M.A.

THESIS

THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY AS IT RELATES TO THE AMERICAN BLACKS' VISION OF AFRICA

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THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY AS IT RELATES TO THE AMERICAN BLACKS' VISION OF AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The problem of identity is an old one. Conscious or unconscious, it has resounded in Negroes' minds since they forcibly left their homeland --Africa-- for slavery in the United States. Being a cultural and racial minority, Negro-Americans felt like "outsiders" withir a "white" society, with a stereotyped "white" image of Africa, according to which black races and cultures were regarded as inferior and primitive. According to this"white" image, Negro identity was systematically undermined and, at the end, reduced to a"surrendered identity". It has been only recently, with the awakening of Africa's oppressed native populations, that a serious effort has been made towards overcoming that surrendered identity by developing a living culture, deep-rooted in the values and memories of Africa.

This dissertation analyses the most characteristic works of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Alex Haley, respectively Native Son, Invisible Man and Roots in terms of how each author deals with identity and with the Black American's vision of Africa in contrast with the reality of their American sojourn.

Being the identity theme an universal one in Black American literature, it is also a constant in those three authors, who, however, are quite different from one another. All of them try to overcome the identity crisis and to assert themselves as members of an ethnic-cultural group in American society. But Wright and Ellison still are woven in the web of the "white" image of Africa and, therefore, their seahh is not apparently linked to Africa: To Wright, "Africa is a distant continent", whose language he wouldn't understand; to Ellison, if "we are sons of Mama Africa", the truth is that from it the Black Americans only have tom-toms beating our voices", "rumba and sambo", and not much more. Unable to overcome the "white" image of Africa, these authors fall, one of them in despair and violence (Wright) and the other in the nobodiness of invisibility (Ellison). Quite differently, to Haley, Africa is a way of self-discovery: In him, the African heritage discloses to Black Americans the riches of a new cultural dimension, offering them a positive image of themselves; by this way, he was able to Americanize his "Kunta clan".

SUMÁRIO

O problema da identidade é já velho; consciente ou inconscientemente, ele tem estado presente no espírito dos negros, desde que foram levados à força, de África, sua terra-mãe, para uma vida de escravidão nos Estados Unidos. Sendo uma minoria racial e cultural, os americanos negros sentiam-se "estranhos" dentro de uma sociedade "branca", que construira uma imagem estereotipada da África, segundo a qual as raças e as culturas negras eram consideradas inferiores e primitivas. De acordo com esta imagem "branca", a identidade dos negros foi sendo sistematicamente minada, até que ficou reduzida a uma "identidade rendida". Só recentemente, acompanhando o despertar dos povos africanos oprimidos, foi feito um esforço sério para ultrapassar essa identidade rendida, desenvolvendo uma cultura negro-americana viva, com raízes profundas nos valores e nas memórias africanas.

Esta dissertação analisa as obras mais significativas de Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison e Alex Haley, respectivamente Native Son, Invisible Man e Roots, examinando como cada um deles lida com a questão da identidade e com a visão negro-americana de África, em contraste com a realidade da sua vivência diária dentro da sociedade americana.

Como tema universal que é dentro da literatura negra norte americana, o problema da identidade é também uma constante na obra destes três autores, que, todavia, são bem diferentes uns dos outros. Os três tentam ultrapassar a crise de identidade e afirmar-se como membros de um grupo étnico-cultural, dentro da sociedade americana. Mas Wright e Ellison ainda estão enredados pela imagem "branca" de África e, por isso, a sua busca aparentemente não está ligada a África: Para Wright, "a África é um continente distante", cuja linguagem ele não compreenderia; para Ellison, se "somos filhos de Mamãe África", a verdade é que os americanos negros só conservam dela "batuques martelando em nossas vozes", "rumba e sambo" e não muito mais. Incapazes de ultrapassar a imagem "branca" de África, estes dois autores caiem um no desespero e na violência (Wright) e o outro no vazio da invisibilidade (Ellison). Bem diferentemente, para Haley a África é um meio de auto-descoberta: Nele, a herança africana abre para os americanos negros as riquezas de uma dimensão cultural nova, oferecendo-lhes uma imagem positiva de si mesmos; por esta via ele conseguiu americanizar o seu clã de Kunta.

Aos
Meus Pais
Com Saudade e Amor.

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Ao Marido e Filhos

I am talking of millions of men who have been skillfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, abasement.

--Aimé Césaire, Discours sur le Colonialisme

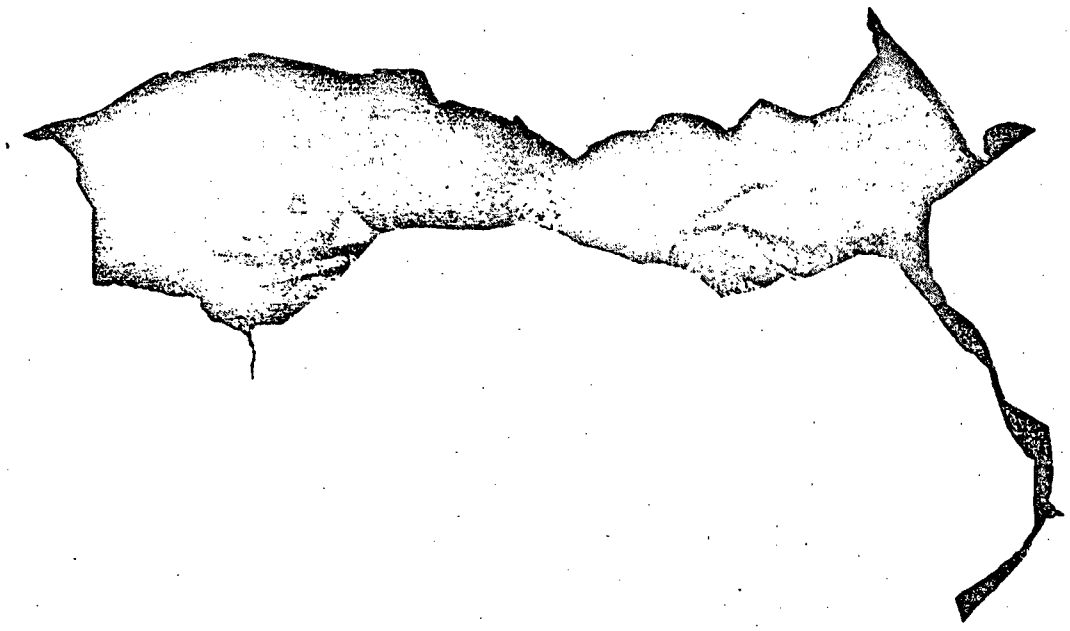
One ever feels his two-ness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife--this longing 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. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.

W. E. B. Du Bois

You niggers ain't nowhere. You ain't in Africa, 'cause the white man took you out. And you ain't in America, 'cause if you was you'd act like Americans-- . . . you ain't no American! You live Jim Crow. . . . You can't live like no American, 'cause you ain't no American! And you ain't African neither! So what is you? Nothing! Just nothing!

Sam's final outburst of anger in The Long Dream, by Richard Wright.



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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 - Statement of Problem

This thesis analyzes the Black American writers' problems of identity, i.e., their search for an "Ego," a self-definition as members of a society.

> I seize the word identity. It is a key word. You hear it over and over again. On this word will focus, around this word will coagulate, a dozen issues, shifting, shading into each other. Alienated from the world to which he is born and from the country of which he is a citizen, yet surrounded by the successful values of that world, and country, how can the Negro define himself?[1]

Before analyzing the problem of identity in the Black American literature, we must have a more precise notion of the term identity.

The term identity seems not only to have pervaded the literature on the Negro revolution in the U.S.A., but also to have come to represent in India (and in other countries) something in the revolutionary psychological field of the colored races and nations who seek (try to find) inner as well as outer emancipation from colonial rule and colonial power. When, for example, Nehru said that "Gandhi gave India an identity," he used the term to define a unity among Indians while insisting on their complete autonomy from the British Empire.

Usually, the term is used without explanation as if it were obvious what it means.

Social scientists sometimes attempt to make it more concrete, using such terms as "identity crisis," "self-identity" or "sexual identity." For the sake of logical or experimental maneuverability, they try to treat these terms as matters of social roles, personal traits or conscious self-images. Its use has, in fact, become so indiscriminate that recently a German reviewer called the concept the pet subject of the Amerikanische Popularpsychologie.[2]

In race relations, the term is nowadays mainly referred to as a revolution of awareness--political, economic, cultural and spiritual awareness. According to Erik Erikson, the alternatives and controversies, the ambiguities and ambivalences concerning the various aspects of the identity issue are:

1. Individual and Communal

William James describes a sense of identity when he writes in a letter to his wife: "A man's character is discernible in the mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive." At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says: "This is the real me!" Such experience always includes, says Henry James (in The Letters of William James, Vol. I):

> An element of active tension, of holding my own, as it were, and trusting outward things to perform their part so as to make it a full harmony, but without any guaranty that they will. Make it a guaranty--and the attitude immediately becomes to my consciousness stagnant and stingless. Take away the guaranty, and I feel (provided I am uberhaupt in vigorous condition) a sort of deep enthusiastic bliss, of bitter willingness to do and suffer anything . . . and which, although it is a mere mood or emotion to which I can give no form in words, authenticates itself to me as the deepest principle of all active determination which I possess.[3]

W. James uses the word "character." Erik H. Erikson says that he describes as "character" what today we call a sense of identity, experienced by any man. To him it is both mental and moral and he experiences it as something that "comes upon you" as a recognition; "it is an active tension (rather than a paralyzing question)--a tension which, furthermore, must create a challenge 'without guaranty' rather than one dissipated in a clamor for certainty."[4]

This would be a "self-made identity," a personal and cultural identity rooted in an ancient people's fate. Let us turn by the way to Sigmund Freud. In an address to the society B'nai Brith in Vienna in 1926, he said:

> What bound me to Jewry was (I am ashamed to admit) neither faith nor national pride, for I have always been an unbeliever and was brought up without any religion though not without a respect for what are called the "ethical" standards of human civilization.
>
> Whenever I felt an inclination to national enthusiasm I strove to suppress it as being harmful and wrong, alarmed by the warning examples of the peoples among whom we Jews live. But plenty of other things remained over to make the attraction of Jewry and Jews irresistible--many obscure emotional forces, which were the more powerful, the less they could be expressed in words, as well as a clear consciousness of inner identity, the safe privacy of a common mental construction. And beyond this there was a perception that it was to my Jewish nature alone that I owed two characteristics that had become indispensable to me in the difficult course of my life. Because I was a Jew I found myself free from many prejudices which restricted others in the use of their intellect; and as a Jew I was prepared to join the Opposition and to do without agreement with the "compact majority."[5]

These obscure emotional forces or dunkle Gefuehlsmaechte are the forces which have a considerable effect on the "mind" of a community. Here Freud gives us an added dimension of "identity." We can define it as a communal consciousness of inner identity. This includes a sense absolutely natural through out the history of a persecuted people such as the Jews:

"the peoples among whom we Jews live." (p. 326) Identity here is one aspect of the struggle for ethnic survival; it is the awareness of inner emancipation felt by a "compact majority."

So individual identity is connected with communal identity, psychosocial identity depends on a community of people whose traditional values influence the growing of those people. Both statements prove to be, according to Erik H. Erikson, the product of a positive sense of identity.[6] This positive sense of identity contrasts with the terms of Negro authors, so negative "that they at first suggest an absense of identity or the prevalence of what we will call negative identity elements. From Du Bois' famous passage (quoted in Myrdal's introduction to Dark Ghetto[7]) on the inaudible Negro, we would be led to Baldwin's and Ellison's suggestive invisibility, namelessness, facelessness."[8] This Negro American sense of "nobody-ness" and the determined preoccupation with invisibility of the Negro authors seem to be a demand to be heard and seen, recognized and faced as individuals with a choice rather than as men marked by what is visible--their color (and by the sterotypes which go with it). This seems to me an actual struggle for an identity, as the only bridge from past to future.

Ellison stated that his writing was indeed an attempt to transcend his own "condition," "as the blues transcended the painful conditions with which they deal." This is a natural emergence from the post-slavery period, we may say a natural consequence, an unconscious mixture of guilt and fear on the white side, and a mixture of hate and fear on the other, being nowadays replaced by sentiments of remorse and mistrust.

2. Conscious and Unconscious

A "sense of identity" obviously has conscious aspects, such as physical and mental, moral and sensual selves; and there is a oneness in the way one experiences oneself and the way others experience us. But the moment a person seems to "find himself" he also "loses himself" transcending identity-consciousness; this surely happens in any revolution when people try new tasks and affiliations as in the case of the Negro revolution when American Negroes found themselves, at the same time that they were trying to assert themselves they were losing themselves in the intensity of the struggle.

Here identity-consciousness, according to psychoanalysts, is covered by unconscious conflicts; so the conscious awareness is also unconscious.

3. Positive and Negative

Erik H. Erikson says that re-studying Freud, he remembered a remark made by a warm-hearted and influential American Jew: "Some instinctive sense tells every Jewish mother that she must make her child study, that his intelligence is his pass to the future. Why does a Negro mother not care? Why does she not have the same instinctive sense?" Erik H. Erikson suggests that given American Negro history, the equivalent "instinctive sense" may have told the majority of Negro mothers to keep their children quiet in their place, away from the futile competition of the world, even if that place isn't a "respectable" place. He still finds Negro mothers are apt to cultivate in their children's minds a "surrendered identity" which has been forced on Negro men for generations. This influenced Negro literature, creating in it a negative recognition. The system of slavery

in North America first contributed to this negative point, then the system of enslavement was perpetuated in the rural South.

So the concept of a negative identity is related to a very big complex.

Every person's psychosocial identity has positive and negative elements. The human being is a result of his growing; he often had no intention of becoming what he becomes; so his positive identity is always in conflict with his past that involves evil prototypes as well as ideal ones.

The individual belonging to an oppressed minority in an exploitative society is aware of the dominant majority which developed in him negative images that he associates with his own negative identity. The feelings of "inferiority" and of morbid self-hate are natural in all minority groups. It is this complex of inferiority that Negro literature describes; it is on account of this complex that literature abounds in descriptions of how the Negro found escape into musical or spiritual worlds or is viewed as a mocking caricature.

"The Negro" usually defends his situation, justifying his negative identity only in terms of his defensive adjustment to the dominant white majority. It is really difficult to distinguish the negative and positive elements within the Negro personality and within the Negro community. Only this could reveal how negative is negative and how positive is positive.

Generally speaking, psychosociologists usually assert that the oppressor has interest in the negative identity of the oppressed because that negative identity is a projection of his own unconscious negative identity--a projection that makes him feel superior.

4. Past and Future

> Turning now to the new young Negroes: My God, a Negro woman student exclaimed the other day in a small meeting, what am I supposed to be integrated out of? I laugh like my grand-mother--and I would rather die than not laugh like that. There was a silence in which you could hear the stereotypes click; for even laughter had now joined those aspects of Negro culture and Negro personality which have become suspect as the marks of submission and fatalism, delusion and escape. But the young girl did not give in with some such mechanical apology as "by which I do not mean, of course . . ." and the silence was pregnant with that immediacy of joint experience which characterizes moments when an identity conflict becomes palpable. It was followed by laughter--embarrassed, amused, defiant.[9]

To the author, the young woman had expressed one of her anxieties wantinga reconstitution of identity elements.

For identity development has two kinds of time: a development stage in the life of the individual and a period in history. So identity contains a complementarity of past and future both in the individual and in society.

A person's (and a people's) identity begins in infancy when mothers make clear that to be born is good and that a child "let the bad world call it colored (if it is colored) or list it as illegitimate (if it is illegitimate)"[10] is a blessing. According to Erikson, "these mothers have put an indelible mark on 'Negro Culture' especially because the systematic exploitation of the Negro male as a slave denied the father's image in the children's mind."[11]

Father and mother as a unit are absolutely necessary in all families; both parents must be present facing the family and its problems; each stage of development needs its own optimum environment and a balance between maternal and paternal strength. The mother's period is the earliest and the most basic. It is here that the first "identity" appears, the first recognition; the final integration is after the end of

adolescence, when the body and the mind are fully developed in his society. There is a deep relation between the first identity experienced in infancy of life and the adolescence when the young person merges with his collective past.

5. Total and Whole

As R. P. Warren says in his book Who Speaks for the Negro (talking about another "cry" from a young Negro woman):

> The auditorium had been packed--mostly Negroes, but with a scattering of white people. A young girl with pale skin, dressed like any coed anywhere, in the clothes for a public occasion, is on the rostrum. She is leaning forward a little on her high heels, speaking with a peculiar vibrance in a strange irregular rhythm, out of some inner excitement, some furious, taut elan, saying: "--and I tell you I have discovered a great truth. I am black! You out there--oh, yes, you may have black faces, but your hearts are white, your minds are white, you have been white-washed!"

Warren reports a white woman's reaction to this outburst and surmises that if this woman

> at that moment heard any words in her head, they were most likely the echo of the words of Malcolm X: "White devils!" And if she saw any face, it must have been the long face of Malcolm X grinning with sardonic certitude!

Erik Erikson defines this feeling she has witnessed as a "totalistic" re-arrangement of images; he means by totalism as "an inner regrouping of imagery, almost a negative conversion, by which erstwhile negative identity elements become totally dominant, making out of erstwhile positive elements a continuation to be excluded totally."[12]

What this process of totalistic rearrangement of images can give us is well exemplified by the Nazi transvaluation of values. The Nazi identity, based on a totalism marked by the radical exclusion of foreign otherness, failed to integrate historically given identity elements, reaching instead for a pseudologic perversion of history. Radical segregationalism

is also totalistic, either white, as in South Africa, recurring to an adjusted Bible, or Negro, as in Black Muslimism which we see later.

The alternative to an exclusive totalism is the wholeness of a more inclusive identity. This leads to another question:

> If the Negro American wants to "find" that wider identity which will permit him to be self-certain as a Negro (or a descendant of Negroes) and integrated as an American, what joint historical actuality can he count on? For we must know that when all the objective realities are classified and all the studies assessed, the question remains: what are the historical actualities with which we can work?"[13]

Returning once more to the individual, we can equate the term identity with the question "who am I." This question nobody asks himself except in a more-or-less morbid state or in the adolescence age. Beyond this, only a certain sense of historical actuality can lead to it as in the American Negro situation.

It is not only among American Negroes, whose social conditions permit that question about identity, but in all parts of the world that the struggle now is for more inclusive identities, participating more in the world to which they belong:

> What has been a driving force in revolutions and reformations, in the founding of churches and in the building of empires has become a contemporaneous world-wide competition. Revolutionary doctrines promise the new identity of peasant and worker to the youth of countries which must overcome their tribal, feudal, or colonial past; new nations attempt to absorb regions; new markets, nations; and world space is extended to include outer space as the proper locale per a universal technological identity.
> (. . .) A more inclusive identity is a development by which two groups who previously had come to depend on each other's negative identities (by living in a traditional situation of mutual enmity or in a symbiotic accommodation to one-sided exploitation) join their identities in such a way that new potentials are activated in both.[14]

With these aspects of the identity issue in mind, we will analyze the principal works of R. Wright, R. Ellison and A. Haley (respectively, Native Son, Invisible Man, and Roots), selected as the most representative. Wright's Black Boy and Ellison's Shadow and Act will also be briefly considered.

Wright, Ellison and Haley are Negroes and Americans. As Negroes, the image of Africa is present in each of their works, conscious or unconscious, as a constant response to white domination. Africa offers a highly actual setting for the solidarity of all Blacks in the Black Diaspora and may provide them with the equivalent of a homeland (if ever so remote)--especially now that independent African countries have replaced the former European colonies.

It is in American society that Wright and Ellison try to search for their identities. Ellison is, in a way, "alienated" from his origins; he wants to show us through his work that he is a Negro-American writer, already acculturated and conscious of his condition. Alienation also characterizes Ralph Ellison's attitude toward Africa. Yet, whereas Wright did at least try, though unsuccessfully, to overcome it, Ellison flatly denied "that there is any significant kinship between American Negroes and Africans."[15] Apparently he has no interest in Africa. For him Africa is "just part of the bigger world picture";[16] he has, he writes, great difficulty in "associating himself with Africa."[17] In both Wright and Ellison their African origins play a subordinate role, though by no means an unimportant one.

The image of Africa as the "homeland" stays permanently in Alex Haley's Roots, well summarized in the following passages:

> What kind of blacks were these who looked down upon their own kind and worked as goats for the toubob? Where had they come from? They looked as Africans looked, but clearly they were not of Africa.[18]

> How many of these strange black ones were in all of toubob land, those who didn't seem to know or care who or what they were.[19]

Haley goes back to his racial past looking for Africa.

We also intend to analyze in Haley the different identities he points out in order to emphasize his own identity: racial identity, including his color (physical features) and the sensitivity (spiritual character), social identity, including tribal and national identities and identity with his land of origins, Africa. These ideas are very personal impressions which come to us, as a necessary step in the painful and tortuous process of finding a "positive" black identity. For, as Kathryn Jackson argues: "People who have not yet seen the glory of their blackness need propaganda as much as they need food."[20] And even Leroi Jones confesses that a subsequent generation will, perhaps, be in a position to leave the realm of pure negation and a simplistic view of the world behind it and make a positive contribution to the emancipation of the blacks:

> We live in a world now where the real work cannot be spoken of clearly. We believe our children will get to the real work. We will make the real work possible. Before the real work can be done, the disease, the power of evil, must be cleared away. The bringer of positive change must have places prepared for them to work.[21]

In order to give a coherent explanation of the causes of such a search for identity in Black American literature, we begin with a short chapter about the socio-psychological background related to changes in the evolution of the image of Africa.

1.2 - Review of Criticism

We will try here to summarize the different critics' opinions about Wright's, Ellison's and Haley's theme of "Identity." The concept of identity we will use in our analysis is that of Erik H. Erikson and Philip Mason. As we have seen,

both of them state that Identity in colored races and nations who form minority groups or are controlled by colonial system is a search for an inner as well as outer emancipation. The word "identity," as we have seen, is for the Negroes a key word, heard over and over again.

So Identity in race relations implies a search for an "ego," a self-definition as members of a society. If the image of Africa is present, consciously or unconsciously, in each one of the three authors, we must relate that concept of identity to this image of Africa. Unfortunately, the only good treatment of this subject that we know is found in Images of Africa in Black American Literature by Marion Berghahn. This author states that the 1960's and early 1970's saw the emergence of a lively artistic and cultural movement among blacks in the United States. This movement was inspired by a keen interest in Africa, where newly independent countries were replacing European colonies. This was completely unexpected, but the truth is that in the 1960's, Afro-Americans became fascinated by Africa: they studied its culture, history, arts and languages.

Marion Berghahn remarks that the identification with that continent became so close that Africa, and not America, was often regarded as the real home of the American blacks:

> There are many examples of this in the black literature of the 1960's, as, for instance, in Clarence Reed's Song from Wasteland: "Africa, Africa/ Wrapped in sorrow/ steeped in pain/ Mother of us all/ I must home to the/ Warming womb/ From whence all sprang . . .," or in Jon Eckel's poem, Home is Where the Soul is: "I have never seen Africa/ that distant land of mine/ but I hear her beauty/ sometimes and her colours staring with me through this world/ . . . Africa, Africa,/ this land of mine/ but I hear her world/ . . . Africa, Africa/ this land of mine/ Africa, Africa, Africa/ this land of men."

But Marion Berghahn does not only speak of the poets' Africa, but also of the Africa implicit in the fiction of writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Baldwin. She says that the image of Africa is present in all of them, and she states:

> Richard Wright's writings deal with a facet of the Afro-American image of Africa which can be understood largely by reference to the changes which took place in the political and social position of blacks in the 1930's. It was in this period that Marxism, which appeared to offer a comprehensive explanation of the Great Depression, made considerable gains among intellectuals and also captured Wright's imagination. On the one hand, Wright identifies himself wholeheartedly with his racial past and to this extent reflects the repercussions of the Harlem Renaissance. In fact, in his early years he had even proclaimed the necessity of a moderate nationalism. But on the other hand, his emphasis on social processes clearly points to a political consciousness which had been shaped by the Great Depression and its consequences and which took its tools of analysis, as is true of other writers of this period, from Marxism. (p. 154)

This critic points out that in spite of Africa being present in Wright's works, it does not play a prominent role, but functions as an undercurrent and unconscious reference, as is also true of Ralph Ellison and Baldwin. Berghahn still notes that all Afro-Americans have a vague feeling of being of African descent, but some prefer to deny it, while others like to cultivate it.

Speaking of those who deny their African past, Berghahn states: "As a consequence of their special position, there existed a considerable number of Afro-Americans who felt rooted in the United States. 'This is our country, and we have no claim on any other,' wrote a colored American in a letter to a journal called Liberator in 1859: '. . . we are not going to Africa. We have no more claim on Africa than has the white American ; that country belongs to the Africans and not to us. We are Americans'" (p. 40). In 1891, however, a strong movement for African emigration began and other blacks "did maintain an ethnic identification with Africa" (p. 63). Authors like Delany, Crummell and Blyden directed public interest towards West Africa (p. 63).

Also important is The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa by the African writer Shatto Arthur Gakwandi from western Uganda. While not treating American Black nationalism, this book provides an excellent critical assessment of twelve major novels from Africa, and the author outlines the main concerns of African fiction. In particular, he is concerned with the parallel relationship between nationalism and modern African literature. His discussion strikes an admirable balance between the evaluation of the literary merits of the novel and the interpretation of the novel as a social document. This book is relevant to our dissertation because it contributes to the better understanding of African identity.

Related to the problem of identity and the outsider in the U.S.A. is Black and White Perspectives on American Race Relations by Peter I. Rose, Stanley Rothman and William J. Wilson. This book tries to answer the following questions: How do blacks view the black urban poor, the members of the upwardly mobile middle class, the black immigrants, the integrationists, and the black nationalists? How do whites assess the current mood of white southerners, the Irish, the Jews, ethnic minorities, the silent majority? How do institutions and professionals concerned with social problems deal with their black constituencies and clients?

To understand better the problem of identity in Black American literature, we read "Aspects of the Racial Past" in The Negro Novel in America by Robert A. Bone. This critic states that Wright, more than any Negro author who preceded him, has a sense of the "presentness" of his racial past. This sense of history, which was part and parcel of his Marxist outlook, has been recorded in Twelve Million Black Voices (1941), published hard on the heels of Native Son.

In the folk history of the American Negro mentioned above, Wright sees the black ghetto as the end product of a long historical process (p. 93):

> Perhaps never in history has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city; we were barely born as a folk when we headed for the tall and sprawling centers of steel and stone. We who were landless on the land; we who had barely managed to live in family groups; we who needed the ritual and guidance of established institutions to hold our atomized lives together in lines of purpose . . . we who had had our personalities blasted with 200 years of slavery and had been turned loose to shift for ourselves.[22]

It was in this perspective that Wright saw the life of Bigger Thomas.

Robert A. Bone characterizes Wright as the Negro novelist who maintained an active interest in his Negro heritage, systematically exploring the racial past in search for distinctive literary material. He concludes that Wright's contribution to the Negro novel was precisely "his fusion of a pronounced racialism with a broader tradition of social protest" (p. 152). This social protest is illustrated by Bigger Thomas, whom Wright defined in his article "How Bigger was Born" as "An American product, a native son of this land, who carries within him the potentialities of either fascism or communism."[23]

We must emphasize here that Robert A. Bone in The Negro Novel in America, as well as M. G. Cooke, in Modern Black Novelists, and Emanuel and Gross in Negro Literature in America, considered Bigger Thomas a product of American society, "a native product," as Wright himself called him.

