

Appearance at Dusk

Between midday and midnight—
the scales just so.
Too late for shadows

she disturbed the equilibrium
of dusk so little as she passed,
I doubted the murky air

had moved at all. You know
in water when something stirs up
the bottom, a cloud of sediment rises—

I questioned if anything happened,
and then she was there,
my answer, where the apples had fallen.

I thought as soon as she saw me
she'd turn, she'd disappear,
but she bent to eat

the ripe fruit cast upon the ground,
her white tail wagging
like some domesticated creature

before the deer looked up again.
This time fixing me
with a gaze that left me fallow.

I don't know how she put to rest
everything that eddied within me, how
as long as we kept one another in sight

windfall could have given way
to snowfall beyond us.
Beyond this stillness, the heady branches,

were they banished?
Only to be sent for
when another spring came:

The hard buds; blossoms;
dawn on the new globes of Winesap,
Delicious—summer, summer again

amid the terror, evenings and mornings
when I'd scare, when I would have bolted
if love hadn't held me there.

—Allison Funk

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belles lettres

A LITERARY REVIEW

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**Zora Neale Hurston has
some fun with a drum she
brought back from her
1936-37 trip to Haiti.**

*(New York World-Telegram & Sun Collection,
Library of Congress). From Valerie Boyd,
Wrapped in Rainbows. New York: Scribner,
2002.*

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Director's Notes

I. Adventures in Black Studies

Some years ago I gave a talk at Fisk University, a historically black college, where I happened to be teaching at the time, about the 1950s and black Americans. At one point, I described the Civil Rights Movement as a grand adventure for its young black enthusiasts. During the question-and-answer period, one young Fisk student vehemently berated me for “calling our people’s life-and-



death struggle for freedom ‘an adventure.’” I suppose he thought that I was belittling this heroic effort at social change by using the word adventure. If that had been my intention I would have deserved the student’s indignation and his putting me in my place, so to speak. But that was not what I was getting at by using the term. I told him, in fact, that the term was first brought to my attention by black writer Claude McKay, who used it to describe black people’s relationship to western culture. McKay, a poet, novelist, world wanderer, and a quirky independent thinker, was something of an adventurer himself; that is to say, someone who enjoyed challenging conventions, whether they were white (racist) or black (prudish and philistine) in origin.



I tried to explain to the young student, with little success, that, especially for the young, there was a sense of self-conscious heroism that drove them to do what they did as well as a certain sort of restlessness. This sense of heroism was driven by a sense of adventure, not that it was fun to do what they were doing, but that it was thrilling to challenge a system, to alter a way of life. The young, in this instance, were compelled by the sheer narrowness of their experience, which enabled them to be both self-righteous in their political purity and willing to risk and sacrifice enormously.



A sense of adventure does not suggest a lack of seriousness; indeed, it is because so much seems at stake that everything about adventure

seems to have the intensity of an overwrought, sudden-death game. Adventure seems rather to suggest a lack of any sense of doubt or failure or even caution. Adventure, as a concept, is a profound belief in the inevitable glory of one’s own destiny, the belief that one will vanquish the foe and discover the grail. I further explained to the student that I had been attracted to African-American Studies as a field because I thought, when I was young, that it offered intellectual adventure, that I could shape things as I went along, innovate as wildly as any great jazz musician, do what I wanted if I had the guts, attack any convention from this vantage point, that Black Studies was fresh, alive, and because one’s enemies were sworn to your utter destruction, that I could be an intellectual hero.

Black Studies was born to be daring, to oppose the status quo, to be a disturber of the academic peace. What’s not to like for a young person! I grew up with Black Studies. I started college in 1970, the same year that Black Studies really took off around the country at various institutions. The student did not appreciate any of this, and perhaps he shouldn’t have. He was at least 20 years younger than I, but I told him he thought with the conservative piety of an old man, something I shouldn’t have said, especially as I thought I was being witty. Naturally, whenever I saw the student on campus after that, he scowled at me.

Alas, things did not turn out quite as I imagined them but I am, even today, struck by how much I am still attracted to African-American Studies because it seems such an adventure—some undertaking of the mind and heart.

This issue of *Belles Lettres* highlights young African-American scholars associated with Washington University. Three of our contributors—Garrett Duncan, Joseph Thompson, and Lester Spence—are Washington University faculty members, Duncan in Education, Thompson in English, and Spence in Political Science, each with a joint appointment in African and Afro-American Studies. Our other contributor is Rebecka Rutledge, a former Washington University Chancellor’s Fellow, having earned her Ph.D. in comparative literature. I am exceedingly grateful, as I am with all our faculty contributors, that they took time from their busy schedules to write for *Belles Lettres*. And the topics they chose to discuss are important: Spence takes on a new book about W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, Thompson’s provides his take on Valerie Boyd’s much discussed biography of anthropologist/novelist Zora Neale Hurston, and Rutledge weighs in on Lawrence Jackson’s literary biography of Ralph Ellison. Duncan deals with the thorny issue of the achievement gap between black and white students in his review of *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*.

Conrad and Tom Stoppard just a couple of examples. Qiu's inspector is single and not afraid of the occasional romance. He's a big-city policeman who understands what motivates people and knows that the twin lures of power and easy money can turn heads. He's also sophisticated and educated, far from the workers and farmers who filled much Chinese writing in the 1970s and 1980s. He reflects the urban Chinese society in which Qiu grew up.

Inspector Chen's talents in the kitchen may be leading Qiu in another direction. On his next visit to Shanghai, he has been invited to visit and taste at one of the city's more elegant restaurants. "The owner contacted me," Qiu related. "She had read some of the things I'd written about food and the inspector's cooking, and she wants me to visit her restaurant in Shanghai—and the one in Hong Kong, too."

