Shaping Words to Fit the Soul

Grandt, Jurgen E.

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Introduction

1. Basie's trumpeter Buck Clayton confirms: “People often wondered how we got some of these titles. . . . We were all sitting round the studio after a playback when [producer] John Hammond asked ‘What are we calling that one?’ ‘Well, let me see . . . ,’ Count said and straightaway we all said that should be the title” (qtd. in Sheridan 98). Reissues that include this and later recordings of “Gone With ‘What’ Wind?” variously list only Basie or occasionally also Goodman as co-composer.

2. See Stepto (5); Baker (Blues 3–4); Gates (Figures 236–50; Signifying 78–79, 181); and Morrison (“City” 42). Gates seems to move closer to Mackey's “telling inarticulacy” when he adds that Signifyin(g) “depends on the success of the signifier at invoking an absent meaning ambiguously ‘present’ in a carefully wrought statement” (Signifying 86). However, Gates's critical practice qualifies this statement substantially. Despite his claim of
being a poststructuralist, his readings are actually more akin to structuralism: if a text performs certain empirically verifiable linguistic and rhetorical rituals, then it is a constitutive text of the African American literary tradition (52). This is why, in his critical paradigm, Zora Neale Hurston is “true somehow to the unwritten text of a common blackness,” but, say, Jessie Redmon Fauset isn’t (183). In other words, what constitutes according to Gates the blackness of a black text may ultimately be ‘unwritable,’ but it can indeed be circumscribed by the critical practice of Signifyin(g). Likewise, Stepto’s critical practice does indeed, if only implicitly, point to a reconfiguration of the southern ritual ground as situated in time and mind rather than time and place: “what is national about Afro-America is that it is without dominion” (77). Even so, at the base of his vertical paradigm of narratives of ascent and immersion respectively, one always finds the South.

3. The writers whose work Stepto analyzes in his study are all southerners by birth, except W. E. B. Du Bois—and Ralph Ellison, who nevertheless considered his years in Alabama formative: “In time I was to leave the South, although it has never left me, and the interests which I discovered there became my life” (Shadow 169).

4. In fact, black literature often exhibits an antipastoral strain, ranging from Frederick Douglass’s plantation garden in Maryland, to the terrifying lynching scene James Weldon Johnson’s ex-colored man witnesses in the Georgia countryside, to Toni Morrison’s not-so “Sweet Home” Kentucky plantation (R. Butler 71–72).

5. All translations of Benjamin are my own, as are subsequently those of Erich Auerbach.

6. The fiction of William Faulkner at times approximates something of an Afro-modernism, as Craig Werner has argued (27–62). Still, history in Faulkner is almost always seen as overwhelming, as for Quentin Compson, or as irrevocably receding, as for Sam Fathers—never as nourishing. It is also interesting to note that there seems to be an inverse correlation between modernist experimentation and salient southernisms: The Sound and the Fury, for example, is perhaps the novel that most consequentially exploits the modernist alienation of word from world, but what Faulkner himself called the “immitigable chasm between all life and all print” is noticeably smaller in, say, The Reivers (qtd. in Bleikasten vii).

7. Kenner’s hypothesis in a nutshell:

   Discussing a poetic, we circle toward a definition of a university system as understood by Americans: a system in which other people are learning things you are not, and you look daily at blackboard traces left by professors whose subjects you are never likely to study, nor need you. The break that defined modernist poetics was preceded by a tacit break with the educational theories of the Renaissance, when they claimed to understand just what combination of learnings would constitute an educated man. (“Poets” 120)

   This notion of the interface between higher education and literary modernism recalls the division of labor inherent in capitalist economic systems. And the American system of capitalism—the ur-form of capitalism, so to speak—was of course designed in such a way as to force as many blacks as possible into peonage.

8. This symbolism was obviously important to Du Bois. In the chapter of his autobiography titled “I Go South,” much is taken verbatim from The Souls of Black Folk’s “The Meaning of Progress,” including the description of the classroom where
he taught for two consecutive summers. However, the pale blackboard is conspicuously missing.

9. Werner describes call and response thus: “Grounded in West African conceptions of the interrelationship of individual and community,” the ritual of call and response

begins with the call of a leader who expresses his/her voice through the vehicle of traditional song, story, or image. This call, which provides a communal context for exploration of the “individual” emotion, itself responds to a shared history that suffuses later stages of the process. If the community, as it exists in the ever-changing present, recognizes and shares the experience evoked by the call, it responds with another phrase, again usually traditional, which may either affirm or present a different perspective on the initial call. Whether it affirms or critiques the initial call, however, the response enables the leader to go on exploring the implications of the material. Rich in political implications, this cultural form enables both individual and community to define themselves, to validate their experiences in opposition to dominant social forces.

(xviii)

Chapter 1

1. For more detailed accounts of the reaction to the issuance of the proclamation, see Foner (1–3, 23–27); Franklin (118–27); McFeely (215–16); McPherson (557–59); and Quarles (199–202).

2. To be sure, Life and Times is not a flawless work of art. Critics have variously pointed at a tone that is exceedingly self-congratulatory at times; at Douglass’s rather embarrassing fawning admiration for whites in position of power, especially his former masters; and at a narrative structure that is somewhat rambling and not nearly as taut as that of his other autobiographies. However, one must ask, at least as far as the first two points of criticism are concerned, if these critics do not project their disappointment in Douglass the human being on to Life and Times as a work of art. And regarding the last point of contention, the less tightly structured narrative development of the last autobiography is, at least to some extent, precisely the result of Douglass’s changed aesthetic of autobiography, which no longer grants primacy to the quest for literacy.

3. Critics who subscribe to a deconstructionist dismantling of mimesis sometimes privilege the text to the extent that it virtually eclipses context altogether: perhaps unwittingly echoing Paul de Man’s contention that death was nothing other than “a displaced name for a linguistic predicament,” Ann Kibbey and Michele Stepto, for example, read the famous scene describing Frederick’s fight with Covey as a transfer of “the signifiers of slavery” back to the slaveholder and as a stand “against the fractured referentiality of the antilanguage of the ‘white man’” (de Man, “Autobiography” 930; Kibbey and Stepto 184). Perhaps this is the kind of critical practice that causes Deborah McDowell to complain that often “the explanation of Douglass’s strength depends overmuch on a focus on style emptied of its contents” (“In” 53). The opposite approach to reading Douglass’s autobiographies, privileging context to
the detriment of text, retains a significant investment in the powers of mimesis, so that the text becomes an archeological dig that yields traces of an ‘authentic’ black folk culture. This approach argues that “Douglass’s *Narrative* contains an unwritten text of folklore that the reader, and probably Douglass himself, may not be conscious of” (Rothenberg 48; Raybourn 29–38). Again, this school almost exclusively focuses on the 1845 *Narrative* because it is closest in time to Douglass’s upbringing as a slave and thus implicitly yields the least ‘diluted’ account of an ‘authentic blackness’ in America. (And the first problem of this approach is presented by the intimation that only the culture of the black slave is truly authentic; that there existed a quite different culture among free blacks, for instance in New Orleans, is conveniently forgotten.)

4. Though Maryland was not part of the Confederacy, it was culturally and economically still very much part of the Old South. A slaveholding state, Maryland remained in the Union thanks largely to Lincoln’s quick quelling of secessionist sympathizers, the stationing of troops, and the imposition of martial law (McPherson 284–90). After the war, the border state remained more southern than northern, with its commercial center, Baltimore, exemplifying the position of the whole state, according to historian C. Vann Woodward: “A mixture of the Old and the New Order, Baltimore was at one and the same time the last refuge of the Confederate spirit in exile and a lying-in hospital for the birth of the New Order” (*Origins* 162).

Douglass himself always referred to Maryland as a part of the South.

5. What Douglass describes here is a rhetorical strategy common to African American speech habits that linguists have termed *signification* or *signifying*—other (mostly regional) variations of signifying include sounding, jiving, the dozens, shuck- ing, et cetera—on which, in turn, Gates’s literary theory of *Signifyin(g)* is based (Baugh 25–28; Labov 306–53; Smitherman 118–34).

6. This tension is exemplary of the genre in general. Paul John Eakin notes that “autobiography is nothing if not a referential art,” but that it is also propelled by “the presence of an antimimetic impulse at the heart of what is ostensibly a mimetic aesthetic” (*Touching* 31). Eakin confirms Douglass’s aesthetic again when he observes that “the autobiographical act is revealed as a mode of self-invention that is always practiced first in living and only eventually—sometimes—formalized in writing” (*Fictions* 8–9). Eakin goes on to acknowledge that culture plays a decisive part in this mode of self-invention because “the self is already constructed in interaction with the others of its culture before it begins self-consciously in maturity (and specifically in autobiography—where it exists) to think in terms of models of identity. . . . [C]ulture has exerted a decisive part, through the instrumentality of models of identity, in the process of identity formation, whether literary or psychological” (*Touching* 102). James Olney has made the case for African American autobiographical writing as a paradigm of autobiography in general, for “autobiography renders in a peculiarly direct and faithful way the experience and vision of a people, which is the same experience and the same vision lying behind and informing all the literature of that people” (“Autobiography” 13, 15–16). This has made the genre particularly attractive to African Americans, whom the mainstream had (or has) sought to exclude from writing the history of America. And if “the aestheticization of culture is a product of modernity” as Gregory Jusdanis affirms, then “[I]n a sense the nation’s diary, telling the story of its past, present, and future. Literary culture has been indispensable to ethnic communities wishing to cement their
integrity as nations and to demonstrate (belatedly) their modern credentials” (82, 47).