Concerning the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, there are several approaches to be mentioned. Certainly all critics agree that Invisible Man is a novel about Identity.

Jonathan Baumbach in Nightmare of a Native Son: Invisible Man, says:

> I hesitate to call Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952) a Negro novel, though of course it is written by a Negro and is centrally concerned with the experiences of a Negro (p. 64).

R. A. Bone simply calls Invisible Man's protagonist a Southern Negro, while J. Baumbach characterizes him more widely, saying: "Though the protagonist of Invisible Man is a Southern Negro, he is, in Ellison's rendering, profoundly all of us" (p. 64). He says that like most of us in life he experiences several changes of identity in the course of the novel, though Ellison's hero exists to the reader as a man without an identity, an invisible "I".

Haley's book, Roots, was published in October 1976, and immediately became a best-seller. There were fourteen printings between publication and the days of the TV series at the end of January 1977. With the final episode on TV, "Roots was no longer just a bestselling book and a boffo TV production but a social phenomenon, a potentially important bench mark in U.S. race relations."[24]

To R. Z. Sheppard,

> Roots most closely resembles a historical novel, a form that Haley does not seem to have studied too carefully. His narrative is a blend of dramatic and melodramatic fiction and fact that wells from a profound need to nourish himself with a comprehensible past.
>
> (. . .) In general, the more verified facts that Haley has to work with, the more wooden and cluttered his narrative. Yet the story of the Americanization of the Kinte clan strikes enough human chords to sustain the book's cumulative power. Haley's keen sense of separation and loss, and his hability to forge a return in language, override Roots' considerable structural and stylistic flaws. The book should find a permanent home in a century teeming with physical and spiritual exiles.[25]

Most of our analysis of the way writers deal with the problem of identity as it relates to the image of Africa is very personal, as we found no critics who dealt specifically with this subject. Our analysis of Haley's Roots, in particular, is absolutely personal. The only criticism obtained is from the newsmagazine Time, especially from the February 14, 1977 issue, which deals with the television series. Although it is not directly relevant to this paper, we will deal with it in this review of criticism.

At the time of the TV series in 1977, Roots was considered Haley's Comet" in Chicago. To Atlanta TV executive Neil Kuvin, it was "Super Bowl every night." In New York, Executive Director Vernon Jordan of the National Urban League called it "the single most spectacular educational experience in race relations in America."

Whatever the reason for the TV version's popularity, it did not necessarily have much to do with artistic merit. Many TV critics had severe reservations about it. The Chicago Sun-Times William Granger, complaining of "puerile" writing and "caricatures," described Roots as "so transparently bad at times that I was filled with embarrassment." Time's own critic, Richard Schickel, labeled the TV production as "Mandingo for middlebrows." He wrote that Roots offered "almost no new insights, factual or emotional," about slavery; instead, there was "a handy compendium of stale melodramatic conventions."

Many critics and viewers, while readily conceding that the TV series was not a precisely accurate recounting of history (few dramatizations are), nonetheless praised the production for what one of them called its mythic veracity. They had a point. For millions of Americans, Roots was real--if not necessarily literally true.

John Callahan, professor of American Literature at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, commented on its rich subject and said: "We now know our roots are inextricably bound with the roots of blacks and cannot be separated." Many observers also feel that the TV series left whites with a more sympathetic view of blacks by giving them a greater appreciation of black history. For example, Beti Gunter, the wife of a lawyer in Little Rock, admitted: "Something inside me tried to say that slavery wasn't that bad, but now I know that it really was a lot worse.

Aurora Jackson, a social worker in Chicago, said: "It's one thing to read about this, and another thing to see it. My concept of slavery was always intellectual. For the first time, I really felt I had a picture of how horrible life was."

"We've been given a piece of literature that takes the civil rights struggle to a higher level," said black Congressman John Conyers. "You can't begin to do anything in life," added Conyers, "until you can own up to your blackness and accept yourself in your blackness and others as they are."

Like black Americans elsewhere, this Congressman had a feeling that because of Roots something good had happened to race relations--even if they could not quite define what". "Perhaps," concludes Time, "it is simply that the gulf between black and white has been narrowed a bit and the level of mutual understanding has been raised a notch."

1.3 - Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation is to determine whether or not a conflict, resulting from an identity problem, really exists in the main works of Wright, Ellison and Haley (respectively Native Son, Invisible Man and Roots) and if such a problem has a real existence, how each author deals with it. We will try to assess the conscious or unconscious influence

of Africa on black American writers and the extend of their preservation or non-preservation of an African heritage.

With that aim in mind, we propose to show how the problem of identity affects the protagonists of each novel. In what terms do they debate among themselves about Marxism or black nationalism or any other ideology, as a solution for their adaptation to American society?

If these authors or any of them feel like "outsiders" in a white society, do they have a separate awareness of their blackness? Are they true black American writers, or are they blacks as white writers?

Do they neglect their African past? What is Africa to them? Is Africa a source of cultural pride to any of them?

Having in mind the preceding considerations, we will formulate the following hypotheses which will orient our analysis. These are only hypotheses, they are not an anticipation of conclusions; the latter, in their right time, can diverge from the former if, by chance, our analysis doesn't confirm them:

1. The main protagonists of Native Son, Invisible Man and Roots, as individuals belonging to the Negro American minority, feel like outsiders within a "white" society which regards black races and cultures as inferior to white.

2. To assert themselves as non-white individuals and members of a non-white community, they have to overcome the "white" image of Africa, according to which the primitive African (or the "Ape Man") would live with his instincts still intact and whose nakedness, polygamy and apparently less restrictive sexual life were mistaken by Anglo-Saxon puritanism as promiscuity, "sinfulness" and obscenity.

3. Striving to overcome their identity crisis, these protagonists must affirm their "different" cultural identity, rooted in a prized African past and expurgated from values and ideologies relevant only to the "white" society.

4. This different black American cultural identity and its rejection of the present American way of life will lead to a revolutionary claim for total equality with whites in American society or, alternatively, to black nationalism, hostile to the traditional American "white" society.

NOTES

[1]Robert Penn Warren, Who Speaks for the Negro? (New York, 1965), p. 17.

[2]Peter Rose, Americans From Africa: Old Memories, New Moods (New York: Atherton Press, 1970),

[3]Boston, 1920, p. 199.

[4]Erik Erikson, "The Concept of Identity in Race Relations," Americans from Africa.

[5]Sigmund Freud, Address to the Society of B'nai B'rith in The Standard Edition (London, 1959), p. 273.

[6]Erikson, "Concept of Identity."

[7]Kenneth B. Clark, Dark Ghetto (New York, 1965).

[8]Erikson, "Concept of Identity," p. 327.

[9]Ibid., p. 337.

[10]Ibid., p. 339.

[11]Ibid, p. 339.

[12]See Robert J. Lifton, p. 7.

[13]Erikson, "Concept of Identity," p. 343.

[14]Ibid, p. 343.

[15]Ralph Waldo Ellison, "Some Questions and Some Answers," Shadow and Act, p. 262.

[16]Ibid., p. 263.

[17]Ibid., p. 264.

[18]Alex Haley, Roots (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1976), p. 202.

[19]Ibid., p. 212.

[20]Marion Berghahn, Images of Africa in Black American Literature (The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1977), p. 191.

[21]Leroi Jones, Raise Race Rays Raze (New York, 1972), p. 28.

[22]Richard Wright, Twelve Million Black Voices (1941), p. 93.

[23]Saturday Review, 22 (1940), pp. 1-4, 17-20.

[24]Time, February 14, 1977, p. 69.

[25]Time, October 1976, p. 55.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

I. General Overview of Negro Problem in U.S.A.

The group designated in the U.S. as "Black Americans" is a large group, including 25 million out of a total population of 222 million. In other regions, particularly in Africa, only a few of those included in this group would be considered "Negroes" because most of them are mixed and therefore included in the white majority. There are also strong cultural differences between American Negroes and African Negroes; much stronger than between the latter and Brazilian Negroes.

Black Americans have lived in the U.S. for generations, much longer than white immigrants who arrived in the nineteenth century. For this reason, it is strange that Black Americans have not yet been integrated, and, more than a minority, they are considered a culturally different people.

Forty years ago, Myrdall already wrote that white Americans, descendants from those Europeans who every summer peopled the beaches looking for a temporarily sunburnt skin, if they mixed with "Negroes," after some generations they would guarantee perpetually to their descendants that same brown colour they now try to get on the beach.

It is only nowadays that we see a strong process of total integration of the Black in the American way of life. Much opposition, however, has appeared from whites as well as from Blacks.

Julho, 1967 — NOVA IORQUE
Polícias nova-iorquinos lutam para dominar um negro, em pleno Manhattan, depois de mais de cem pessoas terem surgido no centro da cidade quebrando montras e pilhando

SOURCE: William Brink and Louis Harris, Negros e Brancos (Ed. Ibis, 1968).

Julho 1967 — CAMBRIDGE
Soldados da Guarda Nacional de Maryland, de baioneta calada, avançam numa rua de Cambridge para dispersar uma multidão de negros enfurecidos. A agitação surgiu após uma manifestação em louvor do papel predominante dos negros na II Guerra Mundial

SOURCE: William Brink and Louis Harris, Negros e Brancos, (Ed. Ibis, 1968).

Julho, 1967 — INDIANA
Um negro senta-se no passeio enquanto um polícia e outros negros o auxiliam, depois daquele ter dito que fora atingido por um tiro durante os motins da noite violenta de South Bend

SOURCE: William Brink and Louis Harris, Negros e Brancos, (Ed. Ibis, 1968).

SOURCE: William Brink and Louis Harris, Negros e Brancos, (Ed. Ibis, 1968).

Setembro, 1965 — NOVA IORQUE
A multidão observa e segue os polícias que guardam e transportam numa maca através das ruas, a caminho do hospital, o cadáver do líder nacionalista negro Malcolm X, assassinado no decorrer duma assembleia em que conferenciava

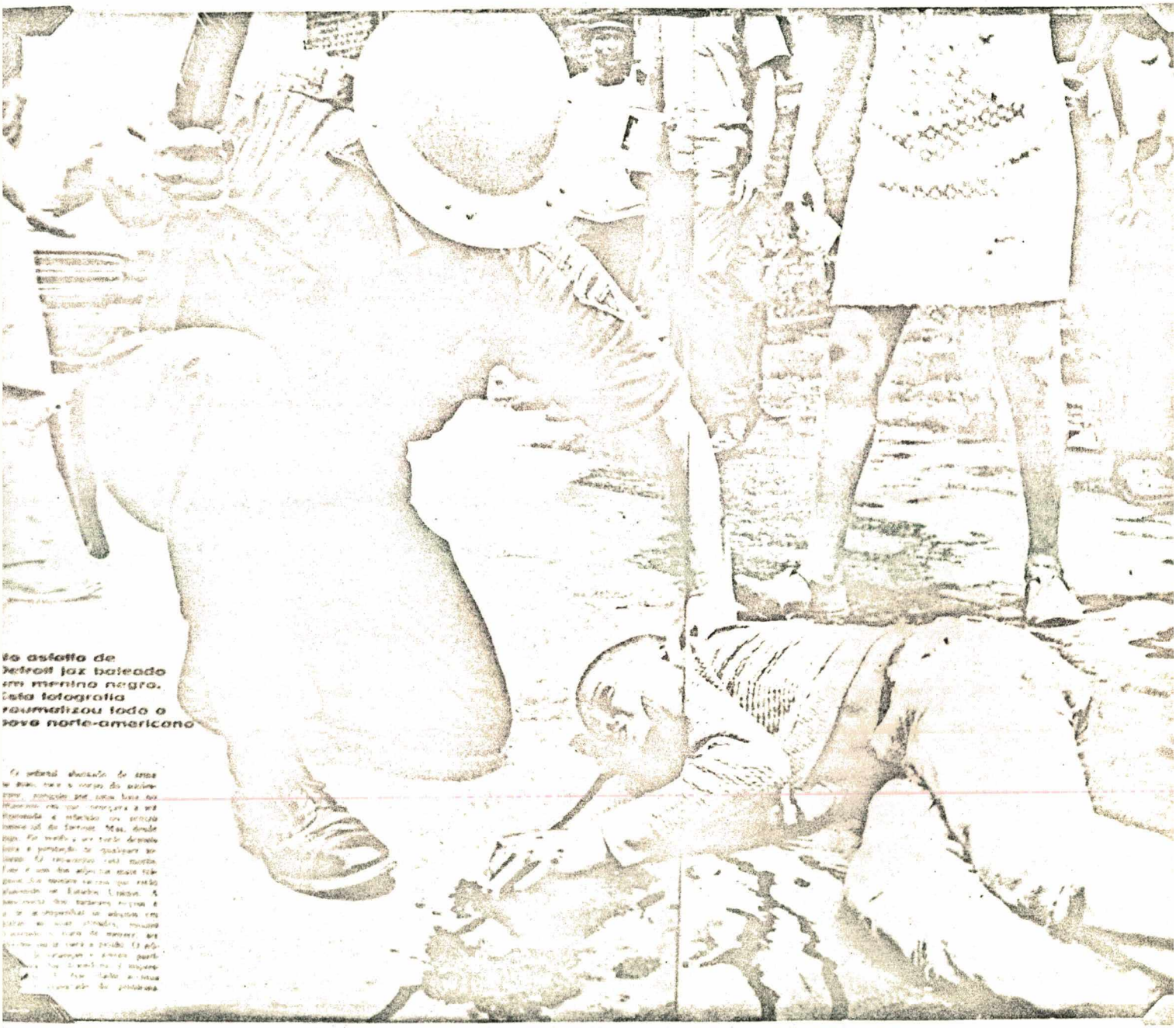
Maio, 1966 — CHICAGO
Atingido por uma pedrada na cabeça, o Dr. Luther King tomba sobre o joelho. O reverendo Dr. King ergueu-se de novo e comandou um grupo de manifestantes durante uma marcha de protesto contra a discriminação habitacional num bairro branco de Chicago. Centenas de pessoas, paradas nos passeios ao longo do percurso da marcha, gritaram protestos e atiraram garrafas e bombas-brinquedo sobre os manifestantes

SOURCE: William Brink and Louis Harris, Negros e Brancos, (Ed. Ibis, 1968).

Julho, 1968 — WASHINGTON
H. Rap Brown, líder do Comitê Coordenador dos Estudantes Não-Violentos, durante uma conferência de imprensa concedida aos jornalistas num passeio da capital norte-americana, durante a qual se referiu ao Presidente Johnson como «cão raivoso.» Brown declarou que queria que Johnson se demitisse e fosse lutar no Vietname

SOURCE: William Brink and Louis Harris, Negros e Brancos, (Ed. Ibis, 1968).

SOURCE: "A Fúria do Poder Negro," Manchete, August 12, 1967, Ano 15, nº 799.



SOURCE: "A Fúria do Poder Negro," Manchete, August 12, 1967, Ano 15, nº 799.

SOURCE: "A Fúria do Poder Negro," Manchete, August 12, 1967, Ano 15, nº 799.

SOURCE: "A Fúria do Poder Negro," Manchete, August 12, 1967, Ano 15, nº 799.

The prejudice against the Negro has deep roots. He is considered a citizen of secondary status, as well as a member of an inferior race. Even recently, at the end of 1979, a book was published by a professor of educational psychology at the University of California at Berkeley defending the thesis that IQ test results showing Blacks scoring lower than whites are fair, accurate, and not, as critics suppose, biased by culture.[2]

Everything started with the slave trade to Virginia and other English colonies in North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Slavery became firmly entrenched in the South Atlantic states, from Delaware to Florida, and in the cotton states of the Deep South, like Alabama and Mississippi. At the last census count before the Civil War, the Negro slave population had grown to 3,953,760, while free Negroes numbered approximately 488,000. At that time, all the United States had 23,000,000 inhabitants.[3]

In Brazil and throughout Latin America, the achievement of emancipation without bloodshed was the result of the absence of the stigma of slavery based on color. Latin American slaves, after their liberation, could become really free, moving into the circle of full citizens, suffering no legal disabilities because of their color. It was quite different in the United States.[4]

There in 1816, long before the Civil War, some white Americans founded the American Colonization Society in order to rid the United States of its Negro problem by resettling freed Negroes in Africa, since Negroes were wanted in America only as slaves. This was the way in which colonization of the Liberian coast started in 1818. Liberia achieved in 1847 an independence which was oppressive to the indigenous tribal peoples; the hatred of the native "country people", who now constitute 97% of Liberia's population, for the "settlers" descended from

American slaves who have dominated the country since its founding, erupted in the bloodshed of Liberia's Revolution in April of 1980.

After the Civil War (1861-65), the former slaveholders and other Southern whites, arguing that they were the only people who knew the Negro, insisted that the closest supervision of his economic activities, the strictest surveillance of his social life, and his complete exclusion from the use of the ballot would be the wisest way of handling him. Their views were put into practice in the enactment of state laws called "black codes." Several of these laws limited the areas in which Negroes could purchase or rent property. Vagrancy laws were designed to force all Negroes to work whether or not they needed or wanted to work. Negroes who quit their jobs could be arrested and imprisoned for breach of contract and in the courts their rights were severely limited. Fines were imposed for insulting gestures or acts, curfew violations, possession of firearms, and the like. In 1883, the Supreme Court even declared the Civil Rights Law of 1875 unconstitutional--and this action was followed by the enactment of new segregation laws in most of the Southern states. After the "separate but equal" doctrine was upheld by that court in 1896 in a case involving intrastate transportation, the white and Negro races were completely and effectively separated.

The shift of Negroes from rural to urban areas like Washington, Baltimore, New Orleans, Philadelphia, New York and Memphis (each one with a population of more than 50,000 in 1900) began in the late nineteenth century. Negroes found great difficulty in securing anything except the more onerous and less attractive jobs, and whites were determined to segregate them in one section of the city (ghettos); even so, as Negroes and whites lived closer together and competed for

jobs and housing, the opportunities for conflict increased, with a large number of lynchings and some race riots.

Several particularly violent incidents in the first decade of the twentieth century attracted the attention of all the United States and also that of the world and originated the creation of a multiracial organization known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This organization was remarkable due to the participation of W. E. B. Du Bois, a well-known Negro, author of The Suppression of the African Slave Trade (1896), the first work in the Harvard Historical Studies and a landmark in historical scholarship in the United States. The NAACP included a plan for widening industrial opportunities for Negroes, but it did not find time to do much in this area; more and more, it concentrated on its crusade to end lynchings, to secure the franchise for Negroes, and to put an end to all forms of segregation and discrimination.

After 1914, the movement of Negroes to Northern cities was greatly accelerated--and new race riots and lynchings took place, including a riot in Chicago in which twenty-three Negroes and fifteen whites were killed.

It was after the First World War that some Negroes, less optimistic for the future, joined around Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican Negro nationalist leader, and his Universal Negro Improvement Association, to put their money and energy into the eventually unsuccessful scheme to return all Negroes to Africa. Having transferred his headquarters from Jamaica to New York City, he founded a popular weekly newspaper, The Ne-

gro World. Through it, he preached a philosophy of militant black nationalism: Negroes, he declared, belonged to a gifted race with a proud past and a great future; they should, therefore, abandon their feelings of inferiority, build their own distinctive culture, and ultimately redeem their homeland in Africa.

Other Negroes, in those years following World War I, used poetry, prose and song to cry out against social and economic wrongs, to protest against segregation and lynching, to demand higher wages, shorter hours and better conditions of work. In short, they stood for full social equality and first-class citizenship. Negro writers, led by Du Bois, called for a "New Negro," a person no longer obsequious and docile, but militant and impatient to secure his rights.

In World War II (1939-45), approximately 1,000,000 Negro men and women served in all branches of U.S. armed forces, and for the first time a Negro was promoted to the rank of brigadier general. Negro soldiers demanded equal treatment whenever it was possible and, after the war, they insisted that the fight for equality at home should continue.

In 1944, Gunnar Myrdal published his world famous An American Dilemma, as the final report of a comprehensive study of the Negro problem, sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. In 1946, President Harry S. Truman appointed a committee of distinguished Negro and white Americans to enquire into the condition of civil rights and to make recommendations for their improvement.

This was the beginning of an era of revolutionary changes, impelled by the steady migration of Negroes to the North and West after World War II and their concentration in important industrial communities that gave them a new powerful voice in political affairs. By the 1960's, more than a third of all the Black Americans were already living in the central cities of twelve metropolitan areas, such as Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, etc.

In 1963, Arnold Rose already summarized the major forces causing the rapid change in race relations since 1940:

> The major forces causing the rapid change in race relations since 1940 seem to have been continuous industrialization and technological advance, the high level of mobility among the American people, economic prosperity, the organization and political education of minority groups, an increased American awareness of world opinion, a consistent support for civil rights on the part of the Supreme Court and a lesser support from the other branches of the federal government and of the Northern state governments, and the propaganda and educational effort for more equal civil rights. Some of these forces are likely to continue to exert the same push as they have in the recent past; others are likely to change in their influence; and new forces are likely to have increasing influence.[4]

The fight for Civil Rights in the fifties and the sixties is well known, with such landmarks as the unanimous decision of the U.S. Supreme Court on May 17, 1956, ruling that separate education facilites were inherently unequal and declaring that racial segregation in public education was unconstitutional; the boycott in 1956, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, of the city bus lines of Montgomery, Alabama, compelling the desegregation of the entire city transportation system, the "sit-in" demonstrations at white lunch counters that refused to serve Negroes; the "freedom riders"; all the other marches and mass demonstrations, until the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, the centennial

of the Emancipation Declaration. On this August 28, more than 200,000 Negroes and Whites demanded an end to racial segregation and discrimination.

Marching and demonstrating were important techniques in the drive to secure the rights of Negroes. These marches were also used by the Black Muslims (a black nationalist religion founded by Elijah Muhammad, whose better-known spokesman was Malcolm X, who joined it in 1952) to point out one of their basic tenets: that the United States would never grant equality to Negroes; Western society and the Judaic-Christian ethical system on which it was based, would be inherently racist and black men should reject its standards. Negroes should, therefore, reject any cooperation with whites and turn their attention to the development of their own culture as well as to their own political and economic institutions. The Black Muslim movement among Negroes was not large, but its popularity was considerable, even among many who rejected its programs.

In 1963, Malcolm X was dropped from Black Muslim ranks, but shortly thereafter he established his own group, the secular organization of Afro-American Unity, trying to unify all the black organizations fighting white racism. It was the beginning of the movement known as Black Nationalism, led by Malcolm X until his death. In his biography, written by Alex Haley (one of the three authors analyzed in this dissertation), he predicted that he might not live to see the book published. That prophecy became a reality on February 21, 1965, when he was assassinated.

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the so-called Civil Rights Act of 1964, outlawing discrimination in hotels, restaurants, public schools, parks, stadiums and swimming pools, and establishing the right to equal employment opportunity in business and unions with twenty-five or more

members, with other provisions, all providing Negroes with a firm legal basis for obtaining equal opportunity. In 1968, a new law against discrimination in housing was enacted.

Despite favorable court decisions and new state and federal legislation which raised Negroes' hopes, the economic gap between the masses of black Americans and white Americans increased in the 1960's. Discrimination in employment continued and the unemployment rate among Negroes was about twice as high as among whites. Until 1968, as we have seen, no law forbade discrimination in housing and the situation was deteriorating rapidly as the migration of Negroes into the cities continued.

The sense of frustration and alienation that many Negroes experienced created the climate for violent reaction. It was the time for the "long hot summers" of 1964, 1965, 1966 and 1967, that marked a historical shift from the era of sit-ins and nonviolent marches, of songs and prayers, to the era of ghetto rioting. The worst outbreaks were in New York City (July 1964), Los Angeles (August 1965), Cleveland (July 1966), Newark (July 1967), Detroit (July 1967, the worst riot of the decade, with a seven-day toll of 43 killed, 2,000 injured, 7,000 arrested and 5,000 left homeless), and Washington (April 1968).

As the situation worsened, new Negro leaders emerged who rejected the nonviolent gradualist methods of the older civil rights leaders. They demanded immediate and substantial improvement in the position of Negroes, by violence if necessary. "Black Power" became a slogan of new leaders like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. They insisted that Negroes should take control of all the institutions in the black ghetto, including business establishments and schools. Other movements, although nonviolent in character, such as

those sponsored by the Southern Christian Conference, contributed to a rapid spread of the rejection of the white man's culture and a focusing on the culture and history of Negroes. In this way many hoped to improve the self-image of Negroes and, in the process, gain greater respect from the white community.

The Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, appointed by President Johnson, concluded in 1968 that white racism, which had its roots deep in the past, was a basic factor in the alienation of the white and black races. In a certain way anticipating the recent Miami riots of May 1980, the Commission declared that:

> to some Negroes police have come to symbolize white power, white racism and white repression. And the fact is that many police do reflect and express these white attitudes. The atmosphere of hostility and cynicism is reinforced by a widespread belief among Negroes in the existence of police brutality and in a double standard of justice and protection--one for Negroes and one for whites.

By contrast with the 1960's, the 1970's was a decade of relative racial peace. Looking back at the last decade, Vernon Jordan, President of the National Urban League and one of America's foremost black leaders, conceded:

> More black people find themselves in better circumstances than at any time in our history. It would be dishonest to claim otherwise. Blacks in high positions have proliferated. Blacks are in jobs never before open to us. Blacks are in schools and colleges that never allowed us through their doors.

Jordan, nevertheless, argued that "the myth of black progress" was a "dangerous illusion" because it does not apply to "the vast majority of black people." (Time, June 2, 1980, p. 12)

In the early days of last June, Vernon Jordan was grievously wounded by two bullets from a rifle in Fort Wayne, Indiana, only five hours after he delivered this warning:

> We cannot ignore the awful pressures faced by black people today. We cannot pretend that what happened in Miami was a purely local event flowing from purely local conditions. The pressures that built to an explosion in Miami are present everywhere today. . . . Yes, we know our days of sacrifice and struggle are not over. Our struggle is for America's soul. . . . Our faith has been sorely tried. It has been burned in the furnace of racial hatreds. But always, black people have revived their faith in America. (Time, June 9, 1980, p. 6)

Another Time issue (August 29, 1977, pp. 18-25), in a cover story on The American Underclass, ascertained that "though its members come from all races and live in many places, the underclass is made up mostly of impoverished urban blacks who still suffer from the heritage of slavery and discrimination." The story reports that if one of America's great success sagas has been the rise of many blacks to the secure middle class, so that today 44% of black families earn $10,000 or more a year, almost a third of all black families are still below the poverty line, defined in 1977 as $5,500 for an urban family of four. In the white families, only 8.9% of them are below that line. Fifty-five percent of the nation's blacks, the report goes on, still live in the mostly depressed areas of central cities, and this concentration seems fated to increase because the birth rate amont the blacks is 51% higher than among whites, and also because of the lingering discrimination on the part of the white majority and a crippling absence of education, training and opportunity among the black minority:

> From everywhere in the ghetto comes the cry for more jobs. The unemployment rate among blacks is 13.2% v. 6.1% among whites. The rate for black teenagers is 39%, v. 14.3% for whites. A generation of young people is moving into its 20s--the family-forming years--without knowing how to work, since many have never held jobs.

Time Chicago correspondent Robert Wurmstedt, once a Peace Corps volunteer, reports:

> The poverty in the black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods on the West Side of Chicago is worse than poverty I saw in West Africa. The people there are guided by strong traditional values. They do not live in constant fear of violence, vermin and fire. You don't find the same sense of desperation and hopelessness you find in the American ghetto.

