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Slipping into Darkness: CLA and Black Intellectual Formation

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## Slipping into Darkness: CLA and Black Intellectual Formation

*Dolan Hubbard*

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President's Address Delivered at the Fifty-Sixth Annual Convention and Fifty-Ninth Anniversary of the CLA in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, April 11, 1996

*I never seemed to find Du Bois' name in the books and newspapers  
and magazines that made up my all-American experience of reading.*

—Blyden Jackson

The Negro intellectual—as an intellectual, not merely  
victim or malcontent—is missing from American fiction.

—Sterling A. Brown<sup>1</sup>

**M**y first mentor in a formal sense was the late Joseph N. Patterson (1917-78), professor of education and philosophy, who devoted twenty-seven years of service to Winston-Salem State University. A Florida native who hailed from Palatka, Dr. Pat, unlike his older brother, did not wish to follow in the footsteps of his father, a medical doctor. The young Joseph found his calling when he listened to a spellbinding speech given by the legendary Benjamin Elijah Mays. With eloquence and inspired passion, Mays placed the masters of the Western tradition in a context that made them come alive in the imagination of the first-generation college students. Mays stressed the social gospel of the Bible with an emphasis on responsibility, accountability, and engagement. The lessons he learned from Mays, Dr. Patterson passed on to students, colleagues, and the community through his pastorship of Wentz Memorial United Church of Christ (1948-78).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Blyden Jackson, "The Ring and the Book," *CLA Bulletin* 9 (Spring 1955): 4-5, rpt. *The Waiting Years: Essays on American Negro Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1976) 64; Sterling A. Brown, "A Century of Negro Portraiture in American Literature," *Massachusetts Review* (Winter 1966): 73-96, rpt. *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: Mentor, 1968) 583.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Wagenfeld, "WSSU to Honor 'Dr. Pat' Today," *Winston-Salem Journal* 8 Feb. 1978: 17-18 and "WSSU Educator Dies in Greensboro," *Winston-Salem Chronicle* 11 Feb. 1978:1-2. Also, see Orville Vernon Burton, foreword, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography*, by Benjamin E. Mays (1971): Athens: U of Georgia P, 1987) xl-xli

Through our almost daily talks as we sat on the bench in front of Carolina Hall or walked around campus, to the Red Room, the Faculty Dining Hall, or rode weekly to the Goodwill Bookstore on Coliseum Drive, which formed the foundation of my library, in our spirited conversations on everything from A-Z, Dr. Patterson made me see the Western tradition in a new light, helped me grow intellectually and understand the scholar's enterprise. He stressed that we are the trustees of a vast cultural inheritance. It is one that preceded the first Africans who arrived in the New World at the dawn of the sixteenth century.

I learned the following things from Dr. Patterson: first, do not be a dessert-before-dinner intellectual; secondly, everything is within our purview and we should not exclude any aspect of the human experience because of our color; and thirdly, the challenge before the black scholar is to bring "coloration" to our meditation on history. In other words, we should slip into darkness and make it congruent with our reality. For Dr. Pat and members of his generation, CLA is the "word made flesh," with its emphasis on a pedagogy of inclusion and on humanistic inquiry.

In these few moments, I want to comment on CLA and Black Intellectual Formation. Intellectual formation deals with knowledge production and how people produce meaning. Specifically, I want to discuss CLA as an extension and continuation of a largely invisible intellectual tradition (from the Free Africa Society to the African American Academy), its impact on the profession (the Africanization of American Discourse), and its role in our future (Where do we go from here?).<sup>3</sup> Perhaps CLA's most enduring legacy is that of providing a forum for black scholars to hone their critical skills and to engender a sympathetic but rigorous critique of the works of our creative writers.

### CLA and Black Intellectual Tradition

The College Language Association reflects both the diversity and vibrancy of a rich black American intellectual tradition with roots that extend back to the Free African Society organized by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in Philadelphia on 12 April 1787. The independent Free African Society, the first such body in the United States, was the precursor to the Independent Black Church, organized on 17 July 1791. Soon thereafter black newspapers came into being. Churches and newspapers pushed for abolition of slavery, a proper moral

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<sup>3</sup> Nathan Hare, "The Challenge of the Black Scholar," *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology*, ed. Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 837-41; Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *The American Negro Academy: Voice of the Talented Tenth* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981); and Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) 41-42.

decorum, and always the quest for reading and writing, hence sowing the seeds of an intellectual tradition. The list of people who were influenced by or wrote for the Afro-Protestant press includes Frederick Douglass, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Charlotte Forten Grimke, and Sutton E. Griggs. CLA stands in this tradition of a vibrant African-Americanist discourse.

