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Frame And Dialect: The Evolution Of The Black Voice In American Literature

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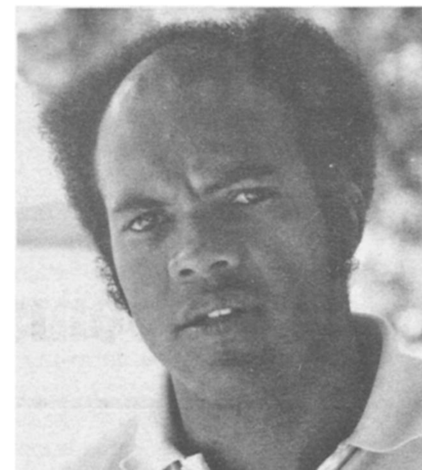
JOHN WIDEMAN

In addition to three novels (*A Glance Away*, *Hurry Home*, and *The Lynchers*), John Wideman has published short fiction, poetry, reviews, and scholarly work in many leading periodicals. He has been awarded a Kent Fellowship, a Ben Franklin Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, and a Rhodes Scholarship.



John Wideman photo by Elise Goldman

Frame And Dialect: The Evolution Of The Black Voice In American Literature

The fact is, of course, that there is no such thing as Negro dialect; that what we call by that name is the attempt to express, with such a degree of phonetic correctness as to suggest the sound, English pronounced as an ignorant old southern Negro would be supposed to speak it, and at the same time to preserve a sufficient approximation to the correct spelling to make it easy reading.

—Charles Chesnutt

Afro-American literature can be approached from a variety of angles. One might be chronological, or historical, a listing of works and writers dating back to the 1760's. Another might be thematic — isolating the leading ideas and points of departure that have characterized black writing over the years. A third could be contrast and comparison of black writing within the framework of American literature in general with the object being to place significant work by blacks into its proper place. All of these strategies however contain problems. Each approach contains a set of assumptions which distort significant aspects of Afro-American literature.

In most full length studies of Afro-American literature the emphasis has been on sequential ordering, upon cataloguing writers into classes and categories, upon establishing firsts — the first novel, the first drama, etc., by a black American. With the chronological perspective come rank orderings of individual writers and of the works of a specific author. Historical periods are delineated without regard to the facts of literary evolution. A kind of soft literary history develops with a tendency towards surveys, each one a little more abrupt and rigid in its treatment of individual texts and authors. Critical judgments are hidden in plot summaries, labels, like the heroic epithets of classical poetry, cling to books; whole volumes and reputations are reduced to a shorthand which is manipulated without reference to originals in succeeding surveys. This soft literary history is characteristic of the way American literature is taught and is even more pernicious for Afro-American literature since the facts in the narrow sense have yet to be established. This gives tremendous latitude to those critics who rush from Phyllis Wheatley to Eldridge Cleaver. No reliable, recognized sources exist to give the lie to their presumptions. Even more damaging to this approach is the fact that historians of Afro-American literature have been dependent for their timetables and values upon co-current assumptions about American history and culture, assumptions with pronounced class, race and sex bias.

The thematic approach in the case of Afro-American literature works out to be an analysis of literature from the point of view of the writer's ideology or the cause and effect derivation of literary form from the general socio-economic and agricultural-industrial forms of an epoch, two tendencies Ejxenbaum warned against in his 1929 essay on Literary Environment. Ejxenbaum argues that "literature, like any other specific order of things, is not generated from facts belonging to other orders and, therefore, cannot be reduced to such facts." Broad ideological categories such as nationalism, assimilation or accommodation convey almost nothing about the specifically literary aspects of a novel or poem and allow critics to lump together writers as distinctive as Willard Motley and Charles W. Chesnutt to prove the critics' pet theses about black life and literature.

Finally, an attempt to insert black writers in the traditional framework of American literature ignores all of the issues noted above, and does not take into account specific characteristics of the American critical tradition: its provincialism, which takes the form of Anglophilia, its ethnocentrism, its diachronic bias, its absolute separation of matters aesthetic from matters social and political, its reflection of the racist assumptions of the society in general when applying itself to black literature, its ignorance of African culture and aesthetic modes, its hierarchial assumptions about classes of literature (i.e.) folklore being lower than literate productions, its recent equation of a black aesthetic with extremist political and social philosophy, its unwillingness to broaden the category of literature to include oral performance of poetry and narrative.

