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Double Consciousness:
Whitman in the Texts of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, C.L.R. James, and Langston Hughes

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Abstract

"Double Consciousness: Whitman in the texts of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, C.L.R. James, and Langston Hughes" focuses on the relationship between writers of the African Diaspora and Western texts, specifically writers of the American Renaissance such as Walt Whitman.

What are the functions of American texts in terms of their relationship with writers of the African Diaspora? Representing these exchanges is highly problematic and we begin with this question. It is through theories from people such as Homi Bhabha, Henry Louis Gates, and Paul Gilroy, that I attempt to bridge the gap. Bhabha's theory of ambivalence is useful in representing how other cultures reinterpret texts. Gates has two strategies: the talking book and Signifyin(g). The talking book can be applied to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, since the "I" in the text directly addresses the reader. Signifyin(g) is useful in representing the dialogues between texts. Paul Gilroy's text *The Black Atlantic:Modernity and Double Consciousness* constructs a model to discuss the ways in which culture travels between the many points of the African Diaspora.

Also taken into consideration are the backgrounds and histories which are important to the cultural production of these texts. Personal histories are a key factor in order to understand why certain writers chose Whitman or Melville as a base. The politics of the American Renaissance as well as the politics of the interpretation of the American Renaissance are also taken into account. All in an attempt to understand why, in each case, these writers used Whitman as a tool to advance their discourse.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is an African author and critic from Kenya. He is responsible for the Africanization of the literature department in Kenya. He is a strong proponent of the defense and the maintenance of indigenous African culture. He out of principle now only writes his novels in Gikuyu, an indigenous language of Kenya. While he supports the de-westernizing of African writings he still relies on Western tools such as Marxism. The first chapter illustrates how Ngugi

uses Whitman as a base for his texts. *Leaves of Grass* acts as a talking book for Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child.*

In the second chapter C.L.R. James illustrates how culture travels among the members of the African Diaspora. James, a mentor to African writers like Ngugi, was born in Trinidad but lived in England and in the United States. Each move across the globe brought on a new and sharper James. It is James's constant efforts to look again that helps him understand cross-cultural relations. James as opposed to Ngugi believes in the possibility of cross-cultural exchanges. James views the American Renaissance as the golden age of American history. It is through the visionaries of this time that James believes a base can be formed leading to a revolution towards the pursuit of happiness.

The third chapter presents Langston Hughes as a symbol for cross-cultural conflicts in the United States. Hughes, whose style is based on a combination of Walt Whitman, Jazz syncopation, and the emotions of the Blues, was looking for a voice and found it through a cultural amalgamation. Hughes is one of the first African American poets to look toward the traditions of America rather than England. In the tradition of Whitman, he became the "other " singer of America. Despite criticism of Whitman as a racist, Hughes is quick to come to his defense. Hughes as opposed to Whitman's detractors views the old gray poet as an insider into African American culture. It is in the third chapter where the topic of African American culture's role in American culture is addressed.

The conclusion of this thesis is that cultural constructions are imagined and cultural borders are difficult to represent. Cultural relations are difficult to define and any effort to reduce culture does not represent the heterogenous nature of culture. Unfortunately, all reductions end up being only essentializations. Still, it is through cross-cultural representations that an attempt to forward the discourse can be made.

Résumé

« Double Consciousness: Whitman in the texts of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, C.L.R. James, and Langston Hughes » est une discussion sur l'intertextualité des textes africains et américains. Ce mémoire explore la relation entre trois auteurs de la diaspora africaine et les écrivains de la renaissance américaine, Walt Whitman en particulier.

Quelle est la relation entre les textes américains et les auteurs de la diaspora africaine ? Ces relations sont souvent un sujet de désaccord. Les relations entre les textes sont difficiles à établir. En utilisant les théories de Homi Bhabha, Henry Louis Gates, et Paul Gilroy, j'interroge la relation entre ces textes et les interprétations interculturelles. Bhabha utilise une stratégie qu'il appelle l'ambivalence qui établit une lecture ouverte des textes. Les lecteurs s'approprient de ce qu'ils ont besoin. Henry Louis Gates a deux stratégies : le livre parlant et Signifyin(g). La première s'adapte bien avec le texte de Whitman et est un modèle qui se revoit souvent dans les textes de la Diaspora africaine. La seconde est utile pour présenter la discussion entre les différents textes et pour examiner les techniques des auteurs qui répondent aux textes établis. Paul Gilroy dans *The Black Atlantic : Modernity and Double Consciousness* présente un modèle utile pour représenter les voies culturelles de la diaspora Africaine. Gilroy construit une référence pour le mouvement de la culture. Il voit la culture comme un échange constant entre tous les points de la diaspora. C.L.R. James est presque la personnification de cette théorie.

En même temps, je présente les contextes historiques particuliers qui sont importants pour comprendre les aspects matériels qui sont cruciaux pour établir ces échanges. Les conditions personnelles sont importantes pour voir pourquoi ces auteurs ont choisi Whitman ou Melville comme une base pour leurs discours. Selon le cas chaque auteur a eu besoin d'un modèle matériel pour s'exprimer.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o est un auteur africain du Kenya qui est responsable pour l'africanisation des départements littéraires au Kenya. Il est un fort protagoniste pour la défense d'une culture africaine indigène mais il utilise quand même des modèles de l'Occident comme le marxisme. Le premier chapitre de ce mémoire présente comment Ngugi utilise le texte de Whitman comme une base pour ses textes. Plus particulièrement, *Leaves of Grass* de Whitman est un texte parlant pour son *Weep Not, Child.*

Le cas de C.L.R. James illustre vraiment l'idée des voies de la culture. James a commencé sa vie à la Trinidad mais il a vécu longtemps en Angleterre et aux États-Unis. On voit dans le deuxième chapitre comment il a incorporé ces trois locations pour se donner une perception distincte, qui lui aidera à comprendre les discussions interculturelles. James en comparaison avec Ngugi croit en la possibilité de liens entres les différentes cultures. James pense que la renaissance américaine qui a produit Whitman, Herman Melville, et Wendell Philips est la période la plus inspirée, qui fournira les idées et la base pour une nouvelle révolution que James entrevoit comme une nouvelle route au bonheur.

Le poète américain de race noir Langston Hughes symbolise le conflit interculturel aux États-Unis. Hughes a incorporé le style de Walt Whitman, la syncope du Jazz et les sentiments du Blues. Il fut le premier poète qui écrivait dans une voix qui prenait les styles de Harlem en considération. Hughes cherchait une langue pour se définir et il la trouva en Whitman. Hughes présente Whitman comme un adepte même devant ses critiques qui voyaient en Whitman un raciste. Le troisième chapitre décrit l'impact de Whitman et introduit la possibilité de Whitman comme initié à la culture Africaine Américaine.

Cette thèse essaie de démontrer que les constructions culturelles sont imaginaires et difficiles à définir. Les relations culturelles sont complexes et les efforts de réduction ne représentent pas la culture qui est hétérogène et presque impossible à réduire à un essentialisme.

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I would like to thank my supervisor, Robert K. Martin, for all his support and his vast knowledge. His insight, scholarship, and advice guided me through the "jungles" of literary scholarship.

Introduction

When Caliban voiced his grievances with western society in *The Tempest*: "You taught me language, and my profit on't/ Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language!" (1.2 362-364), he presented an issue which would be faced by writers directly or indirectly affected by colonialism. Writers of the African Diaspora have had to rely on what W. E. B. Dubois has termed a "double consciousness," part of the West and part of the African Diaspora. These writers have aimed their writing at the center of Western writers but because of constructions based mainly on "race" and color they have been categorized as marginal, writing from outside the "Western tradition." The question revolves around how and what a writer can write from his/her position, as an African, Caribbean, or African-American writer, and still write in or, at least, to the center.

Writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, C.L.R. James and Langston Hughes have all had to maneuver around this question, dealing with subjects and issues without alienating either audience. In a sense Ngugi, James and Hughes are fortunate in that they can crossover from one center to the next since all three writers have been educated towards the center. They have all been acculturated to the traditions of the West. All three have been educated in western style school systems and exposed to writers of the western cannon: Ngugi wanted to write like Robert Louis Stevenson and wrote his master's thesis on Joseph Conrad, James read and reread Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* at least once a year, and Hughes was so fond of Whitman that when in a symbolic gesture he threw overboard all his books, Hughes made a point of recording, in his autobiography *The Big Sea*(98), that he still managed to save his copy of *Leaves of Grass*.

All this to stress that these three writers were definitively not alienated from "Western Culture"; in fact they were highly immersed in it. Ngugi from Kenya believed that Kenyan culture was so oversaturated with "Western Culture" that he along with two other colleagues challenged the English Department to incorporate more African texts into the syllabus, eventually creating an African literature department. He felt that students were being over acculturated with "Western culture" at the expense of their African culture. He has since written a series of books on the subject and has decided, as a political gesture and an effort to reclaim his own authenticity as a Kenyan writer, to abandon English for his fiction writing and to turn to Gikuyu.

James and Hughes were both big defenders of Jazz and Blues before these musical styles were deemed "important". Hughes is a major defender of most African American art forms and is extremely critical of those writers who try to deny their blackness, presenting an argument that would later be found in Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks.* In *American Civilization,* James makes a point of devoting a section to the importance of popular culture. James is a strong supporter of the Western canon but he also did not hide the fact that he was a big fan of Jazz. He even wrote a play based on his *Black Jacobins* in which Paul Robeson starred and was, according to Paul Buhle in his biography of James, not that successful.

All three writers have made a conscious effort to expose the "blackness" of their texts. Although representing blackness is somewhat problematic since how can you

represent skin tone as a form of consciousness[1]? Yet there are signal differences between black and white writing although representing and accounting for these differences is difficult, since there are differences between all writers. I chose these writers because of their different writing styles and forms. I deal primarily with Ngugi as a novelist, James as a cultural critic and Hughes as a poet. These distinctions are often blurred since all three have made breaks into other forms of writing and none have chosen to limit themselves to one form of expression. But all share in the fact in realizing that they have to come to terms with their own "double consciousness".

Still the locating of a shifting center is a problem for post-colonial writers who have been marginalized either directly or indirectly by colonialism or expansionism. To write to the center and not alienate yourself from yourself is the dilemma with which the writer is constantly faced. This is why I start with Ngugi. By being African, at least in North America, Ngugi is probably considered the most marginal. The fact that his Gikuyu name draws blank stares from people who can readily accept Western sounding writers such as C.L.R. James or Langston Hughes attests to the fact that even among academics the imagining of African culture and language is foreign. Ngugi is a prime example of the difficulty of presenting cross-culturally. I use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Arun Mukherjee to illustrate the point that the "marginal" writer has to overcome being either unheard or misheard, or even misread. Spivak and Muhkerjee both place the blame on

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[1]This is a topic that Kwame Anthony Appiah raises in his book *In My Father's House,* New York, Oxford University Press, 1992.

critics who are not versatile enough to listen. Ngugi is faced with the double problem of attempting to bridge the gap while still locating himself as a Kenyan author.

Now, why choose Walt Whitman as the focus for the discussion of three writers of the African Diaspora? Especially since Whitman has been described by some critics as, to put it mildly, unsupportive towards American slaves and Native Americans. Since there are writers like Hughes who believe in Whitman's ability to "contain multitudes" many writers are able to overlook these accusations of prejudice and focus on the positive elements in Whitman. In an introduction for the Whitman anthology that Hughes edited he sums up the reading strategy that many writers from the African Diaspora use when looking up Whitman: "Certainly, his poems contain us all. The reader cannot help but see his own better self therein"(Hughes 10). These writers are able to read Whitman "ambivalently," a reading technique that Homi Bhabha describes that is able to transform the text to the desires of the reader. Along those same lines, James has commented on the openness of *Leaves of Grass* and on the ability of advertisers to transform Whitman into another propaganda machine like the "Voice of America." Which, in a sense, is a strategy that may be similar to Harold Bloom's "misreading" without all that "anxiety" which Bloom believes occurs between strong writers and their successors.

Bloom seems to oversimplify the matter based on his understanding of Freud as if reception was a simple structured matter that can be boxed off into the different subject headings that form his chapters: Clinamen, Tessera, Kenosis, Daemonization, Askesis, and Apophrades. Bloom would have us assume that all these writers are competing with Whitman as if they don't have to fight just to be heard. Then, Bloom does not believe in the influence of politics in the measuring of literary texts. Is the fact that Hemingway is not

as popular as he once was due to his strength as an author or politics? I will try to take into account the numerous different factors, such as politics, that Bloom may view as unimportant, since he believes that strong writers will prevail.

Ngugi in choosing Whitman is relying on what was at the time a necessity for African texts, a western anchor. When reading African texts critics in the West would try to pair them with their Western other. This is a major reason for the African writer's attempt to write like Europeans or in this case like an American. Just like the satellite European universities that were considered inferior to the original back in England, so were these writers considered just cheap imitations of the Western original, or so the early African literature critics would have us believe. But through Whitman as a source of inspiration, writers can subvert this logic because Whitman too is a colonial writer who is able to subvert the logic that tries to present the writer in the colony as inferior. Whitman is able to break the rules and conventions of his time and still find a place in the Western canon. Whitman's role as a groundbreaker is very important to Ngugi, James and Hughes.

All three writers in attempting to locate their discourse within the frames of the West are also trying to break down the barriers. They are trying to create an epistemic shock in the system so that they can be heard. It is no wonder that James is able to locate a parallel in the literary revolution of the American Renaissance, a term coined, or at least brought into prominence by F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. It is also not surprising that since Hughes is writing in what has been termed as the Harlem Renaissance and Ngugi is writing in the African Renaissance that they would look upon their American Renaissance counterparts. The American Renaissance was an epistemic shock that provided a space for American

literature in the Western canon. Or, in other words, the creation of the concept which we call the "American Renaissance" gave American literature cultural currency.

The choice of C.L.R. James is strategic because he locates much of his discourse within the context of the importance of the American Renaissance. For James this is the golden age of American literature and this period is what reflects America. What is interesting and also taken into consideration is that the 1920's and 30's represent the period in which the cultural hub of America completed a move from Boston to New York, presenting a dramatic shift in American culture. With this move also came a new shift towards writers who in future generations would be viewed as distinctly American literary figures. It is specifically during this period, in the beginning of the twentieth century, that writers of the American Renaissance began to make their name. James arrives in 1938 after a literary revolution where the writers of the American Renaissance are settling in to become the center of America's literary identity. For James the idea of revolution and the American Renaissance will be closely intertwined.

James justifies his position as a revolutionary with the contemporary constructions of the American Renaissance. In his book *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* James tries to secure a position for himself in the United States at the height of the red scare through the use of *Moby-Dick* by representing himself as a member of the battle against the oppressive Ahabs, like Stalin and Hitler. He tries to characterize himself as a freethinking Ishmael in an effort to prove his Americaness. James believes in the potential of American democracy and so he fights in order to stay in America.

James is sympathetic to the reading of the American Renaissance as a revolutionary break from literary traditions because even before he came to America revolutions figure

prominently in his discourse, encouraging him to believe that America will be the epicenter for the next major revolution. In *American Civilization,* also originally titled by James "The Struggle for Happiness," he offers a reading of America based primarily on his previous readings in conjunction with readings of Whitman, Melville and the abolitionists. It is because James is able to make these links that he figures as one of the major intellectuals of the twentieth century. His ability to make these links and voice them even in his position as a marginal voice has made him a mythic figure, used again and again to (re)present Black academic criticism.

Another thing considered is the shift in publishing at the time of James and Hughes. The publishing industry moved to New York and so this is another reason for writers to begin to flock to New York. At this time the publishers in New York also began looking for writers that were different from those of Boston and through this wave many hyphenated Americans got their start. Langston Hughes as an African-American and a fan of Whitman is able to fit the mold and so his book of poetry *The Weary Blues* is picked up, with help of Carl Van Vechten, by Alfred Knopf. Van Vechten is also indicative of the kind of social energy that New York had over Boston. New York, at least the New York which Van Vechten traveled, was highly charged sexually. The risks that New York took concerning sex filter down to the kind of risks New York was willing to take as a whole.

New York, especially during the prohibition years, was extremely tolerant of all sorts of sexual expression. In fact even if prohibition was established in order to preserve or construct an imaginary sense of morality in the United States what happens, as George Chauncey presents in *Gay New York, is* more of a loosening of moral constraints. Since patrons of speakeasies were already breaking the law by drinking, the other laws that

controlled behavior were easier to break. New York became a migrating point, since as compared to a small town where a smaller society could keep an eye out for "questionable" behavior, one could remain virtually anonymous in a big city and therefore hide from judging eyes. In New York you were free to do what you liked as long as you didn't get caught.

Whitman's sexuality is important or more importantly his openness towards sexuality. Like Erkkila, I believe that "Whitman is still, a century after his death, a sexually and politically charged figure who works on the boundaries of traditional sexual, social, and cultural taboos"(*Breaking Bounds* 6). Whitman is empowering for people fighting against the control of the images of sexuality which extends to the control of sexuality. Ngugi, James, and Hughes all realize that the "other" was further marginalized by his/her imagined sexuality. Their humanity was measured by some imaginary norm.

It is no wonder that Hughes is so strongly affected by the "Calamus" poems, which Hughes's contemporaries took as a sign or code identifying his homosexuality, but is also symbolic of an openness that works against a system that perverts, dehumanizes, and legislates against the sexuality of the "other." In the United States even imagined acts such as poorly positioned glances have been enough to justify guilt, resulting in the deaths of innocent people. Where the only guilt lay on the basis of a constructed image imbedded in the American cultural imagination, where African Americans are not presented as sexually human, Whitman, especially in "Calamus," is able to blur and open a space for what could be called politically trangressive sexual desires:

> Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
>
> I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,

I will make divine magnetic lands,

With the love of comrades,

With the life-long love of comrades(*Leaves* 117).