The energy unleashed by the post-Civil War moral improvement societies, the founding of black colleges, the black women's club movement, and the rise of national civic organizations—with their organs such as *The Crisis* (NAACP), *Opportunity* (Urban League), and activist newspapers such as *The Boston Guardian* and *The Messenger*—gave rise to the New Negro Movement in the first quarter of the twentieth century. In 1916 the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History began publishing the *Journal of Negro History*, under the editorship of Carter G. Woodson; in 1931 the Bureau of Educational Research of Howard University began publishing the *Journal of Negro Education*, edited by Charles H. Thompson; in 1933 Johnson C. Smith University began publishing *The Quarterly Review of Higher Education Among Negroes*, edited by Henry Lawrence McCrorey; in 1940 Atlanta University began publishing *Phylon: A Journal of Race and Culture*, under the editorship of W. E. B. Du Bois. The National Negro Congress, which was organized in 1936, one year before CLA was founded, consisted of more than 500 African-American organizations united in their determination to end the various forms of discrimination and segregation in American society. In short, our birth was another down payment on the promise made by John Brown, Russwurm and Samuel B. Cornish on the front page of the country's first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal* (1827). Their very first issue carried the ringing declaration: "We wish to plead our cause. Too long have others spoken for us."<sup>4</sup>

Founded in 1937 by scholars of English (and later joined by foreign language teachers), CLA is the mother of black American literary organizations. With few exceptions, those who have founded other black American literary organizations are members of CLA. In 1957, the organization launched *The College Language Association Journal (CLAJ)*, now celebrating its 39th year. From its inception, the journal was catholic in its editorial policy, publishing articles that range from the Western tradition and America's Eurocentric heritage to insightful critiques on writers of the African Diaspora and the black intellectual tradition. Some of the most distinguished scholars, black and white, have published in *CLAJ*. Special

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<sup>4</sup> John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 7th ed. (1947; New York: McGraw Hill, 1994) 414-15; Walter C. Daniels, *Black Journals of the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1982); and John B. Russwurm and Samuel B. Cornish, "Too Long Have Others Spoken for Us," *Black Nationalism in America*, ed. John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970) 24-28.

issues of the journal have been devoted to Langston Hughes (1968); Richard Wright (1969); Ralph Ellison (1970, 1974); Gwendolyn Brooks, LeRoi Jones, and Robert Hayden (1973); James Baldwin (1974); Jean Toomer (1974); the Harlem Renaissance (1974); and the International Dimensions of the African Diaspora (1970, 1972, 1976). In her tribute to Professor O'Daniel, Francis M. Alston notes that he made the journal "the foremost repository of black literary studies in the world."<sup>5</sup>

In *Black Writers of America* (1972), Richard Barksdale, our eighteenth president (1973-75), and Keneth Kinnamon describe the first generation of African-American scholar-critics who founded CLA and other black professional organizations:

[O]ut of the Black colleges of the South, there emerged a critical coterie whose members began to provide articulate and perceptive comment on the fiction, poetry, and drama of Black writers. In a sense, Saunders Redding, Arthur Davis, Hugh Gloster [first (1937) and fifth president (1947-49)], Sterling Brown, Melvin Tolson, Nick Aaron Ford [twelfth president (1961-63)], Margaret Just Butcher, Nancy Bullock McGhee, Nathan Scott, and others were literary academicians . . . in the tradition of Alain Locke, who had served so well in giving focus and direction to the Harlem Renaissance. . . Trained in Northern graduate schools, they rigorously applied the critical standards of the white literary establishment. And their incisive criticism bore good fruit, for the Black creative writer came to recognize that [s/he] now had a critical audience.<sup>6</sup>

Foreign language teachers who made an invaluable contribution to the early years of the association included Velaurez B. Spratlin, Mercer Cook, Frank M. Snowden, Milton G. Hardiman, John F. Matheus, John Howard Morrow, Sr., Edward A. Jones (sixth president [1950-52]), W. Napoleon Rivers, Billie Geter

