



# the waiting years

*Essays on American  
Negro Literature*

BLYDEN JACKSON

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American Negro  
Literature

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## An Introductory Essay

LOUISVILLE, Kentucky, is my hometown. I was not born there. But I was taken there so early in my childhood that my true birthplace means nothing to me. We came to Louisville—my parents, my older brother, and I—when I was not quite four. That was in the historic summer of 1914, the summer which saw the outbreak of World War I. I left Louisville, thenceforth to return only as a visitor, in the summer of 1945. Coincidence had arranged it that, as I had begun my residence in Louisville at almost the exact moment of the opening skirmishes of one of the two big wars of the century, I should withdraw from it within a short time of the closing of the second.

Presumably, anyone should get to know a town well in thirty-one years. I feel certain there was a part of Louisville that, at one time, I did know well. It could, however, only have been the Negro part. For, although Louisville was not Deep South and had, by law, only segregated schools, but no segregated public carriers (except on southbound trains), much of Louisville was not accessible to me. The municipal parks, for instance, were legally open to everyone, as was the public library, and I can distinctly recall picnicking freely in the parks when I was a little boy. But, then, by the time I was beginning to be big enough to notice girls the Park Board had built and set aside a park—Chickasaw by name (all Louisville parks had Indian names)—“especially” for the use of Negroes, so that gradually, yet rather quickly, without law, yet also with the

connivance of law enforcers, Chickasaw became the only park in Louisville for Negroes. In like manner, Louisville had two "colored" branch libraries, one in the west end and one in the east. All other branches were "white," as was, incidentally, the so-called main library. And I have no doubt that for many years, in the town where Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby's Daisy Fay Buchanan and Jordan Baker passed their "beautiful white girlhoods together," any Negro so unresponsive to the community ethos as to have insisted (and he would have had to insist) upon availing himself of the services at a "white" public library, had he refused to be cozened by the usual supposedly polite deterrents, might well (I speak almost seriously now) have ended up hanging from a tree.

Yet lynching was not actually a way of life in the Louisville of my youth. Boys had gangs in those days, too, although not by any means the ferocious kind of combat groups one reads and hears about in current reports descriptive of the inner cities of our present neo-Gothic urban scene. Our gangs were more innocent and considerably less lethal, much closer in what we did and in the bucolic simplicities with which we thought to Tom Sawyer and his friends than to the warring factions of *Westside Story*. Even so, our little band of amateur commandos fitfully pursued for two or three years a modest vendetta with a white gang, the members of which lived in a neighborhood contiguous to ours. I cannot say that the white gang and ours ever had a "rumble" in what has now become the classic sense. But both of our gangs lost no opportunity to exchange insults and to taunt each other. Once or twice, when it could not be avoided, we exchanged blows. That was all there ever was to it, however—boyish bravado and high jinks; and only once can I recall that an agitated parent, who did happen to be white, appealed to the police to curb our violence. In that case, moreover, the police did not act as if we small blacks had committed a desecration of some First Commandment in laying our sooty hands rudely on our "equisized" white peers. They cautioned

all the parents. I heard, or rather overheard, their conversation with my mother. It bordered on the conciliatory.

Such was the prescribed Louisville way. In my Louisville, while it was understood that Negroes had a place and should be kept therein, it was also understood that Louisville was a better than average town where ugly, brutal, open, racial friction was not the accepted thing. The local mores did not countenance the savagery of hicks. Louisville's vaunted public image could not abide such gaucherie. And so most of the "correction" of Negroes in my Louisville was perpetrated in ways that would not trespass against an ostensible observance of piety and good taste. Once on an Elysian summer evening I was strolling home in Louisville through a middle-class, white residential district. I was in my teens. A small white boy, hardly old enough to pronounce his own name—and to whom I was certainly a total stranger—alone on what I took to be his family's front lawn, hissed at me as I passed, "Nigger, nigger, nigger!" I wondered half-sardonically who his parents were. Surely they must have been responsible for training him to call me "Nigger." But where were they from that they had failed to train him not to let me hear him say it?

