

## Desegregating the 1950s: The Case of Frank London Brown

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Because the 1950s has such compelling meanings for me, I am a product of both the Cold War and the Civil Rights movement, I have been researching and writing about this decade for many years. As a child in Catholic schools in the 1950s, I learned terms like "the iron curtain" and "godless Communism" right along with "guardian angels," and the "near occasions of sin." In 1954, like good little national subjects, we were outfitted with dog tags with a "C" in the bottom right corner to indicate our religious affiliation, that being more important in those days than blood type. We had special prayer days to ward off a Soviet attack on the United States. Joseph McCarthy, the Catholic senator from Wisconsin, was one of the good guys. Social justice meant bringing money from home to "ransom pagan babies" in India and China. In Cleveland, Ohio, where I grew up, there was, ostensibly, no segregation, but there were no black teachers in the public or Catholic schools I attended, no black priests or nuns, no blacks in downtown businesses (including the Bishop's office), except as cooks and janitors, but no one admitted to this de facto segregation. That Negroes existed on the margins of America seemed to be a natural fact of life. Though young black people were dancing to do-wop music and rock & roll and improvising some of the most aesthetically beautiful choreography, appropriated by whites on television, there was almost no recognition of black culture. Instead of celebrating black "gures like Du Bois and Robeson and Langston

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Hughes, we grew up thinking there was something vaguely dangerous about them, something that could not even be spoken aloud. When the Civil Rights movement began in the 1950s, we blacks followed that movement from Montgomery to Little Rock, and, watching ourselves for the first time on the nightly news, for us and the country, everything changed.

Given my personal history as one of the repressed subjects of the 1950s but also one changed by black political struggle, I have long been interested in re-reading the 1950s through the marginalized and neglected texts of that period which I believe counter the notion of the 1950s as simply a period of containment (Nadel, Whitfield, Schaub). In interviewing people who were on the left during the 1950s, I have been struck by how politically active black writers were in a period that is commonly characterized as one of repression and containment. Several months ago when I interviewed Esther Jackson, the former editor of the left-wing journal *Freedomways*, she completely rejected the idea that this was a dormant period for black political activity:

This is the period in which Du Bois was traveling in the South speaking to radical groups. Robeson was also working and speaking in the South. The organizing of the trade unions was taking place. Louis Burnham started the Harlem Writers Guild. Robeson began to publish *Freedom*, where Alice Childress, Hansberry, and Ollie Harrington had their first work published.<sup>1</sup> The Harlem Writers' Guild was the center of rich cultural exchange. Killens read sections of *Youngblood* there. The artist Charles White was involved. (Interview, New York City, 1998)

To this list I would add Lloyd Brown, whose 1951 novel *Iron City* was published by the Communist journal *Masses and Mainstream*; Lorraine Hansberry who published her early writing in Paul Robeson's journal *Freedom*, was active in the Party and had begun to write for the lesbian publication *The Ladder* before her death; Frank London Brown, a union organizer, writer, and civil rights activist; Paule Marshall and Alice Childress who were both involved in the militant Association of Artists for Freedom. It was Childress's long-term involvement with the American Negro Theater in the 1940s and 50s that enabled her to write plays of resistance because the ANT directors commissioned her to write plays specifically to counter the stereotyped roles written for black actors.

Ordinary blacks were also situated on the left. In his critical study of blacks and the Cold War, Gerald Horne claims that African Americans

more often than whites were the targets of McCarthyism, and that despite the dangers, blacks, both prominent and non-prominent, more often than whites, showed support for left causes (Horne xi). Because black civil rights activity was invariably labeled communist, blacks were enlisted almost inescapably in the fight against anticommunism, and Horne says that the civil rights work of the African American community of the 1950s and 1960s, must be given “substantial credit for helping to put HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) out of business” (202). Anne Braden, radical activist and writer, goes even further than Horne, declaring that “it was the new Black liberation movement—arising in Montgomery . . . that broke the pall of the 1950s. . . . The beginning of the end of HUAC came . . . when it was foolish enough to go South in 1958 and attack people active in the civil rights movement” (252).