<sup>5</sup> Conceived primarily "as a gathering of teachers [black and white] in the private Negro colleges . . . in the South or along the Eastern Seaboard North to Pennsylvania" (Fowler 7, v), CLA, originally named the Association of Teachers of English in Negro Colleges, gradually expanded to include all teachers of languages and literature at historically black colleges and universities. Later, teachers from historically white colleges and universities joined the organization. For a history of CLA, see the introduction and appendix 2 in Therman B. O'Daniel, *A Twenty-Five-Year Author-Title Cumulative Index to the CLA Journal, 1957-1982* (Baltimore: J. H. Furst Co., 1985) ix-xxx, 132; and Carolyn A. Fowler, *The College Language Association: A Social History* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1988). See also Francis M. Alston, "In Memoriam: A Tribute to Dr. Therman B. O'Daniel, in Behalf of the Zora Neale Hurston Society," *CLAJ* 30.1 (Sept. 1986): 102-03.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon, *Black Writers of America* (New York: Macmillan) 654.

Thomas (ninth president [1956-57]), Albert H. Berrian, and Ruth N. Horry (seventeenth president [1971-73]).<sup>7</sup>

Driven by their belief in a pluralistic America, for which an egalitarian ideal would one day prevail, these architects of African-American scholarship created the moral and intellectual climate that they hoped would lead to the dismantling of American apartheid. They did not invent the African-American conscience; however, they unearthed new configurations of character and intent.

Much of this discussion of CLA's founding must be read against the background of a special literary scene (the New Negro Movement) and in the context of a self-conscious desire to shape black American literature (the growing self-consciousness of the black academy). CLA's founding should also be viewed against the backdrop of an emerging black middle class who, in various forums, raised the following questions: Who are we? What is our relation to American society? What is our relation to blacks in the Diaspora? And where do we go from here?

Excluded from mainstream professional organizations and learned societies, black scholars had to invent their own organizations or go mad. They realized that the life they saved might be their own. Their frustration over their "invisible darkness" was treated in the novels of Nella Larsen, Jesse Fauset, and Ann Petry. Their founding these organizations was congruent with a human desire to be subject in one's own texts rather than be objects in the texts of others.<sup>8</sup>

CLA's very being aided in the development of a diverse *public culture*, with a focus on other ways of seeing and of knowing. CLA eventually prompted a democratic conversation in the academy. For example, CLA members provided much of the energy and muscle that led to the founding of black interests sections in the major professional organizations (e.g., the NCTE Black Caucus and the

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<sup>7</sup> On the contribution of foreign language members to the association, see O'Daniel xx-xxiii, Fowler, Chapters 2-3; Robert P. Smith, Jr., "An Exemplary Life: A Tribute to Will Mercer Cook (1903-1987)," *CLAJ* 31.2 (Dec. 1987): 246-49; and Herman F. Bostick, "A Tribute to Albert H. Berrian (1925-1989)," *CLAJ* 36.2 (Dec. 1992): 240-43.

<sup>8</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the New Middle Class in the United States* (1957; New York: Collier, 1962) and "On the Ambivalence of Negro Intellectuals," *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. August Meier, Elliot Rudwick, and Francis L. Broderick, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971) 115-21. See also Alice Walker, "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1983) 3-14. I borrow the term "invisible darkness" from Larson, who uses it as a *double entendre* to refer to that segment of the population which "grew up unaware of the existence of African American literature" (xi) and to that segment of the literary public which believed that Toomer and Larsen had disappeared without a trace (xii). See Charles R. Larson, *Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen: Invisible Darkness* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993).

MLA Division on Black American Literature and Culture, and the ensuing English Coalition). CLA is now an allied member of the Modern Language Association.<sup>9</sup>

For almost sixty years, CLA members have taught thousands of students from the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe. CLA members have enriched the lives of a veritable who's who of black America (e.g., Lerone Bennett, Martin Luther King, Jr., Toni Morrison, Johnnetta Cole, Ron McNair, Kweisi Mfume, Oprah Winfrey, Trudier Harris, R. Baxter Miller, and Houston A. Baker, Jr., first African-American president of MLA). I should also note that CLA's role in making the Modern Civil Rights Movement and King's Dream a success—the training of the black leadership class—has been largely undervalued, both within and outside our community.

