

Two Writers Sharing: Sterling A. Brown, Robert Frost, and "In Divés' Dive"

It is late at night and still I am losing,
But still I am steady and unaccusing.

As long as the Declaration guards
My right to be equal in number of cards,

It is nothing to me who runs the Dive.
Let's have a look at another five. (Robert Frost, "In Divés' Dive")

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In the recent proliferation of conference papers, critical articles, and books discussing the pioneering innovation and enduring significance of Sterling A. Brown's poetry, literary critics and historians have enthusiastically shown a propensity toward tracing the resonance of "influence" in his work. The persistence of this practice can hardly be faulted because, starting in the early 1960s, Brown began explicating himself to younger generations whom he felt were unacquainted with his seminal efforts to define the distinctiveness of African American literature and culture. In numerous formal and informal interviews, poetry readings, and public lectures, Brown professed an indebtedness to precursing and contemporary writers, including English poets (Ernest Dowson, Rudyard Kipling, Thomas Hardy, A. E. Housman), African American poets (Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and nameless vernacular artists), and the New American Poets (E. A. Robinson, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, and Robert Frost).

In between professing and practice, though, lies a fundamental problem, if we elect to follow Brown's "stage directions" for understanding his poetic apprenticeship. We are challenged by the paradox engendered in his revelation: How can we effectively describe the uniqueness of his poetry and, at the same time, locate it within a tradition of poetry making? Brown, as James Weldon Johnson discovered, always followed his supposed confessions about literary debt with denials about the extent to which anyone shaped and molded his work. Faced with the prospect that readers would interpret Johnson's use of "ultimate source," in his introduction to *Southern Road* (1932), to mean inartistic, slavish imitation, Brown stubbornly resisted Johnson's analysis with this rejoinder: "I think . . . you overstress the influence of the so-called folk epics. These have hardly been my *sources*. Folk experience *has been*" (Letter to Johnson). As a consequence of Brown's retreat, seekers after literary indebtedness find themselves entrapped in poetic miasmas, where the illusory substitutes for the real. I will argue that a relational strategy called "sharing" enables a more appropriate description of the category of influ-

ence informing Brown's uniqueness and his participation in a tradition of poetry-making.

My argument involves three basic concerns. I shall describe the concept of "influence" to reveal how its flexibility as a critical term enables a broader discussion of Brown's claim to poetic uniqueness than is generally found in previous studies of his work. Using arguably the most pointed example of Brown's acknowledged "indebtedness," that of Robert Frost and his poem "In Divés' Dive," I take up the question of how a feature of "influence" I call "sharing" provides both points of convergence and divergence between Frost's and Brown's vision of American poetic tradition. Finally, from my account of "sharing," I derive three general criteria I consider important to describing Brown's poetic distinctiveness and employ these criteria to advocate a relational strategy I believe most effectively applies to reading his work.

Recent study of "influence," as related especially to African American literature, has shown, among other things, that the way of reading literary interaction has generally centered on the imitation of white authors by African American writers. Essentially this relationship has been seen as a one-way street, with the motives of African American authors evolving out of a felt need to prove their "personal merit" and "racial merit" to whites. It's no small wonder, then, that, especially in the mid-eighteenth century, when "originality gained prominence and [when] influence [that is, homage to a venerated predecessor] grew suspect" (Mishkin 5), African American writers came to be viewed negatively as imitative and derivative. In his response cited above to James Weldon Johnson, Brown demonstrates a certain defensiveness about or sensitivity to such accusations.

In addition to showing us feelings of sensitivity, Brown's response to Johnson perfectly illustrates the usual way in which "influence" has been defined—poetic relationships having a generic or thematic connection, in which a younger writer adopts and subsequently modifies a precursing writer's subject matter, form, or style. Out of this pursuit, which theorist Tracy Mishkin develops more fully, came the critics' "interest in source-hunting" (5), which further crystalized "influence" as denoting a "father-son" relationship. Brown himself struggled against this familial metaphor in his denial to Johnson, but it is precisely the imposition of a precursor-imitator relational strategy that constrains many critics writing about Brown.

