African American: Crisis in Identity

In “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” the first chapter of W.E.B. Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk, the identity crisis of African Americans is described as a culture torn between two worlds and strangled by the division of self:

...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness...One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longling to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. (McKelly 1)

The purpose of my journal is to explore the “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (1) to trace the footsteps along the path of “self-conscious manhood” (1) and witness the merging of the African who is also American into the double self-identity of African American. I want to recognize if there is any reconciliation happening in their “unreconciled strivings” (1) and recognize both the evolution and involvement of their voice. Although a depth of conflicting identities - ranging from passive acceptance to militant defiance - span the psychological framework of the African American writer, the voice grows louder with every poem published, every book written, and every speech heard. What are their messages?

This journal will not only trace some of the integral layers that empower the “message for the world” (1) but also clarify the purpose and scope of their message: is it one of emergence “into his double self” (1), or is it one of separation, or is it a combination of both? With that in mind, my journal will focus on the emerging African American identity from the Harlem Renaissance period through the Civil Rights Movement: 1919 through 1969. Over this fifty-year period, I hope to mirror the duality of the African American vision, to recognize their protest against “being cursed and spit upon by his fellows...and having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (1) and to honor their dream of “longing to attain self-conscious manhood” (1).

Like Langston Hughes’ poem “A Dream Deferred,” the duality of the African American identity remains deferred: “Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load. / Or does it explode?” (Heffernan 596). Hughes’ dream for identity “sags” (596) with the stifled and “heavy load” (596) of the dominant society’s culture imposed upon them, while the subdued, separate, African-based, history-bound identity — what was sometimes referred to as the “New Negro” — has the potential to “explode” (596) like a bomb. Hughes poses the question “What happens to a dream deferred?” (596) in an effort to define the African American. In other words, “Who is he? Is he a product of enculturation, or is his identity exploding into a new self?”

The duplicity of the African Americans are like two worlds colliding: one world revolves around history and the other world spins out of control, unformed, unshaped by “unreconciled strivings” (McKelly 1) — still forming and still shaping — that someday might perpetuate a valid oneness. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. said “I have a dream that one day...” (Barkdale 872) meaning that day is yet to come. Likewise, the University of Georgia Press states 38 years later how the “civil rights movement continues its positive influences on people’s lives, but...has not yet been fully realized” (University 1). Again, that day is yet to come. Another echoing of yet to come is in the poem “Birmingham Sunday: (September 15, 1963)” by Langston Hughes in which he states: “Four little girls / Might be awakened someday soon / By songs upon the breeze / As yet unfelt among / Magnolia trees” (Hughes 200). The terms “might be” (201), “someday soon” (201), and “yet unfelt” (201) denote uncertain possibilities.

James C. McKelly poses the same dichotomy as Hughes’ “A Dream Deferred” in dissecting the consciousness of the African American: “Which of two competing allegiances does one serve? One’s loyalty to the black community...Or one’s duty to one’s own future, irrevocably linked to the esteem of a majority culture violently inimical to the minority community of which one is a part?” (1). The two worlds collide resulting in a confused, “polarized crisis of identity” (1). The two worlds of the African American are close and connected as African + American; however, the two worlds are also distant and disconnected as one presently living in the American culture + one trying to connect with the past. A collision of the two worlds was inevitable, especially during the turbulent ’60’s with war, riots, civil unrest, bus boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, bombings, assassinations, and desegregation. The stirring of the political and social scene brewed unrest like a crucible in every aspect of American life, especially African American life.

The journal is written with a sharp focus on this inevitable collision of the two worlds during the turbulent 1960’s. The first section of the journal is a Timeline of important social and literary events to fully appreciate the African American struggle. History is their borrowed conscience that splits into two paths: one perpetuates the urgency toward separation and the other dares to assimilate. The timeline will effectively help you visualize the growth of the African American writer amidst the tug and pull of social and political unrest.

Sections II, III, IV, and V are written through a careful and critical analysis of Abraham Chapman’s Black Voices: An Anthology of African American Literature. Section II, New Negro Renaissance, mentions the writers of the period with particular emphasis on Countee Cullen whose wavering definition of the black artist reflects the theme of my journal. He struggles with his own identity and the paradoxical formula for what it means to be an African American. The Section III, Hurdles, examines the obstacles and struggles that the African American writer had to face. Section IV, Protest or Problem Literature? explains the psychology of the African American. Section V, W.E.B. DuBois and the Black Man’s Struggle, further examines the psychology of the African American and racial consciousness. Sections VI, VII, and VIII separate the African American racial consciousness into three levels: Lost Identity, New Identity, and Double Identity. Section IX Web Sides that perpetuate their dream of freedom, respect, and equality. Section X, Responses, is about Gwendolyn Brooks’ poetic responses to the 1965 brutal murder of Emmett Till. Section XI is a biographical unveiling of Maya Angelou whose life and poetry best parallel the duality of the African American. Her double life is a reflection of the mysterious identity crisis that plague African American writers.

In selecting the pieces for the journal, I focused on two criteria: time frame and message. The time frame spans from 1919 to 1969: however, my focus is the 1960’s Civil Rights Movement and the choir of voices crying “Who am I?” and “Where Do I Fit In?” I also mention Song of Solomon by the contemporary writer, Toni Morrison. Some of the messages are subtle while others are more militant. As far as the writers, I do not separate the selections by gender assuming that their underlying motives for creating the piece, whether it is a play, a novel, a poem, an essay, or a speech, were the same. Simply put, my focus is on the African American person’s identity in tandem regardless of gender.
In referring to African Americans, I sometimes use the term “black.” In researching the literature, I found the terms interchangeable and commonly mixed. Black writers often referred to themselves as “negroes,” “blacks,” “Afro Americans,” “the Race” (Newspapers 1), or, the current term, “African Americans.” This is one more piece of the puzzle in their identity crisis in response to “Who am I?” and “Where do I fit in?”