### CLA and the Historic Moment

The central historic moment in the lives of the black and white scholars who founded CLA was a seemingly intractable social formation: American apartheid. Our members not only provided the intellectual impetus for its demise, but they also set in motion the “decentering” of the canon (only it would reach its full flowering in the wake of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Rights Movement). The critic of this transition was Kentucky native Blyden Jackson, our tenth president (1957-59). He was among the first of the academic critics to thematize the buried text of blackness.<sup>10</sup>

The degradation of the African in the West rested upon the assumption of black cultural inferiority or black biological inferiority, or both. Black complexion is viewed as a badge of human inferiority; consequently, blackness had to be suppressed in all of its guises and on all levels. The alienated, objectified *self* revealed in the eyes of the Other produced in the black a “consciousness of inferiority” or

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<sup>9</sup> Recent studies that place CLA in American intellectual history include Fowler; Richard Lloyd-Jones and Andrea A. Lunsford, eds., *The English Coalition Conference: Democracy Through Language* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989); Marianna White Davis, *History of the Black Caucus: The National Council of Teachers of English* (1994); Dolan Hubbard, “Why CLA Still Prospers,” *Black Issues in Higher Education* 25 Aug. 1994: 57; and Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan, introduction, *Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literature* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1994) 3-25. See also R. Baxter Miller, “Black Literary Journals: Issues of Trust,” *Black Issues in Higher Education* 18 May 1995: 38-40.

<sup>10</sup> In “Blyden Jackson and African American Literary Criticism,” I examine in more detail Jackson and the buried text of blackness. See R. Baxter Miller and Barbara Christian, eds., *Critical Methods of the Black United States, 1868-1982* (New York: MLA, forthcoming). In addition to serving as President of the CLA, Jackson also served as Associate Editor of the *CLA Bulletin*, the forerunner to the journal; see Blyden Jackson, *The Waiting Years: Essays on American Negro Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1976), hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as WY, followed by one page number(s).



“zero image.” The loss of subjectivity engendered self-contempt and despondency, thereby undermining black self-confidence in black institutions. Jackson helped inaugurate a new chapter in American intellectual history wherein scholars vigorously began to contest the social construction of race.<sup>11</sup>

Born in Paducah, Kentucky, on 12 October 1910, Jackson earned the Bachelor’s degree at Wilberforce University (1930). Eight years later (1938), he took the Master’s at the University of Michigan, and fourteen years afterwards (1952), the Ph.D. there as well. Prior to returning to his beloved Louisville, at which for eleven years he taught at Madison Junior High School (1934-45), he partook of the ambiance of the Harlem Renaissance while a student at Columbia University (1931). Melvin Tolson was a classmate and Langston Hughes a friend. In the mid-forties, Jackson began his long and distinguished tenure in black higher education: Assistant and Associate Professor of English at Fisk University (1945-54) and Professor of English at Southern University (1954-62), later serving as Dean of the Graduate School (1962-69). Subsequently he became Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (1969-81) as well as Associate Dean of the Graduate School (1973-76) and Special Assistant to the Dean of the Graduate School (1976-81).

Jackson “captivated conference delegates” with his banquet address “The Ring and the Book” delivered at the Fourteenth Annual Convention and Seventeenth Anniversary of CLA in Atlanta in 1954. With glowing admiration, Jackson tells of his intimate encounter with the incomparable W. E. B. Du Bois, whom he describes as “my first literary passion.” With a joyous enthusiasm, he proudly admits that Du Bois was “my idol. I worshipped him. I must have read *The Souls of Black Folk* a dozen times. I never missed ‘As the Crow Flies in the Crisis’” (WY 63-64). Jackson’s joy is soon dashed when he begins to wonder why more people do not know about Du Bois: “I meant everybody—not just the colored people who formed the omnipresent base immediate reality in my world. I never seemed to find Du Bois’ name in the books and newspaper and magazines that made up my all American experience of reading” (WY 64). With a sweet irony, Jackson confesses that he spent a quarter of a century trying “to anatomize my wonder” (WY 64).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This section is informed by the observation of Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984) 109, 119-20, 123, and Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988) 1-28. I borrow the term “zero image” from Carolyn Fowler Gerald, “The Black Writer and His Role,” *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 370-78.