New questions need to be asked. And these questions should proceed logically from new ways of perceiving the integrity of Afro-American literature as well as its relationship to American literature and culture. In this essay I will attempt to sketch one such context, for the analysis of a fundamental problem: How does black speech evolve into a literary language.

Among other things Afro-American literature is a record of survival, the story of how a captive, oppressed racial minority maintained a sense of dignity and worth in spite of the active hostility of a nation which was growing to be one of the most powerful forces in the world. For nearly four centuries black people came as slaves to the New World and only for the last 110 years have all blacks born in the United States been legally free. This year America is celebrating its bicentennial, the 200th birthday of its independence. Unfortunately black Americans can point to no resounding date or event to mark the beginning of our freedom. Ours has been a continuing revolution, a slow, tortured turning of the wheel, pushing the stone up the mountain again and again. The measure of our freedom has been and will continue to be the degree to which we commit ourselves to struggle. Black writers have defined and redefined the nature of the struggle, and the meaning of being a black American is inextricably tied to struggle. If as many black writers have insisted American "invented" the Negro, then this invention is best understood as part of a larger enterprise of the imagination, the invention of America itself. In order to justify slavery and resolve the contradictions posed by this institution to the legal and moral foundations upon which America was in theory erected, the Africans who were being bought and sold had to be reduced to less than human status. Unlike succeeding waves of immigrants, Africans were not meant to be part of the human economy of the nation. In fact African labor was an investment which made sense only if the human potential and needs of Africans were systematically repressed. This repression took many forms, and scholars of law, of government and history have documented its pervasiveness. From the point of initial contact between Europeans and Africans in the New World the battle lines were drawn — the European colonists had a vested interest in asserting and maintaining the African as a sub-human species, while the African, threatened both by the Europeans' vision of him and the Europeans' power to bring that vision into life through the dehumanizing conditions of chattel slavery, resisted this onslaught on his humanity with those resources least amenable to external control: imagination and will. All forms of resistance were an assertion of humanity. Taken individually such acts might be called heroism; collectively the acts expressing a need for self-identification, for a reality apart from the one being forced upon them by their masters, created a culture.

Afro-American literature is one aspect of this culture. Its roots are historical, psychological and metaphysical. As Richard Wright has stated, there is in American society a struggle over the nature of reality. To move from the acknowledgement of this fact to a closer, detailed analysis of Afro-American literature is a treacherous undertaking. Like the black African writer who must choose English or French to tell his story, like Yeats or Joyce who felt the profound uneasiness of an Irish sensibility negotiating within English, the language of their nation's conquerors, the relationship of the black American writer to the vehicle of his art is complex. Because of his African language and culture, the black man spoke English differently than the European. This difference was incorporated in colonial American literature as dialect, but Negro dialect was taken as a sign not simply of difference but inferiority. Black speech was used in the drama of the late 18th Century as a kind of comic interlude. Conventionalized during the 19th Century by white southern writers — Irwin Russell, the Lanier brothers, Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page — and by the minstrel show which grew phenomenally popular in the North and South during this period, the literary stage representation of black speech was for the majority of white Americans, an accurate representation of Negro character — blacks abused the language, distorting its sound with mispronunciation and its

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sense with outrageous words. Negro dialect as a signifier in American literature announced the presence of an entire value system — white superiority and black inferiority.

Of course dialect was not black speech but the colonial interface of two language cultures — one literary, written, the other traditional, oral. The literary frame in which dialect appeared was a natural extension of the colonial relationship assuring that the interface would be rendered in terms of the literate culture. For a 19th Century black writer to enter the literary culture was not a neutral choice. To some extent he or she was like a merchant who inveighs against slavery and who employs only free blacks in his business, but whose profits on the other hand have a systemic dependence on a slave economy. Language is a systematic representation of reality and its forms reflect assumptions about that reality. No matter how vehement his or her protests and condemnation of white society, the Manicheism Fanon identified in colonial societies placed the black writer in the camp of his enemies because he was using their language, endorsing it as an instrument of enlightenment. In the 1960's a reaction against this prison house of language led black poets to obscenity, to experiments with sounds and screams, street talk, to an alienation from the text so that written language was replaced by oral performance, the shout, chant, the weaving of musical instruments with the human voice.