Joanne Gabbin, in the first book-length bio-critical study of Brown, has good intentions but is only partially correct when she argues that "the poets who most appealed to Brown during [his apprenticeship period] were those who used freedom as their banner: freedom to choose new materials; freedom from stilted, florid poetic diction; freedom to experiment with language, form, and subject matter in new, unconventional ways; and freedom from the kind of provincialism and Puritanism that Van Wyck Brooks said in *America's Coming of Age* has stymied the growth of literature and art in America" (31). This argument illustrates the tendency to see African American poets in terms of the "influence" exerted on them by white precursors, or even contemporaries. In her otherwise perceptive observation, Gabbin finds it unnecessary to interrogate the practitioners of florid language in an effort to determine where Brown agreed or disagreed with their practice. Nor does she explore the remnants of his apprenticeship work, found in the "Vestiges" section of his *Southern Road* (1932), to determine the origins of these poems in earlier poetic practice. Moreover, Gabbin's argument neglects to probe the intraracial conversation that took place among whites, whose preeminence became the

standard critics used in defining "the tradition."

As critics writing about Brown, we can find ourselves caught in the same dilemma that Brown had to face: how to demonstrate his participation in a tradition of poetry-making while simultaneously showing his uniqueness. For Brown, the dilemma had personal implications: Like his integration-minded fellow poets, he sought to prove that he belonged socially to the American mainstream while maintaining his racial integrity as an individual.¹

I would argue that one way out of the dilemma of precursor and imitator, of provider and receiver, and of group member and individual is through the complementarity of "influence" and "intertextuality." These two approaches, as Mishkin persuasively writes, are complementary, "for they can identify each other's weaknesses . . . thereby enhancing the study of literary interaction" (8). In a fuller, more serviceable explanation, Clayton and Rothstein observe that

Strictly, influence should refer to relations built on dyads of transmission from one unity (author, work, tradition) to another. More broadly, however, influence studies often stray into portraits of intellectual background, context The shape of intertextuality in turn depends on the shape of influence. One may see intertextuality either as the enlargement of a familiar idea or as an entirely new concept to replace the outmoded notion of influence. In the former case, intertextuality might be taken as a general term, working out from the broad definition of influence to encompass unconscious, socially prompted types of text formation (for example, by archetypes or popular culture); modes of conception (such as ideas "in the air"); styles (such as genres); and other prior constraints and opportunities for the writer. In the latter case, intertextuality might be used to oust and replace the kinds of issues that influence addresses, and in particular its central concern with the author and more or less conscious authorial intentions and skills. (3)

Although the terms "influence" and "intertextuality" are often distinguished by the question of agency, the

issue of concurrent or overlapping features is of interest to the argument I wish to develop about Brown and Frost. To make the claim for two writers sharing is to argue the significance of intellectual background or aesthetic context. As "influence," the mode of literary interaction I call "sharing" is broadly concerned with questions of context, intellectual background, and tradition. However, "sharing," from a basis in "intertextuality," results not from the relationship between two writers but from literary interactions based on "the enlargement of a familiar idea." Clayton and Rothstein state this idea in a different way when they write: "An expanded sense of influence allows one to shift one's attention from the transmission of motifs between authors to the transmission of historically given material. This shift does not do away with author-centered criticism so much as broaden it to take into account the multifarious relations that can exist among authors" (6). Implicit in the notion of expanding ideas is not a doctrinaire set of assumptions, to which a group of writers would pay obeisance; instead, expansion places ideas in conversation with each other, permitting us to examine points of convergence and divergence.

I have chosen as a case in point the literary interaction of Brown and Frost, using their only personal meeting—an occasion so poignant that it almost appears the archetypal example of "literary influence." In this momentous June 1, 1960, meeting, which held deep symbolic significance for Brown, these two venerable veterans of the culture wars paused briefly to reflect on the convergence and divergence of their lives and careers. Their animated conversation focused on the relative importance of Frost's poem "In Divés' Dive." In my mind, the exchange distilled dialogically the most important moment the two poets shared aesthetically.

