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Chapter 5

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SHEETS: TWO AUTHORS IN SEARCH OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE: RALPH ELLISON AND COLSON WHITEHEAD

Keywords: Baldwin, *Cane*, doubling, Ellison, Hughes, *Invisible Man*, *Native Son*, *The Intuitionist*, Toomer, Whitehead, Wright

MFS: Dr. Sheets, let's begin by talking about the black experience and the Harlem Renaissance. Why do we need these themes as "backdrops" so to speak?

DS: The trauma of slavery and its repercussions permeate the black experience in our country. Slavery began in the United States in the 17th century during the colonial era and extended through the Civil War. During Reconstruction and its aftermath, many repressive social and economic conditions continued by means of Jim Crow—institutional segregation that extended broadly to encompass schools, hotels, restaurants, commercial businesses, public facilities, and potentially every aspect of public life. Indeed, the influence of Jim Crow extended into the North and throughout many parts of the country. Then, there were the onerous tenant farming and sharecropping practices that restricted black economic opportunities in the South. These measures were a social and economic byproduct of two centuries of institutional slavery. Not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were these injustices legally rectified. Another generation or two would pass before these guarantees to social and economic freedom became generally applicable.

Nevertheless, the Harlem Renaissance, which flowered in the 1920s and continued its influence until as late as 1940, was a tremendous boon to African-American culture. It was the byproduct of the Great Migration of African-Americans from the harsh conditions prevailing in the South to the relative freedom of the Northeastern, Midwestern, and Western

regions of the country. From 1910 to 1930, roughly 1.6 million blacks resettled from the South to other geographical areas, and during the second Great Migration (1940-1970) another five million were relocated. With migration and enhanced freedoms came cultural enrichment. Nowhere was this more evident during the first Great Migration than in Harlem, a northern portion of the borough of Manhattan where many African-Americans lived. The Harlem Renaissance included musicians—especially jazz and blues—(Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Billie Holiday, Lena Horne, Thelonious Monk, Jelly Roll Morton, Ma Rainey, Fats Waller, and many others), dancers (notably, Josephine Baker and Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson), as well as entertainers, choreographers, a producer (Leonard Harper), intellectuals (particularly, W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Alain Locke), and authors—poets, dramatists, and novelists and story writers (whose members included Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and my literary favorite, Jean Toomer).

It’s impossible to appreciate the literary contributions of Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Colson Whitehead, as well as other black men and women, without acknowledging the importance of the Harlem Renaissance. Its influence permeated black culture throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries, extending far beyond the confines of Harlem to become a foundational part of American culture. Nowhere is its legacy more prevalent than in jazz and blues, our indigenous African-American music.

How, then, did the foundational black experience in America and the Harlem Renaissance shape the literary development of Ralph Ellison, thereby nurturing the creation of his groundbreaking novel *Invisible Man* (1952)? Ralph Ellison grew up in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The state had only been created in 1907. Significant numbers of African-Americans migrated there in hopes of greater economic and social freedom from the onerous Jim Crow practices in the South. They were drawn to Oklahoma by the prospect of free one-hundred-acre land parcels offered to new settlers. While segregationist policies were also practiced in Oklahoma and throughout much of the country until at least the 1960s, nevertheless, as a frontier state Oklahoma provided freedoms and economic opportunities unimaginable in the South. Thus for Ellison, borrowing from Heraclitus, “geography is fate” (Callahan, 2003, p. xviii; Ellison, 2003a, p. 606).

Ellison was named after Ralph Waldo Emerson. His family cultivated relations across racial boundaries, which nurtured the psychological and moral motivations to transcend racial barriers. Ellison was of mixed-raced ancestry. He studied trumpet with Ludwig Hebestreit, a German-born musician who ran a high school music program and created the Oklahoma City Junior Symphony Orchestra. His support helped Ellison gain acceptance in the music program at Tuskegee Institute, an African-American college founded by Booker T. Washington and now known as Tuskegee University. There Ellison studied for three years before moving to New York. Almost immediately upon arrival, he had the good fortune to meet African-American Harlem Renaissance poet and writer Langston Hughes.

MFS: Let's now turn to some of the principal writers who were either part of the Harlem Renaissance or influenced by it—Langston Hughes (1902-1967), Richard Wright (1908-1960), Ralph Ellison (1914-1994), and James Baldwin (1924-1987).

Langston Hughes

DS: Of the writers you mention, only Langston Hughes was associated with the Harlem Renaissance, although Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin spent a pivotal part of their lives in Harlem and were directly influenced by the Harlem Renaissance. In the case of Langston Hughes, who like Ellison was a Midwesterner, his father abandoned the family when he was young, heading to Cuba and later Mexico. As with many black writers during the 1930s, Hughes was affiliated with the Communist Party, as were both Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

These leftist leanings were hardly surprising. As Arnold Rampersad noted, in a very racially charged society, “only the Communist Party officially defined blacks as socially and intellectually equal to whites” (Rampersad, 2007, p. 117). Indeed, the Communist Party had designated Harlem as “a national concentration point” since 1933 (Rampersad, 2007, p. 92). That was important because during the Depression cultural funding all but disappeared, leaving the Communist Party and its literary organs as the primary support, financially and artistically, for Harlem writers. As Richard Wright noted, “The Communist Party had been the only road out of the Black Belt for me” (Rampersad, 2007, p. 117).

Nevertheless, both Wright and Ellison understood implicitly that Communist support of blacks was a token gesture, namely, that the black institutions and societal customs and practices held no interest for the party. Rather, it supported the black community as a means to an end, the recruitment of disadvantaged workers in America for the Communist cause. The result was, suggested Ben Burns, a white, ex-Communist member who later served as the first editor for *Ebony* magazine, “the contrived, fawning, tiptoe behavior of Party people in relationship to Negroes” (citing Burns, Rampersad, 2007, p. 117).

In recent years there's been a great deal of speculation about whether Langston Hughes was homosexual. Rampersad has suggested that in his encounters with fellow black gay artists, notably Countee Cullen and Alain Locke, that “Hughes's sexual desire, such as it was, became not so much sublimated as vaporized” (Rampersad, 2002, p. 69). However Jean Blackwell Hutson, who served as director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, has made a more direct assertion: “He was always eluding marriage. He said marriage and career didn't work. . . . It wasn't until his later years that I became convinced he was homosexual” (Hutson & Nelson, 1992, p. 96).

What can be said about Langston Hughes's writing? Above all, his poetry and fiction are accessible. That is, the reader doesn't have to be a literary expert to understand his poetry and see its association with the blues. Take, for instance, the finale of “The Weary Blues” in which the reader feels the tapping beat of the blues, hears the sound of the piano, listens to the plaintive voice of the singer, and nods to the rhythmic emphasis of couplets that frequently rhyme: “floor”/“more”; “Blues”/“satisfied”, “mo”/“died”, “tune”/“moon”, “bed”/“head”, and concluding with “dead”.

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
 He played a few chords then he sang some more—
 “I got the Weary Blues
 And I can’t be satisfied.
 Got the Weary Blues
 And can’t be satisfied—
 I ain’t happy no mo’
 And I wish that I had died”.
 And far into the night he crooned that tune.
 The stars went out and so did the moon.
 The singer stopped playing and went to bed
 While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
 He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead.
 (Hughes, 2007, p. 50)

Langston Hughes pioneered a distinctive style of blues and jazz poetry evident in his collection *The Weary Blues* (1926). His stories *The Ways of White Folks* (1934) movingly convey the racial injustice of his times. His autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940) is regarded today as the best reminiscence of the Harlem Renaissance.

Hughes championed many black artists and proved a generous mentor to Ralph Ellison. He introduced him to important artists, inviting him to attend a party at Duke Ellington’s house, gave Ellison his old typewriter, sent him books written by Thomas Mann, and wrote to Richard Wright on behalf of Ellison in order to foster a relationship between the two.

However, just as Hemingway and Faulkner would later criticize Sherwood Anderson as their literary talents developed, Ellison became increasingly more judgmental of Hughes’s writing as he cultivated his literary standards and pursued his relationship with Richard Wright. In part this shift might have been in response to Hughes’s “propaganda-driven art” (Rampersad, 2007, p. 122). But the overriding reason was a drive for excellence. Thus, as Rampersad noted, “the more Ralph read Malraux and Dostoyevsky, the more he found it hard to praise Hughes (and every other black writer save Wright) as an artist” (Rampersad, 2007, p. 122). Hughes’s writing, Ellison felt, aimed low—for a popular audience and, therefore, failed to achieve the exalted standards of which he was clearly capable. Again, quoting Rampersad, “Ralph knew firsthand how well read, cosmopolitan, and sophisticated Hughes was. Why weren’t these qualities better represented in his art?” (Rampersad, 2007, p. 122).

Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, & James Baldwin

DS: Whereas both Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison grew up in the Midwest and this shaped their worldview, Richard Wright’s childhood was in the South where Jim Crow was pervasive. He was born on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi. His father, who was a sharecropper and illiterate, left by the time his son was six. At one point both he and his brother were placed in an orphanage. His mother suffered debilitating strokes, and the family struggled financially to survive. Eventually, they lived with his maternal grandmother. Wright was largely self-educated, no mean feat given his circumstances and the oppressive Jim Crow laws restricting educational opportunities for blacks in the South. Wright’s anger at his deprivation wrought by economic hardship and racial injustice fueled his fiction, essays, and

autobiography. Today he is best remembered for his novel *Native Son* (1940) and his autobiography, published initially as *Black Boy* (1945), which included only the first fourteen chapters recounting the difficult circumstances of his childhood growing up in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas. However in 1991 his autobiography was restored to its original form, encompassing his youth in the South and his young adulthood in Chicago. It was renamed *Black Boy (American Hunger)* and published by the Library of America. Let's examine *Native Son* and *Black Boy*.

Native Son presents the story of a young black man Bigger Thomas—age 20—who lives in squalor in a single room with his mother and younger brother and sister in the South Side of Chicago. Part I is entitled “Fear”. Bigger has committed some robberies with his friends, been sent to reform school, and appears headed for a life of crime. In order for the family to continue to receive financial support, a social worker arranges for him to interview for a job as a chauffeur with a prominent, “progressive” white family, the Daltons. He is hired. He drives the daughter, Mary, and her lover, a (white) Communist. They insist that he spend the evening with them and eat in a black restaurant in the South Side of Chicago that he has recommended. Bigger brings Mary, who is inebriated, home. He carries her to her bedroom, struggling to find his way in the dark, and places her on the bed. When her blind mother enters the room and calls her daughter's name, Bigger become terrified, smothering Mary with a pillow until she dies. Part II is “Flight”. This section chronicles Bigger's efforts to flee following the murder and disposal of Mary in the furnace. During his flight from authorities, he rapes and murders his girlfriend, Bessie, who he fears will betray him. Part III is “Fate”. Bigger is condemned to death. Nevertheless, his acts of violence and murder prove to be existential moments of exhilaration for Bigger Thomas, as he acknowledges toward the end of Book II: “In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that ever happened to him. He was living truly and deeply . . . Never had his will been so free” (Wright, 2005, p. 239).

Native Son was crafted in the style of Naturalism introduced by the French writer Émile Zola (1840-1902), as well as American Naturalism exemplified in the fiction of Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and James T. Farrell. Naturalism was a byproduct of literary realism and was influenced by Darwin's evolutionary theory. It regards man's actions as an inevitable outcome of his dire social and economic circumstances, which reduce him to animalistic urges, brute force, and heinous crimes. Or as George Becker has suggested, the philosophical foundations of naturalism are predicated on “pessimistic materialistic determinism” that is all but devoid of free will and self-determination (citing Becker, Campbell. 2013).

Naturalism decisively shaped Wright's fiction. For as he would later suggest in his autobiography *Black Boy*, “I was overwhelmed. . . . It would have been impossible for me to have told anyone what I derived from these novels. . . . All my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel” (citing from *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, Wright, 1991a, p. 239). How exactly did Naturalism shape his fiction? In Wright's essay “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” (1940), he wrote that his goal was to create a novel for readers “so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears” (Wright, 1991b, p. 874). Ellison, who read *Native Son* “as it came off the typewriter” (Rampersad, 2007, p. 118), absorbed it emotionally, rather than analytically, noting, “I didn't know what to think of it except that it was wonderful” (Rampersad, 2007, p. 118).

What makes Richard Wright's fiction compelling, suggests Rampersad, was that “no writer had ever applied the abrasive of naturalism so ruthlessly to black life, or used Marxism

to cut so deeply into its core” (Rampersad, 2007, pp. 118-119). For while “Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Dos Passos, and others had exposed the corruption of capitalism and liberalism”, he suggests, “no one had linked this corruption so pervasively to racism” (Rampersad, 2007, p. 119).

The result was, as the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* suggests, that “*Native Son* is not only the novel that established Richard Wright as a major literary talent of the twentieth century but also the novel whose mix of urban realism, sociological theory, and naturalistic determinism helped define and influence almost the entire sweep of African American fiction of the post-World War II era” (Gates & Smith, 2014b, p. 120).

The publication of *Native Son* led socialist literary critic Irving Howe in 1963 to celebrate it as the quintessential example of black fiction crafted by an author against which all other literary efforts by black writers must be evaluated and judged. Howe’s assessment, which anticipates the “white privilege” arguments expounded by progressives today, was made not on the quality of the writing or the literary substance of the novel, but rather on the angry emotions and violent actions that implicate the privileged white world as responsible for fostering and perpetuating racial, social, and economic inequities towards blacks in America. I’ll quote from a portion of Howe’s essay “Black Boys and Native Sons”.

The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. . . . In all its crudeness, melodrama, and claustrophobia of vision, Richard Wright’s novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture.

A blow at the white man, the novel forced him to recognize himself as an oppressor. A blow at the black man, the novel forced him to recognize the cost of his submission. *Native Son* assaulted the most cherished of American vanities: the hope that the accumulated injustice of the past would bring with it no lasting penalties. (Howe, 1963)

As fate would have it, James Baldwin, whom Wright had supported and who Baldwin himself later acknowledged as “the greatest black writer in the world for me” during his early literary development (Baldwin, 1998a, p. 253), published an explosively critical essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949). It linked the overwrought emotionalism of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) with Wright’s inflammatory *Native Son*. Baldwin’s criticism was withering. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, “that cornerstone of American social protest fiction”, he argued, “is a very bad novel, having in its self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality, much in common with *Little Women*” (Baldwin, 1998b, pp. 11-12). For Baldwin, excessive sentimentality is a potent vice. For behind those “wet eyes” lies “the mask of cruelty”, the inexorable outcome of the writer’s deep-seated flaws: “His aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity” (Baldwin, 1998b, p. 12).

But if excessive sentimentality is villainous, so too, suggests Baldwin, are the emotions of hate and fear that ignite violence in Richard Wright’s fiction. “All of Bigger’s life”, Baldwin argues, is shaped “by his hatred and his fear” (Baldwin, 1998b, p. 18), which deprives him of his humanity. Fear propels his murderous impulses and hate causes him to rape. Thus for Baldwin, “Bigger is Uncle Tom’s descendant, flesh of his flesh” (Baldwin, 1998b, p. 18). They’re opposites, yet “locked together in a deadly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses” (Baldwin, 1998b, p. 18). Both are

devoid of the life-force of humanity that Baldwin feels should characterize literary fiction, a point which he emphasizes in his conclusion to drive home his argument.

For Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth. But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it. The failure of the protest novel lies in its reject of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended. (Baldwin, 1998b, p. 18)

While *Native Son* is explosive fiction, Richard Wright's autobiographical *Black Boy* (1945) is seen by many critics as his masterpiece. Emulating Frederick Douglas's autobiography—*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, an American Slave* (1945)—it draws upon the conventions of the slave narrative to reveal the harsh and debilitating circumstances of his childhood in the deep South, suggesting a direct analogy with slavery. If *Native Son*, a Book-of-the-Month Club choice, sold 200,000 copies within three weeks, *Black Boy* sold a staggering 450,000 copies four months after its publication, which made it the most successful nonfiction book of its time (Gates & Smith, 2014b, pp. 120-121).

In reviewing *Black Boy*, Ellison argued that it was a “personal catastrophe expressed lyrically”, noting that the book would “do much to redefine the problem of the Negro and American Democracy” (Ellison, 2003c, pp. 128-129). Years later Ralph Ellison suggested in his essay “Remembering Richard Wright” (1971) that *Black Boy* is more of a “‘nonfiction’ novel” than an autobiographical story (Ellison, 2003b, p. 676). However its intent, he stressed, is not to deceive, but rather “to drive home” an awareness “of the complexity and cost in human terms, in terms of the loss to literature and to art, and to the cause of freedom itself, imposed by racial discrimination” (Ellison, 2003b, p. 676).

Black Boy, as with *Native Son*, is fueled by anger driven by a profound sense of injustice. For me, the most moving passage of Wright's autobiographical story is his description on how he developed a passion for literature. One day in a local Memphis paper he read an editorial denouncing the journalist H. L. Mencken. Wright, who was then almost 19, had no idea who Mencken was. Nevertheless, given that he was white, Wright couldn't help wondering “what on earth this Mencken had done to call down upon him the scorn of the South”, something, in Wright's estimation, that was almost entirely reserved for “Negroes” (Wright, 1991a, p. 233).

