Shaping Words to Fit the Soul

Grandt, Jurgen E.

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When Count Basie entered the Columbia studios on May 31, 1940, to record a composition with the title “Gone With ‘What’ Wind?” he certainly had not conceived it as the kind of biting satire that, for instance, Charles Mingus would perform some two decades later with the “Fables of Faubus.” Basie simply remarked that the tune “was really something from Benny Goodman’s book. As a matter of fact I had sat in as a guest piano player in Benny’s sextet when he recorded it for Columbia back in February while we were working at the Golden Gate.” And, he added casually, he had simply “dictated a few little changes here and there” (Basie 240; Sheridan 98–100). The “something” Basie appropriated for this recording.

Among these images [of the South] (none absolutely true or false) there is a great clashing, with the exponents of each set making scapegoats of the others: Northerners for Southerners, the South for the North, the black for the white and the white for the black, and when we try to find stable points of reality in this whirling nightmare of terms and attitudes, they change constantly into their opposites.

—Ralph Ellison, “Tell It Like It Is, Baby”

INTRODUCTION

“Gone With ‘What’ Wind?”
Afro-Modernism’s Southern Ritual Grounds
session was actually a tune composed by Goodman, “Gone With What Draft?” It is safe to say that neither the Jewish New Yorker Goodman nor the midwesterner Basie intended a trenchant contestation of symbolic territory of _The Wind Done Gone_ kind—even if, in what surely constitutes a case of inadvertent poetic justice, “Gone With ‘What’ Wind?” is a blues. Yet the title of Basie’s adaptation, phrased as a question, features at its core an adjective that points to a referential void. Its allusions and wider context stake out a symbolic terrain that at once clearly demarcates a southern setting and yet ultimately resists linguistic representation. Thus, “Gone With ‘What’ Wind?” exemplifies in some ways a paradox central to African American musics: as Nathaniel Mackey astutely points out, “Part of the genius of black music is the room it allows for a telling ‘inarticulacy,’ a feature consistent with its critique of a predatory coherence, a cannibalistic ‘plan of living,’ and the articulacy that upholds it” (252–53). The interrogatory range at the center of Basie’s song title therefore also echoes Ralph Ellison’s observation that “because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it” (Shadow 267).

The music criticism of Mackey and Ellison underlies an aspect of African American cultural production that literary theories have by and large circumvented. African American literary-critical paradigms of the past three decades have tended to privilege modes of reading that draw on the ‘authentic’ black folkways of the rural South framed, in Robert Stepto’s words, as the “genius loci” (67–70). Ann duCille has coined the term “Hurstonism” for these interpretive models, where “the valorization of the vernacular” leads to “an inherently exclusionary literary practice that filters a wide range of complex and often contradictory impulses and energies into a single modality consisting of the blues and the folk” (69). DuCille continues that “such evaluations often erase the contexts and complexities of a wide range of African American historical experiences and replace them with a single, monolithic, if valorized, construction: ‘authentic’ blacks are southern, rural, and sexually uninhibited” (71). More recently, Madhu Dubey has pointed to the still salient “romance of the residual” suffusing cultural criticism today, a romance that hinges on a reification of preindustrial, premodern (symbolic) spaces more often than not situated in the rural South (158–70). Stepto’s own investigation into “the authenticating machinery” of African American narrative, Houston A. Baker’s “blues matrix,” Henry Louis Gates’s “Signifyin(g)” and “speakerly text”—or, indeed, Toni Morrison’s “ancestral South”—all look to the vernacular culture of the Black Belt for their respective readings of African American narrative. Morrison—though a self-proclaimed mid-
western author, perhaps the most ‘southern’ writer alive today—has even called her novels “village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe. Peasant literature for my people” (“Language” 26; “Seams” 59; Interview 119).

