

## Introduction

*Perhaps only someone who is outside the States realizes that it is impossible to get out.*

JAMES BALDWIN<sup>1</sup>

On August 25, 1970, anthropologist Margaret Mead and writer James Baldwin met for the first time to have three recorded conversations, totaling more than seven hours of tape that, once transcribed, would compose the book *A Rap on Race* (1971). The Mead and Baldwin book is an amazing account documenting the meeting of two of the twentieth century's most paradigmatic thinkers and cultural creators discussing the meaning of "race" in the United States and in the world. Yet it seems most important to say that *A Rap on Race* is also a documentation of miscommunication, oversimplification, and overstatement.

In fact, a 1971 *New York Times* reviewer suggests that the book might have been better left unpublished: "Wisdom and baloney are as blither is to blather. . . . We're all capable of it, but only some of us ever bother to publish it."<sup>2</sup> It is a slight understatement to say that the *Times* reviewer found very little of substance in the transcribed conversations. It is also rather telling that all David Leeming could muster up about the book in his nearly four-hundred-page Baldwin biography was to say, "A book by James Baldwin and Margaret Mead was bound to become a best seller."<sup>3</sup>

Despite of what might be perceived as a failure of content perhaps resulting from the cult of personality surrounding Baldwin and Mead at the time, I believe it is no small accident that these two thinkers would “rap on race” and that the nation might listen. More than a gimmick, Baldwin and Mead’s conversation speaks to the longstanding conversation between black American writing and ethnographic writing. And much like *A Rap on Race*, the connection between black writers and ethnography is neither uncomplicated nor seamless. Sometimes the two—the racialized writer and the disciplinary form often used to create and account for “exotic others”—are inevitably at odds, rendering entirely different stories out of the same materials. For instance, in *A Rap on Race* Mead expresses that she is perplexed by Baldwin’s theory of the American experience, which he tells her he believes is specifically informed by a racial history only available to people born and living in the United States. Mead attempts to remedy her perplexity by suggesting to Baldwin that he should consider the condition of black Americans in relation to that of white South Africans (under apartheid) because both groups, according to her, make citizenship claims on countries in which they hold minority status. Although this was an interesting way for Mead to frame solidarity, Baldwin replies that such a comparison is “rather hideous” and that white South Africans might be better compared to white southerners in the United States due to what he perceives as their shared investment in white superiority and racial inequity.<sup>4</sup>

Mead’s “hideous” comparisons aside, the juxtaposition of an anthropologist and a black writer seems to affirm the presumption that it is the job of black writers to report on their race/culture to a mainstream/white audience. Even if there is this presumption that black writers report, I would like to suggest that Mead and Baldwin’s exchanges help to illuminate the intervention that black American writers might make into the “hybrid activity” whose principal function has been “orientation”<sup>5</sup> and whose historical impulse has been an attempt to make cultural

generalizations. Baldwin may be on the stage to report on black culture and to represent black people, but that does not mean he is confined to a particular script or mode of representation. His is an intervention that simultaneously relies on his proximity to and distance from black culture and American culture in order to tell the story of American racial realities.

But Mead and Baldwin's recorded conversations were not as novel as one might be inclined to believe. Since the early part of the twentieth century, well-known black writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Sterling Brown<sup>6</sup> were making use of ethnographic techniques in the creation of both fiction and traditional ethnographies that portrayed and analyzed black life and culture. As Daphne Lamothe notes, the manipulation of the ethnographic encounter allowed many early twentieth-century black writers to enact a "paradoxical Black modernist gaze that look[ed] at Black culture and look[ed] back at the dominant culture."<sup>7</sup>