Curiosity drove his desire to read Mencken. However, for blacks in the South access to a good library was all but impossible since Jim Crow restricted usage to whites. Wright realized he would have to find someone at work who would be willing to lend him his library card—no small feat. With a great deal of careful forethought, he selected a Catholic coworker who had earlier designated Wright to check out books on his behalf. Once Wright had his coworker's library card, he forged a note for the library. Let me quote him directly. “*Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy—I used the word ‘nigger’ to make the librarian feel that I could not possibly be the author of the note—have some books by H. L. Mencken?*” (Wright, 1991a, p. 235). With trepidation, he approached the librarian and gave her the note. His ruse worked. The librarian gave him two books written by Mencken. One was entitled

Prejudices, which made him suspicious, but intrigued. Once he began reading, Wright was mesmerized: “I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. . . . Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club” (Wright, 1991a, p. 237). Wright’s reading of Mencken led to the onset of a literary odyssey—Joseph Conrad, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Dostoevsky, Gustave Flaubert, Twain, Stendhal, Turgenev, and these writers were just the beginning.

James Baldwin

DS: Of the three black, male writers who would define and shape the literary landscape from the Second World War until the Civil Rights era—Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin—Baldwin is celebrated more for his essays than for his fiction (Anderson, 1998). Indeed, Philip Lopate argues that Baldwin “was the greatest American essayist in the second half of the twentieth century” (Lopate, 1995, p. 586). He suggests that Baldwin “perfected a unique style of maximum tension which yoked together two opposites, tenderness and ferocity”, waging “a battleground” between “the analytical and the oracle” that was “always reaching for a higher emotional pitch” (Lopate, 1995, p. 586).

In 2012 Robert Atwan, writing for *Publishers Weekly*, selected what he believed were the 10 most memorable postwar essays and of these James Baldwin’s, “Notes of a Native Son” topped the list (Atwan, 2012). Langston Hughes would write of Baldwin’s style that he evoked words “as the sea uses waves” (citing Hughes, Overbey, 2010). Michael Anderson, in reviewing *James Baldwin: Early Novels and Stories*, as well as *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, both published by the Library of America, exalts the author’s “beguilingly exquisite prose” (Anderson, 1998) while Henry Louis Gates, Jr. enthuses about those “marvelously long sentences” that were “bristling with commas and qualifications” (citing Gates, Anderson, 1998).

His most famous essay collections were *Notes of a Native Son*, *Nobody Knows My Name*, and *The Fire Next Time*, the last of which examines the twin themes of race and religion in shaping the development of the African-American community. From these collections I would also mention some of my personal favorites including “Everybody’s Protest Novel” and “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy”, the latter of which is a response to Norman Mailer’s racially charged essay “The White Negro”, which I’ll discuss later in my essay on Norman Mailer.

Baldwin’s literary journey began improbably. He was the illegitimate child of a man he never knew. His tyrannical step-father, whom he always referred to as his father, adopted him and undeterred, abused and beat him. Economically life was difficult—he was one of nine children. When he was 14, he experienced a spiritual conversion at the Pentecostal storefront church where his step-father preached. As a junior minister, James gave sermons for three years to crowds that exceeded his father’s dwindling congregants. He then abandoned the ministry. By this time Baldwin was beginning to acknowledge that he was gay, which was not easy in a black community that then celebrated male heterosexuality. Yet though all of this he retained his humanity. When asked by a journalist if he felt “disadvantaged” by the handicaps of poverty, his skin color, and his homosexuality, Baldwin denied these were obstacles, nor did he assume the mantle of victimhood. Instead, he responded with verve and wit, noting, “I

thought I had hit the jackpot. It was so outrageous, you had to find a way to use it" (Overbey, 2010).

Baldwin's essay "Notes of a Native Son" chronicles his difficult relationship with his "father", the crushing poverty of his childhood, the formation of his racial identity, and his reaction to experiencing Jim Crow restrictions while in New Jersey. Baldwin's stories are confessional, sparingly emotional, and riveting. Permit me to quote from the opening paragraph of that essay.

On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born. Over a month before this, while all our energies were concentrated in waiting for these events, there had been, in Detroit, one of the bloodiest race riots of the century. A few hours after my father's funeral, while he lay in state in the undertaker's chapel, a race riot broke out in Harlem. On the morning of the 3rd of August, we drove my father to the graveyard through a wilderness of smashed plate glass. (Baldwin, 1998c, p. 63)

If Baldwin's nonfiction, rather than his fiction or his poetry, came to define him as a writer, nevertheless, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) still retains staying power. This novel draws upon the author's youthful experience as a Pentecostal preacher who is locked in mortal combat with his demonic father. It also examines the hypocrisy and failure of black Christian churches to advance the rights of African-Americans while, nonetheless, acknowledging their socially unifying and supportive efforts in nurturing a black sense of community.

Ellison, Wright, and Baldwin all had novels that made the Modern Library's 1998 ranking of the 100 Best English-language novels of the 20th century, as assessed by its editorial board. Ellison's *Invisible Man* was 19th, Wright's *Native Son* was 20th, and Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was 39th. These novels were also featured in *Time Magazine's* "Best 100 English-language novels from 1923 to 2005". Today, Baldwin is most celebrated for his essays, which still retain their relevance and power to engage readers emotionally. He refused to have his fiction and nonfiction grouped with "social protest" literature—as was the case with Ellison as well—because he insisted on having them read within the broader context of American literature. His second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, although clearly not his best, was pathbreaking in its frank discussion of black homosexuality.

As readers, we imagine that the writers we admire interacted with and influenced one another. This isn't always the case. The best writers are fiercely competitive and concerned with safeguarding their literary standing. Certainly, they're aware of the most compelling fiction written by their peers. Nevertheless, literary familiarity with one's rivals doesn't necessarily motivate authors to read the work of others, let alone meet with their competitors.

However, in the case of these African-American writers we're examining, they were all closely associated with one another; they all had close ties to the Harlem Renaissance, and, of course, they framed their writing and their literary identity against the backdrop of slavery, Jim Crow, and the pervasive racial discrimination of their era. Richard Wright was fiercely protective of his literary stature. Nevertheless, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin imbibed his literary aura before challenging his literary standing. As readers we are the beneficiaries of this rivalry since their competitive jostling elevated, rather than inhibited, their writing. Rare are the writers, such as Sherwood Anderson or Langston Hughes, who generously supported

the most promising voices of the next generation, sometimes to the detriment of their own literary standing.

Both Richard Wright and James Baldwin eventually moved to France, which they found culturally and socially liberating after the repressive racial and cultural attitudes toward blacks in America. Nevertheless, for Wright—and to a lesser degree for Baldwin who traveled back and forth—leaving America proved an impediment to his writing. Language and culture, not surprisingly, are essential to creating stories that resonate with readers.

MFS: What, then, are the contributions of Ralph Ellison, and why are Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin significant to understanding him?

DS: Today, when we consider the literary accomplishments of Ralph Ellison, we think, above all, of his breathtakingly original novel, *Invisible Man*, published in 1952. The following year it won the National Book Award for fiction, besting Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*.

How was it received? Saul Bellow, one of America's greatest literary writers in the 20th century, wrote about the excitement of discovering a book that confounds our expectations: "But what a great thing it is when a brilliant individual victory occurs, like Mr. Ellison's, proving that a truly heroic quality can exist among our contemporaries" (Bellow, 1952). For Bellow that was achieved by trying "to rescue what is important", namely, by discovering what "a man may hope to be" (Bellow, 1952). *Invisible Man*, Bellow suggested, "is tragicomic, poetic, the tone of the very strongest sort of creative intelligence" (Bellow, 1952). He gave Ellison what he believed to be the highest praise by crediting him with transcending racial and ethnic themes to present a story "that we can all recognize, burn at, weep over", a novel he credits with having achieved a universal consciousness (Bellow, 1952).

Orville Prescott, principal book reviewer for *The New York Times*, emphasized that *Invisible Man* "is the most impressive work of fiction by an American Negro which I have ever read" (Prescott, 1952). In 1965 a *Book Week* poll, surveying approximately 200 critics and writers, assessed *Invisible Man* to be "the most distinguished single work" published in two decades" (cited in Gottesman, 1971, p. iii). Literary critic Harold Bloom, in evaluating the contributions of African-American fiction in 1991, dismally concluded that Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* "are the only full scale works of fiction I have read by American blacks in this century that have survival possibilities at all" (Bloom & Weiss, 1991).

What is the plot of *Invisible Man*? It's an episodic novel—improvisational riffs that emulate jazz motifs—presented in the first person. It is also a quest narrative in which a self-described "invisible man" is unseen due to the refusal of the white world to see him. Our protagonist is never identified by name. Indeed, he might be any black man who is educated, relatively young, and making his way in the world. The story begins in an underground coal cellar located in the basement of a "whites-only" apartment building in New York City where the narrator has sought refuge. Our invisible man has illuminated that dark subterranean space with 1,369 light bulbs. He plays Louis Armstrong's rendering of Fats Waller's song "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue" on the phonograph. In developing this story Ellison borrowed the premise from Richard Wright's short story "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1942) and philosophically the novel was influenced by Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864).

