Article

Haunt or Home? Ethos and African American Literature

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Abstract: The African American rhetorical tradition could be described as a shelter in an alien environment or as a way station on a long journey. A focus on ethos suggests that such a narrow approach to African American literature cannot do justice to these literary texts: how these writers employ images and symbols, craft and deploy examine identities, blend, criticize, and create traditions, explore contemporary issues, and create community. Because of cultural and racist narratives, African Americans could not simply use either the pre-Socratic or Aristotelian approaches to ethos in their fight for social justice. This essay demonstrates how a postclassical approach to ethos that draws on Bourdieu's concept of habitus and is focused on community-building and self-healing is central to the African American literature and rhetoric.

Keywords: African American literature; ethos; slave narratives; Phillis Wheatley; Martin Luther King; Malcolm X; W.E.B. Du Bois; Booker T. Washington

1. Introduction

In a provocative essay from 1997 entitled, "Home," Nobel-prize winning author Toni Morrison compares living and writing in the United States as an African American woman with occupying a house rather than a home. For Morrison, cultural memory shapes contemporary action, and her characters cannot escape how America's racial history has shaped their lives, coloring how they see the world and influencing their interactions with both African Americans and whites. The nation's racial past is a source of trauma and a burden, and the African American community is scarred by this history, even if shared history offers a potential source of healing and solidarity. Morrison describes her writing as part of an ongoing project to imagine "how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home" (Morrison 1998, p. 5). Throughout the essay, she reconceives race, racial signifiers, and the modern United State nation as potential dwellings in which African Americans must meet and then live, write, think, speak, persuade, and create. These dwellings could be haunted houses or nourishing homes of support and love. Morrison's contrast between houses and homes constitutes a modern reiteration of Greeks' approach to ethos but with an important emphasis. The dwelling place of ethos, character and context, is not a destination that can be reached. Rather, it is a shared journey—between speaker/writer and audience—of exploration, discovery, and creativity. It is also an uncompleted act.

Frequently, scholars and students of the African American rhetorical tradition expect that the texts in this tradition should possess a single rhetorical function or goal: challenging racial hierarchy in its various manifestations.[1] Of course, much African American writing and speaking has sought to influence public opinion, politics, and social structure, especially during the eras of slavery and

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[1] In his *What Was African American Literature?* Kenneth Warren argues that African American literature is the product of Jim Crow segregation and had single focus and purpose (Warren 2011, pp. 1–9).

segregation. However, they do much more than that. Like a dwelling, the African American rhetorical tradition could be described as a shelter in an alien environment or as a way station on a long journey. A focus on ethos, however, suggests that either approach to African American rhetoric by itself cannot do justice to these texts: how these writers employ images and symbols, craft and deploy examine identities, blend, criticize, and create traditions, explore contemporary issues, and create community. Because of the cultural and racist narratives that have dominated American culture, African Americans could not simply use either the pre-Socratic or Aristotelian approaches to ethos. This essay demonstrates how a postclassical approach to ethos that draws on Bourdieu's concept of habitus and is focused on community-building and self-healing is central to the African American literature and rhetoric

The paired concepts of home and ethos to help us better understand African American literature and culture and explore the potential for what Baumlin and Meyer term a "therapeutic model" or reparative model for ethos whose goal is to "recognize, accommodate, and heal—to heal oneself and one's community through mutual understanding, consensus, equity, mutuality" (Baumlin and Meyer 2018, p. 18). This model is postclassical and rooted in postmodern criticisms of ethos and stands alongside the Aristotelian approach, which focuses on persuading others. Because ethos brings together character, persuasion, and context, it helps to reveal how race, racism, and racial identity constitute homes or, in Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, "a habitus,"[2] that shape how writers write and readers read. Karl Maton observes that "habitus links the social and the individual because the experiences of one's life course may be unique in their particular contents but are shared in terms of their structure with others of the same social class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, occupation, nationality, region and so forth" (Maton 2014, p. 52). Bourdieu's concept of the habitus offers an important and necessary adjunct to classical notions of ethos, by emphasizing that character is not simply the product of individual decisions and actions but part of an existing social structure. Race operates similarly as both a social structure and an individual experience, limiting the rhetorical choices of African Americans and the kinds of stories they can tell. Given the social and construction of race and the circumscribed spaces, or homes, African American writers and their readers occupy, African American writers must engage with and deconstruct dominant understandings of racial character to create a literature and a public voice that constructively engage racial inequality. The resulting texts also seek to help build a stronger Africa American community by healing traumas produced by America's history of racism.

