

## INTRODUCTION

# Irredeemable Promise: The Bittersweet Career of J. Saunders Redding

**I**n the downward slope of a thirty-year publishing career, the fifty-two-year-old writer, professor, and literary critic J. Saunders Redding (1906–1988) brimmed with a final project. He wanted to work with the best fiction editors around to publish his second and as yet unwritten novel, a book that would redeem his career and confirm as worthwhile his efforts as a writer and teacher of literature. That early winter of 1959 Redding was going into his fifteenth year of teaching English at a small college in coastal Virginia and wondering about posterity's opinion of him.

A lean man with a confident air, who dressed in the Ivy League style, Redding was from an elite Delaware family and a devotee of the Protestant work ethic. Daily he labored over his books and articles in an upstairs room that his wife and sons were forbidden to enter during specific hours—the edict countermanded rarely, such as when Franklin Roosevelt died. In this upper room Redding had stacks of books, an unframed picture of his father, yellow pads and pencils, and cigarette smoke curling up the walls. It had been a place of productivity, but even his proven sanctuary rebuffed him as the year 1959 unwound.

The fretting that Redding showed that year was what he had displayed his whole writing life, and it was curious because he had already experienced unequivocal success as a writer. He had published long essays in *Harper's Magazine* and *Atlantic Monthly*. *Time Magazine* had reviewed his books and carried his photograph, along with *Saturday Review of Literature*. Redding had cornered literary prizes, like North Carolina's Mayflower Cup, awards noticeable enough that Dean Acheson's Department of State asked him to represent the United States on an extended tour of India as the country emerged from British satrapy to world power. Redding's second book, *No Day of Triumph* (1942), had been published by Harper and reviewed all over the nation. His first novel, *Stranger and Alone* (1950), had also been widely reviewed and deemed significant. He was personally gracious to the literary movers and shakers who supported him. When his sixth book, *An American in India* (1954), came out, he dedicated it to his editor Hiram Haydn. But when he put out feelers to publish a second novel, he did not generate the excitement of a well-known writer, prize winner, and potential best seller.

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Gloomy and filled with a sense of foreboding, Redding reacted like any well-connected writer in a similar situation. He wrote his most powerful friends to steady him. On New Year's Day 1959, Redding sent a note to Henry Allen Moe, the head of the Guggenheim Foundation for more than twenty years. In the letter he chronicled his interminable delays before coming to terms with Bennett Cerf of Random House, a prize among New York literary publishers. Moe, who had authorized a fellowship for Redding in 1944, was in a position to offer another grant so that Redding could finish his project. The professor was disappointed that it had taken a year and a half to relieve himself from a contract clause with the earnest but not profoundly distinguished Indianapolis publishing outfit Bobbs-Merrill, where Hiram Haydn had worked.

In the new year, magic began. In March another Guggenheim went to Saunders Redding, and Bobbs-Merill released him so that he could follow Haydn to Random House. He would call the new book *Cross and Crown*. To friends like Moe, he described a straightforward program for the novel: it would be a sequel. "My plan can be stated simply: it is to write a novel in which the protagonist of *Stranger and Alone* is again the protagonist and in which he brings about his redemption."<sup>1</sup> The redemption of his identity as an American figured highly in the mind of J. Saunders Redding.

The task of narrative rescue went unfinished. Even with a Random House book contract to match his prestigious Guggenheim, Redding neglected the project and spent the year at conferences and in turning himself into a better spokesman. For the liberal arts colleges he prepared a lecture series on international affairs called "People, Policy, and Propaganda." Redding traveled the country and fielded more lucrative job offers than the one he had at Hampton Institute. The five chapters he had written of *Cross and Crown* remained in the desk of the upper room.