That most of us are unaware of the extent of the cultural and political work of blacks in the 1950s is to be expected. The broad range of black political and cultural activity driven by the surging spirit of de-segregation was hardly noted by mainstream journals of the day. Even left-liberal journals like *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*, assuming that there was nothing in black intellectual and political life worth covering, never introduced its supposedly progressive white audience to black literary and cultural expression and never, throughout the entire decade of the 1950s, dealt with race (Teres 210). Despite the intense political and cultural work of blacks during this period, most literary critics and historians, even now, return to the 1950s and re-segregate that period by focusing exclusively on the cold war, excluding race issues and the civil rights movement; or they theorize about black writing of that period through the traditionally canonized texts by Baldwin and Ellison neither of whom was close to the more politicized elements in the black literary world. What I want to do in this essay is to create a dialogue among three of the “repressed” texts of the 1950s that were involved in powerful ways in the postwar battles over universality, difference, and democracy: the 1959 Black Writers’ Conference in New York City; Lorraine Hansberry’s speech at that conference; and the 1959 novel *Trumbull Park* by Frank London Brown, each of which signals resistance to the conservative, assimilationist ideas of the 1950s. In trying to bring to attention writers and texts which are seldom mentioned when critics re-read the 1950s, about whom there is little scholarship, I hope to get beyond the paradigms that position blacks as marginal to US culture and also to con-

tribute to the on-going project of trying to reconstitute an African American literary and cultural left, one that was alive and well in the 1950s (Wald 1995).

I begin with the first Conference of Negro Writers in America held in March 1959 at the Hudson Hotel in New York City and sponsored by the newly formed American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) because the entire black political spectrum, from right-wing to far-left, was represented at this lavishly funded event and because both Frank London Brown and Lorraine Hansberry were present and spoke but were not acknowledged in the written account of that conference. Among the conservatives present were Arthur P. Davis and Saunders Redding, both arguing for an integrationist politics that demand a raceless literature (at least without the black race), and the end of the protest tradition. Reflecting the irresolvability of that project, Davis summarized the conservative position, saying he was looking for a new type of black writing which he called racial fiction without “the problem” (AMSAC 40). Though it requires some detective work to find them, the voices of the left were actually present and actively involved at this conference.

Langston Hughes was there among the invited guests, speaking in such double-voiced irony it is difficult to know whether he was on the right or the left, surely the result of his shakedown by McCarthy and HUAC. His bitterly sarcastic comment that “to be highly successful in a white world . . . you really should be white” or try to develop “eyes white enough to look at Negroes clearly” left little doubt about his anger over white writers who had “taken my blues and gone” (AMSAC 42–43). More radical and resistant positions—and these seem to be the dominant views at the conference—were expressed by theater critic Lofton Mitchell and writers Sam Allen, Sarah Wright, and John O. Killens; but when the proceedings were edited by AMSAC’s executive director John Davis and published in 1960 in a slim little volume called *The American Negro Writer and His Roots*, much of what might have proved controversial was suppressed. As editor, Davis omitted the powerfully militant speeches of Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Childress. The photographs he included construct a congenial, middle-class gathering, with the participants smiling benignly, even Childress who delivered the most withering critique of white racism. Completely ignoring the multi-voiced debate over protest writing, Davis declared in his preface that since America is now committed to integration, the problem of black writers having to write for a non-Negro audience was in the process of “being

resolved.” His preface is a perfect cold war document, containing and obscuring much of the vibrant, sometimes contentious, debate at the conference over issues of integration, protest art, and white control of the publishing industry.

Far from any such resolution, the most progressive voices at the conference raised issues of black representation that continue to be debated in the 1990s. (Consider, for example, issues like a white-dominated publishing industry; whiteness coded as normative, blackness as other.) Loften Mitchell’s panel, which included John Henrik Clark and Alice Childress, concluded that “the Negro writer, contrary to some of the condescending attitudes toward protest writing, should protest more than he has.” This panel refused to even use the term *integration*, substituting instead the more accurate term *desegregation*. Uncompromising as ever, Childress said that there were cash prizes available to the black writer for forsaking racial themes and that the demands for black writers to obliterate themselves by not writing about their own people, was part of what she called “the flow of white supremacist ideas.” The panel renewed support for protest writing and concluded with this remarkably clear-eyed observation: at a time when civil rights is stirring in the south, colonialism is being uprooted, and the majority of the present-day shrinking world happens to be colored, there is something absurd about questioning the value of writing about black subjects and themes.