Sixty years before, at the end of the 19th Century, the same impulse — to escape a literary frame which *a priori* devalued black speech and sensibility — initiated other experiments. The ascendant national philosophy was the white supremacism of the South exemplified at home in the poltical repression of the Negro in the post-reconstruction South and the institution of Jim Crow in the North; abroad in the late grasping for an overseas empire in the Philippines and Cuba. In literature, science, and the law the ideals of the defeated Confederacy were just as evident. Black writers no matter what their level of education or skill, if they were to publish fiction and poetry at all, were expected to do so in the dialect mode. How well this was understood may be illustrated by a few quotes from the period. Paul Laurence Dunbar, a black poet, complained, "I've got to write dialect poetry; its the only way I can get them to listen." James Weldon Johnson in his preface to the *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) argued that black writers "are trying to break away from, not Negro dialect itself, but limitations on Negro dialect imposed by the fixing effects of long convention." Charles Chesnutt went further. He declared "the fact is, of course, that there is no such thing as Negro dialect; that what we call by that name is the attempt to express, with such a degree of phonetic correctness as to suggest the sound, English pronounced as an ignorant old southern Negro would be supposed to speak it, and at the same time to preserve a sufficient approximation to the correct spelling to make it easy reading." Yet white critics persisted in their efforts to lock Negro expression into moulds which corresponded to the majorities vision of black people's lives: "The range between appetite and emotion is not great, but it is here that his [Dunbar's] race has hitherto had its being, with a lift now and then far above and beyond it. A rich humorous sense pervades his [Dunbar's] recognition of this fact, without excluding a fond sympathy, and it is the blending of these which delights me in all his dialect verse."

Such assertions about the *facts* of black life disguised as critical judgments about literature were common then and now. The Negro dialect tradition in American literature culminating at the end of the 19th Century was a reassertion of white power, a reclaiming by the literate culture of the language blacks had begun to fashion to suit their own needs. White writers (and blacks who attempt to capitalize on the vogue of dialect form) are declaring "What we wish to hear, the way we want to hear it — that's what Negro speech is. And what we record of their speech is an accurate index to their character."

This phenomenon I'm describing, the exploitative manipulation of an oral folk material for the benefit of a politically dominant culture, is not limited to America in the 19th century. Confrontation between oral and written cultures and the mode or version of reality contained in each is a historical stage of most civilizations or a feature of the meeting between "advanced" and "primitive" societies. The implications of such confrontations for the quality of life in a society have just begun to be understood and studied.

Although the literary culture devalued black speech, made it appear infantile alongside the matured mode of literate expression, the oral culture Africans brought with them to the New World flourished. The functions of speech in West African society as well as the African languages themselves exerted demonstrable effects on the manner in which other Americans spoke English. Work songs, story telling, dancing, field hollers, religious music, proverbs, riddles, the use of the talking drums and the perpetuation of drum effects after drums were forbidden are modes of socialization as well as artistic modes of expression. They facilitated the learning of a new language and in spite of the terrible Middle Passage preserved the aesthetic canons of West African oral tradition in the New World.

> *You taught me language and my profit on't*
> *Is, I know how to curse*

The slave could seldom use the language he was taught in the New World to curse his master to his face as Caliban does Prospero, but the new language could be employed as a tool, as a means of group identification and solidarity, as a code with meanings the master could not decipher. Though the new language was imposed, though it began as an extension of the master's power over the slave, the slaves learned to curse, to signify, to sing, to tell tales, to use their language — at one stage a Pidgin, then later Plantation Creole — to reinforce social, ethical and aesthetic values, in short to construct a world in their terms, a world in which black people had a measure of power and dignity.

Thus the folk artist, the carrier of oral tradition, could employ in his creations a familiar, mature style whose general features would be recognizable to the majority of blacks being brought as slaves from West Africa. The traditional language functions and artistic modes from Africa, and the conditions of the new environment which brought into play the need for self-expression, for personal and communal ritual and group solidarity were all presented. The situation was ripe for a flowering of folk expression, which is what happened. The roots of the spirituals, blues, jazz, black oratorical styles, folk tales, can be located in this fertile soil. The black literary artist suffered under a different set of circumstances: within the literate culture his role was circumscribed by the dialect tradition, by racism in the publishing industry, by the general hostility against any version of black life which did not fit the self-interest of the white ruling class.

Against this background one can view the evolution of the black voice in American literature as the attempts of various writers to free themselves from a frame which *a priori* devalues black speech. Certain continuities and problems shared by black American writers can be moved out of the context of political ideology and analyzed in terms of language and literary style.