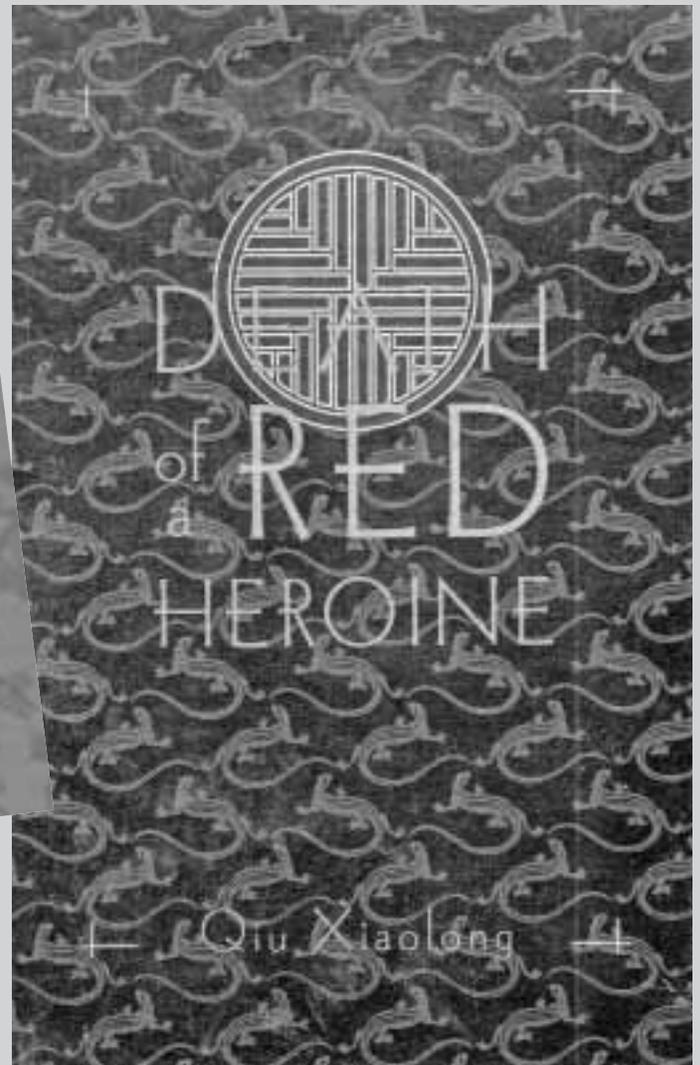
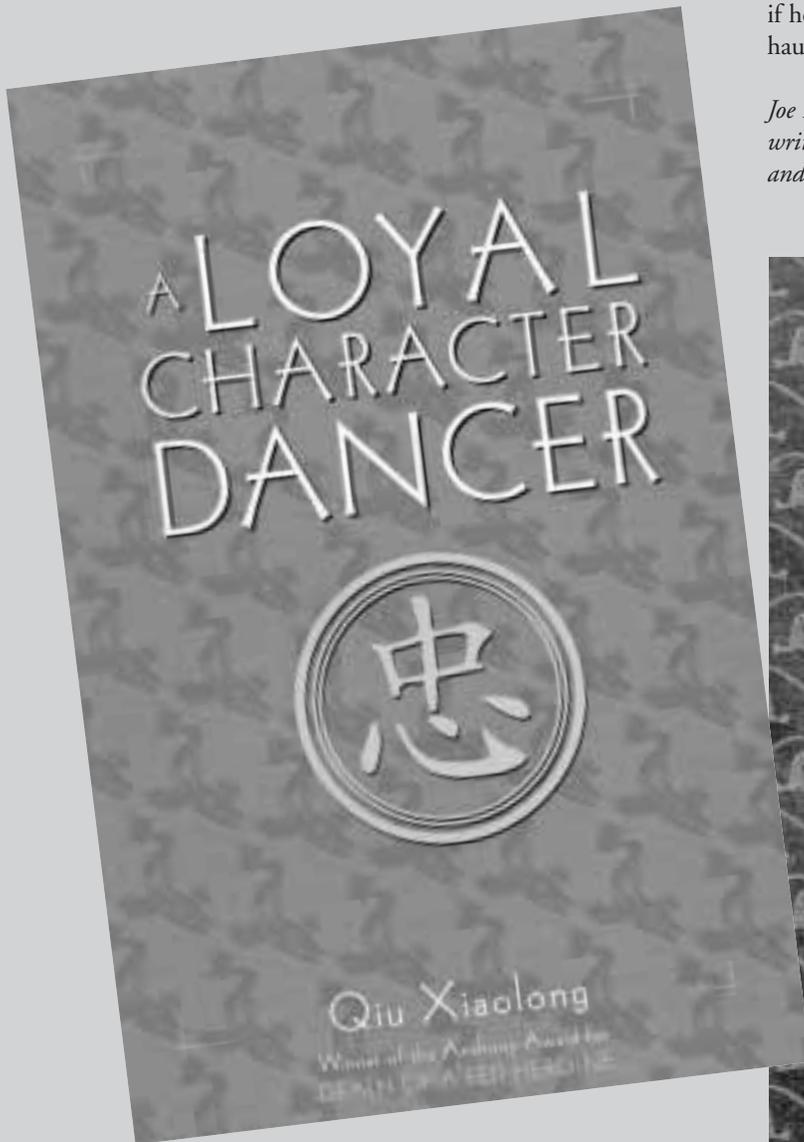
Qiu talks excitedly about the renaissance of Shanghai, the cultural and social capital of China in the 1920s and 1930s,

when Americans and Europeans had major influences on the city and its inhabitants.

"It has become a very popular city for restaurants, clubs, late-night activities," he says. "It's again the 24-hour city it used to be. The cuisine is worldwide, reservations are difficult to get at the top restaurants, people are dressed in the height of fashion, and there seems to be a lot more disposable income. It's hard to believe the changes over the last five years. Everything is designed and decorated like it used to be, a long time ago. One of the more popular new restaurants is named 1929, for the year."

Qiu came to Washington University in 1989 using a Ford Foundation fellowship to study comparative literature and earning his doctorate in 1995. The T.S. Eliot tie-in was strong; Qiu had translated "The Wasteland" into Chinese and knew about the connection between Eliot and the University before he arrived. Now it's home for the author, his wife, and their 13-year-old daughter, who said she would go to Paris with her father only if he stopped off in London so that she could investigate the haunts and atmosphere of Harry Potter.

Joe Pollack, a retired St. Louis Post-Dispatch columnist and critic, writes about restaurants and wine for the Web site saucecafe.com, and is the theatre and film critic for KWMU.



A Loyal Character Dancer, New York: Soho Press, 2002.

Death of a Red Heroine, New York: Soho Press, 2000.

The greatest limitation of the biography is that it ends in 1953, just after Ellison wins the National Book Award for *Invisible Man*. Thus, Jackson leaves a number of questions unanswered. How did John F. Callahan come to be executor of Ellison's literary estate, when Ellison had, in a letter reprinted in *Trading Twelves*, asked Albert Murray to oversee his manuscripts and effects if anything should happen to him? What were the details surrounding the fire that consumed the manuscript of Ellison's second novel, and what occupied his time over the 42 years that elapsed between the publication of *Invisible Man* and his death? And what were the circumstances surrounding the appearance of *Juneteenth*, the posthumously published novel edited by Callahan?

Perhaps Rampersad's biography will allow Ellison to live again. *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* cannot be described as the "art of biography," but it is certainly a well-crafted piece. In a very real way, Jackson could not invent Ellison because Ellison had gone through great pains to invent himself. And perhaps we want to know Ellison because we want, even more importantly, to know ourselves. If novels, as the philosopher Martha Nussbaum has maintained, contain philosophical moments that may provide us some insight as to how life is to be lived, then it is no wonder that we as readers are interested to know whether a writer lived by his or her own philosophy, and whether or not this was done successfully. We want to know if Ellison was true to his word — if, on some lower frequency, he speaks for us.

Rebecka R. Rutledge is assistant professor of English at Miami University.

A Readers' Survey

We at the Center for the Humanities are very grateful to you our readers for your support of this publication. We put a great deal of time, energy, editorial care, and literary purpose into each issue because we respect the time and intelligence of each of our readers. We are proud of what we have produced. But understanding we live in an imperfect world that creates imperfect things, we are committed, of course, to making *Belles Lettres* better. (We willingly concede, as all Americans do, the need for self-improvement.) We are not complacent about what we do. So, to that end we have decided to include a readers' survey in our next issue of *Belles Lettres*, the last one of this academic year. We want to know what you think, what you like about the publication, what you would like to have us change. When the survey comes, please do take the time to fill it out and send it back. What you think is vitally important to the future of the publication, and we want very much to know what's on your mind. We want to remain your friendly neighborhood humanists.

The Center for the Humanities

WU Alum and Teacher Balances Poetry and Mystery

An Interview with Qiu Xiaolong

While turmoil permeates much of the world, with death and destruction as commonplace as coins, literature and poetry sail briskly—most of the time—across international borders, from culture to culture and from language to language with ease and grace.

Take Qiu Xiaolong, for example, who will speak, read, answer questions, and sign books April 19 at 8 p.m. in Room 204, Anheuser-Busch Hall, and April 20 at 4 p.m. in Room 115 Old MacMillan Hall. The readings are under the auspices of The Center for the Humanities at Washington University.



Qiu Xiaolong

Qiu is a visiting lecturer in Asian and Near Eastern languages and literature, born and reared in Shanghai and a resident of St. Louis since 1989. He is in Paris at the time of this writing (mid-February), helping to launch his new novel, *When Red Is Black*, in its French edition. Later in the spring, it will be published in the United States in English. The story stars Detective Inspector

Chen Cao of the Shanghai Police Bureau and is the third novel featuring the low-key detective who is also a gourmet cook and a poet.

