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African Americans and Education: A Study of Arna Bontemps

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In Memoriam

African Americans and Education: A Study of Arna Bontemps¹

BY JOSEPH DOWNING THOMPSON JR.

On 17 February 2000, Joseph Thompson, director of the John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African-American Documentation at Duke University, gave a Library Associates lecture titled "African Americans and Archives." What follows is an edited version of that lecture.

TODAY, I SHALL SPEAK in detail about a black intellectual named Arna Bontemps (1902–1973) who was a writer of fiction that featured black characters, who was a librarian and archivist, and who is the subject of my doctoral dissertation. His papers are here in Syracuse University Library's Department of Special Collections. But first I wish to present a few educational problems arising out of my own experience in libraries, archives, and schools; problems that I have explored in studying the life of Arna Bontemps. It is important to analyze all of these institutions and how, in their interdependence, they shape our understandings of race and what it means to be an African American. The analysis of these institutions, as I hope you will come to understand, is a central component of my work on Bontemps who, I believe, deeply comprehended their significance.

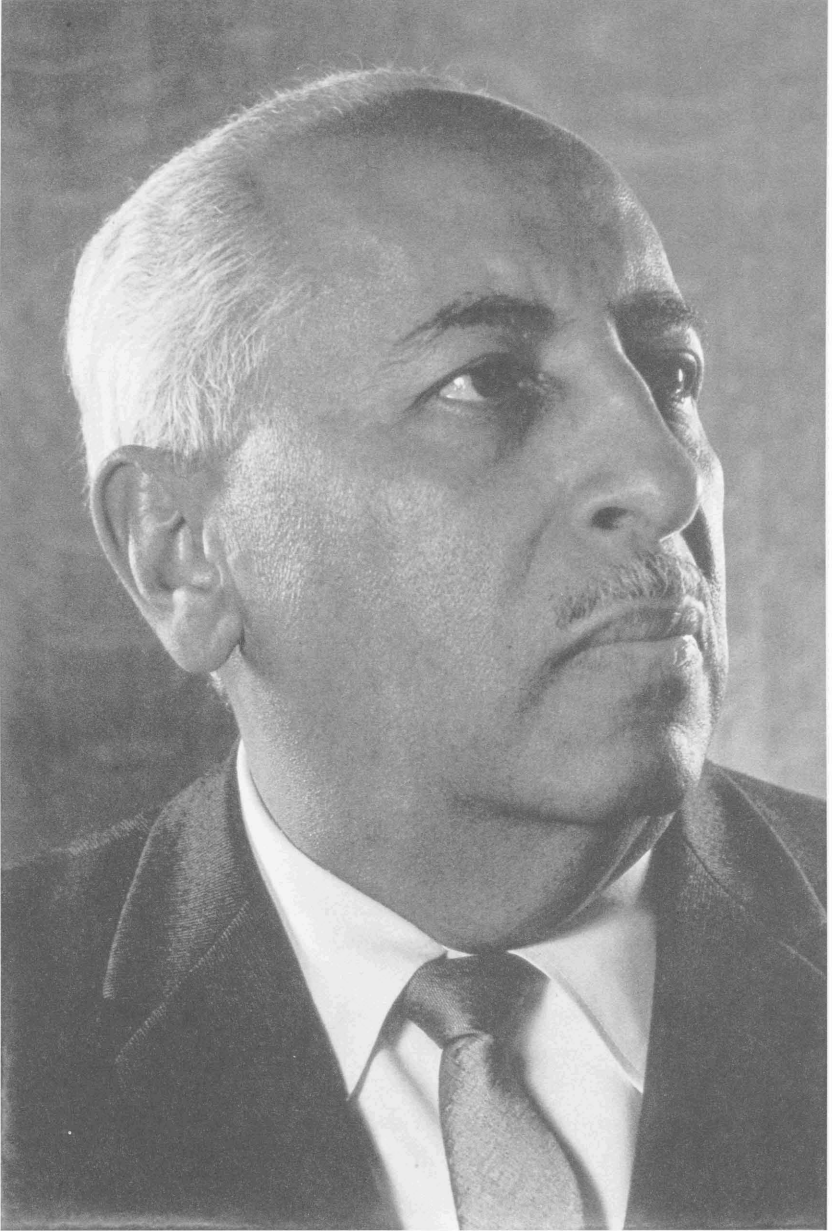
So join me as I recount a few personal scenes.

Scene 1:

It is my third year in a Ph.D. program in African American Studies and English. Oral exams are over, so life is now full of indiscriminate, feverish reading in a desperate search for a dissertation topic upon which to unleash my scholarly fury. Perhaps, I muse, the thought of Henry Louis Gates Jr. will ignite my faculties. It does,

1. Significant portions of this paper are excerpts from a more in-depth and extended chapter of the author's doctoral dissertation.

