

Irredeemable Promise: J. Saunders Redding and Negro New Liberalism

Lawrence Jackson

I picked up a book which I have by-passed on Library shelves for years. J. Saunders Redding's No Day of Triumph. Don't you find interesting, when you [sic] rereading it today, Richard Wright's introduction? The book itself, after the biographical chapters at the beginning, is a marvel so full is it of rich material. Where is he now?

Julian Mayfield, letter to John Henrik Clarke, 6 July 1955

Toward the end of a 30-year publishing career, the 53-year-old writer, literary critic, and English professor James Saunders Redding (1905–88) brimmed with a capstone project. He wanted a leading house to publish his second and unwritten novel, a book that would redeem his career and confirm as worthwhile his efforts as a writer and teacher of literature. That early winter of 1959, Redding was going into his fifteenth year teaching English at a small college in coastal Virginia and wondering about posterity's opinion about him.

The fretting that Redding showed that year was one he had displayed his whole writing life and it was difficult for others to understand because he had already experienced unequivocal success as a writer. He had published long essays in *Harper's* and *Atlantic Monthly*. *Time* magazine had reviewed his books and carried his photograph, along with the *Saturday Review of*

This essay is dedicated to Horace Porter at the University of Iowa.

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Literature. Redding had cornered literary prizes, like North Carolina's Mayflower Cup, awards noticeable enough that Allen Dulles's Department of State asked him to represent the US on an extended tour of India as that country emerged from British satrapy to world power. Redding's second book *No Day of Triumph* (1942) had been published by Harpers and reviewed all over the nation. By 1951, he held a post on the editorial board of the Phi Beta Kappa journal *American Scholar*. His first novel, *Stranger and Alone* (1950), had been widely reviewed and, generally, deemed significant. But when he put out feelers to publish the second novel, he did not generate the excitement of a well-known writer, prizewinner, and potential best-seller.

Gloomy and filled with a sense of foreboding, Redding reacted like any well-connected writer in a similar situation. He wrote his most powerful friends to steady him. On New Year's Day 1959, Redding sent a note to Henry Allen Moe, the man who had headed the Guggenheim Foundation for more than 20 years. In the letter, he chronicled his interminable delays before coming to terms with Bennet Cerf of Random House, perhaps the most prized among the New York literary publishers. Moe had authorized a fellowship for Redding in 1944 and was in a position to offer another grant so that Redding could finish his project. The professor was disappointed that it had taken a year and a half to relieve himself of a contract clause from the earnest mid-western publisher Bobbs-Merrill. Finally, Redding was clear to write a book he had started thinking about in the early 1950s. And, judging from the evidence, it worked. In March that year, another Guggenheim went to Redding. He would call the new novel *Cross and Crown*. To friends like Moe, Redding offered a straightforward program for the novel: it would be a sequel. "My plan can be stated simply: it is to write a novel in which the protagonist of *Stranger and Alone* is again the protagonist and in which he brings about his redemption."¹ The redemption of his own identity as an American figured highly in the mind of J. Saunders Redding.

However, in the words that Redding had once used to deride the "new criticism" literary movement of the 1940s, all his work on the novel came to nothing. Even with equally prestigious fellowship and publisher's contract, he spent his years mainly turning himself into a better spokesman. For the liberal arts colleges, he prepared a lecture series on international affairs called "People, Policy and Propaganda." Redding traveled the country and fielded more lucrative job offers than the one he had at Hampton Institute. The five chapters of *Cross and Crown* he had written would remain buried in the desk of his upper room.

No matter the success that Redding achieved in his remarkable life, he was unable to shake the conviction that the burden of being black in America had ruined him as a novelist and that he had not adequately developed his gifts as a writer. His grave apprehension is born out by one simple fact: only 50 years after the peak of his influence, Redding is almost totally unknown.

Perhaps to a proportion greater than any single one of his contemporaries, J. Saunders Redding resented his situation as a black American who came of age in the late 1930s, wrote successfully in the 1940s and 1950s, and finished a career in publishing by the early 1960s. He rose during an era of American public culture when racial and class politics were highly charged and connected to the production of art. Between the 1930s and the end of the 1950s, large numbers of anti-racist liberal intellectuals shifted from support of social realism and the Communist Party to anti-communism and especially elite forms of literary modernism.² Although writing about race and ethnicity grew in importance to liberal thinkers during this period (notably because of the Nazis' racial persecutions), the idea of remediation due a class or caste of Americans began to be thought irrational, at least partially because sweeping government change was so indelibly connected to the Soviet Union, and because racial "progress" appeared on track.³ Black writers could neither afford to ignore the changes in politics and aesthetics nor fail to respond to the new opportunities and obligations that this ideological shift created. However, the pace of the change was extraordinarily demanding. For Redding, the exciting epoch, the multi-racial audience, and his opportunities for publication exacted a heavy burden. At the peak of his reputation in 1951 he wrote:

Also, and finally, I hope this piece will stand as the epilogue to whatever contribution I have made to the "literature of the race." I want to get on to other things. I do not know whether I can make this clear, but the obligations imposed by race on the average educated or talented Negro are vast and become at last onerous. I am tired of giving up my creative initiative to these demands. (*On Being* 14)

His 1951 epilogue, *On Being Negro in America*, did not stand and his contributions did not salve. His writing tended to discomfit black readers. He did not cleanly pick a side in the aesthetic and political debates between modernists and social realists. He was too much a frustrated "race" man to join easily the reconstituted liberals of the 1950s. To his dismay, Redding's prolific and compulsive writings about his racial identity earned him the title not of a thoughtful humanist, but a "traducer" of his race.

That he succeeded in publishing was far less surprising than that he was called a traitor. Redding claimed birth into the society of educated and politically courageous blacks. His parents had met each other at Howard University's Normal School in Washington, D.C., and three of his four grandparents had known freedom prior to 1865. His elder brother Louis would be one of the lawyers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) arguing at the Supreme Court in the momentous *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Born in 1905, James Saunders Redding had started his B.A. at Lincoln College, outside Philadelphia, and finished at Brown University in 1928. Of his college disposition he recalled, "I raged with secret hatred and fear. I hated and feared the whites. I hated and feared and was ashamed of the Negroes" (*No Day* 39). Horace Cayton, social psychologist and avid member of the 1940s literati, summed up this conundrum with his famous "Fear-Hate-Fear" syndrome, a condition in which blacks suffer from both overt white aggression as well as their own failure to respond aggressively to injustice.⁴ Redding fought himself emotionally to contain these feelings that moved from his anger at racial injustice to shame at black impotence.

He had done well enough as an undergraduate and then a master's candidate at Brown University to publish in the student papers, which led to better things. An anomaly for a black writer during the 1920s and 1930s, Redding nurtured his talent outside of the Communist Party and the Negro social uplift magazines, like the NAACP's *Crisis* or the Urban League's *Opportunity*. Redding titled his first short story "Delaware Coon," and had it published in France in 1930 in the famed modernist journal *transition* edited by Eugene Jolas. Appearing in the journal that published Gertrude Stein's "Four Saints in Three Acts" and James Joyce's early chapters of *Finnegan's Wake* entitled Redding to a bit of acclaim. He had become a modern writer by the way of a social realist treatment of black squalor in his native Wilmington, DE. The act of putting black life in the ghetto onto the written page was a defiant modernist act of creation. The story, without humor or irony, treated the depraved lives of the sporting men, gamblers, switchblade wielding "snow sniffers," and "yaller" women who tattoo their men's names across their bosoms. Redding narrated the tale of sex, drunkenness, brawling, and misery to a soundtrack of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey moaning out the finer points of procreation. When Redding showed the story to his father, the son of an ex-slave woman, a Howard graduate, and the NAACP Wilmington branch chief, the elder Redding expressed genuine grief.

After a stint teaching at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Redding showed up in Harlem to study at Columbia University and, on the merit of the story, was flattered by a journalist, either Ted Poston or Henry Lee Moon, and corralled into the ranks of the Harlem Renaissance. However, even if he accepted the initial flattery, later on Redding felt cheap. After a decade and a half he would express a combination of admiration and contempt for the movement: "Almost every writer or would be writer who so much as lived in or around New York in the middle or late Twenties, or who had any contact with the literary figures and enterprises of that period, have gotten some sort of critical attention or another, and some of those who got attention simply were not worth it."⁵ Referring specifically to himself he was sardonic and caustic. "I basked in that artificial light like a homeless beggar keeping himself warm over a sidewalk grating" (*On Being* 72).