Back to the plot. The reader listens as the invisible man narrates his life-journey, an anti-epic that recounts a series of harrowing experiences in which every effort toward advancement is met with a reversal of circumstance. Nevertheless, by the conclusion of the novel the invisible man, who has decided to write about his experiences, has become empowered. Despite what appeared to be nearly insurmountable challenges, he has arrived at an enlightened self-consciousness determined to leave the darkness for the light. What does this signify? Our invisible man has progressed from ignorance toward enlightenment. This has empowered him to pursue freedom and self-determination, notwithstanding the seemingly impossible obstacles that await him. The story is a *Bildungsroman*, a novel in which the young man's coming-of-age is intertwined with race relations in America during the pre-civil rights era. It is an allegory that presents a devastating tale of life in America for an African-American man coming to maturity in the late 1920s or early 1930s and his experiences in the two decades that follow. *Invisible Man*, as Ralph Ellison acknowledged in an interview with *The Paris Review*, is about the search for identity, which he emphasized “*is the American theme*” (Ellison, Chester, & Howard, 1955).

The novel is beautifully written with sophisticated language that places the reader inside the consciousness of the invisible man. The sense of resignation tinged with despair brought about by hardship and cruelty is offset by humor and an acknowledgment of the absurdity of life's events.

Permit me to quote from the opening passage.

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (Ellison, 1995, p. 3)

The story takes the reader on a journey back twenty years—to the late 1920s or early 1930s—to a Southern town. The narrator is about to graduate from high school. He has been invited to speak to a gathering of important white men. He goes with the expectation of receiving a scholarship that will enable him to attend a black college. But what should have been a celebratory occasion becomes a nightmare. He and several of his black classmates are blindfolded and forced to fight with one another in a boxing ring for the amusement of drunken, white spectators who impose demeaning obstacles for “the boys” to overcome. Our narrator endures humiliation and horror, indignity and injury. He gives his speech under squalid, ignoble circumstances. He is presented with a briefcase that contains the coveted scholarship letter. However, that night he dreams of his grandfather, a former slave, who tells him to open the briefcase. Inside, he finds envelopes encased within envelopes, each embossed with the state seal. Finally, he discovers “an engraved document” embossed in gold lettering that reads as follows: “To Whom It May Concern. Keep This Nigger-Boy Running” (Ellison, 1995, p. 33). Although only a dream, our narrator subsequently spends the next two decades running from blacks and whites, always a victim of circumstance, of corruption, and of misfortune, rather than deliberately and self-consciously pursuing his destiny.

The novel presents the reader with a quest-journey in which each opportunity is met with a crushing setback. Our invisible man attends a Southern black college. While escorting a

white trustee, he is instructed to take him to the black neighborhood. They visit a black sharecropper who tells them that he has impregnated his own daughter. The trustee, rather than condemning the man, gives him money. Shaken, he then asks the student to get him a drink. They head to a black bar where a fight erupts. The embarrassing circumstances that unfold there prompt the dean to expel the undergraduate, although he is given seven letters that he believes to be references. Later, he discovers each only confirms his expulsion.

Our narrator heads north to Harlem. Eventually, he obtains an entry-level job at a paint factory that manufactures "Optic White" paint. There he is accused of unionizing, which results in a fight with one of his co-workers. A paint tank explodes. The narrator loses consciousness. He awakens in the factory hospital to discover that white doctors are experimenting on him using electric shock treatment. He recovers his memory, leaves, and collapses on the street. He's taken in and restored to health by a black woman.

A bit later, while protesting the eviction of an elderly black couple, he is offered a job by the Brotherhood, an organization that resembles the Communist Party. Our narrator accepts the offer with the mistaken expectation that the Brotherhood is committed to furthering the opportunities of blacks. One of his friends, formerly in the brotherhood but disillusioned by its tactics, is shot to death by a white policeman after being apprehended for selling merchandise on the streets of Harlem without a permit. The narrator organizes his friend's funeral, which angers the Brotherhood, who are more concerned with class struggle than supporting black civil rights. Determined to obtain damning evidence about the Brotherhood, he has sex with a white woman who not only can't help him, but exploits him as a black sex object in order to fulfill her violent sexual fantasies about black men. Harlem riots at the instigation of Raz the Destroyer, who earlier had appeared as Ras the Exhorter. The narrator, along with some of the rioters, sets fire to a tenement building. Raz the Destroyer calls for the mob to lynch him. The invisible man flees, trying to return to the black woman who nursed him. Chased by white men brandishing baseball bats, he jumps into a manhole and discovers his underground sanctuary. The novel ends at the beginning of the story. However, the prospect of the invisible man writing his story proves transformative. He now has the courage to seek the light, to begin anew, to pursue his self-determined journey cognizant of the enormous challenges he faces.

The Epilogue offers hope.

So I took to the cellar; I hibernated. I got away from it all. But that wasn't enough. I couldn't be still even in hibernation. Because, damn it, there's the mind, the *mind*. It wouldn't let me rest. Gin, jazz and dreams were not enough. Books were not enough. My belated appreciation of the crude joke that had kept me running, was not enough. . . .

I'm not blaming anyone for this state of affairs, mind you; nor merely crying *mea culpa*. The fact is that you carry part of your sickness within you, at least I do as an invisible man. I carried my sickness. . . . It came upon me slowly, like that strange disease that affects those black men whom you see turning slowly from black to albino, their pigment disappearing as under the radiation of some cruel, invisible ray. . . . At first you tell yourself that it's all a dirty joke, or that it's due to the "political situation". But deep down you come to suspect that you're yourself to blame, and you stand naked and shivering before the millions of eyes who look through you unseeingly. (Ellison, 1995, pp. 573, 575)

The invisible man concludes optimistically, “My world has become one of infinite possibilities. . . . The world is just as concrete, ornery, vile and sublimely wonderful as before, only now I better understand my relation to it and it to me” (Ellison, 1995, p. 576).

If you love great literature, if you are spell-bound by a grand epic, if you’re drawn to fiction that examines important ideas and uses complex language to transport you into another’s consciousness, *Invisible Man* is a “must read”. It’s our American story, a grand quest centered on identity. It’s tragedy mitigated by hope. We watch the invisible man begin his self-actuated journey toward fulfillment fully cognizant of the obstacles he will face. Yes, it’s about a black man, about racial injustice set against a historical backdrop of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and societal prejudice that are the source of our nation’s shame. But the narrator’s refusal to submit, his insistence in the pursuit of self-actuated freedom, his commitment to seeking the light at all cost elevates his quest and our appreciation of the story. In short, *Invisible Man* is a novel at the forefront of great American literature.

But it’s precisely for this reason that so many people attacked it.

George Mayberry, writing for *The New Republic*, makes the case that Ralph Ellison “is not a Negro writer, but a writer who happens to be a Negro”. The kind of commentary, while true enough, would prove deadly to Ellison’s ability to write and publish future novels. Mayberry acknowledges that *Invisible Man* is “a vigorously imaginative, violently humorous and quietly tragic book”. But for many critics writing in the 1950s, quiet tragedy was a “white” concept. Richard Wright’s anger and rage expressed in *Native Son* and *Black Boy* seemed somehow more fitting. Mayberry concludes with the fateful words that *Invisible Man* is “shorn of the racial and political clichés that have encumbered the “Negro novel” (Mayberry, 1952).

Irving Howe—socialist, Jewish, and, white—who later led the charge against Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin in his essay “Black Boys and Native Sons” (1963), felt that both writers failed to evince sufficient racial anger in their narratives for the inequities suffered by blacks. Instead, they focused on writing literature—not black literature or what Howe celebrated and Baldwin referred to derisively as the “protest” novel, but literature plain and simple. For this reason Howe attacked the contributions of both men. However, for our purposes I’ll focus here on his criticism of Ellison and *Invisible Man*. Howe complained, not surprisingly, of Ellison’s “aesthetic distance” from the black experience. He complained of the way in which Ellison characterized his “Stalinist figures” (the Brotherhood), which were “so vicious and stupid”. Above all, he complained about the optimism in the conclusion of *Invisible Man* with its “sudden, unprepared, and implausible assertion of unconditional freedom”. For Howe the ending “violates the reality of social life”. Because in Howe’s estimation a black man who discovers his identity must necessarily “stumble upon social barriers which stand in the way” (Howe, 1963).

Even more damning, however, were the complaints by black writers. For as Rampersad noted, “If most white reviewers liked the book, most black reviewers did not” (Rampersad, 2007, p. 261). Some of the most telling criticism levied against Ellison by black writers was expressed cogently by James Walker in his 1970 essay “What Do You Say Now, Ralph Ellison?” He noted, for instance, “Black students of literature only grudgingly mention his name if at all and *Invisible Man* is not rated highly as a meaningful novel dealing with the Black experience” (citing Walker, Kaiser, 1970).