Traditionally, ethos is defined as an appeal to character (Solmsen 1954, p. 25). This sense of ethos emphasizes how a speaker deploys character in relation to a specific audience, which has proven problematic for African American writers and intellectuals due to the history of racism where racial categories constituted de facto markers of a lack of character. Recent work on ethos, especially Michael J. Hyde's, recuperates the earliest meaning of the Greek term ethos as a haunt or a dwelling. Hyde argues: "The human being is called to be true to its essential character (*ethos*): We *are* the opening of a dwelling place where the truth of what is—be it a stone, tree, eagle, ourselves, or whatever—can be taken to heart, appreciated, and cared for" (Hyde 2004, p. xx). Hyde's intervention is attractive for critics of African American literature because it emphasizes where African Americans live and how character is central to the battle for freedom and racial equality. It also suggests there is a possibility for self-care within the rhetorical uses of ethos.

Framing ethos as a dwelling marries character and context, or as Bourdieu would say habitus and field, and insists that rhetoric is not a mere device for persuasion. Rather, ethos is a dynamic unity of our habits, our social roles, and the wisdom to know how to live well. Ethos includes both our way of life and the social structures that allow that way of life to come into being. For African American

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[2]   Bourdieu defines habitus as the schema or worldview that shapes a person's worldview. The habitus is a product of one's social position and role in society. Fowler observes: "the habitus of the dominated frequently leads them to choose actively what they are objectively constrained to do (Fowler 1997).

culture, ethos is both a personal project of building a character to live a meaningful life in racist culture and a literary project where cultural artifacts testify to the good character of the race, responding to and repairing the harms of living in a racist society. The etymological origins of the concept help to reveal how race inevitably gets intertwined with rhetorical appropriations of ethos. Margaret Zulick's approach to ethos supports this understanding:

> To the philologist, however, there is a rather stark contrast between the archaic meaning of "haunt" or the habitual territory of a wild animal to the late classical "character." Charles Chamberlain's etymological study reveals, however, an intermediate, metaphorical application of the term to mean "custom" or "habit." One can perhaps see how the name has traveled from "air" to "habit" (via "habitat") to "character" in the sense of the constellation of habits of thought, manners, and reputation that constitutes a rhetorical subject. (Zulick 2004, p. 20)

Race, as a haunt, functions as a social and legal fiction, ascribing habits and customs to individuals based on appearance and serving as a proxy for (racial) character. This essay explores how, African American intellectuals frequently used art and literature to counter invidious racial stereotypes during the antebellum, Jim Crow, and post-Civil Rights eras even as they sought to use art to help African Americans heal from the traumas that resulted from slavery, segregation, and limits of the Civil Rights movement. The essay concludes by considering why debates about racial character continue to the present day and why ethos remains an essential element of African American rhetoric and literature.

2. Ethos in Early African American Literature

Early African American writers found literature an unwelcoming discourse, as white readers questioned whether African Americans possessed the intelligence to produce literature and the existing models for literatures offered only caricatures for African Americans. In his 1784 *Notes on Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson writes, "misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry" (Jefferson 1984, pp. 266–267). He further laments: "never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture" (p. 266). For the early African American orators, poets, and writers, American culture was a fairly hostile place. Most whites, such as Jefferson, questioned whether African Americans possessed the intellect to produce art or literature of any kind. Also, because slave laws prohibited most African Americans from learning how to read and write, there were few black literary publications until the 1840s and 1850s and, even then, they were limited to fairly small-run newspapers. One space where African Americans intellectuals could present their ideas was within the black church. Orators, such as Richard Allen (1760–1831) and David Walker (1796–1830), found some success and notoriety. They typically drew on the Bible in crafting arguments for democracy and against slavery. Their speeches and writings emphasized how slavery had not sapped or diminished the character of African Americans. Rather, they tended to question the moral character of whites who professed to believe in the Bible but then failed to realize its moral teachings. Their rhetoric sought to persuade whites from their racist beliefs about black character and build community among African Americans who lacked political or legal standing.

In the fields of poetry and non-fiction, African American writers could not simply engage in creative explorations. Rather, these early writers needed to write themselves into the traditions of literature before they could even begin to experiment with form or structure. In the context of antebellum America, being a "Negro" categorically excluded Africans Americans from the very status of being a writer. Thomas Jefferson's dismissed "Phillis Wheatley's poetry as lacking originality" (Jefferson 1984, p. 264). Wheatley (1753–1784) was the first African American to publish poetry in the United States. Because her work needed to mimic existing literary conventions, Jefferson was not impressed and failed to find the requisite creativity in her work.