Considering what he was up against, perhaps Redding's inability to complete the novel makes sense. "I want to get on to other things. The obligations imposed by race on the average or talented Negro are vast and become at last onerous," Redding had written in a moment of self-reflective torment. Perhaps to a proportion greater than any single one of his contemporaries, J. Saunders Redding resented his situation as a black American who came of age in the late 1930s, wrote successfully in the 1940s and 1950s, and finished a career in publishing by the early 1960s. For Redding, the entire era was characterized by grand opportunity diminished by his own immobilizing feelings of guilt toward his ethnic inheritance, self-loathing, distorted patriotism, and rage. In his book *On Being Negro in America* (1951), he revealed a cry of anguish that resonated deeply for the African American writers of his time. "I am tired of giving up my initiative to these demands. I hope this piece will stand as the epilogue to whatever contribution I have made to the 'literature of the race.'"<sup>2</sup>

J. Saunders Redding never shook the suspicion that his duty toward the “literature of the race” had ruined his abilities as a writer. He sensed that his creative talents had curdled because he had to work so diligently to integrate American society; and none of the trinkets he earned lastingly satisfied him. Why did he feel so strongly at the very end of the 1950s that an optimistic, redemptive statement in fiction was necessary to give his career lasting merit? Why was Redding ignored by the next generation, and his work forgotten? What struggles did he have with his fellow black writers that have made it impossible for his contribution to be recognized? How did the African American intellectual’s attitude toward accepting the values of liberal American critics and intellectuals dramatically shift? The intellectual and artistic struggles during the twenty-five-year arc of Redding’s career from the mid-1930s throughout the 1950s is emblematic of an indignant generation of black writers.

In 1940 Ralph Ellison applauded the “indignant consciousness” of Richard Wright’s character Bigger Thomas. He praised the black character by writing, “He, Bigger, has what Hegel called the ‘indignant consciousness’ and because of this he is more human than those who sent him to his death; for it was they, not he, who fostered the dehumanizing conditions which shaped his personality. When the ‘indignant consciousness’ becomes the ‘theoretical consciousness’ indignant man is aware of his historical destiny and fights to achieve it. Would that *all* Negroes were psychologically as free as Bigger and as capable of positive action!”<sup>23</sup> Twenty-seven-year-old Ellison understood well the impact of *Native Son* and its electricity for black writers and intellectuals, a group who theoretically transformed their indignation at Jim Crow to manufacture a strata of artworks that secured and pronounced a new era of psychological freedom for African Americans. But the black artists’ startling aesthetic, institutional, and commercial successes have overshadowed history’s awareness of their “positive action” or contribution to a group “historical destiny.” Individual black writers did so well, especially between 1940 and 1953, that the idea of the artists operating as a cohort has been obscured.

Redding started his career during the Great Depression, a time when writers like Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, and James Farrell portrayed human life with naturalist or social realist techniques. The portrait of ordinary American life was often undergirded by a positive belief in the perfection of human society, generally compatible with Marxism, and in favor of eradicating gross material disparities in America. The focus on problems of masses of working-class Americans and their day-to-day lives positively signaled a new willingness to extend justice to African Americans. But during Redding’s middle writing years, “modern” writing methods arrived, or rather embedded themselves at elite academic institutions and the intellectual journals. These were elaborate and often difficult literary techniques that made a

case for individual, not societal, transformation. The modernist literary tradition insinuated that the writer's prime obligation to improve society was fulfilled by creating literature that shaped the moral, ethical, and psychological structure of the individual. Yet to Redding's mind, neither the slogan of the social realist nor the individual preoccupation of the modernist was fully satisfying.