Walker elaborated, “There is a sense of anger with Ellison that he has sold out, that he has not dealt with things as they are, that he says little to Black people today and that he is

dated in his outlook". Certainly by 1970 the sensibility among blacks vehemently rejected what they regarded as Ellison's 1950s accommodationist sensibility in which blacks appeared deferential to whites because of the perception that they were, suggested Walker, "part of a society controlled by whites". By 1970, on the other hand, Walker suggested that black sentiment was defiant, insisting that "the image of the Black man is not controlled by or subject to the whims of whites. . . . Blackness will not and should not be defined in white terms". Walker then emphasized his point: "There is in *Invisible Man* a sense of accommodation and willingness to try and change the prevalent white views". He concluded, "This is out-of-date with the current mood of young Black people in general" (Walker citations, Kaiser, 1970).

The tragedy for Ellison, for the black community, and for readers everywhere is that Ellison never completed his second novel, which he worked on for years following the publication of *Invisible Man*. The most polished segment was edited and published initially as *Juneteenth* (1999). In 2010 the entire manuscript, edited and revised, was published as *Three Days Before the Shooting . . .* Sadly, neither version represented Ellison's best efforts.

The reasons for this extended literary draught—although Ellison continued to write essays and some stories—are complex. The literary expectations set by Ellison and his readers for the second novel were exceptionally high. Ellison became plagued by writer's block. Stanley Edgar Hyman, who had helped him shape *Invisible Man*, later seemed to encourage Ellison's most verbose and convoluted writing style. This trend was exacerbated when Ellison's approach to writing shifted away from Hemingway's journalistic brevity in favor of the convoluted density of Faulkner's prose. Some critics blamed Ellison's move from [black] Harlem to [white] Riverside Drive as a factor that left him bereft of ethnic material. Others emphasized the fire in his home in Massachusetts that Ellison said destroyed much of his manuscript, although recent scholarship suggests he had kept a spare copy elsewhere.

Still more troublesome was the relentless march of time. The longer Ellison delayed completing his second novel, the greater the cultural shift in the black community away from what might be characterized as integrationist fiction toward militant activist fiction founded on identity politics. This new outlook never suited Ellison, whose methods and approaches remained grounded in his 1950s worldview. Then too, Ellison spent a great deal of time cultivating literary contacts with writers such as John Cheever and Saul Bellow who might facilitate his efforts to be nominated to the American Academy and National Institute of Arts and Letters, as well as the Century Association. These efforts, although important, took time away from his writing. But most of all, I would argue, the failure to complete a second novel grew out of the searing criticism that his fiction wasn't "black enough".

As important as Richard Wright's tutelage was in Ellison's literary maturation, Jean Toomer (1894-1967), who in my estimation is the greatest Harlem Renaissance writer, most closely anticipates Ellison's efforts to create a universal American story that transcends African-American literature and identity politics. In terms of literary style and sophistication, Toomer's novel, *Cane*, I argue, is the rightful precursor of *Invisible Man*. Both works of fiction are breathtakingly original in story and style. Both men lived in communities where the boundaries between blacks and whites were somewhat fluid, facilitating interactions across racial barriers. This "integrationist" outlook shaped their approach to living and their fiction. Not surprisingly, both men cultivated friendships and relationships outside of the black community. In Toomer's case he attended schools in both all-white communities and black communities growing up. Later, he attended a number of universities, although he never

graduated. The result of this “cultural diversity” was that “rather than viewing himself as black or white”, he preferred to see himself “as an American” (Gates & Smith, 2014a, p. 1141). Indeed, in later years he would insist that he was “of no particular race” (Gates & Smith, 2014a, p. 1143).

In 1921, while serving as an acting superintendent for a black school in Sparta, Georgia, Toomer obtained material that he used to write *Cane* (1923), generally celebrated as “one of the most powerful texts of the Harlem Renaissance” (Sollors, 2004, p. 476). Toomer’s method in *Cane* defies simple categorization. It includes poems and character sketches. The stylistic approach is eloquent, sophisticated, and strikingly modern. *Cane* is divided into three sections covering rural Georgia, urban black communities—including Chicago and Washington, D.C.—and the final segment, which has an urban protagonist situated in a rural backwater. The concluding segment has autobiographical overtones and strives for fictional unity by providing an overarching synthesis. I’ll just include a short passage from this splendid novel by way of example.

Karintha

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,
O cant you see it, O cant you see it,
Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon
. . . When the sun goes down.

Men had always wanted her, this Karintha, even as a child, Karintha carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down. Old men rode her hobby-horse upon their knees. Young men danced with her at frolics when they should have been dancing with their grown-up girls. God grant us youth, secretly prayed the old men. The young fellows counted the time to pass before she would be old enough to mate with them. This interest of the male, who wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon, could mean no good to her. (*Cane*, 1993, p. 1)

MFS: Who would you say are the primary literary influences shaping the fiction of Colson Whitehead?

DS: Colson Whitehead’s fiction has been attributed to a wide range of literary influences: Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, Dave Eggers, Walter Mosley, James Ellroy, Elmore Leonard, Joseph Heller, as well as many “pop” culture referents. Perhaps all these literary attributions are excessive, driven by a need for acclaim in a post-literary era in which getting noticed, let alone read, has become almost illusionary.

Nevertheless, Colson Whitehead’s literary success is deserved. In reviewing his novel *The Intuitionist* (1999) for *Time* magazine, Walter Kirn characterized it as the “freshest racial allegory since Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*” (Kirn cited in Fain, 2015, p. 13). In an interview with Suzan Sherman for *Bomb* magazine, Whitehead emphasized the influence of Ishmael Reed, Thomas Pynchon, and Ralph Ellison on his fiction. He also acknowledged that during his adolescence he was attracted to sci-fi, horror, and slasher films, which, arguably, helped develop his “creds” to serve later as a TV reporter for the *Village Voice* (Whitehead & Sherman, 2001).

MFS: Ralph Ellison directly confronted issues of racism and discrimination in his novel *Invisible Man* while Colson Whitehead’s two most important works of fiction: *The Intuitionist* (1999) and *John Henry Days* (2001) appear to take a more distanced, analytical approach—scanning the scenarios of racism, but at a remove and distilled through a different historical timeframe that filters events through a postmodern relativistic lens. Your thoughts?

DS: Whitehead’s first novel, *The Intuitionist*, received glowing reviews. *Esquire*, suggested John Updike, celebrated it as “the best first novel of the year” while *GQ*, he indicated, declared it “one of the best books of the millennium” (Updike, 2001).

Let’s consider Updike’s assessment since, while I have never embraced his fiction, I have found him to be an astute and fair-minded reviewer. *The Intuitionist*, he noted, is “a strikingly original and polished début”. He acknowledged that sometimes “Whitehead can try too hard” and provided, by way of example, the groan-worthy phrase “thick black mustaches shrub beneath their nostrils, intrepid vegetation on petrous faces”. Nevertheless, Updike emphasized that “generally his writing does what writing should do; it refreshes our sense of the world” and offered, by way of example, “sonic adipose”, Whitehead’s clever term that skillfully evokes “the hissing of steam heat” (Updike, 2001).

Updike acknowledged that Whitehead’s *John Henry Days*, in contrast with *The Intuitionist*, is “slacker and more diffuse”. It is burdened, he argued, by a literary “self-consciousness” that “threatens to block every simple feeling” (Updike, 2001). Indeed, Paul Gray’s assessment in *Time* magazine concurred, noting that *John Henry Days* “generates more glitter and brilliance than warmth” (Gray, 2001).

As for my perspective, when I evaluate whether or not to read a novel—and consider adding yet another author to my select list—I examine the reviews, almost all of which typically disappoint me. If one is glowing and presents a novel with a distinctive plot, interesting perceptions, as well as intriguing language and syntax, then, I examine the novel ideally in a library or a bookstore, but, if necessary, by means of a partial download. However, examining the entire book is preferable since I want to read not only the beginning but, ideally, several passages. As I do so, I’m paying particular attention to the quality of the prose to see whether it surprises and delights. Dialogue, in this hunt for my next intriguing novel, is generally related to secondary status while the interior monologues typically drive my curiosity for “more”.

With these assessment criteria in mind, I found Whitehead’s presentation of the allegorical story of oppositional elevator inspectors—the Intuitionists (black) versus the dominant Empiricists (white)—a fascinating and inventive means of reconsidering race through the prisms of technological automation and the mechanisms of history, race, and gender. As Whitehead himself noted in a conversation with fellow black writer Walter Mosley, “I’m trying to extend the canon of black literature, and I’m a black writer doing this” (Mosley & Whitehead, 2011, p. 93).

To give our readers a sense of Whitehead’s style, let’s consider the opening lines from *The Intuitionist*.

It’s a new elevator, freshly pressed to the rails, and it’s not built to fall this fast.