The first of Qiu's books was *Death of a Red Heroine*, published in English in 2000 and subsequently translated into almost a dozen languages. Because of some of the detective's social and political comments, translation into Chinese came late, and only after some changes in Chen's speeches. Qiu is not happy with the editing, but shrugs his shoulders and admits that having the book printed in his home country was worth a small sacrifice or two. The second Inspector Chen Cao novel, *A Loyal Character Dancer*, has been optioned in Hollywood and may become a movie.

At the same time, Qiu writes poetry in English and translates classic love poems, some more than a thousand years old, from the Chinese. His own poetry, *Lines Around China*, and his editing and translating of *Treasury of Chinese Love Poems*, both appeared last year. Writing in a second language may be difficult, but some major literary figures have done it, with Joseph

II. Adventures in Special Collections

Our library here at the Center for the Humanities continues to grow. We feel it is on the verge of becoming a real resource for the University. We have three immediate aims for our library, and I might best explain them in connection with our current holdings:

Part I

We have obtained copies of the following books:

The Invisible Child: On Reading and Writing Books for Children

by Katherine Paterson

Ways of Telling: Conversations on the Art of the Picture Book

by Leonard Marcus

Writer's Guide to Crafting Stories for Children by Nancy Lamb

Writing with Pictures: How to Write and Illustrate Children's Books

by Uri Shulevitz

A Basic Guide to Writing, Selling and Promoting Children's Books

by Betsy B. Lee

The Business of Writing for Children by Aaron Shepard

How to Write a Children's Book and Get It Published by Barbara

Seuling

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Children's Books by

Harold D. Underdown and Lynne Rominger

You Can Write Children's Books by Tracey E. Dils

Young at Heart: The Step-by-Step Way of Writing Children's Stories

by Violet Ramos

The Way to Write for Children by Joan Aiken

1. The library not only aims to have a full range of children's books but we wish to have the most complete collection available in the area of books that describe the manner and method of writing for children.

Part II

We have increased our comic book holdings to include such titles as *Tomb Raider*, *Captain America*, *Batman*, *Spider-Woman*, *Ms. Marvel*, *Flash*, *Catwoman* (virtually complete run), *Thor*, *Wonder Woman*, Harvey Comics including *Baby Huey*, *Casper*, *Little Audrey*, *Little Dot*, *Richie Rich*, *Spooky*, *Hot Stuff*, *Wendy the Good Little Witch*, *Sad Sack*, and the *Sensational She-Hulk* (virtually entire run). We also have such alternative titles as Robert Crumb's *Self-Loathing Comics*, *Motor City Comics*, *HUP Comics*, *Big Ass Comics*, *Jiz Comics*, *Snatch Comics*, Roberta Gregory's *Naughty Bits*, *Dope Comix*, Debbie Drechler's *Nowhere*, *Aria*, *Dark Oz* (complete), *Barb Wire*, and *Action Girl*.

We also have a growing number of comics written by African Americans or featuring African-American images, which have not been catalogued yet but will be soon. They will include *Meteor Man*, *Monarchy*, *Luke Cage*, *Black Panther*, comics from Gettosake, *Sabre*, as well as very old, very rare titles like *Negro Romance*, *Jackie Robinson*, and other sports comics.

2. The library aims to collect within the next two years every comic book that features African-American images or was written and drawn by African Americans. The library will also aim to have within two years a complete collection of all comics written and drawn by women. We will continue to increase our other comic holdings generally.

Part III

We have obtained copies of the following books:

More Days and Deeds

Around the Corner

The New More Streets and Roads

More Days and Deeds (Catholic edition)

The New People and Progress (Catholic edition)

3. This is the beginning of a collection that will include all the 1950s and 1960s "Dick and Jane," both the public school and Catholic school versions.

Be mindful that in the future we will also list our holdings in pulp magazines including *Amazing Stories*, *Dime Detective*, and *Jungle Stories*. As you can see, all of our holdings are geared toward a comprehensive study of various aspects of children's literary and pictorial history, as well as toward a comprehensive study of an important literary and visual aspect of popular culture.

The Center for the Humanities is very interested in any children's books, pulp magazines, or comic books you may have in your attic or basement if you would like to get rid of them. If you have such material and you would like to donate it to the Center, please call us at (314)935-5576 and speak to either Amanda or Jian, or e-mail us at cenhum@wustl.edu. Also, if you are interested in donating any new children's books, comic books, or magazines to the Center, let us know. We thank you for your interest and support.

Thank you Constance Levy for donating a copy of your latest book, *The Story of Red Rubber Ball*, published by Harcourt Books.

Gerald Early is director of the Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis.



Cage by Marvel Comics.

Rai and the Future Force by Valiant.

Meteor Man by Marvel Comics.

Nanoman by Gettosake.

The Story of Red Rubber Ball by Constance Levy, Harcourt Books.

Sabre by Eclipse Comics.

Notes Written Aboard the Mystery Train

– A Column by Gerald Early

Game Theory

Part I: Varieties of Ludic Experience

In September 2003, Urban Outfitters, a popular street apparel chain, began selling or began being noticed for selling a game called Ghettopoly. It was modeled after the famous board game, Monopoly, which, in and of itself, is not unusual or especially original, as there are a great many officially licensed Monopoly-styled games available. (Ghettopoly is not one of them, but it bears similarities to those that are.) For instance, one can buy Motown-opoly, The Cat in the Hat-opoly, an Elvis Presley-themed Monopoly, or one themed with surfing, Spiderman, Betty Boop, Lord of the Rings, NASCAR, your favorite professional baseball or football team, Las Vegas, Astronomy, or, for the corporate-inclined, Ford Motor Company or Coca-Cola. You can even have a custom-made Monopoly game.

It is probably not an overstatement to say that the Monopoly game board and overall design is the most famous in the United States. No other game has produced anything like this. So, if the inventor of Ghettopoly, a 28-year Taiwanese American (who came to the United States at the age of 8) named David Chang, wanted the game to get any notice at all, it was vitally important to link it to something that was very well known, a piece of deeply established Americana like Monopoly.

But the history of the Monopoly board game is more complicated than perhaps many are aware and tells a story about America that belies the image of this Great American Game, which was not invented by a struggling inventor named Charles Darrow during the Depression in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. He, in fact, stole the game and sold it to Parker Brothers, who invented the myth of the single inventor to protect their patent. The game was actually invented by Lizzie J. Magie, a Quaker, who patented it in 1903 and called it “The Landlord’s Game.” It was meant to teach its players about the evils of capitalism and land monopolism, quite the opposite of what the game has actually promoted since it was bought by Parker Brothers during the Depression. The myth about Darrow, like the myth about Abner Doubleday inventing baseball, has stuck. There is a historical plaque honoring Darrow as the inventor in Atlantic City, the city that supplies most of the property names for the standard version of the game. I know this for a fact because I have seen it. I have been to Atlantic City many times.

Part II: The Agony of American Humor

Ghettopoly is a game about the black American ghetto, the version of the ghetto that emerges in popular culture through

certain forms of popular music, particularly gangsta rap, and certain movies, particularly *Boyz N the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, and films of that ilk, mean black streets movies. On the Ghettopoly box is a thug-looking black man sporting a bandanna, holding an Uzi in one hand and a bottle of malt liquor in the other. The game players are called “playas” and game pieces include a marijuana leaf, a basketball, a pimp, and a “hoe” (whore). Some of the properties are “Smitty’s XXX Peep Show,” “Cheap Tricks Ave.,” “Weinstein’s Gold and Platinum,” and “Busta Rap Recording.” The blurb endorsements on the box are from “Rusta Rhyme,” “B. Diddy,” and “Hustle Simmons.” Clearly, this is all meant to be funny, a parody, and it is funny.

