

Riffing on Hemingway and Burke, Responding to Mailer and Wolfe: Albert Murray's "Anti-Journalism"

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In South to a Very Old Place, Albert Murray challenged the social "science" of journalism and the icons of the New Journalism.

On January 5, 1972, Albert Murray, an African American novelist, cultural critic, and authority on jazz, celebrated the publication of his second book, *South to a Very Old Place*, with a party at the home of Ruth Ellington, the sister and business manager of jazz great Duke Ellington. The book, which began as an assignment for *Harper's* magazine's "Going Home in America" series, was nominated for a National Book Award and received generally positive notice. But what sort of book it was remained open to debate. Murray's first book, *The Omni-Americans*, appearing in 1970, was a collection of essays and book reviews—many of them previously published. This second book, also nonfiction, incorporating interviews with prominent white Southern writers, primarily newsmen, followed by conversations with downhome Mobile, Alabama folk, seemed to defy categorization: one reviewer described it as "an original mixture of autobiography and cultural critique"; another called it "a cross between inspired journalism, cultural commentary, and spiritual autobiography"; yet another summed it up as "a travel book in an intellectual journalese stream of consciousness style."¹ As those early attempts to categorize it indicate, *South to a Very Old Place* might best be described as literary journalism. Reading it as such—and as a contribution to the "New Journalism" subgenre and cultural ferment—expands our thinking not only about who the practitioners of the New

Journalism were, but also about the form such literary journalism could take and the function it served.

First, a little background on Murray. Born in 1916 and still alive ten years into the twenty-first century, he embarked on his writing career relatively late in life; he published his first book at age fifty-four, eight years after retiring from the Air Force. In that regard he departs from the prototype of the New Journalist as a young, brash writer overturning the values of the older generation. But in terms of sheer ambition and ego, Murray matches up well with such leading figures of the New Journalism as Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer whose work and outsized personalities were making headlines in the 1960s. Since his college years at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, Murray had been captivated by the image of the writer as hero and set about creating himself in that image. His apprenticeship began with prodigious amounts of reading that included both the Western literary canon and magazines chronicling the latest literary developments, especially *Esquire*, his favorite. There, in the mid-1930s, he first encountered Hemingway's literary journalism, which, Murray has said, made him think, "I'd like to do that."²

Augmenting this reading program was a key friendship Murray developed in the 1940s with Ralph Ellison, who was an upperclassman at Tuskegee when Murray was a freshman and whose first novel *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award in 1953. Ellison read as widely as Murray, and the two men regularly recommended books and writers to each other. One of Ellison's recommendations in the late 1940s was the rhetorician and language theorist Kenneth Burke, whose work was not entirely unknown to Murray, but Ellison's enthusiasm for it and the man (he and Burke had become friends) convinced Murray to pay special attention to it. As a result, some of Burke's terminology, especially that regarding rhetorical motives, became major components of Murray's literary toolbox.³ Just as important as urging Murray to focus on Burke was Ellison's support of Murray's ambitions: Ellison reasoned that because of their Southern backgrounds (Ellison was from Oklahoma; Murray from Alabama); their deep understanding of black culture, especially as manifested in the jazz they both loved; and their profound commitment to great literature, no matter its culture of origin, the two friends had an important contribution to make to American letters. That contribution, as Murray came to see it, would serve as a corrective to the prevailing view of black culture and its role in the American mainstream.

To offer a corrective was certainly a goal of Murray's first book, *The Omni-Americans*, which on republication got the subtitle he originally wanted: *Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy*. Using Burkean

terminology, Murray in his introduction refers to his book as a “counter-statement” targeting “*the professional observer/reporter* (that major vehicle of the nation’s information, alas) who relies on the so-called findings and all-too-inclusive extrapolations of social science survey technicians for their sense of the world.”⁴ Here we see Murray absolutely engaged with contemporary trends in journalism. Not long before Murray was writing those words about social science surveys and their pernicious effect on mainstream journalism, *Newsweek* had published a glowing story about Philip Meyer, whose use of survey data had helped him win a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on the 1967 Detroit race riots. Referring to Meyer in their August 28, 1968, article as “the most recent recruit to the ranks of those who are applying scholarly, computerized research methods to the demands of journalism,” staff writers at *Newsweek* also used the piece as an opportunity to pat themselves on the back for pioneering social science methodology in 1963 with their cover story, “The Negro in America.”⁵ In fairness, Meyer himself would much later acknowledge the shortcomings of using survey data alone when developing a news story. Author of the influential textbook *Precision Journalism*, first published in 1973, Meyer in the preface to the fourth edition, published in 2002, argued that his book’s previous status as a “how-to” for survey research was unintended and that this new century’s lack of “confidence in social science” had resulted from “overuse” of its methods.⁶

