History, Fiction, and the Ground Between: The Uses of the Documentary Mode in Black Literature

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I

It has become a critical commonplace to herald the rise of the "documentary" (or "nonfiction") novel as a literary phenomenon peculiar to the post-World War II period and to stress particularly the form's growing importance over the last ten or fifteen years. Two recent book-length studies of the documentary novel treat it as a new genre and associate its appearance with epistemological and existential conditions unique to the contemporary world. John Hollonwell, in Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel, argues that writers turned to various documentary modes in the sixties because "everyday 'reality' became more fantastic than the fictional visions of even our best novelists."1 Mas 'ud Zavarzadeh's The Mythopoetic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel rests on the contention that "the nonfiction novel is the genre created by our times of continual crisis and value disorder, for through its modal duality it offers a double vision of the bizarre actuality of contemporary reality, a vision not unlike the schizophrenic view of experience in our age. The writer who approaches facts not to invoke their facade of reality but to enact through his registration their inner turbulence becomes the mythographer of contemporary consciousness."2 These studies, which reject the pronouncements of the "death of the novel" voiced by a number of contemporary critics, undertake to show that In Cold Blood, The Armies of the Night, Slouching toward Bethlehem, and other works of this type signal a vital development in contemporary imaginative prose narrative.

As with most critical commonplaces, there may be a good deal of truth to this one. When Truman Capote declared in 1966 that his account of "a mass murder and its consequences" was a "new" kind of writing, the "nonfiction novel," he was making a significant claim; for In Cold Blood challenged in a fresh way the traditional generic categories of fiction and nonfiction and preceded many comparable works, from The Algiers Motel Incident to Roots and from Hel's Angels to All the President's Men. What is more, the nonfiction novel appears to have important philosophical links to the "metafiction" of Barth or Coover. Barth, in his well-known essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," speaks approvingly of "novels which imitate the form of the novel"—a type of discourse he finds particularly appropriate to our time because "when the characters in a work of fiction become readers or authors of the fiction they're in, we're reminded of the fictitious aspect of our own existence."3 While Barth and other "metafictionists" direct their creative energies toward the fashioning of narratives that are apocalyptic rather than documentary, a similar skepticism about ontological questions would seem to underlie their works and those of many contemporary nonfiction novelists.4 The absurd "historicity" of the Nixon confession in The Public Burning is perhaps closer to the scientific documentation of La Vida than it might first appear to be, since in both works factuality is invoked to provide a sense of reality not readily available to the author's synthesizing imagination.

Once such a generic and literary-historical statement has been formulated, however, it must immediately be qualified. Although in one sense the grouping of works represented by In Cold Blood is new, in another sense it merely marks the revival of the documentary tradition that was one of the important sources from which the novel originally grew. Many prose narratives of the Renaissance, while including elements that were patently imagined, nonetheless claimed to be "true histories" and eyewitness accounts.
Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller; or, The Life of Jack Wilton*, for example, despite all its distortions and anachronisms, dubs itself a "reasonable conveyance of historie," while the often fantastic accounts of a Madame d'Aulnoy or an Aphra Behn assume the status of actual travelogues and memoirs. The works of Daniel Defoe, ranging from the pseudofactual A Journal of the Plague Year to the realistically fictional Moll Flanders, can be seen as transitions between the final flowering of this journalistic tradition and the emergence of the novel as a genre in its own right. In short, the novel had many factual and pseudofactual forebears, and in those works the narrative illusion of historicity was exploited for a variety of formal and rhetorical ends. There is, of course, a crucial difference between such works and contemporary documentary novels insofar as the former laid claim to historicity largely because "moral disapproval was so deeply rooted in the puritan attitude of mind that the writers who wished to avoid its effects disguised their fiction under titles that indicated the presence of fact rather than fiction." Nonetheless, in terms of literary strategy if not in terms of epistemological assumptions, a marked family resemblance abides. From a temporally comprehensive generic and literary-historical standpoint, Capote's claim to have written the first nonfiction novel is actually somewhat tenuous.

What is more, American literature even before World War II contains an impressive array of works that defy the traditional categories of fiction and history. The extensive chapters on whaling in *Moby-Dick*, for example, aim at the informational functions of factual discourse as well as at the symbolic ends of fictive discourse. Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* comprises a complex admixture of truth and imagination, while Thoreau's *Walden*, in its pursuit of a broader philosophical truth, both alters, and adheres to, the true facts about the author's sojourn in the woods. In the twentieth century, works such as Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*, Upton Sinclair's *Boston*, and James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* use the techniques and materials of fiction to reveal a truth about American society that is essentially historical.

Such connections between contemporary American documentary novels and earlier models have been recognized before, and they warrant no further discussion here. One significant tradition, however, for the most part predates the contemporary nonfiction novel, but it has not yet been duly acknowledged as a legitimate forebear—namely, that body of literature which focuses on Afro-American experience. While many white writers in post–World War II America have indeed experienced marked difficulties in representing a historical world that encompasses, within recent memory, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the political assassinations of the 1960s, the Democratic National Convention of 1968, My Lai, Woodstock, and Attica, it could be argued that, for most black writers—and for a number of white writers who are particularly aware of American racism—"reality" in this country has always had a certain horrific quality. As Alfred Kazin observed, in reference to the autobiographical works of James Baldwin and Malcolm X, "if white middle-class writers who have always thought of literature as theirs are struggling to find a form and language for this "crisis of literature," so-called minority writers brought up on collective experiences of oppression . . . have always thought of themselves as creatures of history." This statement applies, I think, not only to autobiographers and memoirists but also to writers working in various fictional modes: the authors of *Imperium in Imperio*, *Jubilee*, and *Captain Blackman* do indeed project themselves as "creatures of history," and the violence and cruelty that these works portray point to the trying conditions that have given rise to an authorial consciousness so insistently grounded in the historical world.