Thus, what Stepto calls the South’s rural “ritual grounds” have engendered a “pregeneric myth,” one that in turn generates the critical apparatuses for the investigation of the entire black American literary tradition (xv, 66–74). The “symbolic geography” he maps focuses on the idea that a landscape becomes symbolic in literature when it is a region in time and space offering spatial expressions of social structures and ritual grounds on the one hand, and of communitas and genius loci on the other. . . . Symbolic geography in Afro-American narratives emerges . . . as a structural topography in which seemingly permanent (to the Afro-American) social structures manifest themselves as sites for locus-specific variations upon a nearly universal race ritual. (67–68)

Defining ritual ground as “a reaction to social structure within a structural topography” that provides “the currency of exchange, as it were, within the realm of communitas,” Stepto’s critical practice delineates “a ‘tribal’ geography” that is almost exclusively male and southern (69, 70, 77).

And so, in an ironic reversal, the historical southern ritual ground, with its brutally disruptive legacies of chattel slavery, ethnic cleansing, and civil war, becomes codified in literary-critical practice as the source of an identifiable and predominantly rural ‘southernness,’ albeit a southernness more often than not under siege or (perpetually) fading away. In the South, the guiding Morrisonian ancestor is always in danger of vanishing—but knowable and somehow stable nonetheless, for myths are by nature consolidating in that they offer tangents of identification. In the still prevailing strains of African American critical theory, Stepto’s pregeneric myth has been reincarnated in poststructuralist garb. For all their ostensible celebration of destabilizing ambiguity and heterogeneous polyvalence, Henry Louis Gates’s “Signifyin(g)” and Houston Baker’s “blues matrix” deploy their own stabilizing mechanisms, authenticating machineries that, like all concepts of authenticity, serve to declare as much who’s out as to identify who’s in (McDowell, “Changing” 165–67). Sandra Adell points out that the critical methodologies of Gates and Baker not only “fall short of their emancipatory goal of freeing Afro-American literature from the hegemony of Eurocentric discourses” but also “bring into sharp relief what can best be described as a nostalgia for tradition. For to summon a tradition, for example, by reconstructing it, is to search for
an authority, that of the tradition itself. Such an enterprise, even as it
pits two or more traditions against each other, or even as it attempts to
fuse traditions, is inherently conservative. Something is always conserved,
something always remains the Same” (137). That “something” is, more
often than not, the symbolic ritual grounds of the American South and
its vernaculars.

These critical approaches become themselves stabilizing rituals, and as
such echo in part the problem engendered by Stepto’s wholesale adoption
of Victor Turner (Stepto 67–69). For the anthropologist Turner, ritual
is geared toward “the process of regenerative renewal” (“Process” 159).
A society’s rituals are therefore also consensus models feeding into the
maintenance of “communitas”: “bedrock communitas,” writes Turner, is “a
generic human relationship undivided by status-roles or structural oppo-
sitions, which is also vouched for by myths and histories stressing the
unity and continuity of the widest group to which all belong by birth and
tradition” (“Images” 233). The evolution of communitas becomes, “for
the groups and individuals within structured systems, a means of bind-
ing diversities together and overcoming cleavages” (Dramas 206). The
normative tendencies in communitas are reinforced when enacted within
a specific geographic space (Dramas 169, 268–69). For all its attention
to liminality and rupture, Turner’s social drama is actually impelled by
processes of assimilation and integration as the ultimate goal of ritual as
a regulatory function (Rosaldo 96–97; D. Weber 530). The status of the
liminal is one that, in Turner’s concept, ultimately contributes to “ensur-
ing the continuity of proved values and norms” (“Process” 163).

However, modernism’s key themes of fragmentation, alienation, and
epistemology complicate the demarcation of the South’s rural “ritual
grounds” as a repository of the “authenticating machinery” of African
American narrative. As Adell stipulates, “in modernism the self is sep-
parated from its world, from its true home in the world. In modernism the
self is homeless and only resides in writing. As such it participates in its
own displacement even as it seeks to reconcile itself with the ordinary,
familial, and social order of everyday life” (139). The modernist severance
of ‘word’ from ‘world’ destabilizes the southern ritual ground as genius loci
of a “bedrock communitas”—and, not coincidentally, many of his theo-
ries Turner formulated in the course of studying premodern societies. It
therefore follows that Stepto fashions the genius loci of African American
cultural production into a premodernist ritual ground, for modernism’s
inherent eclecticism and instability disturb what he, in the 1991 after-
word to the second edition of From Behind the Veil, calls “the dominant
meta-plot of the tale”: he insists that instability is always a product of the (uninformed) reader, never a quality of the text (202, 204).