That was my Louisville. W. E. B. DuBois once spoke of the life of the American Negro, and the limitations imposed upon it, as a life within a veil. Perhaps nowhere in America did his words ring truer than in Louisville, at least in Louisville when I was there. Through a veil I could perceive the forbidden city, the Louisville where white folks lived. It was the Louisville of the downtown hotels, the lower floors of the big movie houses, the high schools I read about in the daily newspapers, the restricted haunts I sometimes passed, like white restaurants and country clubs, the other side of windows in the banks, and, of course, the inner sanctums of offices where I could go only as an humble client or a menial custodian. On my side of the veil everything was black: the homes, the people, the churches, the schools, the Negro park with Negro park police. By the

time I was in my second year of high school even the police who patrolled the streets in which I felt at ease were black. Whatever liberties my boyhood gang had taken, as a maturing citizen no longer a boy, I was generously injected with the mumbo-jumbos of American color caste. I knew that there were two Louisvilles and, in America, two Americas. I knew, also, which of the two Americas was mine. I knew there were things I was not supposed to do, honors I was not supposed to seek, people with whom I could have been congenial to whom I was never supposed to speak, and even thoughts I could have harbored that I was never supposed to think. I was a Negro. An act of God had circumscribed my life.

Except, of course, I never thought it was an act of God. I thought both of the disparate Louisvilles and all of America that clamored so for color caste could be traced back, not to divine intervention, but to sordid human purposes and drives. As such, I thought, and still think, that both of the Louisvilles, as well as any and all Americas, were, and are, subject to change. I did not think a significant change would come easily or soon. Too much was involved. But I did think that it would come. In the meantime I was not loitering dolefully outside the white folks' barred enclosure, too immobilized by self-pity to live a life of my own. I was in no way a casualty of war.

Some years ago indeed, there was a newspaper columnist, one of the most widely read in America, Westbrook Pegler, who had grounded his reputation on antiliberal tirades. He wrote of Communists as if they were the slimiest of devils from hell, of liberals as if they were Communists, and of Negroes as if they were beneath his scorn. And then a moment came in his professional pursuits when, for a period of days—during, I think, a presidential campaign, and on, I also think, one of the campaign trains—he was thrown into close contact with some Negro newsmen. One can imagine Pegler and those newsmen in the club car of their train between working hours, almost surely as the whiskey flowed and thawed them out, peering into each others' lives. At any rate, out of the experience Pegler



produced one of his most famous columns, one that began, "If I were a Negro, I would live in a state of constant fury." Yet most Negroes do not live in states of constant fury. Most Negroes in America have managed to survive, and even multiply (four and a half million at Emancipation; almost twenty-five million today), as fairly well-balanced and reasonably self-gratified individuals. It is not that Negroes are ignorant of, or unperturbed by, all that Pegler came to know and feel. But there is more to black America than a history of oppression, and more to being Negro than merely hating, or envying, whites.

I had fun in the Louisville that I knew, fun in the best of senses. It has long been incumbent upon me, as a teacher of literature, to try to immerse myself in the experience of others. Writer after writer whom I have studied has been like a conductor or a guide, who has, in the manner of Dante's Virgil, led me into, and often through, a world that was not my own. I have wanted to know intimately what Milton's world was like, or Keats's, or Melville's, or F. Scott Fitzgerald's, not to mention, since I teach Negro literature also, the worlds of Frederick Douglass or Claude McKay.

There was a time, for instance, when I projected a master's thesis on Thomas More. And so I amassed and organized, for myself, More's world, item after item, circumstantial detail after circumstantial detail. I knew who Archbishop (later Cardinal) Morton was, and John Colet, and Linacre, and, of course, Erasmus. I knew of More's tutelage in Morton's household, of his studies in the law, of the great fondness Henry VIII once professed for More, of More's family and More's favorite daughter, Meg, of the Rastells, and More's wearing of the hairshirt with which he mortified his flesh. I turned, that is, to the world of early Tudor England, to steep myself in it, almost to live in it, to know what *it* was like, so that when I would read, as I did, of Henry VIII, the monarch, boating down the Thames to steal in upon More in the privacy of More's Chelsea garden, the words in a book would no longer

be mere words to me, but all would have a meaning, for me, of concrete facts actually endowed with literal reality within my field of physical perception. What I was doing was not rare. Students of literature have been doing it for centuries. It is their custom to resurrect the worlds of the writers whose works they read. But this interest of mine in writers' actual lives, this old habit of my trade, has cast its light upon my life in Louisville.