In any event, this trend in journalism that began in the 1960s clearly concerned Murray. Given his reading habits, he no doubt saw the *Newsweek* piece on Meyer, the magazine’s earlier story on “The Negro in America,” and other news stories featuring survey data—and he was sounding the alarm with *The Omni-Americans* in 1970. The picture that emerged, Murray found, was an abstraction, overly generalized and overwhelmingly negative, rendering blacks as culturally deprived ghetto inhabitants with abnormal family structures. Black Americans, Murray countered in *The Omni-Americans*, “regard themselves not as the substandard, abnormal *non-white* people of American social science surveys and the news media, but rather as if they were . . . fundamental *extensions* of contemporary possibilities.”⁷

The Omni-Americans was a polemic; “quite deliberately so,” Murray said in his introduction, then added, “perhaps only works of fiction on the scale of Tolstoy, Joyce, and Thomas Mann can truly do justice to the enduring humanity of U.S. Negroes.”⁸ Or at the very least, such a justice would require a “nonfiction novel,” Truman Capote’s term for his literary journalism and a term Murray has used in interviews to describe *South to a Very Old Place*. That form appealed to him for his second book because it

could “contain the essence of a report of a journey” while also functioning as metaphor.⁹ And using that form provided him with the opportunity to try his hand at Hemingway-style journalism—or “anti-journalism,” as Ronald Weber has described it—that he had first admired so much as a young man. What makes Hemingway’s work “anti-journalism,” according to Weber, is his focus on his “own reacting presence” and his “mingling [of] observation with invention, always making more than describing.”¹⁰

Examples of Hemingway’s “anti-journalistic” technique can be found in the 1967 collection of his journalism, *By-Line: Ernest Hemingway*. Among them is “Notes on Dangerous Game: The Third Tanganyika Letter,” which appeared in the July 1934 issue of *Esquire*. Focusing on two especially successful white hunters (or non-native guides for first-time hunters in Africa) and the game they shoot, Hemingway inserts himself not only in the descriptions of the white hunters but also in italicized asides—on different topics, referring to other moments in time. Early on in the piece, he explains why the two white hunters are special standouts “the point is that they do not get mauled and . . . their clients get record heads, record tusks and super lions year after year. They simply happen to be super hunters and super shots.” He follows that in the same paragraph with this: “(There are too many supers in these last two sentences. Re-write them yourselves lads and see how easy it is to do better than Papa. Thank you. Exhilarating feeling, isn’t it?)” (italics in original).¹¹ And then, toward the end of “Letter,” after describing how he perceives the differences between buffalo and the “fighting bull” in the ring (the buffalo “would be more like the big truck that comes charging in during the intermission”), Hemingway offers this italicized aside: “(There won’t be any more asides you will be glad to bear. Am going to write Mr. P [one of the two white hunters] a letter instead. The asides were put in when I read this over on the boat. Got to missing him.)”¹² In both examples, we get Hemingway responding to his craft and then responding to the subject matter he has featured, drawing attention to both his “making” and his “reacting presence.”

Another technique Hemingway uses to create his anti-journalism emerges in “On the Blue Water: A Gulf Stream Letter,” also published in *Esquire* (April 1936) and also collected in *By-Line*. There his reacting presence is foregrounded through his use of “you,” which can include the reader as well. The “Letter” opens with Hemingway recounting a conversation with a nameless friend who thinks any hunting other than elephant hunting is dull; the friend challenges Hemingway, who likes all hunting, and especially hunting for big fish, to write about the latter so as to convince him of its value. This task Hemingway takes up in “Letter,” and that is where “you” plays a pronounced role. Initially the “you” is generic: “In the first place,

the Gulf Stream and the other great ocean currents are the last wild country there is left. Once you are out of sight of land and of the other boats you are more alone than you can ever be hunting. . . .”¹³ This mode continues for several pages, until the “friend” intrudes with a question, “But where does the thrill come in?”¹⁴ allowing for a transition to a specific time when Hemingway was big-fish hunting from a boat in the Gulf Stream. Then Hemingway represents in direct discourse a conversation with two crew members named Carlos and Julio and presents himself as “you”: Carlos tells Hemingway that he “would like” fishing in a dinghy, which is followed by “I’ll look forward to it, you say.” The piece ends with the following, which further personalizes and particularizes Hemingway’s discourse on big-fish hunting:

“What we need for prosperity is a war,” Carlos says. “In the time of the war with Spain and in the last war the fishermen were actually rich.”

