A Critique of Pure Pluralism

Men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies, to a greater or lesser extent: they cannot change their grandfathers.

Horace Kallen

Reviewing the new (fifth) edition of James D. Hart's *Oxford Companion to American Literature*, Joe Weixlmann praises the editor's effort to expand the coverage of black authors, yet finds the volume's treatment of black, ethnic, female, and modern writers ultimately insufficient and wanting. Weixlmann concludes that "the old, venerable *Oxford Companion to American Literature*, despite its partial facelift, remains in its current incarnation, a product of such staid American and academic values as racism, sexism, traditionalism, and elitism."

This identification of deplorable omissions with a scholar's bias is quite common in the current debates. Frequently an opposition is constructed between close-minded narrowness (sexism, racism, elitism) and the alternative of inclusive openness associated with what is often called "cultural pluralism." In his essay "Minority Literature in the Service of Cultural Pluralism," included in one of the several Modern Language Association readers on American ethnic literature which were published in the last decade, David Dorsey writes:


Only from the diverse literatures can youth feel the meaning of the past... At present diversity is everywhere tolerated in theory, punished in practice, and nowhere justified or justifiable beyond an appeal to solipsism. But America has no choice. Only a genuinely pluralistic society can henceforth prosper here. It must be nurtured in our diverse hearts. And for that we need literature, which is the language of the heart.

In this scholarly drama of diversity and pluralism versus traditionalism and prejudice there is emotion and prophecy just as there are heroes and villains. The editors of another MLA reader, *Ethnic Perspectives in American Literature* (1983), write:

Ethnic pluralism, once the anathema to those who espoused the melting-pot theory, has become a positive, stimulating force for many in our country... Transforming the national metaphors from "melting pot" to "mosaic" is not easy. Indeed, the pieces of that national mosaic have been cemented in place with much congealed blood and sweat. We must all continue to work at making the beauty of our multietnicity shine through the dulness of racism that threatens to cloud it.

*Mosaics from the Heart*

Perhaps only surpassed by the "melting pot," the "literary canon" may hold a record as a contemporary scapegoat. Sometimes angrily described as the typical fiction of a rather malicious white male imagination, the canon has been seen as a central source of evil in literary scholarship, in ways not so different from the manner in which nineteenth-century nativists condemned "povery." Attacks on exclusionary canons of the past and their presumably bigoted institutionalizers have often been accompanied by arguments in favor of the assumed democratic openness of uncanonized and apocryphal texts. This has tended to produce sectarian and fragmented histories of American lit-


eratures (in the plural) instead of American literary history. The
"literary series" which are constructed in new American his-
torical narratives are sometimes single-sex and single-ethnic-
group series. In the absence of a pope, what are we to do about
the problem of the canon in rewriting American literary history?
Let me raise some questions here.

Is exclusionary canonization merely a matter of bad attitude
or of prejudice? Are we likely to produce a more comprehen-
sive literary history if we are dutifully penitent of our ethno-
religious, regional, and sexual biases? The example of Thomas
Wentworth Higginson suggests that this is not necessarily the
case. Though Higginson, a Civil War colonel in the first Negro
regiment, can hardly be described as insensitive toward blacks,
he never mentions Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* or any other
Afro-American text in his *Reader's History of American Lit-
erature* (1903).

Is lack of awareness the problem? Will we overcome our flaws
and biases once we recognize them in other literary histories?
Here the example of V. F. Calverton is discouraging: in *The
Liberation of American Literature* (1932), Calverton includes
a pretty strong antiexclusionary footnote:

In this connection it is important to remark that, despite this interest
in the Negro by many Southern writers and despite the rise of many
Negro writers, the hostility felt for the Negro is just as active to-day
in the South as it was twenty years ago. This hostility is just as pro-
nounced in many ways in literature as in life. *In the sixteen-volume
library of Southern Literature, for example, not a single Negro writer's work is included.* While the biographical section gives mention to Freder-
rick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois, it does
not quote a single selection from their works. Paul Laurence Dunbar
is not even mentioned in the entire sixteen volumes. Needless to add,
dozens of Southern writers whose works are greatly inferior to those
of Douglass, Washington, and Du Bois are included, with ample space
provided for their oftentimes inferior selections. Equally revealing is the
fact that Professor Fred L. Pattee in his recent volume, *American
Literature since 1870*, does not even mention a single Negro writer,
although he discusses hundreds of white writers, many of whose works
are of no more than microscopical importance. Such promising Negro
poets as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen are not even mentioned
in the index; Eddie Guest, on the other hand, is given two pages of
discussion—and partial praise.4

Yet Calverton himself, aware though he was of the issue, never
mentions Douglass (except in this footnote). Incidentally, de-
spite his good anti-Southern intentions, Calverton adheres to
an exoticist definition of Negro art which views actual Negro
poets as unfortunately Westernized compromisers of some real
Negro spirit that seems to exist only outside of bourgeois forms.
Dunbar, he tells us, "was at his best when he wrote in the
language of his people and not in the language of the poets."5

Is it a matter of defining literature? If only we can define
literature broadly enough, will we be able to be more catholic
in writing literary history? Yet another Douglass example tells
us that this is not necessarily the case. Arthur Hobson Quinn's
*History of American Literature* (1951), which emphasizes non-
belles-lettres writing throughout the periods, contains a huge
chapter on "Literature, Politics, and Slavery" that fails to men-
tion Douglass.

I have used *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* (1845) as an
example because it is so conspicuously absent from past literary
histories—it is mentioned neither in Barrett Wendell's *Literary
History of America* (1905) nor in Robert Spiller's *Literary His-
tory of the United States* (1947)—and yet so unavoidable a text
in a literary history of the 1980s. The case of its neglect illustrates
that exclusionary canonization is not necessarily correlated to
bias (in the manner in which Calverton correlated Southern
racism and the *Library of Southern Literature* and Weichmann
ascertained racism and sexism to the *Oxford Companion*). My three
literary historians (Higginson, Calverton, and Quinn) would
have found fuel for their basic contentions in Douglass' work,
yet it did not enter their notions of a "canon."

