

Chapter Title: On Freedom and the Will to Adorn: The African American Essay

Book Title: On Freedom and the Will to Adorn

Book Subtitle: The Art of the African American Essay

Book Author(s): CHERYL A. WALL

Published by: University of North Carolina Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469646923_wall.5

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of North Carolina Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *On Freedom and the Will to Adorn*

JSTOR

CHAPTER ONE

On Freedom and the Will to Adorn

The African American Essay

Who were the first persons to get the unusual idea that being free was not only a value to be cherished but the most important thing that someone could possess? The answer, in a word: slaves.

—Orlando Patterson, *Freedom*

The will to adorn is the second most notable characteristic in Negro Expression.
—Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression”

No subject has engaged African American essayists more than freedom. The writing begins with demands that slavery be abolished and appeals to the nation to live out its creed. Whether circulated in newspapers, pamphlets, or broadsides, the earliest examples of the African American essay helped to define what freedom meant to those who were not free and to some of those, black and white, who were. After slavery was abolished, blacks recognized that although they were no longer legally enslaved, they were not yet free. Essayists contemplated the subject of freedom throughout the twentieth century as the struggle for citizenship rights continued. Their conceptions of freedom expanded to encompass gender as well as race. As the essay continued to offer a space in which alternative concepts of freedom could be explored, some writers moved beyond legalistic definitions and began to imagine a freedom centered in the individual rather than the race. Others explored concepts of freedom that originated outside the geographical and psychological borders of the United States.

As black essayists worked around and through ideas of freedom, they worked new variations on the genre of the essay itself. The open-endedness of the form provided its practitioners an artistic freedom. The essay allowed them to stamp the apparent formlessness of the essay with their own artistic signature. For some this meant channeling the voices of the disenfranchised into the official discourse of democracy. Others sounded a troubled eloquence through foregrounding the pain of their individual alienation. Many used the essay to announce and enact the cultural freedom that African Americans achieved even in the face of political oppression. The adorned language that characterized African American oral expressions in genres as

diverse as the folktale, the sermon, the courtship ritual, and the toast—and that became crucial elements in the fiction, poetry, and drama—made its mark on the genre of the essay as well.

Through a series of representative examples, this chapter charts these changes, while paying attention to the ways that the essay served as the medium for aesthetic debates among black writers and cultural workers. These debates centered on the relationship between art and politics in general and between aesthetics and ideology in particular. Did the writer speak for him- or herself, or as a representative of the race? What subjects were urgent, what perspectives were valuable, and what was the appropriate language for the African American essay? Should the will to adorn be accentuated or subordinated to political exigencies? The last proved a false choice. As this book will demonstrate, the African American essay is at its best an expression of both the determination to be free *and* the will to adorn.

In his magisterial study, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, Orlando Patterson asks the question, “Who were the first persons to get the unusual idea that being free was not only a value to be cherished but the most important thing that someone could possess?” He gives the answer, “in a word: slaves.” In the absence of simple definition of freedom, Patterson offers a tripartite conception: personal freedom, sovereign freedom, and civic freedom. The first is the most widely accepted understanding of the term: the sense that one is not coerced or restrained by another person in doing something desired; conversely, it is the sense that one can do as one pleases within the limits of that other person’s desire. Sovereign freedom is the power to act as one pleases, regardless of the wishes of others; it is the freedom slave owners possessed in regard to those they enslaved. Civic freedom is “the capacity of adult members of a community to participate in its life and governance.”¹ For the first two hundred and fifty years of their history in what became the United States, most people of African descent were denied freedom in all of these dimensions. They did not have the capacity to fulfill their individual desires, while they were subjected to the unchecked powers of their owners to act as *they* pleased. Civic freedom remained a dream deferred, though the examples of their white countrymen kept civic freedom in the forefront of their consciousness.

Those who were free had their own reasons to preserve distinctions between freedom and slavery. Even before the founding of the republic, black people were deployed as evidence in philosophical and political debates over freedom in America. As Toni Morrison observes, “The slave population, it could be assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on

problems of human freedom.”² It could not have been otherwise: the struggle for liberty and equality was contemporaneous with the institutionalization of slavery. As colonial leaders contemplated the rights they deserved as free men, they passed laws such as the Virginia Slave Code of 1705 proscribing the rights of those they enslaved. By the end of the eighteenth century, when freedom had been won for whites—at least those who were male and propertied—slavery was the assumed condition of blacks. At its inception, the nation inscribed the fact of slavery into the Constitution.

Citizenship by definition guaranteed rights that slavery denied. In historian Edmund Morgan’s formulation, “the meaning and the guarantee of (white) equality depended on the presence of slaves. White men were ‘equal in not being slaves.’”³ Poor whites willingly accepted the leadership of their wealthy countrymen whom they believed shared their interests as they shared their racial identity. As elite slaveholders like Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington led the fight against the tyranny of the English monarchy, they promised a victory for freedom and equality for all included in the national covenant. The identification of whites with freedom and blacks with enslavement calcified. On a more abstract level, as Saidiya Hartman observes, “the entanglement of bondage and liberty shaped the liberal imagination of freedom.”⁴ Although their participation was seldom acknowledged, blacks in America were not silent in the debates over the meaning of freedom. For them, freedom was after all an urgent practical matter as well as a matter of intense reflection. They were keenly aware that the putatively universal rhetoric of rights and revolution excluded them. They strove nevertheless to assert their membership in the nascent nation this rhetoric defined.

In May 1788, shortly before the Constitution was ratified, a free black who used the pseudonym Othello published “An Essay on Negro Slavery.” It called on Americans to abolish a practice “inconsistent with the declared principles of the American Revolution,” deplored the effect of the slave trade on Africa, and in a rhetorical turn that would be repeated many times through the nineteenth century, warned that God would punish Americans “with a dreadful attention to justice,” if they persisted in countenancing slavery.⁵ With this invocation of divine punishment, Othello became one of the first writers to identify slavery as a sin that corrupted the nation’s ideals. Adopting a pseudonym that bespeaks a desire to associate with traditions of eloquence, Othello deployed the discourse of Christianity, to which many blacks even in the colonial era laid claim, in order to create a space for himself in the discourse of rights. At the level of abstraction, those rights should have been as available to

him as to anyone, just as the supposed promises of Christianity were. But only by prophesying damnation on his fellow believers could Othello claim his discursive space.

Othello's writing is the earliest essay that can be attributed to a black author in the United States. It was published in *American Museum*, a journal that in its first issue, in January 1787, reprinted Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, the pamphlet that stoked the flames of the revolution. The journal boasted a distinguished roster of contributors including John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington. If their writings set the template for American exceptionalism, "An Essay on Negro Slavery" challenged the emergent nation's sense of rectitude. From its earliest iteration, the African American essay endorsed the democratic ideals the nation professed, while condemning its failure to fulfill them. In their writing, the relationship of African Americans to the nation would remain a complicated allegiance.