One goal of this essay is, accordingly, to demonstrate the centrality of the documentary mode to a wide range of works of black literature. Although the specific manifestations of historicity vary with the writer and the times, the notion that many of the events depicted "did," as Carlyle put it, "in very deed occur" is crucial to the rhetorical and aesthetic effect of much black literature. To avoid confusion, let me note that the term "black literature" is used somewhat loosely in this essay. Most of the writers I treat are black, but there are a number of texts dealing with Afro-American experience that were written by whites. These works too are im-
important to my survey, and the term "black literature" will thus be employed to refer to a body of literature designated by subject matter rather than by authorship. This very ambiguity in the term "black literature," however, leads to a second and related goal of this essay—namely, to suggest the appropriateness of revising some common conceptions about American literary history. While many black writers have worked in genres originated and developed by white writers, others have pioneered in narrative strategy and have in fact anticipated and provided models for the efforts of subsequent white writers—especially those interested in projecting a "sense of the real." Thus black literature may be more reciprocally related to the mainstream of American literature than is often realized. The final goal of this essay is more strictly theoretical: to initiate a classification of various ways in which fact and fiction can be effectively combined in works of prose narrative. Although my essay advances an anatomy, rather than a full theory based on such an anatomy, this enterprise should have a more than technical significance, since such an anatomy can furnish a means of approaching the knotty generic differentiation between factual and fictive discourse—and thus of clarifying the various rhetorical resources that are available in mimetic and historical literary genres. It is also my hope that an examination of the strategies employed in a range of documentary works of black fiction that are patently borderline will highlight some of the criteria involved when we routinely adjudge any work to be mimetic.

The interests of this essay—hermeneutical, literary-historical, and theoretical—are mutually reinforcing, since interpretation of the meanings of texts, placement of those texts in a tradition of literary influence, and consideration of the structural principles that the texts embody should produce a multifaceted critical approach to a group of works. Indeed, as I indicate in my closing remarks about Confessions of Nat Turner and Roots, these three considerations are inextricably intertwined. The writer's personal vision of the world, the strategy chosen to articulate this vision, and the historical context of the moment of composition bear dialectical relations to one another; and synthesis or contradiction in one sphere is bound to reflect—or be reflected by—synthesis or contradiction in another.

II

Before we examine the range of combinations of fact and fiction in the Afro-American documentary novel, we should give due notice to the marked presence of nonfiction in black literature as a whole. After all, while it has often been argued that "poetry" (meaning fictive discourse in general, verse or prose) projects a reality superior to that of the everyday world, it has also been countered that the truths of poetry, if not precisely "lies"—as Plato charged—are in some sense less reliable than the propositions we encounter in nonfiction, which bears no problematic or ambiguous relation to the world of the reader. The difficulties involved in the defense of poetry are reflected in Sidney's An Apology for Poetry: he celebrates poetry for delivering a golden world, while the world of "nature" (concrete reality) is merely brazen; yet he defensively states that the poet, despite dedication to this ideal realm of gold, "nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth." The arguments for the truth-telling capacity of fiction need not be so convoluted as Sidney's—particularly in the twentieth century, when writer and reader alike are less liable to be beset with that puritan distrust of the imagination which Sidney sought to dispel. Nonetheless, a significant number of black writers who wished to explore the problems of slavery and post-Civil War racism have simply avoided the realm of mimesis altogether, preferring instead the more secure realm of historical discourse.

Part of this insistence on a strong factual presence in Afro-American literature is an inevitable reaction against the disbelief of a predominantly white audience, who have often doubted the authority of the black writers addressing them. As Darwin Turner has complained, until quite recently black writers have been hamstrung by the felt necessity to "restrict themselves to self-consciously validated re-creations of Black history" because they were writing for audiences "bemused, skeptical, and hostile... that seek nothing more from Black
plex—but also more rewarding, since we come
to appreciate not only the broad range of rhe-
torical approaches adopted by black writers but
also the many possible combinations of the fic-
tive and the real.

Defining the nature of mimesis is, of course, a
problem that has challenged and intrigued phi-
losophers and aestheticians from the time of
Plato. The battle waged among various theories
—ontological, epistemological, textual, and in-
tentionalist—to name a few—clearly cannot be
relicated here. For the purposes of this essay,
however, I shall propose a working hypothesis
about the nature of mimesis that can then be
tested against a range of works of black litera-
ture. In the broadest sense, all mimesis is, as
Erich Auerbach called it, the “representation
of reality.”11 In the actual practice of creating
narrative fictions, however, the mimetic act
takes one of two forms. On the one hand, some
novelists create texts through the rendering of an
imagined sequence of characters and events that
have potential analogues in the historical world.
Aristotle was speaking of this type of creative
process when he posited that “artists imitate
men involved in action.”12 The Russian for-
malists refined the Aristotelian conception of plot
when they postulated that the final form of a
narrative, or “plot,” consists of the rearrange-
ment and full rendering of those imagined raw
materials of chronological sequence that consti-
tute the “story.”13 For writers engaged in this
type of mimetic act, the object of imitation is, if
not precisely the “real world” itself, an imagina-
tive projection of people and events having pos-
sible correspondences in that world; “imitation”
is directly founded on reality. On the other hand,
there is a grouping of writers who base their
fictional texts not so much on the “real world”
as on the various forms of factual writing that
have reference to that world. Carlyle articulated
this view when he exclaimed, “consider the
whole class of Fictitious Narrative; from the
highest category of epic or dramatic Poetry, in
Shakespeare and Homer, down to the lowest of
froth Prose, in the Fashionable Novel. What are
these but so many mimic Biographies?” (Critical
and Miscellaneous Essays, iii, 100). Barbara
Herrnstein Smith, in her recent *On the Margins
of Discourse*, elaborates on this definition of
mimesis:

As a general class, literary artworks may be con-
cieved of as depictions or representations, rather
than instances, of natural discourse. . . . The various
genres of literary art—for example, dramatic poems,
tales, odes, lyrics—can to some extent be distin-
guished according to what type of discourse—for
example, dialogues, anecdotes of past events, public
speeches, and private declarations—they character-
istically represent. . . . Certain types of discourse
are themselves characteristically *textual inscriptions*
—for example, chronicles, journals, letters, biogra-
phies, and memoirs—and certain genres of litera-
ture, roughly what we refer to as “prose fictions,”
characteristically represent such varieties of in-
scribed discourse.14

For authors adopting this approach to artistic
imitation, the object of representation is only in-
directly the “real world”: more immediately, it
is a real or potential text based on that world.

This distinction between two definitions of
mimesis relates to my previous differentiation
between “nonfiction” and “apocalyptic” novels.
For there is an important difference between
works that utilize factuality to enhance our sense
of typicality and probability and those that em-
ploy documentation to stimulate awe, skepti-
cism, and even disbelief—and thus to imply
rather than directly to convey the ultimate truth
at the heart of the text. The “metafictional” and
the “documentary” visions may have attained
their fullest polarization in the distinction be-
tween a Coover and an Oscar Lewis, but the pull
toward one tendency or the other manifests itself
in earlier literature and provides an illuminating
angle of vision from which to view the use of the
documentary mode in black literature. For pur-
poses of analysis, then, we will group on the one
side those works that use documentation to en-
hance our sense of “truth” and on the other side
those that employ factuality to make us question
our assumptions about what is routinely ac-
cepted as “historical” or “true.” The former

grouping, which I discuss in this section, is
based on the theory that mimesis entails the imi-
tation of a potential sequence of character and
events occurring in the historical world; the let-
ter grouping, discussed in Section IV, is a step
removed from “reality,” drawing on a concep-
tion of mimesis as the imitation of a text mod-
eled on that world. Each category contains
within itself, of course, a wide range of formal possibilities, depending on the particular manner of representation in which the author opts to treat the chosen object of representation.

One strategy adopted by documentary novelists who fall into the first category has been the appending of a factual preface or postscript to a narrative that is patently fictional, with the clear intent of enhancing the reader's sense that the events and situations depicted in the fiction, while not specifically true, are certainly typical and representative of the historical environment under examination. Often, interestingly enough, these addenda have been undertaken in second editions of the works—a circumstance that would seem to imply that the authors felt a need to validate the historical claims of their texts. Thus Richard Wright attached the prefatory sketch "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" to the second edition of Uncle Tom's Children in order to anchor the gruesome events of the ensuing tales in the "real world" inhabited by the author himself: the murders of Bobo, Mann, Silas, Johnny-Boy, and An Sue gain crediblity with the reader's recognition that Wright himself barely escaped such a fate many times in his youth. Wright accomplishes a similar purpose in "How Bigger Was Born," the preface to the second edition of Native Son. Arguing that the character of Bigger Thomas is a wholly typical composite of many youths the author himself had known—even if Bigger's actions are atypical—Wright establishes a concretely sociohistorical context for his novel and accordingly buttresses the validity of his radical analysis of American society.

Howard Fast, in his Marxian re-creation of Reconstruction, Freedom Road, also appended a postscript that guarantees the essential historicity of his tale by attesting that his picture of post-Civil War multiracial unity is not a utopian fantasy but a faithful rendering of a widespread historical phenomenon that is verifiable in documents and records remaining from that period. For Wright and Fast, these prefaces and postscripts are more than incidental addenda to the texts; they authenticate the representative quality of the individuals and incidents portrayed and thus contribute crucially to the rhetorical effect of the works. History is here subordinated to fiction, but not separated from it, since the testaments of veracity increase the reader's sense of the probability of the writer's created world.

This resorting to factual statement in order to justify the world of fiction was, of course, hardly the exclusive province of Marxist writers in the thirties and forties. Albion Tourgée, faced with the barrage of criticism that greeted his portrait of Reconstruction in A Fool's Errand, included in subsequent editions an appendix, entitled "The Invisible Empire," in which he meticulously corroborated his historical claims with references to eyewitness accounts and senatorial investigations of the activities of the nascent Ku Klux Klan. Harriet Beecher Stowe had earlier responded similarly to the charges leveled against the essential truthfulness of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Collecting numerous documentary materials, which she published in 1853 as A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon Which the Story is Founded, she even went so far as to "discover" a source for her novel in the fugitive-slave narrative of Josiah Henson, although she encountered the narrative only after the novel was published—a circumstance that confused for decades the actual relationship between Stowe and Henson. In the first edition of Clotel; or, The President's Daughter, William Wells Brown, the first black American novelist, introduces a series of testimonial devices that validate the representative truthfulness of his melodramatic tale of brutality, seduction, and betrayal.