We can perhaps distrust the authority of the few extant accounts of this fortuitous meeting because they're anecdotal; however, Frost biographer and *Negro Caravan* publisher Stanley Burnshaw offers the most persuasive rendering of the moment. In his *Robert Frost: Himself*, Burnshaw remembers Brown's response to his question probing the nature of Brown's conversation with Frost: "Six great lines from *A Further Range*. Nobody mentions them. He says I'm the only one he knows who knows that poem" (138).

From this brief moment of reflection emerge two distinct and often overlapping views of poetry and literary history. For Brown, the "six great lines" revealed an essential commitment to a democratic vision of America, in which principle and practice coalesced in the body of governing documents that defined America. In his now familiar speech "A Son's Return: 'Oh, Didn't He Ramble,'" Brown tells us in an "autobiographical sounding off" how "In Dives' Dive" reveals "a strong statement of a man's belief in *America* and in *himself*" (22; emphasis added). To understand the significance of Brown's self-disclosure and to see how it accords with Frost's ideas, we must review some of Brown's cultural and political beliefs.

If we use Houston Baker's theory of "AMERICA," we can profitably explore Brown's self-described commitment to America. Baker argues that the defining signification of "AMERICA" is an inscribing and reinscribing discourse based in an "immanent idea of boundless, classless, raceless possibility in America" (65); in short, a committed belief in American democratic principles embraces egalitarianism and racial equality. That Brown was quite committed to these values is clear in his now familiar declaration, "I am an integrationist. . . . And by integration, I do not mean assimilation. I believe

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what the word means—an integer is a whole number" ("Son's Return" 18). In effect, Brown's quest to achieve full integration took him through the process of filling in the fractional status that existed vestigially for African Americans in the U.S. Constitution.

Complete racial integration would be achieved, Brown believed, when the "three-fifths" clause placed in the Constitution for purposes of taxing Black slaves would be supplemented with the other two-fifths, thereby making a whole number and representing the achievement of complete humanity. Despite the survival of the "three-fifths compromise" in a body of *de jure* and *de facto* Jim Crow practices, Brown remained hopeful about the boundless possibility of

America. The context provided by this socio-cultural pursuit frames Brown's exegesis of "In Dives' Dive."

The poem focuses ingeniously on gambling, specifically playing poker, a game Brown says neither he nor Frost indulged in ("Son's Return" 20). In the representation of poker as a game, Frost creates a virtual setting to suggest larger ideas about full, participatory democratic politics. Brown found kinship with the speaker of the poem, who finds himself, late at night, losing in the game. "But still," the speaker proclaims, "I am steady and unaccusing." Brown saw himself in this line: Even at seventy-three (his age when he gave this presentation at Williams College), he was not "laying blame on anybody. If I lose I am not singing blues about anybody else causing it" (21). The source supporting his belief in the game and his right to participate in it was the Declaration of Independence. Shrouded in its protections, Brown agreed with the poem's speaker: "I'm not a good poker player, but . . . I'm going to play my hand out with the cards that come. And that to me is a strong statement of a man's belief in America and in himself" (22).

While "In Divés' Dive" no doubt reaffirmed Brown's passion for courage, belief in democratic principles, and more, Frost probably recalled these same qualities in the context of the controversy that surrounded *A Further Range* (1936), the collection in which "Divés'" was originally published. Although Frost's poetry, like that of most writers in the 1930s, was consumed with issues of social significance, he nevertheless found himself at the vortex of controversy with *A Further Range* because his conservative politics were misread or undervalued. Indeed, an argument can be made that *A Further Range* came under unusual critical scrutiny precisely because Frost's audience was divided on the question of art and its relation to social significance.