Broadsides and pamphlets were among the earliest print media that circulated in the New World, and blacks used them in part to counter the degrading depictions of the race in the dominant society's media. Many pamphlets were printed versions of orations, such as that of Methodist minister John Marrant titled, *A Sermon Preached on the 24th Day of June 1789, Being the Festival of St. John the Baptist, at the Request of the Right Worshipful the Grand Master Prince Hall and the Rest of the Brethren of the African Lodge of the Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons in Boston by the Reverend Brother Marrant, Chaplain*.⁶ Embedded in its title is the link between churches and fraternal organizations like the African Lodge of North America, popularly known as the Prince Hall Masons in honor of its founder. These groups shared the impulse to document their activities. That impulse animated other pamphleteers, including Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, founders of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, who published *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia* (1794) documenting the heroic actions of blacks during the yellow fever epidemic that convulsed the city in 1793.

In 1810, another AME leader, Daniel Coker, published *A Dialogue Between a Virginian and an African Minister*, exposing the failure of white Methodists to address the evils of slavery and refute the widespread belief that the Bible justified the institution. After the minister delivers a scriptural exegesis refuting the claim, the (white) Virginian asks where the minister studied divinity. "In the school of Christ," the minister responds. "And I think that is the best place for a gospel minister to take his degrees. But sir, I think you said something

about Saint Paul.” The use of the dialogue, a genre that dates back to classical Greece and is an important antecedent of the European essay, as well as the speaker’s sardonic tone and confident demeanor, anticipates and perhaps influences later abolitionist texts. The African minister assumes a spiritual authority superior to that of the educated white southerner. He has an answer to every query the Virginian raises, whether regarding the economic cost of emancipation or the social costs of intermarriage. A man of reason and uncommon respect, the Virginian is doubtless inspired by Thomas Jefferson. It is the minister, however, who cuts to the heart of the matter, which is “the liberty of a man. The man himself claims it as his own property. He pleads (and I think in truth) that it was originally his own; and he has never forfeited, nor alienated it; and therefore, by the common laws of justice and humanity, it is still his own.”⁷ Freedom is an inherent right, the property of every man, even men who themselves are considered property.

Pamphlets like *A Dialogue* protesting slavery and advocating freedom circulated in northern cities and towns, often under the aegis of churches and social organizations. Before there were formal antislavery societies, black Americans pioneered a rich tradition of protest writing. Philosophically, they refined concepts of liberty. Politically, they incited resistance to slavery in the South and discrimination in the North. They honed expressions of democratic eloquence that drew from the models of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the King James Bible.

The ideal of the United States as synonymous with freedom continues to stand at the center of the national mythology. Yet, the history of blacks in slavery has lasted longer than the history of blacks in freedom. If for the nation’s founders, freedom presumed its antithesis, the condition of enslavement, for formerly enslaved people, who wrote about their prior and present condition, it was clear that freedom and slavery were not antithetical. Blacks who were legally free did not enjoy the rights of citizenship. As historian Nathan Huggins put it, they were “not really free people in terms of the society, they were black people who were not owned.”⁸ Consequently, they were not only subjected to discrimination but were frequently required to show proof of their status. In their experience slavery and freedom, as it was obtained for both fugitives and free blacks in the North, existed on a continuum.

In sermons and orations, fugitive slaves and free men and women took to the podium to advocate for abolition and citizenship rights. Their spoken words informed their written texts as their written texts informed their spoken words. Once the texts were printed, they were often read aloud so that

those who were illiterate could have access to them. Oratorical strategies left their mark on the written texts of Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, Frances E. W. Harper, Maria Stewart, and David Walker. In their texts they achieved a formal but plainspoken prose that I term democratic eloquence.⁹ That is, their language was eloquent but not elevated; they blended the conventions of written prose with the speech of ordinary people. They tackled the crucial issues of the day—abolition being the most urgent—in terms that were memorable yet accessible to their audience.

Frederick Douglass exemplifies democratic eloquence. His prose was straightforward and unaffected; he recounted traumatic experiences in a matter-of-fact tone that had the effect of heightening the trauma and deepening the respect for its survivors. At the same time, his ironies eviscerated the oppressors. With a simple vocabulary, measured cadence, and regular syntax—except for those passages whose inversions call attention to themselves—Douglass wrote for a general audience. He employed familiar rhetorical tropes: repetition, parallelisms, and antitheses. A self-educated man, he made few classical allusions, but he made frequent references to the Bible; he rightly assumed that his audience was as familiar with these allusions as he was. He made occasional use of figures of speech and analogies to press his point. While he did not use folk idiom, he did not eschew figurative language—adorned language, if you will—but his figures in the main derived from his experience rather than his reading. Without using folk idiom, he gestured toward black people's penchant for adorned language. Moreover, his invocations of enslaved people in the body of his text narrowed the gap between their experiences and those of his free Northern and British audiences.

Many of the nineteenth-century orators, whom I dub “voices of thunder” in the next chapter, were ministers. Henry Highland Garnet, for example, was a Presbyterian cleric, trained in hermeneutics; he brought the strategies for interpreting biblical texts to the interpretation of political texts and events. As they would be for his twentieth-century descendants, the founding documents of the republic were grist for his mill. Garnet's orations were as intense and dramatic as sermons. Like sermons, they succeeded to the extent that auditors and readers internalized their message. The influence of Protestant thought and worship practices was so pervasive in U.S. black communities that even those speakers who were not ministers assimilated the rhetorical styles of the pulpit. That is, they made frequent use of the repetitions, interjections, and biblical allusions to which their audiences were accustomed. In appropriating these elements for written texts, they participated in a larger

movement among nineteenth-century American writers and thinkers. But their use of traditions of African American musical and oral performance sounded a distinctive note.

The incorporation of elements from African American oral culture is perhaps the most visible sign of the innovations the black writers have made in the essay. But it is not the only one. As Nathaniel Mackey observes, critics have been loath to recognize innovations by blacks in literary form rather than content. His term “troubled eloquence” suggests a way to think about these formal contributions. For Mackey, “trouble is a threshold,” the entry place into black letters. That trouble is both an external referent and an internal challenge, which makes the term especially useful for a study of essays in which the public and private often overlap. According to Mackey, troubled or “othered” eloquence “registers a need for a new world and a new language to go along with it.”¹⁰ In its expression, eloquence takes unexpected form, as for example, the eloquence of hesitation or inarticulateness.