<sup>12</sup> Fowler notes that Jackson was the talk of the convention, for he stole the thunder of the keynote speaker, Dr. Lou LaBrant, President, National Council of Teachers of English and Professor of English at Atlanta University, host institution for the convention (1988: 115, 121-22).



I submit that Jackson is describing his encounter with the twin realities that confront the black scholar: first, a discourse of difference that produces what Baldwin refers to as “the rage of the disesteemed”<sup>13</sup> and secondly, the black scholar’s search for models that are congruent with the transhistorical reality of the black community. Simultaneously, the black scholar finds him- or herself in the unenviable position of having to invent and validate the self. Both the black writer and the black scholar are locked inside a prison house of language, a ring, if you will.

CLA came into existence to confront the dominant *critical ideologies* and literary conventions of criticism which excluded black scholars from the category “critic.”<sup>14</sup> The teachers and scholars who founded CLA set in motion the erasure of an oxymoron of epic proportions: black intellectual.<sup>15</sup> They formulated a criticism of engagement that challenged a critical tradition in which *disinterestedness* was valorized as the desired posture of the critic. From a privileged position, whites speak as disinterested commentators in a supposedly value-free universe. The black scholar’s voice is submerged under the generic heading *other*. For too long, mainstream critics and their black and tan wannabes enforced an “invisible darkness.” Too many still refuse to see the critical worldview of the black scholar as connected to an African-American critical continuum. The modern Western world, as Cain Hope Felder reminds us, has such a difficult time in accepting “the idea that Africa and persons of African descent must be understood as making significant contributions to world civilization as proactive subjects within history.” It is in this sense that architects of the black intellectual tradition such as Alexander Crummell, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Anna Julia Haywood Cooper, and Du Bois must be seen as synecdoches for the invisible community.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” *Notes of a Native Son* (1955; Boston: Beacon, 1984) 165.

<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, Carby notes that black women in the nineteenth century “had to confront the dominant domestic ideologies and literary conventions of womanhood which excluded them from the definition ‘woman.’” See Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford UP) 6, 20-34.

<sup>15</sup> This contradiction was treated in poetry by the poster child of the Harlem Renaissance, Countee Cullen: “Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!” See Dudley Randall, ed., *The Black Poets* (New York: Bantam, 1971) 100.

<sup>16</sup> Cain Hope Felder, gen. ed., introduction, *The Original African Heritage Study Bible* (Nashville: Winston-Derek, 1993) v. Also, see Alfred A. Moss, *The American Negro Academy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981); Mary Helen Washington, introduction, *A Voice from the South, by Anna Julia Cooper* (1892; New York: Oxford UP, 1988) xxvii-liv; and Bell Hooks, “Altars of Sacrifice: Remembering [Jean-Michael] Basquiat,” *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 25-37.

In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois elaborates on the black scholar's confrontation with the buried text of blackness:

The would-be black *savant* was confronted by the paradox that the knowledge his people needed was a twice-told tale to his white neighbors, while the knowledge which would teach the white world was Greek to his own flesh and blood . . . for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people. This waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals . . . has even seemed about to make [black people] ashamed of themselves.<sup>17</sup>

The problem for the black scholar is one of referential crisis. The black scholar finds him- or herself trapped in a signifying system that can substitute one term for another without difference as the community cannot control the sliding of the signifier. To be constantly assigned to the status of object in other people's texts rather than subjects in one's own exerts a downward pressure on members of the community to forget rather than to remember. The ensuing "zero image" causes one to slip out of darkness and be at war with the mother tongue.

