

Black Images and White Culture During the Decade before the Civil Rights Movement

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“I have assumed that the slaves were merely ordinary human beings, that innately Negroes *are*, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less.”

“Preface” Kenneth Stampp
*The Peculiar Institution:
Slavery in the Ante-Bellum
South* (1956)

Walter: “We are very plain people . . . what I am telling you is that we called you over here to tell you that we are very proud and that this is—this is my son, who makes the sixth generation of our family in this country, and that we have all thought about your offer and we have decided to move into our house because my father—my father—he earned it. We don’t want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes—but we will try to be good neighbors. That’s all we got to say.”

Lorraine Hansberry *Raisin
in the Sun* (1959)

It is usually assumed that the Civil Rights Movement began with the 1954 Supreme Court decision on *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka* and the Montgomery bus boycott of the following year. However, this assumption suppresses an uneasy feeling that these beginnings were themselves outgrowths of earlier developments. One cannot help suspecting that the decade that followed the conclusion of World War II contributed more to the Civil Rights Movement than conventional thought allows.¹

Admittedly, this period's notable lack of events of equivalent movement justifies this slighting. Truman's 1948 executive order to integrate the armed services doesn't retain the historic significance newspapers originally accorded it. Devised to short circuit Henry Wallace's left wing threat to Truman's reelection, it became mired in discussions of implementation following Truman's victory and would probably have brought little change had the Korean War not generated an acute need for troops. It ultimately exemplifies just how limited and delayed this period's changes in existing racial conditions were.²

Moreover, black people were notably reluctant to support outspoken campaigns for reform. The long standing facts of segregation and ingrained white prejudice made them understandably reticent. The patriotic consensus forged during World War II, bolstered by the ensuing fears of Russia and Communist subversion, occasioned legitimate worries that black criticism of American social conditions would bring only a vindictive white backlash. The fate of Paul Robeson certainly validated these fears. Looking to the courts as the brightest prospect for change, black organizations cultivated a low profile and pursued reform from within the system. As Harvard Sitkoff has observed: "Most civil rights groups avoided direct action. Their leadership opted for a conservative posture to avoid even a hint of radicalism."³ Indeed, the decade from 1945 to 1955 has been aptly characterized as that of the invisible black, as Ralph Ellison suggested with the title of his landmark novel.

Nevertheless, these ten years *were* crucial to the civil rights movement. One important change was economic. Between 1947 and 1952 the average black family income rose from \$1,614 to \$2,338, and by 1952, 40 percent of black men had secured white collar jobs, double the percentage of 1940.⁴ These gains provided monetary resources and expectations that would factor prominently into the subsequent black push for equality. As these gains were constrained by the lingering oppression of Jim Crow laws, black people came to see the elimination of those laws as ever more imperative.

This intensifying awareness of social injustice and of the need for reform—among white as well as black people—offsets the lack of identifiable change in racial conditions during this period. If this kind of change eludes definition in terms of statistics and major political events, it is no less significant. Given the avalanche of publicity and acclaim that attended its publication in 1952, *The Invisible Man* might be construed as confirmation that consciousness of black people was actually very strong and that their plight had already become a broadbased concern. The shocking revelation of the Nazi death camps at war's

end sparked an unnerving realization of America's own racism and produced an outpouring of articles, studies, novels, plays and films focusing upon the mistreatment of blacks. Several of these even achieved notable commercial success. *Deep Are The Roots* (1945), a play that dramatized the difficulties of a returning black veteran, enjoyed a year-long run on Broadway. The film *Home of the Brave* (1949) garnered critical acclaim and strong box office returns for its depiction of a black soldier psychologically scarred by racial prejudice. *Pinky* (1949) offered a portrait of an equally troubled mulatto nurse and became the third largest grossing film of 1949.

These dramatizations of racial injustice from the years immediately following the war confirm an important groundswell of change in popular thinking about the situation of black people and helped to generate a climate receptive to a civil rights movement. They also illuminate some of this change's inherent limitations. Fashioned by white artists for predominantly white audiences, these films and plays advanced crusading appeals for reform that were aimed at white thinking and, in so doing, challenged a major obstacle to black progress. Unfortunately, this new sympathy was betrayed by a lingering white assumption that black people were too weak to help themselves. This bias outweighed these dramas' more obvious faults of inconsistency, timidity and naivete and sharply qualified their actual achievement. This new white broadmindedness didn't just consider white people to be the architects of change; it presumed them to be at once the cause of the racial problem and the key to its solution. In other words, the reform envisioned by these works was fraught with wishful thinking and was notably lacking in black initiative.

