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Introduction

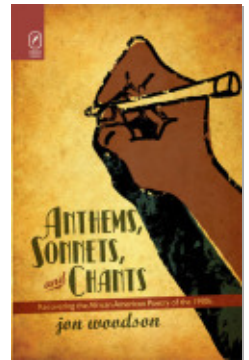
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Introduction

Literary recovery is a response to some mode of marginalization. In the case of the black American poetry of the thirties, there were three directly marginalizing factors: racism, history, and ideology. As Wahneema Lubiano has shown, racism presents a particularly difficult obstacle: “Afro-Americanists have often interpreted [African American] texts as if the relationship of a text to its production was an always already known quantity that could be referred to as a casually explicit or implicit reflection of the racism of the dominant culture. Such references suggest that racism operates always under a set of conditions that anyone could recognize. . . . For most of the period between its publication in 1937 and the early 1970s, for example, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was excluded by the movers and shakers of the Harlem Renaissance and then by Richard Wright’s agenda. Now it is taken for granted that Hurston is part of the Afro-American tradition” (434).

In addition to racism, there were the exigencies of history. Writing in 1940, Langston Hughes suggested that the economic crash in the fall of 1929 marked the end of the Harlem Renaissance, for from that point on, “We were no longer in vogue, we Negroes” (*The Big Sea* 334). We now read Hughes’s words from a perspective so totalized and immersed in the elaborate mythology of the Harlem Renaissance that it is barely possible to register the disturbing disposition of Hughes’s discourse. Some sense of the unease is, however, detectable in the semantic shifts

that the phrase has undergone. Alain Locke had already written of a “fad” for “Negro things” in “Art or Propaganda?” (312). In its final form, the title of David Levering Lewis’s book, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, periodized the brief moment with a metonymic substitution of place for people. These shifting subject positions point to the question of whether or not, following the crash of 1929, the Negro and black cultural productions were to be allowed to revert to their devastating former position in American culture, or whether the interval of interest in the Negro and in Negro things marked a stage of social progress in an evolutionary process. The theorists of the Harlem Renaissance had hoped to construct a program of artistic production that would lead to social progress. In 1931, James Weldon Johnson wrote, “A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as inferior” (281). Then, with the crash of 1929, history intruded and wrecked the Negro’s advance to greatness. It was with a historical metaphor that Alain Locke acknowledged that the Harlem Renaissance period had been traumatically set apart from the Great Depression; in 1938, he wrote, “In self-extenuation, may I say that as early as 1927 I said . . . ‘Remember, the Renaissance was followed by the Reformation’” (“Jingo, Counter-Jingo and Us” 9). In other words, in the African American culture of the 1930s there existed a discourse that registered a perceptible break between the social triumphs of the 1920s and the setbacks of the 1930s. The reformation that Locke looked to as a succession to the Harlem Renaissance was the new culture ushered into the decade of the 1930s by a series of social catastrophes. The reformation was but a transitional stage in an ongoing evolutionary process, not a period unto itself, and in the end Locke saw that the process would lead to “great universalized art” (PAA 103). My argument is that *Harlem* and *renaissance* have subsequently come to signal the discursive construct of the Harlem Renaissance as a uniformity of space, time, and form that were never historical and material realities: most of the writers had left Harlem by 1932 (Bremer, “Home” 3). Joyce W. Warren has observed that “African American literary critics . . . have generally approached periodization by separating black literature from conventional divisions of white writers and identifying African American periods (the Harlem Renaissance, for example, instead of modernism)” (x). In contrast to the idealizing semiotics of a “Harlem Renaissance,” Harlem writing was the work of a handful of moderately productive writers. The literature of the succeeding years lacked

any such semiotic definitiveness; very few periods in African American literary history have been identified and named. Thus, “modern” texts that were not attributed to the Harlem period were easily dismissed and lost, since they lacked the aura of abundance and high accomplishment afforded by an association with the *Harlem Renaissance*.