One further example may suggest that this case is not an ex-
ception. Granville Hicks's *The Great Tradition* (1935) ignores
Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (the inclusion of

4. V. F. Calverton, *The Liberation of American Literature* (New York: Scrib-
ner's, 1932), p. 148.
5. Ibid., p. 143.
which would have strengthened Hicks’s case), whereas the Cambridge History of American Literature—which appeared virtually at the same time as Cahan’s novel (1917)—does devote a paragraph to the book. Ironically, this paragraph appears in a section on Yiddish writing, yet the contributor points out that the English-language Levinsky far surpasses all Yiddish-American prose publications taken together. The apocryphal text Levinsky thus is excluded when it would support the argument, and discussed when it undermines the rationale for a chapter.

Structuring or reconstructing an American literary canon is not necessarily a matter of good intentions or moral probity. Yet the contexts which are consciously or unconsciously accepted as guidelines for a massive history do influence our principles of inclusion (which are inevitably also principles of exclusion). In the past ten years the attacks on bigoted exclusionists—as we saw, prefigured by critics like Calverton—have encouraged the creation of new contexts according to previously excluded categories. The pluralistic demands are quite audible in discussions surrounding literary historiography. In a recent issue of MELUS, Marco A. Portales makes a plea to give “Space” to “other literary Traditions” (and not only to Anglo-American writers) in order to arrive at a new type of American literary history:

one that would detail the stories of writers who have not made it into the canon as the editors of the [Literary History of the United States] and their predecessors defined it, but who nevertheless are as American and the study of which would subtly serve not to continue divisions among our people, but to teach all of us to appreciate the rich cultural diversity that we should have been stressing since American Literature was brought into existence shortly before the turn of the century.  

It is Portales’ declared (and laudable) intention to deprovincialize the teaching of American literature—but what is offered as the alternative is theoretically problematic. The proposal rests on the identification of assimilation with white Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemony—which can thus be opposed in a wholesale fashion—and on the belief in “Traditions” which just continue because of the power of descent. The remedy “Space” is seen in what might appear a very American way; not a finite outer limit of, say, a selective 5,000-page history with certain minimal shares for different writers, but as a flexibly limitless and ultimately all-inclusive thing. Yet a literary history now could not be more inclusive than those of the past without being explicitly exclusive, too; and it is here that more theoretical statements have to be made to offset the unrealistic combination of pluralist faith and the idea of limitless space, which ethnic literature might traverse like Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier. Reference books will not just grow bigger and bigger in the near future, so we must think about the way limited space can be used to accommodate new trends and traditional expectations. Of course, writers should not be excluded by virtue of race, region, or gender; but at the same time, should the very same categories on which previous exclusivism was based really be used as organizing concepts? How, then, can literary histories become more responsive to the changes in canonization? How can they suit the needs of teachers of American literature and general readers?

The dominant assumption among serious scholars who study ethnic literary history seems to be that history can best be written by separating the groups that produced such literature in the United States. The published results of this “mosaic” procedure are the readers and compendiums made up of diverse essays on groups of ethnic writers who may have little in common except so-called ethnic roots while, at the same time, obvious and important literary and cultural connections are obfuscated. As James Dormon wrote in a recent review of such a mosaic collection of essays on ethnic theater, “there is little to tie the various essays together other than the shared theme ‘ethnic American theater history,’ as this topic might be construed by each individual author.” The contours of an ethnic literary history are beginning to emerge which views writers primarily as “members” of various ethnic and gender groups. James T. Farrell may thus be discussed as a pure Irish-American writer, without any hint that he got interested in writing ethnic literature after reading and meeting Abraham Cahan, and that his first


stories were set in Polish-America—not to mention his interest in Russian and French writing or in Chicago sociology. Or, conversely, Carl Sandburg may be dismissed from the Scandinavian-American part of the mosaic for being “too American.”

Taken exclusively, what is often called “the ethnic perspective”—which often means, in literary history, the emphasis of a writer’s descent—all but annihilates polyethnic art movements, moments of individual and cultural interaction, and the pervasiveness of cultural syncretism in America. The widespread acceptance of the group-by-group approach has not only led to unhistorical accounts held together by static notions of rather abstractly and homogeneously conceived ethnic groups, but has also weakened the comparative and critical skills of increasingly timid interpreters who sometimes choose to speak with the authority of ethnic insiders rather than that of readers of texts. (Practicing cultural pluralism may easily manifest itself in ethnic relativism.)

Yet, if anything, ethnic literary history ought to increase our understanding of the cultural interplays and contacts among writers of different backgrounds, the ethnic innovations and cultural mergers that took place in America; and the results of the critical readings should not only leave room for, but actively invite, criticism and scrutiny by other readers ("outsiders" or "insiders") of the texts discussed. This can only be accomplished if the categorization of writers—and literary critics—as "members" of ethnic groups is understood to be a very partial, temporal, and insufficient characterization at best. Could not an openly tranethnic procedure that aims for conceptual generalizations and historicity be more daring, profitable, and conceptually illuminating than that of simply adding to the sections on "major writers" chapters on "the popular muse," "Negro voices," "the immigrant speaks," "generations of women," "mangling of tongues," and the rest of it?

Is it possible now to rewrite Quinn’s chapter and include Douglass or do we need separate chapters for each ethnic group, to be written by "insiders"? Can we construct a chapter on intellectual life in the early twentieth century in which ideas entertained by Anglo-American, Irish-American, Jewish-American, and Afro-American figures can be discussed together, or do we have to separate men and women, immigrants and American-born authors? Is it possible to connect Alain Locke, who ended his introduction to The New Negro (1925) with the hope for "a spiritual Coming of Age" with his college classmate Van Wyck Brooks, or are two heterogeneous ethnic experiences at work in them? These questions apply not only to the synchronic analysis of a period, but also to the construction of diachronic "descent lines." Do we have to believe in a filiation from Mark Twain to Ernest Hemingway, but not to Ralph Ellison (who is supposedly descended from James Weldon Johnson and Richard Wright)? Can Gertrude Stein be discussed with Richard Wright or only with white women expatriate German-Jewish writers? Is there a link from the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin to those of Frederick Douglass and Mary Antin, or must we see Douglass exclusively as a version of Olaudah Equiano and a precursor to Malcolm X? Is Zora Neale Hurston only Alice Walker’s foremother? In general, is the question of influence, of who came first, more interesting than the investigation of the constellation in which ideas, styles, themes, and forms travel?

