

Introduction

WHEN RICHARD WRIGHT tried to capture the essence of his subject in a lecture titled “The Literature of the Negro in the United States,” he said that it should be understood against the background of the story of the global movement from traditional, rural, religiously based, and pre-individual cultures to modern, urban, industrial, secular, and stridently individual societies. It is for this reason that, despite all specificities and differences, Wright said, “One ought to use the same concepts in discussing Negro life that one used in discussing white life.” In this context, Wright arrived at one of his most famous quips: “The history of the Negro in America is the history of America written in vivid and bloody terms; it is the history of Western Man writ small. It is the history of men who tried to adjust themselves to a world whose laws, customs, and instruments of force were leveled against them. The Negro is America’s metaphor.”

Today’s students may find Wright’s gendered language and the very word “Negro” antiquated, if not reactionary. Yet they may be overlooking the Enlightenment legacy of the language of the “rights of man” that easily could be imagined to stand for men and women: even the Declaration of Sentiments of 1848 spoke of “the family of man” in articulating its hope for gender equality. The term “Negro,” too, though it was disparaged by radicals of the 1960s and satirized by LeRoi Jones as

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“knee-grow,” was once a word into which the hope for full equality was inscribed. For Wright, the Negro as America’s metaphor was also a memory-inducing mirror for white America. Near the end of his lecture, he said: “The differences between black folk and white folk are not blood or color, and the ties that bind us are deeper than those that separate us. The common road of hope which we have all traveled has brought us into a stronger kinship than any words, laws, or legal claims. Look at us and know us and you will know yourselves, for *we* are *you*, looking back at you from the dark mirror of our lives.”¹

“Negro literature” was a term capacious enough to include writers of African descent anywhere in the world. In fact, from Gustavus Vassa to LeRoi Jones himself, the writers discussed in this book most commonly employed the term “Negro” to describe themselves, as well as people of African ancestry more generally. Early scholarship in the field, much of it written by intellectuals who had to work within the constraints of racial segregation, supported the political struggle for equality and integration. In 1926, Carter G. Woodson (Ph.D., Harvard University, 1912) established Negro History Week during the second week of February to commemorate the birthdays of Frederick Douglass (1818) and Abraham Lincoln (1809), a black man and a white man who together symbolized the end of slavery. Woodson had pioneered in history with such classic studies as *The Education of the Negro prior to 1861* (1915) and *The History of the Negro Church* (1924) and with an early focus on the history of what in the United States is called “miscegenation” (interracial sexual, marital, and family relations). Benjamin Brawley (M.A., Harvard, 1908) published literary histories that included *The Negro Genius* (1937); Eva B. Dykes (Ph.D., Radcliffe College, 1921) demonstrated the significance of the antislavery struggle for English Romantic literature in *The Negro in English Romantic Thought; or, A Study of Sympathy for the Oppressed* (1941); the poet-critic Sterling A. Brown (M.A., Harvard, 1923) critiqued stereotypes and highlighted realistic portrayals in American writing in his *Negro Poetry and Negro Drama* (1937) and *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937); Benjamin Mays (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1935) pioneered in the study of religion and published *The Negro’s God as Reflected in His Literature* (1938); the immensely productive historian John Hope Franklin (Ph.D., Harvard, 1947) offered a helpfully synthesizing textbook to complement American history textbooks, *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947); Frank Snowden, who in 1944 received a Ph.D. in Classics from Harvard

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with a dissertation written in Latin, “De Servis Libertisque Pompeianis,” focused in his *Blacks in Antiquity* (1970) and other works on the role of blacks in the ancient world, a time that there were no black laws or bans on miscegenation; Hugh M. Gloster (Ph.D., New York University, 1944) wrote his dissertation on “American Negro Fiction from Charles W. Chesnutt to Richard Wright”; and Marion W. Starling, in “The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American Literary History” (New York University, 1946), and Charles H. Nichols, in “A Study of the Slave Narrative” (Brown University, 1949), undertook the first full-scale doctoral work on the slave narrative. Such scholarship had the effect of making visible the African American past, writing blacks into American and global history, rectifying omissions and neglect, and setting the record straight against the then dominant American scholarly opinion that slighted the importance and contributions of blacks.