The third factor, ideology, confronted the black poets of the thirties with critical discourses that defined the centers and the peripheries of African American literature. Perhaps the major component in the development of black literary discourse at the time was the magisterial *The Negro Caravan* anthology of 1941, edited by Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee. Deborah Barnes describes the anthology in this way:

The 1941 publication of *The Negro Caravan*—the first comprehensive anthology of African American literature—democratized American literature and, thus, actualized Brown’s and Davis’s discursive goals. . . . According to the “Preface,” the 1082 page volume was designed to meet three specific goals set out by its editors . . . (1) to present a body of artistically valid writing by American Negro authors, (2) to present a truthful mosaic of Negro character and experience in America, and (3) to collect in one volume certain key literary works that have greatly influenced the thinking of American Negroes, and to a lesser degree, that of Americans as a whole (*Caravan* v). The editors incorporated previously excluded or ignored materials, especially those linking Negroes to their slave past and their so-called “primitive folkways”—“truths” most upwardly mobile Blacks were anxious to forget—to create and preserve “a more accurate and revealing story of the Negro writer than has ever been told before” (v). Thus, in addition to a general fare of short stories, poetry, prose, and drama, *The Negro Caravan* includes “unique,” culturally relevant selections, such as folk literature, fugitive slave narratives, speeches, pamphlets, letters, journalism, as well as the earliest novels never before anthologized. Importantly, and innovatively, *The Negro Caravan’s* canon of Negro writing reflects the breadth of the Negro’s full discursive range. Even more significantly, the editors’ inclusion of vernacular discourses authenticate and legitimize traditionally disparaged forms of ethnic expression and communication. Devised to introduce, instruct, and enculturate its readers to the vast world of Negro discourse from a Negro’s point of view, *The Negro Caravan* transcends mere bibliography by including cultural, historical, and literary interpretations of its selected works. Each of the eight genre sections is prefaced by a still useful historical and critical introduction. Similarly, each author’s work is heralded by bio-bibliographic notes. Moreover, the inclusion of “a chro-

nology of events in American history and literature that have significant pertinence to the writings of American Negroes, as well as a chronology of the history and literature of Negroes,” renders the anthology’s comprehensiveness and pedagogic influence indisputable and, likewise, revolutionary. *The Negro Caravan’s* enlarged scope—its work songs, spirituals, blues, and folk sermons, that is, its vernacular cultural artifacts—ensured a more “democratic” representation of Negroes within the text than segregation or Black middle-class strivings allowed beyond it. Hoping to be useful “not only to students of American literature, but also to students of American social history,” the editors enforced a measure of literary equality. They write in the Preface, [The anthology] presents the literary record of America’s largest minority group, and in doing so it sheds light upon American culture and minority problems. It pieces out a mosaic more representative than is to be found in any other single volume. Many classes of Negroes, from many sections, undergoing many sorts of experiences, are shown in this mosaic.” (vi)

While some aspects of *The Negro Caravan* are tremendously progressive, other aspects are equally erosive. The editors worked with the attitude that their anthology was set in opposition to the misaligned desires of a socially retrograde black bourgeoisie:

Writers belonging to the “we are just like you school”—as Davis called the proponents of “raceless” literature in his anthology *The New Negro Renaissance*—employed counter-discourses designed to undermine racist exclusion by proving their author’s mimesis of white aesthetics and domestic values, specifically those advocating middle-class respectability and materialism. The “best-foot-forward school’s” writing which “in no wise pointed to Negro authorship” (*Renaissance* 70) eschewed the vernacular-authentic aspects of Negro culture according to Davis and Brown—consequently, alienating itself from the Black masses and, thus, from realistic cultural representation. Embarrassed by Black folk idioms and “primitive” folkways, “old guard” writers—in discourses tempered generally for the tastes of white readers—were quick to note their assimilation to the “raceless” mainstream and, more significantly, their estrangement from Negro “low life.” (Barnes 990)

These concepts are particularly relevant to the poetry of the thirties in Sterling Brown’s *Negro Poetry and Drama* (1937), the seventh volume in Alain Locke’s Bronze Booklet series of adult education pamphlets for the Associates in Negro Folk Education. In the “Summary” of that publication, Sterling Brown makes clear his opinion of poetry in the thirties:

Contemporary Negro poets are too diverse to be grouped into schools. Certain chief tendencies, however, are apparent. More than Alberry Whitman, Dunbar, and Braithwaite, the contemporary poets, even when writing subjective lyrics, are more frankly personal, less restrained, and as a general rule, less conventional. They have been influenced by modern American poetry, of course, as their elders were by post-Victorian [poetry], but one of the cardinal lessons of modern poetry is that the poet should express his own view of life in his own way. It has been pointed out, however, that “bookishness” still prevails, that the so-called new poetry revival has left many versifiers untouched. Secondly, more than the older poets who hesitantly advanced defenses of the Negro, the contemporary Negro poet is more assured, more self-reliant. He seems less taken in by American hypocrisy and expresses his protest now with irony, now with anger, seldom with humility. The poets who have taken folk-types and folk-life for their province no longer accept the stereotyped view of the traditional dialect writers, nor, lapsing into gentility, do they flinch from an honest portrayal of folk life. Their laughter has more irony in it than buffoonery. They are ready to see the tragic as well as the pitiful. They are much closer to the true folk product than to the minstrel song.

It is not at all advanced that the contemporary poetry of the American Negro is to be ranked with the best of modern poetry. Too many talented writers have stopped suddenly after their first, sometimes successful gropings. The Negro audience is naturally small, and that part devoted to poetry, much smaller. Few Negro poets have the requisite time for maturing, for mastering technique, for observation of the world and themselves. Negro poets have left uncultivated many fields opened by modern poetry. Many still confine their models to the masters they learned about in school, to the Victorians, and the pre-Raphaelites. Almost as frequently they have been unaware of the finer uses of tradition. The reading world seems to be ready for a true interpretation of Negro life from within, and poets with a dramatic ability have before them an important task. And the world has always been ready for the poet who in his own manner reveals his deepest thoughts and feelings. What it means to be a Negro in the modern world is a revelation much needed in poetry. But the Negro poet must write so that whosoever touches his book touches a man. Too often, like other minor poets, he has written so that whosoever touches his book touches the books of other and greater poets. (127–29)

Following the division established between the bookish poets and the “poets who have taken folk-types and folk-life for their province,” *The Negro Caravan* published poets of the social realist group, while the poets of the

“romantic” group were not included and in effect were thereafter overlooked by literary critics and scholars. In *The Negro Caravan*, Brown, Davis, and Lee did not so much select the African American canon as theorize the critical lens that prevailed over the reception of African American literature for many years to come. Thus, Deborah Barnes states that “[Brown and Davis] lived to see accurate, racially subjective depictions of African American perspectives increase and gain authority in mainstream discourses” (995). When it came down to actually publishing poems from the 1930s, the editors of *The Negro Caravan* included six poems by Sterling Brown (taking up eleven pages), four poems by Frank Marshall Davis (six pages), Melvin B. Tolson’s award-winning “Dark Symphony” (three and a half pages), two poems by Owen Dodson (one page), Richard Wright’s “I Have Seen Black Hands” (two pages), five poems by Robert Hayden (four and a half pages), and Margaret Walker’s “For My People” (two pages). While all of this work bypasses the Victorians (and the pre-Raphaelites, whom Sterling Brown so criticizes in the “Summary” discussed above), the poems are instead merely rooted in the work of Whitman and Sandburg, with a few digression into imagism, albeit an imagism heavily shaded by the despondent satire of *The Spoon River Anthology*. “For My People” is particularly derivative; it recapitulates the stylistic mechanization and social horror of Carl Sandburg’s *The People, Yes*. Sandburg’s poem first questions its audience, only then to alienate it. When one turns away from the exhausting rhetoric of *The People, Yes*, one also rejects the image of society that it proposes. It offers us, on the one hand, an unacceptable status quo of oppression and victimization and, on the other hand, a revolution for and by a nameless, boundless, philistine multitude (Reed 208). As the “Summary” demonstrates, Brown does not make great claims for the aesthetic accomplishments of those poets in the 1930s who pursued social realist subjects and styles. Rather, the editors of *The Negro Caravan* were far more concerned with establishing and advancing a program of racially subjective folk-oriented literature (Barnes 995).