7. The hard-core deconstructionist might now object that, short of touching Douglass’s scarred feet, the Lacanian signifying chain remains unbroken (Derrida 157–64; Spivak lxii–lxvii). However, how ‘true’ the autobiographer’s textual representations of his cracked feet actually are does not really affect the pertinence of historical conscience: the scars may have healed in the half century that lies between their first and their last representation in text, or Douglass may have exaggerated, perhaps prevaricated even (although there is no evidence to that effect). But, again, the point is that even if Frederick Douglass’s feet weren’t scarred from frostbite—somebody’s feet surely were.

Chapter 2

1. I am adapting here Walter Benjamin’s closing argument in his essay on Charles Baudelaire: “He indicated the price for which the sensation of modernity is to be had: the destruction of aura in the experience of shock” (“Über” 229). Benjamin sees in Les fleurs du mal a protomodernism related to, but much more radical and uncompromising than, the protomodernism of Life and Times of Frederick Douglass.

2. William Rankin has already commented on this subject matter in his essay “Ineffability in the Fiction of Jean Toomer and Katherine Mansfield.” However, his brief analysis is mainly a comparative character study and remains largely on the surface of the texts examined. While there is indeed in Cane a ‘despair before the impossibility of precisely capturing emotions, feelings, and states of mind,’ the question of why these fail to be transmitted Rankin does not address, except for the somewhat perfunctory conclusion that “[t]he major literary weapon for expressing the inexpressible is metaphor” (160, 167).

3. George Hutchinson maintains that the story’s title character is actually biracial: African American and Jewish (Harlem 407). However, he fails to take into account that it is really the first-person narrator—like Toomer, a genteel, educated observer from the North—who superimposes Judaeo-Christian attributes onto Fern. Confronted with the mystery that is Fern, the narrator seeks reference points that might be more familiar (more ‘writable’) to himself and his audience. Hutchinson’s overreading of Fern’s ethnicity is based on Hargis Westerfield’s analysis, which links the imagery surrounding Fern, not the title character herself, to the myth of the Jewish Mother of God (269–71). Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr point out that giving Fern Jewish characteristics is in fact Toomer’s nod to Our America, written by his close friend and mentor Waldo Frank (149–50). Scruggs and VanDemarr correctly note that “[t]he real basis for [the narrator’s] attraction to [Fern] lies in her authenticity, which derives from the context of this place,” the ritual grounds of Georgia’s Black Belt; “part of the pathos of the narrator’s various scenarios that place her elsewhere is that it reflects his own uprootedness, not hers” (150).

4. Henderson’s concept of saturation and Soul-Field clearly influenced C. Eric Lincoln’s discussion of “soul,” which is also very reminiscent of Benjaminian aura:

Whatever else it is, soul is the essence of the black experience—the distillate of that whole body of events and occurrences, primary and
derivative, which went into the shaping of reality as black people live it and understand it. . . . Soul is a kind of élan vital developed through the experience of living and performing constantly on the margins of human society, under conditions of physical and psychological stress beyond the boundaries of ordinary human endurance. It is a quality and an art developed in the matrix of the African-American experience. (Race 243–44)

Aura differs from soul, saturation, and Soul-Field in that Benjamin was very much aware of the tautology Benston locates at the core of Henderson’s critical enterprise and that, by extension, also besets Lincoln’s concept of soul. Where Henderson maintains that saturation is linked to poetic structure and therefore at least in part empirically verifiable, Benjamin insists that aura defies reproducibility, linguistic or otherwise (with the tentative exception of very early photography, which nevertheless already augurs the aura’s impending and irreversible destruction). It must be mentioned here that Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility,” more so than “A Short History of Photography” that introduces the term, is as much political polemic as it is cultural criticism. In “The Work of Art,” Benjamin actually advocates modern art’s (Marxist) emancipation from notions of the auratic and from the aura’s “parasitic existence in ritual,” instead grounding itself in a different practice, namely politics (“Kunstwerk” 144–45). While his famous term “aura” is often interchangeable with “authenticity” (as in this passage from “The Work of Art”) or “tradition,” Benjamin never spelled out a definitive concept of the auratic (Rochlitz 138). Benjamin could tout enthusiastically the dawning of a new epoch of radical art here, while elsewhere—as for example in the essay “The Narrator: Observations on the Work of Nikolai Lesskov,” written only a few months after completing the first draft of “The Work of Art”—he harked back with wistful nostalgia to an earlier time when tradition, culture, history, and indeed human experience, were not yet under relentless assault from the fragmenting forces of modernity (Lindner 202–5; Rochlitz 9, 218–19). Concludes John McCole, “Benjamin’s work celebrates and mourns, by turns, the liquidation of tradition” (8).

5. Robert Jones argues that the narrator does reach an epiphany about Avey even before their meeting in the park, concluding that the modern world “induces her spiritual sterility” (Jean 42). However, Jones fails to recognize that the narrator of “Avey” is an unreliable one as he constantly tries to impose his ‘reading’ of, as he says, “what I meant to her” on his companion (Toomer, Cane 46; emphasis added). Similarly, when he receives a short letter from her, he “decided” that her handwriting was “slovenly” (46). Thus, if he does reach an epiphany regarding Avey at all, it is an insight deeply shaped by the conception of his own self in relation to her.

6. Similarly, Paul, who “can’t talk love” to Bona, tries to explain the inexplicable to the black doorman of the club that they have just left together (76). His long explanation, precisely because it tries to explicate that which cannot be explained, is suffused with metaphors, but after he shakes hands with the doorman, he finds that Bona has disappeared. In “Theater,” the anticlimax of John’s daydream about the sensuous dance of Dorris occurs when “John reaches for a manuscript of his, and reads” (55). Thus Dorris, whose dance on stage has spurred John’s daydream, finds her dance “a dead thing in the shadow which is his dream” (56). In all of these instances, language precludes men from tapping the spiritual essence of women. Laura Doyle observes astutely that Toomer’s text
carries on a long tradition wherein movement into the educated class means distance from and containment of other bodies by way of texts. . . . Cane exposes this body-displacing tradition of texts while also retaining the assumption that women live the essential embodiment alienated by this tradition. In that sense Cane joins the body-displacing tradition by keeping its own distance, as male text, from female embodiment. . . . By attributing embodiment to women and authorship to men, Cane thus reinscribes the function of the embodied woman as material instrument of men’s culture. It affirms the racial-patriarchal aesthetic myth, which we saw operating in Romanticism, of female content and male form, with form as the governing metaphysical mechanism. Cane eschews metaphysical hierarchies without, however, withdrawing from the gendered oppositions that inflect those hierarchies. (94)

7. Significantly, the only instance in which Lewis and Kabnis connect is a moment devoid of speech:

His [Lewis's] eyes turn to Kabnis. In the instant of their shifting, a vision of the life they are to meet. Kabnis, a promise of a soil-soaked beauty; uprooted, thinning out. Suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him. Arm’s length removed from him whose will to help . . . There is a swift intuitive interchange of consciousness. Kabnis has a sudden need to rush into the arms of this man. His eyes call, “Brother.” (98)

As between the narrator and title character in “Fern,” a momentary spiritual connection is established here not through language, but through the eyes. However, Kabnis gives in to “a savage, cynical twist about within him” that “mocks his impulse and strengthens him to repulse Lewis.” Kabnis’s “thinning out,” parallel to the thinning out of the beauty and power Toomer himself once believed he had managed to arrest in Cane, continues unhindered (98).

8. In addition to the modernist gesture of combining different literary forms, this, then, is also the reason why “Kabnis” was written as a closet play. “The value of a performative . . . employment of ‘race,’” writes J. Martin Favor, “is precisely the ability of the performer to be at once ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ racial discourse, both ‘really’ black and not ‘black’ at all” (151). We never see the church choir perform “My Lord, What a Mourning” because in Cane’s symbolic territory they are “really black,” while the lead character in “Kabnis” is, of all of Toomer’s characters in Sempter, the one most painfully confronted with his alienation, being neither “really black” nor “not ‘black’ at all.”