“All right,” you say. “If we have a war you get the dinghy ready.”¹⁵

Murray uses these techniques throughout *South to a Very Old Place* to likewise make himself the center of his report while creating a context that mingles observation and invention to move beyond mere neutral and disengaged description. An example is evident in the book’s opening, addressing a generalized “you”: “You can take the ‘A’ train uptown from Forty-second Street in midtown Manhattan and be there in less than ten minutes. There is a stop at Fifty-ninth Street beneath the traffic circle which commemorates Christopher Columbus. . . .”¹⁶ The next section begins similarly: “you can also go south from midtown Manhattan by taking another northbound train from Forty-second Street.” But in the very next sentence, the “you” becomes individualized to Murray—“But this time you keep on past 125th Street”—as it is particularized to this moment of traveling on assignment (“this time”), which he expands on in the following sentences: “This time you roll on across the Harlem River and continue on through the Bronx and that part of suburbia to Connecticut. Then one hour and maybe fifteen, maybe twenty, maybe thirty or thirty-five minutes later you are that many more statute miles further north from Mobile [Murray’s hometown] than Lenox Terrace [Murray’s New York street address]. “You” largely continues to refer to Murray for several pages, as the text moves to his memories of how he felt growing up outside of Mobile: “as far as you were concerned just about the only white man who really knew how to strut his stuff walking back in those days was not anybody anywhere in and around or even near Mobile, Alabama. It was a western cowboy. It was the one and only Tom Mix.”¹⁷ In this way Murray is making the context for his reporting while foregrounding his reacting presence, his insights,

as he begins creating himself as the metaphor for his text—an important counterstatement for both mainstream and the “New” journalism, about which there is more to come below.

But before moving to that, I offer a couple more examples of how Murray adapts Hemingway’s anti-journalistic techniques. On his travels south, one of the first newsmen Murray meets with is Edwin Yoder, then associate editor of the *Greensboro Daily News*. Murray recounts what the two men talked about—William Faulkner, the state of contemporary journalism—and then in italics indicates what the conversation prompts him to recall but not say:

*“Hey look man, the same old [Uncle] Remus, who . . . used to spin for you and all . . . [Southern] white boys such weather-worthy yarns as make such nets as can hold what is . . . comprehensible of human motivation is . . . the selfsame old uncle . . . who used to hand-take me fishing and crabbing on Three Mile Creek [and who] . . . taught me the socialogistics of nightclub entertainers and road musicians, the psychologistics of skin-game survivors and the vernacularities of calculus and trigonometry among other unmentionable unmentionables during all my steel-blue times in rook joints and jook joints, for all the A-B-C days I spent in book joints.”*¹⁸

And after recalling that they also talked about what Murray calls the “Sambo Fallacy”—the flaws in Stanley Elkins’s then widely accepted theory that slavery reduced African Americans to “perpetual child[ren]”¹⁹—Murray adds an italicized aside to the reader in the style of Hemingway: “(*Why is nothing ever made of the fact that to be Afro-American is to be derived at least in part from a mask-wearing tradition?*)”²⁰ Again, what is foregrounded is Murray’s reacting presence, his reactions now not only to his interview subject, but also to the topic at hand, a topic that Murray himself has introduced into the conversation with Yoder.

So by echoing the form of Hemingway’s “anti-journalism,” Murray places himself at the center of his book, which allows him to extend to a symbolic level the overt critique he offers of mainstream journalism practices. What he is up to becomes even clearer when he reports his conversation, again with Yoder, about the routine use of “ghetto” to describe black neighborhoods. Here’s Murray’s complaint: “inherent in the word itself is a very strong danger of overinterpreting both behavior and personality in terms of environment.”²¹ And he explains to Yoder that the theoretical grounding for his complaint is Kenneth Burke’s five terms of dramatism—scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose—that Burke lays out in *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), which was the first book of Burke’s that Murray bought.²¹ He goes on: “when [journalists] use ‘ghetto’ the way they do they are really trying to explain all action and purpose from scene

alone—which just can't be done, especially when all you think you need to know about circumstance is a bunch of goddam [sic] statistics."²³