Much might be said about the merits and demerits of the racially subjective folk-oriented approach to literature, particularly because in many respects its influence continues to dominate much of contemporary literary and critical activity, while its contradictions and blind spots have never been entirely recognized or resolved. This study is not directed toward the decentering of the folk-oriented discourse of that undertaking and instead turns aside to consider the cultural function of the poetry of the 1930s without being persuaded by the aesthetic and ideological assessments of the critics at the time. In order to approach the poetry with a better grasp of its relationship to the discourses of the period, I place the poetry in relation to the crises that affected the lives of African Americans directly—the Great Depression;

the existential-identity crisis; and the Italo-Ethiopian War, with its threat of race war. One measure of this thematic approach through cultural discourses is to take stock of these crises by studying the poetry presented in *The Negro Caravan*. Through its valorization of racially subjective folk-oriented literature, the anthology is grounded in the recognition of the centrality of what I am calling the existential-identity crisis. At the same time, the mode in which the anthology historicizes African American culture places the poets in an idealized space outside of historical reality; the anthology includes no poetry that addresses the material realities of the period. *The Negro Caravan*'s "American Scene" entry for 1929 offers "Collapse of the New York stock market, followed by business depression" (1075), but the "Negro World" entries between 1930 and 1940 list novels by Hughes, Hurston, Fauset, and others, and a few major events, such as the first Scottsboro trials and the Harlem race riots. Even Tolson's "Dark Symphony," the only poem that can be said to incorporate historic events, erects heroic action and "inauthentic collective representation" (Reed 208) within the sublimated space of its symphony in an unresolved transcendence of the contemporary crises. Similarly, the implied historical narrative of Walker's "For My People" ordains its utopian end to history without conceptualizing the change of consciousness that is required to make possible such a social outcome: the poem depicts a black collectivity in a static culture. My study does discuss works by some of the poets included in *The Negro Caravan* (for example, Hughes, Dodson, and Wright); however, the works in which they confront the three crises under discussion are not included in *The Negro Caravan*. Thus, even when I take up poets who were included in *The Negro Caravan*, it is necessary to recover other texts by Hughes, Dodson, Tolson, and Wright.

The stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed intervened in the cultural maturation of the New Negro movement, disrupting to a considerable degree the movement's cultural capital and displacing its program of social progress through art. Millions of people needed food, clothing, and shelter after the collapse of the American economic system. Black poets reacted to the new conditions indirectly, for there are few poems that address the crash or the Great Depression thematically; rather, the effects of the crash and the Great Depression form the background to themes that arise from the new conditions. In 1937 Eugene Holmes stated at the Second American Writers' Congress that "there has scarcely been any poetry—a few wilderness cries from Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown and Richard Wright, and with only one or two new names, like Owen Dodson and Frank Davis" (177). Holmes's dismissal of the black poets of the 1930s was but one of the several voices that established the truism that the Great Depression ushered in a time of poetic bankruptcy. One of the chief reasons

for recovering the poetic work of this controversial and opaque decade is to disprove the truism that this period was a time of artistic inarticulacy and mediocrity for African Americans.

Ideology, the third factor contributing to the forgetting of black poets of the thirties, came into play in the political discourses that contextualized and shaped a larger understanding of that decade. Gloria Hull identifies the main thrust of the treatment of thirties poetry when she comments that “Hughes’ 1930s poems are usually deemed inferior” to his nonpolitical poetry (quoted in Duffy 201). More broadly, in *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State*, Michael Szalay addresses the forgetting and the recovery of thirties writing as the conflict between a dominant conservative culture and relatively powerless radical intellectuals:

Without doubt, the most impressive new scholarship on the thirties and forties—from Alan Wald’s *The Revolutionary Imagination* (1983), through Cary Nelson’s *Repression and Recovery* (1989), Paula Rabinowitz’s *Labor and Desire* (1991), James Bloom’s *Left Letters* (1992), Barbara Foley’s *Radical Representations* (1993), Alan Filreis’s *Modernism from Right to Left* (1994), and Constance Coiner’s *Better Red* (1995) to Michael Denning’s *Cultural Front* (1997)—has explored comprehensively the often conflicted corporate identities that operated on the left of the period. These critics have tended to understand literary politics by mobilizing increasingly refined distinctions between conservative and radical, Stalinist and Trotskyist, fellow traveler and Popular Front moderate, and, most recently, between a “cultural front” and mainstream communism and liberalism. Understanding the politics of the era through impressively involved research, this body of scholarship faithfully reproduces and negotiates the often agonized constellation of political identities available to the radical writer of the time. Yet precisely because of the scruple for historical detail these critics have brought to their work, their otherwise excellent scholarship has operated within some very discernible parameters. In part because the distinctions among different political groups of the era seem crucial to these critics, their work has tended—with one exception, we will see—to “recover” the traditional protocols of literary biography as much as the literature of heretofore neglected writers. Hoping to compensate for a tradition of cold war criticism that whitewashed the impact of thirties radicalism, most of these critics believe that the most intelligent political accounts of the literature of the thirties and forties were made during the thirties and forties. (16–17)

