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1994

## 'Post-Humously Hot': Bill Traylor's Life and Art

Colleen Doyle Worrell

*College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences*

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'POST-HUMOUSLY HOT': BILL TRAYLOR'S LIFE AND ART

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Program of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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by

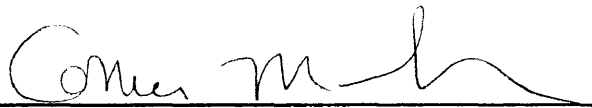
Colleen M. Doyle

1994

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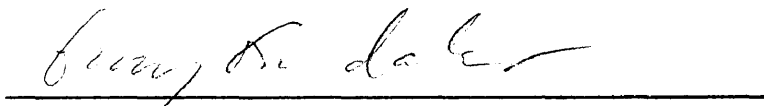
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Colleen M. Doyle

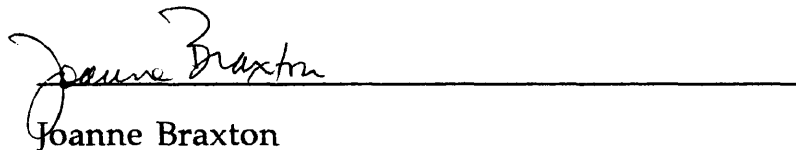
Approved, April 18, 1994

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Alan Wallach

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Grey Gundaker

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Joanne Braxton", written above a horizontal line.

Joanne Braxton

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I am indebted to a number of people who have guided, assisted and encouraged me in my research and writing on Bill Traylor. I would like to thank Professor Mechal Sobel for introducing me to Bill Traylor and encouraging my early exploration of his life and work. I also wish to extend my thanks to Miriam Fowler, Marcia Weber and Eileen Knott who, during my stay in Montgomery, Alabama, happily shared their research and memories. I am also grateful for the guidance and criticism of Professors Alan Wallach, Joanne Braxton, and especially Gray Gundaker whose astute attention to this manuscript was invaluable. Finally, my love and thanks to Sterling North Worrell who made the journey an adventure.

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## ABSTRACT

This work is an exploration of the life and art of Bill Traylor, a self-taught artist from Alabama.

Born into slavery circa 1855, Traylor lived most of his life on the George Hartwell Traylor Plantation in Benton, Alabama. Moving to Montgomery late in life, Traylor took up drawing after he could no longer work, creating unique, vivid images from around 1939 through to his death ten years later. His art was collected and preserved by white artist Charles Shannon who kept the work in storage until the 1970s. Revived and merchandised during a period of strong interest in black folk art, Traylor's art quickly captured the attention of the commercial art world. His work is now a "hot" commodity in an established and growing market (selling for between ten and fifty thousand dollars), and has been acquired and exhibited by a number of museums and galleries, both in the United States and abroad.

"'Post-Humously Hot': Bill Traylor's Life and Art" offers an expanded understanding of the artist and his work by enlarging the context of critical and scholarly appreciation. Organized into three chapters, the work places Traylor's past in a historical context, discusses the relationship between his art and Afro-Christianity, and addresses the influences of the commodification of his work within the art market. In the end, this work attempts to move beyond circumscribed knowledge received from Shannon and the marketplace in order to inspire further scholarship on Bill Traylor and other self-taught artists.

## INTRODUCTION

I was "introduced" to Bill Traylor by Professor Mechal Sobel in September 1992. At the first meeting of a graduate-level history course on slavery in America, Mechal Sobel showed the class a book she had discovered called Bill Traylor: His Art -- His Life (1991), edited by two New York art dealers, Frank Maresca and Roger Ricco. Bursting with enthusiasm for the art and the artist, Mechal Sobel told us she had purchased a second copy of the book so that she could cover her apartment walls with its pages. She was astounded by her find and wanted Traylor's art to surround her.

Mechal Sobel was taken both by the art and the story it told. What intrigued her was not simply that Bill Traylor, an aging ex-slave who lived most of his life on the Traylor plantation in Benton, Alabama, made these incredible paintings and drawings out of bits of used cardboard while homeless on the streets of Montgomery in the 1940s. Mechal Sobel, making connections between Bill Traylor's life, his art and her own scholarship, saw a story that was yet to be told. She outlined the spiritual elements that she believed directly linked Traylor's art to West African culture and religion, and encouraged her students to explore the connections for themselves. This thesis is my response to her call.

"'Post-Humously Hot': Bill Traylor's Life and Art" is the culmination of two years of research and writing. My study began with

Maresca and Ricco's book on Traylor which, true to the observation that the "coffee-table art book" is the "principle vehicle for the popularization of scholarship," remains the most comprehensive source on Traylor's art and life.<sup>1</sup> Determined to expand the scope of analysis beyond that which this publication represents, my research took me to Montgomery, Alabama and what remains of the George H. Traylor Plantation. In Montgomery I met gallery director Miriam Fowler who, along with Marcia Weber, an art dealer in Montgomery, had been doing research on Traylor for a number of years. Part of the Montgomery art scene for decades, these two women readily shared their research, experience and knowledge. happy to have someone pick up where they left off. They directed me to the Traylor plantation where, based on information provided by G. H. Traylor's descendant Mrs. Rosa Traylor who is still living there, I located two broken down cabins that had allegedly been slave quarters and, later, housing for share croppers. The cabin that Bill Traylor occupied had according to Mrs. Traylor, fallen apart long ago.

Chapter one is the result of gathering pieces of scattered biographical information on Traylor in order to provide a more complete picture of his life. The story of Traylor's past has been based on the memory of Charles Shannon, the white artist who became Traylor's friend and patron and preserved his large body of work. By using both primary and secondary sources -- from Traylor family oral history interviews to scholarship on African American history -- chapter one

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes Fabian and Ilona Szombati-Fabian, "Folk Art from an Anthropological Perspective," pp. 247-292 in Perspectives on American Folk Art, Ian M. G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank, eds. (NY: W. W. Norton /The Winterthur Museum, 1980), pp. 252-253.



establishes an account of Bill Traylor's past that is based on history rather than memory. Since there is only a small amount of archival material available, it is not possible to completely recreate Bill Traylor's personal history. Even with such material, however, as Raymond Williams observes in The Long Revolution, it is difficult to achieve a "felt sense of the ways in which the particular activities . . . combined into a way of thinking and living." Williams explains that an additional element is needed to achieve a sense of actual lived experience:

We can go some way in restoring the outlines of a particular organization of life . . . . Yet even these, as we recover them, are usually abstract. Possibly, however, we can gain the sense of a further common element, which is neither the character nor the pattern, but as it were the actual experience through which these were lived.<sup>2</sup>

In restoring the outline of Bill Traylor's past, his art provides the further common element that allows a glimpse of life as he experienced it.

Chapter two focuses on Traylor's art and artistic process. Opening with a brief outline of the scholarship and criticism on Traylor, the chapter's particular concern is enlarging our perspective of Traylor's work. Focusing on the spiritual nature of many of his paintings and drawings, this section explores the elements of Afro-Christianity in much of his work. As this discussion demonstrates, Bill Traylor's art provides vivid visual evidence of resilient African influence on American culture. The importance of Traylor and his work is profound

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Joseph J. Ellis in After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture (NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979), p. 39.

for, as author Alice Walker maintains, in learning, creating and life in general, "models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect . . . enrich and enlarge one's view of existence:"

What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one's glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity, a fearlessness of growth, of search, of looking, that enlarges the private and the public world.<sup>3</sup>

“‘Post-Humously Hot’: Bill Traylor’s Life and Art” attempts to enlarge our understanding of Bill Traylor by exploring the private world suggested in his art as well as its links to the public world it was created in.

Chapter three considers the part of the public world that has brought Bill Traylor to our attention. Recently declared "post-humously hot" in a popular magazine article on "outsider art," Bill Traylor's work is now valuable merchandise in a thriving art market.<sup>4</sup> Dealers and galleries devoted to this art now outnumber the artists themselves, and their prevalence reflects the proliferation of collectors at both the institutional and private level. The abundance of recent publications on self-taught art, including catalogues, coffee-table art books, periodicals and newsletters also demonstrate the dramatic growth of this market.

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<sup>3</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1983 [1967]), pp. 4, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Amanda Lovell, "Art & Soul," *Mirabella* (November 1993): 50.

Not surprisingly, many American museums have also begun to devote particular attention to these artists in recent years. Although twentieth-century American self-taught art has not been embraced by the entire museum community, a number of museums have had very (commercially) successful exhibits, most notably L. A. County Museum of Art's "Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art" (1992). Audience response and commercial interest has been so strong the first American museum devoted solely to self-taught art, the American Visionary Art Museum, will soon open in Baltimore, Maryland.

Charting the rise of Traylor's art from a non- to a hot-commodity, the final chapter discusses how the evolution of this market has determined Bill Traylor's artistic reputation. Since his art was revived and merchandised by Charles Shannon in the late 1970s, we have come to understand Traylor and his art from within the context of the market. The process of designating and consecrating Traylor's work follows the pattern of commodification outlined in Johannes Fabian and Ilona Szombati-Fabian's study of folk art demonstrating that "Under conditions that govern our relationship to art in the Western world, art appreciation is always also, and sometimes nothing but, art appraisal."<sup>5</sup> Chapter three discusses how critical discourse on self-taught artists and their work has been influenced by this relationship, illustrating the need to move beyond the confines of the market in order to grant self-taught art and artists the scope they demand.

"'Post-Humously Hot': Bill Traylor's Life and Art" is ultimately an exploration and celebration of Bill Traylor's place in and contribution to

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<sup>5</sup> Fabian and Szombati-Fabian, p. 254.

American culture. Like the scholarship Toni Morrison recognizes in her article "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," this work attempts to "[disentangle] received knowledge" by privileging the imagination of the artist:

Now that Afro-American artistic presence has been "discovered" actually to exist, now that serious scholarship has moved from silencing the witnesses and erasing their meaningful place in and contribution to American culture, it is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imaging ourselves . . . . We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact.

We are not, in fact, "other." We are choices.<sup>6</sup>

By choosing to examine the history, creativity and imagination of Bill Traylor we expand our understanding of his art and life. Like looking into a kaleidoscope, this work aims to inspire an array of views on the artist and the art. For in the process of further exploration, we can achieve a more comprehensive vision of the African American experience, enrich our perspective of the American self, and gain unique insight into the culture in which we all participate.

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<sup>6</sup> Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Michigan Quarterly Review vol. 28, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 208.

## I.

In her 1979 essay "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," Alice Walker challenged: "We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone."<sup>7</sup> The same year Walker's essay was published Bill Traylor's genius was made public in a one-man show at the R. H. Oosterom gallery in New York, precisely thirty years after his death. Traylor's art had not been thrown away, but rather tucked away in the attic of Charles Shannon, a young local white artist who befriended Traylor in the late 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Since then, as Shannon noted almost ten years later, "Traylor's work has carved out for itself a place in the story of American art." In constructing this story, critics have placed the art, not the artist, at center stage for, as one critic wrote, "Traylor's work lives its own life and like all good art, stands on its own."<sup>9</sup> So while canvas by canvas the art has been collected and coveted, the history of the artist has remained lost, its importance ignored.

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<sup>7</sup> Walker, p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> Shannon's relationship with Bill Traylor is discussed further at the end of this chapter as well as in chs. 2 and 3.

<sup>9</sup> Diane Finore, "Art by Bill Traylor," The Clarion (Spring-Summer 1983): 31, 48.

This is not to say, however, that the story of American art is without an account of Bill Traylor's life. The biographical information cited in articles, reviews and catalogues for decades has been based on Charles Shannon's story of the artist's life. Bruce Chambers, for example, in Art and Artists of the South, acknowledges Charles Shannon's centrality to his understanding of Traylor's life and art. He notes Shannon's "writings and conversations about his friend, Bill Traylor, provided this author with the necessary biographical material."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in a 1983 article in The Clarion, Diane Finore stated, "Certainly, Shannon is the only person today who can answer any questions about old Bill."<sup>11</sup> Even the most comprehensive publication on Traylor, Bill Traylor: His Art -- His Life, edited by Frank Maresca and Roger Ricco, relies solely on Shannon's interpretation of the past as the interview format of the section called "Remembering Bill Traylor" suggests. Similarly, in the short introduction to this section the editors state, "Shannon is responsible for the encouragement, collection, and preservation of Bill Traylor's remarkable body of work. He is also the primary source of information on the artist's life history, circumstances and artistic practices."<sup>12</sup> As these and many other articles on Traylor attest, our knowledge and understanding of Bill Traylor's past, as well as

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce W. Chambers ed., Art and Artists of the South: The Robert P. Coggins Collection (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1984), p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> Finore, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Maresca and Roger Ricco, eds., Bill Traylor: His Art -- His Life (NY: Knopf, 1991), p. 3.

our interpretation of his art has been based on Charles Shannon's memory.

Memory as a way of interpreting the past, however, is quite distinct from history. In her article "Mythos, Memory and History," Fath Davis Ruffin notes that "Each kind of narrative mode reflects a different take on past experience." Memory, she explains, is a "personally validated version of the past," a type of narrative interpretation based on "the individual or collective memories of people who have lived through a set of experiences." History, on the other hand, is a research-based version of the past which "emerges from the academic experience of . . . historians and other scholars."<sup>13</sup> Both means of interpretation are crucial to a contemporary understanding of the past, and our understanding of Traylor's past, therefore, can be enlarged by introducing different "takes."

This chapter, then, reflects efforts to collect and preserve the artist, "bone by bone," in order to present a history of Bill Traylor. Bone by bone aptly describes this process for what we uncover are pieces of the past which do not necessarily fit together or support each other to make a cohesive whole. Given the lack of information and archival material on Traylor, in fact, the task of reconstructing a complete skeleton of his personal history is virtually impossible. In order to recreate a basic outline of his life, therefore, general sources on the black experience in

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<sup>13</sup> Fath Davis Ruffin, "Mythos, Memory, and History," pp. 506-611 in Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture, Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine, eds. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), pp. 510-511.

America have been used to fill the gaps left by the dearth of specific information on Bill Traylor. While it creates a rather jagged composition, this variety of material works together to inform the historical version of Bill Traylor's past taking shape here.

Validity as well as distortion occur in all modes of interpretation, including history.<sup>14</sup> Even the written record is not sacred, as the search for Bill Traylor's date of birth has proved. While all records point to the Traylor Plantation in Lowndes County, Alabama, as Bill Traylor's place of birth, his birth date has no fixed point of reference. A 1949 baptismal record cites his year of birth as 1855, yet according to Shannon, Bill Traylor claimed to be born in 1854.<sup>15</sup> Although the 1880 census agrees with this date, there are a number of others that do not: the 1870 Lowndes County census establishes his year of birth as 1853; the 1900 census records Traylor's birth date as April 1856; the 1920 Montgomery County census notes his year of birth as 1860.<sup>16</sup> The 1860 pre-emancipation census information on the Traylor plantation confuses the issue even further. Since during the antebellum period enslaved blacks were not listed by name (census records show only age, gender and color), we can only make a reasonably informed guess as to which record

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 510.

<sup>15</sup> For Traylor's reference to his age according to Charles Shannon, see Maresca and Ricco, p. 5. Baptismal record is from the St. Jude Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He had been baptized into the Catholic church in January 1944 by Rev. Jacobe. This church was part of the St. Jude Charity Hospital (also referred to as the Oak Street Hospital) where Traylor stayed while he was ill and where he died in October 1949.

<sup>16</sup> The 1890 census was destroyed and information from that census year is unavailable.



might refer to Bill Traylor, and none of these corroborate a date from the other records.<sup>17</sup> What we are left with, then, is a range of possibilities rather than a fixed date telling when Traylor's life began.

The lack of knowledge about the origins of self and the inability to authenticate one's existence in time present marked the beginning of life in slavery. As Henry Louis Gates acknowledges in Figures in Black, there is an intricate relationship between our understanding of time and our sense of self:

A sense of self as we have defined it in the West since the Enlightenment turns in part upon written records. . . . Our idea of the self . . . is inextricably interwoven with our ideas of time as it is with the uses of language. In antebellum America, it was the deprivation of time in the life of slave that first signaled his or her status as a piece of property.<sup>18</sup>

Countless slave narratives and oral histories attest to the fact that the means to accurately establish and record origins were not available to most men and women born into slavery. In The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, perhaps the most well-known slave narrative, Frederick Douglass begins:

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<sup>17</sup> Of the thirteen adults and five children of color listed on the Traylor plantation in the 1860 census there are two possible ages and birth years for Bill Traylor, one record of a male, age 8, born in 1852, and another for a male, age 10, born 1850.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial" Self (NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.100.

I was born in Tuckahoe, . . . in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. . . . I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time.

The deprivation of knowledge was a method of reinforcing slave status. Frederick Douglass explains, "By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant."<sup>19</sup> In this environment, memory was most often the only record of one's origins.

Particularly in the interpretation of slavery's past, memory and history are inextricably linked. "Slavery's time," writes Gates, "was delineated by memory and memory alone. One's sense of one's existence, therefore, depended upon memory. It was memory above all else that gave shape to being itself." Even after emancipation, freed blacks were "slaves . . . to his or her own power of recall,"<sup>20</sup> for even the written record, with its roots in slavery, could not necessarily reveal the origins of self.