But, of course, there is a bit of uncertainty as to who exactly is the butt of this joke. As an African American, is one supposed to laugh along with this or wince at being laughed at? Is misspelling Malcolm X as Malcum X supposed to be hilarious or something else? (As the word “cum” is a vulgarity for male ejaculation, the misspelling, when one considers Malcolm X’s life as a Muslim, borders on insult. But it is laughingly outrageous, too.) Or is the United States one of the few places on

earth where one can make a buck poking fun at other people’s self-destructive behavior?

There might be two ways to see this in another perspective: how would the public react if someone put out a Monopoly-type game based on Italian-American gangsters, or, more precisely, how would Italian Americans themselves react? If the game was based on the *Sopranos*, perhaps everyone would take it in good fun. Perhaps if it were based on the life of John Gotti or Frankie Carbo or Frank Nitti, maybe not. What if it were about Italian Americans generally and represented them as wife-beating Catholics, bingo-playing housewives, mobsters who ran houses of prostitution, gambling casinos, and directed drug trafficking? Would Italian Americans laugh and think this makes them an interesting type in some Constance Rourke-like anthropological scheme of American humor? Suppose someone put out a Monopoly-styled game called JAP: Jewish American Princess, about neurotic, social climbing among Jews or satirically poked fun at Jews for acting like a parvenu group, a common accusation made against them, especially by the anti-Semitic. Suppose the game was put out by someone who wasn’t Jewish. Jews might find this amusing, but then again maybe not. I do not pose these examples to say that the groups that were targets of such games would necessarily be right in opposing them or wanting to ban them. We do know that there are two versions

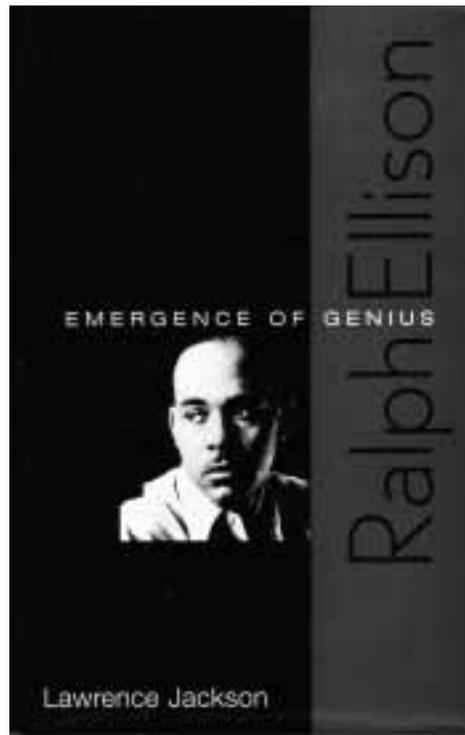
It is probably not an overstatement to say that the Monopoly game board and overall design is the most famous in the United States. No other game has produced anything like this.

days of his youth, when he spent hours observing and learning the deft movements of the marching bands of Oklahoma City. Those seeking Ellison in *Emergence of Genius* may be disappointed, for he remains an attractive but enigmatic figure who seems content to stand just beyond our grasp.

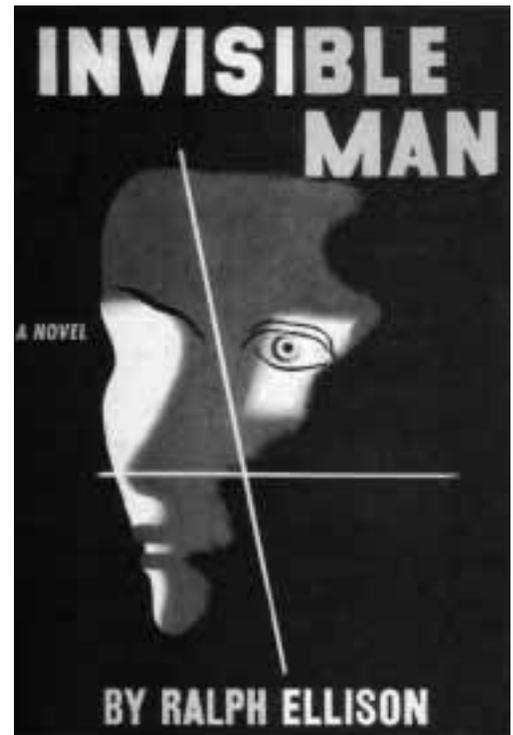
In writing the biography, which he began researching in 1995, Jackson faced a number of challenges. No biography of Ellison had ever been written. Jackson was able to interview a number of Ellison's acquaintances and family members, including his brother, Herbert, and his longtime friend Albert Murray, but Ellison's widow Fanny denied his requests for an interview. She did, however, allow him to quote from portions of the Ellison papers at the Library of Congress. There, he found himself working side by side with Arnold Rampersad, a well-known biographer who had been granted permission to write the definitive biography of Ellison when Jackson was near completion of the work.

Jackson is, by his own admission, a novice biographer, and the early portions of the text that echo Ellison's own autobiographical moments give witness to this fact. Yet even here Jackson makes a valuable contribution. He takes us to Oklahoma City and makes us feel as though we might actually breathe the air Ellison breathed as a child. He not only provides us with an introduction to Ellison's father, Lewis, who died when Ellison was three and with whom Ellison shared a deep bond; we are also introduced to Ellison's mother, Ida, a strong-willed, independent woman of remarkable intelligence.

Jackson later sheds light on Ellison's close association with Langston Hughes, who provided Ellison entrée into Harlem's inner circle. The two men became close friends: Ellison once presented Hughes with a photograph, a self-portrait accompanied by the words, "To Langston, the 'dream keeper,' in sincerity and admiration, Ralph Ellison." Hughes, who was not financially well-off, reciprocated with a set of Thomas Mann first editions, which Ellison directly set about reading. Jackson describes their relationship as an "emotional intimacy," but says nothing of the conclusion reached by Hughes' biographer, Arnold Rampersad, that Hughes was possibly, in spite of the lack of concrete evidence, homosexual. Hughes introduced Ellison to Richard Wright, who published Ellison's first book review in the same issue of the *New Challenge* that contained Wright's landmark essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing." Wright and Ellison's friendship took many twists and turns, with Ellison alternately acting as apologist for Wright's viewpoints and as critic of Wright's work. Wright is portrayed as brilliant and petulant, a literary giant who jealously guarded his turf even from Ellison.



Lawrence Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2002.



The jacket for Invisible Man. (Courtesy of Random House; photograph courtesy of Moorland-Spingarn Library, Howard University)

Jackson is, by his own admission, a novice biographer, and the early portions of the text that echo Ellison's own autobiographical moments give witness to this fact.

Such friendships are the stuff of biography, and the milieu Wright and Hughes led Ellison to presents the reader with figures such as Angelo Herndon, the black Communist organizer who had been jailed for violating Georgia's black codes.

Emergence of Genius hesitates to disclose the specifics of Ellison's intimate relationships with women. While his marriage to Fanny Ellison is revealed in some detail, his first marriage to the dancer and actress Rose Aramita Poindexter is not discussed in any way that would allow the reader insight into the development and possible strengths of this union. We know only that the marriage was a troubled one, and that the two permanently separated shortly before he entered the Merchant Marine Corps in order to escape being drafted into the Army as the U.S.

entered World War II. Ellison had become romantically involved with a white novelist named Sanora Babb while estranged from Rose, a member of the elite black community of New Haven, Connecticut. Ellison's involvement with Babb lasted a number of years, and he continued to see her during his marriage to Fanny. While Jackson is certain to point out that Fanny and Ellison were quite well matched intellectually and that their temperaments quickly solidified their relationship, his discussion of Ellison's interest in the other two women is unsatisfactory, especially given that he interviewed Sanora Babb for the book.

unfortunately, the strategy that the authors used to compose *Young, Gifted, and Black* leaves this apparent contradiction unresolved in the book.

