

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe. . . . I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination. . . .

RALPH ELLISON, *INVISIBLE MAN* 3 (1980) (1952).

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Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination

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At the end of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Edgar Allan Poe describes the last two days of an extraordinary journey:

"March 21st—A sullen darkness now hovered above us—but from out the milky depths of the ocean a luminous glare arose, and stole up along the bulwarks of the boat. We were nearly overwhelmed by the white ashy shower which settled upon us and upon the canoe, but melted into the water as it fell. . . .

"March 22d—The darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before us. Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal *Tekeli-li!* as they retreated from our vision. Hereupon Nu-Nu stirred in the bottom of the boat; but upon touching him, we found his spirit departed. And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow."

They have been floating, Pym and Peters and the native, Nu-Nu, on a warm, milk-white sea under a "white ashy shower." The black man dies, and the boat rushes on through the white curtain behind which a white giant rises up. After that, there is nothing. There is no more narrative. Instead there is a scholarly note, explanation, and an anxious, piled-up "conclusion." The latter states that it was *whiteness* that terrified the natives and killed Nu-Nu. The following inscription was carved into the walls of the chasms the travelers passed through: "I have graven it in within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock!"

No early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe. And no image is more telling than the one just described: the visualized but somehow closed and unknowable white form that rises from the mists at the end of the journey—or, at any rate, at the end of the narration proper. The images of the white curtain and the "shrouded human figure" with skin "the perfect whiteness of the snow" both occur after the narrative has encountered blackness. The first white image seems related to the erasure and erasure of the serviceable and serving black figure, Nu-Nu. Both are figurations of impenetrable whiteness that surface in American literature whenever an Africanist presence is engaged. These closed white images are found frequently, but not always, at the end of the narrative. They appear so often and in such particular circumstances that they give

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pause. They clamor, it seems, for an attention that would yield the meaning that lies in their positioning, their repetition, and their strong suggestion of paralysis and incoherence; of impasse and non-sequitur.

These images of impenetrable whiteness need contextualizing to explain their extraordinary power, pattern, and consistency. Because they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing. This haunting, a darkness from which our early literature seemed unable to extricate itself, suggests the complex and contradictory situation in which American writers found themselves during the formative years of the nation's literature.

Young America distinguished itself by, and understood itself to be, pressing toward a future of freedom, a kind of human dignity believed unprecedented in the world. A whole tradition of "universal" yearnings collapsed into that well-fondled phrase, "the American Dream." Although this immigrant dream deserves the exhaustive scrutiny it has received in the scholarly disciplines and the arts, it is just as important to know what these people were rushing from as it is to know what they were hastening to. If the New World fed dreams, what was the Old World reality that whetted the appetite for them? And how did that reality caress and grip the shaping of a new one?

The flight from the Old World to the New is generally seen to be a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility. Although, in fact, the escape was sometimes an escape from license—from a society perceived to be unacceptably permissive, ungodly, and undisciplined—for those fleeing for reasons other than religious ones, constraint and limitation impelled the journey. All the Old World offered these immigrants was poverty, prison, social ostracism, and, not infrequently, death. There was of course a clerical, scholarly group of immigrants who came seeking the adventure possible in founding a colony for, rather than against, one or another mother country or fatherland. And of course there were the merchants, who came for the cash.

Whatever the reasons, the attraction was of the "clean slate" variety, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not only to be born again but to be born again in new clothes, as it were. The new setting would provide new raiments of self. This second chance could even be made more gleaming by the constraint, dissatisfaction, and turmoil left behind. It was a promise genuinely promising. With luck and endurance one could discover freedom, a way to make God's law manifest; or end up rich as a prince. The desire for freedom, freedom from oppression; a yearning for God's law is born of the detestation of human loss and corruption; the glamor of riches is in thrall to poverty, hunger, and debt.