These lines could be read either to justify democratic or sexual allusions or both.

Whitman's link between the body and the soul reaffirms the humanity of the subject by focusing on the beauty that is robbed by reductive narratives which try to control the "other's" body and soul. Through his expansive love he is able to reaffirm the worth of a group of people who have been relegated to a second class status. This is a portrait of the ideal Whitman that is often read and occupies the literary imagination instead of harsher readings that can portray him negatively. Whitman's defenders seem to be able to forget his failings in favor of the positive elements in *Leaves of Grass*.

Finally, African American texts such as the folktales are an important part of understanding Whitman and help explain why his work would attract such a large following among writers of the African Diaspora. It is due to the adaptable quality of his poetry that Whitman is able to speak to his listeners as a comrade. When Whitman speaks to his audience, surprisingly he is able to speak their language. Because of this talent, Hughes is one of Whitman's strongest defenders. But it is Hughes's belief that Whitman understands African American culture That is why Hughes is able to justify Whitman's work to a critic Lorenzo D. Turner who wrote to Hughes in the *Chicago Defender*: "From a careful study of all Whitman's published works I am convinced that he was not a friend of the Negro, and had very few contacts with Negroes, and thought that they were inferior to other human beings"(July 25). Hughes does not believe this to be the case and in his rebuttal in the following week's column, he emphasized the importance of judging

Whitman on his merits. It is my aim to show especially in the third chapter that there is some indication of an understanding or familiarity with African American culture, which Hughes repeatedly tried to demonstrate to Whitman's detractors, especially in terms of Whitman's insider knowledge concerning the "Signifying Monkey" folktale.

Hughes salutes Whitman as one of the finest American poets, which can be seen in his many tributes to Whitman. Hughes seems to attribute this to Whitman's status as privileged observer and as someone who was able to love all Americans. Whether or not that is true still remains to be seen, but at least Whitman has been able to maintain an image as the American bard of Democracy and the path-breaking poet of the Western canon. This image has fueled the writings of future generations that decided to write back to the bard.

Chapter I

Walt Whitman and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o: Through "a stream in whose embrace all creatures alike receive their religious value".

> If we consider the story on the anagogical level, however, there is a deeper message. Ngugi is a disciple of Walt Whitman (from whose poem, "On the Beach at Night" comes the title of the novel). Ngugi believes in Whitman's concept of the brotherhood of man and remains optimistic that man can be improved.
>
> Taban lo Liyong

African texts have been challenged to be read dialectically[2] but to argue that they can only be read in that paradigm is to limit the text. The problem of how to read cross-culturally forces the critic to come to terms with their own blindness or perhaps deafness. In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's frequently-quoted "Can the Subaltern Speak?", she problematizes the possibility of accurate cross-cultural readings. The problem of projecting one's interpretation about the "silent other," according to Spivak, is that it relies on conjecture and co-relates to the position of the critic in relation to the subject. In her attempt to justify a position that no one can "truly" speak for the subaltern, she problematizes Ranajit Guha's 'Subaltern Studies' group's claim of representing voice. The

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[2]An interesting text that represent this shift is *Marxism and African Literature* edited by Georg M. Gugelberger, Africa World Press, Trenton, New Jersey, 1985.

reason Spivak uses Guha is to illustrate that any discourse, even a discourse not emanating from the West, is problematic[3]. Spivak states that the object becomes:

> For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject's itinerary has not been traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual. In the slightly dated language of the Indian group, the question becomes, How can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak? Their project, after all, is to rewrite the development of the consciousness of the Indian nation(Spivak 80).

So in this case, although the interpretation is supposed to be objective, there is a constraining agenda that tries to force a reading, focusing on some elements and ignoring others. This is done in the name of an "authentic" reading. The whole issue of authenticity is problematic and too large a topic to discuss here, but often those who claim authenticity like Afrocentric critics are just as guilty of essentialising as Eurocentric ones. This is the point Spivak is trying to make: it is almost impossible to make the subaltern truly speak.

When readers try to limit the text by confining it to dialectical readings or reading all African texts as if there is only one way to read an African text, they are doing a disservice to the text and are at the same time contributing to the hegemonic system that prefers to

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[3]This use may also be a strategic attempt to reassert her currency in light of criticism which would view Spivak as being too Western and therefore out of touch.

relegate marginal texts into understandable and less exotic boxes. The "other" becomes the "subject" and not the "Subject." This idea, borrowed from Spivak, illustrates how "the west" looks at subaltern subjects as the object of study rather than the Subject, which would be the material. This is where the Afrocentric critics have a legitimate claim against the state of western criticism that wants African culture to fit a western mold.

Arun Mukherjee in her article "The Vocabulary of the 'Universal': The Cultural Imperialism of the Universalist Criteria of Western Literary Criticism" addresses this issue and has been able to establish perhaps a less cryptic and more optimistic position aligned with Spivak,

> "that the western critics, instead of developing a sensitivity to other ways of apprehending the world, have simply imposed the traditional Western categories on the works from the new Commonwealth, all in the name of "universality"(17).

Her article questions the merits of western critics who believe they can tackle Afro-Asian texts with only the tools of the west. This is often the case when the West tries to speak for the 'other', the critic when working in the West must realize the 'other' position or forever be speaking out of context. Mukherjee illustrates how often texts like *Pather Panchali* or *Midnight's Children* are misread because the techniques used are not appropriate to the text. Mukherjee prescribes at least a partial immersion in the 'other' culture to remedy this western shortsightedness.

The difficulty increases when trying to represent cross-cultural exchange as in the case of Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. He illustrates a grid work of how black culture is able to flow from the four main English speaking sectors of the African Diaspora, North America, The United Kingdom, The Caribbean and Africa.

The Black Atlantic is the metaphor for the conduit or middle passage for this cultural exchange. Reading how culture travels is a difficult task because the critic must try to accommodate Spivak's impossible task of reading the 'other' in comparison with another culture. The critic has to speak through both sides of his mouth in an effort to be open to at least two positions. This requires a bit of creativity on the part of the critic. The critics that I have chosen are versatile enough for this task.

The purpose of this chapter will be to illustrate that African literature is more complex and cannot be limited to any type of essentialization, as in the dichotomy of "good native" versus "bad colonizer." This is not to say that the dialectic does not exist but that this type of interpretation has managed to overshadow all other readings and this remains problematic. The reading I propose for James Ngugi/Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* will defer the dialectical Manichean reading and rely on a Signifyin(g) reading that focuses on reading the tropes, the turns in which words or phrases are used in a way that effects a conspicuous change in what we take to be their standard meaning. Some of the more famous tropes are metonymy, metaphor and synecdoche. This kind of reading assumes an ambiguity that assumes that "yes" can often mean "no".

The text troped by *Weep Not Child* is "Walt Whitman", not Walt(er)Whitman the poet but the mythical figure who created or was created by *Leaves of Grass.* In order to discuss the troping of the text, my first project will be to question why Ngugi would trope a text and then ask why "Walt Whitman" specifically. The first thing that will have to be summarized is a brief history of Ngugi and African literature . The second part will focus on the tradition of borrowing in order to instill "value." The third part will briefly outline why "Walt Whitman" is different , how a text that would seem to be problematic charges

post-colonial discourse. Finally, I will illustrate with a few examples from both texts and will conclude with some criticism directed at what some critics would claim to be the misogyny of the text.

It may now seem strange or out of fashion to try to link Ngugi, the anti-imperialist, the anti-English writer who now writes fiction only in Gikuyu and is famous for his abolition of the English department in Kenya, with Walt Whitman the quintessential American poet. But Ngugi's love for Kenya and his fellow Kenyans and his attempt to create a national literature for Kenya allows for there to be many comparisons to Whitman. The epigraph illustrates that Whitman is viewed as subversive in Kenya or at least in Kenyan educational circles. His ideas on brotherhood flourished in a country where a group of assembled men were feared by the colonists and legislation was created in order to prevent assemblies of indigenous Kenyan men. Whitman at least, if only metaphorically, provided a space where men could come together. It is no coincidence that Ngugi is considered the "African Tolstoy"[4] and Whitman the "American Tolstoy."[5] Their love of the people, the land, and for freedom[6] fuels the legend that supports both mythic men.

Ngugi is a giant in Kenya. His texts are widely read in universities all over the world even if to some readers he might seem quite foreign or exotic. Especially since there are

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[4]This title is given to Ngugi during an interview, "'Tolstoy in Africa': An Interview with Ngugi Wa Thiong'o". in Ba-Shiru: A-Journal-of-African-Languages-and-Literature 1973 5:1. 21-30

[5] This is alluded to in Gay Wilson Allen's *Walt Whitman Abroad* Syracuse University, 1955. 144-186

[6]The Land and Freedom Movement is the Kenyan rebels' name for themselves as opposed to the colonist's vilified Mau Mau.

often cultural biases that question the validity of discourse emanating from Africa, I feel that it is necessary to acculturate, without being didactic, an audience that is not familiar with African literatures. And if I may for a moment digress, and blow the lid off of Pandora's box; *Weep Not, Child* is mentioned in Harold Bloom's *Western Canon*, in the section devoted to his personal canon. For those that recognize the industry of Bloom this is to illustrate that Ngugi is a major Kenyan, African, and World writer. Ngugi is one of the most well known post-colonial writers rivaled only by Chinua Achebe(*Things Fall Apart)* and Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses)*.

Ngugi by being the first widely published Kenyan writer has had to be the ground breaker and like Whitman has allowed himself to be put in a vulnerable position in trying to break conventions to define a Kenyan national literature, while trying to adhere to imagined standards of what an African writer should be. Ngugi is emerging, as a writer, at the cusp of independence with a rather euphoric optimism. As Carol Sicherman in *Research in African Literatures* illustrates:

> It must not be forgotten that *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* were both written while he was an undergraduate at Makere, *A Grain of Wheat* while he was an MA student at Leeds University in England. The burgeoning of his political awareness during his years at Leeds(1964-67) certainly affected Grain but did not fully blossom until *Trial[of Dedan Kimathi]*(1989 349).

The earlier texts often have many rough edges because of "Ngugi's early requirement that the writer 'be prepared to suggest' a future(Nagenda and Serumaga, 'A Discussion' iii)(

Sicherman 1989 350)". And also one must remember that his focus on Western literature has changed and this was written before he decolonized his mind[7].

Sicherman relates in "Ngugi and Kenyan History" that after having been offered the opportunity to revise his texts, Ngugi chose to "correct" certain terms that he later found to be problematic. The examples she cites are changing "the party" to "the movement" in response to his disenchantment of his earlier ideals. This editing which is really a rewriting is a form of Ngugi taking on the guise of a Whitman like figure. Whitman, from the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* until the *Deathbed Edition,* chose to rework the text in an effort to correct earlier "flaws". In their effort to have their texts "be" the country they are representing, they both feel the desire to rewrite their texts in conjunction with the passage of time. They both want to maintain a mythic prophetic tradition.

Part of that tradition is in the construction of an identity. The choice of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o the Kenyan Gikuyu writer instead of James Ngugi the colonized Christian writer is similar to Walt Whitman's stance as the poet of the people as compared to the more formal and distant Walter Whitman. Both writers in their self-(re)naming are forming a prophetic identity as well as trying to establish themselves as part of the community from which their discourse emanates.

Ngugi in his effort to be prophetic has had to challenge and criticize Kenyan society constantly. Although his writing practices have been criticized, his first four novels established for Ngugi a firm place on the African literary scene, and as opposed to a new writer he has the freedom to write or do almost anything and be published. This

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[7]See *Decolonising the Mind.*

success has enabled Ngugi to become an activist supporting the writing of literature in African as opposed to European languages[8]. Despite his success or maybe because of it, he has still managed to get himself into trouble with the government. Since he opposed and openly criticized the government he spent a year from Dec. 30,1977 until Dec. 12,1978 as a political prisoner for possessing 18 banned books, a trumped up charge[9], on the order of Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi, who according to Sicherman believed Ngugi was participating in anti-Moi or Mwakenya activities . During this time Amnesty International adopted Ngugi, as in the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa in Nigeria, as a prisoner of conscience. Now, due to his role, according to the government, as an upstart, because he is disillusioned by the lack of progress since Kenyan Independence Dec. 12, 1963, he has been exiled from Kenya. There is irony in the man of the people being forced to live abroad[10]. But according to Ngugi his texts, such as *Matigari* give him a mythic presence in Kenya. And now through newspaper articles and the teaching of his disciples at the

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[8]The development of this position appears to be quite gradual. *Homecoming, Writers in Politics , Decolonising the Mind* and *Moving the Centre* chronicle Ngugi's ever-changing position on the role of language and literature. His latest position in *Moving the Centre*, recognizing the need for a lingua-franca, would stress a non-hegemonic language, as he suggests maybe Swahili.

[9]This is Ngugi's position and is explained in *Decolonising the Mind.*

[10]This description of Ngugi is idealistic. Obviously Ngugi has his faults and has been criticized for his biases See Frederick Buell, *National Culture and the New Global System*, Baltimore:John Hopkins University Press, 1994.

university department he formerly chaired, his presence, even though strictly controlled and watered down in official circles, is still felt in Kenya[11].

Weep Not, Child, which has been received almost as Ngugi's autobiographical text, can serve as frame to imagine Ngugi's early life. His life is chronologically parallel to the main character, Njoroge's life. His life could serve as a point of reference for understanding Njoroge. Ngugi is born Jan. 5 ,1938, a bit younger than Njoroge, to a similar family with four wives and twenty-seven siblings. Like Njoroge, Ngugi's brother in 1954 joins the Mau Mau. In 1955-59 he wins a place at Alliance High School, a school similar to Njoroge's Siriana. In 1955 Ngugi's, like Njoroge's house is razed by anti-Mau-Mau campaign. Njoroge's involvement in the war and strike is imagined because Ngugi at this point was too young to have been involved in these early stages of the war or strike. But in 1959 when Ngugi teaches at Kahuguini primary school and then enters Makere, we can imagine Njoroge following the same or a similar path as Ngugi. We can see Njoroge, when later Ngugi, in 1961-1964 becomes a columnist for *Sunday Post*, *Daily Nation* and *Sunday Nation* and in 1962 Ngugi writes *Weep Not, Child* . There is Njoroge again in 1964 when Ngugi graduates from Makere and enters Leeds university on British Council Scholarship and then publishes *Weep Not, Child* . Finally in 1966 *Weep Not, Child* wins

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[11]Ngugi clearly chronicles this part of his life in his *Decolonising the Mind*, James Currey/Heinemann, London,1986.

first prize for anglophone novel at first World Festival of Negro Arts at Dakar(awarded by a jury headed by Langston Hughes)[12], Njoroge is traveling with him.

This mirroring is important because it relates to the importance of the value of education and how it effects both Ngugi and Njoroge. Ngugi and Njoroge mirror each other in terms of how they were both able or maybe fortunate enough to receive an education. They both received the "value" of the colonizer. The value of education and the fortune of being one of the few able to receive one is an underlying theme of the text, so the flow of value works both with Ngugi and Njoroge. In incorporating Whitman in a reading of *Weep Not, Child* we can see what Gates terms as a Signifyin(g) of value. To paraphrase Michel Foucault : value is something that is kept in check by the forces of power. But according to Gates that value can also be seen as a tool to subvert the master's domination. Just as those early African-Americans who were sold into slavery did, you can subvert the master's text by "yessums."

The question of value is problematic in the justification of the old g(r)ay poet. The use of Whitman is problematic in the sense that there is a certain indeterminacy, value is issued by the reader. To this day readers reject any "queerness" in Whitman, maybe even alluding to his children[13]. Erkkila identifies the problem when discussing Whitman and the

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[12]This biographical information is supplied by Carol Sicherman. *Ngugi Wa Thiong'o: The Making of a Rebel*.London:Hans Zell Publishers,1990.

[13]When asked about his sexuality by John Addington Symonds, Whitman replied that "I have had six children" (Folsom 204) in *Breaking Bounds*.

conflation/separation of sexual liberation and democracy in the introduction to *Breaking Bounds*:

> By equating democracy with sexual liberation, Whitman was also the first poet to provoke among his unsympathetic readers what was (and perhaps still is) the deepest underlying fear of democracy in America: that in its purest form democracy would lead to a blurring of sexual bounds and thus the breakdown of a social and bourgeois economy based on the management of the body and the polarization of male and female spheres(7-8).

This attests to the privileging of certain readings and the avoidance of others in order to preserve a certain ideal. The logic that believes that the "queer" Whitman corrupts the "democratic" Whitman is similar to that logic that believes that the African corrupts the European system. So in 1962, when *Weep Not, Child* came out we could still make the link between sexual liberation with decolonization. In those terms, Whitman is the ideal vehicle to use in questioning the value of a system that discriminates against sexuality or nationality .

The question of value, especially when it is concerned with colonialism, is loaded with so much cultural baggage that its use in any sense seems didactic. In this sense, the term 'value' is therefore supposed to be the corrective in the civilizing mission. The 'wild,' the 'savage' is supposed to be somewhat neutralized by 'value' and the native is supposed to become somewhat civilized but not enough, so that the colonizer can justify his presence

in the colonized country[14]. Among the many debates surfacing in post-colonial circles, the topics of identity, authenticity and nationalism are forcing critics to be very wary of the term 'value'. Discussion of the term finds its roots in the whole economy of the colonial discourse, the master who brings "something of value" to the primitive native. This "something of value" has been the argument of many colonists to justify their presence in their efforts to help civilize the African. We have only to look at the work of such popular fiction writers like Robert Ruark in Kenya, who actually wrote *Something of Value* , a novel, reinforcing the colonial myth, about how the Mau Mau are trying to destroy all the 'value' that all the colonists have created in the 'wilderness of Africa.' It is only the "good" Africans who are able to incorporate this 'value.'