In order to pursue such questions I have set myself a double task. I shall review significant criticisms of the shortcomings of the concept of cultural pluralism in the hope that the arguments made by intellectual historians of the past decade may affect thinking about American literature today; and I shall attempt to suggest the complexities of polyethnic interaction among some of the intellectuals who were involved in developing the term "cultural pluralism." It is ironical that the story of the origins of cultural pluralism I shall tell could not have been told in the "pluralistic mosaic" format of group-by-group accounts of American cultural life: one protagonist would illustrate what the current fashion calls "the Jewish experience," another "the Black experience," a third "the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant experience." But the fact is that it was not any monoethnic "experience" that led to the emergence of the concept of cultural pluralism. It was the protagonists' troubled interaction with

each other. Pluralism had a fairly monistic origin in a university philosophy department in the first decade of this century; yet it is a notion whose very mobility challenges the concept's central tenet of the permanent power of ethnic boundaries.

**Ku Klux Pluralism?**

From its inception, the term pluralism has been used contrastively against racist ogres. When Horace Meyer Kallen, apparently for the first time in print, used “Cultural Pluralism” in his essay collection *Culture and Democracy in the United States* in 1924, he offered his capitalized phrase as the redemptive alternative to a forced concept of hierarchical homogeneity as envisioned by the Ku Klux Klan.

In manyness, variety, differentiation, lies the vitality of such oneness as they may compose. Cultural growth is founded upon Cultural Pluralism. Cultural Pluralism is possible only in a democratic society whose institutions encourage individuality in groups, in persons, in temperaments, whose program liberates these individualities and guides them into a fellowship of freedom and cooperation. The alternative before Americans is Kultur Klux Klan or Cultural Pluralism.9

In his opposition to racial myths and dreams of the Klan—which was newly revived after the success of *Birth of a Nation* (1916)—Kallen goes so far as to reject all concepts of American cultural cohesion as “Kultur Klux Klan,” even nonracist and nonhierarchical ones such as the melting pot, the target of his most famous essay, “Democracy versus the Melting Pot.” Kallen’s antithetical spirit often manifested itself in such puns. In 1906 he disparaged “Cultur-Zionism”;10 and in 1930, invoking E. Boyd, he described Stuart Sherman as a “Ku Klux Kritic.”11 The printed phrase “cultural pluralism” was born in a literary polemic which equated all forms of assimilation and acculturation with hard-core racism. This rhetorical strategy is still operative in the many attacks on the melting pot today, attacks which silently identify melting pot and Anglo-conformity and which delight in antitheses.

When it comes to defining cultural pluralism positively (and not merely contrastively against hierarchically conceived notions of oneness), Kallen is lyrically evasive. His invocations of “the outlines of a possible great and truly democratic commonwealth” are vague to the point of contentlessness, unpolitical, and sustained by faith in musically harmonious diversity. Speaking about his ideal commonwealth, Kallen sets the tone for our continuing confusions with cultural pluralism:

Its form would be that of the federal republic; its substance a democracy of nationalities, cooperating voluntarily and autonomously through common institutions in the enterprise of self-realization through the perfection of men according to their kind. The common language of the commonwealth, the language of its great tradition, would be English, but each nationality would have for its emotional and involuntary life its own peculiar dialect or speech, its own individual and inevitable esthetic and intellectual forms. The political and economic life of the commonwealth is a single unit and serves as the foundation and background for the realization of the distinctive individuality of each *natio* that composes it and of the pooling of these in a harmony above them all. Thus “American civilization” may come to mean the perfection of the cooperative harmonies of “European civilization”—the waste, the squalor and the distress of Europe being eliminated—a multiplicity in a unity, an orchestrated of mankind. (C. 124)

The buzz words that permeate today’s ethnic discourse are all there, as a static notion of eternal groups—cast as pseudo-individuals—is made the basis of a lofty prophecy of an orchestrated American harmony. The abstract contrast with the squalor of Europe evokes little more than Walt Disney’s International Village at Epcot Center with its permanent background music and country-of-origin waiters.12


12. As John Higham and Philip Gleason have pointed out, Kallen’s vision of cultural pluralism is somewhat problematic. Higham called attention to the “chronic indistinctness of the pluralist idea in ethnic relations” (John Higham, *Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America* [New York: Atheneum, 1975], p. 196), and Gleason argued that cultural pluralism “has
Contrasted by Kallen against old-world hierarchies and squalor as well as monotheistic domination in America, cultural diversity itself appears as something redemptive in itself, an ideal to maintain and preserve, though the survival of the ingredients seems threatened in America. Kallen and his successors assume that while the whole concept of cultural pluralism is open-ended, the stable quality of each instrument must be preserved. Kallen’s definition of cultural pluralism rests on quasi-eternal, static units, on the “distinctive individuality of each *natio*” (*nationes* are thereby removed from the history of their own emergence), on “ancestry,” “homogeneity of heritage, mentality and interest,” and mankind’s “psycho-physical inheritance.” Kallen writes: “In historic times so far as is known no new ethnic types have originated, and from what is known of breeding there comes no assurance that the old types will disappear in favor of the new” (C. 119). In an earlier essay he had argued: “To preach assimilation is to preach the absurd and is an unworthy abasement, possibly only to the spiritually degenerate.” Kallen’s polemically anti-assimilationist metaphors direct the pluralists’ attention to unhistorical ethnic persistence rather than to historical change and to group survival rather than to group emergence (now termed ethnogenesis). Whereas the melting-pot image is eminently dynamic and accommodates the continuous processes of assimilation and ethnogenesis, both mosaic and orchestra are static.

At the root of cultural pluralism is a notion of the eternal power of descent, birth, *natio*, and race that Kallen shares with his worst antagonist, the racist E. A. Ross, against whom he polemizes, but with whom he also agrees, sometimes explicitly (C. 119). Higham concluded that both the pluralist Kallen and the racist Ross “asserted that ethnic character was somehow rooted in the natural order.” Gleason fully explored the racist component in Kallen’s cultural pluralism, and his conclusions deserve the serious attention of today’s cultural pluralists:

Kallen’s racialism was romantic in that he valued diversity as such and did not attempt to rank human groups as superior or inferior according to any absolute scale of racial merit. But he also resembled the romantics in attributing the distinctive characteristics of peoples to inborn racial qualities whose origin and nature were obscure . . . Kallen’s racialism was also central to his conviction that ethnic nationalities would perpetuate themselves indefinitely . . . Kallen’s whole handling of race was extremely ambiguous. He was certainly not a strict