Hilliard believes that we should tap the resources of “gap closers” when it comes to designing research to guide education policy for black students. Gap closers are teachers, principals, and programs that normally promote academic excellence among typically low-achieving black students. However, as Hilliard notes, gap closers are generally unacknowledged in debates on school reform and rarely influence the direction of teacher education and school leadership programs that prepare teachers and administrators to work in schools with low-achieving black students. Instead the vast majority of researchers, educators, and policymakers operate from the assumption that failure is inevitable when it comes to educating most black students and that the most we can hope to do is to assist these students in meeting minimum competency standards.

These beliefs prevail despite the presence of gap closers and gap closing schools in diverse settings in every part of the country. For example, black students have a long tradition of academic excellence at the high-powered, African-centered Marcus Garvey School in Los Angeles. They also fare extremely well in the public Central Park East Elementary and Secondary Schools of New York. These schools feature a fairly traditional but nonetheless rigorous curriculum with high performance standards. In addition, an untold number of religious and military academies also have had considerable success promoting high academic achievement among black students. Despite their different ideological commitments, educators at these schools abide by the belief that, regardless of their backgrounds, all students can meet high standards. More importantly, though, these educators go about the business of educating black students as though such expectations are nothing out of the ordinary.

The fact is, as an observer notes in *Young, Gifted, and Black*, “we can, whenever and wherever we wish, teach successfully all children whose education is of interest to us.” If this observation is true, and I believe that it is, and if we know what works, and we do, then the only question is whether we really want to live up to the promise of *Brown* and promote academic excellence among all of our students. The extent to which the ideas and measures presented in *Young, Gifted, and Black* are taken up in contemporary education reform efforts may serve as an indication of where we, as educators, policymakers, and citizens, stand on this issue.

Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hilliard III, *Young Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.

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The Sublime Ellison

Lawrence Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002)

The secret of biography resides in providing more than facts to add to our knowledge of a writer. Biography should succumb neither to hero worship nor to the cult of personality but should instead respect facts in a way that is rigorous yet committed to fairness. It should refuse a synthesis between inner existence and creative output, while giving form to the whole of the



Lawrence Jackson

Photo: Christian B.S. Allen

writer's life as he or she moves through the beauty and difficulties of working and living. In biography, it is not simply the triumphs but also the trials the reader seeks. We want to believe that the biographer is neither voyeur nor gossip, but a chronicler posing successfully as a dramaturge. We hope, perhaps, that the biographer will allow the writer to live as he or she had not lived since actually in the flesh.

Yet there are some writers who, no matter how forceful their impact on our lives, no matter the longevity of their works, remain on the fringe of our understanding. Such is the case with Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man* (1952) and subject of Lawrence Jackson's 2002 biography *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*. Both texts are representations of Ellison's life. A number of chapters in *Invisible Man* are decidedly autobiographical, so much so that one hears them echoing clearly, along with certain essays from Ellison's *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986), in the early sections of Lawrence's biography.

However, Ellison practiced the art of autobiography and self-disclosure in a way that left him strangely foreign to us. Keeping himself somewhat beyond hailing distance of an admiring public, Ellison continued to breathe new life into his novel long after its publication by granting interviews in which he elaborated on the processes of writing, the problems of racial identity, the cultural force of jazz and the blues, and the importance of metaphor in rendering social critique. He held various teaching positions and fellowships, spoke forthrightly of influences from his boyhood that shaped his writing, and lectured widely on his aesthetics and his politics, yet he revealed very little of his inner emotions. And he negotiated questions regarding his much anticipated second novel (an incomplete manuscript that was published in 1999—five years after his death—as *Juneteenth*) with a grace that bespoke the

of a homosexual-theme Monopoly: Gay Monopoly and Gayopoly, which provide fairly stereotypical views of homosexuals: lavender, "queens," and bare-chested motorcycle guys in leather. Far from being seen disapprovingly by the gay community, the games are sold in outlets that specialize in gay clientele. Of course, one might argue that being gay is one kind of social category and being ethnic or racial is another.

But isn't powerful humor, rooted in some sort of social commentary or observation, bound to be anarchic and offensive, especially to the bourgeoisie, and isn't humor particularly striking and uncomfortable when there is some element of truth in the parody, when the group can, through the distortion, see something of itself in the haze of the humor, or something particularly vulnerable about itself. Foul-mouthed black comedians like Red Foxx and Rudy Ray Moore, whose forbidden records I sometimes heard as a child, were effective in their "blue" routines about sex because most of the adults listening to them recognized a certain basic truth about the battle of the sexes in their jokes. That is precisely why such humor exists: to be taboo-breaking in its offensiveness. American humor, as Constance Rourke knew well, is often crude, tasteless, insulting, even cruel. That is what we want from humor, the ability to laugh at what, in conventional and polite society, we cannot laugh at. The fat, the disabled, the ugly, the ill, racial minorities, the innocence of childhood, sex, bodily functions, the pieties and sacred cows of various people, the arrogant social rituals of the ruling class, all of this and much more are exploded by humorists.

Are there limits? Would we laugh at someone making fun of the Holocaust? Would we laugh at jokes about slavery? (There is an actual board game about the Underground Railroad. It is not a parody of slavery.) Would we laugh at jokes about AIDS in Africa? I don't know. It is possible. It is more likely we might laugh at a Hollywood film about someone making a board game about the Holocaust or slavery or, say, date rape, than we might laugh at the actual game if it existed. Maybe a better question is should we laugh if such board games existed? Should we have humor about people who cannot help what they are or people who have been history's victims? The anarchists in us all would say, why the hell not? Better to moon God, fart at fate, than rail at either. Let us laugh at the absurdity of human life.

At any rate, many African Americans, shopping at Urban Outfitters or learning about the game by word-of-mouth, angrily denounced GhettoPoly and insisted that it be removed from the



shelves of the chain, which, apparently, it was. Black clergymen and politicians condemned the game and its creator. I suppose the game had the whiff of black-faced minstrelsy about it, in which black people are not parodies but the nightmarish projections of the white or non-black imagination. The fact that Chang is Asian does not do much to improve relations between blacks and Chinese-Americans. Pressure was put on Hasbro, the company that owns Monopoly, to get Chang for trademark or copyright infringement. (I do not know how vigorously Hasbro has pursued Chang for this, or even how he was able to launch the game in the first place, but when General Foods owned Parker Brothers' Monopoly back in 1974, it went after Ralph Anspach, an economics professor at San Francisco State University who invented a game called Anti-Monopoly, with great energy and determination. Maybe General Foods felt that Anti-Monopoly was a threat because it was ideologically and conceptually opposed to the idea and aim of Monopoly as a game that exalted capitalism. Anti-Monopoly was in fact returning the game to what it was when it was originally invented at the turn of the century by Magie, a follower of radical economic thinker Henry George.) Would there be this much outrage if Chang had been black? When rap star Nelly, in conjunction with a beverage company, put out a high-energy (that is, highly caffeinated) drink called Pimp Juice, there was certainly an outcry about it, but not as much as there has been about GhettoPoly. It might be that some don't consider the drink as offensive as the game, although Pimp Juice is a fairly ridiculous name for a product, much like calling a new fragrance for women, Scent of the Whore or Sluttish Seduction, or marketing an amusement park for Chinese Americans called Kung Fu Land.