Figures extracted from Time (June 2, 1980, p.12) show that between 1970 and 1979, the percentage of black families classified as middle income dropped from 12% to 9%. The average income of blacks slipped 3% farther behind that of whites (from 60% to 57%). Black unemployment in the same decade rose from 8.2% to 12.6% --- which is twice that of whites. And now, "as the U.S. faces a recession, black unemployment is expected to climb higher. Among black teenagers in large cities this summer, the unemployment rate may reach 50%. The only consolation in such alarming statistics is that joblessness alone rarely triggers a riot. 'If it did', says Newark Mayor Kenneth Gibson. who is black, 'every city in the country would be in flames." (Time,June 2, 1980, p. 13).

The effort realized in the last thirty years to fuse Americans - Whites and Blacks - into a whole people has been enormous, but it will only be successful on the day when the cultural barriers cease separating the two groups. Even frpm an economic and social point of view, blacks still have a difficult challenge if they wish to achieve the same level as white people.

The series of reforms (more political power for blacks, police review boards, a variety of job programs, anti-discrimination laws...) have not been sufficient to the aims prossecuted. As Miami demonstrated last May, the elements that created the history of ghetto rioting still exist. Sociologist Philip Hauser og Chicago, says: "There isn't a central city in this country where the mood of the black community isn't the same as in Miami." Joseph D. Feaster Jr., president of Boston branch of N.A.A.C.P., agrees: "If you get the right circunstances and the ignition, then you're going to have the problem" (Time, June 2, 1980, p. 13).

If the gap between the masses of black Americans and white Americans continues, doesn't the shattering sense of frustration and alienation that many Negroes experience create the climate for new violent reaction? Doesn't the angry, bitter mood of Negro Americans continue to reflect the view that Negroes themselves would have to assume the major responsability for improving their condition?

From this point of view, it does not seem important to extend the discussion of urban Marxism and "mystical" black nationalism. During recent decades, the efforts of most American Negro leaders have been aimed toward integrating the Negro into the mainstream of American life. Malcolm X and others who, like him, preached the opposite, were mere exceptions to the general

rule.

In North America, both Marxism and black nationalism preach revolution, an extensive and drastic change in the status quo. It is only this that they have in common. If we follow Erikson's categories, we would say that black nationalism is a "totalistic" rearrangement of images, an inner regrouping of imagery, a negative conversion, by which erstwhile negative identity elements become totally dominant, making out of erstwhile positive elements a combination to be excluded totally. On the opposite side, Marxism is a revolutionary doctrine that promises a new and wider identity. Whether this new identity were were "peasant-and-worker" or proletarian", of "all-workers", we would always be facing the "wholeness" of a more inclusive identity, in which it would seem unimportant to be a Negro or a descendant of Negroes.

Not differentiating Negroes and whites, Marxism does not present any original solution to the Black American problem.

Black nationalism has flourished only in times of crisis, in different forms--sometimes mystical and even mythical. Though neither Black Muslims nor the Black Nationalist movement of Malcolm X, or the Black Power movement has found a hospitable society to such totalistic turns. Nevertheless, we must emphasize that all these forms of black nationalism had a salutary influence on Negroes' self-image, as we shall see later. They had long regarded themselves in terms of a "surrendered identity," an identity of "negative recognition" (Erikson), which would not permit them a total realignment to be self-certain as Negroes and, at the same time, integrated as Americans.

II. The Self-Image of the Negro American

The relationship of Black Americans with Africa has never been an easy one. It comprises a broad field of attitudes,

some of them paradoxical. At one end we find a complete lack of interest in Africa and a strong emphasis on the "Americaness" of Black Americans; at the other extreme there exists a radical identification with Africa, adherent to a movement propagating ideas of a return to the "homeland," namely Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement (1920-1930). Garvey held that the Negro must renounce all hope of assistance or understanding from American whites, leave the country and build a new civilization in Africa. But the truth is, as the writings of Black Americans demonstrate, they take an ambivalent attitude towards Africa, depending on changing historical circumstances, and also on the individual experience within one and the same period.

Despite this variety of attitudes, we see a constant preoccupation in Black American writers with the "white" image of Africa, which has had a profound influence on the lives and the self-consciousness of Black Americans and thus in turn on their own relationship with Africa. This image is really important because only a very few Black Americans have actually succeeded in emancipating themselves from the impact of this "white" image of Africa.

It is remarkable in this context to notice, as the literature of Black America will show, that Black American attitudes towards Africa are not only defined by the dominant (white) image of the continent, but also by the position which blacks occupy as a minority in white America.

A. The "White" Image of Africa

It is impossible to solve this complex problem in a few lines, but we can give the general picture of continuities and

changes in the "white" image of Africa as a result of historical and cultural evolution.

All studies that have been published about the subject emphasize the existence of certain stereotypes, such as the idea that has persisted over centuries that Blacks are inferior beings who, as a consequence, have been considered as possessing something like a "natural" slave mentality. This has led to the assumption that racism is a product of slavery. But the concepts of slavery, or more precisely, serfdom, had been developed in Europe--France, England, Russia, Bulgaria, etc.--long before the establishment of the transatlantic slave trade. People of white or colored skin were indiscriminately enslaved. It was true, in fact, that slaves were differentiated from free men and a slave was under total subjugation to the will of another, and therefore in an inferior condition. As Jordan has pointed out, "The slave was treated like a beast. Slavery was inseparable from the evil in men; it was God's punishment upon Ham's prurient disobedience. Enslavement was captivity, the loser's lot in a contest of power."[5]

This means that before the colonization of America, slavery already existed as well as some more-or-less set ideas about it. The African slave came easily into these ideas and hence the racial dimension and the black-white problem. By the time slavery was introduced into America, a remarkable differentiation had taken place in the treatment of groups of white and black servants. In this period there are various indications that "Negroes were more singled out for special treatment in several ways which suggest a generalized debasement of Negroes

as a group."[6] This differentiation between African and European "servants" became more obvious when slavery received legal sanction. By this time, a man with a dark skin was almost always identified as being a "slave." Thus the state of Maryland implemented a law in 1663 which stipulated that "all negroes or other slaves within the province, and all negroes and other slaves to be hereafter imported into the province, shall serve durante vita; and all children born of any negro or other slave shall be slaves as their fathers for the term of their lives."[7] The degradation of the Blacks to an inferior status came in fact as a direct consequence of slavery:

> Why was American slavery the most awful the world has ever known? The slave was totally removed from the protection of organized society (compare the elaborate provisions for protection of slaves in the Bible), his existence as a human being was given no recognition by any religious or secular agency, he was totally ignorant of and completely cut off from his past, and he was offered absolutely no hope for the future. His children could be sold, his marriage was not recognized, his wife could be violated or sold (there was something comic about calling the woman with whom the master permitted him to live a "wife"), and he could also be subject, without redress, to frightful barbarities--there were presumably as many sadists among slaveowners, men and women, as there in other groups. The slave could not, by law, be taught to read or write; he could not practice any religion without the permission of his master, and could never meet with his fellows, for religious or any other purposes, except in the presence of a white; and finally, if a master wished to free him, every legal obstacle was used to thwart such action. This was not what slavery meant in the ancient world, in medieval and early modern Europe, or in Brazil and the West Indies.[8]

Later on, when the idea of inferiority was already established, a change occurred in the image of Africa, which appeared to justify this discriminatory treatment that had been shaped during the period of European overseas expansion prior to the eighteenth century. This change accompanied the dissolution of the feudal structures of European societies. In fact, the negative ideas about the dark-skinned people came

from the "discovery" of Africa and, from the very beginning, were connected with "white" ideas about Africa. It was that condition of subjugation and racial discrimination in the New World that induced Black people in the course of time to social protest and to the search for an identity, in a new society where they had been forced to live.

B. How Negroes Came to be Considered Inferior

To understand the Negro's self-image and "who am I?" problems, we must go back to the birth of the American Negro. Over 300 years ago black men, women and children were taken from Africa, their native land, and placed in an alien white land. They occupied the most degraded of human conditions: that of a slave, a non-person and a piece of property. The Negro family was in this way broken. Economic reasons were stronger and they had to be used for that. In Alvin F. Poussaint's words in The Self-Image of the Negro American, p. 350:

> The Negro male was completely emasculated, and the Negro woman systematically exploited and vilely degraded. The plantation system implanted a subservience and dependency in the psyche of the Negro that made him forever dependent upon the good will and paternalism of the white man.

At the end of the Civil War (1865) slavery was abolished, but the Negro had been stripped of his culture and stayed as an oppressed black man in a white world. In the late 1800's and early 1900's, the racist propaganda of the white man about the inferiority of the Negro increased intensely. He was terrorized, mutilated and lynched. The white man projected his worst ideas onto the black man: he saw the black as an animal with a lust to murder, with ravaging sexual impulses, etc. The white man got in this way what he most wanted: exclusion of Negroes from society, inspiring the whole system of discrimination.

Whites could convince blacks that they really were inferior. They encouraged attitudes in Negroes that realized their stereotypes. Black men were happy-go-lucky, lazy, stupid, irresponsible, etc. All these propaganda ideas came through radio and movies such as "Birth of a Nation" and acted like electric shocks which conditioned the Negro to say "Yes, I am inferior."

They were not only conditioned to believe that Negroes are "no-good," but they also believed that only "white is right." The only ones who could elevate themselves were light-skinned Negroes because they had much more "white blood." Some of these light-skinned Negroes still reject their darker brothers today.

Black men--at least before the 1960's--despised their kinky hair, broad noses and thick lips, because they were taught to despise them.

The most tragic fact is that the Negro has come to form his self-concept on the basis of what white racists have said. Therefore, black people learn quickly to hate themselves more than their oppressors. We know racism has left almost irreparable scars on the Afro-American psyche that has obliged him to reach out for a sense of identity.

Being a Negro has many implications for the development of one's ego; implications related to economic class status and to the color of one's skin too. The black child develops in a color caste system which disturbs him deeply. The contacts with these symbols of caste inferiority such as segregated schools, neighborhoods and the indirect reactions of his family, bring him the consciousness of being sociologically and psychologically rejected. He may see himself as unwanted by the white caste society and being unworthy of affection. These negative forces

shape the Negro's personality, developing in him conscious or unconscious feelings of inferiority, insecurity and self-doubt.

Alvin F. Poussaint says in The Self-Image of the Negro American, p. 352, that:

> In the earliest drawings, stories and dreams of Negro children there appear many wishes to be white and a rejection of their own color. They usually prefer white dolls and white friends, frequently identify themselves as white, and show a reluctance to admit that they are Negro.

R. Coles, in "When I draw the Lord He'll be a Real Big Man," reported that "Negro children in their drawings tend to show Negroes as small, incomplete people and whites as strong and powerful."[9]

Poussaint adds that in Mississippi or any northern city ghetto, children usually shout at each other in anger, "Black pig," "Dirty nigger," etc., which proves their damaged self-esteem. Most of these negative complexes have been passed to them by their parents who were accustomed to believe in their own inferiority and to hate their blackness.

Many of their crimes are against their own people, against other Negroes; it is a vicious circle of self-destructive behavior as if to say to the world, "Yes, I am inferior and I hate myself for it."

But the Civil Rights Movement (1960's) has generated some changes, though integration as presently practiced does not seem to offer the mass of Negroes a solution to problems of the negative self-concept. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that integration has moved at a snail's pace and has been marked by white resistance. The Negro has found himself in the position of asking the white man to let him in his schools, restaur-

ants, theatres, etc., though he knows the white man did not want him. Negro parents feared psychological harm to their children sending them to "integrated schools." Many of these people have found this type of integration degrading and have not wanted to go to any school where they have to be "accepted by white Southern racists."

Negro children suffered because they were placed in a school with children who were generally the products of prejudiced white homes. The black child experienced a hard situation, school was "an experimental laboratory for bigoted whites to learn to live with Nigras."[10] White continued to be a model of culture and thus the Negro had to give up much of his black identity and subculture to be comfortably integrated.

From this point of view, Black Muslimism, Black Power and, in general, Black consciousness movements appeared to be able to contribute a great deal to the Negroes' sense of identity and self-esteem. For example, it is significant that Emma J. Lapsansky, a black doctoral candidate in American Civilization, gave the title "Black Power is My Mental Health" to her paper about the accomplishments of the civil rights movement (in Black Americans, Forum Lectures, 1970). "Black consciousness" programs can build Negro self-confidence by calling upon the black man to think and do things for himself: and could mobilize the black community for positive political and social action.

> The development of black consciousness could serve as an alternative and supplementary approach to the building of the Negroes' self-image along with the present drive toward complete racial integration.[11]

This means that black people must undo the centuries of negative self-image created by white men and replace it with a more positive self-image and greater self-confidence.

If we try to summarize the Black American historical and socio-psychological background in a global view, we could say that Negro and white relationships from the Civil War onwards have been approached through three different and successive predominant theories.

The first one, promoted until this century, we could call the "Sambo" school.[12] This theory states that Negroes are innately lazy and incompetent, capable of working only under compulsion. From this point of view, Negroes are child-like innocents, perhaps biologically inferior; slavery, whatever its excesses, was a generally benign means of giving the colored people civilized ways. We can find this general message in Margaret Mitchell's long historical romance Gone With the Wind (1936).

The second theory, which predominated in the 1940's and 1950's, viewed Negro Americans as devastated victims in the hands of the whites. Historian Stanley Elkins detailed in Slavery (1959) a view that whites had done to blacks what the Nazis did to the Jews. Negroes were acted upon; they themselves didn't act because their culture was broken by slavery and its racist aftermath.

The third view, which emerged with the civil rights revolution of the 1960's, argues that Negroes are strong, proud and culturally cohesive. The formerly described devastated black family also had unsuspected resources. Historian Herbert Gutman began to work on the view that the black family is shrewd, strong, not so weakened as it had seemed, a view that developed further in his Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925 (Pantheon, 1976). Economist-historians Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman in their excellent book Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery (Little, Brown & Co., 1974), applying quantitative historical methods and using computers, came up with an astonishing portrait of slavery as a

highly rational and efficient system that gave the South considerable economic growth and a high standard of living. The belief that slave-breeding, sexual exploitation and promiscuity had destroyed the black family would be a myth; plantation owners were economically interested in encouraging the stability of slave families.

NOTES

[1]Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma (New York, 1948), p. 23.

[2]Arthur Jensen, "Bias in Mental Testing," Time, September 24, 1979, p. 54.

[3]"Population," Collier's Encyclopedia, 1970 edition, Vol. 19.

[4]John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes (Knopf, 1957), p. 84; Stanley Elkins, Slavery (New York, 1963), pp. 63 ff.

[4A]Arnold Ross, The Negro in America (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), p. xviii.

[5]Jordan, White Over Black (Baltimore, 1971), p. 56.

[6]Ibid., p. 77.

[7]Elkins, Slavery (Chicago, 1968), p. 40.

[8]Ibid., p. ix.

[9]The Atlantic, May 1966, p. 69.

[10]Alvin F. Poussaint, The Self-Image of the Negro American (New York, 1965), p. 354.

[11]Ibid., p. 356.

[12]"Sambo" is the stereotype of a "typical" plantation slave, "docile, but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration," Elkins, Slavery, p. 82.

Theme for Negro writers will emerge when they have begun to feel the meaning of their history as a race as though they in one lifetime had lived it themselves throughout all the long centuries.

Richard Wright

CHAPTER THREE

RICHARD WRIGHT, 1908-1960

Wright was the first writer to break with a literary tradition that defined the black man either as a savage or a superhero; his concentration upon subjugation, alienation, violence, and frustration is similar to that of subsequent authors who have used Wright's achievement as a literary touchstone and a point of departure.

R. Wright was born on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, in 1908, just over forty years after the end of the American Civil War and exiled himself from America after the Second World War. He married a white woman and died in Paris in 1960.

His father was a black peasant; his mother a devout woman who was forced to support her family as best she could after the desertion of her husband. Wright's childhood consisted of intermittent moves from one Southern town to the next, of part-time jobs and sporadic schooling, and of sharp lessons in what he was later to call "the ethics of living Jim Crow." At fifteen he struck out on his own, working in Memphis while he accumulated enough savings to go north. Arriving in Chicago on the threshold of the Great Depression, he worked at a succession of odd jobs until his association with the Communist Party lifted him to a new plane of consciousness.

From an early age Wright had dreamed of becoming a writer. In Memphis he developed a passion for reading Dreiser, Mencken, Lewis, and Anderson. "All my life," he writes in Black Boy,

had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel."

Black Boy, an autobiography which traces the first seventeen years of his life, suggests how Wright attempted to suppress his tendency toward extreme behavior, how he had to dissemble before those white Southerners who expected him to be submissive. When he discovered the imaginative possibilities of literature, his own discontent found itself mirrored in the violence of fictional characters in contemporary American literature of his time. "I vowed that as soon as I was old enough, I would buy all the novels there were and read them to feed that thirst for violence that was in me, for intrigue, for plotting, for secrecy, for bloody murders."

Ellison explains in Shadow and Act, p. 83, the reason why Wright felt that thirst for violence: he felt violence was inflicted upon him by both family and community, and his response was also violent and it was that violence that gave significance to his writings.

Wright's first writings were poems, articles, and stories written for the Communist Party press. His first book was Uncle Tom's Children (1936). This cry of anguish and violence clearly reveals the strength of Wright's emotional ties to the deep South. His other major publications include a novel (Native Son, 1940), a pictoral history (Twelve Million Black Voices, 1941), an autobiography already referred to (Black Boy, 1945), and a posthumous collection of stories (Eight Men, 1961). Richard Wright's Native Son marks a high point in the history of the Negro novel, not only because it is a work of art, but because it had a strong influence on a whole generation of Negro

novelists. It is a brutal novel, often called the American Negro Tragedy.

Native Son is today the most familiar novel--and Bigger Thomas the most memorable character--in Negro fiction. The book was an instantaneous success and was successfully adapted to the Broadway stage by Orson Welles.

Dos Passos, Farrell, Steinbeck, and the late Dreiser were the fountains where R. Wright quenched his thirst. An American Tragedy (1925) seems to have been his direct model for Native Son. Both novels make use of criminality as their emotional climaxes and in each case the crime is the natural and inevitable product of a corrupted society. Both authors based their trial scenes on authentic court events: Dreiser on a New York murder case and Wright on the famous Leopold and Loeb kidnam-murder in Chicago. Both of them, Clyde Griffiths and Bigger Thomas, are native American products. Both of them try to show the criminal guilt of the society they live in.

Much of the material for Native Son was provided by Wright's personal experience in Chicago, a hard and injust experience as a Negro in a white society.

To confirm this brutal situation, remember Myrdal's sociological analysis in An American Dilemma, which he started writing in 1940, the date of Native Son (see appendix).

In Chicago, he worked hard at all kinds of jobs, from porter to post office clerk. One job in a burial society took him inside the south-side houses, where he saw the corrosive effects of ghetto life on the Negro immigrant. During the Depression, he had been in the South Side Boy's Club, where he saw the live models which would inspire him to create his Bigger Thomas:

"They were a wild and homeless lot, culturally lost, spiritually disinherited, candidates for the clinics, morgues, prisons, reformatories, and the electric chair of the state's death house."[1] Meanwhile, R. Wright increased his knowledge and had been seduced by the concepts of Marxism through the John Reed Club and the Communist Party.

R. Wright joined the party in 1934 and left it ten years later, disappointed; his involvement in it is modestly understated in The God That Failed (1949).

As a frustrated Negro and a segregated one, he felt the need of belonging, and the Communist Party had appeared at the moment, the right way to find himself and to interpret his life as a Negro.

His correct sense of history helped him to understand folk history, his racial past and to consider the black ghetto as the end product of a long historical process:

> Perhaps never in history has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city: we were barely born as a folk when we headed for the tall and sprawling centers of steel and stone. We who were landless on the land; we who had barely managed to live in family groups; we who needed the ritual and guidance of established institutions to hold our atomized lives together in lines of purpose . . . we who had had our personalities blasted with 200 years of slavery had been turned loose to shift for ourselves.

It was in this perspective that Wright saw his Bigger Thomas's life.

The most impressive feature of Native Son is its narrative; R. Wright tries to involve us emotionally throughout Bigger's criminal career, without chapter divisions and with breaks only when necessary to mark a change of scene.

against the society where he lives. "He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough."[4] Here is the key to all of Bigger's behavior and to all his violence. To justify Bigger's tyranny and to prove how society influences a human being's behavior, his mother's voice floated to him in song, a song that irked him:

> Life is like a mountain railroad
> With an engineer that's brave
> We must make the run successful
> From the cradle to the grave. . . .[5]

Yes, "life is like a mountain railroad" where to go ahead means to carry all our dreams, all our frustrations, everything we have lived before; and Bigger had been, in fact, all his life so conditioned by fear and violence, that being found alone in a white girl's room, when blind Mrs. Dalton appears, forces him into a state of hysterical terror, and he murders the poor girl. It is an accident and not an accident; he killed because of fear, accidentally, but he did kill to be <u>someone</u> in the society, where he never had been <u>himself</u>.

> We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence.[6]

Living on the margin of his culture, Bigger is constantly tormented by the glitter of the dominant civilization. It is a serious problem to him to feel confident of his own identity in a society where he feels constantly in conflict. Hence comes his dominant fear:

> I don't know. I just feel that way. Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me.[7]

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Bigger is afraid, but transfers his fear to Gus, accusing Gus: "Aw, you scared; that's all. He's a white man and you scared."[8] That is exactly what torments Bigger, because they have never robbed white people before: Bigger is afraid of robbing a white man and he knows that Gus is afraid, too. Blum's store is small and Blum is alone, but Bigger cannot think of robbing him without being flanked by his three pals. But even with his pals, he is afraid. He had argued all his pals but one into consenting to the robbery, and toward the lone man who holds out he feels a hot hate and fear; he has transferred his fear of the whites to Gus. He hates Gus because he knows that Gus is afraid, as even he is.[9]

"The Gay Woman," a movie Bigger watches while he and his gang kill the time waiting to rob Blum's shop, is emblematic of that futile world of cocktail parties, golf, etc: the white world from which he had been forever excluded; the white world he hates and he envies because he can't be admitted there. To fill his empty world, he gets a job at Dalton's, the good whites, who protect the blacks, therefore he has a place with them, a place he doesn't recognize and finds monotonous; and to break the monotony of his daily life, he commits murder, a murder that is understandable, but non-acceptable.

All his reactions, even the crime he commits, are like those of conditioned animals in laboratories who react in a certain way to certain experiences and then are put in a situation where it's not possible to react. "Bigger's eyes were wide and placid, gazing into space. 'That's when I feel like something awful's going to happen to me. . . .' 'Naw; it ain't like something going to happen to me. It's . . . It's like I was going

to do something I can't help. . . .'"[10] Bigger Thomas, as an American, has grown up in a society that imposes as ideals the fight against injustice, the struggle not to be humiliated before anyone, the right to free professional determination, respect for human dignity, and the freedom and equality proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence.--But he, as a Negro American, cannot react normally to that state of being conditioned; the Negro youth has been taught to believe these ideals but cannot aspire to live, like the white Americans, according to them. From this situation comes the frustration and the neurosis he feels when he is in the whites' world: "He had not thought that this world would be so utterly different from his own that it would intimidate him. . . . He was sitting in a white home; dim lights burned around him; strange objects challenged him; and he was feeling angry and uncomfortable."[11] Even the whiteness of Mrs. Dalton terrifies him (he isn't used to living near white people): "Her face and hair were completely white; she seemed to him like a ghost."[12] Everything is strange and confusing to him: "The long strange words they used made no sense to him; it was another language."[13] How can it be possible for both peoples, white and black, to live in the same country and in the same society and to both be human beings?! Hence comes the violence. Bigger reacts by violence.

> This Negro boy's entire attitude toward life is a crime! The hate and fear which we have inspired in him, woven by our civilization into the very structure of his consciousness, into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality, have become the justification of his existence.
> Every time he comes in contact with us, he kills! It is a physiological and psychological reaction, embedded in his being. Every thought he thinks is potential murder.[14]

Other Negroes in the novel, like his mother and his sister, have an opposite reaction, also abnormal, of summitting to everything and passively accepting everything, singing church hymns, suffering silently, bearing the offenses, and always saying "yes" to the white people--and that is why they are praised by them as a good example of Negro behavior, that is to say, of guarantee of perpetuation of unequal relations between both races.

Ellison states in Shadow and Act, p. 83, speaking of R. Wright, that there were other ways in which other Negroes confronted their destiny: In the South of Wright's childhood, some accept the role created for them by whites and solve their conflicts through the hope and the catharsis of Negro religion; or they can repress their dislike of Jim Crow social relations and help the whites in oppressing their brothers; or they can reject the situation and adopt a criminal attitude, being terribly violent, as was Bigger Thomas.

The Negro suffers a sharp clash, he continues, on the psychological level, individual and familiar. The young Negro critic, Edward Bland says:

> In the pre-individualistic thinking of the Negro the stress is on the group. Instead of seeing in terms of the individual, the Negro sees in terms of "races," masses of people separated from other masses according to color. Hence, an act rarely bears intent against him as a Negro individual. He is singled out not as a person but as a specimen of an ostracized group. He knows that he never exists in his own right but only to the extent that others hope to make the race suffer vicariously through him.[15]

Book II, "Flight", opens with Bigger's relations with his family and gang again, to show the different behavior he has after the murder. Bigger is now a hero: "He had murdered and created a new life for himself." As a criminal, Bigger achieves

a sense of purpose, a meaning in life, an imaginary identity he hadn't had before being oppressed by society; he feels himself, he feels free.

He has a rebirth:

> The shame and fear and hate which Mary and Jan and Mr. Dalton and that huge rich house had made rise so hard and hot in him had now cooled and softened. Had he not done what they thought he never could? His being black and at the bottom of the world was something which he could take with a new-born strength. What his knife and gun had once meant to him, his knowledge of having secretly murdered Mary now meant. No matter how they laughed at him for his being black and clownlike, he could look them in the eyes and not feel angry. The feeling of being always enclosed in the stifling embrace of an invisible force had gone from him.[16]

But after his rebirth he is submitted to a series of interrogations by Peggy, by the Daltons and finally by the police. Throughout the action he is convinced of being cleverer than the others he fools and he learns to exploit the blindness of others, "fooling the white folks" during his interrogation, using this deep something in his racial tradition to tell the whites what they want to hear from a black mouth.

But soon comes discovery, flight and capture. The narrator uses the moment to comment on Bigger's "normal" way of life: "But it was familiar, this running away. All his life he had been knowing that sooner or later something like this would happen to him."[17] His flight and capture are reinforced by violence again--Bessie's murder, which convinces the police that he had not killed Mary Dalton accidentally. It is Bessie's murder that is used during the trial to convince the audience to condemn Bigger and to demand his death for Mary's death.

> They were bringing Bessie's body in now to make the white men and women feel that nothing short of a quick blotting out of his life would make the city safe again. They were using his having killed Bessie to kill him for his having killed Mary, to cast him in a light that would sanction

> any action taken to destroy him. Though he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white girl that he would be punished. The black girl was merely "evidence."[18]

Wright's way of writing is delightful; he gives us in a meticulous narrative his strong sense of life, suffering and fighting with his Bigger Thomas; he describes the emotional state of his characters in psychological terms, brought from the deep life of the deep South.