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Arna Bontemps. From Syracuse University Library.

but in unexpected ways. Eventually, the following passage from *Figures in Black*, in which Gates defends the use of literary theory in the interpretation of “black” texts, leaps out at me:

We are the keepers of the black literary tradition. No matter what theories we seem to embrace, we have more in common with each other than we do with any other critic of any other literature. We write for each other and for our own contemporary writers. This relation is one of trust, if I may. How can any aid to close reading of the texts of the black tradition be inimical to our modes of criticism?²

These words trouble me on a visceral level, for I am looking to discover myself within them yet cannot find myself there. Though Gates speaks mainly about discursive practices, about scholars communicating and sustaining communities with one another, his statement that “[w]e are the keepers of the black literary tradition” echoes through my mind, especially the term “keepers,” which evokes ideas of possession and ownership.

It is doubtful that Gates thought anyone would view his rhetorical strategy so literally, but by this time the questions in my mind will not be tamed—what is being kept in a material sense? And who is included in the “we” that keeps it? The realization strikes me that although I am black, an African Americanist, and aspiring to be a professor of literature, I do not think of myself as being the keeper of very much at all, neither of money, nor of property, nor, alas, of the black literary tradition. With a disturbed hesitation, I close *Figures in Black* and return it to my bookshelf, dismayed that Gates and I have reached this impasse over a linguistic act of which, I myself acknowledge, I may be exacting too strict a signification.

Scene 2:

Here is a psychological scenario that repeats itself on any number of days when I enter the main doors of Yale University’s Sterling Memorial Library. If you have been there, your reaction to the architecture is perhaps similar to mine; the stone out of which the

2. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), xxii.

building is constructed, the towering bookstack, the high ceilings, the numerous arches infuse me with the sense that I should solemnly process to the mural of Alma Mater which hovers above the circulation desk, bow prostrate before her, and offer my gratitude that a Yale I.D. card will allow me to move beyond the mural, beyond the watchful guard, and into the stacks.

Listen as Eugene F. Savage, creator of the mural, describes what is depicted there:

Under the spreading branches of the tree of knowledge is a golden portal within which stands Alma Mater, laurel crowned, clothed in white, and wearing a blue mantle. . . .

On the left of the composition, Light bearing a torch, and Truth holding a mirror have led their followers to make grateful acknowledgement to Alma Mater. Science and Labor present to her the fruits of the earth; Music, Divinity, and Literature attend on the right, while the Fine Arts places a figure of Winged Victory at her feet.³

Initially tempted to consider myself one of Alma Mater's devotees, I finally decide against it. Everybody up there looks pretty white to me, and I'll be damned if I'll have *characters in a mural* thinking I wouldn't be there were it not for Affirmative Action.

Putting my own pride aside for a moment, I begin to wonder how poor Alma Mater must be faring, what with the weight of some-odd million books literally at her back. But homegirl remains poised year after year. How does she do it? There is a clue in *The Yale University Library Gazette* of April 1931, which was devoted to the then-newly-built Sterling Library:

The essence of a library is the bookstack, tier upon tier of self-supporting shelves with long slits of windows lighting narrow aisles. . . . In the design of the Sterling Memorial Library, one of the first principles was the placing of the stack in the most accessible and important position on the site and its direct expression as the dominating feature of the

3. This quotation is taken from a prepared descriptive statement which is available at the circulation desk of Yale University's Sterling Memorial Library.

façade. The great book tower is the first glimpse one gets of the library from any approach. . . . This external expression of the functional core of the building gives the library a structural dignity and direct symbolism in the tradition of the great monuments of the past.⁴

No doubt Alma Mater's burden is made lighter because by hoarding books in the great book tower, she keeps a tradition. The symbolism of the great monuments of the past undergirds her and acts as an equal and opposite force to the combined tonnage of all those leaves and spines.

Thus, Alma Mater, the "bounteous mother," can hold her head up high rather than bend it under the strain of her load. If this library and others like it, arguably at the center of university life, are not ostentatious exhibitions of keeping, of possession, of ownership, then I do not know what else could be. But somehow I am alienated from this exhibitionism. The thought of being in the mural still does not appeal to me, even though I enter it, or at least hide behind it, every time I whip out my I.D., jet past the guard, and ascend into the tower.

Scene 3:

From Sterling it is a short walk to Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, another monument to possession. Upon entering at the ground level, one sees several floors of books enclosed in glass. The entire collection, or what one would imagine to be the entire collection, is there before one's very eyes. The Beinecke houses, among many other treasures, the James Weldon Johnson Collection, a wealth of books and documents, such as the papers of Langston Hughes, pertinent to the study of twentieth-century African American literature and culture. When I consider this, I have a greater understanding of why Gates's phrase wrenches me so. Maintaining a literary tradition (as well as other disciplinary traditions) is not simply about communication among scholars who have similar interests and objects of study. There is also a physical component.

4. Ellery S. Husted, "The Sterling Memorial Library," *Yale University Library Gazette* 5, no. 4 (April 1931): 57.

Attitudes towards, and cultural practices involving, certain material objects must be contemplated. I identify with the James Weldon Johnson Collection to an extent because it chronicles the accomplishments of black people, but another part of me recalls my modest, rural Virginia roots. I come from a social and familial milieu where folks do little book writing, letter writing, journal writing, college attending, artifact collecting, library designing, capital donating, or any of the other types of practices that go into the formation and sustenance of a Sterling, a Beinecke, or even their darker brother, a James Weldon Johnson Collection.