Still, this outpouring of white concern did open new and expanded opportunities for a black response, constrained though these opportunities were by unquestioned blind spots in this white concern. On one hand, black actors began to find roles to play—though the limitations of these roles made it unlikely that the actors' investment of effort would ever earn them acclaim. Black authors from Chester Himes to John Hope Franklin were likewise able to get published—so long as their writings didn't decry existing racial conditions or demand reform. These constraints made it virtually impossible to create a black character who was both outspoken and admirable. On the other hand, this soul-searching within white culture cleared the way for new dialogue with the other side and made it receptive to innovative displays of black conviction and merit. On the ballfield, at the theatre and in the bookstore, Jackie Robinson, Ethel Waters, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison offered new, ennobling images that discredited outworn stereotypes of black weakness. Cuing their presentations to the changing racial climate, these spokespersons for their race demonstrated that black people possessed unacknowledged strengths and that a call for reform was both *possible* and *necessary*. If all four notably avoided outright protest, they nonetheless formulated a distinctive display of inherent self-worth and passive resistance to racial injustice that would prove central to the ensuing civil rights movement. Although their achievement had little direct bearing on either the Brown decision

or the Montgomery bus boycott, they fashioned an image that was presumed upon by both: a black person whose thwarted potential deserved better opportunity.

One of the first signs of change in white thinking was Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro and Modern Democracy*, which gained enough stature following its publication in 1944 to influence the Supreme Court decision in the Brown case.⁵ Myrdal premised his landmark sociological study upon his belief that "it is thus the white majority that naturally determines the Negro's place," and that the situation of the Negro was actually "a white man's problem."⁶ According to Myrdal, white Americans were strongly committed to their country's noble constitution, but failed to integrate its lofty principles into their daily lives. This failure left them with a distorted view of social reality and festering psychological tensions. Myrdal argued that the "American dilemma" of his book's title was a racial problem that afflicted white people, not black. As he explained in the book's most quoted passage:

The American Negro problem is a problem in the heart of the American. It is there that the interracial tension has its focus. It is there that the decisive struggle goes on . . . The 'American Dilemma,' referred to in the title of this book, is the ever-raging conflict between, on the one hand, the valuations preserved on the general plane which we shall call the 'American Creed,' where the American thinks, talks, and acts under the influence of high national and Christian precepts, and, on the other hand, the valuations on specific planes of individual and group living, where personal and local interests; economic, social, and sexual jealousies; considerations of community prestige and conformity; group prejudice against particular persons or types of people; and all sorts of miscellaneous wants, impulses, and habits dominate his outlook.⁷

Myrdal crafted his presentation so that it didn't appear as either an outright censure of American values or an actual program for reform. Instead he promoted the less controversial objective of a more stable state of mind. After cultivating the posture of a social scientist in his richly detailed portrait of black living conditions, Myrdal turned psychiatrist and urged that white Americans confront the psychological damage they did *to themselves* by their mistreatment of black people. He argued that white mental and moral health necessitated a searching reassessment of the corrosive racial conditions for which they were responsible.

By directing its thrust at white consciousness in the belief that mistreated black people were powerless to act on their own behalf, Myrdal's book anticipated popular racial dramas that followed. *Deep Are the Roots*, one of the first, opened one month after V-J Day and ran successfully from September 1945 to November 1946. "We decided," wrote playwrights Arnaud D'Usseau and James Gow in a promotional account, "that whatever idea was picked it would have to

deal with a post-war theme. . . . We then asked what urgent problem—other than the war—was troubling Americans most.”⁸ Their conclusion—racial prejudice—prompted them to write a play about a black officer named Brett who, upon returning to his native South, proudly hopes to extend his wartime advances. His plans for becoming a teacher quickly fall apart in the face of white resistance. Helpless in his own defense, he is reduced to pained confusion.

Significantly, the main dramatic concern turns out to be the dispute this black man provokes among members of a local white family who share little beyond their presumed respectability. Central to the differentiation of the family members is their attitude toward black people as they debate Brett’s situation. Geneva, the sister most concerned for Brett’s well being, emerges as the dominant force in this conflict and, for her portrayal, the unknown Barbara Bel Geddes won high critical praise and stardom. Meanwhile, Gordon Heath, who played Brett, was little noticed and quickly forgotten. Like Myrdal, the authors of *Deep Are the Roots* dealt with racial prejudice as it evidenced itself in the outlook of their white characters and then strove to indicate the tremendous difference a more tolerant, more caring attitude could make. By having Geneva even propose marriage in order to help Brett, the play effectively confirmed the guilt Myrdal had discovered in white America.