Yet while much of the past remains inconclusive, the written record has provided greater depth and breadth to Bill Traylor's history.

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<sup>19</sup> Frederick Douglass, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An African Slave pp. 243-33 in The Classic Slave Narratives, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. (NY: Mentor/Penguin, 1987), p. 255.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 100-101.

State, county, institutional records, as well as family archives, link his past to the history and development of the United States. For although African Americans have a unique history within this country, as Fath Davis Ruffin and other scholars have concluded, "their history is connected at the root with virtually all aspects of the American experience."<sup>21</sup>

The late eighteenth century brought changes that dramatically affected the lives of black and white Americans in the decades that followed. Having established their country's independence and created a government based on the consent of "the people" (defined as white land-holding males), Americans were charged with the energy of building their republic. While one notion of "republicanism" held that virtuous individuals should work and be willing to sacrifice for the common good of the republic, another version "emphasized individuals' pursuit of rational self-interest." Those who belonged to the latter school of thought believed the new nation and its economy could only benefit from aggressive development: "When republican men sought to improve their own economic and social circumstances, the entire nation would benefit."<sup>22</sup>

Self-improvement and economic gain were tied to the land, especially in the plantation economy of the South. While the industrial revolution and influences of an expanding market economy created a

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<sup>21</sup> Davis, p. 507.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Beth Norton, David M. Katzman, Paul D. Excott, Howard P. Chudacoff, Thomas G. Paterson, and William M. Tuttle, Jr., eds., A People and A Nation: A History of the United States (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1986), p. 156.

diversified northern economy, the southern economy relied solely on commercial agriculture from its settlement through the antebellum period. The economic patterns of the South were, of course, deeply affected by other markets. In the wake of England's burgeoning textile industry and the invention of Eli Whitney's cotton gin, for example, the agricultural economy of the South spread westward and gained momentum. "Cotton grew so swiftly," wrote W. E. B. Du Bois in Black Reconstruction in America,

. . . that the 9,000 bales of cotton which the new nation scarcely noticed in 1791 became 79,000 in 1800; and with this increase, walked economic revolution in a dozen different lines. The cotton crop reached one-half million bales in 1822, a million bales in 1831, two million in 1840, three million in 1852, and in the year of secession, stood at the then enormous total of five million bales.<sup>23</sup>

By the early 1800s, cotton was the primary southern crop, and its territory began spreading from the seaboard states westward.

The dramatic growth in Alabama's population from 1830 to 1860 clearly demonstrates the enormous impact the cotton economy had on the state (see fig. 1). Along with many other ambitious planters, George Hartwell Traylor of South Carolina emigrated to Alabama in 1826 at the age of 25. His first land grant is recorded in January 1828, and by 1833, the beginning of the cotton boom in Alabama, he owned 388 acres of land in Lowndes County near Benton, forty miles outside of Montgomery.

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<sup>23</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880 (NY: Atheneum, 1992 [1935]), p. 4.

**FIGURE 1: CENSUS FIGURES FROM 1820-1860<sup>24</sup>**

Census <u>Year</u>	Total White <u>Population</u>	Total Enslaved <u>Black Population*</u>
1820	85,451	41,879
1830	190,406	117,549
1840	335,185	233,532
1850	426,514	342,844
1860	526,271	435,080

\* Note: This figure does not include free blacks who comprised a small percent (between .66 and 1.35 percent) of the total black population during the antebellum period.

Lowndes County and the surrounding counties were in the heart of the "black belt." This region was named partly for its rich soil and partly for its dense black population, for with the white planters came enslaved

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<sup>24</sup> Figures come from Alabama census records (U.S. Decennial Census Publications) as well as from James Benson Sellers, Slavery in Alabama (Birmingham, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1950), pp. 40-41, 179.

blacks. By the mid-nineteenth century, Alabama's black belt held more than 70 percent of the state's slave population.<sup>25</sup>

The ever-increasing slave population shown above makes obvious the utter dependence of the cotton economy on the slave economy. In his book Slavery in Alabama, James Benson Sellers remarked that, "slavery must have seemed to the pioneer of Alabama as much a necessity as the eating of bread and the drinking of water. The pioneers . . . had to hack out their homes and farms from a wilderness. . . . Slave labor was the quickest, cheapest, and sometimes only help available."<sup>26</sup> The nonmechanized plantation economy of the South was established and expanded through the exploitation of the enslaved.

White settlers' drive to improve their condition had, of course, disastrous consequences for enslaved African Americans. With western expansion and the growth of the southern agricultural economy came the institutionalization of slavery which caused the rupture of the African American family unit. Families that had been established in the eastern seaboard states for generations were split up and brought or sold "down river." In her journal from 1838-1839, Fanny Kemble recorded the horror she felt as she witnessed one of her new husband's slaves beg his master not to give him to another planter who was moving to Alabama. With "an absolute cry of despair," Kemble wrote, "almost in a state of frenzy," the black man cried that he would rather kill himself

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<sup>25</sup> Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South, compiled by workers of the Writer's Program of the Work Projects Administration in the state of Alabama (NY: Richard H. Smith for the Alabama State Planning Commission, 1941), p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Sellers, p. 17.

than leave the Georgia plantation that had long been home to his parents as well as his own wife and children.<sup>27</sup> Fanny Kemble convinced her husband not to separate the family. Hundreds of thousands of other slaves, however, were forced to move west, some with but most without their families. Records have determined that the majority of white migrants were "younger sons of eastern slaveholders, whose inheritance included only a portion of the family's slaves, or small farmers who owned just one or two blacks."<sup>28</sup>

By the 1820s, the majority of slaves in America were second- or third-generation African Americans. Since the foreign slave trade was banned in the Mississippi Territory in 1798, and banned outright in 1808, the number of first generation Africans in Alabama was small by comparison. As late as 1859, however, there is evidence of "fresh Africans" being imported into slave states by illegal traffickers.<sup>29</sup> Approximately 400 survivors of the slave ship "Wanderer," owned by Charles Lamar from Georgia, for example, were dispersed throughout various southern states. Anthropologist Charles Montgomery interviewed and photographed seven of these survivors in 1895. Living in Georgia and South Carolina, those interviewed still used their African names and readily shared stories of their native Africa, discussing the

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<sup>27</sup> Frances Anne Kemble, Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839 (1863) as quoted in Norton, p. 298.

<sup>28</sup> Sellers, p. 201.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

language and their memories of the people and their customs.<sup>30</sup> Another ship, "Clotide," arrived in Mobile Bay in 1859 with 116 Africans. Emma Langdon Roche interviewed nine survivors living near Mobile, Alabama in 1913. Fifty-four years after their arrival, these survivors also used their African names, addressed each other in their native "Takar" language, and retained many of their African customs.<sup>31</sup> Although small in number in comparison to second- and third-generation African Americans, these survivors represented the persistence of African language and culture in the United States during and after slavery.

Although the foreign trade did exist throughout the history of slavery in the United States, interstate trade was the main source of the phenomenal rise of the slave population in most states, including Alabama. Census figures from 1850 and 1860 show South Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia as the place of origin for the majority of African Americans brought into Alabama as slaves. Further details on their origins and migration, however, remain unknown. James Sellers commented:

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<sup>30</sup> See Charles J. Montgomery, "Survivors from the Cargo of the Negro Slave Yacht "Wanderer,'" American Anthropologist 10 (1908): 611-623; Tom Henderson Wells, The Slave Ship "Wanderer" (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1967); John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (NY: Oxford University Press, 1979 [1972]), pp. 27-29; Emma Langdon Roche, Historic Sketches of the South (NY: The Knickerbocker Press, 1914), pp. 1265-128; Voices of Triumph: Perseverance (VA: Time Life Books, 1992), p. 72.

<sup>31</sup> Blassingame, pp 27-29; Wells, pp. 86-87; Wells refers to this ship as the "Clotilda," see p. 86.



No one knows how many of the slaves were born in Alabama, how many were imported by masters, how many were brought in by traders. No one knows exactly where they came from. But one does know, with out question, that, once in Alabama, most of them stayed there.<sup>32</sup>

The story of the white Traylor family's emigration is much easier to trace than the arrival of black Traylor family in Alabama. There are no records detailing the origins of George Hartwell Traylor's slaves. It is unclear whether he brought slaves with him from South Carolina or whether they were purchased once he was established in Alabama. George Hartwell Traylor's descendants, however, vaguely remember the origins of Bill Traylor's parents. "Some people believe," writes Rosa Lyon Traylor, "his mother was Sally from [Virginia] and his father was William from Georgia."<sup>33</sup> Baptismal and census records confirm this information. Bill Traylor's 1944 baptismal record from St. Jude's Catholic Church cites Bill Traylor from Georgia and Sally Traylor from Virginia as his parents. Furthermore, the 1870 census records Bill Traylor, age 17, as head of household living with Sally Traylor, age 50, and Emet Traylor, age 15, and the 1860 census records of the Traylor plantation list a black female, age 40, which could be Sally Traylor.<sup>34</sup> There is no way to trace

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<sup>32</sup> Sellers, p. 172.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Mrs. Rosa Lyon Traylor (wife of George Hartwell Traylor's grandson) to Mrs. Antoinette Beeks (great, great-granddaughter of Bill Traylor) dated July 8, 1992.

<sup>34</sup> William Traylor, Sr.'s year of birth is unknown so it is not possible to locate him in the list of slaves on the Traylor plantation in 1860. Bill and Emet Traylor, most likely Bill

the history of the families his parents may have left behind, but it is clear that by the 1860 census, Bill Traylor's family had at least two generations established on the George Hartwell Traylor plantation.

The 1860 census records show the Traylor plantation at its peak. With only eighteen slaves, the plantation was relatively small. The white Traylor family recalls the plantation as having all the typical buildings of a small, self-sufficient plantation: a small estate for the planter's family and several slave cabins, as well as a smoke house, dairy, cotton gin and barns.<sup>35</sup> The family-size farm was predominant in Alabama through the 1860s, however, as was the case throughout the antebellum South. The small percent of wealthy Alabama planters, however, held the majority of economic and political power. By 1860, the larger planters, approximately one-third of one percent of the total white population, held one-third of the privately-held land, one-third of the declared wealth of the state and owned one-third of the slaves. And, as Sellers observes, "The patterns and practices associated with the institution of slavery in their state were largely of their making."<sup>36</sup>

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Traylor's brother, would have to be the 10 (born 1850) and 8 (born 1852) year olds in the 1860 census which, as noted earlier in this chapter, do not match the birth dates cited in the 1870 census. A listing for Sally Traylor, age 60, appears separately from Bill Traylor, age 22 (living alone), in the 1880 census.

<sup>35</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 5; Letter from Mrs. Traylor to Mrs. Beeks; Rosa Traylor Oral History Interview with Marcia Weber, audiotape (1992), courtesy of Miriam Fowler, Alabama State Council on the Arts, Montgomery, AL; Sellers, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Sellers, pp. 40, 42-43.

Little is known of Bill Traylor's experience during slavery. Born in the 1850s, he spent somewhere between nine and fifteen years on the plantation prior to emancipation. Unlike the experience of slave children on many of the larger plantations, Traylor was probably in daily contact with the white Traylor family as well as his own family. In 1860 George Hartwell Traylor owned thirteen adult slaves: eight female slaves, between the age of 18 and 45, and five male slaves, between 19 and 40 years of age according to the state census. The work performed by these slaves on the Traylor plantation probably varied according to a number of factors including age, ability, gender and season. While many studies have shown that slaves' work duties were not necessarily restricted by gender or condition (e.g., pregnancy), the majority of house slaves, for example, cooks, house maids and nursemaids ("mammies"), were usually women. Since it was small, the men and women of the Traylor plantation most likely shared the labor of the fields, farm and household. Slave children, of which there were five between the ages of four months and ten years old on the Traylor plantation in 1860, were often assigned small duties but generally were left to play on their own or under the supervision of an older slave woman or child. By the end of slavery Bill Traylor was most likely working in some capacity on the plantation since most slave children entered the work force as half hands in early adolescence (age 10 to 14). As Eugene Genovese writes in Roll, Jordan, Roll, "Plantation records and slave narratives [testify] that no slave did any work before the age of ten; that most did not work until the

age of twelve; and that they did light field work for the first years thereafter."<sup>37</sup>

The fact that Bill Traylor stayed on the plantation after emancipation and remained there well into his eighties might suggest that he had strong ties with both the black and white Traylor family. Many freed persons chose to remain on the plantation after the Civil War, and family and community seemed to be major factors in their decision. One ex-slave from Mississippi recalled the black community on the plantation celebrating their freedom, but claimed, "It didn' feel no diffrent; we all loved our marster an' misus an' stayed on wid 'em jes' lak nothin' had happened." A Tennessee woman, Rosaline Rogers, age 38 at the time of emancipation, and the mother of fourteen children, elected to stay on to keep her family together: "I was given my choice of staying on the same plantation, working on shares, or taking my family away, letting them out for their food and clothes. I decided to stay on that way; I could have my children with me."<sup>38</sup>

Yet emancipation caused a wide variety of reactions among slaves. Many chose to leave behind the oppressive place where they had lived as slaves. Patience, a freedwoman from South Carolina, explained she felt she had to leave in order to feel truly free: "I must go, if I stay here I'll

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<sup>37</sup> Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family From Slavery to Present (NY: Basic Books, 1985), p. 32; Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (NY: Pantheon, 1974 [1972]), p. 502.

<sup>38</sup> Cited by Jones, p. 47 from Philip D. Morgan, "Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowercountry Blacks, 1700 to 1880," William and Mary Quarterly 39 (October 1982): 563-399.

never know I'm free."<sup>39</sup> Some slaves could not believe freedom had finally come and left the plantation temporarily in order to test their liberty. Many freed persons, however, whether by choice or by necessity, returned to plantations.

Along with the ties of community, limited options influenced the freed persons decision. As one Alabama freed woman explained, "didn' many of us go, 'cause we din' know where to of went."<sup>40</sup> Remaining with the master was one of the few ways Bill Traylor and the hundreds of thousands of other freed persons in the South could support themselves. In many regions, including Lowndes County, Alabama, large planters banded together to prevent black laborers from obtaining their own land or going to work for other large planters in the area.<sup>41</sup> In all cases, blacks were fighting against the sentiment that, as one Alabama resident put it, "slavery [would] be regvanized in some shape or other." This feeling, expressed in a 1866 Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction, was supported by the testimony of Judge Humphrey of Alabama who noted: "There is really no difference, in my opinion, whether we hold them as absolute slaves or obtain their labor by some other method. Of course, we prefer the old method. But that question is

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<sup>39</sup> Cited by Jones, p. 51 from Orville Vernon Burton, "Ungrateful Servants? Edgefield's Black Reconstruction: Part I of the Total History of Edgefield County, South Carolina" (unpublished PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 1975), p. 136.

<sup>40</sup> Leon F. Litwack, Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery (NY: Knopf, 1979), p. 212.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 322-323.

not now before us!"<sup>42</sup> And while the Freedman's Bureau advised freed persons to make labor contracts to insure their new rights, the black laborer was still largely at the mercy of the landholding whites. "Employers," as Jacqueline Jones writes, "retained unlimited authority in using various forms of punishment and felt free to disregard the agreements at first sign of recalcitrance on the part of their laborers."<sup>43</sup>

After the Civil War, the federal government's reconstruction program did little in terms of giving freed persons the opportunity to break the dependency on the white planter. The Bureau's contract system is only one example of the government's ineffective management of the slave's transition to full citizen. Ultimately, the "failure of the federal government to institute a comprehensive land confiscation and redistribution program," as Jacqueline Jones has observed, "combined with southern whites' systematic refusal to sell property or extend credit to the former slaves, meant that the majority of blacks would remain economically dependent upon the group of people (if not the individuals) whom they had served as slaves. . . . Most freed people remained concentrated in the Cotton Belt, in the vicinity of their enslavement . . . ."<sup>44</sup> In the wake of the hostility and disorder following the Civil War, and the federal government's confusion over how to manage reconstruction, Southern legislators did all they could to restrict the status of blacks.

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<sup>42</sup> As cited by Du Bois in Black Reconstruction, p. 140.