The whole novel oscillates, like a Rembrandt painting, from black to white, from the huge black rat Bigger kills with a skillet to the icy gales and heavy snowfalls of Books I and II representing the hostile white environment: "To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead."[19] There is a constant play on blindness, the blindness of Mrs. Dalton who can't see who killed her daughter, the blindnes of white people who can't understand the ambitions of Negro people.

R. Wright could choose for a victim a brutal oppressor, but he prefers to direct his anger against someone who ironically helps the Negroes and is friendly to them; someone who "wants to give the Negroes a chance." But they helped to make the black ghetto as it is on the South Side, separating the Negroes from the whites, renting only old houses to them in black quarters, being just as innocent, just as quiet as the others; remember the loud cries of the mad man who had been introduced to Bigger's cell::

> "You're afraid of me!" the man shouted. "That's why you put me in here! But I'll tell the President anyhow! I'll tell 'im you make us live in such crowded conditions on the South Side that one out of every ten of us is insane! I'll tell 'im you dump all the stale foods into the Black Belt and sell them for more than you can get anywhere else!

> I'll tell 'im you tax us, but you won't build hospitals! I'll tell 'im the schools are so crowded that they breed perverts. I'll tell 'im you hire us last and fire us first! I'll tell the President and the League of Nations![20]

Book I portrays the old Bigger; Book II, the new; Book III, the Bigger who might have been. The whole narrative is concerned with Bigger's fight for his life. The important question throughout the book is not whether Bigger will be spared, but whether he will be saved. Max, the lawyer, tries to save him. After his talk with him, Bigger feels that he must make a decision: "In order to walk to that chair (the electric chair) he had to weave his feelings into a hard shield of either hope or hate. To fall between them would mean living and dying in a fog of fear."[21] How will Bigger die; in hope or in hate? This is the tension of Book III.

Bigger's fundamental problem is to find someone or something he can trust. Kardiner and Livesey have written of the lower-class Negro family:

> The result of the continuous frustration in childhood is to create a personality devoid of confidence in human relations, of an eternal vigilance and distrust of others. This is a purely defensive maneuver, which purports to protect the individual against the repeatedly traumatic effects of disappointment and frustration. He must operate on the assumption that the world is hostile.[22]

This lack of relatedness to the world appears especially in Bigger's relations with Bessie. As Max points out, "His relationship to this poor black girl reveals his relationship to the world."[23] Their affair is a strange one, devoid of devotion, loyalty or trust--which society has denied to both. This shows their incompleteness as Negroes (the <u>negative</u> category, according to Erikson).

Bigger's lack of relatedness is proved at the end of Book II, just before his capture: "He was surprised that he was not

afraid. Under it all some part of his mind was beginning to stand aside; he was going behind his curtain, his wall, looking out with sullen stares of contempt.[24] Bigger's conflict with himself and with the others increases in Book III, while he struggles in the death cell toward some relatedness with his fellows:

> If he reached out his hands, and if his hands were electric wires, and if his heart were a battery giving life and fire to those hands, and if he reached out with his hands and touched other people, if he did that, would there be a reply, a shock? Not that he wanted those hearts to turn their warmth to him; he was not wanting that much. But just to know that they were there and warm! Just that, and no more; and it would have been enough, more than enough. And in that touch, response of recognition there would be union, identity; there would be a supporting oneness, a wholeness which had been denied him all his life.[25]

The structure of Book III is essentially a series of attempts by Bigger to find himself and to have an identity. He rejects his family ("Go home, Ma"; "Forget me, Ma")[26]; his fellow prisoners ("Are you the guy who pulled the Dalton job?" --He does not want to talk to the whites because they are white and he does not want to talk to Negroes because he feels ashamed. His own kind would be too curious about him")[27]; and religion, neglecting the Negro preacher's attempts to give Bigger a heart of love and not of hate:

> "Son!" the preacher admonished.
> "I don't want you!"
> "What's the matter, son?"
> "Take your Jesus and go!"[28]

To reject Jan and Max is the hardest for him; the only link he has with the world is through them and the main conflict of the novel occurs between them and Bigger's experience as a Negro--his distrust of whites, his incompleteness as a Negro.

Jan and Max are remains in Wright's mind of his experience in the Communist Party. The Communist Party would be the only

one to eliminate racism, being the freest arena of interracial contact in America.

In Book III of Native Son this interracial contact is expressed in Jan, who tried all the time to be nice and friendly to Bigger and it is Max who shows the due social justice of the American society to their Negroes, as a Communist answer to Bigger.

To Bigger, Communism is a matter not of ideology but of "relatedness." Jan and Max are his only hope. Jan through his act of understanding, forgiving Bigger even for the loss of his love--the dead Mary: "The word had become flesh. For the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him."[29] But Max serves as Bigger's confessor, more than a lawyer; after Max's speech fails, Max tries to communicate his vision of Communism to Bigger, but fails too. As Bigger loses his hope, he takes up the shield of hate which is his destiny, dying in the "crisis" of his identity without solving it.

> Bigger saw Max back away from him with compressed lips. . . . Max lifted his hand to touch Bigger, but did not . . . Max's eyes were full of terror. . . . He felt for the door, keeping his face averted. . . . He did not turn around . . . Max paused but did not look.[30]

What terrifies Max isn't that Bigger dies, but that he dies hating. He struggles for love, but Bigger is defeated by the environment that dominates him and doesn't permit him to find his real identity.

For Wright himself, the Communist Party was no shield of hope, therefore Max, representing it, wasn't enough to realize a Bigger "in hope." Bigger is a human being whose environment has made him incapable of relating to other human beings except by murder.

Wright in his article "How Bigger Was Born" says: "Bigger, an American product, a native son of this land, carries within him the potentialities of either fascism or communism."[31] Wright tries to develop a political symbolism in the novel that is not quite successful. Bigger continues forever a nationalist Negro claiming his own right to a fair place in an American white society. Bigger is R. Wright himself struggling for what is due to him as a Negro. It is in the American society he tries to find his identity, while other writers go back to their racial past looking for Africa, as did Alex Haley.

> Wright's most important achievement was--he has converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and "going underground" into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America.[32]

Considering the problem of identity as it relates to the American Black's vision of Africa, we see Africa doesn't play a prominent role in Wright's work. However, this doesn't mean that it played an insignificant one. It is typical of Wright's attitude towards Africa that he does not refer to it in his autobiography. Only years later, when planning a trip to Ghana, he tells us that when the word "Africa" came up, "something strange and disturbing stirred slowly in the depths of me." He had a vague feeling that "I am African! I'm of African descent . . . yet I'd never seen Africa; I'd never really known any Africans; I'd hardly ever thought of Africa." When Dorothy Padmore, the wife of the well-known "father of Pan-Africanism,"[33] asked, "Why don't you go to Africa?", he felt he was "on the defensive." And when, while in Ghana, an African asked him "what part of Africa" he came from, Wright's reaction was similar: "I didn't answer. I stared vaguely about me. I had, in my childhood, asked

my parents about it, but they had no information, or else they hadn't wanted to speak of it." The truth is Wright, as his parents, felt uncomfortable about their African descent; their reaction to this complex is defensive silence.[33A] But some of Wright's novels have some information about his early contact with Africa and his negative attitude towards it.[34]

In The Long Dream (1958)--one of the novels concerned with racial issues--for instance, Fishbelly, the hero, and his friends, have a heated debate about Africa. Sam, the son of an adherent of Garvey, asks provocatively: "Fish, you want to go to Africa?" But Fishbelly only mumbled: "All I know about Africa's what I read in the geography book at school." "Sam wants us to git naked and run wild and eat with our hands and live in mud huts." Zeke ridiculed Sam's words. Clearly none of them wants to identify himself with this kind of image of Africa. They are ashamed of their heritage: "White folks say you bad 'cause you black," Sam said. "And there ain't nothing you can do about being black." As they can't be free from their inheritance at least they try to forget and to deny it. They avoid the problem of their identity and live under the illusion that they are "ordinary Americans." But Sam, influenced by his father, knows that this is a dangerous delusion. Tony's provocative question is meaningful: "Why you put lye and mashed potatoes on your hair? . . . You kill your hair to make it straight like white folks' hair!" Sam's provocation is also worth being quoted because it offers a good idea of the problem of the Negroes' identity and their image of Africa, as Wright treats it:

> "Fish, what your color?" --"M-my color? Fishbelly asked stammeringly. "Hell, man, can't you s-see I'm black?" "Yeah?" Sam asked ironically. "And why you black?" --"I

> was born that way," Fishbelly said resentfully. --"But there's a reason why you got a black color," Sam was implacable. --"My mama's black. My papa's black. And that makes me black," Fishbelly said. "And your mama's mama and your papa's papa's papa was black, wasn't they?" Sam asked softly. --"Sure," Fishbelly said with a resentful hum, afraid of the conclusions to which his answers were leading. --"And where did your mama's mama's mama and your papa's papa's papa come from?" Sam next wanted to know. --"From A-Africa, I reckon," Fishbelly stammered. --"You just reckon?" Sam was derisive. "You know damn well where--" --"Okay. They came from Africa." Fishbelly tried to cover up his hesitancy. Sam now fired his climactic question: "Now, just stand there and tell me what is you?" Before Fishbelly could reply, Zeke and Tony set up a chant: Fishbelly's a African! Fishbelly's a African!" --"Let Fish answer!" Sam tried to drown them out. --"I'm black and I live in America and my folks came from Africa," Fishbelly summed up his background. "That's all I know." --"Your folks was brought from Africa," Sam sneered . . . "Fish is a African who's been taken out of Africa.. . . Fish thinks he's an American, but he ain't. Now my papa says all black folks ought to build up Africa, 'cause that's our true home--"

But the friends reject this idea vigorously. They feel they belong to the United States, thus driving Sam into a final outburst of anger:

> You niggers ain't nowhere. You ain't in Africa, 'cause the white man took you out. And you ain't in America, 'cause if you was you'd act like Americans-- . . . You ain't no American! You live Jim Crow . . . You can't live like no American, 'cause you ain't no American! And you ain't African neither! So what is you? Nothing! Just nothing.

This is the climax and the end of the discussion.

Wright's novels reflect not only his vision of African descent, but his sense of powerlessness vis-a-vis the whites. He concluded "that those powerful, invisible white faces ruled the lives of black people to a degree that but few black people could allow themselves to acknowledge." This idea has a curious effect on Wright's characters such as Fishbelly, Bigger or "Black Boy." They hate the whites so much and they are so ashamed of being black that they feel in crisis, a crisis of alienation from their own group and from the world of the whites

from which they had been excluded. Fish was aware "how black people looked to white people; he was beginning to look at his people through alien eyes and what he saw evoked in him a sense of distance between him and his people that baffled and worried him."[35]

This isolation characterizes all other characters in Wright's novels. He wants to show us how the American society dehumanized them. They all, states Wright--including himself--"felt tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless," because "the civilization which had given birth to Bigger contained no spiritual sustenance, had created no culture which could hold and claim his allegiance and faith."[34]

It seems sometimes Wright's Negro nationalism, as we see in "Blueprint for Negro Literature," is an escape from this alienated society. Wright, therefore, exhorts Black American writers to revive Negro culture and "racial wisdom" by giving to the Negroes of the ghettos an awareness of their culture, with Southern roots. Folklore is one of the most important African inheritances. Later on, Wright, disillusioned with this nationalism and with the Communist Party principles, wrote a remarkable novel, The Outsider. Its main character, Cross Damon, sees himself as a rootless intellectual who called himself "creator of himself."[37] Damon (and Wright himself, I believe) thinks his intellect enables him to construct his own world of values to compensate for the vacuum around him. His color has no positive function here; it only helps colored people to be aware of their social and cultural questions. They are more knowing "than whites."[38] But neither Cross nor any of Wright's other characters can be called "free-outsiders." They all have

a fixation to the American white world they opt, only by circumstances. Remember the words of Fishbelly: "I don't want to read nothing about Africa. I want to make some goddam money."[39] This is a long dream "from which their awakening turns in death," an account of their impossibility of adapting to the American standards which blocked them. Finally, identifaction with the white world is so complete that inferiority, "that fantastic and fearful image of one's self,"[40] is accepted as valid and is perpetuated.[41]

Fish--like Wright himself--escapes from this vicious circle only by leaving the United States. Bigger, on the other hand, accepts his inferiority, "the crime of being black,"[42] to the hilt as he was barred from finding his identity through positive action, his hatred of the whites and of himself drives him to an act of destruction. But even this negative "act of creation,"[43] as Baldwin interprets Bigger's resort to murder, does not give him more than a sham liberty. "They still ruled him . . . he had reached out and killed and had not solved anything."[44] Nothing betrays the absurdity of Bigger's predicament more candidly than the reports which appear in the local press about his case. He had hoped, through these murders, "to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering"[45] and to find a measure of humanity. But the press commentaries heap the most humiliating insults upon him, calling him a "jungle beast . . . utterly untouched by the softening influences of modern civilization."[46] They fail to appreciate how much he is, after all, a product of this "modern civilization" and push him back into the pit from which he was hoping to escape. The circle of hopelessness closes.[47]

Wright's world is a complex one, oscillating between two worlds--black and white, both being repulsive to his characters. They live, as he said, in a "no-man's land."[48] So, in this way, Wright stays an "outsider" who can't deal with his social reality; because of it, the idea of a return to Africa as an alternative to a miserable life in the United States continued hammering his mind. This is the Garvey Movement tendency--to exalt "the potential strength of the American Negro," to search for an identification with the African homeland"; but all this program was, Wright later thought, based on illusions. He says this movement doesn't offer a solution to the problems of the blacks in the United States, and going back to Africa wouldn't be a solution, either. Africa is a distant continent and people there wouldn't have solidarity with his own group in the United States. Going back to Africa he would ask himself: "But, am I African? . . . How can I make contact with this sort of people, I don't understand even their language?" Wright's world was really an ambivalent one. He didn't succeed in making contact with the Africans, because "he also made the mistake of attempting to apply his concept of the outsider rather uncritically to Africa."[49] But the more Wright knew Africa, the more he convinced himself "each hour events were driving home to me that Africa was another world, another sphere of being."[50] "I had understood nothing. I was black and they were black, but my blackness did not help me."[51]

He set out to judge a civilization by Western standards, leaving him alien to it, leaving him to continue an outsider, in his "no-man's land between the black world and the white."[52]

His conflict, his dilemma between Africa and the New World is well symbolized by his farewell to Africa, at Cape Coast Castle, once the assembly point of slaves:

> If there is any treasure hidden in these vast walls, I'm sure that it has a sheen that outshines good--a tiny, pear-shaped tear that formed on the cheek of some black woman torn away from her children . . . a shy tear . . . on that black cheek, unredeemed, unappeased--a tear that was hastily brushed off when her arm was grabbed and she was led toward those narrow, dank steps that guided her to the tunnel that directed her feet to the waiting ship that would bear her across the heaving, mist-shrouded Atlantic.[53]

At the time when Native Son was written (1940), the "Sambo School" view still predominated in the U.S. (see p. 45), though there were already signs of change. It was the time of Myrdal's comprehensive study of the American Negro problem, sponsored by The Carnegie Corporation of New York, which had begun in 1938 and which would lead to the famous An American Dilemma (1944). Wright himself, as we have seen, puts in Max's defense speech the guilt-of-the-nation thesis, anticipating in this way the view considering Blacks as devastated victims in the hands of whites.

At that time, social inequality, segregation and discrimination contrasted with the mass passivity, the inertia and inarticulateness of the black masses in America. As Erikson pointed out, the same instinctive sense that told Jewish mothers they should make their children study, because intelligence was their pass to the future, "told the majority of Negro mothers to keep their children, and especially the gifted and the questioning ones, away from futile and dangerous competition, that is, for survival's sake to keep them in their place, even if that place is defined by an indifferent and hateful compact majority." (p. 332)

In other words, that was the very time of an identity of negative recognition, of the surrendered identity that had been forced on Negroes for generations.

Bigger is a typical example of a young man brought up in the post-slavery period, in which social stereotypes had made an unconscious mixture of guilt and fear on the white side and an opposite mixture of hate and fear on the black side.

Bigger's positive identity had been undermined systematically. Belonging to an oppressed and exploited minority, prevented from emulating the dominant cultural ideals he eventually developed the negative images held up to him by the dominant white majority. He had the feelings of inferiority and of morbid self-hate evident in most minority groups. His identity was defined only in the negative terms of his defensive adjustments to the dominant white majority, plus the violence and revolt we will go on to deal with.

In all countries and in all classes, says Erikson, young people "fit into and take active charge of technical and scientific development, learning thereby to identify with a life-style of testing, inventing and producing. Youth which is eager for such experience but unable to find access to it will feel estranged from society, upset in its sexuality, and unable to apply its aggression constructively." (p. 338) If this happens in all countries and in all classes, how would Bigger, whose childhood was violence, who found no carrier, no choices in adolescence, behave?

He had no choices, and like his creator, Wright, he would be a militant black nationalist if he had lived twenty years later. At that time, he had to choose between the Communist Party and . . . nothing! If he were a white man, he could be a fascist. As a colored man with anti-white feelings, the Communist Party couldn't fit him in because the Party didn't offer him the possibility of revenge--and, after all, the vast majority of American Communists were white!

Another real Bigger was already born when this fictional Bigger came out: Malcolm X, then a teenager with another name. His father had been murdered, probably by whites, and Malcolm soon would enter the fringes of the Chicago and Harlem underworld. Becoming a procurer, a dope pusher, and an armed robber, among other things, Malcolm was sentenced in 1945, at the age of 20, in Boston, to ten years in prison for burglary. While there he read prodigiously and developed an interest in the Nation of Islam, popularly known as the Black Muslim movement.

Bigger dies in hatred, after a short life of fear and hate. Violence is the only open to him. Revolt is the only identity element available to him--and that leads him to an anti-social identity. He never surpasses the identity crisis in which Negro American "surrendered identity" had plunged him. If he could manage to surpass that crisis, it would be through a "totalistic rearrangement of images," by which his negative identity elements would become totally dominant (Erikson), and never throuth the "wholeness of a more inclusive identity," permitting him to be himself--certain as a Negro and integrated as an American. In this sense, as Wright himself has ascertained, he, Bigger, is an"American product," carrying within him the potentialities of "either fascism or communism," that is to say, the germ of political violence.

He was an "American product" under the peculiar circumstances of social inequality, segregation and discrimination which Black Americans like him had to deal with at that time. The country as a whole, however, is not hospitable either to totalistic turns or to revolutionary doctrines promising the "wholeness" of a new identity of peasant-and-worker.

NOTES

[1]Richard Wright, "I Tried to be a Communist," Atlantic Monthly, 174 (Aug. 1944), p. 68.

[2]Richard Wright, Twelve Million Black Voices, 1941, p. 93.

[3]Native Son, p. 10.

[4]Ibid., p. 14.

[5]Ibid., p. 13.

[6]Ibid., p. 23.

[7]Ibid., p. 19.

[8]Ibid., p. 26.

[9]Ibid., p. 28.

[10]Ibid., p. 24.

[11]Ibid., p. 47.

[12]Ibid., p. 48.

[13]Ibid., p. 49.

[14]Ibid., pp. 366-367.

[15]Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 84.

[16]Native Son, pp. 141-142.

[17]Ibid., p. 207.

[18]Ibid., pp. 306-307.

[19]Ibid., p. 109.

[20]Ibid., p. 318.

[21]Ibid., p. 333.

[22]Abram Kardiner and Lionel Livesey, The Mark of Oppression (New York: Norton, 1951), p. 308.

[23]Wright, Native Son, p. 367.

[24]Ibid., p. 250.

[25]Ibid., p. 335.

[26]Ibid., p. 278.

[27]Ibid., p. 316.

[28]Ibid., p. 314.

[29]Ibid., p. 268.

[30]Ibid., pp. 391-392.

[31]Saturday Review, 22 (1940), 1-4, 17-20.

[32]Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 94.

[33]George Padmore, Pan-Africanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa (London, 1956).

[33A]This and all antecedent quotations are from Richard Wright, Black Power (A Sociological Study) (London, 1954), pp. 9, 35, 39.

[34]It is important to emphasize that Wright identified himself with his protagonists. See Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," in Chapman, Black Voices, pp. 538-63.

[35]Wright, Long Dream, p. 326.

[36]Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," p. 549.

[37]Wright, quoted in Cruse, The Crisis, p. 185.

[38]Wright, Outsider, p. 129.

[39]Wright, Long Dream, p. 178.

[40]Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (London, 1965), p. 26.

[41]See e.g. Wright, Long Dream, p. 189.

[42]Wright, Native Son, pp. 275, 289.

[43]Baldwin, Notes, p. 30.

[44]Wright, Native Son, pp. 307, 255.

[45]Wright, Black Boy, p. 112.

[46]Wright, Native Son, p. 260. While writing Native Son, a black youth committed a murder in Chicago. His case is strikingly similar to that of Bigger. Apparently Wright used certain press reports, some of which are quoted in McCall, The Example of Richard Wright, p. 4.

[47]Marion Berghahn, Images of Africa in Black American Literature (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1977), p. 160.

[48]Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," p. 554.

[49]D. Padmore, "A Letter," in Studies in Black Literature, Vol 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1970) 5-9. Dorothy Padmore, who spent a longer period in Ghana herself, reports that Africans did not trust Wright and treated him with reserve.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Wright, Black Power, p. 10.

[52]Baldwin, Nobody, p. 215.

[53]Wright, Black Power, p. 341.

Fiction became the agency of my efforts to answer the questions: Who am I, how did I come to be? . . . What does the American society mean when regarded out of my own eyes, when informed by my own sense of the past and viewed by my own complex sense of the present?[1]

R. Ellison

CHAPTER FOUR

RALPH ELLISON, 1914-

Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952) was judged in 1965 by a group of critics, authors, and editors as "the most distinguished single work" published in America since 1945. Ellison wasn't known before, in spite of having already written stories and essays.

Ellison's youth was different from that of many twentieth-century Negro writers. He was born in 1914 in Oklahoma City, where the barriers between white and black were not severe. At the time of his birth, Oklahoma had been a state for only seven years; "thus it had no tradition of slavery, and while it was segregated, relationships between the races were more fluid and thus more human than in the old slave states."[2] He was compelled to attend the usual segregated schools (which surely created in him a subconscious color problem), but he was able to develop his interest in jazz and then in classical music which he studied in the Tuskegee Institute. He then studied sculpture in New York, where he met R. Wright, who had just published his first collection of stories, Uncle Tom's Children. Wright became his close friend and influenced him strongly. Like Wright and many intellectuals of the 1930's, Ellison was attracted to political radicalism, and some of his early work--"The Birthmark" (New Masses, 1940), "Recent Negro Fiction" (New Masses, 1941), and "The Way It Is" (New Masses, 1942)--expresses his interest in left-wing politics. But while Wright joined the

Communist Party, Ellison was too individualistic, as we see by the central themes of Invisible Man, and its main character ("I am nobody but myself," "I visualized myself," "I felt superior.")[3] and he never joined the Communist Party.

His fiction of the early 1940's asserts the need for white Americans to recognize Negro identity in all of its complexity. This was the idea he explored in "Mister Toussan," a short story published in New Masses. Other stories, such as "Slick Gonna Learn" (1939), "Afternoon" (1940), "In a Strange Country" (1944), "Flying Home" (1944), and "King of the Bingo Game" (1944) approached the same theme from various points of view. Some of these stories and others have recently been collected in Shadow and Act (New York: Random House, 1964).

The theme of racial identity, reflected in all these stories, is the artistic point of Invisible Man. This novel received the National Book Award for Fiction in 1953, and was considered an important work in modern American literature as well.

This chapter analyses the problem of identity in Invisible Man and in the essays, Shadow and Act. Identity has been defined as the search for an "Ego," for self-definition, a permanent theme in Ralph Ellison. This theme is not only specifically Negro, but American too:

> It is the American theme. The nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are. It is still a young society and this is part of its development.[4]

Pierre Dommergues in a volume entitled "Les U.S.A. en Recherche de leur Identité," states that the theme we find in Ralph Ellison always worried American writers, so Invisible Man isn't specifically a Negro novel, though its main character is a colored man. According to the French critic, this undefined identity is

both a lack of ethnological cohesion and a national past identifiable with the vastness of the American territory.

We know the wish for individual definition is considered a dominant preoccupation of the modern spirit and though this is as intrinsically human as the vital needs of our body, it is unfortunately conditoned by the factors that prevent its development. This is the case of a country born under the most beautiful ideals of democracy--the U.S.A.--where people are scaled according to their ethnological antecedents, as is their participation in the American society and culture. The most striking examples are the Jewish and particularly the Negro communities.

The American Negro who offers his efforts to the letters and arts of his country always sees this work undervalued due to the limitations of his color. With his social and spiritual aspirations usually frustrated ones, he feels himself displaced in his own country. This fact can't be forgotten when speaking of the hero of Invisible Man, whose problem is partly, but not exclusively, the modern and mechanized man's problem; he is an outsider who struggles for integration, for self-knowledge and self assertion in a segregationist world.* It can be clearly understood now that color can't be disregarded when speaking of the protagonist and his identity; therefore, each page of the work oscillates between black and white: white men and women (p. 36); white man (p. 38); she's white (p. 55); white and black (p. 70); white folks (p. 71); white shorts (p. 71); white uniform (p. 71); a white person (p. 74); his white forehead (p. 83); white dividing line (p. 84); white pillars (p. 85); white hair

*R. Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 24--"I had been left alone with an unknown danger."

(p. 91); white collar (p. 99); white blacksmith (p. 103); white vapour (p. 107); etc., etc.

In The Invisible Man, the hero of the novel, like its author, is looking for his "ego" and for his place in the world. To reach it, he participates in a series of experiences which are essential to define himself--such as: his grandfather's advice when dying, his past years in a South Negro school, his experience in the industrialized North, his rebirth by the machine, his contact with the Brotherhood and at last his meeting with Rinehart. Each of these experiences ends with the fall of the hero and the "wasting" of his doctrine, but each of these experiences is followed by others which form a circle which essentially defines the parameters of the entire book.

In the prologue, the hero introduces himself to the reader in a state of invisibility and in an "underground hibernation."

> I am invisible simply because people refuse to see me . . . When they approach me, they only see my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination--indeed, everything and anything except me. . . . Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of biochemical accident of my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.[5]

As a conclusion, the hero is only psychologically invisible, "a matter of construction of their inner eyes," in Ellison's words.

Light is for him a symbol of truth: "I love light." "Perhaps you will think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form. . . . The truth is the Light and the light is the Truth."[6]

That is why he has his "refuge" lighted by 1369 lamps whose current is diverted from Monopolated Light and Power.

This condition of invisibility is connected to that of irresponsibility--"to whom can I be responsible and why should I be, when you refuse to see me? Responsibility rests upon recognition and recognition is a form of agreement."[7]

The hero's hobby is listening to music. He understands and feels Louis Armstrong's beat perhaps because both are invisible and he admires the Negro musician because he knew how to transcend his invisibility.

He feels the necessity of meditating upon his past, of recognizing the failures of his life and thus there arises his idea of writing his memories. As for his author, writing is a way of communication. So in the first twenty chapters following the prologue (which are a series of "flashbacks" in the first person) we are presented with the early years of the protagonist's life.