By writing this journal, I hope to understand the African American writers as they formed new allegiances to themselves, their heritage, and their tomorrows. From Garveyism to the tumultuous world of the Civil Rights Movement, with all of its volatile eruptions and empowering voices lending force as if a catapult, to the Black Power movement of Malcolm X, their messages increase in volition, intensity, pride, and fierce determination. The civil unrest and major uprisings throughout the nation during the Civil Rights Movement created an infectious outpour of literature as if it was a mounting fever pacing itself against time. African Americans refused to be left out; as a result, the white face of America changed dramatically during this time. With this change, the dreams of the African American became songs for self-discovery against a dominant culture’s agitating and defining embrace keeping them “crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination…tangnished in the corners of American society” (King 616). Their hopes and dreams – their songs of self-discovery – are set in verse through poems, essays, plays, novels, autobiographies, and speeches. It was a musical birth of a new identity, but what exactly is that new identity? Is it a separate, African identity or a product of enculturalization? Or, is it a combination of both?

Section I: Timeline
(from Literature and Its Times Vol. 3 & 4 and African American Literature)

In order to appreciate the scope of the African American literary movement, this timeline provides a visualization of their literary and political progress against the backdrop of race riots, assassinations, bus boycotts, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s passive resistance, Malcolm X’s separatism, wars, and Black Power. Not all of these entries will be examined in my journal; however, several items should be noted. For example, in 1925 the New Negro is born; in 1930 the Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching is founded, in 1943 there are race riots in Harlem, in 1954 Brown vs Board of Education outlaws school segregation, Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on a bus to a white man while, at the same time, Emmett Till is murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman. However, in the 1960’s, Americans are engulfed in the flames of heated hostilities such as college students vs the establishment, hippies vs Vietnam, or women striking for an end to nuclear weapons testing. Despite these politically aroused events, the black writer is being published and honored such as the 1968 National Endowment of the Arts sponsoring a team of Negro and white poets to


Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die” and Home to Harlem are published.

Marcus Garvey starts “Black Star” shipping line for trade between black Americans and Africans

Black WWI Veterans Parade in New York City

“Red Summer” – race riots in Chicago, Washington, and 18 other cities

83 recorded lynchings

1920 Harlem Renaissance flourishes in New York City.

F. Scott Fitzgerald publishes This Side of Paradise – helps usher in glamour of the Jazz Age

61 recorded lynchings

1921 Shuffle Along opens, starring Josephine Baker. 64 recorded lynchings

64 recorded lynchings

1922 James Weldon Johnson’s The Book of American Negro Poetry is published.

Claude McKay’s Harlem Shadows is published.

57 recorded lynchings

1923 Jean Toomer’s Cane is published.

33 recorded lynchings

1924 Paul Robeson appears in All God’s Chillun Got Wings.

Ku Klux Klan membership reaches 4.5 million.

16 recorded lynchings
1925  Countee Cullen’s *Color* is published.

Radio show Amos ‘n’ Andy is introduced into radio.

The New Negro ushers in a new age.

17 recorded lynchings

1926  Langston Hughes’ *The Weary Blues* is published.

30 recorded lynchings

1927  James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones* is published.

Langston Hughes’ *Fine Clothes to the Jew* is published.

Duke Ellington plays at the Harlem Cotton Club.

Countee Cullen’s *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* and *Copper Sun* are published.

Garvey is deported.

16 recorded lynchings

1928  Oscar DePriest becomes Chicago’s congressman.

Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* is published; first best seller by a black author; won the Harmon Foundation Gold Medal Award for Literature

11 recorded lynchings

1929  October 29 – “Black Monday” – Stock market crash

Great Depression stifles Harlem Renaissance

10 recorded lynchings

1930  Langston Hughes’ *Not Without Laughter* is published.

Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching is founded.

21 recorded lynchings

1931  *Scottsboro case*

13 recorded lynchings

1932  Sterling A. Brown’s *Southern Road* is published.

Wallace Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring* is published (satire about the Harlem Renaissance)

8 recorded lynchings

1933  James Weldon Johnson’s *Along This Way* is published.

26 recorded lynchings

1934  Zora Neale Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is published.

James Weldon Johnson’s *Negro Americans, What Now?* is published.

Langston Hughes’ *The Ways of White Folks* is published.

15 recorded lynchings

1935  Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* is published.

20 recorded lynchings

1936  8 recorded lynchings

1937  Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is published.

Claude McKay’s *A Long Way from Home* is published.

8 recorded lynchings

1938  6 recorded lynchings

1939  3 recorded lynchings

1940  Richard Wright’s *Native Son* changes the face of African American literature.

5 recorded lynchings
1941 4 recorded lynchings

1942 Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, is published.

6 recorded lynchings

1943 Race riot in Harlem

3 recorded lynchings

1944 Melvin B. Tolson’s *Rendezvous with America* is published.

2 recorded lynchings

1945 Richard Wright’s autobiography, *Black Boy*, is published.

Chester Hime’s *If He Hollers Let Him Go* is published.

1 recorded lynching

1946 6 recorded lynchings

1947 1 recorded lynching

1948 2 recorded lynchings

1949 3 recorded lynchings

1950 Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Annie Allen* wins Pulitzer Prize.

2 recorded lynchings

1951 Langston Hughes’ *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (jazz poetry) is published.

1 recorded lynching

1952 Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is published.

1953 Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* wins National Book Award.

Melvin B. Tolson’s *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* is published.