There are other signs of a radical presence at the AMSAC conference. We know, for example, that Communist writers Louis Burnham and Lloyd Brown were there although they were not invited to speak (Interview 1997). We know that Frank London Brown was there because he is pictured in the photographs and because his wife wrote later in a memoir that at the Black Writers’ conference he “spoke vehemently in support of social protest” (Graham 288). Lorraine Hansberry is photographed delivering a formal speech that was omitted from the published text, but published posthumously in 1981 in *The Black Scholar*. With her first play about to open on Broadway in three weeks, Hansberry, at twenty-nine, was the figure in the spotlight at the conference, which makes it all the more intriguing that her paper was not included in the published proceedings. Despite the fact that Hansberry is rarely defined as a left-wing activist, her speech is without question the most radical statement of the conference.

Entitled “The Negro Writer and His Roots: Toward A New Romanticism,” Hansberry’s speech stands out from all the others because, even

by contemporary standards, her politics are remarkably progressive. She aligns herself firmly with the protest tradition, arguing that all art is inherently ideological—in her terms “ultimately social”—and that the work of the cold war was to encourage retreat from the political and social while allowing the fundamentally ideological nature of ideas to go unquestioned. She and Alice Childress are the only speakers to identify white supremacy as the basis of race problems. Hansberry is the only speaker to use the term *black* to designate her racial identity. She is the only one to extend protest to include gender, class, sexuality, and physical disability. She is the only speaker to historicize the conference by references to the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till and by reminding the participants of the essential connection between this literary event and the “fifty thousand Negroes in Montgomery Alabama walking their way to freedom” and nine small children who insisted on going to school in a town called Little Rock” (140).

What makes me so eager to return to Hansberry’s omitted text is that her defense of protest art is both an aesthetic as well as a political manifesto. In her argument for a more complex definition of protest literature, she remains firmly opposed to any evasions or denials of what black life has meant in this country:

Let no Negro artist who thinks himself deserving of the title take pen to paper—or, for that matter, body to dance or voice to speech or song—if in doing so the content of that which he presents or performs suggests to the nations of the world that our people do not yet languish under privation and hatred and brutality and political oppression in every state of the forty-eight. (138)

For Hansberry this is a “war against illusions,” but, for her, that means constituting the black subject with all of its conflicts and dilemmas: “I am saying that whatever the corruption within our people, tear it out and expose it and let us then take the measure of what is left . . . the most painful exigency of cultural and social life will not be exempt from exploration by my mind or pen.” The black writer must reject “the false romanticism” that depicts evils in ghetto life as “folksy or harmless” pastimes; all forms of color prejudice; the ludicrous pursuit of materialism in order to create a black bourgeoisie in imitation of their white counterpart; all forms of cultural apology that produce shame for and distance from the black folk heritage, or the slave past, or the sharecropper and ghetto present” (137). For Hansberry this “outward-inward turning eye,”

focused outward to critique racism and domination and inward to examine black life in all its complexity, is the model for protest literature; and she does not worry that the “inward-turning” eye will create negative images: this exposure of “the confusions and backwardnesses of our people will not result in a denigrated image but will “only heighten and make more real the inescapable image of their greatness and courage” (138).

Hansberry’s war against illusions might very well have been aimed at an earlier black writers’ forum, the 1950 *Phylon* symposium published at Atlanta University, in which many of the contributors, the major black scholars and critics of the early 1950s, debated whether or not black writers should continue to focus on “Negro themes, Negro life, Negro characters” or whether, in a quest for “universality,” these race matters should be abandoned. None of these symposium respondents dealt with the central, unspoken philosophical problem of these debates: that blackness is excluded from the term “universal.” One participant, Hugh Gloster of Morgan State, went so far as to claim that writing about black life was a form of cultural isolation from which black writers needed to be emancipated. Even Langston Hughes, whose entire literary output could be described as culturally black, found it a “most heartening thing to see Negroes writing in the general American field, rather than dwelling on Negro themes solely,” and he praises black writers like Willard Motley, Frank Yerby, Ann Petry, and Dorothy West for presenting “non-Negro subjects” and therefore lifting their work to a “universal plane” (*Phylon* 307–311). A number of these critics felt that integration and full equality for blacks were so close at hand that writing about Jim Crow, white violence, and oppression was a relic of the past. Sterling Brown, characteristically disdainful of black self-rejection, said that the *Phylon* group had turned integration into a “literary passing for white,” (Sterling Brown 46), but such conservatism, especially among established critics and scholars was a typical reaction to cold war conditioning.