The film version of the play *Home of the Brave* (1949) offered a different mixture of these same ingredients.⁹ Here too the black character is a troubled veteran, though his debility has a more dramatic manifestation: a mysterious mental disorder prevents him from walking. Once again a compassionate white person, in this case a wise psychiatrist, helps a weak black man. With its orchestrated “flashbacks” from the doctor’s office to earlier battle conditions, *Home of the Brave* is a psychological drama investigating the sources of this “wounding.” Through drug induced visits to the past, the psychiatrist gets Moss, the black character, to admit his suspicion of a close white friend. “I knew he hated me,” he confesses, “because I was a black so I was glad when he was shot.” Suppression of the guilt that accompanies this belief, amidst the complicated circumstances of battle, accounts for his crippling and sets up his “cure,” which is the play’s high point. The doctor precipitates this therapeutic and dramatic climax by blurting, “You dirty nigger, get up and walk.”¹⁰ Outrage spurs the veteran to step toward the doctor, but suddenly realizing he can walk, he dissolves in gratitude.

Paradoxically the film presents this shocking insult as evidence of white understanding and compassion. The doctor completes his patient’s rehabilitation by using this ploy to establish that Moss’ infirmity stems from a misunderstanding. “The whole point of this is,” he explains just before his insult, “you had been thinking that you had some special kind of guilt. But you’ve got to realize something. You’re the same as everybody else. You’re no different, no different at all.” To Moss’ reply that he’s colored, the doctor explains, “That’s sensitivity. That’s the disease you’ve got.” Thus *Home of the Brave* offers an eye-opening confrontation with racism, which turns into a specious exercise in right thinking



***Deep Are the Roots* (1945) addressed white racism and tried to show the difference a more tolerant and caring outlook could make. Photo courtesy of Alfredo Valente, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.**

whereby black people are urged to see themselves as no different and to overcome their debilitating hypersensitivity. If *Home of the Brave* effectively showed how racism could be as corrosive to black thinking as Myrdal had maintained that it was to white, its advance was checked by a similar belief that this damage could be repaired with an amended outlook. This contrivance was solidly grounded in the period's comfortable, confident white belief that the situation of black people could be remedied without any change to the existing social structure.

Pinky, the third largest grossing film of 1949, is perhaps the best known and most respected of the popular racial dramas. It surpassed its predecessors with its consolidation of the period's twin beliefs that the plight of black people was a white problem and that its solution was an improved understanding. The implausibility of having the lily-white actress Jeanne Crane play the lead role of a mulatto was outweighed by her effectiveness in getting white audiences to imagine how altered their lives would be if they were black. One feature that vividly betrays this role's implicit assumption of a white performer is *Pinky*'s improbable outspokenness.¹¹ In a confrontation with the demanding patriarch Miss Em (played by Ethel Barrymore), *Pinky* angrily asks:

What am I then? Tell me. You're the ones that set the standards, you whites. You're the ones who judge people by the color of their skins or by your own standards, by the only ones that matter to you. I'm as white as you are. That's why you all hate me. What should I do? Dye my face? Grovel and shovel, say 'yess'm and no'm?

Pinky references her misleading appearance in order to challenge entrenched distinctions between black and white people, yet ironically, *her outburst*, bolstered by her references to her color, simply confirms her true whiteness.

In 1949, few black people, certainly none hoping to attract a white audience or gain white support, would have dared to speak out so boldly against intractable white bigotry. Even within the film itself *Pinky*'s conduct is shown to be inappropriate, significantly adding to her problems. Her lesson in white power—that of the supportive white characters as well as the abusive ones—teaches her how self-defeating and ultimately unnecessary her antagonism is. Aunt Dicey, the film's principle black character, played by Ethel Waters, lends her support to this line of thinking. In her most important speech, she counsels *Pinky*:

Pinky, I've lived in this world a long time, long enough to know for sure if it's something white folks don't want you to have, something they want for themselves, you might as well forget all about it.