If economic disaster in American society in the 1930s had a hand in making a physical place for Redding, the theoretical mechanics for this had existed earlier. A generation before Redding's debut, the American liberal intellectuals on the edge of World War I had encouraged a kind of cultural pluralism, enabling the participation in American life of non-Nordic ethnic stock. And it was not the economic radicals in the vanguard. Horace Kallen had prepared Americans to capitalize on the specific attributes of an integrated ethnic American experience in the 1915 essay "Democracy versus the Melting Pot." Kallen thought of America as capable of profitably bringing together diverse composites that retained their distinctions. "As in an orchestra," he concluded, "every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization."<sup>4</sup> Kallen found reason to celebrate ethnic particularity, but he had not dealt with the relationship between producing fine cultural artifacts and having access to society's resources.<sup>5</sup> How would black artists learn to play their tunes without teachers, instruments, and freedom from everyday labor in order to practice? A young black writer of a certain privilege, Redding had an additional struggle. His first angst—widely shared by his peers—was finding and feeling comfortable with the idea of his own ethnic melody. Then, by the time that he did that, the wind had shifted and subordinated culture to economics.

Following the stock market crash of 1929, the wide-scale intervention by the federal government into the American economy and the increasing prominence of communists and left-wing political groups signaled a passionate, rambling renewal of the liberal pledge to individual rights and social welfare, and one that increasingly saw culture as utterly subordinate to economics and politics. In a 1935 lecture at the University of Virginia, John Dewey redefined the crisis in American liberalism and in the process secured culture to economics and considerably reduced the power of ethnic distinctiveness. The marriage between culture and economics prepared the way for a new term: social liberalism. Dewey reminded the listeners of the classic liberal tradition that descended from John Locke through Thomas Jefferson and grew up in the nineteenth century with John Stuart Mill. Dewey hoped to convince his audience that it had become necessary for classic liberals to become social liberals. He argued for

the poverty of the classic position, which took the term in practice to mean nothing more than a laissez-faire government approach to business regulation, relying on the theory that the only condition necessary for free action was the absence of constraint.

The dire poverty of the Depression immensely helped Dewey's arguments in favor of refining classic liberalism, as did increasingly relational and contingent global political affairs. Dewey proposed that the majority of America's liberals "are committed to the principle that organized society must use its powers to establish conditions under which the mass of individuals can possess actual as distinct from merely legal liberty."<sup>6</sup> Distinguishing between freedom from constraint and freedom to act, Dewey defined the contemporary liberal mission in terms that must have cheered a then twenty-nine-year-old Saunders Redding for what it said about a fundamental recognition of disparity in American life. Social liberalism "signifies liberation from material insecurity and from the coercions and repressions that prevent multitudes from participation in the vast cultural resources that are at hand," Dewey told his listeners.<sup>7</sup>

Dewey primed an audience including publishers, philanthropists, and educators that would transform the scope of American culture and greatly ease the obstacles to at least partial participation for blacks like Redding. From the time of Dewey's pronouncement through the end of the 1940s, a windfall of resources did open up and national public attitudes changed. But an assumption underlying the discussion about democratizing resources was that blacks would achieve full success when they had assimilated to white American values and cultural models.

The touchstone for the liberal repudiation of Kallen's orchestra of ethnic distinctiveness and Dewey's "freedom from material insecurity" was Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 *American Dilemma*. Approaching the situation of racial segregation directly, Myrdal defined the country's racial dilemma as a moral problem, a failure to live up to a creed of belief. The Swedish economist affirmed that Americans' idea of themselves was properly grounded in liberal traditions in private property and Western individual rights philosophy; the problem was only that blacks were excluded. Myrdal did not make an argument for black misery on account of poverty of resources; nor did he believe that there was anything culturally specific or historically important about African American life. The only question revolved around whether or not whites would permit complete assimilation.

Even with those caveats, the window for the country's liberal soul searching was narrow. By the later 1940s, American liberalism made what Irving Howe would call "the turn in politics toward an increasingly conservative kind of liberalism."<sup>8</sup> Ex-communists and ex-leftists redeemed their radical pasts by making what historian Michael Kimmage calls the "conservative turn"—overtures

to American patriotism, traditional religion, and the voicing of some cynicism about the potential for human change.<sup>9</sup> Their revisionist work began to obscure the idea that racial prejudice had ever been a dominant layer of American thought or that resources had been monopolized and blacks excluded.