A review of articles in the *New York Times*—the paper of record that Murray read—on race relations and the black community in the late 1960s confirms his view that “ghetto” is routinely used: black children are described as “ghetto-bred” and “ghetto-confined”; it is “ghetto residents” who are “victims of social change”; two young soldiers, recently returned from Vietnam, are first and foremost “ghetto blacks,” etc.²⁴ The potential here is for the entire black community, when defined by environment, to be seen only as victims, incapable of action and dependent on those outside “the ghetto.” In other words, Murray’s point by way of bringing up Burke is that this usage of “ghetto” robs the community of its most important dimensions: agents and agency—or people who have the wherewithal to act. A corrective, then, to mainstream journalism’s representation of the black community is Murray himself, a Harlem “ghetto” resident at the center of his report. And how wonderfully ironic the whole premise is: a black man visiting white Southern writers, primarily journalists, who is controlling the conversations and their representation, while recording *his* perceptions of these writers’s responses to *his* ideas. Hence, he notes Yoder’s “twinkle which always lights up his expression whenever some topic [Murray raises] engages him,” a twinkle that earns him the distinction of being a journalist apart from “the nonsense, terminological and otherwise, that is too typical of so many other newsmen and editorialists these days.”²⁵ And, likewise, this assessment by Murray of Yoder’s response to his ideas ensures that, at least with regard to this representative black man, the shift in emphasis from scene to agent and agency is complete.

But if Murray himself is a sign of the black community’s agency in *South to a Very Old Place*, the greatest evidence of agency Murray argues elsewhere is “stylization”²⁶—lifestyle, art style, writing style. Here he aligns with Wolfe and Mailer, whose “stylish reporting” challenged the workmanlike prose of 1960s mainstream journalists. But Murray was not a fan of either man’s work, made clear in *The Omni-Americans*, with the former being tagged as “a non-Jewish New York know-it-all . . . trick-typist from Virginia” and the latter “a white Negro,” in reference to Mailer’s famous 1957 essay.²⁷ Mailer makes a couple of appearances in *South to a Very Old Place* as well: Early on in the book, Murray ruminates seriously about how an article on the role black mammies played in raising little white Southern boys would help counter the negative view of black matriarchs put forward by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in his 1963 treatise *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, which was widely embraced by the liberal mainstream at the

time. But in addition, he notes, it might also “help even Norman Mailer to make up his mind as to whether he wants to be a Texan or an Irishman (say, like Big Daddy Pat Moynihan), or maybe he’ll settle for being a U.S. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev after all.”²⁸

The second mention of Mailer occurs toward the end of the fourth chapter, whose title “Tuskegee” refers to the town and school to which Murray has returned to assess the changes since his last visit. While there he recalls the conversations with a former beloved teacher, then deceased, that he always had after traveling someplace new—the Swiss Alps, “hemingway’s spain, and the paris . . . of *The Sun also Rises*”(lowercase in original),²⁹ or London, Rome, Athens. He imagines the conversation they would have had on this trip South: “among the tidbits that most certainly would have been included this time” would have been the story of Norman Mailer at a recent publishing party “disguised . . . not as a somewhat white Negro or a Brooklyn Texan but as a Brendan Behan Irishman.”³⁰ After describing their brief exchange at the party, Murray moves to his perception that while he has heard that Mailer is “a very nice Brooklyn nice guy,” he still “tends to confuse being a swinger with a swaggerer,” and “his capers never really suggest Ernest Hemingway as he used to seem so eager to have people think[,] but F. Scott Fitzgerald.”³¹ Murray then criticizes through his imagined conversation how Mailer’s work represents blacks: “*As for what old Norman thinks of us in print, all I can say as of now is that instead of taking off our balls he only wants to relieve us of our brains. He seems to like our balls even to the extent of painting his own black*” (italics in original). And he ends the section—which covers about a page and a half of text—by jumping forward in time to the present, apparently early 1970 when he is back in New York writing, offering what he could have said if the trip South had taken place “a few months later”:

*Did you see that crap old Norman Mailer wrote about us in Life Magazine? He writes a whole big fat article defining himself in terms of the zodiac (Aquarius this, Aquarius that and the other) and then turns around and declares that it is black people who are such lunatics that they are all shook up because a white man has put his foot on the moon! Very nice guy that Mailer or as Jimmy Baldwin says “A very sweet guy, really.” But is he ever full of adolescent gibberish about us!*³²