The background to Waters' appearance in this role is even more instructive than this advise in measuring both expected black behavior and its attendant



***Home of the Brave* (1949) offered a specious remedy to racism by encouraging black people to overcome “debilitating hypersensitivity.” Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art.**



The implausible casting of Jeanne Crane (left) as a mulatto in *Pinky* (1949) was effective in getting white viewers to imagine how altered their lives would be if they were black. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art.

assumption of passivity and weakness. At the time Waters was offered the role of Dicey, her reputation as a difficult, demanding actress had reduced her to a Harlem recluse fearful that her illustrious career was finished.¹² Elated though she was over this opportunity, Waters nonetheless was too proud to have it become personal humiliation. At great risk and with considerable hesitation, she resisted the role of conventional black menial that director John Ford pushed her to play and was subsequently vindicated when Ford was replaced by Elia Kazan. However, Waters channeled none of this off-camera resistance into her performance, which earned her an academy award nomination. Dicey notably refuses to challenge the film's white characters. Yet, as played by Waters, Dicey was a significant departure from the weak black stereotypes of the previous dramas. Instead of Jemima servility or *Pinky*-like outspokenness, Waters developed a display of compassion and resolute belief in the Lord that made her characterization both strong and moving.

In her autobiography *His Eye is on the Sparrow*, Waters would emphasize this trust in God—along with her dauntless racial pride—as the source of her success. Her book's odd title is a reference to the spiritual she sang in Carson McCullers' stage adaptation of *Member of the Wedding*, which opened shortly

after the release of *Pinky* and became the surprise Broadway success of 1950. This solo, which spotlighted Waters and her beliefs, was the play's most memorable moment and epitomized her contribution. She herself proposed the inclusion of this moving expression of the Lord's caring and her deep concern for others. Moreover, Waters' suggestion stemmed from reservations about this role that were very much like her objections to Aunt Dicey.¹³ When the producer Robert Whitehead initially approached Waters with the part, she refused it because she found Berenice to be "a bitter woman" who was "sordid and ugly," a woman who is "a chain smoker, drinks heavily, and has lost her faith in God."¹⁴ Waters saw this black woman as one whose hard life experiences had destroyed her dignity and humanity. McCullers was anxious enough to secure this talented actress that she made the revision and approved Waters' proposed spiritual.

As a black cook tending a motherless white teenager named Frankie and her much younger white neighbor John Henry, the role of Berenice Sadie Brown was essentially a supporting one, that of another black menial, which Waters transformed into another formidable presence, perhaps the greatest role of her illustrious career. Waters' Berenice was a surrogate mother troubled by her differentiating blackness. Her background, so unlike that of her charges, was both a burden and threat; she notably lacked the securities of their middle class existence. Yet Waters presented her deprivations so that they convincingly endowed her with a wisdom and understanding that her privileged charges lacked. Her confessions of loss and sorrow, especially those about her dead husband Ludie, exemplified a hard-won strength, an abiding faith and an unbowed love.

The bonding of this trio was so close that the implicit racial barrier between them never intruded until the short final scene. Preparing to move and feeling truly happy for the first time, Frankie failed to notice Berenice's uncharacteristic dejection. Grieving for the absent characters who hadn't fared as well, this unappreciated figure of support painfully realized that she was no longer needed or wanted. As the curtain came down she sat dejectedly at the center of the stage. Any protest at this point would have violated the moving eloquence of her ratified integrity. At the same time, her disquieting silence shifted the dramatic focus away from Frankie to her own predicament. Suddenly the current white preoccupation with itself was shattered by this formidable, mistreated black woman.

With her roles in *Pinky* and *Member of the Wedding*, Ethel Waters intruded a memorable blackness upon white consciousness and, along with it, an appeal for better understanding and better treatment. Carefully avoiding any *Pinky*-like denunciation, which she could have delivered with a conviction Crane lacked, Waters channeled her racial pride into these roles and made them compelling examples of denied worth. Outspoken on behalf of her beliefs rather than her racial frustrations, she compelled white audiences to notice both the strengths and sufferings of overlooked black people.

"Remember you are on a stage all the time," wrote a baseball fan to Jackie Robinson in 1947. "Your mistakes will be attributed to all Negroes," the writer



In *Member of the Wedding* (1950) Ethel Waters intruded a memorable blackness upon the current white preoccupation with itself. Photo courtesy of Alfredo Valente, Lincoln Center.

explained. "There are thousands of American youngsters of your complexion and my different complexion who are going to learn their first lesson in sociology from your experience."¹⁵ When this letter was written, Jackie Robinson was attracting national attention as the first black man to break into major league baseball. Moreover, during that memorable 1947 season, Robinson made very few mistakes as a Brooklyn Dodger. He hit the most home runs of any team member and missed fewer games. He posted a final batting average of .297, led the National League in stolen bases and was second in the number of runs scored. His winning of the Rookie of the Year award was indisputably deserved. Still, as his fan implied, Robinson's achievements with his bat, glove and swift feet were no more important than his conduct and attitude. If his stage was quite

different from Ethel Waters', he labored under the same audience expectations, which necessitated a similar modification of *his* proud personality. Significantly, he too projected an image of strength that demonstrated, rather than demanded, that black people deserved more respect and better accommodation.