The slave narrative was a popular genre in the antebellum period. These narratives, which drew on religious writings, captivity narratives, and the picaresque novel, described the journey

from slavery to freedom. As journey narratives, they underscore how the culture of slavery affects character and how the quest to achieve freedom, equality, and literacy requires a lengthy process and ongoing struggle against dominant white perspectives. Olaudah Equiano published the first slave narrative, in 1789. Frederick Douglass wrote probably the most famous one in 1845, and Harriet Jacobs is recognized for her 1861 narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which explores the challenges slavery brought for women. Because the slave narratives served as abolitionist tracts, the authors needed to emphasize their intellect, moral virtue, and Christian faith. These constraints limited what African American writers could write and, in turn, caused early critics to question the artistic value of their work. Nonetheless, the focus on virtue allowed these writers to reframe their experiences to emphasize their autonomy and their efforts to heal themselves from the horrors of slavery. They also offered glimpses of how African Americans came together as a community despite the hardships and obstacles they faced.

For writers, such as Wheatley and Douglass, being understood without offending the primarily white audience was no easy task. Consider Wheatley's most famous poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (1773):

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land

Taught by benighted soul to understand

That there's a God, there's a *Savior* too.

Once I redemption neither sought nor knew

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,

"Their colour is a diabolic die."

Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain*,

May be refin'd and join th' angelic train.

In this poem that explores the link between ethos and exile, Wheatley cannot merely challenge race-based slavery and the hypocrisy of so-called Christians who participate in the slave trade. Her task is much more delicate. She must affirm the value and truth of Christianity, acknowledge that Africans were "heathens" (according to late 18th century discourse), distinguish between moral and immoral Christians, criticize contemporary racial stereotypes, and defend the character and virtue of black Christians. Wheatley's poem is thus revolutionary not in its metaphors or structure, but in its application to Africans whose humanity had been stripped from them. Wheatley is writing herself into the field of literature as her habitus or character, defined by her race and gender, exclude her from the discourse.

Since the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts movement of the 1960s, it has been fairly commonplace for critics to analyze African American literature based on its relation to African American linguistic and cultural traits. In this rendering, the character or ethos of African American literature is intertwined with a shared set of habits and practices that can be traced from Africa to America through the Middle Passage, slavery, segregation, and then the Great Migration (1915–1960).[3] Wheatley's work, however, resists this way of framing the African American rhetorical tradition as her writings do not draw explicitly on an African American tradition of writing, nor does the poem overtly challenge race-based slavery or racial segregation. Such an approach would overlook the rhetorical genius of Phillis Wheatley. The poem, especially the last four lines, defends the race from the claim that African Americans are beyond religious salvation. Not unlike later African American writers and orators, Wheatley dares white Christians to live up to their professed values. To establish her standing to speak, Wheatley demonstrates her character by embracing Christianity and rejecting, at

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[3]　See Gates (1988) for his discussion of signify in' as an example of this approach.

least rhetorically, African spiritual beliefs. There is an ironic undercurrent to the poem as well. The opening line—"T was mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land"—seems to describe the slave trade as a "mercy". Also, the word "brought" understates or even erases the violence of the trade and agency of those who participated in and profited from the slave trade. Despite the poem's calm tone, its rebuke of racist theologies that deny African Americans access to eternal salvation suggest that Wheatley is well aware of these ironies. The central task of the poem is to argue for African American personhood, especially a religious recognition of her status as a human being, that places ethos and character at the center of African American literary production. In fact, this claim of self-possession and ownership is a necessary pre-condition for establishing ethos in the modern world.

The slave narratives also illustrate how ethos, as both haunt and character, shaped African American literature during the antebellum era. The abolitionist press published these slave narratives as part of its propaganda effort to rid the country of slavery. Because these abolitionist accounts featured violence, daring adventures, and a good dose of Christian morality, the resulting books found a broad audience. When Frederick Douglass set out to write the account of his liberation from slavery, there was considerable skepticism from white southerners that an African American could write such a piece. Even northerners suspected that white abolitionists were crafting, if not creating out of whole cloth, the accounts of slavery that emerged during the 1840s and 1850s. To combat these concerns, the slave narratives frequently included letters and essays from famous white abolitionists, attesting to the veracity of the accounts. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) began with a preface from William Lloyd Garrison, a well-known abolitionist:

> Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ some one else. It is, therefore, entirely his own production; and, considering how long and dark was the career he had to run as a slave,—how few have been his opportunities to improve his mind since he broke his iron fetters, it is, in my judgment, highly creditable to his head and heart. (p. 7)

The stated purpose of Douglass's writing was to reveal the horrors of slavery. However, more importantly, his slave narrative demonstrated how slavery was robbing African Americans of dignity, morality, and justice and offered a path to self-healing and self-ownership for African American readers and demonstrated the value and virtue of African Americans for white audiences.