Does this mean that I am barred from access to what some, even myself, might call a piece of my heritage? Absolutely not. I am, after all, a graduate student at the institution, with all the rights, honors, and privileges thereto appertaining. I hasten to add, however, that it was not until I entered graduate school and had the opportunity to encounter firsthand an archival machine like the Beinecke that I began to discern the class and educational politics that lay behind the many anthologies, textbooks, and works of scholarship before which I had humbled myself as a learning subject.

The foregoing scenes within archives, libraries, and schools investigate the encounter between my personal identity and my formal academic life. Here is a statement from Arna Bontemps, which quite wonderfully explores the relationship between educational institutions, particularly libraries, and identity. In 1965, speaking of his adolescent visits in the 1910s to a public library in southern California, Bontemps asserts that what awaits a child on the library shelf can affect the development of his or her self-concept:

There was integration, so to speak, in the library itself in those days, though the librarian looked at me a little hard at first. But her expression changed when she saw how regularly I returned, and it was actually my own parents who put a limit on the number of books I could draw out in a given week. I finally concluded that everybody concerned was to some degree hostile to my reading needs: The Librarian who eventually smiled but never talked to me about books or made suggestions, as she frequently did to the white

are non-violent by nature,
Librarians have always been non-violent, but this does not mean they have been spared the effects of the non-violent efforts by Negro Americans to ^{finally in this} ~~actually gain~~ the freedom ~~they were~~ promised a hundred years ago. A story, which could be apocryphal in ~~some~~ details, has recently gone the rounds in Nashville, Tennessee. The incident it relates is said to have occurred ^{several years ago,} before ~~the specific date~~ ^{had decided to} it became generally known that the Public Library ~~was~~ ^{was} quite desegregated. A group of respected and forward-looking (Negro) citizens, mostly ministers, decided that the time had come to strike a direct non-violent blow for the right to read. Accordingly, they marched up the hill and entered the front door of the very temple of reading, over which the name of Carnegie was conspicuously engraved. ~~But~~ ^{Andrew} while the outside of the building had long been familiar to all of them, the inside was strange, and for a moment they paused, wondering which way to turn. Seeing their confusion, the librarian at the charge desk ^{smiled} nodded and asked graciously, "Is there something you gentlemen want?"

To a man, the delegation stepped forward. Their leader answered, courteously but firmly, "Yes, we want to borrow a book."

Undismayed, the librarian asked, "Which book, sir?"

Apparently this was not a question they had ~~not~~ anticipated. In the moment of surprise and consternation that followed, not one of the ministers could think of a book to ask for, but they did not burst into laughter until they had retreated a safe distance outside.

Then it was that they began to realize ~~that~~ the limitations of their strategy. There was a tactic designed to get them inside the door, and certainly there were too many places in which that had been a ^{vexing} ~~real~~ problem, but once inside, a new situation emerged, one ^{of} which ~~must~~ ^{obviously had} be approached with equal seriousness, but one which ~~may be found to have~~ its own requirements.

A page from the typescript of a Bontemps essay, "The Negro Awakening: What Librarians Can Do." From Syracuse University Library.

youngsters; my father, whose attitude toward moderation convinced him that reading for pleasure, like a taste for candy, was something that had to be curbed in a growing boy; and most emphatically the authors of the books, who treated me as if I didn't exist.⁵

His indignation over those distant moments is calm. As an adult lecturing to other adults, he carefully reconstructs the perspective of the perceptive juvenile whose intellectual cravings are left unsatisfied by a stubborn community of grown-ups. Although the child views his elders as united in a conspiracy to deny his desires (in that sense, too, "[t]here was integration"), the mature author alerts us to the complexities of the situation. Only his father's reasoning is made explicit in the passage. Obviously, Bontemps does not, and did not as a youth, agree with that reasoning. Nonetheless, Paul Bontemps's main concern is clearly for young Arna's welfare.

We are left to infer that the librarian, on the other hand, fails to perform her duty either out of disregard for black patrons, out of the knowledge that one of Bontemps's hue "didn't exist" in the books, or out of a combination of the two. The silence of the authors on the question of Negro existence is most puzzling to the adolescent, for theirs is a disembodied silence. Personally familiar with his father and the librarian, he can thus begin to establish their motivations; yet he is not likely to meet the writers, and for this reason, remains disillusioned not so much by a deliberate infliction of psychological damage, but rather by a passive sin of omission. The singularity of the passage lies in its ability to announce so simply that black children's relationships to educational institutions, whether their experiences be celebrated or never written into existence, are dependent upon immediate contact with the guardians and professionals who structure the practice of reading in their lives and who mediate what they read, as well as upon residual contact with the authors who create material for their consumption.

5. Arna Bontemps, "Words Like Freedom" ("An extract from the address by Arna Bontemps. Read at the Louisiana Education Association's Annual Meeting, Baton Rouge November 22, 1965"), TMs, Arna Bontemps Papers, Department of Special Collections, Syracuse University Library.