Redding did not linger long enough in graduate school to apply for a Julius Rosenwald fellowship, and his dossier was too good for him to have to submit an application for public relief, and subsequently gain employment with the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Instead, Redding went on to teach at the Louisville Municipal College, the State Teacher's College in Elizabeth City, NC, and Southern University in Louisiana, where he began his first book. In 1939, he published an academic treatment of African-American literature, *To Make a Poet Black*. The book held black writers to a litmus test of national fidelity and racial celebration, similar to the ideology Redding had known as a child. He shunned the idea of closing ranks with other blacks merely because of skin color and offered an assertive condemnation of black writers like Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley. "[N]ot once did she utter a straightforward word for the freedom of the Negro," amounted to his judgment against Wheatley and in favor of George Moses Horton (*To Make* 10). But his rather hardheaded estimate announced the presence of a new and proud formation: African-American literature. Redding divided the group into four parts: forerunners, abolitionists ("Let Freedom Ring" he entitled the chapter), adjusters (to post-Reconstruction racism), and New Negroes, fairly standard designations. But where he resisted the orthodoxy of segregation was in his conclusion. "Negro mothers, too, bore children in the 'lost generation,'" he counseled his reader (*To Make* 120). If the 1920s expatriates had written chronicles of failure of the human spirit and ended destructively, then the resurrection of literary distinction in the 1930s was an exciting model for black literature. In the hands of Faulkner, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck, the 1930s had produced literature of

considerable social significance. Black literature too would have a crop of giants, he implied.

Redding's ability to link the slightly known Harlem Renaissance writers with the premier expatriate talents of the 1920s showed his sympathy with Malcolm Cowley, *New Republic's* lead-off critic in the fight for social realist literature between 1932 and 1939. One of Cowley's finds in 1938 had been Richard Wright, author of *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), whom Cowley called a "vigorous new talent" ("Long" 280). Redding agreed that Wright was the literary hurricane increasing the pressure on the weather of social change. Here he found black talent trying to turn the life struggles of the city poor into the stuff of epic. In 1942, Redding sent Wright an appeal for friendship that heaped praise on Wright's new book *Native Son* (1940): "There is no doubt that *Native Son* did more to win Negro writers genuine respect . . . than anything yet done."⁶ On the lookout for the leaden lining of every cloud, Redding expressed some concern that "a few plunging publishers" would "go all out for anything Negro" and "we will be swamped in mediocrities, as we once were before." But he also imagined Wright's "great talent" enough to keep the literary standards of black writing high.

Redding's adulation for Wright's "great talent" sutured him to the new breed of critics who wished to battle racial injustice and also to champion African-American literature—particularly the work of the slave narrative—as an important body of study. Broadly, the group included the black critics teaching at black colleges who published creative and critical work during the 1930s and 1940s and into the 1950s: Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davis, Nick Aaron Ford, Eugene Gordon, Hugh Gloster, Eugene Holmes, Blyden Jackson, John Lovell, and Waters Turpin. Redding was the marquee writer of this bunch who, in spite of their sometime radical politics, remained closely identified with African-American institutions.

Something else was also happening. The popular success of *Native Son* suggested a new relationship between black writers and white America that privileged candid, outspoken social realism. Redding found the appearance of anger and frustration in Wright's work cathartic, but he also recognized the peril for black audiences that lay ahead as the modern writers explored the unseemly psychological underbelly of racial oppression: "They did not want to believe that they were as helpless, as outraged, as despairing, as violent, and as hate-ridden as Wright depicted them. But they were. They did not want to believe that the America that they loved had bred these pollutions of oppression into their blood. But it had" ("Alien" 53). And in one other central aspect Redding

admired Wright's career: "[h]e too wanted both critical and creative success." But Redding was separated from this rare cadre of critics who also wrote fiction during the 1940s and 1950s—Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin—by a sincere desire for at least grudging respect from a black audience. Even more difficult, the southern-based African-American middle class, producing its first critical mass of college students, artists, and social activists in the early 1940s, proved more economic in its tastes than its white counterpart. Undeniably, black Americans could easily lose their social class footing for the sins of liberalism, measured by anything from their support of communism to embracing sexual freedom or racial equality. But, their anti-modern indifference also had a source in the alternative cultural traditions produced by origins in diverse African ethnic heritages and followed by generations of slavery and racial segregation. Redding himself possessed the range of attitudes: a modernist impatience with the older patterns of race relations; a bourgeois pursuit of status and a desire for public approval; and a sense of the deep value of cultural traditions born in abject slavery. These colliding positions were an energetic hive of admiration and embarrassment for Redding himself, and his complex views on black American life.

In 1940, Redding took a sabbatical and wandered the southern backcountry, talking to locals and keeping a writer's notebook. Two years later, he found his greatest success as a writer with the wrenching memoir and travelogue, *No Day of Triumph*. Richard Wright wrote the book's tart, single page introduction. Noting Redding's attacks on black college administrators, Wright asserted that Redding was "the first middle-class Negro to break with the ideology of the 'Talented Tenth' in a complete and final manner." His approach was curious and different from that of W.E.B. Du Bois who had, in the 1903 *Souls of Black Folk*, written a book using fundamentally similar expository techniques and asking similar questions. But Redding's book was no Wagnerian opera of mythic portent or pastoral refulgence. He revealed a gurgling miasma below the Mason-Dixon Line that even the generosity of the New Deal had left unaddressed. In realistic language and detail, the book steadily emphasized the damage wrought by generations of slavery and blistering racism. Here and there he found the earthy pride and resilience of the common man.

Redding introduced his sorrow song of black life in America with a chapter on his own family history. A childhood in Delaware had introduced him to the biliousness of black life. Son of a light complexioned mother and a dark complexioned father, he had seen the prejudice among blacks that scorned excellence if it were

dark skinned, or came from the wrong side of the river. One grandmother bitterly remembered slavery and never forgave whites or their version of culture; another grandmother aggressively sought white favor and privilege. Redding portrayed his own adjustment as a largely uncomfortable one and by the time he had gotten to college, first at all-black Lincoln and then later at all-white Brown, his personality had fallen in on itself. He had become retrospective and prickly. When he recounted the extraordinarily privileged black collegians in New England's Ivy League system in the 1920s, he recalled chiefly the suicides and self-destructive behaviors. Redding's account of his access to American upper-class life was written as if he were putting into words a companion piece to Harriet Wilson's forgotten 1859 novel *Our Nig, or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*. There was no marvelous democracy among the talented and ambitious in the North.

The heart of the book was the months spent meandering west from Virginia to Louisiana, and it continued the narrative tone of discomfort. Touring the South, noting the filthy conditions that the black traveler endured, the rank grub and seedy berths, Redding did not pretend to have any insider's knowledge that might elevate or ennoble the squalor. Even where he found pleasant entertainment, there was no getting around what segregation had done. Around October 1940, he stopped at a black college and interviewed the school's president. The resulting portrait revealed a fatuous Uncle Tom and proto-fascist who believed himself to be a freedom fighter. In Redding's most sensational passage, he described the bedrock of Negro elites as delusional:

Negro schoolmen are terrific snobs, the true bourgeoisie. Grasping eagerly for the straws of recognition, a great many of them proclaim loudly their race-faith and avow social radicalism. Some let it be known discreetly that they are Communists. But theirs is a puerile profession of faith, a smart-alecky, show-off kind of radicalism. In reality they look to the upper-middle class whites for their social philosophy and actual practices ape that class's indifference to social and political matters and reforms. They are the bulwark against positive action, liberal or even independent thought, and spiritual and economic freedom. (119–20)

Redding guarded himself by making the reference completely anonymous, a sensible precaution. The strongly unfavorable account revealed a pompous bureaucrat who had fired a teacher for

voting, thought the WPA bred indolence among Negroes, and proudly snorted that he did not “educate” but “train” Negroes to fulfill their roles as second-class citizens. “I know what Negroes have to do, and I train ‘em to do just that” (138), the man told Redding. Obviously with such leaders, black America was walking out from slavery blindfolded.