* * *

She doesn't know what to do with her eyes. The front door of the building is too scarred and gouged to look at, and the street behind her is improbably empty, as if the city had been evacuated and she's the only one who didn't hear about it. There is always the game at moments like this to distract her. She opens her leather field binder and props it on her chest. The game gets harder the further back she goes. Most of the inspectors from the last decade or so are still with the Guild and are easy to identify: LMT, MG, BP, JW. So far she doesn't particularly like the men who have preceded her at 125 Walker. . .

All the inspectors who have visited 125 Walker in the past have been Empiricists. As far as she can tell. When she gets fifteen years back in the record there are no more faces to put to the initials. (Whitehead, 2000, pp. 1-2)

The Intuitionist is "historiographic metafiction", a term pioneered by Linda Hutcheon, a Canadian scholar of literary theory, that refers to a novel that self-consciously alludes to historical literary texts in framing its story (Maus, 2014, pp. 6-9). From its inception the story borrows and subverts the notion of "racial uplift" developed by W. E. B. DuBois and Alain Locke in the early 20th century—namely, that educated and self-reliant black artists might through hard work advance the opportunities for themselves, thereby opening the way for the rest of the black community. How does the story accomplish this? *The Intuitionist's* opening section is labeled not "up" but "down" (Maus, 2014, p. 19). The first line describes the failure of a newly made elevator, an indictment of the Intuitionists desire to create the perfect elevator. Indeed, the very concept of the perfect elevator is itself a metaphor for an idealized and perfect world freed from the impediments of racism and discrimination.

The novel evokes an earlier era before the Civil Rights era when blacks were "colored" men and women struggling to overcome racism. The protagonist, Lila Mae Watson, the first female black elevator inspector, personifies the uplift creed. Nevertheless, at every turn her dedication, talent, and intuition fail her. By the conclusion of the novel Lila Mae resigns her job and commits to studying, interpreting, and, when called for, revising the three volumes of text and critical assumptions made by the Intuitionist founder, James Fulton, to create the perfect elevator. Only then does Lila Mae transcend the repressive social limitations of her era and, in so doing, her circumstances resemble that of the invisible man at the conclusion of Ralph Ellison's novel.

Two years after *The Intuitionist*, Whitehead published his second novel, *John Henry Days* (2001). However, it wasn't until I was giving a reading of my second novel, *American Suite*, at the Harvard Coop in Boston in January, 2011 that I picked up a paperback copy sitting upon a display table. How would I characterize *John Henry Days*? It is a postmodern meditation on (black) American folklore. John Henry, a "steel-driving man", bested an automated steam powered hammer around 1870. According to the legend, he died of over exertion with the hammer still in his hand.

I loved Whitehead's beginning with its postmodern premise that offers the reader multiple and contradictory personas of John Henry. I was intrigued by the divergent timeframes and alternating narratives that present the legendary man with respect to seven other "historical" characters—some real and some imagined—whose lives intersected with his. This historical context is set against the banality of present-day junketeers, jaded and awash in consumerism, who have gathered to attend the "John Henry Days" Festival in Talcott, West Virginia where the United States Post Office is unveiling a commemorative stamp in John Henry's honor. Unfortunately, the novel never measured up to *The Intuitionist*.

Nevertheless, I was relieved and delighted to discover that Whitehead had surmounted the onerous burden of creating a “worthy” second novel.

From my perspective *John Henry Days* has an insurmountable challenge alluded to by Updike and Paul Grey. The prologue begins with what appears to be fourteen different literary-historical renderings of John Henry. This is intriguing and authentic since very little is actually known about his life. However, once these multiple identities of the folk hero are evocatively sketched out, the novel becomes challenged. Either Whitehead has to render fourteen different episodic narratives of John Henry that tie into the present circumstances—arguably, an undue burden on the reader—or he is faced with abandoning the premise of the prologue as just a clever ruse in order to present a more engaging and conventional narrative arc. To his credit Whitehead finds a middle approach. Six chapters illuminate the folk hero’s life, seven “historical-driven” characters, whose lives intersect with John Henry, are presented, and the reader is provided with narratives of several modern-day junketeers feasting—literally and metaphorically—off the consumer spoils of the festival, in addition to an odd-assortment of visitors and residents. But under the weight of this hefty structural edifice, the plot and the emotional lives of the characters falter. The reader, then, is left with a technical feat largely devoid of story and *dramatis personae*.

MFS: I apologize for saying this, but perhaps Ralph Ellison was a better writer. After all, he had to struggle in his youth and later adulthood. Colson Whitehead seems, by comparison, a child of privilege, having grown up in the Upper West Side of Manhattan, graduated from Harvard, and virtually handed a job at the *Village Voice* in New York that facilitated his connections and publishing opportunities. Do anger and injustice prompt the grit and determination, if not brilliance of a writer—in this case Ellison—in a way that relative affluence and privilege—as exemplified by Whitehead—do not?

DS: Ralph Ellison’s the *Invisible Man* is an allegorical work that beautifully illuminates one dimension of our American story. None of the rest of his literary efforts approach that of the *Invisible Man*. But, then again, how many of us are blessed with even one extraordinary work of fiction? Ralph Ellison had two major advantages over Colson Whitehead. First, he lived in an era when fiction was celebrated, when writers, the best ones, anyway, lived immersed in a world of words and their literary audience was well read and appreciative of great literature. Second, Ellison was writing about the heroic phase of the African-American struggle to overcome racism, and he had memorable experiences upon which he drew to create the *Invisible Man*.

By contrast, Colson Whitehead is living and writing in our diminished post-literary present where literary fiction takes a backseat to the Internet, gaming, comics, films, texting, and every other conceivable form of distraction in a society increasingly beset by “virtual reality”, consumerism, and decadent values as we try to ignore the specter of global terrorism. If we consider our overarching book theme of “doubling”, those writers who mirror one another or at times seem antipodal rivals, we have to acknowledge that while the centrality of literature in the 20th century nurtured Ellison’s development as a writer, the decline of serious readers in the 21st century has been detrimental to Whitehead’s literary maturation.

The fact is that even if Whitehead were the best author writing today—and he has many rivals for that coveted position—he would, nevertheless, have had to create stories for

audiences whose reading skills are impoverished, whose tastes are feminized, and whose values are cocooned in a vapid world of ideological correctness undergirded by identity politics. These obstacles are exacerbated by the calamitous pyrotechnics of postmodern fiction that are deadening to meaningful narratives and lethal to mesmerizing characters. In summary, these social and cultural trends make it all but impossible to create great literature, a subject that I have discussed at length in my essays posted on my website Literary Gulag, and many of which are also available on the University of Illinois open-access website IDEALS (<http://www.literarygulag.com/blog/archive>; <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/3460/browse?type=title>).

The compromised literary position of Colson Whitehead is particularly evident if we look at the fiction and nonfiction he has written after the publication of *The Intuitionist* and *John Henry Days* and his receipt of the coveted MacArthur Fellowship (2002). Whitehead's nonfictional collection of essays about New York, *The Colossus of New York* (2003), has been praised by one reviewer, writing for the *New York Post*, as "rhapsodic lover letters" about New York (Random House book blurb "Praise" for *The Colossus of New York*, n.d.). However, to others the book might be interpreted as a narcissistic reflection of that insular world of New Yorkers, their self-appointed writers, and the insular publishers who collectively embrace this myopic perspective. *The Colossus of New York* was followed by the novel *Apex Hides his Hurt* (2006), which has as its protagonist a "nomenclature consultant"—an expert in naming things—who visits a town considering "rebranding" itself by acquiring a new name. This clever conceit allows for all sorts of commentary about the commercialization and marketing of American society. All of which is well and good, but have our contemporary postmodern novelists all entirely sidestepped the Great American Novel for this kind of drivel? Then, there's Whitehead's "semi-autobiographical novel" *Sag Harbor* (2009), characterized by Tom Chiarella, writing for *Esquire*, as "a snoozy summer tale of rich kids dealing with racial dynamics on a beach, groping for a stake in who-cares America"—which is not exactly a subject enticing to me (Chiarella, 2011). This was followed by a fairly successful zombie novel, *Zone One*—more about that a bit later—and then a less than memorable "gambling memoir", *The Noble Hustle* (2014), which never rises to the level of memorable literature or even, for that matter, knowledgeable poker. Thus, Dwight Garner, reviewing it for *The New York Times*, acknowledged that the book "is a throwaway, a bluff, a large bet on a small hand" (Garner, 2014).

One of the harshest critics of Colson Whitehead's fiction in recent years has been Harvard literary critic James Wood. In 2001 he took "dead-on" aim against Whitehead's *John Henry Days* in his review "Virtual Prose" published in *The New Republic*. His argument was that "Whitehead's book is really a didactic novel that wants to be honored for not being so". He grudgingly acknowledged that *John Henry Days* "is daring, nervy, knowing, and smart". However, from that moment on Wood's barbed attacks and strident criticism gained traction. For him, the novel "is a bristle of bricolage". While the story is clever, he admitted, the characters lack human warmth and depth. The novel should, in his estimation, be read as allegory and its focus, he suggested, is "social, historical, and linguistic" in lieu of Wood's preferences, which would be "characterological, aesthetic, and metaphysical" (citations Wood, 2001, pp. 30-33). The postmodern cleverness, he maintained, mars the novel's efforts to be more substantial, which in Wood's frame of reference would resemble the fiction of Charles Dickens with his embrace of real characters, real story, and yes, reality-infused realism.