This statement need not be restricted to the young. For adults and children alike, the contexts of reading are as significant as the contents of the texts being read; there is an interdependence between literary representation and sociological factors, external to texts themselves, which guide and shape the activity of reading. Bontemps's anecdote tells us that a person's literacy is not simply a matter of ability but needs also to be considered in light of his or her proximity to print culture and the social sites that are the primary points of contact with books.

Having used Bontemps and myself to weave a kind of educational web, I will now home in on one area in particular: the school. John Guillory examines what he calls the culture of the school in very insightful ways. As I discuss school culture, bear in mind the centrality to school culture of libraries, archives, and the written and printed record found within them.

Guillory employs the phrase "school culture" in *Cultural Capital*, which studies debates in the 1980s and early 1990s about multiculturalism in the literature classroom. He writes,

While the debate over the canon concerns what texts should be taught in the schools, what remains invisible within this debate—too large to be seen at all—is the school itself. The absence of reflection on the school as an institution is the condition for the most deluded assumption of the debate, that the school is the vehicle of transmission for something like a national culture. What is transmitted by the school is, to be sure, a kind of culture; but it is the *culture of the school*. School culture does not unify the nation culturally so much as it projects out of a curriculum of artifact-based knowledge an imaginary cultural unity never actually coincident with the culture of the nation-state.⁶

School culture is an environment characterized by the "formal study of cultural artifacts" and the *proprietary* "relation to culture" that study instills in "the subjects of its pedagogy," that is to say, in

6. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 38.

the students.⁷ School culture encourages a sense of cultural, racial, ethnic, and/or national ownership over the objects being studied.

Here is an example of the dynamic Guillory points out—a quotation from *African American Literature: An Anthology of Nonfiction, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. It economically encapsulates one of the most common guiding principles behind the teaching of African American literature and culture in secondary schools and universities:

We created this book to provide an anthology of African American nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama that would present you with an insight into the richness of African American literature and African American culture. We created this book, also, because we believe that the study of African American literature provides you with an opportunity to better understand yourself and other cultures.⁸

This statement encourages black students to formulate their racial identities around, and to take ownership of, the tradition presented; it simultaneously obscures the class and educational dimensions that may inhere.⁹ The readers of this anthology may be able to bond racially with the authors, but would they be able to identify with the writers' socioeconomic positions, even if this topic were addressed at all (which it is not). And here I hope you have in mind my earlier comments on the James Weldon Johnson Collection.

These editors subscribe to a prevalent model of black identity formation that Bontemps and others helped to construct, the historical development of which I try to suggest in my dissertation. This is a model where students are presented with material that can be *racially* theirs. As we shall see in a moment, the culture of the

7. *Ibid.*, 40.

8. Demetrice A. Worley and Jesse Perry Jr., eds., *African American Literature: An Anthology of Nonfiction, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama* (Lincolnwood, Ill.: National Textbook Company, 1993), xi.

9. I acknowledge that one can interpret the quote as speaking to a broader audience than African Americans only. Even so, the passage still suggests that the literature being presented here either belongs or does not belong to the reader on the basis of race.

school fueled the need for the type of black-identified writing that Arna Bontemps provided. In the early decades of the 1900s (the period of Bontemps's life that I cover), if black students were to *own* culture, they would need to have artifacts that they could claim for the purposes of racial identification. I wonder, however, if in our day the model may require adjustment, particularly in terms of class, education, and socioeconomic status.

What I hope to have expressed in this presentation thus far is the following: it is important to engage in the study of the intellectual, cultural, and political *traditions* (remember “keepers of the tradition”) of various racial or ethnic groups and even to contribute to those traditions. This is the goal of, say, a doctoral program in African American Studies or of the John Hope Franklin Research Center. It is just as important to investigate simultaneously the material and sociohistorical processes and institutions by which those traditions are constituted. This type of investigation will contribute to the democratization and increased accessibility of scholarship. This is the spirit of my intellectual labor. This is the spirit in which I direct the Franklin Center. This is the spirit in which I study Arna Bontemps, towards whom I shall now exclusively turn.

My doctoral dissertation focuses largely on Arna Bontemps, the black writer, educator, and librarian, who was born in 1902 and died in 1973. Active in the Harlem Renaissance, Bontemps was a close associate of and literary collaborator with Langston Hughes. Throughout his career, he sustained a deep interest in black history; one of his best known works is the historical novel *Black Thunder* (1936), which is based upon Gabriel Prosser's rebellion in Virginia in 1800. Bontemps wrote many books for children that featured black characters. He was chief librarian of Fisk University from 1943 to 1964 and lectured to school librarians and teachers across the country, an aspect of his career that illustrates a concern with the education of young people. The following quotation from the dust jacket of Bontemps's *Story of the Negro* (1948), a history designed for adolescents, epitomizes that concern: “In this account of the history of his people, Arna Bontemps has told the story that, he says, ‘I would have given my eye teeth to know when I was a high

school boy in California—the story that my history books scarcely mentioned.”¹⁰

Because of Bontemps’s extended connections to educational institutions (there were very few moments in his life when he was not a student, a teacher, or a librarian) and the obvious theme of education in his writing, an analysis of his life yields complex and historically-grounded theories of the intersections of race and school culture in the early twentieth century, though the statement of those theories as theories often depends upon the process of literary interpretation.