There is an awful lot to unpack in those references to Mailer. First, Murray is clearly signifying on Mailer’s “The White Negro,” a piece that Mailer was enormously proud of, as he refers to it in *Advertisements for Myself* as “one of the best things I have done.”³³ To recap what Mailer does in that essay in terms of representing the black community: His argument is that the posture of the white hipster, “the American existentialist,” is derived from

a distinctively black lifestyle, the causes and effects of which he describes thusly: “Hated from outside and therefore hating [themselves],” blacks are disfranchised, psychopathic primitives, “virtually illiterate” and living only in the “enormous present,” who are forced into “relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body.”³⁴ And, further, the black man “in his music”—jazz—gives “voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm.”³⁵ Hence, Murray’s distillation of Mailer’s attitude in his first reference to that New Journalist in *South to a Very Old Place*—admiration, even awe, for black men’s presumed sexual prowess combined with condescension toward their supposed lack of brains. In Mailer’s New Journalism of the 1960s, blacks are not frequently mentioned, but when they are, the characterization put forward in “The White Negro” is perpetuated. An example: In *Armies of the Night*, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 and which began as a magazine piece for *Harper’s*—in fact it was the whole of the March 1968 issue—Mailer asks, “Was a mad genius buried in every Negro? How fantastic they were at their best—how dim at their worst.”³⁶ This comment not only harkens back to “The White Negro,” but also suggests the one-dimensional abstractions of social science surveys that Murray found so disturbing.

Second, unpacking the section on Mailer also brings into relief that Murray has set himself up in the book as Mailer’s equal, and perhaps his better, in terms of intellect and writing. Mailer, like Murray, was known to have been a great admirer of Hemingway. The *Life* magazine piece to which Murray refers—actually, it was a three-part series on the Apollo 11 space mission and moon landing that was published between August 1969 and January 1970—uses a quotation from Hemingway’s “Second Poem to Mary” as an epigraph. The epigraph was retained when the series was expanded for the book *Of a Fire on the Moon*, which came out later in 1970. So Murray’s references to “hemingway’s spain and the paris of . . . *The Sun also Rises*” signal he is claiming the man as *his* literary ancestor. But more interesting is the signifying Murray does on Mailer being less like Hemingway and more like F. Scott Fitzgerald—while a very nice guy—which is in part Murray alluding to Mailer’s own words in the second installment of the Apollo story in *Life*, published on November 14, 1969. There Mailer notes this about astronaut Michael Collins, the one astronaut on the mission who did not get to walk on the moon: “Indeed, if Collins was later to grow a mustache on the trip back, an act which increased his slight but definite resemblance to the young Hemingway, he had a personal style which owed more to Fitzgerald. It was Fitzgerald, after all, who first suggested that you could become the

nicest man in the world.”³⁷ And so Mailer becomes Murray’s Collins by way of Fitzgerald—a very nice guy, competent, yes, but not worthy of a moon landing.

It would have been the third installment of the Apollo series in *Life*, appearing on January 9, 1970, that sealed Mailer’s unworthiness for Murray, as it is there that “Aquarius”—the name by which Mailer refers to himself in the third person throughout the series—encounters a black man, a professor at an Ivy League school, who is attending the same moon-landing party as Mailer. The interactions Mailer has with this man, and his reactions to him, are what Murray distills to Mailer “declar[ing] that it is black people who are such lunatics that they are all shook up because a white man has put his foot on the moon.”³⁸ Indeed, Mailer writes, “Yesterday, Whitey with his numbers had taken a first step to the stars, taken it ahead of Black men. How that had to burn in the ducts of this Black man’s stomach, in the vats of his liver.”³⁹ It would burn, Mailer argues, because blacks had “distaste for numbers,” and by extension technology, because “numbers were abstracted from the senses, numbers made you ignore the taste of the apple for the amount in the box, and so the use of numbers . . . eroded that extrasensory aura” that blacks possessed and which separated them from whites, for blacks “lived with the wonders of magic as the whites lived with technology.” Mailer asks, “How many Blacks had made a move or inhibited it because the emanations of the full moon might affect their cause,” adding, “Now Whitey had walked the moon, put his foot on it”—and so “[t]he Black professor had cause to drink,” in order to drown his sorrows.⁴⁰

As the above indicates, Mailer maintains the separation between blacks and whites he describes in “The White Negro,” with all blacks living a life of the senses and the majority of whites—all but the hipsters—mastering the universe. Murray offers yet one more counterstatement of that, for which I return to his first reference to Mailer in *South to a Very Old Place*, where, after suggesting that a positive treatise on the role of black mammies might help Mailer settle his identity crisis, he lists several possible identities Mailer might choose, ending with “a U.S. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev.” With this reference to Levi Yitzchak, Murray uses allusion to yoke relatively contemporary events with his counterstatement. Yitzchak was an eighteenth-century rabbi renowned for his arguments with God that were memorialized in folk songs, especially one called “A din torah mit got,” which translates as “a court session with God,” and which came to be known as “The Kaddish of Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev.” The African American baritone Paul Robeson famously sang this song after World War II through the 1950s, and Leonard Bernstein used it as the basis for his