By 1950 the highly regarded Columbia University English professor Lionel Trilling could comfortably announce in a collection of essays called *The Liberal Imagination* that a broad public sensibility of fairness and ethical judgment abounded all over the nation and that liberalism was the only source and viable flower of the American intellectual tradition. Trilling proposed that only a robust criticism and complex literature—as in one that borrowed from works that both sustained and critiqued the status quo—could safeguard individual choice and political and religious freedom, guarantee lack of interference, and, of course, deal with racial prejudice. Turning himself into a kind of Whittaker Chambers of literary criticism, Trilling implied that instead of radical politics, smart and dissenting liberals would account for themselves in literature, the “human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty.”<sup>10</sup> Trilling’s reliability as a judge of American tradition was strongly reinforced by his own Jewishness; it was understood that he could be relied upon to record candidly the existence of prejudice in America.

But Trilling’s willingness to erect a myth of liberal America and to embrace writers and ideas that had been hostile or indifferent to a concept like a racially pluralist American society was always a difficult maneuver for black writers. In the dozen years before *The Liberal Imagination*, African American writers had emphasized the crisis in resources and the cruelty of whites. Their characterizations had been studies of human ugliness, frustration, and bitterness. They had hoped to demonstrate the deep humanity within the individual African American life that was curbed by punishing social and economic injustice.<sup>11</sup> Redress of inequality had seemed a prerequisite to entering the mainstream of American culture. But in the wake of Myrdal and Trilling, the cultural field-generals who Ralph Ellison had in mind when he once described the unwitting treachery of “neutrals,” “sympathizers,” and “disinterested military advisors,”<sup>12</sup> black writers were told to shift their focus to things like “possibility,” or optimism in the American scene, and “difficulty,” which also meant courting the elites. These were among the terms of the new definition of American liberalism by the end of the 1940s. As the longed for era of liberalized racial relations began, it brought with it the aesthetic practices of high modernism and cast out those of literary realism that had described social and racial catastrophe.

The dust had not settled by 1956 when *Phylon*, the flagship literary journal for black academics during the era of segregation, published one of Redding’s most alert peers, the literary critic Arthur P. Davis. A Howard University professor

and Columbia University Ph.D., Davis wrote in bittersweet tones of the impact the disruption of the old racial order was having on black writers. "I think we can safely say that the leaven of integration is very much at work," Davis announced.<sup>13</sup> He was torn because the victory after nearly one hundred years of postbellum struggle carried a sharp and unintended consequence for black creative artists. "It has forced the Negro creative artist to play down his most cherished tradition." The "cherished tradition" that black writers had to shuck in the face of the "new climate" was the style of writing, elegant or vitriolic, that wailed against racial conditions. While protest fiction's effectiveness in the giant political goal of ridding the country of racial persecution and discrimination was debatable, it had, as a force distinct from the Harlem Renaissance and for more than twenty years by 1959, reopened the publishing industry to black writers.

The shift in publishing taste to protest writing and back again, and the relationship between the emerging black writer, aesthetics, and politics in the United States, were markedly different from the black writing boom of the 1920s. Around the time of the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision, most of the major publishing houses enlisted the work of at least one black novelist, dealers in words who lifted their pens in the struggle of art and life, but who also served notice to the new American racial liberalism. Harper touted Richard Wright, who in two works sold nearly one million hardcover copies; Random House claimed the erudite Ralph Ellison but shored itself up commercially with the blockbuster sensation Willard Motley; Farrar, Straus published all four of William Gardner Smith's books; Houghton Mifflin supported Ann Petry; James Baldwin started out with Knopf and then settled in at Dial; and even the poet Gwendolyn Brooks tested the waters of seminarative fiction at Harper.