Bontemps came of age at a pivotal moment in American history. At a time when there were significant increases in secondary education, certain intellectual communities, such as those of the Lost Generation and the Harlem Renaissance, were preoccupied with the question of what it meant to be American or what it meant to be black American. With an ever-increasing level of education in society, identity became a more pressing issue. I hypothesize that during this time, schools began to assume the function of teaching students *who they are* racially or culturally (i.e., what they should or should not *own* racially or culturally) as opposed to simply giving them the tools to join a civic community in a responsible manner. The work of intellectuals such as Bontemps helped schools to fulfill this function.

The notion of school culture cannot be applied to earlier periods in American history without modification, but we should attempt to present fresh interpretations of African American literary and intellectual history (dare I say the history of “race” or “blackness” as ideologies?) by highlighting school culture in our investigations. One ought to be able to historicize school culture by researching the ways it has responded over time to the changing conditions of race surrounding it; simultaneously one can discover how school culture is imbricated in the production, or at least reproduction, of the racial landscape of society. I will now give you a greater sense of how Bontemps’s childhood and early adult experiences with schools and other educational institutions in the 1910s and 1920s

10. A copy of *Story of the Negro*, with the original dust jacket, can be found at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

led him to create works that argued for the academic validity of African American history and culture. I will then offer an interpretation of his first and as yet unpublished novel, "The Chariot in the Cloud," a typescript of which is housed in this library. Bontemps composed the novel in the late 1920s. Thus, the late 1920s to 1930 is a reference point in the background information I am about to present.

How would one characterize the educational climate of the United States from 1900 to 1930, the period roughly concurrent with Bontemps's childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood? At the time, a college education was not common. To have graduated from high school was something of a privilege. Secondary education, however, was changing drastically during the closing decades of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth century. According to James D. Anderson, "it was in the period 1880 to 1930 that the American high school was transformed from an elite, private institution into a public one attended by the children of the masses." He writes, "At the beginning of this era less than 3 percent of the national high school age population . . . was enrolled in high school and even fewer attended regularly." By 1930, "47 percent of the nation's children of high school age were enrolled in public secondary schools."¹¹ The increase in the construction and operation of public high schools caused high school attendance to be a more widespread aspect of American life.

Black citizens, especially those who lived in the South, did not benefit from the changes in the same way that their white counterparts did. According to Edward A. Krug, black students accounted for only three percent of the students in public high schools in 1930, although blacks were about ten percent of the total United States population.¹² With this knowledge, it might be easy to assume that the 1930 figures showed no real improvement over earlier data, yet there was in fact a significant increase in black enrollment in public high schools, from 27,631 in 1920 to 118,897 in 1930; in

11. James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 186-87.

12. Edward A. Krug, *The Shaping of the American High School*, vol. 2 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), 126.

the same time period, black private high school enrollment remained steady, at 9,526 in 1920 and 9,868 in 1930.¹³ The 1920s were years of rapid growth in public high school education for blacks. Even so, many could not take advantage of the growth. Krug states, “As late as 1929 there were 282 counties in these states [the Southern states] with one-eighth or more of their population black that provided no . . . high schools. In these 282 counties lived 1,600,000 black people, between one-fourth and one-third of the total black population in the fourteen states involved.”¹⁴ For those concerned about black education, then, the 1920s must have been a period of hope for advancement combined with a recognition of overwhelming need if Americans of African descent were to keep pace with increases in white secondary education.

Where was Bontemps in these statistics? He was born in a day when anything more than an elementary education was uncommon, was a teenager when secondary education was on the rise, and in 1930, was now a young man when more than half the nation’s high school age population was on the verge of attending high school. From elementary school through college, the young writer’s connection to institutions of formal schooling had been virtually uninterrupted, and he had been educated almost exclusively in private, Seventh-Day Adventist schools. Given the state of schooling in the United States of his day, Bontemps’s level of education and the duration of his career in schools, both as a student and later as a teacher, went beyond what was typical for whites as well as blacks; however, the menace of “mis-education,” to borrow a term from Carter G. Woodson, lingered over Bontemps when he was a student.¹⁵ Although he was scholastically privileged, his schooling placed him in jeopardy of having his self-worth eroded by the extant representations of black people in history and literature.

According to Bontemps, one of the impressions students might form “was that the Negro had no history.” “Here was a contention

13. Edward A. Krug, *The Shaping of the American High School*, vol. 2 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), 126.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1933, 1969, 1992).

that any school boy could establish by merely opening his history book. Where was the Negro mentioned? What was said about him?"¹⁶ Bontemps also mentions the stereotype of black docility during slavery. More accurate understandings of Africans in the New World would have to be gathered outside the classroom walls. Bontemps could not take the contents of his books at face value, even though he felt that white children could do so. For him, the history lesson would not end after the book was read and discussed, but instead, would have to become a process of active participation in the questioning and the correcting of historical narratives themselves. It was left to the young student to follow his conscience beyond the schoolyard to a more nuanced appreciation of black existence and to bring his black experience into the schoolyard with him as a complementary form of knowledge. Bontemps comprehended that as long as textbooks remained as they had been when he was a child, the promise of formal schooling would come at a potential price.