The appending of documentary evidence attesting to a text's historical accuracy was not, however, the only means by which these early novelists strengthened their claims to truth. Many abolitionist novelists enhanced their social critique by adopting the rhetorical structure characteristic of the slave narrative—namely, that episodic and rambling form in which the narrator, alternately a participant in, and spectator of, the social situation, piles up a series of vignettes that together constitute an indictment of slavery. The rather sprawling plot sequence of Uncle Tom's Cabin, for example, gains a certain effectiveness from its power to indict the slave system on many fronts, from the liberal household of the St. Clare's to the oppressive plantation of Simon Legree: what the novel loses along the axis of tightness of plot and character development it thus recovers—at
least in part—in the breadth of its social survey. Martin Delany's *Blake; or, The Huts of America*, which has been similarly criticized for the disjunctiveness of its story line, takes its hero on a tour of the Southern states as he plans a massive and widespread slave rebellion. While the novel clearly lacks careful shaping, it effectively uses Henry Blake as a vehicle for the author’s ideological ends; like the slave narratives on which it is based, the novel places greater importance on the completeness of its indictment of slavery than on the plausibility of its story line or the subtlety of its psychological portraiture. In the final, substantially revised edition of *Clotel; or, The Coloured Heroine*—which appeared more than a decade after the initial version—Brown eliminates most of his documentary testimonials and instead relies on the scene-by-scene progression of his narrator to convey his indictment of slavery. Clearly he had come to feel that replication of the scattered effect of the slave autobiography, rather than incorporation of eyewitness verification, was the more forceful strategy for achieving his rhetorical ends. There is even evidence to suggest that Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* may have been influenced by the narrative structure of these accounts composed by fugitive slaves. As one critic has recently revealed, there may be a seminal connection between the episode in which Huck scares off the slave hunters by claiming he has been exposed to smallpox and a similar episode in Pennington’s record of his own escape from slavery. The importance of this discovery lies, I would suggest, not only in the implication that Twain may have borrowed particular elements from slave narratives but also in the notion that the overall plot structure of *Huck Finn* may to some extent be influenced by the episodic rhetorical strategy of the slave narrative. Picaresque novels such as *Don Quixote*, after all, were not the only “road” stories on which Twain might have modeled his satiric revelation of a society that enslaves the innocent; the “road” from slavery to freedom was also described in a distinctly American genre of the nineteenth century with which Twain may well have been acquainted.

In the work of writers from William Wells Brown to Mark Twain, then, documentation has entered the fictional narrative in various ways in order to increase the reader’s sense that the situations described are typical rather than unique. In works such as *Clotel* or *A Fool’s Errand*, the object of representation, of course, remains an imagined set of individuals and occurrences, but the manner of representation draws heavily on corroborative or structural elements routinely associated with nonfictional texts and thus enhances the historical veracity of the novel. Still other writers who have been aware of the rhetorical potential of combining the truth value of history with the power of fiction have instead used “novelistic” devices to reenact an actual episode from black history. In *Hanover; or, The Persecution of the Lowly*, for example, Jack Thorne (David Bryant Fulton) dramatizes, and fleshes out, the Wilmington massacre of 1898. Prefacing his work with a synopsis of the historical events that led up to, and occurred during, this attack on the entire black population of a Southern city, the author proceeds to use a multiplicity of fictional techniques, including interior monologue, dialogue, and the shaping of a suspenseful story line, to re-create the motives and feelings of the various participants in the event. Arna Bontemps undertakes a similar enterprise in his *Black Thunder*, an imaginative reenactment of the attack on the Richmond arsenal led by Gabriel in 1800. While adhering closely to the known facts about the rebellion, Bontemps takes the liberties traditionally associated with the novelist in his attribution of motives and internal conflicts to such shadowy historical personages as Gabriel himself; Jubal, a female leader of the rebellion; and M. Creuzot, a white member of the Rights of Man movement.

In order to clarify the outlines of this developing critical anatomy, two provisos should be inserted here. First, narratives such as *Hanover* or *Black Thunder* are not wholly separable from the first grouping, since Thorne and Bontemps, like Wright and Stowe, employ corroborative materials that vouch for the truth of the text. The difference is that works like *Native Son* or *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* propose themselves to the reader as fictional versions of a typical historical situation, whereas the works of Thorne or Bontemps undertake a re-creation of the past that makes a claim to historical truth that is not merely representative or typical but more specifically factual. Second, the documentary particu-
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lers in the works of Thorne and Bontemps project a more immediate sense of historicity than do those analogous factual details that supply the backdrop in traditional historical novels such as *War and Peace* and *Romola*. For Tolstoy may re-create the consciousness of a Kutuzov, or George Eliot that of a Savonarola, without giving the reader the impression that the author is adhering strictly to known history, since the primary goal of *War and Peace* or *Romola* is to reconstruct the crosscurrents of a historical epoch through the lives of “typical” imagined people. As Georg Lukács has proposed in his study of the classic historical novel, such “world-historical” figures as Kutuzov or Savonarola remain on the sidelines of the novelistic action, since

the being of the age can only appear as a broad and many-sided picture if the everyday life of the people, the joys and sorrows, crises and confusions of average human beings are portrayed... There occur great historical collisions in which, while the “world-historical individuals” are conscious bearers of historical progress (or of the “spirit” according to Hegel), they are so only in the sense of granting consciousness and clear direction to a movement already present in society.¹⁷

In the traditional historical novel, historical depth is attained by means of fictional typicality, not factual particularity; indeed, as Herbert Butterfield has argued, “sometimes a wrench has to be given to history in order to subdue it to the demands of the novel.”¹⁸ Thorne and Bontemps are doing something quite different: “world-historical” events and individuals are not peripheral but central to the created world, and the truth of these novels thus hinges in a special way on historical corroboration. To borrow the useful terms of Warner Berthoff, the criterion of validity for Tolstoy and Eliot is “veracity”; that for Thorne and Bontemps is “verification.”¹⁹ *Black Thunder* thus bears a closer formal resemblance to *The Armies of the Night* than to *War and Peace*—similar as Bontemps’ enterprise may be to Tolstoy’s in many of its assumptions about history. For both Mailer and Bontemps place historical actors in the foreground of their works; no other strategy for conveying historicity, it seems, will do.