There was very much more in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to make a trip worth the risk. The habit of genuflection would be replaced by the thrill of coming to power—control of one's own destiny—would replace the powerlessness felt before the gates of class, caste, and cunning persecution. One could move from discipline and punishment to disciplining and punishing; from social ostracism to social rank. One could be released from a useless, binding, repulsive past into a kind of history-lessness, a blank page waiting to be inscribed. Much was to be written there: noble impulses were made manifest and appropriated for a national tradition; base ones, learned and elaborated in the past and rejecting homeland, were also made into law and appropriated for tradition.

The body of literature produced by the young nation is one way it inscribed its transactions with these fears, forces, and hopes. And it is difficult to read the literature of young America without being struck by how antithetical it is to our modern rendition of the American Dream. How pronounced in it is the absence of that term's elusive mixture of hope, realism, materialism, and promise. For a people who made much of their "newness"—their potential, freedom, and innocence—it is striking how dour, how troubled, how frightened and haunted our early and founding literature truly is.

We have words and labels for this haunting—"gothic," "romantic," "sermonic," "Puritan"—whose sources are to be found in the literature of the world these immigrants left. But the strong affinity between the nineteenth-century American psyche and gothic romance has rightly been much remarked. Why should a young country repelled by Europe's moral and social disorder, swooning in a fit of desire and rejection, devote its talents to reproducing in its own literature the typology of diabolism it wanted to leave behind? An answer to that seems fairly obvious: one way to benefit from the lessons of earlier mistakes and past misfortune is to record them so as to prevent their repetition through exposure and inoculation.

Romance was the form in which this uniquely American prophylaxis could be played out. Long after the movement in Europe, romance remained the cherished expression of young America. What was there in American romanticism that made it so attractive to Americans as a battle plain on which to fight, engage, and imagine their demons?

It has been suggested that romance is an evasion of history (and thus perhaps attractive to a people trying to evade the recent past). But I am more persuaded by arguments that find in it the head-on encounter with very real, pressing historical forces and the contradictions inherent in them as they came to be experienced by writers. Romance, an exploration of anxiety imported from the shadows of European culture, made possible the sometimes safe and other times risky embrace of quite specific, understandably human, fears: Americans' fear of being outcast, of failings of powerlessness; their fear of boundarylessness, of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; their fear of the absence of so-called civilization; their fear of loneliness, of aggression both external and internal. In short, the terror of human freedom—the thing they coveted most of all. Romance offered writers not less but more; not a narrow a-historical canvas but a wide historical one; not escape but engagement. For young America it had everything: nature as subject matter, a system of symbolism, a thematics of the search for self-valorization and validation—above all, the opportunity to conquer fear imaginatively and to quiet deep insecurities. It offered platforms for moralizing and fabulation, and for the imaginative entertainment of violence, to plume incredibility, and terror—and terror's most significant, overweening ingredient: darkness, with all the connotative value it awakened.

There is no romance free of what Herman Melville called "the power of blackness," especially not in a country in which there was a resident population, already black, upon which the imagination could play; through which historical, moral, metaphysical, and social problems, and dichotomies could be articulated. The slave population, it could be assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom: its lure and its elusiveness. This black population was available for meditation on the terror—the terror of European outcasts, their dread of failure, powerlessness, Nature's limits, natal loneliness, internal aggression, evil, sin, greed. In other words, the black population was understood to have offered itself up for reflections on human problems in terms other than the abstractions of human potential and the rights of man. In ways in which artists—and the society that bred them—transferred internal conflicts

to a "blank darkness," to conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies, is a major theme in American literature. The rights of man, for example, an organizing principle upon which the nation was founded, was inevitably yoked to Africanism. Its history, its origin is permanently allied with another seductive concept: the hierarchy of race. As the sociologist Orlando Patterson has noted, we should not be surprised that the Enlightenment could accommodate slavery; we should be surprised if it had not. The concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery.

Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American. (There also exists, of course, a European Africanism with a counterpart in colonial literature.)

What I wish to examine is how the image of reined-in, bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness became objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona. I want to show how the duties of that persona—duties of exorcism and reification and mirroring—are on demand and on display throughout much of the literature of the country and helped to form the distinguishing characteristics of a proto-American literature.