As a student, to measure the reaction of the white school boy to the history book, Bontemps had only to look around him at his classmates. Both in high school and in college, the overwhelming majority of them were white. The racial politics of his schooling were complicated not only by books but also by his being the one dark face in a sea of lighter skin, though it does not appear that Bontemps suffered any particularly virulent or violent form of racism at the hands of teachers or students.

The expectations of Arna's father, Paul Bontemps, may have caused as much anxiety as the actions of his peers or instructors. Arna recalled that "when he sent me away to a white boarding school during my high school years, after my mother had died," he cautioned, "Now don't go up there acting colored."¹⁷ When Paul Bontemps employed that phrase, he had in mind Joseph Ward, nicknamed "Buddy," who was the younger brother of Arna's maternal grandmother. Paul Bontemps "was horrified by Buddy's ca-

16. Arna Bontemps, "Freedom Is a Powerful Word" (speech delivered at Columbia University, 5 July 1948?), Arna Bontemps Papers, Department of Special Collections, Syracuse University Library, 3.

17. Arna Bontemps, "Why I Returned," *Harper's* 230 (April 1965): 179.

sual and frequent use of the word *nigger*.” As if this were not enough, “Buddy was still crazy about the minstrel shows and minstrel talk that had been the joy of his young manhood.” “He loved dialect stories, preacher stories, ghost stories, slave and master stories.”¹⁸ The elder Bontemps did not wish his son to draw undue attention to himself by behaving any differently than the white students or by claiming the sort of cultural legacy of which Buddy was so fond. In order for young Arna to take equal advantage of all the academy’s offerings, the father’s reasoning probably went, he must fit in. Apparently, Arna complied with his father’s wishes, but “[b]efore I finished college, I had begun to feel that in some large and important areas I was being miseducated, and that perhaps I should have rebelled.”¹⁹

More complex and accurate accounts of black history and culture were needed to counter such miseducation. For Arna to walk into the classroom “acting colored,” that is to say, asserting knowledge of and/or ownership of a neglected culture or history, would have been the only way for any type of complex blackness—be it in the form of “folk” culture, “high” culture, or history—to enter the academic program. Blackness did not saunter in with the textbooks, nor were the white students likely to be familiar with traditions of black history or culture. For better or for worse, an individual’s being black and/or performing blackness seemed to have the potential of being conflated with the study of collective black history and culture. Perhaps this is precisely what Paul Bontemps feared. To Arna, “acting colored” might have been a form of rebellion; to Paul, it was an assault upon the school’s willingness to treat Arna as it did white students.

Such a conflation—of the sort that would turn the black student into an object of study among white peers—was probably not what Arna Bontemps was advocating in criticizing his father. Rather, he believed that one could “act colored” and be educated all at once; the two were not mutually exclusive. Thinking back upon his father’s admonition, Bontemps demands,

18. Arna Bontemps, “Why I Returned,” *Harper’s* 230 (April 1965): 179.

19. *Ibid.*

How dare anyone, parent, schoolteacher, or merely literary critic, tell me not to act *colored*? White people have been enjoying the privilege of acting like Negroes for more than a hundred years. The minstrel show, their most popular form of entertainment in America for a whole generation, simply epitomized, while it exaggerated, this privilege. To-day nearly everyone who goes on a dance floor starts acting colored immediately, and this had been going on since the cakewalk was picked up from Negroes and became the rage. Why should I be ashamed of such influences?²⁰

Bontemps uses the statements about black performance in order to suggest that, contrary to what history books implied, African American history, in this case cultural history, did exist and that its existence was significant not only to blacks but to whites as well. Though one might not be able to study the history of the cakewalk in high school or in college, Bontemps clearly feels that such cultural forms are valid as objects of study and should certainly not be objects of shame. If one has not suffered mis-education, one will show no remorse for “acting colored”; to be educated *properly* is to appreciate the value of black history. Educated blacks should have license to “act colored” because colored people are actors and agents on the stage of American history. Rather than shame, there should be a proud rediscovery and continuation of their historical agency, as well as a recognition of the interdependence of black and white people. Bontemps’s fiction revels in the depiction of colored people “acting colored.”

The need to focus on black culture and historical agency probably presented itself no more urgently to the young Bontemps than when he arrived in Harlem from California in 1924 to teach school and to connect with the burgeoning black literati. Like many of his fellow New Negroes, Bontemps drew inspiration from the energy of the place. Located in the midst of this exciting environment was Harlem Academy, the Seventh-Day Adventist school where Bontemps taught while he lived in New York. With a faculty and student body composed of people of African descent, the Academy

20. Ibid.

was Bontemps's first sojourn in a secondary setting with a core of black students. He remained there until 1931.