One of the most well-known early twentieth-century articulations of the black relationship to dominant/white American culture is encapsulated in W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of *double consciousness* and his employment of the veil metaphor. Du Bois begins *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by describing the black and white worlds as separated by a "veil" that he spends the rest of the text "stepping within," "seeing beyond," and "raising" in an attempt to help his readers understand his claims for black American citizenship: "Leaving, then, the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses,—the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls. . . . And, finally, need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil?"<sup>8</sup> Du Bois's revelation to his reader that he is kin to the folks who live "within the Veil" in his "Forethought" to *Souls*, then, functions as an opening anecdote of sorts, not unlike the opening conventions that came to mark some of the most canonical ethnographies of the early twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

The classical ethnography uses the convention of the “arrival narrative” to introduce the objective “Western” ethnographer who, due to his or her close affiliations with the culture/peoples being studied, via participant-observation<sup>10</sup> and time in “the field,” has the capacity to reveal an assortment of material cultural evidence to the reader. In the case of Du Bois and other black writers of the period, however, writing about black American racial identity and the black racial experience is highly distinct from recounting one’s time in “the field.” As opposed to a revelation about New Guinea, Samoa, “the African bush,” or even an Indian reservation in the American Southwest, in some deep sense there is no escape from “the region of blackness” out of which these African Americans write and into which they allow their readers to peer. Yet for these early African American (re)presenters of black culture, the ethnographic encounter becomes a recognizable and marketable trope and a method for them to begin the process of examining and explaining various sites and types of black cultural production. Of the many techniques employed in the creation of classical ethnography, throughout this book I explore how black writers use as tropes “going into the field” or either acting themselves or creating characters who act as “participant-observers.” I argue that these troped techniques produce various modes of analyzing black culture within a variety of texts.

James Baldwin, much like Du Bois and other black writers who both came before and followed him, might be said to occupy the peculiar position of being black and narrating the topic of race and the black cultural experience to the nation: that is, he occupied the role of native ethnographer,<sup>11</sup> tasked with representing the American racial experience and writing about that meaning for what was surely a multiracial, but predominantly white, reading audience. More generally, what characterizes the role of ethnography within the production of African American letters, then, is the burden placed on black writers to act as cultural translators.

Of course, African American letters exceeds the boundaries of the genre of ethnography. I am, after all, not arguing that black

fiction be read as ethnography, nor am I suggesting that ethnography be read as fiction. I would, in fact, discourage reading all black American fiction as ethnography due to the attending assumptions in authenticity implied by the genre, but I do think it is valuable to think about how black writers may combine techniques of fiction and ethnography to confound black objectification. And building off the work of Daphne Lamothe, who argues that New Negro writers used ethnographic writing as a strategy “to self-reflexively assume the roles of translators and explicators of African American and African Diasporic folk cultures to Western audience,”<sup>12</sup> I would like to suggest that ethnographic writing continued to be a useful tool for black writers both to effect change and to issue critiques of American race relations, while also seemingly adhering to a convention of cultural translation that would be easily embraced by a mainstream reading audience.

Thus, in *Black Regions of the Imagination* I focus on the formally unnamed literary period situated between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement (1930–1970)<sup>13</sup> to explore how four well-traveled, canonical mid-twentieth-century African American writers—Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Chester Himes—attempted to negotiate their roles as black cultural translators. Staying true to these four writers’ biographies, which entail fairly extensive episodes of international travel and long periods of living outside the United States, I examine how these writers follow a previous generation of black American writers who made use of ethnographic techniques. I argue that these mid-twentieth-century writers used ethnography or ethnography-inspired writing<sup>14</sup> for a variety of reasons: to document versions of black life that they variously believed to be in danger of assimilation, to deconstruct racist constructions of African American inhumanity, to pay tribute to black cultural exceptionalism in the face of American racism, and to destabilize expectations regarding the scale and content of African American letters.