Due to this early scholarship, interest in previously neglected works and authors grew and received more critical attention. Thus, Robert A. Bone wrote *The Negro Novel in America* (1955), a dissertation for Yale University in which he singled out the achievement of Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, new editions of which were published later with full biographical introductions by Arna Bontemps and Darwin T. Turner. Bone soon also called attention to the brilliant structure of Charles Chesnutt’s short stories. Paul Edwards brought back Gustavus Vassa/Olaudah Equiano in a marvelously introduced facsimile edition in 1969, in which he highlighted Equiano’s account of trying to talk to a book. And much scholarship followed, accelerating especially in the 1970s, after the creation of Black Studies Departments.

The best African American writers confronted issues of slavery, segregation, and race in one way or another, but their literary interests were broader. These writers commented on positions taken by race leaders and educators, and they engaged in debates with their contemporaries, but they did more than reflect or build on black precursor texts. Perhaps Wright was exceptional in that he read Negro literature systematically and, in *White Man, Listen!* (1957), published the knowledgeable and argumentative lecture about it referenced above. Wright and these authors generally fought Jim Crow and excoriated lynching. Yet each also lived in an aesthetic universe that was centrally shaped by reading a wide array of materials that included, but was not limited to, Negro literature.

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Reading and writing, these authors took part in world literature. Equiano/Vassa read Milton, Pope, Thomas Day, American Quakers, and British abolitionists, as well as the autobiographies by his black British contemporaries James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw and Quobna Ottobah Cugoano. Frank Webb read Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, Eugène Sue, and Alexandre Dumas, père. Charles W. Chesnutt read Ovid, Dumas, Thomas Hardy, Pushkin, Henry James, Joel Chandler Harris, George Washington Cable, William Dean Howells, and Albion Tourgée. Jean Toomer read Shaw, Ibsen, Goethe, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Flaubert, Baudelaire, and the Imagist poets, and he was inspired by modern art and photography. W. E. B. Du Bois read very broadly, but he remained an unwavering Germanophile who quoted Goethe's *Faust* from memory, viewed his own life path in the light of Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, and wrote in the *Pittsburgh Courier* about Richard Wagner's operas that "no human being, white or black, can afford not to know them, if he would know life." Wright read everything he could get his hands on, including Poe, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, William James, Proust, Joyce, and Hemingway. He loved Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" so much that he wrote that he wished he had written it.²

Zora Neale Hurston thoroughly disliked Du Bois and opposed being forced into racial groupings such as "skinfolks" rather than "kinfolks." Her favorite authors were Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Hans Christian Andersen, and she adored Norse myths. Ralph Ellison read Wright, of course, considering him a racial "relative," but he viewed Melville, Dostoyevsky, Malraux, Joyce, and Faulkner as his literary "ancestors," and he regularly retyped a Hemingway short story as a warm-up exercise that prepared him for his own writing.³ Adrienne Kennedy commented on Du Bois and Paul Robeson, and she read *Jane Eyre* and world tragedy; adapted Euripides; specifically mentioned Maurice Maeterlinck, Anton Chekhov, and Tennessee Williams; and intertwined her own stories with famous Hollywood movies she had seen. Before LeRoi Jones became Amiri Baraka, he read Herman Melville, Charles Baudelaire, August Strindberg, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*.

Each of these writers confronted the white preoccupation with race but did so by resisting notions of a prescriptive aesthetic and by drawing on a broadly international range of available aesthetic resources. If there

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was one Negro author read by many others, it was Alexandre Dumas, though generally not his race-themed *Georges* but, rather, *The Count of Monte-Cristo* or *The Three Musketeers*.

This Book

The essays collected here, written over a long period of time, take a literary approach to black writing in an attempt to present writers as readers and as intellectuals who were open to the world. Olaudah Equiano has been considered the progenitor of the African American slave narrative. Yet in his lifetime, he was known as Gustavus Vassa and used the name Equiano only once, when he published his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789). He spent less time in America than sailing the seas, and he settled in England. He referred to himself as a Negro or “the African.” Written in the age of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Benjamin Franklin, Equiano’s autobiography was that of one of the most widely traveled men of his time, who quoted much English poetry from memory. The book, at the center of which was his religious conversion, ended with a plea for free trade. In an open letter to a slavery advocate, Vassa, who married Susan Cullen, an Englishwoman, and left a substantial inheritance to his daughter Joanna Vassa, published what may be the first interracial manifesto, giving interracial marriage its biblical sanction.