This was Bontemps's situation while writing "The Chariot in the Cloud." One imagines that his job and lifestyle in Harlem, combined with his personal academic history, made him uniquely aware of the tensions in African American education. Ensclosed in an artistically inspirational milieu full of colored people acting colored, Bontemps found himself instructing black youth, many of whose parents might have given their children injunctions similar to what Paul Bontemps gave Arna upon sending him to boarding school. When he entered Harlem Academy each day, he must have seen in his pupils' dark faces a great potential coupled with a gaping vulnerability.

They were vulnerable, as he himself had been, to the impression that black history and culture, if they existed at all, were not worthy of serious consideration. Furthermore, they might have been led to believe (and there was probably a firm basis for the belief) that if they claimed their black heritage, schools would not serve them as well as they served those who attempted to ignore or subordinate racial issues. Perhaps his classroom of black high school students became for him a metaphor for the growth in African American secondary education that was occurring at the time. More and more black students were entering secondary schools, but this also meant that ever more were being sent to a site of possible psychological injury. These deep-seated contradictions were brewing within Arna Bontemps and are revealed in his fiction.

The central character of "The Chariot in the Cloud" is Alec Plum, a boy who grows into an educated young man during the course of the story. Much of it is set in and around Mudtown, a settlement of black people in the vicinity of Watts and Los Angeles, modeled after the area in which Bontemps himself was raised. Towards the end of "Chariot," Alec heads east to New England and Harlem in order to attend college and pursue a career as a violinist. Though Alec is the protagonist, the reader is not entirely limited to his point of view, and events in the lives of other characters are sometimes allowed to direct the movement of the narrative. Other

significant figures include Alec's grandmother Ma Pat, her brother Augie, and her neighbors Azilee and Beulah Clow.

"Chariot" contains a number of elements that correspond to Arna Bontemps's own biography. Mudtown and Harlem were locations in which Bontemps resided at approximately the same ages and for approximately the same reasons that Alec does. The character Augie is based on Uncle Buddy, and the character Johnson Plum, Alec's father, is based on Paul Bontemps. There are, however, noticeable differences. Alec is a musician, not a writer. He attends high school with black children, not white. Augie has no use for literacy, while Uncle Buddy could read, spell, and "quote the whole of Thomas Hood's 'The Vision of Eugene Aram'."²¹ One of the novel's primary themes is the role of educational institutions in the black child's "search for maturity," expressed mainly through Alec's experiences as a schoolboy in a community where a high level of formal education is not the norm.²² "The Chariot in the Cloud" is, at least in part, a novel about the alienation that formal schooling produces in the individual black subject, but it is also about the drive, which goes hand in hand with this alienation, to prove black people, their history, and their culture worthy of academic scrutiny.

Largely a product of his father's foresight, Alec's schooling makes him valuable to his grandmother Ma Pat. She "couldn't read her own name," and it is Alec who takes down her dictation of a letter to her brother Augie, summoning him in his old age because "Nobody can do for you like your own people and I'm all you got now."²³ Alec's literacy enables her to communicate with her brother. Ma Pat remunerates his services with her tears: "It was plain to see that she was immensely proud of it [the letter]. . . . her eyes filled with water and moistened the glasses so that she could

21. Ibid.

22. Kirkland C. Jones, *Renaissance Man from Louisiana: A Biography of Arna Wendell Bontemps* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992), 70.

23. Arna Bontemps, "The Chariot in the Cloud," 1929, p. 22, Arna Bontemps Papers, Department of Special Collections, Syracuse University Library. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically.

not see at all. She said, ‘Thas purty writin son, might purty’” (22–23). In actuality, Alec’s handwriting may not be terribly impressive. We are told, “Already, at that age, the figures had begun to incline reticently backwards. Yet they were distinct and honest” (21). Even so, his grandmother’s emotional appreciation for the practical function of her grandson’s writing impresses upon him the desirability of such a skill. Her reaction also represents the significance of Alec’s generation—a generation with more opportunities for the acquisition of literacy.

Alec’s learning comes with a price. As he continues his education, he becomes increasingly alienated from the place in which and the people around whom he was raised. By the time he reaches high school, he has grown more aware of the differences in education that distinguish him. His school is populated mainly with middle-class blacks who live in an upscale area unlike Mudtown. Behind the times, Mudtown stands for everything away from which Alec is gradually moving. Mudtown

was more than a place; it was a period and a condition. Negroes there were unadorned, simple and charming; miserable but satisfied. For these indeed were the old days; in every mouth there was laughter. Aged and decrepit men sat picturesquely on boxes in front of Blake’s tiny grocery store, men who remembered the ‘mancipation: the beginning of their race. There were songs in the little frail dwellings and over kitchen stoves. Lilacs grew at every doorstep and in every house there was a guitar. (78–79)

As “Chariot” progresses, the changing nature of Alec’s relationship to Mudtown and its people is made more explicit. When he graduates from high school, he plans to “make an immediate effort to get away” because unfortunately, “[h]is little high-school education was putting him painfully out of position with his own people” (140). He will translate the widening social chasm into geographical space.

