



LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: PICTURING AMERICA

THE WORK OF FREEDOM: INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL— ESSAY

Essay by Quraysh Ali Lansana, Director, Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Creative Writing, and Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing, Chicago State University; and Emily Hooper Lansana, Theater and Literary Arts Curriculum Supervisor, Chicago Public Schools

The African American historical journey is characterized by a commitment to engaging in the work of freedom while remaining focused on service to oneself and to one's community. Whether it involves the struggle to escape from slavery or from the contemporary shackles of poverty, the work of freedom is consuming, demanding passionate dedication and vision.

The works selected for this series illustrate both solitary and communal moments of reflection and transformation that have been part of the work of freedom. Each reminds us that the lessons of freedom, which have recurred throughout African American history, have nourished each succeeding challenge in the struggle.

This battle for freedom and deliverance is fought again and again—each time African Americans wrestle with the earth, with our spirits, and with our relationships to our bloodlines and our oppressors. In the novels, essays, and poems in this series, we discover that freedom comes at a price, that we are intimately linked to those who have created our sense of home and family, and that we cannot experience individual liberation without assurance of our collective emancipation.

These readings powerfully illustrate that African Americans are still working to answer the questions What is freedom? What does it taste, smell, feel, and sound like? Can we pass it along to our children, or must each individual in each generation forge his or her ultimate release?

The **Picturing America** collection includes images that may be used to explore these questions, such as the solitary black laundress washing clothes in Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series, No. 57* (17A) and communal events like the *Selma-to-Montgomery March for Voting Rights in 1965* (19B) captured in James Karales's iconic photograph.

Another civil rights-era image, Romare Bearden's *The Dove* (17B), provides a glimpse into an African American community in Harlem during a time of significant social and political change. And Martin Puryear's *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (20B) offers an artistic metaphor that resonates with themes found in **The Work of Freedom's** readings: transcendence, danger, faith, and salvation. The image and its title invite interpretation, and may be used to stimulate discussion about the complex journey from slavery toward freedom. The historical information for Puryear's work, including consideration of Washington's legacy, may also offer insight into this literary series.

J. California Cooper,
Family

Woven into the narrative of J. California Cooper's novel *Family* is a theme that is a touchstone in African American culture and history. It is a story, told by folklorists Doug and Frankie Quimby, of eighteen Africans from the Ibo tribe who were captured and brought to Dunbar Creek on St. Simons Island, off the Georgia coast. When they realized they were

about to be sold into slavery, they chained themselves together and walked into the creek, singing a song in their language, the beginning of which has been translated as:

“Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me
And before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free . . .”
—African American spiritual “The Ibo Landing Song”

The story and song suggest that this group of Africans chose death over enslavement. They believed that the way to maintain ownership of their spirits was to end this life and move to another realm, where they could “go home and be free.” For many Africans in America, the unknown afterlife was preferable to the familiar desperation of slavery.

This feeling permeates Cooper’s novel, which depicts the anguish, courage, triumph, and tenacity of one family struggling against the horrors of captivity—a reflection of the collective African American will to endure and succeed. Cooper depicts the complex layers of the institution of slavery by portraying both those who were in power and those who were disenfranchised. In doing so, she also examines our notions of race and power and of blood or familial kinship.

From the beginning, the reader’s assumptions are challenged. We learn that the narrator, Clora, has tried to poison herself and her children to save them all from unbearable lives as slaves. The children survive, but though Clora dies, she is unable to “go home and be free.” Instead, she must struggle daily with difficult truths, and while she can gaze into the lives of her family members, she is powerless to protect or change them. Clora watches as her daughter, Always, is raped by the plantation owner, gives birth to a child at the same time as the owner’s wife, and craftily chooses to switch the babies. Soon, the owner’s son, whom Always raises, shows greater love for her than her own son, who has been raised as the master’s child.