Critics have noted that these framing devices worked to de-emphasize the creativity that it took to write a good slave narrative and allowed white abolitionists to consider themselves as the theoreticians of the movement. By the time of Douglass (nearly fifty years after the first slave narratives), there came to be a generic formula, of sorts, for African American writers to follow. It emphasized the moral character of the liberated slave and how slavery had impeded the effort to attain virtue and live a good Christian life. Moreover, the slave narrative sought to demonstrate how slavery compromised the moral and spiritual virtue of slave owners. Because the entire social and economic framework of the country depended on slavery, even the slaves of "good" owners could not escape the pernicious effects of evil slave-masters.

As with so much in African American literature, slave narratives reflect a sustained engagement with rhetoric and character. The writer is not merely describing a scene, character, or dilemma, but is fighting to write at all. Slave law prohibited slaves from learning how to read and write, and many slave owners discouraged even religious gatherings among slaves because they feared what might happen in those gatherings. The result is that many African Americans were doomed to ignorance, which was, in turn, used to justify their enslavement. Abolitionists deployed the slave narratives to demonstrate the intelligence and morality of African Americans, while Southern supporters of slavery challenged them as frauds. Douglass wrote his narrative to both defend his character and argue for the

possibility that African American literature could exist.[4] Douglass and other writers of slave narratives put pen to paper to change American law and culture and to offer hope and a method for self-healing for other African Americans. They were not seeking to achieve in literature for the mere sake of individual gain. Rather, there was a commitment to the broader community. Moreover, the spiritual dimensions of the slave narratives and the poetry of Phillis Wheatley is not an accident. There was an instrumental reason to engage religion in this quest for personhood, liberty, and equality: if African Americans possessed spiritual worth and moral value as acknowledged by God, then man-made laws allowing slavery and second-class citizenship would be unjust and immoral. Further, their journeys to physical and spiritual freedom and healing offered models for other African American who heard their stories and could be inspired by them. Ethos as character was fundamental to African American literature during this period because it constituted a necessary rhetorical building block, even if it was temporary respite from the onslaught of then dominant views, as African Americans made the argument for freedom. At the same time, ethos was also a "haunt" because whites viewed African American writers with suspicions about their intellect, ability, and culture. During this period, these suspicions shaped the choices African American writers made and limited the kind of writings that would be produced, published, and read.

3. Ethos during the Era of Segregation

After the Civil War, African Americans hoped that the end of slavery would improve their political, social, cultural, and economic situation. While the period of Reconstruction (1865–1877), immediately after the Civil War, brought many African Americans into political power, it was a short-lived success. By the 1890s, Jim Crow segregation was common all over the South and endorsed by the United States Supreme Court in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision. Not only did whites create separate facilities for African Americans, but they took political power in a ruthless manner, as white supremacist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan, flourished during the early twentieth century. Many Southern African Americans were forced into sharecropping, which shackled them into a never-ending cycle of debt. Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) rose to prominence during this period to become the leading spokesperson for the African American community. In his famous 1895 speech at the Atlanta Exposition, he urged African Americans to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and focus on achieving economic success:

> Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour, and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life; shall prosper in proportion as we learn to draw the line between the superficial and the substantial, the ornamental gewgaws of life and the useful. No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities. (pp. 146–147)

Washington argued that political or social activism will prove ineffective in changing things. Rather, he believed that character would be developed through hard work and that the best way to gain the respect of whites is by accumulating wealth.[5] Washington closes his famous 1895 speech by emphasizing the importance of a certain kind of character: "It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house" (Washington 1970, p. 148).

4　See generally, Douglass (1997).
5　Following the logic of Bourdieu's habitus, Washington is correct that economic wealth would provide a certain kind of capital. Du Bois, as we will see, questions if that kind of capital would be sufficient to succeed in promoting racial equality.