15. It is also worth noting the case of nativist journalist Agnes Reppil (of Franco-German descent) who was troubled (as was Barrett Wendell) by Jewish immigrant Mary Antin’s presumptuousness in taking “possession of Beacon Street” and calling the Pilgrim fathers “our forefathers.” Reppil significantly associated immigrants with dirt and quotes Elizabeth Robins Pennell, who wrote that “if Philadelphia blossomed like the rose with Mary Antins, the city would be ill repaid for the degradation of her noble old streets, now transformed, into foul and filthy slums. Dirt is a valuable asset in the immigrant’s hands” (Agnes Reppil, *Counter-Currents* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916], pp. 227–228; also see Mary Dearborn, *Pocahontas’ Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1985], chapter 2). Reppil invoked none other than a slightly misquoted Kallen in order to support her nativism. “Mr. Horace Kallen,” she writes approvingly, and some pages before the Philadelphia dirt sets in, “has put the case into a few clear conclusive words when he says, ‘Only men who are alike in origin and spirit, and not abstractly, can be truly equal, and maintain that inward unanimity of action and outlook which makes a national life’ ” (Reppil, p. 203; compare with Kallen, *Culture*, p. 115). The culture critic Randolph Bourne, however, despite his dislike of assimilation, was more clearly aware of the political implications of the New Englanders’ reaction to Mary Antin. “We have had to watch,” Bourne writes in *Trans-National America* (1916), “hard-hearted old Brahmins virtually indignant at the spectacle of the immigrant refusing to be melted, while they jeer at patriots like Mary Antin who write about ‘our forefathers’” (Randolph S. Bourne, *War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays, 1915–1919*, 2nd ed. [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973], p. 107).

biological racist like Madison Grant, but neither did he systematically distinguish between biological and cultural elements in the manner of Franz Boas . . . Kallen talked about "nationalities" as embodying this undifferentiated inheritance in such a way as to make it virtually impossible to determine which elements of an ethnic group's identity were genetically determined and which were culturally transmitted.

Kallen never clarified these issues, and those who came after him in the pluralist tradition apparently failed to recognize them . . . and certainly failed to address them. Therefore the crucial role of Kallen's ambiguous racist assumptions still constitutes a major theoretical problem in the cultural pluralist interpretation of ethnicity and American identity.17

The current polemics in the name of cultural pluralism notwithstanding, Kallen's concept was not even a good theoretical basis for inclusiveness. One would expect that Kallen's system was not exactly hospitable to the many melting-pot Americans; and he did write in 1906: "We have to crush out the . . . chameleon and spiritual mongrel . . . For of all things, the realization of the race-self is the central thing."18 Yet even within his racialist group-by-group approach there was sufficient ethnic exclusiveness to deserve mention. Kallen's pluralist orchestra did not have any room for Afro-Americans, among others.19 It could play neither Shuffle Along nor Rhapsody in Blue. As Isaac Berkson's Theories of Americanization (1920) illustrates, the shortcomings of cultural pluralism certainly did not escape Kallen's contemporaries; Berkson perceptively remarked that Kallen's theory was "based on the assumption of the ineradicable and central influence of race."20 It is worth reconsidering the intellectual foundations on which even some current claims for the American literary mosaic are made. By accepting Kallen's anti-assimilationist bias which is so persuasively directed against the (equally anti-assimilationist) Ku Klux Klan, the new ethnic literary historians may inadvertently become well-intentioned practitioners of Pluralism Klux Klan.

Another Look at the Origins of Cultural Pluralism

The term cultural pluralism first appeared in print in 1924; but this was long after Horace Kallen started using it conversationally. The story of the origins of the coinage "cultural pluralism," in part unrecoverably lost and in part intriguingly suggestive, does little to detract from the theoretical criticism of the concept. However, it provides us with an exemplary tale of ideas criss-crossing not only ethnic lines, but originating from and traversing the color line at the height of racism.21

The son of Esther Rebecca and Jacob David Kallen (a rabbi of the German-speaking orthodox congregation Hevra ha-Moriah in Boston), Horace Kallen was born in Germany in 1882 and came to America at age five.22 Kallen "felt close to his mother" but "was alienated from his father, whom he remembered as . . . proud, demanding, [and] domineering."23 As a younger, Kallen (like his contemporary, Mary Antin)24 ex-

19. This criticism of Kallen's exclusivism was fully developed by Higham. "(T)here was a fatal elision when he wrote that America could become 'an orchestration of mankind' by perfecting 'the cooperative harmonies of European civilization.' Nothing in Kallen's writing gave away the magnitude of that elision. In the fullest statement of his argument there was only a single oblique footnote on the point. 'I do not discuss the influence of the negro,' Kallen confessed in fine print. 'This is at once too considerable and too recondite in its processes for casual mention. It requires separate analysis' [Kallen, Culture, p. 226]. The pluralist thesis from the outset was encapsulated in white ethnocentrism" (Higham, p. 208).

21. Parts of the story have been suggested by Gleason and Higham as well as by Barbara Solomon, Milton Konvitz, Moses Rischin (who views Kallen's role in a very favorable light), Sarah Schmidt, and Clara Crane; others are offered here for the first time.
23. Ibid., p. 56.
explored the Boston sites of American history textbooks, Bunker Hill and Tea Wharf, and later remembered the syncretistic overlay of Jewish and American lore in his mind.

In our household the suffering and slavery of Israel were commonplace of conversation; from Passover to Passover, freedom was an ideal ceremonially revered, religiously aspired to. The textbook story of the Declaration of Independence came upon me, nurtured upon the deliverance from Egypt and the bondage in exile, like the clangor of trumpets, like a sudden light. What a resounding battle cry of freedom! And then, what an invincible march of Democracy to triumph over every enemy—over the English king, over the American Indian, over the uncivilized Mexican, over the American champions of slavery betraying American freedom, over everything, to the very day of the history lesson!55

When Kallen entered Harvard at eighteen he was a religious renegade, thought of the Old Testament as a "narrow, bigoted" book (S. 38), and was ready to absorb the teachings of Josiah Royce, George Santayana, and, especially, William James and Barrett Wendell—all of whom Kallen got to know well personally. One could sketch Kallen’s interaction with all of these teachers (he wrote poems about his philosophy professors), but a brief consideration of (Anglo-American) Wendell and a cursory reference to (Irish-American) James will suffice here.

Kallen remembered that Wendell emphasized "the role of the Old Testament as a certain perspective, a certain way of life. He showed how the Old Testament had affected the Puritan mind, traced the role of the Hebraic tradition in the development of the American character" (S. 38). Kallen reluctantly accepted the challenge of this approach.