Any student who first reads Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) is surprised by the sheer aesthetic pleasure that this suspenseful novel of manners provides, with its fully realized characters and its ironic narrative tone. To state that this novel was the best fiction published by an African American in the slavery period is hardly an exaggeration. Yet even though the novel first appeared in England with an introductory comment by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and was reprinted as a popular cheap edition that sold twelve thousand copies, no current American anthology gives any room to *The Garies and Their Friends*, and Webb rarely is taught in courses on African American literature. Written in the slavery period but set largely among free colored people in Philadelphia, the novel focuses, quite prophetically, on the etiquette, troubles, and violence of a Jim Crow society that would follow the abolition of slavery. Webb remains the big unknown figure in American literature, perhaps because he is believed to have avoided the representation of slav-

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ery, yet a most sarcastic scene with northern candidates who are being interviewed for the job of overseer on a Georgia plantation shows that slavery was also among Webb's concerns. In *The Garies and Their Friends*, Webb aspired to participate in the genre of the social novel, in the spectrum from Eugène Sue to Dickens. Webb also was clearly inspired by Dumas and set a novella at the very site of Dumas's *Man with the Iron Mask*. In that 1870 novella, "Two Wolves and a Lamb," Webb pioneered in creating fiction in which no black character appeared, a form of literary expression that was once called "raceless fiction." It was a mode of writing that provided many later authors with the liberty to experiment with themes they wished to isolate from any overarching obsession with race, such as a psychoanalytic understanding of violence (Wright's *Savage Holiday*), rape (Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*), or a fully realized homosexual plot (James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*).

Long ignored in American literary studies, Charles Chesnutt's works have enjoyed a much deserved revival. He was a great master of irony and the most accomplished writer to address the legacy of slavery and the arrival of Jim Crow in forms of fiction that drew on, and transformed, plotlines and formal devices he found in a wide range of great authors, as well as in "plantation school" dialect writing that often leaned toward nostalgia for slavery. Chesnutt's own complex narrative structures laid bare the tragic, comic, and tragicomic potential of the lives of slaves, former slaves, and their descendants and the ways that white characters understood, or misunderstood, those lives. In his Uncle Julius stories, Chesnutt employed a biased narrator for the frame narratives to stage meaningful narrative competitions with Julius's inside tales. Chesnutt also offered an intricate form of dialect transcription that compels the reader to slow down and contemplate the force of the inside story of conjure, involving a magical metamorphosis in slavery days, against the often placid and self-contented analysis offered by the frame narrator. Was not slavery itself a form of magical transformation that changed a person into an animal or a thing, the reader is forced to ask, and what can racial distinctions mean when the color line, though forcefully drawn, is also porous—and can, in any event, be easily crossed by magic? Although sometimes considered merely a concession to a market for dialect writing that Chesnutt supposedly was happy to abandon, the short stories in *The Conjure Woman* (1899), as well as the "goopher" tales that did not make

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it into that collection, were an extraordinary aesthetic accomplishment in the age of literary realism.

Jean Toomer was a towering figure of American literary modernism. In *Cane* (1923), his very sentences sparkle with synaesthesia and the palpable joy of experimenting with features of poetry, prose, and drama in a *mélange* of images that trains the reader's eyes and ears on the rural South, the new urban centers of Washington and Chicago, and the intellectual's quandary in dealing with the clash of tradition and modernity. This drama is further complicated by the contemplation of the legacy of slavery and the newly intensified, often violent drawing of the color line in America, embodied by a truly gruesome lynching of a pregnant woman. How can an artist create beauty out of such a painful history, Toomer asks? Yet he attempted to do just that. Toomer also was, and perhaps remains to this day, the most radical questioner of the American belief in race. He attacked the notion of racial difference in countless ways, starting with non-clichéd descriptions of his characters ("her skin was like dusk on the eastern horizon") and including many attempts to broaden the category of "American" to contain all racial groups. This has provoked the strange accusation that Toomer changed his racial self-description out of sheer opportunism: a highly visible, and demonstrably false, claim was made that Toomer supposedly was the only member of his family who ever crossed the color line. In fact, Toomer spent crucial years of his puberty with his mother and stepfather who had married as "whites." His grandfather's sister also encouraged her brother to pass for white, as she did. Coming from a multigenerational, racially mixed family, Toomer was only too aware that talk of blood was a scientific fantasy employed mostly for sinister ends. He also found support for his pro-choice view of race in the contemporary Negro press. His radicalism, combined with his remarkable aesthetic experimentation, has attracted many readers, writers, students, and artists to his work.

