By and large, theorists and practitioners of postcolonial criticism have tended to steer well clear of African-American cultural politics. Among the many persuasive reasons for such navigational caution, I suspect that not least is the risk of running aground on questions of terminology. For all the rhetorical force of Leroi Jones’s assertion that ‘Black is a Country’,¹ the fact remains that with neither a territorial identity nor the usual element of physical separation from the metropolitan centre, black America cannot strictly be said to fit any standard model of the colonial or postcolonial experience. Of course, some degree of congruence is often conceded. In The Wretched of the Earth, for instance, Frantz Fanon asserts that in their quest for a precolonial cultural matrix, black people in the United States and Latin America faced a problem ‘not fundamentally different from that of the Africans’.² Significantly, however, Fanon qualifies the assertion almost immediately by adding that although subjectively the situations might appear comparable, ‘the objective problems were fundamentally heterogeneous’; the concerns that kept Richard Wright or Langston Hughes on the alert, we are told, were essentially distinct from those that confronted Leopold Senghor or Jomo Kenyatta (p. 216). More recently the African-American critic Donald B. Gibson has similarly repudiated the colonial analogy, arguing to a contemporary audience that Wole Soyinka ‘stands in a quite different relation to European culture than we do to American-European culture’.³

The danger on the one hand is that a merely figurative deployment of the colonial paradigm is liable to empty an effective critical vocabulary of its specific historical and political charge; slackly used, as Sara Suleri warns, the concept of postcolonialism risks degenerating into little more than ‘a preapproved allegory for any mode of discursive contestation’ and ‘a free-floating metaphor for cultural embattlement’.⁴ On the other hand, to

propose a literal application of postcolonial theory to the struggles of black America is to court the charge of simplifying, distorting, or negating the latter’s distinctive concerns. And, to complicate matters still further, we have Ishmael Reed’s caveat that the very use of ‘black America’ is potentially hazardous: according to Reed, the term too easily becomes a ‘lazy metonymy’, which imposes (or lays claim to) a spurious political and cultural unity in defiance of the exuberant variety of actual African-American lives.

Even if such terminological anxieties can be allayed or circumvented, there remains the larger problem that in reaching out to address black American literature, postcolonial criticism may itself be seen, in Linda Hutcheon’s words, as ‘yet another of the First World academy’s covert colonizing strategies of domination’. Two issues need to be distinguished here. The first is a general resistance to and suspicion of postcolonialism’s comparative basis, arising from the understandable desire of any self-conscious and formerly subordinate, marginalized, minority, or Third World culture to be differentiated in all its particularity, rather than being subsumed into a single homogenizing narrative. Thus, when H. L. Gates, dean of African-American Studies at Harvard, regrets ‘the ascendancy of the colonial paradigm’ and wearily asks ‘Do we still need global imperial theory — in this case, a grand unified theory of oppression?’, it is clear that he neither expects nor wants the answer ‘Yes’. Instead, as he has indicated on several occasions, he believes that the analysis of black culture requires specialized aesthetic tools: ‘we must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures’.

The usage of ‘we’ and ‘our’ in Gates’s statement serves as a pointer to a second and more specific critical issue, which nowadays goes by the unlovely label ‘credentialism’. What it boils down to is whether the would-be critic possesses the requisite insider’s qualifications. If not — as in the present instance of a white European engaging with black American literature — a fair number of contemporary theorists would argue that the whole project is illegitimate. Michael Awkward, for instance, suspects that ‘a quintessential will to power’ lies behind many white academics’ efforts to intervene in, map out, or appropriate for their own purposes the cultural terrain of black America. As one of the melanistically challenged, I may dislike the imputation, but it is a salutary reminder to proceed with caution. After all,

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there is no denying at least a potential resonance between certain critical activities and the historical procedures of colonialism.

That said, however, I do not accept that literary criticism is, or ever can be, divided up into racial no-go areas or any other kind of exclusive fiefdom. Like Edward W. Said, whose words I wholeheartedly endorse, I have no patience with the position that “we” should only or mainly be concerned with what is “ours”.