In addition to the texts that Szalay lists, numerous cultural studies approaches

are “dedicated to recovering and reevaluating repressed or forgotten, largely leftist or politically progressive poetry from the first half of the century” (Chasar).¹ Szalay’s approach to the New Deal is salutary in that he refashions the assumptions that have been applied to this period. This revisionist tendency needs to be continued to the point where critics abandon their conventional dependence on the politics of the Left as a means to analyze the vast cultural production of this virtually neglected period and also in order that they may see past the ancillary categorizations that limit and preordain the investigation of an underappreciated but considerable body of literary production.

To avoid falling prey to the errors inherent in arbitrary periodization, I have situated my investigation of poetry as “social text” around three distinct “historical crises” (DuPlessis 26). However, the periodization of the thirties was not arbitrary; many of those who experienced these crises saw them as breaks in history that signaled a new historical period. I have interpreted poems by capitalizing on the ability of social philology² to resolve the apparent disconnectedness of “mixed methodologies,” which seem questionable when associated with the notion that the poem is autotelic,³ bracketed off from the world. Social philology uses the outside as if it were inside the language, so what appears to be an eclectic methodology is not that at all. Rather than thinking of the theories used in this study (Kittler’s discourse networks [poststructuralist media theory], film theory, interart theory, semantic analysis, Virilio’s dromomatics, psychoanalysis, and McGann and Bornstein’s materialism) as *other* modes of literary analysis, here they are considered extensions of the “*interconnection of the work’s elements*” (Dewanto “Periphery”; emphasis added). The relationship within social philology between “outside” and “inside” is further described by Maria Damon: “*Equal attention to the outlying context surrounding poetry’s production, distribution, and reception, and to its inner workings will reveal how mutually imbricated, constitutive, and reflective these are*” (687; emphasis added). Thus, situated dialectically to the idea of the autotelic poem, “social philology” is not a “mixed methodology” despite the eclectic appearance it gains from its complex theoretical resourcefulness and diverse methodological inclusions.

The first chapter presents three long poems that confront the African American experience of the crash and the Great Depression—the watershed events of the thirties. Of the three poets discussed in the first chapter, Richard Wright is the only canonical figure, though he holds this status as a novelist and writer of short stories. But Wright published a dozen poems in leftist journals before he published fiction, and his antilynching poems, “Between the World and Me” and “I Have Seen Black Hands,” have become anthology pieces—with the latter included in *The Negro Caravan*. His most

ambitious poem, “Transcontinental,” has received no previous critical attention. The parallel neglect of Langston Hughes’s radical poetry from the thirties perhaps suggests that the absolutism that characterizes Wright’s third period has similarly inhibited investigation. While ideologically predictable, “Transcontinental” is a stylistic departure from Wright’s better known poems: it is a surrealistic tour de force that uses revolutionary zeal to successfully unite, on the one hand, popular culture, American myth, and contemporary tensions between individual angst and unrest and, on the other hand, longings for a collective destiny. “Transcontinental” turns out to be Wright’s most sophisticated and resourceful poem.

In contrast to the celebrated career of Richard Wright, Welborn Victor Jenkins was nearly erased from literary history; little is known of his life, and his work might have been entirely forgotten if not for one vague (but sufficient) mention in Eugene Redmond’s *Drumvoices*. Redmond was aware of Jenkins thanks to the list of thirties poets that Sterling Brown provided in *Negro Poetry and Drama*. This study’s presentation and discussion of “Trumpet in the New Moon” is my most significant recovery of a forgotten work. Not only is “Trumpet” a poem of impressive length but also it is thematically rich, poetically innovative, and intellectually original. While Jenkins was praised in Sterling Brown’s *Negro Poetry and Drama*, the length of his poem perhaps prevented him from being included in *The Negro Caravan*, an omission that no doubt played a major role in his being silenced.