Like Waters, Robinson refused to consider his blackness a mark of inferiority. When he was still a child his mother moved the family into a white neighborhood in southern California and adamantly resisted pressure to relocate. In the army after his athletic success at UCLA, Robinson faced a wartime court martial for refusing to sit in the black section of the bus. Still, his kinship to Waters is probably greatest in offering another memorable display of black pride that likewise avoided Pinky's denunciation of white injustice.

During the momentous first meeting that led to Robinson's signing, Brooklyn general manager Branch Rickey carefully apprised Robinson of the many abuses to which he would be subjected, as well as the stoic response that would serve him best. "Mr. Rickey," Robinson finally replied, "do you want a ball player who's afraid to fight?" In a sentence that neatly summarized his expectations, Rickey replied, "I want a player with guts enough not to fight back."¹⁶

In his impressive study *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*, Jules Tygiel carefully reconstructs the demanding consequences of this agreement. Robinson's donning of a Dodger uniform compelled him to accept the Jim Crow policies that surrounded Dodger operations. He had to accommodate himself to separate housing, dining and transportation. On the playing field, where he was most exposed and vulnerable, he was subjected to a withering blast of abuse and foul play. In 1947 he set a National League record for the number of times a rookie was hit by pitchers and was repeatedly spiked by base runners.¹⁷ On these occasions all of Rickey's worst fears were confirmed. At the same time Robinson's response realized his greatest hopes. Not only did Robinson get the necessary hit, steal the extra base or execute the difficult play, he did so without getting into fights. Best of all he converted these tests of character into exhibitions of strength and courage. With fire in his eyes and a firm set of jaw, he responded to mistreatment with such intensified determination that opposing managers reconsidered and soon retreated from their tactics of intimidation. Though latter-day critics would fault Robinson's insistent silence as capitulation to white expectations, it was construed at the time as strong-willed concentration, a triumph over fear and anger. His play defeated both his opponents and white assumptions of black weakness.

If Robinson's refusal to complain cost him dearly, it won respect from white fans and made them uncomfortable over his mistreatment. In perhaps the most trying ordeal of his rookie year the Philadelphia Phillies were urged by their manager Ben Chapman to hit Robinson with a torrent of verbal abuse. Robinson responded by riveting his attention on the game. In the eighth inning with the teams locked in a scoreless tie, he singled, stole second and advanced to third on an overthrow; from there he was singled home with the game's only run.

Meanwhile, the fans who heard the Phillies' slurs deluged the Commissioner with letters of complaint, and Walter Winchell openly attacked Chapman on his Sunday national broadcast.

Because of all the adverse publicity of these complaints, the team owners sought to do some fence mending prior to the next meeting of the two teams. For this, Robinson, who was in the grips of a slump that left him hitless in his previous



With the intensity of his play, Jackie Robinson compelled white fans and ball players to realize that he was equal to the best white players and deserved to be treated as such. Photo Courtesy of National Baseball Library, Cooperstown, New York.

twenty times at bat, was pressured into a pregame publicity shot which required him to walk to the Phillies' dugout and shake hands with Chapman. To the abuse that again poured from the Phillies' dugout once the game got underway, Robinson responded with two hits, two runs and a spectacular catch that sent the game into extra innings. With tight-lipped intensity, Robinson spoke with his play. His hard-earned achievements compelled white fans to admit that he was not only equal to the best white players but also deserved to be treated as such.

Robinson was wise enough to realize that he had to move beyond this self-imposed silence lest it become a prison, or worse, personal degradation. Like Waters, he came to believe that he had to speak out in defense of his beliefs. Such was the thinking that brought him to the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1949 to comment on the well-known black actor Paul Robeson. Like Robinson, Robeson had once been an outstanding athlete who had gone on to even