We need to heed the message of "Into the Mainstream and Oblivion," by Julian Mayfield (1928-84), whose name is rarely invoked in these days of the declining significance of race. Born in Greer, South Carolina, Mayfield was reared there and in Washington, D.C., where his family migrated when he was ten. After finishing high school, he enlisted in the army, served in the Pacific area, then returned to study at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Widely traveled in the United States, Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean, Mayfield made his mark as a novelist, essayist, and editor. He served as communication aide and speech writer (1962-66) for Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, and as senior political advisor (1971-74) to Guyanese Prime Minister Forbes Burnham. He is the author of three novels: *The Hit* (1957), *The Long Night* (1958), and *The Grand Parade* (1961). Confronted with the continuing burden of grotesque inequality, Mayfield wrote on "the difficulties, and solaces too, of race in America." His cautionary tale is the intellectual equivalent of the canary in the cultural coal mine. He warns those among us who insist on turning our difference into racial profit that we proceed at our own risk, for beyond the dead bird lies the path to social death. If we do

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<sup>17</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Penguin, 1989) 6. Also, see James A. Noel, "Memory and Hope: Toward a Hermeneutic of African American Consciousness," *Journal of Religious Thought* 47.1 (Summer-Fall 1990): 18-28.

not heed the canary in the coal mine, we promote an ethical invisibility and participate in an intellectual redlining of our community.<sup>18</sup>

### Slipping into Darkness

Jackson opened his banquet address with a praisesong in honor of Du Bois and concluded it with a sobering riff on the invisibility blues:

I play this game with myself about Negro literature. I think of what has been written there as the book. I think of the community of belief [i.e., the antihuman intellectual tradition] around the book as the ring. And then I see the ring, tight as it is, encircling the book and constricting it within a pitifully small area. . . . We need to work, in every way we can, at widening the ring. The book cannot really expand unless the ring does also. The Greeks had a River Ocean, which encompassed nothing less than the whole wide world. Our work in this association will never be done until our ring has lost all its boundaries and disappeared finally, into that river. (WY69)<sup>19</sup>

Jackson challenges us to interrogate the social text by raising the following questions: Who decides what or who is let in or kept out of the book? Are we our brothers and sisters gatekeepers? Who decides what constitutes the beautiful and the sublime? Our notion of aesthetics is intimately tied up with our notion of humanity. As a result of black people not being viewed as human by the authors

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<sup>18</sup> Julian Mayfield, "Into the Mainstream and Oblivion," *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America*, ed. James A. Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross (New York: The Free Press, 1968) 557-61. Originally published next to Arthur P. Davis' contrasting essay, "Integration and Race Literature," in the American Society of African Culture's booklet entitled *The American Negro Writer and His Roots* (1960), Mayfield's essay "anticipates a decade of insistence by American black men that the varied preciousness of their group identity be publicly recognized and turned into racial profit" (556). See also Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), and John Brown Childs, "Afro-American Intellectuals and the People's Culture," *Theory and Society* 13 (1984): 69-90.

<sup>19</sup> A magnificent series of analyses, from varying viewpoints, of a central event, Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69) tells of the murder in Rome, during the Renaissance, of a young wife, Pompilia, by her arrogant, worthless, ratlike husband, Guido Franceschini. The "book" is an old parchment-covered volume telling the story of the case, which Browning (1812-89) had picked up in Italy; the "ring" is the symbol of Browning's attempted achievement of a perfect circle of truth through the telling of the story in 21,116 lines from all possible points of view. See Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69; New York: Norton, 1961). Also, see L. M. Findlay, "Taking the Measure of Difference: Deconstruction and *The Ring and the Book*," *Victorian Poetry* 29.4 (Winter 1991): 401-14.

of the book, this produces pressure on the black scholar to transcend blackness, to slip out of darkness and “enter into the mainstream and oblivion.”<sup>20</sup>

Jackson also notes that the ring is a metaphor for containment and constriction. It signifies that blacks are excluded from certain kinds of opportunities and certain kinds of knowledge; they are perpetually consigned to unequal development. They are not viewed as contributing in any meaningful way to knowledge production. It is because they are trapped inside the ring, providing physical labor and/or raw materials for other people’s texts, that produces the haunting song our ancestors came to sing:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child;  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child—  
A 1-o-n-g w-a-y-y from home.

In “Black and Blue,” Louis Armstrong provides the interior coordinates to this lamentation when he unlayers the theological transgression that lies at the heart of our dilemma as Africans *in* but not *of* the West: “It’s my skin that’s my sin.” In the midst of their troubled ambivalence, our founders laid the groundwork for a criticism that bears witness to the richness and vibrancy of a cultural tradition that is rooted in the material conditions of black life in the New World. Many of their students would lead the fight for a black aesthetic; that is, their students promoted a criticism that is *with* and not *against* itself. It is a criticism of affirmation rather than a criticism of negation. Following the North Star of their imagination, they slipped into darkness and saw how beautiful they are. These prophets for a new day showed us that Africans were people before Western criticism was born, and our peoplehood is more sacred than any criticism can be. Criticism was made for people, not people for criticism.