The everyday black folks who talked to Redding were sincere and proud, but generally without the tools to navigate the modern world. In a small Tennessee town, an eighth-grade-educated teacher narrated the life of Alec Hill, a poor befuddled farmer whose series of “wrong-turnings,” mishaps, and bad-luck culminate with the suspicion that he has impregnated his own daughter. And even when Redding’s native sympathy was called upon, he found the dregs. In Kentucky, where he looked up friends of his family, he found a couple trying to pass for white, plainly angered by his contact, and the gothic story of a young woman’s spiral from small town bourgeois propriety into alcoholism and what was then called sexual perversion. In contrast to the stories of woe, Redding offered up a passel of tragic heroes: Flap, a pistol-carrying pool-hall chief, the central opponent to segregation in his Tennessee hamlet; Coe Harvis, a drunken lawyer representing the black poor in a West Virginia coal-mining town; “Aunt Julie,” a dignified woman who had in slavery endured beatings by her master and rape by the stud; and Redding himself, struggling with his own dignity not just in the face of poor, uneducated fellow blacks, but white truculence. At a washed out bridge in southeastern Missouri, he faced down the bogey of the “typical southern white man” (170), trying to jump his place in a line for a ferry over the river. In Memphis, he withstood a policeman’s bullying, but then broke down tearfully along the banks of the Mississippi.

Redding concluded the book with a rewrite of black nostalgia from the 1930s: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Waters Turpin’s *These Low Grounds* (1937), books that romanticized the turn-of-the-century all-black town. Redding went to the Mississippi town River City, founded 20 years after the Civil War by ambitious black entrepreneurs who cleared raw land and built sawmills and banks. But the dream of economic success without politics had sagged, become tattered, and was now broken. Some blamed an outsider for introducing skin-color hierarchy. But Redding’s talks with the Yale educated mayor, son of one of the founders, emphasized a broader climate of “[a]trophy and desuetude” (300).

Redding walked a tightrope between blaming whites for black degradation and putting on the hair shirt of black inferiority. He determined to accept responsibility not only for his condition,

but also for his liberation. On occasion he described other blacks unflatteringly—“sullen animals guarding their lairs” (260)—and he left open the suggestion that the Reconstruction was a “mess left by corrupted Negro political leaders” (295). Such rhetoric established direct points of sympathy with his editor W. T. Couch and other southern liberals.⁷ Redding’s manner of extricating himself from a tone that seemed to fault blacks for the realistic descriptions of southern poverty was to swing at the end. *No Day of Triumph* concluded in Louisiana at a Louis Armstrong concert with a girl named Mynola on Redding’s arm. With a bit of effort, he was able to overcome shyness and, in the midst of the jumping crowd, breathe in the “air of freedom”:

I felt that I had come a far way, not in space and time alone, but in something which even to myself I feared to call understanding. I dared not boast anything so final and satisfying as comprehension. Only an utter fool would pretend enough discernment and insight and to a sympathy sufficiently broad to embrace the total meaning of all I had seen and heard and of all that there was to be felt. . . it is an empty boast (it is also pure condescension), and it is based upon a fallacy. That fallacy is that the Negro is a problem both in vacuo and in toto, whereas in reality the Negro is only an equation in a problem of many equations, an equally important one of which is the white man. To know and understand and love the Negro is not enough. One must know and understand the white man as well. (339)

Although *No Day of Triumph* introduced no whites by name as speaking voices, the book gestured to them explicitly in its finale. The Negro problem was the American condition.

He had achieved nearly everything that critics claimed black narrative writing had not then done. Redding was not a propagandist; his trademark was scrupulous, even self-deprecating honesty. He had not written a long rant wedged in an ideology, but his book was not glib, romantic, or lightweight. Nor could his work conveniently be used to endorse segregation. Redding showed profound psychological depth in his characters and he filled the book with rich, invaluable descriptions of people and scene. The accounts he provided were reworked so steadily in the ensuing years that they became literary tropes. In ten years, Ralph Ellison would take the raw material of the corrupt college president, the incestuous farmer, artifacts connected to slavery, and Louis Armstrong to extraordinary dramatic heights. The book also revealed a decided strength. *No Day of Triumph* avowed, in a

voice far more reputable than the sensational Chicago communist Richard Wright, that blacks were no kin to Stowe's Uncle Tom, angelic martyrs patiently biding their time with love in their hearts. And they were not all Bigger Thomases. The book declared that though it was crucial to abolish racial segregation, access across the color-line alone would not resolve a heritage of black suffering. There would be no simple solution to racial crisis in the US.

No Day of Triumph was Redding's best-received work in a lifetime of writing. *Harper's*, *Negro Quarterly*, and *New Masses* all ran chapters, a fact that verified the book's appeal across the spectrum of American liberals, from "new" liberal bourgeoisie democrats to "old" liberal communists and black nationalists in the middle. Redding had managed, on the strength of his narrative techniques, his sharp ear for dialogue, and his poignantly rendered dramas, to reach the ear of the American public.

However, the 37-year-old did not get complete confidence from his literary feat. Shortly before the fall 1942 publication of *No Day of Triumph*, Redding revealed himself to his Harpers editor, Kentuckian Edward Aswell, who responded to comfort him and brace him up. In an episode replete with racial overtones, Aswell, barely five years Redding's senior, offered the following oddly avuncular advice: "You have no reason to feel in the least degree ashamed of what you have done. No book is as good as it ought to be. The perfect book has never been written and never will be. Take comfort in that fact."⁸ Redding pursued literary success, but he was overcome by the shame that in him whites had found a Negro to confirm their worst suspicions about the masses of American blacks. He had been told by the Rockefeller Foundation to "Go out into Negro life in the South. Go anywhere you like and see what you find." Harper's emblazoned these words on the book jacket, unaware that, instead of freeing the book from the charge of white censorship, they implied that Redding was not his own man.

Thus, it did not help him so much that the book was a smash in the mainstream press. Despite their complex political differences, the white critics showed themselves to have a remarkably similar self-interest in promoting the book. The novelist Wallace Stegner, writing the review for the *Atlantic*, thought *No Day of Triumph* was "the sanest and most eloquent study of the Negro American that has appeared" (130). Malcolm Cowley supported the book in the pages of the *New Republic*: "[Redding] is surprisingly good-humored, objective and as willing to admit his own faults or those of his people as [he] is to describe their grievances" ("Journey" 470). In the *New York Times*, William Shands

Meacham fully concurred with his peers: “[A] book by a Negro who is no apologist for his people, and one who can clearly see their faults” (8). Redding had been attractive to Aswell at Harper’s because the editor found in him “the gift of true vision—the ability to look at life with a steady, level gaze and see it as it really is, and then put it down in words without distortion.”⁹ To top off, in 1943, the state of North Carolina made Redding the first black recipient of the Mayflower Award for outstanding writing, and the national press gladly carried the news story of southern racial “good-will.” White America may have liked his prose, but they loved that he did not seek, single-mindedly, to indict them for the existence of black serfdom and worse in the South.

Such well-placed applause turned chary black reviewers on the defensive. Redding’s black constituents labeled him obsequious to white power and accused him of serving up reports of exaggerated black squalor to humiliate and weaken the fledgling black middle class. The reviewer for *Phylon* dismissed the “bizarre” examples of black life in the South that Redding had chosen and used the occasion of criticism to comment publicly on Redding as a man:

I do not feel that Redding has broken finally with his tradition. The fact that he derides a college president and berates his colleagues does not bind him essentially to the mass of Negroes. Herein, perhaps, lies the difficulty he had in communing with his former associates. He may have been called snob, but seldom radical in his thinking; for he was then, as he is now, the victim of the stern discipline in cramped aloofness of his exclusive boyhood surroundings. And he has not yet attained a sympathetic understanding of Negro life. (“N. T.” 88–89)

The Howard English professor John Lovell, writing for the *Journal of Negro Education*, lamented Redding’s overly personal approach to the topic. Lovell wanted to see a strategy that would “reindict and retry American civilization” in the manner of *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son*. Instead, Redding’s book had only produced one more “denial of the power of literature to trouble the water of muddy social forces” (Lovell 220). However, the reviewers who quibbled with him over personal and literary matters were mild in comparison with the more politically minded writers. When the *Journal of Negro History* reviewed the book in January 1943, they found Redding more than an obstacle in the path of racial uplift; he was a traitor, among the “miseducated colored Laval and Quisling writers for media publicity.”

By comparing Redding to famous Europeans who had easily switched allegiance to the Nazis, the *Journal's* verdict was clear: "Intentionally or unintentionally these writers are literary saboteurs betraying Negroes for the glee and satisfaction of their worst traducers" (Brewer 109).