Chapter 3

1. The graphophone was developed by Charles Sumner Tainter along with Alexander Graham Bell and his cousin Chichester Bell in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as an improvement on and alternative to Edison’s phonograph. The graphophone was initially conceived as a dictation device, its distinguishing feature a wax-covered cylinder that was more accurate and sensitive than the tin foil
favored by Edison. However, the Columbia Phonograph Company, founded in 1889, was the only company successful in marketing the graphophone, largely because it sold cylinders of music—the John Philip Sousa marches were a particular boon for the corporation. Also in part because of company mergers and various lawsuits and countersuits concerning copyright infringements, the graphophone was already outdated technology by the turn of the century. Though Tainter’s innovations laid the foundation for the success of Columbia and had a long-lasting impact on the further evolution of recording technology, the graphophone’s unwieldy six-inch wax cylinder could not compete with Edison’s and never succeeded in the marketplace. By the 1910s the terms graphophone and phonograph were used interchangeably, also because releases in Edison’s Diamond Disc Series were distributed as both increasingly popular discs and, until 1929, cylinders, if only in sharply declining numbers (Millard 64–69; Morton, Sound 16–42, Off 17, 76–79). Given the “sharp, scratching noise” Sarah hears as the salesman cranks up the device, this is a phonograph playing a disc, not an Amberal cylinder—as is, incidentally, the “graphophone” Cash Bundren aims to purchase from V. K. Suratt in William Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying (Wright, “Long” 132; Faulkner, As 258, 261; Frow 47).

2. The manuscript of “Long Black Song” contained a fifth section that was dropped in the final version published in Uncle Tom’s Children. In this final section, Tom arrives on the scene with Sarah’s brothers, all three of them recently discharged from the military and still wearing their uniforms. The veterans die fighting at Silas’s burning house, with Sarah, as in the published version, about to flee across the hills (Sollors 118).

3. Significantly, Silas threatens Sarah with the whip first. The black-on-black violence exerted by the master’s preferred tool of regulatory violence prefigures here Zora Neale Hurston’s contention of the black woman as “de mule uh de world” (Their 14). Silas’s character also recalls the whip-wielding Sykes in Hurston’s short story “Sweat” (949). Later, when Sarah sees the two white men wrestling with Silas “on the ground, rolling in dust, grappling for the whip” the latter had intended to use on his wife, the earth-mother figure, the whip again symbolizes the power to define and police the South (149). Werner Sollors has pointed out the similarities of “Long Black Song” to another of Hurston’s stories: “The Gilded Six-Bits” also dramatizes the encounter of the ‘natural’ time of black folk with the clocked time of capitalist modernity leading to the protagonist’s adultery (123–28).

4. Echoing the final scene between Fern and the narrator, an embrace in which it is not clear what happens, so is Wright’s wording of this disturbing passage ambiguous, and many critics read it as a rape scene (J. A. Joyce 380; M. Walker 117–18, 184–85). Furthermore, Sarah is linked to the same objective correlative as Fern—again with obvious sexual overtones—namely a nail: as Sarah recedes from the advances of the white salesman into the house, “[h]er numbed fingers grabbed at a rusty nail in the post at the porch” (137). In “Fern,” the narrator says of the object of his desire, “If you walked up the Dixie Pike most any time of day, you’d be most like to see her resting listless-like on the railing of her porch, back propped against a post, head tilted a little forward because there was a nail in the porch just where her head came which for some reason or other she never took the trouble to pull out” (17).

5. Sarah’s sexual arousal occasioned by the sounds of “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” is very reminiscent of an episode in Wright’s own childhood. At the age
of twelve, young Richard became infatuated with an elder’s wife in his grandmother’s church. As he would later write in *Black Boy*,

I felt no qualms about my first lust for the flesh being born on holy ground; the contrast between budding carnal desires and the aching loneliness of the hymns never evoked any sense of guilt in me. It was possible that the sweetly sonorous hymns stimulated me sexually, and it might have been that my fleshy fantasies, in turn, having as their foundation my already inflated sensibility, made me love the masochistic prayers. (131–32)

Around that same time, Richard promised his grandmother he would make a serious effort at praying. Locking himself in his room for prayer, an unexpected by-product of this ritual were his first literary efforts:

My attempts at praying became a nuisance, spoiling my days; and I regretted the promise I had given Granny. But I stumbled on a way to pass the time in my room, a way that made the hours fly with the speed of the wind. I took the Bible, pencil, paper, and a rhyming dictionary and tried to write verses for hymns. I justified this by telling myself that, if I wrote a really good hymn, Granny might forgive me. But I failed even in that; the Holy Ghost was simply nowhere near me. . . . (140)

6. As far as I have been able to determine, the 1915 version of “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder” was the first to be available on disc. The hymn would later be covered by artists as diverse as Johnny Cash and Hampton Hawes, the Five Blind Boys of Alabama and Johnny Paycheck. That 1919 is the year in which the story is set is made clear by Silas’s news that Tom had returned from the war. The demobilization and repatriation through the early part of 1919 of black troops from the European theater sounded the prelude to the devastating race riots of the infamous “Red Summer” of 1919 (D. Lewis 3–24).

7. Though the Edison Mixed Quartet’s vocal arrangement has the lead baritone and tenor trade lines on the chorus section with the contralto and soprano, this does not constitute call and response. Call and response, as a musical strategy, entails the interaction between leader and collective (or congregation) (Fulton, “Singing”).

8. Interestingly enough, when HBO decided to turn the Richard Wright story into a half-hour made-for-TV short for its “America’s Dream” series, starring Danny Glover as Silas and Tina Lifford as his wife, the song that leads to catastrophe is “Body and Soul” (O’Connor). I thank Warren J. Carson for bringing this movie to my attention.

9. In “Long Black Song,” Wright also appears to apply his own version of ironic typology. The biblical names of the three black characters ironically refracture scripture: in Genesis, Sarah is the wife of Abraham, remaining childless until the age of 90. Silas accompanies Paul on his journeys and is also credited with being the bearer of the First Epistle of Peter. And the Book of Ruth tells a story of fidelity, loyalty, and, eventually, idyllic bliss—not at all how “Long Black Song” presents baby Ruth’s mother (DeCosta-Willis 546–48; McCarthy 735–37; Sollors 142).

10. This, of course, is a recurring contention in the slave narratives, that the peculiar institution is as injurious to the master as it is to the human chattel.

11. The role of religious music for Wright remained the same outside of the southern ritual grounds, too. In “The Man Who Lived Underground,” originally begun in
1941, the protagonist witnesses a church service immediately after he has fled from the police into New York City’s sewer system (Rowley 254–55, 262–63). Hearing the black congregation sing “Jesus, take me to your home above / And fold me in the bosom of thy love” in their subbasement church makes him feel “that he was gazing upon something abysmally obscene, yet he could not bring himself to leave” (Eight 24). Later, right before he is apprehended by police, he hears the same churchgoers sing, “The Lamb, the Lamb, the Lamb / Tell me again your story / The Lamb, the Lamb, the Lamb / Flood my soul with your glory” (67). Written almost two decades later, the radio play “Man, God Ain’t Like That,” also published in Eight Men, is set in Africa and Paris (Rowley 490–91). Babu inspires his ‘master,’ the American painter John Franklin, by singing the hymns he has learned from Methodist missionaries, among them

At the cross, at the cross,
Where I first saw the light,
And the burden of my heart rolled away,
It was there by faith I received my sight,
And now I am happy all the day . . . (Eight 161)

In Paris, Babu comes to believe that Franklin is God and brutally murders him when the painter insists on sending him back to Africa. Eluding trial despite a confession to French police, Babu returns to his native land, where he becomes the leader of a religious cult preaching the imminent return of Jesus in the shape of John Franklin.

12. These writings were often the result of economic necessity, not artistic interest. Wright’s attitude toward the blues seems as ambivalent as his assessment of black (southern) folk culture in general. In Black Boy, his persona is disturbed by “how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair” (43). In direct opposition to the inner life of Sarah in “Long Black Song,” the jeremiad continues:

(Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with man. I asked myself if these human qualities were not fostered, won, struggled, and suffered for, preserved in ritual form from one generation to another.) (43)

Certainly, the blues is just such a “ritual form,” but Wright recognized this only in his foreword to Oliver’s book and, fleetingly, in Twelve Million Black Voices. Deploiring the “cultural barrenness” of black life served the persona of the alienated, questing hero he sought to project in his autobiography (Sollors 146–47). Elsewhere, his assessment of black vernacular culture could be much more differentiated. The following passage from Twelve Million Black Voices, a book much less quoted than his persona’s invective in Black Boy, is particularly insightful also because it concerns the very medium of Richard Wright’s craft:
We [the African slaves] stole words from the grudging lips of the Lords of the Land, who did not want us to know too many of them or their meaning. And we charged this meager horde of stolen sounds with all the emotions and longings we had; we proceeded to build our language in inflections of voice, through tonal variety, by hurried speech, in honeyed drawls, by rolling our eyes, by flourishing our hands, by assigning to common, simple words new meanings, meanings which enabled us to speak of revolt in the actual presence of the Lords of the Land without their being aware! Our secret language extended our understanding of what slavery meant and gave us the freedom to speak to our brothers in captivity; we polished our new words, caressed them, gave them new shape and color, a new order and tempo, until, though they were the words of the Lords of the Land, they became our words, our language. (40)

Chapter 4

1. For more on Johnson and the legend of the crossroads, see Marcus (21–40); Palmer (111–17, 124–28); Pearson and McCulloch (18–64, 87–102); Schroeder (27–52, 99–100); and Stolle (40+).

