



Afro-American Writing Today

AN ANNIVERSARY
ISSUE OF THE
SOUTHERN REVIEW

Edited by James Olney

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WHAT WAS SAID by way of acknowledgments in the “Editorial Note” to the Afro-American number of the *Southern Review* I would like to repeat here: I doubt that I will ever again receive, for a single issue, so much help from so many people as for this one. I hesitate to list the names, for I fear that I will forget some, but I cannot fail to thank at least the following for assistance, advice, encouragement, and good words in general: Houston A. Baker, Jr., Thadious Davis, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Robert Hemenway, Joyce A. Joyce, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Robert O’Meally, Charlotte Pierce-Baker, Arnold Rampersad, Charles H. Rowell, John Sekora, Robert B. Stepto, Claudia Tate, John Edgar Tidwell, and Mary Helen Washington. Anthony Barthelemy served as associate editor of the Afro-American special number, and his presence is discernible throughout this volume. Donna Perreault’s assistance in transforming the special number into a manuscript for Louisiana State University Press has been invaluable. Likewise, Beverly Jarrett and Catherine Landry of LSU Press have demonstrated editorial wisdom at every stage of the transfiguration from journal issue to published book. I am deeply grateful to all these people who have assisted in bringing this volume into being twice over.

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Introduction

THIS VOLUME IS intended to put into more lasting form a special number of the *Southern Review* (Summer, 1985) devoted to Afro-American writing. That issue of the *Review* enjoyed a very considerable success and an eager demand. Indeed, it was sold out, through new subscriptions and requests for individual copies, before the number ever arrived from the printer in the *Southern Review* offices, which says something about the timeliness of devoting a special number of the journal to the subject of Afro-American writing and also about the lively interest that exists in many quarters, both within and without the South, in this liveliest of literatures. Putting aside for a moment the liveliness of the literature, I might say something first about how and why it seemed particularly appropriate in 1985 to devote a number of the *Southern Review* to Afro-American writing. I should emphasize in this regard four points: the very title of the *Southern Review*; the history and present situation of the *Southern Review*; the historical and current circumstances of Afro-American writing; and the state of Afro-American criticism, both literary criticism and cultural criticism more broadly, in recent years and today.

As to the title of the *Southern Review*: I assume that it would be generally agreed, and I take it pretty much as a given, that the South is uniquely what it is in large part because of the black presence in that section of the country. This is doubtless true of the entire nation (C. G. Jung used to claim that Americans of all races differ from Europeans because of the subtly pervasive influence of black rhythms and black styles), but for historical, economic, and social reasons it is true to a much greater degree of the South than of America in general. Ralph Ellison has said that the peculiar blend of possibility and denial faced by the Negro provides a kind of heightened metaphor for the American experiment and indeed for the human condition, and one might well

suggest that this emblematic significance that can be read in the situation of the Negro generally is not diminished but only intensified in the South, which itself, in the pages of writers both black and white, has often enough been seen as a compressed image of the problems and possibilities of the entire country. If this is so, then a "southern" review that is going to do justice to the literary, historical, and cultural realities of the region and its relationship to the nation must necessarily accord a fair portion of its time, attention, and space to the black presence in the life and the literature of the South and throughout the United States. Although much of the writing collected in this volume comes from outside the South, the roots of Afro-American literature and culture unquestionably go deep into southern soil, and thus it seemed as natural and fitting to devote a special number of the *Southern Review* to Afro-American writing as it was to devote special numbers to the southern writer and to T. S. Eliot.