1954 Brown vs Board of Education

1955 James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son* is published.

Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama because she would not give up her seat on a bus to a white man.

Emmett Till (14 years old) is brutally murdered for whistling at a white woman

Montgomery Improvement Association formed; Martin Luther King, Jr. president

Montgomery Bus Boycott

1957 Desegregation at Little Rock

1 recorded lynching

1959 Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* is produced on Broadway.

Langston Hughes’ *Selected Poems* is published.

1 recorded lynching

1960 Sit-in Campaign

Gwendolyn Brooks’ poems “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi, Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” and “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” are published.

1961 Langston Hughes’ *Black Nativity* (gospel play) and *Ask Your Mama* are published.

Freedom Rides

1 recorded lynching

1962 Langston Hughes’ *Tambourines to Glory* (gospel play) is published.

Mississippi Riot

1963 Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington

Malcolm X forms the Organization of Afro-American Unity.
John F. Kennedy is assassinated.

James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* is published.

1 recorded lynching

1964 LeRoi Jones’ play *Dutchman* is produced and wins the *Village Voice*’s Obie Award.

Civil Rights Act

3 recorded lynchings – last reported lynchings in America

1965 Malcolm X is killed.

Voting Rights Act forbids the obstruction of registration of black voters

Stokely Carmichael promotes “Black Power”

Robert Weaver becomes first black American to serve in Cabinet.


Claude Michael’s *The Manchild in the Promised Land* is published.

Melvin B. Tolson’s *Harlem Gallery* is published.

Uprising in Watts, Los Angeles, marks the first of a series of riots in Atlanta, Cleveland, Milwaukee, San Francisco, and other U.S. cities.

Martin Luther King, Jr. receives Nobel Peace Prize.

1967 Jean Toomer’s *Cane* is reprinted for the first time.

Editors Dudley Randall and Margaret G. Burroughs publish *For Malcolm*.

Langston Hughes’ *The Panther and the Lash* is published posthumously.

William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is published.

Thurgood Marshall becomes the first African American Supreme Court Justice.

1968 Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *Where Do We Go From Here* is published.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated.

Robert Kennedy is assassinated.

Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination in sale or rental of housing.

Abraham Chapman’s *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature* is published.

Black Power Conference at Newark; H. Rap Brown, Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, proposes “separation of the U.S. into black and white countries with theme of ‘If America don’t come around, we’ve got to burn America down, brother’” (Nault 270).

Federally financed National Endowment for the Arts sponsors plan to send teams of Negro and white poets to Southern colleges (Nault 401).

Section II: New Negro Renaissance


Countee Cullen was assistant editor of *Opportunity* in 1926 and ran a column entitled, “A Dark Tower.” He responded to the NAACP questionnaire entitled, “The Negro in Art – How Shall He Be Portrayed – A Symposium” which ran from 1926 to 1927 in *The Crisis* (Gabbin 4). During those two years, his opinion ranged from one end of the spectrum to the other: first, he said:

African American artists have a duty ‘to create types that are truly representative.’ Just a year later in what appears to be a critical reversal, he said that African American artists should not be bound by their race or restricted to race matters… Ironically, the poet who was recognized as best representing the emerging New Negro resented having his poetry judged on the basis of race. ‘If I am going to be a poet at all, I am going to be POET and not NEGRO POET.’ (Gabbin 4-5).

Thus, Cullen searches for the mark and struggles with identity just as desperately as other African Americans who constantly ask “Who am I?” “Where do I fit in?” “Do I ignore my heritage, or do I cling to the culture of my race?” According to Gabbin, “Cullen’s own fierce battle with double consciousness coalesce in the conundrum no better expressed than in Cullen’s own lines in ‘Yet Do I Marvel’: Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black and bid him sing!” (5). The paradox lies in his “blackness that was at once his perceived handicap and his greatest asset” (5). However, there is another underlying paradox relative to his blackness: should he acknowledge his past – his culture – or should he separate from it altogether? Many writers faced this same dilemma. Some chose to recapture their lost identities while others chose to blend African American culture with American culture. Still others chose another more explosive route; as Gwendolyn Brooks writes in “garbageman: the man with the orderly mind”: “Dilute confusion. Find and explode our mist” (Brooks 5). Thus, the confusion about “Who am I?” and “Where do I fit in?” explodes into another realm of identity as a more militant, defiant, and proud African.
The black writer in the pre-desegregated period had a two-rung hurdle to jump: one was the hurdle of literary excellence in opposition to the mainstream, dominant literary world; the second was the actualization and verbalization “of a new society that respects the dignity of men” (Stern 645). During the volatile transitional period of the 1960’s, the African American writer created “a celebration of survival” in spite of their oppressive social status. In other words, the typical stereotype of “brute Negroes, contented slaves, wretched freedmen, and exotic-primitive figures” (Tidwell 383) were no longer acceptable to both the African American writer and reader; they “expected not just positive racial images but idealized versions of black life” (383). In Notes of a Native Son James Baldwin’s essay entitled, “Many Thousands Gone,” he underscores the cloudy definition of the African American writer as “that shadow which lies atwath our national life…self-created, intertwining” and a reflection of a double-self. He understands how the African American, submissively and determined to the dominant culture, keeps out of the way casting a mere shadow on the path of literary exposure. He states that “paradoxically, it is we…who…reinvent the black face with our guilt” (Baldwin 594). In other words, the African American writer stiles their own emergence into America by continuously pushing away conformity and continually exposing the horrors of his past. Ironically, it is through those memories that empower the African American voice.