Redding had earned himself a sobriquet that would stick. He was now the infamous "traducer" of his race. Obviously, the label did not matter to his white audience, but being accused of racial disloyalty pained him. As a successful writer and a member of the black college professorate, he felt compelled to perform on the dramatically different stages of black and white American life, and the gap between the assumptions, expectations, and resources of the two audiences was enormous. At the illustrious beginning of his career, Redding had to face losing the support of other blacks—certainly an important factor in *No Day of Triumph's* never appearing in paperback. Redding was also a bit ahead of his natural constituency: the American "new" liberals—political anti-communists and literary aestheticians interested in difficult recordings of the individual human experience—who claimed to champion racial justice would not comprise a group until after World War II. Redding's success d'élite could not get him lectures before audiences of white elites, job offers from their colleges, or even regular access to circles of other equally talented white writers.

For the most part, he rejected the whites who were keen to associate with him: the Communist Party and its journals and satellite groups, still key sources of interracial intellectual contact in 1942 and 1943. Redding claimed to have fallen out with the Party personally in 1933 when, after attending several cell meetings, he decided, "I resented democracy for leaving me and itself so defenseless; but I hated Communism for putting me on the defensive" (*On Being* 62). Still, his point of view from the early 1940s coincided precisely with the communists' putative principles of social justice. When *No Day of Triumph* came out, *New Masses* even pirated a chapter, and his editor Aswell gave Ralph Ellison of the communist-backed *Negro Quarterly* something to reprint. Party members sent Redding fan mail. However, when he attended a party in his honor in New York, he felt manipulated by the Party officers' exaggerated promises to make him a financial success (*On Being* 90). A black man seeking wide admiration as a writer might have extended them his consideration. In the early 1940s, Richard Wright, William Attaway, Ted Ward, Ralph Ellison, Ernest Kaiser, Carl Ruthven Offord, Melvin B. Tolson, and many others hovered in and around the orbit of the Communist Party in New York, and certainly at the time Redding was their equal in

talent. However, Redding remained tied to the African-American community's limited resources. From afar and to his white peers, Redding had a vigorous and enviable career. In reality, the elite sectors that congratulated his work remained rigidly closed off, and those that were open to him he did not particularly want.

The reception of the book in the white press launched Redding into an on-and-off career as an expert on American race relations and public policy. The suspicion other blacks had toward *No Day of Triumph* probably helped add a new boldness to his role as public journalist. "A Negro Speaks for His People" appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1943, just before bloody riots between blacks and whites swept Detroit, New York, Los Angeles, and the military bases. The article hit the racial crisis squarely, serving notice that blacks understood the American war creed as a pledge to "wipe out racialism and the threat of racialism from the earth" ("Negro Speaks" 62). Redding opposed the well-liked "Southern liberals" like Richmond editor Virginius Dabney, who in a January issue of *Atlantic Monthly* had blamed "Negro agitators" and "extremist Negro leaders" for stirring unrest (94). However, writing from North Carolina where whites had recently been ambushed, a race riot nearly touched off, and with the state legislature already threatening Elizabeth City State College with cuts as punishment for his rebellious book, Redding badly did not want to be misconstrued or seen as a terrorist. With candor and stark evidence, he revealed the new spirit among blacks with clinical precision. The era of "outworn Negro leaders" was over. By adding elements of "growing class-consciousness" to the race problem and viewing their struggle through an international lens, blacks were making "a stupendous challenge to the South" ("Negro Speaks" 62).

Months later, Redding popped up in the two-year-old academic journal *Antioch Review*, a liberal and radically humanist magazine out of the college in Yellow Springs, OH. *Antioch's* editors were outspoken proponents of the belief that "the social role of the intellectual in our time is to employ ideas to further democracy in the fullest sense" (Laroquentinker 24). Alone among the prestigious intellectual quarterlies during the early 1940s, *Antioch* published the cutting edge of criticism by black Americans and about African-American culture. Redding was the first black to publish in *Antioch*, and appropriately he called his essay "The Black Man's Burden." Redding now believed that, despite black optimism, nothing indicated a "permanent dissolution of the old stereotypes that condition so much of our national thinking" ("Black Man's" 587). He compared the condition of blacks in America with "the lung in a tuberculous body."

“And what the Negro wants exactly is that the government recognize a sense of obligation to him and to extend its wardship to him on terms of equality with other people” (594). Counter to the NAACP’s strong resistance to any policy that “set the Negro apart for special treatment,” Redding supported the writer Carey McWilliam’s proposal to ease racism and its effects by creating an Office for Negro Affairs. Redding favored drastic measures to replace the current black leadership and broadly alter the condition of negroes in America.

As a public critic, Redding became adept at barbecuing over an open flame the black leadership class who used Booker Washington tactics. His brassiest assault appeared in 1944 in *Common Ground*, the journal put out by the Common Council for American Unity and designed to eliminate legal racial barriers. The essay “Southern Defensive” criticized the “potential danger” of the all-black “Durham Conference” and the all-white “Atlanta Conference” uniting into the new Southern Regional Council (SRC) (41). Redding wanted a hot light to expose the inner cran- nies of the SRC for the usual reasons. The organization’s leadership came from recently quit members of the Council of Interracial Commission, but it proposed to use precisely the same tactics as the older and, by implication at least, unsuccessful organization; the SRC refused to shrug off racial segregation, and it continued to support the myth that the South alone should solve the “Negro problem.” “[I]t is not hard to imagine the unscrupulous using the Southern Regional Council as a wedge to split Negroes on sectional lines,” warned Redding (“Southern Defensive” 41). Redding’s criticisms of liberal American social uplift probably hurt his chances at becoming the secure public commentator on black American life for liberal America. Instead, he went in another direction and began a sustained effort of cultural commentary that appealed to blacks along lines of region, class, and inclination.

In 1944, Redding took a job in the English department of Hampton Institute, Booker T. Washington’s alma mater, and he also won a Guggenheim Fellowship to begin work on a novel. He could not have imagined that he was about to embark upon the task for which he would become best known to large numbers of black Americans, and through which he carried out his own mission of racial obligation. His longstanding influence came out of his regular work as probably the most widely read black literary critic in the US. Redding shoved out with a weekly column called “A Second Look” on 29 January 1944, published by the *Baltimore Afro-American*, a paper circulated from Richmond (VA, USA) to Newark (NJ, USA), with its hub in Baltimore, and with an overall

circulation of 244,000 (Wilkerson 514). For nearly two years, Redding made "A Second Look" a grab-bag general forum that discussed culture, race, and politics from a politically centrist, integrationist, and Christian American position.¹⁰ He presented to black readers his views on California governors, veterans' affairs, University of North Carolina professors and potential Supreme Court nominees, Roosevelt's legacy, China's post-war role, the prominent sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, the Bomb and the Russians, Christmas, Indochina and British imperialism, white professors at black colleges, filibustering southern Democrats, the United Nations, and Harry S. Truman. His racial attitude suited the needs of an African-American audience that demanded that white society accept a certain burden. "[T]he bridge to the truly democratic future must be built by white people," he assured his readers.¹¹ But he also faulted blacks and black leaders for failing to take advantage of the enormous opportunities that were becoming available. Even the record-breaking number of black graduates in the early 1940s was unimpressive because of the black collegians' unsophisticated interests and truncated values, nearly exactly the same as the working class.¹² "[O]ne is hard put to distinguish the average colored college graduates from the unfortunate clodhoppers who have never seen a school," he rang down from on high.¹³ Brusque perhaps, Redding was teasing out a position that praised the value of liberal arts ideals and institutions without overly romanticizing the richness of black heritage.

In the first months of the column, he found only a few creative writers worthy of comment: Richard Wright, once in passing; a commentary on the perdurable Langston Hughes; and, twice, homage to the rainmaker Lillian Smith, whose tragic novel of interracial romance *Strange Fruit* (1944) attested to the country's racial obsession. But after the end of hostilities in Europe on 18 May 1945, he announced "this column will concern itself with books for the next few weeks," identifying a regular commitment to book reviews that would hold him until 1966. About a year later, on 29 June 1946, the column changed its name from "A Second Look" to "Book Reviews." Thereafter, Redding's mission was to inspire black reading audiences. "It is strange, when you stop to consider it, how much more interested white people are in the literature and art of colored people than we are ourselves," Redding would tell his audience.¹⁴ So he used the column as an omnibus of sorts to bring to his audience reviews, typically of black writers, a huge proportion of whom would never see their books discussed in print.