Some of the better established journals carried a regular Negro writer to report on the episodes of racial realignment in the country: *Commentary*, *Nation*, *New Republic*, *American Scholar*, *Partisan Review*, *New Leader*, *Reporter*, *Saturday Review of Literature*, and *Survey Graphic* would all have at least semiregular Negro contributors before the end of the 1940s. Obviously the inclusion of black writers, which began in earnest during the Second World War, was prima facie evidence of a new world: the very presence of the writers symbolized the end of the conditions that they described. Less a report from the frontiers of apartheid, the black writers and their protest books had the effect of depicting a door closing on an era.<sup>14</sup> But had racial oppression, and the imperative requiring artists to contribute to its demise, really dissolved? The liberalism that amassed itself in American centers of learning and in dense urban areas tended to say that it had.

The new assumptions were not easy for everyone capable of taking advantage of them. "Play[ing] down his most cherished tradition" damaged a man like

Saunders Redding, who had been talked of, between 1942 and 1952, as the most promising black prose writer in the country. But during the lift-off years of his career, a feeling of self-described “morbidity” weakened him. Redding worried that he was misperforming his role as a black American, and he maintained a brittle exterior to impress the public. In his novel *Stranger and Alone* he had described the condition that affected him and his generation, especially men like Chester Himes: “it was the horrible thing the retreat from their ambition had done to them. It had made them very hard and brittle outside, and very soft inside, like two-minute eggs. If you crack the shell, she said, everything runs out.”<sup>15</sup>

Redding’s yolk ran at least in part because he witnessed himself losing his audience. *No Day of Triumph* was among the most important narratives published by an African American in the 1940s, a book that belonged in the company of Wright’s *Native Son* and *Black Boy* and Petry’s *The Street*. *No Day of Triumph*’s disappearance in favor of the novels of Redding’s much better known contemporaries Ellison, Petry, and James Baldwin emphasizes the neglected historical moment of influential writers and critics in the 1940s and 1950s.

Once the movement abandoning protest writing was under way in earnest, as early as Baldwin’s biting 1947 reviews in the pages of *New Leader* and culminating in 1949 with his frontal assault on social realism, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” critics were quick to chide anything smacking of too much bitterness. It seemed to be a sign of victimhood. In a span of five years, Americans went from shock at the moral ugliness Myrdal had exposed to a feeling that the protest fiction genre was overworked exaggeration. Black writers were reminded that Richard Wright had exhausted the genre’s possibilities with *Native Son* in 1940.

The speedy transformation of American society from racial indifference to racial liberalism rode on the back of a paradox. Negro writers were encouraged to find a new home in the “mainstream,” and their mortgage was loyalty to it. At the same time that justice impartial to race in American courtrooms became at least not impossible, American civil liberties faced increasing jeopardy in congressional hearing rooms. Americans seemed to be on a very different path than white South Africans were to addressing racial division following the Second World War. But the outward face of increasing tolerance concealed the political economy of a dangerous interior. When it was happening, Bob Bone, an important white critic of African American literature, found the country’s accelerated efforts at racial integration necessary to feed the growing needs of the military industry. America’s “unconscious drive for national unity” served to strengthen the “permanent war economy.”<sup>16</sup>

Redding’s public brittleness and emotional runniness reflect the precariousness of an entire movement of black writers, critics, and poets from the second half of the 1930s through the end of the 1950s. They were sometimes called the



“Richard Wright School” or were pulled together even more vaguely as an “Integrationist” literary movement. In a sense they were both and neither. Richard Wright was the dominant figure of African American literature, from the time he started publishing in 1935 to his death in 1960. His concerns—to develop a literary style that competed on the stage of world opinion and a literature of ideas—were ambitions widely shared by his fellow black writers. Wright’s lifelong relationships with writers in Chicago and New York touch on the prime geographies and include very many of the personalities that wrote the books that proved the downfall of racial segregation in American public life and the maturity of African American literature. Furthermore, never before had so many liberal integrated institutions been available to more than a handful of black writers and thinkers. The Federal Writers’ Project, the Communist Party and its umbrella groups like the National Negro Congress and the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, the Julius Rosenwald Foundation, the Artists’ Colony at Yaddo—all these famously welcomed and cultivated African American artists at one point or another during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