Part of the acclaim and part of the contentiousness for *A Further Range* derives from Frost's announcement of what he considered new poetic paths. He dedicated the collection "to E. F. for what it may mean to her that beyond the White Mountains were the Green; beyond both were the Rockies, the Sierras, and, in thought, the Andes and the Himalayas—range beyond range even into the realm of government and religion." As aesthetic statement, the dedication to Frost's wife Elinor tells us much about his charting new poetic territories. According to biographer Lawrance Thompson, Frost hit upon the idea of using "as metaphor the fact that his experiences had caused him to look across all the ranges of mountains in the United States, and thus to endow his poetry with a further range of themes, even social and political" (440). It is in this context that Burnshaw's observations must be viewed: Frost had a consuming concern for gambling; that is, not playing cards, but taking chances. What ranged beyond the mountains, beyond the explicitness of actual place was an implicit realm—the imagination. With this collection, Frost's approach was not so much one of imagined flight as of imagined confrontation, and as a consequence of this new direction, Frost suffered the

ignominy of being accused of writing his first seriously flawed or simply bad book.

Critic George Nitchie typifies a large number of commentators when he called *A Further Range* "Frost's first bad book." He adds that his assessment is

not based on the dubious proposition that a poet is somehow obligated to deal with certain preeminently social issues from a certain set of premises. Rather . . . it is based on the propositions, that, as poet, Frost seldom exhibits any very vital or immediate sense of collective aims, of broadly social values, and that in *A Further Range* he implies that such aims and such values are somehow undesirable in themselves, are absurd or unnecessary, wasteful or destructive. (112)

In this view, "social significance" means very little if it refers to proselytizing, propagandizing, or inspiring collective action. Frost seldom missed an opportunity to tout the virtues of New England life, as he saw them: independence, self-sufficiency, individualism, and so forth. Yet precisely these terms drew tremendous heat from reviewers and critics of *A Further Range*, who seemed to be divided on the significance of these qualities and on Frost's treatment of them.

Among the many critics, biographers, and literary historians who have written on Frost, Richard Poirier, in *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, has emerged as one of the most articulate and persuasive spokespersons. By positioning Frost's popularity with a literate general public and a college audience that rejected modernism and Europeanized New York intellectuals against the poet's critical detractors, Poirier adeptly shows the mixed constituency to which Frost's poetry played (227). Frost was either soundly greeted or assailed, depending on the audience. Connected to this issue of audience is the problem of Frost's response. He felt that it was necessary to explicate himself, partly in response to the negative reviews of *A Further Range*, and also in an effort to gain acceptance from the very group that had lambasted him. To understand this

issue is to accept the premise that Frost's politics and poetics became, as Poirier observed, "inseparable" (236-37). In an extended passage, Poirier discusses the implications of this claim:

Frost takes his place in an American tradition which proposes that since you are most inconsequential when you are most "included" in any system or "stated plan" you are, paradoxically, most likely to find yourself, and to be saved, when you risk being excluded or peripheral. This is a tradition full of political implications. The placement of the self in relation to the apparent organizations of things is one of the major concerns of Frost's later poetry, but it is a political concern only while it also reveals his more general contempt for a tendency in modern liberalism to discredit the capacity of ordinary, struggling people to survive in freedom and hope without the assistance of the state or any other kind of planning and despite the arrogant solicitude of those who think that such people would be better off if "provided" for. (264)

I wish briefly to consider one implication of this marvelous observation. Frost, rooted in the New England-Yankee tradition of self-help, railed against the New Deal fashioned by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The consensus among reviewers and critics that *A Further Range* was Frost's most polemical collection to date focused squarely upon its aphoristic, didactic quality as masking a rather thinly veiled but scathing denunciation of authority. Frost's conservative politics were fairly well-known, and thus this collection revealed to critics a direct opposition to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, an attack which they characterized as *ad hominem*. It is true, as Burnshaw writes, that the New Deal represented for Frost an erosion of sorts. The dignity, the courage, the spirit of self-help that had made America *America* had suffered because of the Depression. To Frost, though, the New Deal not only bailed out many American people but threatened to create a class of "no-good dependents" by "infantilizing" them. The New England virtues of self-reliance, courage, and independence defined, for Frost, the quintessential American citizen, and

the New Deal, according to this perspective, threatened to "take the starch out of self-reliant people" (Burnshaw interview).