At the column's onset in 1944, a new Renaissance in black writing appeared on the horizon. Redding carried the creed of

liberalism to his black audience, assuring them that the era of blanket racism in the arts had closed. “[T]he first-rate publishers are neither prejudiced nor averse to taking the necessary risk involved in issuing a new writer’s work,” he suggested to his somewhat incredulous black readers.¹⁵ “[The] day when good writing is ignored is largely past” (qtd in Haydn 51).¹⁶ In March 1945, Redding continued this line of reasoning to a much wider audience in an essay called “The Negro Author: His Publisher, His Public, and His Purse” in *Publisher’s Weekly*. However, he did not spend his years of greatest influence, between 1946 and 1956, describing a cascade of black talent brought out by white publishers. Rather, he chronicled two phenomena, often with immense irritation: the declining fortune of inept black social realist writers and the successes of the black modernists, whose tendency toward stylistic difficulty and discrete individual experience Redding found regrettable. His criticism of two writers is emblematic of the larger trends: Chester Himes, closely identified with social realism, and James Baldwin, the darling of American new liberals and “high” modernists.¹⁷

As a critic, Redding got the undeserved reputation of a snob. He regularly reviewed writers published outside of the commercial industry and he forged his own brand of literary modernism: one that applauded bracing realism, psychologically deep characters, and which strove to re-imagine social arrangements. However, crucially, Redding also demanded a style that resisted obscurity and one that thematically offered a fairly strenuous black vindicationism. He would not reward black writers for indifference toward a black audience. He was reluctant to endorse the avant-garde modernist artists way out in front of the reader, unless, like Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, the work seemed to offer the possibility for dramatic social change. He required too an unusual kind of chastity in his favorite characters; Redding’s regular if veiled criticisms in the 1940s of books that handled any form of sexual impropriety may have contributed to the 1950s phenomenon that critic Michael Hill calls the “trope of adolescence.”¹⁸ Redding expressed sentiments that were almost entirely unsympathetic to the man-on-the-street views of his intellectual peers like the Howard University poet and critic Sterling Brown or the Chicago sociologist and writer Horace Cayton. In one of the early examples of his critical standards, he steadily rejected the work of the writer Chester Himes, a favorite of Cayton’s, and whose works in the 1940s best captured what came to be known as black protest fiction.

For Redding, the narrative choices of Chester Himes’s 1945 book *If He Hollers Let Him Go* seemed utterly false: “There is

nothing at all inescapable in what happens in it.”¹⁹ However, what genuinely offended him was Himes’s use of vulgarity in the book, the author’s delight in squeezing into his characters the more putrid elements of contemporary life. Redding condemned “the extensive use of jive language,” which he believed vitiated the novelist’s ability to say something “important.” And then Himes had created a protagonist that Redding believed a “stinker.” In Himes’s work, Redding found missing the powerful moral didacticism that had ruled Richard Wright. He did not anticipate the burgeoning French existentialist movement that some black writers felt was a native response of American Negroes anyway. He rejected meaningless suffering among literary characters. Instead, he thought that the writer should desire to create sympathetic reactions from his audience. He faulted Himes for failing to show a belief in the strong moral quality necessary for the progressive betterment of society.

For his part, Chester Himes had taken to writing like a man battling for his life on the printed page, and he brought to the arena of public opinion his resentment at the caviling directed at his book, the reluctance to point out the achievement of his new perceptions, the tendency of the liberal press to react as if they had heard it all before. Himes defied his critics in February 1946 in *Saturday Review of Literature*. He said that Americans refused to “look upon the grim actualities of their own lives, the depths of their own depravities, the dangers of their dissatisfactions, and the extent of their brutalities, accepting instead, with fulsome self-delusion, the utterly deliberate, premeditated falseness of their own picturization” (13). To this breed, Himes would offer “the truth as I see it” and, as for the race problem, “I would not saddle an underprivileged, uneducated, poverty stricken, oppressed racial group with this responsibility.” Redding shared these sentiments, but he dared not bring to the surface this level of straightforward seething resentment.

Compared to his contemporaries, Himes’s remarks of dissent, his vision of literature’s function, as well as his narrative ability were uncommon. Working hard to keep himself under control and mainly succeeding at it, Redding refused to accept that black audiences might be inspired by Himes’s dark vision of meaningless frustration. But the alternatives of progressive reform posed between 1943 and 1950 in Carl Ruthven Offord’s *The White Face* (1943), Curtis Lucas’s *Flour Is Dusty* (1943) and *Third Ward, Newark* (1946), Alden Bland’s *Behold a Cry* (1947), William Gardner Smith’s *Last of the Conquerors* (1948), and Philip B. Kaye’s *Taffy* (1950) were unsatisfying too. To Redding, these books constituted the “mediocrities” that he had warned Wright

might flood the literary marketplace. But the flood metaphor, insofar as black writers were concerned, was merely hyperbole. Despite the letters that he regularly received at the *Afro* bemoaning the sad fate of aspiring novelists, there were not enough would-be black novelists to break down the doors of the New York publishers.

Redding's 1947 opinion of Himes's second novel *Lonely Crusade* (1947) came as no surprise. Himes had drawn much of the plot from the rich terrain of his first novel, but his second book was more probing, angst-filled, and despairing. Redding was not prepared to face the world of flawed frightened men again. "In *Lonely Crusade*, the same error is made [as in *If He Hollers*]," Redding said. "Or it may not be an error from the author's point of view. It may be that he deliberately creates heroes with a hundred petty flaws in order to show how weak and foolish and depthless even heroes are."²⁰ Despite "spots of excellence," Redding concluded that Himes had over-determined his theme. "[H]is theme, [which] I think is fear, the fear that the author seems to believe is the only natural endowment of the colored man in the white world."

Once again, Himes responded to his critics, especially the implication that he had written a symbolic allegory of African-American life. He wrote to the *Afro* directly and Redding gamely reprinted portions of the letter. "Must we construe every colored character in fiction as typical of all colored people, or will we concede that these are fictional characterizations, typifying nothing more than imaginary persons in an imagined theme?" (Himes, "Letter" 4). Himes had felt the brunt of the double standard from the black middle class, the group who had "vehemently denied that Lee Gordon is typical of us." This sensitivity to the depiction caused Himes to find a "hypersensitivity on their part equal to that of Lee Gordon's." Himes found a psychology of denial in the upper class of black audiences, one which Redding also had noted.

However, Redding's decision to push Himes out from under the canopy of good writing seemed to make sense on several grounds. Himes had sounded off against the middle class, liberals, and communists, and he refused to offer a character that had surmounted the problem of racial injustice. But the American scene after World War II seemed to present so much evidence to contradict his pessimism. Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) had been another best-seller, and publishers like Doubleday were offering cash prizes for the best book on black American life. Several prominent writers of the black American experience, Owen Dodson, Arna Bontemps, Bucklin Moon, and Horace Cayton, all spent several weeks in overlapping residence at the Writers' Colony at Yaddo in

Saratoga Springs (NY, USA). In 1948, Himes and Redding were guests, and all of them were vetted by the left-leaning admissions committee trio of Malcolm Cowley, Newton Arvin, and Granville Hicks.

It was also becoming clear that the new kind of post-war liberal society would be increasingly selective in its attitude of remedial benevolence. The unprecedented numbers of black writers and ethnic centered projects struck some in the literary world as a kind of a publicity gimmick, or worse, symptomatic of the threat of a dangerously base mass culture. Columbia professor Robert Gorham Davis reported in a *Partisan Review* symposium in 1948 that contemporary critics believed that writers still subscribing to “[l]iberalism, progressivism and naturalism” were nearly synonymous with the “false and superficial” literary communists of the 1930s. Taken all together, these ideologies “make impossible literary understanding” (869). The reaction against “sociology” in favor of art was not exactly strident, but it was effective. The progressive Marxist reformers of the 1930s had evolved to accept a creed of high modernist aesthetics and were thinking of themselves as “new” liberals as the 1950s began. Naturalist literature seemed merely an example of the sloppy “old” liberalism of the 1930s that could not shake its association with Stalin. Domestic racial issues in and of themselves were necessarily thought subordinate to the fight against communist aggressiveness.²¹ Serious books that were clearly more concerned with an agenda of social reform than with the experience of an individual expressed in often-difficult language were understood partially as crass appeals to the commercial public. Critic William Tindall mockingly wrote that, “if an author wants his novel to sell better than the better sellers, he has only to choose for his subject either the evils of drink or the prejudice against Jews, Negroes, or, sometimes, Chinese” (55). Redding deferred to the New York tastemakers at Columbia and *Partisan Review*. He called them the “*Partisan Review* geniuses and giants” and pointed to the journal as a source of intellectual might.²²

