  
HERE.”

free is who we are and be  
 love who what will life us we  
 struggle love struggle—against primitive death  
 while you walking round  
 spirit death tie you down  
 slave death and servant death and let me work for us to be. (21)

In one of the earliest interpretations of “Wise I,” Daniel Won-gu Kim quotes lines from the poem that in performances are spoken as an instrumental version of the spiritual “Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen,” played by a saxophonist, fades out. It begins:

If you ever find  
 yourself, some where  
 lost and surrounded  
 by enemies  
 who wont let you speak your own language  
 who destroy your statues  
 & instruments, who ban your  
 oom boom ba boom  
 you in deep deep  
 trouble (7)

The “oom boom ba boom” of the poem is, importantly, a striking onomatopoeic rendering of the African drum, a means of communication, cultural expression, and a catalyst for spiritual and ancestral possession. Kim describes these lines in strikingly aesthetic terms, seeing danger for the “Afrikan subject threatened with enslavement into gray Western subjectivity.” While Dada may indeed have influenced Baraka here, Kim’s reading obscures the historical resonances of the line and its context.<sup>157</sup> “Wise 1” testifies to a history where Africans were enslaved; their language, whether through words or drum, banned; their religion and culture, signified by the destruction of their statues, destroyed. The griot or storyteller speaks to “you” plural, the community “lost and surrounded / by enemies” and deep in the “trouble of exile.” The word “If” is a “zero conditional,” which uses the simple present tense “to discuss events or situations that are general truths or facts, i.e., those that are possible at any time,”<sup>158</sup> In this case it refers to historical truths that may also speak to present conditions, one of several moments in the poem when the concept of history as a spiral—with its repeated patterns of exploitation and resistance to that oppression—and Afro-Surreal Expressionism come together. The limitation of Kim’s criticism though, is the part of the poem he leaves out—the part that makes this a blues poem. It reads:

If you ever find  
yourself, some where  
lost and surrounded

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<sup>157</sup> Granted, Kim uses “Wise 1” to set up a critique of interpretations of Baraka’s oeuvre that ignore its complexity through a over emphasis on the destructive nature of his poetry and post-bebop jazz, but in doing so he ignores unfortunately misses some of the complexity of “Wise 1.”

<sup>158</sup> See Supakorn Phoocharoensil’s “If-conditionals in Authentic Corpus-based English.” *Review of European Studies* 6.3 (Sept 2014), p. 64.

by enemies  
 who wont let you speak your own language  
 who destroy your statues  
 & instruments, who ban your  
 oom boom ba boom  
 you in deep deep  
 trouble

humph!

probably take you several hundred years  
 to get  
 out!

This is the blues, funny and horrible at the same time.

This second poem and its title “Wise 1” invokes “Wise One,” the second song from John Coltrane’s widely-acclaimed “epic,”<sup>159</sup> post-bop album *Crescent Islam* (1964) beyond the exact rhyme of the two titles and secondary placements within larger works. Kalamu ya Salaam refers to as “an ultra-modern exploration of the blues.”<sup>160</sup> The title intimates a connection between Coltrane and the griot-narrator, an identity that shifts throughout the poem. The poem presents a stance towards exilic history (some where / lost) and existential subjectivity (“the confusion /

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<sup>159</sup> See the liner notes for *Crescent* written by Michael G. Nastos

<sup>160</sup> See Kalamu Salaam’s blog post: "Various Artists: "Lonnie's Lament" Mixtape." *Breath of Life: A Conversation about Black Music*. <<http://www.kalamu.com/bol/?http://www.kalamu.com/bol/2011/05/31/various-artists-%E2%80%9Clonnie%E2%80%99s-lament%E2%80%9D-mixtape/>>.

the sickness” (8)) symbolized first by the spiritual citation “Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen” and later by the music of the Coltrane album and the impulses that reflect the musics’ ethos. Since Coltrane’s epic album *A Love Supreme* is the ultimate musical reference for Baraka’s long poem, and because *Crescent* is considered to be the prelude to that album, “Wise 1,” represents an extension of mournful prelude continued from the first unnamed poem. The word “Lament” reappears, this time from the song “Lonnie’s Lament,” which, along with the first musical citation, “shines” down upon the poem, revealing a continued engagement with Lamentations and hence the testifying, Afro-diasporic focus of the poem. It also contributes to the steady building of musical and historical references, lament, loss, and sorrow that gives the poem its elegiac cast. The titles on the album *Crescent*, which include, in order, “Crescent,” “Wise One,” “Bessie’s Blues,” “Lonnie’s Lament,” and finally “The Drum Thing,” signify sacred slave songs, the blues and again the drum and its rhythms, all of which saturate this early poem and many of the poems that follow. The album title *Crescent* evokes the semi-circular shapes that begin each section of Jean Toomer’s hybrid *Cane*, a Harlem Renaissance text Baraka admired and shared with other poets during the Black Arts Movement.<sup>161</sup> “The Drum Thing,” the final song on *Crescent*, informs the “oom boom ba boom” or the changing same as manifested through the percussive genius of Elvin Jones.

The hermeneutics, form, and sound saturate of the blues the first eight numbered poems in *Wise*, and dominate in numerous poems until the end of the final poem “Y The Link Will Not Always Be ‘Missing’ / #40,” which ends on a blues note. That the first numbered poem of *Wise* would be a poem steeped in the blues is not surprising because, for Baraka’s black people are

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<sup>161</sup> Baraka’s long poem suggests an affinity with Toomer’s *Cane*. *Cane*’s motifs and themes of black folklore, Southern culture, mourning, railroads, and “Box Seats” (reinterpreted in *Wise* as “Box Cars”) invite future comparisons between the texts.

blues people. The exile rhythms that animate *Wise's* poetics include vibrations that continue to emanate from the “monumental rupture” that was the Middle Passage and all that followed from it. The *rhythms* of exile, emphasize the historicity of exile experience. The poem’s temporality, repetition and sometimes irregular patterns of occurrence point to the effects of history on human beings, effects which are existential in nature, an ethos that demands an interrogation and exploration of the African American subject in exile. It is this psychological burden and liminal subjectivity that Baraka repeatedly returns to in his work, as in his essay “‘black’ is a country” from *Home: Social Essays* (1966): “We *are* Americans, which is our strength as well as our desperation” (104). By placing the word black in quotations, the poet calls attention to its temporal and spatial construction, and the phrase also suggests that this definition of black identity is not a choice but is the result of exilic history.

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