African American intellectuals' travels and encounters with radical spirits across the Atlantic, including European pacifists and leftist enthusiasts for black American creativity, challenged them to rethink American notions of race. Two examples of this phenomenon were the cases of Countée Cullen's meeting with Claire Goll and Horace Cayton's self-reported comedy of manners-like near-romance with Nancy Cunard. Similarly, Claude McKay's response to Leon Trotsky in 1923 and Du

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Bois's visit to Nazi Germany in 1936 demonstrate these cosmopolitan intellectuals' openness to the world, as well as their critical engagement with the political streams of Soviet Communism and German National Socialism. With his abiding love for Germany and for Wagner's operas, Du Bois offered a most perceptive analysis of the effects of Nazi propaganda in his remarkable, though too little known, essay "The Present Plight of the German Jew."

Zora Neale Hurston was a central figure in the 1930s until Richard Wright took the spotlight in the 1940s. Both were southern-born Negro migrants to northern cities, and both wrote short stories that thematized the conflicts of urban modernity and rural life in the form of adultery tales. However, they rather sharply polemicized against each other's work. Hurston's academic training in the Anthropology Department at Columbia University and Wright's friendship with central figures of the Chicago School of Sociology helped shape their different points of view; Hurston's political conservatism and Wright's leftist radicalism further enhanced their opposition.⁴ As a result, they are not often read together and compared, though such comparisons increase our understanding of both of these modern writers' attempts to project prototypical African American stories.

With the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the days of legal segregation were numbered. It was somewhat surprising, then, that in 1955 Zora Neale Hurston published an attack on *Brown v. Board* in a southern segregationist newspaper, in which she invoked "the days of the never-to-be-sufficiently-deplored Reconstruction," and polemicized against government by decree, while focusing the core of her essay on the fear of "the evils of Communist penetration" and the worry that school desegregation might be a communist plot designed to prepare the country for interracial marriages (then still banned in many states). The rhetoric of Hurston's essay was strong, even strident. An essay by Hannah Arendt of the same period suggested that the issue of interracial marriage was an explosive one in the 1950s, and this juxtaposition permitted me to draw some tentative conclusions about the changing national mood from the 1950s to the 1960s.

Born three years after the end of the Civil War, Du Bois died the day before the March on Washington in 1963. His reflections in his posthumously published *Autobiography* (1968) offered a review of the history from Reconstruction to the impending success of the Civil Rights Movement. Du Bois gave surprisingly candid accounts of his personal life

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and depicted his academic and civil rights career vividly, although the book also bore the stamp of Stalinist Cold War rhetoric. Speaking in the voice of a man who had turned ninety when he began his autobiography, Du Bois not only reviewed his life as if it were an unfulfilled bildungsroman, but he also commented scathingly on the American attempt “to reduce life to buying and selling” and even on the puzzling spectacle of Elvis Presley going “through the motions of copulation on the public stage” and driving teenage children into a frenzy. As the youth cult was just taking off in America, Du Bois dryly pronounced the most un-American of maxims: “Youth is more courageous than age because it knows less. Age is wiser than youth because it knows more.” That the public recognition the aged Du Bois may have hoped for came only in the form of intense surveillance by the Federal Bureau of Investigation is another cruel irony of his life.⁵