I was an alienated intellectual being suddenly challenged in his alienation... And the challenge turned not on anything in the Hebraic tradition at all [but]... on what Americanism came to mean to me... in terms of the philosophical pluralism with which [William] James was identified and... in terms of the interpretation of the American tradition and the literary tradition of America by Barrett

Wendell... The [Zionist] meanings came to me rather in terms of the American Idea than in terms of what I had learned of Torah [Jewish law] at home or in Cheder [Hebrew school]. (S. 40)

The result was that in 1902 Kallen became a Zionist at Harvard, "where a Yankee, named Barrett Wendell, re-Judaized" him (S. 36). Sarah Schmidt’s excellent analysis of Kallen’s Judaism stressed the compatibility between his Zionism and what Wendell (echoing Theodore Parker) called "the American idea." "To be a Zionist was to be a good American" (S. 39). Kallen’s activities in the Menorah Society and as a self-styled Zionist permitted him to have it two ways, "to retain," or, perhaps more accurately, to reinvent, "his Jewish identity and to become, thereby, a better American" (S. 5). Americanization and ethnicization went hand in hand as Kallen developed a modern ethnic identity that continued to remain at odds with his father’s traditional faith. Kallen’s transformation can be seen in the context of what Herbert Gans has termed "symbolic ethnicity" which goes along with assimilation: Kallen absorbed concepts from the surrounding culture (the American idea), but gave it an ethnic name (the Jewish idea). Kallen’s own life story illustrates Higham’s generalization that pluralism "has unconsciously relied on the assimilative process which it seemed to repudiate."

If Kallen’s new outlook was not traditionally Jewish, it also was not the result of a collective momentum. "Kallen’s decision to become a Zionist was entirely a personal, abstract, one, not influenced by the Jewish community or by the fledgling American Zionist movement" (S. 39). The pervasive metaphors of individualism in Kallen’s group thinking may point to this individual moment of his own ethnic rebirth, his personal ethnogenesis in an assimilative context. The orchestra image, too, recurs, when Kallen remembered the influence of William James’s philosophical pluralism, which stressed the reality of manyness, the refusal to accept the proposition that the many are appearance and only the one is reality. When I accepted this

25. Sarah L. Schmidt, “Horace Kallen and the Americanization of Zionism,” Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1973, p. 34. All further references to this work appear in the text, cited parenthetically as S.

idea I didn’t have to think of it as an image that could be dissipated. I could think of it as a present perduring reality which, in my personal history, all my experiences joined and with which they orchestrated and made the me that I was becoming. . .

What it [James’s pluralism] released me from was an attitude which shut out operational working of my past. It opened opportunities. Zionism became a replacement and reevaluation of Judaism which enabled me to respect it. . . which allowed me to see an ongoing pattern, a group personality, called Jew. (S. 40)

Through the intellectual contact with James and Wendell, Kallen underwent dramatic changes in ethnic outlook, yet began to formulate static and abstract notions of an “ongoing pattern,” of ethnic persistence—imagining the individual as a collectivity and the collectivity as an individual.

Kallen’s relationship to Wendell must have been complicated by Wendell’s anxieties about the influx of immigrants who, like Mary Antin, made claims to a full American identity. Moreover, Wendell appears to have suffered from some physical revulsion caused by conviviality with blacks and Jews, a form of psychosomatic racism. Barbara Solomon called attention to Wendell’s daughter’s recollections. Edith Wendell Osborne writes that her father, a “great believer in tradition,” honored the annual recipient of the Jacob Wendell Scholarship (given out “for merit only”) by “asking the scholar to dine at his house, inviting, amongst others, the President of Harvard to meet him.” Wendell’s daughter dwells on her father’s fear “that eventually the scholar would be either an Ethiopian or a Hebrew, holding he would then permanently abandon the dinners.” Yet she concludes with the comforting note that “up to the present they have all been Americans, and, with hardly an exception, gentlemen.” It is this narrow and exclusive definition of “Americans,” of course, that we might expect to have startled Kallen. Wendell revealed at least some of his difficulties to Kallen; and the former student, far from taking the broader approach to Americanness, sounded just like his mentor when he criticized Antin for her American claims, describing her as “intermarried, ‘assimilated’ even in religion, and more excessively, self-consciously flattering American than the Americans” (C. 86). However, Kallen deflected the critique from nativist exclusion from the category “American” toward anti-assimilationism.

Kallen dedicated Culture and Democracy to the memory of Barrett Wendell with whom he had had an intensive exchange of letters up until Wendell’s death. As Moses Rischin has recently shown in a thoroughly detailed and glowing account of Kallen’s contribution to American pluralism, Kallen incorporated a Wendell letter into “Democracy versus the Melting Pot.” This excerpt also makes clearer what Wendell feared about Antin: “Your Jewish race,” he writes to Kallen in December of 1914, “is less lost than we, of old America. For all (its) sufferings . . . it has never lost its identity, its tradition, its existence. As for us, we are submerged beneath a conquest so complete that the very name of us means something not ourselves . . . I feel as I should think an Indian might feel, in the face of ourselves that were.” Kallen used the last sentence anonymously, ascribing it merely to “a great American man of letters, who has better than any one else I know of interpreted to the world the spirit of America as New England” (C. 93).

The pluralist plot begins to thicken in the years 1905–1908. Kallen who graduated in 1903 worked as a teaching fellow for Santayana and James in 1905–1907 and received a Sheldon fellowship to go to Oxford in 1907–1908, the same academic year during which William James delivered the Hibbert lectures at Oxford, later published under the title A Pluralistic Universe. The lectures were full of references that must have been meaningful to Kallen. James used the image of the “federal republic,”


lic” which recurred in Kallen (C. 124); significantly, James’s use takes the American political system as a philosophical model for the universe: “The pluralistic world is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom.” James also posits a clear alternative between “pluralism” and “monism,” and in a form that has persisted in the rhetoric of pluralism since Kallen.

Is the many-ness-in-oneness that indubitably characterizes the world we inhabit, a property only of the absolute whole of things, so that you must postulate that one-enormous-whole indivisibly as the prior of there being any many at all—in other words, start with the rationalistic block-universe, entire, unmitigated, and complete?—or can the finite elements have their own aboriginal forms of manyness-in-oneness, and where they have no immediate oneness still be continued into one another by intermediary terms—each one of these terms being one with its next neighbors, and yet the total ‘oneness’ never getting absolutely complete?  