But to name the period after its star is yet a misnomer. Wright, whose influence, reputation, and intellectual energy may have dominated the movement briefly during the early 1940s, largely disappeared after he left for France and the widespread overturning of social realist literature took place. Nor were all the writers, like the famous iconoclast Zora Neale Hurston, or the members of the two Harlem Writers’ collectives of the late 1940s and 1950s, committed integrationists. Certainly black writers wished to see the prohibitions of segregation struck down, but integration into the “mainstream” was hardly uncritically endorsed. In his early years a man like J. Saunders Redding had never even liked the stance; he was uneasy with and had accepted the standpoint of integration as a drowning man gasping for air. “It was rather like the action of one who kicks and splashes frantically to save himself from drowning and suddenly finds that he has reached a shelf on which he can stand in the river bed. His objective was not the shelf, but just to be saved. I kicked and splashed in all directions, and suddenly there I was.”<sup>17</sup>

Swimming in the direction of integration had one greatly tangible benefit, which was to increase the number of educational facilities for black America. Perhaps the principal component of the sweeping historical change was the bona fide generation of African Americans with access to colleges, graduate schools, and liberal institutions, who made up a reading public and comprised the group of artists that came of age during the World War II and cold war eras. Redding’s life, frustration, and aspiration touched on similar yearnings experienced by a large and historic cadre that included Alger Adams (who published under the name Philip B. Kaye), William Attaway, James Baldwin, Alden Bland, Edward Bland, Arna Bontemps, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lloyd Brown, Sterling

Brown, Alice Browning, Anatole Broyard, Horace Cayton, John Henrik Clarke, Harold Cruse, Arthur P. Davis, Charles T. Davis, William Demby, Owen Dodson, Ralph Ellison, Nick Aaron Ford, Fern Gayden, Eugene Gordon, Richard Gibson, Hugh Gloster, Rosa Guy, Lorraine Hansberry, Robert Hayden, Chester Himes, George Wylie Henderson, Carl Moses Holman, Eugene Holmes, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Blyden Jackson, LeRoi Jones (who later became Amiri Baraka), Ernest Kaiser, John O. Killens, Curtis Lucas, Paule Marshall, Julian Mayfield, Claude McKay, Marian Minus, Albert Murray, Ann Petry, Dorothy Porter, Willard Savoy, William Chancellor Smith, William Gardner Smith, Will Thomas, Melvin B. Tolson, Waters Turpin, Margaret Walker, Theodore Ward, Dorothy West, Richard Wright, and Frank Yerby.

Not all whites pivoted toward the center as sharply as Lionel Trilling. Writers and critics like Bucklin Moon, Lillian Smith, and Thomas Sancton made it possible for politically radical black writers like Ralph Ellison, Ann Petry, and Chester Himes to get book contracts, to meet publishers and agents, and to place their work in magazines. Edwin Embree of the Julius Rosenwald Fund administered a large philanthropic grant to black artists from the 1920s through the 1940s, which the lion's share of black creative writers during this era received. Fascinatingly and in an era of overt, palpable bigotry, the spearhead of the integration movement included the best of white America's liberal intelligentsia. This was the cohort who yanked the country into a new era; *The Indignant Generation* is their story.

*The Indignant Generation* is a synthetic social movement history that charts the overlooked achievement of J. Saunders Redding's generation in mostly three-year chunks. The book follows the writers as they circulate in and through the intellectual hubs: Washington, D.C., New York, and Chicago. It begins by looking at the genesis of the politically committed writers' movement during the 1930s and then follows it through its most spectacular success in the first half of the 1940s. The signal origin year of 1934 sees Richard Wright gaining national notice, the beginning of the Communist Party's Popular Front strategy, and the death of New Negro movement icons Wallace Thurman and Rudolph Fisher. But crucially, for a twentieth-century literary movement, 1934 is the year of the publication of a rare black "little" magazine, *Challenge*, edited by Dorothy West.