How long will this state of hibernation last? All we know is that the hero doesn't consider it a permanent situation: "a hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action."[8]

Only later on, as we can conclude from the epilogue, he feels the necessity of abandoning that state and coming back again to the world: "Nevertheless, the very disarmament has brought me to a decision. The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath." (Invisible Man, p. 468

This act of reconciliation is a necessary, conscious one. It is necessary because, as he confesses to us, every man, even invisible, has a mission to fulfill and if he doesn't do it he practices a social crime; it is conscious because only now,

knowing the realities of the world that he imagined perfect, does he accept the necessary coexistence of the vile and the marvellous:

> There is a death in the smell of spring and in the smell of thee as in the smell of me. And if nothing more, invisibility has taught my nose to classify the stenches of death.[10]

He still recognizes that a false concept, to which he submitted his whole life, lies at the original base of his situation:

> And my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an invisible man.[11]

The spiritual conflict that prevails over the hero's rebirth is translated into dualism, both negation and acceptance of his past: "Open the window and let the foul air out," "it was a good green before the harvest."[11A] He later changes to an attitude of compromise. From the man he had been he only accepts the condition of invisibility, a condition he doesn't want to leave, to contest against the chaos of the world to which he returned.

In the reader's first contact with the protagonist of Invisible Man, he is seen as a victim of himself and of society. He confesses in the first chapter of the novel that he has fought all his life for the truth and condemns himself because he tried to build his image according to others' eyes. That truth is nothing other than his self-knowldege.

It's interesting to notice the personage who identifies himself with the narrator is not known by his name, which proves he has only one identity. He was the young man who, before the fall of his illusions, believed in the principle White is right, and in the "Brotherhood,"[12] and later in Rinehart[13] the Master of Chaos. The transference of one phase to another is not possible

without ruining a doctrine, without the feeling of a fall and without a revelation of another truth. Each of these truths, either Bledsoe's or the Brotherhood's or Rinehart's have a common element connecting them together, symbolically expressed in the sentence: "Keep this Nigger--Boy--Running."[14] This truth runs throughout the others staying in the protagonist's consciousness; he knew it, even as a child when his dying grandfather advised him:

> Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I gave up my gun back in the reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with grins, agree them to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or burst wide open.[15]

Though considering this a delirium of a dying old man, the protagonist doesn't exclude the possibility of its being full of meaning, hence his search for the meaning behind it. Therefore, in the epilogue, he begins to understand the deep meaning of his grandfather's words. Do they mean the principle that commanded the formation of the country whose greatness had been violated by men?! Will the Negroes be the inheritors of that principle by which they had been sacrificed?! Will they be the ones to reaffirm that principle because they haven't been corrupted by the world? Moving from doubt to doubt, the Invisible Man ends with another question:

> Agree them to death and destruction--grandfather had advised. Hell, weren't they their own death and their own destruction except as the principle lived in them and in us? And here is the cream of the joke: weren't we part of them as well as apart from them, subject to die when they died? I can't figure it out; it escapes me.[16]

The hero of Invisible Man moves in a world of violence that sometimes sounds like a world of nightmares:

> For a second I saw him bent over holding his hand, then going down as a blow caught his unprotected head. I played one group against the other, slipping in and throwing a punch and then stepping out of range while pushing the others into the mêlée to take the blows blindly aimed at me. The smoke was agonizing and there were no rounds, no bells at three-minute intervals to relieve our exhaustion. The room spun round me, a swirl of lights, smoke, sweating bodies surrounded by tense white faces. I bled from both nose and mouth, the blood spattering upon my chest.[17]

He is always dreaming of violence. Even the irony and the humor have tragic implications. In the first part of the novel there is a dramatic intensity which diminishes in the second half, where there is a narration of his relations with the Brotherhood and this returns in the second chapter with the Harlem Revolution. This violence contrasts with the passivity of the protagonist.

The hero begins as a docile Southern Negro, faithful to the principle "White is Right," at the same time anxious both to please the "white folks"[18] and to honor his own people--within the established limits.

As an extraordinary orator, he is invited to repeat, in the presence of the most important whites of the city, the words he had used when he graduated from high school, defending humility as the essence of progress--not because he believed in it, but, as he confesses to us, because he knew he would be well accepted.

After having gone through a lot of outrageous experiences, he could understand its true meaning.

To amuse those who both envy and fear him, he is invited to fight blindfolded with nine other men. The prize for the winner is some gold coins set in an electrified carpet. Through this act of humiliation and through the stimulus of insincere words of praise, he gets the prize, a scholarship to a Negro College.

> Keep developing as you are and someday it will be filled with important papers that will help shape the destiny of your people.[19]

Through this triumph he believes he is free from his grandfather's words. Later on he understands better that such freedom is impossible. That night the very truth is shown to him through a dream whose meaning he cannot yet fully grasp:

> That night I dreamed I was at a circus with him and that he refused to laugh at the clowns no matter what they did. Then later he told me to open my brief case and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of weariness. "Them's years," he said. "Now open that one." And I did and in it found an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. "Read it," my grandfather said. "Out loud."
> "To Whom It May Concern, Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."[20]

During his short stay in the college, which corresponds to his last years in the South, the hero is so optimistic that not even an unjust punishment can discourage him. His ideal of success is Bledsoe, his Negro director whom he dignifies in such words:

> . . . he was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country, consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; . . . what was more, while black and bald and everything white folks poked fun at, he had achieved power and authority; had, while black and wrinkle-headed, made himself of more importance in the world than most Southern white men. They could laugh at him but they couldn't ignore him.[21]

It is an irony, but it is Bledsoe who is closely related to his tragic fate, either destroying his first identity or recommending his permanent unemployment.

Bledsoe had chosen the protagonist to show off to the Northern white philanthropost, Norton, who contributed heavily to the College, building the games' yard. The hero chose the "wrong way" and showed the College's benefactor the misery, the corruption, and the madness that existed behind the College walls, and

that had been craftily hidden by Bledsoe. For this error, the hero was expelled.

During the drive conducting Norton, the invisible man took him to a cabin where there lived a Negro family whose chief, Trueblood, is an African not contaminated by three centuries of civilization and a practitioner of incest. Norton is so curious about the fact, he wants to hear from the Negro all the details of that story.

> "You see, suh, it was cold and us didn't have much fire. Nothin' but wood, no coal. I tried to git help but wouldn't nobody help us and I couldn't find no work or nothin'. It was so cold all of us had to sleep together; me, the ole lady and the gal. That's how it started, suh.
>
> "That's the way it was," he said. "Me on one side and the old lady on the other and the gal in the middle. It was dark, plum black. Black as the middle of a bucket of tar. The kids was sleeping all together in they bed over in the corner. I must have been the last one to go to sleep, 'cause I was thinking 'bout how to git some grub for the next day and 'bout the gal and the young boy what was startin' to hang 'round her. I didn't like him and he kept comin' through my thoughts and I made up my mind to warn him away from the gal. I was black dark and I heard one of the kids whimper in his sleep and the last few sticks of kindlin' cracklin' and settlin' in the stove and the smell of the fat meat seemed to git cold and still in the air just like meat grease when it gits set in a cold plate of molasses. And I was thinkin' 'bout the gal and this boy and feelin' her arms besides me and hearing the ole lady snorin' with a kinda moanin' and a-groanin' on the other side. I was worryin' 'bout my family, how they was goin' to eat and all, . . .
> There we was, breathin' together in the dark."[22]

Deeply moved by it, Norton gives one hundred dollars to the African as a gift.

Some critics think Norton is an "alter-ego" of Trueblood and say both committed the same crime; while Norton only desired it, Trueblood did it. One is reminded of Norton's comments about his daughter during the drive:

> Her beauty was a well-spring of purest water-of-life, and to look at her was to drink and drink and drink again.

> . . . She was rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art. A delicate flower that bloomed in the liquid light of the moon. A nature not of this world, a personality like that of some biblical maiden, gracious and queenly. I found it difficult to believe her my own.[23]

Norton was so shocked when he heard Trueblood, that the hero needed to take him to Golden Day, a house of ill repute, where he gave him a drink. There were mad people and prostitutes there, whose misery and madness also shock Norton, and bring him much suffering. With a touch of irony, it is a mad man who tells Norton the basic truth: "You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see,"[24] and the protagonist listens for the first time to the revelation of his true identity; and the mad man said, turning to Mr. Norton:

> He has learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He is invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man "and the boy this automaton" "To you he is a mark on the score card of your achievement, a thing, not a man; a child or even less a black amorphus thing. And you for all your power, are not a man to him but a god, a force" . . . "He believes in you as he believes in the beat of his heart. He believes in that great false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right. I can tell you his destiny. He'll do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset. He's your man, friend. Your man and your destiny. Now the two of you descend the stairs into chaos."[25]

It sounds as though a mad strength impells the passive hero to the most revolutionary behavior and then to his own destruction.

Bledsoe is terribly cynical toward the Invisible Man at his departure. He condemns him because he has chosen a miserable section of the city to show to one of the most important men of the North; he also condemns him because he can't lie, when the lie is for a Southern Negro what most pleases the white. The protagonist has no opportunity to defend himself because Bledsoe says the only truth is the truth of the most powerful.

Bledsoe orders the Invisible Man to leave the College and to go to the North, promising to help him there. He gives to him some letters of recommendation, all of them closed. The poor hero blindly accepts the letters and does not suspect that they will condemn him to perpetual unemployment.

In this moment of crisis, the hero sees his grandfather's ghost smiling at his failure.

But the hero doesn't desist; optimistic, he sees his punishment only as a proper recompense for his fault and he thinks to return one day after having paid his debt.

Accepting the responsibility of a crime he hadn't committed, the hero goes to New York hoping to get a job there as soon as possible with the aid of Bledsoe's letters. When he discovers Bledsoe's treason, he is deeply disappointed, feeling at the same time the weight of his past:

> Twenty-five years seemed to have lapsed between his handing me the letter and my grasping its message. I could not believe it, tried to read it again. I could not believe it, yet I had a feeling that it had all happened before.[26]

Allegory dominates this chapter. In a certain way, Bledsoe's punishment is related to the Battle-Royal scene[27] --in both cases we see the destruction of the Negro by the Negro, and the strongest being victorious. There is still a parallel between his dream, when he got his certificate and Bledsoe's letters, both confirming the message "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." Bledsoe's behavior is a result of his wish to please the whites, whom he believes to hold power.

At last the hero begins to work in Liberty Paints, a very large factory which has the "slogan" "Keep America Pure with Liberty Paints." This is his first contact with the industrial world, where he finds, as in the South, fraud and disillusion.

This chapter is one of the most symbolic of the whole novel. The hero must throw ten drops of a black liquid in tins with white paint to make it still whiter, the "optic white," that is nothing else than an optical illusion. The white becomes whiter because it assimilates the black vitality. As in the Battle-Royal,[27] the Negro is used to increase white power--the ten drops are probably the ten fighters. The hero mistakenly dilutes the white paint and "a grey tinge glowed through the whiteness," which makes us think that the black power wrongly used can contribute to annul white power. It is interesting to note that this failure is only visible to the personage, which proves that the black paint is invisible like the hero, and his grandfather's words were right:

> I looked at the painted slab. It appeared the same: a grey tinge glowed through the whiteness and Kimbro had failed to detect it. I stared for about a minute, wondering if I were seeing things, inspected another and another. All were the same, a brilliant white diffused into gray. I closed my eyes for a moment and looked again and still no change. Well, I thought, as long as he's satisfied.[28]

Finally when his failure is discovered, he is transferred to another section where he must manage the machine which prepares the base for the white paint. As he can't control the paint color, he got hurt and they take him unconscious to the hospital.

The following scene shows to us the hero in an electrified box where he is submitted to suffocation. Visibly invisible--that is the irony of the situation--he listens to two voices which seem to ignore him, discussing him:

> The machine will produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy without the negative effects of the knife . . . and the result is as complete a change of personality as you'll find in your famous fairy tale cases of criminals transformed into amiable fellows after all that bloody business

> of a brain operation. And what's more . . . the patient is both physically and neurally whole.
>
> But what of his psychology?
>
> Absolutely of no importance . . . the patient will live as he has to live and with absolute integrity . . . he'll experience no major conflict of motives and what is even better society will suffer no traumata on his account.[29]

The psychological meaning of the sentence "society will suffer no traumata on his account," pictures the opinion of the Northern whites to the Negro, as the surgeon, still more violent, represents Southern whites. Both want the Black neutralized, but through different ways.

This scene symbolizes man dominated by the machine; it reminds us of the electrified carpet of the Battle-Royal.

He only is cured when he doesn't remember either his name or his mother's, that is to say, when he loses his identity and the memory of his past:

> I tried to remember how I'd gotten here but nothing came. My mind was blank as though I had just begun to live.[30]

This rebirth by the machine that is a castration of the "Ego" to Ellison, comes as a way for him to enter in the Brotherhood.

So, the first part of the novel ends with the most macabre adventures of the hero.

For the first time in his life, the hero meets someone giving him a sisterly and friendly hand--Mary. Mary, like her quiet, "controlled" house, is a force to impel him and to prepare him to enter the Brotherhood:

> . . . nor did I think of Mary as a "friend"; she was something more--a force, a stable familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face. . . . Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement.[31]

It was Jack, one of the Brotherhood's leaders, who invites the hero, because of his occasional speech, to become a member of the Brotherhood. This proposal is a promising one to him, but he doesn't know at that moment, the rules of the movement; accepting it he can assert himself and be somebody socially.

> If I refused to join them, where would I go--to a job of porter at the railroad station? At least here was a chance to speak.[32]

To get a new identity, he must break the memory of the past and submit to a hard training according to the principles of the movement. At that time he is optimistic about and faithful to the opportunities given to him by the Brotherhood--apparently a non-racist movement.

> Here was a way that didn't lead through the back door, a way not limited by black and white, but a way which, if one lived long enough and worked hard enough could lead to the highest possible rewards. . . . For the first time, lying there in the dark, I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race.[33]

Later on we can conclude this new forced identity isn't the permanent and final one. The remembrance of his grandfather, and Mary is still alive in his mind, though his new personality of a Brotherhood orator, his "public self," tries to annul it.

This part of the novel describing his stay in the Brotherhood is very slow narration, which breaks the dramatic tension sustained in the novel till then. Here we see both the climax and the fall of the hero. This second part introduces two main characters--Clifton and Rinehart--who sybolize disillusion and decadence.

The slow fall of the hero is here gradually contrasted with the first part of the novel where it is abrupt. Here the protagonist tries to do his best for the Brotherhood, but its

members slowly come to dislike his speeches and they dismiss him from this topic to another of less importance--to the "Woman Question."

That dismissal (his first glimpse of the truth about the Brotherhood) is sent in an anonymous letter to the hero of the novel:

> . . . do not go too fast. Keep working for the people but remember that you are one of us and do not forget if you get too big they will cut you down. You are from the South and you know this is a white man's world. So take a friendly advice and go easy so that you can keep on helping the colored people. They do not want you to go too fast and will cut you down if you do.[34]

Tod Clifton, whose destiny is parallel to that of the hero, is the first one to advise him about the false aims of what turns out eventually to be a communist front organization. Clifton, feeling betrayed by the Brotherhood, leaves it and passes his last days of life selling "sambo-dolls" in New York streets.

The fact that he sells "sambo-dolls" for only 25 cents is nothing more than a criticism of the Brotherhood; Clifton thinks that every human being is a "sambo-doll" manipulated by historical wires.

Clifton's death begins the Harlem Revolt. Clifton provokes the police, who shoot him in order to alienate his race from the Brotherhood.

It is Clifton's death that awakes doubt for the first time in the hero's mind. He can't understand why Clifton left the Brotherhood. Were its principles really valid, true? Why did Clifton leave a movement which gave him a chance for self-assertion?

Ellison's passive hero now becomes revolted with Clifton's death. Without asking the leaders of the movement, he makes a

speech during the funeral ceremonies which is heavily criticized, because he defends individual responsibility.

It was then that Jack tells him that discipline and blindness are the most important items in the Brotherhood. That is the main point for the hero, who at that moment begins to understand what is hidden behind appearances.

Jack still says to him he is proud of having lost one eye defending his duty. We would say that the fact of Jack having only one eye indicates his distorted perspective of the Brotherhood.

> If it should, maybe you'll recommend me to your oculist. . . . Then I may not-see myself as others see-me-not.[35]

In spite of being disappointed, the hero can't leave the Brotherhood:

> . . . I felt as though I had been watching a bad comedy. Only it was real and I was living it and it was the only historically meaningful life that I could live. If I left it, I'd be nowhere as dead and as meaningless as Clifton.[36]

In his partial way of seeing, Jack's behavior is parallel to Bledsoe's; it is Jack's attitude that destroys completely the hero's illusions:

> I couldn't leave it and I had to keep contact in order to fight. But I would never be the same. Never. After tonight I wouldn't ever look the same or feel the same. Just what I'd be, I didn't know. I couldn't go back to what I was--but I'd lost too much to be what I was. Some of me too, had died with Tod Clifton.[37]

To escape from the consequences of his acts and to escape from the threat of society, he decides to disguise himself in dark glasses and hat to hide. Instead, he is known as Rinehart, Rinehart the runner, the gambler, the briber, the lover and the Reverend. He is all of them; he is the "alter ego" of his invisibility which he unconsciously creates. It is through

Rinehart that the hero acquires consciousness. For Rinehart the world is possibility and facility.

The protagonist now asks himself if one of the aims of the Brotherhood wouldn't be the sacrifice of the weak; he considers himself a victim and a sacrifice--a victim used by the Brotherhood for its aims and a sacrifice inciting Harlem Negroes to racial violence. He also recognizes the big mistake of the Brotherhood for the Negro:

> I thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men.[38]

He considers his invisibility a constant in his life though only now is he conscious of it:

> And now I looked to a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure. They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same--except now I recognized my invisibility.[39]

Now he can understand the meaning of his grandfather's words; therefore he tries to apply his grandfather's lesson to his behavior--to agree with Jack though he is against his methods and principles till he has something "real" to hang on to.

And how does the hero find his identity and gain knowledge of himself?

Well, pursued by Ras, after the Harlem Revolt has broken out, he falls in a hole from which he can't escape. To illuminate it, he is forced to burn his diploma, Clifton's doll and the Brotherhood's identity card. Without these symbols he has neither past nor identity.

After having told us his life and having decided to try the world again, Ellison's hero asks the reader: "Who knows but that on the lower frequencies I speak for you?[40]

From this final identification of the narrator with the reader, we can conclude that beyond the color problem, the hero's problem will also be that of any man of his epoch.

Ellison proposes this question in his thesis and proves what some critics say, that the novel's theme isn't specifically the Negro and American, but especially the dilemma of "The Modern."

We stated before that it is difficult to define American identity due to factors such as the non-existence of a national past, the lack of ethnological cohesion and the vastness of the American territory. The Negro has another aim--to modify the image created by the white about his identity. The error, says the author, is in the ways used by Blacks to define themselves as Blacks and as Americans. This is the hero's problem, who is as faithful as any other American, to the old "American Success Dream," and tries to assert himself, individually and socially; but without being able to find the truth of a world in a metamorphosis where Good and Bad, appearance and reality, continually change their forms. This situation leads him to choose to be invisible in others' eyes.

This state of being invisible is for Ellison the loss of his "ego." This is why Negroes are a hated and envied group, which is not seen by the others as truly human.

He only becomes visible when he discovers his identity, which the hero does when he leaves his contemplative hibernation.

This metaphorical condition of being invisible is reinforced by actual physical blindness. Barbee, the preacher, is blind; Jack has only one eye and even the hero since he was a Southern student feels himself blinded by his ambitions. The metaphors of darkness and light reinforce the blindness metaphor--to see in the dark he must burn the symbols of his past and later on, because he needs light, he illuminates his refuge with 1369 lamps.

Even the characters have their own symbolical meaning. Thus, Norton is the Northern capitalist, who associates himself with the Southern middle class and the conservative Negro chiefs to young schools' institutions. Bledsoe, the Southern Negro educator, is a pragmatist, fighting by hard and cynical ways. Lucius Brockway represents the anti-associative Negro group of workers.

Structurally, the novel rotates around the opposite poles of Capitalism and Communism. Communism is represented by the Brotherhood. Both forces are strong in the modern world. The hero's destiny in the Brotherhood symbolizes that of a generation of Negro intellectuals who entered and believed in the American Communist Party; the Communist Party was an alternative in a Capitalist society the Invisible Man knew in the factory where he worked in the Northern United States.

The Brotherhood is not only a communist movement, but it also symbolizes the integrationist aspiration of the modern Negro, while Ras, to whom Negroes are from Africa, their land of origin, represents the separatist tendency of Black Muslims, the one major Negro group that in the 1960's called for separation

of the races and Black supremacy as an alternative approach to the black man's problems of identity and self-esteem.

Relating this problem of identity to the image of Africa in Ellison's Invisible Man, we don't see an active and permanent image of Africa in it. Probably because Ellison, as we stated in the Introduction, denied "that there is any significant kinship between American Negroes and Africans."[41] He has, he writes, great difficulty in "associating himself with Africa," because:

> the American Negro people is North American in origin and has evolved under specifically American conditions: climatic, nutritional, historical, political and social. It takes its character from the experience of American slavery and the struggle for, and the achievement of, emancipation; from the dynamics of American race and caste discrimination, and from living in a highly industrialized and highly mobile society possessing a relatively high standard of living and an explicitly stated equalitarian concept of freedom. Its spiritual outlook is basically Protestant, its system of kinship is western, its time and historical sense are American (United States), and its secular values are those professed, ideally at least, by all of the people of the United States.[42]

Nothing could be more explicit than this statement: there is a complete lack of cultural connection between Africans and Afro-Americans, according to Ellison. The real nature of black culture can be derived only from the history of the black Americans in the United States. Black American culture has, to him, various points of contact with Anglo-Saxon culture; but it also possesses a number of independent elements which derived from the development of black society in white America and which Ellison would like to see preserved, what can be said is that Africa--in the shape of Pan-African nationalism à la Du Bois, for example, doesn't play a role.

But it seems to us that Ellison at the same time didn't forget Africa, in spite of never having seen it. This is a natural and understandable attitude: parents have uses which they transmit to their children; though they sometimes repell them, something stays in their unconsciousness.

Ellison has a negative attitude towards Africa, but it does not mean that he has nothing to say on this subject. For example, in the Invisible Man, we find his "ugly ebony African god"[43] is kept together with other "cracked relics from slavery times"[44] in a room at the college which the main character of the novel is attending. "Though I had seen them very seldom," he says, "they were vivid in my mind. They had not been pleasant and whenever I had visited the room I avoided the glass case in which they rested."[45]

It was only during his "archetypal" journey from the South to the North that he learns to accept the Afro-American part of his past. He discovers his true self hidden deep down in this past, stating "I am what I am! . . . To hell with being ashamed of what you liked. No more of that for me."[46] Slowly he comes to realize that alienation from his true self, from his black ego, has turned him blind and been used by different social forces which manipulated him in pursuit of their own selfish interests. That was the case of the Brotherhood--formed by liberals and the communists--which imposed on him their own ideas about what his role should be.

His ego revolts finally against these foreign influences; he is not a Black, but an American Nationalist. Ellison discusses Ras, the Black Nationalist in his work; it seems that Ras' movement occupies a special place among those he discusses

and he tries to show us Ras' movement is worthier than the Brotherhood.

Ras appears as a judge of the Invisible Man's behavior as a member of the Brotherhood:

> You my brother, mahn. Brothers are the same colour; how the hell you call these white men brother? Shit, mahn. That's shit! Brothers the same colour. We sons of Mama Africa, you done forget? You black, Black! . . . You african, African! Why you with them? Leave that shit, mahn. They sell you out. That shit is old-fashioned. They enslave us--you forget that? How can they mean a black man any good? How they going to be your brother?[47]

These words clearly have a profound effect on the hero of the novel as on his friend Tod Clifton; they feel fear and amazement, but Ellison's ego is too deeply involved with the ideology of the Brotherhood to readily accept Ras' words when he asks them:

> What you trying to deny by betraying the black people? Why you fight against us? You young fellows; You black men with plenty education; I been hearing your rabble-rousing. Why you go over to the enslaver? . . . Is it self-respect--black against black? . . . He got you so you don't trust your black intelligence. You young, don't play you'-self cheap, mahn. Don't deny you-self! . . . You black and beautiful--don't let 'em tell you different! . . . Ras recognized your black possibilities, mahn.[48]

This criticism is a warning to the narrator, but he is committed to the Brotherhood and at this moment he can't yet understand the meaning of Ras' words. It is then step by step that he comes to recognize how Harlem assumes the rights of its people--Black people. Ras the Exhorter has become Ras the Destroyer on a great black horse. He leads a contingent of blacks, armed with sticks and rifles, into a battle against both the whites and the blacks of the Brotherhood.

It seems that African power, coming directly from Africa, is playing an important role on the American political stage.

Ras appears on the battle scene dressed as an African chief with a "fur cap upon his head, his arm bearing a shield, a cape made of the skin of some wild animal around his shoulders."[49] He leaves the protagonist with the impression of a "madman in a foreign costume. . . . A figure more out of a dream than out of Harlem, than out of even this Harlem night, yet real, alive, alarming."[50] Ellison doesn't take Ras as comic, but seriously. He knows that Ras' way of dressing, like his hatred and violence, are expressions of deep feelings of social frustration, which we deduce from all his behavior as a black leader who wants for his people due rights in American society: "We are Americans, all of us, whether black or white, regardless of what the man on the ladder there tells you, Americans."[51]

But, on the other hand, Ras's shield, spear and fur are evidently intended to indicate cultural distance and to demonstrate how inappropriate it is for Black-Americans, living as they do in an industrial society, to orient themselves towards Africa. This is a weapon Ellison uses to find his identity only inside the United States. Ras' black nationalism only forms an alien identity, turning Black Americans into Africans: "And I knew it was better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether Ras's or Jack's."[52] This is obviously a rejection of Africa. Nevertheless, Ellison discusses the African problem and doesn't forget the black sons of Mama Africa, its "knuckles" and the "rabbit-foot" as luck pieces, the African tom-toms and all peculiar cultural richness the slaves (often referred to) brought to the vast whiteness in which they themselves were lost.

Having finished Ellison's Invisible Man analysis, we will consider briefly Shadow and Act, essays where Ellison explains to us what is most precious in Negro culture and how it relates to the problem of identity. These essays are, in Ellison's words, concerned with three general themes: "with literature and folklore, with Negro musical expression--especially jazz and the blues--and with the complex relationship between the Negro American subculture and North American culture as a whole."[53]

Literature and musical expression are arts; and as Ellison's art is a "celebration of life",[54] he, as a writer, celebrates what is most precious in Negro life, the human qualities that Negroes have developed beyond the barriers that have been imposed upon them. He considers it most important to the Negro writer to show what he feels and not to show what the Negroes should have been. His literary attitude requires a consciousness of the moment and a special purpose to fulfill. It also requires abandoning his doubts about "who" and "what" he is, and how he came to be. He shows the psychological evolution not only in Shadow and Act, but in Invisible Man too.

We said that Ellison finds it important to celebrate the values of Negro life which are worth preserving; for him the key of that celebration is in Negro folklore:

> The history of the American Negro is a most intimate part of American History. Through the very process of slavery came the building of the United States. Negro folklore, evolving with a larger culture which regarded it as inferior, was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his masters to define his crucial matter for him. . . . It is important to me. One ironic witness to the beauty and universlity of this art is the fact that the descendents of the very men who enslaved us can now sing the spiritual and find in the singing an exultation of their own humanity. . . .