Each of Clora’s children finds a path to freedom, but Clora’s own liberation comes at the cost of her sense of home and family as her relatives spread across the earth and join the “human family.” While she can give us a perspective that travels through time, she cannot move across time herself and share her family’s experiences. “History don’t repeat itself,” she says. “People repeat themselves. History couldn’t do it if y’all didn’t make it. Time don’t let you touch it tho.” Clora provides a window through which we can engage history, and ourselves as part of history.

Edward P. Jones, *The Known World*

The Known World by Edward P. Jones is considered by many to be among the finest novels written in the last decade. It is a patiently paced, wise, and quietly sardonic historical narrative based on a peculiar truth about American slavery and the notion of freedom—that some free blacks owned blacks as slaves. The novel is set in the antebellum era in the fictional Manchester County, Virginia, where Henry Townsend, a man who’d bought his own freedom, now buys the lives of others. If the irony of an ex-slave owning slaves isn’t enough, Henry’s former owner, William Robbins, who sold Henry his first slave, is his teacher in the methods of slave ownership. And Robbins is deeply in love with Philomena, a slave with whom he has two children.

The Known World is filled with engaging considerations about the meaning of freedom. The main character of the novel is actually slavery. We get an exploration of the master-slave dynamic when both parties are black, as well as of the traditional white-black master-slave relationship turned upside down in Robbins’s love for Philomena, which is so profound that Robbins’s wife knows she can’t compete.

The novel also toys with, and in some ways pokes fun at, laws governing the rights of slave owners during this period, revealing a troubled society caught in a web of its own creation.

**James Baldwin,
*The Fire Next Time***

James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* consists of two essays. In the first, "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," Baldwin addresses African American self-definition and personal and collective history in the service of the future. He instructs his nephew on how to function within the racist society into which he was born. Baldwin believed that the Negro must show whites, who are limited by ignorance and naiveté, how to love, and that the act of love is the only way to end white domination and black inferiority in society. For Baldwin, this was the path to freedom.

In the second essay, "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in my Mind," Baldwin writes that during his fourteenth year, he became "afraid—afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without":

What I saw around me that summer in Harlem was what I had always seen; nothing had changed. But now, without any warning, the whores and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue had become a personal menace. It had not before occurred to me that I could become one of them, but now I realized that we had been produced by the same circumstances.

The circumstances he refers to were both real and imagined. They included, most notably, the direct and indirect impact of the white man on African American lives, and the often debilitating constraints of circumstance—the circumstance of birth, culture, and religion. Baldwin saw religion as both a release/escape and a confinement/control motivated by fear. He writes, "Negroes in this country are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world."

Much of the second essay focuses on Baldwin's issues with the Nation of Islam, then a recent phenomenon. Although the Nation of Islam and its leaders, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X, presented a new way for blacks to view themselves—an alternative freedom—Baldwin asserted that their ideas were no better than those of racist whites whose intent was the perpetual subjugation of Negroes.

**A Selection of Six
Poems by Various
Authors**

Poems are the focus of the fourth session of this series. The six selected poems address, challenge, and, in some cases, mock the constraints of freedom, whether societal or self-imposed. Encompassing almost seventy years of black American life, these poems also reflect the continuum of triumph and struggle, and the ways in which contemporary poets have interpreted and expanded on the work of their predecessors. To that end, the section opens with two poems by living authors.

**Gregory Pardlo,
"Double Dutch"**

Gregory Pardlo's "Double Dutch" is a stunningly crafted fleeting moment captured and distilled. The three girls in the poem, all beautiful personifications of movement and energy, are in fact traveling nowhere—just up and down in sing-song rhythm. Pardlo details their urban gymnastics as journey, evoking a lunar mission, time-lapse photos, a dust-heavy bee, a paddle boat, a sleeve of running water. Among the implicit narrative seams of the poem is its lack of setting. The girls are suspended here, in this moment, along with the reader. Nothing exists beyond now. Here, there is joy, escape. Tomorrow is not promised.