On top of this, white American writers and critics put up other hurdles for the African American writer. For example, Marcus Klein of Barnard College writes regarding Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin: “But what seems characteristic of major Negro literature…is an urgency….to be more than merely Negro…The time has seemed to urge upon him, rather, a necessity to discover his nonracial identity within the circumstances of race” (Chapman 42). Chapman questions why there is an “emphasis on being more than ‘merely Negro’ and ‘nonracial identity’” (42). The criticism here lies in the fundamental scope of Americanism from a white member of the dominant society without regard for the African heritage inherent in the hearts of black writers and vital to their craft. Furthermore, the African American writer is criticized for attempting to create their own story rather than settle for the identity imposed upon them by the dominant culture. Again, more criticism is noted in William Faulkner’s Essays, Speeches and Public Letters when he states that the “Negro is not yet capable of more than second class citizenship…the Negro, is not yet capable of, or refuses to accept, the responsibilities of equality. So, we the white man, must take him in hand and teach him that responsibility…He must learn to cease forever more thinking like a Negro and acting like a Negro” (43). On one hand, we have Chapman’s opinion that the African American writer needs to stay within their bounds – in writing as well as in society; on the other hand, we have Faulkner insisting they assimilate into white America and forget their past. This demonstrates the dual nature of African American writers who have to hold up a black, shadowy mirror reflecting itself into a white, overpowering mirror, thus channeling and echoing the throngs of white American rejection. To judge their work according to “a single standard of criticism” and “[e]valuating black literature as literature…would remove a stigma associated with their writing – that of race…blacks hoped their writing…would be integrated into the American literary mainstream” (383). In other words, they wanted recognition as a writer, not a black writer.

Section IV: Protest or Problem Literature?

The immigrant story of voluntarily coming to America, rejecting all ties to his past, and conforming to the “vesture of his adopted land” (593) is not the case of the African American whose “past was taken from him whether he would or no” (594). Knowing that their forced presence in America bonds their forced new presence in America, Baldwin contemplates the psychology of the African American as a reflection of their literature referring to it as “protest” literature if written by blacks and “problem” literature if analyzed by whites (594). He emphasizes the paradox by noting the duality of the identity issue itself: is it “protest” literature or “problem” literature? He gives two examples: Kingsblood Royal and If He Hollers Let Him Go. Both bear the same theme: black is a terrible color with which to be born into the world” (594); however, there is a “tremendous disparity of tone between the two creations” (594). By comparing “protest” and “problem” literature written by opposite races, one can understand the tug and pull of “Who am I?” and “Where do I fit in?”

Section V: W.E.B. DuBois and the Black Man’s Struggle

Another writer, whom Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to as “one of our most remarkable men of our time,” and the novelist John Oliver Killens claims ‘was the greatest American intellectual of the twentieth century’” (Sime 243) is William Edward Burghardt Du Bois of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, the first black person to receive a Ph.D. in American History from Harvard University. Du Bois writes in The Souls of Black Folk published in 1903 that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.” He describes the African American psychological experience as “a people with ‘two souls,’ one ‘American’ and one ‘Negro’” (Du Bois 496) derived from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s concept of a “double-consciousness” (Sime 243). In an effort to unify racial consciousness, he advocates full political and civil rights for African Americans,” (243) participated in the Niagara Movement, edited The Crisis, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, an organization he helped to found” (243). In addition, he was involved in the Pan African movement, which sought an independent and united black Africa, free of white colonial powers as well as founded Phylon, a scholarly journal, at Atlanta University” (243). Du Bois understands the dual nature of the African American when he writes, “I whiten my black men…I am black” in his poem “The Song of Smoke” (243). Furthermore, to demonstrate the splitting of the African American and his contradictory quest, Du Bois writes:

The black man’s struggle is not a weakness but rather a paradox: Do I continue to bow down and simply accept my condition, or do I rise up and create my art? Or, more in line with the focus of this journal, the questions that rose out of that post-Emanicipation period are: “Who am I now? What will I evolve to be? Do I try to be like the dominant culture, or do I embrace the beauty of my heritage and race? Where do I fit in?”

Section VI: Lost Identity

Amira Baraka (alias Everett LeRoi Jones)

On one hand, the lost focus of African Americanism is seen through several poets, novelists, and essayists during the fifty-year span of 1919 to 1969. Amira Baraka blatantly states in his poem, “lieroy”: “When I die, the consciousness I carry I will to black people. May they pick me apart and take the useful parts, the sweet meat of my feelings. And leave the bitter bullshit rotten white parts alone” (Barksdale 750). He reveals how the dominant culture’s “bitter bullshit rotten white parts” (750) are unnecessary to black consciousness; that by sitting through the rubble of a fallen false white foundation, by separating the white influence from the black culture, yields the product or the “sweet meat” (750) of black identity. To further protest conformity dictated by the white dominant culture, Baraka changes his American name, Everett LeRoi Jones, to Imamu Amiri Baraka in honor of his lost African heritage.

Maya Angelou
Maya Angelou also writes to recapture and protect that lost identity. For instance, in "The Black Family Pledge" (Angelou 2) she writes, "Because we have lost the path our ancestors cleared / kneeling in perilous undergrowth, / our children cannot find their way... the old wails of our ancestors have faded beyond our hearing, / our children cannot hear us crying... We ARE our brothers and sisters" (3). In other words, the African American and path must be recovered in order to gain their voice – a voice to lead their offspring into the future – a voice that must be heard in order to connect with the brothers and sisters of their heritage. She reiterates this message throughout many of her poems such as the one read at the Million Man March where Angelou is reminded of "voices of old spirit" (3) that "say, draw near to your own history" (3). She validates the historical significance of their history, warranting it as the key that unlocks their shackles of self-identity; she also commands respect for acknowledgement of black history rather than continue "imposing our own history" (3). Again she voices the significance of lost history as a channel in the stream of consciousness when she writes, "The me / myself of me sleeks / in the folds and history / of fear" (Bonvibre11). So, the very core of her being exists in the past while answers to the questions "Who Am I?" and "Where am I going?" are held captive through memory and allegiance.