The middle portion of the book looks at the great climb to literary modernism and liberalism in the 1940s and early 1950s. During this period black writers found the elusive quality of artistic success and intellectual respect. The transformative "long decade" introduced to the national scene a group of amazingly mature and brilliant black writers. The fifteen-year period began with Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* and ended with a blockbuster 1953 that witnessed James Baldwin's first novel, Gwendolyn Brooks's only fiction, and Ann

Petry's finest high modernist tour de force. In this important epoch, black American writers became best sellers and prize winners, and their much celebrated individual accolades seemed to outstrip the very notion of a cohort. Richard Wright became the first writer of African descent to sell copies of his books in the hundreds of thousands; and added to that was the fact that he was a major intellectual force in his era. J. Saunders Redding won a southern literary prize in 1943; Willard Motley's 1947 novel *Knock on Any Door* did so well that Humphrey Bogart starred in the film version; Gwendolyn Brooks's *Annie Allen* of 1949 was the first work by a black American to win the Pulitzer Prize; and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* of 1952 claimed the National Book Award. Indeed, in 1953 it could seem as if racial discrimination against black writers was a thing of the past.

The final period of *The Indignant Generation* examines the artists who repudiated mainstream aesthetics and political compromise and prepared the ground for the militant writers of the 1960s and the aggressive rejection of American liberal ideals. The modernists of the 1940s and early 1950s had redeemed a historical past that enabled black writers to challenge more fully the prominence of the Western artistic tradition itself, a move that began to question the value of integration and cut against the assimilation politics that was at the core of the 1940s black liberal stand. But as they ran counter to the public mood, writers faced deadly isolation and difficulty in articulating their ideas and asserting themselves in opposition to those who had supported them. The "new" liberalism of Lionel Trilling went hand-in-glove with the conservative backlash that followed the Second World War and created conditions ripe for McCarthyism as well as a more general quieting of dissent. The struggle of the later 1950s revealed the key tensions that determined the artistic and aesthetic approach of black writers during the 1960s. Surprisingly, the writers of the integration era paved the way for the black aesthetic movement of the 1960s through a variety of responses to the "new" freedom available in the "liberal" age: among them, anger, expatriation, disillusionment, and artistic silence.

By posing a new period—1934 to 1960—and suggesting that there is a confluence in the career arc between ghostlike J. Saunders Redding and the much better known Richard Wright, we can gain important insights into the anguished artistic and political choices facing African American writers who embraced artistic naturalism in the 1930s and modernism after the second half of the 1940s. The period approach helps us to understand the deep suspicion toward Western society that encouraged the younger generation of black artists to advocate a radical departure from Western models particularly by the mid-1950s and flowering in the 1960s. By focusing on the quarter century between the Great Depression and the Bay of Pigs as a social movement, we regain access to a vital time during which key formal barriers fell that had prohibited

African Americans from full participation in the cultural and literary life of American society.

What happens when we examine the twentieth-century breakthroughs for African American writing within the context of a group, such as the commercial breakthroughs of Richard Wright, Frank Yerby, and Willard Motley, and the artistic breakthroughs of Gwendolyn Brooks and Ralph Ellison? To take one example, Frank Yerby examined in isolation seems merely the creation of a Madison Avenue advertisement and publicity machine. But in closer relation to his network at *Challenge* magazine and the Chicago Federal Writers' Project, Yerby's fuller, more complex, and radical literary achievement emerges. By concerning ourselves with milieu, we can better approach the resounding authority of the individual achievement, especially since all the benchmark achievements of Wright, Yerby, Motley, Brooks, and Ellison occurred within twelve years. Additionally, two of the people, Wright and Ellison, were collaborators, and four of them—Wright, Yerby, Motley, and Brooks—were Chicago-bred intellectuals and social realists.