It may be helpful to look at the role of Western texts in African fiction. Ngugi was not the first writer to use a western text as his title and for his epigraph. Many writers have used the texts of the west as an anchor. Chinua Achebe used W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot. Ayi Kwei Armah used Sartre and Plato. Tayeb Saleh used William Shakespeare. There was a certain belief that there had to be a core of the west in all texts. The structure of blurbs on African texts often positioned the text in relation to its Western precursor. On the back cover of a recent edition of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, a review highlights what the critic views as the text's "description of the vague

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[14]A better representation of this process can be seen in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. New York:Verso,1983. He goes into detail about how the structures of colonialism reinforce the need for the colonizer's presence in colonial territories.

existential ennui of his unnamed hero recalls Sartre's *La Nausée.*" The merit of the African text was defined in relation to its other.

African writers like African-American writers during the nineteenth century and before used western texts like *The Bible* to prove their humanity[15]. This is what some critics would call writing back. Writing back, as used by Salman Rushdie, served as inspiration for the title of the Holy Trinity's, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin, green book , *The Empire Writes Back.* They try to create a text that will serve as a master key for a disparate group of texts. *The Empire Writes Back* assumes that all post-colonial texts are somewhat similar. This is limiting for all authors trying to write "post-colonial" literature and for all theorists/critics trying to comment upon it. But as the title somewhat implies, the relationship presented is of an "inferior" and homogenous literature trying to write up to the Western texts.

So when trying to conceive of Walt Whitman as instilling a sense of "religious value" in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, as referred to in the title, we might see this as being Whitman or rather the text that we know as "Walt Whitman" trying to civilize the African writer or rather the text that we know as "James Ngugi," and this is partly the case. The point is that the term 'value' is indeterminate or rather "ambivalent" and is appropriated through a set of criteria forced by the interpreter. At least this is the point that Homi Bhabha tries to present in his article in *'Race' Writing and Difference* ; that certain texts, he cites *The*

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[15]See Henry Louis Gates jr., *The Signifyin(g) Monkey* for more details on how western texts were a vehicle to prove a slaves humanity or even allow them to obtain there manumission papers. Part of the justification for slavery was that the slaves were inferior and that they were only fit to be slaves.

Bible, are ambivalent in which 'value' can be appropriated by the reader. "Whitman" seems to fall into this category of ambivalence; as a text Whitman has been read in various conflicting ways. In fact it is Donald Pease, in "Walt Whitman's Revisionary Democracy," who illustrates Whitman's preference for open readings, in accordance with Bhabha's theory of ambivalent texts, through his citing of Emerson:

> The poets are thus liberating gods. The ancient British bards had for the title of their order, "those who are free throughout the world." They are free, and they make free. An imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterward when we arrive at the precise sense of the author. I think nothing is of any value in books excepting the transcendental and extraordinary. If a man is enflamed and carried away by his thought... let me read his paper and you may have all the arguments and history and criticism(Pease 150) .

Pease follows up by adding, "After hearing Emerson on poetry, Whitman aspired to remake himself in Emerson's image of the poet"(Pease 150). So the irony of the 'value' of Whitman, after reading his text, is that, according to Pease's interpretation of Whitman, it is found in the reader.

Whitman is an ideal vehicle for the colonial/post-colonial writer. Ngugi needed a text that would serve as a passkey. A text that could serve him as ambivalently as Bhabha's Bible but still remains, to some extent, secular. The key element to this text is that it would have to be a simulacrum for presence. As Tenney Nathanson would suggest in "Whitman's Addresses to his Audience":

> Despite Whitman's penchant for the sweeping and doctrinaire pronouncement, the particular "truth" the poet of the early work will tell us will be less important than how he will claim to be able to tell it: directly and personally to each of us, whoever and wherever we may be, and whenever we may live. Such assertions are a regular feature of Whitman's apostrophes(Nathanson 130).

The text speaks to the reader as if it is always already part of the reader. Nathanson stresses that throughout *Leaves of Grass* the poet talks to the reader. Nathanson uses examples of personal address such as "'personally to you now,' as the poet declares in 'Starting from Paumonok'" and "'What is it, then between us?'(Nathanson 131)" to illustrate his point. Although Nathanson at some points attributes this presence to what J.L. Austin would call "performative utterances" because it conflicts with the idea of an ambivalent text, a point that I would thoroughly disagree with, I will not argue this point because it would escape the scope of this paper[16]. Still, I would agree with the point that he tries to make in relation to the voice of the text. He says "I've tried to suggest, the poet seems to slough off his particular, limited body, becoming instead a force which both flows through space and time and annuls them, assuming an invisible form which pours itself into us, dissolving our separateness and subjecting us to the poet's irresistible will" (Nathanson 134). This, except for the part when we are subjected to the poet's irresistible will, is the description of an ambivalent text . The point is that, even if Nathanson's

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[16]See Jacques Derrida's *Limited Inc.:ABC....* John Hopkins University Press, 1977 for a view that is skeptical of Austin's theory.

argument conflicts in a theoretical way, I agree that the reader is addressed, if not by the poet, at least by the text.

Whitman is an example of what Henry Louis Gates jr. presents in the *Signifying Monkey*, as the talking text. As Gates illustrates, "the implicit premise of this study is that all texts signify upon other texts"(xxiv). The link between Bhabha and Gates is reinforced by Gates in his suggestion that "Signifyin(g) depends on the success of the signifier at invoking an absent meaning ambiguously "present" in a carefully wrought statement"(Gates 86). Basically, my argument is that the creation and the publication of Ngugi's text *Weep Not, Child* was helped because of its Signifyin(g) of an ambivalent text. *Leaves of Grass* a text that was able to bring a certain indeterminable 'value' to Ngugi's novel and to be able to provide space for radical (re)readings/(re)writings of a text that even until now is considered average. Under this light *Weep Not, Child* is not a didactic post-colonial text but an indeterminate Kenyan text, probably Ngugi's most open text.

Ngugi's choice of Whitman as inspiration is not unusual as Ed Folsom illustrates in his introduction to *Walt Whitman: The Measure of his Song*:

> Whitman, of course, invited the response; to address Walt Whitman, after all, is in a very real sense to complete his poetic act, to create the other half of the dialogue he initiated:
>
> > Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!
> > Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,
> > But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than
> > before known,

Arouse! for you must justify me.

....

Leaving it to you to prove and define it,

Expecting the main things from you(xxiii).

Of course, it is clear that Ngugi read Whitman and it is certain that Whitman enters the text, at least and at very least through the epigraph and title. Ngugi is/was an avid reader and, despite his present position that encourages, in an African context, African oriented literatures above all others, he was a great fan of western literature. In fact he thoroughly enjoyed Robert Louis Stevenson, and, according to Carol Sicherman, one day hoped to be able to write just like him. And Ngugi's love for Western literature does not stop at Stevenson he wrote his master's thesis on Conrad. It is not farfetched at all to suggest that Ngugi, like numerous others, as Folsom points out, writes back to Whitman. My extensive use of quotes is an effort to re-create or imagine the missing proof.

Taban Lo Liyong an African writer, teacher and contemporary of Ngugi who was involved with the abolition of the English department[17] at the university where Ngugi and Taban both taught, commented on Ngugi's use of the "great old American poet" in his review of *Weep Not, Child* in *Africa Report*, cited in the epigraph. Again, this epigraph illustrates that Whitman was viewed as subversive in Kenya or at least in Kenyan educational circles. His ideas on brotherhood flourished in a country were a group of

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[17]Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Henry Owuour-Anyumba, and Taban Lo Liyong in 1968 presented a paper to abolish the English Department at the University of Nairobi. See Ngugi's *Homecoming*. Heinemann:London, 1972.

assembled men were feared by the colonists and legislation was created in order to prevent assemblies of indigenous Kenyan men. Whitman at least, if only metaphorically, provided a space where men could come together.

Whitman is the type of "ideal poet-messiah" that tends to fuel ecstatic responses in a wide variety of writers and readers as Walter Grunzweig presents in "Walt Whitman and German Expressionism." Grunzweig quotes Franz Werfel in *Decision* who lionizes Whitman when he writes:

> I was seventeen or eighteen when Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* fell into my hands. I can never forget those intoxicated days when my mind was inundated by this Mississippi of poetry. Until that time I had believed that there was an aristocratic hierarchy of objects suitable for poetry. But Walt Whitman taught me and my generation that in the realm of reality there is nothing commonplace; that in the simplest word, the commonest designation, the most shopworn idea there lies hidden an explosive poetic force surpassing a thousandfold that which is esthetically sanctified. Walt Whitman , this prophet of a cosmic democracy, taught us far more: that a mysterious, a divine stream of love fills the universe- a stream in whose embrace all creatures alike receive their religious value. And through his own mighty example he showed us that the poet can be the antenna of the stream. The example of this Homeric American continues to work upon a future yet unknown("Thanks" 43)(Grunzweig 249).

Grunzweig believes that "this passage suggests the American's poetic significance"(249). But this is one of many confessions of spiritual invigoration by *Leaves of Grass* that

allows the text to flow into other texts. The following paragraphs will illustrate how Whitman flows into Ngugi's text.

The title is the obvious marker and is the signal indicating that Whitman is clearly in the text but *Weep Not, Child* is more than just that Whitman is a key for the text . In an article by Gersham A. Nelson, "Rastafarians and Ethiopianism" a section that is supposed to be revealing for Haile Selassie's importance in Rastafarianism is also revealing for Whitman's importance in the text:

> Because the bible became widely used to demonstrate Haile Selassie was the Messiah, the movement became more firmly religious. Among the many Biblical passages used as proof of the Messiahship of the Ethiopian monarch is Revelation 5:2-5:
>
> > And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice: who is worthy to open the book and loose the seals thereof? And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under earth was able to open the book, neither to look thereon. And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book -And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof (Nelson 74).

This section reveals that even if Whitman cannot open the text at least Whitman is able to encourage the possibility. In Whitman's text there remains the possibility, open but often unread. Whitman plays the role of the non-judgemental teacher who allows the student to make the best of what is taught, or rather learned. Whitman remains the key to the Signifyin(g) chain that Whitman anticipates in "Song of Myself :

I teach straying from me, yet who can stray from me?

I follow you whoever you are from the present hour,

My words itch at your ears till you understand them.

...

(It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue of

you,

Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen'd.)(85 1244- 1249)

Whitman's power as a prophetic teacher contributes to the possibility of unlocking sealed books and in that unlocking he also able to provide a voice. Whitman is like Haile Selassie who is a Messiah for boundary breaking writers. *Weep Not, Child* as a title incorporates Whitman into a messianic tradition that is found in many African texts of this period[18].

Ngugi, realizing the potential of Whitman, uses *Leaves of Grass* as the supplement and also a totem. The quest for education, the 'value' of the colonizer, is troped to be an idealized education, an education like Whitman's, instead of the actual colonial education. Ngugi echoes Whitman when he describes Njoroge at school when he learns how to conjugate:

Njoroge could now sing,

I am standing up.

You are standing up.

She is standing up.

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[18]Abdul R. JanMohamed addresses this topic in his *Manichean Aesthetics*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1983.

We are standing up.

You are standing up.

They are standing up.

Where are you going?

I am going to the door.

We are going to the door.

Point to the blackboard. What are you doing?

I am pointing to the blackboard(*Weep* 46).

This is not an exact repetition of "Song of Myself," but in order to make this connection Gates believes you must rely on the reader. "The reader must supply the model of which the author's text is a distorted image, mirrored in some way"(*Signifyin(g)* 110). Whitman's ecstasy is mirrored through Njoroge's Signifyin(g) of "The Song of Myself". This conjugation which may seem insignificant in itself , by making a metonymic jump, is similar to Whitman in its Adamic qualities. Here Njoroge is listing and naming , with his new tool, education as if he were Adam in the Garden of Eden. You can hear the echoes of Njoroge finishing this listing with "Such-like I love" but it does not have to be stated because Njoroge is ecstatic as soon as he offered, by his mother, the chance to go to school. But as the reader soon learns, the irony builds as the supplement is problematized.

Still through the simple act of Njoroge's conjugation, again, there is an example of Whitman entering the text. Once this opening is revealed, one text seems to directly talk to the other. The education receives new meaning and the reader is able to create more links. "Song of Myself" is able to address Njoroge and ask:

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin

of all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun,(there are millions

of suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look

through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self(ll31-37).

Here these lines echo or foresee a strategy that Njoroge will have to develop. It is the text writing itself to Njoroge. Also in this section is an ironic questioning of the education that has brought these texts together. The Signifyin(g) text responds and questions the original text in an effort to write itself.

The relation illustrated above is not only an echo but also a parody. Even though Ngugi's text praises Whitman and the openness his text offers, there is still a sense of doubt that flows through the text. The text questions the other text's imperatives. The role of parody is to question the text that is being parodied. Gates uses Mikhail Bakhtin's *Discourse Typology in Prose* to define parody as a part of Signifyin(g).

> In parody, "as in stylization, the author employs the speech of another, but, in contradistinction to stylization, he introduces into that other speech an intention which is directly opposed to the original one. The second voice, having lodged in the other speech, clashes antagonistically with the original, host voice and forces it

> to serve directly opposite aims. Speech becomes a battlefield for opposing intentions(*Signifyin(g)* 110).

In Njoroge's singing of his conjugation we see the irony of this act in that it is only conjugation and not real singing, as in the case of "Song of Myself". We also see the difference between practice singing versus practical singing. When he and his fellow students have to sing for real they fail miserably. This double-voiced discourse reveals the gaps in the 'value' of education that the text alone only reveals almost at the end of the text. As the text progresses we wonder if this appeal to not weep is justified or if the reassurance is only another bill of goods that has been bought without reflection.

Weep Not, Child and "Starting from Paumonok" both mirror each other. *Weep Not, Child* is often viewed as semi-autobiographical as mentioned previously and the link is often made that Njoroge and Ngugi are interchangeable, and the comparison is often made in readings of "Starting from Paumonok" that Whitman is also being, to some extent, autobiographical. Whitman clearly enters the text even if there is no concrete evidence that Ngugi is consciously using Whitman's text. As Gates describes ,

> Signifyin(g) is black double voicedness; because it always entails formal revision and an intertextual relation.... Repetition, with a signal difference, is fundamental to the nature of Signifyin(g) as we shall see(Signifyin(g) 51).

This is a crucial part of Gates's argument. Both texts (re)write each other in a Signifyin(g) way.

One point that might seem problematic is that *Leaves of Grass* can also evoke images of Walt Whitman the colonizer. Ngugi and Whitman both constantly refer to the land as if

they know it intimately. But since Whitman is one of the colonizers his relationship to Ngugi is somewhat problematic.

> Aware of the fresh free giver the flowing Missouri, aware of mighty
> Niagara,
> Aware of the buffalo herds grazing the plains, the hirsute and
> strong-breasted bull,
> Of earth, rocks, Fifth-month flowers experienced, stars, rain, snow,
> my amaze,
> Having studied the mocking-bird's tones and the flight of the
> mountain-hawk,
> And heard at dawn the unrivall'd one, the hermit thrush from the
> swamp-cedars,
> Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World.(I 9-14)

These lines seem to stress Whitman's role as an observer . Sometimes Whitman's voice can be clouded by a voice that would be typical of an anthropologist or ethnographer. The translation from one culture to the other becomes problematic because how can the colonizer speak with or for the colonized, even in relationships in which their identity is separated. Ngugi would have an easier time siding with a Native American.

Weep Not, Child takes this issue into consideration and queries the role of the colonizer without necessarily making a judgment on Whitman. If we take the lines above as compared to these lines that illustrates how the colonizer Mr. Howlands pictures his Kenyan land, his "shamba":

> He just loved to see Ngotho working in the farm; the way the old man touched the soil, almost fondling, and the way he tended the young tea plants as if they were his own.... Ngotho was too much of a part of the farm to be separated from it(*Weep* 33).

Sometimes Whitman is detached from the land and is only an observer. Then *Weep not, Child* asks if Whitman is Mr Howlands. Njoroge seems to sympathize with Mr. Howlands until he realizes that he, like other Kenyan land-owning-colonizers, is part of the problem. Njoroge realizes this in his conversation with Kamau . Kamau presents this argument in a dialogue with Njoroge:

> 'Yes. They are robbers.'
>
> 'All of them?'
>
> 'Yes. Even Mr Howlands'(*Weep* 49)

Whitman would, according to this logic be a 'robber' but when the reader later meets Mr Howland's son, Stephen(*Weep*124), who is not so different from Njoroge. The reader still wonders if they are all robbers, especially since shy gazing Stephen is portrayed as the twenty ninth bather in "Song of Myself" looking out but afraid to come out and play with the other African boys. This doubt whether to believe in the value of education is compounded in his quandary of whether or not to accept its practitioners. This conflict which has in other texts led to suicide is approached differently in *Weep Not, Child.*

The idea of value is seen in Ngugi's effort to rewri(gh)te[19] through Signifyin(g) *Leaves of Grass* to counter the mythologizing of such writers as Robert Ruark[20], as Ngugi latter describes in *Moving the Centre* to be his fear that a second rate writer like Ruark would represent Kenya. In his novel *Something of Value,* Ruark, according to David Maughn-Brown ,tries to demonize the Mau Mau:

> As time went on there was less objection to the binding part of the oath, and Kimani and the others found that a man might slake his animal appetites on the body of another man quite satisfactorily if no women were available. And so, gradually, another strong bond, apart from the bond of the oath, was linked to each man.... The sounds at night sometimes reminded Kimani of the noise goats made in a hut, snuffling, grunting, and stirring endlessly(Maughn-Brown 142).