Along with the question of denouncing authority, more than one critic wondered whether *A Further Range* represented a further elucidation of the human condition or a shriveling up of an enervated poetic talent capable only of a polemic masquerading as poetry. The basis for attacking this collection usually focused on its moralistic or didactic features, not Frost's poetic experimentation and ingenuity. It is precisely this kind of "telling" that many reviewers—some of whom were Leftists anyway—seized upon as evidence of a diminishing poetic talent whose political conservatism was out of step with current thought.

Brown, of course, agreed with Frost regarding the necessity of people to be free from systems or institutions that abridged individual freedoms. Like Frost, he appreciated the ruggedness of individual efforts and initiatives. The characterological qualities often found in Brown's portrait poems include stoicism, philosophical indifference, tonic shrewdness, and the like. However, Brown did not enjoy Frost's racial privilege, and, as a consequence, he parted company with Frost on the role of governmental systems. Brown's editorship for the Federal Writers' Project was made necessary by the proliferation of stereotyped representations of African Americans. The self—the *Black* self—in Brown's view declared itself against a world view of racial stereotyping. What rescued the dignity of Blacks from warped imaginations and projections of difference was sheer will or an indomitable spirit. And it is this will that forced Brown into an imagined reckoning with the self and with the self in society.

Finally, if "In Divés' Dive" can be used as evidence, Brown departed from Frost regarding the relative use of folk traditions in advancing his views about democracy. The principal reference in the title of Frost's poem repre-

sents an important demarcation between Brown and Frost. Frost, in 1960, apparently knew nothing of the well-known Negro spiritual containing the Divés reference. It is quite possible that he knew about Divés through the biblical parable (Luke 16: 19–31) and maybe Elizabeth Gaskill's novel *Mary Barton* (1848), whose theme "the rich don't get it" (45) foregrounds an idea that differs from Frost's. By turning to the formal differences in the several versions of the Divés story, we can infer more clearly the character of African American life as Brown represented it and begin to see how he enlarged an idea in ways Frost did not.

How Brown came to know the Divés-Lazarus story is not difficult to discern. The son of a renowned Congregationalist pastor and theologian, Brown admitted his thorough acquaintance with biblical readings. As a student of Harvard's legendary Shakespearian and folk song collector George Lyman Kittredge, Brown no doubt knew quite well the different folk songs versions, too. And as principal editor of *The Negro Caravan*, Brown wrote with unusual sensitivity and insight about the Negro spiritual based on the Divés-Lazarus story, "I Got a Home in That Rock."

Fundamentally, as biblical parable, the Rich Man-Lazarus story anticipates a theme that resonates throughout the various forms containing this story: "the reversal of fortune" that takes place when both men die. In life, according to the Gospel of St. Luke, Divés (so-named because *dives* in Latin means "rich man"), bedecked in his finest clothing, hosts a lavish banquet but fails to see (or sees but ignores!) the starving, sore-infested Lazarus (whose name means 'God helps') who lies, at Divés's doorstep, begging crumbs from the bounteous table. At their death, Lazarus is borne away by angels to rest in the bosom of Abraham in heaven, while Rich Man

Divés is ferried to hell, where his perpetually parched throat becomes his unending punishment and his anguish increases to the point of making him beg Abraham to send Lazarus with a cooling drop of water. Having been denied this wish, Divés pleads that Lazarus be sent to warn Divés's five brothers to repent of their selfish ways before they incur the fate he now experiences in hell. Abraham once again denies Divés's request because, "if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16: 31).

This sparse rendering hardly probes the complexities and interpretative debates about this parable: "If man chooses heaven on earth, will he sacrifice a real heaven after death?" "Was Divés intentionally cruel or did he mistakenly pass by Lazarus?" An analogy posed by one writer to demonstrate what he understands to be Divés's charitable nature reads: "Divés spoke about the colored races, but never saw the Negro who passed his gate. Divés discussed employment statistics, but never imagined himself a man out of work. *He did not see*" (*Interpreter's Bible* 291; emphasis added). Before one can be blamed for not taking an appropriate measure, one has to see the problem wholly and steadily. Although Brown never commented directly on this parable, it is possible to infer from his scholarship and poetry how "the reversal of fortunes" theme informs his vision of the folk.