Wood's vitriolic criticism was accentuated at the conclusion of his review. He argued that the prose—"extraordinarily uneven, and sometimes barely comprehensible"—may be derived from any number of sources including Whitehead's "fogged yearnings of rock journalism" and "the semi-literate theorists at *The Village Voice*" (Wood, 2001, pp. 30-33). Wood provided several examples, although I'll provide just one excruciatingly painful sentence he selected from *John Henry Days*: "The place mats of Herb's Country Style aspire to the perspectives of mountain divinities, bought in bulk and fixing a century of scrabbling achievement in its just form on the diaphanous paper". Wood emphasized that the prose is studded with grammatical and diction errors and provided examples. Whitehead used "discreet" when he meant "discrete". A character "evacuated his chair", which, as Wood pointed out, is an awkward phrase. Whitehead wrote "deviant" when he actually meant "divergent". The protagonist was said to have "reiterated some of the dialogue", although that usage is wrong, suggested Wood, since that applies to self-repetition, rather than paraphrasing the words and concepts of others. Indeed, some of these solecisms by Whitehead would again be noted by Wood in a subsequent review of David Foster Wallace's story collection *Oblivion* published in *The New Republic* three years later (Wood, 2004, pp. 26-30).

Not surprisingly when James Wood published his literary primer *How Fiction Works* (2008), Colson Whitehead took deadly aim, mocking Wood's pretentious style in his parodic review. Permit me to quote a brief passage.

In closing, I direct your attention to a perfect sentence. Yes, they exist. One of the pleasures of my profession is discovering these elusive unicorns in the books sent for my review. . . . I share with you a recent find:

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. (Whitehead, 2009)

Nor was Whitehead's attack isolated. The arrogance and smug self-satisfaction evident in *How Fiction Works* led Walter Kirn, a well-known fiction writer, to characterize Wood in his biting satiric review in the Sunday Book Review of *The New York Times* as the supreme deity, that omniscient critic who has "attained the detached, big-picture perspective of an orbiting critical satellite" (Kirn, 2008).

MFS: Colson Whitehead has written an allegorical novel about elevator inspectors (*The Intuitionist*, 1999) and a novel about the tony waterfront community in Long Island (*Sag Harbor*, 2009). One could not think of a more disparate dichotomy. Yet each reflects a certain struggle—for acceptance, for visibility, and for fitting in. Whitehead's fiction sometimes—I'm particularly thinking of his zombie novel *Zone One* (2011)—seems more "pop" culture than literary. Am I off on this?

DS: My sense is that in our post-literary era, writers who succeed in the literary marketplace will try to do everything possible to stay "current". If they fail, if they set their standards too high, too attuned to the holy grail of literary perfection, the marketplace with its fickle audience who can scarcely read will find a new literary icon that magnifies their own inflated sense of celebrity-driven, quasi-literate virtuosity. The fate, then, of the abandoned writer who has lost critical market share and whose literary career appears to be cratering might parallel the terrible outcome that befell David Foster Wallace. He was, if you will recall, a "writer's writer" of contemporary postmodern *haute* prose. While publishers kept lowering literary

standards, here was an author who couldn't or wouldn't succumb, a writer who literary critic David Ulin characterized in glowing terms: "One of the most influential and innovative writers of the last 20 years" (Ulin citation, Noland & Rubin, 2008). Nonetheless, in the face of diminished literary possibilities that increasingly conspired to limit and marginalize his fiction, David Foster Wallace committed suicide in 2008.

Whitehead is trying to avoid the fate of David Foster Wallace and every other writer who threatens to disappear into obscurity. *Sag Harbor*, for instance, is a self-conscious effort to develop and sustain readers drawn to memoir and writerly self-disclosure while, nonetheless, posing as a novel. I don't know about its "market success", but it fails as a literary endeavor.

Nevertheless, Whitehead's *Zone One*, which mimics the conventions of a zombie thriller while simultaneously deconstructing its methods and approaches, was well received. In selecting this topic the author consciously chose to reinvent himself and his fiction to reach a younger, more diverse audience. Fortunately, for him, the literary hipsters loved the concept. Thus, Glen Duncan, a British writer whose novel *The Last Werewolf* (2011) reinvigorated the werewolf narrative with literary smarts saturated with titillating sex and violence, likened *Zone One*'s postmodern fusion to "an intellectual dating a porn star" (Duncan, 2011).

Absent a plot, Duncan suggests, we get the "Boschean mayhem", the severing of heads, those "skels" who "shuffle and suppurate and tear the living to pieces", but we also get, he notes, "the essayistic asides and languid distentions, stray insights, surprising correspondences, ambivalence, paradox". This is Whitehead's endeavor "to take the psychology of the [zombie] premise seriously, to see if it makes a relevant shape" (citations, Duncan, 2011).

For millennials *Zone One* is celebrated as a swanky meditation about a stupefied America. Thus, the anti-hero laments today's mediocrity in a passage targeted to appeal to zombie aficionados who are likely to embrace the sentiments expressed as rapturously profound: "Beauty could not thrive, and the awful was too commonplace to be of consequence. Only in the middle was there safety. . . . He had led a mediocre life exceptional only in the magnitude of its unexceptionality" (*Zone 1* citation, Duncan, 2011). But if that fails to impress you—as, indeed, should be the case with any sophisticated reader—there are moments, suggests Duncan, when Whitehead's prose achieves lyrical intensity. To demonstrate this he provides us with a sample: "Snipers trained their scopes, muzzles crackling next to the squatting cornice gargoyles and the shells hopping on the rooftop tar" (*Zone 1* citation, Duncan, 2011). Let our readers be the judge.

MFS: If you were developing a course on black literature that was five weeks in length who would you start with and end with and why? Your choices are the following: Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Colson Whitehead. Give us one word to encapsulate each of these writers.

DS: I never follow directives very well—an occupational hazard, I'm afraid. Permit me to designate a phrase, not a word, and I have slightly altered your selection of authors. What follows is an abbreviated syllabus.

The course would assign one book by each writer. My approach would be historically grounded, so we would begin with Toomer and proceed chronologically as shown.

Wk. 1: Jean Toomer (rather than Langston Hughes): “Renaissance & Transcendence”; Book: *Cane*

Wk. 2: Richard Wright: “Protest Novelist or Freedom Fighter”; Book: *Black Boy*

Wk. 3: Ralph Ellison: “Great American Novelist”; *Invisible Man*

Wk. 4: James Baldwin “The Evidence of Things Not Seen” (title borrowed from a nonfiction book by Baldwin); Book: *James Baldwin Collected Essays*, particularly “Everybody’s Protest Novel”, “Notes of a Native Son”, “Nobody Knows My Name”, “Down at the Cross”.

Wk. 5: Colson Whitehead: “Postmodern & Post-racial?”; Book: *The Intuitionist*

Wk. 5 would include a discussion of the essay “The End of the Black American Narrative” by black novelist Charles Johnson that was published in *The American Scholar* (2008), which I’ll discuss a bit more in question 11.

I would have students write a short essay for each week’s class emulating the style of the assigned writer. If we extended the course length, the class would run for the entire semester. Students would then write a paper that could potentially become the basis for an undergraduate thesis in either creative fiction or literary criticism. That story or essay would illuminate the black experience based on or influenced by the writers we have discussed.

MFS: If Ralph Ellison and Colson Whitehead were to dine in New York City, what would be the gist of conversation? What do you think Ellison would say to Whitehead about his writing style?

DS: Dinner would be at Bedford Hall in Bedford Stuyvesant (Brooklyn), a bar and lounge space that has preserved the ambiance of prohibition era replete with books and artifacts, but reframes those sensibilities for the contemporaneous present. Eating and discussion there flows seamlessly to the next venue, which would be Dizzy’s Club near Columbus Circle in Manhattan.

Just imagine this memorable evening. Famed trumpeter and artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, Wynton Marsalis, has put together a special ensemble in honor of Ralph Ellison. He begins the jazz set featuring Louie Armstrong’s interpretation of “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue”.

Juxtaposed with this marvelous music, off to one side, Ellison and Whitehead are engaged in a conversation at cross-purposes with one another.

Ellison: “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”

Whitehead: Woooo, man. It’s the higher frequencies I dig. The variable frequencies, the so-so frequencies, the ‘tween frequencies. The post-hip-hop razzle-dazzle, the noisy venting shake-shake, that continual buzz that tells me I’m alright.

Ellison: “But I’m your destiny, I made you.”