I also argue that these writers’ own mobility prevented them from completely internalizing the previous generation’s

relationship to ethnographic methods. Writing amid landmark shifts in American race relations brought on by the Civil Rights Movement and the decolonization of Asian and African countries during the 1950s and 1960s that were to change even the way classical anthropology was practiced,<sup>15</sup> Hurston, Wright, Baldwin, and Himes represent characters practicing (or sometimes themselves practiced) particular ethnographic techniques of participant-observation in a way that might allow for an expressed critique of the American cultural practice of racism. More importantly, these writers' use of participant-observation shifted during their own careers and over the decades in which they wrote to enact a more knowingly critical relationship to the translation of black culture via black-authored literary writing. The chapters that constitute *Black Regions of the Imagination* tell the story of a growing critique of black cultural translation and a movement away from representing or practicing traditional "literary participant-observation." From Hurston's more straightforward ethnographic writings to Himes's creation and killing off of fictional detectives who behave like urban ethnographers in Harlem, I argue that these authors move from an unquestioning use of these techniques to a critical engagement with them.

En route to exploring the ethnographic impulse and critique inherent in these writers' works, one must also acknowledge that a geographical component comes into focus when one remembers that classical ethnography has always employed a site of "fieldwork." So in addition to thinking about how the stylistic lens of ethnographic technique may have shaped these writers' works, *Black Regions of the Imagination* also considers the role of geographical location and the representation of national belonging. What might be most provocative about these writers, then, is their sense of how the stakes involved in being an African American artist and an American citizen are played out when one moves out of and back into the United States. To this end, in *Black Regions of the Imagination* I attempt to articulate how these writers simultaneously represented an African American particularism born out of American racial segregation while

also making clear the possibilities that arise when African Americans think more dynamically about both their metaphorical and literal positions in the world. In imagining this project, I am particularly drawn to Robert Reid-Pharr's sense that black people under segregation and in the midst of desegregation were "engaged in a constant process of choosing blackness, choosing a relationship to American history that privileges critique without insisting upon the destruction of either state or society."<sup>16</sup> This is no less true of the writers discussed in this book, all of whom create texts in which the negotiation of black American identity is central and must be seen as a critique of the U.S. racial dilemma that drove them from the country variously.

Engaging the conflicts that result when terms such as *African American*, *nationalism*, *black diaspora*, and *internationalism* are juxtaposed, I suggest that mid-twentieth-century artists such as Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, and Chester Himes consistently represent black Americans within both national and international settings, thereby creating a third narrative space, which I refer to as *the region*. *The region* is a way to make sense of the antinational narrative concerns of these black writers as they set about both documenting and reimagining a set of "homegrown" experiences within a more worldly<sup>17</sup> framework. One sees in the primary texts of this study the constant coupling of national and international settings and concerns: Hurston cannot write about the American South without mentioning Bahamian fire dancers in *Mules and Men*, and Wright cannot visit Indonesia without commenting on the hair-care proclivities of African American women in *The Color Curtain*. This coupling becomes a method for disallowing the privileging of either the national or the international as these writers seek, in various ways, to acknowledge the particularity of the African American experience while also endeavoring to escape the parochialism dictated by mid-twentieth-century American racial segregation. Unlike other antinationalist paradigms used to theorize black internationalism—namely, black diasporic or cosmopolitan thought, which themselves require

the moving away from a national experience of race—I contend that the region becomes a way for us to think through the work done by black writers, particularly the four canonical African American writers of this text, as they stayed tied to America and worked abroad. It is best to think of the dichotomies that I variously call on in this project—national/international, America/the world, home/abroad, home/“the field”—as always existing in contrapuntal relationships that allow us to “think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting” with the others.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the Baldwin quote that serves as the epigraph to my introduction hits on a theme he repeated in a variety of ways throughout his career: it is only through leaving the United States that one realizes how impossible it is to leave. For Baldwin the statement implies that national removal and national belonging are somehow linked—that for him, a black man, they are mutually constitutive. For *Black Regions of the Imagination*, Baldwin’s quote is indicative of the sort of simultaneity of “inside/outside the nation” or “national/international” that I hope to explore in Hurston’s ethnographies, Wright’s travel writing, Baldwin’s fiction, and Himes’s detective novels. As I said earlier, key to understanding these works is the embrace of each writer’s ability to bring his or her nationally constructed understanding of the black American experience into conversation with his or her life and experiences outside the United States. In other words, I argue that each writer variously aims to elucidate the ways in which U.S.-based African American narratives might be coextensive rather than antithetical to more international or global narratives.