Serious African American drama had entered Broadway in the 1930s with Langston Hughes’s play *Mulatto* (1935). The fame of that piece was eclipsed by the enormous success of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), which was turned into a movie starring Diana Sands, Claudia MacNeil, Ruby Dee, and Sidney Poitier. Half a year after the March on Washington, young black playwrights turned to the more experimental off-Broadway scene where one-act (as opposed to Broadway’s multi-act) plays and absurd (as opposed to realistic) drama flourished, and out of which a new black theater movement developed. A pioneer of that movement was Adrienne Kennedy. Her *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) was the opening volley in a theatrical revolution that featured characters who appear to be collages of multiple and contradictory selves, stage props “possessing the quality of nightmares and terror,” ritualistic repetitions and variations of identical lines, chorus-like chants taken from Greek tragedy, and enigmatic and troubling images and metaphors (“the race’s hair fell out”), all of which evoked the harrowing sensation of divided races, divided families, and divided selves and set the tone for the 1960s. Kennedy’s Sarah is a figure that is both black and white, male and female, as Queen Victoria, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Patrice Lumumba, and Jesus make up “her selves.” Produced by Edward Albee, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* emerged from a modern drama tradition going back to Maurice Maeterlinck and August Strindberg, Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Eugène Ionesco. Kennedy’s many plays made her “totally cool” work (as the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks characterized it) widely

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known. Kennedy's formal influences are apparent in the plays of many of her American followers, from Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1975) to Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) and Parks's own early experimental plays, as well as in the international drama scene.

LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's explosive one-act play *Dutchman* (1964) was also produced by Albee. Jones presents a divided self, too, in the middle-class Negro Clay and the white bohemian Lula, both of whom speak lines that Jones also used in essays and poems. With its circular ending, *Dutchman* suggests an eternal repetition of the action: the ritual killing of the Clays by the Lulas creates a Flying Dutchman-like situation in the underground setting of the New York subway. The reader finds echoes of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, and Ionesco's *Lesson*. Yet Clay delivers a long speech before Lula kills him, and that speech embodies powerful anger and becomes a pro-nationalist manifesto, declaimed by an absurd character who will be killed for his words. Clay, an aspiring artist, sees art as a neurotic perversion and advocates racial violence as the only course of action that will restore the black man's sanity. Clay and Lula are narcissistic mirror images of each other, but their composite self, their "corporate Godhead," has cracked lethally. On the stage, Lula literally kills Clay and, as the ending suggests, will kill more and more Clays. Symbolically, however, the play encourages viewers to cast off their Lulanness, to exorcise their murderous whiteness and femininity to arrive at the "pure heart, the pumping black heart" of an undivided identity. *Dutchman* thus presented a serious challenge to the universalist and integrationist spirit of the postwar years and helped to open up an era of, one could say, "Lula-free" questing for a male-focused racial authenticity. Clay's speech also may have marked the beginning of the gradual end of the common use of the word "Negro."

Based on a conference at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the issues of *Daedalus* on "The Negro American" (1965) give the reader a sense of how America's racial future was imagined a half-century ago. At least one of the prophecies—voiced by the sociologist Everett C. Hughes—found its fulfillment in an unexpected way at President Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009. Short stories by Amina Gautier ("Been Meaning to Say" and "Pan Is Dead"), a novel by Heidi Durrow (*The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*), plays by Thomas Bradshaw (*Strom Thurmond Is Not a Racist* and *Cleansed*), and poems by Terrance Hayes ("For Brothers

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and the Dragon” and “The Avocado”) suggest trends in recent works by African American authors who began their careers in the twenty-first century and published in “the age of Obama.”

What is the sense of the literature—call it Negro, black, Afro-American, or African American (with or without hyphen)—that emerges as one reads the Enlightenment traveler Vassa, the Philadelphian expatriate to Britain and Reconstruction-time returnee Webb, the self-taught cosmopolitan Chesnutt, the experimenter and radical universalist Toomer, various writers’ international encounters and conversations in the inter-war period, the antithetical spirits of Wright and Hurston, Du Bois’s views of his century, and Kennedy’s and Jones’s dramatic experiments? The essays in this book, essays that alternate between close readings and broader cultural contextualizations, delineate a literary series of striking works. Even after a half-century of Black Studies, the reader can make fresh and often surprising discoveries in these works, as well as in the authors’ encounters and dialogues with others. The transnational and transracial openness of African American writers was remarkable, particularly given the constraints under which they produced “Negro literature,” and it has helped to usher in a period in which African American literature has found a truly global audience. The essays in this book attempt to honor that literature’s achievement, heterogeneity, creativity, and openness to the world of letters.