That there should have been these three special numbers in a single year was determined by the history of the *Southern Review*: the journal was founded in 1935 under the editorship of Charles W. Pipkin, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren and refounded, in a new series, in 1965 under the editorship of Lewis P. Simpson and Donald E. Stanford. Thus 1985 was a dual anniversary year, marking fifty years since the founding of the original *Southern Review* and twenty years since its refounding in a new series (coincidentally, it was also the fiftieth anniversary of Louisiana State University Press and the 125th anniversary of the founding of Louisiana State University)—hence a year for celebration and for commemorative issues of the *Southern Review*. The spring number bore on its cover the legend "An Anniversary Issue: The Southern Writer," the summer number was designated "An Anniversary Issue: Afro-American Writing," and the autumn number declared itself "An Anniversary Issue: T. S. Eliot." As to the history that led up to these anniversary issues, the original series of the *Southern Review*, although it lasted only seven years, was astonishingly, brilliantly successful, and when the editors designate were planning the editorial direction for the new series, they believed, and no doubt rightly, that they should follow to a considerable extent the lead that had proved so successful in the journal's brief first incarnation. That is to say, the new series, like the original series, has had a dual focus on the literature of the southern United States and on modernist literature, which the editors, however, perceived not as two polarized interests, all too likely to yield a divided, schizophrenic publication, but as complementary and fruitful ways to a better understanding of both southern and modernist writing. Southern writing, in their view,

was not a provincial literature (unless Yeats, for example, and the Irish literary renaissance could also be labeled "provincial") but was, on the contrary, very near the center of whatever could profitably be called "modernism"; and whatever was alive and well in the literature of the South was hand in glove with the shaping of the modernist canon that was going on not only in the South but simultaneously in the northern states, in Great Britain and Ireland, and on the European continent as well. One might say, then, that special issues devoted to the southern writer and to T. S. Eliot constituted recognition of this historically determined dual focus of the *Southern Review*—as it were, the journal's two-eyed, single-visioned understanding of modern literature published as two discrete numbers. But this is not yet a full explanation of the Afro-American issue, which appeared, appropriately, in the middle of the *Southern Review*'s anniversary year.

In the planning stages of the new series of the *Southern Review*, according to the account given in Thomas Cutrer's *Parnassus on the Mississippi: The "Southern Review" and the Baton Rouge Literary Community, 1935–1942*, the new editors consulted Cleanth Brooks on the direction that he felt the journal should take after more than twenty years of nonpublication. "It should take [a direction] as different from that of the magazine of 1935–1942 as the literary situation demanded," was Mr. Brooks's advice. The literary situation of the late 1930s was, in many ways, not especially conducive to the publication of significant amounts of Afro-American writing, but in recent years, and certainly by 1983, when I was appointed to succeed Donald E. Stanford upon his retirement as editor of the *Southern Review*, that situation had changed dramatically. And so it seemed to me and to my colleague, Lewis P. Simpson, who gave his enthusiastic support to the Afro-American special number from start to finish, that personal and historic circumstances had conspired to offer us a unique opportunity to do something that would be altogether in keeping with the editorial purview and vision of the *Southern Review* and that would yet, at the same time, extend it in the different direction that, as Mr. Brooks said, "the literary situation demanded." Afro-American writing has not been prominent in the pages of the *Southern Review*, and, as suggested above, there have no doubt been good historical reasons for this relative neglect; all historical explanations aside, however, there seemed to both Lewis Simpson and me to be compelling reasons for changing this situation and thus realizing the added dimension that was potentially available and altogether appropriate to the journal's editorial vision. And this brings me to the third of my four points, namely, the historical and current circumstances of Afro-American writing.

One reason for bringing Afro-American writing into greater prominence in the pages of the *Southern Review* is that in this literature the modernist mode and the southern literary and cultural heritage are more fully joined and more completely engaged with each other than in probably any other writing. Moreover, one can perceive from the perspective of the mid-eighties that this merger of modernism with a southern heritage characterizes Afro-American writing not only today but historically from the Harlem Renaissance to the present—from Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes through Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin to Amiri Baraka and Ishmael Reed. Toomer, Hurston, and Hughes were, in their various ways, modernists, and so have been those who came after them—to the degree, indeed, that Afro-American writing may well come to be seen as the primary locus of modernist literature in the eighties. Moreover, while the South may or may not have been always at the center of the black writer's consciousness, Afro-American writing, for whatever reasons personal, social, and historical, has rehearsed again and again the drama of departure from the South and return to it—a return not always in fact (though often enough it has been) but at least in imagination, a return that would uncover obscured traces, that would discover and recover the cultural and ancestral past. Afro-American writing might thus be said to be both quintessentially modern (or modernist) and quintessentially southern, and as such a more than appropriate literature, indeed a central literature, for the pages of the *Southern Review*.