The poem closes with a remarkable pronouncement:

She makes jewelry of herself and garlands
the ground with shadows.

The jumper is precious and palpable, yet she decorates the earth and her space on it with only the notion of her presence, and not her presence itself. She *is*, and she is right *here*, but we have only a reference to the Dutch acquiring Manhattan to suggest that we are anywhere in particular.

**Patricia Smith,
“Looking for Bodies”**

Patricia Smith’s “Looking for Bodies” eloquently captures the shocking aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which even now is almost impossible to comprehend. We can grasp the magnitude and scale of the storm, and we can understand the failure of the levees. We know the number of people who lost their lives. But many of us still cannot fathom the disastrously inadequate rescue and relief effort, a response that suggested to many an indifference based on race and class.

“Looking for Bodies” is a haunting work about the search for the missing in the long days following the hurricane. Smith employs what Pulitzer Prize-winner Gwendolyn Brooks dubbed “verse journalism”—“poet as all-seeing eye,” “poet as fly-on-the-wall.” The poem’s first section immerses us in the gruesome, intimate details of what to do while looking for bodies, but also what not to do during a search. Smith guides the reader in and through the house, through the death-riddled water, to the devastating confirmation of what we’ve been seeking:

A monstered smell sings her out of hiding,
and at first you believe
that one doll, plumper than the rest
and still intact,
survived the deluge,
but then you—

In the second and final section, the water is turned almost holy by the presence of the woman’s body, and we, as faux saviors, are both blessed and cursed by this baptism. Smith’s use of different perspectives implicates the reader as both accomplice and hero.

**Gwendolyn Brooks,
“A Bronzeville Mother
Loiters in Mississippi.
Meanwhile, a Mississippi
Mother Burns Bacon.”**

Gwendolyn Brooks also challenges us with different perspectives in “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.”

Published in her 1960 book *The Bean Eaters*, this long poem imagines the internal dialogue and family dynamics of Carolyn Bryant, the woman who accused Chicago teen Emmett Till of whistling at her, then grabbing her about the waist while requesting a date. The poem is set during the 1955 trial of Carolyn’s husband, Roy Bryant, and his half brother, J. W. Milam, for Till’s murder—a trial that helped invigorate the American civil rights movement.

Brooks portrays Mrs. Bryant as enraptured with the fantasy of being the “milk-white maid” pursued by “the Dark Villain,” an image from the ballads of her youth. She is consumed with the thought of being “worth it,” worth “(t)he time lost. The unwanted fame.” But she is also troubled, somehow disappointed that the villain was “...a blackish child/ Of fourteen, with eyes still too young to be dirty...” She thinks he should have been older, and being a mother herself, questions her memory of what Till had done to set this maelstrom in motion, because he was just a child.

When Mr. Bryant sits down at the kitchen table, Ms. Brooks shifts the perspective and heightens the intensity. This poem is the result of Brooks’s knowledge of the Till murder and trial through the media, and her own expansive imagination. We can never know if the events in the kitchen actually occurred, but the fact that they seem plausible reveals the unparalleled skill of the poet.

Bryant and Milam were acquitted after the trial, but the following year—protected by the double-jeopardy law—they both confessed to the murder in a magazine interview.

**Lucille Clifton,
“the times”**

these too are your children this too is your child

This is the last line of Lucille Clifton’s “the times,” from her book *Blessing the Boats*, published in 2000. The words speak as much to the murder of Emmett Till as they do to the contemporary violence among urban youth. Clifton, one of the nation’s bravest and most nimble poets, presents a courageous human twist:

another child has killed a child
and i catch myself relieved that they are
white and i might understand except
that i am tired of understanding.

Would Emmett Till have lived a full life if a white man had protected him or a black woman had felt empowered enough to stop Bryant and Milam? Does living in a safer neighborhood absolve us from the responsibility of looking after the inhabitants of poorer communities? Who or what do we claim as ours, and how do we define those individuals or things?