Meanwhile, the Philadelphia-born black intellectual Alain Locke, who had taken Kallen’s section in a Santayana class, graduated from Harvard in 1907 and became the first (and, until 1962, only) black Rhodes scholar at Oxford in the academic year of

of the difference between his negative perception of a North Carolina wood clearing and the mountaineers’ positive image of the same scene—not as denudation of nature, but as a “paean of duty, struggle, and success”—James generalizes: “I had been blind to the peculiar ideality of their conditions as they certainly would also have been to the ideality of mine, had they had a peep at my strange indoor academic ways of life at Cambridge” (William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals* [1906; rpt. New York: Holt, 1910], p. 234). It should be noted, however, that Kallen was critical of James in a letter written to Wendell shortly before James delivered the Hibbert lectures: “Poor James! victim of a too excellent English style!” (Horace M. Kallen, letter to Barrett Wendell, 11 March 1908, Wendell Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University).

31. Also see Higham, *Send These to Me*, p. 206.
33. Ibid., p. 147.

James’s Hibbert lectures.34 When Locke applied for the scholarship, Crane writes, he noted sardonically that although Rhodes had acquired a huge fortune in Africa, no one of African descent had ever been awarded one of his scholarships. Physically small and prone to heart trouble, Locke met the athletic requirement for the Rhodes Scholarship by serving as coxswain on the Harvard crew; and his extracurricular activities in public speaking and music qualified him as an all-round student . . . In his personal interview with the committee, Locke stated that he wanted to go to Oxford not only to continue his studies in literature, but also because he wished to “see the race problem from the outside . . . to see it in perspective.” Locke’s “maturity of purpose” and brilliant college record resulted in his appointment.  

It was from Kallen’s encounters with Locke that the idea of cultural pluralism germinated. As Kallen remembers:

It was in 1905 that I began to formulate the notion of cultural pluralism and I had to do that in connection with my teaching. I was assisting both Mr. James and Mr. Santayana at the time and I had a Negro student named Alain Locke, a very remarkable young man—very sensitive, very easily hurt—who insisted that he was a human being and that his color ought not to make any difference. And, of course, it was a mistaken insistence. It had to make a difference and it had to be accepted and respected and enjoyed for what it was. 

Two years later when I went to Oxford on a fellowship he was there as a Rhodes scholar, and we had a race problem because the Rhodes scholars from the South were bastards. So they had a Thanksgiving dinner which I refused to attend because they refused to have Locke.

And he said, “I am a human being,” just as I had said it earlier. What difference does the difference make? We are all alike Americans. And we had to argue out the question of how the differences made differences, and in arguing out those questions the formulae, then phrases, developed—“cultural pluralism,” “the right to be different.” (S. 49)

The remembered story of Kallen’s coming to Locke’s rescue has been retold several times as the myth of origins of “cultural
pluralism," and it was occasionally expanded to include Wendell's attempts to dissuade Kallen from making a public gesture for a black person (S. 49). A closer look at the Wendell-Kallen correspondence, however, yields a much more complex situation. The "Locke affair"—that inspired Kallen to speak of "cultural pluralism"—begins with a letter from Kallen to Wendell, dated 22 October 1907, which, as far as I know, has not previously been cited:

Now I want to ask a favor of you. You will perhaps remember little Locke, the yellow boy who took . . . English 42. He is here as a Rhodes scholar; and some people have been in America officious and mean-spirited enough to draw "the color-line" for the benefit of Englishmen. The boy earned his scholarship in an open competition. He has said nothing to me himself. Others have deprecated his being here. But he is here, one of America's scholars, and a Harvard man. He finds himself suddenly shut out of things,—unhappy, and lonely and doesn't know how or why.  

Whether merely to placate Wendell (as Rischin suggested in a personal letter) or to express his own feelings, Kallen, the father of cultural pluralism, adds:

As you know, I have neither respect nor liking for his race—but individually they have to be taken, each on his own merits and value, and if ever a negro was worthy, this boy is. I have remembered your warning and have been silent on the matter, but I listened with great anger and I have said all that I could concerning what was commendable in him, and now I want you to write a word to Dyer and others, if you can, to help him right this wrong.

Wendell answered on 3 November 1907 with a frank and detailed account of his race-repugnance.

As to Locke, I really feel regretfully unable to write as you would like me to. My own sentiments concerning negroes are such that I have always declined to meet the best of them—Booker Washington, a man whom I thoroughly respect,—at table. Had Locke won my father's scholarship, I should have given up my plan of an annual dinner at which the former Wendell scholars have, so far, come together here to greet the new one. Professionally, I do my best to treat negroes with absolute courtesy. It would be disastrous to them, if they are gentlemen at heart, to expose them in private life to such sentiments of repugnance as mine, if we were brought into anything resembling personal relations.  

Wendell questioned Locke's legitimacy as a Rhodes scholar, for how could he be representative of what was "best in the state" that sent him?

At least for many years to come, no negro can take just this position anywhere in America. Before he can, the kind of American which unmixed nationhood has made me must be only a memory. It is sad, I admit—not least so to me for the reason that I am passing, perhaps of the past altogether.  

Wendell concluded with the following advice regarding Locke:

There is no reason, I think, why you should not invite some of your Oxford friends to meet him at tea; though to do so without intimation that he was coming might be inconsiderate. To make a 'cause' of the matter would be, at this juncture, deeply inexpedient.  

Wendell's term "repugnance"—a classic case of what another student of William James's, the sociologist Robert Park in 1928 termed "racial antipathy" in the essay "The Bases of Race Prejudice"—is faithfully echoed by Kallen in his letter to Wendell of 12 November 1907:

As to Locke—you have phrased my own feeling toward the race, so well that I don't see that there is anything more to say. I have already done the thing you suggested. I have had him to tea—he has met a Rhodes scholar from Princeton,—an old pupil of mine,—Dyer, and the Diceys. One of my Princeton colleagues, Harper, whom you may have met, is here and has expressed spontaneously a wish to meet the boy. So he is to come to tea again too' it is personally repugnant to me to eat with him. Shylock's disclaimer [Merchant of Venice I.iii.35ff.] expresses my feeling exactly; but then, Locke is a Harvard man and as such he has a definite claim on me. I think he is going to do us

39. Barrett Wendell to Horace Kallen, 3 November 1907, Horace M. Kallen Collection, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
credit. Already he has 'cox'd a boat to victory and won a silver cup."