Owen Dodson was another of the social realist poets whom Sterling Brown listed in his 1937 pamphlet. He is represented in *The Negro Caravan* by the small and diffuse “Cradle Song” (“Aluminum birds flying with fear / will scream to you waking” [lines 7–8]), and a backward-looking ode to the two white women who founded Spelman College. Thus, Dodson’s sequence of four sonnets, “Negro History,” is yet another recovery that restores a neglected master poet to attention, and one suspects that it was Dodson’s use of the sonnet that kept “Negro History” out of the anthology. The long poem is a privileged modernist genre, where scope, transcendence, dynamism, and difficulty, not length, are the determining factors of a poem’s achievement. As Lynn Keller indicates:

I don’t wish to quibble how long is long, a particularly fruitless activity given that the scale of a poem as literary/cultural practice cannot necessarily be correlated simply to its scale as an object. After all, “The Waste Land,” a central modernist long poem, has only 434 lines, and works like Gwendolyn Brook’s “Anniad,” or John Ashbery’s “A Wave” or “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” while far from being book-length, certainly have the heft of long poems. In some contexts, the complexity

of a poem's intent and conception, as well as its length. Relative to other works in a poet's *oeuvre*, might better determine whether it should be considered as a long poem than the number of pages it occupies. . . . (Keller 20–21)

Like many of the African American poets from the thirties, Dodson was a poet without a book. One characteristic common to the works of these so-called magazine poets is an impressive compression of theme, atmosphere, emotion, and memory. Dodson's "Negro History" is indeed the breathtaking distillation of his vision of an imperiled people who are held in suspension at a point of historical extremity and trial.

Cornel West has observed that African Americans entered modernity with the provision that they were things. In conflict with such insupportable repression was the emancipatory notion that "the project of the self—of an identity that one 'works on' for one's entire life—is itself the cornerstone of modernity" (Kimmel). Chapter 2 examines the need for *self-fashioning* (the development of identities), a need that arose in opposition to the existential obliteration of the African American by the ever-increasing persuasiveness of technological media. In the 1930s, radio, magazines, and films reinforced the inferiority of the black American in compelling and powerful ways, and a largely unrecognized body of poetry responded to this negative identity. The chapter takes the many sonnets published by African American poets in the thirties as the sign of the self-in-process. In order to examine the various subject positions available to African Americans in the thirties, I have assembled the sonnets into a metatext that treats the work of multiple authors as though they are the work of one author of a sonnet sequence: this collectivizing move liberates the poems to be read culturally and produces revealing insights into the zeitgeist. While many studies deal with the "sonnetized" body, the treatment of the African American body in connection with the sonnet opens a new chapter in literary and cultural analysis. In "Toward the Black Interior," Elizabeth Alexander states that

the black body has been misrepresented, absented, distorted, rendered invisible, exaggerated, made monstrous in the Western visual imagination and in the world of art. The visual art world hegemony is very, very white. Black people have always made art and always imagined and understood ourselves to be other than monstrous stereotype. Therefore, the "real" black figure is a very different thing from the imagined one, and versions of what that "realness" looks like will frequently contradict each other. How do we understand "reality" when official narratives deny what our bodies know? (6–7)

The black body is not commonly associated with the sonnet (a few essays on Claude McKay being the exception, though they are more concerned with the body as body rather than the sonnet as body). Even Alexander, in her discussion of Brooks's turn to the sonnet in the 1940s, observes that "the sonnet is a 'little room,' and Brooks reveals the equivalent of painted tableaux in her sonnets" (6). Nor has the considerable extent to which black poets in the thirties published sonnets been previously realized. The chapter moves to a new understanding of the sonnet, beyond the framing of the sonnet as "the body of the sonnet—a privilege-soaked, white-identified form" (Palatnik) to the absorption of the sonnet into the black literary imagination where it became a component of new identities and new psychosocial potentialities. The thirties was simultaneously a time of social constraint and sociocultural richness—for African Americans as well as for whites—making available a wealth of materials for the construction of new individual, social, and collective identities. Broadly speaking, African Americans were successful in resisting the effects of the crisis in capitalism and the resulting social crises that were visited upon African Americans even as they were increasingly unable to compete for a share of the dwindling stock of national resources. The chapter examines the materials that African American poets used when constructing new identities through sonnets. The literary record provides evidence of the transformation of abjection, trauma, and inarticulacy into personhood, autonomy, and vocal citizenship.