2. Personal conversation with Frank L. “Rat” Ratliff (30 May 2005) and Roger Stolle (31 May 2005).

3. Dockery Farms is to the blues what New Orleans is to jazz. Charley Patton, who lived and worked there in the early 1920s, is considered to be the single most important figure in shaping what is now called the Delta blues. Patton partnered often with Willie Brown, and it was Brown who mentored Robert Johnson and is credited for his role in the latter’s “Cross Road Blues” (Evans 41–49).

4. The most likely burial site, unmarked until recently, is in the cemetery at Little Zion M. B. Church just outside of nearby Greenwood. A second gravestone is in Morgan City’s Mount Zion M. B. Church, which is the ‘official’ burial site of Johnson, at least according to his death certificate. The third is in Quito, on the grounds of the Payne Chapel M. B. Church, about halfway between Morgan City and Itta Bena on Highway 7, a hamlet so tiny one does need recourse to supernatural powers to find it, because the official highway map of Mississippi does not even list it.
Johnson did indeed find his untimely end in Quito, at the Three Forks Store, which reportedly was in the yellow one-story building, long since abandoned, after the highway bridge and flanking the dirt road that leads to the Payne Chapel. A fourth possible location of Johnson's crossroads is rumored to be outside of Robinsonville, just southwest of Memphis, but no one is able to say for certain where this one is. Last, and more mundane perhaps, given the perennial push-and-pull between commercial crossover appeal and artistic integrity that has been marking the history of black music in the New World, the most concrete crossroads may be the New York City studio whence Black Entertainment Television, BET, airs its hugely successful *106 & Park* top-ten video countdown every weekday.

5. It is commonly assumed that Arna Bontemps, who “edited” the memoir, was responsible for the more poetic touches in the text (Nichols 12; K. Jones 102). However, my research indicates the opposite: the two manuscripts housed in the archives of the W. C. Handy Birthplace, Museum, and Library in Florence, Alabama, reveal that the famous opening paragraph was Handy’s own, with only slight amendments by Bontemps. In a telling letter, Handy complains that he was less than happy with his editor:

> I thank you for the correction, Taylor [Texas, a stop on one of Handy’s concert tours] which I remembered, but being blind, my editor took so many liberties with my manuscript, that I wouldn’t let him see the last seven chapters, because I was dealing then, with something he knew nothing about. In fact, if you will read the opening paragraph, “Where the Tennessee River,” and so forth, he got that out and said, “I came into the world singing the blues.” He wanted the book to be more about the blues, and cut out much of my background, which I put in, and that’s maybe how Tyler crept in. (Letter to Hank Patterson)

Though Handy’s memory is rather selective here—the published version does begin with the idyllic image of Florence overlooking the Tennessee River, although an earlier manuscript displays Bontemps’s radical corrections, some handwritten, in that very opening paragraph—it still reveals the diverging priorities of memoirist and editor (Handy, *Father of the Blues as Edited by Arna Bontemps* 1; K. Jones 96). “Maybe my editorship of Handy’s book will gain consideration for me in the field of folk music,” Bontemps had hoped initially (“Letter” 7 Feb. 1941 74). However, he confessed to his friend Langston Hughes that “[t]he Handy book is a headache. He jumps on my neck when I jazz it up; Trounstine [Handy’s lawyer] screams when I fail to. I’m afraid it’ll come to no good end” (“Letter” 14 Nov. 1939 42). “The Handy book should go to press soon,” he later wrote, “vastly diluted since I last saw it, no doubt. I take no credit or blame for its final shape” (“Letter” 26 Jan. 1940 54). And indeed, when *Father of the Blues* did come out, Handy had not acknowledged Bontemps at all, causing the latter to sniff in turn that “Handy mashed it up a lot in the interest of dignity, etc.” (“Letter” 2 July 1941 84).

The first typescript is entitled *Fight It Out* and looks to be entirely Handy’s own, bearing only Handy’s name on the inside title page (Handy, *Father* xiii). In this manuscript, the passage about the plowman’s song and Handy’s compositional modus operandi reads as follows—I have used proofreader’s marks to indicate the handwritten corrections and changes:

> The primitive tone or correlated note of “St. Louis St. Blues” was
born in my brain when a boy. In the valley of the Tennessee River was known as McFarland’s bottoms, which our school overlooked. In the Spring, when doors and windows were thrown open, one day the song of a Negro plowman half a mile away fell on my ears. This is what he sang:

“Aye-oh-you, Aye-oh-O
I wouldn’t live in Cairo-O!”

All thru the years this snatch of song had been ringing in my ears. Many times I wondered what was in the singer’s mind. What was wrong with Cairo? Was Cairo too far South in Illinois to be “up North”; or too far North to be considered “down South”?

In any event, such bits of music or snatches of song generated the motif for my Blues and with an imagination stimulated by such lines as, “I wouldn’t live in Cairo,” I wrote my lyrics.

At that time if I had published a composition called “The Cairo Blues,” and this simple four-bar theme had been developed into a four-page musical classic, every grown-up now, who heard that four-bar wail then, would claim that Handy didn’t write this number and you would hear them say, “I heard it when I was knee-high to a grasshopper.” Politely put this would be a mis-statement of fact; bluntly written, it would be a lie mixed with small truth. That two-line snatch couldn’t form a four page composition any more than the letters “i-n,” could spell the word information. (XII.1)

In the other manuscript, titled Father of the Blues as Edited by Arna Bontemps—an unnumbered page inside the manuscript, between pages 25 and 26, identifies this version as “Re-written and arranged by Arna Bontemps”—the same passage appears as follows:

When I was a boy, I once stood in an open doorway listening to a plowman’s voice floating across the spring-green fields. Presently I made out words and a snatch of melody.

Aye-oh-you, aye-oh-O,
I wouldn’t live in Cairo-O!

Through many years that fragment lingered in my mind. Often I tried to imagine what could have been in the singer’s mind. What was wrong with old Cairo? Was it too far South to be “up North,” or too far North to be “down South”? In any case, there was the music, brief, plaintive and inconclusive.

Now suppose I had taken this slight, four-bar theme and built upon it a composition of four pages in length and called the piece The Cairo Blues. What would my fine-feathered friends say? Exactly what some of them have said about other blues compositions of mine. “Aw, I heard that song when I was knee-high to a grasshopper.” And while they would be telling truth, in a remote sense, they would be making a very childish observation. For that two-line snatch could no more form a full-length composition than the letters in could spell information. (183)
The letters and other materials in the Handy archive further confirm Handy’s compositional method and general modernist sensibility as a composer and arranger. Unfortunately, a thorough and comprehensive assessment of the holdings of Florence’s Handy Museum is beyond the scope of my present study, but this is important work that I feel ought to be undertaken most urgently.

6. It appears that Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” was mined for a most famous “snatch” itself: The bridge of Handy’s composition betrays a striking resemblance to George Gershwin’s “Summertime.”

7. In Father of the Blues as Edited by Arna Bontemps, the passage reads:

   The primitive Southern Negro exaggerated the minor third and seventh tones of the scale. I had noticed this tendency. With them it was universal. Whether in the cotton fields of the delta or on the levee up St. Louis way, it was always the same. Till then, however, I had never heard it used by a more sophisticated Negro or by any white man. I introduced these two notes into my song that night and I think I can say they proved effective. Widely employed now, they are known as “blue notes.” Another first was chalked up when I struck upon the idea of using the seventh in the opening measure of the verse instead of by resolution. This was a distinct departure in composition, but it touched the spot like two fingers of rye. (116)

   There is no equivalent passage in Fight It Out, only the pithy explanation, “See the blue notes?—The Blues then were a composite of the snatches, phrases, and idioms illustrated herein” (XII.5).

8. Some blues scholars, however, have also asserted that the blue note is in some ways akin to a countermodernist affirmation of the individual self: for Rod Gruver, for instance, “organic man, man the irrepressible, wins a major victory in the blue note itself; for the blue note is a symbol of man’s refusal to give up his unpredictable orneryness, his inalienable right to be himself and nobody else’s” (223). This affirmation of the self, though, is won through the fragmentation of the western tonal scale and is therefore yet another manifestation of Afro-modernism’s intrinsic difference from high modernism. It is, once again, Ellison who distills the ramifications of the more strictly musicological aspects: “The blues is an art of ambiguity; an assertion of the irrepressibly human over all circumstance, whether created by others or by one’s own human failings” (Shadow 277).

9. Most obviously, the Faust legend comes to mind. To pick just one example of the legend’s translation from the Old World to the New, the Igor Stravinsky–Charles Ferdinand Ramuz collaboration of 1918, L’histoire du soldat, finds its irreverent southern rock counterpart in the Charlie Daniels Band’s “The Devil Went Down to Georgia.”