> *Some view our race with scornful eye,*
> *"Their color is a diabolic die"*
> *Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain*
> *May be refined, and join th' angelic train*

These lines are from "On Being Brought from Africa to America" by Phillis Wheatley, an African girl who was brought as a slave to America in 1761 and learned English so quickly and thoroughly that she was writing poetry in her new language within a few years.

> She was crying, not from anything I said, but she must have skinned her ass when she hit the floor. I turned on the light and she was sucking her arm and getting the blanket and crying. I kept calling her a god-damn bull, but I didn't like what I was wondering: I was wondering how Cat Lawson got to her mind. Because that wasn't the kind of kid that would respect anybody on account of age.

Gayle Jones, a young black woman, is the author of the second passage, a moment in her novel *Corregidora*, (1975), written while she was a graduate student at Brown University. Are there connections to be made between these two examples of black writing? Shouldn't a critic of black writing be able to define areas of continuity, devise strategies, suggest logical categories for handling these widely different styles if in fact the critic argues for a black tradition in American literature? Not that these two young female writers need to be alike because they are black, rather, are there signs of unity in diversity we may draw from their examples? And where might Chesnutt's or Dunbar's use of dialect fit? In order to unite these writers, one of the central problems in the study of black literature must be confronted: the task of charting the evolution of black speech into a self-sufficient, independent literary code.

For an African brought to America as a slave in the 17th and 18th centuries the literary code of English was at least thrice removed: by the initial language barrier of his African tongue, by the discrepancy between the oral and literate traditions in English, and finally by the African tradition in which verbal art was an oral rather than a written mode. Wheatley transcended two barriers — she learned to speak English and she learned a literary code of that language. Since the norms of 18th-century poetry reflected little of the language she heard spoken around her, her notion of poetry would be that it was a closed system, derived from imitation of earlier written works. No place existed in this variety of poetry for the rough and ready Americanized English she might hear in the streets, or the speech of other Afro-Americans with whom she might come into contact, and of course there was no room for Africanisms she might recall. The conventions of neoclassical poetry ruled out casual talk; her voice and feelings had to be generalized according to rules of poetic diction and characterization; the particulars of her African past if they were acceptable at all, had to be subordinated to the reigning conventions she absorbed. Wheatley was affected by specific facts of the literary historical environment into which she was transplanted. Her experience of poetry in Africa just wouldn't count as poetry in her new situation. The aesthetic canons which she might have internalized were irrelevant to the new context because no language or social framework existed to reinforce them. This barrier was too great to surmount. Wheatley is absorbing a foreign literary tradition just as she learns a foreign language; they are not an extension of her past experiences with language but are meant to replace what came before. In terms of the evolutionary framework I'm attempting to sketch, Wheatley represents the meeting of oral and liter-

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ate cultures, and, therefore, the potential for interpenetration, a potential her writing does not exploit.

A distinction must be made here between what counts and doesn't count in the official version of American literary history. Many writers black and white used Negro dialect in their work before dialect was exploited by white southern writers in the last quarter of the 19th century. The slave narrative is an example of a genre where the development of black speech as a literary language might fruitfully be investigated, but the narratives, factual and fictional, have been traditionally perceived as extraliterary and the fiction of black writers such as Martin Delaney has been noted strictly from a historical/ideological perspective rather than subjected to literary analysis. The narratives, the fiction of William Wells Brown and Delaney did not count as literary facts. New questions need to be asked—how does black speech evolve into a literary language—before these "extraliterary" facts can be "discovered" in Ejxenbaum's sense: "the incorporation of a new set of facts (under the sign of some particular correlation) strikes us as being the discovery of those facts, since their existence outside a system (their 'contingent' status) had been from a scientific point of view equivalent to their non-existence."

From the point of view of American literature then, the fact of black speech (and the oral roots of a distinct literary tradition—ultimately the tradition itself) existed only when it was properly "framed," within works which had status in the dominant literary system. For black speech the frame was the means of entering the literate culture and the frame also defined the purposes or ends for which black speech could be employed. The frame confers reality on black speech; the literary frame was a mediator, a legitimizer. What was outside the frame chaotic, marginal, not worthy of the reader's attention becomes, once inside, conventionalized into respectability.