**Kwame Dawes,
“Tornado Child” and
Langston Hughes,
“America”**

The final two of the six poems in this session address different approaches to self-identification, to ways of naming oneself. Both Kwame Dawes’s “Tornado Child” and Langston Hughes’s “America” offer explanations of how people identify themselves, but the former might be considered more personal and the latter more communal. Both poems sound warnings and address democracy, and both close with ideas of inclusion. “America” is the most literal, straightforward poem of the six in this group. Its tone is firmer than that of the others, with the possible exception of Clifton’s “the times.”

There are many consistent themes in these poems, although the poets approach them with very different styles and from different perspectives. Identity—in relation to the world, self and situation—is a critical element investigated in these works. The main idea is to define which of these three aspects of identity (world, self, situation) most significantly affects how we as humans view ourselves, and how African Americans see themselves.

In his poem “Liberation Narratives,” which speaks to the same questions found in the pieces by Dawes and Hughes, Haki R. Madhubuti—an influential Black Arts Movement poet and scholar—writes:

if you don’t know
who you are,
anybody can
name you.

Anybody. Any body. The black body as entity or vehicle, and disposable, constitutes a contextual thread in the poems of Dawes and Hughes, most notably as a transient construct—a shadow, a tornado, a prayer. Such is the tenuous nature of the African American experience.

Nikki Giovanni, another seminal poet and essayist from the Black Arts Movement period, has stated that she didn’t know she’d grown up poor until someone told her. She was happy and, as far as she knew, wanted for nothing. Indeed, African Americans’ ability—and need—to find joy in a country built on racism, classism, and sexism, and the myriad ways in which those “isms” manifest, is the substance of survival, for better or for worse.

**Octavia Butler,
Kindred**

In this haunting novel, Octavia Butler explores the realities of slavery through the vehicle of science fiction. In a series of journeys back and forth between the twentieth and nineteenth centuries, she skillfully guides us through the emotional turmoil of this cruel institution and underscores the necessity for freedom and reconciliation.

The term “kindred spirits” usually refers to people who are like-minded and able to communicate almost instinctively with one another. But here, Butler challenges our notions of “kindred.” The central character, a black woman named Dana, moves into a new home in suburban Los Angeles with her white husband, Kevin, on a June day in 1976, her twenty-sixth birthday. Dana appears to be truly “free”: She is economically stable, a

homeowner. She is emotionally secure, apparently happily married. Yet she seems to be subconsciously struggling with unresolved issues in her ancestry as she embarks on a new journey to establish a home and create a family.

While unpacking boxes, Dana is overcome by dizziness and nausea. She finds herself transported across space and time to the banks of a river in antebellum Maryland, where she rescues a white boy, Rufus, from drowning. She meets Rufus again and again throughout the novel, as a boy, as a young adult, and finally, as a man and a slave owner. She is captive to Rufus's cries for help, repeatedly called from her modern-day reality into the world of slavery to save Rufus, often from himself.

Remembering the names etched into her family Bible, Dana realizes that Rufus is one of her ancestors, and that Alice, an enslaved African woman owned by Rufus, is also her ancestor. She believes she must do everything she can to ensure that Rufus and Alice become the parents of Dana's Grandmother Hagar. Over a period of years in the historical time frame, and days in the contemporary time frame, Dana is transported into the web of violence and oppression in which her African ancestors struggle to survive.

Butler not only challenges our ideas about kindred spirits and family but also what it means to be a hero/heroine. Dana is compelled to come to Rufus's aid, becoming a central figure in the life of a nineteenth-century Southern slave owner, by a force she does not understand. She risks her own safety and sanity in order to protect him, enduring physical violence and psychological terror. Yet she continues to make the journey.

Dana struggles to find her identity in a space and time where she is culturally out of place. She attempts to use the strengths of her modern experience to leverage power for herself and her family in the volatile antebellum South. While she is able to save Rufus's life, there are many others she is unable to save.