At the very end of 1949, a regularly featured *Partisan Review* writer and Columbia professor, Lionel Trilling, would collect the influential essays he had been issuing for the second half of the 1940s and famously publish them under the title *The Liberal Imagination*. Like Davis, Trilling would make quite clear that he resisted the organizational orthodoxy of “liberalism”—such as it had been in the John Reed Clubs or American Writers’ Congresses—which he thought had greatly reduced the “variousness and possibility” of contemporary writing and thought (Trilling 10). Trilling hoped to reclaim and make liberalism “new”

by stripping it of its innocence and infusing it with the mature rigor found in elements of conservative thought. To do this, Trilling diminished two authors, the literary historian V. L. Parrington and the novelist Theodore Dreiser, and the creed of “social responsibility”: “This is the liberal criticism, in the direct line of Parrington, which establishes the social responsibility of the writer and then goes on to say that, apart from his duty of resembling reality as much as possible, he is not really responsible for anything, not even his ideas” (31). Top American critics were finished with understanding novels for the work that they conducted in the public sphere or their resemblance to “reality.” A Guggenheim awardee, a Yaddo fellow, and on the verge of being elected to the editorial board of *American Scholar*, Redding was finishing a novel that he had been writing since 1943. Operating under public scrutiny, perhaps not the ideal condition for a fiction writer, Redding wanted the critics to affirm his new work. He was faced with a contradiction, one that caused him to evaluate the work of others under standards that he as a creative writer could not summon. With the curious exception of a single blooper—communist Lloyd Brown’s *Iron City* (1951)—Redding, who did not review *Native Son* or *Black Boy*, wrote no flattering public criticism for social realism.

At the beginning of the 1950s, Redding found himself using the word “morbid” to describe, at least in part, the black American mind (*On Being* 3). What seemed distinctly morbid was that he had spent five years deriding that which he was compelled to produce. Redding’s own fiction closed out the long decade of social realism that had begun with Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children*. In 1950, Redding completed and published *Stranger and Alone*, his novel about black college life. However, the fiction novel that took him seven years was an agonizing act of desperate creation. In 1944, Redding had written to Richard Wright and confided that finally the “great pressure” with *Stranger* was gradually “easing off.” Writing steadily, Redding was tentatively believing in his work, but he revealed to Wright the special burden of his writing life and personality: “It’s getting to the place where I know where I am; and my evenings and nights aren’t filled with the black glooms of discouragement.”²³ He surely had not anticipated another six years of writing a novel for both black and white audiences, a process he called “terrifying” (“Negro Author” 146). In spite of himself, Redding perfectly captured the dilemma of the black writer at the time that social realist techniques fell from favor: alienated, sensitive, and in despair.

Redding’s novel horrifyingly portrayed black education and the drive for upward mobility; his general outlook in *No Day of*

Triumph had been auspicious by comparison. A book designed to strike a blow against the fetid bi-racial caste ruling the black portion of the segregated South for indifferent white overlords, *Stranger and Alone* exposed the immense pain of Redding's own life, his own brittle psychology. It indelibly linked him to the ragged protesters of the world. The novel's protagonist Shelton Howden is an orphan who can only suspect that his father was a white man and his mother a whore. Clumsy, diffident, and poor, Howden has almost no outstanding qualities, except, perhaps, one: near graduation from fictional New Hope college, he accepts the academic position of racial inferiority. "It never occurred to him that the books he was reading and the lectures he heard might be the scholarship of prejudice, the rationalizations of fallible men whose conclusions were questionable" (48). At first, Howden hopes to become a doctor so that he can become "prosperous, assured" and join the group whose claim to social prestige rests on its material prosperity. He can cure himself by acquiring from among "the shiniest cars, the prettiest wives" (50). But after a disastrous encounter with a railroad crew, Howden is crippled, gives up medicine, and turns to education. He works as a college administrator, learning at the feet of President Wimbush at Arcadia College. A fixture in the maintenance of racial inequality and black quiescence, Wimbush is the illegitimate child of a black woman and a southern planter. He teaches Howden the showmanship necessary to manage southern blacks away from social and economic equality. Howden falls in love with Wimbush's daughter Gerry, and she and her friends conduct a decadent and hollow Negro high-society. The two of them help Howden completely erase his moral compass. "My God, son, group or race ethics, race morality—it's got nothing to do with us, and it's got nothing to do with reality either," Wimbush tells the protagonist (157). Howden concludes the book as a county school supervisor who betrays black principals organizing to gain equal school apportionments. Redding's Shelton Howden was a hideous monster, a study in cowardice. As a protagonist he was nearly completely unsympathetic, a man beyond redemption. Like Bigger Thomas, Redding's character lived outside of any redeeming African-American-based social or cultural values, nor did any seem to exist. It was difficult to believe that people as empty as Shelton Howden existed.

Newly liberated critics did not welcome him this time. Ralph Ellison, who by 1950 no longer associated with communists or their publications, knew Redding from a 1943 Schomburg Library discussion of *No Day of Triumph*. Ellison wrote the benchmark *New York Times* review of *Stranger and Alone* and declared that the book's only significance was "sociological" and that the

writing lacked “high quality” (4). The critic Ulysses Lee, a University of Chicago Ph.D. and former student of Sterling Brown, gently reprovved the novel’s execution and eased his dispraise by beckoning to the future: “[T]his might have been the fine and penetrating novel of the tender more painful edges of Negro life that Saunders Redding yet may write” (181). Those who enjoyed the book most heartily had been enlisted in the cause of protest writing. Anne Petry, who had reviewed the novel for *Saturday Review of Literature* and called it “first rate,” wrote to an editor at Harcourt Brace to convey personally her brimming admiration (“Race” 18).²⁴ Redding received endorsement for his social conscience and sense of responsibility to the race, not for the quality of his execution or the inevitable unfolding of his plot. He had written himself into the league of Chester Himes.

Stranger did not bring the coronation of a magnificent talent in fiction, and, in 1951, Redding compulsively published another memoir, *On Being Negro in America*. *Saturday Review of Literature* noted the book and included Redding in a group of “notable newcomers.” Redding, a veteran and not a newcomer, wrote a regretful note to the editor Louise Hazzard describing the catalyst for his new work.

[T]he truth about Negro people seems the most important truth the American democracy needs to learn. And so I’m writing one more book about this truth. I want to write it much less than I *need* to write it. (It would probably save my time and labor if I consulted a psychoanalyst.) It’s an art of purification, a catharsis. After it’s done, perhaps I can write the books I want to write without feeling that I’m betraying something fundamental in me and American life.²⁵

As he had claimed in the memoir, “I want to get on to other things” (*On Being* 14). Fiction may have been one of the other things, but scrub characters like Shelton Howden did not inspire him then. When *Saturday Review* columnist Eloise Perry Hazard wrote up her brief blurb on Redding, she eliminated any notice of Redding’s major novel *Stranger and Alone* within the past year (Hazard 10).

Between 1952 and 1953, Redding tried to hack out his feelings of racial fraternity and to consider the world phenomenologically. He surgically pruned the “emotional baggage,” which had been his racial identity. Whatever his books did not do, he believed that he had made a personality advance. Writing about the period he claimed, “I had rid myself of all those requirements and responsibilities that had fallen my lot, and the lot of any

American Negro.” He stopped referring to other black Americans as “my people,” and decided that he had both “escaped” and “depersonalize[d]” himself: “I was glad. I was free” (*American* 10–11). No barker for the ideology of black uplift, Redding prepared himself to embrace the creed of the individual.

Nor was it a matter merely of ideology. Redding’s fiery essays from the 1940s gave way to contrasting duties in the 1950s. He went to India for the State Department in 1953 and faithfully swatted down communism, such as he could, and he swore to the students, who waved at him copies of black communist William Patterson’s indictment of US racism, *We Charge Genocide* (1951), that America had reformed its egregious racial policies. When he wrote about his trip in the book *An American in India* (1954), he found out that he was still fettered by his racial experience. But even though his book ultimately disclosed the same maddening search for a secure American identity, in spite of his racial ancestry he found himself flattered. His politics were on the mark. *Time* magazine called him “good looking” and said that he had written a “clean and calm” book that likened “the Reds to wild dogs” (“Wild Dogs” 116, 120).