While many African Americans supported Washington and his approach, a significant number of African Americans disagreed. W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) challenged Washington's focus on economic success and believed that African Americans should focus on education, civil rights, and voting to promote personal and group success. He further believed that a small group of highly educated African Americans, known as the Talented Tenth, should lead the African American community in this fight for social and political recognition. Intellectual achievement, not hard work and what Bourdieu would frame as social or cultural capital, was Du Bois's answer to the question of what kind of character or ethos African Americans ought to develop. The conflict between Du Bois and Washington centers on which habits and roles African American should develop and what constitutes virtue or excellence. Further, their debate about character hinges on who is the audience for these performances of character—whites or African Americans—and which specific performances of character will help African Americans gain the spiritual and emotional tools to thrive. Du Bois, working with many Northern whites, started the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP sought to promote racial equality in education, politics, and social structure. The debate between Washington and Du Bois split the African American community as the two men offered competing visions for how to develop the character of African Americans. Southerners and working class African Americans tended to support Washington's vision, while northerners and those with more education gravitated toward Du Bois's position.

By the mid-1920s, writers, artists, and intellectuals believed that art and literature was a key site in the battle for racial equality. By creating an artistic movement, they sought to challenge existing racial stereotypes and prejudice. African American literature, according to this line of argument, was an instrumental tool designed to counter white propaganda and one that could transform freedom and equality from a dream into a reality. More than mere political propaganda, these intellectuals believed that literature could help forge a common identity and culture among African Americans, who were divided by social class, region, and the urban-rural divide.[6] Literature and art were key tools in the dialectic relationship between self and community. Alain Locke (1885–1954) became the de facto spokesperson for the "New Negro Movement," which today is known as the Harlem Renaissance (1920s and 1930s).

Despite the shared goals of the Harlem Renaissance, the ferment of creative and critical work in the movement produced a stunningly wide array of positions about how best to achieve these goals. W.E.B. Du Bois argued during this period that literature constituted a form of propaganda, emphasizing its rhetorical value to correct erroneous assumptions (logos), build sympathy across racial lines (pathos), and demonstrate the character of African Americans (ethos). Locke differed from Du Bois and focused more on how increased and more sophisticated creative expression would prove the value of African Americans. Relying heavily on logos, he believed that cultural achievement led the way to political and social equality ("New Negro", Locke 1968, pp. 15–16). Both Locke and Du Bois believed that the Talented Tenth or the most educated and talented African Americans would help bridge the races. Langston Hughes (1902–1967), in his famous 1926 essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," challenged Locke's emphasis on cultural achievement and Du Bois's plea for racial propaganda. Hughes urged writers to embrace the unique aspects of black culture because he believed that African American could become good artists and truly love themselves if only by accepting the habits, practices, values, and ordinary ways of black people. (Hughes 1994, pp. 94–95). Hughes cautioned against producing literature with the singular aims of persuading or pleasing white audiences. Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) shared this sensibility with Hughes and emphasized

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6　　Many African American intellectuals of this period believed that African Americans lacked a unifying or common culture, marked by regional differences and the rural/urban divide. Slavery and segregation only created the appearance of a shared culture (and one that seemed anti-intellectual). Many argued that once African Americans embrace modernity, the distinctions between black and white would diminish.

pathos in her writing.[7] Among these writers and intellectuals, there was a sharp disagreement about whether the focus of African American rhetoric should be aimed externally at whites who embraced Jim Crow segregation and might relent or at African Americans who needed to recognize their moral worth and needed to build a healthy and whole community.

Of course, this conversation also included voices that thought that the entire concept of a unique or distinctive African American voice was ridiculous. George Schuyler (1895–1977), in his 1926 essay "The Negro-Art Hokum" (Schuyler 1994) and his novel *Black No More* (1931), disagreed with the entire premise behind the New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance. Schuyler's voice is important because he lays the foundation for later black conservatives who emphasize character rooted in virtue—not social activism—as the key to improving the position of individual African Americans. Schuyler's approach to ethos broke from modern version promoted by other African American intellectuals; he believed individuals developed and possessed character, not whole communities.

The flourishing of the Harlem Renaissance is an important reminder that segregation was both ubiquitous but varied. To consider Jim Crow as a single system fails to capture how African Americans could and did navigate the systems and found some agency.[8] While segregation suggests separation, it would be a mistake to assume that Jim Crow was static. From the beginning of World War I through the 1950s, African Americans moved in great numbers from the rural South to the urban North, looking for jobs, freedom, and education. This mass movement of African Americans is frequently known as the Great Migration and transformed African American culture, so much so that today African American culture is frequently synonymous with Northern urban spaces. The Great Migration, beyond transforming African Americans, also signals African American agency in the face of constraint and discrimination. Both ordinary African Americans and those in the arts and cultural criticism during this period sought new "dwellings"—symbolized by the Northern urban milieu—to build their lives and offered a new representation of the character of African Americans.[9]