<sup>43</sup> Jones, p. 55.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

W. E. B. Du Bois' discussion of what could have been, creatively suggests the attitudes and legislation that combined to restrict the rights of black citizens. In his essay, "Looking Backward" in Black Reconstruction in America, Du Bois constructs a fictional statement by a small, fictional group of "determined and clearthinking [southern] men" who, in 1863, acknowledged,

The Negro is free and to make his freedom real, he must have land and education. He must be guided in his work and development but guided toward freedom and the right to vote. Such complete freedom and the bestowal of suffrage must be a matter of some years, but at present we do not wish to take advantage of this and retain political power based on the non-voting parts of our population. . . . And in anticipation of this development, we propose to pass a reasonable code of laws recognizing the new status of the Negro.<sup>45</sup>

Instead of "a reasonable code of laws recognizing the new status of the Negro," the South passed the Black Codes. This legislative effort made blacks free in name only. The codes, Du Bois commented, "were deliberately designed to take advantage of every misfortune of the Negro:"

The Negro's access to the land was hindered and limited; his right to work was curtailed; his right of self-defense was taken away, when his right to bear arms was stopped; and his employment was virtually reduced to

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<sup>45</sup> Du Bois, Black Reconstruction, pp. 165-166

contract labor with penal servitude as a punishment for leaving his job.<sup>46</sup>

Mississippi, for example, declared that all blacks over the age of 18 found without a job after "the second Monday in January 1866" would be fined or jailed. Alabama gave the former master the first option in the apprenticing of a child. Every region, state, and township established its own specific codes whose function was to exercise control over the labor, lives, and families of black Americans.<sup>47</sup>

Working on land, usually borrowed but occasionally their own, was one of the few ways blacks could work independently and retain at least some control over their own labor and their family. In his decision to remain on the Traylor plantation, Bill Traylor joined a great number of black laborers who entered the southern workforce as sharecroppers. His fondness for working the land is suggested by Shannon's anecdote concerning one of Traylor's drawings: "One fine spring day I went by and [Traylor] was drawing a man plowing. He said, "I wanted to be plowing so bad today, I draw'd me a man plowing.""<sup>48</sup> Sharecroppers were usually given a portion of land, a house, tools, seed and food which they would pay for with a portion of their crop.

While developed as a compromise between white landowners who refused to give up their land and black laborers who wanted to farm it, the sharecropping system proved disastrous. With discrimination toward blacks in the local market, and the over-dependence on cotton in

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.

<sup>48</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 29.



the foreign export market, race relations as well as the economy of the South came to suffer greatly. Still, with the extremely limited opportunities open to the black worker, family sharecropping seemed to be one of the more satisfying options. As one observer noted in 1866: "Those appear most thriving and happy who are at work for themselves."<sup>49</sup>

Bill Traylor seemed to have worked both for himself as well as the white Traylor. He was, for instance, listed as a farm laborer on their land in the 1880 census, and as the flagman on the 1888 surveying team hired to map the land handed down to George Hartwell Traylor's son, Marion Hartwell Traylor (born 1862). According to Mrs. Rosa Traylor, Marion Hartwell Traylor's daughter-in-law who has lived on the land since her marriage to John Bryant Traylor in 1935, Traylor lived and worked on the land before she arrived. While she did not know or remember hearing about him or his family, she wrote to Bill Traylor's great granddaughter that he "probably ran the grist mill, milked cows and raised cotton."<sup>50</sup>

Bill Traylor raised most of his own family on the Traylor plantation. A marriage license from Lowndes County shows Traylor married Laurissa Dunklin, a 19 year old black woman from the nearby Dunklin plantation, August 3, 1891. While some of Bill Traylor's descendants claim that he had two wives, census records mention only

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<sup>49</sup> As quoted by Jones, p. 46, from John Townsend Trowbridge, The South: A Tour of Its Battlefields and Ruined Cities. A Journey Through the Desolated States, and Talks with the People (Hartford, CT: L. Stebbins, 1866), p. 232.

<sup>50</sup> Letter from Mrs. Traylor to Mrs. Beeks.

one marriage. The 1900 census lists Lorisa as his wife of nine years;<sup>51</sup> however, the birth years of the older children suggest that some of the nine children listed may not have been from this marriage: Pauline, born 1884; George, born 1885; Sallie, born August 1887; Nutie, born October 1887; Rubin, born 1892; Easter, born 1893; Erline, born 1895; Lillie, born 1896; and Child, born 1898. While it is possible that some of the older children were born to them before they were married or that they were Bill Traylor's children from another relationship, the proximity of birth dates for Sallie and Nutie suggests that they may have been adopted.<sup>52</sup>

There were other Traylor's in Lowndes County, some of whom may have been relatives, but the children Bill Traylor and his wife raised could have been either parentless kin or nonkin.<sup>53</sup> Bill Traylor allegedly

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<sup>51</sup> The spelling of Traylor's wife's name differs from record to record and includes variations on the following: Lorisa, Laurissa and Laura.

<sup>52</sup> The duration of this relationship would have been some time between 1881 (since the 1880 census shows him living alone) and 1891. But since the 1890 census records were destroyed, Bill Traylor's living arrangements and marital status cannot be verified at that time.

<sup>53</sup> The surveying record lists a black man named Richard Traylor as one of the two chain bearers. The 1900 Lowndes County census listed him as Dick Traylor, born in 1848, married to Emma, born 1875, with three children. This census also lists a Tom Traylor, born 1862, married to Martha, born 1870, with no children. Furthermore, as noted earlier, the 1870 census lists an Emet Traylor living with Bill Traylor and his mother.

told Shannon that he had "raised twenty-odd children."<sup>54</sup> Cited and frequently misconstrued in countless articles over the past two decades, this statement can perhaps be explained by discussing the reality of the thousands of orphaned children in the South after the Civil War.

After emancipation, many freed persons took orphans or other parentless children into their own families after slavery. Herbert G. Gutman in The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom notes that while relief organizations and black charitable institutions did meet the needs of some of this population, the attention of individuals and families was the most important factor in the care of these children. The flood of five or ten thousand orphans expected at the war's end by the Department of the Gulf's Bureau of Free Labor never came. African Americans, Conway explained, took in thousands of orphaned kin and nonkin: "I find the colored people themselves taking into their families the orphaned children of their former friends and neighbors thus saving us the necessity of bearing large expenses in caring for them."<sup>55</sup> Another relief official marveled at the generosity of the many blacks who adopted these children: "It is remarkable to witness how much these poor people do for orphan children. We often find them with one, two and three

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<sup>54</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 8. Note that many of articles in the bibliography on p. 185 of this book mention that Traylor either "had fathered" or "raised" more than twenty children. One article (Finore, p. 44) states that he "elected to stay on [after emancipation], marrying and fathering between 20 and 25 children."

<sup>55</sup> As quoted by Herbert G. Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925 (NY: Vintage Books, 1977 [1976]), p. 228, from Thomas Conway, The Freedmen of Louisiana, Final Report of the Bureau of Free Labor (1865), pp. 14-15.

helpless children, not their own, but a deceased brother's, sister's, daughter's, son's, cousin's, and not unfrequently a deceased friend's child."<sup>56</sup> This pattern continued well after the war and into the twentieth century as the search for employment or death left many children parentless and in the care of friends or relatives.

According to Charles Shannon, it was in the late 1930s, only after all his children moved away and the white Traylor he knew died, that Bill Traylor moved into Montgomery. Shannon recalls: "Explaining why he finally left the plantation, he told me, 'My white folks had died and my children scattered' so he came into town."<sup>57</sup> Marion Traylor who, as Rosa Traylor noted in the margins of his genealogy, "sort of grew up" with Bill, died in 1904. His wife, however, survived him by a number of years and remained on the plantation until her death in March 1943.<sup>58</sup> It was sometime between these two deaths that Bill Traylor left their land.

While the lack of community seems certainly to have been a factor in his decision to leave the plantation, it was likely that the need to support himself also motivated his move to Montgomery. With the depreciating value of land and cotton, as well as other crops, poverty was the reality for the majority of farmers and rural people. Between 1910 and 1930 an estimated two million blacks, eager to make lives for

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<sup>56</sup> As quoted by Gutman, p. 228 from Yorktown Superintendent to the editor, Friends' Review, XX (1867), p. 380.

<sup>57</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 8.

<sup>58</sup> Shannon states that Mrs. Marion Hartwell Traylor died in 1934 but her death actually occurred in 1943.

themselves and escape the brutality of rural southern racism, migrated to the city. Employment opportunities in urban areas during World War I provided much of the incentive for this mass migration in the 1910s. By the 1920s, production and consumption were at an all-time high, and America's future looked bright. Yet the glare of the consumerism dominating American culture left the nation blind to rising debt and warnings of a failing economy which foreshadowed the Great Depression. Thousands of people moved to urban areas seeking employment and an aging Bill Traylor moved with them.

Although it is not clear exactly when Traylor moved into the city, 1920 census records place him in Montgomery living with his wife and three sons, Mack, age 18, John Henry, age 13, and Plank, age 10. When this move occurred and whether it was permanent is unknown for the only other record that has been located is a 1936 health department record which shows Bill Traylor receiving aid from the Old Age Assistance Program, and living at 111 Monroe Street (the Ross Clayton Funeral Parlor according to the City Directory) in Montgomery. Information from his grandchildren places Traylor coming into Montgomery as early as 1911, when his youngest son Willie was born in the city. Yet it is not until 1933 -- the same year Franklin Delano Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration and Public Works Administration were initiated -- that his granddaughter, Mrs. Margarete E. Traylor Staffney, recalls visiting him while he was "living on the streets of Montgomery." Mrs. Staffney, around the age of nine or ten at the time, remembers him living first in the back of the Peking Pool Hall next to the Peking Theater on Monroe Street. Sometime later, Bill

Traylor moved into the back of the Ross Clayton Funeral Parlor on that same street. By the time of his next move to a little white shanty on Bell Street, he had a government relief job fixing shoes.<sup>59</sup> This job was probably one of the many public works programs which, through the president's 1935 Emergency Relief and Appropriation Act, found work for jobless individuals.

One anecdote Mrs. Staffney tells is how Bill Traylor fixed a pair of shoes for her while working his "relief" job. She also remembers how her grandfather's artwork lined the railings of the walkway up to the shanty he lived in on Bell Street in Montgomery. In an interview at the 1992 Traylor family reunion Mrs. Staffney recalled how people walking by, both black and white, would admire them. She noted "any one they want, they would get. Some people give 'em a dime, some give 'em a quarter, some would give 'em fifteen cent and some wouldn't give em nothin." It seemed, a relative near her mused, as if he wasn't bothered either way. He just liked to make them and hang them, using a little bit of string pushed through holes in the top of whatever piece of cardboard he had found to create on. Mrs. Staffney continued, "I believe he didn't know the way of money. He didn't know what money was because he

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<sup>59</sup> Charles Shannon's memories, on pp. 3, 4, and 8, have Bill Traylor's living arrangements recorded quite differently from what the family remembers. In this section I am relying on Bill Traylor's family records and memories rather than Charles Shannon's. Information from interview by Miriam Traylor with granddaughters, Mrs. Myrtha L. Delks and Mrs. Margarete E. Traylor Staffney, and other descendants of Bill Traylor at the Traylor Family Reunion, audiotape courtesy of Alabama State Council on the Arts (August 1992).

was born a slave and he stayed on that man's plantation until the last one was dead."<sup>60</sup>

Bill Traylor relied at times on the support of the government but apparently benefited from the kindness of family, friends and acquaintances after age, rheumatism and the economy left him with little means to support himself in the late 1930s through the 1940s. During this period a recession hit and by the 1940s federal relief programs were cut drastically. Relief officials in Montgomery denied Bill Traylor assistance once they found that his daughter Sarah Howard lived in the area on Bragg Street, and he was forced to rely on her, on and off, during this time. He also went to stay with another daughter in Detroit during World War II but was not happy there and returned to Montgomery. He told one granddaughter that he "would rather be in Montgomery with nothing to eat than in Detroit."<sup>61</sup> His granddaughters, however, remember him being quite unhappy living at Aunt Sarah's, noting that she was not very warm and quite "feisty." Remarking on why the family did not save any of their grandfather's work Mrs. Staffney commented, "Aunt Sarah was so feisty that she probably threw them all away."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Traylor Family Reunion audiotape.

<sup>61</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 22. Note that Traylor also had relatives in Detroit, New York, Philadelphia and Washington. According to the testimony of his granddaughters, Mrs. Staffney and Mrs. Delks, as well as a letter from 1946 to Shannon from Traylor's daughter in Detroit, quoted on Maresca and Ricco, p. 22, Bill Traylor was not happy away from Montgomery although his children and relatives did try to get him to stay with one of them so he would be taken care of.

<sup>62</sup> Traylor Family Reunion audiotape.

Used to being independent, Bill Traylor it seems was happiest sitting behind a table on Monroe Street creating his own unique images.

It was in Montgomery in the 1940s Bill Traylor that did most of his creating. With time on his hands, at around the age of eighty-five, Bill Traylor began drawing and painting on a daily basis. His work suggests an incredibly active and creative mind, full of stories, memories and wisdom. Bill Traylor most likely turned to art when loneliness and a lack of purpose pervade a his life. One of his granddaughters remembers that he was often sad. "He used to cry all the time," she explained in an interview. During her visits with him at Aunt Sarah's in the early 1940s Mrs. Staffney recalls, "If he was talking to you his mind wasn't with you. His mind was always long gone."<sup>63</sup>

Many self-taught artists who begin to create late in life, as curator Roger Manley has written, "have gone through a period during which they have had to question their sense of self-worth as human beings, and making their art has helped them to rediscover that feeling." In his research, Manley found that approximately 180 of the 200 rural artists he interviewed "reported feeling a sense of loss and depression immediately before beginning their creative work." Most of these artists, like Bill Traylor, had prolific periods of creativity. The few individuals that locate their sense of purpose in their art, as Manley states, "have a kind of enormous productivity that would be impossible to sustain without the commitment that comes from having a real need to fulfill."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Roger Manley, "Separating the Folk from their Art," New Art Examiner (September 1991): 27.



Although no one is certain when he began to draw, critics for decades have cited Shannon's "discovery" of Bill Traylor in the spring of 1939 as the beginning of Traylor's artistic career. Charles Shannon recalls seeing Bill Traylor for the first time in the heart of what he called Montgomery's "black territory." Traylor was somewhere between 83 and 89 years old and Shannon was 24. Shannon recalls, "He had a white beard and was bent over. It looked like he might be drawing. When I got close to him I could see that he had a little straight-edge stick and was ruling lines with the stub of a pencil on a small piece of cardboard."<sup>65</sup> Charles Shannon and other members of the New South School and Gallery began visiting him regularly after that point, and became a source of support for Traylor's art.

The New South School and Gallery in Montgomery, Alabama was founded in March 1939 by a group of young artists and idealists who were deeply interested in modern art. Along with providing a place for them to exhibit and promote their own work, this group founded the New South to help others who were less fortunate. New South members "felt the need to go beyond the mainstream of art in Alabama and use their talents to make a statement about the poor and underprivileged." It was, as one member explained, "a youthful cause . . . not only . . . because all the intellectuals in New York were into this thing," but because as an

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<sup>65</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 3.

artist "You would practically not belong to your society if you weren't involved."<sup>66</sup>

Intellectuals in New York and their counterparts elsewhere were keenly interested in the connections between American "primitive" or "folk" art and modern art. The concept of folk art, as Kenneth Ames explained in a 1989 symposium, "was given its most influential shape by a coalition of artistic and cultural activists [during the 1920s and 1930s]. They adopted the idea of folk art both to legitimize modern art in America and to counteract conditions associated with modernization, immigration, and the Great Depression that threatened to overturn social order."<sup>67</sup>

Holger Cahill, one the early promoters of folk art, set the tone for its inclusion in the art world in the catalogue for the 1932 Museum of Modern Art landmark exhibition, "American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900." In this catalogue Cahill explained, "Folk art may be called primitive in the sense that it is the simple, unaffected and childlike expression of men and women who had little or no school training in art, and who did not even know that they were producing art." Moreover, Cahill asserted, "Folk art cannot be valued as highly as the work of our greatest painters and sculptors, but it

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<sup>66</sup> Virginia Van der Veer Hamilton and Miriam Fowler, eds., New South, New Deal and Beyond: An Exhibition of New Deal Era Art, 1933-1943 (Montgomery, AL: The Alabama State Council on the Arts, 1990), p. 10.

<sup>67</sup> Kenneth Ames, in "Folk, or Art? A Symposium," The Magazine Antiques 135 (January 1989): 277.

is certainly entitled to a place in the history of American art."<sup>68</sup> Cahill's concept of folk art, influenced by the aesthetics of fine art, was embraced by the majority folk art enthusiasts.

Charles Shannon and the New South wanted to establish a place where folk art could thrive in the South, and Bill Traylor became one of their "native talents." The formal articles of the organization, drafted by seven charter members in March 1939 pledged to "broaden the cultural life of Southerners of all classes; encourage native talent toward more and higher production; develop a wider market in the South for arts and crafts; provide a center, open at all times, for those interested in the arts."<sup>69</sup> As one of their adopted artists, members visited Traylor and made sure he was well and had enough supplies to continue working. The group also organized a one-man exhibition of his work in early 1940. In the exhibition catalogue the members lauded Traylor's art as both primitive and folk. The roots of his creativity, they explained, "lie deep within the great African tradition" yet his expressions are also part of the larger context of African American folk culture: "Bill Traylor's works are completely uninfluenced by our Western culture. Strictly in the folk

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<sup>68</sup> Holger Cahill, "American Folk Art" in American Folk Art: Art of the Common Man in American, 1750-1900 (NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1932) as quoted by Gene Metcalf in "Black Folk Art and the Politics of Art," pp. 160-193 in Art, Ideology, and Politics, Judith H. Balfe and Margaret Jane Wyszomirski, eds. (NY: Praeger, 1985), pp. 179-181.