> Just take a look at some of the slave songs, blues, folk ballads; their possibilities are infinitely suggestive.[55]

He asserts the need for white Americans to recognize Negro identity in all of its complexity and says in this old song, there are three attitudes faced with the problem of liberty:

> Ole Aunt Dinah, she's just like me
> She work so hard she want to be free
> But old Aunt Dinah's getting kinda ole
> She 'afraid to go to Canada on account of the cold.
>
> Ole Uncle Jack, now he's a might "good nigger"
> You tell him that you want to be free for a fac'
> Next thin you know they done stripped the skin
> off your back.
>
> Now ole Uncle Ned, he want to be free
> He found his way north by the moss of the tree
> He croos that river floating in a tub
> The patate roller give him a mighty close rub.[56]

The song reflects the aspiration of the American slaves for their individual rather than collective freedom.

The first attitude is that of a slave who dreams of freedom, but rejects it because he knows the problems it would cause him, problems he feels unable to face such as: separation from the family, abandonment of homeland, etc.

The second attitude is that of a slave who dreams of freedom, and plans to run away, but he confides in the wrong person and is denounced.

The third attitude is that of the slave who dreams of his flight alone and without being seen.

Freedom in the song is always in the "North"--in the northern states of the U.S. or even Canada.

But to speak of folklore implies knowing the African who created it and knowing the conditions in which he, as slave, brought it into being.

Ellison says that Negro folklore is generally considered by white cultures as "unacceptable and reduced to a negative sign."[57] To him, the Negro slave is the man who produced the world of music; to whom the art, the songs and the dances were an expression of liberty, as compensation for his frustrations and sense of personal failure.

These are Ellison's words, speaking of the "blues":

> The blues speak to us simultaneously of the tragic and the comic aspects of the human condition and they express a profound sense of life shared by many Negro-Americans precisely because their lives have combined their modes. THIS has been the heritage of a people who for hundreds of years could not celebrate birth or dignify death and whose need to live despite the dehumanizing pressures of slavery developed an endless capacity for laughing at their painful experiences. This is a group experience shared by many Negroes and any effective study of the blues would treat them as poetry and as ritual.[58]

> The blues are an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near tragic near comic lyricism: as a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of a personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.[59]

All human aspects translated here, under a structure that is as poetry as ritual, are the essential tones expressed in the "blues" by Ellison.

Also considering jazz, as part of the Negro-American life, a Negro experience translated into music and a way of the artist being free and finding oneself, Ellison, worrying now more than ever about his identity, increases the value of Negro culture. As he says in his essay "Living With Music":

> I had learned from the jazz musicians I had known as a boy in Oklahoma City something of the discipline and devotion to his art required by the artist. These men, many of them world famous, lived for and with music intensely. Their driving motivation was neither money nor fame, but the will to achieve the most eloquent expression of idea--emotions

> through the technical mastery of their instruments (which some of them wore as a priest wears a cross) . . . The delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group during these jam sessions was a marvel of social organization. I had learned too, that the end or all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieved his creativity within his frame. He must learn the best of the past and add to it his personal vision. Life could be harsh, loud and wrong if it wished, but they lived it fully, and when they expressed their attitude toward the world it was in a fluid style that reduced the chaos of living to form.[60]

Ellison states music, like classics and jazz musicians, exalts life in rhythm and melody, trying to give meaning to it. But, he says, jazz apprenticeship is done in a different way: not in long years of learning, but in what he considers "apprenticeship ordeals, initiation ceremonies of rebirth."[61] And he explains to us that after the musician has learned the techniques of jazz and the operation of the instrument and knows traditional styles, intonation and timbre, he must find himself--he must be reborn to find his soul. All with the aim of getting the identification between the instrument and his inner impulses, in order to express his own voice and to reach what he calls "self-determined identity."

Mahalia Jackson, Charlie Parker, Charlie Christian and Jimmy Rushing were some of the famous names related with jazz admired by the writer.

Speaking of Mahalia Jackson: "Her singing is simply the expression of the Negro's natural ability as is held by the stereotype. . . . Miss Jackson is the master of an art of a singing which is as complex and of an even older origin than that of jazz."[62]

But no other musician struggled more than Charlie Parker for the value of jazz; he had been one of the famous post-war jazz

"powers," despite the bad social conditions of his time:

> Parker operated in the underworld of American culture on that turbulent level where human instincts conflict with social institutions, where contemporary civilized values and hypocrisies are challenged by the DYONYSIAN urges of a between-wars youth born to prosperity, conditioned by the threat of world destruction and inspired--when not seeking total anarchy--by the need to bring social reality and our social pretensions into a more meaningful balance.[63]

His popularity was not among the Negroes, but among a certain middle-class white group, who reacted against the traditional American way of life, against the education, habits and clothes which is well represented in the "white-hipster."

Ellison says that they don't know very much about the history of jazz; they only know the jazz as entertainment, an art not separated from social problems, was probably born in a certain moment and in a certain club.

Ellison still says that jazz tries to express the Negro experience in America. In primitive jazz, these sounds were expressed in "blues." One of the most famous blues' singers was Jimmy Rushing.

> The blues is an art of ambiguity, an assertion of the irrepressibly human over all circumstances whether created by others or by one's own human failings. They are the only consistent art in the United States which constantly reminds us of our limitations while encouraging us to see how far we can actually go. When understood in their more profound implication, they are a corrective, an attempt to draw a line upon man's limitless assertion.[64]

Ellison considers that through the blues Jimmy could command the attention of the American public after the Depression, proving to them that musical expression, even considered as pure entertainment, could teach them who the American-Negro was.

We said before that Ellison found the celebration of Negro values in folklore. We confirmed it speaking of "blues"

and "jazz," but we had not yet spoken of the opinions the author gives about Negro folklore in Invisible Man.

Ellison asserted that he took from Negro folklore some theme symbols and images for his novel. He cites, as an example, the sentence "If you are black, stay back; if you are brown, stick around; if you are white, you are right"; another one--the anecdote--"the Negroes are so black that we can't see them in the dark." Both of them are related to the contrasts light/blackness, good/evil, ignorance/knowledge from Western mythology.

After this explanation, we understand better his statement:

> In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility.[65]

The process of the adaptation of that folklore is better described in the following passage:

> It took me a long time to learn how to adapt such examples of myth to my work--also ritual-- . . . the rituals become social forms and it is one of the functions of the artist to recognize them and raise them to the level of art.[66]

The Battle-Royal scene in The Invisible Man, where the blindfolded boys are obliged to fight with one another to amuse the white spectator, is typical of Southern behavior, as accepted by whites as by Blacks. It is a ritual of initiation.

Another example cited by Ellison is the use of the mask:

> We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense; when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals.[67]

When the Americans revolted against English power, he explains, they sank the tea in Boston Harbor, using Indian masks. The society of that time encouraged the use of the mask. Negroes use it not only because of fear, but to hide their identity. This is expressed in the character of the grandfather in The

Invisible Man, who, behind his kindness hides the good sense of saying "yes" wanting to say "no." His behavior is a denial and rejection through agreement:

> Samson, eyeless in Gaza, pulls the building down when his strength returns; politically weak, the grandfather has learned that conformity leads to a similar end, and so advises his children. Thus his mask of meekness conceals the wisdom of one who has learned the secret of saying the "yes" which accomplishes the expressive "no."[68]

This advice, which implies rejection and a false agreement, points the plot in the dual direction which the hero follows throughout the novel.

In this way, the hero's mask hides Ellison's true identity, and at the same time interrelatednes of blackness and whiteness can be easier, because both whites and Negroes always look at each other suspiciously.

Rinehart is the best example of using a mask in the novel. He is a character of many faces, representing America and its evolution, the chaos in a country without a past. Even his name reminds us of the call of the students of Howard to anarchy and it has the echo of a "blue" song by Jimmy Rushing:

> Rinehart, Rinehart
> it's so lonesome up here
> in Beacon Hill[69]

In Ellison's words:

> Rinehart is a cunning man who wins the admiration of those who admire skulduggery and know-how; an American virtuoso of identity who thrives on chaos and swift change; he is greedy, in that his masquerade is motivated by money as well as by the sheer bliss of impersonation; he is godlike in that he brings new techniques--electric guitars, etc.--to the service of God, and in that there are many men in his image while he is himself unseen; he is phallic in his role of "lover"; as a numbers runner he is a bringer of manna and a worker of miracles, in that he transforms (for winners, of course) pennies into dollars, and thus he feeds (and feeds on) the poor, etc.

> Rinehart's role in the formal structure of the narrative is to suggest to the hero a mode of escape from Ras, and a means of applying, in yet another form, his grandfather's criptic advice to his own situation.[70]

Under his mask, Rinehart tries to show his different faces to the hero. His identity and that of the other fictional characters is determined by what they do or don't do.

To write, Ellison explains to us, is an act of communication. His message, that is, the main point in the process of definition of a Negro and novelist is now the object of our attention.

We already called attention to the fact that the author rejected the propaganda literature and interpretation of the world in terms of race, to celebrate the human values of his folk. We will prove it with examples from Shadow and Act.

When we speak of the novel theory of Ralph Ellison, we must have in mind two concepts: one of the Negro novel and another of the Negro novelist, both related with the process that considered him an artist.

> We do become writers out of an act of will, out of an act of choice. It is through the process of making artistic forms--plays, poems, novels--out of one's experience that one becomes a writer and it is through this process, this struggle, that the writer helps give meaning to the experience of the group. And it is the process of mastering the discipline of techniques, the fortitude, the culture through which this is made possible that constitutes the writer's real experience as writer, as artist.[71]

We can conclude from this statement that the translation of the personal experience in artistic forms has to Ellison the purpose of defining him as writer and giving meaning to his folk experience: and the way to that self-definition is his own experience as an artist.

So he explains to us that from his knowledge as a writer he concluded that a simple novel wasn't enough to translate all

experiences, as the American life was too rich to be limited to a single novel.

As Negro, he feels attracted by the nineteenth-century novelists who, in his own words, "considered the American democracy and pictured in their works the inner conflicts of the human being."[72]

Ellison says that something is lost in American Literature after Mark Twain; excepting Faulkner, the treatment of the Negro after Huckleberry Finn suffered a complete amnesia in American letters.

Despite Twain's humanitarian treatment of the Negro, he divided them into "good niggers" and "bad niggers." Ellison congratulates him for the former. In Huckleberry Finn, Ellison comments, Twain doesn't idealize the Negro, but pictures him as he is in Jim's character, in his good and bad traits, in his ignorance and superstition, in his condition not only as slave but as a human being anxious for freedom.

Huck is in a dilemma--he is undecided whether to free Jim or write to Widow Watson and receive the reward money for sending him back to her. In the end, rejecting the common treatment given the fugitive slave, Huck decides to recognize the Negro as a human being. Later on he states to Tom Sawyer, "I know you will say it is dirty low down business but I'm low down and I'm going to steal him."[72A]

So as Ellison sees, this sense of democratic responsibility we find in Huck Finn disappears in twentieth-century fiction, and with it, the sense of black-white brotherhood.

For a clearer understanding of Ellison's theory of Art, we will quote the following passage:

> Art by nature is social. And while the artist can determine within a certain narrow scope the type of social effect he wishes his art to create here his will is definitely limited. Once introduced into society the work of art begins to pulsate with those meanings, emotions, ideas, brought to it by its audience and over which the artist has but limited control. . . .
>
> In its genesis the work of art, like the stereotype, is personal; psychologically it represents the socialization of so profoundly personal problems involving guilt (often symbolic murder--parricide, fratricide--incest, homosexuality, all problems at the base of personality) from which by expressing them along with other elements (images, memories, emotions, ideas) he seeks transcendence. To be effective as personal fulfillment it is to be more than dream, the work of art must simultaneously evoke images of reality and give them formal organization. And it must, since the individual emotions are formed in society, shape them into socially meaningful patterns. . . .
>
> The work of art differs essentially from reportage not merely in its presentation of a pattern of events, nor in its concern with emotion (for a report might well be an account of highly emotional events), but in the deep personal necessity which cries fullthroated in the work of art and which seeks transcendence in the form of ritual.[73]

Through this statement we know how Ellison relates literary work to society. Now we must analyse the two concepts--the Negro novel and the Negro novelist, as the author of Invisible Man sees it.

Being conscious of the ambiguity in American society in which the Negro lives, Ellison defines his position as an American Negro writer, saying: "I am without doubt a Negro and a writer, I am also an American writer."[74] And later on he adds to it:

> The American Negro novelist is himself inherently ambiguous. As he strains toward self achievement as artist (and here he can only "integrate" and free himself), he moves toward fulfilling his dual potencialities as Negro and American.[75]

As a Negro writer, he had always had the preoccupation of picturing the experience of his folk, and giving value to the Negro-American subculture distorted by the false interpretations based on the society and on statistics:

> Like most Americans we are not yet fully conscious of our identity either as Negroes or as Americans. This affirmation of which I speak, this insistence upon achieving our social goal, has been our great strength and also our great weakness because the terms with which we have tried to define ourselves have been inadequate. We know we are not the creatures which our enemies in the White South would have us be and we know too that neither color nor our civil predicament explains us adequately. Our strength is that with the total society saying to us "No, no, no," WE continue to move toward our goal. So when I came to write I felt moved to affirm and to explore all this--not as a social mission but as the stuff of Literature and as an expression of the better part of my own sense of life.[76]

Ellison confesses to have always had the preoccupation of giving value to the human qualities the Negro developed while reacting to the obstacles he should have faced:

> If the writer exists for any social goal his role is that of preserving in art those human values which can endure by confronting change. Our Negro situation is changing rapidly, but so much we've gleaned through the harsh discipline of Negro American life is simply too precious to be lost. I speak of the faith, the patience, the humour, the sense of timing, rugged sense of life and the manner of expressing it which all go to define the American Negro. These are some of the things through which we've confronted the obstacles and meanness of which you speak and which we dare not fail to adapt to changed conditions lest we destroy ourselves.[77]

We have said that Art is for this writer a celebration of life and the social conditions, which depicts so well the situation of the colored man in the U.S.A., are not the only factors to give value to the Negro experience in this country. That experience poorer in joys than in pains can't be absent from Ralph Ellison's work.

> As for my writer's necessity of cashing in on the pain undergone by my people (and remember I write of the humour as well), writing is my way of confronting, often for the hundredth time, that same pain and that same pleasure. It is my way of seeing that it be not in vain.[78]

Referring to his decision to write novels, Ellison says that the art of novel writing is:

> that of describing for all that fragment of the huge diverse American experience which I know best, and which offers me the possibility of contributing not only to the growth of literature but to the shaping of culture as I should like it to be. The American novel is in this sense a conquest of the frontier: as it describes our experience, it creates it.[79]

The theme of this dissertation is the problem of identity as it relates to the American Blacks' vision of Africa.

We described the main subject of some of Shadow and Act essays which are concerned with Ellison's artistic theory, where he defends the main purpose of his work as a writer that is to celebrate the human values of his people--the Negro American people--not in terms of a race but of a people. Here he concentrates on the question of identity that is to him more a universal question than a question limited to a race.

As in Invisible Man, we don't see in Shadow and Act a permanent preoccupation of the author with Africa. It is true we can't eompare a work of art, such as Invisible Man with Shadow and Act, which is only a collection of essays and interviews, where the author only confesses his feelings and he criticizes what he sees worth being criticized, without any pretensions of writing literature.

The image of Africa only appears to justify his true Negro-American culture, when R. Ellison was asked about what he understood by "Negro culture":

> . . . for the term "culture," I know of no valid demonstration that culture is transmitted through the genes.[80]

> . . . the American Negro people is North American in origin and has evolved under specifically American conditions: climatic, nutritional, historical, political and social. It takes its character from the experience of American slavery and the struggle for, and the achievement of, emancipation.[81]

He doesn't care specifically about Africa. He is U.S.A.-oriented, where he feels himself part of the American people, only with specific characteristics from his cultural inheritance.

It is when speaking about that inheritance that he speaks of Africa, when he relates blues and jazz with their primitive African origins in Shadow and Act.

Ellison was six years younger than Wright; they worked together for a few years on New Challenge, a Negro Marxist magazine begun in 1937 in New York. Notwithstanding his apprenticeship dominated by Wright, Ellison's Invisible Man is the best novel ever written by an American Negro, having been judged in 1965, as we saw, the best American novel since World War II.

Invisible Man is a densely symbolic and maybe even ironic novel, written exclusively about Negro American identity in America's socio-political context. In Part I, we deal with the actual Negro-American context, first in the agrarian South with its myths, where all the prizes of white society were held out to the Negroes, only to be denied them, and then in the capitalistic North, where Negroes were used as unskilled laborers out of the workers' unions. Part I ends with the protagonist being subjected to painful shock therapy, whose purpose is "to produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy without the negative effects of the knife."[82]

In Part II, we deal with the possible options open to the actual context, described in Part I. Ellison gives two alternatives: the Communism of the Brotherhood and the black nationalism of Ras. Ellison portrays a satyrical image of Communism, a new myth which tries to capture the Negro masses only to betray them later. He gives to Ras the

quixotic image of a warrior riding a great black horse and dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian warrior, complete with shield and spear.

The protagonist has no other choice than to keep continually running, running, running from the South, the North, Communism, black nationalism. . . . By running, he discovers the only way he can survive--invisibility. There is another alternative (a less manipulative form of invisibility) represented by the disguised Rinehart, a chameleon-like person, from whom the protagonist asks: "Could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend?"[83]

The protagonist himself chooses, or is impelled, to invisibility. Even there, when he collapses, too tired to close his eyes, lying in "a state neither of dreaming nor of waking, but somewhere in between," he has a nightmare: He is the prisoner of a group consisting of all the people he has been running away from, who castrate him to free him of "illusions."[84]

We can see in this state of being invisible the loss of the protagonist's ego; but if we try to interpret this problem in the context of Erikson's psychoanalytic ego theory, we must go deeper. Maybe the very title of Ellison's novel suggests invisibility, nobody-ness, an absence of identity or the prevalence of what Erikson calls "negative identity elements," but we would rather interpret Ellison's preoccupation with invisibility (like that of other Negro Americans such as Baldwin) as:

> a demand to be heard and seen, recognized and faced as individuals with a choice rather than as men marked by what is all too superficially visible, namely their color (and by the stereotypes which go with it). In a haunting way they defend an existing but in some ways voiceless identity against the stereotypes which hide it. They are involved in a battle to reconquer for

> their people, but first of all (as writers must) for themselves, what Vann Woodward calls a "surrendered identity."[85]

We have in Ellison a similar position to that of Wright. Both of them try to overcome the identity crisis of Negro American people--one showing that running away, invisibility, is a false solution (to be free of "illusions" one must be castrated), and the other convincing us (almost to the author's disappointment) that Black violence doesn't seem to solve the Negro-American problem. It is remarkable that both protagonists agree on one point: Communism is, for both, a matter not of ideology, but of relatedness. To Bigger, "for the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him"[86]; to the "invisible man," in the Brotherhood, "for the first time . . . I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race."[87]

But what we must emphasize here is that neither of these two authors was able, at the different times when they were writing, to envisage the feasibility of integration of blacks and whites in the "wholeness" of a more inclusive identity:

> For a more inclusive identity is a development by which two groups who previously had come to depend on each other's negative identities (by living in a traditional situation of mutual enmity or in a symbiotic accomodation to one-sided exploitation) join their identities in such a way that new potentials are achieved in both.[88]

NOTES

[1]The Souls of Black Folk (New York, 1903; Premier Edition, 1961), p. 17.

[2]Shadow and Act (1964), p. 7.

[3]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (London: Penguin Books, 1978), pp. 17, 19.

[4]Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 178.

[5]Invisible Man, p. 7.

[6]Ibid., p. 10.

[7]Ibid., p. 16.

[8]Ibid., p.34.

[9]Ibid., p. 468.

[10]Ibid., p. 468.

[11]Ibid., p. 462. [11A]Ibid., p. 203.

[12]The Brotherhood was a multi-racial organization approaching various social groupings, working for their equality. It had socialist tendencies. "The Brotherhood of Man is History and Change." (Invisible Man, p. 251). "The Brotherhood! Who was the first to arouse the people? The Brotherhood! Who will always be the first to advance the cause of the people? Again the Brotherhood!" (Invisible Man, p. 386)

[13]Rinehart, the master of Chaos, in Ellison's words, appears for the first time in the work on page 388, near the end, when a woman coming up the stairs of the subway confused the protagonist with him, calling him Rinehart: "Rinehart, baby, is that you? she said." Rinehart is a multiple personality, as I explain on p. 99 of this dissertation.

[14]Invisible Man, p. 35.

[15]Ibid., pp. 19-20.

[16]Ibid., p. 497.

[17]Ibid., p. 24.

[18]Ibid., p. 87 ("We take these white folks where we want them to go.")

[19]Ibid., p. 34.

[20]Ibid., p. 35.

[21]*Ibid.*, p. 92.

[22]*Ibid.*, p. 49.

[23]*Ibid.*, p. 44.

[24]*Ibid.*, p. 87.

[25]*Ibid.*, pp. 86-88.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 168.

[27]The scene of the Battle-Royal is on page 23. It is a fight among blindfolded Negroes to amuse the white spectators.

[28]*Invisible Man*, p. 180.

[29]*Ibid.*, pp. 207-08.

[30]*Ibid.*, p. 203.

[31]*Ibid.*, p. 225.

[32]*Ibid.*, p. 267.

[33]*Ibid.*, pp. 307-308.

[34]*Ibid.*, p. 332.

[35]*Ibid.*, p. 412.

[36]*Ibid.*, p. 413.

[37]*Ibid.*, p. 350.

[38]*Ibid.*, p. 439.

[39]*Ibid.*, p. 439.

[40]*Ibid.*, p. 503.

[41]R. Ellison, "Some Questions and Some Answers," *The Shadow and the Act*, p. 262.

[42]*Ibid.*, pp. 262-263.

[43]*Invisible Man*, p. 148.

[44]*Ibid.*, p. 220.

[45]*Ibid.* p. 225.

[46]*Ibid.*, p. 215.

[47]*Ibid.*, p. 299.

[48]Ibid., pp. 299, 300.

[49]Ibid., p. 447.

[50]Ibid., p. 395.

[51]Ibid., p. 386.

[52]Ibid., p. 454.

[53]Shadow and Act, p. xviii.

[54]"That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview," Shadow and Act, p. 22.

[55]"The Art of Fiction," Shadow and Act, p. 173.

[56]Ibid., p. 174.

[57]"Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Shadow and Act, p. 48.

[58]"Blues People," Shadow and Act, p. 249.

[59]"Richard Wright Blues," Shadow and Act, p. 90.

[60]"Living With Music," Shadow and Act, pp. 188-89.

[61]"The Golden Age, Time Past," Shadow and Act, p. 206.

[62]"As the Spirit Moves Mahalia," Shadow and Act, p. 213.

[63]"On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz," Shadow and Act, p. 224.

[64]"Remembering Jimmy," Shadow and Act, p. 239.

[65]"The Art of Fiction: An Interview," Shadow and Act, p. 174.

[66]Ibid., pp. 175-75.

[67]"Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Shadow and Act, p. 55.

[68]Ibid., p. 56.

[69]"Hidden Name and Complex Fate," Shadow and Act, pp. 149-50.

[70]"Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Shadow and Act, pp. 56, 57.

[71]Shadow and Act Essays, introduction, xxii.

[72]"The Seer and the Seen," Shadow and Act, p. 33.

[72A]Ibid., p. 35.

[73]"Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Shadow and Act, p. 55.

[74]"The World and the Jug," Shadow and Act, p. 139.

[75]Ibid., p. 118.

[76]"The Seer and the Seen," Shadow and Act, p. 36.

[77]Ibid., pp. 39-40.

[78]Ibid., p. 41.

[79]"The Art of Fiction," Shadow and Act, p. 183.

[80]"Shadow and Act," Shadow and Act, p. 179.

[81]Ibid. p. 203.

[82]Invisible Man, p. 82.

[83]Ibid., p. 400.

[84]Ibid., p. 458.

[85]Ibid., p. 327-28.

[86]Native Son, p. 268.

[87]Invisible Man, p. 271.

[88]Erikson, p. 343.

If you don't care who and where you come from, well, I does!

(Roots, p. 664)

CHAPTER FIVE

ALEX HALEY, 1912-

For years, even Haley, who is now 57, did not know that he was a writer. He got only mediocre grades in high school, and after two years at a North Carolina teacher's college, he became a cook in the Coast Guard, where he stayed for 20 years. He started writing to relieve the boredom of life aboard ship, and when he left the service in 1959, he decided on even more hazardous duty, the life of the freelance journalist.

It was in London, on a writing assignment in 1964, that he conceived the idea of Roots. Looking at the British Museum's Rosetta Stone, which is the key to an understanding of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, he wondered if the strange African sounds--Kamby Bolongo; Ko; Kunta Kinte--his grandmother had passed on to him could somehow be the key to his own background. He discovered that they could, and he spent the next twelve years doing research and writing, eventually tracing his own origins back seven generations to a young African by the name of Kunta Kinte. This was the name of "the African," as his grandmother called him, that had lived across the ocean near what he called the "Kamby Bolongo" and had been out in the forest one day chopping wood to make a drum when he was set upon by four men, beaten, chained and dragged aboard a slave ship bound for Colonial America.

He discovered not only the name of "the African"--Kunta Kinte--but the precise location of Juffure, in Gambia, West

Africa, from where he was taken in 1767 at the age of sixteen and imprisoned on the Lord Ligonier on its way to Maryland, and sold to a Virginia planter.

In Juffure, Haley talked with his own African sixth cousins snd took some photographs with them.

He has rediscovered for himself and for an entire people a cultural heritage that slavery had taken away from them--a heritage that represented their own identity.

At the moment, Haley is finishing up a book about the writing of Roots, called Search, which is to be published in the spring of 1980. After that, he wants to begin another book, probably about the islands of the Caribbean, an area that fascinates him because of its mixture of races.

ROOTS, GENERAL OVERVIEW: WHY ROOTS?

Roots represents a pan-African racial "boost" which implies that a better future for a Negro involves not only a new social situation--bread, housing, health and jobs--but another moral and spiritual atmosphere of respect for the most sensitive elements of the Negro personality: religion, culture, history, etc., i.e., for his true identity.

Haley, like Wright and Ellison, wants a due place for the Black American, as Abdias do Nascimento wants for the black Brazilian, when he says, "The Negro is not a strange body newly arrived in this country, he is the very body of the country,"[1] therefore, his own identity is proved. Haley, to prove it, goes to his origins, to Africa, where there might exist such a valid culture and civilization, perhaps even greater than those of the white people. He exalts Mandinka culture and also

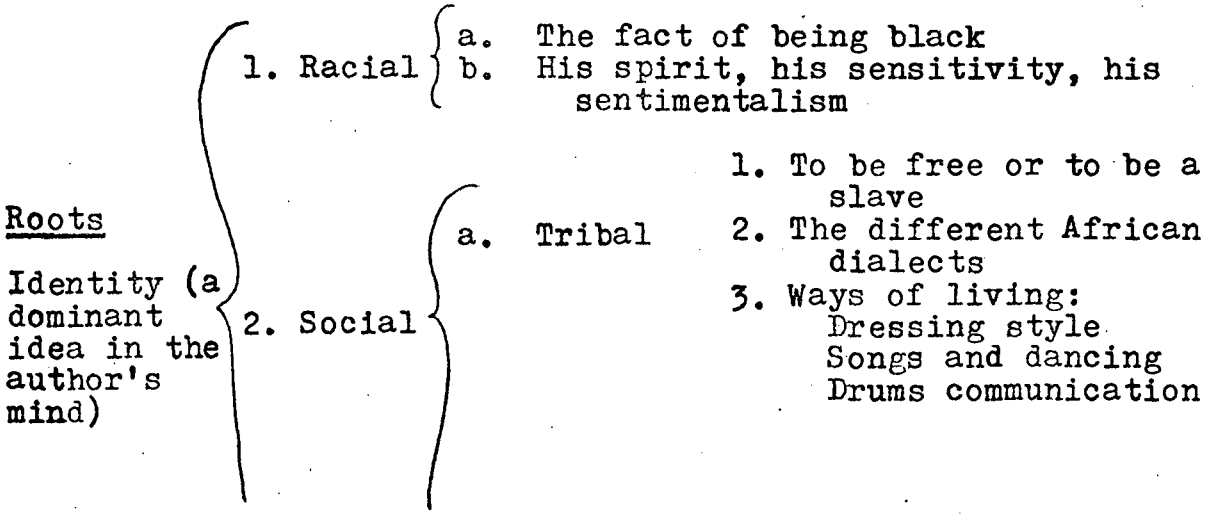
glorifies Kunta's (his seventh grandfather's) origins so that we will feel deeply moved by Kunta's departure, leaving his homeland as a slave, in this way losing his own identity.