In many respects, W. E. B. Du Bois’s essays in *The Souls of Black Folk* partake more of classical literary styles than of the democratic eloquence of Douglass and Harper.¹¹ But his is a troubled eloquence. Notably, his writings register a historical shift in which freedom becomes aligned as much with individual identity as with a people’s collective freedom. In the first essay, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” he poses a question never imagined by the eminent Victorians Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold, whose essays he admired: “How does it feel to be a problem?” The question acknowledges the trouble at the threshold of his consciousness. He gives a series of answers in different modes—the autobiographical, philosophical, historical, and sociological—but none of the answers is sufficient to answer a question that should never have had the occasion to be asked. Despite his formidable erudition, Du Bois the essayist writes for the general reader, not the specialist. He draws insights from the academic disciplines he has mastered but presents them without scholarly apparatus. His manner recalls another of Theodor Adorno’s observations: “In the essay, discrete elements set off against one another come together to form a readable context; the essay erects no scaffolding and no structure. But the elements crystallize as a configuration through their motion. The constellation is a force field, just as every intellectual structure is necessarily transformed into a force field under the essay’s gaze.”¹²

The force field for Du Bois is the condition of blacks in the post-Reconstruction world, a world which Du Bois both observes and inhabits. He begins his essay with elements of the personal, posing a question that he creates or distills from his own experience. He acknowledges that the ques-

tion is never phrased in his exact words, but it is implicit in racialized questions white men pose to him, questions he does not deign to answer. “And yet,” he allows, “being a problem is a strange experience,—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe.”¹³ “Strange” and “peculiar” are recurring adjectives that link the familiar anecdote of the white girl, new in town, who refuses his visiting card to the collective condition of black Americans. Double consciousness is a “peculiar sensation.” Trouble begins for Du Bois at the moment when, stunned by the girl’s rejection, he recognizes his racial difference. The alienating effects of that difference play out in short recollections of his school days, when his superior intellect allows him to transcend the rejection of his white peers. But the bitterness the rejection engenders leads Du Bois to ask a second question, in a phrase reminiscent of Old Testament prophets, “Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?”¹⁴

The question has another inescapable echo: the spirituals “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” and “Lord, How Come Me Here?” express a similar sense of bewilderment and angst. These echoes suggest the profound ways in which the spirituals were both a source and model for Du Bois’s troubled eloquence. He borrows much of his imagery from the spirituals. For example, the image of his grieving wife as “a childless mother” seems to invert the aching lyric “sometimes I feel like a motherless child.” That line and the phrase that follows, “a long way from home,” capture the existential dilemma of enslaved people who found themselves dislocated and dispossessed. For good reason, “home” is one of the most familiar spiritual tropes. But the spirituals express as well existential questions that anticipate and inform those posed by Du Bois. “Lord, how come me here?” reflects a sense of alienation that resonates with “How does it feel to be a problem?” The trouble at the threshold of consciousness that Du Bois represents in his essays clearly had antecedents in the songs of the black and unknown bards who likewise sought to understand their condition in the American wilderness.

No one before him had been more appreciative of the spirituals than Du Bois, for whom they constituted the “singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people” (205). But they were also “persistently mistaken and misunderstood,” their message “naturally veiled and half articulate” (205, 209). Du Bois discerned in the sorrow songs what other commentators had failed to perceive—that is, a profound critique of the institution of slavery. (Douglass is the great exception; his 1845 *Narrative* is the origin of the phrase “sorrow songs.”¹⁵) For Du Bois, the critique of slavery was the source of the “real poetry and meaning” of the songs, the poetry and meaning

that lay beneath “conventional theology and unmeaning rhapsody” (210). The examples he quotes not only protest the exploitation of labor, they inscribe the disruption of family (“mother and child are sung, but seldom father”) and emotional exile (“the mountains are well known, but home is unknown”) (211). Literally and figuratively, these are instantiations of trouble at the threshold of consciousness. When Du Bois queries how he came to be an outcast and a stranger in his own house, he is emulating the creators of the spirituals by fashioning a question in a biblical mode that conveys an urgent secular critique. Du Bois extends the long-standing identification of enslaved blacks with the biblical Hebrews by creating metaphors in the same key, for example, “Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites” (7). Three lines from a spiritual—“Shout, O Children!/Shout, you’re free!/For God has brought your liberty”—capture the jubilation of emancipation in the freed peoples’ “own plaintive cadences” (7). The epigraph to the opening chapter is the first reference to those cadences. The silent bars of “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” represent the “naturally veiled and half articulate” message of enslaved black folk to the world, as Du Bois explains in “The Sorrow Songs.” That explanation comes at the end of *Souls*. By not quoting the lyrics or even giving the title of the song in the beginning, Du Bois suggests how buried the “strange meaning of being black” in America at the dawn of the twentieth century remains for his readers.

As much as Du Bois seeks to invite his readers into the world behind the veil, the epigraphs represent what they cannot hear, indeed, what cannot be said outright. Moreover, the music acts as a bridge that spans the experiential gap between the creators of the spirituals and the cosmopolitan Du Bois. He remembers in “The Sorrow Songs” that even as a child the songs had stirred him strangely. Before he learned their history, he knew them at once “as of me and of mine” (204). In the full knowledge of their history, Du Bois embraces the sorrow songs as his own. By steeping himself in their legacy, he earns the right to speak for those whose silent voices are figured in his text.¹⁶ Their troubled eloquence informs his troubled eloquence.

Zora Neale Hurston’s “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (1928) is a meditation on freedom and racial identity that could not be more different from Du Bois’s. Refusing the construction of herself as a problem and rejecting the burdens of history, Hurston’s persona is fully engaged with the feelings that the essay’s title promises to explore. She claims her right to her subjectivity and her own language; she speaks for no one but herself. Insistently colloquial in her diction and humorous in her tone, the speaker is intent on seem-

ing to have nothing to prove. In sharp contrast to earlier essays in the tradition, Hurston's begins with a joke. "I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on his mother's side was *not* an Indian chief."¹⁷ To a degree the joke is aimed at the essay's white readers, who might have assumed that black racial identity required some explanation. But the joke is directed at blacks as well, especially those who are eager to claim a Native American heritage in order to claim to be something more than black. Hurston might also be signifying on Du Bois when she writes this. In 1920, he dramatically charted his genealogy in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* that included "a flood of Negro blood, a strain of French, a bit of Dutch, but thank God! no 'Anglo-Saxon.'"¹⁸ In any case, the Native American heritage—here with the intimations of a royal lineage—is a badge of distinction that Hurston's speaker does not need. She is happy to be just who she is—without any mitigating explanations.

"How It Feels to Be Colored Me" uses what Ralph Ellison would define as "vernacular process" to explore its subject. Ellison used the term to describe how "the most refined styles of the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-ear improvisations which we invent in our efforts to control our environment and entertain ourselves."¹⁹ For Ellison the vernacular is not racialized. He points to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as an example of the vernacular process at work in the novel. The process yields an American novel that is distinguishable from its English antecedents. Mark Twain sets the template, as the language of the first-person narrator/protagonist of *Huckleberry Finn* signals the invention of a democratic style.²⁰ Of course, Ellison appropriates that style as a novelist, but he does so as an essayist as well. His style as an essayist is consistently digressive, in keeping with the styles and techniques of the past, but their discursive shifts that incorporate a more colloquial prose and insistent allusions to jazz suggest improvisation rather than digression as a formative principle in the enactment of a vernacular process.