Even with the intense longing to remove himself from Mudtown, he never fails to comprehend the inherent worth of its inhabitants. At one point, he watches a group of black foundry workers tending to the “belching and spitting furnaces” (140):

Their duties, he thought, were not unlike those of the virgins in his history book who kept fires for the gods. Nor were these fires less sacred. Here was a god, too, unknown to the black men, who required a service rigid and austere. . . . A heathen god who demanded the blood of men for oblations and who trod his enemies under iron feet. (141)

The virginally innocent workers perform their services because they have few, if any, other choices. For being trampled under the foot of a heartless industrial deity, they deserve to be the subject of myth. By elevating them such that they can stand alongside the contents of his schoolbooks, Alec pays a remarkable tribute to their labor. In a sense, he integrates the men into his personal curriculum. He has raised them to their proper heights, imagining that even those who are privileged enough to study books in a formal setting might learn from the struggles of black laborers poised before a fiery furnace.

Alec eventually recasts the mythical image in his mind's eye into a resolute commitment. He decides

to learn something about his race; it would be a fascinating subject for his study after he had been to college. Everywhere he had seen them merely taken for granted or willfully passed by, while in truth they were the most enigmatic of people: beautiful in certain attitudes, apt, sometimes inspired, they were on the other hand frequently repulsive to the sight and sadly wanting in many essential qualities. It was a question as to what might become of them, a question to which he would later in life give attention. For the present, here they were, increasing rapidly in number, supplanting the Mexicans and other foreigners in the mills and foundries. Their position and influence in American industry and art, their imprint on American life would be interesting indeed to determine. (141)

Again, we can identify the ambivalent character of Alec's perspectives on black people. Fleeting bouts with disgust unsettle his admiration. He is devoted to "his race" yet distanced from them. Alec can put off his questioning until "later in life," for he will not be in-

volved in their *becoming*. He does not have a sense of himself as an active participant in the processes of history that will define “their imprint on American life.” True to the form of the disinterested scholar, he will begin his analysis only after the imprint is made. The choice of the word “imprint” here seems deliberate and reflects the almost contradictory feeling of duty that rests next to Alec’s repulsion. The word connotes the printed texts about which and through which the educated person learns while being schooled. Alec will have to postpone scholarly investigation of his race until after college because he suspects the curriculum of higher education, no less than the heathen industrial god, will “take them for granted” or “wilfully pass them by.” It will be up to young intellectuals such as himself to make the race’s imprint known so that it might be studied and appreciated.

Is Alec’s position a mirror of Arna Bontemps’s? The case could be made, but more important is that Bontemps *uttered* Alec’s predicament, and in so doing, left an indication of his belief that the conflicted position of educated blacks was itself an alive and timely subject deserving of novelistic representation. The representation of Alec’s musings can be regarded as the representation of a theory about what formal education can do to black students—produce, or at least heighten, their distance from less-educated blacks, as well as stimulate the almost paradoxical impulse to honor them by studying them.

These passages articulate in fictional form the ambition of black intellectuals of Bontemps’s generation to write blackness into the academic record. In portraying Alec’s scholastic experiences, the novel also offers an explanation of the genesis of that ambition. To hearken back to my earlier comments, I have attempted in this presentation to celebrate Bontemps’s contribution to the African American cultural and historical tradition but also to suggest some of the social and material factors that led him to provide those contributions. Among the people most immersed in the educational world of his day, Bontemps shows us the way in which developments in specific social phenomena, such as school culture, defined a need for cultural and historical tradition. School culture is a crucial component in the effort to understand race and racial identity

as social and historical constructs, rather than as assumed, natural, and immutable phenomena.

I would hypothesize that the need for cultural and historical tradition did not exist, or at least was not expressed, in the same way at earlier moments in American and African American history. Of the South in the period 1860 to 1880, for example, James D. Anderson has written,

Black leaders did not view their adoption of the classical liberal curriculum or its philosophical foundations as mere imitation of white schooling. Indeed, they knew many whites who had no education at all. Rather, they saw this curriculum as providing access to the best intellectual traditions of their era and the best means to understanding their own historical development and sociological uniqueness. To be sure, a study of the classical liberal curriculum was not a study of the historical and cultural forces that enabled Afro-Americans to survive the most dehumanized aspects of enslavement. Yet that curriculum did not necessarily convince black students that they were inferior to white people. . . . For such educators as [Richard] Wright [who was professionally active during the post-Reconstruction era], the classical course was not so much the imposition of an alien white culture that would make blacks feel inferior as it was a means to understanding the development of the Western world and blacks' inherent rights to equality within that world.²⁴

The curriculum was a tool upon which to exercise critical judgment in analyzing one's situation and condition in society, regardless of whether it precisely reflected one's own background. Today, the school is often thought of as a place to endow students with a sense of identity based upon the presentation of a cultural heritage over which to claim ownership. That notion of the school's function, which many now take for granted, did not prevail in Wright's era. The idea itself has a history not to be taken for granted; it found expression in figures such as Arna Bontemps.

24. Anderson, 29–30.