Earlier I said that cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation's literature, and that what seemed to be on the "mind" of the literature of the United States was the self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man. Emerson's call for that new man in "The American Scholar" indicates the deliberateness of the construction, the conscious necessity for establishing difference. But the writers who responded to this call, accepting or rejecting it, did not look solely to Europe to establish reference for difference. There was a very theatrical difference underfoot. Writers were able to celebrate or deplore an identity already existing or rapidly taking a form that was elaborated through racial difference. That difference provided a huge payout of sign, symbol, and agency in the process of organizing, separating, and consolidating identity along culturally valuable lines of interest.

Bernard Bailyn has provided us with an extraordinary investigation of European settlers in the act of becoming Americans. I want to quote a rather long passage from his *Voyagers to the West* because it underscores the salient aspects of the American character I have been describing:

"William Dunbar, seen through his letters and diary, appears to be more fictional than real—creature of William Faulkner's imagination, a more cultivated Colonel Sutpen but no less mysterious. He too, like that strange character in *Absalom! Absalom!*, was a man in his early twenties who appeared suddenly in the Mississippi wilderness to stake out a claim to a large parcel of land, then disappeared to the Caribbean, to return leading a battalion of 'wild' slaves with whose labor alone he built an estate where before there had been nothing but trees and uncultivated soil. But he was more complex than Sutpen, if no less driving in his early ambitions, no less a progenitor of a notable southern family, and no less a part of a violent biracial world whose tensions could lead in strange directions. For this wilderness planter was a scientist, who would later correspond with Jefferson on science and exploration, a Mississippi planter whose contributions to the American Philosophical Society (to which Jefferson proposed him for membership) included linguistics, archaeology, hydrostatics, astronomy, and climatology, and whose geographical explorations were reported in widely known publications. Like Sutpen an exotic figure in the plantation world

of early Mississippi—known as 'Sir' William just as Sutpen was known as 'Colonel'—he too imported into that raw, half-savage world the niceties of European culture: not chandeliers and costly rugs, but books, surveyor's equipment of the finest kind, and the latest instruments of science.

"Dunbar was a Scot by birth, the youngest son of Sir Archibald Dunbar of Morayshire. He was educated first by tutors at home, then at the university in Aberdeen, where his interest in mathematics, astronomy, and belles-lettres took mature shape. What happened to him after his return home and later in London, where he circulated with young intellectuals, what propelled, or led, him out of the metropolis on the first leg of his long voyage west is not known. But whatever his motivation may have been, in April 1771, aged only twenty-two, Dunbar appeared in Philadelphia. . . .

"Ever eager for gentility, this well-educated product of the Scottish enlightenment and of London's sophistication—this bookish young *litterateur* and scientist who, only five years earlier, had been corresponding about scientific problems—about 'Dean Swifts beatitudes,' about the 'virtuous and happy life,' and about the Lord's commandment that mankind should 'love one another'—was yet strangely insensitive to the suffering of those who served him. In July 1776 he recorded not the independence of the American colonies from Britain, but the suppression of an alleged conspiracy for freedom by slaves on his own plantation. . . .

"Dunbar, the young *erudit*, the Scottish scientist and man of letters, was no sadist. His plantation regime was, by the standards of the time, mild; he clothed and fed his slaves decently, and frequently relented in his more severe punishments. But 4,000 miles from the sources of culture, alone on the far periphery of British civilization where physical survival was a daily struggle, where ruthless exploitation was a way of life, and where disorder, violence, and human degradation were commonplace, he had triumphed by successful adaptation. Endlessly enterprising and resourceful, his finer sensibilities dulled by the abrasions of frontier life, and feeling within himself a sense of authority and autonomy he had not known before, a force that flowed from his absolute control over the lives of others, he emerged a distinctive new man, a borderland gentleman, a man of property in a raw, half-savage world."¹