What the paradigms of Turner and Stepto minimize is that rituals, as acts that seek to regulate transferences of power and shifts of identity, in and of themselves often reinforce the disruptive impulses behind any transformation as much as they are designed to contain them (Hutcheon 97; Raboteau 86–87). Art, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, has always had an intricate connection to ritual:

> The original way of embedding the artwork in the context of tradition found its expression in the cult. The earliest artworks, as we know, originated in the service of a ritual—first a magic ritual, then a religious one. It is now of decisive significance that the artwork’s auratic mode of existence is never severed entirely from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the “authentic” artwork has its foundation in ritual, in which it had its original and earliest use value. This ritualistic basis, however it is mediated, is still discernible as a secularized ritual in even the most profane forms of aesthetic service. . . . With the secularization of art, authenticity takes the place of cult value. (“Kunstwerk” 144)

Benjamin here also stresses that the “use value” of art (reconfigured in Stepto’s paradigm as “the currency of exchange” within the *communitas*) has itself become highly unstable amid the social and political upheavals of modernity. Ralph Ellison grafts the implications onto southern American ritual grounds and argues that “while the myths and mysteries that form Southern mystique are irrational and even primitive, they are nevertheless real, even as works of the imagination are ‘real.’ Like all mysteries and their attendant myths, they imply . . . a rite. And rites are actions, the goal of which is the manipulation of power—in primitive religions magical power, in the South (and in the North) political power” (Going 572). The experience of repeated uprooting in the Middle Passage and under the peculiar institution informed virtually every ritual, religious or secular, of the slaves, rites in which they “asserted repeatedly . . . that their lives were special, their lives had dignity, their lives had meaning beyond the definitions set by slavery,” as Albert Raboteau writes (231). Thus, rituals as acts that seek to negotiate shifts of power and transformations of identity, and perhaps southern rites in particular, are always also manifestations of disruption, whose fissures often bespeak a “telling inarticulacy.”

In Stepto’s literary-critical paradigm, however, southern ritual grounds tend to be stable: the ritual journeys of ascent from an oppressive South
to a relatively free North and of immersion from northern alienation to southern *communitas* that inform black American narrative in various later amplifications are both teleological in their (symbolic) geography. Recent critical developments of Stepto’s paradigm are the narratives of dispersion and recuperation charted by Judylyn Ryan along an east-west axis, which in turn inform Edward Pavlič’s concept of Diasporic Modernism. In these later narrative modes, explains Pavlič, “figures attempt to expand the communal forms of the symbolic South in relation to newly imagined African cultural codes and patterns” (“‘Papa’” 62). The place where the latitudinal paradigm of Stepto and the longitudinal paradigms of Ryan and Pavlič converge is the American South. But if Nathaniel Mackey is correct in arguing that the telling inarticulacy of African American texts is, at least in part, the result too of a resistance against the dominant discourse, this inarticulacy not only seeks to destabilize “predatory coherence,” but can also, inadvertently, affect the ostensible stabilities of the texts’ very own expressions of “communal forms”—then the black ritual grounds of the American South extend deep into the adjectival *terra incognita* of Basie’s “Gone With ‘What’ Wind?”

The rise of modernism in western art coincided, roughly, with the Great Migration, the exodus of African Americans from the predominately rural South to the industrial metropolises of the North. Adell’s suspicions about the summoning of “tradition” notwithstanding, the massive geographical and sociocultural dislocation and modernism’s centrifugal forces generated certain patterns of sensibility that distinguish Afro-modernism from much of Euro-American modernism. Hugh Kenner’s intriguing hypothesis that the U.S. educational system contributed to the emergence of high modernism—for Kenner, America was “the world’s first classroom civilization” and *The Cantos* simply “a Penn first-year curriculum, the one Pound happened to take”—also hints at such a crucial difference (*Homemade* 160; “Poets” 115). For one, the vast majority of Americans of African descent had no access to the institutions of higher learning that helped shape the aesthetic sensibilities of the Ezra Pounds and the William Carlos Williamses:

Several hours into the academic day, the blackboard is confronting students with a dense overlay of symbols left over from previous classes. When their instructor in the heat of exposition is moved to chalk up something of his own, no more than his precursors is he likely to wipe his whole expanse clean, not wanting to turn his back to the class for too long (a principle of rhetoric, not safety). Erasing just a little, he makes his additions slantwise. And as the palimpsest builds up day-long—dia-
grams, short lists, circles with three points marked on them, bits of math, supply and demand curves, bits of Aramaic—all superimposed, all bespeaking the day’s intellectual activity in that room—you feel yourself in the presence, as Beckett put it, of something you could study all your life and not understand. The blackboard with its synchronic overlay, its tough and hieroglyphic fragments of a congeries of subjects (nothing obvious goes on the blackboard; what is obvious can merely be stated)—the blackboard is our civilization’s Great Smaragdine Tablet (which said “Things below are copies,” and was itself one of the things below). Absence of explicit and consecutive sense, teasing intimations of domains of order that others comprehend, that I could comprehend had I world enough and time, these are elements of its daily rhetoric, as it marshals, at random, enigmatic signs. (Kenner, “Poets” 118–19)

For the budding modernist poet enrolled at Penn, at Yale, at Harvard (Quentin Compson’s college), the blackboard is a two-dimensional, physical expanse upon which those cryptic signs congregate. For the African American writer—most likely barred from institutions of higher learning—the blackboard is also a symbol of black struggle in the New World, especially considering the significance of the trope of literacy in the (neo)slave narrative. How different, then, the blackboard behind the veil:

The school house was a log hut, where Colonel Wheeler used to shelter his corn. It sat in a lot behind a rail fence and thorn bushes, near the sweetest of springs. There was an entrance where a door once was, and within, a massive rickety fireplace; great chinks between the logs served as windows. Furniture was scarce. A pale blackboard crouched in the corner. My desk was made of three boards, reinforced at critical points, and my chair, borrowed from the landlady, had to be returned every night. Seats for the children—these puzzled me much. I was haunted by a New England vision of neat little desks, and chairs, but alas! the reality was rough plank benches without backs, and at times without legs. They had the one virtue of making naps dangerous—possibly fatal, for the floor was not to be trusted. (Du Bois, Souls 39)

The “pale blackboard crouching in the corner” a youthful Fisk University student teaching summer school found near the hamlet of Watertown, at the edge of the Tennessee hill country, is indicative of the ongoing struggle against racial inequality at the dawn of modernism. There is no question, given the pallor of the blackboard, of “Great Smaragdine Tablets” in this schoolroom, for any chalk marks on that particular board would be
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comparatively difficult to descry in the first place. Interestingly, some ten
years later, that same Fisk alumnus, now Dr. William Edward Burghardt
Du Bois, returned to the area, but found his little schoolhouse gone:

In its place stood Progress; and Progress, I understand, is necessarily
ugly. The crazy foundation stones still marked the former site of my poor
little cabin, and not far away, on six weary boulders, perched a jaunty
board house, perhaps twenty by thirty feet, with three windows and a
door that locked. Some of the windowglass was broken, and part of an
old iron stove lay mournfully under the house. I peeped through the
window half reverently, and found things that were not familiar. The
blackboard had grown by about two feet, and the seats were still without
backs. (Souls 43)

Symbolically, then, the “meaning of progress” in education must be mea-
sured in inches per decade. In this, the blackboard is Du Bois’s posteman-
cipation updating of Frederick Douglass’s pen: recalling the harsh winters
he experienced on the Maryland plantation where he grew up, Douglass
asserts that “[m]y feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen
with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes” (33). For Du Bois as
for Douglass, the instruments of writing and literacy serve to negotiate the
pain and suffering of history, and consequently to assess the progress from
the past to the present (Stepto 20).