The documentary mode has been used not only in novels that explore the public aspects of Afro-American historical experience but also in those that explore the private—though here, admittedly, the line between the factual and the fictive becomes a very fine one indeed, since the biographical and historical criteria for verifiability are not available to the average reader. Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*, for example, is based on the life of the author’s own great-grandmother and adheres as closely as possible to the “facts” of that life as they were orally relayed to the author, when she was a child, by her grandmother, the daughter of her protagonist. Nonetheless, these materials are fully “novelized”: Vyrly emerges as a rounded imaginative creation, and her life is endowed with the shaped plot and symbolic significance we commonly associate with a fictional being. There is only an occasional narrative element that reveals the novel’s genesis in fact, such as the somehow anomalous incident in which young Jim gets his head caught inside a pot—an episode that has no bearing on any thematic, narrative, or psychological pattern in the novel and that apparently has value only as an anecdote that Walker’s grandmother remembered about her brother. Walker’s essay “How I Wrote *Jubilee*” is full of information about her methods of researching the novel and about her reliance on the oral tradition. Significantly, however, she has published this piece separately: *Jubilee* is intended to stand on its own as a fictional interpretation of Afro-American history.

What unites all these treatments of fact in fiction, from Wright to Bontemps to Walker, is a common directing of documentary detail toward the ends of historical truth. To be sure, these works vary in the degree of historicity that they aspire to project: they constitute a spectrum in which Bontemps occupies the pole of public history, Walker that of private history, with writers from Wright to Brown ranged in between. This grouping of works is qualitatively characterized, however, by a shared conception of mimesis that clearly entails the imitation of a story that is modeled on “real life” and in which, accordingly, the function of documentary detail is to enhance the reader’s sense of the probability—times indeed the actual historicity—of the scenes and events being described. The object of imitation here is the historical world; the artist’s creation of raw material in the form of imag-
in characters and events is merely a midway point in the process of converting “reality” to full-fledged “representation.”

IV

The documentary mode has thus been employed in Afro-American literature in a variety of ways to convey different varieties of truth—whether private or public, generally representative or historically specific. As has often been pointed out, however, the ontological status of “poetry,” or fictive discourse, is problematic. One possible term to oppose against “fact” is “fiction”; another is “falsehood.” The documentary mode has also been used in black literature for the purpose of feigning—of deliberately tantalizing the reader’s intuition of probability or knowledge of history with assurances that an implausible (if not indeed patently false) event or series of events is true. The goal of this strategy is not, of course, to lie but to challenge the standard versions of truth that are conveyed through textbooks or, more recently, through the mass media. In order to ensure this sense of skepticism about established versions of the “truth,” the artist adopts a different approach: he or she generally fashions a fictive text that calls to mind not so much “reality” itself as a factual text that could have been written—but, interestingly enough, was not written—about that “reality.”

Some authors have attached guarantees of historicity to accounts of Afro-American experience that obviously depart from known—or even probable—historical fact and that enter the sphere of myth. Aphra Behn’s Oronoko; or, The Royal Slave, which may be the first fictional text in the Western tradition that is about slavery,prefaces its fabulous account of heroic deeds and noble suffering with the narrator’s assurance that

I do not pretend, in giving you the History of this ROYAL SLAVE, to entertain my Reader with the Adventures of a feign’d Hero, whose Life and Fortunes Fancy may manage at the Poet’s Pleasure; nor in relating the Truth, design to adorn it with any Accidents, but such as arrived in earnest to him... there being enough of Reality to support it, and to render it diverting, without the Addition of Inven-

tion... I was myself an Eye-Witness to a great Part of what you will find here set down...²⁰

Like the prefatory materials attached to Gulliver’s Travels, another imitation of a travel memoir, these assurances of factuality attempt to cajole the reader into a historical frame of mind; and while our full credence is by no means secured, our curiosity about the factual importance of the ensuing tale is whetted and our attention is compelled. Sutton Griggs employs a similar strategy in his Imperium in Imperio, a prophetic novel about racial warfare. The narrative is prefaced and concluded by a participant’s confession of his role in the imperium, and Griggs’s foreword assures the reader that

having perfect faith in the truthfulness of his [Trout’s] narrative I have not hesitated to fulfill his dying request by editing his ms., and giving it to the public. There are other documents in my possession tending to confirm the assertions made in his narrative. These documents were given me by Mr. Trout, so that, in case an attempt is made to pronounce him a liar, I might defend his name by coming forward with undisputable proofs of every important statement.²¹

Like Behn, Griggs does not expect the reader to believe this testament as fact; but, by suggesting the format of the rogue’s confession, he does succeed in bringing his tale temporarily into alignment with criteria for historical evaluation and thus in elevating his melodramatic account to the status of legend, if not of strict history. In works such as Oronoko and Imperium in Imperio, the documentary mode functions to validate—or at least to propose—a bold refashioning of history that carries crucial implications for the reader’s complacent notions about the conditions and terms of historical truth in his or her world.