Hurston's use of vernacular process unfolds similarly. Her essay is digressive as it moves from childhood recollections to college reminiscences to a scene in a Harlem nightclub. It uses colloquial expressions to convey serious ideas; it tackles with humor some of the same subjects that provoke Du Bois's anguish. Consider how Hurston expresses her understanding that race is a social construction. For Du Bois, the moment of racial recognition occurs when the white girl rebuffs him; it sends him into an emotional tailspin. For her part, Hurston announces forthrightly, "I remember the very day that

I became colored" (826) and begins an account of a childhood that was in its way as idyllic as Du Bois's had been in his New England village before his encounter with his new classmate, except that Eatonville, Florida, was an "exclusively colored town." Ironically, in the all-colored town, Hurston did not feel colored. It is only when she leaves and moves to Jacksonville at age thirteen that she experiences a delayed racial recognition. "I was not Zora of Orange County anymore," she recalls, "I was now a little colored girl. I found out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown—warranted not to rub or run" (827).²¹ As she becomes conscious of a fixed racial identity, Hurston's speaker trades in bravado, as for example in her insistence that when she is discriminated against, she feels "merely" astonished that anyone can deny themselves "the pleasure of my company" (829). The performance of bravado in Hurston's essay protects her speaker against the anger and despair that threaten Du Bois's persona.

Hurston's conception of freedom is strictly personal; it has nothing to do with history or politics. History would offer only excuses for a speaker who proclaims "slavery is sixty years in the past" (827). While she concedes that it took a "terrible struggle" to make "an American out of a potential slave," she does not regret the cost. Indeed, she declares, shockingly, "Slavery is the price I paid for civilization" (827). To be sure, the essay's "I" has not been enslaved, so has not paid this price. But the end result of a struggle that has been waged on her behalf is her ability to declare herself free. Casting off the burden of history, she can identify herself in the present as an American who is running a race unencumbered. She goes so far as to say she is freer than her white counterpart, because "the game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting" (828). The use of metaphors from sports and games creates a discursive space in which politics can be held at bay. The tone is at once ebullient and arch.

That tone derives in part from the essay's rejection of race as an immutable condition. Race is instead a feeling that comes and goes depending on where one is and what one does. In scenes at Barnard and at the nightclub, the speaker feels herself most colored when thrown against a white background. Freedom is the choice to identify or not with a racially defined experience. It thus enables the speaker to make the essay's most famous declaration: "But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negro-hood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low-down dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong

regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife” (827).

The speaker separates herself from those who view blackness as a tragedy, a condition that would require explanation and expiation. She does not mind being black; the reference to “nature” suggests that she is further separating herself from those who would essentialize race. Abjuring any identification with weakness, “Zora” is certain that she as an individual is strong and therefore poised to win at the game of life. The image of her sharpening her oyster knife captures the spirit of bravado that pervades the essay. It is also significant that even within the paragraph the essay shifts discursive registers. It opens with a formal, even melodramatic statement. But by the fourth sentence, the diction shifts to the idiomatic “low-down dirty deal” and “helter-skelter skirmish.” These phrases anticipate Hurston’s observation in “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” where one of the elements of the “will to adorn” is the use of the double descriptive. In such linguistic turns, Hurston democratizes the high styles of the past in just the way Ellison describes.

Hurston’s conception of freedom as individual represents a crucial turn in the development of the twentieth-century African American essay. Equally important was the decoupling of the idea of freedom from the tenets of the U.S. nation-state. A notable example is “Cuba Libre,” the opening essay in LeRoi Jones’s collection titled *Home*, which examines the relevance of freedom as defined outside of, and counter to, the U.S. context.²² On a philosophical level, it considers what civic freedom means, when not defined in terms of electoral politics or capitalism. The essay works on one level as reportage, an account of a trip by a group of black intellectuals to Cuba in 1960. It records interviews with government officials and encounters with Cuban poets and workers—interviews and encounters that are facilitated by the author’s fluency in Spanish; it also gives an extended account of the events commemorating the first anniversary of the revolution. On another, personal, level, it is a record of Jones’s evolution from an apolitical “beat poet” to a poet for whom art without politics is inconceivable, the poet who finds a home in Harlem and then Newark, where he embraces black nationalism. On all three levels, the essay is constructed as a physical journey from Greenwich Village to Havana and from Havana to the Sierra Maestra mountains, and a metaphysical journey from ignorance to possible enlightenment, and from apathy to potential commitment. While the geographical journey can be mapped, the changes in consciousness remain ineffable.

The essay opens in Jones’s Greenwich Village apartment where he is hosting a party. The phone rings and he is invited to join a trip to Cuba, a place

where he has never thought of going. He is asked whether, as a poet, he “might like to know what’s *really* going on down there.”²³ In 1960 Jones has yet to publish a volume of poems, so the invitation is couched in part by an appeal to his vanity. The appeal is enhanced by his inclusion in a group that was to include the prominent black writers James Baldwin, Alice Childress, Langston Hughes, and John Killens—none of whom actually made the trip. But Jones’s lack of curiosity about the rest of the world, which he deems typically American, is a much deeper problem than his literary reputation. For him, as for most of his countrymen and -women, Cuba Libre is the name of a cocktail.²⁴ Given the anti-Communism of the U.S. government and press, Cuba would be the last place Americans would expect to learn about freedom.

The turning point in the essay comes when a young Cuban woman challenges Jones’s political bona fides. Jones responds, “I’m a poet . . . what can I do? I write, that’s all, I’m not even interested in politics” (147). She accuses him of being “a cowardly bourgeois individualist.” Screaming and stomping, a young Mexican poet piles on: “You want to cultivate your soul? Well, we’ve got millions of starving people to feed, and that moves me enough to make poems out of” (147). Jones does not respond to these indictments, and his silence makes them speak louder.²⁵ They resonate throughout the remainder of the essay, and perhaps beyond. Jones returns to the United States as a political poet who rejects the ethic of individualism and the aesthetic of art for art’s sake.

The remainder of the essay recounts Jones’s journey by train, bus, and on foot to the site on the island where the revolution was won. It describes the crowds of impassioned Cubans and their allies from throughout the Americas. (Jones is repeatedly reminded that “American” is not an identity exclusive to citizens of the United States.) The crowd’s fervor proves unsettling: “I was ecstatic and frightened. Something I had never seen before, exploding all around me” (148). Buoyed by the experience, Jones ceases to be an observer and becomes a participant. Yet, his revolutionary cries retain a homegrown flavor: “Viva Calle Cuarenta y dos,” “Viva Symphony Syd,” “Viva Cinco Punto,” and “Viva Turhan Bey.” Rather than the Cuban revolution, Jones pledges his fealty to Forty-Second Street, a jazz disc jockey, a jazz club, and a Hollywood movie actor.²⁶ With these linguistic crossings and jazz-inflected soundings—on both the levels of content and form—Jones expands the parameters of the African American essay.