Another compelling reason for giving prominence to Afro-American writing now has nothing to do with the fact that the *Southern Review* is a specifically southern journal or that it has traditionally had an eager interest in modernist literature but lies instead, very simply, in the quality of contemporary Afro-American writing and the vitality of the tradition it embodies. Any literature that can boast of the poets, dramatist, critics, and fiction writers included in this volume can claim something much more than mere good fortune or a state of being blessed. There is here a long tradition, a tradition both of living and of literature, very much alive in writing now, and one would be hard pressed to name another body of writing with quite the same vitality and variety and drive as this one shows. What editor would not be grateful for the opportunity to publish any or all of the writers (not to mention the photographer) represented here? From an editor's point of view, *opportunity* is the exact and right word: it was an opportunity not to be missed and one that I am happy to say was embraced with enthusiasm and gratitude.

Perhaps the most appropriate way to say something about the cur-

rent state of Afro-American literary and cultural criticism is to look at a pair of motifs that appear in a number of the pieces in this collection, namely, jazz music (specifically, the blues) and quilts or quilting. These two subtexts, as it were, developed quite spontaneously and independently—they were not planned, and pieces were not chosen because one or the other motif was present—and, taken together, they say something of great importance about Afro-American literature and culture. Also—and this again is important—the motifs occur both in pieces that might be described as “creative” and in pieces that might be described as “critical.” (One reason for using quotation marks here is that the line between the two modes in this collection is a flexible, indistinct, and shifting one.) That the motifs appear in critical essays as well as in fiction and poetry (and in the photographs as well) suggests that they have in common a deep-running significance in and for the black community, a significance that goes far beyond the genres of literature or the different means of expression in language, in musical sounds, and in images. Even in those pieces in which quilting or the blues do not explicitly appear, it might well be argued that they are present in spirit and that together they represent a principle of thinking, of relating, of tradition, and of living that is essential to the black community both literary and extraliterary.

“Weaving, shaping, sculpting, or quilting in order to create a kaleidoscopic and momentary array,” Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Charlotte Pierce-Baker remark in their essay on quilting and community in a story of Alice Walker, “is tantamount to providing an improvisational response to chaos.” That this formulation is in essence rather like Robert Frost’s famous description of poetry (“a momentary stay against confusion”) does not make it the less exact or fitting as a description of specifically black artistic and cultural forms. On the contrary, I would suggest, on the one hand, that in spirit this formulation has to do with a world and an activity that are Frosteian by nature but, on the other hand, that in introducing the word *improvisational*, it serves to draw quilting together with jazz music and points to a highly significant aspect of all sorts of cultural forms of the Afro-American community. It is improvisation and recurrence with variation or revision that characterize not only blues and quilting but also Afro-American poetry, fiction, drama, and criticism—and indeed the phrase “improvisation and recurrence with variation or revision” might be taken as a fair description of Afro-American literary tradition and literary history. And beyond strictly literary concerns, this all has to do with community—community of spirit in the present and community of creative expression across generations. (One thing that

struck me forcefully about the pieces that came in for the Afro-American number—in contrast to the flood of regular submissions, presumably largely from white writers, dealing with erotic situations, marital conflicts, and generational antagonisms—was the constant emphasis on family, on ancestry, on, in a word, community.) Quilts might be seen as a visible symbol of ancestry and heritage and communal piecing together just as the literary tradition that started even before the writing of the slave narratives in the nineteenth century and that flows through writers of the Harlem Renaissance and Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright to writers of the present moment can be conceived of as an analogue to the blues tradition of repetition and variation, recurrence and increase.

To express it as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston Baker have notably done, the artistic and cultural forms of the black community are intimately bound up with the activity known as signifying. Signifying is playing on and against a previous expression, a previous form, and in Afro-American writing, as in the Afro-American community, it is both substance and style; in other words, where signifying is the mode, style is substance. Because oral/aural signifying obtains in linguistic, verbal exchanges as it does in the recurrences and variations of jazz music, it is a metaphor not only for the local ways of individual jazz performances but for those of individual Afro-American texts, and a metaphor as well for the extended tradition and history established in many performances and over many texts. Signifying constitutes an interpretation, a variation, a revision, and an extension of what has gone before. In his poem "Sr/Sd: for an African Chronicle," Houston Baker refers to "an endless play of signifiers," and this is at once a nice indication of the way in which style-as-meaning is everywhere in Afro-American expression and a clear demonstration of how Afro-American writers allow modernist and postmodernist critical terminology (*signifier* and *signified*, for example) a place in their discursive practice while making it, at the same time, all their own. The discourse recently produced by linguistic critics of French and other persuasions has been a fact of the Afro-American community, literary and otherwise, for about as far back as one can see. Signifying is the network of expression, interpretation, and meaning that binds together a community in the present by drawing that community into interpretive league, into interpretive exchange and interchange, with its own past.