This use of the documentary approach is fairly crude in the hands of Behn or Griggs. But recent years have witnessed a highly creative treatment of this approach by such writers as Ishmael Reed, E. L. Doctorow, and John A. Williams. In Mumbo-Jumbo, Reed assumes the role of cultural historian and boldly reshapes the reader’s entire notion of twentieth-century American history with his assertion that Haitian
folk rituals are at the heart of the major strands of modern American popular culture—a movement that he terms "Jes Grew," an ironic echo of Stowe's rather condescending assessment, through Topsy, of the black folk tradition. Inter- splicing his narrative with such corrobative materials as newspaper clippings about his char- acters' exploits and photographs from Mark Sullivan's Our Times, Reed boldly replicates a kind of historical chronicle and challenges our fixed conceptions of the "facts" of history by demonstrating that the materials that can be used to validate one version of history can be creatively rearranged to "prove" another. History is, Reed implies, what we choose to make of it: the politics and prejudices of the writer, rather than any meaning inherent in the "facts" themselves, mold the interpretations that we commonly accept as truth. A similar intent underlies Reed's recent Flight to Canada, although here the author lays less stress on the creation of a new mythos of interpretation and instead emphasizes his satiric critique of great figures from the American past, such as Lee, Lincoln, and Poe. E. L. Doctorow evinces an analogous attitude toward history in Ragtime, a novel wittily imitative of Heinrich Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas. In Doctorow's retelling of this tale, known facts about historical personages, created facts about them, and the fantastic tale of the proud and rebellious Coslhouse Walker are combined in a potpourri that forces the reader to abandon the attempt to distinguish with any cer- tainty between the fictive and the real. The documentary mode functions here, as in Reed's work, to question our notions about who creates history and thus to challenge the ethnocentric biases that underlie many accepted versions of the American past. 22 In Captain Blackman, John A. Williams employs a similar strategy. Using a protagonist who participates in all the significant wars in American history from 1776 to the Vietnam conflict to some nameless colonial war in the future—a device somewhat reminiscent of Woolf's method of historical commentary in Orlando—the author approaches the reader on two levels. He takes us on a tour of United States military history and, through extensive quotation from congressional reports and other historical documents, exposes the vital —if unacknowledged—role played by black troops in key historical battles. At the same time, Williams moves from the historical to the mythic and grimly prophesies a massive retaliation of blacks on the entire white population of the United States. The method may indeed be "fraudulent," but the goal is to point, if only by distortion, to a truth beyond the ken of our standard history texts. In works such as these, it is no accident that the conclusions partake of a note of apocalypse: the violence that these writers see latent beneath the surface of American life is allowed to erupt in the realm of imagina- tion, and the inclusion of "historical" particulars heightens the reader's intuition that the implaus- ible is not wholly impossible. There is a related type of work in the Afro- American literary tradition that, while employing a similar admixture of fact and fiction, creates an effect that might more accurately be termed "antidocumentary"—namely, the roman à clef. In Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, for example, the reader instantly recognizes a series of veiled replications of actual persons and happenings from history: the college is clearly Tuskegee Institute, the founder closely resembles Booker T. Washington, Ras the Exhorter is based on Marcus Garvey, and the Brotherhood is obviously the Communist Party. By deliberately withholding explicit identifications, however, El- lison aspires to make his narrative both a symbolic version of specifically Afro-American experience and a comment on the common experience of existential man. John A. Williams accomplishes an analogous purpose in The Man Who Cried I Am. By projecting such historical figures as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright in the guise of fictional characters, the author bases his critique of American racism in a verifiable historical reality but also lends a chilling credence to his hero's fabulous discovery of an inter- imperialist plot to exterminate all people of color from the face of the earth (the reverse apocalypse of that in Captain Blackman). Like the mythic treatments of history that they closely resemble, these antidocumentary works produce a challenge to our historical and philosophical complacency. Because they adhere so closely to known historical particulars, however, these ro-
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Miss Jane Pittman is not based on such narratives in the way Jubilee is based on the life history of Walker's ancestor, since Miss Jane Pittman replicates not only the content but also the form of an oral transcription. Like Defoe's A Journal of the Plague Year, it is not so much a fictitious account as a pseudo factual one: its goal is to disrupt stereotypic attitudes toward old people in the South and to convince the reader that the historical personage Miss Jane Pittman did actually exist and triumph over almost insurmountable obstacles of racial prejudice. In The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman and Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, the reliance on an autobiographical model is central rather than peripheral: where Stowe and Delany incorporated a structural element of the first-person slave narrative into the manner of representation of Uncle Tom's Cabin and Blake, in the novels of Johnson and Gaines the presumed autobiographical intertext is the object of imitation.