Within a few years after his return to the United States, Jones changed his name to Amiri Baraka, became a black nationalist and later a Marxist who used his writing to try to spark in the black masses of the United States the revolu-

tionary ardor he admired in Cuba. While some of his readers were persuaded that black people in the United States could achieve freedom only through revolution, most of the working-class blacks he hoped to reach were not.

Patricia Williams looks at the subject of freedom through a different lens. She writes as a law professor and as a woman who came of age in the aftermath of the civil rights and Black Power movements. In my reading, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991) is a bookend with *The Souls of Black Folk*. What Reconstruction was to Du Bois, the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision is to Williams: a moment of limitless possibility and devastating disappointment. The post-civil rights moment is the force field in which the essays in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* unfold. While the specific cases the essays address—Tawana Brawley, Howard Beach, Eleanor Bumpers, Bernhard Goetz—have faded from the headlines, the causes they explore, including affirmative action, police brutality, and racist violence, continue to be the focus of public debates. At the book's core is the continuing struggle to claim and define freedom for African Americans. Like Du Bois, Williams combines political critique with personal reflection and infuses democratic eloquence with troubled eloquence.

In a sign of the social and political progress that African Americans—particularly privileged African Americans—made across the twentieth century, Williams, unlike Du Bois, emphasizes her professional identity, both in the book's subtitle, *Diary of a Law Professor*, and in her use of specialized academic language. Yet she argues that the language of the law is insufficient to her task. What she fashions instead is “an intentionally double-voiced and relational” mode of writing.²⁷ This mode of writing incorporates the personal as well as the political; it opens up space to represent feelings as well as coolly rational analysis. The analysis is couched in the language of critical theory, feminism, African American history, political science and rhetoric as well as constitutional law. Williams writes for her fellow academics, but her audience extends beyond the academy. In a move that transgresses legal protocols, Williams locates the motive for this new mode of writing in her personal experience. Referring to “persistent perceptions of me as an inherent contradiction”—that is, being perceived as “too black” or “not black enough”—she acknowledges the extent to which both the substance and the style of her writing derive from her personal experience. While the essays are mainly about the jurisprudence of rights, they also address implicitly the question Du Bois posed in 1903, “How does it feel to be a problem?” Like Du Bois, Williams makes it clear that her problematic status derives from those who misperceive who she in fact is.

Tellingly, Williams traces her interest in the law in general and her specialized interest “in the intersection of commerce and the Constitution” to her family history. Her great-great-grandmother was the slave of a Tennessee lawyer, who purchased her when she was eleven and he was thirty-five and impregnated her when she was twelve. Whether pondering the intricacies of the laws that enslaved her ancestor or imagining her ancestor’s adolescent feelings, Williams grapples with the legal and affective meanings of freedom. She quotes from a speech she wrote to present to a law school audience. It argues that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution conceive of freedom on the one hand as “the letter of the law which describes a specific range of rights and precepts,” and on the other hand as “the spirit of the law, the symbology of freedom,” which is in some ways “utterly meaningless or empty” and at the same time “a vessel to be filled with possibility, with a plurality of autonomous yearnings” (16). Williams’s project in her essays is to be attentive to both the letter and the spirit of the law. To explore the latter, she needs to find a genre more pliant than a legal treatise: the essay fulfills her purpose.

The choice is controversial, as the frequent criticism of her colleagues attests. They object to her writing as being too personal and too emotional. When she offers a defense of her approach, she writes like an essayist. “I deliberately sacrifice myself in my writing. I leave no part of myself out, for that is how much I want readers to connect with me. I want them to wonder about the things I wonder about, and to think about some of the things that trouble me” (92). In other words, she invites readers to participate in what Lukács calls the process of judging; she invites them to join her in thinking through complex and contentious issues. She strives to earn their trust even when they disagree with her conclusions: she puts herself on the line. She offers legal definitions and glosses current events in plainspoken prose, but insists on letting her readers know what she is both thinking *and* feeling about the subjects she addresses. The result is a fusion of democratic eloquence and troubled eloquence.

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, the genre of the essay has been crucial for interventions in political debates, whether about abolition, anti-imperialism, or desegregation. It has also been a primary medium for debates about the purpose and form of literature and art. Given the historical context in which they unfolded, these aesthetic debates are closely aligned with questions of freedom as well. Indeed, many of the same writers join both sets of debates. There is, however, a discernible shift in emphasis. Rather than defining what freedom is or how it can be achieved politically, these essays fore-

ground the role art can play in attaining it. Although the emphases shift, the essays continue to reflect patterns of democratic eloquence, troubled eloquence, and vernacular process. Moreover, whatever its subject, the essay provides a space both to define and enact the will to adorn.

"The Value of Race Literature" (1895) by Victoria Earle Matthews initiates the aesthetic debates that recur among black writers across the twentieth century. It is worth noting that Matthews's words were first delivered at a meeting called by African American women to protest attacks on their gender and race. In this political speech, later published as an essay, Matthews queries the purpose of literature, the validity of race as a category, the representation of black subjects in writing by white authors, and the audience for writing by blacks.²⁸ Decades before Ellison, Baraka, and Morrison, she posits music as a touchstone for literary expression by invoking Antonín Dvořák's assertion that Negro melodies "can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States."²⁹ In his *New World* symphony, the Czech-born composer would test his claim. By analogy, Matthews suggests that folklore could serve as the foundation of literary art. Most significantly, she calls for an engaged literature. Writing during the period historian Rayford Logan would deem "the nadir of the Negro's status in American society," Matthews argues if literature could not win the war against race prejudice, it could do much to advance the cause.³⁰

Anticipating objections to the premise of her essay, Matthews asks whether there was such a thing as a literature demarcated by race, "apart from the general American literature." She quickly notes that a similar question might be asked regarding American literature itself. If a race literature exists, she queries, how might it be defined? She argues that historical conditions had created inevitable differences in "the limitations, characteristics, aspirations, and ambitions" of black Americans that are reflected in their writing. To date, she concedes, their literary achievement is undistinguished, but the array of authors she cites evinces an impressive literary presence. Her definition of literature is capacious and includes history, biography, scientific treatises, sermons, speeches, travel writing and essays, as well as poems and novels. Starting with Phillis Wheatley, she lists dozens of authors with references to their work, including William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm (founders of *Freedom Journal*, the first national black newspaper, established in 1827), Frances Watkins Harper, Charlotte Forten Grimké, and historian George Washington Williams. Plainspoken in its eloquence, the roll call supports her argument that a race literature exists and that women as well as men have created it.