Of course, some blacks themselves are profiting on the image of blacks in ghettos as monsters or social nightmares of some sort. Chang did not invent the images of GhettoPoly; he took them from other sources, not a few of them, black. In some measure, the rise in the romanticization of ghetto culture is directly related to the late 1960s and the rise of the Black Panthers and the glorification of black men in prison as being revolutionaries. Hollywood and independent Blaxploitation movies of the early 1970s like *Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song*, *Superfly*, *Black Caesar*, *Hell Up in Harlem*, and the like, intensi-

fied this romanticization of ghetto life as authentic black life and as a form of revolutionary challenge to American society. (If prison produced revolutionaries instead of more whacked-out sociopaths, our country would stop putting men and women in prison immediately. We can live with sociopaths. If ghettos produced revolutionaries, ghettos would have been eradicated long ago.) This leads to more complex questions about what it means when people participate willingly in their own degradation, as women in hardcore pornography do, which, of course, as some women argue, like marginal porn star Annabel Chong, is actually a form of liberation because it is some kind of expression of power. We might thank the post-modernists and culture critics for giving us more cant, over-intellectualized nonsense about the expression of power than the world can possibly bear. There is a great deal of talk in some circles about resistance. But in the case of pornography and women, what is being resisted on the part of the women actors and how? There is a damn sight less resistance in the world than most cultural critics think. What passes for resistance is often frustration, anger, indifference, thorny resignation, even steely unhappiness. Perhaps pornography and games like Ghettopoly exist because we cannot endure all the unhappiness that so frames human life. People like porn star Annabel Chong and the community parodied by Ghettopoly are more unhappy than we realize. The same argument about power and resistance is, in fact, made about those unseemly aspects of black culture, and all cultures have their unseemly aspects as they are about life as groups of people are determined to live it; opportunists decide to distort these maladjustments even further to make a buck. But it is all about power, in the end, isn't it? It is simply difficult to point to who exactly has this power.

Part III: Atlantic City, Then and Now

For several years, when I was a boy, my family would go to Atlantic City for a week during the summer. A group of my relatives and their friends would rent a house, always a house owned by some black person, and always, naturally, in the black part of town. People would be asleep all over the house, on the floor, in every bed, on the sofas and chairs. This never seemed to me to be a case of overcrowding, and I certainly did not think this occurred because working class people had to economize on their vacations by taking "group specials." I knew nothing about adults and money, then. I knew that I loved everything about these trips, including the overcrowded house. It felt like camping out and it was a marvelous feeling to be surrounded by relatives and friends, such a closeness and delight in being a petted child, as I was then. It was great to hop over people in the morning, fight to use the bathroom, fret about not getting to the beach because everyone was taking such a long time to get ready. And I loved Atlantic City, the Boardwalk, and the beach.

That is precisely why such humor exists: to be taboo-breaking in its offensiveness. American humor, as Constance Rourke knew well, is often crude, tasteless, insulting, even cruel. That is what we want from humor, the ability to laugh at what, in conventional and polite society, we cannot laugh at.

At the time, I did not pay much attention to the fact that we not only lived in the black part of Atlantic City but went only to the black part of the beach. (There were no signs, as in the South, but everyone behaved as if there were.) Just to be on the beach, for a city kid like me, was exhilarating, the cold, hard, shimmering waves, the hot sand between one's toes, the wind from the ocean, the gulls overhead. But I especially loved walking on the Boardwalk at night, going to the Steel Pier, where my sisters, aunts, and uncles danced in a big dance hall, and the Million Dollar Pier, which had amusement rides. We would buy salt-water taffy and Planter's peanuts. In the early morning, we would rent bikes and ride up and down the Boardwalk. In fact, I learned to ride a bike in Atlantic City. It was like a glorious playground.

I mention this because Monopoly, the standard version, is about Atlantic City, and I knew all the streets and locations of the game board well as a child. Even when I played the game as an adult, I would grow wistful about the times I spent in Atlantic City as a boy. When I went to Atlantic City three years ago with my mother and visited the casinos for the first time, there was, with the ghostly, abandoned Boardwalk, the ruined, unpopulated beach, a sadness not only about that place but about America itself where the past vanishes in the maw of the dynamo of ever greater money-getting and money-making. The small businesses on the Boardwalk were gone. The beach was unusable. Nothing could exist that would distract people's attention from the giant casinos. I felt lonely. It was, in those days of my boyhood, despite the subtle segregation, a more human time and place. Some months after I returned from this trip, my oldest daughter, who had just bought a new Monopoly set for some occasion, asked if I would play with her and her sister. I hadn't played in a while, several years. I told her no.

"I'm not very good at the game," I said, "Besides, I discovered that I really don't like it."

Perhaps, all this time, I only thought I liked something that I had never liked at all.

Addendum

The Center for the Humanities will open, in the next few months, either late this spring or early next fall, a display case in its library that will feature various games and toys, some old, some recent. Among the games on display will be Ghettopoly. During Black History Month, February 2005, it will be placed side-by-side with a game about black history called Blackboard put out by an African-American company. Visitors can look at both games, a study in contrasts, indeed, and make whatever conclusions they wish. Announcement of the actual opening date for the display will be made in upcoming issues of *Belles Lettres* and *The Figure in the Carpet*.

ments, how are black students able to sustain the effort necessary to achieve academically? How do they commit themselves to intellectual work when it is taken for granted in schools and society that black people are naturally intellectually inferior?

Perry argues that in the past an indigenous black philosophy of education informed students' commitment to achieve despite the obstacles they encountered in school and society. According to her, this philosophy, which equated literacy with freedom and with black humanity itself, survived over time through cultural narratives that each generation transmitted to its youth. Moreover, these narratives have a discursive function and served to foster in students "identities of achievement" that motivated them to persevere despite the injustices they faced in school.

What, then, accounts for the contemporary "achievement gap" in schools? This is an interesting question that the authors address only indirectly and mainly through the way they define the problem of black student underperformance. Perry defines the problem largely as a condition of the post-Civil Rights era. Steele, whose work focuses on the underperformance of high-achieving black students at elite, predominately white colleges and universities, sees the problem as one of learning "from people who part of yourself tells you are difficult to trust." The real achievement gap, Hilliard argues, is not the disparity between



black and white students. Rather the real gaps are those between the current achievement of black students and their potential for excellence, on the one hand, and the quality of the services provided to these students that prevent them from meeting high performance standards, on the other. Notwithstanding differences in how the authors frame the problem, they all share the view that black student underperformance is largely attributable to the ways they are perceived (or believe they will be perceived) by teachers and other adults in kindergarten through graduate and professional school settings.

Having generally reframed the debate by placing the social identities of black students at the center of the discussion, the authors offer different perspectives on what measures to take to remedy the situation.

Having generally reframed the debate by placing the social identities of black students at the center of the discussion, the authors offer different perspectives on what measures to take to remedy the situation. Based on her historical and literary analyses, Perry surmises that black students will achieve in school environments that have a leveling culture; that is, one that extends a culture of achievement to all of its members. These are school environments that promote a strong sense of group membership and that explicitly and regularly communicate the expectation that all students will achieve. Perry posits that black students will excel in these situations, regardless of their class background or prior level of preparation or of the cultural responsiveness of the school.

According to Steele, "the success of black students may depend less on expectations and motivations—things that are thought to drive academic performance—than on trust that stereotypes about their group will not have a limiting effect in their schooling." He recommends therefore that institutions devise programs to help black students lessen their distrust, presumably of white people. Interestingly, both Perry and Hilliard are highly critical of the kind of studies and policy recommendations that Steele discusses in his essay—although they do not critique him per se—on the grounds that they psychologize black student failure and lack a "sophisticated, nuanced, historically, and politically grounded notion of culture—one that is necessarily linked to history and social and political location." Steele does not account for such criticism in his essay and,



Black parents know their children will not be able to survive if they are mediocre. Therefore, their education must equip them for excellence.