The Illustrations

Each essay is accompanied by an image. Gustavus Vassa, painted by William Denton and engraved by Daniel Orme, is shown in the frontispiece of his autobiography as a reader of the Bible, which his hand holds open at Acts of the Apostles 4:12 (Chapter 1). The rarely reproduced daguerreotype of Frank Webb shows him seated on the right with his hands folded in his lap; next to him stands his wife, Mary, whose arm rests on an unidentified man (Chapter 2). A photograph of Charles W. Chesnutt in the library at his home in Cleveland portrays him, too, as a writer who is a reader of many books (Chapter 3). A photograph of Claude McKay speaking at the Kremlin in 1923 illustrates the many international connections of the 1920s and 1930s (Chapter 5); stage photographs of *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (by Roger Pic) and of the cast of *Dutchman* (by Alix Jeffry) give the reader a sense of contemporary productions of those plays

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(Chapters 10 and 11, respectively), and a news photograph of Obama's first inauguration accompanies Chapter 12, for a reason that is clarified in the essay itself.

As particular highlights, this book includes examples of the most memorable visual representations of twentieth-century intellectuals and artists in the artwork of the German-born artist and pacifist Winold Reiss and that of the promoter of Negro literature Carl Van Vechten. Reiss did much in the 1920s to define the New Negro visually in numerous portraits and illustrative work. Van Vechten created an archive of fourteen thousand portraits between 1932 and 1964, an archive that includes many black writers, artists, and performers he photographed with his Leica. Three images in this book are color reproductions of Reiss's pastel portraits: *Jean Toomer* (Chapter 4), *W. E. B. Du Bois* (Chapter 6), and *Zora Neale Hurston* (Chapter 8), all from 1925. Reiss, trained by Franz von Stuck at the Munich Art Academy and invited by Alain Locke to serve as chief illustrator of the *New Negro*, often contrasted realistically rendered faces and hands with flat, or at times merely outlined, clothing against a largely empty background with a few lines to suggest shadows that intensified the outline. Thus, Reiss's portrait of Toomer represents his brooding face with an almost three-dimensional effect, while the lower half of the image is dominated by the large black jacket that seems to lack any depth. In a similar way, Du Bois's face is so precisely realized as to seem sculptured, whereas his white jacket is merely outlined: his thoughtful face and the part of his hand that is visible at the bottom seem to move out of the flat white surroundings toward the viewer. In portraying Hurston gazing down to the right, in profile, Reiss used a square format, left some pencil shadings visible in her face, and let the more sketched quality begin just below her neck, extending to her characteristically flat dress or blouse. In all three cases, the monochromatic surroundings enhance the precision of hair, eyebrows, eyelashes, mouths, and ears of the pensive faces of the writers Reiss portrayed.⁶

Whereas portrait painters often fill in background with telling objects, portrait photographers tend to use white, flat, or otherwise nondescript backdrops. Reiss and Van Vechten seemed to invert this custom. While Reiss chose light, nondescript backgrounds for his painted portraits, Van Vechten worked with numerous props and avoided blank walls, instead using fabrics, wallpapers, and rugs as artificial and often bold backdrops in his photographs. Van Vechten's photograph of Richard Wright (1939)

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shows him in half-profile, seated in a half-length pose with the prop of a black, presumably African, sculpture, which he holds in both hands and seems to be examining most intently (Chapter 7). His torso and the sculpture are sharply outlined against the faint zebra-striped wallpaper in the back on which his shadow falls. In Van Vechten's portrait of W. E. B. Du Bois (1946), part of a large set of Kodachrome color photographs, Du Bois looks straight at the camera against the backdrop of an undulating red cloth, suggesting a red flag, giving the portrait a strangely warm glow and blurring the contrast between human figure and background (Chapter 9). Like Wright, Du Bois is wearing a suit and tie, but the tie's knot is a bit loose; the tiepin seems to protrude; and a ribbon is dangling toward an inside pocket that may perhaps contain Du Bois's glasses, adding a touch of disarray to the well-groomed figure.⁷ That two visual artists so strikingly and memorably portrayed a great many twentieth-century African American writers is a welcome gift to teachers and students of literature.