Maughn-Brown adds that "the vehemence of Ruark's hostility to homosexuals is the equivalent of his hostility to communism"(142). One might think back to Erkkila's point about democracy and sexuality. Ruark's attitude is due to the fear of the 'wild native', which the colonizer has to control with such means as the preindependance vipande, a pass, that in order to work a native Kenyan must carry with him at all times and was often filled with items that were often less than flattering. The vipande was a way to insure the obeisance of colonial values.

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[19]Ngugi wants to rewrite Ruarks text but he also more importantly wants to right the negative representation of Kenyans in literature.

[20] In a review of Maughn-Brown's book in *Research in African Literatures* the reviewer pities Maughn-Brown for all those hours reading those lousy Ruark novels.

Whitman is the ideal supplement because he glorifies brotherhood. Whitman rewrites what Ruark tries to establish as being negative and inhuman. In a Signifyin(g) gesture Paumonok enters the text as a reference for images of homosocial environments:

> I will sing the song of companionship,
> I will show what alone must finally compact these,
> I believe these are to found their own ideal of manly love, indi-
> cating it in me,
> I will therefore let flame from me the burning fires that were
> threatening to consume me,
> I will lift what has too long kept down those smouldering fires,
> I will give them complete abandonment,
> I will write the evangel-poem of comrades and of love,
> For who but I should understand love with all its sorrow and joy?
> And who but I should be the poet of comrades? (VI 86-94).

Throughout *Weep Not, Child* there is a strong quest to find homosocial spaces, the town the barbershop and the assembly.

Weep Not, Child's effort to rewrite the image of the Kenyan anti-colonialist is seen in the Boro character. Boro is the Mau Mau, in the sense that he is the role model for Kenyan freedom fighter. He is not the vilified Mau Mau of Ruark. He is the Mau Mau in the tradition of Whitman, the comrade. Whitman rewrites the feared male space. Ruark presents the colonial "fear of the natives", not unlike the "Jim Crow" days in the American south; when people believed that black men were giant penises willing to "fuck" anything

or rise up in a fit of rage like Nat Turner and kill all the land owners. Instead Ngugi tries to demystify and humanize the warped images of Ruark through:

> Walt Whitman, a Kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
>
> Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating drinking, and breeding,
>
> No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from
>
> them,
>
> No more modest than immodest
>
> ....
>
> Through me forbidden voices,
>
> Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
>
> Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd("Song of Myself" 24 497-518)

Whitman in this sense acts as a filter. Whitman can be seen as a prism that transforms the homogenous white light and "transfigures" it into a heterogeneous rainbow of light.

Ngugi rewrites the vilification of the colonized by Ruark through the prism of Whitman to create an ambiguously "queer" character. Although it is never stated directly, it is hinted repeatedly that Boro is queer . The most indicative example is: "Boro is queer. Our elder mother says that it was the war that changed him. Some people say however that it is something to do with our brother, the dead one"(*Weep* 42) . Whether or not "queer" is an intentional code word for Ngugi, it still would almost seem as if this quote was Signifyin(g) Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" a poem about the ability to mourn. Boro when mourning for his lost brother has characteristics of the speaker but I believe that there is more to it than just mourning. The statement that his "queerness" began once he came back from World War Two could be an allusion to the

belief that homosexuality is a something taken from Europe. But there is more to it. The allusion is curious because,

> It was common knowledge that they [Boro and Mwangi] had loved each other very much. Before the war, it had always been said that such love between brothers was unnatural and portended no good(*Weep* 25).

So as these code words appear in the text they are handled very cautiously throughout the text.

Boro is the unstereotypical African homosexual. Chris Dunton's "'Wheyting Be Dat?' The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature" represents images of homosexuality that tend to be seen as "simply, objectively, as part of a pattern of exploitation"(428). He believes that,

> It remains true that the great majority of texts in which the subject [homosexuality] occurs stigmatize homosexual practice as a profoundly "un-African" activity: a perspective succinctly expressed by the grandmother in Maddy's play *Big Berrin* when she inquires: ' 'Homosexuality? Whetying be dat?''(16)"(423).

This attempt to disown African homosexuality that Dunton cites to be the rule rather than the exception contradicts Ruark's fear above of, if not of homosexuals, at least of homosexual acts which these ' animal appetites' are compelling these Africans to perform. Both African writers and colonial writers view homosexuality as a stigma that neither wants to claim. Boro is not the 'stigmatized queer' although maybe he did come out after the war, as quoted above, still he does not carry all that stereotypical negative ideological baggage that Dunton cites. Boro is, if anything, a role model. He is not stereotyped as the effeminate man, or the castrated man, as is done in other African texts, inspired by

Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. The role of the effeminate and castrated man is placed on the father who is through his role, as the father, could be more aligned with heterosexuality, as opposed to Boro. The text makes it clear that it is a failure to come to terms with necessity of the performance of certain liberating acts that is more dangerous than the actual performance. Summarizing Dunton's point, in which he uses Ouloguem's *Bound to Violence* as an example, "that the ideology of colonialism and neocolonialism depend [sic] upon a ruthless misrepresentation of real relationships"(438).

So Ngugi is able to rewrite male space in an era where a group of Kenyan men were seen as dangerous. And as Taban argues previously, Whitman is the great source to use for an example of brotherhood and democracy. And despite a few areas which might seem problematic in the reception of Whitman through poems such as "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors", Whitman tends to serve as more of an inspiration rather than a hindrance. And, as compared to other texts available to Ngugi in the 50's and 60's, (Ruark, Alan Paton, or Elspeth Huxly), Whitman is hardly offensive.

Another area that may be problematic in Ngugi's use of Whitman and brotherhood is the exclusion of women as Subjects and is criticized by Florence Stratton in her book, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. She finds male African writers problematic in the way they deal with women in that they resort to what she terms a sexual allegory, a system that creates a mythic structure for men, relegates women to the sidelines. She like Spivak acknowledges that 'othered' women are doubly 'othered,' they are considered to be lower than the men because of their sex. Stratton takes offense of their portrayal in African texts because first they have no voice and secondly when presented they are beaten summarily, as if it is a regular occurrence. African women in

these texts are either mothers or prostitutes. But this is a common criticism in African literature mired in a theory that preached men first and women defended their men no matter what .

Still Ngugi's texts have been able to serve as a starting point for other Kenyan, African, and post-colonial writers. His innovations have led to a vital questioning of literary theory and aesthetics. His use of Whitman was his first attempt to breach the master's system with the master's tools. It would not be until later when he will challenge his earlier use of western tools and later abandon English totally from his fiction. His theories are of course problematic but are, at least, a step forward in the aporia of representing the 'other.' And whether Ngugi acknowledges it or not Whitman serves as a role model in establishing a format for Ngugi and African literature.

Chapter II

C.L.R. James Singing in America

> Son, these niggers writing. Profaining our sacred words. Taking them from us and beating them on the anvil of Boogie-Woogie, putting their black hands on them so that they shine like burnished amulets. Taking our words, son, these filthy niggers and using them like they were their godgiven pussy. Why... why 1 of them dared to interpret, critically mind you, the great Herman Melville's Moby Dick!(Ishmael Reed , *Mumbo Jumbo*)
>
> What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?(C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*)
>
> But I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now.(Bob Dylan, "My Back Pages")

In 1901 Cyril Lionel Robert James, one of the twentieth century's greatest minds, was born in TunaPuna, Trinidad. There James would spend the first three decades of his life; as a student, a cricket player, and a teacher. James was to live and observe and write two works. *Minty Alley* a novel about life in Trinidad and the *Life of Captain Cipriani: An Account of British Government in the West Indies* which was later published and abridged by Leonard Woolf`s imprint, *The Hogarth Press*, into *The Case for West Indian Self-Government,* which is about self-determination and conflicts in government between colonies and their colonizing countries. This is a picture of the first James.

James, who underwent many changes, is a complex figure and despite certain aspects that do remain somewhat constant, he is always ready to explode his convictions by changing vantage points. This is important to note, especially when scholars today try to pigeon hole James as the deconstructionist, the Marxist, the cultural critic, the post-colonial critic, or the Americanist critic, that James is all of the above and more.

The best example to illustrate this attempt to classify would be *American Civilization,* the focus of this chapter. Since this book was published posthumously the editors of this text Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart have fought for control in court over James's words against his literary executor, Robert A. Hill. The concession was allowing Hill to insert the "Literary Executor's Afterword." Hill's section is presented in a way to illustrate his prominence. It is not the "Afterword" but the "Literary Executor's Afterword" which begins with its own "preface," an effort to situate his importance. Both the editors and the literary executor have different visions of James. Reviewers have noticed the difference in critics' positions towards James in *American Civilization* and have often chosen to side with either the editors or the literary executors. Ethan Casey in his review of *American Civilization* in *Callaloo* represents Hill as the authority on James: "in his [Hill] comprehensive Literary Executor's Afterword"(1263). By using the word "comprehensive", Casey presents Hill as the serious representative in James studies. Casey is not alone in establishing a hierarchy, in a constant effort to take control of James's legacy.

Any effort to classify James would be limiting his impact as an intellectual. That is not to say that he did not develop in any linear way throughout his career, which in fact, to large extent, he did, but to illustrate that there are no clear breaks in James or his theory.

Still his location as he explains in *Beyond a Boundary*, his almost autobiographical text[21], is elusive, and this is strategic on his part. Maybe James would have responded in a similar way, to all this effort to control his work, by saying: *"Some of you may believe that you have read [*The Black Jacobins*]. I did more than that, I wrote it. But it is only in late years that I am able to understand and to appreciate the full significance of what I wrote in that book"(Nielsen 1997 51).*

When James was 31 he left for England. There he became a Marxist and first rank cricket columnist as a replacement for Neville Cardus of the *Manchester Guardian*. Staying with his long time friend, fellow countryman and star cricket player, Learie Constantine, James began to make a name for himself as a spokesman for independent government and self-determination of the colonies. Here he wrote what is probably his most well known work, *The Black Jacobins*. It was his research for this book that got him involved with the Trotskyist movement. The Black Jacobins alludes to the French Jacobins of the French Revolution. This is a retelling of the classic struggle in Haiti between Toussaint L'Ouverture and colonial powers. *The Black Jacobins* is a ground breaking text recasting the position of history from the point of view of the so-called savages, as people at the time believed these revolutionaries to be.

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[21]The reason the text is almost autobiographical is because it is about cricket and only about him indirectly. James's text begins as he is describing the view from his house of the field. Cricket is the object of his gaze but through cricket we see a reflection of James.

In 1938 he came to America in what was supposed to be a six month visit, based on the invitation by the leader of the Socialist Workers Party, James Cannon[22], but managed to stay for fifteen years until he was deported, as a radical, in 1953, at the height of the McCarthy hearings. James's arrival in 1938 signaled the founding of the S.W.P.. During this stay he was very prolific producing some of his most important work and was also able to captivate a small following through his lectures. James was "a speaker who could rival Schactman and Cannon[23], James enthralled audiences for hours with no notes, no podium, and without hesitating on a single word"(Wald 190). He was chosen as the best candidate to debate former philosopher, turned to politics, Bertrand Russell.

The American experience also enabled him to grow, as Stuart Hall describes: " he was partly involved in, and excited by, the Harlem Renaissance. He knew Richard Wright and was a friend of Carl Van Vechten's[24]. He was moved by the music, the film, the fiction, and the popular culture of the era"(Hall 9). It was in these fifteen years that James grew again. He only left because he was thrown out. James believed that the future was in America and that he had become American. In *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, he goes to great lengths to prove that he was American:

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[22]James P. Cannon's book, *The History of American Trotskyism*, Pathfinder, 1972, discusses the founding of the S.W.P.. James's role is not highlighted in the text but along with other supporting texts James's influence can be corroborated.

[23]Schactman and Cannon were the official leaders of the S.W.P..

[24]Van Vechten was an important contact for Langston Hughes. It was Van Vechten who introduced Hughes's work to Alfred Knopf.

> From that beginning, stage by stage I have spared no pains to understand the United States and become a part of the American people. I remember that for years I pertinaciously read comic strips, unable to see what Americans saw in them. I persisted until at last today I will walk blocks to get my comics. In Europe and when I first came here I went to see movies of international reputation. Now I am a neighborhood man, and I prefer to see B gangster pictures than the latest examples of cinema art. I know the tension of American life and the underlying tension which give American movies, however superficial, the permanent attraction they have(*Mariners* 1953 201).

It may seem odd, especially at the height of the "red scare", but as a Marxist and a critic, and as an American, James in America moved by leaps and bounds.

When James was in America he immersed himself in American culture. He spent fifteen years working on America. He saw a social justice that America provided. As Stuart Hall recounts, in the first essay in *C.L.R. James's Caribbean*, James felt that he was spiritually American:

> In 1953, James was asked to leave the United States because of his Trotskyist activities. He was imprisoned on Ellis Island and decided to fight the expulsion. As a part of his defense, he made a wonderfully Jamesian gesture: he attempted to present *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* as testimony to the fact that he was a much better American than the immigration authorities. It was as though he was saying, "You do not understand your greatest artist, Melville, and I do. How can you expel me for un-American activities when I am telling you that next to Shakespeare, here is the greatest use of the English language? It is because you do

> not understand what your own author is telling you that you can expel me. You should welcome me--not throw me out"(Hall 12).

This interpretation of James's strategy by Hall closely resembles what Henry Louis Gates jr. terms as Signyfin(g)[25]. This is James's attempt to manipulate tropes he believes will guarantee him American citizenship.

At the time *Moby-Dick* was considered one of the centers of the American Renaissance. As William V. Spanos and Donald E. Pease argue in their work on *Moby-Dick*, this text has shifted throughout the years in order to support the conventional political wisdom of the times. As Spanos illustrates, in his *The Errant Art of* Moby-Dick*: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies,* through an argument that he uses to explain how the hegemony of the 1950's was able to frame discussions of *Moby-Dick* :

> ...it was Mathiessen's inaugural dissociation of Ishmael from Ahab and his identification of Melville's "Americanism" with the former that enabled the harnessing of *Moby-Dick* as such to the global Cold War scenario, the scenario that privileged Ishmaelite America as the symbolic agent of the "free world" in its self-ordained effort to resist Ahabian communist aggression and by thus incorporating specific or local dissent into its total and completed structure...(Spanos 33-34).

Matthiessen in his *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* established an image of Ahab, in the section of the text as "The Fate of the

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[25]This will be expanded upon in the following paragraphs.

Ungodly God-like Man" as the Promethean hero: "whose desire to help humanity was also misdirected and led him into crime, makes a not unfitting counterpart for Ahab"(Matthiessen 448). It is this reading of Ahab, which critics like Spanos highlight, that would be most prominent in the early cold war years: "that Ahab should have inherited his name from one of the greatest kings of Israel, who seduced by false prophets, went to his death in battle"(Matthiessen 463). The creation of Ahab the evil, the tyrant, later to be then transformed by the popular imagination into a Stalin or Hitler: "Melville created in Ahab's tragedy a fearful symbol of the self-enclosed individualism that, carried to its furthest extreme, brings disaster both upon itself and upon the group of which it is part"(Matthiessen 459). Which is similar to the conclusions that James draws:

> Ahab is all isolation, all loneliness, all meglomania and irresponsible madness, the men in no way inferior to him in technical skill endurance and determination, are moved by feelings common to all humanity in its greatest moments. This is the reason why they followed Ahab, though at the beginning Melville says he does not know. Once before we have been given a hint of it, that is when Melville says that the thing that appealed to Queequeg, Tashtego and Daggoo in Ahab was his inflexible determination to conquer the whale(*Mariners* 1986 71).

James illustrates the charismatic tyrant. So James reinforces the typical vision of the Captain of the *Pequod*:

> Ahab is of the race of Prometheus. But it seems as if, for Melville, that type was now doomed. Great men, leading their fellows from one stage of civilization to another, there have always been and will always be, but the Promethean individual, containing in himself, his ideas, his plans, the chart of the future, he seems finished.

> In the world of affairs he leads only to disaster, which is why perhaps in literature he no longer appears at all(Mariners 1986 126).

James in his thinking was in line with other post-Matthiessen scholars, when forming his arguments he intended to maintain and build upon the tradition of American scholarship.

James kept abreast of the Melville scholarship of his time. In *American Civilization* he comments on Matthiessen and his text: "F.O.A. Matthiessen, an author of a very fine and liberal-minded study of the nineteenth century, has stated in print that if he were in France, he would join the French Communist Party"(*American Civilization* 258). When James wrote *Mariners*, he tried to write back to this argument, calling himself Ishmael and in effect saying, "Look it is me... the biblical Abraham's other son... Ishmael ... anyone ... anyone ... I am not Ahab." But this post-Matthiessen reading came upon deaf ears, which according to Pease, in his contribution to *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, was a typical response from people who were only interested in kicking out these "un-American radicals" that threatened "America." James would be labeled an Ahab and sentenced to the fate of all opposing prophets.

Despite his plea James was thrown out and so he returned to the Caribbean. And this ended the third phase. He did eventually return to the United States to teach as an invited academic. His popularity rose in the 60's and 70's while his loyal followers maintained his legacy. Today James's importance is once again acknowledged. Since 1993 at least ten new texts have been either devoted to James, his unpublished manuscripts, or reeditions of out of print texts with new introductions and criticism. These texts, including *American Civilization*, are all published by major academic publishers: Blackwell, Duke, Humanities Press, State University of New York.

James's importance has often been underrated and forgotten but this is partly due to his audience in the West which is rather specialized. He did not have a publicist in France who was able to circulate his texts as Sartre did for Fanon through his endorsements. Nor could you easily pigeon hole James, this due to the large variety of topics about which he wrote and the fact that he was always evolving as an intellectual. Furthermore James is not always easily understood as he points out in his *American Civilization,* published post-humously and therefore, at times, doubly difficult. Although he did try to be easily understandable, he attributes one of his main problems of this to the style of his essay He says the goal of his essay will be that:

> It will have to fill up certain gaps in what after all will be an essay, in which at the best only certain important *aspects* can be treated. At the same time as we are filling up gaps, we have to attempt to make some integration of the whole so that a total impression of society in movement, will be left with the reader(*American* 199).