William Demby's The Catacombs represents another play on feigning in recent Afro-American fiction—though its flirtation with pseudo-factuality ultimately attaches it more to the nouveau roman than to the nonfiction novel. Placing himself, William Demby, at center stage as a fictional character, the author spins a tale about marital infidelity in the form of a simulated diary. "This is a day in March," the novel begins. "Here in Rome it is nine o'clock." Because of the extreme novelistic self-consciousness emerging from its reflexive form, however, The Catacombs takes shape less as a pseudofactual document, like Miss Jane Pittman, than as an imitation of a first-person novel written in diaristic form. It is an imitation of an imitation—a phrase that calls to mind John Barth's description of the prototypical modern fiction. In The Catacombs the documentary mode becomes so convoluted that the artist's status as "maker" comes supremely to the fore; the question of historicity or fraudulence becomes virtually irrelevant, since the object of imitation is clearly a potential text rather than a potential sequence of events in the world, and the endless mirrors of narrative reflexivity are more central to the author's design than are any persons or occurrences that might be reflected in those mirrors.
The Uses of the Documentary Mode in Black Literature

The philosophical distance between Mumbo-Jumbo and The Catacombs is considerable, for the documentary mode that produces a powerful antiracist reshaping of the nation's past in Mumbo-Jumbo simply suggests a postmodernist artistic self-consciousness in The Catacombs. This divergence points up the broad range of purposes for which the documentary mode can be used in works that feign rather than project reality. What binds all these works together—from Oroono to Mumbo-Jumbo to The Man Who Cried I Am—is more a shared conception of mimesis than a common philosophical outlook. For mimesis here involves not the imitation of reality but instead the projection of an untrue reality that is nonetheless treated as if it were true. These texts thus all partake, to one degree or another, of a deliberately mannered quality; for what they imitate is most often not so much reality itself—in either a representative or historical sense—as a hypothetical document that might be based on that reality. The hypothetical texts on which these works are modeled vary, of course: Miss Jane Pittman simulates the form of an oral transcript, Imperium in Imperio presents itself as a criminal confession, and Mumbo-Jumbo imitates a chronicle. But what narrative feigning commonly conveys is a sense of being two steps removed from the object of imitation in the real world. And while some of these texts, such as The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, use the pseudoactual mode to tantalize the reader's curiosity about the narrative's possible historicity, most project a metafictional or even apocalyptic vision of historical process. They insistently remind us that the text being imitated was not written, because the realities of American society have prevented it from being written. Because of the seriousness of their underlying social and historical themes, these pseudodocumentaries in the tradition of black literature do not have the openly parodic and mirthful quality of a novel like Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor. But they do exhibit a similar conception of what a novel is: Barth's description of the self-conscious mimetic process in the contemporary novel applies to a number of contemporary works of black literature and, more importantly, to a significant body of earlier narratives in the Afro-American tradition. Clearly much black literature has not required a post-holocaust "fictual" reality in order to project an apocalyptic vision of the world.

V

It may seem that this anatomy of possible uses of the documentary mode in black literature has a critical relevance that is primarily technical: since all works of fiction aim at a kind of truth, what is the importance of describing the particular strategy by which that truth is conveyed? The matter is not so simple, however, as it seems. A relation obviously exists between the artist's philosophical outlook and the narrative vehicle chosen to articulate this outlook; an apparent inappropriateness of the vehicle reflects either poor artistic choice or, more serious, an unresolved contradiction in the ideas themselves that cannot be satisfactorily encompassed by any single narrative strategy. An author who wishes to convey a vision of the world that corresponds to the reader's sense of what is typically or historically true will encounter serious problems in employing the type of mimesis that suggests feigning rather than veracity. Conversely, an author who wishes to provoke our skepticism about what we ordinarily consider to be historical or true would do well to avoid a version of mimesis that relies on our accepted notions of probability or historicity. Certain rhetorical vehicles would seem suitable for certain rhetorical ends, and others not. Indeed, in works that intentionally play on our knowledge—or illusions—about what is true, the adoption of an inappropriate rhetorical vehicle produces more than purely formal problems; it can also leave the author open to charges of ideological confusion and even personal dishonesty.

This problem is ably illustrated by two works that have been the cause of considerable critical dispute—William Styron's Confessions of Nat Turner and Alex Haley's Roots: The Saga of an American Family. Much of the furor that greeted the publication of Styron's novel in 1967—recorded in John Henrick Clarke's William Styron's Confessions of Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond—can be traced to the conflicting claims to historical truth that Styron is making in his "meditation upon history." On the one hand, the richly imaginative texture of Styron's
novel suggests that he is writing a narrative similar to *The Man Who Cried I Am*, in which the "facts" of a public historical life are merely used as a narrative framework, which is then fleshed out and altered by the boldly ranging speculations of the novelist. On the other hand, Styron lays claim to a privileged historicity by his decision to frame the novel with excerpts from the actual "confession" of the historical Nat Turner. His fictionalizing thus proposes itself not as a mythic extrapolation from known events—as in Reed or Williams—but as the legitimate embellishing of a truth that can be essentially verified by documentary evidence, as Bontemps undertook to do in *Black Thunder*. Yet Styron would seem to have ignored or deliberately misrepresented certain important information about Nat—such as his having been married to a slave woman—and instead to have relied on a "confession" extracted by an antagonistic amanuensis under conditions of: extreme duress. Styron's portrait of Nat as homosexually inclined, obsessed with white women, and tragically over-educated thus appears to be based on personal conjecture rather than on public documentation. And those critics who charge Styron with distortion of the "facts" have considerable justice on their side, for Styron incorporates a claim to historical accuracy into the generic foundation of his work. The racism and dishonesty that *Ten Black Writers Respond* charges are thus manifested in formal as well as ideological discords in the text: the ambiguous generic premise of *Confessions of Nat Turner* reflects the author's desire to enjoy simultaneously the benefits of legendary reshaping and those of documentary veracity.