The legitimizing frame can inhere in the structure of a work (the dialect stories of Chesnutt's Uncle Julius are tales within tales, seemingly subordinate to the voice of John, a narrator who speaks literary English); in the subjective voice—over that of a third person omniscient (Irwin Russell's "Christmas Night in the Quarters"); in objective depersonalized descriptive adjectives and stage directions ("befo de wah" said the gnarled, old slave, gazing nostalgically at the sumptuous oaks shading the spacious veranda of the big house). Or the frame can be implicit: conventions of Negro speech, manners, dress, once firmly established can upon their appearance trigger automatic responses in an audience. James Weldon Johnson in the Preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* yearns for the day when a "colored poet in the United States may sit down to write in dialect without feeling that his first line will put the general reader in a frame of mind which demands that the poem be humorous or pathetic." The frame implies a linguistic hierarchy, the dominance of one language variety over all others. This linguistic subordination extends naturally to the dominance of one version of reality over others.

If the lines from Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America" are at one end of the continuum representing the evolution of black speech to a self-sufficient literary language, the narrator of *Corregidora* demonstrates how far other writers have moved out of the frame. Wheatley's poem illustrates almost total dependence on a foreign literary tradition, foreign to African languages, to American speech, to the traditions of African verbal art. Transition—the application of the ideas of the written literature to a native oral tradition—exists potentially, but has not begun. Gayle Jones also exhibits debt to a literary tradition, but it is a tradition including Wheatley and Pope, Faulkner and Ellison, a tradition richer in models and less foreign to American speech. The salient issue here is not the throng of influences on *Corregidora* which may be mustered from other works of literature, but rather the relationship between literate and oral traditions in Jones' novel. Gayle Jones is a member of a black speech community and this membership implicates a significant dimension of her literary style. In contrast to Wheatley for whom oral traditions black or white are negligible, the fluency of Jones in two language cultures permits her to create a considerable dramatic tension between them, a tension responsible for much of the novel's impact and uniqueness. One critic's comment that "The book is written with almost embarrassing power" is evidence of how difficult this tension is to resolve. In the quoted passage from *Corregidora* there is no hierarchical relationship between black speech and a separate literary language, no implicit dependency. The norms of black oral tradition exist full bodied in the verbal style of the novel: lexicon, syntax, grammar, attitudes towards speech, moral and aesthetic judgments are rendered in the terms of the universe they reflect and reinforce. Through the filter of the narrator's sensibility the entire novel flows, and Corregidora's sensibility is constructed of blocks of black speech, her own, her men's, the speech of the people who patronize Happy's bar, the voices of her mother and the dead black women keeping alive the memories of slavery. Black speech is allowed to do (the author insists that it can) everything any other variety of literary language can do. The message comes through loud and clear to the reader: there is no privileged position from which to view this fictional world, no terms into which it asks to be translated, its rawness is not incidental, not local color or exoticism from which other, more familiar voices will relieve you. A black woman's voice creates the only valid terms for Corregidora's world; the authority of her language is not subordinated to other codes; the frame has disappeared.

In this novel and others black speech as a literary language has become *Creolized*, that is, it has moved from being a *Pidgin* at an earlier historical stage, and has become the only (or principal) language of a speech community. A Pidgin has no native speakers. It exists as a *lingua franca*, a language used for purposes of wider communication, especially in a group when the native language of no member of the group will suffice. Negro dialect as it was conventionalized in 19th century American literature fits perfectly the definition of a Pidgin. But dialect or pidgin are no longer accurate words when speaking about the black language of contemporary Afro-American fiction. An independent literary language has developed from the halting pidgin of dialect. Verbal structures, grammar and vocabulary are related to but not explicable solely by the logic of standard English. Black writers have created their own code of discourse from the resources of the black oral tradition and the models of American literature.

If racial conflict in American society is a struggle over the nature of reality, Chesnutt joined the fray when he juxtaposed the dialect voice with standard literary discourse (a code for the real), dramatizing the inadequacy of the assumptions (encoded in literary discourse as part of the real) which locked the black voice and black character into conventionalized, formulaic moulds. Uncle Julius like Kilroy, peeks around the frame, uses it for his own purposes, ultimately demolishing its restrictions. In order to move closer to *Corregidora*, we must look to writers other than Chesnutt for literary transformations of the outward forms of black folk speech.