Added to this that this is just a collection of several manuscripts that were not intended for book form but only handed out as rough drafts to be commented upon and if presented would have only been done in a much shortened form:

> To repeat, tiresome as it may be by now, a full and complete study would integrate all this with the proper proportions and balance and such a recognition of the complexities as is possible in an essay of 75,000 words. Enough however, has been said to show the general tendencies among the workers who with their wives and children, constitute over two-thirds of the nation(*American* 198).

But probably, due to the political climate, the red scare, these essays were highly unlikely to be published for they were extremely critical of the values that were being promoted by right-wing thinkers that also supported the Cold War mentality. This is the kind of writing that eventually resulted in James's expulsion.

American Civilization never offers a full picture of the intellectual revolutionary who was involved in some of the major revolutionary activities of the twentieth century, influencing such figures as Kwame Nkrumah, Eric Williams, Leon Trotsky, Jomo Kenyatta, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and countless others. In *American Civilization*, which is the primary text discussed in this chapter, we are left with snippets, points that are often abstract or left hanging. Part of James's appeal today relies on the belief that he is more of a deconstructionist than a mystic with a required reading list:

> Not a line written here implies that by reading the correct books or studying economics or following a "correct" political policy, he will "understand" and "write better." God forbid that anyone should read such nonsense in what I am saying. Artistic processes live and develop in far deeper layers of consciousness than that(*American* 268).

James exposes the traces and projects the subjectivity of the "objective intellectuals" he is critiquing and at no time does he say, you must do this or you must read this.

Preceding this citation he praises Norman Mailer but he wants to contrast himself to others of his intellectual contemporaries who would recommend each other's book like some sort of entropic circle. The choice of Mailer is significant because Mailer is not the kind of pedantic writer that James is critical of. Mailer's attempt to bridge the gap between intellectuals and ordinary people is similar to James's vision. James prided himself

on his ability to be an "average Joe." James found merit in all forms of American culture, which can be seen in his section on popular culture. As opposed to many of his contemporary intellectuals, James believes that you can be an intellectual while also enjoying culture freely and making your own intellectual choices. Even when expressing his point of view James does not offer any prescriptive remedies. This is probably because James was very open and read almost anything, Hegel, Marx, James Joyce, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and even Dick Tracy comic strips. His reasoning is: "we have to examine more closely the conditions in which these new arts, the film, and with the comic strip, the radio and jazz have arisen, in order to see exactly why they become an expression of mass response to society, crises, and *the nature and limitations of that response*(*American* 122). He was also a big fan of television and sometimes had it on all day while he was working.

James read extremely difficult and challenging texts but his acceptance of popular culture and his familiarity with cold war intellectualism demonstrate that he is not an elitist and is willing to question all arguments, even those that he strongly believes in or challenges. James did have strong opinions and he did have some sort of personal canon, but he was always willing to bend and widen his canon, if the widening could be justified. He was a man of the people and he did his best to stay current and not lose touch. Even when writing his most complex articles on Marx and Hegel he tried his best to write, like Whitman, in a form in which he could be understood. In fact, as previously cited, James wanted to reduce the size of this essay so that it could be read and understood by the average American.

It might not be hard to believe that James only wanted to be remembered as "a West Indian who did his part"(*American* 296) and not as a prophet. James did his part and more in his eighty-eight years as a writer, speaker, mentor and revolutionary. Although James's influence is rising once again James is a figure who is always already imprinted in the Black imaginary. In the first epigraph Ishmael Reed's speaker refers to C.L.R. James as one of "these filthy niggers and using them [words] like they were their godgiven pussy". James is the real/mythical figure that can crossover from one culture to another and use the words as if they were his. Reed realized that figures like James posed the most serious threat to hegemonic constructions. James used his pen like a stick of dynamite to explode any oppressive constructions. James uses his pen to blast himself into American culture by criticizing the "great Herman Melville," in James's *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways.*

The power of his pen can be seen in his audience, who he was able to attract through his writings. Although James was not a mainstream writer he was able to attract people like Leon Trotsky, Paul Robeson, James Padimore, Betrand Russell, and Eric Williams, who took the time to listen to James. As J.R. Johnson, James's alias, he led the Social Workers Party, and was subjected to criticism by Irving Howe in his article "On Comrade Johnson's American Resolution or Soviets in the Sky" in "Workers Party internal Bulletin" number nine. The power in James's writing is also represented by the fact that repeatedly people come back to James in the 60's, 70's, 80's and 90's and claim him as their champion. The best example is *The Black Jacobins* which has constantly been in print by different independent presses, in full form or excerpt, to present empowering images of the colonized.

Reed also reinforces this idea of a mythical person by making the reference an anachronism. James's book on Melville which is referred to above did not appear until the nineteen fifties, at least twenty years after Reed's Harlem Renaissance character cites James. By playing his game with memory, Reed is stating that C.L.R. James was always already a part of American consciousness even if James was not physically present. African-American history and memory are constructed by hegemonic forces. Even if there are defiant voices from speakers powerful enough to be heard and to stay heard and remembered, these voices are unfortunately in the minority. Reed plays with memory and history to illustrate that there always were Black interlopers like C.L.R. James, and indeed it should be noted that often they were not as much interlopers as they were just there because American culture is mixed but unfortunately certain constructs obscure visibility and render a large portion of the population to a state of invisibility, again attesting to James's ability. Aldon Lynn Nielsen in *Writing Between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality* represents the situation accurately:

> Those who would speak white power must speak it in an already African accent, and black writers breaking into print in America find themselves already there behind the white textual veils of signifying blindness, those veils persistently reerected by white discourse in its redoubled effort not to read Africanity of its own texts, not to hear the blackness of its own tongue(*Writing* 11).

As in the case when the nameless protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is mixing the paint he is forced to add a little black to make the perfect white.

Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that "black" is a constructed term in order to unify a diverse group of people in order to present it as the "other." Reed's speaker is trying to

reinforce the hollow argument that Black critics have no right to criticize White texts through a criticism of C.L.R. James, and Reed through his pivotal role as a critic is able to "trope a dope"[26] and deconstructs that entire argument, as explained above.

According to Nielsen in his *C.L.R. James: A Critical Introduction,* Reed is a big fan of James and has incorporated his theory into his writing style. Beside the previously mentioned example, the use of *Mumbo Jumbo* as the title is a similar creative strategy which allows the term to be deconstructed from the sense which relies on the linking the adjective with illogical and nonsense to its other which means just the opposite.

This argument is reinforced by Henry Louis Gates jr.'s use of the same Ishmael Reed quote, as in the epigraph, in his introduction to *Black Literature and Literary Theory,* which through its use in Gates's article is given cultural currency. Gates relies on this quote to represent a tradition of Black criticism. This introduction, in part, is a response to arguments fielded in the academy that Black criticism is nothing more than "Voodoo Criticism,"[27] hence the title "Criticism in the Jungle." The title also works in a Signifyin(g) way in that it also recalls the Mohammed Ali and George Forman boxing match, "Rumble in the Jungle," in the country at the time called Zaire, also significantly enough across the Atlantic. This match did for boxing what Gates is trying to achieve with this introduction.

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[26]This term is borrowed from Henry Louis Gates jr.'s *The Signifyin(g) Monkey*. It is playing on Mohammed Ali's famous boxing move that would try to fool his opponent into thinking that he is weak so that the opponent would come in closer a take chances in order to finish the fight. Ali would fool his opponent until he was close enough to do some real damage. Ali is considered a "thinking" fighter, playing against the image that all boxers are "brutes".

[27]This is a reference to an article written by Ishmael Reed and collected in *Writing is Fighting*.

For Gates, the use of C.L.R. James "represented a profound definition and defense of the critical self: in an act of self-defense, the writer asserts the integrity of the self through the device of displacement, the self is both distanced and affirmed"(Gates 2). And Gates, the critic, in a similar fashion is resorting to the same technique by citing James and his *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*. Gates is writing in another Signifyin(g) way a new version of the C.L.R. James's famous defense and critique of Melville and American civilization. Gates recreates the effect which James presents when his text is Signifyin(g) his real life:

> Melville built his gigantic structure, a picture of world civilization, using one small vessel, with a crew of thirty-odd men, for the most part isolated from the rest of the world. Here was I, just about to write, suddenly projected on to an island isolated from the rest of society, where American administrators and officials and American security officers controlled the destinies of perhaps a thousand men, sailors, "isolatos", renegades and castaways from all parts of the world. It seems now as if destiny had taken a hand to give me a unique opportunity to test my ideas of this great American writer(*Mariners* 1986 133).

So by using James, Gates is able to locate himself in a center that would seem to be marginal but is as American as *Moby-Dick*.

The second epigraph could be C.L.R. James's rallying cry and places him amongst the first past the "post", in terms of breaking the boundaries of colonialism, modernity, or even structuralism. James, who embodies Paul Gilroy's theory of an intellectual in the *Black Atlantic*, is the prime example of someone who has been transformed by cross-

cultural experiences. Here Gilroy explains the complex braiding that forms the black Atlantic intellectual:

> The key to comprehending this lies not in the over hasty separation of the cultural forms particular to both groups into some ethnic typology but in a detailed and comprehensive grasp of their complex interpenetration. The intellectual and cultural achievements of the black Atlantic population exist partly inside and not always against the grand narrative of Enlightenment and its operational principles. Their stems have grown strong, supported by a lattice of western politics and letters. Though African linguistic tropes and political and philosophical themes are still visible for those who wish to see them, they have often been transformed and adapted by their New World locations to a new point where the dangerous issues of purified essences and simple origins lose all meaning. These modern black political formations stand simultaneously both inside and outside the western culture which has been their peculiar step-parent(*Black Atlantic* 48-49).

Through a self-understanding of James's particular complexities James realizes that all systems, as in the case of sports like cricket, are constructed, and in order to understand systems one should be able to explode or deconstruct these systems with extra or maybe "other" knowledge. The black Atlantic intellectual is in the privileged position of realizing that there is not an invisible barrier that separates cultures, from one 'authentic' culture to another. James's breadth of knowledge allows him to see beyond totalizing narratives.

Like Hayden White, or even Richard Rorty, James realizes that histories are narratives and that one must know more than the narrative and rather try to figure out what braids

the narrative in order to achieve a fuller understanding. Paget Henry and Paul Buhle, in their article in *James's Caribbean*, describe this technique as when:

> This subtextual level becomes the privileged site upon which the battle is to be waged. Breaking these subtextual codes liberates possibilities for semiotic play, for "difference" that remains imprisoned in the structures of colonial discourses. These new possibilities for difference constitute the semio-linguistic capital for making a radical break in the post-colonial period(130-131).

Henry attributes this ability to break boundaries to James's, "Black Atlantic", like shifts constantly shifting center.

Paget Henry is not alone in citing James's role as an exile as a defining quality. Said says about exiles, particularly referring to James and Theodor Adorno, that, "the *exilic* intellectual does not respond to the logic of the conventional but to the audacity of daring, and to representing change, to moving on, not standing still"(Said 64). Intellectuals like James are able, in Said's words,

> to imagine and investigate in spite of barriers, and always to move away from centralizing authorities towards the margins, where you see things that are usually lost on minds that have never traveled beyond the conventional and the comfortable(63).

It is James's actual shifting from one part of Gilroy's four diaporic points, Africa, the Caribbean, North America and Europe[28], to the other which allows him to embody

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[28]Actually, instead of Europe and North America he specifies the United Kingdom and the United States but I think Canada and France should be included among the diasporic points.

Gilroy's theory. James is never really at home, he never settles down. Even when he returns to what was once his home, Trinidad, he is still foreign. James is an outsider so he seems to be more sensitive to these aspects of African Diaspora the more he travels. But James realizes that there is a bond between African people even if it is constructed. In *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, Glen Richards cites this common bond in reference to an earlier C.L.R. James text in which he discusses the black "Jacobins":

> These are my ancestors, these are my people. They are yours too if you want them. We are descendants from the same stock.... Faced with the same difficulties, we would respond in the same way. That seems to be inherent in people who have made the Middle Passage and had to learn all that they can and build a new life with what they gathered from the standards, the ideas and the ideologies of the people and the new civilization in which they live(Richards 325).

This excerpt almost predicts Gilroy.

The use of Bob Dylan, who may know of C.L.R. James or may have even met him, might seem strange but this epigraph is used to stress how James's American years radically changed him[29]. In a sense this echoes the second epigraph but it also links James to another generation of critics like Paul Buhle, Paget Henry, Aldon Lynn Nielson and The Drum and Spear collective who, in the past, have encouraged renewed interest in James. It also stresses the importance of American Culture to his development. It is James's immersion into American culture particularly Whitman, Melville, Wendell Philips

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[29]See *Beyond a Boundary* where James illustrates the psychic change that he undergoes in the U.S..

and other abolitionists[30] that has allowed him to rethink and see himself again in a new American light. James embraces these three but particularly Philips and Melville because they are men of praxis. James admires contact and praises abolitionists, like Philips, who were able to maintain contact with the masses:

> Without this constant contact with the mass, Abolitionism would have been nothing, and none knew this and admitted it more freely than the Abolitionists themselves. They had found what both Whitman and Melville had failed to find. Abolitionist intellectuals in their political action showed a solution or rather a method of solution that corresponded in range and intensity to the inspired vision of Melville(*American* 87).

So together Melville and Philips have sighted a political problem and used the available resources to fight for what they believe in. And according to James they have chosen the proper things to believe in, mass revolution and the plight of African Americans. But first, it is in Whitman that he will find another voice, one that has been translated to incorporate his new Americaness. In a sense James has like Whitman unburdened himself from European dogma and started again to create something new and revolutionary.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how James read and reformulated his ideas based on readings of Walt Whitman, Herman Melville , Wendell Philips and other abolitionists. The purpose is not to present James as an ideal or perfect reader but to investigate his readings while also focusing on the gaps. As opposed to how difficult it is

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[30]This reference to Wendell Philips and other abolitionists may seem problematic but it is the form James uses in *American Civilization*.

to read cross-culturally the stress will be on how natural it is, or at least how natural the attempt is. As in the case above, identity is as real as it is imagined/constructed. There are no smooth lines separating one culture from another and no interpretation is "true" or "real" but rhetoric filled with the writer's biases and baggage. So, this is not to say that reading cross-culturally clearly is not an impossible task but it is a task which people like James believe must be attempted. James would argue that these readings are often clearer than non-cross-cultural-readings. James adapted easily to cultural shifts, when he came to America it was like "déja vu all over again" with a signal difference.

When C.L.R. James came to America in 1938 he came as a Trotskyist and a revolutionary and although he decided to break off with the Trotskyist movement, he remained until his death a revolutionary. In reading James one should remember that in his American published formal work, as opposed to the published correspondence with Constance Webb[31], he was following a political agenda. His critical interpretations are structured on how they relate to his revolution. Therefore his interpretations prioritize praxis, a reading that incorporates theories of political action or theories that will lead to political actions.

James is different compared to other American intellectuals. When James left the Trotskyist movement he did not jet towards the right. He left because he felt that he was able to go beyond the limits and oversights of the Trotskyists. This is probably one of the

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[31] Which can be found in *Special Delivery* the introduction by Anna Grimshaw .Another revealing portrait can be found in Grimshaw's contribution to *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*. More will be mentioned on this topic in the following paragraphs.

reasons for a revitalization in interest in James. When James started to become popular in the 1970's and starting to climb to his present position, as a leader amongst American intellectuals of the twentieth century: "All of this came as a considerable surprise to many of James's former associates in the Workers Party a number of whom had misjudged him as nothing more than an ultraleftist with the ability to inspire a small cult of followers"(Wald 304). James would probably attribute it to his perseverance as an intellectual. As James explains in *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, referring to the other Trotskyists, "It is as if they have been stricken by the plague. They are today, as a body the loudest shouters for the war against Communism in defense of democracy I can now testify that many of them no more believe in democracy than the communists do"(*Mariners* 1952 199). James could not understand how people who called themselves intellectuals could shift so radically.

In *American Civilization*, James gave his opinions of various writers of the nineteenth century but these interpretations are only part of the story. Although James is critical of Nineteenth century writers, particularly Walt Whitman, whom he nonetheless calls the greatest American poet, for their meandering Romanticism diverting attention from what he thought Herman Melville perfectly presented in *Moby Dick*, the plight of the average man against the fascist Ahab, he still believes that the American Renaissance is America's golden age. As James states,

> We can see this quite clearly in Melville. In 1850 Melville, in seeing Ahab in the America of that time, saw dynamically. His book represents the world as it was and the world as it was going to be. It had a tremendous *movement.* Melville did

> *not* leave the reader uncertain. He carried everything to its conclusion and made it clear that Ahab would ruin civilization(*American* 267).

Whitman in James's eyes focused too much on the individual and not enough on the class struggle. James was a representative of an extreme, actually quite similar, but on the opposite pole, to Langston Hughes's patron Charlotte Mason who wanted Hughes to produce work only focusing on the individual, perhaps stereotypical, Negro. Hughes was sharply criticized by his patron for writing any socially motivated work. Hughes realized that there was a middle ground but because of his patron, like James who was motivated by his political agenda, he was forced to focus on one aspect and shun the other. James in this belief was in form with the 1930's conventional wisdom in socialist circles to suppress the individual and rather support the people or the community. Using this logic, Whitman by supporting the individual is subverting the importance of the community. Although writers like James and Hughes were often forced into choosing the individual or society. Writers, like the later Hughes, could like Whitman focus on both.