The birth of cultural pluralism was beset by ironies: a non-religious Jewish student was converted to Zionism by a Boston Brahmin professor who suffered from spells of repugnance brought about by race contact during dinners; the student denounced assimilation and endears himself to his professor by claiming the same feelings of repugnance toward a black fellow student whom, with the help of his professor, he yet wants to protect against racism; and he views the young black intellectual, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, not as a fellow-philosophy student, but as an athlete and credit to the university. It seems strange, indeed, that Kallen singled out the early contact with Locke as the stimulus for pluralism when his own letters at the time of the incident make Kallen such an unlikely ancestor for contemporary pluralists. Upper-case "Cultural Pluralism" emerged in a world which also contained lower-case "negroes."

Alain Locke, whose personal statements and letters might reveal another dimension of the story, or another story altogether, contributed some philosophical essays to collections edited by Kallen or dedicated to him in later years (essays that are curiously omitted in collections of Locke's works), and described his own conversion to cultural pluralism in a longer autobiographical statement published in 1935.

Verily paradox has followed me the rest of my days: at Harvard, clinging to the genteel tradition of Palmer, Royce and Münsterberg, yet attracted by the disillusion of Santayana and the radical protest of James: again in 1916 I returned to work under Royce but was destined to take my doctorate in Value Theory under Perry. At Oxford, once more intrigued by the twilight of aestheticism but dimly aware of the new realism of the Austrian philosophy of value; socially Anglophone, but because of race loyalty, strenuously anti-imperialist; universalist in religion, internationalist and pacifist in world-view, but forced by a sense of simple justice to approve of the militant counter-nationalisms of Zionism, Young Turkey, Young Egypt, Young India, and with reservations even Garveyism and current-day "Nippon over Asia." Finally a cultural cosmopolitan, but perforce an advocate of cultural racialism as a defensive counter-move for the American Negro and accordingly more of a philosophical mid-wife to a generation of younger Negro poets, writers, artists than a professional philosopher.

Small wonder, then, with this psychograph, that I project my personal history into its inevitable rationalization as cultural pluralism and value relativism, with a not too orthodox reaction to the American way of life."

Alain Locke, though he adopted Kallen's term here, saw the dynamic of "cultural racialism" as a counter-move for black intellectuals and interpreted it in a broad international context. In the introduction to his famous anthology *The New Negro* (1925), he called Harlem the "home of the Negro's 'Zionism.'" Incidentally, Locke also once mentioned that he wrote a study entitled "Frederick Douglass; a Biography of Anti-Slavery" (1935).

**Beyond Pluralism**

The point of this documentation was not to malign Horace Kallen—whose correspondence with Wendell deserves study beyond the uses that were made of it here—but to ask new questions about some problems at the very source of cultural pluralism. Pluralism is not a redemptively transcendent category that removes its advocates from prejudice. Few champions of pluralism today share the racist sentiments expressed in the Wendell-Kallen correspondence, but Kallen's anti-assimilationist bias has remained pervasive in the many diatribes against melting pot and intermarriage. In the current cultural debates pluralism often implies purism.

The tradition of pluralism from 1924 to the present discussions of literary histories is, of course, characterized by several shifts and changes. Most notably, the terms pluralism and cultural pluralism came into high fashion in the period during and after


World War II, when the antithesis against totalitarianism made pluralism a 'desirable' (though still largely undefined) concept. Though Kallen's influence has not been universally acknowledged, Kallen, too, participated in providing Cold War definitions of pluralism against totalitarianism. In the essay "Alain Locke and Cultural Pluralism" (1955), for example, Kallen writes:

There persists in the sciences of man and nature and in philosophies as they have developed in our country, a disposition to assert and somehow to establish the primacy of totalitarian unity at the beginning, and its supremacy in the consummation, of all existence. It is, of course, conceded that multitude and variety seem pervasive, always and everywhere. But it is denied that they are real. It is the One that is real, not the Many. 48

Kallen thus substituted "totalitarian unity" for James's "monism" and instrumentalized the pluralist tradition for political purposes of the 1950s. As America was pitted against its "monolithic" adversaries, there was some ideological necessity to reconstruct the United States as the culture of the many. The current vogue for indeterminacy in interpretation (sometimes in combination with cultural relativism) may also originate in pluralist thought. Thus James argued that "pluralism involves indeterminism"; and even though he lectured that "if you say 'indetermination,' you are determining just that," he was only mocking Hegelian thinking in that passage. 49

Albert Murray has very forcefully argued that the "mainstream is not white but mulatto," 50 but literary pluralists of our time would like to construct a mosaic of ethnic stories that relies on the supposed permanence, individuality, and homogeneity of each ancestral tradition and has no space for the syncretic nature of so much of American literary and cultural life. Ironically, while the pluralist argument is often phrased against a racist target, literary pluralists share their dislike of mixings and "impurities" with the old nativists who, too, worked very hard at ignoring not only certain ethnic groups but also the polyethnic mixings in American culture. 51 Instead of accepting the possibility of a text's many mothers, pluralists often settle for the construction of one immutable grandfather. This bias in favor of purity and monoethnic myths of origins makes it far from unusual now for Americanists to publically profess the belief that only ethnic insiders are entitled to criticize literature from a given "ethnic tradition"; yet is this "biological insiderism"—advanced in the name of pluralistic diversity—not merely a timid approach that freezes ethnicity not only in the texts, but also in the interpreters themselves? Despite his claims for static ethnic persistence Kallen was ethnicized in a modern environment, as a result of reading and by an act of will rather than in the spirit of his own father. His ethnicity was a product of a transethnic experience of modernism, not of any tradition or "ethnic experience."