At least, that is, for Americans of African descent at the dawning of
the twentieth century. Du Bois, in fact, would go on to assume a position
at the University of Pennsylvania, but not even this comparatively liberal
institution was exempt from the veil: given an ill-defined one-year fel-
lowship there, Du Bois did no teaching at all because his name was soon
stricken from the catalogue. As he notes dryly in his autobiography, “I
did no instructing save once, to pilot a pack of idiots through the Negro
slums” (197, 194–95). It was only a few years after Du Bois’s brief stint
at Penn that Williams and Pound enrolled there, who after all were not
even a generation younger than he. But their radically different experi-
tences, and consequently the vastly different meanings modernity and
modernism came to have for these three, are instructive. For Du Bois,
who had “touched the very shadow of slavery” during his first sojourn
below the Mason-Dixon line, history was not in the past but very much
alive, and hence crucial to understand in the forging not just of what
Alain Locke would famously call the New Negro, but of a new, modern,
modernist black art (Autobiography 114). Appropriately, the metaphor of
the veil has three dimensions, while the metaphor of the blackboard has
but two—not necessarily a qualitative difference, but a conceptual one to be sure.

Certainly, American high modernism was not without a concern for history. After all, Pound famously called The Cantos “a poem including history” (Kenner, Pound 362–67). But for the white American modernist, history presented options: one could select which bits and pieces of information one wanted to copy from the blackboard, “our civilization’s Great Smaragdine Tablet,” into one’s notebook. Thus, Euro-American and European high modernism offered to many what Jed Rasula terms an “idiomatic arsenal” consisting of a myriad of “elective parts” (70). But for the black artist in the New World, the point was that he or she did not have the same choices as Ezra Pound, or T. S. Eliot, or H. D., or Gertrude Stein, simply because, more often than not, there was no blackboard to copy from. Even Professor Du Bois had his blackboard taken from him at Penn. And so, for the American of African descent, “the adventure of Western culture” (to use George Kent’s apt phrase) and the confrontation with modernity invariably led to the American South (Kent 15). For the African American artist, confronting the rituals of the South and their legacies was not an elective; it was inescapable. Hence, the one dimension comparatively diminished in Kenner’s symbol of the blackboard in the classroom—and the one salient in Du Bois’s account—is the fourth: time. And it is this dimension that Afro-modernism is concerned with to a much greater degree than American high modernism.

Thus, Afro-modernism is really modernism with a historical conscience. The “telling inarticulacy” at the center of Basie’s song title furnishes the cue to my critical investigation into the southern ritual grounds of Afro-modernism as modernism with a historical conscience. In a variety of texts and contexts, the South constitutes a symbolic territory that actually resists the very narrative strategies deployed to capture it and hence is the catalyst of an epistemological crisis as much as the foundation of any “authenticating machineries.” At the same time, this stubborn resistance, the modernist alienation of word from world, prompts ever new and imaginative (re)mappings of that same territory, ontological processes of revelation within a field of tension in which narrative postures toward existence are continuously negotiated anew. In this act of (re)mapping, Afro-modernism seeks to tap not only historical consciousness—the blackboard in Ezra Pound’s classroom at Penn—but a historical conscience—the veil that accounts for the blackboard in Du Bois’s schoolhouse in Watertown, Tennessee, and its subsequent sacrifice to “Progress.” Hence, Afro-modernism suggests the reconfiguration of southern ritual grounds as situated in time and mind rather than time and place.
“Modernism with a historical conscience” may sound like a contradiction in terms, but, as Adell reminds us, the Afro-modernist text in particular “is embedded in a paradox. It is a conjuring-weaving which reveals its dark shadow, the subtext of black existence and its un-said and un-sayable history” (140). Therefore, in the present study I shall follow Craig Werner’s lead and use the term “Afro-modernism” less as a definition of a specific school of artists or of a peculiar set of aesthetic paradigms, than as shorthand for the various ways in which artists confront the collision and collusion of alienation, fragmentation, and epistemology in the modern world (Werner 183–88). Nevertheless, as pointed out above, I believe there are indeed certain trends and patterns that distinguish much of Afro-modernism from its Euro-American counterpart, and the concept of Afro-modernism as modernism with a historical conscience therefore seeks to do justice to artistic form as well as to cultural history.