Kaddish Symphony No. 3, which premiered in 1963.⁴¹ The reference ties Robeson, a black cultural celebrity, really a heroic figure not only for his artistic excellence but also for his social activism and political convictions, to white cultural excellence, which is entwined yet again with black culture, as Bernstein's symphony is noted for its jazz inflections. In other words, the reference becomes a sign of one of Murray's signature arguments: that white and black Americans by way of their culture are vitally connected, rendering American culture and U.S. citizens "inextricably mulatto." To separate black culture from white cultural excellence, as Mailer does in his last Apollo installment and elsewhere, indicates a profound misunderstanding of the country, and especially African Americans.

While the above indicates how Murray at specific points directly takes on Mailer in *South to a Very Old Place*, it is in terms of the book's overall style that he counter-states Wolfe (recall the reference to him as the "trick typist" in *The Omni-Americans*). Wolfe's New Journalism up to the time Murray had finished drafting his book, which the text itself indicates was likely summer 1970, would have allowed Murray to conclude that his treatment of the black community did not help to correct, and in fact reinforced, the prevailing view of blacks as a race apart, or marginalized, from the mainstream. Blacks are window-dressing in "The Pump House Gang," when the La Jolla youths, on a lark, go to the Watts community of Los Angeles during the riot just to see "what was going on,"⁴¹ or they are described, in passing, as society's deviants in "Tom Wolfe's New Book of Etiquette," where he explains, "Unique styles, today, tend to be developed by various marginal, religiously possessed, netherworld, outcast—'pariah'—groups. Such as: teenagers, artists & bohemians (or 'hippies'), Negroes, narcotics users, homosexuals & camp culturati."⁴³

When a black man is the focus of one of Wolfe's pieces from the 1960s, as is Cassius Clay in "The Marvelous Mouth," which appeared first in the October 1963 issue of *Esquire* (about a year before he changed his name to Muhammad Ali), he comes off as a caricature, at best exotic, but still one of society's outsiders. Note how Wolfe begins the profile:

One thing that stuck in my mind, for some reason, was the way that Cassius Clay and his brother, Rudy, and their high-school pal, Tuddie King, and Frankie Tucker, the singer who was opening in Brooklyn, and Cassius' pride of "foxes," Sophia Burton, Dottie, Frenchie, Barbara and the others, and Richie Pittman and "Lou" Little, the football player, and everybody else up there in Cassius' suite on the forty-second floor of the Americana Hotel kept telling time by looking out the panorama window and down at the clock on top of the Paramount Building on Times Square. Everybody had a watch.⁴⁴

What's more, the clock is "on that whacky Twenties-modern polyhedron on top of the Paramount Building,"⁴⁵ suggesting the whacky building is matched by the whacky Clay and his entourage. And Clay, even though he is a "phenomenon" wherever he goes, is an outsider to New York, unable to really understand it, Wolfe suggests, because it is "beyond his frame of reference."⁴⁶ Furthermore, Clay becomes a caricature by the title "The Marvelous Mouth," making that body part Clay's dominant feature, over something like, say, his intelligence. To be sure, the piece is not intended to be a serious exploration of what makes Cassius Clay tick, or to probe his psyche. Rather, in Wolfean style, it is both to poke some fun at the folks who have the nerve to approach Clay, either out of admiration or out of contempt, and to deflate its subject by inflating some of his traits. Interesting reading, but the light touch that the style demands keeps it solidly in line with mainstream ideas about black folk.

And in the end it is Wolfe's style that Murray would see as limiting what Wolfe could accomplish in his representation of African Americans. One additional piece in which blacks play an important role that may have appeared before Murray had completed his manuscript is "Radical Chic," first published in the June 1970 issue of *New York* magazine. "Radical Chic" features the Black Panthers, who are guests of honor at a fundraiser held in the home of Leonard Bernstein and his wife Felicia and attended by New York's most prominent socialites—Otto Preminger, Jean vanden Heuvel, Gail Lumet, Barbara Walters, Frank and Domna Stanton, and others. The object of Wolfe's satire, the socialites, are practicing a kind of *nostalgie de la boue*, which he translates as "romanticizing of primitive souls."⁴⁷ And he claims to have been up to pretty serious business with the piece, citing in the head note for the excerpt he included in *The New Journalism* his goal of "draw[ing] the reader inside the emotional life of the characters."⁴⁸ The emotional life he exposes is indeed that of the socialites, an exposure that is facilitated by the presence of the Panthers, who themselves remain distant, stylized objects. As the Panthers arrive, Wolfe describes how the socialites thrill to see them:

Shoot-outs, revolutions, pictures in *Life* magazine of policemen grabbing Black Panthers like they were Vietcong—somehow it all runs together in the head with the whole thing of how *beautiful* they are. *Sharp as a blade*. The Panther women . . . are so lean, so *lithe*, as they say, with tight pants and Yoruba-style headdresses, almost like turbans, as if they'd stepped out of the pages of *Vogue*, although no doubt *Vogue* got it from them.⁴⁹

Wolfe is of course poking fun at the socialites's response to the Panthers's

presence, but that is the only representation of the Panthers available to the reader. So thoroughgoing is Wolfe's style that what a reader takes away from the discourse offered by Don Cox, Field Marshal of the Black Panthers—and he is quoted extensively in the piece—is not the message he brings but rather his tendency to pepper his speech liberally with “see” and “you know,” verbal tics that the Radical Chic love, we learn, because “[t]hey are so, somehow . . . *black* . . . so *funky* . . . so metrical. . . .”⁵⁰ The Panthers remain, quite literally, imprisoned within Wolfe's style, located at an objectified and alienating distance, as blacks so often had been in white society.

But since style is, according to Murray, a culture's highest achievement, it's not the fact of stylization that is the problem with Wolfe's treatment of blacks, but rather the kind of stylization. So, embracing the New Journalism's—and particularly Tom Wolfe's—emphasis on style, Murray cultivates style in *South to a Very Old Place* as a metaphoric means to counterstate how “the Negro” is represented as a disfranchised outsider by both the mainstream press and the New Journalism of the 1960s into 1970. And his model is jazz, but not the jazz of Mailer's imagining, which is a product of a black lifestyle defined by violence and raw orgasm, but rather the elegant and sophisticated music of Duke Ellington. A “true jazz composer,”⁵¹ Ellington's sound is by turns classical and vernacular, extravagant and controlled, playful and serious—and quintessentially American, according to Murray,⁵² as are U.S. blacks. Ellington “wrote music of every kind”—“pop songs and blues; ballets and opera; theater, film, and television scores”⁵³—but in part what made him so American, Murray explains, are the “devices” he used to structure his music: Ellington “proceeded not in terms of the convention of exposition, development, and recapitulation, but almost always in terms of vamps (when not coming on like gangbusters), riffs, breaks, choruses of various kinds, such as ensemble, solo, call and response, through chases and bar tradings to outchoruses and tags.”⁵⁴ And so Murray's “nonfiction novel” seeks to capture that Ellingtonian sound in the structure of the book and in the rhythm and diction of his prose.

In terms of structure, *South to a Very Old Place* consists of a Prologue, six chapters, and an Epilogue—or a vamp, which is the introduction to a jazz tune, generally improvised; six choruses; and an outchorus. The vamp is Murray musing on the meaning of home—and how a transplanted black Southerner living in New York gets from midtown Manhattan home to Harlem. And, of course, his very first words about this signal his engagement with Ellington: “You can take the ‘A’ train. . . .”⁵⁵ recalling one of Ellington's signature pieces, “Take the A Train.” The chapters, or choruses, contain solos (often Murray's musings as he meets with such journalists as Yoder,

Joe Cummings of *Newsweek*, and Hodding Carter II of the *Delta Democrat-Times*), call-and-response passages (recalled conversations from the past or with the writers he is visiting), and even ensemble playing (the discourse of the black Mobilians he meets with in Chapter Five, who start out soloing but end up sounding as if their voices are joined, as Murray leads this “band” primarily by “listen[ing] as if from the piano”⁵⁶). And the outchorus allows Murray to sum up his goals for the book: to take the reader not only to the South to see how it has changed from before the Civil Rights Movement to after its heyday, but also to show how a return home brings back “*the promises that exact the haze-blue adventuresomeness from the brown-skinned hometown boy in us all*” (italics in original).⁵⁷ The jazz form reinforces not the alienation of black Americans from the mainstream but rather argues for their centrality to it.