In the end, Dana is confronted with a choice between Rufus's need to control her and her own need to survive. She triumphs, but at what cost? Butler forces us to wrestle with profound questions about loss and liberation. The novel makes a powerful statement about how our ancestral legacy can pervade our contemporary consciousness—how the past demands that we recognize what it means to give voice to our kindred.

***Quraysh Ali Lansana** is the author of five poetry books, including *They Shall Run: Harriet Tubman Poems* (Third World Press, 2004), and a children's book, *The Big World* (Addison-Wesley, 1998). He is editor of seven anthologies, including *Dream of a Word: The Tia Chucha Press Poetry Anthology* (Tia Chucha Press, 2006) and *Poetry from the Masters: The Sixth Wave* (Just Us Books, 2008) for young adults. He is a former faculty member of the drama division of the Juilliard School and former associate editor-poetry for *Black Issues Book Review*. He earned a master of fine arts degree in the Creative Writing Program at New York University, where he was a departmental fellow. He currently serves as a contributing editor for *The Writer's Chronicle* of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, and is a 2008 Pushcart Prize nominee.*

***Emily Hooper Lansana** is the theater and literary arts curriculum supervisor for the Chicago Public Schools. Before joining CPS, she served as arts-in-education consultant for eta Creative Arts Foundation. She has taught at Chicago's Columbia College, Chicago State University, the University of Chicago, and DePaul University and was director of education at New York's Lincoln Center Theater. An accomplished storyteller, she has served on the board of directors of the National Association of Black Storytellers and as president of the Chicago Association of Black Storytellers. She received her bachelor of arts degree in theater studies with a certificate in teacher preparation/education from Yale University and a master's degree in performance studies from Northwestern University.*



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LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: PICTURING AMERICA

THE WORK OF FREEDOM: INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL— RECOMMENDED READING

The following works are recommended for those who would like to continue reading and discussing books on this theme.

Fiction

James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. This semi-autobiographical novel takes place in Harlem in the 1930s. Fourteen-year-old John Grimes is being raised by his mother and stepfather, Gabriel, a preacher who is abusive to his family. Defying expectations that he too will become a preacher, and imagining a broader life for himself, John rejects the strict religious discipline preached by his stepfather. The story, told from the perspective of John, Gabriel, Gabriel's sister, and John's mother, is a tumultuous exploration of attitudes on sex, race, generational differences, and individual efforts to separate from the oppressive notions of others, be they parents, whites, the church, or the opposite sex.

Marita Golden, *Long Distance Life*. Marita Golden uses the story of one family to chronicle transitions in the lives of African Americans as they moved from the rural South in the Great Migration, struggled through the Jim Crow and civil rights eras, and settled in urban ghettos. Esther, the daughter of a successful mother and revered father who died when she was a child, drops out of Howard University and takes up with a married man, has a child, and finds herself losing all sense of herself. She heads south for five years during the height of the civil rights movement, later returns to resume her life, giving birth to another child and watching the divergent paths her two children take. Told from the perspective of various characters, this novel explores issues of class and race and the struggle to realize individual ambitions.

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*. "Milkman" Dead, breast-fed and otherwise coddled too long by his mother, is unhinged by family conflict and obsessed with gaining wealth. His estranged sister's granddaughter, Hagar, desperately in love with Milkman, plots his murder in response to his rejection of her. His friend Guitar likewise wants him dead, suspecting that Milkman has cheated him out of hidden gold, wealth that Guitar planned to use to finance a group set on avenging the murder of blacks by whites. In his search for the gold, Milkman meets Circe, a mystical woman who recalls his family history, particularly a great-grandfather who escaped slavery by flying back to Africa. Toni Morrison's fantastical novel explores the complexities of the quest for identity.