All during the early 1950s, conservatives weighed in on the side of blackness as the “problem,” perhaps none so virulently anti-black as Richard Gibson, whose essay “A No to Nothing” (1953), the lesser-known companion piece to James Baldwin’s famous anti-protest essay, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” claims that the wall of restrictions blocking the black writer’s progress as artist is simply black writers’ inability to divorce themselves from the racial problem. The black writer, Gibson insists, must “remember the claims of art,” avoid propaganda,

connect himself to the traditions of Gide, Kafka, Mann, Proust and Joyce, “not merely of Langston Hughes and Chester B. Himes, and leave the issue of race for his life as a private citizen.” Then, in a telling metaphor, Gibson declares that by following these dictates the black writer will insure that *his black skin [will be] no iron curtain about his brain*” (91, emphasis mine). While Gibson means to imply that blackness is a constriction, he inadvertently describes its power: blackness is inherently oppositional. Using the rhetoric of the cold war, Gibson equates blackness with Communism, as powerful in its opposition to the United States as the Soviet Union. To be black in cold war America is to be both subversive and dangerous.

Frank London Brown’s 1959 novel *Trumbull Park*, published the same year as Hansberry’s speech, explores, as Hansberry did, what Sterling Stuckey called the “new militancy.”<sup>2</sup> Both were on the left, but because Brown was a nationalist, “more concerned with 47th and King Drive than with the international issues, his activism was not always recognized by the organized left wing (Johnson 1997). Brown was a civil rights activist, a labor union organizer, a musician who read his short stories in jazz clubs, and a member of the prestigious Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. His concern for what the new civil rights movement meant for black identity is the subject of *Trumbull Park*, which recapitulates the 1950s debate over black representation, taking its characters from racial shame and fear, to their first acts of civil rights militancy, from experiencing blackness as a mark of inferiority to its representation as empowering. I want to open up my discussion of this highly neglected novel by speculating on how important it is to my claim that there is a radical black voice in 1950s black literature. Since it is obvious that the civil rights movement is the source of political change in Brown’s novel, I will use Kobena Mercer’s excellent description of that process: “. . . the progressive character of the Civil Rights movement involved a strategy for the rearticulation of black identity around the subversive logic of the demand for ‘equality’” (431).

To understand how Brown’s autobiographical novel enables this “rearticulation of black identity,” I begin with the fact that it is based on Brown’s own experiences as a civil rights worker, specifically during the two years from 1954 to 1956 when he and his wife Evelyn, along with several other couples, moved into the all-white, public housing project in Chicago called *Trumbull Park*.<sup>3</sup> While *Trumbull Park* is about the massive and violent opposition of whites to integrated housing, the focus



of the narrative is, as Hansberry has directed, on the “embattled resisters,” the six black couples in the novel. I see four patterns in the novel that foreground interconnection and interdependency rather than individuality and thus fix the novel’s attention, its “inward-turning eye,” on the collective transformation of its “embattled resisters:” 1) Although told from a first-person narrator’s point of view, the main character, Louis “Buggy” Martin, his wife, Helen, and the other five couples, by working together, gradually develop the consciousness that moves them to political action, producing in the novel a sense that their fate, their goals, and ultimately, their success depends on collective struggle. Throughout the text, the characters are always identified as part of a community, not as the isolated individuals we see in nearly all 1950s media representations of heroic black characters. 2) In a novel whose first-person narrative voice is male, and for the first half of the text nearly oblivious to women as political forces, there is a dramatic disruption of the male-privileged narrative voice as Buggy, a working-class man, revises his narrative and gives women the strongest political voice in the novel. 3) The novel retains throughout a vernacular (i.e. collective) voice that nurtures political struggle, a vernacular that is not a “shorthand for indicating Negro inferiority,” but one that can express resistance, anger, play—“a full range of communicative needs,” as John Wideman puts it (36). 4) Finally Brown employs a documentary style that links his fictional world to actual historical events, not to authenticate his story for a skeptical white audience, but to signal the connections between Trumbull Park and the larger world and as a gesture of solidarity to a newly conscious, empathetic black audience. I note that *Trumbull Park* sold more than 25,000 copies, that it was reviewed and celebrated in the black press as well as in mainstream press, but a review of the novel by Langston Hughes in *Jet*, as well as articles on Brown in *Sepia*, *Ebony*, and the *Chicago Defender*, suggest the importance of this book in the black world. In its emphasis on collectivity, *Trumbull Park* represents a section of working-class Chicago and challenges the dominant aesthetic of individuality that emerges in mainstream 1950s literature, particularly in the “chosen” black text of the period: *Invisible Man*.