As a folk song, "Divés and Lazarus" is only minimally related to the biblical parable, but Brown would hardly find this distinction or the problems posed by the song's encapsulating form compelling. In the ballad stanza, where the story is generally rendered in four iambic lines (the first and third being tetrameter and others trimeter, with the second and fourth lines rhyming), the song is characteristically condensed, dramatic, and impersonal. The narrator often begins with the climactic episode and tells the story's action tersely by means of action or dialogue. Most importantly, the narra-

tor usually tells the story without self-reference or expressions of personal attitude or feelings. With little of the intrusiveness of the narrator, the situation is presented dramatically, often with a view that is unsentimental or ironic. Finally, because the narrative often has no connection between verses or scenes, there is no explanation of the events leading up to the climax of the narrative.

Consider these two verses from the *Traditional Ballads of Virginia*:

There was a man in ancient times,
Dressed in purple and fine linen;
He ate, he drank, but scorned to pray,
Spent all of his days in sinning

Poor Lazarus lying at his gate,
All helpless in his condition,
He asked the crumbs fell to the floor
That fell from his rich table.
(Davis)

Brown would see the rather impersonal narrative voice as making almost no intrusion upon the text of the story and would understand that the listener is only brought into the narrative conflict through the song's lyrics. Brown's own artful use of the tall-tale tradition, which I've commented on elsewhere, effectively refutes the assumed formal qualities of the folk song.² Through his Slim Greer poems, for example, he establishes the necessity for a personal relationship through storytelling as a prerequisite for community.

But a significant feature of the Negro spiritual "I Got a Home in That Rock" is its capacity to represent, like most spirituals, a sense of community and an inspiration for changing the status quo. In *Black Song*, still the most comprehensive study of Negro spirituals, John Lovell poignantly observes that "the folk community of the spiritual believed in *poetry* as a maker and a reflector of change so powerful as to constitute magic" (196; emphasis added). The poetry and incipient political force of the lyrics identified by Lovell accord with Brown's scholarship on the spirituals.

In *The Negro Caravan* (1941), unarguably the most comprehensive

literary anthology of its time, Brown wrote with assuredness and cogency about the "folk stuff," including the spirituals. In summarizing the major issues of this genre, using the precursing scholarship of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Newman White, among many others, Brown wrote incisively about the folk origins of the spirituals (that is, whether they were composed by individuals or groups, derived from African or European music or combined, etc.) and especially its poetry. For Brown, the difference in metaphorical range functioned as an important difference between white and Negro spirituals:

To hide yourself in the mountaintop
To hide yourself from God. (white)

Went down to the rocks to hide my
face,
The rocks cried out no hiding place.
(Negro) (*Caravan* 417)

The similarity that exists between the two sets of lines lies in their "general idea, certainly not in the poetry" (*Caravan* 417). In these two very different sets of lyrics rests a fundamental belief that permeates Brown's folk-based metaphysics: that the "poetry" of Negro folk language revealed wit, wisdom, and a world view. Distilled in these two lines is an anthropomorphized vision of nature itself. The idea, once we leave the realm of the religious for the social, is that no place can provide refuge or escape from the encroachments or assaults made against African American humanity.

As Lovell stated this argument, the "magic" of the spirituals was not simply rescue but empowerment. It provided justice, "an irresistible force against strong earthly powers" (Lovell 340). Lovell finds no better instance of universal justice than that portrayed in "I Got a Home in That Rock":

Poor old Lazarus, poor as I, Don't you
see? Don't you see? (repeat)
Poor old Lazarus, poor as I, When he
died had a home on high.
He had a home in-a-that Rock, Don't
you see?