According to Said, there is a wider intellectual responsibility, which is precisely to subvert such parochialism in favour of ‘mixing, of crossing over, of stepping beyond boundaries’; these, he says, are ‘more creative human activities than staying inside rigidly policed borders’. I do not rehearse Said’s views simply to rationalize my own border-crossing interests. More importantly, the intention is to underline the need for the disciplinary enclaves of postcolonial theory and African-American literature to be more open to each other’s efforts and achievement. Since there is no definitive consensus on what technically constitutes postcoloniality in the first place, and since cultural identity, as Stuart Hall reminds us, is ‘not an essence, but a positioning’, it seems obvious to me that from the critic’s point of view, black America’s precise geo-political contours are ultimately less important than the perspectives that emerge when its culture is conceptualized as postcolonial. This does not mean denying the distinctive historical and material conditions that have shaped that culture. On the contrary, it means that what is required is an analysis which can acknowledge both differentiation and sameness: to quote Said again, ‘we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its own particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations’ (CI, p. 36).

Said’s call for a ‘global, contrapuntal analysis’ (CI, p. 386) may sound like a counsel of perfection, but there are good reasons, both ideological and pragmatic, for trying to implement it. Cornel West, a tireless advocate of black Americans’ obligation to theorize their struggle in global terms, has urged that ‘we need to posit totalities with all the openness and flexibility that one can muster, but we must posit totalities in order to look at the dynamic relation between parts’. Without some sense of connection to a larger whole, West believes, there can be no effective social movements, and the

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10 *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. xxviii. Further references (hereafter CI) are given in parentheses in the text.


12 For example, Ashcroft and others in *The Empire Writes Back* (see below, n. 28) include white settler colonies within the postcolonial designation, whereas Linda Hutcheon is among many theorists who fear that to do so trivializes the ‘Third World experience of colonization’; see ‘Circling the Downspout of Empire’, in *Past The Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, ed. by Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1990), pp. 167–89. Williams and Chrisman likewise have severe reservations about whether ‘the argument for inclusion’ has been won (p. 4).


oppositional politics of an oppressed group will inevitably become ‘emaci-
ated [. . .] dispersed [. . .] nothing but existential rebellion’ (p. 82). The
African-American writer bell hooks shares this anxiety about political
‘emaciation’ and ‘dispersal’. In conversation with Paul Gilroy she has
deplored the naivety of sectarian black identity politics in the United States
and explicitly attributes it to ‘the lack of a whole critical theory and practice
around colonization and de-colonization’.15 The question then arises: cui
bono? Whose interests are best served when the various sites and categories
of liberation struggle are cordoned off from each other or discouraged from
acknowledging a cognate agenda? From the historical record it is clear that
the only beneficiary of such subaltern fragmentation is the dominant group,
the rulers. In other words, in the realm of cultural politics there may be little
to choose between the apparently progressive pluralism of ‘separate but
equal’16 and the old imperialist strategies of ‘divide and conquer’.

Hence, in line with Fanon’s call for ‘a world of reciprocal recognitions’,17
I would argue that the effort to include black America in the postcolonial
debate is not only intellectually valid but politically necessary. As Edward
Said has noted, resistance in the colonies, and opposition and dissent in the
metropolis, are connected and complementary manifestations of the same
emancipatory project (CI, pp. 333–34),18 a point which is readily confirmed
in the long tradition of cross-fertilization between black American and other
anti-imperialist struggles. Consider, for instance, the acknowledged impact
of W. E. B. Du Bois’s Pan-Africanism and the ‘New Negro’ movement of the
Harlem Renaissance on the francophone theorists of Négritude such as
Senghor and Césaire. Or, again, think of the way Stokely Carmichael and
other Black Power militants in the United States invoked Fanon as ideologue
and patron saint during the 1960s and early 1970s.19 There will probably
always be purists who wish to deny or downplay the relevance of the colonial
paradigm to the black minority in the States. However, I submit that if the
historical experiences of rupture, exile, subjugation, social marginality, and
linguistic and cultural dispossession count for anything in the definition of a

16 The phrase has a peculiarly sinister ring in the context of the United States. Brought up in the long
shadow of the Jim Crow codes and the notorious 1896 Supreme Court ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson, black
Americans in the twentieth century have surely had more cause than most to distrust the intentions of
anyone still advocating the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’.
17 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Masks, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press,
18 In 1967 Stokely Carmichael anticipated Said’s observation in his call for a transnational assault on
the ‘octopus’ of American imperialism: ‘While we disrupt internally and aim for the eye of the octopus,
we are hoping that our brothers are disrupting externally to sever the tentacles of the United States’
(The Dialectics of Liberation’, in Stokely Speaks: Black Power Back to Pan-Africanism (New York: Vintage,
19 During the Newark and Detroit riots of 1967, it was said that ‘every brother on a rooftop can quote
The Wretched of the Earth required reading for members, and, in their ten-point political platform,
explicitly characterized African-Americans in Fanonian terms as ‘black colonial subjects’. 
colonized identity, then it is hard to see how African-Americans can possibly be excluded from the discussion.