At one level, Alain Locke's "New Negro" was an urban man at home in the industrialized city, trying to repair and improve his station in life. At a deeper level, the New Negro sought to challenge the stereotypical representations of African Americans that were rooted in slavery and the imagery—found in Jim Crow minstrelsy—that supported it. In the language of rhetoric, the New Negro Movement constituted a conscious and intentional effort to reframe the character of African Americans for whites and blacks alike, albeit with competing rhetorical strategies. While the Harlem Renaissance did not generate political or social reform as the 1950s Civil Rights movement did, it was nonetheless successful in creating a generation of writers, painters, and artists who produced a breath-taking diversity of work, which depicted the journey of change African Americans were experiencing. Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, the Harlem Renaissance raised the profile of the arts within the African American community and demonstrated the centrality of literature and art as a potential catalyst for change—both internally and externally. Since the Harlem Renaissance, artists have played an increasingly significant role in African American cultural life.

4. Ethos and the Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights movement became an important force for political, social, economic, and cultural change during the 1950s and 1960s. It drew upon the African American rhetorical tradition and

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[7] Holmes argues that Hurston offered the most effective rhetorical voice because it was not reduced to either mimicking or reversing dominant white literary values (Holmes 2004, p. 91).

[8] Holmes demonstrates that a literary genius such as Zora Neale Hurston could find agency even in the rural South as her stories capture the intelligence, wit and wisdom of ordinary African Americans living under Jim Crow (Holmes 2004, pp. 75–91).

[9] In his monograph, Eric King Watts argues "the New Negro movement should be credited" with "allow[ing] black artists to have a say in the ongoing production of prevailing taste" (Watts 2012, p. 195). In other words, the Harlem Renaissance opened up the range of artistic possibilities and, despite the efforts of Du Bois and Locke, presented competing approaches to representing the black "voice".

its emphases on ethos, self-healing, and name making. The efforts of Wheatley and Douglass to demonstrate the character of worth of African Americans and the African American community never really ended, as the transition from slavery to segregation did not dismantle racial stereotypes but merely changed how they affected the social order. The debate between Washington and Du Bois about how African Americans ought to achieve success, gain economic self-sufficiency, or focus on political reform, continued throughout the twentieth century. Du Bois's position shifted from his earlier focus on education and civil rights activism to become a Marxist, who believed that only an economic revolution could produce a political one. However, others, most notably Martin Luther King (1929–1968), picked up the positions of the early Du Bois to advocate for social change. Malcolm X (1925–1965) became known for his more aggressive approach to racial inequality. Malcolm X's embrace of self-defense and economic self-sufficiency echoed or rhymed with Washington's approach, even if there is a much greater stridency and anger in his rhetoric.

It has been commonplace to pit Martin Luther King and Malcolm X against each other, as critics and scholars want to identify *the* rhetorical form that was successful in catalyzing the social, legal, and political reforms of the 1960s. In a perceptive analysis from 1991, religious scholar James Hal Cone argues that Martin Luther King and Malcolm X "*complemented* and *corrected* each other; each spoke a truth about America that cannot be fully comprehended with the insights of the other. Indeed, if Americans of all races intend to create a just and peaceful future, then they must listen to both Martin and Malcolm" (Cone 1991, p. 246). The genius of Cone's analysis is he realizes that social change happened because integrationist (King) and nationalist (X) positions worked together to create a political, social, and cultural change. They also spoke to the spiritual and emotional needs of different African Americans. Neither alone would have been successful. In a sense, the debate between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X echoed the debated between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, but with a shift in tone and perspective.

As Cone also points out, it was not merely their words or the arguments that mattered. Rather, it was their complementary characters. Martin Luther King offered the refined character of a formally trained Southern minister of solid middle-class upbringing. Malcolm X, on the other hand, represented poor urban blacks who had suffered from racism despite the relative absence of Jim Crow legislation in the North. Cone implores us to understand the pair in dialogic terms:

> We should never pit them against each other. Anyone, therefore, who claims to be for one and not the other does not understand their significance for the black community, for America, or for the world. We need both of them and we need them *together*. Malcolm keeps Martin from being turned into a harmless American hero. Martin keeps Malcolm from being an ostracized black hero. (p. 316)

Cone's dialogic approach to African American rhetoric serves as a model for how to understand and interpret African American writers and intellectuals. It reminds us that these authors and orators are not merely speaking to one audience or another, but to other writers and speakers as well. Throughout King's speeches, for example, he frequently quotes scripture, Socrates, and the Founding Fathers. From one point of view, King's texts, such as "The Letter from Birmingham Jail," seem more indebted to Greek Philosophy, Transcendentalism, and existentialism than other African American writers or thinkers. Such an analysis, however, would neglect that King deployed such sources to persuade whites that their own intellectual traditions demand black freedom. King's rhetoric also built on the efforts of earlier writers who sought to write African Americans into the European and American intellectual traditions. On the other hand, Malcolm X's project of rebuilding African American identity through a revisionist history that placed Africa—and not Europe—at the center of world history was, at heart, a program in character development. Malcolm X, through the Nation of Islam initially and later his own teachings, encouraged African Americans to take pride in themselves and become people of character who built black families, businesses, and communities.