Although the tone and the issues of the controversy are quite different, a similar dynamic underlies the more recent debate over Alex Haley's *Roots*. Again, the question of historical accuracy is raised. Much of the impact of Haley's narrative derives from the validity of the "African link" established by oral historians on both sides of the Atlantic; yet the legitimacy of some of Haley's sources—in particular of the *griot* in Juffure who confirmed the story of the eighteenth-century kidnapping of Kunta Kinte—has been sharply called into question. As with *Confessions of Nat Turner*, this objection to the book's historicity carries considerable weight:

for while Haley routinely evades detailed queries into his methodology by the assertion that his narrative aspires to be "fiction," not history, the fact remains that a good deal of the power of *Roots* rests on the emergence of autobiographical statement from what appears to be fictional speculation. "The baby boy, six weeks old," Haley remarks near the end of his tale, referring to the most recent descendant of Kinte, "was me." Like *Confessions of Nat Turner, Roots* claims a mixed generic premise; the opening and middle sections present a patently fictionalized exploration of Afro-American experience, along the lines of *Jubilee*, but the conclusion anchors the text in the realm of historical verification, in the mode of *Black Boy*. And, like Styron, Haley has a certain ideological interest in securing for his text the benefits of fictional extrapolation and historical corroboration, since he wishes to chastise the nation for the racial chauvinism of the past and yet to assure his readers that his own success story bears testament to the vitality of the nation's democratic ideals in the present—two goals that may not be logically contradictory but that can be seen as bearing a problematic political relation to each other. Although the ideological discords of *Roots* are hardly commensurate with those of *Confessions of Nat Turner*, both Styron and Haley can with some justice be accused of confusing personal myth with historical reality. And this ideological sleight of hand is reflected in each work's conflicting generic claim to retell history from the author's chosen perspective and at the same time to secure for this perspective the validity of historical truth. One person's history may indeed be another person's fiction, but it would seem that any person's fiction and history can be treated as a unified discourse only at considerable risk.

VI

*Confessions of Nat Turner* and *Roots* are significant for a number of reasons. To begin with, what appears to be a debate over literary value masks a political debate about race relations in the contemporary United States that extends far beyond the literary domain. Darwin Turner's rather sanguine prophecy that writers dealing with Afro-American experience no longer need
feel bound to justify their historical veracity is thus somewhat premature: the documentary mode continues to be central to black literature. In addition, an implication about the mutual interdependence of ideology and form emerges from this examination of Styron and Haley. It may not be true that all works containing contradictory philosophical premises necessarily reflect a discordance in the formal pattern of the text; but it would seem that problematic ideological perspectives certainly contribute to the literary difficulties facing the author. Finally, on a theoretical level, the examples of these works suggest the importance of generic consistency to the writing and reading of literature, as well as the potential utility of distinguishing qualitatively between modes of fiction on the basis of the different definitions of mimesis that they implicitly project.

In summary, I suggest that black literature offers a broad and diverse range of materials for examining mimesis in its different modes. Because much black literature has from the outset been challenged in its veracity, its practitioners have resorted to a diverse set of techniques for conveying their visions of historical reality and potentiality. Many writers in this tradition have effectively grounded their works in autobiographical and historical modes. Other writers wishing to project a vision of “truth” have experimented with various manners of representation designed to enhance verisimilitude while retaining the imaginative benefits associated with mimesis. Works as different as Freedom Road, Blake, and Jubilee illustrate the possible range of approaches falling under this rubric of mimesis. Writers concerned with arousing skepticism about accepted versions of the American past, by contrast, have opted for a type of mimesis in which the object of imitation is itself patently an invention. The manner of representation varies here according to the type of text that is being imitated: the vastly divergent effects of Ragtime, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, and Mumbo-Jumbo reveal the multiple possibilities available to practitioners of this mode of fictional representation. Although at first glance it may be difficult to distinguish the “what” from the “how” in any given act of fictional representation, close scrutiny of the text usually yields clear distinctions and provides some important insights into the formal and philosophical goals of the author. Indeed, this anatomy of the uses of the documentary mode in black literature may be of value to the study of other groupings of texts, insofar as it suggests that our analysis of mimesis in literature may at times be sidetracked by a mistaken apprehension of the type of representational act that is taking place or by a confusion of the object with the manner of representation. An examination of the uses of the documentary mode in black literature thus clarifies the position of black literature in American literary history and illuminates broader issues of interest to criticism. The lack of attention paid to Afro-American literature by many scholars not only has obscured the proper literary-historical significance of an important literary tradition but also has deprived literary study of a stimulating testing ground for some of its most crucial theoretical questions.

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Notes

8 Thomas Carlyle, Critical and Miscellaneous Essays (Boston: James Munroe, 1839), 110, 108.
9 Sidney, An Apology for Poetry; or, The Defense of
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14 Smith, On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 8. It should be clear from the above discussion that my two definitions of mimesis are distinctly qualitative; that is, they implicitly reject the notion that fictive and factual discourse can be aligned along a spectrum and adjudged by criteria of degree rather than of kind. For an articulate version of the spectrum theory, see Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966).


26 Interestingly enough, Bontempes, when seeking a focus for his novel about slave rebellion, rejected Nat's confession on the grounds that he "felt uneasy about the amanuensis to whom his [Nat's] account was related and the conditions under which he confessed" (Preface to Black Thunder [1936; rpt. Boston: Beacon, 1968], p. xii).

27 Mark Ottaway, "Tangled Roots," London Times, 10 April 1977, pp. 17, 21. Unfortunately, Ottaway's attack on Haley's methodology has been taken in some quarters as general proof of the unreliability of African and Afro-American oral traditions.

28 "Interview: Alex Haley," Playboy, Jan. 1977, p. 79.