Indeed, I would go further. Since existing centre-periphery models of analysis have recently come under such severe attack, and since notions of ‘doubleness’, ‘hybridity’, ‘syncretism’, and ‘creolization’ are now regarded as fundamental to the postcolonial mode, is it not time to acknowledge that the complex social positioning of African-Americans at the very heart of the First World imperium presents us with the aftermath of the colonial encounter in its most extreme and challenging form? It is no longer enough to theorize that aftermath as if it were confined to territories ‘out there’ on some putative margin as construed by Western discourse. On the contrary, as Julia V. Emberley insists in relation to the indigenous peoples of Canada, ‘First World discourse should come home to meet its more local forms of “othering”’. In other words (though admittedly this is to wrench Booker T. Washington’s famous injunction out of context), ‘Cast down your buckets where you are’.

My contention is not just that the black experience in America vividly illustrates and parallels various configurations of postcolonialism, although this is demonstrably true. Nor am I simply claiming that postcolonial theory can be ‘applied’ to black literary texts, though again this is certainly the case, and the results are often illuminating. Rather, or additionally, what I am suggesting is that many aspects of the theoretical debate itself might be clarified, interrogated, sharpened, enriched — and perhaps even realigned with meaningful practice — if they were approached by way of a more attentive engagement with the perspectives and insights of African-American writers.

Richard Wright is a case in point. Although Native Son (1940) was published more than quarter of a century before translations of Fanon’s work were readily available in the United States, the novel remains, even today, one of the most detailed analyses we possess of that murderous complex of resentment, fear, self-hatred, desire, rage, and aggression which for Fanon typified the psychopathology of the colonized. Bigger Thomas, ‘in a state of permanent tension’ like Fanon’s natives, inhabits ‘a world cut in two’, where the rat-infested squalor of Chicago’s South Side ghetto contrasts with the spacious elegance of the Daltons’ white neighbourhood as diametrically as the opposing zones of native and settler in The Wretched of the

20 See, for example, Henry Louis Gates Jr: ‘The sovereign-colony relation is simply another instance of the spatial topography of center and margin on which oppositional criticism subsists. And it is just this model that [...] has started to exhaust its usefulness in describing our modernity’ (‘Goodbye Columbus? Notes on the Culture of Criticism’, American Literary History, 3 (1991), 711–27 (p. 723).
22 Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, pp. 52, 38. Further references (hereafter WOE) are given in parentheses. Significantly, in the earlier Black Skin White Masks, Fanon actually mentions Bigger Thomas as an example of his thesis (p. 139).
Earth. Bigger may not know the word ‘Manichean’, but he surely knows the condition to the bone:

We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain’t. They do things and we can’t. [...] Half the time I feel like I’m on the outside of the world peering in through a knot-hole in the fence.23

The economic structures of American society have already imbued Bigger with a sense of his own marginality and worthlessness. These feelings are exacerbated by direct contact with whites, and in his response to Mary Dalton’s overtures of friendship we should recognize precisely that ‘internalization — or, better, epidermalization’24 of inferiority that Fanon diagnosed as the inevitable by-product of white imperialist ways of seeing: ‘He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin’ (NS, p. 107). In Wright’s analysis, as in Fanon’s, the resulting build-up of stress, and the need for psychic wholeness, find their consummation in murder. Fanon speaks of a cleansing violence which ‘frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; [which] makes him fearless and restores his self-respect’ (WOE, p. 94). In Native Son, Bigger kills twice — once by ‘accident’, the second time deliberately — and emerges from the violence feeling ‘like a man reborn’ (NS, p. 149). Thereafter, even as the police cordon closes in, we are told:

There remained to him a queer sense of power. He had done this. He had brought all this about. In all his life, these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free. (NS, p. 279)

The euphoria does not last, however, for as both Wright and Fanon were aware, the inchoate revolutionary consciousness still has more to learn. In Fanon’s words:

The clear, unreal, idyllic light of the beginning is followed by a semi-darkness that bewilders the senses. [...] In their weary road toward rational knowledge, the people must also give up their too-simple conception of their overlords. The species is breaking up under their very eyes. (WOE, p. 145)

In his prison cell, awaiting trial and execution, a bewildered Bigger begins to conceive the seismic possibility that two white men — his attorney, Boris Max, and more especially Jan, boyfriend of the murdered Mary — are actually ‘people, people like himself’ (NS, p. 398), who are honestly trying to understand and become part of his struggle. They may not succeed, but even the effort is significant: ‘A particle of white rock had detached itself from that looming mountain of white hate and had rolled down the slope,

23 Richard Wright, Native Son (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 58. Further references (hereafter NS) are given in parentheses in the text.
24 Fanon, Black Skin White Masks, p. 13.
stopping still at his feet' (NS, p. 326). Here is the moment when the Manichean dialectic gives way. It is the necessary, transforming moment when Fanon’s colonized natives discover that ‘the settler is not simply the man who must be killed’, and, in face of ‘truths that are only partial, limited and unstable’ (WOE, p. 146), anti-colonialism begins to move from instinctual and purely reactive mayhem towards a more complex and ultimately humanist politics of liberation.

Bigger Thomas is no card-carrying member of the insurgent fellahin, obviously, and his death is his own. But one important consequence of reading Fanon and Wright together like this is that it becomes less easy to reduce the ending of Native Son to some kind of blurry and apolitical existentialism. It is my contention that the cross-references rehistoricize and restore to the novel its specific socio-political urgency vis-à-vis the shape of American racism, while at the same time allowing Wright’s native-born and dispossessed protagonist to speak to the wider politics of postcolonialism.

I should like to see such cross-referencing — border-crossing — on a wider scale. It seems almost perverse, for example, that in all the talk about ‘doubleness’ (a condition which, according to Hutcheon, ‘characterises the two-fold vision of the post-colonial),25 theorists in the field have so seldom turned to the ground-breaking work of Du Bois, who formulated ideas about ‘double-consciousness’ and the ‘twoness’ of black Americans more than ninety years ago.26 Ralph Ellison’s sustained exploration of ‘the uneasy burden and occasional joy of a complex double vision’ also deserves attention.27 In The Empire Writes Back we are told that typically the Janus-faced postcolonial text ‘uses the tools of one culture or society and yet seeks to remain faithful to the experience of another’,28 and much speculative effort has gone into theorizing how (and, indeed, whether) such duality can be achieved. Yet close study of Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952) might go a long way towards defining a repertoire of available strategies. As the black critic Larry Neal put it in his tribute to the author’s canny intercultural balancing act: ‘That trumpet you got in your hand may have been made in Germany, but you sure sound like my Uncle Rufus whooping his coming-home call across the cotton fields’.29 How sad, then, that some arbitrary demarcation of critical boundaries has virtually excluded Invisible Man from the postcolonial frame of reference.

Likewise, how strange that postcolonial critics concerned with the creative possibilities of hybridity and contamination should fail to draw theoretical

25 ‘Circling the Downspout of Empire’, p. 176.
sustenance from such exuberantly ‘contaminated’ black writers as Ishmael Reed and Charles Johnson. The latter, for instance, advocates an art that is ‘dangerous and wickedly diverse, enslaved to no single idea of Being’, and enunciates in the sparkling intertextual play of his fiction a powerful critique of all essentialist notions of cultural identity. On the theoretical side, the critic Barbara Johnson has also warned against the pitfalls of essentialism, particularly in relation to separatist and ‘vernacular’ models of criticism. Pointing to the etymological doubleness of the very word ‘vernacular’, she reminds us that ‘[it] does not name a separate realm: it comes from the Latin “verna”, which means “a slave born in his master’s house”. The vernacular is a difference within, not a realm outside’. The two Johnsons mentioned here (novelist and critic) propose a sophisticated and by no means uncontested notion of subaltern identity formation; not surprisingly, a very different and indeed hostile stance has frequently been adopted by Afrocentrist and cultural-nationalist critics. From a transnational perspective we may well see such controversies as a direct counterpart of those which arose in West Africa between Soyinka and the so-called bolekaja critics. But again, it is not the mere parallel that interests me. Rather, it is the possibility of convergence and intervention, the idea that where common ground exists, theorists of black American and postcolonial cultures might actually participate in and benefit from each other’s explorations.