A central concern I have in this book is fostering an understanding of place and its relationship to African American identity in the world. If *place* is the ground in which all narratives must take root, *place* in the context of this study has to move between being both literally and metaphorically understood.



That is to say, because black American citizens have such a troubled history in the nation as a place, the writers in *Black Regions of the Imagination* often describe themselves as physically fleeing the nation. Thus, my interest in their writing is in representing a new sense of the place that the United States holds in each author's mind, even when they reside and represent outside of the nation. This dual understanding of race and national belonging allows them to resist what Paul Gilroy has described as the "easy claims of African-American exceptionalism,"<sup>19</sup> without losing sight of the truly particular ways in which being African American continued to carry significance in their writing.

But to evoke Paul Gilroy is inevitably to summon black diasporic discourse. With this evocation I must make note that this book differs in various ways from many other narratives that focus on black international writers and writings. Most distinctively, I have elected not to use the black diaspora as the central paradigm for thinking through black internationalism. I have opted not to do this for a number of reasons. While I am deeply invested in examining the ways in which some of the writers in this study engage in what we have come to recognize as the practice of diaspora,<sup>20</sup> I do not believe diaspora is the only viable way to describe or analyze black international narratives. In fact, I argue that in the writings of Zora Neale Hurston the presumption of a black diaspora is rejected in favor of an American national belonging. Thus, the black diaspora as the single organizing framework for this book would not allow me to explore how the writers of this project embrace a variety of ways of belonging, be it nationalism, cosmopolitanism, Third World solidarity, et cetera.

Additionally, for me, black diaspora discourse often fails to account for intersections between "the local" and questions of gender in substantive ways. Because of scholarly emphasis on narratives of travel, dispersal, movement, and general removal from the "domestic" space, diaspora discourse is susceptible to the masculinization of its language and theorization.<sup>21</sup> A more fruitful mode of inquiry into black diaspora is one that does not

“conflate the *politics* of travel and *actual* travel,” because it helps us to retain both the domestic and the traveling subject.<sup>22</sup> This is my aim in this study.

Yet, even as I resist the black diaspora as the single theoretical paradigm for organizing and analyzing international black cultural production, I still consider *Black Regions of the Imagination* a study in representations of belonging. I am interested in the compelling narrative of the creative and personal engagements these black writers had with ideas of democracy and U.S. nationalism. I follow their respective ways of expressing an artistic commitment to the African American political quest for civil rights as a dynamic project that exceeded the boundaries of U.S. national belonging. To avoid the trap of signaling black “racial progress” by replacing U.S. nationalism with a type of black cultural nationalism, and thereby still privileging nationalism as the most important model of belonging, my project considers what it might mean to have an antinationalist mode of black articulation. This does not mean that I cede the language, scope, and significance of the nation-state as an organizing framework in the mid-twentieth-century world (neither American nor black cultural nationalism are off the table for this project); rather, in choosing to consider black a region, I engage a type of antinationalism that allows for the fullness of world organizing imagined within the artistic work of Hurston, Wright, Baldwin, and Himes. Also, considering black a “region” allows me to escape the binary of nationalism versus internationalism (or, as is often the case in black studies, nationalism versus diaspora) that traditionally frames black international narratives.