This sense of community is perhaps even more overwhelmingly present in Roland Freeman's eloquent photographs. A great many of them depict someone in the act of weaving or braiding or patching or improvising or piecing together—in the act, in short, of signifying. There is

the picture of the girl with her hair in cornrows learning the means and the meaning of quilting from a woman one might guess to be her grandmother. That photograph is in spirit precisely the same as the one of an elderly woman showing a youngster (grandmother and grandson in this case) something in a tattered and worn book that would appear to be the family Bible—showing something, it might be supposed, about births and deaths, about family history, about heritage and ancestry. It might seem a great leap, an unjustifiable leap, from these photographs to the poetry of Amiri Baraka and Michael Harper and Marilyn Nelson Waniek, or to the fiction of Richard Perry and John E. Wideman, or to the essays of Anthony Barthelemy and Clyde Taylor, but the truth is, I believe, that these and all the other pieces gathered together in this volume, like the photographs themselves, enact an improvisational drama of generational recurrence and revitalization and variation, a revision that means new life for the predecessor as for the reviser and, indeed, means new life for the community as a whole and for the tradition that is embodied and extended in the photographs, drama, stories, interviews, poems, and essays of this volume. Those readers familiar with the original issue of the *Southern Review* will notice that one of the strongest pieces contained therein, the conversation between Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, is omitted from the present volume. I very much regret that Toni Morrison would not give her permission to reproduce that piece.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

*An Interview with
Josephine Baker and James Baldwin*

IN 1973, HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR., was in Paris interviewing black American expatriates. He sought to know why, after the "gains" of the sixties, so many black Americans still found it necessary to live abroad. In addition to interviewing Leroy Haynes, proprietor of a Parisian Soul Food restaurant, Beauford Delaney, painter, and Bob Reid, musician, Gates interviewed Josephine Baker and James Baldwin. Although some twelve years have passed since these interviews, the observations and comments of Baker and Baldwin offer us insights into the expatriate experience then, and America now.

The interview with Josephine Baker began in her home, "Villa Maryvonne," in Monte Carlo. Later, while she and Gates were dinner guests at James Baldwin's home in St. Paul-de-Vence in the south of France, Gates concluded his interview with Baker and interviewed Baldwin. Although all of the conversation over dinner that night was not preserved, Baker's and Baldwin's responses to Gates's questions were. The individual interviews I have edited to read as a single conversation so that the genial ambience of that evening in St. Paul could be captured. Gates speaks of that evening and the events that led up to it in his own introduction to this piece.—Anthony Barthelémy

So many questions that I should have asked that night, but did not! I was so captivated by the moment: under the widest star-filled evening sky that I can remember, in the backyard of Baldwin's villa at St. Paul, drunk on conversation, burgundy, and a peasant stew, drunk on the fact that James Baldwin and Josephine Baker were seated on my right and left. It was my twenty-second summer; a sublime awe, later that evening, led me to tears.

Those few days in the south of France probably had more to do with my subsequent career as a literary critic than any other single event. At the time, I was a correspondent at the London bureau of *Time* magazine, a training that is, probably, largely responsible for the quantity of my later critical writing, and for its anecdotal opening paragraphs. I had just graduated from Yale College in June, as a Scholar of the House in History. *Time*, to even my great surprise, had hired me to work as a correspondent during the six month collective vacations at the University of Cambridge. I figured that I would "read" philosophy or literature at Cambridge, take the M.A. degree, then join permanently the staff at *Time*.