<sup>69</sup> Charter members include Jean and George Lewis, Charles Shannon, Blanche Blazer (Shannon Angell), Mattie Mae Knight, Paul Sanderson and Emily Chilton. Articles of the New South School and Gallery as cited by Hamilton and Fowler, p. 7.

idiom . . . they are as unselfconscious and spontaneous as Negro spirituals."<sup>70</sup>

While the group folded soon after Traylor's New South show, members of the group remained involved with him long after it dissolved and had an enormous impact on Bill Traylor's artistic career. Art supplies were the primary benefit of the member's interest in Bill Traylor's work, but encouragement and material support were also important to his productivity. Artist Jay Leavell, for instance, was a regular source for Bill Traylor's supplies. Leavell was a senior in high school when he joined the New South in 1939. He worked as a display manager for J. J. Newberry's department store and, according to his wife, Jo Leavell Fleming, used to bring Bill Traylor all kinds of packing boxes and display boards as well as paint supplies. Moreover, she noted that Jay Leavell had a hand in teaching Bill Traylor to write his name (see fig. 2).<sup>71</sup> After Mr. Leavell's death in 1983 a number of Traylor originals were found in his attic by his wife and are now in a variety of private and public collections.

The largest body of Bill Traylor's work was collected by Charles Shannon. Shannon visited Traylor regularly and would take away the work that Traylor had finished since his last visit. In 1941 while an artist-in-resident at West Georgia College he would visit Traylor every

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<sup>70</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 19; Bill Traylor exhibition catalogue (Montgomery, AL: New South School and Gallery, 1940).

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Marcia Weber, an art dealer from Montgomery, AL, who has done research on Traylor (March 1993). Shannon states that a black friend who used to visit Traylor often taught him to write his name (see Maresca and Ricco, p. 14).

FIGURE 2: "Dogfight with Writing"  
(Maresca and Ricco, p. 155)



weekend when he returned to Montgomery. Shannon explained: "His work piled up behind the Coca-Cola box and I would take it and store it to preserve it. I would see that he had what he needed to keep him going, and he came to think of himself as working for me."<sup>72</sup>

As Traylor's friend and patron, Charles Shannon made an early attempt to promote Traylor's work during a 1941 during a trip to New York. A friend who had contacts at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) helped to arrange a small exhibition of Traylor's work at the Fieldston School in New York. After the exhibition, Traylor's work was shown to director Alfred Barr and MOMA museum staff who, without consulting Traylor or Shannon, sent a check for \$20.50 for some of Traylor's work -- \$2.00 for the large drawings and \$1.00 for the smaller ones. Shannon was appalled by the unsolicited offer and sent back the check with a demand that all the work be returned to him at once. Soon after this incident Shannon began to have less direct involvement with Bill Traylor. Shannon was drafted in 1942 and after returning to Montgomery in 1946, he only visited Traylor occasionally. He continued to collect his work sporadically until 1947.

Through the work of Shannon and other New South members, a couple of human interest pieces on Traylor were published in the 1940s. Journalist Allen Rankin's stories have received some attention in recent articles on Traylor mainly, according to contemporary critics, because of the "racist edge" of his writing. In his account of the 1940 New South exhibit of Traylor's work, for example, Rankin wrote that members "helped him up two flights of stairs, into the brightest, whitest room he

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<sup>72</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 20.

had seen since Christmas mornings back in Old Master's house. There in the room sat white people. And there all around the white walls hung Bill's paintings."<sup>73</sup> Yet Allen Rankin considered himself one of Traylor's champions. Because of his story in *Colliers* magazine, Rankin reported in 1946, Traylor's story was "picked up by *Negro Digest*" and "art fanciers . . . from as far away as New York and California" wrote Rankin to ask about the artist for years after it went into print.<sup>74</sup> Although his sentimental, hyperbolic condescending prose is disturbing, in his articles Rankin did exhibit some respect for Traylor's art:

True, his pictures looked like things never actually seen on this earth. But if you looked at the stuff awhile, something happened. The crudity dissolved and with it the stiffness. A rhythmic motion swept over old Bill's gutter canvases, and something more than that -- a strange unity of composition and feeling for life.<sup>75</sup>

By late 1940s, Bill Traylor's "feeling for life" was waning. His health began to deteriorate after he lost a leg to "the shivers" (gangrene) around 1943.<sup>76</sup> In January 1944 he was baptized into the Catholic faith by Rev. Jacobe of the St. Jude Church in Montgomery. By 1947 he was quite sickly and spent periods of time in the parish's charity hospital (also

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<sup>73</sup> Allen Rankin, "He Lost 10,000 Years," *Colliers* (June 22, 1946): 67.

<sup>74</sup> Allen Rankin, "He'll Paint for You -- Big 'Uns 20 Cents; Lil 'Uns, A Nickel," *Alabama Journal* (March 31, 1948).

<sup>75</sup> Rankin, "He Lost 10,000 Years," p. 67.

<sup>76</sup> Traylor Family Reunion audiotape.

called the Oak Street Hospital).<sup>77</sup> It is believed he painted on and off until his death on October 23, 1949.<sup>78</sup> Allen Rankin's 1948 article in the Alabama Journal includes a photograph of Bill Traylor painting under a fig tree in Sarah Howard's backyard surrounded by his artwork. "If you go," suggested Rankin in his article, ". . . take him paints and cardboard [and] he will paint [for] you . . . He'll do it for 20 cents for "de big uns," a nickel for "de lil' uns." Old Bill is too old to consider himself rare. He just wants to paint."<sup>79</sup> It seems that it was his art that late in life gave him happiness and purpose.

One granddaughter marks the date of Bill Traylor's death by the birth of one of his great-granddaughters. The three grandchildren still living remember when Traylor's funeral was, although his grandson, Clement Traylor of Buffalo, New York, was the only one who actually attended.<sup>80</sup> Their memories of him are all they have for any art that had

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<sup>77</sup> Baptismal and death records are from the St. Jude Church Baptismal Record Book, Vol. 1, p. 35, entry 12. Most of Traylor's descendants were Baptists (Traylor Family Reunion audiotape). Moreover, Mrs. Rosa Traylor recalls her brother-in-law telling her that every Saturday "all the Negroes would walk [many miles] to a Baptist church in Benton" (Rosa Traylor Interview with Marcia Weber).

<sup>78</sup> Traylor Family Reunion audiotape. Charles Shannon has incorrectly stated Traylor died around February 1947 (see Maresca and Ricco, p. 20).

<sup>79</sup> Rankin, "He'll Paint for You;" photography by Albert Kraus. Kraus meticulously recorded the dates of his photographs.

<sup>80</sup> Traylor Family Reunion audiotape. Traylor has three grandchildren, Mrs. Staffney, Mrs. Delks and Mr. Clement Traylor, and 18 great-grandchildren. The family is trying to trace other descendants who appear in the 1870-1920 Alabama State Census information.



been left with the family was long ago destroyed. Most of Traylor's descendants migrated north and became quite dispersed in the years that followed his death. It was not until 1984 that any family members realized that he had become well-known in the art world.

Many of the descendants had not even known he was an artist until Traylor's granddaughter, who lives in Detroit, learned that a Detroit museum planned to exhibit some of his work. Shocked by the realization, she contacted her daughter, Mrs. Antoinette Beeks, in Atlanta, Georgia, and together with other members of their family they began to delve into their family history. They had never heard of Charles Shannon until they learned that he held the largest collection of Bill Traylor's work. Eager to learn more about their famous ancestor and interested in acquiring some of his art for the family, they wrote Shannon for details. Shannon forwarded their letter to Hirschl and Adler Galleries Inc., the New York-based commercial gallery that represents him, who sent back a brief, businesslike response to Mrs. Beeks. The letter quoted the current price range Bill Traylor's works were selling at, suggested they come to the gallery if they wanted to purchase any and thanked them for their interest. While upset by this letter, they took no action until the family convened at a reunion in 1992. By then family members had done considerable research and learned that Traylor's work had achieved considerable status and commercial value in the art world. As a New York Times journalist wrote in a 1992 article on the lawsuit, "Gradually, they became aware of the accolades heaped on their remarkable ancestor by art critics and museum curators, and learned that he was the subject of numerous

shows and a book. They also discovered that the body of his work could be worth millions of dollars." At that time, the family believed exploitation was involved. Mrs. Beeks reasoned: "He had lived all of his life in a subservient role to a white man. I just can't imagine him not doing what a white man told him to." At the reunion the family had "a very long, deliberate, emotional discussion" and decided to sue both Charles Shannon and Hirschl and Adler Galleries under the premise that Shannon stole the work from their ancestor. "Regardless of the monetary value of the work," Mrs. Beeks asserted, "the fact of the matter is, it was Bill Traylor's legacy, and it belongs to us."<sup>81</sup>

The 1992 suit was settled out of court in October 1993. In a statement issued by both parties in the dispute, Traylor's descendants dropped any claim to the art and reversed their position on Shannon's role in acquiring the art. Rather than stealing the art and exploiting Traylor, as the suit alleged, the statement holds that they now believe that Shannon purchased the work and played an important, helpful role in establishing Bill Traylor's artistic reputation.<sup>82</sup> In return, Shannon placed twelve paintings in trust for the family. Bill Traylor's descendants, however, won more than a small collection of his work. Discovering his art inspired them to expand their knowledge of their

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<sup>81</sup> Richard Pérez-Peña, "Link to Past, and Possible Fortune," New York Times (December 9, 1992): B1-B2.

<sup>82</sup> Catherine Fox, "Traylor Folk Art Suit Settled," Atlanta Constitution (October 31, 1993): N4; Richard Pérez-Peña, "Settlement Over Artwork by Ex-Slave," New York Times (October 7, 1993): B11; Wade Lambert, "Folk-Art Cases Settled," Wall Street Journal (October 7, 1993): B5.

family history. Their efforts have contributed greatly not only to their knowledge but to ours as they add their memories, research efforts and understanding to the story of Bill Traylor's life.

Born into slavery and a sometimes homeless artist on the streets of Montgomery, Alabama during the 1930s and 1940s, aspects of Bill Traylor's biography are the stuff that makes "outsider" and "folk" art catalogues. Yet Traylor's life history holds more value than the museum wall text or a coffee-table art book can convey. By examining his life in greater detail, it is clear that his past is part of the woven fabric of American history and culture. More extensive research and scholarship can help us move beyond the rendition of Traylor's life that has been the staple story in the art world. And while we can, by using both history and memory, try to get a sense of his past, the best we can achieve is an abstract rendition. As David Bradley's character John Washington muses in The Chaneyville Incident, "what a man's dying really means . . . [is that] his story is lost. Bits and pieces remain, but they are all secondhand tales and hearsay, or cold official records that preserve the facts and spoil the truth . . . ." What is missing, continues the fictional historian, is not often the most important data, but "the stuff of background, the material of understanding, the real power of history."<sup>83</sup>

Chapter two explores Bill Traylor's art which provides insight into another dimension of his life. Producing an estimated 1,500 works of art during the last decade of his life, Traylor's artist drive and momentum is worthy of intense study. Although the next chapter discusses his artistic production as a means of rounding out our understanding of his past, it

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<sup>83</sup> Bradley, p. 48.

focuses mainly on the legacy found in his work. For in the art itself lies the "real power of history" which enables us to open another chapter of Bill Traylor's story.

## II.

It was not until the late-1970s that Charles Shannon and his wife Eugenia took Bill Traylor's art out of storage and began preparing it for public viewing. As Charles Shannon explained, "By then the climate in the art world had changed to one we judged would be more responsive to Traylor's work. We decided to try to get it out in the world." The Shannons embarked on a "several-year process" of organizing and cataloging Traylor's work.<sup>84</sup> Shannon erased distracting smudges from canvases and trimmed them for more suitable framing. He also assigned titles to Traylor's work and grouped them by "periods" in order to make the collection presentable in accordance with the standards of the art world. Shannon's efforts eventually propelled Traylor's art into the spotlight of national and international recognition, thereby establishing "the audience that Shannon felt Bill Traylor always deserved."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Meredith Walker, "Bill Traylor: Freed Slave and Folk Artist," Alabama Heritage (Fall 1989): 31.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 31; See Maresca and Ricco, pp. 25-26 for Shannon's account of the preparation process. In a March 1993 interview with Marcia Weber, an art dealer from Montgomery, I was told that in the late 1980s Shannon gave her advice on how to best prepare the dozen or so works by Traylor that she and Mrs. Leavell found in the attic of the Leavell's home shortly after Jay Leavell's death. Shannon explained that he used an eraser to clean up

Yet in the process of "getting it out in the world," Shannon left a profound impact on how we understand and interpret Bill Traylor and his art. Shannon's titles, "periods," interpretation and anecdotes contribute to a received body of knowledge that has delineated the context of critical appreciation of Traylor's work. Just as renditions of Traylor's life have not strayed far from Shannon's memory, discussions on Traylor's art remain entrenched in Charles Shannon's process of interpretation. Critical reliance on Shannon as "the primary source of information on the artist's life history, circumstances, and artistic practices" has resulted in a circumscribed understanding of the artist and the art. Like chapter one, this chapter is devoted to moving beyond received knowledge and expanding the context of our appreciation of Bill Traylor and his art.

In her 1983 article in The Clarion, Diane Finore commented, "Traylor's work lives its own life and like all good art, stands on its own. It does not need the sentiment of his being an 85 year old ex-slave." Contrary to this statement, however, most contemporary critics and journalists still rely on a sentimentalized version of Traylor's life story in their discussions of his work. A 1980 review of Traylor's 1979 one-man show at the R. H. Oosterom Gallery for example, begins, "The Yankees rode through the slave quarters with the news that the slaves

were free . . ."<sup>86</sup> Similarly, the single reference to Bill Traylor in a 1993 Mirabella article on "outsider" art noted, "Nobody wanted Bill Traylor's paintings . . . when the former slave was on the streets of Montgomery, scrounging up shirt cardboards to work on."<sup>87</sup> In many accounts, biography is not used "fairly and calmly" rather, as curator Alice Rae Yellin has written, it works to focus attention on the eccentric and the unusual as a way "of engaging viewer interest."<sup>88</sup> As critic Dan Cameron noted in a 1985 Arts Magazine article, "biographical observations are meant to stress his role as an outsider."<sup>89</sup>

In the fabric of critical discourse on Traylor, strands of his life story are interwoven with descriptions of Traylor's creative process. As with the biographical observations, critics, often paraphrasing or directly quoting Shannon, rely on information provided by him in their discussions of Traylor's art. Diane Finore, for instance, after noting that "Traylor sketched on any paper or cardboard that came his way," cites Shannon's analysis of Traylor's artistic tendency: "In a recent

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smudged canvases, erasing, among other things, traces of Traylor's finger and hand prints. He also noted that he had trimmed some works and removed the strings Traylor had used to hang the art in order to achieve a better fit in frames. Weber declined the advice noting that she wanted to keep it as close to Traylor's actual finished product as possible.

<sup>86</sup> Gylbert Coker, "Bill Traylor at the R.H. Oosterom," Art in America (March 1980).

<sup>87</sup> Lovell, p. 50.

<sup>88</sup> Alice Rae Yellin, ed., Passionate Visions of the American South: Self-Taught Artists from 1940 to Present (New Orleans, LA: New Orleans Museum of Art/University of Mississippi Press, 1993), pp. 8, 41.

<sup>89</sup> Cameron, p. 47.

conversation Shannon recalled, 'Irregular shapes would set him off. He responded to the shapes of cardboard he was using. Their jaggedness set off the action of the whole design.'"<sup>90</sup> The extent of Shannon's mediating presence on our understanding of Traylor, however, is clear in Maresca and Ricco's Bill Traylor: His Art -- His Life, the most comprehensive work on the artist. The textual presentation, a question and answer format involving the editors and Shannon, was insisted upon by Shannon who would not agree to do the book if it was handled any other way.<sup>91</sup> This format assured Shannon's control over the process of disseminating knowledge on the artist and, in turn, it shapes the audiences understanding of the Traylor and his art.

Information provided by Shannon has contributed volumes to the discourse on Traylor, however, it has for too long been a delineator of scholarly and critical inquiry instead of a supplement to it. Discussions on Traylor's "artistic development," for example, are informed by Shannon's anecdotes, titles and cataloging process. In an attempt to define and order Traylor's creativity for its marketplace début, Shannon grouped his work into periods according to their content and aesthetic characteristics. Since, however, Traylor's creative life was only partially tracked by Shannon, and the works he collected were not dated, a precise

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<sup>90</sup> Finore, p. 44.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Marcia Weber (March 1992); According to Weber, Ricco and Maresca had originally wanted to include other peoples' perspectives and information on Traylor in the book, e.g., her own and other New South members still living. Shannon allegedly refused to sign the release until the editors dropped this idea and agreed upon the interview format.



measure of "development," as well as efforts to arrange the work into periods, should be regarded as one man's interpretation.<sup>92</sup> Yet like many articles and catalogues that discuss Traylor's work, the catalogue for the 1988 exhibition "Bill Traylor Drawings" at the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center outlines "the evolution of Traylor's work" by citing the "periods" Traylor went through as an artist: "Certain configurations, which Shannon calls "figures in construction" -- abstract designs with figures and animals -- occurred midway or late in the evolution of Traylor's work."<sup>93</sup> By giving works specific titles and arranging them under a distinct heading, Shannon structured not only how the body of Traylor's work was to be viewed as a whole, but to a great extent, how individual works were to be interpreted.