Matthews also cites a large number of non-black writers, from Americans Mark Twain and William Dean Howells to the Europeans Alexandre Dumas, Alexander Pushkin, and Ivan Turgenev. Some of these references advance her argument that literature has an instrumental value, while others work mainly to show off her erudition. But while some of the specifics are not always germane, the issues Matthews explored in her essay continue to resonate. Does African American literature exist? If so, do African American writers carry particular responsibilities to their natal communities? What are the criteria by which their writing is judged? Are they obligated to criticize negative images of blacks created by whites? Should they themselves depict only positive images of blacks? What relationship does race literature have to the literature of the dominant society? Who is its audience? Although few of the writers who came to print in the next century had heard of Victoria Matthews, many grappled with the questions she raised.

As they did, they raised the essay to a greater level of prominence. Reflecting with an acute self-consciousness their obligations and frustrations as artists who represented the race—both on the page and in their public personae—writers of the Harlem Renaissance debated questions of aesthetics and politics vigorously. I explore these debates at length in Chapter 3, “On Art and Such.” Suffice it to say here that some writers of this period found the burden of race more onerous than others. Langston Hughes famously declared in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” that artists should pay no heed to what either whites or blacks thought about their work. To the call that artists should mine the raw material of folklore, James Weldon Johnson responded in the affirmative, while Zora Neale Hurston insisted that the folk artist, who was inevitably “the Negro farthest down,” was the true artist. To a substantial degree, the essays these writers composed enacted the aesthetic they formulated. Consequently, no one mistakes Hughes for Alain Locke or Jessie Fauset for Hurston. Whether they chose to uplift the race or to dig deeply into the recesses of its culture, the content of their arguments shaped the form of their expression.

Questions over the function of African American literature and the criteria by which it should be judged continued to reverberate. In 1937, Richard Wright published “Blueprint for Negro Literature,” an essay that is often read as his literary manifesto. In keeping with its title, the essay is divided into numbered sections, beginning with “1. The Minority Outlook,” followed by “2. The Role of Negro Writing: Two Definitions.” Other sections take up “The Problem of Nationalism in Negro Writing” and “Subject and Theme.” The ninth and final section carries the heading “The Necessity for Collective

Work.” But what is interesting formally about “Blueprint” is the way in which its argument exceeds its structural constraints.

Not surprisingly, the essay argues for a social consciousness among black writers that is comparable to the social consciousness of the black working class. Unlike literature that is tethered to a past in which “humble” novels, poems, and plays are figured as “decorous ambassadors who go a-begging to white America,” the working class demonstrates a deep social consciousness that needs only to be channeled in a new direction.³¹ Significantly, the essay first appeared in *New Challenge*, a second version of a journal cofounded by Dorothy West, which Wright as editor moved to the Left. Its one issue included contributions by Alain Locke and Sterling Brown, among other veterans of the New Negro Renaissance. “Blueprint” declares the end to that chapter in literary history. Writers of the new generation would do well to turn to the folklore that nourishes workers—a folklore that is created by and speaks to blacks in the way that Wright hoped literature could. The essay urges writers at once to affirm and transcend the nationalism of the black community. That nationalism is expressed through folklore, as well as through social institutions. Ironically, in an essay that seems to set forth literary dictates, it refers twice to the fluidity of the culture it urges black writers to embrace. In the same breath that the essay argues for a social realism, it acknowledges that social realism is inadequate. In order to achieve the requisite “complex simplicity,” black writers are urged to draw on Eliot, Stein, Joyce, and the full roster of literary modernists. The most compelling necessity for the black writer, however, is a “perspective,” “that fixed point in intellectual space where writers stand to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of their people,” the point that Marxism had provided Wright. Yet, even the enumerated list that constitutes this “Blueprint” does not predict a result. It cannot envision the literature it prescribes. The autonomy of craft, and the force of the imagination, as well as the complexity of the conditions of the lives the black writer strives to represent made the future of black literature impossible to predict.

It was no coincidence that James Baldwin’s essay, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” critiqued what he considered Wright’s failure to achieve the complex simplicity he championed. For Baldwin, Wright’s *Native Son* was to the twentieth century what Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had been to the nineteenth: a one-dimensional sentimental tract. Sentimentality, which Baldwin defined as “the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion,” was their shared failing. The dishonesty of sentimentality for Baldwin was the antithesis of truth, which was not in turn necessarily tied to the ideal of

freedom, an individual condition that transcends the political, but which he identified instead as “freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted.”³² This freedom exists in a wholly different realm from that sought by Douglass and Garnet. Baldwin’s conception of freedom for the individual rather than the collective could be fruitfully compared to ideas set forth in previously discussed essays by Du Bois and Hurston. But Baldwin is not discussing personal freedom here. He is refracting his concerns through the prism of literature and art.

Although the critique of Wright accounts for the essay’s enduring fame, Baldwin’s one-time mentor is discussed only in the last paragraph. Rejecting Wright is the final act in Baldwin’s effort to clear a space for his own art. Earlier in the essay he dismisses his white contemporaries James Cain and Anita Loos; they, like Wright, are scorned for their failure to create fictions as complex as the realities they purport to represent. Baldwin’s use of the modernist keywords “ambiguity” and “paradox” suggest the aesthetic standard to which he aspires. Yet there is little in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” to tie Baldwin’s aspirations to the art-for-art’s-sake tenets conventionally associated with the modernists. Rather, Baldwin hopes to use the literary strategies of modernism in the service of an honest representation of black life. As I will show in Chapter 4, “Stranger at Home: James Baldwin on What It Means to Be an American,” his determination to explore the many dimensions of African American experience and his commitment to examining the complexities of his own consciousness produce a “troubled eloquence” discernible in the content and form of his essays.

When in “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin decries the critical tendency to view African American literature in terms of sociology rather than art, he anticipates a recurrent theme in Ellison’s essays. In “Autobiographical Note,” the preface to *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin’s first volume of essays, he singles Ellison out for praise. “Mr. Ellison,” he writes, “is the first Negro novelist I have ever read to utilize in language, and brilliantly, some of the ambiguity and irony of Negro life.”³³ Baldwin, like Ellison, argues that ambiguity and irony are not qualities black writers need to appropriate from white writers: these qualities are inherent in African American life.