Claude McKay

Some poems echo the yearning of the past such as those written by Claude McKay. In his poem entitled "The Tropics in New York," he captures the spirit of desire: "Set in the window, bringing memories / Of fruit trees laden by low-singing rills, / And dewy dawns, and mystical skies... A wave of longing through my body swept, / And, hungry for the old, familiar ways, / I turned aside and bowed my head and wept" (McKay 4). The sense of yearning is compounded with the sense of loss. There is a definite desire to return to the past and connect with a lost identity. He emphasizes the essence of the African American through another poem entitled "America" in which he states: "Darkly I gaze into the days ahead, / And see her might and granite wonders there, / Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand, / Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand" (4). The "wonders" (4) are the strongholds of the African true identity, which he also calls "priceless treasures" (4). In other words, the past is their treasure chest that can support them "into the days ahead" (4). This captures the duality theme where the future is seen but not seen – heard but not heard – it is there, but it is buried.

Section VII: New Identity

While Baraka, Angelou, and McKay yearn to recapture their lost identity, other poets identify an alternative focus which is African-rooted rather than African-remindful. Yearning for yesterday in order to satisfy a new identity, poets during the Black Arts Movement and writers of the Civil Rights Movement inspire a return to the past as an alternative identity focus. Moving backward toward the future is in itself a dual concept just as the African American’s own self-identity is a dual concept.

Maya Angelou

Angelou’s poetry is of a dual nature in itself because it not only empowers the lost identity but also a new identity. For instance, she writes, "I shall not be moved. / Her universe, often / summarized into one black body / falling finally from the tree to her feet, / made her cry each time into a new voice. / All my past hastens to defeat" (Angelou 20). Her words empower the message to form a new voice or a new identity. In this poem, the speaker defiantly protests to be moved, but once she falls, a new voice is unleashed and victorious. Angelou encourages African Americans to move and discover a new self.

Likewise, in "Equality," Angelou emphasizes this message: History...cannot be unlived, and...need not be lived again. / Lift up your eyes upon / The day breaking for you. / Give birth again / To the dream...Take it into the palms of your hands / Mold it into the shape of your utmost / Private need. Sculpt it into / The image of your most public self (Angelou 5). In this poem, Angelou encourages others to focus on a new day, a new reality — to mold the dream of who they want to be and to allow that newfound self to be a "public self" (5). In other words, do not just dream of who you want to be – be who you want to be. She refers to it as a private and individual undertaking that is to be acted upon not against as indicated in her commandments and action verbs such as "Give birth," "Take it," "Mold it," and "Sculpt it." It will not just happen; each individual has to make it happen. In other words, the underlying impetus to change is not simply wanting it, but making it happen. This same message of making it happen is seen in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" in which he states: "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed" (Barksdale 865). Once making the commitment to find her true self, Angelou writes in "Recovery": "But I, now, / reft of that confusion, / am lifted up / and speeding toward the light" (Angelou 5). Thus, by freeing herself from the "confusion" (5), allows her to soar to new heights – to a new identity. With an urgency, she rejects whatever holds her back and flies toward "the light" (5) — her new birth.

Black Power: James Meredith, Stokely Carmichael, and Charles Hamilton

A more radical and empowering ideology formed during the Civil Rights Movement was Black Power. On June 5, 1966, James Meredith began a solitary March Against Fear from Memphis to Jackson to protest against racism; tragically, he was shot soon after starting his march. However, Stokely Carmichael, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Floyd McKissick picked up where he left off. Carmichael coined the phrase “Black Power” in a speech urging “black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, and to build a sense of community” (Sparks 2). He “urged a complete rejection of the values of American society” (2). The following year, Carmichael and Charles Hamilton co-authored the book, Black Power. Many civil rights groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) did not support his radical views. Carmichael states as his reason for writing the book that “We had only the old language of love and suffering” (3). He wanted to “speak in the tone” of the urban ghetto black people who faced riots and injustice; their anger was building up without a release. He wanted to provide a new voice – a new identity called “black separatism” (6).

Another phrase he coined was "Black is Beautiful" (2) and encouraged a sense of “black pride and a rejection of white values of style and appearance. This included adopting Afro hairstyles and African forms of dress” (2). He criticized Dr. King’s nonviolent movements, and became the “honorary prime minister” of the Black Panther Party” (2). Furthermore, as an extreme measure of protest, he changed his American name to Kwame Ture as an outward statement of independence and a reflection of his new identity.

Haki Madhubuti (alias Don L. Lee)

Changing one’s American to an African name was a strong declaration of self-identity and freedom from being Americanized. Another writer, Haki Madhubuti (alias Don L. Lee), likewise changed his name as a pronouncement of a new self. His poetry was written in a new voice, too: “black dialect and slang” (Moff 2) which is a major influence on modern rap. He is the author of 19 books, founded the Third World Press in 1967, and established a school for black children – the Institute of Positive Education in Chicago – in 1969. Some of his poems published under his Swahili name are “Book of Life” (1973) and “Killing Memory, Seeking Ancestors” (1987).