Shannon's interpretations inform the titles he assigned to Traylor's art. Shannon, for example named one work "Blue Man Reading" for it shows a man sitting in a chair holding a square object housing the letters "A" and "B." This painting, however, might also be interpreted as a man drinking from a can of a popular brand of beer, then

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<sup>92</sup> Although the beginning of Traylor's artistic career cannot actually be determined (it is assumed he began in 1939 when Shannon "discovered" him), we know Traylor did draw for the ten years that followed. Shannon visited him occasionally for only three years, mainly from 1939 to 1942. After that he saw him only a handful of times and has noted that Traylor's later work "was not good and I didn't save it" (Maresca and Ricco, p. 5).

<sup>93</sup> Michael Bonesteele, "Creativity and the Natural Artist," Bill Traylor Drawings (Chicago: Chicago Office of Fine Arts, 1988), p. 23.

in a blue, red and white can labeled "Anheiser Busch" (see fig. 3).<sup>94</sup> Critics have not questioned or challenged Shannon's titles and interpretations.

Like Shannon's periods and titles, his anecdotes and memories also inform the critical appreciation of Traylor's art. Religion, for example, according to Shannon, does not enter into Traylor's work just as it did not enter into the conversations they had during visits. Shannon stated that in all his time with Traylor, "He never talked about religion." Traylor's conversion to the Catholic faith in 1944 suggests that Traylor made a conscious choice in his religious life and was deeply concerned with religion.<sup>95</sup> Following Shannon's lead, however, critics have concluded that Traylor's work is planted firmly in secular soil. Diane Finore noted, for example, "Unlike many contemporary folk artists, there is no sense of religious imagery or revelation in [Traylor's] work." Similarly, in a recent review of Maresca and Ricco's Bill Traylor, critic Michael Rosen noted that "what emerges from this monograph is a coherent sensibility of an ingenuous and witty man inspired by the

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<sup>94</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 107. This figure reappears in other works alongside other drinking figures. See John Beardsley and Jane Livingston, eds., Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980 (Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery, 1982), p. 142. My thanks to Sterling Worrell and Marcia Weber for their interpretation of this figure.

<sup>95</sup> See Maresca and Ricco, p. 15. The accounts of the amount of conversation between Traylor and Shannon have varied from source to source. For the most part, however, Shannon has noted that Traylor was a man of few words; Traylor's 1944 baptismal records were only recently discovered in July 1993 by Miriam Fowler, then the Gallery Director for the Alabama State Council on the Arts, Montgomery, AL.

FIGURE 3: "Blue Man Reading"  
(Maresca and Ricco, p. 107)



secular world." Moreover, art historian Peter Morrin, after comparing Traylor to "masters" of the past, comments that Traylor's art differs from other contemporary black folk art because it is not relevatory or biblical in nature.<sup>96</sup> It would be simplistic, of course, to state that these interpretations are wholly determined by Shannon's process of getting that art out to the world. Yet, at the same time, the effects of his mediating presence cannot be denied. Through a different analytic approach, one that relies on interdisciplinary scholarship rather than Shannon as a primary source, it becomes clear that Bill Traylor's art is deeply spiritual. When he created, like preacher, musician and painter Anderson Johnson, Bill Traylor often relied on his "spritual eye:" "To learn to paint," explains Johnson "you have to be able to see with the other eye . . . your spiritual eye."<sup>97</sup>

Alain Locke's 1925 essay, "The New Negro," celebrated the new generation of young, vibrant African Americans whose creative expression would "prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relationships." In this essay Locke did not fail to acknowledge the older generation's part in the development of American culture. "For generations," Locke observed, "the Negro . . . has contributed not only

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<sup>96</sup> Finore, p. 46; Michael J. Rosen, "Streetscapes," New York Times Book Review (February 12, 1992): 18; Peter Morrin, "Bill Traylor," Art Papers 14 (July-August 1990): 18.

<sup>97</sup> Anderson Johnson as quoted in "In the Tradition of Folk Art," the 1993 Virginia Power calendar (Richmond, VA: Virginia Power, 1993), p. 8.

materially in labor and social patience, but spiritually as well."<sup>98</sup> While not part of the generation of the "New Negro" lauded by Locke as bringing in "a spiritual Coming of Age," Bill Traylor's drawings and paintings hold a legacy of African American self-expression and spiritual development.

Although it is impossible to know when Bill Traylor actually began drawing, it is likely that he did not have the opportunity to express and develop his creativity until later in life. We do know that Bill Traylor drew and painted for at least the last ten years of his life. It has been estimated that Traylor produced more than 1,500 works.<sup>99</sup> When living on Monroe Street he allegedly drew nearly every day, from dawn until late into the night. Charles Shannon has remarked that there was hardly a time he went by and found Traylor not working: "On summer evenings he would be sitting there at nine or ten o'clock smoking his

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<sup>98</sup> Alain Locke, "The New Negro," pp. 512-523 in Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature, Abraham Chapman, ed. (NY: Mentor, 1968), p. 523.

<sup>99</sup> Based on Charles Shannon's estimate (see Maresca and Ricco, p. 25). It is not possible to get an accurate count of the work Traylor produced. First, it is not known when he actually began drawing; second, it is impossible to track how many were bought, destroyed or lost over the years. Charles Shannon destroyed a number of Traylor's later works noting that "the little work he did after his return was not good and I didn't save it" (Maresca and Ricco, p. 5). It has been suggested that Traylor's daughter Sarah Howard also may have thrown away some of his art while he was living with her on Bragg Street in Montgomery (Traylor Family Reunion audiotape).

pipe and drawing."<sup>100</sup> Given the intensity of Bill Traylor's creative process, his drawing cannot simply be explained as work for idle hands. His art was a devotion, and his will to create suggests a complex relationship between Bill Traylor and his art.

Both the creative process and the creations themselves provide a means to explore and interpret this relationship. Among the many things Traylor drew were people, animals, plant forms, household and farm objects, and various geometric shapes and vessels. His subjects were sometimes the sole object of his focus yet often were involved in abstract scenes or events. Bill Traylor: His Art -- His Life gives the reader a glimpse of the wide variety of subjects that captured Traylor's creative interest. On one page the reader finds scenes of lively visual movement, with people, things and animals in a flurry of activity, while other pages reveal a still life of a jug or a rendition of a farm or circus animal. Sometimes painting in a palette of bright complimentary colors of poster paint, and other times using single deep hues of charcoal or sketching only in pencil, Traylor's creative process reveals a distinctive untutored style. The way Bill Traylor drew and painted was unique, direct and intentional. To create a drawing Traylor used a pencil and almost never erased. With a straightedge stick he would trace his figures and then would complete them freehand using colored pencil and charcoal (see fig. 4). With the supplies brought to him by friends, patrons and

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<sup>100</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 4. It is difficult to track Traylor's artistic productivity after 1942. After this time he moved between states to his children's homes and his health began deteriorating. He probably was not drawing and painting as constantly as in the years before.

FIGURE 4: Bill Traylor, Montgomery, Alabama, c. 1940  
(courtesy of Alabama State Council on the Arts)



acquaintances, he eventually added paint to this repertoire. He selected deep, rich colors to enliven his work, only occasionally trying out pastels and softer hues.

In many of his drawings Traylor's method is quite obvious. With his stick he would make an outline of a figure using geometric shapes like boxes and rectangles, and then he would add circles and his own invented shapes freehand to finish his drawing. In "Woman with Green Blouse and Umbrella," for example, the two adjoining quadrangles that form the body of the woman are seen clearly through the green charcoal that becomes the upper body of the woman (fig. 5). The other elements that complete the drawing, the bulbous chin and spindly nose, the umbrella with its smooth handle and pointy tip, and the black heeled-shoes are all creative outgrowths inspired by his initial configuration. Yet in other works, the manner in which his art is constructed is more subtle. In "Female Drinker" smooth curves and soft contortions take the place of conspicuous lines and angles (fig. 6). We cannot be sure whether the difference between these works is due to his "artistic development," artistic intention or the types of materials used.<sup>101</sup> What is certain is that the variations and nuances of his style comprise a body of work that is

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<sup>101</sup> The term "artistic development" carries fine art connotations by implying that as Traylor gained more expertise his art evolved into a higher, more refined product that better approximated fine art. Since, as noted earlier, the dates each work was constructed are not known a chronology of his work cannot be ascertained, nor can a pattern of development, in this sense, be extracted. Traylor was interested in expanding the scope of his art. In conversations with Shannon he mentioned that he was working on ways to place a person and other objects in his drawings of houses (see Maresca and Ricco, p. 29).



FIGURE 5: "Woman with Green Blouse and Umbrella"  
(Maresca and Ricco, p. 113)



FIGURE 6: "Female Drinker"  
(Maresca and Ricco, p. 73)



distinctly his own.

In creating these images, however, Traylor was not left uninfluenced by the rich visual world that surrounded him. According to Shannon, Traylor's painting of an elephant was inspired by a circus billboard, and he drew "a camel from a pack of cigarettes."<sup>102</sup> As curator Alice Rae Yellin has recently observed:

The visual environment of the [self-taught] artist had a cumulative and generally unrecognized effect on their sensibilities and creative expressions. Like other members of their communities, the artists saw and were constantly exposed to handmade road signs, commercial posters and billboards, illustrated calendars, magazines, newspapers, church art, and larger-than-life public sculptures.

Like other self-taught artists, Traylor did not copy these images, rather he incorporated their "design, composition, subject matter, style, [and] scale" into his knowledge-base and aesthetic ideas.<sup>103</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting part of Bill Traylor's creative process was his choice of canvas. He would not use new, white poster board; instead he chose material others had thrown away -- shirt and advertising cardboards, candy cartons, drycleaning bags (figs. 7, 8). Charles Shannon recalled: "I brought him poster board, but he preferred his cut-up boxes and backs of window cards. He would stick the nice clean boards I brought him over in the corner and after a while they

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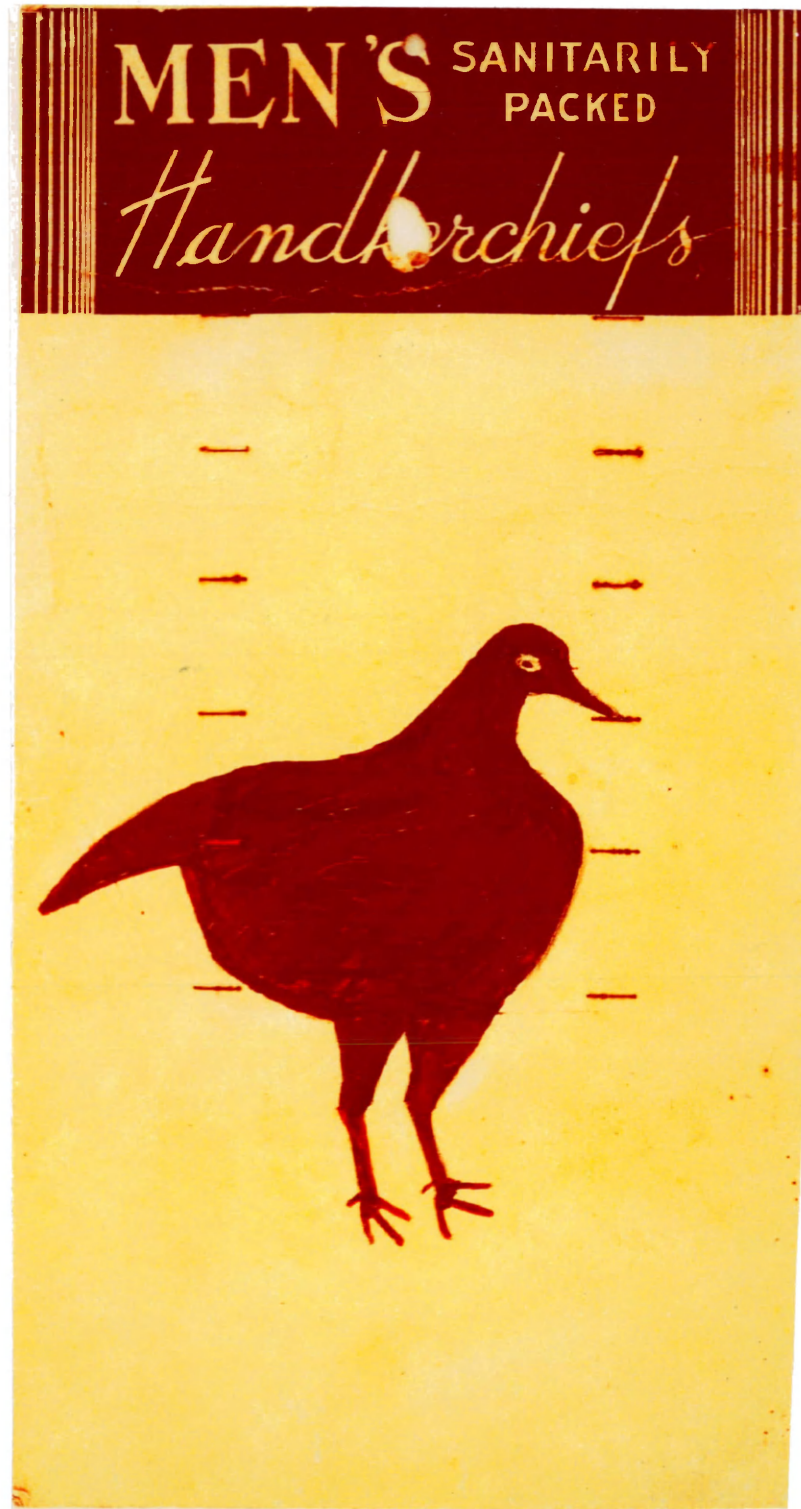
<sup>102</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 29.

<sup>103</sup> Yellin, pp. 20, 48.

FIGURE 7: "Radio"  
(Maresca and Ricco, p. 81)



FIGURE 8: "Pigeon"  
(Maresca and Ricco, p. 134)



would be sort of ripened . . . [and] he would use them."<sup>104</sup> He worked with cardboard, carrying bags, store displays and other materials that he found on the street or were given to him. Traylor seemed intrigued and inspired by their odd shapes and imperfections.

The smudges, tears, stains, cracks in the thrown away material were incorporated into his art and appear to be as integral to his creative process as they are to his creations. In a painting of a man plowing, for example, stains and a streak of gray give the cardboard depth and texture (fig. 9). The soiled canvas works harmoniously with the figures he constructs to convey the sense that they are on land, in the midst of a field. Other paintings simply blend splotches and patterns into the creations. In one work the letters on a box bottom are blended into the pattern on a woman's dress. In others a round rough patch on the cardboard becomes a spot of land upon which a drinking man sits and a faint gray column determines a dogfight's battleground. Like many contemporary self-taught artists, Traylor "found visual comfort" in worn everyday material, and these "artifacts in turn influenced [his] aesthetic judgment."<sup>105</sup>

When drawing Traylor was usually surrounded by his art and often by other members of the black community. Far from being a social outcast, he seems to have been very much interested in and involved with his community. Shannon has commented that while he was on Monroe Street "friends from the country" would often visit him. Shannon noted that Traylor's "work flourished here." As Alice Rae

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<sup>104</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 11.

<sup>105</sup> Drawings can be found in Maresca and Ricco, pp. 13, 57, 133, 168; Yellin, p. 55.

FIGURE 9: "Man with Mule Plowing"  
(Maresca and Ricco, p.133)



Yellin writes, "The work space for a self-taught artist does not have the same connotation as a trained artist's studio. Work spaces are usually well-integrated into daily living spaces . . ."106 Living independently yet also part of a community, Bill Traylor seemed happiest when working on his art in downtown Montgomery.

Visitors remember that Traylor was always surrounded by his work but displayed little interest in it once it was completed. After he finished a drawing, he would often put a string through holes he made in the top and hang the art around where he worked. While Traylor enjoyed being surrounded by and displaying his art, he did not appear to be too concerned either way about keeping or selling his work. Nor was he concerned with turning a profit or with the value attached to it by others. The small amount of money he received from selling his art was used to buy his next meal. Also, he often exchanged work for paint and other supplies so he could continue creating. Bill Traylor, though, was apparently amused that people, mostly strangers, bought his work "when they don't even need 'em."107 Bill Traylor needed them, or more precisely, it seems he needed to create them.

For Bill Traylor the value of his art was in the act and process of creating. When brought to a small exhibition of his work in the New South School and Gallery in 1940 he seemed amused by some of his own work but was more interested in getting back to his drawing. Charles Shannon commented in Bill Traylor: His Art -- His Life: "Nobody was

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106 Maresca and Ricco, p. 4; Yellin, p. 55.