10. For more on Esu’s role at the crossroads, see A. Davis (472); Floyd (24–26, 72–76); Gates (Figures 48–49; Signifying 5–42); and Rudinow (134).

11. The lyrics are from the second take of “Cross Road Blues.”

12. Though the Allman Brothers Band is considered to be the “first” southern rock band, period, most if not all of the genre’s criteria actually fit Elvis Presley’s Sun recordings as well as Ike Turner’s “Rocket 88,” the song that birthed rock ‘n’ roll (Palmer, Deep 222, Rock 201). Given my aim of remapping southern (figurative)
territory as well as the Allman Brothers Band’s own rejection of the label, it is more accurate to place the band in a stylistic continuum.

13. The events surrounding the deaths of Allman, Oakley, Lydon, and Williams are recounted in detail in Scott Freeman’s band biography, Midnight Riders, and Randy Poe’s biography of Duane Allman, as well as in the memoirs of Joseph Campbell, Chuck Leavell, and Willie Perkins.

14. The only Robert Johnson song the band ever recorded in the studio is 1991’s “Come On in My Kitchen.” Though recorded ‘unplugged,’ the retro-arrangement does not attempt to recreate the original. What does begin as a slow, twangy, archetypal blues eventually becomes an upbeat, jaunty little piece, complete with gospel choir and New Orleans–style second-line rhythms. The only other reference in the ABB catalogue to the myth of Robert Johnson’s crossroads—other than a very early version of “Cross Road Blues” by the Allman Joys—occurs in Eat a Peach’s “Melissa,” among the first songs the band recorded after Duane’s fatal accident (though it had been written some years earlier). “Melissa” concerns the compulsive wanderings of a “gypsy” who “flies from coast to coast”:

Crossroads,
Will you ever let him go? Lord, Lord—
Will you hide the dead man’s ghost,
Or will he lie beneath the clay,
Or will his spirit roll away?

The ABB’s eschewing of the Johnson song catalogue prefigures the more recent revisionism of some white blues artists. For example, genre-bending slide guitar virtuoso Hank Shizzoe, a veritable encyclopedia of American blues, refuses to play “Cross Road Blues” because of his aversion to the commodification and distortion of the myth of the crossroads (personal communication, 17 Nov. 2005).

15. Not quite coincidentally, it was Duane Allman who breathed new life into the famous Layla sessions. British guitarero Eric Clapton and the studio musicians he had hired (recording under the pseudonym “Derek and the Dominos”) had gotten bogged down in creative aimlessness, so Clapton decided to bring in Allman to restore focus to the proceedings. Though not credited anywhere on the resulting album other than as guitarist, Allman contributed significantly, most notably the famous seven-note introductory riff on “Layla” (Brent 74–75; Freeman, Midnight 78–84).

16. They also resist the ‘jam band’ label that became so fashionably hip in the 1990s. It’s left once again to Gregg Allman to set the record straight: “We jam, but we’re not a jam band . . . [I]mprovising happens spontaneously. Jamming is not something you set out to do” (qtd. in Perlah). And Allman is correct indeed in that it was the record company MCA that created the brand label “southern rock” in 1974 specifically for that other stalwart combo of the genre, Lynyrd Skynyrd. Though nowhere near as musically adventurous as the ABB, Skynyrd, too, resisted cooption to a certain degree, as evidenced in their tongue-in-cheek hit song “Workin’ for MCA.” And lead singer Ronnie Van Zant agreed with his colleague: “Southern Rock’s a dead label, a hype thing for the magazines to blow out of proportion” (qtd. in O’Brien and McKaie 4). At the same time, they also displayed much less awareness of the historical exigencies of their own southern ritual grounds when, albeit
at the behest of MCA, they toured in support of their 1974 Second Helping album using the Stars and Bars as stage backdrop. Their smash hit “Sweet Home Alabama,” to this day the unofficial anthem of the South, evinces this self-contradiction that stays unresolved, in turn condemning and praising the state's segregationist governor George C. Wallace. The Confederate battle flag has remained a staple of Lynyrd Skynyrd shows ever since (O'Brien and McKaie 16–17; Odom and Dorman 98–110). The ABB’s influence on the band had already been explicit on their debut album, where the anthem “Free Bird” was a tribute to the recently departed Duane Allman.

17. McTell is a fascinating figure in his own right. He was born in Thomson, Georgia, probably in 1901, and his wanderings took him all over the South, North, and the Midwest. Containing copious ballads and spirituals as well as blues, McTell’s discography is one typical of the traveling musician who had to cater to the diverse tastes of diverse audiences and is much more varied than Robert Johnson’s. This is perhaps the reason why John Lomax, who ‘re-discovered’ McTell playing in the driveway of an Atlanta rib shack, never issued the 1940 recordings he did with the singer. Like much of his life, McTell’s death is shrouded in legend, too: succumbing to an apparent brain hemorrhage in 1959, he was reportedly seen, Elvis-like, at Curley Weaver’s 1962 funeral, or playing at an Atlanta storefront church in 1972 (Bastin 213–14; D. Kent, liner notes).

18. The band recorded the Willie Dixon-penned classic, Oakley’s only lead vocal, for their Idlewild South album. Characteristically, as they would later do with “Statesboro Blues,” they were not satisfied with simply covering the song: the original riff they grafted onto “Statesboro Blues,” but reversed it for “Hoochie Coochie Man.” In the original hit version for Muddy Waters—as well as in “Statesboro”—the riff is ascending; in the Allmans’ version of the Dixon song, it is descending. Likewise, the Taj Mahal version of “Statesboro Blues” that initially captured Duane is significantly different from the rearrangement that found its way to the top of the ABB bandbook: for one, Mahal’s rendition lacks the riff from “Hoochie-Coochie Man” and deploys a much more pronounced shuffle beat, mostly a result of Mahal’s use of only one drummer.

19. In Fight It Out, the passage appears as follows:

One day, at Tutwiler, while waiting for a train that had been delayed nine hours, I enjoyed a sleep to be awakened by a guitar played by a colored man, and in a manner new to me. He was using a knife pressed on the strings in a way since made popular by Hawaiian musicians, who make use of a steel bar. The chords he struck would waken any one. Question: how many years—or centuries—had a knife antedated the steel bar? Knife or steel bar, in any event, produced unforgetable [sic] tones. The man was singing:

“Goin’ Where the Southern Cross the Dog.”

He would repeat the line three times, accompanying it on his guitar with the weirdest [sic] melody I have ever heard. The tone stayed in my mind.

(VI.3)

Father of the Blues as Edited by Arna Bontemps describes the event thus:
Then one night at Tutwiler as I nodded in the railroad station while wait-
ing for a train that had been delayed nine hours, life suddenly took me by
the shoulder and awakened me with a start.

A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside
me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes.
His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he
pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner later popularized
by Hawaiian musicians who used steel bars. The effect was unforgetable
[sic]. His song, too, struck me instantly.

Goin’ where the Southern cross the Dog.

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the
guitar with the weirdest melody I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my
mind. (73–74)

20. Personal communication with Kirk West, 5 April 2006.
21. The whipping post was not a regional feature by any means. This particular
kind of corporal punishment had been brought to the New World early on, and virt-
ually every town in New England had a whipping post. However, in the South the
whip was the master’s preferred tool for enforcing his absolute power over his human
chattel, and so the whipping post became a symbol of the most inhuman cruelty
and injustice of the peculiar institution, as countless slave narratives attest. That
poor whites sometimes ended up tied to the whipping post was considered especially
effective punishment and deterrence in a region where flogging was associated with
the submission of unruly subhumans, the lowest of the low. The whipping post would
remain in use long past emancipation; in fact, southern states did not abolish it until
a few years after the end of Reconstruction (Franklin and Schweninger 42; Stampp
174; Woodward, Origins 94–96).
22. As a genre, southern rock at once resuscitated and revamped traditional
modes of southern masculinity (J. Butler 73–74; M. Butler 43–44; Ownby 371–74).
What Paul Wells calls the chivalric pattern of the plantation model “naturalises
hierarchies and the idea of an ‘extended family’ as a benevolent, self-evidently moral
construct. This enables southern rock bands to represent the South without reference
to the key issue of ‘race’” (121). While the ABB was, and is, certainly complicit in
maintaining these southern gender hierarchies, the Allmans’ racially integrated,
extended ‘brotherhood’ renders visible (and audible) the African American pres-
ence, something that sets the band apart from almost all the other acts in the genre.
See also Abernathy (14); Ostendorf (78–79).
23. On the original studio recording on the ABB’s self-titled debut album, Gregg
Allman can be heard shouting off mic during the guitar-screams. And on the Fill-
more tapes, Duane’s announcement, “We got a little number from the first album
we’re going to do for you; Berry [Oakley] starts her off,” is followed a yell of recog-
nition from the back of the hall, “Whipping Post!” which is picked up with joyful
anticipation by someone else closer to the stage, “‘Whipping Post,’ yeah!”
24. This kind of rhetorical minstrelsy has also seeped into the lyrics of Gov’t
Mule, an offshoot of the ABB and mainstay on the jam band circuit since the mid-
1990s. Next to innovative covers—ABB-like reinventions really—of Son House or
Memphis Slim and leader Warren Haynes’s tip of the hat to fellow North Carolinian
John Coltrane, the group’s self-titled debut album also contains their theme song, “Mule.” Ostensibly about social class, the chorus of “Mule” slips into discursive minstrelsy and asks

Where’s my mule,
Where’s my forty acres?
Where’s my dream,
Mister Emancipator?