Whitehead: Destiny is no destiny for me. I ride alone, unencumbered. Freewheeling. As I like.

Ellison: “I’m not blaming anyone for this state of affairs, mind you.”

Whitehead: The earth spun, not your way, but mine. It’s different now.

Ellison: “So there you have all of it that’s important.”

Whitehead: Ditto. I hear you. I write through you on to the nexus of totalizing frequencies.

Against this artful tit-for-tat the two writers skillfully evade your question. Ellison's dialogue, as some of our astute readers may notice, is borrowed directly from *Invisible Man* and, therefore, is rendered above in quotes. The lilting melody of "Black and Blue" performed by Wynton Marsalis resonates. Ralph Ellison and Colson Whitehead nod their heads at variable rates to the heard and unheard, the seen and unseen, the past and the ahistorical present, their interchange set against those high and low frequencies that most of us never hear.

MFS: Aside from Colson Whitehead, what contemporary African-American writers do you find interesting?

DS: In 2006 Sam Tanenhaus, editor of *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, asked prominent writers, editors, critics, and literary experts to identify "the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years" ("What Is the Best Work of American Fiction of the Last 25 Years?", 2006). The favorite of those polled was Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Toni Morrison, as our readers may know, won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Certainly, she deserves reading.

There are many African-American writers who your readers might enjoy reading. One online list, published by the Williamsburg Regional Library, lists their top 100 or more choices, which might be helpful to your readers (<http://www.wrl.org/books-and-reading/adults/100-african-american-writers-mostly-fiction>).

Some writers and fictional works that should be considered for your "must read" list might include the following: Charles R. Johnson, *Middle Passage* (1990); August Wilson's play *Fences* (1983); John Edgar Wideman, *Philadelphia Fire* (1990); Samuel R. Delany—*The Einstein Intersection* (1967); Percival Everett, *Erasure* (2001); Ishmael Reed, *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1070* (1972); Walter Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990); Carl Hancock Rux, *Asphalt* (2004); Michael Thomas, *Man Gone Down* (2007); as well as a number of women writers—in addition to Toni Morrison, of course—including Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937); Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (1975); Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993); and Edwidge Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* (stories, 1996), and one of my "under-the-radar" favorites—Fran Ross's *Oreo* (1974), which was reprinted by New Directions in 2015.

MFS: What can you speculate about the future of African-American literature?

DS: Charles R. Johnson, whose novel *Middle Passage* won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1990, was the second black writer after Ellison to win this prize. In 2008, when Barack Obama was initially running for president, Johnson published "The End of the Black American Narrative" for *The American Scholar*. He made the case for the post-slavery, post-racial 21st century novel that need no longer be defined and, therefore, framed by identity politics. While today some of us aren't persuaded of President Obama's success in creating a post-racial presidency, let alone a post-racial society, nevertheless, Johnson's desire for African-American literature to transcend the slave narrative and the racial identity matrix remains compelling. Permit me to quote from the conclusion of his essay.

If the old black American narrative has outlived its usefulness as a tool of interpretation, then what should we do? The answer, I think, is obvious. In the 21st century, we need new and better stories, new concepts, and new vocabularies and grammar based not on the past but on the dangerous, exciting, and unexplored present, with the understanding that each is, at best, a provisional reading of reality. . . . These will be narratives that do not claim to be absolute truth These will be narratives of individuals, not groups. And is this not exactly what Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of when he hoped a day would come when men and women were judged not by the color of their skin, but instead by their individual deeds and actions, and the content of their character?

I believe this was what King dreamed and, whether we like it or not, the moment is now. (Johnson, 2008)

Langston Hughes's essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", published in *The Nation* in 1926, suggested that the black artist "works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites". He emphasized that black writers at that time looked to have the artist depict blacks as "respectable" and "good". Whites wanted black artists to represent stereotypes and cautioned the artists: "Don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously". Adding, "We will pay you". Both whites and blacks, if given the opportunity, Hughes argued, "would have told Jean Toomer not to write *Cane*". Why? Because, Hughes noted, "The colored people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. Most of the colored people who did read *Cane* hate it. They are afraid of it". Thus while "the critics gave it good reviews the public remained indifferent". Hughes acknowledged that "*Cane* contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America". For that reason he felt the need to emphasize that *Cane* "is truly racial" (Hughes, 2014, p. 1323).

But for Toomer, who saw himself "as an American" writing American literature, "*Cane* was a song of an end", that is, an African-American story that once written allowed him—and perhaps others—to move beyond the boundaries of race (Toomer citation, Gates & Smith, 2014a, p. 1141). He resented the fact that "people have expected me to write a second and a third and a fourth book like *Cane*" (Toomer citation, Gates & Smith, 2014a, p. 1141). In the case of Ralph Ellison, let me emphasize again to our readers that the criticism he received suggesting that *Invisible Man* wasn't a black novel proved so censorious that he never published another novel in his lifetime.

It's important that *Cane* and *Invisible Man* be acknowledged as central to the American canon of great literature, rather than relegated to a ghettoized or tribal category of African-American literature. Certainly, they can be read and should be celebrated as African-American literature, but that's not the point. The point is that they are deservedly amongst the greatest novels in the American canon, and they deserve to be read for what they are—great literature.

Let me make my case from another vantage point. Toomer counted many prominent poets and critics among his literary circle including Hart Crane, Waldo Frank, Van Wyck Brooks, and Edward Arlington Robinson. Does anyone think that he wanted to be known to them merely as an African-American writer? Would Ralph Ellison have wanted Saul Bellow or John Cheever to see him as merely an African-American writer? Or, for that matter, would Saul Bellow or Norman Mailer or Philip Roth have wanted to be relegated to the category of Jewish writer, marginalized and set apart from a universalized American canon?

On November 6, 2015 I attended a one-day conference held at the University of Illinois entitled “African-American Writing in the 21st Century”. There, I heard a compelling talk by Yogita Goyal, Associate Professor in the humanities at UCLA, entitled “We Need New Diasporas: Contemporary African Literature and the Problem of the Global”. Goyal’s case was that the American slave narrative must and is, in fact, already being displaced by the African diaspora narrative. She cited an article in *The New York Times* that stressed the growing impact of the black African diaspora in America. That article emphasized that between 2000 and 2010 legal black African immigrants increased to approximately one million, nearly double the figure of the previous decade. More importantly, however, the total number of black African immigrants arriving between 2000 and 2010 exceeded “more than three centuries of the slave trade”. Indeed, Kim Nichols, who serves as executive director of the African Services Committee, located in Harlem, noted that the black African diaspora has been “doubling every 10 years since 1980” (Roberts, 2014). Thus, even if African-Americans would like to keep the slave narrative at the core of their literature, given the changing demographics in our country that won’t be possible. Time is moving forward and, increasingly, the slave narrative is receding into the nation’s rear-view mirror.

What, then, are the broader implications of these changing demographics? In 2008 Fareed Zakaria published his book *The Post-American World*, which argued that while the United States will remain the most powerful nation, nevertheless, its power, relative to other countries, will diminish. Imbedded in this argument is that we live in a global era and that these global circumstances increasingly define us as a nation and a people. Extending this argument further, this would suggest that American literature is no longer merely a national literature. Rather, it should reflect our global circumstances, transitioning away from local stories to focus increasingly on the global multicultural narratives that have come to embody our post-American world.

This phenomenon was anticipated in the 1950s. As an expatriate living for an extended period in France, Baldwin was concerned with issues that were increasingly trans-national. Thus, as Gates & Smith emphasized, “Baldwin’s writings would mark one of the essential witnesses to this new era encompassing the civil rights moment in the United States and decolonization struggles across sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean” (Gates & Smith, 2014b, p. 393). While Chinua Achebe’s post-colonial Nigerian novel *Things Fall Apart*, first published in the United Kingdom in 1958, may have been viewed initially to English and American readers as a novelty, its success heralded the impetus here and elsewhere toward post-national literatures.

Today, this globalizing trend is accelerating. Thus, Hope Wabuke, a contributing editor for *The Root*, as well as a contributing writer for *Kirkus Reviews*, recently highlighted “The 15 Best Works of Fiction by Black Authors in 2014”. Of the 15 writers mentioned, 10 are written by black diaspora writers who have emigrated or now live in America or Britain having arrived from Africa or the Caribbean. Amongst those she mentioned I’ll refer to four now living in America. Marlon James, Jamaican-born, just received the 2015 Man Booker award for his novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. Dinaw Mengestu, Ethiopian-born, is a MacArthur award-winning recipient. Teju Cole, a Nigerian-American author, was born here, but raised by his Nigerian parents in Nigeria until he returned to America for college. Finally, there’s Chris Abani, also a Nigerian and American author, who was born in Nigeria (Wabuke, 2014).

Of course, this touches upon the underlying issue of whether nations and national literatures in our globalized society have relevance today, which, of course, I strongly believe. We diminish our national stories at great peril. But we'll save that discussion for another time.

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