This, I believe, is the task Edward Said looks ahead to when he speaks of the transfiguration of history and geography into ‘new maps, new and far less stable identities, new types of connections’. A more adventurous critical cartography could establish vital communication and supply lines in the areas I have already touched on: that is, in developing an account of how ‘otherness’ is constructed and experienced, and in the theorizing of hybridity as against the romantic or strategic appeals of ‘race retrieval’ and cultural nationalism. There is also rich potential for further comparative study. For example, an analysis is needed of the intersections between Europe’s Orientalism and America’s self-fashioning through an Africanist mythology, as signposted by Toni Morrison in Playing in the Dark. And other issues awaiting sustained discussion include black America’s contribution to postcolonial debates about address and audience, the social function of art, the responsibilities of the native intellectual, and the protest mode as ‘reverse discourse’.

32 See, for example, Molefi Kete Asante, Kemetic, Afrocentricity and Knowledge (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), and, from the same Afrocentrist enclave at Temple University, Language and Literature in the African-American Imagination, ed. by Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1992).
In the remainder of this essay, however, I want to focus on just one aspect of recent theoretical deliberations, and to indicate how it may be reappraised in the light of evidence drawn from African-American fiction. The postcolonial critical enterprise has been much preoccupied with matters of ‘voice’, linguistic displacement, and silence — generally, with the tensions inherent in attempting to use the language of the dominant culture to articulate a subjectivity which that very language has helped to deny. More specifically, these issues coalesce around the figure of the so-called ‘native informant’, a problematic figure whose authenticity, reliability, and expressive power have come under intense scrutiny, giving rise to such unresolved questions as Gayatri Spivak’s ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ and Rey Chow’s ‘Where have all the natives gone?’ An approach to these questions by way of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* opens out some worthwhile perspectives.

The Trueblood episode in *Invisible Man* should be a compulsory text for any student of the native informant syndrome. Jim Trueblood, a dirt-poor Alabama share-cropper, whose very name seems to attest an original and uncontaminated ethnicity, has become notorious in the local community for a dream-induced act of incest which leaves his own daughter pregnant. In an almost parodic version of the colonial encounter, the visiting white dignitary Mr Norton — horrified and fascinated in equal measure by such outrageous native behaviour — demands a first-hand account, and Trueblood duly obliges by detailing the act, its context, and its consequences in a bravura performance which occupies a full twelve pages of the novel. I say ‘performance’ advisedly, for the speaker is neither artless nor unrehearsed: ‘He cleared his throat, his eyes gleaming and his voice taking on a deep, incantatory quality, as though he had told the story many, many times.’ He has: he has told it to his farm boss, retold it to the sheriff, then again to the sheriff’s cronies (‘they wanted to hear about the gal lots of times’), and repeated it before an ever-widening circle of avid listeners including ‘big white folks, too, from the big school way cross the State’ (*IM*, p. 48). Like any good informant, he has learned to give his audience what they want (or expect) to hear. As a result, instead of hounding him out of the county, the white community rewards him with food, clothing, offers of employment, and cash; Norton’s contribution is a hundred-dollar bill.

What is immediately obvious from this summary is that Trueblood has translated his story into a saleable commodity; as Houston Baker says, the narrative has become an ‘expressive product [. . . ] framed to fit market


demands’. Baker goes on to argue that, having thus entered into an industrial-capitalist system of exchange, ‘[Trueblood’s] actions as a merchant seem to compromise his status [. . .] as a character of undeniable folk authenticity.’ In other words — and presumably theorists like Spivak would agree — the voice we hear is not that of a ‘true blood’ at all, but a contaminated, complicit voice, already irreparably distorted by contact with the white world. But there is more to it than this. When we ask why the incest narrative has acquired such exchange value, attention shifts from speaker to hearers, and to Ellison’s sharp perception of the role of native testimony in ‘the economy of Manichean allegory’. Norton’s response to Trueblood is instructive: ‘“You did it and are unharmed!” he shouted, his blue eyes blazing into the black face with something like envy and indignation. [ . . .] “You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!”’ (IM, p. 46). Norton, it scarcely needs saying, once had a daughter too, a deceased paragon whose beauty and maidenly virtues he recalls so rhapsodically as to convey beyond doubt the intensity of his own repressed incestuous desires. In his voyeuristic excitement over Trueblood’s story, therefore, we see those features of ‘transitivity’ and ‘preoccupation with the inverted self-image’ that, according to JanMohamed, typify the colonial encounter and cast the native ‘as no more than a recipient of negative elements of self that the European projects onto him’ (p. 67).