Jean Toomer, *Cane*. At the forefront of the Harlem Renaissance, Jean Toomer—a man of mixed racial heritage—struggled to understand issues of race and identity. His 1923 novel defies standard structure, offering poems and lyrical prose, stories and vignettes to provide a unified impression of African American life and to explore broader themes of miscegenation, sexuality, and racial identity. The novel is organized into three sections, centering on life in rural Georgia, the black ghetto of Washington, D.C., and returning to rural Georgia. Among Toomer's characters are Karintha, a disturbingly beautiful black woman, and Becky, a white woman who gives birth to two black sons in a small Southern town.

Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children*. This was Richard Wright's first published book (1938), and its very title suggests a break from past submissiveness and signals the beginning of modern black "protest" literature. Drawing on his own experience growing up in the Jim Crow South, as well as research he conducted as a journalist, Wright offers five stories, originally published independently. An adolescent is forced to flee the rural South to avoid his likely lynching after being in the wrong place at the wrong time; a conservative pastor finds it within himself to resist the blandishments of the white powers-that-be to lead a protest rally in a small Southern town; a woman absorbs a new vision of resistance given her by her sons as they work with the Communist Party.

Poetry

Gwendolyn Brooks, *A Street in Bronzeville*. Gwendolyn Brooks's first book of poetry focuses on a racially segregated neighborhood in an unnamed city, patterned on Chicago's South Side. Brooks celebrates the vitality of Bronzeville, the passion and promise of black folks who have fled the South for prospects up North; but she also offers a realistic portrait of their poverty and despair. Brooks captures the rhythm of city life among maids and hustlers, preachers and office workers, all crowded into a ghetto and making do with what little opportunity they have to live fully realized lives.

Lucille Clifton, *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir, 1969-1980*. Known for examining themes of gender and race consciousness, Lucille Clifton offers several of her published poems, including "Generations," "Good News about the Earth," and "An Ordinary Woman." Her womanist perspective and ethnic pride mix with a spiritual consciousness rendered in lyrical mysticism. The book also includes her personal history, one of overcoming obstacles and discovering and expressing her creativity even as she came to know herself as daughter, wife, mother, and friend.

Kwame Dawes, *Wisteria*. Ghanaian-born Jamaican poet Kwame Dawes carries the spirit of the diaspora in this collection of poems based on his friendships and conversations with elderly black women in the small town of Sumter, South Carolina. The women, all in their 70s and 80s, recall Jim Crow laws and sweet dreams of better lives for their children, along with recollections of everyday life fortified by faith and hope. Dawes beautifully renders the voices of common people and conveys their impact on his sense of place and identity.

Robert Hayden, *Collected Poems*. The first black poet chosen as consultant to the Library of Congress, Robert Hayden drew on extensive research he conducted while working for the Federal Writers' Project for the historical basis of much of his work. The collection includes a series of poems on slavery and the Civil War and musings on historical figures from Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X. Hayden combined the historical and personal to offer a perspective on the longing for freedom from bondage and stereotype and all other encroachments on human expression.

Langston Hughes, *The Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. These poems are sharp-eyed, colorful portrayals of the daily life of African Americans rendered in the phrasings of colloquial language, songs of faith, soulful blues, and vibrant jazz. His poems are of trials and triumph, freedom and uplift, and the everyday rhythms of life's joys and sorrows. The collection includes his best-known poems: "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "The Weary Blues," and "Refugee in America."

Quraysh Ali Lansana, *They Shall Run: Harriet Tubman Poems*. Speaking mostly in the voice of Harriet Tubman, Quraysh Ali Lansana renders a songlike dialect that reflects on the steely determination of a woman who understands the compelling need for freedom. He also presents Tubman as a woman, less than heroic—the sum total of all the parts of every woman, complete with self-doubts and longings, but somehow assembled into heroic proportions.