107 Maresca and Ricco, p. 8.



less impressed with Bill Traylor than he was himself."<sup>108</sup> His lack of interest in his finished product was, perhaps, precisely because it was, simply, a product. Its presence was pleasant but it could not compare with feelings engendered in actually creating art. The artistic impulse, the process of transforming ideas into a visual form of communication, was what was valuable and fulfilling for Traylor. Many self-taught artists have expressly stated that their art is about exercising the power of the mind. Artist Edgar Tolson explained, "You don't make it with your hands. You form it with your hands . . . You make it with your mind."<sup>109</sup> Similarly, in 1990 Thorton Dial, Sr. stated, "Art ain't about paint. It ain't about canvas. It's about ideas. Too many people died without ever getting their mind out to the world. I have found how to get my ideas out and I won't stop. I got ten thousand left."<sup>110</sup> Like these artists, Bill Traylor created in order to express his inner thoughts, beliefs and feelings, and Traylor's art is a rich legacy of the workings of his mind.

Bill Traylor's art presents a vision of the world as he experienced and interpreted it. While no singular interpretation can convey the depth and breadth of his work, one aspect of his legacy is clear. Through his work Bill Traylor expressed a distinctive Afro-Christian world view. In exploring this aspect of his vision we need to establish its

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>109</sup> Michael T. Hall, "'You Make it With Your Mind:' The Art of Edgar Tolson," The Clarion 12:2/3 (Spring-Summer 1991): 43.

<sup>110</sup> Butler Hancock, "The Designation of Indifference," New Art Examiner (October 1992): 22-23.

sociohistorical links to African American culture. Making this connection, we will observe that Bill Traylor's work stands as a symbol of the fusion of African ethnic traditions with Anglo-European traditions during and after slavery.<sup>111</sup>

Perhaps the strongest and most pervasive evidence of this ethnic interaction in American culture, Afro-Christianity originated during the transition of Africans to North America and slavery. Most of the Africans brought to North America as slaves were from central and western parts of the continent, including Congo-Angola, Nigeria, Dahomey, Togo, the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone.<sup>112</sup> For the majority of people in these countries during the period of American slavery, religion was not separate but essential to all aspects of life. Religion was part of the woven fabric of existence both in the world and world view of many West Africans. While they brought a wide variety of languages, cultural beliefs and religions with them to America, the violent rupture that compelled them to adapt to the new world and way of life forced a certain creolization of African ethnic traditions. As Sterling Stuckey has written, "Africans of different backgrounds and religious practices made conscious efforts to find a common spiritual vision."<sup>113</sup>

In her book Trabelin' On, historian Mechal Sobel has examined the effect of this fusion on the African world view. "[I]n an early phase of slavery," she writes, "the core understanding, or Sacred Cosmos, at the

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<sup>111</sup> See Sterling Stuckey, Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America (NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp 91-92.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

heart of the world views coalesced into one neo-African consciousness -- basically similar yet already significantly different from West African understanding."<sup>114</sup> Although Sobel's term "neo-African consciousness" does not necessarily convey the complexity and diversity of the African ethnic traditions that persisted during and after slavery, her discussion helps us to see how African traditions combined with European beliefs and Christianity to create a uniquely Afro-Christian world view.

In his reading of the Africanization of Christianity in America, W. E. B. Du Bois divided the "adaptation and mingling of heathen rites" into three main components: the priest, the music and the religion.<sup>115</sup> While scholars after Du Bois have added to or elaborated on these components, there is a consensus on four basic elements of Afro-Christianity: (1) a concept of a high god; (2) the importance of ecstatic experience; (3) the belief in spirits and spirit forces; and (4) a vision of life after death.

Over time and through generations these elements demonstrate the persistence of African values in the African American consciousness. For many enslaved African Americans, Afro-Christianity became a vital source for explanation, order, control and power. Mechal Sobel has commented that the Afro-Christian world view "gave coherence to prewar slave society. It provided the possibility for meaningful lives with meaningful goals . . . . [And] it retained the very special Sacred Cosmos of blacks, filled with spirit and joy and mourning and time past,

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<sup>114</sup> Mechal Sobel, Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. xvii.

<sup>115</sup> As quoted by Stuckey, p. 257, from W. E. B Du Bois' The Souls of Black Folk.

all used to understand time present."<sup>116</sup> This tradition had a profound impact not only on the religious realm, but on all aspects of African American culture. Sterling Stuckey notes, "there is reason to believe that the ring shout [an aspect of the Afro-Christian conversion experience] figured prominently in the formation of slave culture, whatever the demographic realities, from the earliest periods of slavery on the continent." Stuckey feels that this continued tradition proves the continuity of African influence over the formation of slave as well as African American culture after the war. The values that grew out of this ritual, Stuckey argues, was a nurturing aspect of the slave community and fostered the beginnings of black nationalism after slavery. "Moreover," he adds, "the shout continued to form the principle context in which black creativity occurred."<sup>117</sup>

In Bill Traylor's art two essential elements of the Afro-Christian Sacred Cosmos are evident: the ecstatic conversion where the "little me" leaves the "big me" and travels to God, and the spirit force in its Afro-Christian forms of voodoo, conjuring and folklore.<sup>118</sup> The ecstatic conversion involves a type of death and rebirth where the sinner "falls" or is struck by God, hit over the head, and summoned by His power. The soul travels to God leaving the body behind. "Killed, the seeker finds himself at the jaws or brink of Hell, and it is here that he sees himself as

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<sup>116</sup> Sobel, p. xxiv.

<sup>117</sup> Stuckey, pp. viii, 95.

<sup>118</sup> Mechal Sobel, "Anglo/Afro-American Culture," course lecture, The College of William & Mary (September 1992). Sobel "introduced" me to Traylor via Maresca and Ricco's book and suggested I explore these elements in his work (see Introduction).

twofold: a man in a man."<sup>119</sup> A messenger of God, usually a small white man, saves the repentant sinner as they realize the existence of their inner self, "the little me inside the big me." They look down on the shell of their old self realizing that they have been saved and are filled with God's love and power. The volume God Struck Me Dead details over sixty accounts of ex-slaves' ecstatic conversions where the similarities in the experiences provide rich evidence of the survival of the Sacred Cosmos:

I died and saw a deep hold and a little man called to me saying, "Follow me." I journeyed on . . . I don't know how I left but I do know how I went to heaven. I declare to you I saw myself in two bodies. Little me was standing looking down on the old dead me lying on a cooling board. While I was in the mansion I saw a beautiful white bed and one man came and made it for me and turned and said to me, "That is yours."

I am not hell-scared or devil-dodging for I know that I have died and don't have to die any more.<sup>120</sup>

Rich evidence of this experience is also found in spirituals and is clear in the following song from a mid-nineteenth century revival meeting:

Sister (or brother), you better get ready;  
You got to die, you got to die,  
It may not be today or t'morrow

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<sup>119</sup> Sobel, p. 112.

<sup>120</sup> Charles Johnson, ed., God Struck Me Dead. The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Vol. 19, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972 [1941]), p. 84.

You never know the minute or the hour  
 But you better get ready, you got to die.<sup>121</sup>

Bill Traylor's art celebrates the same ecstatic experience. What Charles Shannon referred to as "states" or "hysteria" in the book Bill Traylor is an expression of a part of the conversion process that leads the Afro-Christian to God. The concept of the soul as separate and distinct from the human form also figures largely in most of Traylor's drawings. What Shannon and other critics have seen as "devilish kids" are Traylor's visual renditions of the "little me," the soul of the person he has drawn. This is most obvious in two works that Shannon has titled "Big Man, Small Man" and "Animated Figure" (figs. 10, 11).<sup>122</sup> Both of these drawings feature a large man and a small figure. In "Animated Figure" a solid line extends the arms of the "little me" to form a connection between the legs of the "big me." This line represents the vital spiritual link. The connection of the spirit force to the loins of the big man suggests the regenerative power of the soul. Similarly, in "Big Man, Small Man" a spiritual connection is clear in the similarity of the figures' appearances. Their postures, however, are symbolic of their essential difference. The large figure is hunched over, holding his back and pointing down towards hell, while the small man, the soul, is pointing to heaven. This dynamic illustrates the soul's relationship to God (spirituality), and the body's imperfect, worldly status (depravity).

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<sup>121</sup> Cited by Stuckey, p. 33 from William John Faulkner, The Days When the Animals Talked (1977).

<sup>122</sup> Although some titles allegedly came from comments made by Traylor, Shannon actually titled the work.

FIGURE 10: "Big Man, Small Man"  
(Maresca and Ricco, p. 103)



FIGURE 11: "Animated Figure"  
(Maresca and Ricco, p. 170)





In Traylor's work the "little me" plays a spiritual role, acting as an intermediary between the "big me" and God, as Traylor's "Preacher and Congregation" vividly illustrates (fig. 12). Here the "preacher" stands in a circle looking upward, with one arm outstretched and a finger pointing towards God. Only one other dark figure, representing the congregation, enters the circle. The other paler figures hover just along the edge of the circle, seemingly watching over the spiritual process. This circle, with the surrounding spirits and sense of motion, is reminiscent of the ring shout or ring dance, an integral part of African American expressive culture.

For many denominations of Afro-Christianity, the ring shout is an instrumental part of the movement towards ecstasy and conversion. Zora Neale Hurston acknowledged the prevalence of this phenomenon well after the Civil War. In her work as editor and supervisor of the "Negro unit" of the Florida Federal Writers project in the late 1930s, Hurston recognized the African roots of this aspect of the conversion process:

[T]he Negro has not been christianized as extensively as is generally believed. The great masses are still standing before their pagan altars calling old gods by a new name . . . .. [T]he congregation is restored to its primitive altars under the name of Christ. Then there is the expression known as "shouting" which is nothing more than the African "Possession" by the gods. The god possesses the body of a worshipper and he or she is supposed to know nothing of their actions until the god decamps. This is

FIGURE 12: "Preacher and Congregation"  
(Maresca and Ricco, p. 88)



still prevalent in most Negro protestant churches and is universal in the Sanctified churches.<sup>123</sup>

Harold Courlander noted in A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore (1976) that "In most of Africa, dance, like singing and drumming, is an integral part of supplication . . ."<sup>124</sup> Yet more than supplication, the Afro-Christian ring shout is a process. As Edward Channing Gannett observed in the Sea Islands in 1865, the participants use song, dance, drum beats to create a rhythm that will move them to an exalted state:

The "shout" is a peculiar service in which a dozen or twenty jog slowly round a circle behind each other with a peculiar shuffle of the feet and shake of the arms, keeping time to a droning chant and hand clapping maintained by bystanders. As the exercise continues, the excitement increases, occasionally becomes hysterical. Some religious meaning is attributed to it . . . .

Comparing his description with Marshall Sterns' observation of a ring shout in South Carolina in 1950, it is clear that the tradition has continued with remarkable similarities:

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<sup>123</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, The Sanctified Church: The Folklore Writings of Zora Neale Hurston (Berkeley, CA: Turtle Island), 1981), pp. 103-104.

<sup>124</sup> Harold Courlander, A Treasury of AfroAmerican Folklore: The Oral Literature, Traditions, Recollections, Legends, Tales, Songs, Religious Beliefs, Customs, Sayings and Humor of Peoples of African Descent in the Americas (NY: Crown Publishers, 1976), p. 366.

The dancers form a circle in the center of the floor, one in back of another. Then they begin to shuffle in a counter-clockwise direction around and around, arms out and shoulders hunched. A fantastic rhythm is built up by the rest of the group standing back to the walls, who clap their hands and stomp on the floors . . . suddenly sisters and brothers scream and spin, possessed by religious hysteria . . . This is actually a West African circle dance . . . a complicated and sacred ritual.<sup>125</sup>

While both of these descriptions come from observances in South Carolina, the ring shout was prevalent throughout the United States. As Sterling Stuckey notes, "hardly a state in the Union was without practitioners during and following slavery."<sup>126</sup>

As with the ring shout, virtually no "slave area was without spirit-workers, and virtually no slave was without contact with spirits."<sup>127</sup> The blending of West African supplication or spirit worship with Euro-Christian customs and religion created the Afro-Christian forms of folk religion or conjure. Conjure (also called, among other things, voodoo and root work) played an active part in slave life. Albert Raboteau, in his book Slave Religion, notes that conjure was "a system of

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<sup>125</sup> As quoted by Stuckey, p. 85, from Edward Channing Gannett, "The Freedman at Port Royal," North American Review 101 (1865): 10. Marshall Sterns, The Story of Jazz (NY: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 12-13, as quoted by Stuckey on p. 17.

<sup>126</sup> Stuckey, p. 95.

<sup>127</sup> Sobel, p. 41.

magic, divination, and herbalism widespread among the slaves."<sup>128</sup> The narratives of ex-slaves, including Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass, as well as white slaveholder's journals and accounts of slave revolts, point to the centrality of the conjurers in slave life. These accounts, and many others, locate the root doctor's involvement in both the black and white community.<sup>129</sup> The types and roles of practitioners varied greatly. Called conjurers, root doctors, herb doctors, spirit-workers, mojo-men and diviners, all had a special power, a supernatural knowledge. In her list of "certain remedies and beliefs held in common throughout the South by practitioners of the various 'old religions' popular within this region," Zora Neale Hurston recorded the belief that, "Persons born with cauls, commonly called 'veils', over their eyes are credited with supernatural powers such as healing and being able to see ghosts."<sup>130</sup> Black conjurers and herb doctors were recognized, feared and respected by blacks and whites alike. Practitioners were often leaders in the black community.

The strongest practitioners had "conjure power" that could work evil as well as good. It was this dual potential, as Mechal Sobel suggests, that reinforced their power: "It was recognized that conjurers had the power to do . . . good acts, but their power was not wielded out of a desire

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<sup>128</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South (NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 80.

<sup>129</sup> See, for example, Douglass' account on pp. 297-299 of his narrative. For more on conjurers and slave rebellions see Sobel, pp. 36-43; Raboteau, pp. 280-284; Hurston, pp 15-40; see also Blassingame, pp. 109-113.

<sup>130</sup> Hurston, pp. 19, 21.

to be good or do good. Conjurers could use their power for whatever ends they chose, which made them all the more dangerous."<sup>131</sup> Depending on their strength and position, practitioners were able to interpret signs, read dreams, administer cures and produce charms. A wide variety of ritual libations -- cures, charms or "tricks"-- were created out of a mixture of special materials, roots and herbs which was "moistened with liquor to strengthen their power by strengthening their spirits."<sup>132</sup>

In Bill Traylor's work liquor and drinkers are a common theme. Some paintings perhaps appear to recreate the visible life around him, like, for instance, the Anheiser Busch can discussed earlier. In one anecdote Shannon has suggested that drinking had once been a problem in Traylor's life: "The whiskey theme was to recur often, but as for Traylor himself, he said "what little sense I did have whiskey took away."<sup>133</sup> Many of his other works express an abstract world where a moral battleground surrounds the drinkers. The painting titled "Man with Yoke" (fig. 13), for example, has two "little me" figures sitting on a yoke on a big man's shoulders, seemingly fighting over whether he should follow the path of evil -- suggested by the flask in his hand -- or of the Lord -- symbolized by the second "little me" figure pointing his long finger up towards heaven.

Yet while intemperance and moralizing may abound in the action surrounding the drinkers, other aspects of Traylor's work link drinking

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<sup>131</sup> Sobel, pp. 42-43.

<sup>132</sup> Raboteau, p. 278.

<sup>133</sup> Charles Shannon, "Bill Traylor's Triumph," *Art & Antiques* (February 1988): 61.

FIGURE 13: "Man with Yoke"  
(Maresca and Ricco, p. 49)



with both conversion and conjure. "Female Drinker," for example, depicts a woman drinking while in an ecstatic dancing state.<sup>134</sup> The female figure is black and quite smooth and curved compared with many of Traylor's other figures. Beautiful and graceful, her figure seems more of a celebration than part of a dilemma. Ritual libations and practices including dance (the ring shout is the primary example) were often used to move persons to ecstasy and prepare for their communion with God. "Female Drinker" suggests the joy of this preparation.

The aspects of conversion and conjure become more obvious in "Drinking Bout With Keg" (fig. 14) where the female drinker reappears amongst a myriad of characters, both human figures and souls as well as animals. Pointing his long finger at her, apparently chasing and preparing to hit her, the "little man" figures largely in the action. As with the other works discussed earlier, the female drinker seems about to be "struck" by God through the workings of the "little me," the soul. An attacking dog, however, is also introduced in this scene, suggesting another element of conjure that involves spirits and signs.