Only recently have we begun to reckon fully with the import and prominence of the American Communist Party as an engine of intellectual and artistic development for black Americans who were committed to issues of social and economic justice. But how much more can we learn if we look over time at the multiple organizations and ideological tendencies that came out of the American Communist movement in conjunction with the other significant institutions shaping African American writers at the time, such as the Federal Writers' Project and the Julius Rosenwald Fund? When we do this, we see the political limitations of the mainstream organizations, as well as the ambiguity that many of the writers regularly exhibited toward demanding ideological movements. Perhaps most important, a study of a twenty-five-year movement and historic group presents for the record the challenges and contributions made by black Americans to a more broadly conceived liberalism in American public life before and after the Second World War.

As consequential as the black writers' relationship to liberal, communist, and anticommunist politics is the work and point of view of the significant African American intellectual class teaching at black colleges—people like J. Saunders Redding, whose contribution too often has been ignored. When we attach less well-known artists and critics to the mid-twentieth-century literary bloc, our orientation shifts. For example, when African American critical voices are added to the famous debate between Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright over the uses of folk realism and political naturalism, we find less evidence of a squabble with roots in misogyny than we do of a rather strong clash in the sphere of cultural politics, particularly the ideological challenges put to traditional philanthropic organs by Communist-backed institutions during the

Popular Front era. By including black critics from historically black colleges, writers with only coterie followings, and fledgling black journals, we enhance the possibilities for generating new definitions for black literary politics in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

By examining a temporal chunk and sifting through the literature, newspapers, journals, literary archives, and institutional records for their ample conjunctions, we can also reconstruct the valuable relationships between visionary white liberals—the professional critics as well as those in the publishing industry—and black writers. Carl Van Vechten is well regarded as an important custodian of black letters during the 1920s and 1930s, but who replaced this white broker in the 1940s and 1950s? How was the message of emerging black writers shaped and contained during the period? How much of mid-twentieth-century liberalism and cold war anticommunism was foisted upon black writers as a requirement for their acceptance in circles of influence and prestige?

Disillusioned and unable to finish his novel, J. Saunders Redding certainly paid the price of black liberals dissatisfied with liberalism and with even fewer places of relevance to go by the end of the 1950s. However, he was not alone in his dimming. Several of the bright lights that had shone so fiercely in the 1940s and early 1950s had burned to dull embers before the end of the decade. There were several examples of the flicker and snuff of talents that were the equal to Redding. Globally, Richard Wright would be dead by 1960, and even his legacy as an internationalist dismissed. Chester Himes had taken to writing detective fiction to support himself in Europe, since it had become impossible to earn a living as the writer of serious fiction in the United States. By 1960 Gwendolyn Brooks would write poems for Emmett Till and Little Rock, evidence of an emotional fire that would lead her to reclaim the black audience and reject white publishers entirely. Ralph Ellison, a fellow at the American Academy in Rome between 1955 and 1957 and already renowned as a slow writer, had in effect finished the chief creative output of his years. Ann Petry, one of the most gifted and successful of the black writers, ended her career as a writer of adult fiction in 1953. William Gardner Smith, the precocious and phenomenal talent who published a well-received novel at the age of twenty-two and who went on to write three more, neither gathered a collective of interest around his work nor developed his talent. He remained an expatriate. And James Baldwin, who would become the most famous of them all, distanced himself from his early liberal backers and embraced black suffering.

The next generation of writers born in the 1930s and 1940s would answer central questions about racial and cultural politics differently from their older predecessors. They soon challenged the idea that America had much to offer in

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the way of culture or civilization. Julian Mayfield captured much of this new discontent of a postintegration generation in his poignantly titled 1959 speech, "Out of the Mainstream and into Oblivion." By the end of the decade America was poised to explode, and even had he finished it, it is doubtful that Redding's novel of redemption would have prepared them.