Andrew Ross in "Civilization in one Country" in *Rethinking C.L.R. James* describes how James interpreted the old gray poet. In the singer of the "Song of Myself" James saw "Whitman's deep, but flawed, praise of individualism(his Open Road is a diversionary bohemian route that will end in the cul-de sac of Existentialism(Ross 77)". According to James, "His [Whitman] catalogues and shouting are a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury. But it does not signify nothing"(*American* 58). James did not accept what according to Donald Pease in *Visionary Compacts* was Whitman's objective, "to recover for the American masses what Jean-Jacques Rousseau called the 'common self'"(115).

James, in accordance with his time, questions the "common self" as a bourgeois construction.

James like Matthiessen acknowledged that Whitman contributed greatly to American form. The break from all the rules and regulations of European lyric poetry was to James Whitman's greatest achievement. He says in this paradoxical statement "as poetry valueless, but extraordinarily significant as a portrait of the United States between 1850 and 1914"(*American* 56). According to Betsy Erkkila, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound also found Whitman's poetry problematic. James believes that despite the "valuelessness" of his poetry there is an important message to gain from Whitman:

> What are these ideas? Whitman tried to prove that, contrary to Europe, in America all men were equal, that all men were knitted together by a common bond of Democracy with a capital D, that not only all men in America were equal, that all men all over the world were really equal, and in time, one generation, fifty generations (it did not matter) would all be really equal with the equality of equal Americans; he was for revolutions in Europe which would make Europeans able to be equal as Americans were equal(*American* 56).

But as he said Americans did not read Whitman:

> It was not that he was too deep --he was too shallow. They believed this more or less and would accept it from public orators, public minded parsons, newspaper editorials, commencement orators and the like. When it was presented as poetry, they would have nothing of it (*American* 56).

James is right about Whitman's poetry being unpopular but not for the reasons James presents. Whitman was ahead of his time and his popular appeal came after when his

poems were used as empty vessels to express the propaganda or commercialism of the United States. James compares Whitman's poetry to the "Voice of America." As James clearly points out in describing the legacy of Whitman's poetry:

> His "body beautiful" and "body electric" and "seminal wetness" are the reservoir from which advertisers of foods, toothpaste, vitamins, deodorants draw an unending source of inspirations by which to cheat and corrupt the American people(*American* 60).

Through this argument James is trying to represent Whitman's poetry negatively, the end result seems to be just the opposite. The overriding sense one derives from this example is the wide appeal of his poetry. So obviously, as proved by the advertisers' constant use, the people definitely enjoyed Whitman and his ideals were an influence on the consumers. Whether or not the consumers were affected positively is another matter.

What James finds problematic is also what makes Whitman so great. James distrusts Whitman's ambiguity but this is what inspired writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes. It is also this openness that allows him be read, reread, or even misread by future generations and find value in his poetry. Still James believes that "the paradox of his [Whitman] career is that though he had little that was really new to say, his passion to identify himself with his fellow countrymen did enable him to create a new social medium"(*American* 66).

Although Walt Whitman comes in second to Herman Melville, who is, according to James, second only to Shakespeare, James is still very much indebted to Whitman, even if only in terms of form, and I don't think I can stress this aspect enough. When looking at

the creation of *Leaves of Grass*[32] and the creation of many of James's texts we can see that both resorted to similar methods. Both went into self-publishing in order to get out what they felt to be politically relevant. Both sent out their manuscripts or first editions to people of contemporary literary importance to receive some sort of endorsement. Both were their own publicists. Both would write under different names and give praise to their texts. Both writers are very similar in the modes of distribution.

In the issuing of *American Civilization* the editors tried to present James in almost a Whitman like pose with a signal difference(see figure I and figure II.). The picture in *American Civilization* tends to illustrate James's double consciousness; he has the relaxed pose but he does not have the attire. Even if these clothes may appear to be rather casual they are still above working dress. James in this photo will never fully fit into the world of Whitman for he is too stiff, in the sense that the picture pretends almost a cinematic looseness which in its mimicry makes it stiff . James still has some TunaPuna in him, which he even acknowledges in *Beyond a Boundary* . Maybe this is the signal difference that resonates throughout James text. In any case, in comparing both pictures we can see the breaks between James and Whitman. Both are revolutionaries, but James is a revolutionary with a signal difference.

The major revolution in America during the nineteenth century was the Civil War. Both writers were impressed by the Civil War. James as represented in the following quotation believed that the present inequalities were only to be solved by war:

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[32]For an interesting look at the construction of *Leaves of Grass* refer to the first chapter of Betsy Erkkila's *Whitman the Political Poet* Oxford University Press, 1989.

C.L.R. James in America in the 1940s.

FIGURE I. Engraved frontispiece for *Leaves of Grass* (1855).

Figures I and II.

> The present writer advocates nothing. This is an objective analysis. but this much can be said. There will be no peace, no cessation of crisis, there is no haven ahead. *It will be many, many years before the whole world is reorganized*, and whoever believes or claims to believe that there is some possibility of emerging from the crisis on a world scale without blood, suffering, wearisome struggles, on a national and international scale, whoever says this is a charlatan or a fool, most probably the former.(*American* 277)

Whitman may be the charlatan or the fool but at least he understood the serious price of war and Whitman did not have the advantage of hindsight or distance. He lived through the war as a nurse caring for the casualties of this great war.

In the "Drum Taps" cycle Whitman presents the cost of war. The cycle starts off with mock optimism and patriotism tinged with an underlying irony that is not always read,

> The blood of the city--arm'd! arm'd! the cry everywhere,
> The flags flung out from the steeples of churches and from all the
> public buildings and stores,
> The tearful parting, the mother kisses her son, the son kisses his
> mother,
> (Loth is the mother to part, yet not a word does she speak to
> detain him,)
> The tumultuous escort, the ranks of policemen preceding, clearing
> the way,
> The unpent enthusiasm, the wild cheers of the crowd for their
> favorites,

The artillery, the silent cannons bright as gold, drawn along,

rumble lightly over the stones,

(Silent cannons, soon cease your silence,

Soon unlimber'd to begin the red business;)("First O Songs for a Prelude" 281).

The last two lines add a double voiced irony which questions all the enthusiasm of the previous lines. Once "the red business begins all the optimism will change and people will eventually start to question who is being served by this "business." Whitman may be ecstatic but as a newspaperman he must realize that there are always ulterior motives. Slavery is an important factor in the Civil War but there is also more than slavery at stake. This is not only the revolution James imagines or constructs. He does not see the ravages as Whitman does in "The Wound Dresser":

I onward go, I stop,

With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,

I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable,

One turns to me his appealing eyes--poor boy! I never knew

you,

Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that

would save you(310).

If James does see the cost he has chosen to avoid dealing with the casualties. No matter how one values revolution one must still acknowledge the actual human costs instead of hiding behind rose colored glasses, as is the case with James at times.

James in many ways was not interested in the political Whitman perhaps because he was overwhelmed by Whitman's romanticism. Whitman is definitely concerned with politics although he does not have the benefit of Marx, according to Pease:

> Whitman intended his poetry to perform an explicit political duty. In turning from politics to poetry, Whitman reversed the politicians' maneuver. They elevated liberty into an ideal principle, more worthy of worship than practice. Whitman's poetry generalized liberty into the motive common to all actions, as cheap and available as vitality itself. Then he treated everything in America-- whether in man or in nature, in the psyche or in the body, in the slave or in the slavemaster-- as a realization of liberty. By returning liberty to a context where argument over its nature was clearly inappropriate, Whitman removed it from the platform of contending parties(*Visionary* 119).

Then Pease states a few lines below: "Whitman used natural law as a weapon against the ruling ideology of his day, a way to mark the difference between national polity and the laws of nature (*Visionary* 119). James recognized the Whitman that Pease describes, one in which James is critical, for "this was a perpetual maneuver of Whitman. Constitutions, laws, institutions, things, none of *these* were real. The real things were individuals-- you and me. Over and over again he does it"(*American* 63). James again resorts to avoiding the individual in attempt to present a larger vision, a total good. To some, Whitman can be called a romantic, at least in a certain sense but Marxism emerged at a period where Marx himself was surrounded by the influence of Hegel and German Romanticism.

James believed in the concept of the "total man,"[33] placing body and mind together. But in reality what James ignores is emotion as if it is unimportant. It is a hole in his logic to see this structure as an essentialized body. James was able to explode so many constructions and see through American culture and realize that it is not Black or White but it is Black and White braided together. But when it came to emotion and praxis he could not see the braid. Even in Melville he saw the social structure but he decided to shy away from "our hearts honeymoon" with only a cursory few lines, which again allows James to claim Melville as a superior artist compared to Whitman[34]. James in many ways tries to avoid emotion, even his own.

A revealing look at James's emotional side is seen in *Special Delivery*. I do not have space or time to go into a full evaluation but although James tried to present himself as defender of Women's rights we can see through his letters to Constance Webb and through Anna Grimshaw's descriptions in the introduction and in her contribution to *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies* that when it came to women and relationships he was definitely not an expert.

James is often blinded by his own romanticism about American democracy or his aversion to emotion. Andrew Ross cites in an article in *Rethinking C.L.R. James* that in *American Civilization* there is no mention of the genocide or territorial theft(Ross 80). Walter Benjamin quoted by Ross, "There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism"(Ross 81), signals that even if *the Declaration of*

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[33]For more information see *American Civilization* page 248.

[34]See *American Civilization* page 59.

Independence might have been a revolutionary document in terms of its effects on the future of civilization, one must remember that there are traces that are linked to those, like the slaves and Native Americans, that were negatively effected by this document.

I don't want to present Whitman as having the absolute last word on American politics but it is important to point out as Betsy Erkkila illustrates in *Whitman the Political Poet*, that there is more to Whitman and that is his politics. Here she chronicles Whitman's political apprenticeship. She believes that "Whitman's active engagement with the party of Jefferson gave him the sense of political power and the coherent social mythology he needed in order to move away from the morbid and derivative lyrics that he began writing during the 1830's"(Erkkila 20). James still could not accept the political Whitman, as visionary or prophet.. Although James likes to portray himself as an Ishmael, among other issues his strong disavowal of Whitman's personal politics makes him often sound like the "totalitarian" Ahab. For him Whitman will remain: "a singer of loneliness and Democracy with a capital D"(*American* 97).

It is because of his arrival in America in the late 1930's that the Golden age of American literature for James was the nineteenth century and of course the greatest writer was Herman Melville and his masterpiece, according to James, *Moby-Dick* . It is not surprising since a large amount of criticism on the left beginning with Matthiessen and including Newton Arvin, Granville Hicks, and Jay Leyda has taken this position. For James, Melville is the prophet of destruction and James explains this fully in his *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, and he focuses on Ahab and his tragic flaw:

> Ahab is no common man. He has a fine brain and has had some education. He is a man of splendid physique, great courage, and a passionate, sincere temperament.

> He is a Quaker, and in his early days so hated the Catholic Church that he spat into one of the sacred vessels of a cathedral. In short, he is a man who wants to live fully and completely according to his beliefs. That precisely is the cause of his undoing(*Mariners* 1986 16).

James, as already stated, in his reading of *Moby-Dick* saw himself as Ishmael as opposed to the Ahabs of this world. In fact *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* can be seen as James's Signifyin(g) gesture towards *Moby-Dick*. James is writing his own *Moby-Dick* using *Moby-Dick*. James is the prophet of destruction one hundred years later. It is quite easy to compare James with Melville.

Carolyn L. Karcher presents an image of Melville that can be compared easily with James. In her *Shadow Over The Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America* we see an image presented of Melville in a very Jamesian pose:

> On the one hand he discovered a primitive, heathen, nonwhite people who "dealt more kindly with each other...". On the other hand, he saw that wherever "civilization" and Christianity had penetrated the South Sea islands, the natives had been decimated by imperial wars and white-introduced venereal diseases, their "depopulated land" invaded by "rapacious hordes of enlightened individuals," and their "small remnant" literally "civilized into draught horses, and evangelized into beasts of burden"(T, 195-96). As a result, never again did Melville take for granted either the superiority of white Christian civilization or the benefit of imposing it on others. Never again did he judge nonwhite peoples by ethnocentric standards. *On the contrary, he began to reexamine his own society through the eyes of "savages."* (Karcher 1-2)(My Italics)

So here is a view of Melville's double consciousness. Through its description we see that Melville is similar, in Karcher's representation, to the James who wrote *The Black Jacobins.* She also cites Melville's letter to Hawthorne, a letter of which James would have approved, Melville cites his allegiance "to the principle of 'unconditional democracy in all things'... he would consider a 'thief in jail... as honorable a personage as Gen. George Washington'"(Karcher 11). Karcher also believes that:

> Melville had more in common with the abolitionists than has generally been recognized. He explicitly upheld the charges of cruelty and sexual exploitation that the abolitionists leveled at slaveholders, and he condemned slavery as a monstrous betrayal of the American Revolution's egalitarian ideals. Again and again Melville warned that failure to abolish slavery would bring an apocalyptic judgment on America(Karcher 16).

Melville according to Karcher also had his differences with the abolitionists but overall his principles were more aligned with the abolitionist rather than the proslavers.

James believed, "that the soil that produced Emerson also produced Garrison"(*American* 87). This brings us back to the image of the unnamed protagonist in *Invisible Man* mixing the paint. Adding just a drop of black to make the perfect white. So what is important to note is that whatever James found to be disagreeable in Whitman or so great in Melville, no matter whether James was right or wrong, is a product, according to James, of America. James realized from his American experience that,

> The American people, the great body of them are ignorant of many things their European brothers know. But in *social* culture, technical knowledge, sense of equality, the instinct for social cooperation and collective life, the need to live a full

> life in every sphere and a revulsion to submission, to accepting a social situation as insoluble, they are the most highly civilized people on the face of the globe(*American* 273).

So in the years James spent in America he experienced a reinvigoration and saw the incredible potential in American Civilization. What was supposed to be a six month journey became an integral part of his being. Not only was he influenced by America, his influence is still felt. James has encouraged his readers to look again because even he realized that everything is more complex than it seems. He was fortunate to realize that totalizing narratives are problematic and made it his life to explode these constructs. Again, "that the soil that produced Emerson also produced Garrison"(American 87) and also produced C.L.R. James, another singer of American civilization.

Chapter III

Langston Hughes, The "Other" Whitman, and "The Signifying Monkey"

What C.L.R. James failed to understand about Walt Whitman and American culture Langston Hughes understood intimately. As George B. Hutchinson argues, Whitman's legacy in African American poetics is underestimated. Whitman's contribution, specifically *Leaves of Grass*, led to the development of the cultural politics and poetics of African American poets of this century, especially Langston Hughes: "Inspiring modernist breaks with previous African American as well as Anglo-American literary practices and intellectual traditions, Whitman's writing contributed crucially to some of the most fruitful developments in black writing in the twentieth century"(Hutchinson, "Whitman's Legacy" 201). When the landscape of American literature changed, Whitman would be amongst its brave new leaders. Through Whitman's example African Americans did not have to write like Longfellow anymore and even when they did at least they could talk about "me". Voices that might not have anything new to say were at least able to speak for themselves and illustrate their merit on terms for which Whitman had laid the groundwork. Not only did Whitman liberate the body, he had begun to liberate all sorts of bodies that were formerly cloaked.

Langston Hughes by his own admission is a disciple of Walt Whitman. In fact among his contemporaries he was the most like the myth of Whitman, a people's poet. Faith Berry in her biography, *Langston Hughes:Before and Beyond Harlem*, shows that: "Like

Whitman Hughes wanted to be a writer without becoming in Whitman's term a 'literatus'"(Berry 32). Hughes worked very ordinary jobs; waiter, laundry worker, mess boy on a ship, doorman and other common labouring jobs. Berry believes that: "working at this common occupation made him feel seriously close to Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* he was reading and whose influence he was beginning to feel"(Berry 32).

He would later in 1946 edit his own anthology of Walt Whitman's poems, *I Hear the People Singing*, in which he would also include his famous introduction "The Ceaseless Rings of Walt Whitman" . In this collection he focuses on Whitman's emphasis on beauty , the revolution of the common man, and of freedom and the future, and probably because the targeted audience is young readers, the sexual body is left out from this collection. Through Hughes's selections the reader can get an impression of how he reads Whitman. Even through the tone of the introduction the reader can see that Whitman is the kind of poet Hughes aspires to be, the poet of the common man and woman, a reflection of the people.

Hughes is an iconoclast as compared to his poetic contemporaries like Countee Cullen. He is the first to shy away from European poetic styles. Because of this he has been called not the poet laureate but the "poet lowrate of Harlem"(Berry 84). Hughes is one of the first major defenders of jazz as an art form. In the London Times he is called the "cabaret poet"(Berry 70). And Nathan Huggins suggests that, of the Harlem Renaissance, he is "the only artist to take jazz seriously"(10). His poems reflect a hybrid mixture of Whitman's America and the syncopated jazz beats, as well as subjects from popular blues songs. He later put out an album, *Weary Blues* on Verve in 1958 reading his

own poetry to a musical accompaniment arranged by Charles Mingus and Leonard Feather that incorporates the ideal mixture of jazz and poetry.

Hughes's famous article,"The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"(1926), was written as a response to George S. Schuyler's "The Negro-Art Hokum." Schuyler in his article is very critical of jazz, similar to the way former[35] jazz critic, Stanley Crouch ,of the *Village Voice* is now critical of rap and hip hop. This article illustrates the hybridity that Hughes felt was part of his writing. Although he was a product of Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg and White American culture, he was also undoubtedly a product of Charles Chestnut, Paul Laurence Dunbar and African American culture. And he felt that denial of one's culture, as he points out in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," is problematic. Since Hughes's poetry reflected this attitude he was chosen to counter Schuyler's article.