Apparently, Redding decided that he was being patronized, and that a better title for the book would have been “An American Negro in India.” His anti-communism suggested his place within the “new” liberalism of the McCarthy Committee’s 1950s, but his fault-finding with the social realists never matured into a full-blown allegiance with the formalist critics and literary high modernists. While it probably had something to do with the way his novel *Stranger and Alone* had been characterized, Redding was unfulfilled by the extravagant claims of 1950s American high modernists. They proposed to build human life on a foundation of fragmented experimental texts, couched in symbolism and teeming with cynicism and hyper erudition. While disinclined to lend support to “protest” realism, Redding wanted the writers to struggle with the mighty epic of race in the building of the American nation. He found only interior portraits of technical virtuosity. One example represents the basic commentary he had for Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), Ann Petry’s *The Narrows* (1953), Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* (1953), and Melvin B. Tolson’s *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953). He loved Gwendolyn Brooks’s work, but he thought *Annie Allen* (1949) was nearly obtuse: “is not this penchant for coterie stuff—the special allusions, the highly special feeling derived from an even more special experience—that has brought poetry from the most highly regarded communicative skill to the least regarded?” Redding sharply opposed the idea that special preparation was necessary to

unpack poetry: “No one wants to read a psychological treatise whatever for that matter, in order to get at the meaning of a poem.”²⁶ To a degree, he failed his *Afro-American* audience because he did not make clear the great value of the writing being published in their midst, or at least the reason that the writing received such high praise from other quarters. Instead, he nearly duplicated the experience he had had when he published *No Day of Triumph*.

Nowhere was Redding’s tendency to pick at black authors and to miscast the broad scope of the artistic and social transformation that the works and commentaries signaled more evident than in his appraisal of James Baldwin, the best lauded and publicized black writer of the 1950s. Nor did what amounted to a condemnation of Baldwin begin as that. Redding might have missed Baldwin’s foraging missions in *Commentary* or *New Leader* in the 1940s, but he did not ignore the succulent 1953 novel *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. Unlike most of the other sensational works published between 1952 and 1954, he praised Baldwin’s book warmly. “No one can quarrel with his literary talent,” he wrote in his review.²⁷ However, in the pages of Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), Redding found the seeds of betrayal.

Redding saw Baldwin as having capitulated to the vengery of bohemian life, capricious intellectual fashion, and purposeless aesthetics. He felt uncomfortable with Baldwin’s modern attitudes, his imposition of individual self-made values, and his apparently casual repudiation of the idea of a tradition of African-American literature that Redding had worked so hard first to write into existence and then to cultivate. While he left alone Baldwin’s famous dismissals of the social realist literary tradition, Redding vehemently disagreed with Baldwin’s estimate of what it meant to be a black American. “Can Baldwin believe that the American Negro is unqualified (not merely disqualified!) in the very nature of him and in experience to find his identity in America?” he asked after reading “Stranger in the Village,” the final essay in *Notes of a Native Son*.²⁸ In it, Baldwin had weighed the Western cultural heritage of black Americans and Swiss villagers. The 31-year-old high school graduate from Harlem had decided that blacks were inherently “disesteemed” and bore “no credentials” of cultural value. Baldwin lamented that, in so far as Western culture was concerned, random Swiss peasants “move with an authority I will never have” (“Stranger” 164). “Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory,” Baldwin wrote, “but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive” (165). Years earlier, when reviewing Chester Himes, Baldwin had decided that American Negroes had no “tradition to cling to in the sense that Jews may be said to have

To a degree, [Redding] failed his Afro-American audience because he did not make clear the great value of the writing being published in their midst, or at least the reason that the writing received such high praise from other quarters.

a tradition; this was left in Africa long ago and no one remembers it now" ("History" 11). The combination of the two views suggested that Baldwin had moved from believing that there was no worthwhile black American tradition to believing that what blacks had known in Africa was not very worthwhile either. To Redding, who went on to join the American Society for African Culture in 1957, and whose last long work, *The Lonesome Road* (1958), was a series of short biographies of Negro heroes, Baldwin's mid-1950s position that African Americans operated without a deep cultural and historical base was sacrilege.

Obviously, Redding's opinion on Baldwin stood in sharp contrast to the book's strong praise from white America. *Notes's* success was not all that difficult to predict: the essays that comprised the volume had originally appeared in the A-list of American journals and magazines. The book read like a companion piece to Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), but one written by a person whose painful personal experiences with the flaws of socialist politics, religious and racial orthodoxy, and professional social reformers had led them to the tough Canaan of new liberalism. Redding himself may have experienced a life of at least glinting advantage and success, but his indignation was aroused fully by Baldwin's flip treatment of racial injustice as a thing of the mind and the antebellum era: "That's the thing, really, about *Notes of a Native Son*: it is pretty. Even when one finds a pretty in the street one cannot completely turn his back on it until pretty proves a whore. *Notes of a Native Son* proves."²⁹ Redding ranted by himself. On the other side of the proverbial racial literary street, Alfred Kazin, author of the pace-setting literary history *On Native Grounds* (1942), thought Baldwin's book was superb, "one of the two or three best books ever written about the Negro in America, and it is the work of an original literary talent who operates with as much power in the essay form as I've ever seen" (244). A mature James Baldwin fully dominated the 12 years between 1953 and 1965, and he spent his best writing years creating novels, short stories, plays, and, most celebratedly, essays that seemed to nudge an increasingly self-conscious, contrite, and awkward America into the habitat of public racial tolerance. Before the decade was even out, Paule Marshall's *Browniegirl, Brownstones* (1959), the most promising narrative work to come out of the second half of the 1950s, explicitly pointed to "Jimmy" Baldwin as the oracular public intellectual of the time.³⁰ Fifty years later, Baldwin's reputation rests more on the essays that he published in the 1950s and 1960s than upon anything else. But Redding dismissed him in contemporary language as if Baldwin were a venereal coquette.

Baldwin represented the success of the redefined “liberal” center in American life, one that claimed itself free from any “ideology,” whether that meant communism or race pride. Even his professional scope differed enormously from earlier black writers. Baldwin considered Norman Mailer, the author of searing works of 1950s politics and sexuality like *Barbary Shore* (1951), *The Deer Park* (1955), and “The White Negro” (1957), his most important peer and rival; he certainly got little from Redding as an older writer who had seriously explored the conundrum of race in a useful manner. When he had reviewed books such as Redding might have written, for example, John Hope Franklin’s *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947), Baldwin tended to dismiss the distinctiveness of the group with a sweep: “What is happening to Negroes in this country has been happening for a long time and it is something quite logical, inevitable and deadly: they are becoming more American everyday” (“Too Late” 99). Baldwin did not dwell on the white world’s reluctance to admit blacks into the mainstream or on blacks’ special value, the work of Redding’s generation. Rather, he identified the flaws of white America and steadily pointed to the broad commonalities that blacks and whites inevitably shared. On the other hand, something like racial integration made Redding somewhat uneasy. He had never particularly esteemed the position; he had accepted the standpoint of integration as a drowning man gasping for air: “It was rather like the action of one who kicks and splashes frantically to save himself from drowning and suddenly finds that he has reached a shelf on which he can stand in the river bed. His objective was not the shelf, but just to be saved. I kicked and splashed in all directions, and suddenly there I was” (*On Being* 35).

Baldwin’s coziness with integration came across in his next book, and Redding’s response to the novel *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) contributed only to his mounting negative appraisal. The novel used Paris as its setting and explored the life of a white protagonist, a decision of artistic peril according to Redding’s tastes. “James Baldwin needs to find a subject worthy of his very real talents,” Redding warned his audience.³¹ In truth, America’s new liberalism and its anti-ideological approach challenged the very idea of black writing. Redding wanted to answer the call with his own fiction, but the very quality of his experiences built up a huge distance. Redding—who had not been to prison, had not raised himself unaided, had not been forced out of school after ninth grade, had not engaged in interracial sex, and had neither spent the majority of his life in the northern black ghetto nor fled there—had fallen outside of the popular dimensions of black life as surely as if he had been white. The basis of shared assumptions with a white audience was changing and it became ever more difficult to

imagine a character like the southern educator Shelton Howden having an epic of redemption.