The antinational stance I intend to imply by moving toward *the region* and away from the black diaspora is not without its own problems. Regions tend to conjure up the pejorative sense of marginality or a lesser status in relation to the national, a meaning that can be especially dangerous when associated with African American life and cultural production. Regions traditionally refer to geographical places. And in the context of the United States, the region is often situated as the marginal

and temporal “other” of the nation. That is to say, regions, and most notably the “American South,” are characterized and self-constructed as the nation’s “static but organic” foil: backward, romanticized, and racist.<sup>23</sup> The vexed history of African American political and social valuation in the United States has historically marked its cultural production as marginal to the center. This is especially complicated when we consider that African American musical and fashion styles (African American “cool”) have been employed at various moments throughout the twentieth century to further the American imperial project.<sup>24</sup> From the top down, the relationship of the nation to blackness and black people has often appeared to be one of ownership, not equality. The American imperial project notwithstanding, regions have often been imagined synonymously to territories, which is to say, the phrase “black regions” may imply for some readers that black people occupy a relationally minor status within the United States.

Such an understanding of region’s scale when compared to that of the nation fails to capture the powerful counternarratives that might be created out of regional spaces by writers who have embraced the extranational mode of representation that I am proposing by employing a concept such as *the region*. This extranational mode of representation is marked by a deep engagement with both the national and international questions of race and genre; it retains a sense of nationalism without losing sight of the world outside the nation-state. In the case of the black writers of this project, the extranational mode of representation requires that they stay attentive to their positions as black writers shaped by the U.S. racial policy of segregation, even when they move outside the U.S. racial landscape. Their personal and creative worlds speak to the friction that is caused at the intersection between national belonging/rejection and internationalism.

I would like to stress that *imagination* is the operative word for understanding how the writers in *Black Regions of the Imagination* attempted to negotiate issues of national and international “belonging.” Unlike much nationalist writing, which

seeks to create distinct boundaries between “the nation” and the rest of “the world”—and for the purposes of this book I would underscore the way in which ethnography undergirds nationalism—the narratives of this study resist such boundary keeping. Each chapter of the book is framed by its featured writer’s desire to resist.

In chapter 1, I focus on Zora Neale Hurston’s writings. I begin with her in part because she serves as a literary bridge between the Harlem Renaissance writers and the mid-twentieth-century black writers who inhabit the later chapters of this project. Also, the writing of Hurston, as the only trained ethnographer, provides a formal lens for understanding the ethnographic techniques employed by her later contemporaries. This chapter examines Hurston’s ethnographies *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938) and argues for an understanding of black American citizenship as created through the coupling of both international and national representations of blackness. In reading her U.S.-based ethnography, *Mules and Men*, against her Caribbean-based ethnography, *Tell My Horse*, I contend that Hurston’s constitution of a modern black American citizenship within a rural context becomes visible only through the primitivizing of the black Caribbean.

In chapter 2, I examine Richard Wright’s travel narratives *Black Power* (1954) and *The Color Curtain* (1956). Whereas I argue in chapter 1 that Hurston used ethnographic writing to create a rural, black American identity within the United States, I argue that Wright employs ethnography’s participant-observation technique in an attempt to distance African Americans from the United States. Unlike Hurston, who remained an American nationalist, Wright tried to transition from a national to a global perspective once he moved to France. This attempt was never entirely successful for multiple reasons. Not only did the publishing world refuse to embrace Wright’s globally focused books, but Wright was unable to create a non-U.S.-based narrative that

did not make use of an American racial narrative. For instance, in the first part of the chapter I focus on *The Color Curtain*, a text in which, even when Wright was writing about his participation in a 1955 Indonesian conference on nonalignment, he found himself drawn to critiquing black American conference attendees. The second part of the chapter focuses on *Black Power* to explore how Wright's writing about his travels to the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) complicated his sense of his position as participant-observer as he tried to reconcile his blackness and his American citizenship in the face of black African culture. I finally conclude that the ties that continued to bind Wright troubled him, yet he found it nearly impossible to write about the world without writing about African Americans.