Rich man, Dives, lives so well, Don't
you see? Don't you see? (repeat)
Rich man, Dives, lived so well, When
he died he found home in hell,
Had no home in that Rock, Don't you
see? (qtd. in Lovell 340)³

Brown and Lovell agreed that, in Lovell's words, ". . . in the Afro-American spiritual, universal justice straightens all, clarifies all, judges all, at long last" (Lovell 340).

The Negro spiritual thus emerges as a music of political as well as religious significance. Brown understood that the "I" in "I Got a Home in That Rock" signifies not just the individual but also the community. In this way, the Rich Man-Lazarus parable represents more than a reversal of fortunes in the next world; it offers profound hope to sustain aggrieved singers/listeners in this world. "The spirituals," Brown argues, "were born of suffering" (*Caravan* 420). Rather than supporting a case for "You take dis worl', and give me Jesus," the spirituals derive their strength, their *raison d'être* as "tragic poetry." That is, the language of the spirituals is rooted in a nearly cathartic emotional response to hardship, trial, and tribulation. In effect, the Divés-Lazarus parable teaches the listeners/singers that understanding selfishness, self-interest, and irresponsibility has consequences *in this world* and in the world that follows; therefore, the individual is connected to the community by love, care, and concern, and the community, in turn, is responsible to its individual members. By maintaining this sense of community, whatever befalls the group can be properly withstood.

Principally, then, the points of convergence and divergence in Brown's and Frost's use of the Divés-Lazarus story focus on the two poets' respective associations of art and the social significance of art. Among the most focused critical comparisons of these two poets, Mark Jeffreys vacillates tellingly between Brown's indebtedness to and departure from Frost and other "New American Poets." Ultimately, though, Jeffreys is most serviceable and cogent when he

comments that "Brown's acknowledgment of Frost is one of kindred spirit more than kindred technique" (214). Unlike Frost, who never had his identity of being an American questioned, Brown had to argue for recognition that he was "a part of," not relegated to being "apart from," America.

Even though Frost never had to argue for his identity as an American, he nevertheless attempted to define the meaning of being one. But being an American was important to Brown, too, as many of his poems suggest. In "Old Lem," for example, Brown subtly suggests a protracted history of legal and social customs in contrasting, minute gestures: "Their fists stay closed / Their eyes look straight / Our hands stay open / Our eyes must fall" (*Collected Poems* 81). Or in the raucous "Slim in Atlanta," in which Brown skillfully uses the techniques of the tall tale, the peripatetic Slim satirizes racial proscription and laughs the reader into understanding the ridiculousness of such practices: "Down in Atlanta, / De whitefolks got laws / For to keep all de niggers / From laughin' outdoors" (*Collected Poems* 81). Frost never had to write a poem like "Sam Smiley," whose last two lines elevate the poem out of the more direct social protest against lynching and into a cultural moment resonating with impressive power of human emotion: "And big Sam Smiley, King Buckdancer, / Buckdanced on the midnight air" (*Collected Poems* 46).

"In Divés' Dive" served quite different aesthetic and political purposes for these two writers. The traditional claim for "influence," as Mark Jeffreys correctly observes (see, especially, 221), has no merit if one poem or poet is set forth in hegemonic relation with the other. However, the special form of sharing that takes place between both writers rescues Brown from his own dilemma of how to acknowledge his participation in modifying a given body of ideas without accepting the burden of being "influenced."

Notes

1. This difficulty with racial integration was only one of many dilemmas confronting Brown. See, for example, his steadfast disavowal of being included as a New Negro, only to contradict his own claims, as Robert Stepto has persuasively shown, by locating himself in the center of New Negro activity in New York during the 1920s.
2. See my essay "The Art of Tall Tale in the Slim Greer Poems."
3. It bears mentioning that either Brown misremembers or the editors mistranscribe these lines in "A Son's Return." The two published verses are interposed. More importantly, the published line "[Divés] had a home in that Rock" alters dramatically the meaning of the biblical parable, since he had *no* home in the kingdom.

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