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) is begun in literary discourse but as Janie's voice takes over the narration, Hurston returns dialect to its roots in black folk speech, elaborating the context in which black speech is the independent expression of a speech community rather than a shorthand for indicating Negro inferiority. Hurston depicts the form and functioning of black speech within a specific cultural setting, and because this setting is a totally black community any external frame is minimized. The language reflects the lives of rural black folk and is adequate as any peoples' language is adequate for a full range of communicative needs. Which is not to suggest a lack of aesthetic dimensions in black speech. These in fact are emphasized in Hurston through the sustained metaphor of "talk" — talk as ritual, talk as play, talk as prop of institutions and values in the community, and, embracing all its other functions, talk as an instrument for validating experience and vice-versa, experience as the confirming ground of talk. Authenticity of character, of experience are related by Hurston to the connection between word and act. "You got to go there, to know there," a connection embodied by black speech in its various artistic modes — boasts, courtship speech, the dozens, preaching, singing the blues, etc. Because Hurston focuses on blackspeech as it functions in a specific community setting, the reader's attention is drawn away from the external form of dialect — the comic orthography, the elisions, preposterous words, the "eye dialect" — in short the stylistic stock and trade of 19th and early 20th century writers of Negro dialect, stylistic tricks which were subversive because they suggested invidious comparisons between the written and spoken, divergence or deviancy from the "norm." The question of technical accuracy in rendering dialect is also put in proper perspective by Hurston's approach. Whether Chesnutt or Cable or Harris came closest in approximating the *actual* speech of southern rural blacks is a specialist's concern, which may be sorted out with tape recorders and statistical analysis, but a question which leaves literary evaluation untouched. Once a convention for dramatizing black speech appears in fiction, the literary critic should be concerned not with matters of phonetic accuracy, but with the evolution of a written code and how that code refers to the spoken language in suggestive, artful, creative ways. How does Hurston's or Chesnutt's rendering of blackspeech make available to the

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reader those elements of language which manifest the full range of Afro-American experience in the southern rural United States? In the sense that Dell Hymes develops for the concept, blacks form speech communities, and their speech acts must be viewed as phenomena rooted in distinct cultural settings. To understand what a person is saying one must learn to recognize not only the culturally variable nature of words themselves, but of the social situations which occasion speech acts.

Black speech like any other variety of language defines reality for its users. Black speech in American literature could not perform this function until it divested itself of the frame, those elements in a literary tradition which resolve in favor of the literate, conflicting versions of reality codified into written and oral modes of expression. In the same sense that the French New Novel could not totally dispense with all "realistic" conventions of fiction, black speech cannot escape entirely the frame of American literary language. Barthes in *S/Z* discusses the code of realism in "readerly" fiction, arguing that the code of novelistic realism refers to a pictorial code which is itself not "reality" but a set of conventions for depicting reality within the frame of a classical painting. As long as the depiction of black reality was dependent for its verification on the conventions of another code (mainstream American literature) and the conventions of that code were not examined as Barthes examines the relationship of fictive and pictorial realism, the black voice in American fiction could never become a distinct, independent index to reality. The New Novelists had to explode in their fiction a dependence on pictorial conventions to deprive the traditional novelists' "realism" of its arbitrary authority, and in a similar fashion Chesnutt, Hurston and Jones each attack the authority of the literary frame which mediated between black speech and reality. Such attacks and counterstatements embodied in the writing of black American writers form one of the unities in diversity which substantiate a Black Tradition in American Literature.

MARGE PIERCY

Marge Piercy's new novel, *Woman On The Edge Of Time*, is available from Alfred A. Knopf. *To Be Of Use* (poetry) and *Small Changes* (fiction) are out from Doubleday.

Marge Piercy

From Where I Work

A Column

A number of women's publishing houses have started since 1969, mostly for the same reasons: that what they print was not wanted by established large or small presses. I want to look at two West Coast publishers that are successful in the terms in which we use that word in the world of poetry and small presses; that is, we aren't talking about profits but survival and satisfaction. Each of them has hung on, got the books printed and out, set up a distribution network and generated a respectable list of books in print.

When Alta and John Oliver Simon broke up as a couple although not as friends, he got the house and Alta got the press. Although Simon continues to print *Aldebaran Review* (a series of handsome chapbooks) on it, the machine is now in the garage attached to Alta's house in San Lorenzo and basically it's the Shameless Hussy Press. A shameless hussy was what Alta's mother called women she didn't approve of. Hussy comes from housewife, Alta told me, and she has been mostly a housewife although she's held a full range of rotten and illpaid jobs of the sort women get, labor in and lose, all without endangering our amateur standing in the world.