A more recent example of a full-length album of sonic minstrelsy is the 2002 Me and Mr. Johnson by Eric Clapton, that most prolific purveyor of the crossroads myth (Lipsitz 121).

25. And herein lies also a crucial difference: black minstrel shows such as Mahara’s committed even more “significant crimes” simply by taking their show on the road. In an era when rituals of racial segregation pervaded every parcel of public space, the mere mobility alone of black minstrel troupes, not just crisscrossing the South, but sometimes venturing north of the Mason-Dixon line, even overseas, enacted recurrent transgressions of boundaries designed to keep Americans of African descent in their place (Gu sso 88).

26. Brother Wynton explains in the liner notes to Black Codes:

Black codes mean a lot of things. Anything that reduces potential, that pushes your taste down to an obvious, animal level, anything that makes you think less significance is more enjoyable. Anything that keeps you on the surface. The way they depict women in rock videos—black codes. People gobbling up junk food when they can afford something better—black codes. The argument that illiteracy is valid in a technological society—black codes. People who equate ignorance with soulfulness—definitely black codes. The overall quality of every true artist’s work is a rebellion against black codes. (qtd. in Crouch 12–13)

That the ever-combative Stanley Crouch, Wynton’s ideological amanuensis, (mis)quotes Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s “Volunteered Slavery” in his liner notes speaks to yet another irony of the southern ritual ground, considering that it’s this very tune that opens Derek Trucks’s 2006 Songlines album (Crouch 7).

27. Coltrane’s most famous recording in waltz time is his classic 1960 rendition of “My Favorite Things,” and the tenorist returned again and again to this time signature. It was originally Jaimoe who spurred the ABB’s interest in modern jazz: “Duane and Berry was very much into rhythm and blues, and I kind of turned them on to a lot of jazz things . . . John Coltrane and Miles Davis were Duane’s favorite jazz people. ‘My Favorite Things,’ by Coltrane, he loved. And that Miles Davis thing, Kind of Blue. Duane’s favorite song was ‘All Blues’” (qtd. in Freeman, Midnight 63). Both “My Favorite Things” and “All Blues” are in waltz time, and both feature Coltrane. “Dreams,” another early ABB classic, is in fact nothing else than a slightly spruced up “All Blues” with lyrics attached, as Oteil Burbridge likes to point out when he quotes the famous Paul Chambers bass line. Confirmed Duane Allman, “You know, that kind of playing [on At Fillmore East] comes from Miles and Coltrane, and particularly Kind of Blue. I’ve listened to that album so many times that for the past couple of years, I haven’t hardly listened to anything else” (qtd. in Poe 182).
28. Pioneered by trumpeter Miles Davis, modal jazz requires the improviser to play over a mode or scale rather than over a chord progression. The borderline between chordal and modal improvisation is often somewhat blurry, but generally a modal jazz tune employs only one or two scales, whereas a chordal tune is harmonically much more complex; Davis's *Kind of Blue* and John Coltrane's 1960 “My Favorite Things” are the most influential examples of modal jazz. The shift from bebop’s lightning-quick chord changes to merely one or two scales doesn’t necessarily make the improviser’s task any simpler, for modal jazz requires comparatively much greater melodic inventiveness. At the same time, neither Duane Allman’s nor Dickey Betts’s technical dexterity or their harmonic awareness match that of, say, a Barney Kessel, and so modal jazz offers a more accessible path than bebop (or standards for that matter) for blues-based instrumentalists seeking to exert their improvisational prowess. Almost all of the ABB’s extended improvisations occur on tunes whose solo sections are either two-chord vamps (“High Falls”) or entirely modal (Betts’s homage to Charlie Parker, “Kind of Bird”—even though Bird, of course, never played modal jazz), but the heads are often harmonically and rhythmically advanced, certainly for rock.

29. The godfather of gypsy jazz recorded the tune six times under slightly different titles (Dregni 251; Vernon 166, 208, 214–15, 223, 229, 230–31). That Betts has Reinhardt in mind is evidenced by the fact that he quotes the eighth-note figure from the lullaby’s bridge, which is also the part that Reinhardt borrowed note for note. That is also the same section that occurs in Grieg’s op. 17, “Twenty-five Norwegian Dances and Folk Songs”—and in the third movement of Gustav Mahler’s Symphony no. 1 (Benistad 76–82; Fischer 1–4, 181–90).

30. In this respect, “Mountain Jam” is fairly unusual in that most vehicles for extended improvisation in the ABB handbook utilize a minor scale.

31. The oft-repeated comparisons between Gregg Allman and Jimmy Smith are desperately overhyped; in fact, Allman cites Booker T. Jones of Booker T. and the MGs as his biggest influence (Lynskey 17). Though he knows the music of Smith, King of the B3, very well, Allman is smart enough a musician to realize that he has neither Smith’s fleet fingers nor Smith’s harmonic sophistication; consequently, his solos are rare and always very short. His main task is to furnish the harmonic carpet for the guitarists and the bass player to float over. Also, it may sound as though Led Zeppelin initially forged a similar aesthetic approach as the ABB—their self-titled debut contains several blues covers—but rather than the mining of the southern groove continuum’s (Afro)modernism, Zeppelin emphasized a parodic approach to the blues.

32. Tapings of several live performances allow tracing the evolution of the medley and corroborate that, other than a few signposts along the way, the structure of the extended performance could change virtually from day to day. At an April 11, 1970, performance in Cincinnati, the band was still relatively unknown and touring in support of their first studio album. At that performance, “Mountain Jam” had not yet joined “Whipping Post,” but it lasted for over forty-four minutes and is particularly noteworthy for a funk section halfway through that eventually leads to fleet-fingered country and western, all of it merging into a Chuck Berry homage; also, the Zeppelin quote seems to have originated with Betts, who leads the ensemble here into the descending four-note riff from “Dazed and Confused.” By July, a mere three months later, the medley had already gelled. Two performances of the conjoined “Whipping Post” and “Mountain Jam,” only 48 hours apart, at the
second Atlanta International Pop Festival display the band’s spontaneity: Friday’s “Whipping Post” doesn’t contain a rubato section until the very end, and, instead of the theme, “Mountain Jam” begins with Duane and Betts tossing back and forth a three-note motif the latter played around with in the first song. Gregg discards the Zeppelin quote from “Mountain Jam.” The band’s quick thinking and internal chemistry are on full display when the second half of the medley was interrupted for half an hour due to a severe thunderstorm; when the ABB resumed the set, Duane didn’t even count off, simply started playing a funk lick, and the rest of the band fell in to continue “Whipping Post” where they had left off. On the Sunday version of “Mountain Jam,” “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” makes its first appearance and is taken in tempo, to a shuffle beat to boot, before slowing to a statelier tempo. For a show in Washington, D.C., half a year later, the band played “Whipping Post” on its own again. From the very beginning of Duane’s solo, the overall approach has decidedly shifted to modal (especially in Gregg’s comping), even more so than later at the Fillmore, and there are now two lengthy free rubato sections. (And when Gregg Allman decided to record a stripped-down version of “Whipping Post” for a solo project, his arrangement remains chordal throughout, but he garners it with a “Spanish tinge” courtesy of maracas, timbales, and congas—missing is the sonic minstrelsy of the whip and cry.) By the final concert of the ABB’s 2007 summer tour, “Whipping Post” closed out their performance and stood once again by itself, as it had in the very beginning. “Mountain Jam” did precede it in a truncated version, but it was now the closing bookend of a medley beginning with “In Memory of Elizabeth Reed” with a prolonged percussion-bass jam in between. The way the ABB navigates these frequently changing time signatures within an improvisational whole that bends, stretches, and contracts the underlying rhythmic pulse but never ruptures it abruptly also indicates why its music is modernist and not postmodernist like, say, the dizzying array of musical bric-a-brac of John Zorn’s Naked City (Dombrowski 214–15).