In “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion,” the presentation he made as he accepted the National Book Award for *Invisible Man* and later published as an essay in *Shadow and Act*, Ralph Ellison elaborates on this theme. He describes the speech he heard around him as he composed his masterwork as “an alive language swirling with over three hundred years of American living, a mixture of the folk, the Biblical, the scientific and the political. Slangy in one

stance, academic in another, loaded poetically with imagery at one moment, mathematically bare of imagery in the next.”³⁴ He deployed this language in his essays as well as his fiction. The essays incorporate literary allusions, colloquial expressions, political discourse, and humor. When, in “The World and the Jug,” Ellison compares his situation as a writer to both Wright and Baldwin, he asserts that all write not only out of their experience but of their reading and their discipline as writers. Baldwin, Ellison avers, “is not the product of a Negro store-front church but of the library, and the same is true of me.”³⁵ Ellison’s statement is partially true and purposely provocative: while Baldwin could not have become the writer he became had he never left the storefront church, he would not have been the writer he was had he never been in one. Quite apart from this Baldwin aside, the goal of Ellison’s essay was to intervene in debates about the relationship between race and writing. Was black writing merely a mirror of black life? If so, the writer was an observer who simply transcribed what he or she saw. Or was the writer an artist, who by virtue of his wide reading, discipline, and craft transformed the raw material of life into art? To consider the black writer anything other than an artist was for Ellison a form of racial condescension.

Although Ellison’s prose could be knife-sharp, he did not, like Wright, publish blueprints or manifestos. Instead, like Baldwin, he became a prolific essayist. The keywords of his writing—freedom, fluidity, experiment, openness, and diversity—are key terms in most definitions of the essay. As is typical of the genre, Ellison’s essays look at the many sides of every subject—turning each subject over, handling it, and arriving at whatever conclusion it reaches in a seemingly unplanned, open-ended, and digressive way. Carefully crafted though they are, his essays sometimes appear to be free improvisations. They adhere to the pattern Adorno describes in “The Essay as Form,” where he writes that the essay “thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over . . .” (16). The pleasure of Ellison’s essays derives in part from his rejection of structural constraints and his embrace of the form’s inherent discontinuities.

Larry Neal issued a rebuke to Baldwin and Ellison as he announced a paradigm shift in African American letters in the opening lines of his signature essay: “The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.”³⁶ Although Baldwin spent much of the 1960s on the front lines of the civil rights movement, he had left the United States to take up residence in France in 1948. Ellison, who lived at the northern edge of Harlem, was perceived to have joined the white American

literary elite. In 1968 when Neal published his essay titled “The Black Arts Movement,” neither Baldwin nor Ellison was favorably inclined toward Black Power, though Baldwin later softened his stance. Equally discomfiting for both would have been the imperative that art support an explicit political agenda. Neal argued that Black Arts and Black Power assumed the existence of two Americas—black and white: “The Black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people” (257). Baldwin and Ellison recognized no such duty; they cultivated the broadest audiences they could. Indeed, Baldwin addressed his essays in *The Fire Next Time* (1962) specifically to white Americans. Moreover, both paid homage to their white precursors, whom Ellison called his “literary ancestors.”³⁷

For Neal in 1968, the “destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas and white ways of looking at the world” was paramount. While Neal’s language and even more so the language of the illustrative texts he cites are laced with violence, Neal insists that the goal of Black Art is ethical. He argues that black ethics and aesthetics are inextricably bound. Both serve to end the oppression of black America and the Third World. Violence, verbal violence at the least, is required to achieve that goal. For black artists to fulfill their role in the transformation of the social order, they must reject and destroy the “Euro-American cultural sensibility” and replace it with the humane, ethical sensibility of Black Art.

Neal identifies LeRoi Jones, soon to rename himself Amiri Baraka, as the “prime mover and chief designer” of the Black Arts Movement (263). The two men edited the movement’s signal anthology *Black Fire*, also in 1968. Both believed that the fusion of ethics and aesthetics they called for in literature had already been achieved in black music. Baraka’s landmark study *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963) had implied as much when it argued that black Americans’ worldview was expressed through their music, and therefore one could chart the history of black Americans through a study of that music. Baraka proposed a variation of Du Bois’s perspective in *Souls*, except that for Baraka blues, not the spiritual, was the definitive black American music. Baraka extended his argument in the highly influential “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music),” an essay that exemplifies the more experimental and poetic mode Baraka crafted in the essays he published in the late 1960s and beyond. In contrast to “Cuba Libre,” in which Castro’s revolutionary rhetoric and praxis were catalysts for the essayist’s personal and political transformation, in “The Changing Same,” African American music becomes a focus of the essay’s arguments and a model for its structure.

Few listeners at the time perceived a close connection between rhythm and blues and free jazz, the more common name for what Baraka dubbed “New Black Music.” The audiences were certainly different: most of those who danced to James Brown did not meditate to John Coltrane. Baraka was intent on showing that the music of both men was rooted in religious traditions that could be traced to Africa. Analogously, Baraka asserted, the Miracles of Motown were “spiritual,” as was jazz innovator Albert Ayler. The rhythm and blues singers came out of the black church and adhered to what Baraka deemed a “practical” religion, while Coltrane and Ayler aspired to a “mystical” religion. But, he argued, “the differences . . . are artificial, or they are merely indicative of the different places of spirit.”³⁸ Social protest was another binding force, which motivated Charles Mingus’s “Fable for Faubus,” as well as Stevie Wonder’s recording of Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind.”³⁹ The essay concludes by resolving the oppositions, stating, “the New Black Music and R&B are the same family looking at different things. Or looking at things differently” (211). Overturning the hierarchy that “practical” and “mystical” seem to suggest, the essayist remarks, “James Brown’s screams, etc., are more ‘radical’ than most jazz musicians sound, etc.” (210). The judgment reflected Baraka’s racialized nationalism: free jazz was less “radical,” because it incorporated the influences of European atonal music. Whether Tin Pan Alley, Beethoven, or Schönberg, such influences were “music lessons of a dying people” (194). Many of the black musicians he valorized would have disagreed.

Baraka’s own position shifts as he works around his subject. Throughout the essay, he engages in his own brand of vernacular process in language inflected with hip jargon and black urban speech. Describing the blurred lines between gospel music and rhythm and blues, he writes, “in the straight city jamup gospel, echo chambers, strings, electric guitars, all are in evidence, and Jesus is jamup contemporary, with a process and silk suit too, my man” (192). In a sentence, Baraka describes the instrumentation, the dress, the hairstyles, and the *attitude* of gospel quartets. The gospel singer is as much a hipster as the soul man. Indeed, as the biographies of many attest, they were often the same person.⁴⁰

With its frequent use of ellipses, sentence fragments, and interpolations of poetic lines, “The Changing Same” strives to be as affective and experimental as the music it valorizes. For example, Baraka writes of Coltrane, “the music is a way into God. The absolute open expression of everything” (193). At another point in the essay, words are no longer organized into sentences; keywords “Change,” “Freedom,” “Spirit,” and “Essence” invite readers to complete the thoughts the words initiate. Later, an italicized “note” interrupts the prose

and serves more as entreaty than analysis: *Let the new people take care of some practical bi-ness and the R&B take care of some new bi-ness and the unity musick, the people-leap, can begin in earnest* (208–9).