Photos this page from: Hale-Benson, Janice E., *Black Children: Their Roots, Culture, and Learning Styles (Revised Edition)*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

dard (Early), or get Du Bois wrong (West and Reed). In attempting to defend Du Bois' work and stature, Benjamin continues to write provocatively but himself misses the boat. Responding for example to West's critique that Du Bois was never quite "of the people" Benjamin cites Du Bois' willingness to live among poor black people in Atlanta and his work on *The Philadelphia Negro* as proof of West's folly. Turning to *The Souls of Black Folk* may have given Benjamin pause however, as a number of times in that text Du Bois reveals ambivalence and at times hostility towards the majority of southern black men and women. West may be paid too much and may indeed be separated from "the masses," but this does not mean he is wrong in making this assertion.

Similarly, Benjamin misses the mark when he tackles Reed's critique on modern interpretations of Du Bois. Reed's central argument is that for a number of modern black scholars the trope of "double consciousness" resounds more than other themes (Du Bois' political critique of Washington for example). Reed argues that this is problematic because Du Bois himself abandoned the concept, because scholars of other periods have ignored it as a seminal concept, and because it is not a uniquely African-American idea. Whether one disagrees or agrees, these are serious ideas that deserve a serious response. Reading Benjamin one gets the idea that Reed was just upset that humanities scholars got to have all the fun.

Crouch's rejoinder does not resolve these problems and provides problems of its own. He condemns Du Bois largely for being a leftist with a Black Nationalist tint, for ignoring his own ability to overcome white supremacy, and condemning blacks to a sort of mass victimhood that their own heroism did not warrant. Crouch sees Du Bois as a tragic figure, and indeed in some ways he is. I think of Du Bois as a person who in many aspects was born some 100 years too early—literally as a man born before his time. But Crouch's focus on heroic individualism, a limited, even naive analytical frame, largely ignores the impact of mass systems of terror, the extraordinary range of white hegemony. What Crouch fails to understand is how truly powerless the individual was and how Du Bois' exceptionalism actually proved that point. Even exceptionalism would not get Du Bois a faculty appointment at a white university.

This work was an enjoyable read. Even when it meandered, the authors are excellent wordsmiths. It seems to me, though, that if Du Bois is one of the most important figures of the 20th century, if *The Souls of Black Folk* is one of the most important books of the 20th century, then both he, and we, deserve more.

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Promoting Black Student Excellence Fifty Years After Brown: A Question of Desire

Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hilliard, *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*, Beacon Press, 2003, \$25.00 U.S. (Cloth)

Nearly 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, black students once again are at the center of a nationally contested dialogue on school reform. The contemporary debate, like those before it, focuses on the "achievement gap," or disparities between black and white students, where the latter group generally outperforms the former on various measures of educational attainment. However, in contrast to the underlying wisdom of the landmark 1954 ruling that held society responsible for educational inequalities, today the conventional line is that community and self-imposed factors are mostly to blame for the underperformance of black students in schools. One of the more popular views holds that anti-intellectualism is prevalent in black communities and parents place little value on education, which accounts for why their children underachieve in schools. Another common explanation is that black teenagers have oppositional identities and reject academic achievement on the grounds that it is tantamount to "acting white." There is also speculation that high-performing black students succumb to pressures from their black peers to underachieve or, in integrated settings, become so caught up in how they believe others view them that their academic performance suffers as a consequence.

In *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*, Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hilliard examine these popular views and offer different perspectives on the pressing issue of black student underperformance. Over three separately written essays, each author presents her or his particular take on the problem and proposes ways to resolve it. Perry opens the book with a series of questions that captures some of the dilemmas that black students face in schools and that she and her colleagues agree must be taken into account in any analysis of their academic performance. For example, she asks how is it possible for black youth to commit themselves to work hard over time in school when they cannot predict when or under what circumstances this effort will be acknowledged and recognized, either in school or the larger society? Given the unpredictability of their teachers' responses to their work or society's regard for their accomplish-



from Playthell Benjamin, Stanley Crouch, *Reconsidering the Souls of Black Folk: Thoughts on the Groundbreaking Classic Work of W.E.B. DuBois*, Philadelphia: Running Press, 2002.

Zora's Ink

Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*, New York: Scribner, 2003. Pp. 527. Index and photographs.

The African-American author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) signed her name on her associates' minds in indelible ink. Years after she would descend from the height of her writing career during the 1920s and 1930s, her former peers, many of whom were fellow luminaries of the artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, could vividly recall her actions and her words. Her mark was lasting because she was a raconteur, a veritable storehouse of stories told with a disarming sense of humor. Anyone with even passing familiarity with her biography has probably heard about the day when a financially struggling Hurston, lacking fare for the Manhattan subway, borrowed some change from the cup of a beggar and explained that she needed the money more than he did at that particular moment. She would, she assured her reluctant benefactor, repay him later.

It was an anecdote Hurston told of herself. It has been recited by others many times. One wonders if the incident actually occurred or if it was a "lie" of the sort that Hurston captured when she sponsored "lying contests" among southern blacks in order to draw out the wealth of tall tales and other folklore that she had passionately dedicated herself to recording and celebrating. Although the tales were not literally true, they crystallized more profound truths about the essence of the human condition and the ethos of a resilient people. Whether or not it was based in reality, the encounter with the destitute man was similarly a tale with a deeper meaning, as it announced Hurston's signature traits—she was bold, inventive, unique, unforgettable—qualities illustrated not only by her actions as a player within the anecdote itself but also by the mischievous pleasure she enjoyed in telling the story in the first place.

Valerie Boyd's devotedly researched and lovingly written biography of Hurston revels in relating a number of the key stories that contribute to the author's legend and that define her as one of the most original public figures of the 20th century. In the early chapters of the biography, readers with knowledge of Hurston's oeuvre will recognize, without ever turning to the source notes, that many of the incidents are drawn from her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* and her semi-autobiographical novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. There is, of course, very good reason for this. Boyd is recounting the author's childhood years, for which contemporary sources are relatively scarce. Because Boyd consciously, and effectively, employs a style that echoes Hurston's own writing, the voice one hears often seems to be not that of the biographer describing her subject but rather that of the subject speaking through the biographer.

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Hurston moved to Washington, D.C., in 1918 with hopes of attending Howard University. After working as a waitress all summer, she enrolled in the high school division, Howard Academy, in December. (ZNH Collection, University of Florida)

Although those who have read Hurston may desire a stronger dose of Boyd's voice in the earlier chapters, those who have more recently been exposed to Hurston will probably be spurred to explore more of her delightful books, precisely because Boyd has so skillfully reflected her subject's tone. Taken as a whole, the early chapters effectively explain the origins of the author's wanderlust and independence (and thus lays the framework for the remainder of the biography) by recounting how the premature death of her beloved mother left Hurston, at an early age, wandering across the South to live with various of her older siblings.

As the biography progresses through Hurston's adult life, the work of Boyd's adroit hand clearly emerges, carefully rendering the contours of Hurston's personality, her poise and her pluck (in order to receive free schooling in her 20s, Hurston shaved 10 years off her age and then continued, throughout her

life, to change her age to suit the circumstances). Boyd also weaves the web of Hurston's associations, describing her relationships with various black and white figures, including Alain Locke, Fannie Hurst, Carl Van Vechten, and Franz Boas. She paints a richly detailed portrait of Hurston's relationships with African-American author Langston Hughes and with her patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy and domineering white woman who financially supported the work of a number of Harlem Renaissance artists and insisted that they refer to her as "Godmother."

In describing Hurston's attitude towards Mason, whose view of African Americans was infantilizing at best, racist at worst, Boyd ably reconstructs one of the few stories that Hurston could not candidly tell. During the period Mason provided funds to Hurston, she exerted a great deal of control over the career of the budding author and anthropologist. Mason's demands were sometimes unreasonable, and her reactions to her beneficiary's work were capricious. Yet "Godmother" offered Hurston what she desperately needed—the resources to document and publicize the black folk culture that had nurtured Hurston's sense of self from the days of her youth in the Florida town of Eatonville, which was founded and governed by African Americans. Even though there was a power imbalance between the two women, Boyd suggests that Hurston did not sacrifice her dignity. She found ways to satisfy Mason by expressing her genuine good will towards the wealthy matron,

while more subtly expressing her dissatisfaction when Mason's decrees upset her.