In contrast to Wright's attempts to use ethnographic techniques to create distance between himself and the nation, in chapter 3, I argue that Baldwin manipulates the "arrival narrative" that is so common to traditional ethnography in order to deny and complicate knowledge of the (black) "other" in a desegregating nation. Using romance and both heterosexual and queer sex as metaphors, Baldwin denies the easy racial knowledge claims that seemed to run rampant in the United States during the mid-twentieth century. Unwilling to allow an ethnographic figure to conduct a productive inquiry into "the other," Baldwin uses the interracial romance between *Another Country* protagonists Ida Scott and Vivaldo Moore in order to expose the true self-work that a white man / white nation must do before racial, sexual, and gender knowledge and equality can be achieved.

In chapter 4, I examine how Chester Himes, writing from Paris, attempted to create an alternative black identity by recreating the black American ghetto from abroad. This chapter, which focuses on Himes's novels *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), *The Real Cool Killers* (1959), and *Blind Man with a Pistol* (1969), argues that Himes created a black space (Harlem) that was so hyperbolized that it would be unrecognizable to white readers. I pay close attention to Himes's use of his protagonists, a set of

black detectives who, I argue, function as participant-observers by virtue of spending the entire detective series translating the motivations of black criminals to a white police force. Much like Baldwin, Himes is critical of participant-observation's capacity to produce any sort of realistic representation of black life, but unlike Baldwin, Himes disrupts this technique by rendering his detectives increasingly inept throughout the detective series. With my concluding discussion of Himes, I usher my readers into the moment just before the Black Arts Movement and the rise of black militant thought and artistic production. The very act of black cultural translation is fated for Himes, and the death of the participant-observer is foundational to understanding Himes's detective series as a whole.

Finally, in the conclusion, I mark the shift between the mid-century writers and the Black Arts Movement. Using Himes's final, posthumously published novel, *Plan B*, I examine how the Black Power Movement influenced but ultimately rendered outdated a certain relationship to black cultural translation and internationalism practiced by writers of the previous generation. In the end, I hope to mark influence and progression of black literary production and generational concerns.

I hope my refusal to cede the language of nationalism, my resistance to diaspora as a single framing paradigm, and my insistence on exploring parochialism/particularism in relation to black American cultural production will not result in my being taken as a proponent of American exceptionalism or national exaltation. My aim, ultimately, is not to make an argument for the exceptionalism of black American cultural production at the expense of other members of the black diaspora; it is, instead, to explore the ways in which midcentury black American writers negotiated, translated, and circulated to the broader world their identities, which were constituted by a variety of particular formative experiences born out of the nation's history of slavery and segregation. I would like to add that possible critiques of my attention to the particularities that shape African American cultural production must themselves consider

the presuppositions that have to be made about black American cultural production's "authenticity." In other words, in order to offer up a critique of any study of black American particularity, one must assume that black American identity remains untouched by immigrant populations (both black, white, and "other") and that black cultural producers fail to absorb and be moved by the significance of mainstream and worldwide events that are transmitted through media outlets, or that they otherwise remain untouched by various international influences. Particularity does not necessarily imply isolation. For example, in Imani Perry's discussion of hip hop, she contends that hip hop is distinctly black American music, "and yet it is certainly 'impure.'"<sup>25</sup> Although it is a musical form influenced by Caribbean and Latino music trends, "one must remain aware of its location."<sup>26</sup> What Perry's work illustrates, then, is the tension between those scholars who see black cultural production as dynamic and those scholars who see it simply as parochial. I would go further to say that those scholars who critique others who focus on black American cultural production as inherently arguing for the purity and primacy of black Americanness fail to comprehend the varied and dynamic ways in which black American cultural production is shaped by a global world, even as it remains located in the United States in particular ways.

Finally, *Black Regions of the Imagination* follows the quest of Hurston, Wright, Baldwin, and Himes as they attempted to imagine black writing capable of fostering new ways of representing black American life. Their imaginations were not without complexity and contradiction. This inevitably means that the paradoxes of Hurston's, Wright's, Baldwin's, and Himes's writings are ones worth watching as they travel.