33. Still, quite often—more often than not—American popular music has elevated ‘blackness’ as the emotional, expressive standard for white musicianship, a romanticization that lingers on in the new millennium, as David Grazian’s study Blue Chicago shows. That negrophilia and negrophobia are not mutually exclusive, as Berndt Ostendorf has pointed out, is exemplified by the following exchange between Elvis Presley and his guitarist Scotty Moore in Sam Phillips’s Sun Studios (Ostendorf 81):

PHILLIPS: Fine, fine, man, hell, that’s different! That’s a pop song now, little guy! That’s good!
SCOTTY MOORE: Too much vaseline!
(Elvis laughs, nervously, proudly.)
MOORE: I had it too!
ELVIS: Y’ain’t just-a-woofin’!
MOORE (imitating an eye-rolling black falsetto): Please, please, please—
ELVIS: What?
MOORE: Damn, nigger! (qtd. in Marcus 192)

34. The ABB was not nearly the first to stipulate racially integrated seating. A similar clause appeared in all of Roland Hayes’s contracts following his 1923 return from a tour of Europe (P. Anderson 90–93).
35. All of Collier’s quotes come from my interview with him, conducted on 14 April 2006, at the Georgia Music Hall of Fame’s Zell Miller Center for Georgia Music Studies. In another bizarre niche of this particular southern ritual ground, Otis Redding’s first recording was for producer Bobby Smith’s Confederate Records Studio, whose offices were housed in Macon’s Robert E. Lee building. Smith’s first two signees were Redding and Redding’s friend Wayne Cochran, “The White James Brown.” Smith quickly realized the former’s star potential and changed his label’s name to Orbit Records in order to get more airplay (G. Brown 16–17; Freeman, Otis! 68–71).

36. Riffing along more contemporary revolutions of the southern groove continuum, historian William Jelani Cobb comes to the exact same conclusion when he adjudges that “[t]he legions of mic-grabbing rhyme-spitters in Germany, Japan, France, and Amsterdam are no more contrary to the black roots of hip hop than Leontyne Price was a threat to the Italian roots of opera” (7). Blues scholar Joel Rudinow locates the standard of authenticity in a performative stance marked not by ethnicity, but by the integrity and understanding with which an idiom is used that, historically, did originate with Americans of African descent (135–36). Extending the African American ritual of call and response, musicologist Samuel Floyd insists that “[t]rue dialogism requires that the composer, the performer, and the listener modulate effectively between black vernacular and European-derived voices in a way that keeps the cultural integrity of both intact and viable in a fused product” (266). It is my argument that, at its very best, the ABB’s music exemplifies such “true dialogism” as it strains to give voice to (Afro-)modernism’s historical conscience. Seconds sociologist Paul Gilroy, “I realise that the most important lesson music still has to teach us is that its inner secrets and ethnic rules can be taught and learned” (Black 109). Thus, as jazz scholar Jeffrey Magee summarizes it, “the phenomenon of Afro-modernism is at once both racially grounded and transcendent of race” (14).

Chapter 5

1. In hip-hop, a similar phenomenon occurs. There, the claim to authenticity is often accompanied by a militant territoriality, a fierce loyalty to the proverbial ’hood—East Coast, West Coast, the Dirty South, Nellyville, et cetera—framed as the incantatory ritual of ‘keeping it real,’ both a promise and an admonition. In hip-hop as performance, the ritual ground of the ’hood is usually under siege from a variety of threats: from the police, for example, or rival gangs, or simply just tragically unhip outsiders trying to crash the block party, and so on. At the same time, for hip-hop as business, the music, and all the defensive demarcations of its various ritual grounds that characterize much of it, has long since become a lucrative commodity in the global economy. And so, what Kembrew McLeod observes of black inner-city hip-hop applies equally to the white southern rock of the Drive-By Truckers: “Authenticity claims and their contestations are a part of a highly charged dialogic conversation that struggles to renegotiate what it means to be a participant in a culture threatened with assimilation” (147). And the Dirty South is no enclave in this regard, as Matt Miller points out: “The politically oppositional orientation of the Dirty South—expressive of the reclaiming of former sites and symbols of enslavement and segregation, and the legitimation and celebration of ‘lowdown and
dirty’ working-class African American culture—diminishes as the concept spreads outwards into global markets, and is often eclipsed by superficial notions of edginess afforded by the appropriation of contemporary southern urban blackness” (“Dirty”).

2. Williams, convicted of three of the murders in 1982, has always proclaimed his innocence. Both the work of the Fulton County Task Force and that of the prosecution in Williams’s trial has remained hotly debated over the decades, so much so that a quarter century later, DeKalb County Police Chief Louis Graham, a member of the Task Force at the time of the murders, felt compelled to reopen five of the cases falling under his current jurisdiction. Although that investigation was dropped a year later, alternate theories based on new or withheld evidence and witness statements keep resurfacing, most recently of involvement of the Ku Klux Klan or of a convicted child molester (Scott E3; Scott and Torpy A1; Suggs and Gentry A1; H. Weber). For in-depth accounts of the crimes, investigation, and trial, see Chet Dettlinger and Jeff Prugh’s *The List* or Bernard Headley’s *The Atlanta Youth Murders and the Politics of Race*. The entire case file is accessible on the Web site of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (“Atlanta”).

3. The parental admonition here echoes the folk belief that thunder and lightning are signs of God being at work, which demand the respectful response of silence and rest (Lincoln, *Race* 54–55). The southern-gothic touches of the novel’s opening scene also recall an earlier, very different Atlanta: W. E. B. Du Bois’s poem “Litany of Atlanta,” written in the wake of the bloody 1903 race riot, describes a city in the grips of an apocalyptic cataclysm: “A city lay in travail, God our Lord, and from her loins sprang twin Murder and Black Hate. Red was the midnight, clang, crack and cry of death and fury filled the air and trembled underneath the stars when church spires pointed silently to Thee” (line 11). And seven decades later, Dudley Randall asked,

> What desperate nightmare raps me to this land  
> Lit by a bloody moon, red on the hills,  
> Red in the valleys? Why am I compelled  
> To tread again where buried feet have trod,  
> To shed my tears where blood and tears have flowed?  
> Compulsion of the blood and of the moon  
> Transports me. I was molded from this clay,  
> My blood must ransom all the blood shed here,  
> My tears redeem the tears. Cripples and monsters  
> Are here. My flesh must make them whole and hale.  
> I am the sacrifice. (lines 1–11)

Although “Legacy: My South” does not describe Atlanta directly, it acts nevertheless as a companion poem to “Litany of Atlanta” in terms of its postapocalyptic landscape. Setting these three ritual grounds side by side, this intertextuality thus points to one hallmark of the African American literary canon, namely its cyclical approach to time and history, because the opening scenes of “Magic Words” circumscribe a preapocalyptic landscape.

4. Significantly, the novel recurrently depicts Tasha and her classmates as studying for a vocabulary test, doing spelling homework, or preparing a book report (33, 36, 54, 56, 70, 101, 164, 175, 188, 194). Not quite coincidentally, Rodney fails another spelling test in “The Direction Opposite of Home,” and Octavia’s spelling
book is stolen in “Sweet Pea” (109, 148). The unreliability of any kind of referential reporting also extends to physical acts and images: Tasha, for one, fails to grasp the import of her slightly older cousin Ayana’s body language (61, 64). And all three of the major characters comment on the surreal disconnect between the images they see on the local evening news—usually introduced by WSB Channel 2’s Monica Kaufman, the first black news anchor in Atlanta. To Tasha, the nine photographs of missing children broadcast by Channel 2 “looked like school pictures . . . arranged in three rows like a tic-tac-toe game waiting to be played” (24). And later, when Kaufman reports the discovery of Rodney’s body, Octavia muses, “Kodak commercials say that a picture is worth a thousand words, but the one they showed of Rodney ain’t worth more than three or four. Boy. Black. Dead” (155).

5. Befitting a city that displays a remarkable readiness to discard its past(s), the characters in Jones’s follow-up novel, *The Untelling*, twentysomethings (and therefore of the same generation as Tasha, Rodney, and Octavia) negotiating the vagaries of love and marriage in the mid-1990s, have no memory of the Atlanta Child Murders—at least they don’t display any awareness of them. Accordingly, the motif of the air freshener recurs, but it is divorced from its association with recent Atlanta history (143). The novel’s narrator only remembers the janitor of her elementary school remarking darkly, “Wasn’t even last year that someone was snatching kids right around here” (95). And while *Leaving Atlanta*, like *Cane*, isn’t really a roman à clef, some of its characters resemble the actual victims. Jashante, for example, is a composite character of sorts: fourteen-year-old Edward Hope Smith, the first victim on the Task Force list of twenty-nine, was last seen in the evening of July 20, 1979, at Greenbriar Skating Rink; Lubie Geter, also age fourteen and the eighteenth name on the list, was hawking Zep Gel car deodorizers outside a shopping center in the afternoon of January 3, 1981, when he disappeared. Wayne Williams, though never even vaguely identified in Jones’s novel, was known to have an uncanny ability to impersonate a police officer—he also liked to pose as a music producer and talent scout—and it is just such an impersonator who lures Rodney into his car (“Atlanta”; Headley 35, 81–83, 138–41).

6. For instance, the narrative voice knows that Leon, Rodney’s classmate and an accomplished shoplifter, is lying to the candy store owner (105). The separation of the narrative voice from Rodney’s mind, barely hinted at for most of “The Direction Opposite of Home,” is perhaps most obvious at the very end, where the narrative voice identifies the serial killer only as “the driver” and foregoes any closer description, when Rodney himself remains, as usual, acutely aware and observant of everything else surrounding him at that moment (140).