As for Hurston's relationship with Hughes, Boyd evenhandedly chronicles how their mutually inspiring professional and personal friendship devolved into an ultimately irreconcilable struggle over the jointly authored play *Mule Bone*. Indeed, by the time

As for Hurston's relationship with Hughes, Boyd evenhandedly chronicles how their mutually inspiring professional and personal friendship devolved into an ultimately irreconcilable struggle over the jointly authored play Mule Bone.

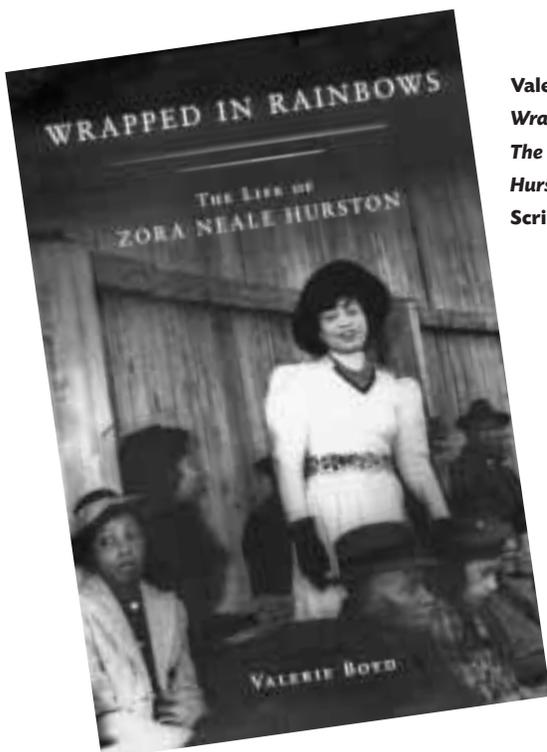
Boyd completes her narration of the *Mule Bone* episode, one feels a palpable sense of loss at the imaginative works that might have resulted from an extended collaboration between these erstwhile intimates who shared a very similar view on the importance of black folk culture to the formal development of African-American artistry. This perspective on African-American culture countered an emphasis on highbrow art that was advocated by other black writers of Hurston's era.

Hurston's unambiguous embracing of the folk illustrates her artistic independence and originality. In her written works, Hurston was capable of gracefully juxtaposing more formal, "literary" language with black vernacular speech, in a manner that neither privileged the literary nor debased the dialect. Boyd demonstrates that

Hurston moved through her social and professional life with similar confidence and grace, even though she often found herself financially dependent on friends, patrons, and foundations. For Boyd, Hurston's determined choice to attempt a living as a professional writer, in a society where black women were not thought of as author material, proves the singular audacity of her vision. Although she was briefly married several times, she essentially lived the life of a single woman, in a society where many a black woman would have been pleased to marry a solvent, professional black man. Hurston had such opportunities, but marriage, as it was conventionally practiced, was simply not consonant with her ambitions. Money was not important enough for her to compromise her ideals and her identity by marrying.

In the end—you may well have heard this story too—Hurston died in poverty in 1960, with her books out of print, and was buried in an unmarked Florida grave. Her work and her name were revived in the 1970s, and ever since, she has been posthumously receiving just recognition for her genius. But in narrating this tale, Boyd avoids the discourse of tragedy that is often associated with it. Boyd's Hurston was well aware that her unconventional life might result in an impecunious death, but she pursued the life she felt destined to lead. That is, perhaps, the most compelling story of all. With an impressive command of the generation of Hurston biographical scholarship that followed Robert Hemenway's important 1977 biography and with a firsthand interpretation of the primary sources, Valerie Boyd has written a biography eminently worthy of the adventurous story that was the life of Zora Neale Hurston.

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Valerie Boyd,
Wrapped in Rainbows:
The Life of Zora Neale
Hurston, New York:
Scribner, 2003.

Reconsidering the Souls of Black Folk



Co-author Stanley Crouch

Stanley Crouch and Playthell Benjamin, *Reconsidering the Souls of Black Folk: Thoughts on the Groundbreaking Classic Work of W.E.B. Du Bois*, Philadelphia: Running Press Book Publishers, Hardcover 2002. Pp.160.

2003 marked the centennial of the classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*, one of the most important nonfiction works penned in the 20th century. Its author, W.E.B. Du Bois,

is a towering figure not only in African-American life and culture but in American life broadly considered. It is fitting that this work be honored with a tome devoted to considering the impact not only *Souls* had but Du Bois had on American intellectual and political life. However, as pleasurable as it is to read, Benjamin and Crouch fall far short of the standard set by Du Bois 100 years ago.

The work is divided into two sections: one dealing with the context, the other dealing with the text (and with modern day scholarship on Du Bois). Benjamin pens an essay then Crouch writes a shorter response. I find that the structure is perfect for a work such as this and lends it an improvisational tone that befits the improvisational (and pugilistic) style of both Benjamin and Crouch, sharply in contrast to the style of the work the two men consider.

The first section deals with the context. To truly understand the power and majesty of *Souls* it is crucial that we begin by understanding life at the beginning of the 20th century.

Though African Americans were still brutalized and victimized, they maintained enough agency to never quite fall to the ontological status of *victim*. Jim Crow segregation and white supremacy had not only severely truncated the living opportunities of black men and women throughout the United States but people of color throughout the world. However, as pernicious as the structural forces of terror and subjugation were, *ideas* could not be segregated the same way one could segre-

gate bathrooms. And there was still space for the individual pursuit of excellence.

This meant that Du Bois could not only be influenced by the black men and women he encountered at Fisk, but he could also be influenced (and himself influence) Germans such as Max Weber, under whom he studied while in Berlin. What this also meant was that Du Bois could have the audacity to complete the requirements for not just one Ph.D. (at Harvard) but *two*. Du Bois also wrote the equivalent of a dissertation in political economy at the University of Berlin. The only reason Du Bois did not get this second Ph.D. was because he was denied the funds (\$350) by the white philanthropic foundation in the United States that supported him to stay in residence one last semester. What both Crouch and Benjamin are able to show in this section is that for all the fakelore and folklore of white supremacy, Du Bois was still able to stand head and shoulders above those who *themselves stood head and shoulders above the rest*. Benjamin's discussion of the German influence on Du Bois is particularly insightful, as Benjamin's knowledge of music renders him able to trace the strains of German nationalism through German high culture and in turn talk about how this impacted Du Bois.

Du Bois was still able to stand head and shoulders above those who themselves stood head and shoulders above the rest.

Crouch's response is a riff on some of the same themes of antagonistic cooperation, Ellisonian individualism, and the mulatto nature of American life that he is famous (some would venture *infamous*) for. He deftly fuses disparate elements (the Enlightenment, the *Magna Carta*, Benjamin Banneker, and Du Bois' own *Philadelphia Negro*) into one colorful tapestry, concluding it with a critique of Black Nationalism that has a well-known sound to those familiar with Crouch's previous works.

The second section is supposed to deal with the text itself and the period after its publication—but here is where the work falls apart. A significant portion of Benjamin's essay is devoted to attacks on modern day scholars (Adolph Reed, Cornel West, and Washington University's own Gerald Early all fall victim to Benjamin's ire) who either are not living up to Du Bois stan-



W.E.B. DuBois, Nina Gomer DuBois, and Burghardt DuBois, 1897.

Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, W.E.B. DuBois Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. (p. 3) from Katz, Michael B. and Sugrue, Thomas J., *W.E.B. DuBois, Race, and the City*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.