Stepto places the beginning of Afro-modernism with the 1912 publication of James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (95–97). For Houston Baker, Afro-modernism begins on September 18, 1895, the day Booker T. Washington delivered his famous address at the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition (Baker, *Modernism* 15–16). Alfred Appel and Jed Rasula posit the apotheosis in 1927, the year Duke Ellington’s “Black and Tan Fantasy” was released, and the year placards announced Louis Armstrong as “The Master of Modernism” (Appel 206; Rasula 109–10). Werner reads the fiction of Charles Chesnutt as the first writings heralding the full complexities of what he calls African American “(post)modernism”; and when it is Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that constitutes the key black modernist text for Pavlić, it is Richard Wright’s *Native Son* for Yoshinobu Hakutani (Werner 17; Pavlić, “‘Papa’” 61–62; Hakutani 1–6). Notable about this roll call is the fact that the artists deemed pioneers of Afro-modernism are all southerners by birth or by upbringing—with Ellington the sole but, as a native Washingtonian, also tentative exception. Certainly, the South’s significance owes as much to demographics as to aesthetic principles; but because of this, too, the South appears a region central to the emergence of Afro-modernism, regardless of its definition.

Ultimately though, the genesis of Afro-modernism, Paul Gilroy states, lies in the experience of repeated uprooting and dislocation in the Middle Passage and its aftermath. As he writes in his seminal *The Black Atlantic*, it’s “the relationship between masters and slaves that supplies the key to comprehending the position of blacks in the modern world” (219–20). Thus, however varied, and sometimes contradictory, the approaches that black American artists took to meet the challenges of the twentieth century, they all
shared a sense that the modern world was fragmented along axes constituted by racial conflict and could accommodate non-synchronous, hetero-cultural modes of social life in close proximity. Their conceptions of modernity were periodised differently. They were founded on the catastrophic rupture of the middle passage. They were punctuated by the processes of acculturation and terror that followed that catastrophe and by the countercultural aspirations towards freedom, citizenship, and autonomy that developed after it among slaves and their descendants. (197)

This dialectic of terror and acculturation was being told and retold in countless (re)incarnations of that most ‘telling’ of African American rites: call and response (Floyd 94–97; Gilroy 200; Stuckey 41–48).

My study does not pretend to trace a comprehensive panorama of (southern) Afro-modernism: in literature alone, such a feat would have to tackle at the very least the fiction of Zora Neale Hurston, Ernest Gaines, and Alice Walker, as well as the poetry of Sterling Brown, again Walker, and Yusef Komunyakaa—not to mention the music of, say, Ray Charles, or the paintings of Romare Bearden. Hence, this study visits a series of southern ritual grounds and listens to selected, specific responses to the calls of modernity.

The first “call” will be that of the “Old South,” and my cartography of Afro-modernism begins with the 1893 Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. Douglass’s last autobiography has been unduly dismissed or neglected by critics because it avails itself of an expanded aesthetic of autobiography, one that the still dominating structuralist approaches fashioning the canon of African American narrative—Stepto’s latitudinal paradigm or Gates’s Signifyin(g)—cannot accommodate. The 1845 Narrative and the subsequent My Bondage and My Freedom undoubtedly emphasize the joint journeys from slavery to freedom and ignorance to literacy, and thus remain fully invested in the possibilities of literary mimesis. Douglass’s final autobiography as a protomodernist text, however, becomes more and more concerned with the fissures created by the inherent instability of all acts of textual representation. For Douglass, the modernist alienation of word from world can, and must, be counteracted if text is to tap what he calls “a life and power far beyond the letter,” an historical conscience (Autobiographies 792). Like its predecessors, Life and Times ultimately places this historical conscience at the frostbitten feet of its hero. Simultaneously, its protomodernism recognizes that there is indeed an increasing distance between ‘telling’ letters on the one hand, and as of yet unarticulated lives and powers on the other. The expanded aesthetic of Life and Times therefore not only negotiates a much more complex dynamic of immediacy
and distance, inside and outside, text and history, but also reinscribes its historical, southern conscience on the international grounds it visits.