7. At one point, the narrative voice coldly observes that “Monica Kaufman said that the missing children had been asphyxiated. Your children’s dictionary (which you hate) does not include this important word, so you consulted the real one in the family room. Asphyxiate is to smother, which is almost the same as drowning” (113–14).

8. Jones herself has a different take on the nature of the second-person-singular point of view: drawing on Jim Grimsley’s *Winter Birds*, she says that “[m]y idea for the second person in *Leaving Atlanta* is the idea of a guardian angel almost speaking to Rodney” (“(Un-)Telling” 74). Jones’s insistence on the narrative voice as protector rather than stalker fails to explain, however, not only why it cannot protect him from a life already filled with terror and from a grisly, premature death, but why nothing is
ever really explained to Rodney. Either way, Jones’s own interpretation of the voice as guardian angel still supports my reading of the disorienting nature of language because the voice, if it is an angelic one, after all still exists only as words.

9. Interestingly, the tangible “Terminus” surviving today—the Zero Mile Marker of the old Western & Atlantic Railroad from which in 1847 the city’s original boundaries were drawn—is located approximately a quarter mile from the W&A’s very first zero mile post. Where exactly that first marker’s location was, no one knows today (Rutheiser 15–17). Once again, the southern ritual ground defies exact geographic circumscription.

10. Emphasizing again the chasm between the sign and its referent, both Tasha and Rodney discover that the school gossip on Octavia—her body odor, her intellectual deficiencies, and so on—is not accurate either (48–49, 89–90).

11. Accordingly, Octavia, prompted by her mentor Ms. Grier, expresses an interest in calligraphy: “I made sure that my penmanship was perfect, so somebody could know me for that” (165).

12. Octavia here remembers what Ms. Grier had told her earlier about her own childhood in an attempt to alleviate the fifth-grader’s fear and anger. Orphaned at an early age, Ms. Grier tells Octavia that she was sent to live with an aunt and uncle. The first night in her new home, she wanted to share the bed with her cousin Twyla, who rebuked her: “‘Not in here with me,’ Twyla said, as though bed sharing was disgusting. I tucked my little head and went to the other twin bed. The pretty spread was butter colored and I was afraid that I might spoil it. I was as lonely that night as I have ever been in my life. But I didn’t cry because I didn’t want to wet the eyelet pillow slip” (235). Ms. Grier’s anecdote here echoes the beginning of Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif,” in which the two main characters, Twyla and Roberta, meet as young girls at an orphanage and “changed beds every night . . . for the whole four months we were there” (1776). Other Morrisonian resonances in Leaving Atlanta include the recurring motif of marigolds—The Bluest Eye, also a story of a harrowing loss of innocence, begins with the observation that, “[q]uiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941”—and the dedication of Jones’s novel, “Twenty-nine and more,” points to the narrative’s radically changed symbolic southern ritual grounds from those of Beloved, dedicated to “Sixty Million and more” (Morrison, Bluest 9).

13. The character of little Tayari in Leaving Atlanta therefore resembles Vladimir Nabokov’s Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov in Pnin much more than the Man in the Macintosh in James Joyce’s Ulysses—if, that is, one subscribes to Nabokov’s own interpretation of the Bloomsday book (Nabokov, Pnin 185–91; Nabokov, Lectures 316–20; Joyce 90–91, 209, 273, 307–8, 348, 395–96, 529, 600). In Ulysses, the appearance of the author in disguise is but one of a myriad of puzzles Joyce proudly proclaimed to have hidden in the novel for generations of English professors to ponder over (Kenner, Ulysses 9). In both Pnin and Leaving Atlanta, neither author’s alter ego is a Joycean “self-involved enigma,” but serves to remind us that the images we form about each other are often less than truthful, and thus these images also have the dangerous potential of portraying the people behind them as less than human (J. Joyce 600; B. Boyd 278–79). Perhaps because both Jones and Nabokov are, ultimately, champions of the human imagination—if in very different ways, to be sure—Pnin’s hero, just like Octavia at the close of “Sweet Pea,” is released at the end into a freedom that can only be imagined, not narrated: “Then [Pnin’s] little sedan boldly swung past the front truck and, free at last, spurted up the shining road, which
one could make out narrowing to a thread of gold in the soft mist where hill after hill made beauty of distance, and where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen” (191). Tayari Jones’s brother, Lumumba, also has a few cameo appearances of his own in Leaving Atlanta.

14. Rodney’s father is also in many ways Jones’s revision of the tragic hero in August Wilson’s play Fences, Troy Maxson, who chastises his younger son, “A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house . . . sleep you behind on my bedclothes . . . fill you belly up with my food . . . cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not ’cause I like you! Cause it’s my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you!” (2431). Claude Green imparts to his son that his brother Joe never amounted to anything because his father was already too old to give his youngest son “a good whipping when he needed it”; like Troy Maxson, Joe works as a garbage man for his city’s sanitation department (132).

15. “Red Dog,” the brief skit that precedes “Dirty South,” mimics a drug raid gone bad. It begins with a character named Straight Shooter knocking on the door of a drug house. Immediately following the completion of the transaction, armed police storm the premises and subdue everyone with force. In an obvious distancing of referent from sign, the skit implies that Straight Shooter acts as an informant and is hence shooting anything but straight. The skit’s title refers to a paramilitary antidrug police squad that was notorious, especially in Atlanta’s black community, for its brutality and corruption (M. Miller, “Rap” 183–84). Although the squad has since dissolved, the Red Dogs’ mystique continues to live on among the city’s law enforcement and malefactors (Richard B. Lyle III, personal communication, Georgia State Board of Pardons and Paroles, Atlanta, Georgia, 20 May 2005).

16. Although the characters are, for the most part, not aware of it, the West End is also the location of The Wren’s Nest, Joel Chandler Harris’s home, a national historic landmark and perennial intimation of Harris’s appropriation of the Uncle Remus stories. Furthermore, the name of the protagonist’s sister, Hermione, Jones says she got not from Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale, but from a novel by H. D. entitled HERmione; there, the child bearing that name is constantly reminded by the mother that her name derives from the great playwright’s work and therefore carries with it certain responsibilities of decorum (T. Jones, “(Un-)Telling” 73, 75). In The Untelling, the mother’s favorite admonition is, “That is not what Dr. King died for” (1).

17. The time frame of the novel coincides with the very public debate surrounding the body of yet another Atlantan, the puzzling yet appropriately named mascot of the 1996 Olympics, the androgynous Whatizit? (Hiskey 14; Rutheiser 1–7).

18. Jones signifies here on Faulkner’s famous pronouncement to his students at the University of Virginia that there was “no such thing really as was because the past is” (Faulkner 84).

**Conclusion**

1. To be sure, postmodernism is perhaps an even more hotly contested concept than modernism. Fittingly, the term itself eludes definition, or even consistent application. bell hooks, for example, appears to use it as a catchall term that includes the theoretical enterprises of deconstruction and poststructuralism. I use the terms
postmodernist to denote certain aspects of and trends in contemporary literary and mass culture, and poststructuralist or deconstructionist to denote the critical theories that accompany them.

2. The nexus between consumer capitalism and the commodification of culture Huyssen illuminates here brings to mind Robert Stepto’s “‘tribal’ geography” that supplies “the currency of exchange, as it were, within the realm of communitas” (70, 77). Except that in Stepto’s paradigm, this currency of the vernacular must resist capitalist cooption. This, then, also brings to mind Benedict Anderson’s contention that “[c]ommunities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6).

3. Madhu Dubey’s critique exposes an apparent self-contradiction in hooks’s take on (black) postmodernism: elsewhere in Yearning, hooks’s “cure for the fragmentation of black communal life in the post-Civil Rights era calls for a retrieval of the very conditions that she earlier admits to be irrevocably lost—the ‘organic unity’ and ‘traditional black folk experience’ of the days of racial segregation” (34). Nevertheless, hooks’s “authority of experience” can remain a valuable concept for a critique of postmodern blackness if we remind ourselves that said experience is far from homogenous (as hooks herself insists repeatedly); nor is said authority always absolute (as the unresolved paradox in Yearning manifests).

4. See, for example, also K. Davis (242–44); Dubey (19–22); Hakutani (viii); Spaulding (1–4); and Werner (20). It is also worth pointing out here that elements of Christian Moraru’s rereading of postmodernism as “memorious discourse” are based on bell hooks and on his readings of African American writers such as Ishmael Reed or Charles Johnson as well as on hip-hop (Memorious 118–24; Postmodern 83–125).

5. Postmodern neominstrelsy has also been satirized in feature-length films such as Robert Townsend’s Hollywood Shuffle or Spike Lee’s Bamboozled and is widespread enough that it has engendered a countermovement: the Internet-based “Stop Coonin Movement” consists of “an underground collective of educators and activists” whose slogan is “Hustlin Consciousness to the Hip Hop Community” (Stop).