

## **Dreams Deferred: The Personal Narratives of Four Black Kansans**

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Students of Midwestern culture tend to focus on the prefix of this geographical adjectival designation. Midway between New England and the Pacific coast, between Canada and the South, the region known as the Midwest has drawn on opposition. Its character, according to James R. Shortridge, is “enigmatic and contradictory.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps nowhere are these terms more applicable—and more anguished for creating ambiguous and arbitrary conditions—than in the area of the Midwest’s racial politics.

Among Midwestern states, Kansas’ history of race relations may be considered paradigmatic of the peculiar and painfully contradictory way in which they have played out historically in America’s middle states. As a border state prior to the Civil War, Kansas was torn between pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions, becoming popularly known as “bleeding Kansas.” However, the political success of the latter faction led Kansas to fight on the side of the North, ultimately suffering the highest rate of fatal casualties of any state in the nation. If European settlers had originally come to Kansas seeking fulfillment of the promises of the American Dream,<sup>2</sup> the Blacks who came following the war sought the same dream—liberty, equality and justice, on the one hand, and material prosperity, on the other. In the decades of the 1870s and 1880s, between sixteen and forty thousand Exodusters arrived in Kansas. Fleeing the economic depression, the sharecropping system, and the racial inequities of the Reconstruction South, they regarded the state as the home of John Brown and of dedicated abolitionists, as

a state more hospitable than others to Black settlement<sup>3</sup>—a land where the dream of political freedom and economic opportunity might be realized. An eye-witness account in the *Topeka Commonwealth* for May 16, 1879, for example, reported that Blacks assembled in Nashville “shouted at the very top of their voices, . . . for . . . the idea of Kansas, which to the colored man of America, is the grandest, greatest, and freest of all the States of the Union.”<sup>4</sup>

By the early decades of the twentieth century, however, Kansas promises of freedom and equality for Blacks had been compromised institutionally, legally and socially. Although the American Dream remained an ideal, racism persisted as a contradictory, daily reality, creating a tension that Mary W. Burger identifies in the writings of Black Midwesterners as a “profound sense of in-betweenness.” She contends that “living with the uneasy tolerance of middle America,” “its benevolent racism, its patronizing exploitation” is more evident in these texts than it is in the narratives of other African Americans.<sup>5</sup>

Narratives by four Black Kansans provide a valuable opportunity to examine the ambiguous and arbitrary racial atmosphere characterizing the country’s middle states in the early decades of the twentieth century: Langston Hughes’ novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930); Gordon Parks’ novel, *The Learning Tree* (1963); the first chapter of Frank Marshall Davis’ autobiography, “Livin’ the Blues: Memoirs of a Black Journalist and Poet” (1986); and an interview with Grant Cushmanberry, entitled “God’s Little Half Acre” (1989).<sup>6</sup> Despite the diversity of their genres, an autobiographical impulse drives all four of these narratives,<sup>7</sup> which are, to date, with one exception, the only published narratives by Black Kansans.<sup>8</sup> All four document the story of a poor Black boy’s coming-of-age, a stage in life which, even in the most propitious of circumstances, may be confusing and terrifying. Exacerbating what is already a difficult period of growth is the uncertainty of the racial climate in the small Kansas towns or their environs in which these narratives are set. Hughes’ protagonist, Sandy, grows up in Stanton, the pseudonym he chose for his hometown, Lawrence; Parks’ protagonist, Newt Winger, in Cherokee Flats, the pseudonym for his hometown, Fort Scott; Davis in Arkansas City, and Cushmanberry in Nicodemus and Hoisington.

A comparison of Hughes’ autobiographical account of his boyhood in *The Big Sea* (1940) with Arnold Rampersad’s recent biography reveals that although Hughes creates an idealized family for his fictionalized self in *Not Without Laughter*, he represents the pains of racism more accurately in his novel than he does in his autobiography.<sup>9</sup> Parks’ three autobiographies—*A Choice of Weapons* (1966), *To Smile in Autumn* (1979), *Voices in the Mirror* (1990)—as well as a personal memoir—“A Look Back” (1975)—reveal that principal experiences in his Kansas boyhood form the narrative of his novel. In re-creating these events four times, Parks may be compared to Frederick Douglass, whose three autobiographies suggest that his mature sense of self was predicated on his boyhood experiences in slavery. Like Douglass, Parks repeatedly returned to examine the impact of racism on his coming-of-age in Kansas.