The deep tissue of Redding's personal experience stemmed from an early twentieth century that had shown him as little of ordinary white American life as had his years teaching at Morehouse, Louisville Municipal, Southern, Elizabeth City, and Hampton Colleges. But by the end of the 1950s, contemporary black writers needed the confidence to speak with a communal, omni-American voice, the first-person plural "we" that peppered Baldwin's works. They needed to be on sure footing as they spoke of a collective American reality, and this required courage, vulnerability, timing, and opportunity, and Redding never quite put the four qualities together. Even the theatric violence that Baldwin revealed in essays like "Notes of a Native Son," where, in a New Jersey town, he claimed to have thrown a water glass at the head of a waitress in a room filled with patrons, surely appeared like a moment of crude immaturity and self-indulgence to someone like Redding, who had conditioned himself over the years to diffuse and contain the pain of the American racial scene. He concluded his perspective on the 1950s generation by mishandling its major star, the person whose work set the course for 20 years of writing and activism. Redding ably represented the anxiety of the age. He could not escape Cayton's "Fear-Hate-Fear" syndrome and forgive a younger writer like Baldwin for at least giving the appearance that he had, in Ralph Ellison's legendary phrasing, "changed the joke and slipped the yoke." Shelton Howden, Redding's mangled protagonist from *Stranger and Alone*, would have no redemption. Neither, for that matter, would J. Saunders Redding.

Notes

1. Redding, letter to Henry Allen Moe, 1 January 1959, J. Saunders Redding Papers, John Hay Library, Brown University.
2. Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (1961); Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s and 1980s* (1987).
3. Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," *American Historical Review* 99.4 (1994): 1070–71.
4. Horace Cayton, "Black Boy: Negroes Hatred of Whites and Fear of His Hate in Wright's Autobiography," *Pittsburgh Courier* 13 Jan 1945: 7; Horace Cayton, "The Psychological Approach to Race Relations," *Reed College Bulletin* 25.1 (1946): 16–23.
5. Redding, rev. of *We Have Tomorrow*, by Arna Bontemps, *Afro-American* 10 Aug 1946: 4.

6. Redding, letter to Richard Wright, 18 Aug 1942, Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.
7. Couch was a “southern liberal.” He believed that segregation protected blacks while they underwent the process of civilization and acculturation to the white American way of life. See W. T. Couch, “Publisher’s Introduction,” *What the Negro Wants*, ed. Rayford Logan, (1944), x–xxi; Kenneth Janken, *Rayford Logan: The Dilemma of the African American Intellectual* (1993), 154–55.
8. Edward Aswell, letter to J. Saunders Redding, 30 Sept 1942, J. Saunders Redding Papers, John Hay Library, Brown University.
9. Aswell, letter to J. Saunders Redding, 16 April 1942, J. Saunders Redding Papers, John Hay Library, Brown University.
10. For the first six months, Redding provided titles for the column, then abandoned titles for the duration of his time at the *Afro*. The columns are thus cited by date. Citations include the first line or sentence of the column for identification purposes, if it was neither titled by Redding nor a book review.
11. Redding, “A Second Look: To Those Who have Been Watching,” *Afro-American* 17 March 1945: 4.
12. Edwin R. Embree, *Brown America: The Story of a Tenth of the Nation* (1943), 107–108. Between 1936 and 1942, 24,000 black Americans graduated from college, more than the total number who had previously graduated from all colleges in the US. In 1942, 46,000 blacks were enrolled in college, taught by 2,500 black teachers, among them more than 200 holders of the doctorate in philosophy.
13. Redding, “A Second Look,” *Afro-American* 15 Sept 1945: 4.
14. Redding, “It is strange,” *Afro Magazine* 6 Feb 1950: 6.
15. Redding, “A Second Look: Prejudiced Publishers?” *Afro-American* 14 Oct 1944: 4.
16. Redding’s own experience as a writer was a bit different. His editor Hiram Haydn would be reprimanded by Bobbs-Merrill publisher D. L. Chambers for accepting the project *On Being Negro in America* and unwisely filling his list with “Jews and Negroes.”
17. Redding and his contemporaries were “modernists” who ranged from using techniques of social realism to the significantly more elite “high” modernist symbolism. I am using the term “modernism” nearly synonymously with the theorization of the historical “avant-gardes” (1890–1945), following the broad distinctions made by Jürgen Habermas in “Modernity—An Incomplete Argument”: “The avant-garde understands itself as invading unknown territory, exposing itself to the dangers of sudden, shocking encounters, conquering an as yet unoccupied future Modernity revolts against the normalizing functions of tradition; modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative. This revolt is one way to neutralize the standards of both morality and utility” (5). Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide* (1986) and Peter Bruger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (1984) both advance the notion of political work as a necessary quality of an

avant-garde, and Huyssen also discusses the importance to modernists of collapsing the distance between high and low cultural forms. George Hutchinson's thoughtful and probing *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (2000), 199, 474, presents the difficulty of calculating a chronology of African-American literature's engagement with and participation in twentieth-century European-American modernism and reminds us that Raymond Williams wrote that the exclusion of realism and naturalism from the era of modernism is deeply flawed. Robert Crunden's *Body and Soul: The Making of American Modernism* (2000) makes the point that inevitably two modernist movements evolve: the aesthetic shift in consciousness in the 1920s, followed by the political shift to the Left in the 1930s. Hutchinson, who stretches the Harlem Renaissance well into the 1930s, writes that black writers "depended far more than the high modernists upon realist discourse because their objective social position vis-a-vis the dominant language differed from the modernists" (119). Mark Sanders, in "American Modernism and the New Negro Renaissance," has devised the term "heterodox modernism" to recover the rich multi-racial environment during the first half of the twentieth century (but specifically the 1920s) (129). Sanders finds that the triumph of New Criticism in the 1940s and 1950s fundamentally re-wrote the aesthetic history of the earlier period of greater collaboration and decidedly eliminated the New Negro in the process. The ideal of politics and bridging aesthetic distances between high and low culture is especially important when determining the modernist qualities of African-American social realists like Richard Wright, William Attaway, and Chester Himes, whose work is often distinguished, in terms of periodization, from Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Gwendolyn Brooks. The latter group is thought more comfortably modernist. Instead of a hard dichotomy between realists and modernists, the writers who published in the 1940s and 1950s regularly showed strong tendencies to use techniques of literary realism within an overall modernist philosophy. But to site a specific case, Ann Petry's two novels, *The Street* (1946) and *The Narrows* (1953), provide strong evidence for the regular overlap and continuity between the seemingly divergent techniques within the same generation of writers. Black writers during the 1940s and 1950s were undeniably modernists who used differing elements of social realism in verse and prose.

18. Michael Hill, "The Trope of Adolescence in the African American Novel," lecture, Emory University, Oct 2002. Hill observes that in the 1950s a significant portion of black novelists deliberately explored the lives of young, pre-sexual protagonists. One benefit from this preoccupation was escaping the minefield American culture had identified in black sexuality, greatly sensationalized by Abram Kardiner and Lionle Ovesey in the influential socio-psychological study *Mark of Oppression: A Psychosocial Study of the American Negro* (1951).

19. Redding, "A Second Look: It is hard to speak with objective clarity," *Afro-American* 1 June 1946: 4.

20. Redding, rev. of *Lonely Crusade*, by Chester Himes, *Afro-American* 13 Sept 1947: 4.

21. Geraldine Murphy, "Baldwin and the Poetics of Cold War Liberalism," *ELH* 63 (1996): 1034. In the pamphlet "We Put Freedom First," written by the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, the most prominent of America's new liberals claimed that the Soviet's exaggerated racial tension "spread confusion in the progressive camp." They characterized the difference between communism practiced by the Soviet Union and racism in the US as the difference

between the impending “enslavement of Europe” and the discomfort of blacks “in the Southern states of America” who were still forced “to travel in separate railway compartments” (Murphy 1034).

22. Redding, rev. of *From Deep Within*, by William Henry Huff, ed., *Afro Magazine* 7 July 1951: 4.

23. Redding, letter to Richard Wright, 6 Jan 1944, Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

24. Ann Petry, letter to Denver Lindley, 17 Jan 1950, J. Saunders Redding Papers, John Hay Library, Brown University.

25. Redding, letter to Ms. Hazard, 28 Jan 1951, J. Saunders Redding Papers, John Hay Library, Brown University.

26. Redding, rev. of *Annie Allen*, by Gwendolyn Brooks, *Afro Magazine* 27 Aug 1949: 3.

27. Redding, rev. of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, by James Baldwin, *Afro Magazine* 16 May 1953: 2.

28. Redding, rev. of *Notes of a Native Son*, by James Baldwin, *Afro Magazine* 17 March 1956: 2.

29. Ibid.

30. Clive tells Selina “as Jimmy Baldwin says, they’re seeking absolution through poor us, either in their beneficence or in their cruelty” (253).

31. Redding, rev. of *Giovanni’s Room*, by James Baldwin, ed., *Afro Magazine* 17 Nov 1956: 2.

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