greater success on stage in *Emperor Jones*, *Showboat* and a highly acclaimed 1943 production of *Othello*, which promoted Robeson as the first black to play Shakespeare's Moor. Deeply disturbed over entrenched racial injustice, Robeson had a long standing commitment to racial reform which by 1947 was provoking controversy.¹⁸ His escalating denunciations of American mistreatment of black people climaxed with his widely reported assertion at a Communist sponsored World Peace Conference in Paris: "It is unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against the Soviet Union which in one generation has raised our people to full human dignity."¹⁹ White outrage over these remarks generated a bloody riot of opposition to his ensuing Peekskill concert and destroyed Robeson's career. Uneasy over the difficult position in which he was placed by the committee's invitation, Robinson opened by stressing his reluctance and lack of qualification to comment on political matters. He then acknowledged Robeson's achievements, dismissed his remarks as a "siren song sung in brass," and stressed his own commitment to America. Closing with optimism for improved racial relations, he asserted, "But that doesn't mean that we're going to stop fighting race discrimination in this country until we've got it licked. It means that we're going to fight it all the harder because our stake in the future is so big. We can win our fight without the Communists and we don't want their help."²⁰ For Robinson, fighting meant quelling the virulent white backlash ignited by Robeson's criticisms. It also meant advancing the cause of his people. Thus in distinguishing his views from Robeson's, he was careful to establish that he was not bowing to white pressure. Speaking out here as he had recently begun to do on the ball field, he did so in support of his belief that resolution and perseverance served black people better than inflammatory protest.²¹

This telling exemplification of a new black attitude that was strong, intent upon reform, and yet resistant to outspoken denunciations was quickly complemented by a similar incident from the literary world. "This tableau, this impossibility," wrote James Baldwin in the June 1949 issue of *Partisan Review*, "is the heritage of the Negro in America: *Wash me*, cried the slave to his Maker, *and I shall be whiter, whiter than snow!*"²² In this early essay entitled "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin attacked Harriet Beecher Stowe for her portrayal of black people. By showing how two of her three major black characters were "as white as she could make them," Baldwin exposed how Beecher's self-serving contrivance likened her black characters to Pinky and was a demeaning reduction of them to mere social problems.²³

Because Baldwin was writing for a small but influential scholarly journal, he was able to be more controversial and more outspoken than his fellow black artists and performers, who were addressing larger but more narrow-minded white audiences. Moreover, the vigor of Baldwin's attack demonstrated his full assumption of this license. Nonetheless, Baldwin's position on protest was, at its center, very close to that of Waters and Robinson. In the end, his argument proves quite different from what it initially appears. His opening assault upon familiar



James Baldwin in 1953. Photograph by permission of William Rossa Cole.

white biases gives way to a paradoxical attack upon protest itself, which he then ingeniously shades into a moving appeal on behalf of the black cause.

Baldwin engineered this reversal with an abrupt shift from past to present, from white author to black, from Stowe to Richard Wright. Wright had attained literary prominence at the end of the depression with the 1940 publication of his *Native Son*. After a 1944 break with the Communist party, followed by the disappointing reception of his *Black Boy* a year later, he, like Robeson, grew increasingly embittered about American racial conditions and in 1947 moved to Paris.²⁴ Baldwin's criticism of this distinguished black predecessor, who had previously written letters of recommendation for him, came from the same beliefs

that motivated Robinson's HUAC address: his conviction that his race reaped few benefits from insistent denunciations of white injustice.

From Baldwin's perspective, Bigger Thomas, the chief character of *Native Son*, embodied the doomed methodology of the protest novel. Wright's conception of Thomas as an indictment of white racism struck Baldwin as lacking the same elemental humanity that Waters missed in McCullers' original Berenice. "For Bigger's tragedy," he explained, "is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human."²⁵ Baldwin found Bigger neither a credible black person nor an acceptable human being. Like Robinson and Waters, he believed that there could be no meaningful bridge across existing racial divisions that failed to acknowledge the Negro's essential worth. He realized that black self-esteem was as crucial to fiction as it was to theatre and baseball. For black people to make meaningful progress they first had to free themselves from entrenched assumptions of weakness, especially well-intentioned white ones. Thus his criticism of Stowe and Wright closed with a stirring call for an acknowledgement of black worth and a better understanding between black and white people. Ostensibly speaking for members of his own race while directing his comments to the white readership of the *Partisan Review*, he asserted: "But our humanity is our burden, our life, we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it."²⁶

"Everybody's Protest Novel" exposed entrenched literary conventions that blocked the creation of realistic, believable characters and helped to keep black people truly impoverished. Even though Baldwin's first novel was not to appear for another four years, this essay, along with "The Image of the Negro" and "Many Thousands Gone," constituted a crucial formulation of his literary objectives.²⁷ *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953) was set in Harlem and the storefront religions of Baldwin's upbringing. Moreover, his own family was very much like the one he depicts. Nonetheless, the significance of this autobiographical dimension lies in its self-evaluation rather than its self-revelation. Baldwin constructed his novel around the Saturday of John Grimes' birthday in order to have his fourteen-year-old grapple with the dashed hopes of his family past. "If God's power was so great," he wonders, "why were their lives so troubled?"²⁸

In using the distress of John's Saturday to explore the hardships of his elders—his stepfather Gabriel, his mother Elizabeth and his Aunt Florence—Baldwin offered glaring examples of white injustice. Yet he pointedly refused to have this mistreatment become *the* reason for his characters' blighted lives and thereby reduce them to mere victims. His careful record of white abuse was offset by an equally careful depiction of their own contribution to their problems. His sympathetic revelation of the flaws that betray their noble intentions produced characters that were both human and complex, ones that quietly cast off the shackles of the protest stereotype.