The legacy of the Civil Rights movement is deeply connected to questions of ethos. This is probably best represented by the famous line from Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech: "I

have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." Many commentators have read this line to mean that Americans ought to develop a "colorblind" approach to understanding race. While this is clearly a portion of what King intended, such a reading rushes over a key assumption and distorts King's message. Like Phillis Wheatley during the late 18th century, King knew that African Americans were constantly being judged and labeled because of race. His appeal to character, here, is in the service of the particular political and social goals of equality and freedom. Despite his reputation for being a dreamer, King is enough of a realist to know that the appeal to character has the potential to forestall racial and racist judgments, at least in some instances. While character may be mutable, King implies that the existence of race-based judgment seems to be an all too permanent of a feature of American life. Although he is arguing for equality in the speech, King seems to assume almost unconsciously that white America will always question the value and worth of his children. Only character has the potential to protect them.

5. Ethos in Contemporary African American Literature

Since the 1980s and 1990s, civil rights activists have focused on how African Americans and other people of color disproportionately remain poor, undereducated and incarcerated, even though formal barriers in education, housing, and employment have been removed. The persistence of race and racism after the demise of Jim Crow has only sharpened the focus on character and identity in the African American rhetorical tradition. Questions of racial character have not diminished in contemporary life. While earlier periods emphasized the word "racial" in racial character, today the concept of character allows society to distinguish worthy from unworthy recipients of government protection, freedom, and wealth. For some critics, what keeps many African Americans undereducated, poor, incarcerated, and suffering from second-class citizenship is character, not race. It is choices, behaviors, habits, or values they adopt that have trapped many African Americans. Thus, any lingering gaps in achievement and wealth are not the result of racism, but flaws in African American culture. Conversely, the educational, economic, and political success of some African Americans once again suggests (to some) that it is not race or racism, but the relative failure of African American culture, writ large, which is the primary force holding back many African Americans.

Race continues to prove to be a significant social, cultural, political, and economic boundary. While that boundary is not a legal mandate, racial lines continue to divide our cities, workplaces, prisons, religious institutions, politics, and even our bookstores. The boundary is shadowy and not always easily definable, yet it is there. As today's critical race theorists, such as Michelle Alexander, Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Williams, and Bryan Stevenson would argue, race continues to shape policies and laws. The new legal regime requiring *de jure* discrimination allows enough wiggle room for disparate effects to happen without triggering antidiscrimination law. This can be seen most easily in our criminal justice system. As Michelle Alexander argues in *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander 2010), race still matters because we live in a world where more African American men are imprisoned today than during segregation despite a lowering national crime rate and evidence to suggest that people of all races commit crimes at about the same rate.[10]

Not only does character offer an easy explanation as to why some African Americans "succeed" and others "fall" behind, but it also produces conflict within the black community and alienation for individuals who do not fit dominant cultural ideas about racial identity. Many contemporary African American writers explore how social class, mixed-race identity, profession, gender, and sexual orientation have ruptured the putative African American nation and created significant numbers of

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[10] See also Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* (Stevenson 2014). His book describes how racism has profoundly affected the criminal justice system's treatment of African Americans, creating a situation where African Americans are much more likely to be facing the death penalty.

people who feel abandoned by the African American community. Consider Michael Thomas's novel, *Man Gone Down* (Thomas 2007). To critic Kenneth Warren, the novel symbolizes the end of African American literature because the character's struggle to come up with tuition money to a fancy New York private school for his mixed-race children is not shared by all African Americans. The novel's lengthy final scene focuses on a high stakes golf outing in which the protagonist is seeking to win his children's tuition money from some young and rich white men. Thomas's nameless main character (echoing the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's 1952 Invisible Man) does not face any overt racism, but he is facing an identity crisis and a crisis of values. The protagonist cannot help but view the contest, its stakes, and how the participants view him through the lens of America's racial history. The unnamed narrator is well aware of how his education, marriage, and concern about his children's private school tuition seem to place him outside of how the African American community has traditionally defined itself. The reason the golf outing has such symbolic power is that the novel's hero is trying to find a way to accommodate his conflicting desires to meet his white wife's expectations for an upper-middle-class life with his attachment to the African American community and his identity. His angst is the product of the changing boundaries of the African American community and identity, not his desire to abandon blackness or the social, political or cultural irrelevance of the African American community. In other words, the novel is concerned with whether a middle-class man married to a white woman possesses the ethos of African American culture.