Shameless Hussy Press got started because Susan Griffin, Pat Parker and Alta all had books of poetry they could not get published. Although *Letters to Women* was Alta's second book and she had received requests to submit the manuscript on the strength of her first, when male publishers found the book consisted of poems to women, they lost interest. Pat Parker is a black lesbian, a winning combination in getting a book accepted then as now. Susan Griffin is a highly political feminist.

Only two bookstores would handle Shameless Hussy's early output: the Gotham Book Mart in New York and Up Haste in Berkeley. At first the books were rough and lacked spines. Alta charged as little as she could, but finally she had to make more professional looking products and raise the prices to get distributors to handle them. She carried the books around herself and talked them into stores. Alma Cremonesi, the only other person involved with the press during the first years, hustled the books at women's centers, conferences and caucuses.

Shameless Hussy was a shoestring operation. The first three books cost only $1 apiece, but Alta had to raise the money a dollar at a time before she could roll. She used to go to the Med Coffee Shop in Berkeley and go around asking people for contributions.

The description of Shameless Hussy in the best selling *Women's Survival Catalog* helped. The appearance of women's bookstores across the country made the operation more plausible. Some of the poetry began to be reviewed. In 1975 Shameless published six new books in runs mainly of three thousand. Of 36 titles, 30 are still in print. A male volunteer, Angel Skarry, has been doing printing and handling orders for two years. Sarah Kennedy, who's sixteen, also prints and coedited the *Skin of Change* anthology. The Press now pays for itself, but sometimes Alta still has to raise money for special books.

Shameless Hussy gets three submissions a day, about a hundred a month. Often Alta rejects manuscripts she feels would be acceptable to other presses. "I publish a book I need that can't get published any other way. In fact Shameless Hussy specializes in books that are unpublishable. Of course all the writers we publish are geniuses!"

Shameless also distributes books that she particularly likes and feels could use the help, and reprints occasionally: a George Sand tale and the upcoming Calamity Jane's letters to her daughter. On the list besides Alta's own fine poetry and prose are Susan Griffin, Lyn Lifshin, Mary Mackey, Ntozake Shange, Gail Todd, Joyce Carol Thomas, Mitsuye Yamada. Alta claims as many records as a hotshot Olympic team; among them is being the first feminist press to bring out a book by a man, Paul Mariah's *Personae Non Gratae* (in its third printing). Prison poetry was rare when she did the book, but she published him for the same reason as the women (she likes and needs the work and nobody else will touch it). Shameless Hussy has done books for children by children. Children's books are acceptable to adults when written by adults, she points out. Children may corrupt other children and in fact they say terrible true things. Alta has also started videotaping authors and has made one film, "For colored girls who have considered suicide" by Ntozake Shange—which opened as a play recently off Broadway.*

Shameless Hussy is very much Alta's baby and she calls herself the head honcha. The feminism is an emotional, wide ranging, individualistic and inclusive set of standards that embraces many different women with different backgrounds and ideas and the work of some men. The Women's Press Collective is a different operation. It is an anarchist collective, everyone has an equal voice, decisions are made consciously and politically, and the politics are explicitly radical, lesbian, working-class based, revolutionary and egalitarian. It would be fair to say everyone in the collective sees their work as political as well as cultural.

The collective consists now of six women, each concentrating on a job. Later they will rotate jobs. Pat Parker reads manuscripts and answers mail. Joanne Garett and Sheila Shulman run the presses and collate. Laurie Merrill also works on the collator, cutting and assembly work. Karen Sjoholm does darkroom and layout. Martha Shelley is serving as business manager. Judy Grahn and Wendy Cadden, who were with the Collective from the onset and whose importance in shaping its consciousness can't be overstated, are hovering eminences. They help, they're around, but they have finally withdrawn from the day to day full time work.

However, to think of the Collective as consisting only of the women who are in it full time is a mistake. Judy Grahn made a joke once about the women's press collection, pointing out that more than five hundred women have worked there. Many women volunteer for a while, occasionally, whenever they have time or come through Oakland. The press depends on that help. That other women think the Press is important and contribute free labor to make it exist is the Collective's greatest resource. Their capital is women's enthusiastic hand labor.

If the Collective had done nothing else but publish Judy Grahn, their place in my cultural history would be secure. I consider her (and Susan Griffin whom Alta has also printed) a major poet. Her not yet receiving general recogni-

*The play has been moved to Broadway by Joseph Papp. (Editor's Note.)

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