Moreover, Baldwin presented his scarred characters so that they were finally ennobled by their pride and redeemed by their suffering. The same Saturday that

occasions his characters' painful recollections of their shattered dreams also revives kinship and hope. Their collective anguish blossoms into a spiritual communion of family and race that makes it possible for John to move out of himself and experience the redemption for which he longs. For Baldwin, as for Waters, the tortured conditions of black existence forged character in spite of its damage. Defeated but not destroyed, his characters retain an elemental humanity that is neither color-coded nor cued to protest. "I wanted my people to be people first, Negroes almost incidentally," Baldwin would argue in promotional material for his novel.²⁹ Still as several critics rightly observed, his characters were unmistakably black, as indelibly marked by their intense longings as by their losses, a people richly deserving of more respect and better opportunity.³⁰

"Well I was," observes Ralph Ellison's nameless narrator late in *The Invisible Man*, "and I was invisible, that was the contradiction."³¹ Convinced of his personal worth, he believes that his encounters with white people have failed to bring him meaningful recognition. Significantly, Ellison did not present this reflection as protest so much as one more example of his narrator's sensitive, insightful black intelligence. Certainly Ellison and his black contemporaries had plenty of justification for this troubled reflection. Despite their increased concern about racial injustice, most white people persisted in believing that black people were too weak to help themselves and that reform could be accomplished through a reexamination of conscience. That blacks should have felt overlooked and slighted by this attitude is hardly surprising. Nonetheless, in spite of its limitations, this outlook did create new opportunities and improve the prospects for tangible reforms. Initially it generated a receptivity to the impressive efforts of Waters, Robinson, Baldwin and Ellison, which in turn expanded white thinking and opened its ears to what black people were saying.

The observation with which Ellison's narrator concludes this reflection on his invisibility carried an auspicious reflection on these developments. "Perhaps I could tell them to hope," he says referring to his fellow blacks, "until I found the basis of something real, some firm ground for action."³² Because there is so little support for his thinking, he accepts his subterranean isolation as his ordained lot. However, the numerous readers drawn to his story quickly disproved this assumption. All that was necessary for his wishful thinking to become a civil rights movement was an acknowledgement of the emergent fact that *many* black people in fact shared his aggravated consciousness of denied worth and his intense yearning for change. Certainly Ellison's novel and the achievements of his fellow black artists and performers helped to promote this new cast of mind. As they articulated beliefs deeply felt by members of their race and communicated them in a voice which whites were willing to hear, they provided the Civil Rights Movement a valuable foundation.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. rose up just three years after the publication of *The Invisible Man* and announced that the time for action had arrived, he represented a determined black community, which was now confident of its worth and intent upon correcting its mistreatment. Absorbing the spirit of Waters,

Robinson, Baldwin and Ellison he argued that black people deserved equality and, without harsh censure, called attention to the injustice that blocked their way. Stressing the fundamental Christian values that affirmed the spiritual strength of many black people and naturally commanded white respect, King invoked them so as to position white people at the very center of Myrdal's dilemma: how could a moral nation sanction immoral racial practices? King's inspired speeches finally laid to rest the image of black weakness and intruded the question of whether white people were strong enough to acknowledge their mistakes. Confidently presuming upon the previous decade's change in white and black thinking, he announced that time for concrete reforms was at hand.

Notes

1. Civil Rights Movement, (capitalized) refers in this paper to the campaign of black activism begun in 1955, in contrast to "general" civil rights movement.

2. Certainly Truman's decision was important, but its diminished significance today is probably best explained by this failure to precipitate greater change and its upstaging by the more momentous decisions of the 1950s. Two books that explore the important ramifications of this decision are William Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Columbus, Ohio, 1970) and Donald R. McCoy and Richard T. Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1973).

3. Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality 1954-1980* (New York, 1981), 17.

4. *Ibid.*, 18.