Commenting on the same psychological syndrome in an American racial context, Toni Morrison has observed that black people function in the white imagination as ‘publicly serviceable instruments of private dread and longing’. In view of this, I would conclude that for Ellison the subaltern’s alleged inability to speak authentically boils down to nothing more than the interlocutor’s inability to hear what is being said above the clamour of his own projected fantasies. Because of course Trueblood does speak, and in doing so he authenticates himself, speaks for himself, no matter what his white audience may choose to make of it. Like the ‘old singer of spirituals’ in the Prologue, for whom freedom ‘ain’t nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head’ (IM, p. 14), Trueblood has realized that in order to escape from other people’s construction of his experience, he must define and take control of it by telling the story in his own way. His twelve-page narrative act thus prefigures the autobiographical and self-liberating endeavour of Invisible Man as a whole: the unnamed protagonist, too, must discover the shape and meaning of his life through the process of telling it. The novel

39 The same idea, of course, governs the novel’s primary metaphor of invisibility; as the protagonist explains, ‘I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me’ (IM, p. 7).
itself represents that process, and perhaps it is not purely coincidental that in
the famous valedictory sentence (‘Who knows but that on the lower
frequencies I speak for you?’) the active and final verb is ‘I speak’
(IM, p. 469).

In Dessa Rose, Sherley Anne Williams engages with the problem of the
subaltern voice from a different angle, but issues of linguistic empowerment
are again pivotal. Published in 1986 and set in the 1840s, the novel
undertakes one of the counter-discursive tasks which Stephen Slemon has
noted as most typical of the postcolonial mode: ‘the reinsertion into history
of those acts and figures of anti-colonialist resistance that imperialist forms
of representation have systematically left out’.40 The eponymous heroine,
heavily pregnant, has been sentenced to death for her leading part in a slave
revolt where five white men were killed. Since the execution is to be delayed
until after her child is born, Adam Nehemiah, a peripatetic white authority
on slave management, takes the opportunity to conduct a series of interviews
with Dessa in order to elicit material for his forthcoming book, The Roots of
Rebellion in the Slave Population and Some Means of Eradicating Them. Here is a
clear-cut instance of the scenario deplored by Spivak, with the native
positioned as a mere ‘object for enthusiastic information-retrieval’.41
Nehemiah’s fervent aside, ‘Pray God this darky don’t die before I get my
book’,42 is a succinct reminder of how the dedicated ethnographer conceives
his priorities.

It has become almost axiomatic these days that ‘whoever frames the
discourse controls knowledge’.43 In ironic recognition of the traditionally
privileged status assumed by white versions of history, Williams structures
her novel so that, apart from a brief prologue centred in Dessa’s con-
sciousness, the dominant point of view in the opening section is Nehemiah’s.
It is only through his journal entries that we hear Dessa’s voice, and, even
though he attempts to transcribe her mode of speech, it is inevitable that by
‘framing’ the slave dialect with his own more educated register he contrives
to distance and subordinate her reality to his own purposes. But a black
subjectivity announces itself despite his apparent authority. Reading
between the lines of Nehemiah’s text — and even without recourse to
postcolonial theories of ‘mimicry’ and ‘slippage’ — anyone versed in
African-American styles of ‘signifying’ will be aware of how white linguistic
control is being subverted and an alternative knowledge produced. A proper
account of black signifying as verbal art-form, ‘critique oblique’ and

40 ‘Modernism’s Last Post’, in Adam and Tiffin, pp. 1–11 (p. 5).
41 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism’, Critical Inquiry,
(hereafter DR) are given in parentheses in the text.
insurgent weapon is well beyond the scope of this discussion, but, as broadly
defined by Michael G. Cooke, it is a species of ‘meta-communication, where
the surface expression and the intrinsic position diverge’. An immediate
instance of such meta-communication in Dessa Rose is the slaves’ singing.
Nehemiah complacently overhears the verses of a spiritual as ‘a quaint piece
of doggerel which the darkies cunningly adapt from the scraps of Scripture
they are taught’ (DR, p. 52). But while the surface expression may indeed
derive from the masters’ culture, its encoded significance in the black
community is profoundly insubordinate: it is in fact through the ‘call and
response’ of the spirituals that news of a conspiracy to rescue Dessa is
transmitted.