While Douglass’s final autobiography presents us with a protomodernism in which the widening gap between word and world could still be bridged, in Jean Toomer’s *Cane* the axis of mimesis becomes unhinged. The novel sets out to respond to the call of “the spiritual truth” of the post-Reconstruction South as the author himself heard it in the archetypal southern small town on the threshold of modernity (qtd. in Kerman and Eldridge 95). However, the book depicts characters who are either unable to grasp fulfillment and tap a spiritual, mystic wholeness, or who are incapable of articulating comprehensibly their spiritual selves, chronicling the futile attempts of the narrative voice in its various guises to capture and reproduce Toomer’s South. The modernist crisis of representation leads to a breakdown of communication caused paradoxically by language itself, the very medium of communication. The recurring shifts between levels of narrative consciousness indicate that it is ironically language itself that prevents the book’s characters from shaping words to fit their souls, as it were. *Cane* thus attests to the price for which literary modernity is to be had: the fragmentation of the mimetic power of language. The novel’s historical conscience, represented by the mythical character of Father John, is still ‘writable’ and hence communicable, but at the same time Father John is relegated to a dark cellar, ignored or misunderstood by the community aboveground—the embodiment of a historical conscience that has shifted almost completely from the realm of ‘telling’ to the realm of inarticulacy.

One of the rituals *Cane* deems quintessential to the Black Belt’s “spiritual truth”—as did, of course, Douglass—is the ritual of song. However, the novel constantly refers to and reports on singing, but it incorporates an actual song into its narrative but once, and only fleetingly at that. In contrast, a small Mississippi farm is the setting of Richard Wright’s *Long Black Song,* where the Methodist hymn “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” serves as the catalyst that occasions both a majestic (if utopian) vision of interracial harmony and that most brutal of southern rituals, lynching. The specific rendition of the hymn that Sarah, the protagonist, hears and that triggers the tragic events was recorded by the all-white Edison Mixed Quartet: in its performance decidedly not an antiphonal liberation text in the African American tradition, the hymn nonetheless pits two distinct realms against each other, the millennial realm of the hymn’s “yonder” on the one hand, and the historical exigencies of a southern territory marked by the ritual of lynching on the other. The resulting dialectic oscillates between the realities of southern violence and the ideal
of southern multiculture and reveals that, contrary to Toomer's belief (and Douglass's), song and music in fact betray the African American liberation struggle, and not just in the Deep South. Wright insists that only the writer can give voice to a viable historical conscience.

Accordingly, the long black song the title announces is one that is never sung in the story. This long black song, though, resounds at one of the 'blackest' of all black southern ritual grounds—the crossroads. This is the location where, or so the legend goes, the “King of the Delta Blues Singers,” Robert Johnson, traded his soul to the devil. In critical theory, too, the crossroads has become the prime metonymy for Afro-modernism—in Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* as well as Edward Pavliç's *Crossroads Modernism*. “Music,” Paul Gilroy adjudges, “becomes vital at the point at which linguistic and semantic indeterminacy/polyphony arise amidst the protracted battle between masters, mistresses, and slaves. This decidedly modern conflict was the product of circumstances where language lost something of its referentiality and its privileged relationships to concepts” (*Black* 74). But because black music is also “so often the principal symbol of racial authenticity,” in the third millennium “the well-policed borders of black particularity” remain just as vigilantly guarded (34, 6). Despite Wright's profound pessimism regarding the liberatory potential of music, one of the goals of *Shaping Words to Fit the Soul* is to reference sound as a figurative ritual ground capable of decolonizing visually inscribed, petrified mappings of raciological categorization; music can, however fleetingly, indeed swing open doors to spaces that allow for the possibility of combining seemingly divergent and opposite forms of human experience and expression.