Schuyler's article opens with: "Negro art there has been, is, and will be among the numerous black nations of Africa; but to suggest the possibility of any such development among the ten million colored people in this republic is self-evident foolishness"(Schuyler 51). He accredits, in a style very similar to Crouch, all African American developments to their tutor's tutelage: "the Aframerican is merely a lampblacked Anglo-Saxon"(Schuyler 52). He believes that "Negroes and whites from the same localities in this country talk, think, and act about the same"(Schuyler 52). His argument is structured to assert the equality of all men ahead of race. He thinks nurture plays a bigger role than does any racial

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[35]The reason why Crouch is a former writer in the *Village Voice* is because he decided to punch out one of his editors. Crouch has a very hot temper.

links. But through his argument he discredits any African American artform such as jazz. The point that Schuyler is arguing is that African Americans should not be labeled or boxed in because of their color.

Hughes on the other hand contrasts this argument, in his rebuttal, with an indirect reference to poets like Countee Cullen:

> One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible("Racial Mountain" 55).

Hughes stresses that the poet, who happens to be of rich background, is never taught to see the beauty of his own people. Here the beauty-seeing Whitman comes out in Hughes when he describes the lower working class people: "Whereas the better-class Negro would tell the artist what to do, the people at least let him alone when he does appear. And they are not ashamed of him—if they know he exists at all. And they accept what beauty is their own without question"("Racial Mountain" 56). Hughes tries to illustrate the acceptance of the poorer class versus the assimilationist tendencies of the upper class: "'Let's be dull like the Nordics', they say in effect"("Racial Mountain" 57). He then

finally presents a thinly veiled autobiographical tale about how African Americans ignore artists only until they are acclaimed by a white audience:

> I know a young colored writer, a manual worker by day, who had been writing well for the colored magazines for some years, but it was not until he recently broke into the white publications and his first book was accepted by a prominent New York publisher that the "best" Negroes in his city took the trouble to discover that he lived there. Then almost immediately they decided to give a grand dinner for him. But the society ladies were careful to whisper to his mother that perhaps she'd better not come. They were not sure she would have an evening gown("Racial Mountain" 57).

Hughes illustrates how writers like Schuyler chose to ignore poor African American culture. There is irony in not letting the poet's mother come because the hosts are afraid that she will not be presentable, not a fine enough representation of upstanding African Americans, when she is directly responsible for the upstanding poet. So Hughes ahead of his time heartily embraces jazz against the Crouch of his time: "jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile"("Racial Mountain" 58). Hughes accepts the risks of writing against the grain. while trying to express that the only shame is in denying oneself.

When Hughes came to Harlem he was attending Columbia University, but he probably spent more time in time in Harlem then he did at Columbia. Harlem in the twenties was a very nice place to live: "in Johnson's words, 'better cleaner, more modern,

more airy, more sunny houses than they [African Americans] ever lived in before'" (Rampersad 1:51). It was here that Hughes would become a famous poet. He was writing, submitting and publishing before, but as he described in the above excerpt he started to be published by "mainstream" periodicals and by Alfred Knopf and then started to be recognized.

The poem that launched him into the white market is "The Weary Blues", which begins:

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
He did a lazy sway...
He did a lazy sway...
To the tune o'those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man's soul...(Rampersad and Roessel 50).

The poem itself, in a sense, is very simple with a simple rhyme scheme and simple diction. But Hughes is able to illustrate and glorify the blues, which also is considered by some to be simple music. Hughes is able to capture the moment in a deceptively simple way. He, like the " Harlem Blues Man," is able to transform a "sad raggy tune" and transform it into "Sweet Blues!". He is also able to capture the sexual energy emanating from that moaning piano and to release the collective tension. He was to see in Harlem a voice that he had to expose.

During the nineteen-twenties African American culture was in. Life in Harlem was considered outré and people from all over came to experience this American mythical exoticism. Despite what some people believe, Harlem was as much a construction of the white imagination as it was of the black. In *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920's*, Ann Douglas goes to great lengths to illustrate that the twenties cultural scene was Black and White. Nineteen-twenties Harlem, which is viewed as a Mecca of culture, was also a place where non-black Americans could escape the puritanical constraints of American culture and go wild. Going to Harlem was similar to a type of imaginary minstrelsy where the patrons would temporarily blacken themselves so they could act like minstrels. Huggins describes the minstrel transformation: "White men put on black masks and became another self, one which was loose of limb, innocent of obligation to anybody outside itself, indifferent to success (for whom success was impossible by racial definition), and thus a creature totally devoid of tension and deep anxiety"(253). Harlem was as intertwined as all American civilization had become with black and white culture, except it had a black face.

Despite prohibition the alcohol kept flowing in Harlem. Such famous musical venues as the Cotton Club served a mainly white clientele and often some of the black artists that played there were barred on non-working hours. So white patrons were filled with the excitement of forbidden pleasures: sex, drugs, and jazz. White poets like Vachel Lindsay, "The Congo" or foreign poets like Federico Garcia Lorca, *The Poet in New York*, both of whom Hughes enjoyed, were able to exploit this African exoticism in their work. People were searching for something that later would be termed as "cool." This led to the support of some writers who were given allowances to be native informants.

For Hughes such patronage enabled him to receive the financial support he would have never been afforded through the profits of his poetry alone. Mrs. Charlotte Mason gave him the financial freedom to work on his craft without the constant fear of not knowing where he would find the money for his next meal. She provided him with the money to fulfill his needs and even gave him extra. But this came at the price of intellectual constraints. He had to write what she wanted him to write. *Not Without Laughter* is an example of her influence. V. F. Calverton in his August 6,1930 review of *Not Without Laughter* in *The Nation,* collected in Gates and Appiah's critical reader on Langston Hughes, describes the book that Hughes's patron wanted him to write:

> Here is the Negro in his most picturesque form—the blues loving Negro, the spiritual-singing Negro, the exuberant, the impassioned, the irresponsible Negro, the Negro of ancient folk-lore and romantic legend. "Good-natured, guitar-playing Jim Boy"; Angee Rogers loving Jim boy no matter where he goes or whom he lives with; Aunt Hager, the old mammy of a dead generation, "whirling around in front of the altar at revival meetings...her face shining with light, arms outstretched

> as though all the cares of the world had been cast away..."(qtd. in Gates and Appiah 13).

She was after her vision of the " picturesque Negro" and would require Hughes to write representative pieces. His patron believed he should write on "Negro" themes and subjects oriented towards stereotypes or primitivism. His social protest poems would not have been "black" enough. While he was under her patronage he had to conform to her whims.

Also Hughes's friendship with Carl Van Vechten offered him access to publisher Alfred A. Knopf, who published his first collection of poems, *The Weary Blues*, in 1926. Van Vechten, an intimate of Knopf and Gertrude Stein, offered support but more importantly it was Van Vechten who was to certify the young Hughes's poems of their merit for white publication. Hughes would write the poems and Van Vechten would judge the poems' authenticity, their "blackness." Not even judging Van Vechten's possible ulterior motives, this relationship seems problematic and many critics criticized Hughes for his involvement with Van Vechten, such as Allison Davis, who: "charged that the book had been influenced by the author of *Nigger Heaven*, who had 'misdirected a genuine poet'"(Berry 85). Hughes's support of Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* was also seen as troubling. Van Vechten was viewed by some as an interloper. Faith Berry describes Van Vechten and Hughes's response towards Van Vechten's work:

> For the forty-six-year-old Van Vechten, Afro-Americans were at one and the same time atavistic and exotic specimens and embodiments of bourgeois respectability. His novel reflected these characteristics, but Hughes saw more of the latter than the former, writing to Locke as soon as the novel appeared that

> "colored people can't help but like it. It sounds as if it were written by a NAACP official or Jessie Fauset. But it's good"(Berry 79).

Here Hughes is able to draw out the positive aspects of the work while ignoring what other critics would find troubling. And with all the criticism, Hughes still valued his relationship with Van Vechten.

The Negro Renaissance or the Harlem Renaissance coincided with a period in which the new New York publishing industry started to support the publishing of more non-traditional white writers of the past, which since that time have now become traditional, and encouraging new writers, like Hughes, into print. It was also the time of the jazzmen, Armstrong, Ellington, and others, who were creating a whole new art that would have to wait for history to make the final judgment. As previously stated, the melding of these two worlds for Hughes led to a creation of poetry that was conscious of two aspects of African Americaness. The writing of the Harlem renaissance was in part a rewriting with a signal difference of the innovations that were attempted in the previous century. As Count Basie would say it was time for "one more time once."[36] They like Whitman were looking for a new voice to define themselves.

Who built the Harlem Renaissance? This period or at least its reputation was built up by its participants. The Harlem or Negro Renaissance was a period where the African

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[36]Count Basie would replay a certain musical section a number of times with certain innovations and introduce it with "one more time" but continue to play it more than once. Basie explains the popularity of that line emanating from a tag he used in "April in Paris": "As soon as that record hit the jukeboxes, everywhere we went, audiences started imitating that jive line I used for the tag. 'One more time. One more once'(Murray 318). He has an album with Quincy Jones called *One More Time*.

American Harlem intelligentsia could, through African American magazines like *Crisis* and *Opportunity* , look for forms and create forms of self-definition that were African American instead of the stereotypical minstrel representations which, at the time, were feeding the American cultural imagination. Writers of the time were driven by spiritual leaders like W.E.B. Dubois, graduate of Harvard and editor of *Crisis*. He recruited and encouraged new talent like Hughes. Wallace Thurman's publication *Fire!!* in 1926 with large variety of the biggest names in the Harlem scene, although unsuccessful, was an effort to create a consolidated project. People whom Hughes met during this period also proved instrumental to his literary career; W.E.B. Dubois, James Weldon Johnson, Wallace Thurman, Alain Locke, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset, Arna Bontemps, Carl Van Vechten, and many other Harlem writers or writers of African American culture.

Magazines like *Crisis* and *Opportunity* were being supported by, as Hutchinson points out in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, the new emerging publishing industry situated in New York instead of Boston. These companies were formed by people like Alfred Knopf who weren't interested in presenting the very colonial literature of Boston but were more interested in publishing World writers and distinctively American writers like Melville, Poe and Whitman. They were interested in something more vital, capturing the pulse of the nation. They were also interested in the more left-leaning writers like Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Waldo Frank. And it just so happened that the best writers were not colonials from Boston anymore. It was not only African American literature but hybrid literatures from all hyphenated cultures that were vitalizing American Literature.

Hughes is one of the vitalizers of American literature and as Hutchinson suggests he owes a great deal to Whitman and Hughes's hyphenated culture. But where Hutchinson leaves off I propose to further his argument. There is no question that Hughes was deeply affected by Whitman and this can be illustrated by the dramatic scene in *The Big Sea* when Hughes throws all his books overboard breaking all the bonds with his past and all his other literature with the exception of keeping his copy of *Leaves of Grass*(*Big Sea* 97-98). But a reading of Whitman can be enhanced with an acknowledgment of the African American literary tradition. What I want to stress is that there can be no doubt about Whitman's tremendous contribution to American literature but what I will also try to present is Whitman's debt to African American culture. It is Whitman's ability to "contain multitudes," those whom he loves, which allows him to borrow their culture in an ambivalent way. It is not only his borrowing of classical images but his borrowing images of his contemporary culture, more specifically, for my case African American culture. It is highly probable that Whitman the great collector and chronicler borrowed allusions from African American culture as well as the other classical cultural metaphors that are cited in any discussion of Whitman.

There are clearly points in *Leaves of Grass*, in which readers have found Whitman's representation of African Americans to be offensive[37] while others are quick to rally to his defense[38]. What is his relationship towards African American culture? How can there be

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[37]Eric Lott in *Love and Theft* is quick to criticize Whitman.

[38] You can see Langston Hughes's defense of Whitman in his two articles in the *Chicago Defender*, July 4, 1953 and August 1, 1953.

such disparity amongst his critics? Is this due to a sense of ambivalence that is presented in chapter one, in which writers are able to eliminate the negative and accentuate the positive in order to further their own project? Whatever the answers maybe there is much to gain in Whitman even if it is only in the establishing of a voice represented in Whitman's famous "I" as in "Song of Myself":

1

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I learn and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this
air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their
parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,

Nature without check with original energy (28-29).

This opening section to "Song of Myself" establishes Whitman's beginnings as a poet and offers an outline for what he proposes to do in the remaining sections of the poem and to some extent how he will write the rest of his poetry: his rejection of poetic meter and form, his creation of new words, his oral style, his fascination with the beautiful "loafing body" , his refusal of modesty and shame, and his belief, (even if this point may be a topic for debate) in the equality of man. "Song of Myself" and "I Hear America Singing" are ironized by Hughes, as the poet as a radical in "I Too":

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"

Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed—

I, too, am America(Rampersad and Roessel 46).

Here Hughes abandons a rhyme scheme and adopts a style that is similar to Whitman. "They'll see how beautiful I am" is the line that spiritually links Hughes and Whitman, as if Hughes is answering Whitman. Hughes is reinforcing the link between the beauty of the body and soul that Whitman presents in his poetry. Since his body is beautiful, so his soul must be.

The "I," in the poem, also presents a major break from the hegemony of a history that tries to mute the non-mainstream speaker. It is through the development of the many "I"s that African social activists believed they would develop the "we"s and enter the public sphere, as in the case of his poem "Shadows":

We run,

We run,

We cannot stand these shadows!

Give us the sun.

We were not made

For shade,

For heavy shade,

And narrow space of stifling air

That these white things have made.

We run,

Oh, God,

We run!

We must break through these shadows,

We must find the sun(Rampersad and Roessel 34).

Another force behind the "I" is that it can isolate the "you" as in Hughes's poem "To Certain Intellectuals":

You are no friend of mine

For I am poor,

Black,

Ignorant and slow, —

Not your kind.

You yourself

Have told me so, —

No friend of mine(Rampersad and Roessel 43).

This technique allows Hughes to isolate the two parties in conflict. The "I" and "you" are two separate identities and it is often the "you" who is unable to understand the "I." The "I" and "you" work in opposition to each other. The "you" is a great all encompassing title to represent the forces that bind the "I's." The "you" represents a vehicle to present frustrated anger because the "you's" are so wrapped up in their discourse that they are too deaf to hear the "I's". When Hughes is talking he is talking to no one in specific,

unlike Whitman's "you" who is his audience. When Whitman is talking, he is talking to "you." This signals the difference in privilege between Hughes and Whitman. Whitman would use "you" rarely as a pronoun to use against his critics or those he would like to criticize. He would use "them," as in the case of "the talkers" in "Song of Myself" :

I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the begin-

ning and the end,

But I do not talk of the beginning or the end(Whitman 30).

But Whitman sings the song of the individual as in the case of "Song of Myself" and is able to love them all from afar. Hughes is an African American and since he is writing out of the margins of white America, Hughes's relationship when speaking, especially in terms of pronouns, is quite different from Whitman's.

Hughes critiques the "you's" as thieves and know-nothings and only projectors of cheap minstrel imitations of what they perceive as "Negro culture." Here is Hughes's famous critique of the usurping "you's," in "Note on Commercial Theatre" :

You've taken my blues and gone—

You sing' em on Broadway

And you sing' em in Hollywood Bowl,

And you mixed'em up with symphonies

And you fixed'em

So they don't sound like me.

Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

You also took my spirituals and gone.

You put me in *Macbeth* and *Carmen Jones*

And all kinds of *Swing Mikados*

And in everything but what's about me—

But someday somebody'll

Stand up and talk about me,

And write about me—

Black and beautiful—

And sing about me,

And put on plays about me!

I reckon it'll be Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me(Rampersad and Roessel 215-216).

Hughes realizes that he cannot control "you" so he will have to rely on "me." Here is Hughes in a Whitman like gesture proposing to "sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world"(*Leaves* 89): "And sing about me"(above). The relationship towards there audience and subjects is different but their goals; writing about the body and soul, and challenging form and tradition, are very similar. Whitman and Hughes are in a relationship that converges and diverges. There might be, at certain points, where both poets would seem to be speaking with the same voice but there are also other points in which because of their respective position in society and the stratification that their different identities present which place both speakers at opposite poles. There is an invisible wall that separates the two. No matter how much Hughes admires Whitman, he still wants to be able to sing in his own voice and he does not want to let any other poet speak for him.

Langston Hughes is the voice of the dreamer and the lover that is characteristic of Whitman's poetry. Hughes writes in "The Dream Keeper":

Bring me all of your dreams,

You dreamers, Bring me all of your

Heart melodies

That I may wrap them

In a blue cloud-cloth

Away from the too-rough fingers

Of the world(Rampersad and Roessel 45).

Hughes like Whitman offers to be the bard of the people chronicling their "dreams" and their "heart melodies." He is willing to list like the old gray poet except there is a signal difference. Whitman is writing from the green grass while Hughes has chosen to write from the blue clouds. There is also a difference that is also important; Hughes has stated that he would write "Away from the too-rough fingers" which illustrates the softness of Hughes as compared to Whitman "the rough."

Hughes's preference for an anti-rough position illustrates a rewriting of the stereotype of "Jim Dandy," which has been seen as a minstrelisation of Yankee Doodle Dandy by Eric Lott, and is symbolic of a challenge to totalizing narratives that attempt to isolate and categorize people through essentialized labels that would attempt to identify identity. Then again Hughes had the advantage over Whitman. Hughes with Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Alain Locke and a generally larger queer environment is in a better position to see a larger number of openly queer role models and thus have the tools to break down the stereotypes and articulate an African American queer subjectivity. Hughes

did not have to prove his manliness. There was nothing wrong with being seen as soft. Since Harlem was a great meeting point for assembling a diverse variety of people from different parts of the United States and even the Caribbean it became easier to differentiate people from their stereotypes. In Arnold Rampersad's biography of Hughes, he illustrates how even Hughes's father had stereotypically based racial prejudices that forced him to leave the United States and live most of his life in Mexico.