Fittingly, when the plot succeeds, Dessa’s escape from jail is also an escape
from Nehemiah’s textual containment. In the middle section of the novel an
omniscient narrator takes over, covering the period while Dessa and her
companions hide out and start to explore ways of achieving autonomy. The
political implications of narrative control are further underlined in the third
section, where Dessa assumes full first-person responsibility for telling her
own story. Nehemiah makes a last-ditch effort to identify and recapture
her, insisting: ‘I know it’s her. [...] I got her down here in my book’ (DR,
p. 231). But his ‘knowledge’ cannot hold her any more; his book has been
superseded. The epilogue finds Dessa settled in a free community out west,
passing the word on to a generation whose knowledge and history will no
longer be defined by white discourse: ‘This the childrens have heard from
our own lips’ (DR, p. 236).

‘Definitions belonged to the definers — not the defined.’ Like Dessa Rose,
Morrison’s Beloved is concerned with how those voices and lives which have
been occluded by the dominant culture can be recuperated and given the
power of self-definition. In Morrison’s novel, however, the answers are less
easy to come by; that is to say, her characters’ emergence from their
historical silencing is far more problematic than Dessa’s. Part of the
explanation, I think, lies in Morrison’s aching sense of ‘unspeakable
thoughts, unspoken’ (B, p. 199) — all those stories which can never be
told — and in her acknowledgement that articulacy itself may effectively
betray or evade the realities of the voiceless. Much the same idea underlies
Spivak’s claim that ‘if the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern
is not a subaltern any more’. As Rey Chow explains and expands Spivak’s
argument, “speaking” itself belongs to an already well defined structure

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44 Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy (New Haven, CT: Yale
University Press, 1984), p. 15. The phrase ‘critique oblique’ is from the same source.
45 Appositely, Simon Gikandi has observed: ‘The voice is a synecdoche of the unwritten culture of the
colonized [...] and its privileging in the text signifies an epistemological shift from the hegemony of the
are given in parentheses in the text.
and history of domination’, so any attempt to reinstate the native’s voice risks neutralizing ‘the essential untranslatability’ of the subaltern experience. In terms which bear directly on the bitter paradox Morrison has to negotiate in *Beloved*, Chow concludes: ‘We should argue that it is the native’s silence which is the most important clue to her displacement.’ In African-American literary studies, of course, these issues have long been part of the debate about ‘authenticity’ in nineteenth-century slave narratives. Discussing Frederick Douglass’s autobiographical writings, for instance, Houston Baker observes that with the achievement of literacy, inevitably ‘the black self [. . .] begins to distance itself from the domain of experience constituted by the oral–aural community of the slave quarters’. Anticipating Spivak and Chow, therefore, Baker’s argument is that the native’s original experience — ‘the voice of the unwritten self’ — can never be genuinely represented.

Nevertheless, this is precisely the task Morrison sets herself. Silence, speechlessness, and untranslatability are the **donnée** and domain of *Beloved*; but for the author, as for her characters, the challenge is to ‘make a way out of this no way’ (*B*, p. 95) and, somehow, to bespeak those reaches of experience where language cannot go. The task for the reader is equally demanding, prefigured by Ella in the novel who, on meeting newly escaped slaves in Cincinnati, ‘listen[s] for the holes — the things the fugitives did not say, the questions they did not ask. Listen[s] too for the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind’ (*B*, p. 92). Here as elsewhere in the text, Morrison’s carefully weighted negations (‘unnamed’, ‘unmentioned’, ‘disre-membered’, ‘unaccounted for’) tacitly affirm and compel recognition for what their prefixes strive to cancel — those names, memories, and lives that continue to populate the silence.

The problem of ‘untranslatability’, however, is perhaps most effectively addressed in Morrison’s strategic use of free indirect speech. Aply, this narrative mode locates author and reader both inside and outside a character’s consciousness: first-person thought processes are given from a third-person perspective. Moreover, the character’s internal discourse is **heard** (by the reader), yet at the same time **unheard** (because unvoiced). In Morrison’s hands this becomes the perfect instrument for representing those subjectivities which, by virtue of their social and linguistic positioning, cannot reveal themselves. A forceful example is the scene where Sethe attempts to convey to Paul D the emotional truth behind her act of infanticide. In direct speech, though ‘spinning’ and ‘circling’ round the topic, she is able to fill in most of the background detail, up to and including the conscious part of her decision to resist recapture: ‘I couldn’t let [Beloved]

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47 *Writing Diaspora*, pp. 36, 38. The preceding quotation, from Spivak in interview, is cited by Chow, p. 36.