I am going to look in some detail at the way this collective resistance is narrated in the two chapters in *Trumbull Park* in which the couples begin to defy the police who ostensibly are at the housing project to protect them from the white mobs but who in actuality are in league with the whites. The six couples begin as a distinctly unorganized, contentious

group whose political positions range from not wanting to offend whites to planning to arm themselves and shoot whites on sight. For the first several months, the couples live in terror and shame, all of them reluctant to challenge the mobs which, with the collusion of the police, gather around their homes at night, chanting racial epithets and detonating bomb-like explosives. In response, the black residents act in total fear: they board up their windows as bricks come flying through; they eat in silence; they try to hide the truth from their children; they sleep in terror. The most demeaning aspect of all of this is that the police, under orders not to arrest or use force against whites, force the black tenants to ride in and out of the projects in police wagons and sign log books each time they enter or leave the projects as if blacks are the ones guilty of a crime. While Buggy is fearful of the police and the mobs, his greatest fear is that he lacks the courage to stand up to whites.

The first confrontation with the police takes place when the six couples meet at Buggy's house and decide that they will not sign the log books. Each character, encouraged by the others, performs an act of defiance, men and women together, almost in counterpoint: Helen begins, shouting to the police that they will meet whenever they want and without police permission; Buggy's voice follows hers; Ernestine backs Helen up; Arthur and Mona join them, then Nadine and Terry. As all of these unlikely "soldiers of Trumbull Park" gradually become emboldened. In the first act of physical defiance, Ernestine leads the way out of the house through "the ring of uniforms and plainclothes," refusing to sign the log books despite police threats. In the final moments of this scene, Buggy watches Christine grab her husband and daughter and, like the others, plunge into the darkness, signifying her defiance with a rhythm and blues song: "I heard her laughing as she walked out of sight past the policemen into the almost pitch-black courtyard of the project . . . , 'Let the good times roll, Honey!'" (260). Shouting out this line of sexual innuendo from a rhythm & blues song, Christine transmutes its sexual energy into a force that intimidates the police and reinvigorates the protesters.

The disruption of the male-centered narrative voice is another important part of the novel's collective politics. If there is anything that marks this novel as progressive for the 1950s, it is Brown's questioning of and rejection of its male-centered narration and his characters' reliance on women's strength and leadership. I consider this a remarkable feature of a 1950s narrative in a decade in which gender politics are almost never

questioned, in which male narrators and authors sexualize and silence women without awareness or censure. Brown actually corrects own male-centered narrative by having his narrator Buggy, nearly half way through the novel, openly question the way the narrative has represented women:

What was getting wrong with me? Women were beginning to be on my mind more and more . . . the women had done something that we men didn't have to do. They had put in twenty-four hours a day in good ol' T.P. [Trumbull Park]—no husbands, no nothing- and had faced up to the mob *and* the policemen everyday. (225)

As if both narrator and author are suddenly aware of their gender bias, women are given the two major political speeches in the chapters following Buggy's feminist awakening. The first speech, given by Mona Davis at a downtown church dramatizes what is happening in Trumbull Park and enlists community support. Thus it is a woman who frames their "private" anger and struggle in a collective, public space. The second speech is given by Buggy's wife Helen, and I quote it in full because it suggests Brown's decision to make women central and to make Helen the one who links this narrative to a larger international network of political activism:

Down South, Buggy, the radio talks about how Negroes are pushing trying to get the Supreme Court to outlaw segregation in schools. Everywhere everybody is doing something . . . what are we going to do? I don't want a Lincoln, or even a fur piece like some people have. I just don't want to sit by and watch life pass me by without doing something about it. (412)