The statement inverts the perspectives earlier assigned to the rhythm and blues artists and the jazz musicians. Seeming to echo the closing stanza of Margaret Walker's poem "For My People," which urges a new generation to rise and take control, Baraka urges musicians to sound a new consciousness—"the people-leap"—and inspire the unity that precedes and provokes revolution.

In its riffs on freedom, "The Changing Same" highlights interconnections between the two sections of this chapter. Eschewing any attempt at being systematic or philosophical, it allows for many different kinds of freedom. The civil rights movement aspires to civic freedom, although in a sarcastic reference to the "freedom to be a white man," that is unavailable to all people of color, the essay denigrates the movement's effectiveness. Musicians, whether they play R&B or jazz, are seeking the different and more difficult freedom "to want your own particular hip self" (195). Readers can fill in their own examples, from the camel walk danced by James Brown to the futuristic music performed by Sun Ra and his Arkestra. As Carter Mathes argues, in its "sensory expansion . . . generated through the projection of its innovative sounds," the new music "offered space for imagining radical ideas of black identity."⁴¹ Mathes analyzes the ways that writers, including Baraka and Neal, strived to create similar spaces in their poetry and drama. Baraka strives to achieve comparable spaces in his essay.

Almost all the musicians Baraka invokes in "The Changing Same" are men.⁴² By contrast, Alice Walker commands her readers to heed the songs of black women: "Listen to the voices of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Roberta Flack, and Aretha Franklin . . . and imagine those voices muzzled for life."⁴³ In "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," her most famous essay, Walker contrasts these legendary singers to the "crazy," "Sainted" black mothers and grandmothers who were forbidden to read and write, who lacked the means to paint and to sculpt, and who were consequently driven mad. Walker esteems the creativity of those who survived, who were inspired by the "will to adorn" and who in the process of expressing it achieved a spiritual freedom; their creations expand Walker's definition of art. Moreover, in its digressiveness, "In Search" enacts the "will to adorn" even as it honors it.

"In Search" incorporates literary allusions and analyses and addresses questions to its readers that urge them to think through the essay's arguments; it references historical facts and interjects autobiographical fragments. It catalogs the aspersions routinely cast on ordinary black women and avers

that the fate suffered by black women who are frustrated artists is even meaner. It links the critical neglect of Phillis Wheatley's poetry to her physical suffering. When it takes readers to the museum gallery that exhibits a quilt by an anonymous black woman, it invites them implicitly to reflect on the possible circumstances of *her* life, in light of the sickness and impoverishment that marked the end of Wheatley's. It ends by asserting that art by black women is less often found in museums or in books than in their everyday practices of quilting, cooking, and gardening. The poet's mother in her garden is as much an artist as her daughter whose words we are reading. Every digression in the essay pivots back to the question at its heart: "What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time? In our great-grandmother's day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood" (233).

Midway through the writing, Walker introduces the essay's title and then begins its most important digression, a short sketch of her mother's life. Her mother exemplifies "those millions of black women who were not Phillis Wheatley or Lucy Terry" or any of the writers and artists she catalogs. "I found," Walker writes, "while thinking about the far-reaching world of the creative black woman, that often the truest answer to a question that really matters can be found very close" (238). This statement, like those of Baldwin and Patricia Williams previously discussed, is the perspective of an essayist, who uses his or her individual experience to work through issues that resonate far beyond themselves. In this case Walker returns to the question around which her essay pivots and which, truth be told, had rarely been addressed in print before. Her mother's story reinforces the point: Minnie Lou Walker, whom the writer does not name here, is a sharecropper, the mother of eight children, whose life is defined largely by the hard labor she performs. Indeed, "there was never a moment for her to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her own private thoughts . . ." (238). Anticipating her reader's puzzlement, Walker interposes another question, "But when, you will ask, did my overworked mother have time to know or care about feeding the creative spirit?" (239).

Rather than answer the question directly, Walker describes the quilt hanging in the Smithsonian made by "an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago" (239). Its subject is the Crucifixion, which connects the quilter to the crazy saints that open the essay and which reinforces Walker's assertion that spirituality is the basis of art. Averting the question again, Walker returns to Woolf, quoting her famous observation that "Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman." The anonymous quilter becomes part of a broader tradition of female artists. The essay

then returns to the figure of Walker's mother, whose stories, she confides, have enabled her own. She not only includes some of the stories themselves in her published fiction, she incorporates "something of the manner" in which her mother told them: her mother influences the content and the form of her daughter's fiction. Walker thereby claims her biological mother as her literary foremother.

The author's mother is, however, an artist in her own right. The mother's relationship to her garden is the relationship of the artist to her work: "She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty" (241). Her garden is the mother's canvas. As the essay describes it, the essay's title becomes both literal and metaphorical. The garden, "so brilliant with colors, so original in its design," planted on land the family did not own, belongs to the mother. The mother's garden inspires what is arguably the essay's most lyrical passage: "Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbenas . . . and on and on" (241). Arranged in a metrical pattern and highlighting the internal rhymes among them, the names of the flowers constitute a poem. The paragraph's thesis that poverty does not destroy the creative spirit restates the essay's theme and resonates with one of Hurston's central tenets in "Characteristics of Negro Expression," from which I take the subtitle "the will to adorn." Hurston writes that "there can never be enough of beauty, let alone too much."⁴⁴ When Walker ends her sentence—"and on and on"—she captures this sensibility.

In mainly colloquial language, the essay takes up issues of art and aesthetics, asking readers to consider an expansive definition of art that collapses the binary between arts and crafts, folk art and high art. Implicitly, it asks whose interests such distinctions serve. Explicitly, it challenges readers to question who can be considered an artist. By using the metaphor of the garden—a common subject for Western artists, some of whom, like Claude Monet, are celebrated for the gardens they planted as well as for those they painted—the essay reminds us that women and men, blacks and whites, the privileged and the poor are valued differently even when they perform the same activity. Walker's description of her mother is the portrait of an artist, who has achieved a spiritual freedom that is invisible to those who oppress her. It is akin to the freedom that Du Bois heard in the spirituals and that Ellison witnessed in the jam sessions. Moreover, like the jazz musician who to Baraka channeled revolutionary fervor, the mother/artist inculcates in Walker and in

her readers the “respect for possibilities,” chief among which is the possibility of freedom.

The subject of freedom will resonate throughout this book. In the following chapters, I analyze the sermons and orations of nineteenth-century men and women who laid the foundation for the African American essay. I then chart the debates on art and aesthetics that preoccupied writers during the Harlem Renaissance, before turning to four of the most influential essayists of the twentieth century: James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, June Jordan, and Alice Walker. They extend some of the arguments of their precursors and deploy similar rhetorical strategies even as they expand definitions both of freedom and of art. In an epilogue, I consider the status of the essay in the twenty-first century as it shifts its medium from print to digital.