Some of the people I knew there made their marks upon a larger stage. Whitney Young was from a family associated with Louisville. I went to school with an aunt of Julian Bond and played sometimes in the street before the house of the poet Joseph Seamon Cotter. But with or without celebrities, my Louisville was a strong and rich community. I have never felt cheated because I grew up in it. It had one high school, and I still wonder if any high school anywhere ever had a better faculty. The two women who taught me Latin taught me Latin. They did not only make their classes translate. A Caesar of flesh and blood was given to me by the first of them; and the other, an old maid, gave me a Dido and Aeneas, as well as an Anchises and a host of deities and mortals, who were at least at one time bright and vivid, not at all ridiculous or trivial in my mind. The dullest of my history teachers knew her history. The best, my father, dramatized the past as if it were a play being performed before his students' eyes. The man who taught me trigonometry and college algebra, and coached me in my graduation speech, left me forever contemptuous of mental indolents who alibi that mathematics is either arid or obscure. And I still think that I am an English teacher because I once studied English under one of my high-school English teachers. Moreover, I believe my high school was as it was because my Louisville was what it was. It was the truest democracy I have ever known. I do not mean that it was perfect. But I do mean that when I have compared it with other worlds I have observed or studied, such as those I read about in my trade, no matter how exemplary the other worlds have been considered, I have never been able to bring myself to feel that life in any of

those other worlds would have been better for me than life as I knew it in Negro Louisville, or that in any of those other worlds would the people I encountered have been of a nobler breed than those with whom I did consort as I grew up in Louisville.

I have taken, for example, more interest, perhaps, in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* than I might have were I not so involved as I am in my comparison of communities. Clearly Grover's Corners in New Hampshire, the town of *Our Town*, and a citadel of Aryanism, is a paean to the best in the New England village. I empathize with Emily Webb when she realizes, from beyond the grave, how wonderful, taken for granted and unappreciated as they tended to be, were all the days there. I admit, moreover, Grover's Corners' saltiness of earth. But had I had to choose between Grover's Corners and my Louisville I would have taken Louisville. I would never have traded my parents for Emily Webb's, nor my close associates and relatives, including my cousin who went to jail, for the people that she knew. Indeed, if the intention of American color caste was (as it surely was) to make me feel abased or to induce in me that chronic state of black rage which two young black psychiatrists, confirming Westbrook Pegler, have written a book to say is a medical fact for the American Negro—then color caste, at least in my personal reaction to it, has failed. All that I need to do is remember Grover's Corners. I know, that is, as I might well depose in a court of law on my solemn oath, of at least one segregated black community, ordained and ostracized by color caste, that I would match—virtue for virtue, as well as failing for failing (because, for every Thomas More, nature seems impartially to provide a Wolsey or a Thomas Cromwell)—with the finest of white communities. I know also, incidentally, from my youth and young manhood, of some other Negro communities that I would esteem as highly as I esteem the Louisville I remember not with loathing, but with love.

I would not be so silly as to argue that segregation has not deprived Negroes. In an America without color caste Booker T.

Washington, for example, might well have become president. He was, after all, a master politician, perhaps the best of southern vintage since the Civil War. But Washington was a member of a downtrodden minority. He did belong to a people who, during his lifetime, in America were universally Jim Crowed, widely disfranchised, and frequently imposed upon (with no hope of redress) by the most inconsequential of whites. Only recently has the southern Negro sharecropper ceased to be the likeliest symbol for the most wretched of Americans. And even today, *disadvantaged* remains largely a code word, and something of a palliative, for black. Yet, my Louisville did exist, substantially as I have said it was. I have not created it out of whole cloth, nor have I taken a fantasy and tried to beguile myself and others into believing that the fantasy is true. What I have asserted as there, was there—every distinctive portion of it. And, being there, it taught me, at a time when all my basic views were acquiring what is probably their final form, the folly, as well as the iniquity, of color caste. Surely there must have been, I could hardly fail to note conclusively, something mad about a system from which everybody lost. “Deprive yourself,” that system said to me. But what about the whites? I thought, when I meditated upon the Louisville that I had known—the one I had found not traumatic and depressing, but a source of much splendor and delight to a growing boy—that the whites were depriving themselves of something, too.