You ever hear of Bandung? . . . That's where the man on the radio says that a whole bunch of colored folks from all over the world—Africa, India, China, America, all over—are getting together to figure out how to keep from being pushed by all the things that are happening in the world—how to make the wagon go the way they want it to go. (412)

In the final chapter, Helen's political vision of solidarity with other "colored folks" motivates Buggy to refuse the protection of the police vans and stage a one-man walk-in: "I was going to get in line with all those people that Helen had heard about on the radio, the ones from Down Home, the ones from Bandung" (413).<sup>4</sup> Buggy says at the beginning of this last chapter that he is done with listening to "Old Black Joe" and "The Darktown's Strutter's Ball," but it is Helen who acts, beginning a call-and-response by singing the first line of a Joe Williams song

as he walks out of the door: “Ain’t nobody worried!” Buggy “answers” her with the second line, “And it ain’t nobody cryin’!” Buggy leaves the house singing the rest of the song, “Every Day I Have the Blues:”

Nobody loves me! Nobody seems to care! Speaking of bad luck and trouble—well you know I’ve had my share! Seems to me that every day, every day, every day, I have the blues . . . (416)

While these blues lyrics could easily be interpreted as a defeatist gesture, they can also be read as an act of supreme self-validation created out of the singer’s acceptance of hard times and her (or his) ability to construct art out of “bad luck and trouble.” The real sense of the song as affirmation, however, can be discovered only in performance—both Buggy’s and Joe’s. Buggy’s memory of hearing and seeing Joe Williams in a club singing to an audience charges the song with its power:

I could see that big, dark, smiling, sweating, strong-looking crinkly-haired Joe Williams at DeLisa’s singing that song. Holding the mike in one hand, and walking with that head way, way up in the air, carrying the mike with him as he walked, chest way out shoulders way back . . . singing and swinging, preaching a natural gospel of power—that finger-popping, hip-swinging, bust-you-in-the-mouth-if-you-mess-with-me kind of power! (416)

Throughout the rest of the chapter, the song serves as a counterpoint to the taunts of the white crowds. When Buggy imagines them calling out, “*We dare you to walk, nigger!*” he sings a line from the song, “Noooooo-body wants me. Nobody seems to care!” Finally when he and his buddy Harry who joins him in the walk-in have come through without backing down, the words come pouring out, this time with Harry joining in. Consider how this chapter narrates collective action. The song assists, perhaps even compels action, creating a kind of antiphonal relationship between music and action, much as it did in many civil rights demonstrations. Though Buggy originally plans a one-man walk-in, his friend Harry has joined him, and Helen’s voice impels him into action, then surrounds and encourages the two men for the entire walk-in. The chapter ends with the words of the song inscribed in italics on the page but unmediated by any character, so that the blues voice, the characters’ voices, and the narratorial voice all seem to be speaking as one: “Every day, every day . . . Well, it ain’t nobody worried, and it ain’t nobody cryin’!” Many of the images of *Trumbull Park* explicitly anticipate the aesthetics of protest of the 1960s and 1970s. These characters walking through violent mobs, sustained by powerful singing accompaniment,

and inspired by the vivid performance and blues rhetoric of Joe Williams, will, in just a few short years, be replaced by demonstrators whose victory will be to march *into* police vans, rather than out of them.

I do not want to make any grand claims for this novel as a subversive and revolutionary act, but I do want to keep in mind that the novel's "inward-turning" eye, focused on black subjects engaged in political struggle, repudiates the notion of an apolitical 1950s. In an article in *Sepia* magazine celebrating the publication of his first novel, Brown says explicitly that he was writing this novel to encourage political change: "If I could get the Negro reader to identify himself with this man, then, at the end of the novel, the reader would be sworn to courage—if the trick I tried to pull on Negro readers worked—" (29). There are shortcomings in this text; the novel's collective politics would almost necessitate a fuller development of the six couples and their relationships. But as perhaps the only text we have that describes in detail the psychic and physical cost of being involved in a desegregation struggle; as a text which focuses on the formation of a black consciousness that leads to political action and self-affirmation; and as one which figures women as revolutionary influences, *Trumbull Park* is key to a reconstruction of a black radical literary tradition.