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nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out’ (B, p. 163). But at this point Sethe stops speaking, because she has reached the brink of that original horror for which she has no words: ‘She could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask’, we are told; ‘she could never explain.’ So free indirect speech takes over:

When she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher’s hat, she heard wings. [...] And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they could be safe. (B, p. 163)

For two paragraphs, at the unutterable heart of Sethe’s memory, the narration can only be third-person. When she actually does speak again, the very starkness of her summation is a measure of the abyss it has traversed: ‘“I stopped him,” she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe”’ (B, p. 164).

The subtlety and tact of Morrison’s shifting perspective achieves a fine poise between intimacy and distance, and the result is to empower the voice of the unwritten self while simultaneously preserving and respecting its silences. Time and time again in the novel we encounter tell-tale lacunae, areas of raw experience where the protagonists’ first-person testimony breaks down because, as Paul D agrees with Sethe, ‘saying more might perhaps push them both to a place they couldn’t get back from’ (B, p. 72). And yet for Morrison herself, as she makes clear in Playing in the Dark, finding ‘the words to say it’ constitutes ‘the full agenda and unequivocal goal of a novelist’ (PD, p. v). Hence the pervasive tension in Beloved between the unspeakable and that which needs to be spoken. The semantic instability of a repeated sentence in the closing pages drives the point home: ‘It was not a story to pass on’ (B, pp. 274, 275). With emphasis on the final preposition, the statement seems to mean that Beloved’s story is too painful to be retold, and therefore should not be handed down to succeeding generations. But re-read with the emphasis on ‘pass’, it suggests the reverse, that those who have received the story should not allow it to go unheeded — in fact, should take responsibility in their turn for transmitting it — and, of course, the existence of the novel itself supports this second meaning. Living with such dualities is far from comfortable. But the indivisible need both to remember and to forget strikes me as a theme which haunts the wider subaltern condition as relentlessly as the murdered revenant Beloved haunts this novel, and it is here, I suggest, that postcolonial studies stand in greatest need of Morrison’s vision.

The way forward is as difficult, and as necessary, as the move Sethe’s younger daughter, Denver, has to make in the final section of the novel. Sethe, racked by memory and guilt, has submitted wholly to Beloved and the voracious demands of the past, and Denver realizes that unless she
herself can break free of the destructive isolation at 124 Bluestone Road and get help from outside, they are all doomed. But to venture outside is to become vulnerable, to ‘step off the edge of the world’ (B, p. 243) into a future where — as her mother has taught her — the monstrosities of history are always already there, waiting to be re-enacted. As she stands on the porch, paralysed equally by the terrors that lie behind and the danger ahead, she hears from beyond the grave the teasing voice of her grandmother, Baby Suggs, urging her to bear what must be borne and take the decisive step forward anyway:

But you said there was no defense.
“There ain’t.”
Then what do I do?
“Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on.” (B, p. 244)

The challenge is somehow to reconcile memory with hope, and in view of my earlier claims for the importance of converging discourses, it is significant that Denver’s first step towards the future is to share her story, to bring it to the notice of a wider community whose cognate experiences and collective concern can help to shape a solution.

It is not stretching the episode too far, I believe, to read it as a figure for one of the most urgent items on the contemporary postcolonial agenda — the need to find ways of being responsible to one’s own history without remaining trapped by it. In Beloved, Morrison’s painful engagement with the burden of the African-American past is balanced by her perception that to ‘know it, and go on’ is the condition for survival. To deduce from this a more widely applicable wisdom is in no sense to negate the specifically situated experience of black America. Rather, it is ‘explicitly to universalize the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the suffering of others’.49 Different histories bear witness to different devastations but, as I have argued throughout this essay, lines of convergence can and should be drawn. Black American literature speaks for itself — in as many senses as that phrase can bear. None the less, it can also speak to others, to all of us, and with a more extensive intercultural recognition of that achievement, perhaps we might have firmer grounds for hoping, with Said, that ‘lesson[s] learnt about oppression will not be forgotten or violated in another place and time’.