A key link Hughes would have to Whitman could be in their sexuality, although Rampersad tries to shade Hughes's sexuality in his official biography to make Hughes seem asexual. Rampersad tries to strategically insert sections to protect Hughes from being labeled a homosexual: "This is an important consideration, given the later speculation, *without convincing evidence*, that he was a homosexual(my italics 46). Through the gaps, Rampersad presents another picture. Rampersad throughout the biography highlights certain signal indicators that could bend the "straight" image that he is perhaps being forced to present.

Rampersad as the official biographer, the one sanctioned by Langston Hughes's protectors, is forced to maintain certain standards. He was definitely not able to present the image that Isaac Julien did in *Looking for Langston* (1988) as African American homosexual/queer icon. Rampersad has done what Kobena Mercer in *Welcome to the Jungle* describes as consigning Hughes "to the 'closet' of black collective memory"(223). Unlike Whitman, especially in later editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Hughes genders his speakers so that they appear to be heterosexual, but still some poems like "Ma Man" or "Gypsy Man" remain ambiguous:

Ma man's a gypsy

Cause he never does come home.

Ma man's a gypsy,—

He never does come home.

I'm gonna be a gypsy woman

Fer I can't stay here alone.(Rampersad and Roessel 66).

Is it Hughes talking about himself or is he just adopting one of his many characters? Unfortunately this is a very hard question to resolve.

Hughes did try to hide behind that smiling facade in order to keep up appearances. It is not unusual that in death like in life he tried to protect his image from unnecessary attacks about his sexuality. We can see how Hughes used masking and tactical representation as an armour to hide his true feelings from his audience, through Rampersad's introduction to *The Big Sea*(1940), where he comments on Hughes's objectives when writing his first autobiography:

> First, Hughes, who depended almost desperately on the smiling surface he offered to the world, had to preserve that face even as he expressed, as an artist, some intimation of psychological depth that could come only from the recitation of varied and trying experiences—in short, from the revelation of conflict and unhappiness. Second, and more telling, Hughes, who for certain intimate reasons craved the affection and regard of blacks to an extent shared by perhaps no other important black writer, had to compose a book that would speak not only to whites—who published and bought books, who made books possible—but also to blacks. And yet the message of a black writer to whites and the message from the

same writer to blacks are often not only different but contradictory(*The Big Sea* xiv-xv).

Hughes clearly wanted to maintain an image that would provide him with the least resistance while presenting himself. Rampersad describes Hughes's link with the black community as being "psychologically mortgaged." It is a difficult battle to maintain a positive image against hegemonic American values, especially values that relegated your being to some part of the American imagination.

Writings on Whitman are more obliging to present Old Walt as the great gay poet, as opposed to Hughes. As the critics canonize they attempt to de-sexualize. It is paradoxical that a sexual poet like Hughes is separated from any sexual identity. But Whitman can still remain the advocate of "comradery," "adhesiveness," and "manly friendship." His writings about the body and sexual situations lead to unmistakable interpretations about the sexuality in Whitman's poetry. It is clearly noted that Hughes deeply enjoyed Whitman's more sexually explicit poems dealing with homoerotic allusions. In fact Rampersad's biography of Hughes notes his appreciation of certain Whitman poems, "Calamus" and "Song of the Open Road" which led to suppositions on the part of other Harlem writers. "With Hughes's reference to paganism, Whitman's infamously homosexual poems, and the scandalous Joyce novel, Locke felt free to declare himself'(Rampersad 69).

So if Hughes sees Whitman as a literary forefather: "Walt Whitman, greatest of American poets"(Hughes, "Introduction" 7). Whitman's representation of African Americans as the subject of the White male gaze is problematic. Maurice Kenny has claimed this in his article "Whitman's Indifference to Indians" that Whitman was

indifferent towards the killing of the Native Americans when it came to supporting manifest destiny. Kenny sees the problematic creation of Native American identity by the White gaze of Whitman. He finds Whitman's descriptions troubling. Here he quotes one of Whitman's attempts to describe native Americans:

> Though some of the young fellows were, as I have said, *magnificent and beautiful animals,* I think the palm of unique picturesqueness, in body, limb, physiognomy, etc., was borne by the old or elderly chiefs, and the wise men(578, emphasis added)(Kenny 31).

Kenny finds Whitman's representation of Natives Americans as animals to be troubling and limiting, to say the least. Whitman, because of his poetry, was considered by some to be a "criminal monster," so Kenny asks:

> How is it he did not recognize kindred spirits—his counterparts in the Indian chiefs, warriors, or "wise men" who were also labeled "criminal monsters"? In another essay, "Some Diary Notes at Random," he describes a ninety-four-year-old black slave he had known as a young boy in Long Island as "cute." Whitman claimed later in life to be an abolitionist(Kenny 32).

So even as critics like Kenny question Whitman's views towards "other" Americans there were still his admirers that would choose to overlook or ignore these aspects of his character. Hughes prefers to see the "other" Whitman that Hutchinson links to Borges: " a ubiquitous signifier always slipping in and out of our embrace, an ecstatic moving always outside our attempts to fix a position for him"(Hutchinson,"'Other' Whitman" 17). Hughes believes in the Whitman of Democracy and equality . This is the image Hughes presents in his Anthology of Whitman's poetry. Hughes creates an image where Whitman

at an early age, "acquired his sympathy for the Negro people and his early belief that all men should be free—a belief that grew to embrace the peoples of the whole world, expressed over and over throughout his poems, encompassing not only America but the colonial peoples, the serfs of tsarist Russia[39], the suppressed classes everywhere"(Hughes 8). Hughes in his portrait of Whitman fails to identify(or maybe ignores) any indication of prejudice or racism. In fact he comes to Whitman's defense, twice, against charges of racism in columns Hughes wrote for *The Chicago Defender*, an African American newspaper.

Hutchinson and Lott attribute Hughes's almost blind love of Whitman to a concept developed by Homi Bhabha: ambivalence or, drawing on a deconstructionist reading, undecidability. The reader tends to focus on the positive representations in the text. There may be any number of troubling aspects but they are overlooked or ignored. Hutchinson lists two reasons why African Americans would focus on Whitman. "First is respecting the 'idiom' of each existence"("'Other' Whitman" 18). Whitman's audience no matter what culture or class speaks to the reader in their own voice. And second is that the you speaks to all readers: "the poem "To You (Whoever You Are)" at times seems directly addressed to a slave"(Hutchinson, "'Other' Whitman" 19). So people would overlook Whitman's more obscure signals of racism and embrace the poet that could contain multitudes.

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[39]One might think that "the serfs of tsarist Russia" would be a strange insertion but the publisher of this collection of poems was a Marxist press.

This above section illustrates the complicated relationship Whitman had with African American identity. Eric Lott tries to understand attitudes towards African Americans through his understanding of minstrelsy:

> This produced a popular form in which racial insult was twined with racial envy, moments of domination with moments of liberation, counterfeit with currency— a pattern at times amounting to no more than the two forces of our particular modes of racism, at others gesturing toward a specific kind of political or sexual danger; and all of it comprising a peculiarly American structure of racial feeling.(Lott, "Seeming Counterfeit" 227).

This may be the best example to understand the doubleness in the reception of Whitman's work. On one side we have critics like Kenny who are critical of Whitman's attitude towards Native American and African Americans and Hughes who exalts Whitman as the poet of Democracy and equality.

In the "Children of Adam" we have a poem that can incorporate both Whitman's dehumanizing gaze but also flashes of enlightenment. Maybe there is irony in that he is taking the reader to a slave auction.

7

A man's body at auction,
(For before the war I often go to the slave-mart and watch the
sale,)
I help the auctioneer, the sloven does not half know his business.

Gentlemen look on this wonder,

Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it,

For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one

animal or plant,

For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily roll'd.

In this head the all-baffling brain,

In it and below it the makings of heroes.

Examine these limbs, red, black, or white, they are cunning in

tendon and nerve,

They shall be stript that you may see them.

Exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition,

Flakes of breast-muscles, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not

flabby, good-sized arms and legs,

And wonders within there yet.

Within there runs blood,

The same old blood! the same red-running blood!

There swells and jets a heart, there all passions, desires, reachings,

aspirations,

(Do you think they are not there because they are not express'd in

parlors and lecture-rooms?)

This is not only one man, this the father of those who shall be
fathers in their turns,
In him the start of populous states and rich republics,
Of him countless immortal lives with countless embodiments and
enjoyments.

How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his off-
spring through the centuries?
(Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you could—
trace back through the centuries?)(*Leaves* 98-99)

This poem seems to be erotically charging the images of the slaves at auction and who could be seen in a certain sense as soulless mannequins; but that is not the case. Whitman challenges this description by referring to the "all baffling brain". He also illustrates that within the slave's body runs: "The same old blood! the same red-running blood!". Also Whitman challenges the idea that the body is inferior to the soul so praise of the body can also be interpreted as praise of the soul. Whitman sees the human value of all people and realizes the structure of power is based on ideology as he explains:

How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his off-
spring through the centuries?
(Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you could —
trace back through the centuries?)(above).

In a statement that would seem to be arguing in terms of equality, it appears that Whitman is suggesting: humans are victims of the times in which they are born.

The idea that Whitman is placing into question is the merit of a birthright which according to American Democracy should be rejected. The abolition of a king in favor of a democratically elected government is part of the foundation of Whitman's democracy which he supports in the French Revolution, as can be seen in his poem "France" or when he echoes the song of the French revolution when he sings:

> Allons! with power, liberty, the earth, the elements,
>
> Health, defiance, gayety, self-esteem, curiosity;
>
> Allons! From all formules!
>
> From your formules, O bat-eyed and materialistic priests(*Leaves* 155).

Whitman questions the value of any system that places value one's birthright. He places more importance on health: "Only those may come who come in sweet and determin'd bodies"(*Leaves* 155).

In "The Sleepers" another distorted image of minstrelsy is presented. "The Sleepers" is considered a surreal work and this can be signaled through the first line "I wander all night in my vision"(424). Since "The Sleepers" is constructed like a dream the lines identifying tropes like metaphor and metonymy are more open to interpretation, leaving more room for ambiguity.

Robert K. Martin in his *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* cites this excerpt from "The Sleepers" in his text:

> Well do they do their jobs, those journeymen divine,
>
> Only from me can they hide nothing, and would not if they

could;

I reckon I am their boss, and they make me a pet besides,

And surround me, and lead me and run ahead when I walk,

To lift their cunning covers and signify me with stretched

arms, and resume the way;

Onward we move, a gay gang of blackguards with mirth-

shouting music and wildflapping pennants of joy(10).

I agree with him in essence that there is a mood of sexual arousal and sexual release, "the phallus is freed"(10). But I don't think that what is necessarily evoked is "the pleasure of men together, a triumphant repossession of childlike joys, with Whitman as Pan in the procession back to a natural world of innocence"(10). Whitman is only the passive Pan to the eye of the critic who does not know the story of "The Signifying Monkey" because it is only through this tale that a framework could be set up where this transgression of the sexual order could be possible as somewhat, as far as their Humanity is concerned, equal partners.

This section signals Whitman as an insider into African American culture and here is where my argument goes beyond Hutchinson. Although Whitman is criticized for his minstrelisation of African Americans, Martin, in a sense, asserts this position by calling him a Pan figure[40], I believe that Whitman tries to subvert this argument by incorporating parts of African American tradition. I believe that Whitman who, according to Hughes in "The Ceaseless Rings of Walt Whitman" grew up among slaves or maybe former slaves

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[40]My understanding of Pan is based on Patricia Merivale's *Pan the Goat God*, Princeton, 1968.

on the Whitman farm where he most probably came into contact with African American folktales. It is this knowledge, or even possibility, that signals America's mixed heritage. This is why writers like Hughes believe in the compassion of writers like Whitman, even in front of Whitman's detractors.

Whitman with his gray beard and his passive ecstasy may on the surface resemble Pan but this interpretation would leave Whitman open to critics who would fault Whitman for his minstrelisation of African American Culture. In order to establish the slave-workers' humanity Whitman must account for his partner's motivation. If the black guards that "signify me" are Signifyin(g) then in many ways an equality is established. This path seems more probable since Whitman has already decentered the hierachy by transforming his slaves into "guards." Destabilizing the master/slave binary which jepordizes the role of the master without his slaves. Whitman questions this structure again when he asks: "I reckon I am their boss." Whitman in setting up an equal transaction asserts an equality for all participants.

In the above quoted excerpt from "The Sleepers," the speaker relates that he (assuming that the speaker is male) is being signified by the black guards: "and signify me with stretched arms." But for Whitman being signified is definitely a desirable achievement, especially if we take into consideration the sexual metaphors that Martin presents. In the speaker's dream we can see that the speaker is trying to fool the signifiers at their own game by blurring the lines between signifier and signified similar to Eric Lott's concept of love and theft. This is sentiment is expressed in the line "I am the their boss, and they make me a pet besides," this section suggests the blurring of roles and

it is only this kind of signifying blurring, a love and a theft, that would allow him to get "fucked"[41] by them in the social hierarchy of his time.

To be signified is to be fucked and cuckolded. Part of the story in "The Signifying Monkey" is how the monkey is able to cuckold[42] the lion: "At the very same time I had my dick in your wife"(Abrahams 102) and also get the lion fucked by the elephant: "And got your ass mangled and drug in the sand"(ibid). Which is not as direct as another version cited in Gates's *The Signifying Monkey* when the monkey threatens: "Well, Brother Lion, the day have come at last, that I have found a limb to fit your ass"(61). Is it the elephant?

In Abrahams's version, "your ass mangled and drug in the sand," connotes the colloquial image of "getting fucked up" or "getting the crap beat out of someone" but it also can connote an attempt of Freudian emasculation that monkey performs when he pees on the lion which in retaliation the lion offers: "'That's all right, Mr. Monkey, if that's the way you want to play./ The sun's gonna shine on your ugly ass some day'"(ibid). Meaning that someday the monkey will be signified, which in another version of the tale, the lion threatens that someday the monkey will get a branch up his ass.

The monkey is the go-between for sexual encounters. It is not coincidental that the monkey is a"pimp" as described in the tale :

Deep down in the jungle where the coconut grows

Lives a pimp little monkey, you could tell by the clothes he wore.

---

[41]I am using "fucked" because of the multiple connotations of the word.

[42]This cuckolding is similar to that as explained in Eve Sedgewick's Between Men, Columbia,1985.

He had a camel-hair benny with belt in the back,

Had a pair of nice shoes and a pair of blue slacks.

Now his clothes were cute little things,

Was wearing a Longine watch and a diamond ring.(Abrahams 101).

As a contemporary reader who can judge the monkey by his clothes, the clothes seem to be similar to what the producers of blaxploitation would conceive of a pimp. But in an effort to insure that the term is not taken out of context, I have consulted the *Oxford English Dictionary* which lists the word pimp at the time of Whitman to mean: "One who provides means and opportunities for unlawful sexual intercourse; a pander, procurer"(XI 845). The verb form of pimp is the action involving the above description or "to take advantage of"(ibid). So the monkey is either more traditionally fooling the signified or literally getting them "fucked" depending on the interpretation of the interpreter of the tale. So with the aid of the tale there can be a new incorporation of metaphors adding new levels to the speaker's dreamplay.

There is a benefit in coming back to the folktale. Roger D. Abrahams, who has collected African American folktales, including "The Signifying Monkey," in his *Afro-American Folktales,* has opened a window into the intertextuality of certain African American folktales and non African American literary works. He is re-presenting folktales that nineteenth century writers would have either heard or read. The folktales in this collection are from the nineteenth century and some were even transcribed to plantation journals as early as 1815. Abrahams has collected folktales from people from different destinations among the transplanted people of the African Diaspora, but "The Signifying Monkey" is definitely American. In fact, "The Signifying Monkey" is among the most

famous entry, this is the inspiration for Henry Louis Gates jr.'s book *The Signifying Monkey*. Among the others that are familiar with the tale, Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes who included this folktale in their own Anthology, *The Poetry of the Negro*(1970), in which they print a much more publishable version, as compared to Abrahams's version cited here.

The *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, which came out at the end of 1997 has realized the importance of this tale in terms of its contribution to African American literature and has chosen to print the Hughes and Bontemps's version as opposed to the cruder Abrahams's version because the *Norton*'s audience is targeted for undergraduate students. It is not improbable that Whitman and his audience were familiar with this folktale and if not from first hand sources, they must have seen it in print. If Whitman used it to supply the background for "The Sleepers," it probably did not go unnoticed by his readers who were familiar with the tale.

Despite the recent outcry against Whitman and his agenda which might not have been necessarily encouraging for African American, writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, as argued in the first chapter, and Hughes were able to draw some benefit from Whitman's work. As Hutchinson explains: "This is as attributable to the interests, needs, and imaginations of his readers and the contexts in which they read him as to the ideological ambiguities of his poetry"(Hutchinson "Whitman Legacy"212). Although Whitman will never be the perfect poet he at least provided a wider opening for writers that had to recreate a stolen history. Hutchinson concludes his article in Folsom's *Walt Whitman:the Centennial Essays*, by challenging critics to go beyond focusing on Whitman the racist:

To argue for the pervasive impact of Whitman's legacy on the Harlem renaissance is not, then to attempt to "save" Whitman from examinations of his racism or to try to contain racial difference within American sameness—but it is to insist on a "mulatto" aspect of American traditions that coexists with and continually revitalizes their multicultural distinctiveness. And it is to demonstrate the need to go beyond ideological interrogation toward diverse historical investigations of the complex, productive, and often ironic or scandalous interrelations between ostensibly separate "racial"/cultural traditions in the United States.("Whitman Legacy" 213).

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