I finished high school in 1925. I was fourteen, and so I lectured, at my commencement, to an indulgent audience of my elders, on “Eternal Peace.” In the fall I went off to college, to Wilberforce University in Ohio, three miles from Xenia and about the same distance from Yellow Springs. It was a Negro school, considerably more a Negro school than schools like Fisk, Howard, Hampton, and Tuskegee. For it had been founded by the largest of the Negro Methodist denominations, the AMEs (African Methodist Episcopal Church). It had no white patron saints in its background, no tradition of Yankee schoolmarms from Down East, no ties with the Freedmen’s

Bureau, no grateful subsidiary's relationship to white philanthropists who might visit its campus as does Mr. Norton, the northern capitalist, in *Invisible Man*. It did have a tie that I was never quite able to fathom, because of what I had been conditioned to assume was the ironclad nature of America's commitment to separation of church and state. That tie bound Wilberforce, a church school, to the state of Ohio. Wilberforce's campus, when I was there, was bisected by a ravine. Everything on one side of the ravine was called the "Church Side" and was maintained by the AMEs. Everything on the other side of the ravine was called the "State Side" and was maintained by the state of Ohio. The "Church Side" now, incidentally, is a separate institution, Wilberforce University. The "State Side" now is an autonomous state college, Central State University. But when I was going to college, both sides had one president who happened then to be the holder of a German doctorate and the son of the AME bishop whose position made him chairman of the university's board of trustees. Once or twice while I was at Wilberforce I did see a committee from the Ohio legislature on the campus. And I remember an all-university convocation in honor of some legislators to whom the bishop made a rousing plea for higher education for the Negro which, despite the altruistic direct references of its exalted rhetoric, even I could discern, was indirectly a fervent plea for more state funds for Wilberforce. But whites were not much in evidence at Wilberforce when I was there. The "State Side" concentrated on teacher-training, trades, and commercial subjects. It did seem to have more money and to be better kept than the "Church Side." Yet the "Church Side," where I was, monopolized the liberal arts. It gave the prestige degrees.

Both the "State Side" and the "Church Side" of my Wilberforce, however, were intensely Negro. Over all the campus, ravine or no ravine, hovered the spirit of Daniel Alexander Payne, the physically frail, indomitable AME bishop who had founded the school. Behind Payne loomed the sacred appari-

tion of Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and its first bishop, whom some have called the father of the American Negro. Negro history was inescapable at Wilberforce. The home of Colonel Charles Young, at that time the greatest military hero of the race, was just off the campus. Near the ravine was Homewood Cottage, where Hallie Q. Brown, at an advanced age, was still active. She had written *Homespun Heroines* and had gone to school with the children of physician-journalist Martin R. Delany, whose family had made its home at Wilberforce during Delany's later years. The Underground Railroad had run through Wilberforce. Tawawa Springs, a watering spot to which some of the more compassionate southern planters had once been wont to convey their favorite mulatto concubines and progeny, sloped down from the university infirmary. But what, perhaps, above all, made Wilberforce so intensely Negro, so proud and self-conscious of its past, was its belief that America in general tended to ignore places like Wilberforce. It was Wilberforce doctrine that most whites sanctioned only Negro enterprise in which whites could exercise the real hegemony.

One of the stories reflective of the atmosphere of Wilberforce when I was there has to do with Colonel Young. The colonel, a West Pointer, had not long been dead in 1925. He was a major when America entered World War I. He had hoped to be promoted and, as the first black American general, to lead combat troops in France. But army medical examiners had found fault with his health. Outraged, the major had mounted his horse at his Wilberforce home and ridden all the way to Washington. If he had hoped to prove his examiners a lie, he did not win. The army retired him as a colonel and sent him, instead of to France, to organize a constabulary for Liberia in Africa. It was gospel at Wilberforce that the army's exile of the colonel had hastened his death. (He died in Africa.) I am not sure but what it was not, according to the story, an African fever, or the *sequelae* of one, which immediately occasioned the colonel's demise. I have seen pictures of the

colonel. Stern, erect, a rich dark brown, he looked out with a calm and steadfast eye upon a world he had been determined to have treat him as it treated any other man.

I did not go immediately from college into graduate school. My parents were concerned about my youth and inexperience, particularly since I had announced my intention to try for a master's degree at Columbia. I have always thought, however, that it was New York, and not Columbia, that gave my parents pause. I did not waste my year at home. I read voluminously. If I am sympathetic now when I hear undergraduates who are finishing college say that they would welcome a respite for a season from the lockstep of the academic processional, if I can believe that their motives are as often honorable as not, it may well be because I recall my own year of youthful leisure. So much that I had missed at college I made a part of me during that year. Then, just before I was scheduled to report to Columbia, my mother, the librarian at our Louisville high school, suddenly died. She had not been ill and she was a young woman. It was a tragedy for which my family was unprepared. My father, who had taught her and married her when she was only seventeen, I could see, in spite of his reserve, was deeply shaken. But he reminded me that life goes on. I remember how quiet he was, and yet how reassuring, when he and my brother escorted me to the train that bore me to New York.