Amiri Baraka (alias Everett LeRoi Jones)

Yet another writer who changed his name as an outward symbol of separate identity is Amiri Baraka (alias Everett LeRoi Jones). He wrote three plays about racial tension in the United States: The Slave Ship, The Toilet, and Dutchman. He “rejected black nationalism and composed plays that were filled with Marxist ideology” (Barksdale 746). For example, in Dutchman, Baraka’s theme is the danger of trying to emulate white culture. So, by writing plays with a fresh image, Baraka set out to unveil a new identity for African Americans.
In addition, Baraka wrote several poems encouraging the formation of a new identity. In “Ka’Ba” he states:

We are beautiful people
With African imaginations
full of masks and dances and swelling chants
with African eyes, and noses, and arms
tho we sprawl in gray chains in a place
full of winters, when what we want is sun.
We have been captured,
and we labor to make our getaway, into
the ancient image; into a new
Correspondence with ourselves
and our Black family. We need magic
now we need the spells, to raise up
return, destroy, and create… (Bonvibre 4)

The “new / Correspondence with ourselves / and our Black family” (4) is the new identity of the African American – one that is unyielding, full of memories and “African imaginations” (4). The path toward creating the new self is through “raise up / return, destroy, and create” (4). In other words, the past has to be remembered, the present must be destroyed, and a future self must be ordained.

Dr. Maulana Karenga

In 1966, Dr. Maulana Karenga, a college professor, created Kwanzaa as “a celebration to help African Americans reconnect with their African heritage and unify their families and communities” (Kwanzaa 1). He felt an urgent need to provide a cultural identity “because he saw a need for African Americans to have a holiday of their own, one that would help them to be proud of their past” (1). Up until this time, their past was bitter and painful. With rise to the new celebration, a new identity emerges. The name is a Kiswahili phrase meaning first fruits of the harvest. The seven principles of Kwanzaa reflect a commitment and regard for newness. Through this celebration, African Americans can begin to answer the questions: “Who am I?” and “Where do I fit in?”

Section VIII: Double Identity

Through my research, the majority of poetry echoes a dual nature of survival. There is the painful historical passion mingled with the cry for a separate black culture; do African Americans hold on to their past while at the same time merge with the dominant society’s cultural thrusts, or do they separate from the white-controlled culture and explode into a new self? McKelly explains this dual nature of survival through the words of James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois in “a sort of dual personality...the waste of double aims, a ‘seeking to satisfy to unreconciled ideals’ which can never be satisfied” (1). Is there an answer? According to McKelly, the African American is doomed to a life of cultural pergatory and “irreconcilable binarisms” (2). This tugging of identity can be seen through the writings of Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, Lucille Clifton, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Safiya Henderson who best embrace a dual cry of the African American: “Who am I?” and “Where do I fit in?”

Margaret Walker

In the poem “The Struggle Staggers Us,” Margaret Walker emphasizes the struggle between past and future: “There is a journey from the me to you. / There is a journey from the you to me. / A union of the two strange worlds must be...Out of this blackness we must struggle forth” (Walker 1). In this poem, Walker sees two worlds and the need to merge in order to push forward into the future. In another poem, “Dark Blood,” she writes: “There were bizarre beginnings in old lands for the making / of me...Someday I shall go to the tropical lands of my birth...return to Mobile...then to reconcile the pride and pain in me” (Walker 1). Although Walker wants to revisit her history -- revisit only, since she is certain to return to Mobile -- she will return to her present existence with a merging of the pride of Africa and the pain of existing in her American world.

Toni Morrison

In Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon, she parallels the characters with major characters of the Civil Rights Movement. Milkman is Martin Luther King, Jr., and Guitar is Malcolm X: two extremes of racial identity – one peaceful and the other violent. The ending of the book is important as a treatment of the merging of selves into one identity: “By associating Milkman and Guitar with the two extremes of the black world...Morrison incorporates into her story the entire spectrum of black experience, and...unites the opposing forces” (Walker 146). Even though the two extreme identities exist, the ending gives hope for a merging of the two warring worlds into one.

Lucille Clifton

In two of Lucille Clifton’s poems, she discusses the potency of “tending to the past” and “dragging [yesterday] forward tomorrow” (Lucille 1). In the poem entitled, “I am Accused of Tending to the Past,” Clifton writes: History. / she is more human now. / learning languages everyday, / remembering faces, names and dates. / when she is strong enough to travel / on her own, beware, she will” (3). In this poem, Clifton realizes the impact of remembering the past, but also the impact of how it will identify who she is. The most impactful poem, however, is “The Mississippi River Empties into the Gulf.” In this metaphorical poem, the river carries yesterday into streams of tomorrows:

the mississippi river empties into the gulf
and the gulf enters the sea and so forth,
none of them emptying anything,
Section IX: Web Sites

THE BLACK COLLEGIAN ONLINE: THE CAREER SITE FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR www.black-collegian.com

The Black Collegian Online: The Career Site for Students of Color provides a wealth of information regarding jobs, African American issues, and educational channels. In one section – African American Issues – I came across an article on Kwanzaa entitled, “Know Your Kwanzaa” by Linedde Molver. It fully explains the historical deliverance of celebrating the African American's cultural identity.

Inspired by Karenga who responded to the urgency for African Americans to unite and be proud of their heritage, the Kwanzaa is a celebration originating in African harvest festivals. It is not a religious celebration or a political outcry. Stemming from the Kiswahili phrase Amatundya ya kwanzaa, meaning first fruits of the harvest, “Karenga metaphorically captures the need for fruition and amalgamation of the African American people” (Molver 1). Written in a dual language, the web site explains the celebration and guiding principles (Nguzo Saba): Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Nin (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith) in the “victory of the African American struggle” (3). By referring to the tenets in both English and Kiswahili, an allegiance to African American culture is permanently “set in stone” by having it set it the printed word. In other words, it is like a bridge between two worlds and is a permanent fixture - not an imagined or wished for dream of the future. It offers a wealth of information, contacts, educational support, and professional networking for the African American. I chose this web site as the best example of the explosive identity that separates completely from the dominant culture and forms a new allegiance to African culture. In this explosive co-joining of cultures, the mixture settles as the newfound heart and soul of African American consciousness.