Chapter 4 will therefore not only visit the actual crossroads where said tricky transaction between Johnson and the devil took place. It will also examine the figurative crossroads in the compositional practice of the “Father of the Blues,” W. C. Handy, as well as in the soundscapes navigated by the flagship of southern rock, the Allman Brothers Band. Handy's blues are a product of pastiche and collage and result from the collision of what he calls “snatches of song” from a wide variety of sources; at the same time, the so-called blue notes give voice to Afro-modernism's historical conscience (*Handy, Father* 138). At the crossroads of the blues therefore meet old and new, tradition and fragmentation, history and progress, myth and commerce, authenticity and simulacrum—and, of course, black and white. Ralph Ellison knew that “Southern whites cannot walk, talk, sing, conceive of laws or justice, think of sex, love the family or freedom without responding to the presence of Negroes” (*Shadow* 163). The music of the Allman Brothers Band, steeped deeply in the history of the music as it
translates Handy's compositional technique into improvised performance, traverses an intersection closely related to the racial crossroads, namely that of cultural property and cultural propriety. A close ‘reading’ of the Allmans’ iconic song “Whipping Post” and its minstrel echoes exemplifies how blues can transcend raciological typology, but it cannot, ultimately, transcend history.

The final chapter journeys to a seemingly very different setting, namely the inner city of the post-Soul generation in Tayari Jones's novel Leaving Atlanta and on Goodie Mob’s debut album, Soul Food. At the core of Jones's narrative that explores the effects of the infamous Atlanta Child Murders on the lives of three fifth-graders and their community is an epistemological crisis that pits word against world, language against experience, sign against referent. The crisis, fueling a profound sense of disorientation, is so great that it revises, and even partially reverses, Douglass's archetypal, protomodernist journey in which literacy figured as “the pathway from slavery to freedom” (38). Thus, both Leaving Atlanta and Jones’s follow-up novel, The Untelling, navigate a landscape that overlaps with the ritual grounds of the newest of the New Souths, the “Dirty South,” a landscape that, in its original mapping by Goodie Mob, also generates a deep confusion. But even in these texts, a historical conscience manifests itself by mapping symbolic ritual grounds that betray their complicity with the legacies of white supremacy and chattel slavery.

Finally, the juxtaposition of literature and hip-hop prompts a prolegomenon on the relationship between Afro-modernism’s historical conscience and postmodernism. Hip-hop is perhaps the most fiercely territorial expression of contemporary black culture, but it also avails itself of postmodernist techniques. In fact, Russell Potter hears in hip-hop “one form of radical postmodernism” (9). bell hooks’s essay “Postmodern Blackness” has emerged as a key text in the field—also because she recognizes hip-hop as perhaps the most vocal (and visible) manifestation of African American postmodernism. hooks applauds its subversive and potentially liberating elements, but professes to be disturbed by “postmodern critiques of the ‘subject’ when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time” (28). The resistance to postmodernism’s assault on notions of essence and authenticity, she writes,

is rooted in the fear that it will cause folks to lose sight of the specific history and experience of African-Americans and the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience. An adequate response to this concern is to critique essentialism while emphasizing the significance of
“the authority of experience.” There is a radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black “essence” and recognition of the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle. (29)

Afro-modernism as modernism with a historical conscience anticipates in many ways hooks’s concept of “the authority of experience” informing postmodern blackness. As Little Brother’s provocative 2005 album The Minstrel Show exemplifies, thoroughly postmodernist yet socially conscious hip-hop is often born from an impulse akin to Afro-modernism’s historical conscience. The group’s hip-hop satire amplifies Christian Moraru’s rereading of postmodernism as “memorious discourse,” which does not dissolve history into poststructuralism’s wall-to-wall textuality, but seeks to recover it in an act of cultural recollection (Memorious 21–27). Thus, Little Brother’s postmodern blackness orchestrates an impulse deeply embedded in Afro-modernism’s historical conscience, namely how to wrest wholeness from the pain and terrors of American history.

The starting point for the following discussions is one that may appear geographically circumscribed, but my critical practice takes to heart George Kent’s counsel: “Any universalism worthy of recognition derives from its depths of exploration of the density, complexity, and variety of a people’s experience—or a person’s. It is achieved by going down deep—not by transcending” (11). Thus, I hope that in “going down deep,” deep below the Mason-Dixon Line, we may also find out something about the world above and beyond it.