One of the people who knew Brown well is the poet Gwendolyn Brooks who wrote a poem in his memory after his death in 1962. Entitled "Of Frank London Brown: a tenant of the world," the poem describes him as a beloved and charismatic leader:

We let our spirited and our venturesome go—  
 Our Liberator and our insevere  
 Armed arbiter, our scrupulous pioneer—  
 (44)

With the possessive "Our," Brooks implies that this liberator is on intimate terms with his (and her) community. Combining words that suggest a revolutionary vocation as well as a moral integrity (the "pioneer" is "scrupulous;" our "Armed arbiter" is "insevere"—) Brooks paints a portrait of a person, not unlike Malcolm X, who combines the sometimes cold task of revolution with love and carries out political action with religious conviction. Her poem captures something of the impact of Brown's writing and his life on the people he knew, indicating that Brown was at the center of black intellectual and political circles in Chicago. His erasure and the erasure of so many forms of black radicalism from

American literary canons puts me in mind of Ralph Ellison's warning about the most dangerous aspect of the containment politics of the 1950s: "Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word" (*Shadow and Act* 1962).

#### POSTSCRIPT: THE AMSAC CONFERENCE AND THE C.I.A.

We need to ask how and why so many novels like *Trumbull Park* are completely absent from black literary history, absent even from new anthologies like the *Norton* and the *Riverside*, and simply not acknowledged as a part of that literary history. On the one hand the emphasis on formalism, on modernism defined as a certain kind of experimental style, and the New Critics' insistence on the text dissociated from politics and social issues paved the way for black literary history to make such judgments and create such omissions. But the suppression of these political texts was also part of the deliberate effort of cold war practices to discredit radical or progressive politics.

We now know from the Frank Church committee exposé of C.I.A. front organizations that the omissions and distortions of the AMSAC conference were neither accidental nor benign (*New York Times*, February 26, 1976). Two years ago when I interviewed Lloyd Brown, one of the Communists present at the 1959 black writers' conference but not allowed to speak officially, he described an encounter at the conference with Langston Hughes in the Hudson's hotel bar. He remarked to Hughes that the conference seemed very well funded. "Yes," replied Hughes, "by somebody with a whole lot of dough." "And," Brown responded, "he can print all the money he needs." Hughes just shrugged off this comment and asked if Brown were going along to the upcoming AMSAC conference to Africa. Brown tried to be diplomatic, but both he and Hughes were well aware of the politics behind the African trip:

I said I couldn't get away from my job. Actually I had not been asked and for the same reason I was not asked to be one of the speakers—my long association with Paul Robeson. The AMSAC, which appeared from nowhere, vanished the same way . . . So check out the Church's committee's report on the phony organizations set up by the C.I.A. (Letter, April 8, 1996)

Several months later the poet Sam Allen, one of the conference speakers, told me that he had refused to accept a staff position with AMSAC when he learned of the C.I.A. connection: "The offer was tempting, but

I'd be damned if I was going to cooperate with something that was set up to go into the black community and report back to the government" (Interview, March 16, 1997). AMSAC's C.I.A. connections are now a matter of record though it may be impossible to know who in AMSAC was actually directed by the C.I.A. or aware of its operations. The discovery of how active the government was in helping to create the African American literary canon of the 1950s underscores the legitimacy of the claim Abner Berry made in the *Daily Worker* that the leading literary critic of the 1950s was a senator named Joseph McCarthy.

We have not yet assessed the influence of the C.I.A. and the McCarthyism on black literature of the 1950s. But we do know a great deal about how black writers were harassed, intimidated and silenced. Lloyd Brown's 1951 novel *Iron City* and his ground-breaking essay "Which Way For the Negro Writer?" were omitted from all accounts of black literary history, and neither has ever been mentioned in any assessment of black writing of the 1950s nor included in any anthologies of black literature. Ralph Ellison took great pains to separate himself from his earlier leftist politics, and the anti-Communist stance of *Invisible Man* completed that separation. Perhaps the best example of the effect of McCarthyism on black writers is Langston Hughes' retractions and silences after his testimony before HUAC. According to biographer Arnold Rampersad, Hughes dissociated himself from all left-wing circles and causes and finally, humiliatingly, agreed to cut from his biographical essays on famous black writers "almost all accounts of overt racism," and all references to Du Bois and other radicals (Rampersad 229-230).