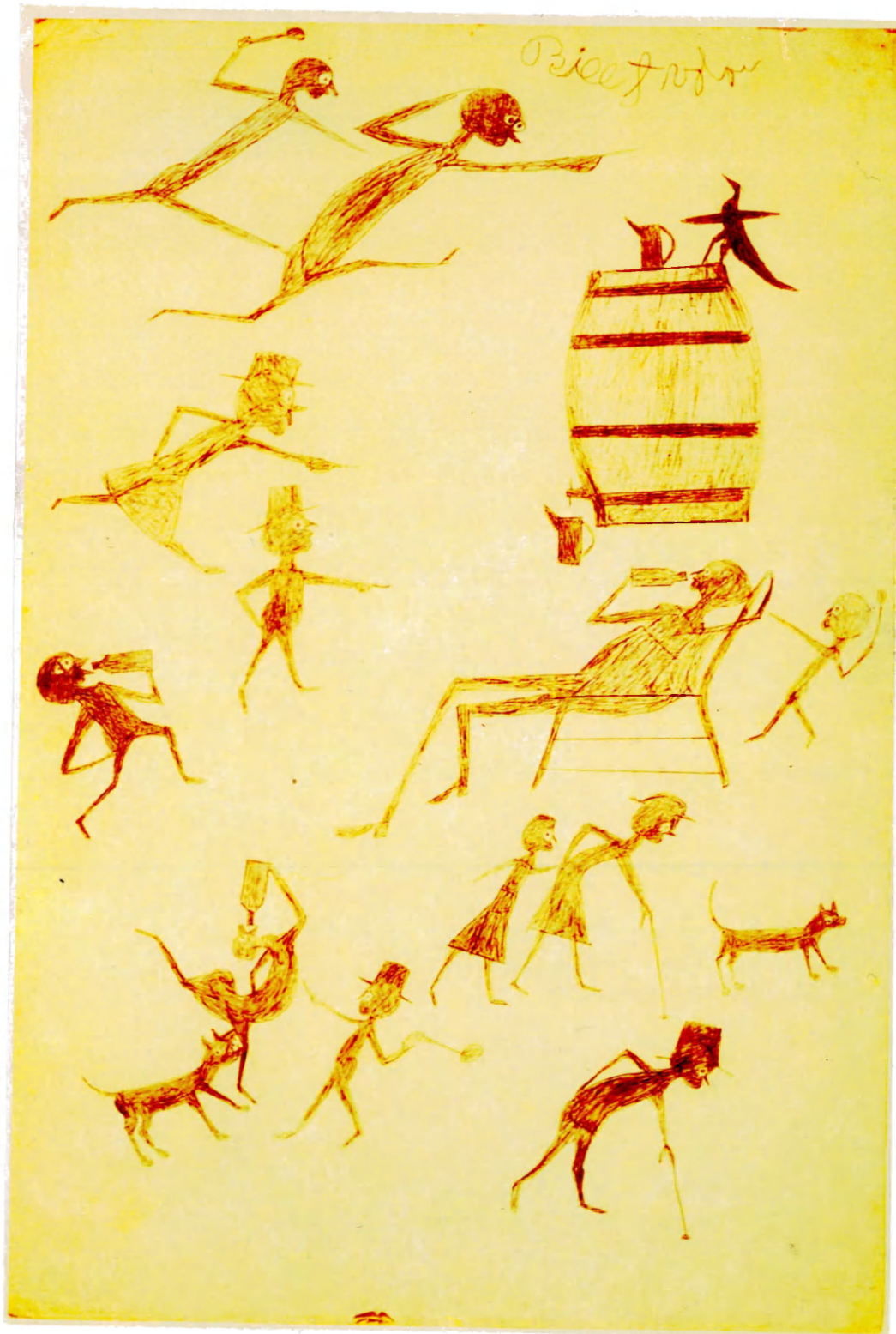
In many West African cultures, animals are important signs of both good and evil. And as with Harriet Powers, a quilter and ex-slave born in Georgia in 1837, it is likely that Bill Traylor inherited and absorbed a variety of African and Afro-Christian values. As Stuckey writes in his interpretation of Powers' craft, "given the prevalence of ethnic forms in slave communities of the South, she perhaps absorbed the values of an ethnic group she was not born into as easily as she

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<sup>134</sup> See fig. 6.



FIGURE 14: "Drinking Bout With Keg"  
(Maresca and Ricco, p. 81)



might have taken to those native to one or more parents."<sup>135</sup> While the African heritage of Traylor and his parents cannot be traced through the written record, Traylor's art leaves traces of West African culture that may have been passed on from his parents or others he grew up with. In "Drinking Bout With Keg," for example, the bird, similar to biblical doves and ravens, seems to play a mediating role between heaven and earth. Aspects of Yoruban culture and lore may have influenced Traylor in his creative use of the bird figure. In Flash of the Spirit, Robert Farris Thompson notes that the Yoruba often associate the bird with the mind of a person where his/her spiritual power is held. The bird often symbolizes a great source of healing potential or ashe, "the power-to-make-things-happen, God's own enabling light rendered accessible to men and women." The bird in "Drinking Bout With Keg," perhaps "God's ashe in feathered form," links the power of the keg's contents with a source of potential healing and spiritual revival.<sup>136</sup> For in the environment that surrounds the female drinker evil -- most explicitly signified by the attacking dog -- potential danger and disorder abound. Meanwhile, the dog suggests links to other West African cultures. Some Kongo mystics, for example, see the dog as a Janus-like figure, a spiritual link to higher worlds and higher gods who, like the conjurer, can do

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<sup>135</sup> Stuckey, p. 91.

<sup>136</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy (NY: Random House, 1983), p. 5; on birds and ashe see, pp. 7-9, 47-51. See also Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism (NY: Oxford, 1988), pp. 7-8.

both good and harm.<sup>137</sup> In any case, the attacking dog clearly suggests an unwanted presence, perhaps a curse. The bottle of the female drinker may hold the charm ("spirit") necessary to ward off harmful tricks and spirit forces.

Even those Afro-Christians who did not believe in voodoo or the power of the conjurer adhered strongly to beliefs and practices concerning signs and spirit forces. "Signs or portents," writes Mechal Sobel, "were connected with virtually every aspect of life, including the weather, cooking, work, love, children, health, birth and death."<sup>138</sup> Conjure was transferred into a legacy of folklore which, along with tricks and mojos (charms), attempted to make sense of life, to order and control reality.

Rich allusions to African American folklore can be found in Bill Traylor's stories and art. Dogs, snakes, birds, and other animals figure largely in the expression system of the storyteller as well as in Traylor's art. Animals are not merely ornaments but part of the action, causal agents in much of Traylor's work. The attacking dog mentioned above demonstrates the centrality of animals in Traylor's creative expressions. Shannon recounts stories Traylor told him where animals take on human qualities. The two he mentions in Maresca and Ricco's book concern frogs and mules, both trickster figures in African American folktales. In folklore, the mule is a symbol of the black man and the obsequious role he was sometimes forced to play during slavery. Traylor's work titled, "He's Sullin," and his tale about this mule is

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<sup>137</sup> Thompson, p. 121.

<sup>138</sup> Sobel, p. 73.

representative of the type of folktales surrounding this figure. According to Shannon, Traylor explained this work to him: "He's sullin'. He won't work. Minute he sees a plow he start swinging back. You can't make him go. Gits his pride from his mama."<sup>139</sup> In many African American folktales the mule is usually involved in a test with the master where the mule out-wits the white man. Stories of resistance and subversion as well as lessons on life were created out of tales brought over from Africa and adapted to the life in America.

Tales about "Brer Rabbit," "Brer Fox," "Tar Baby" and many others are part of an oral tradition that is both history and art. Yet like Traylor's art, oral expressive culture is complex and ambiguous, and the stories have no definitive end.<sup>140</sup> And while both the African American

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<sup>139</sup> Maresca and Ricco, pp. 26-27. Although Traylor chose to express himself visually rather than orally, he seemed quite cognizant of the African American oral tradition by the explanation he gave to Shannon of the difference between his white and black figures: "He placed his little stick down on the profile of one of his figures and said, "now you see there, when the stick touches the nose and the chin but it doesn't touch the lips, it's a white man." He said, "If it touches all three, it's a black man" (*Ibid.*, p. 14). The black figures alone, it seems, hold the oral potential of the trickster figure as discussed in Roger D. Abrahams, ed., Afro-American Folktales: Stories From Black Traditions in the New World (NY: Pantheon Books, 1985), pp. 3-33. See also Gates, Signifying Monkey, pp. xxiv-xxv.

<sup>140</sup> For details on folklore concerning frogs, mules and other animals see Courlander, pp. 419-420, 466-474; see also Abrahams, parts I-VII; Virginia Hamilton, The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales (NY: Knopf, 1985). See Abrahams' introduction, pp. 3-33, for discussion of how folktales are stories that have no end due to the ever-changing

storyteller and Bill Traylor inventively express their version of the African American self and culture, Traylor's art moves beyond folk culture by creating his own unique visual form.

As he turned ragged, imperfect pieces of cardboard from the street into wonderfully vivid creations, Bill Traylor rendered both a life and a world. Traylor's art resounds with W. E. B. Du Bois' message in The Souls of Black Folk on the importance of such a discovery:

[T]here must come a loftier respect for the sovereign human soul that seeks a freedom for expansion and self-development; that will love and hate and labor in its own way, untrammelled alike by old and new. Such souls aforetime have inspired and guided worlds . . . the rich and bitter depth of their experience, the unknown treasures of their inner life, the strange renderings of nature they have seen, may give the world new points of view and make their loving, living and doing precious to all human hearts. And to themselves in these days that try their souls, the chance to soar . . .<sup>141</sup>

Through his art Bill Traylor gave himself "the chance to soar," and his work gives us the chance to better understand his "loving, living and doing." By giving us a unique perspective on the African American experience, Bill Traylor and his art represent a significant contribution to the study of American art and culture.

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nature of African American folktales and the impact of teller's artistic license; also on the importance of the role of the tale teller, educator and artist in the black community.

<sup>141</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (NY: Signet, 1982 [1903]), pp. 138-139.

### III.

Browsing through women's magazines while waiting to get my hair cut one day, I was surprised to find a painting by Bill Traylor on the pages of the November 1993 issue of Mirabella magazine. Traylor's painting was included in an article on "outsider art" by journalist Amanda Lovell. The location of Traylor's work within a popular magazine laden with manufacturers' advertisements, perfume samples and tear-out subscription forms suggests the current status of Traylor's work as a much sought-after commodity in an established and growing art market. Lovell writes, "Nobody wanted Bill Traylor's paintings . . . when the former slave was on the streets of Montgomery, scrounging up shirt cardboards to work on. Now, like [other "outsider" artists], he's post-humously hot."<sup>142</sup>

In the opening caption of the article the editors glibly remark to their readers, "Outsider Art is easy to love but damn near impossible to explain. Amanda Lovell tries, anyway . . . ." Lovell's explanation of "outsider" art centers on the success it is currently enjoying in the art market. Lovell, of course, does allude to the disadvantaged circumstances of many of these artists, and attempts to this term used to define their art by comparing it to art brut, folk art and various movements within fine art. However, to convey its essence to her audience, she lists various new museums, exhibits and books that have

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<sup>142</sup> Lovell, pp. 48, 52.

arisen out of consumer interest in the subject. She also cites artists' financial success stories, noting that some "name" works, Bill Traylor's included, "fetch mid-five-figure prices." The reason behind the inclusion of this article in a popular magazine, after all, is that this art is currently in vogue and, as Lovell tells her readers, "it may well be the art of the nineties."<sup>143</sup>

Like Amanda Lovell and her readers, Bill Traylor's contemporary audience has come to understand his art from within the context of the market. The art market has brought Bill Traylor to our attention and, like Charles Shannon's titles and anecdotes, it shapes our understanding of Traylor and his work. "[T]he vicissitudes of Traylor's posthumously established reputation as an artist," as one lone critic acknowledged, "are almost wholly determined by the marketplace and its acolytes."<sup>144</sup> This study of Traylor and his art would not be complete, then, if we did not address the market and the commodification of Traylor's work within it. For, as anthropologists Johannes Fabian and Ilona Szombati-Fabian maintain, ". . . the character of art in the West as merchandise, folk art not being an exception, is the most basic, if not the most salient, quality to which a critical reflection must address itself."<sup>145</sup>

Maresca and Ricco's book on Traylor best expresses the notion that Bill Traylor's work is, perhaps first and foremost, merchandise. With its coffee-table book pricing and packaging, it represents the pinnacle of the commodification process that Traylor's work has gone through. Critic

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 52.

<sup>144</sup> Norman Girardot, "Cave Man," *Folk Art Messenger* (Spring 1992): 6.

<sup>145</sup> Fabian and Szombati-Fabian, pp. 252-253.

Norman Girardot commented that the "book calls attention to itself as an arresting, and in some ways disturbing, physical artifact and cultural commodity."<sup>146</sup> This book stands as a symbol of the absorption and consecration of Traylor's work by the art market.

The absorption and consecration of Traylor's art by the marketplace followed a process of designation.<sup>147</sup> Designation involves the discovery of an object as well as the assessing and assigning the value of the object once it has been deemed "a work of art." "'Art'," as Raymond Williams writes in Marxism and Literature, is not "a categorically separate dimension, or body of objects," distinct from other material processes, nor is "the aesthetic" an "isolable extra-social phenomenon." Rather, each are derived from and contained within social processes, products of the "variability, the relativity, and the multiplicity of actual cultural practice." The process of designating value can be understood as variable responses to a specific "aesthetic situation."<sup>148</sup> In the discourse on art, the term "value," as anthropologists Johannes Fabian and Ilona Szombati-Fabian have noted, carries an equivocal meaning involving both aesthetic and commercial

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<sup>146</sup> Girardot, p. 6.

<sup>147</sup> In the use of the idea of "designation and consecration" I am relying on the work of French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel; see The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public, translated by Caroline Beattie and Nick Merriman (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991), p. 177.

<sup>148</sup> Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992 [1977]), pp. 153-154, 157.



value since "art appreciation is always also, and sometimes nothing but, art appraisal."<sup>149</sup>

While he was "discovered" by Shannon in the late 1930s, his work did not hold value within the marketplace until Shannon revived and merchandised his collection of Traylor's art in the early 1980s. Maresca and Ricco's preface gives us a glimpse of the designation process as they bring the reader into the world of the collector/dealer embarking on what folk art scholar Jean Lipman has referred to as "the hunt."<sup>150</sup> The editors recall their first encounter with Traylor's work in Charles Shannon's apartment in 1981. In this section they refer to Shannon not by name but as "the seller," and suggest that although they had the good taste to recognize the aesthetic value of Traylor's work, at that time they were not sure they could convince the market to follow their superior judgment.

From the moment we began to leaf through [Traylor's drawings], we were stunned. Here was something different, great, and truly unexpected. . . . But we hesitated and became practical. Who would understand and appreciate this work? What would the costs of marketing be? Hesitating to make a decision, we left the

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<sup>149</sup> Fabian and Szombati-Fabian, p. 254.

<sup>150</sup> Jean Lipman, "The Museum's Good Friend: Effie Thixton Arthur, 1902 to 1979," The Clarion (Spring 1980) as cited by Julie Ardery in "The Designation of Difference," New Art Examiner (September 1991): 29.

apartment and shortly thereafter the seller consummated a deal with someone else.<sup>151</sup>

Sketched in the context of buyers, sellers, consummated deals and, implicitly, fortunes missed and made, this section vividly illustrates the importance of commercial viability in the assessment of Traylor's art. Included in the pages devoted to a lavish celebration of Traylor and his work, the preface conveys the idea that objects cannot be deemed aesthetically worthy until they are accepted by the marketplace and considered commercially worthy.

In Traylor's case, the process of commodification began well after his death. During his lifetime, as Lovell points out to Mirabella readers, "there was no market for this kind of thing."<sup>152</sup> While Traylor did sell or trade his work, this transaction was not part of a working market but rather was based on a system of fair exchange. Traylor often bartered his work for paint or other art supplies. When offered money for his drawings, the artist used it to buy his meals for the day or to purchase what he needed to continue drawing.<sup>153</sup> This type of exchange is similar to that occurring with contemporary folk artists in Shabda in southeastern Zaire when anthropologists Johannes Fabian and Ilona Szombati-Fabian did their research in the 1970s. In their article "Folk Art From an Anthropological Perspective" they explain:

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<sup>151</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. xi.

<sup>152</sup> Lovell, p. 52.

<sup>153</sup> To a certain extent, many contemporary self-taught artists have continued to operate under a similar sort of balanced exchange system. See Manley, p. 28.

The transaction is not far removed from primitive exchange. Like other craftsmen in these towns, the painter sells his product at a price just high enough to give him a daily income comparable to that of other workers and artisans. . . . The price of the painting reflects the value of materials (and therefore varies with sizes) and the artist's labor. A separation between use/exchange value and market value (one that would permit the "circulation" of paintings) has not yet occurred.<sup>154</sup>

Bill Traylor did not "know the way of money," as his granddaughter Mrs. Staffney stated, in the modern sense of market value.<sup>155</sup> Traylor did not separate value from function, as is clear in his oft-repeated statement, "Sometimes they buys 'em when they don't even need 'em."<sup>156</sup>

During this period Shannon did attempt to introduce Traylor's work to the art market. As the 1941 exchange between Shannon and MOMA director Alfred Barr suggests, however, the market at this time was not able to deem this work commercially worthy. Barr's offer of \$2.00 for large works and \$1.00 for smaller ones, was rejected by Charles Shannon who expressed "revulsion at Alfred Barr's imperious attempt . . . to purchase some of Traylor's drawings . . . for a mere pittance."<sup>157</sup> While a small coterie of dealers and collectors were devoted to American

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<sup>154</sup> Fabian and Szombati-Fabian, pp. 252-253.