AFRICANA: GATEWAY TO THE BLACK WORLD www.africana.com

The front page of the web site has several icons: Newswire, Open Source, This Day in Africana History, Amazing Black Fact, Africana Comic, Africana E-Cards, Africana Box Office, Africana Radio, along with several articles to click on such as “Reading Between the Lines: Saving Private Johnson,” “The A-List,” “Footsteps: The Best Children’s Magazine you Never Heard of,” and “Easter Dinner.” Under “Open Source,” there are several items to click on such as “Africana isn’t the only one” and “Fashion Fair? A Black Model for Estee Lauder.” Also, under “Newswire,” there is a list of articles to choose from: “White House Reworks Tax Plan,” “Boston Marathon or Kenyan Nationals?” “Nigerian Pres. Takes Election Lead.”

This is a perfect example of the duality of the African American consciousness because it not only accesses the dominant culture’s interest but also the minority culture’s interest. For example, the Africana history, facts, movie and radio interests, and Kenyan and Nigerian news are on one end of the spectrum, while articles appealing to the dominant culture, such as taxes, news, and fashion, are on the other end. The web site stands in between the dichotomy of black identity: American and African American.

Section X: Responses

During the Civil Rights Movement, several poems, essays, and books were written in reactive response to the times. Gwendolyn Brooks responded to the 1955 murder of a fourteen-year-old African American boy named Emmett Till. At www.reed.edu/~paulsona/brookstill.html, the article states that his alleged “crime” was whistling at a white woman, Carolyn Bryant. Her brother and husband, J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, kidnapped him at gunpoint from a relative’s home, brutally beat him, gouged out one eye, shot him in the head, threw him in the Tallahatchie River of Mississippi with a cotton-gin fan tied to his neck with barbed wire. The men were acquitted. The funeral was a four-day event and one of the most powerful media events of the Civil Rights era (Murder 1). Broook wrote two poems in 1960: “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi, Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” and “The Last Quentin of the Ballad of Emmett Till.” The first poem is written from the point of view of the white woman at whom Till supposedly whistled; the second poem is from the mother of the murdered child. This historical event is the heart of the darkness engulfing the angst and smothering identity of the African American.

Section XI: Maya Angelou’s Biography

From Maya Angelou: Author and Documentary Filmmaker by Lucia Raatma and The Heart of a Woman by Maya Angelou
Maya Angelou wrote *The Heart of a Woman* as the fourth book in a series of autobiographies. It tells about the period in her life when she was a dancer/singer at the Purple Onion, a New York City nightclub, a writer for the Harlem Writers Guild, a coordinator for Martin Luther King, and a woman who falls in love with an African freedom fighter and moves to Cairo and Ghana. The book is an emotional outcry of blending her Americanism and Africanism into her true self.

The first lines of her autobiography reinforce the theme of this journal and how the African American identity fluctuates from old to new. She writes, "The ole ark's a-mover'in, a-mover'in, a-mover'in, the ole ark's a moverin' along...That ancient spiritual could have been the theme song of the United States in 1957. We were a-moverin' to, fro, up, down and often in concentric circles" (Angelou 1). She further states that "we became our own befuddledment" (1). In other words, the Pandemonium of society brewed a double-consciousness in African Americans with the never-ending questions of "Who am I" and "Where do I fit in?"

The only true connections she made was when she "sang the race memory, and we were united in centuries of belonging" (48). In her Apollo Theater performance, she came to realize the power of the past by singing "the race memory" (48). Her pursuit of identity reaches beyond her need for entertainment. Politics grabbed her attention. She joined Martin Luther King's efforts by producing a musical revue called *Cabaret for Freedom* to raise funds; in turn, he asked her to become a coordinator for his efforts. During this time, she joined the Harlem Writers Guild, a "group of African-American writers [who] met in their homes" (Raatma 58). She began her writing career by sharing her poems with her peers.

Although engaged to another man, she fell in love with an African freedom fighter, Vusumzi Make. After struggling with whether or not to pursue the relationship, she states, "Marry a man I hadn't even slept with and go to Africa. Leave Martin King and my own struggle. But all the black struggles were one, with one enemy and one goal" (Angelou 114). Thus, she acknowledged a connection between his African struggles and her own. Make reinforced her dual identity after she accepted his marriage proposal by telling her: "This is the joining of Africa and Africa-America! Two great peoples back together again." (120). Angelou completed the joining of her two selves when she "looked into the mirror and saw exactly what I wanted to see...a young African virgin, made beautiful for her chief" (128). Thus, her life is a living metaphor for the complexity of the African American identity crisis.

Raatma states that Angelou visited the small village of Keta before leaving Ghana. The villagers and Angelou could see a remarkable resemblance in each other. She was "happy to think that she had found her roots. Her history made more sense to her, and she felt a very special connection to the people of Keta...Angelou writes: I knew my people had never completely left Africa...As we carried [Africa] to Philadelphia, Boston and Birmingham [sic] we had changed its color, modified its rhythms, yet it was Africa which rode in the bulges of our high calves, shook in our protruding behinds and crackled in our wide open laughter" (70). Her validation of self is realized when her past finally connects to her present; she acknowledged that "people had never completely left Africa" (70). It is the crucible's product—the base of a solution to the conundrum. Rather than being in America trying to connect to Africa, she was in Africa and clearly connected to America. It took a trip to Africa—a trip to her "roots" (70)—to bridge the gap of consciousness and solidify her identity.