The third chapter presents the body of poetry that addresses two topics that most Americans have forgotten—the Italo-Ethiopian War (1934–36) and the concept of race war. In the thirties Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* (1918) was a highly influential book, and part of its influence was that it disseminated the possibility of a war between races in which the white race was exterminated. The association of the fascist invasion of Ethiopia with race war was an inflammatory mixture for the African Americans of the thirties, so when it spilled over into poetic expression, it produced a stirring body of poetry. The interpretations layered onto this unique historical event ranged from labeling it a legal lynching to viewing it as the prelude to the end of the world. The chapter follows the drama of African Americans who assumed a variety of traumatic postures—warrior, victim, monster, citizen, and revolutionary—while taking note of the complex mixture of forces that these events directed toward African Americans.

While it is true that there were relatively few volumes of poetry published by African Americans in the thirties, no critic has dealt with the totality of what is known to exist. Several volumes have never come under discussion, presumably because they do not express a suitably social realist politics. In the body of work that is denigrated as romantic and escapist,

the inner-directed gaze supposedly represents the counter movement to a communal polarity; but where individual expression and idealized art make themselves felt as discourses, they must be taken into account as legitimate discourses of the period. In other cases, important anthologies and volumes of poetry have been lost to literary history, and by recovering them, as I have in a few cases in this study, a fuller account of the culture has been made available. Generally, there is a tension between interiority and exteriority in the black poetry of the 1930s: the black intellectuals who dominated the interpretive discourses of the 1930s valorized exteriority, while black culture heedlessly and inexorably plunged into interiority. This dichotomy has barely been recognized, and where it has been, it has not been taken up as a topic for cultural analysis. One of the few exceptions is Elizabeth Alexander's *The Black Interior*, in which the binary emerges not as the opposition of the interior and the exterior but rather as the contradiction of the real and the dream:

If black people in the mainstream imaginary exist as fixed properties deemed “real,” what is possible in the space we might call surreal? [Ntozake] Shange powerfully suggests that the contagion of racism seeps into the intimate realms of the subconscious and affects how black people ourselves see and imagine who we are. Indeed, by writing a book of dream poems I learned that race, gender, class, sexuality—our social identities—exist and have been “always already” constructed in the dream space, even when they are constructed outside of a racist impetus. I imagined that in dream space I was a somehow “neutral” self, but found no such neutrality there. Yet social identity in unfettered dream space need not be seen as a constraint but rather as a way of imagining the racial self unfettered, racialized but not delimited. What I am calling dream space is to my mind the great hopeful space of African American creativity. Imagining a racial future in the black interior that we are constrained to imagine, outside of the parameters of how we are seen in this culture, is the zone where I am interested in African American creativity. “The black interior” is not an inscrutable zone, nor colonial fantasy. Rather, I see it as inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn't, or should be.

As black people we have been bound by mainstream constructions of our “real,” and we have bound ourselves with expectations that we counter those false realities. (6)

This subject position that is “racialized but not delimited” had been anti-

pated by Sterling Brown and Arthur Davis in the thirties, as Deborah Barnes points out. The editors of *The Negro Caravan* had constructed their own version of the *insubordination* of the bluesman, an insubordination that dissented from the prevailing stereotypes of blacks: “In short, [Arthur P.] Davis asks Negroes to acknowledge their interpretive agency and autonomy. He wants them to replace self-alienating, stereotypic perceptions of the Black experience with their own; that is, he wants them to apprehend and evaluate their world from a *subjective perspective*—whatever that is—rather than swallowing whole received knowledge which denigrates Negroes” (992; emphasis added). Whereas the bluesman carries his insubordination into violence toward the community or toward the self as a form of resistance, black intellectuals of the thirties still longed for the “emancipatory” authenticity of the folk form. Thus, *The Negro Caravan* is freighted with folk texts and modern re-creations of folk-rooted insubordination. But Elizabeth Alexander’s theorization represents a further advance in which there is a recognition of the problematic anchoring of the racial “real”: “Many black viewers are looking for ‘positive imagery,’ and while we often need those images, the power of the wish places constraints on what a black artist might feel free to envision and find in that subconscious space” (7–8). To the extent that I have been able, I have attempted to follow the delineation of the struggle between the inner and outer worlds, a study made all the more difficult by the contemporary intellectual culture, which does not condone the search for the consistent, integrated self. This study, then, takes pains to recover the chthonic discourses of negative identity from which the African American poetry of the 1930s emerged.