That train bore me, also, into a new world. Yet, in at least one regard it merely extended the world I had always known. If in Louisville I had lived within a context of two worlds, one black and one white, and if the church and the white legislators at Wilberforce had repeated, as it were, for me, that same setting, with a split universe that was almost an exact duplication of the dichotomy of black and white that I had known in Louisville, in New York I entered another divided world. I spent my days at "white" Columbia and my nights in close communion with Negro Harlem. I lived again as I had always lived, within a veil. Inside the veil I moved without restraint.

Harlem was mine, all mine. Outside the veil I moved only as I had always moved, to use a phrase from the imagery of *Invisible Man*, in the enemy's country. I went to lectures at Columbia. I became familiar with the campus. I did use the library. It was, as a matter of fact, inside that huge and cavernous library, completely by myself, that I could be found for most of the many hours during which I essayed the role of a Columbia student. I never spoke to a professor. No professor ever spoke to me. The only Columbia student I established an acquaintance with was Melvin Tolson, with whom I shared a course in Victorian literature. I was no more a part of Columbia, except for its library, than I had been a part of the white folks' Louisville or of the white Ohio with which I had had a tenuous connection through the "State Side" at Wilberforce. I was, incidentally, not thereby distressed. To a young man, drunk as I was upon the promise and the hope of scholarship, being much alone with books and one's own thoughts can be something of a boon. My enforced solitude at Columbia was a boon to me. I could make my way from my lectures to the tranquil recesses of the library without interruption and without worrying over any distractions, once I had settled myself at a library desk. I did buy copies of the *Columbia Spectator*, the campus daily. I read it regularly. I knew very well who Nicholas Murray Butler was. I knew how eminent were some of my professors. I had one who had been decorated by a foreign government. Sometimes, privately and quietly, I prowled a little around Columbia. And sometimes, when I wanted a rest from reading, I would cross over Broadway and sit in a park from which I could gaze toward Grant's Tomb and the Riverside Church. I always walked to Columbia in the morning. I walked back to Harlem in the late afternoon or early evening.

Harlem of 1931 and early 1932, the Harlem that I first knew, was still the Harlem of the Harlem Renaissance, although the twenties were past and the Renaissance in its most storied days was over. Whether Harlem of the twenties was a prouder, livelier, more exciting, and more tonic place to be



than my Harlem of the early thirties was, however, at least a debatable proposition. For Harlem in 1931 and 1932 was still the capital, not only of black America, but of Negroes everywhere. There was still, when I arrived there, nothing like Harlem elsewhere in the continental United States, or in the Caribbean, or in South America, or in Africa, or anywhere at all that Negroes could be found in numbers; and the Negroes who lived in Harlem knew that there was not. Moreover, Harlem in 1931 was not only a world capital for Negroes, it was also, for all Negroes everywhere, a mecca. On Seventh Avenue, Harlem's famous main thoroughfare, it was not unusual to hear then, as one of the virtually inevitable quips of the Harlem brand of those power brokers of conversation who make a business of saying what the crowd loves to hear, the playful admonition. "Stand here—just stand here long enough—and you'll see every Negro you ever knew."

I lived in Harlem at the "Y." Langston Hughes lived there, too, on the same floor with me. Cecil, the janitor on our floor, was a typical Harlemit. He was, that is, a migrant from the South. Indeed, Cecil was a Carolinian who had been bred to speak Gullah, the tongue, distinguished by its African survivals, which the black Sea Islanders, in their remoteness from the rest of America, have been able to preserve for three hundred years much as it was originally devised by them in their first adjustments to their once-new American environment. But neither Gullah nor the relative physical isolation of where the Gullahs live had prevented Cecil from hearing of Harlem or from making his way to it as to a promised land. Harlem of today may well be a place to which Cecil would not have come. When people speak of it, they tend to refer to dope and muggings, to vice and petty crime, to armies of jobless and welfare mothers easy with their sexual favors, and, above all, to horribly bad housing, to limited horizons of every kind, and to a hopeless slum. The Harlem that attracted Cecil was very different. Its reputation was not repellent. It attracted everybody, or, at least, every Negro—and not simply because of its cabarets,