As we move into the twenty-first century, I ask you will our literary engagement with blackness be altered? Will blackness come to *mean* differently; will it acquire new significations? As the world hurtles on toward the new millennium, will the American idea of blackness gradually become an elegiac exercise? Will we see the emergence of “symbolic blackness”? Will we dress up and become “symbolically

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<sup>20</sup> On 3 April 1996, Ron H. Brown (1941-96), the first African-American Secretary of Commerce and 34 others, including many business executives, died when their military airplane crashed into a mountainside two miles from the Croatian city of Dubrovnik. Though he saw himself as a world-class talent, and rightly so, Brown always traveled with the knowledge that many in white America would not allow him to escape the ring of race. With head unbowed, he drew upon his African-American heritage as a source of strength and pride. See Steven A. Holmes, “Remembering Ron Brown: So Visible, but from Which Angle?” *New York Times* 7 April 1996: Section 4: 1,4.

black” on national talk shows that discuss issues of race and on certain occasions such as Kwanzaa and Martin Luther King Day? At these moments of self-indulgent gratification, we can luxuriate in our *pigment-ecstasy* before the clock strikes midnight. Intellectuals without portfolio, some of us will purport to speak for the black community without any meaningful, structural accountability to the community.<sup>21</sup> As we ponder these issues, profound questions must arise about our avowedly humanistic values, about race, gender, and the underclass, and about subjectivity itself. To wit, are we scholars who are black or are we blacks who are scholars? For all of his troubled ambivalence, Jackson knows that the academy, indeed, American society, must come to grips with the African in the West, with the buried text of blackness.

Let me be clear: I am not advocating a critical chauvinism—one that promotes a narrowly defined concept of blackness in the New World. I follow the lead of Joseph Patterson and Blyden Jackson and insist that all is within our purview. Catholic in their outlook, they accept it as a given that we are influenced and inspired by the Western tradition. Our community has a tradition of blending discrete sources to create new ways of seeing and of knowing. The larger issue is one of respect and reciprocity. Reduced to its lowest common denominator, Africans in the Diaspora cite scholars from the Other World in their works, while observing that this intellectual protocol is largely unreturned in kind. Bereft of the intellectual currency that is supposed to take place in the marketplace of ideas, many black scholars succumb to the referential crisis; consequently, they slip out of darkness.

In the midst of his despair [sic], Jackson provides us with another way out of the restrictive social text of racism and difference. In his narrative, the River Ocean is a metaphor for Art. Art functions as the mediator between the contradictory aspects of life as symbolized by the ring. A hinge is to a gate as a ring is to a book. Both are necessary if the gate or book is to be opened and closed. Art enables people to transform a hostile world into one whose face is sympathetic to their reference community, while acting as a gateway that touches the human in all of us. It is when we begin to offer up a critique of a suffocating social text that the criticism of the disesteemed overflows us, which the ring is designed to keep down, hold in place.

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<sup>21</sup> I borrow “symbolic ethnicity” from Herbert Gans, who discusses this concept in the context of ethnic groups whose Americanness is constantly being challenged. See Herbert Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America,” *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Riesman*, ed. Herbert Gans et al. (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1979) 193-220. Also, see Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan 3-25. “Symbolic representation” is a leitmotif in Manning Marable, *Beyond Black and White: Transforming African-American Politics* (London: Verso, 1995) 101, 125-26, 188-89.

A familiar critique of CLA is that the founders were too accepting of the critical values of the white world. While this observation has some merit, it begs an even larger question. What if there had been no CLA? Over the course of its almost sixty-year history CLA has helped (1) to alter the perception of the black scholar as ill-trained and not worthy of academic citizenship, (2) to provide the black writer with a sympathetic audience, (3) to lay the foundation for a heightened African-American consciousness and to lead the move to decentering the canon, (4) to provide the impetus for black interest sections in other national professional organizations, (5) to train the black leadership class, (6) to nurture the many doctoral students who attend our annual conventions, and (7) to play an influential role in the intellectual work of nations.