If we approach American literature, ethnic or mainstream, with an awareness of the dynamic nature of ethnogenesis, 52 we might arrive at an understanding of writing as more than a reflection of ethnically diverse "experiences." Instead, literature could become recognizable as a productive force that may Americanize and ethnicize readers, listeners, or other cultural participants. It is precisely this aspect that has often been emphasized by American writers who, from the Jewish American assimilationist Mary Antin to the black nationalist Malcolm X, 53

51. The writer Jean Toomer is a good example here. He may have been excluded from older literary histories because he was black, but the new concern for Toomer as a black writer does injustice to Toomer's polyethnic ancestry and artistic interests. As Nellie McKay writes persuasively, Toomer "was convinced that in the melting pot of America, the people of this nation were evolving into a racial mixture that would make it not only inaccurate but impossible to select out strains of racial or ethnic heritage eventually" (Nellie Y. McKay, Jean Toomer, Artist: A Study of His Literary Life and Work, 1894–1936 [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984], p. 244).
52. See chapter 2 of my forthcoming Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, in press).
have emphasized the importance of reading in their ethnic conversion experiences.\(^{54}\)

The additive approach that puts abstract group after group into a volume not only avoids generalizations and synthesis, but also cannot come to terms with American culture which abounds in ethnogenesis on the basis of transthetic contacts like the ones that were sketched here. Many other models of new transthetic approaches exist that focus on cultural interaction and ethnicization and avoid static and abstract uses of ethnic groups. Two recent books are of special interest in this respect as they illustrate these new approaches to American literature. In his excellent study *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (1984), William Boelhower, drawing on texts from Chief Joseph's (Heimni Tooyalak's) 1887 speech and Henry James's *The American Scene* to Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, pursues new paths of ethnic inquiry in a semiotic context. Stressing semiosis as the production of ethnic

\(^{54}\) Even contemporary advocates of pluralism and proponents of the power of ethnicity sometimes go further than literary critics in recognizing cultural texts as a shaping force of supposedly "natural" group affiliations. Thus Andrew Greeley writes: "Subscriptions to any two of the following are sufficient to guarantee one membership at least on the margins of this ethnic group: *The New York Times*, *Commentary*, *Partisan Review*, *Saturday Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Atlantic* (but not Harper's), *Dissent*, *The New Republic*, and *The Nation*. In case of doubt, a subscription to *The New York Review of Books* alone will suffice" (Andrew M. Greeley, "Intellectuals as an 'Ethnic Group'," *New York Times Magazine*, 12 July 1970, p. 22). Greeley's not altogether facetious ethnic identification-by-subscription, ironically published in *The New York Times Magazine*, was echoed by Michael Novak, who, originally writing in the safety of Harper's, defines "ruling classes" parenthetically as "subscribers to the New Yorker," I suppose" (Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnic: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* [New York: Macmillan, 1975], p. 68). Jules Chametzky observed that ethnic identity may not be "what you do or what you are but an image created by what you read or at least know about" (Jules Chametzky, "Styron's Sophie's Choice. Jews and Other Marginals, and the Mainstream," *Prospects*, 9 [1985], 435–436). Even Kallen's supposedly instinctual repugnance at interracial dinners may be seen as an extreme form of Shakespeare exegesis, since in his letter to Wendell he explicitly invokes Shylock's disclaimer: "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you" (*The Merchant of Venice* I.iii.35ff.).

Boelhower argues that "advocates of the multi-ethnic paradigm now often repeat the essentialist errors of their monocultural predecessors in attempting to trace out a blueprint of clear and distinct and ultimately reified ethnic categories" (B. 20). Instead, he directs our attention to the question: "Who can predict when the ethnic difference will surface and why?" (B. 31). Among Boelhower's many interesting conclusions is the following insight:

While there is a reasonably definable encyclopedic core to every ethnic culture, it is theoretically impossible to define its intensional limits. As long as there is an ethnic subject, any object can function as ethnic even in a non-ethnic context. (B. 105)

For Boelhower, "there is no parthenogenesis of ethnic codes. One ethnic novel or a particular encyclopedia does not account for the production of another." Therefore, "there is no unilateral aesthetic starting point for the multi-ethnic critic" (B. 35).

Similarly aiming for a transthetic perspective, Mary Dearborn has synthesized the fragmented approaches to ethnic and women's studies in her study, *Pocahontas' Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture* (1985). Interpreting so-called ethnic and mainstream women writers from Frances Harper and Mary Antin to Gertrude Stein (another William James student) comparatively and against the background of literary criticism and ethnic theory, Dearborn suggests that strong similarities "exist between the male and female literary traditions." Viewing her own work as a contribution toward reconstructing the canon, Dearborn concludes that it is useful to look at ethnic women writers in an American context "to see the ways in which they try to rewrite, expand, revise, subvert that tradition and the ways in which they have been excluded from that canon."\(^{56}\) A growing number of literary scholars are pursuing postpluralist, postethnic approaches in studying American literature. Ethnogenesis, the emergence of ethnic groupings, sometimes with

\(^{55}\) Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly*, pp. 23, 83, 107. All further references to this work appear in the text, cited parenthetically as B.

\(^{56}\) Dearborn, *Afterword*. 
the help of literary texts, is now being studied together with efforts at constructing myths of persistence. Ethnicity is being recognized as a dynamic phenomenon that needs theoretical and practical understanding—without the reified nativist and belligerently antithetical closures of the past.

Since the omission of Frederick Douglass’ _Narrative_ from American literary historiography was the point of departure here, the book may now serve as a concluding illustration for the process of ethnogenesis that transcends popular constructions of purism. There is an often-analyzed individual development which culminates in Douglass’ creation of an American Christ-like _hero_, who undergoes a rebirth experience _despite_ his enslavement; and there is a collective, and ethnic, aspect to Douglass’ growing sense of selfhood as a living _man_, part of a living community of people who should not be slaves. The collective aspect is best grasped as the development of a sense of sacred peoplehood through a shared cultural activity. It is most clearly spelled out by Douglass when he describes the effects of the slaves’ songs at the Great House Farm:

They would then sing most exultingly the following words:—

“I am going away to the Great House Farm!
O, yea! O, yea! O!”

This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves . . . [These songs] told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; . . . they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains . . . To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery.”

As Douglass’ account makes clear, the songs contribute to the process of ethnogenesis, of emerging peoplehood. Though the texts need contain no specific reference to freedom (many songs did) and though the songs need not be of “pure” African origins (Lawrence Levine wrote about the “irrelevancy” of the question of origins “for an understanding of consciousness”), the very act of collective singing is a revelation about the nature of things and a bonding process for the heterogeneous slaves who are united in a feeling of brotherhood through the ritual of singing. The sense of a dynamically emerging group identity is acquired, in a precise historical setting, and on the basis of words and music. Many other observers, among them ethnic outsiders like the literary historian and collector of spirituals Thomas Wentworth Higginson, noticed the centripetal force of “these peculiar but haunting slave songs.” Higginson’s observation interested Alain Locke on whose materials Margaret Just Butcher’s book _The Negro in American Culture_ was based, which includes this reference. Butcher/Locke also stressed that Douglass “was far in advance of any narrowly racialist stand”—including, we might add, that of many literary historians and pluralists. For the new literary histories that are in the making the time had come to follow Douglass’ lead and to go beyond pure pluralism.

60. Butcher, p. 148.