> Around the fire that night, the drummer from Juffure chanted the names and the feats of great Mandinka wrestling champions of even a hundred rains in the past, and when it was the boy's time for bed, the wrestlers left the jujuo to return to Juffure.[2]

> The first child of Omoro and Binta Kinte is named Kunta!
>
> As everyone knew, it was the middle name of the child's late grandfather, Kairaba Kunta Kinte, who had come from his native Mauretania into the Gambia, where he had saved the people of Juffure from a famine, married Grandma Yaisa, and then served Juffure honorably till his death as the village's holy man.[3]

Roots is still a literary compensation in psychoanalytical terms; it raises a consciousness of being a Black American with African roots; it is even more, it is a cultural and physical resistance against American culture by referring back to an African continuity, as if he wanted to say to us: "We are somebody; we have our own non-American past."

Roots, with the image of Africa always present, is a human affirmation, ethnological and cultural, a document written to overcome the Black man's shame of slavery. The book is structured around a series of identity "layers" that can be diagrammed as follows:



2. Social (cont.)
   b. National - The author is against acculturation. He shows Africa had a culture and a civilization too, before the "toubobs" discovered it.
3. Identity with land of origins--Africa was his (or their) homeland.
4. Identity with the Sun: "Each day's new sun will remind us that it rose in our Africa, which is the navel of the earth."[4]
5. Identity with nature: with "the lonely old oak in the middle of a field."[5]

Compared with the attitudes of Wright and Ellison, Haley's relationship with Africa is more direct and more personal. In fact, Haley would not even be known as a writer if it were not for the revolutionary nature of his work and his own eccentricity as a researcher. Sometimes the novel displays the same tensions and ambivalences which are characteristic of Black American writers. However, Haley's position vis-à-vis Africa is clearer than any of the others, in terms of preserving his racial past and his racial individuality as a Negro: It was in Africa that Haley tried to assert his Negro self, unlike Wright and Ellison, whose world was the American society where they belonged, or tried to belong, asserting themselves.

We believe Haley's work Roots represents a rebirth for the author. In this way he compensates for a lot of his inner problems. They were problems of a whole people; people, though of different identities, of different tribes, of different dialects, in a long and painful journey; they cried and lamented--always in their own languages, the only ones they had, which they tried to keep until forced to speak that of the New World. The communication among the different Black people during that tortuous

journey turns the different identities into only one, which is the symbol of the total force of a people. Haley's work--Roots--represents a total identity, long before it was lost:

> Kunta realized from the low murmuring that spread gradually throughout the hold that once the men had actually been able to see each other up in the daylight, he and his own shackle-mate weren't the only ones trying now to communicate with one another. . . . for the first time since they had been captured and thrown in chains, it was as if there was among the men a sense of being together.[6]

Haley was like all the black people in the U.S.A., unadapted to circumstances or forced to adapt to them, but feeling truly frustrated. He was experienced enough to expect salvation in American society, where he was born and lived most of his life, then he thinks his best salvation is to know his roots, and to sing them for every people who had lost theirs and their identity.

The dramatic "scenes of Kunta's departure and conversion," the key passages of the book, show how strong Kunta's inner resistance (maybe Haley's inner resistance) was in identifying himself with the image American society created for the Black people--a world in which the manifold associations of "black" with "slave," "thief," "dirt," "evil," "sinner," are evidence of deep-rooted prejudices.

There was no chance for Kunta or his people to escape this darkness which was their fate. He had no choice but to identify himself (even as a rebel) with the suffering of all black men and to accept despair and misery until the slaves would be free again. Based on this sort of identification with black people's sufferings, Haley, Kunta's descendant seven generations later, returned to his homeland, glorifying his grandfather's lost identity, singing his "roots."

Roots appears to us as a racial odyssey where the dominant theme is the suffering of a people who lost their identity when enslaved. To emphasize that identity, Haley's attitude towards his African ancestry is directly connected with his views on African life; he had the opportunity of knowing it well when he went to Gambia searching for his roots. Africa embodies for him the mysterious and free past of the Blacks, a racial past that includes the fact of being black and possessing a different spirit and sensitivity. Haley seems to defend the pure physical image of an African black and in this way his true identity before being enslaved and mixed with the whites: "Kunta noticed his reflection in the still surface of the pool--a narrow black face with wide eyes and mouth. Kunta smiled at himself, then grinned with all his teeth showing."[7] Haley also seems to reject that loss of being pure black, accepting the Mandinka's image of it when a black woman had escaped from a toubob (which the African people named the whites who imprisoned the Africans as slaves) that took her away from the tribe: "But then the child was born: He was a strange pale tan color, like a cured hide, and had very odd hair--and wherever Yankeh Jallon would appear thereafter, people would look at the ground and hurry elsewhere."[8] This continues hammering at his mind, probably because Haley himself is filled with ambivalence about his own color; he is a "paleface," like almost all Black Americans, compared to the dark skins of black Africans. "Kunta grew so furious every time he thought about that brown one that he wished he knew enough of the toubob tongue to go and shout, 'At least I'm black, not brown like you!'"[9] Later on, he still states (through Kunta's mouth): "Every time Kunta thought about

any aspect of blood mixing, he would thank Allah that he and Bell could share the comfort of knowing that whatever otherwise might prove to be His will, their manchild was going to be black."[10]

But the physical identity of a race isn't the only preoccupation of the author. Haley describes the blacks as highly sensitive, with a sensitivity the "toubobs" always neglected; this is the case of the grandmother Nyo Boto, who once told Kunta her anguished story:

> "In my home village one night, very far from her and many rains ago, when I was a young woman and wife," Nyo Boto said, she had awakened in terror as flaming grass roofs came crashing down among her screaming neighbors. Snatching up her own two babies, a boy and a girl, whose father had recently died in a tribal war, she rushed out among the others --and awaiting them were armed white slave raiders with their black slatee helpers. In a furious battle, all who didn't escape were roughly herded together, and those who were too badly injured or too old or too young to travel were murdered before the others' eyes, Nyo Boto began to sob, "--including my own two babies and my aged mother."[11]

Haley seems to be here not only an impersonal writer, but a critic influenced by the feeling with which he identifies himself--sensitivity. This is the same that we feel when he describes Kunta's feelings--symbols of affection and sensitivity--after being captured, still in his homeland:

> Kunta was let alone the rest of the night. At dawn, he began to make out--tied to other bamboo trunks--the figures of the other captured people, eleven of them--six men, three girls, and two children--all guarded closely by armed slatees and toubob. The girls were naked; Kunta could only avert his eyes; he never had seen a woman naked before. The men, also naked, sat with murderous hatred etched in their faces, grimly silent and crusted with blood from whip cuts. But the girls were crying out, one about dead loved ones in a burned village; another bitterly weeping, rocked back and forth, cooing endearments to an imaginary infant in her cradled arms; and the third shrieked at intervals that she was going to Allah.[12]

Leopold Sédar Sénghor, the President of the Republic of Senegal and founder of the cultural movement known as "Négritude," finds the African's heightened sensibility and his strong emotional quality his chief psychic traits. Two

sources, he says, explain the origin of the psychic profile of the Negro African: the millenniums of his tropical experience and the agricultural nature of his existence; the heat and humidity of tropical regions and a pastoral closeness to the earth and the rhythms of its seasons. Emotion, he finds, is at the heart of négritude: "emotion is Negro."

Samuel Allen records in "Tendencies in African Poetry" that Richard Wright writing American Negro poetry shows rebelliousness, intensity and despair due to the common social factor of oppression. Sénghor, on the other hand, finds an intensity in a poem by Wright which he considers peculiarly African.

Haley accepts and identifies himself with this Sénghorese black image of African sensitivity. Neither distance nor time is important to Haley. He is proud of all his past and of his people, and Africa is his emotional home. Four hundred years of alienation from Africa had turned the blacks into "Americans and their destiny was in the country's destiny"[14]; but it is no more. Roots is a shout of hope for him and for his people, asserting themselves. It is with pride that Haley describes the social identity of Africans, a social identity both on tribal and national levels. Haley develops the tribal identity largely and passionately in reaction to the Americanness of Black Americans.

He points out the way of living in the tribe, how the Mandinka's children learned to read in Arabic, how they learned to love and to worship Allah, taught by the arafang, their teacher: how they counted their age by rains, throwing a stone in a little pot to count it: how they learned to head off the goats: how to defend their animals and themselves against the wild

beasts; how the young people respected the old ones--their examples, their teaching and their judgment; how they communicated by drums, their usual language used for distances; how Mandinka men chose their wives, how they loved them and how the wives respected the husband as a chief and a male; he also points out their style of dress, how they use fur ornaments according to their age; the meaning of their amulets; how they sing and dance to celebrate the most important fact for them, the harvest; how tasteful their food was in contrast later with that of the Americans.

He also gives a very detailed account of the circumcision celebration--how the boys are isolated deep in the forest and how they learn there how to fight like a Mandinka, becoming proud warriors, never feeling defeated; how they learn how to survive alone, hunting and fishing enough for themselves and for their future families; how they learn the meaning of bird's songs and the sounds of the other animals, the language of the forest. He goes on at length about the facts of Mandinka history and their religion and, finally, describes their sexual practices; he also points out the different African dialects and how they are closed to the respective tribes; he distinguishes precisely between freedom and slavery, probably to emphasize how the fact of being free before having been enslaved was so meaningful for his people, and also to show how the slaves, who lived among them, in tribes, were so privileged that "slaves aren't always easy to tell from those who aren't slaves."[15] They could easily be free again; they could buy their freedom with what they saved from farming on half-share crops with their

masters, or by marrying into the family that owned them which would never happen to the slaves of whites.

Haley also explains, through Omoro, Kunta's father, how in their tribe some people are slaves, and others not:

> --Some were born of slave mothers.
> --Others had once faced starvation during their home village's hungry season, and they came to Juffure and begged to become the slaves of someone who would feed them.
> --Still others had once been enemies and been captured as prisoners--"They become slaves, being not brave enough to die rather than be taken," said Omoro.[16]

It seems that Haley wants to prove that the tribal life was really an important one for the Blacks who have lost it, so through Kunta, when he is already in America, he says:

> As the days passed, he began to see that although these black ones lived better than those on the previous toubob farm, they seemed to have no more realization than the others that they were a lost tribe, that any kind of respect or appreciation for themselves had been squeezed out of them so thoroughly that they seemed to feel that their lives were as they should be.[17]

To glorify African culture, he is against acculturation, and, as a result against the ignorance that says that Africa had no culture or civilization before the "toubobs" discovered it.

> Kunta told Bell how all the children in his village were taught to write, with pens made of hollowed dried grass stalks, and ink of water mixed with crushed pot black. He told her about the arafang and how his lessons were conducted both mornings and evenings. . . . Kunta told her how the students in Juffure had to be able to read well from the Koran before they could graduate, and he even recited for her some Koranic verses.[18]

It is also in revolt against acculturation that he wants to continue being named Kunta Kinte, as soon as he arrives in America; he rejects "his" American name--Toby; he rejects American food, and he also rejects the shorts the "toubobs" give to him to wear to cover his body; he wants to continue to be himself, just as later on he wants his daughter Kizzy to continue being

an African descendant, giving to her a Mandinka name: Kizzy. He teaches her African words, he offers her a Mandinka doll as a toy, with her he speaks of Mandinka's tribe and his people.

Because he wants his daughter to be as African as he himself, he detests the friendship between his daughter and Massa's niece, which could acculturate her:

> This was too much. It was outrageous enough to have to sit by and watch while Kizzy was turned slowly into a well-mannered lap dog, but now that she'd been housebroken, they wanted him to deliver the animal to its new keeper. Kunta shut his eyes, struggling to contain his rage.[19]

And to continue his identity, even in a foreign land, he teaches Kizzy Mandinka's words and he himself wants to continue being called Kunta instead of the "toubob's" name Toby. He doesn't want anything to do with the blacks who are intimidated by the master to shun anything African.[20] These black Americans have lost their roots and Kunta wonders if Bell knows where her grandparents came from, since she has told him that she heard the whites were against imported African Negroes.[21] This happened probably because the idea of Africa isn't so important for an un-self-conscious African, such as Bell, as it is to a self-conscious African, exiled in a strange land, such as Kunta. The black is conscious of home chiefly because he has lost it.

To Kunta, the image of Africa is his salvation and it is permanently in the author's mind. When Kunta's child was born, he "felt Africa pumping in his veins--and flowing from him into the child, the flesh of him and Bell--as he walked on a little farther."[22] We feel throughout the reading of Roots the severe pain the author feels because his ancestors were taken away from Africa; Kunta is nothing less than a psychological picture of Haley.

Haley identifies himself with the land of his origins--Africa; Africa was his homeland and his ancestors' homeland. Even the African earth was part of them; he and his brothers as they were dragged along even ate the sand they were dragged through in a strong attempt to retain the tie to their land they did not want to lose.[23]

Kunta, knowing he would never see Africa again, idealized his village Juffure: "No other well has such sweet water. No other trees' shade is as pleasant. No other kitchens smell of the cooking of our women,"[24] and disconsolately thought of the grief that would be felt in his village as his family realized that he was gone forever.[25] "The voyage was over. He had lived through it all. But his tears soon flooded the shoreline into a gray, swimming mist, for Kunta knew that whatever came next was going to be yet worse."[26] Here starts his loss of identity when he touches the toubob's land, and they do what they want with him; mistreating him when he resists them, bathing and oiling him, forcing him into strange clothing, and finally chaining him together with the others.[27]

Kunta represents today's Black-American, conscious of his roots and of his peoples, who wants to continue being African from Africa, with his own identity. Therefore, ignoring the distance between the toubob's land and his own, he tries to run away, believing he will meet other excaped Africans somehow there in the land of the toubob, "and maybe they would be as desperate as he was to feel their toes once again in the dust of their native land."[28] If he stayed there, he would remain an outcast, a non-being, because he did not identify with his existence as a Black American without a past. He would have to

integrate his life as a member of American slavery, in spite of being psychologically alienated from it. In other words, what Haley tries to do is generalize the very personal evolution of his own consciousness as Kunta's descendant.

We believe Roots is just a matter of making sense of the present by including its past history. Haley realizes that adopting this position involves taking over the biblical notion of black being the symbol of "evil, sin, dark." Death, violence, and hatred (remember Wright's Native Son) are the crosses which Black Americans have to bear, not merely for the sake of their own humanity, but also, and above all, to save white America. In fact, Haley interprets Black American problems as deriving from their refusal to know their true origins and causes as a direct result of slavery. The blacks, purified by their suffering, shown in Roots, are expected to provide a kind of "moral consciousness" of white Americans who probably never think what they are doing when supporting racism, and what their white ancestors did when they forced the Blacks into slavery.

Through love and compassion, we feel through Kunta's servitude and that of all Blacks captured by whites, the history that gives them the due rehabilitation denied for a long time. We see slaves as Christ-figures of that time, beaten and mocked with no just cause.

Haley's appeal to love his past, his people, his earth, his nature, his tribes, his dialects, his ways of living, is a constant effort to be himself. He transfers to Kunta, his ancestor, his black nationalism in order to prove his identity. He feels as lonely in America, as "the lonely old oak in the middle of

a field," but he is reborn when he identifies himself with the sun, the giver of light to life: "Each day's new sun will remind us that it rose in our Africa, which is the navel of the earth."[29]

But Kunta dies without being free again, never accepting the toubob's land or their culture. Freedom is Kunta's constant thought. He and all his people free in Africa. Roots is about the struggle for freedom, because freedom was part of his identity. Kunta dies physically, but his effort to survive spiritually doesn't, and it continues alive in all his descendants.

Kizzy, Kunta's daughter, never forgot her father, even though she lived away from him, being enslaved and used by a white owner she detested.

> Kizzy would find herself smiling as she remembered with what delight she used to sit on the high, narrow buggy seat alongside her pappy as they went rolling along the hot, dusty Spotsylvania County roads; how at other times she and Kunta would walk hand-in-hand along the fencerow that led to the stream where later she would walk hand-in-hand with Noah.

She said to his (mulatto) son, George:

> "Yo' gran'pappy like to tell me things in de African tongue. Like he call a fiddle a Ko, or he call a river Kamby Bolongo, whole lotsa different, funny-soundin' words like dat." She thought how much it would please her pappy, wherever he was, for his grandson also to know the African words.[30]

Time passes and Kizzy's son is already six years old when peace of the U.S.A. starts being disturbed; it is one Sunday in 1814, when Kizzy's son, George, who helps in the whites' kitchen, comes flying down to slave row, breathless with a message: "Miss Malizy (the slave cook) say tell y'all dat England's army done whupped five thousan' Newnited States so'jers, an' done burnt up both dat capitol an' de White House."[31] He refers to

the war between U.S.A. and England, which had started in 1812.

George was a clever boy; he was son of Kizzy and his master, Mr. Lea. He would later be called Chicken George; he was the new "gamecocker" like his father, Master Lea had been; he was of mixed blood, but he never forgot what his mother told him about Africa and his grandfather Kunta Kinte:

> "Mammy," he said "one time you tol' me gran'pappy give de feelin' dat de main thing he kep' on his mind was tellin' you dem Africa things"--
>
> . . . . .
>
> After another silence, George said, "Mammy, I been thinkin'. Same as you done fo' me, I gwine tell my chilluns 'bout gran'pappy."[32]

The passing on of Kunta Kinte's name and history becomes a refrain throughout the book. It binds George, who, in turn, passes it on to his son Tom, a master blacksmith who is emancipated after the Civil War. One of his daughters, Cynthia, marries an ambitious black man named Will Palmer, who, in 1894, becomes the prosperous owner of a lumber company. They were Haley's grandparents; Haley was born son of Bertha Palmer and Simon Haley, both college-educated teachers and solid members of the black bourgeoisie.

Roots' fictionalization virtually ends with the move of the family to Henning, Tennessee, after the Civil War, where whites welcome Tom's skill as a blacksmith, but will not allow a black to have his own shop. Rather than work for anyone but himself, Tom rigs a wagon with a forge and bellows and begins a successful career as an itinerant blacksmith.

Freedom was the family's long-time dream. As a slave, Tom dreamed of going North:

> "Up Nawth" offered to free black people, and Tom had weighed at great length proposing to the whole slave-row family that instead of waiting endless years trying to buy their freedom, they should carefully plan and attempt a mass escape to the North.[33]

Being free was one of the ways in which they could be themselves and continue having the African inheritance brought to the U.S.A. by Kunta Kinte, Tom's great-grandfather. This strong African inheritance which marks Kunta Kinte's descendants, can be seen in the following conversation of Virgil, Tom's brother, and his daddy, Chicken George:

> "Pappy," he said finally in his piping voice, "you gwine tell us 'bout our great-gran'daddy?"
> "You's a good man, George," said Kizzy softly. "Don't never let nobody tell you no different! An' don't never git to feelin' we don't love you. I b'lieves maybe you gits mixed up 'bout who you is, an' sometime who we is. We's yo' blood, jes' like dese chilluns' great-gran'pappy."
> . . . . . .
> Overwhelmed with emotion, Chicken George moved his chair near the hearth. The three boys (his sons) squatted down before him, their eyes glistened with anticipation, and Kizzy handed him the baby. Composing himself, he cleared his throat and began to tell his four sons their gran' mammy's story of their great-gran'pappy.
> "Pappy, I knows de story, too!" Virgil broke in. Making a face at his younger brothers, he went ahead and told it himself--including even the African words.
> "He done heared it three times from you, and gran'mammy don't cross de do'sill without tellin' it again!" said his wife with a laugh. George thought: How long had it been since he last heard his wife laughing?
> Trying to recapture the center of attention, Virgil jumped up and down.
> "Gran'mammy say de African make us know who we is!"
> "He do dat!" said Gran'mammy Kizzy, beaming.[54]

Tom's father, Chicken George, was concerned about Freedom all the time, and it was that idea he transmitted to his sons, especially to Tom, whose direct descendants we know.

> "Massa, don't mistake me none, ain't got nothin' but de bes' kin' o' feelin's 'bout you, Massa. But me an' 'Tilda jes' got to talkin', and Massa we jes' 'cided we gwine try see couldn't us buy us an' our chilluns from you, an' spen' out de res' our days free!"[35]

But they couldn't buy their freedom, because meanwhile their owner went bankrupt and George's family was sold to another Master. Chicken George went to England as "gamecocker," sent by his owner (his father), who promised him liberty as soon as he came back. When he returned he couldn't bear his slavery any longer, but he only received his freedom paper after a lot of trouble.

Chicken George only needed to free all his family, who were then working for Murrays, a very good white family; but after the war between the North and the South of the U.S.A., President Lincoln abolished slavery, signing the "Emancipation Proclamation" which set them all free. In this way they conquered part of their identity.

> The jubilance in the slave row was beyond any measure now as they poured out across the big-house front yard and up the entry lane to reach the big road to join the hundreds already there, milling about, leaping and springing up and down, whooping, shouting, singing, preaching, praying.
> "Free, Lawd, free!" . . . "Thank Gawd A'mighty, free at las'!"[36]

Even Lilly Sue's son,[37] Uriah, eight years of age, had lain for weeks suffering a delirium of fever.

> "Freedom! Freedom!" He raced first for the pigpen shouting, "Ol' pigs quit gruntin', you's free!" He coursed to the barn, "Ol' cows, quit givin' milk, you's free!" The boy raced to the chickens next, "Ol' hens quit layin", you's free! --and so's me!"[38]

Freedom came to them again and the image of Africa continued alive from one generation to another. The same African words Kamby Bolongo; Ko and Kunta Kinte had passed on from one

generation to another till the day Haley, Kunta Kinte's seventh grandson, intended to search for his past, for his roots, for his self.

> If you don't care who and where you come from, well, I does![39]

Neither Wright's Native Son, nor Ellison's Invisible Man has reached the popular success of Roots. John Aldridge once remarked that "the quality and intensity of a literary work will depend upon the success with which the writer can find and communicate his private truth in the public truth of his age."[40]

Haley's private truth is that of his color threatening constantly to deprive him of individuality, of his own identity; the public truth to which this corresponds is that all Black Americans have been similarly threatened. Another point is that thinking about their own families and where they came from, they are trying to find out who they are. On the other hand, to Black Americans who in the 1970's were already thinking about them and their ancestors as strong, proud and culturally cohesive, Roots was just a matter of filling in the blanks of their history. To the white Americans, who at that time were still thinking of Negroes as devastated victims, broken by slavery and its racist aftermath, Roots awakened the feeling of guilt, giving whites a sympathetic view of Negroes and their history, leading to Professor John Callahan's quotation that "We now know our roots are inextricably bound with the roots of blacks and cannot be separated."

We think that these are the reasons the book has reached the category of a social phenomenon. Intrinsically, as a literary work, it has nothing especially valuable. Nor is it a truly historical novel. As a blend of facts and fiction

(Haley called his saga "faction"), it cannot be evaluated as history, but also it is not mere entertainment.

Africa is romanticized to the point that it seems a combination of classical Greece and a holiday resort; it would be paradise if the whites didn't come in. Besides, in Roots, nearly all the whites are villainous and nearly all the blacks are heroic.

Roots' opening section, a fictionalization of Kunta's birth, Moslem upbringing and manhood rites, have a vividness of detail that an impassioned imagination can provide. Let us consider this passage, for example:

> In rage, Kunta snatched and kicked against the shackles that bound his wrists and ankles. Instantly, angry exclamations and jerking came back from whomever he was shackled to.[41]

The horrors of Kunta's ocean crossing are based on familiar scholarship.

Once in America, where Kunta is sold to a Virginia planter and renamed Toby, Haley recreates the Old South of mansions and slave shacks, fully aware that chains and blood ties were at times indistinguishable. For example, the father of George, Kizzy's mulatto son and Kunta's grandson, was also George's own owner, the planter who raped Kizzy at fifteen just after he bought her.

The book details slave family life--birth, courtship, marriage ("jumping the broom"), death and the ever-present fear of being sold off and having to leave one's kin. Roots seems to agree with the explanation of the historian Herbert Gutman[42] who argues that family stability among black slaves (now widely accepted, despite the breakup of many families by sale) was a strong anti-insurrectionist force. When Kunta plans to run away once more, despite his partially amputated

foot (following his fourth escape attempt, half his right foot was cut off), Bell, the slave woman he married, tells him that her first husband was killed for running away and her children sold off, and that now she is pregnant again. So Kunta stays.

The actual master-slave relationship doesn't seem to have been the one traced in Roots. The historian James Brewer Stewart says, "Plantation overseers and owners were not all-powerful. They were tied by a system of reciprocal rights and obligations."[43]

Roots often looks like a cartoon, where the hero is always a Negro and the villain is always white. Whites are treacherous, violent and contemptible; blacks are noble and enduring, even forbearing when given a chance for revenge. Let us consider Tom's encounter a few weeks after the Civil War ended, with one of the villainous white bosses:

> A morning . . . he recognized a lone rider along the road as the former Cavalry Major Cates, his uniform tattered and his horse spavined. Cates also recognized Tom, and riding near the fence, he reined up. "Hey, nigger, bring me a dipperful of your water!" he called. Tom looked at the nearby water bucket, then he studied Cates' face for a long moment before moving to the bucket. He filled the dipper and walked to hand it to Cates. "Things is changed now, Mr. Cates," Tom spoke evenly. "The only reason I brought you this water is because I'd bring any thirsty man a drink, not because you hollered. I jes' want you to know that."
> Cates handed back the dipper. "Get me another one, nigger."
> Tom took the dipper and dropped it back into the bucket and walked off, never once looking back.[44]

In a sense, Roots is effectively "the story of the Americanization of the Kinte clan," and, the way it is written, it "strikes enough human chords to sustain the book's cumulative power," despite its "considerable structural and stylistic flaws," pointed out by R. Z. Sheppard.[45]

Thanks to the new ages, inaugurated in the 1960's with African decolonization and the American Civil Rights revolution, we have in Haley a view on the Negro-American problem of identity that is quite different from that of Wright or Ellison. With Haley, we have no struggle ethnic identity survival. Haley's heroes don't fight to reconquer their people from a "surrendered identity"; black people don't need that because they are "liberated" in America as well as in Africa. The surrendered identity belongs to the past. In Haley, we still have a search, but it is for a comprehensible ethnic past, both individual and communal. The "real me," the "subjective sense of invigorating sameness and continuity" (which Erikson calls the "sense of identity") must include a sense of pride, shared by individuals belonging to a determined people, even if this has been despised throughout history.