<sup>155</sup> Traylor Family Reunion audiotape.

<sup>156</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 8.

<sup>157</sup> See Maresca and Ricco, p. 25, for an account of this attempted transaction; Girardot, p.

primitive and folk art, Traylor's art did not quite fit into this niche. Accounts of the 1932 MOMA "Art of the Common Man" exhibit establishes the fact that their interests lay in traditional folk art objects like whirligigs, samplers, chests, quilts and limner portraits.

Without a market to sell the work to, Charles Shannon put his collection of Traylor's work into storage. As Shannon explained: "In the late forties and for years to come, [abstract expressionism] completely dominated the art climate. Work such as Traylor's was not given the time of day." With no market for his product, Shannon "stored it away, keeping out a few drawings for [his] own enjoyment."<sup>158</sup>

A market for black art began to develop in the 1970s. As art historian Gene Metcalf has noted, during this period the black awareness movement and American folklorists' interest in material culture combined to generate a real concern "for American folk art defined by its 'blackness.'"<sup>159</sup> As discussed in chapter one, American folk art and primitive art have enjoyed a lucrative commercial audience since the 1920s.<sup>160</sup> By the 1980s, Metcalf writes, "black art (especially when it could be labeled as black folk art) had become a marketable commodity in the established folk art world."<sup>161</sup> Assessing the responsiveness of the art market during the late 1970s, Shannon "set about cataloguing, cleaning,

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<sup>158</sup> Maresca and Ricco, p. 25.

<sup>159</sup> Metcalf, p. 182.

<sup>160</sup> See chapter one, pp. 34-40.

<sup>161</sup> Metcalf, p. 183.

and otherwise putting the body of work in orderly condition to prepare it for public exposure."<sup>162</sup>

The one-man show for Traylor in 1979 at the newly established R. H. Oosterom gallery in New York met with minimal success; it did, however, engender some commercial interest in Traylor's work. In the role of "the seller," Shannon "consummated a deal" with a commercial gallery soon after this show. Through the increased exposure gained by this agency, Traylor's work was selected to become part of the 1982 Corcoran Gallery exhibit "Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980." One of Traylor's paintings, in fact, was used for the catalogue's cover. And, after being hailed as "the star of the show" by New York Times critic Vivien Raynor, Traylor's "ascendance into art-heaven" was assured.<sup>163</sup>

Traylor's work has ascended in the art world during the past decade because a market for his work had developed and thrived. The process of designation involves the recognition of a corpus of like objects that can be referred to in order to legitimate the value of an object. Fabian and Szombati-Fabian recognize two opposing movements involved in the process of art evaluation. While one impulse assigns a specific value based on individual objects' aesthetic qualities, a second impulse, "sociologizing," searches for general "contexts and connections," ways to achieve abstract comparability between valued objects. In the case of Traylor's art, the corpus has varied according to the

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<sup>162</sup> Maresca and Ricco, pp. 25-26. See chapter two for a discussion of the effect of his "preparation process" on our understanding of Traylor and his art.

<sup>163</sup> New York Times critic Vivien Raynor proclaimed Traylor "the star of the show in her 1982 review (Finore, p.43); Cameron, p. 46.

context in which it is being assessed. His art was originally merchandised in a market that revolved around black folk art. Since then it has been discussed and marketed in the context of primitive art, black art, modern art, naive art, art brut and outsider art.

The issue of assigning a work of art or an artist to a specific corpus is quite problematic. "Outsider," for example, is one of a many terms used to define a type of artist who is self-taught and, in most cases, works in a manner, and from a position, that differentiates them from the traditions of the mainstream, academic art world. While the term was originally advanced by Roger Cardinal who took up the cause of art brut (the devotion of French artist Jean Dubuffet), its definition has evolved since the publication of his 1972 book, Outsider Art.<sup>164</sup> The term was not taken up on a large scale until the definition of "folk art" was called into question by a number of scholars in the late 1970s.<sup>165</sup> By the 1980s, many collectors, dealers and scholars, unable to comfortably situate the idiosyncratic, unique art of some so-called folk artists within this communal, ritualistic canon, embraced the idea of the "outsider" who defied folk as well as mainstream art traditions.

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<sup>164</sup> Roger Cardinal, Outsider Art (London, England: Praeger, 1972); Following Dubuffet, Cardinal recognized art brut, the art of the insane, the innocent, as "outsider" art; see pp. 16-17, 29-30.

<sup>165</sup> See, for example, Ken Ames' comments in "Folk, or Art: A Symposium," and Ames' Beyond Necessity: Art in the Folk Tradition (NY: W. W. Norton, 1977); Daniel Robbins, "Folk Art Without Folk," Folk Sculpture, USA, Herbert Hemphill, Jr., ed. (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1976).

As with the definition of folk art, however, the term "outsider art" has been the subject of much heated debate. While some advocates staunchly defend or mutely accept the term "outsider," others have proclaimed it pejorative, demeaning, class-biased and totally market driven. Curator Roger Manley, for example, writes that "When representatives from the art market make contact with artists they label Outsiders, all too often these dealers and collectors are only acting out of a sense of what will sell or increase in value. The term "Outsider" itself sets up an imaginary category which seeks to make acceptable a range of exploitative practices."<sup>166</sup> Similarly, some of the few artists that have been consulted on the matter have expressed the notion that such terminology is incongruous and unnecessary. Georgia artist Reverend Howard Finster, for example, has stated,

"As far as I'm concerned, there ain't no outsiders of anything. If you're an artist, you're an artist. If you're a mechanic, you're a mechanic. If you're a farmer, you're a farmer. Ain't no outsider farmer, ain't no outsider mechanics. That's just something that someone's go up to class things. I ignore it."<sup>167</sup>

Curators, dealers, collectors, scholars and fine artists, however, continue to use terms like "outsider" and the debate over proper terminology wages on. The struggle to label and define this art, however, has taken precedence over serious study of these artists and their creative lives.

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<sup>166</sup> Manley, 26.

<sup>167</sup> As quoted by Tessa Decarlo and Susan Subtle Dintenfass in "The Outsiders," Los Angeles Times Magazine (October 11, 1992).

This predicament follows the pattern outlined in Fabian and Szombati-Fabian's study of folk art where "a science of folk art seeks its meaning beneath the surface of its images and behind the backs of its producers."<sup>168</sup> In "Folk Art from an Anthropological Perspective," they reason that "the logic of the market" that creates this pattern for it requires the abstraction of the social, historical and political significance of art objects. "Concretization," write Fabian and Szombati-Fabian, "jeopardizes the currency value of a corpus . . ."<sup>169</sup> In the process of designation, in other words, legitimization of an object through its corpus association must be abstract so that the value of an object can remain perpetually fluid.

The "logic of the market" is by no means benign, for both artistic identity and critical reference are compromised.<sup>170</sup> Placing a particular artist in a particular corpus in order to judge the value of their work in the marketplace, for example, imposes an artistic identity on them that may be inappropriate or misleading. Howard Finster does not see himself as an "outsider" yet dealers merchandise his art to a successful market according to his status as a "visionary." Moreover, as the discussion in chapter two has revealed, by accepting the abstract knowledge received from within the marketplace we can only achieve a cursory understanding of the artist, the art and the material

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<sup>168</sup> Fabian and Szombati-Fabian, p. 292.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., see pp. 253-254 which includes their discussion of "the logic of the market."

<sup>170</sup> Hancock, p. 21.



circumstances in which the art was produced.<sup>171</sup> With the control over the artistic identity firmly in the hands of the dealer, collector or scholar who presents this art to the world, an individual's artistic talent and unique vision become an incidental part of the label assigned to them in the marketplace. The "sensibilities of the 'protector,'" as artist Bessie Harvey's statement suggests, become the defining force behind the work once it leaves the hands of its creator and enters the marketplace:

"We just take the waste that nobody don't want or couldn't care less about, and we see beauty in it. And we bring out the beauty we find in this junk (as they call it). Then, when we bring it out -- Oh boy -- it is something big and new then, and we don't get no credit for what we've done. Except they take our name and put it out and make it big so they can buy the work from us for nothing and sell it for something. And they keep the something and we still get the nothings."<sup>172</sup>

Though this art would probably not be discovered or recognized without their efforts, it is necessary that the study of self-taught art like folk art "confront the damage caused by collectors . . ."<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Fabian and Szombati-Fabian, p. 259. The authors believe that the only way to "go beyond the logic of the market" in the study of objects that are designated as art, one must "gain access to the concrete material conditions of their production."

<sup>172</sup> Hancock, p. 25; Scott Crocker and Toshiaki Ozawa, "Boneshop of the Heart," (1990) as quoted by Manley, p. 25.

<sup>173</sup> Fabian and Szombati-Fabian, p. 262.

Bessie Harvey's statement directly refers to the inequities involved in this market system and the exploitation that almost inevitably results. Her comments mirror Fabian and Szombati-Fabian's observations that the logic of the market "leads to grave-robbery and cultural thievery on a grand scale; it creates a kind of market where profits realized by intermediaries are in no relation to the benefits that go to producers, i.e., it creates a kind of exploitation that can be explained but not excused by the mechanics of a free market."<sup>174</sup> The exploitation of these artists has received an inordinate amount of media coverage recently, including a recent "60 Minutes" exposé and an "L.A. Law" episode based on the 1992 lawsuit against Shannon by Traylor's descendants. As a number of articles detail, ethics and exploitation are urgent, valid issues that those involved with self-taught art must address. To focus solely on this aspect of self-taught art, however, as collector Butler Hancock has remarked, erodes "the artist's rights to equal critical representation" and relegates the identity of the artist to that of victim or potential victim.<sup>175</sup>

Like artistic identity, critical reference has also been skewed by the workings of the market. One symptom is the prevalence of "positivistic"<sup>176</sup> labeling which praises the art with adjectives that carry negative connotations: lovable, quaint, child-like, primitive, witty, raw. Collectively, as John Michael Vlach has noted, "these words form a

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<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>175</sup> Hancock, p. 25; see also Manley, pp. 25-28 for a discussion on exploitation.

<sup>176</sup> I am using the term as defined by Fabian and Szombati-Fabian, pp. 288-289.

dialect of derogation . . ."<sup>177</sup> Those engaged in this critical discourse rely on the "lazy, easy brandname" terminology of this dialect, writes Toni Morrison, "when the hard work of analysis is deemed too hard, or when the critic does not have access to the scope the work demands."<sup>178</sup> It is the "attitudes of the beholder," as Fabian and Szombati-Fabian explain, not the "attributes of objects" that fuels this "ideological verdict." Critics like Morrison, Fabian and Szombati-Fabian realize the pernicious influence of this frame of critical reference.<sup>179</sup> While it acknowledges the existence of self-taught art, this type of critical discourse consigns the art to an inferior status.

Another symptom of the effects of the market can be found by examining the focus of critical reference. In "The Designation of Indifference," for instance, Butler Hancock decries the critical focus on what he calls "safe" art in response to a commercial market that favors "non-controversial" art. Hancock argues that this creates an inaccurate critical picture of the art of the self-taught for there are many self-taught artists who confront controversial issues and "hot" topics in a manner that equals the work of fine artists.<sup>180</sup> Moreover, he asserts, this narrow focus allows the "avant-garde" art establishment to deny the importance of self-taught art:

The "designation of difference" by a small field of enthusiasts pales in comparison to the designation of

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<sup>177</sup> John Michael Vlach, "The Wrong Stuff," New Art Examiner (September 1991): 24.

<sup>178</sup> Morrison, p. 209.

<sup>179</sup> See Vlach, pp. 23-24; Morrison, p. 208, Fabian and Szombati-Fabian, pp. 289-292.

<sup>180</sup> Hancock, p. 21-22; Ardery, p. 31.

indifference as practiced with a vengeance by a powerful art hierarchy that is committed to, and invested in, the proposition that there is no viable art to consider or protect when it does not come out of an approved commercial or academic movement.

Critical reference, Hancock implies, can reinforce the hegemony of high culture categories that isolate self-taught artists in subordinate positions.<sup>181</sup>

In a 1991 article in American Art, museum director Kinshasha Holman Conwill raises some important questions regarding the abundance of critical interest in African American self-taught art over the art of trained black artists:

What is it about this art that is so engaging that curators, collectors, dealers, critics and trained artists have devoted major exhibitions, publications, hours of discussion, and passion to its study and acquisition? Is it merely coincidence that so many of the artists are southern, poor, black, and without formal training, and that those who collect their work are often white, educated, and affluent? Why are some of the same individual collectors and institutions apparently less interested in the works of trained black artists. . .? . . . Is the work of self-taught artists somehow more "authentic" . . .?<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Vlach, p. 24.

<sup>182</sup> Kinshasha Holman Conwill, "In Search of an "Authentic" Vision: Decoding the Appeal of the Self-Taught African -American Artist," American Art 5:4 (Fall 1991): 3-4.

Issues of class, race and hegemony, while perhaps only part of the reason behind the acceptance of one type of artist over another, are suggested by this tendency. Given the fact that critical focus leads to the marginalization of some types of artists and the elevation of others in the art market, however, it is crucial that we engage in a discourse devoted to exploring and expanding critical criteria so that all art is can be accorded scope it demands.

Curator Alice Rae Yellin has commented, "Self-taught artists have emerged into the artistic mainstream, but it has been trained artists, collectors, dealers and scholars who have coaxed them out. They have not sought the art world; the art world has come to them."<sup>183</sup> For many self-taught artists still alive today, the art world now comes to them in droves -- in cars, on tour buses, through the mail or telephone -- and the demand for their work has forced them "to turn their creative energies to running repetitive mailorder outfits."<sup>184</sup> The art market has not simply found a receptive consumer audience for their art, it has altered their private worlds and effected how they are perceived by the public world. Though the nature of this influence is different for "post-humously hot" artists like Bill Traylor, as with living artists, the market informs our understanding of their work and their lives. We now encounter their work on the sanctified walls of museums as well as in commercial art galleries, exhibition catalogues, newspaper and magazine articles, coffee-table art books, calendars, and even popular television

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<sup>183</sup> Yellin, p. 19.

<sup>184</sup> Manley, p. 25.

programs. The art of the self-taught comes to us as designated, consecrated merchandise of the art world.

Created at the slow beginnings of self-taught art's popularity and embraced by the art market during the past decade, Bill Traylor's art now reigns as some of the highest priced and most sought after merchandise in this market. While the cost of and interest in Traylor's art has grown over the years, the scattered critical and scholarly work on him and his work is stunted by comparison. Yet if self-taught art is truly "one of the last frontiers in twentieth-century American art," as Corcoran Gallery curator Jane Livingston has pronounced, scholarly discourse must expand and critical criteria must evolve so that the process of exploration does not plunder what it seeks to preserve in the name of manifest destiny.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Jane Livingston, "The Art of the Self-Taught/The Art of Our Time," in Yellin, p. 28.

## CONCLUSION

In an article on the 1992 Traylor family lawsuit against Charles Shannon and the commercial gallery representing him, High Museum curator Carrie Przybilla commented that the case raised questions about exploitation, a "thorny issue" that haunts self-taught art.<sup>186</sup> Believing that Bill Traylor had been taken advantage of by a white artist, the Traylor family suit was concerned more with control than financial rewards. Traylor's reputation and art had been Charles Shannon's domain for decades, and the lawsuit was a challenge to his exclusive rights to this legacy. The legacy, according to the family, is not merely the art, which is estimated to be worth millions of dollars, but the story of the art and the artist which has until now disinherited Traylor's descendants.

This disinheritance is perhaps the most poignant aspect of the lawsuit. Like the Traylor family, many self-taught artists are denied a part of and in their legacy once it has entered the art market. As artist Bessie Harvey's comment suggested in chapter 3, their creations escape their control once it leaves their hands. Aesthetic control is transferred to the hands of those who designate the object "art," establish its commercial value and subsequently "speak" for the art (even when it is

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<sup>186</sup> Susannah Vesey, "Drawn into Controversy," The Atlanta Journal (January 3, 1993):

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"so strong that it speaks for itself"). Ignoring the producers, this art becomes the domain of the consumers.

This type of control restricts the content and context of the objects we appreciate. Our understanding of Traylor's past has been delineated by the memory of one man. Chapter one adds to this understanding by presenting a historical account of Bill Traylor's life. Similarly, chapter two outlines how attempting different connections can expand our appreciation of Traylor's art. Specifically addressing the spiritual nature of his work and its ties to Afro-Christianity, we are able to add a new chapter to the interpretation of his art. Yet, as chapter three discusses, it is only by moving beyond the knowledge received within the context of the market that we are able to enlarge our perspective of Bill Traylor and his art. Ultimately, one of the primary goals of this work is to call the boundaries of received knowledge into question and, by raising "thorny" issues, invite the proliferation of discourse on Bill Traylor in particular, and self-taught art in general, so that through inquiry and debate, we may enrich and enlarge our view of American culture.



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