5. Two useful studies of this important book are: David Southern, *Gunnar Myrdal and Black-White Relations: The Use and Abuse of An American Dilemma 1944-1969* (Baton Rouge, 1987) and Walter A. Jackson, "The Making of a Social Science Classic: Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*" in *Perspectives in American History*, New Series 2, 1985, 221-267.

6. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York, 1944), xliii.

7. *An American Dilemma*, xliii.

8. Arnaud D'Usseau and James Gow, "Manufacturing a Problem Play," *New York Times*, Oct 14, 1945, sec. 2, 1.

9. *Home of the Brave* originally appeared as a Broadway play in which the lead character was Jewish. Because the play was a commercial failure, the film version converted him to a black man in the belief that the mass of moviegoers would relate better to this form of racial prejudice.

10. This racial slur is a key element of the veteran's debility. First used by a bigot, it is repeated by his friend in a moment of anger just as he is shot.

11. In a later day reflection, Elia Kazan, the film's director, would trace Pinky's deficiencies to Cranes's limitations as an actress, saying that "not only was she white in her face but also in her heart." However, this problem of "whiteness" was inherent to the role itself. See Elia Kazan, *Kazan on Kazan* (New York, 1974), 60.

12. Ethel Waters, *His Eye is On the Sparrow* (New York, 1951), 258-64.

13. Ethel Waters, *To Me It's Wonderful* (New York, 1972), 4-5, 7-9; *His Eye is On the Sparrow*, 263, 272-75; Virginia Spencer Carr, *The Lonely Hunter* (New York, 1975), 330-37.

14. Waters, *His Eye is On the Sparrow*, 263.

15. Quoted in Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York, 1984), 200.

16. Harvey Frommer, *Rickey and Robinson: The Men Who Broke Baseball's Color Barrier* (New York, 1982), 6. Later in the same conversation, Rickey is reported to have added: "I want to beg two things of you, Jackie. Give it all you have as a ballplayer. As a man, give continuing loyalty to your race and to the critical cause you are going to symbolize. And above all, do not fight. No matter how vile the abuse, you must ignore it. You are carrying the reputation of a race on your shoulders. Bear it well, and the day will come when every team in baseball will open its doors to Negroes." (15) While one is naturally suspicious of Frommer's lengthy quotations, those who knew both men have confirmed the overall accuracy of his account of this important meeting.

17. During his rookie year Robinson was hit nine times, seven coming during the first half of the season. Had Robinson not been exceptionally quick the number of hits and spikings would have probably been much higher. See Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, 132-34, 191-92.

18. Dorothy Butler Gilliam, *Paul Robeson: All-American* (Washington, D.C., 1976), 123-35. Susan Robeson, *The Whole World In His Hands* (Secaucus, New Jersey, 1981), 153-64. Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York, 1988), 296-380.
19. Quoted in Ronald A. Smith, "The Paul Robeson—Jackie Robinson Saga and a Political Collision," *Journal of Sports History* 6 (Summer, 1979), 18.
20. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 20.
21. In 1949, Robinson ceased backing away from the mistreatment he received on the baseball field. At first he only confronted his challengers and spoke up for his side. However, over the years that followed Robinson became increasingly known for his short fuse. See Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, 322-27.
22. James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Partisan Review* 16 (June, 1949), 584.
23. *Ibid.*, 580.
24. Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York, 1973), 286-333, especially 294-97; Addison Gayle, *Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son* (Garden City, New York, 1980), 167-98, especially 176-78.
25. Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," 585. Baldwin's disagreement with Wright, which began with "Everybody's Protest Novel," continued through his later "The Survival of Richard Wright" *The Reporter* 24 (March 16, 1961), 52-55 (retitled "Alas, Poor Richard" for *Nobody Knows My Name*). This quarrel is discussed in M. Charney, "James Baldwin's Quarrel with Richard Wright," *American Quarterly* 15 (Spring 1963), 65-75.
26. Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," 585.
27. James Baldwin, "The Image of the Negro," *Commentary* 5 (April, 1948), 378-80; "Many Thousands Gone," *Partisan Review* 18 (Nov./Dec. 1951), 665-80.
28. James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (New York, 1953), 193.
29. Quoted in *Commonweal*, 58 (May 22, 1953), 186. Similar references to this promotional statement appear in *The Nation* 176 (June 6, 1953), 488, and *Time* 61 (May, 1953), 127-28.
30. *Commonweal*, 58 (May 22, 1953), 186, *Time* 61 (May, 1953), 127-28. See also *New Leader*, 36 (June 1, 1952), 21-22.
31. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York, 1952), 383.
32. *Ibid.*, 383.