However, her identity crisis tugs surprisingly harder now that she knows her roots just like Frederick Douglass' bittersweet knowledge when he learned to read documents: "while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the former...For one I was freed, but I was not free. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and defest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had...gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes" (Douglass 368). In that vein, Arthur A. Schomburg writes: "The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future" (1). This is also known as remembrance. Both Angelou and Douglass resent their uprooted heritage and have to face the unnerving anguish of knowing the truths of yesterday while facing the pains of tomorrow.

Her sorrowful lament as she fully understands the complex connection occurred while flying over Egypt. Heavyhearted, Angelou realized the tragedy of her ancestors and the impact of slavery. She writes:

I was mourning all my ancestors...I could look down from my window seat and see trees, and bushes, rivers and dense forest. It all began here. The jumble of poverty-stricken children sleeping in rat-infested tenements or abandoned cars...The drugged days and alcoholic nights of men for whom hope had not been born. The loneliness of women who would never know appreciation...Here, there, along the banks of that river, someone was taken, tied with ropes, shackled with chains, forced to march for weeks carrying the double burden of neck irons and abysmal fear...America's period of orgiastic lynching shad begun on yonder broad savannah. Every ill I knew at home, each hateful look on a white face, each odioous rejection based on skin color, the mockery, the disenfranchisement, the lamentations and loud wailing for a lost world, irreclaimable security, all that long-onerous journey to misery, which had not ended yet, had begun just below our plane. I wept. (257)

Angelou wept for the loss of her cultural identity and the cruelties of past, present, and future crimes against African Americans. Literary critic, A. Walton Litz writes: "Angelou is able to be a spectator viewing her own past as a complex happening which has ended. Africa provides a renewal for a new pulse of life for her continuing journey" (9). In her bittersweet realization, the veil of a double-consciousness remains.

from *African American Literature: Voices in a Tradition*

Marguerite Johnson (Maya Angelou) was born in St. Louis in 1928. After her parents divorced, she lived with her grandmother in Arkansas. She was a talented actress and singer touring Europe in the production of Porgy and Bess, a folk opera. She taught dance in Paris and TelAviv before returning to America and joining the Civil Rights Movement. She married an African freedom fighter named Vusumzi Make and moved to Cairo and Ghana with her son, Guy. Angelou received a lifetime appointment as Reynolds Professor of African American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Proudly standing at the inaugural podium for President Clinton in January 1993, Angelou read her poem "On the Pulse of Morning." She was the first African American and the first woman poet to have such an honor.

Although Angelou is famous for her poetry, she has also written screenplays, magazine articles, and a ten-part television series for National Educational Television which deals with "Africanisms in United States culture" (African 31). She wrote *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Gather Together in my Name, Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry Like Christmas, The Heart of a Woman, Maya Angelou: Poems, I Shall Not Be Moved, and Wouldn't Take Nothing for my Journey Now.*

This journal explores questions of lost identity, new identity, and merging into a double-consciousness or sense of duality. For a century, the steam of the African American's volatile struggle festered into a sweltering push for civil rights. Through poetry, novels, and essays, their vies for freedom and equality are the two sides of an African American and I am African. Their double-consciousness was the root of civil unrest, radical ideas, militant protest, and enabling literary works. How did their voice get heard through all of the chaos? There were two main problems for African American writers: how to write to their divided (white and black) audience and how to become...
accepted as writers rather than black writers. The reactionary voice of the African American was threaded together with seams of personal grief, social restraint, forced compliance, and even moreso in the rebellion, change, and social impact of the 1960’s and 1970’s. Several impressive authors sang their off-beat tunes, leaving white America tapping their toes in a countdown toward equality and mystifying black America’s sense of identity.

Through my research, I discovered a tremendous volume of African American literature as well as evidence of the confusion that exists in their identity crisis. My future research will involve a more involved review of exactly what African heritage means. Religious, historical mythologies abound and give rise to new cultural beginnings. Dr. Moses, author of *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History*, states: “Afrocentrism and its history have been long disputed and controversial…My research investigates the fascinating and imaginative, if sometimes contradictory meanings embedded in the so-called Afrocentric tradition, which has complex origins in enlightenment Christianity, 18th century progressivism and Black resistance to White supremacy” (1). I am intrigued with the controversy surrounding Afrocentrism, Egyptocentrism, and Black Nationalism, and how those terms are interchangeable. Moses said that the “African American’s quest for political and economic equality…were devised to demonstrate why African Americans should be assimilated into White mainstream American society” (2). Again, we have conflicting and dual rhythms beating out a pattern of confusing terms for identity: Is the African American ever going to know the roots of his heritage? Will he learn to forget the past and assimilate into the dominant culture’s expectations and habits? Or, will he progressively uncover a true identity by denying the dominant culture’s influence and clinging to past dreams?

I would also like to have a more detailed analysis of the volatile Civil Rights movement including speech writers, magazine publishers, and the media. Who were the people behind the voices? How did the message unravel from the tangled threads of prejudice? Was it politically undermined or underscored? There are so many directions to take in the study of African American culture and literature. I am hooked with uncommon curiosity and enduring empathy. Years ago, I began an interest in slave narratives. Today, my interests are extended to the complexities of the African American consciousness as they “sail through this to that” (Clifton 1). My goal is to continue researching and investigating the African American paradox and looking for answers to the questions: “Who am I?” and “Where do I fit in?”

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Black Americans were unequally issued loans on unfavorable terms during the sub-prime loan bonanza that prefigured the housing crisis and are still suffering in its aftermath, a new report from the American Civil Liberties Union has found. The resulting economic downturn has adversely affected them to a much greater degree than white homeowners, said the ACLU’s Rachel Goodman, who said the findings suggest banks knowingly preyed on black mortgage-seekers when it came to issuing sub-prime mortgages. "Race must have been a factor somewhere in the decision-making, because it otherwise doesn’t make