Over the course of its almost sixty-year history, CLA has helped alter the debate—the terms of what we mean by humanist—as it has provided a criticism of reference for both black writers and critics as well as for the community of scholars, domestic and international. In short, CLA has humanized the profession.<sup>22</sup> The force of history demanded a greater focus on the color of criticism and the criticism of color which we read in the pages of *CLAJ*. In this regard, CLA reflects Dr. Pat's project.

Because we have been instrumental in widening the ring and expanding the book, CLA has added a new chapter in American intellectual history. Along with the church, civic and fraternal organizations, CLA (especially in its first three decades), was an important area of life outside the family where African Americans enjoyed freedom. At its annual conventions and in the pages of the journal, black academics proved their worth as scholars, in spite of the restraints of a segregated society. Guided by spunk and a solid gold collegiality, CLA carved out a place for itself in the intellectual economy. It plowed the ground and paved the way for the new black intellectuals.

The remarks of Frederick Douglass, who found “complexional institutions” extremely problematic, ring as true now as they did when he delivered them to the African Americans of the District of Columbia assembled in the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church on the day of interment of the assassinated twentieth President of the United States, James Abram Garfield (1831-81), in Lake View Cemetery, Cleveland, Ohio: “We are here not merely as American citizens but as colored American citizens. . . . Our relation to the American people makes us in

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<sup>22</sup> Though never acknowledged, the bold presence of CLA informs Houston A. Baker's influential essay “Discovering America: Generational Shifts, Afro American Literary Criticism, and the Study of Expressive Culture.” See Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984) 64-112.

some sense a peculiar class, and unless we speak separately, our voice is not heard.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, we are here not merely as American scholars but as black scholars. Our peculiar history endows us to speak for a community handicapped by the arbitrary sign of skin color used to exclude it from mainstream discourse.

Standing on the doorstep to the twenty-first century and over halfway toward our first century, we should be mindful that our existence as an association is both personal and objective. It is personal because our ancestors were brought to America against their will. They utilized a dialectic of accommodation and resistance as they struggled to maintain human dignity. Our moral voice comes from *remembering* their trials and triumphs. We are charged with telling the history behind the history and revealing the complexities of the black experience in the New World. At our best, we have, on occasion, met Du Bois’ challenge that the “Talented Tenth” become an intellectual clearinghouse and strategy center for blacks in America.

Our mission in this association is also an objective enterprise. As black scholar-critics, we must remain sensitive to how we construct knowledge and how we frame meaning and inscribe value. We have taken the Western tradition and reconceptualized it within the structural affinities of Africans in the Diaspora. As a unified intellectual community, we work to break the chains of white cultural hegemony, push to desegregate the academy, and advocate the democratization of knowledge.

Our challenge in this association is to articulate what Baldwin calls the “rich confusion” produced by our cultural tradition, to develop a criticism that is *with* and not *against* itself, and to intelligently examine our comparative American identities.<sup>24</sup> The progressive scholar must translate this tradition into critical texts and convert them into the rainbow of the composite American experience. In Jackson’s closing statement, the River Ocean occupies this symbolic space. In another context, Zora Neale Hurston refers to Art as “a crayon enlargement

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<sup>23</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times*, rev. ed. (1892; New York: Collier Macmillan, 1962) 476. On Douglass’ distaste for “complexional institutions,” see Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass* (1948; New York: Atheneum, 1970) 108, and Waldo E. Martin 100-02.

<sup>24</sup> James Baldwin, “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American,” *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dell, 1961) 22.



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of life,” for it reminds us of our limitless potential.<sup>25</sup> Whether in the world of the Greeks or the world of a black child coming of age in segregated central Florida, the finite (the ring) cannot hold the infinite (the river). To widen the ring and expand the book, we must make the journey back and admit the black, female, and gaycodes from the underground. To the extent that we illuminate the complexity of the multicolored and multitextual American reality as well as illuminate the representation of blackness and whiteness in the West, we maintain a fidelity to the transhistorical concerns of our community. In short, we restore the critical, darkened eye as we slip into darkness and give birth to brightness.

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<sup>25</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; New York: Harper Perennial, 1990) 48. See also Hortense J. Spillers, “Introduction: Who Cuts the Border? Some Readings on ‘America,’” in Spillers, ed., *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 1-25.

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