Marilyn Nelson, *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. Emmett Till was fourteen years old when he was murdered in 1955 in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman. His death sparked protests that fed the nascent civil rights movement. Marilyn Nelson explores Till's life and the forces of racial hatred that led to his death. She touches on

justice, innocence, and ghosts of “strange fruit.” Her poem is written as a “heroic crown of sonnets” —interlinking lines of poetry, with the last line comprised of the first line of each of the preceding 14 sonnets. This precise structure enables Nelson to protect herself emotionally as she struggles with this very painful subject.

Sonia Sanchez, *Shake Loose My Skin: New and Selected Poems*. Published in 1999, this book brings together poems from earlier collections by Sonia Sanchez, including *I’ve Been a Woman* (1978), *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (1984), and *Wounded in the House of a Friend* (1995). Sanchez, one of the most powerful voices of the Black Arts Movement, brings boldness, strength, and energy to political awareness, as well as an inner emotional sense, as she explores racial identity, sexuality, and spirituality.

Theater

W.E.B. DuBois/Thulani Davis, *The Souls of Black Folks*. In 2003, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the publication of W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folks*, Thulani Davis staged dramatic readings from that famous work. DuBois offered the thematic frame for examining race in America through the “double consciousness” used by African Americans and the “veil” behind which emotions were hidden. His collection of essays, many in response to Booker T. Washington’s more moderate stance on the pace of racial progress, forcefully declared that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” In 1995, Davis participated in the documentary film *W.E.B. DuBois: A Biography in Four Voices*, along with Wesley Brown, Toni Bambara, and Amiri Baraka, describing significant periods in DuBois’ life.

Endesha Ida Mae Holland, *From the Mississippi Delta*. Playwright Endesha Ida Mae Holland offers an autobiographical stage piece portraying the resilience of the female spirit. Three narrators tell the story of Phelia, a black girl raped at age eleven by her white employer who turns to prostitution and stealing until she finds redemption as a civil rights worker, and ultimately earns a doctoral degree. Phelia’s mother, Aint Baby, has her own triumphs, progressing from brothel madam to certified midwife.

Samm-Art Williams, *Home*. Crossroads, North Carolina, in the late 1950s has little to offer the restless Cephus Miles. When his sweetheart, Pattie Mae, leaves for college and eventually marries someone else, he is humiliated and rendered directionless. He refuses to fight in Vietnam and serves time as a draft dodger. Later life in the big city offers a string of nowhere jobs. He loses the family farm until a mysterious benefactor rescues it. By the late 1970s, Cephus returns to witness huge changes in the town, the end of segregation, and new opportunities. But he continues to feel like an outsider, struggling with notions about the meaning of home.

August Wilson, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. The second work in August Wilson’s chronicle of the African American experience, this play is set in 1911 in a boardinghouse in Pittsburgh. Owner Seth Holly, his wife, Bertha, and their boarders talk about migration from the South, hopes of jobs in the North, disappointments of life, and the constraints of racism. A few of the boarders are haunted by memories of bondage and their fear of Joe Turner, a representational character who kidnapped freed and runaway slaves. The residents wrestle with searches for lost loved ones, and for a place for themselves in a changing world.

Nonfiction

Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” In this 1926 essay, written at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes speaks to black intellectuals and artists, urging fearlessness in combining their art and their racial identity. He cites the frustrations of racial strictures but rails against the temptation of artists to standardize themselves to white norms. Hughes urges artists to free themselves from constraints set by whites and distorted middle-class notions about the value and beauty of black culture.

Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays*. Amiri Baraka reprints essays he wrote in 1965 when he was still known as LeRoi Jones, offering a look back at the tumultuous 1960s. The

collection begins with “Cuba Libre,” recalling a trip to Cuba on the first anniversary of Castro’s coup and Baraka’s exuberance at witnessing the successful outcome of a revolution and the promise of true reform. The collection moves on to angry and defiant essays about social injustices in the United States and sharp criticism of a consumer culture that ignores social inequities in favor of creature comforts.



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