The average man has an unconscious tendency to believe that his tribe or race, class, caste or religion is naturally superior to the others, or, at least, not inferior. It is this feeling and search in the past for the elements to demonstrate its assertiveness that make up Haley's work. If white people have a well-known rich cultural past in Europe, Negroes also have a homeland and, thanks to their moral traits and other cultural attributes, they have endured centuries of physical and mental sufferings as no other people could do. And now that the worst is over, Negroes have only to think on what they have accomplished in the past, under the most adverse circumstances, to realize what they can achieve in the time to come.

So we can easily find in Roots, using Erikson's categories, a positive identity, both individual and communal--conscious, deeply rooted in the past and projected into the future to "the wholeness of a more inclusive identity."

This whole identity would be the achievement of the Americanization of all Kinte's Afro-American clans, in order to offer to the American Negro his place in a new constellation, the nucleus of which is suggested by the words Negro and American--that is to say, where he would feel a balance--neither more black nor more American.

NOTES

[1]O Quilombismo: Documentos de uma militancia pan-africanista (Ed. Vozes), p. 207.

[2]Alex Haley, Roots (New York: Doubleday and Co., 197), p. 101.

[3]Ibid., p. 3.

[4]Ibid., p. 202.

[5]Ibid., p. 286.

[6]Ibid., p. 166.

[7]Ibid., p. 67.

[8]Ibid., p. 140.

[9]Ibid., p. 140.

[10]Ibid., p. 252.

[11]Ibid., p. 54.

[12]Ibid., p. 54.

[14]Ibid., p. 153.

[15]Ibid., p. 52.

[16]Ibid., p. 52.

[17]Ibid., p. 251.

[18]Ibid., pp. 331, 332.

[19]Ibid., p. 360.

[20]Ibid., p. 342.

[21]Ibid., p. 352.

[22]Ibid., p. 344.

[23]Ibid., p. 59.

[24]Ibid., p. 69.

[25]Ibid., p. 169.

[26]Ibid., p. 189.

[27]Ibid., p. 191.

[28]Ibid., p. 242.

[29]Ibid., p. 212.

[30]Ibid., p. 446.

[31]Ibid., p. 448.

[32]Ibid., p. 446.

[33]Ibid., p. 576.

[34]Ibid., p. 564.

[35]Ibid., p. 560.

[36]Ibid., p. 642

[37]Lily Sue is Chicken George's daughter-in-law.

[38]Roots., p. 644.

[39]Ibid. p. 642

[40]John Aldridge, After the Lost Generation (New York and London: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1951).

[41]Roots, p. 150.

[42]Herbert Gutman, Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1923 (Pantheon, 1976).

[43]Quoted in Time, February 14, 1977, p. 76.

[44]Roots, p. 645.

[45]See p. 17.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Looking back on the literature which has been examined (respectively Native Son, Invisible Man and Roots), it seems justified to reaffirm our introductory statement that Africa, negatively or positively, never ceased to occupy an important place in Afro-American life and, in particular, in the writings of Afro-American intellectuals. Africa possesses a considerable weight as a cultural element within Afro-American culture, even if few Afro-Americans are themselves conscious of this.

In the introduction of this dissertation, we mentioned the "white image" of Africa, an image that had been strongly influenced by the theory of evolution that the racists used to justify the Negro's inferiority. It was this image, according to which Blacks belonged to the "inferior races," which confined the Afro-Americans to the status of an underprivileged minority. Among the damage done to Blacks must be counted the loss of self-respect and the identification with the values of the dominant culture--or on the other extreme, a non-identification, resulting in protest (as in Wright's works). Inevitably, identification with that image implied the acceptance of its notions about Africa and black men in general.

The "white" image of Africa makes understandable the facts that Negro-Americans would straighten their hair and use bleaching cream, because curly hair and dark skin were regarded as ugly. Also according to that image, the great

majority of Negro Americans found it impossible, for many generations, to identify with Africa, that "wild" and "barbaric" continent. And if a Negro American despises his "black ego" or is ashamed of it, the resulting self-hatred is, as a rule, not restricted to his individuality. It is also transferred to other Negroes, in whom he encounters his own "contemptible" ego.

On the other hand, the "white" image of Africa justified white racism and the image of the Negro as "Sambo," the stereotyped "typical" plantation slave, lacking character and a sense of responsibility.

Surrounded by so many distorting mirrors, the Negro's positive identity was undermined systematically and reduced to the reflection of a negative recognition. And even this "surrendered identity" was stimulated, as pointed out by Erikson, by that "instinctive sense" which guided the majority of Negro mothers to keep their children away from vain and dangerous competition, "that is, for survival's sense to keep them in their place even if that place is defined by an indifferent and hateful 'compact majority.'"[1]

That "white" image of Africa, with the idea of an uncivilized," pagan, and wild continent inhabited by people who were allegedly morally and intellectually inferior, still impregnates the works of the first of our three authors: Richard Wright. According to Wright, Negroes belong nowhere and are nothing: "You niggers ain't nowhere . . . you ain't no American! And you ain't African neither! So what is you? Nothing! Just nothing!" (The Long Dream, cit.) In this way, Richard Wright was perpetuating the myth that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no culture, in short, that black existence is nothingness. We see it in Native Son's hero,

Bigger Thomas, who accepts his inferiority, "the crime of being black"; the press calls him "a jungle beast . . . utterly untouched by the softening influences of modern civilization." Bigger is a Negro who has lost completely (or better, who never had) a sense of orientation and is absolutely alone.

The "white" image of Africa is also present in Ellison's work. Alienation characterized his attitude towards Africa. He denies any interest in Africa, but it would be a mistake to conclude that Ellison never concerned himself with the problems of Africa. In one way or another, Africa is a recurrent theme in Negro-American literature--and it is encountered in Invisible Man, for example, in the shape of an "ugly ebony African god," kept together with other "cracked relics from slavery time." The protagonist says that "though I had seen them very seldom, they were vivid in my mind. They had not been pleasant and whenever I had visited the room I avoided the glass case in which they rested."[2] Also characteristic of Ellison's attitude towards Africa is the way he describes Ras's ideology as exotic, crazy and funny; he concluded that "it was better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras's or Jack's."[3]

Only with the third of our authors, Alex Haley, do we see the traditional "white" image of Africa surpassed. Haley is one of the men that contributed much to the re-establishment of the African past as a positive value in Negro-American identity. Roots filled in the blanks in Black-American history, appealing to a proud image of it. It was just this that made the book's strong success.

Closely connected with the African image that people hold is the Negro-American problem of identity--individual and communal.

This problem of identity is a constant in the three authors, who are quite different from one another. All of them try to assert themselves as members of an ethnic-cultural group in American society. If in Wright and Ellison that search for an identity is not linked to Africa, in Haley, identity and African roots are closely associated. To Wright "Africa is a distant continent," whose language he wouldn't understand. To Ellison, if "we are sons of Mama Africa" (p. 299) the truth is that from it the Black Americans only have "tom-toms beating our voices (p. 333), "knuckles" (p. 313), "rumba and Sambo" (p. 345), and "a small Ethiopian flag" (p. 220). To Haley, Africa is a way of self-discovery, an alternative to his loneliness among millions of Americans. Africa is an old world, but for him it is a new one, where Haley tries to find his own roots and his people's roots. He hopes to find a cultural past to tell the world about--to say to the whites, "We are someone. Why don't you white people recognize us, if it was you who brought us out of our motherland?"

As a result, in Ellison and in Wright, the heroes don't try to assert their identity through Africa, but rather in American society as American Negroes. But we should contrast them.

In Native Son, Wright's hero, Bigger Thomas, is always anguished, subjugated, frustrated, violent; and because of this alienation, he is a hero whose fear and hate lead to his self-destruction. That destruction is, however, positive: it was in this way that Wright converted the American Negro tendency of "self-annihilation" into a strength to face the world and to awaken the American consciousness to a feeling of responsibility for Negro alienation.

Negro, but his ego fades slowly throughout the first part of the work; his "self" has a black color, but that color disappears in society, to give way to the universal man: "But we are all human . . ." (p. 195) The Negro's "invisibility" is enlarged until "race" becomes a metaphor through which larger meanings are conveyed.

Negro-Americans have really inherited a social role of nobodyness--that voiceless, surrendered identity which would seem fitted to Ellison's invisibility. But, according to Erikson, that preoccupation with invisibility should be interpreted as "a demand to be heard and seen, recognized and faced as an individual with a choice rather than as a man marked by what is all to superficially visible, namely, his color (and by the stereotypes which go with it)." (p. 136)

Ellison's hero is an ambivalent protagonist who lives between two opposite poles, that of humanism and that of a mechanized world. This protagonist, as the alienated intellectual that he is, sometimes is a passive "automaton" (p. 81), "a black amorphus thing" (p. 81), and other times he is active--"he has eyes and ears . . . he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity" (p. 81).

He is a complete protagonist; he is a whole; he represents his people. Literally, besides being a protagonist, he is a critic and a narrator. As a critic he seems like a white man: "These niggers look like they're about to pray" (p. 26). As a narrator he is an impartial witness; and at the same time a protagonist, telling about his experience from the viewpoint of an impersonal observer:

> With the supercargo lying helpless upon the bar, the men whirled about like maniacs. The excitement seemed to have tilted some of the more delicately balanced ones too

> far. Some made hostile speeches at the top of their voices against the hospital, the state and the universe . . . (p. 73)

Haley's hero, Kunta Kinte, is a historical protagonist; we would call him an exemplary protagonist because there were many other Kuntas like him. Could we have so many "Invisible Men" and so many "Bigger Thomases"?! Although he is a real life protagonist, the way that the hero achieves his maturity is sometimes artificial. This is because his action is described by a Negro American who is looking at Africa from the outside.

Kunta, we may speculate, represents the Negro American of today, conscious of his roots and of his people, with a positive sense of identity, full of pride in his African roots. In him, the Negro-American present is linked with the actuality of an African living past, with the values and memories of Africa giving meaning and direction to a new Negro-American culture. And surely this is the only way that can lead to the joining of black and white American identities "in such a way that new potentials are activated in both," that is to say, in a "more inclusive identity" (Erikson).

Kunta, we may speculate, represents the Negro American of today, conscious of his roots and of his people, who wants to continue being an African from Africa, with his own identity.

Comparing Bigger Thomas, the Inivisible Man and Kunta Kinte, we can note several similarities and contrasts between them.

The contrast between Ellison's and Wright's heroes is obvious. If Bigger Thomas is, in a certain way, a "jungle beast," Ellison's hero is a conscientious educated being, who rejects violence. Both, however, experience the same alienation in relation to the society, which made one "a beast" and the other a being divided between a human being and an automaton.

Haley's hero, Kunta Kinte, is distinct. Kunta and his descendants make one hero only; they are coherent with themselves from the beginning to the end. Why? Kunta was a free man before, who has been enslaved, but who never accepted his situation as a slave and who struggled rationally, using all his efforts, for his freedom again. His daughter Kizzy, his grandson George and his great-grandson Tom did the same. But only Tom realized the dream of the abolition of slavery, as a result of the victory of the North in the Civil War of 1861.

The "invisible man" is at the same time a palpable and an imaginative protagonist, while Bigger Thomas is only a palpable protagonist. The "invisible man" is imaginative because he lives underground all the time (but another premise could be considered if we say "invisible man" goes underground only because he wants to be free); but he is palpable because he has a remarkable individuality, as we can see by his constant use of I, though that I lives in a social loneliness: "I am an invisible man . . . I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." (p. 7)

The Invisible Man's protagonist is a hopeful man (p. 106); Hope, Faith, Endurance and Triumph are aspects of his moral strength, while Bigger Thomas is a deluded and violent man. The Invisible Man's protagonist believes in human relations, and Bigger Thomas doesn't believe in anyone, even in those who do their best to help him. Bigger Thomas refuses the advice of the priest, who would like to encourage him and to help him; he is a radical, he does not believe and will not believe in anyone while the American world segregates him. The

"invisible man" is optimistic and reflective; and because he believes so much in others, he almost fails and is destroyed. It is only light which gives him strength and faith in the world again. Kunta Kinte is also optimistic and it is this optimism that makes him fight many times against the "toubobs"[2] and takes him near destruction.

The Invisible Man's protagonist doesn't want destruction: "I wanted freedom, not destruction"; "when I discover who I am, I'll be free . . ." (p. 137) The same happens to Kunta Kinte. Wright's Bigger Thomas wants destruction, because through it he is free; after having murdered he feels himself free--"He had murdered and created a new life for himself--an imaginary identity --he feels free" (p. 155--Book II).

Summing up, the Invisible Man's protagonist is an ambivalent protagonist--a protagonist who knows and doesn't know who he is, who accuses whites because they diminish his ego. Ellison's hero is black and is white at the same time; he is the one who hides himself in the darkness, to reappear in the light, who starts as an individual Negro, slowly becoming an American, and finally a universal man.

In contrast to him, Kunta Kinte and Bigger Thomas are stable and relatively simple protagonists; the first wants to be free till the end of his life; the second wants violence, he also is secure within, till the end. The basic problem of Native Son is how to translate Bigger's complicated feelings into universal ideas; in Bigger's relationship with Max, he is forced to attempt to formulate ideas his intellect cannot handle. Between Wright's skill and knowledge and the potential of Bigger's feelings lie a thousand years of conscious culture.

Both Bigger Thomas and the "invisible man" will end their lives alienated, though they have tried throughout to live new lives without being truly reborn. Both of them, as well as Kinte, were alienated from their own family; though Kinte and his family aren't an alienated family, as we can see by their constant memory of their origins; this is also proved by the transmission from one generation to another of the old African's saga and also by a scattering of inherited African words; with the same aim, it is meaningful that at the birth of each member of the family, they celebrate the cult of consecration to the moon. (p. 14)

We should point out that Haley, as a historical and popular novelist, is optimistic and romantic in the sense that he probably thinks that everything would be all right if whites would behave rationally and were educated about black history; on the contrary, Wright's vision (and even Ellison's) is far more extreme, more tragic, more doubtful that the whole system can be changed by such rational means. We could call the latter two part of the "underground."

When we approach Wright's and Ellison's visions as part of the "underground," and at the same time compare them to Haley's optimistic and romantic vision, we touch the bottom of the question, which is precisely the main theme of this dissertation: "The Problem of Identity as it Relates to the American Blacks' Vision of Africa."

We have seen in chapter two that until very recently only a few Black Americans have actually succeeded in emancipating themselves from the impact of the "white" image of Africa. As psychological studies have shown, Black American children learn early to identify themselves with the value

system of white culture.

It is mainly for this reason that the great majority of Black Americans find it impossible to identify themselves with Africa. But it is also true that there has always existed a small minority whose adherents are more-or-less aware of the mechanisms which have been producing that Negro-American alienation, and therefore have attempted to create a racial solidarity in order to activate a group consciousness. All black nationalist movements are nourished this way. The first black consciousness groups were religious and the awareness of their African roots found expression in names such as the well-known African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in Boston as early as 1816. Among the more recent nationalist movements, already discussed in this dissertation, are Garveyism, Black Muslimism and Black Power.

It seems that black nationalism becomes radical (or more radical) whenever the situation of Negro Americans worsens or there are high, but unfulfilled expectations. The latest wave of nationalism arose in the 1960's, when the failure of the integration movement of the previous decade became obvious. Now, if "the myth of black progress" is only "dangerous illusion," because it does not apply to the "vast majority of black people," as Vernon Jordan points out (see chapter two), it seems probable that in the next few years we will see a Black Power resurgence.

On the other hand, it seems that each wave of black nationalism is more intense than the preceding one. The wave of the sixties surpassed all previous movements with regard to popular support. Now Black Americans no longer see themselves in terms of that surrendered identity forced on them for generations by the "white" image of Africa. Black Americans feel strong, proud and culturally cohesive. Today, they

identify strongly with their African past to an extent which has not been observed before. This acceptance of an ethnic identity will result in group cohesion and a strengthening of their political position to an extent which earlier nationalists had never dreamed of.

It is in this context that we see Wright's, Ellison's and Haley's visions of Africa.

Each man shapes his entire personality according to his environment. Our three authors' identities--and those with which they molded their main protagonists--are not exceptions to the general rule.

Both Wright and Ellison believed in the "primitiveness" of Black Africans. Civilization was "white." Racism was also "white," but weren't the Negroes inferior to white folks? When did colored people dominate the world? Where could white cultural, social and economic predicaments also be found in colored peoples?

What role could a black have in a white society? Wright's and Ellison's answers are similar to a certain extent. The black man wasn't in a position to demand anything. Blacks were nobody, were "nothing" (Wright), were "invisible" (Ellison). In this context, it is understandable that both Bigger and the "invisible man" go underground.

What role could Africa have in Black-American life? Once more Wright's and Ellison's answers are similar: none. They were Black-American, not Afro-American. Africa, and, therefore, black nationalism, from Garvey to the fictional Ras, could not solve Black-American problems.

Where else could they find a way to solve Black American problems? Wright and Ellison try alternative ideologies proposed by "white" society, namely Communism. Communism did not solve their problem.

It seems that Bigger must really die and that Ellison's protagonist must run to invisibility. There can be no other way out . . .

But there is another way, only it happens that in the forties and fifties the essential requirements were not yet brought together. We had to wait for the Civil Rights revolution and the series of reforms that followed it: anti-discrimination laws and practices, more political power for blacks, job programs. Only after all this has the Negro-American community been able to arrive at a reliable estimate of the place which African heritage occupies in their culture. Only then were they in a condition to develop an autonomous and lively culture of their own. This culture had to be capable of offering to Negro-Americans a positive image of themselves and of giving them some protection against the identity-destroying impact of racism; this culture must, therefore, make Black Americans aware of the value of their own traditions and customs.

Haley's Roots, "the story of the Americanization of the Kinte clan," despite its "considerable structural and stylistic flaws" (R. Z. Sheppard), fulfilled this necessity of spreading the values and memories of Africa in American literature.

Now we have arrived at our dissertation's end. It would be interesting to return to the hypotheses formulated in the Statement of Purpose and see if they were correct or not.

The first one stated that "the main protagonists of Native Son, Invisible Man and Roots, as individuals belonging to the Negro American minority, are outsiders within a "white" society which regards black races and culture as inferior to whites." This assertion was fully confirmed.

The second hypothesis ruled that "to assert themselves as non-white individuals and as members of a non-white community, they (the protagonists) have to overcome the "white" image of Africa, according to which the primitive African (or the "Ape Man") would live with his instincts still intact, and whose polygamy, nakedness, and apparently less restrictive sexual life were mistaken by Anglo-Saxon puritanism as promiscuity, "sinfulness," and "obscenity." This hypothesis was also confirmed. We have seen how Wright and Ellison, notwithstanding their cultivated skills and the masterpieces of literature they have produced, failed to break the circle of alienation, of nobodyness that was woven around them by the "white" image of Africa. On the other hand, the success of Roots, a secondary literary work, illustrates well its meaning to a society that had justly overcome that "white" image, thereby disclosing the riches of a new cultural dimension.

The third hypothesis asserted that "striving to overcome their identity crisis, these protagonists must affirm their 'different' cultural identity, rooted in a prized African past and expurgated from values and ideologies relevant only to the 'white' society. It is an assumption well confirmed, as we have just seen.

The fourth and last hypothesis argued that "this different black-American cultural identity and its rejection of the present American way of life will lead to a revolutionary claim for total equality with whites in American society or, alternately, to black nationalism, hostile to the American traditional 'white' society." It is a hypothesis that could largely surpass the limits of the three works we dealt with. In Native Son and in Invisible Man, we see the current

American way of life discredited; in Roots, the same purpose is fulfilled through a systematic erosion of the "white" image. The hero is always a Negro, the villain always a white. In the three works, a preoccupation with racial equality is ever-present that in Native Son and Invisible Man leads to a discussion on Communism in terms of racial relatedness rather than ideology. Invisible Man also explores the other hypothetical violent issue, that of black nationalism, thus showing that this hypothesis should be examined.

What is really worth emphasizing here is that neither Wright nor Ellison was able to envision the feasibility of a total integration of Negro and white Americans. Haley, however, was able to Americanize his "Kunta clan." This is because a Negro-and-white integration in the "wholeness" of a more inclusive identity depends on the development of an autonomous, living Black-American culture, capable of offering a positive image of this group, which only then could join its identity to white Americans "in such a way that new potentials are activated in both" (Erikson).

NOTES

[1]Erikson, p. 332.

[2]*Invisible Man*, p. 148.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 450.

[4]Toubobs--the white Americans.

APPENDIX I

Negro crime has periodically been the subject of serious debate in the United States and, at least since 1890, has often been the object of statistical measurement. At all times the stereotyped notion has prevailed that Negroes have a criminal tendency, which manifests itself in acts ranging all the way from petty thievery by household servants to razor-slashing homicide.

Statistics on Negro crime have not only all the weaknecesses of crime statistics generally--such as imcomplete and inaccurate reporting, variations between states as to definition and classification of crimes, changes in policy --but also special weaknesses due to the caste situation and to certain characteristics of the Negro population. Breaking the law is widespread in America, but only a small portion of the population is arrested, convicted, and sent to prison. Only when official action is taken are there statistics. Some major crimes (such as violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act and avoidance of tax payments) are committed in the ordinary course of conducting a business; others (such as fraud and racketeering) are committed frequently and often go unpunished. It happens that Negroes are seldom in a position to commit these white-collar crimes; they commit those crimes which much more frequently result in apprenhension and punishment. This is a chief source of error when attempting to compare statistics on Negro and white crimes.

In the South, inequality of justice seems to be the most important factor in making the statistics on Negro and white crime not comparable. Negroes are more likely to be arrested than are whites, more likely to be indicted after arrest, more likely to be convicted in court and punished more heavily. Some white criminals have made use of the popular belief that Negroes are inherently criminal, and by blackening their faces when committing crimes have diverted suspicion onto Negroes. Some of the crimes in the South usually <u>can</u> be committed only by Negroes; for example, the violation of the segregation laws. Again, when white lawyers, installment collectors, insurance agents, plantation owners, and others cheat Negroes, they are never regarded as criminals.

A third cause of distortion of the Negro's crime record is his poverty: he cannot bribe the policeman to let him off for a petty offense; he cannot have a competent lawyer to defend him in court; he usually cannot pay fines and must serve a prison sentence. The Negro's ignorance acts in a similar fashion: he does not know his legal rights and he does not know how to present his case; he lacks influential connections. In the North the fact that an unusually large proportion of Negroes are in the age group 15-40, which is the age group to which most criminals belong, operates to make the Negro crime rate, based on total population figures, deceptively high. Negro concentration in the cities in the North, where the crime rate is higher than in rural areas, acts in the same manner.

In general, our attitude toward crime statistics must be that they do not provide a fair index of Negro crime. Even if they did, a higher crime rate would not mean that the negro was more addicted to crime, either in his heredity or his culture, for the Negro population has certain external characteristics (such as concentration in the South and in the young adult ages) which give it a spuriously high crime rate.

In 1939 there were about three times as many Negro males in prisons and reformatories as there were native white males, in proportion to the sizes of their respective populations; the rate for Negro women was more than four times as great as that for native white women. In the South the number of Negro male felony prisoners was only between two and two and a half times as great (in proportion to population) as the number of native white male felony prisoners. In the North, however, the Negro rate was almost five times as large as the white rate. This would seem to be due mainly to the fact that Northern Negroes are concentrated in cities, where social disorganization is greater and law enforcement is more efficient.

In view of the fact that whites generally believe that Negroes are especially responsible for rape and sex crimes, it is important to note that these offenses are relatively unimportant among Negroes (although the rate is higher among Negroes than among whites). Like other Negro crime rates, the Negro rape rate is fallaciously high: white women may try to extricate themselves from the consequences of sexual delinquency by blaming or framing Negro men; a white woman who has a Negro lover can get rid of him or avoid social ostracism by accusing him of rape; neurotic white women may hysterically interpret an innocent action as an "attack" by a Negro. Real cases of a Negro's raping a white woman probably involve only psychopathic Negroes, at least in the South, for punishment is certain and horrible.

The first group of "causes" of Negro crime to be consideres is the discrimination in justice, already summarized. In the same way, poverty, ignorance of the law, lack of influential connections, Southern patterns of illegality and use of weapons in fights, concentration in the cities and in young adult ages in the North--operate to make the Negro crime rate higher than the white crime rate, and so may be thought of as another group of causes.

A third group of causes of Negro crime is connected with the slavery tradition and the caste situation. It has always been expected that Negro servants in the South should pilfer small things. In fact, their money wages are extremely low because white employers expect them to take part of their earnings in kind. Something of the same custom prevails between all white employers and Negro employees in the South. This custom operates to raise the Negro's criminal record in two ways: First, it has developed in the Negro a disrespect for the property of others. This feeling is strengthened by the fact that Negroes know their white employers are exploiting them. The second

way in which this Southern custom gets the Negro in trouble is when he moves north. In the North any type of taking of property without express permission is regarded as stealing and it may sometimes lead to arrest: Negro servant women in the North have a bad reputation for petty pilfering, and this adds to bad interracial feeling.

Much more deeply based in the caste situation than this custom is the Negro's hatred of whites. A good many crimes of Negroes against whites are motivated by revenge for disciminatory or insulting treatment. Caste, especially when it causes legal injustice and insecurity of life and property, prevents the Negro from identifying himself with society and the law. Because the white man regards him as apart from society, it is natural for a Negro to regard himself as apart. The Negro community tends to be sympathetic toward an individual Negro who commits a crime against whites, since he is only expressing a hostility which is generally felt. The slavery tradition and the caste situation are refelcted also in the low regard for human life that characterizes lower-class Southerners generally, and especially Negroes. The fact that the law is arbitrary in the South further depreciates the value of a Negro's life and property.

Certain traits, present everywhere, but more developed in the Negro as a consequence of his slavery background and his subordinate caste status, also have been conducive to a high Negro crime rate. Sexual looseness, weak family bonds, and poverty have made prostitution more common among Negro women than among white women. Carelessness and idleness have caused the Negro to be the source of a disproportionate number of accidental crimes and of vagrancy.

Social disorganization is generally high among Southern Negroes, but disorganization reaches its extreme when Negroes migrate to cities and to the North. The controls of the rural community are removed, and the ignorant Negro does not know how to adjust to a new type of life. Negroes are especially prone to take over the criminal patterns of the urban slums, since they have difficulty in getting regular and decent jobs. More Negro mothers than white mothers have to work for a living and so do not have time to take care of their children properly. Negro children, more than white children, are forced to engage in street trades where they easily pick up the arts of robbing and prostitution. The overcrowdedness of the homes and the consequent lack of privacy prevent the growth of ideals of chastity and are one element in encouraging girls to become prostitutes.

Partly because Negro neighborhoods are slum areas and partly because Negroes are supposed to be masters of sensuous pleasure, Negro neighborhoods are frequented by whites who wish to do something illicit or immoral. Gambling dens and cabarets, illegal selling of narcotics, white and Negro brothels are concentrated in Negro neighborhoods. The owners of these enterprises are practically all whites. The police do not enforce the law much in Negro neighborhoods; what goes on is too much for them to handle, and they come

to expect graft for "protection." In such a neighborhood Negroes, especially children, develop a distorted sense of values.

We know that Negroes are not biologically more criminal than whites. We do not know definitely that Negroes are culturally more criminal than whites, although we do know that they come up against law-enforcement agencies more often. We suspect that the "true" crime rate--when outside influences are held constant--is higher among Negroes. This is true at least for such crimes as involve personal violence, petty robbery, and sexual delinquency, and because of the caste system and the slavery tradition. The upper and middle classes among Negroes are at least as law-abiding as the corresponding classes among the whites; much of the differential in gross crime rate lies in the fact that the proportion of lower-class Negroes is so much greater.

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