But it is in the rhythm and diction of his prose that Murray’s homage to Ellington takes flight especially and provides a stylistic alternative to Wolfe. It helps to define Murray himself as hip, urbane, well educated, yet downhome. Suggesting Ellington, the prose is extravagant but controlled, by turns vernacular and learned. One example is when he thinks about how Jonathan Daniels of the *Raleigh News and Observer* offers a model more mainstream journalists would do well to adopt:

What you actually find yourself thinking is: *old young* Jo-naythan, son of old Joseefus, the old time dimly remembered Tarheel Editor of my young manhood: old *forever young* Jo-naythan, forever young and forever full of piss and vinegar, who wrote such books as *A Southerner Discovers the South* and *A Southerner Discovers New England* as if with the typewriter propped against the dashboard, who got maybe as close to F.D.R. as Jack Burden was to the Boss in *All the King’s Men* (up there in the White House with his banker’s glasses and his seed- and feed-store facts and figures and his courthouse square yarns which he knew how to spin with exactly the right contemporary Southern mixture of inky-fingered journalistic hipness and immediacy and Chapel Hill grass roots—not without the expected overtones of ante-bellum book learning and phrase turning to be sure).⁵⁸

In that passage, we see Ellingtonian playfulness with the early repetition of “old” four times—the first two times in reference to Daniels himself, then the third time in reference to Murray’s memory of the era, and the fourth returning to the first mention of Daniels with the addition of “forever”—all together suggesting a condensed version of the AABA structure of a blues ballad. And related to Ellington’s propensity to take everyday—even clichéd—sounds and put them in the context of his own ambitious sound, Murray takes in this passage about Daniels the clichéd language—“forever young,” “piss and vinegar”—and sets it in the context of serious work:

Daniels's books; Robert Penn Warren's masterpiece, *All the King's Men*. For both Ellington and Murray, the goal for that kind of move is to connect the vernacular with "high art." And, finally, the last parenthetical is a marvelous brief solo recalling perhaps the sound of Johnny Hodges, the Ellington band alto saxophonist known for his romanticism, as Murray builds a very long phrase with "and" and "which" and no punctuation, asking us to read it without a break up until the one dash, after which he adds a jazz-like tag and Ellingtonian playful wink: "not without the expected overtones of antebellum book learning and phrase turning to be sure."

But perhaps it is when Murray recreates the dialogue of the black Mobilians as they converse about that Southern politician who had recently exited the White House that his prose most swings and struts à la Ellington:

"Lyndon Johnson. Lyndon Johnson. Old Lyndon Johnson. They can call him everything but a child of God as long as you please and I still say old Lyndon Johnson, faults and all. They talking about what they talking about and I'm talking about what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the same thing I always been talking about. I'm talking about us, and I say old Lyndon Johnson is the one that brought more government benefits to help us out than all the rest of them up there put together all the way back through old Abe Lincoln."⁵⁹

In these lines, we see Murray building the tune, starting with the first chorus of "Lyndon Johnson"—simple, punctuated lines that are repeated several times with an interlude and then a return to "I still say old Lyndon Johnson." Then a new chorus begins with the refrain of "talking," which incorporates a kind of call-and-response: "they talking," "I'm talking." Next the tune returns to the subject of that talking, "old Lyndon Johnson," and ends with a flourish, and, as in the previous example, there is no internal punctuation so that the words can build to a crescendo for the outchorus: who is Lyndon Johnson? He's "the one that brought more government benefits to help us out than all the rest of them up there put together all the way back through Abe Lincoln." In this rendering of a black Mobilian's take on Lyndon Johnson, the goal of Murray's stylization comes into clear focus: to provide a picture of the black community playing with language to be sure, but playing to make a point—that African Americans are dynamic, positive, wise, and knowing. Like Ellington. Like Murray himself. And unlike anything by Mailer or Wolfe.

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Endnotes

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¹⁹ Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 84, 130.

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²⁶ Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 54–55.

²⁷ Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 101.

²⁸ Murray, *South to a Very Old Place*, 54.

²⁹ Murray, *South to a Very Old Place*, 127.

³⁰ Murray, *South to a Very Old Place*, 129.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Murray, *South to a Very Old Place*, 130.

³³ Norman Mailer, “Sixth Advertisement for myself,” in *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1959), 335.

³⁴ Norman Mailer, “The White Negro,” in *Advertisements for Myself*, 348, 357, 341. Mailer makes explicit his view that blacks are psychopathic, claiming that it is “no accident that psychopathy is most prevalent with the Negro” immediately before explaining how hatred imposed from the outside and then internalized forces blacks into a “moral wilderness.”

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³⁷ Norman Mailer, “The Psychology of Astronauts,” *Life*, 14 November 1969, 26.

³⁸ Norman Mailer, “A Dream of the Future’s Face,” *Life*, 9 January 1970, 130.

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⁴⁰ Mailer, “A Dream of the Future’s Face,” 138–39.

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⁵⁶ Murray, *South to a Very Old Place*, 172.

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⁵⁸ Murray, *South to a Very Old Place*, 44–45.

⁵⁹ Murray, *South to a Very Old Place*, 176.