So, I sailed to Southampton from New York on the *France* in June, 1973. After a week of pure fright and anxiety—after all, what *does* a *Time* correspondent *do*?, and *how*?—I decided to go for my fantasy. I proposed doing a story on "Black Expatriates," perhaps every young Afro-American would-be-intellectual's dream. To my astonishment, the story suggestion was approved. So, off we (Sharon Adams, to whom I am married, and I) went by boat, train, and automobile to Europe, in search of blackness and black people.

In the Paris bureau of *Time*—Paris was the only logical point of departure, after all—I dialed Jo Baker's phone number. (*Time* can get to virtually *anyone*.) She answered her own phone! Stumbling around, interrupting my tortured speech with loads of "uh's" and "um's," I asked her if she would allow me to interview her. On one condition, she responded: "Bring Jimmy Baldwin with you to Monte Carlo." Not missing a beat, I promised that I would bring him with me.

Baldwin agreed to see me, after I had begged one of his companions and told him that I was heading south anyway to see Jo Baker. Cecil Brown, the companion told me, was living there as well, so maybe I could interview him as well? Cecil Brown, I thought. Def-i-nite-ly! (*Jive-ass Nigger* had been a cult classic among us younger nationalists in the early seventies.) So, off we went.

Imagine sitting on a train, from Paris to Nice, on the hottest night of August, 1973, wondering how I could drag Baldwin from St. Paul to Monte Carlo, and scared to death of Baldwin in the first place. It was a thoroughly Maalox evening; to top everything else, our train broke down in a tunnel. We must have lost twenty pounds in that tunnel. Finally, just after dawn, we arrived at Nice, rented a car, then drove the short distance to St. Paul.

After the best midday meal that I had ever eaten, before or since, I trekked with great trepidation over to Baldwin's "house." "When I

grow up . . .,” I remember thinking as I walked through the gate. I won’t bore you with details; suffice it to say that if you ever get the chance to have dinner with Jimmy Baldwin at his house at St. Paul, then *do* it. “Maybe *I* could write *Notes of a Native Son* if I lived here,” I thought.

I am about to confess something that literary critics should not confess: James Baldwin *was* literature for me, especially the essay. No doubt like everyone who is reading these pages, I started reading “black books” avidly, voraciously, at the age of thirteen or fourteen. I read *everything* written by black authors that could be ordered from Red Bowl’s paper store in Piedmont, West Virginia. LeRoi Jones’s *Home and Blues People*, Malcolm’s *Autobiography*, and *Invisible Man* moved me beyond words—beyond my own experience, which is even a further piece, I would suppose. But nothing could surpass my love for the Complete Works of James Baldwin. In fact, I have never before written about Baldwin just because I cannot read his words outside of an extremely personal nexus of adolescent sensations and emotions. “Poignancy” only begins to describe those feelings. I learned to love written literature, of any sort, through the language of James Baldwin.

When Baldwin came into the garden to be interviewed, I was so excited that I could not blink back the tears. That probably explains why he suggested that we begin with wine. Well into that first (of several) bottles, I confessed to him my promise to Jo Baker. Not missing a beat, he told me to bring Jo *here*. Did he think that she would drive back from Monte Carlo with me? Just tell her that dinner is served at nine.

And she did, after a warm and loving lunch with her family (we met *eleven* of the legendary twelve children), at her favorite restaurant overlooking Cape Martin. She had recently returned from a pilgrimage to Israel, and was looking forward to her return to the stage, her marvelous comeback. She was tall, as gracious and as warm as she was elegant, sensuous at sixty-five. Pablo this; Robeson that; Salvador so and so: she had been friends with the Western tradition, and its modernists. Everywhere we drove, people waved from the sidewalks or ran over to the car. She was so very *thoughtful*, so intellectual, and so learned of the sort of experience that, perhaps, takes six decades or so to ferment. I cannot drink a glass of Cantenac Brown without recreating her in its bouquet.

How did all of this lead to my present career? *Time* would not print the story, because, they said, “Baldwin is passé, and Baker a memory of the thirties and forties.” My narrative remains unpublished, but shall appear in a new essay collection called *With the Flow*. When I went “up” to Cambridge from *Time* and London in October, 1973, I was so angered by the idiocy of that decision that I threw myself into the B.A. curricu-