*Trumbull Park* is not the only text absent from this history; but it is not my intention to supply names of absent or neglected texts, rather to insist that the ways we do literary history, our notions of the canonical, lead to these kinds of omission. Using Michael Denning's (and others) direction that we analyze literature as a social formation, we must certainly construct any history of the 1950s by looking at what was covered in black magazines of that period (and ignored in mainstream white magazines); at the political activism of people like Esther and James Jackson, Lloyd Brown, as well as that of Rosa Parks, JoAnn Robinson, and Septima Clark; at the creative writing published in left wing journals like *Masses & Mainstream* and Robeson's paper *Freedom*; at the work of the dramatists and actors at the American Negro Theater; at the effect of blacklisting musicians, writers, artists, politicians, labor organizers, etc.,

all of which figure importantly in this history (Denning 202–203). To read the suppressed literary work of the 1950s in relation to the social and political work black writers were engaged in—and I maintain that much of this literature finds its source more fully in radical and progressive political activism—would enable us to reconstitute the period, to see it, not as one of gradualism, passivity, and assimilation but as one which projects an assertive and vital kind of progressive politics, and one that maintains at its core an affirmation of the distinctiveness of African American culture. In rediscovering and re-recording these voices, I think that what we will find is that there is no missing link between the 1950s and the militant political activity of the 1960s and 1970s, that the 1950s did not represent the “triumph of assimilation” but is a part of a circle of African American resistance and radicalism.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hansberry and Childress actually published their first work in *Masses & Mainstream* (Letter from Lloyd L. Brown to Mary Helen Washington, October 23, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> While I am linking Lorraine Hansberry and Frank London Brown as two of the missing voices in the protest tradition, I should point out the many other stunning similarities between these two writers. Both Brown and Hansberry lived for thirty-five years, Hansberry from 1930 to 1965; Brown, from 1927 to 1962. Both died from cancer. Both were from Chicago, and their first major published work is about families struggling to escape the ghetto and to integrate an all-white Chicago neighborhood. Both managed to maintain a delicate balance between being politically on the left and being amazingly included in elite establishments; Hansberry in Broadway circles, and Brown as a graduate student and instructor at the University of Chicago and a member there of the prestigious committee on Social Thought. Brown was also a labor organizer with the United Packinghouse Workers Union and a musician who read his short stories to jazz accompaniment, performing at one point with Thelonious Monk in Chicago and New York.

<sup>3</sup> These battles for open housing, begun by the NAACP after the 1948 Supreme Court ruling against racially restrictive covenants, became the major civil rights initiatives in northern cities like Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago. According to Arnold R. Hirsch in his article "Massive Resistance in the Urban North: Trumbull Park, 1953-1966," (*Journal of American History*, September 1995, 522-550.) Trumbull Park Homes, built by the federal government, operated, with government approval, as segregated housing. White resistance to integration can only be described as massive and intractable. While the police stood by, white tenants carried on sophisticated warfare, throwing bricks and sulfur candles through the windows of homes and detonated nightly hundreds of bomb-like explosives. Whites made it impossible for blacks to use any community facilities, including stores, parks, and churches. When white South African writer Alan Paton was invited by *Collier's* magazine to come to the US. in 1954 to do a story on "The Negro in America Today," he visited Trumbull Park and interviewed Frank Brown. Paton said that a world in which there were police everywhere, white tenants sitting outside in the sun on a spring day, "colored men and women and children sitting behind blinds," and bombs going off at regular intervals, was unreal.

<sup>4</sup> I first heard a reference to the Bandung conference in Malcolm X's speech "Not just an American problem, but a world problem," given at Corn Hill Methodist Church in Rochester, New York on February 16, 1965. He hailed Bandung as the first time in history that the dark-skinned nations of the world united to reject colonialism and racism and to promote unity among the colonized. No European nation was invited, nor was the United States, their very absence signifying them as the world's colonizers. In *The Color Curtain*, Richard Wright gives a first-hand view of the conference, which he attended. Adam Clayton Powell was there, asserting that far from being oppressed, Negroes were a privileged group. The press praised Powell for his patriotism, and Congress passed a resolution commending Powell (Letter from Lloyd Brown, October 23, 1998).