Thomas's novel is not alone. Contemporary novels by African Americans, if not focused on historical trauma, explore the personal challenges of being black in contemporary America. Novels, such as Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* (Whitehead 2009), Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (Senna 1998), Martha Southgate's *Taste of Salt* (Southgate 2011), and Mat Johnson's *Pym* (2011), explore individual journeys to find self-acceptance, self-understanding, self-healing, and some form of social recognition and/or personal success. In other words, these are personal journeys, not metaphorical or symbolic ones representing all African Americans. These African American characters do not represent the masses of African Americans, or maybe even a large number. Rather, Colson Whitehead's upper-class Benjy or Senna's multiracial Birdie are interesting and complex, precisely because of the relatively unique way race affects their lives. They are nonetheless deeply concerned with ethos, as race and racial identity are not mere markers of biology but deeply intertwined with notions of culture and character. They also seek healing from the racial wounds and injuries from which they suffer.

Although an ancient concept, postclassical critiques of ethos, however, can help redefine the goals and stakes of contemporary African American literature in a putatively post-racial age. Today, even forty plus years after the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968, racial classifications, distinctions, and stereotypes continue to shape social interactions and policy decisions, albeit in less categorical ways than during Jim Crow segregation.[11] In the traditional Aristotelian model, ethos means character. Just as Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass embraced religious imagery and rhetoric in their writings to show that African Americans possessed moral self-worth and, thus, were deserving of freedom, contemporary writers frequently explore questions of identity and character as their protagonists try to achieve self-acceptance and social recognition. These questions of character and identity should not be considered beyond the scope of the African American rhetorical tradition, but part of the much older tradition of rhetoric that uses writing, drama, poetry, and oratory to consider how to live and live well. What distinguishes African American writers from others and thus make it a distinct tradition is how social recognition plays a much greater role in their rhetoric and the importance of using appeals to ethos as a form of self-healing.

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[11] For example, recent efforts to combat voter fraud (despite limited evidence of such fraud) seem directed at poorer African Americans who tend to vote for the Democratic Party. The main point, here, is not that the proponents of these measures are racist. Rather, the key point is that proponents feel fairly confident that they can predict, based on assumptions about character and identity, about how this will affect voter turnout and election results.

There is a second way that ethos can help provide some clarity about what African American literature and rhetoric is becoming. Before ethos got defined as "character," it meant a dwelling or haunt. I increasingly think of African American literature as a dwelling from which writers write and readers read. This dwelling, however, is not like a house from which a person can move or sell. African American literature is not an old house that one can put on the market and sell to the highest bidder. Ethos as dwelling does not work this way. Because ethos also connotes character, the dwelling place of ethos is also built upon a foundation of habits, social roles, and virtue. For the past forty or so years, humanities scholars have used the concept of culture to explain how behavior, rituals, beliefs, and values shape institutions and ideas. It also led to explanations about how institutions can possess racist or sexist cultures. While there is not a perfect overlap between ethos and culture, there is a relation. What if African American literature describes and represents the existential dwelling places or "houses," in the words of Toni Morrison, where African Americans live and the "homes"—both personal and communally—they want to find? While these existential dwellings have changed for many (but not all) African Americans as a result of the Civil Rights movement, the concept of race, however, has not disappeared. Nor are African Americans free from race, racism, or, what critical race theorists, call racialization. For better or worse, the concept of race and the reality of race shapes lives, especially for African Americans, and constitute a significant element of where they dwell. Moreover, because a dwelling place can offer shelter even if the roof needs repairing and the basement needs stabilization, the dwelling of African American culture is deeply connected to African American history, music, and cultural practices. As this article has explored, there is ongoing tension between conceptualizing African American identity as a grounded place or social location and as a journey of discovery.

As long as African Americans form a community and identify as such, African American literature will be a dwelling space for writers and readers. Questions of character and identity do not disappear simply because laws change. In fact, if the history of the Civil Rights movement has taught us anything, it is that it can ultimately prove easier to change laws than the underlying beliefs, habits, and rituals that supported them. The focus on ethos helps underscore how the concept of character within African American life is haunt and home at the same time. Rhetoric and the concept of ethos provide us tools to consider how culture continues to construct social relations, individual identities, and art even when legal discourse has changed.

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