Let me call attention to some elements of this portrait, some pairings and interdependencies that are marked in the story of William Dunbar. First is the historical connection between the Enlightenment and the institution of slavery—the rights of man and his enslavement. Second, we have the relationship between Dunbar's education and his New World enterprise. The education he had was exceptionally cultivated: it included the latest thought on theology and science, an effort perhaps to make them mutually accountable, to make one support the other. He is not only a "product of the Scottish enlightenment" but a London intellectual as well. He read Jonathan Swift, discussed the Christian commandment to love one another, and is described as "strangely" insensitive to the suffering of his slaves. On July 12, 1776, he records with astonishment and hurt surprise a slave rebellion on his plantation: "Judge my surprise. . . . Of what avail is kindness & good usage when rewarded by such ingratitude." "Constantly bewildered," Bailyn goes on, "by his slaves' behavior. . . [Dunbar] recovered two runaways and 'condemned them to receive 500 lashes each on five different times, and to carry a chain & log fixt to the ancle.'"

Let me take this to be a succinct portrait of the process by which the American as new, white, and male was constituted. It is a formation with at least four desirable consequences, all of which are referred to in Bailyn's summation of Dunbar's character and located in how Dunbar felt "within himself." Let me repeat: "a sense of authority and autonomy he had not known before, a force that flowed from his absolute control over the lives of others, he emerged a distinctive new man, a borderland gentleman, a man of property in a raw, half-savage world." A power, a sense of freedom, he had not known before. But what had he

known before? Fine education, London sophistication, theological and scientific thought. None of these, one gathers, could provide him with the authority and autonomy that Mississippi planter life did. Also this sense is understood to be a force that flows, already present and ready to spill as a result of his "absolute control over the lives of others." This force is not a willed domination, a thought-out, calculated choice, but rather a kind of natural resource, a Niagara Falls waiting to drench Dunbar as soon as he is in a position to assume absolute control. Once he has moved into that position, he is resurrected as a new man, a distinctive man—a different man. And whatever his social status in London, in the New World he is a gentleman. More gentle, more man. The site of his transformation is within rawness: he is backgrounded by savagery.

I want to suggest that these concerns—autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power—not only become the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but that each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity.

Note

1. Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), pp. 488–492.

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Transparently White Subjective Decisionmaking: Fashioning a Legal Remedy

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Goodson, Badwin & Indiff is a major accounting firm employing more than five hundred persons nationwide. Among its twenty black accountants is Yvonne Taylor, who at the time this story begins was thirty-one years old and poised to become the first black regional supervisor in the firm's history. Yvonne attended Princeton University and received an M.B.A. from the Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University. While employed at Goodson, she was highly successful in attracting new clients, especially from the black business community. In all other respects her performance at the firm was regarded as exemplary.

Yvonne always was comfortable conforming to the norms of the corporate culture at Goodson, and in fact had been comfortable with "white" norms since childhood. Her manner of speech, dress, and hairstyle, as well as many of her attitudes and beliefs, fell well within the bounds of whites' cultural expectations. However, Yvonne may have adapted to the corporate culture *too* well. It is common practice at Goodson to be less than absolutely precise in keeping records of one's billable hours. Instead, accountants generally estimate time spent on clients' accounts at the end of each day, and tend to err on the side of over- rather than underbilling. On the rare occasions this practice is discussed, it is explained in terms of the firm's prestige in the business community; the idea is that clients should consider themselves fortunate to be associated with Goodson at all. Like other young accountants, Yvonne at first attempted to keep meticulous records, but she soon realized others were surpassing her in billable hours without spending more time actually at work. Contentiously, and consistent with her general pattern of conforming to prevailing norms, she gradually adopted the less precise method.

Under Goodson's promotion procedure, the decision whether to promote an accountant to regional supervisor rests on senior partners' evaluations of the candidate's accounting knowledge and skills and, to a lesser extent, on assessments of her interpersonal skills solicited from clients and from peers in the office. The reports on Yvonne's accounting skills were uniformly excellent. Comments from some peers had overtones of distance and mild disapproval, suggesting that they were somewhat uncomfortable with Yvonne as a black

1. "Fashioning a Title VII Remedy for Transparently White Subjective Decisionmaking," 104 YALE L.J. 2009 (1994). Originally published in the *Yale Law Journal*. Reprinted by permission of The Yale Law Journal Company and Fred B. Rothman & Company.