The publication dates for these four narratives span six decades (Hughes' novel is separated from Parks' by a generation and from Cushinberry's account of his life by two generations); however, their writers were roughly contemporaries,<sup>10</sup> and the narratives cover a similar period of time, both historically and in the lives of their protagonists.<sup>11</sup> Hughes' story opens in 1911 when Sandy is nine years old and concludes seven years later when he is sixteen; Parks' opens in the 1920s when Newt is twelve and concludes four years later when he is also sixteen; from its introductory description of Davis' high school graduation in 1923, his autobiography circles back to include his earliest memories from around 1910, and the interview with Cushinberry, while mentioning no dates per se, reflects on his boyhood during the Depression, then comes into the present. Differences in these four personal narratives are apparent, deriving from differences in genre, in conditions pertaining to the time and circumstances of writing and publishing, and in the personal orientations of the writers. However, collectively, it can be seen that these works document a master narrative<sup>12</sup> that focuses on 1) the intensification of the difficulties in the Black Kansan boy's search for identity because of "the profound state of in-betweenness" generated by racist politics in the state and 2) the nurturing effects of the wisdom, the vision and the culture of the Black community and family. Collectively, they thus document both the persistence of racism in Kansas and the persistence of Black Kansans in their efforts to survive and prevail despite the state's ambiguous and arbitrary racial politics.

Like the majority of Kansas' European settlers, many Blacks came to Kansas to farm. Like European settlers, Blacks who farmed in Kansas found that their engagement with the soil, the weather and the insects challenged their initial idealism. In what has become almost a cliché of Kansas Studies, the image of Kansas as garden repeatedly confronts the image of Kansas as desert. From the outset of their narratives, Hughes, Parks, Davis and Cushinberry place their young protagonists in a natural and therefore a neutral setting; here their attempts to understand reality begin. However, their accounts suggest that for the Blacks who settled in Kansas, much more devastating to their dreams than the physical conditions of the land were the social realities of racism.

In acknowledgement of nature's role in the lives of most Kansans, both Hughes and Parks literally give the lay of the land in the opening chapters of their novels. Like Frank Baum's classic Kansas story (1900), which opens with a tornado's whisking Dorothy off to Oz, *Not Without Laughter* and *The Learning Tree* begin with a description of a tornado's destructive power. Not only does the storm emphatically establish the Kansas setting at the outset of both narratives, but it also serves as a correlative for the young protagonists' psychological state and for ethical issues. As the storm wrecks its havoc, Sandy and Newt, temporarily separated from their families, are terrifyingly alone; in their distress and disorientation, they lose their sense of reality. As a result of the storm, however both, grow, forced to face death and the amorality and the unpredictability of natural disaster. Consequently, not only for the first time do they recognize their

own vulnerability as well as the vulnerability of all humanity, but they also begin to consider concepts of justice. Despite the preacher's proclamation in *The Learning Tree* that the storm is "'a warnin' to the wrongdoin' of all these sinners round here'" (18), the storm in both Parks' and Hughes' novels does not discriminate; it takes the lives of blacks and whites, and the lives it takes are those of the good.

Parks' protagonist, as did Parks himself, belongs to a farming family, and much of his novel is set in rural Kansas. His mother keeps the family well fed, and his father and his brother spend their days working the land, tending animals, and helping their neighbors. Their practice of the Protestant ethic, their hard work, and their moral uprightness make it possible for the family to sustain life on the land. Despite the extremities of weather described in *The Learning Tree* and despite the family's poverty that Parks describes in his first autobiography, *A Choice of Weapons*, as well as in his last, *Voices in the Mirror*, the family farm does not fail, and the family table is always heaped with its bounty. In developing his autobiographical accounts of the years following his Kansas boyhood, years spent in northern urban centers such as Minneapolis, Chicago, Washington and New York, Parks acknowledges a certain nostalgia for the prairie of his boyhood and idealizes, even sanitizes, the Kansas landscape. In comparison, for example, to the filthy work of cleaning spittoons in Chicago, he comments that "Plowing was backbreaking but it was much cleaner. The freshly turned soil had been cool and soothing to my bare feet. Keeping the plow straight in the furrows brought clean sweat." In *To Smile In Autumn*, Parks comments that "As a boy in Kansas I eased the pain of hunger by turning to a mulberry tree, digging a turnip or a potato from the earth, or snatching an apple from some farmer's orchard. In Harlem there had been only the garbage can to forage for supper. It was a dirty poverty, filled with stink, fright, and loneliness."<sup>13</sup>

For Parks' Newt, the natural world remains beautiful and incomprehensible although it is always associated with death: with grasshoppers that destroy cornfields, with hawks that swoop down on chickens, and, most horrifyingly, with whites who unjustly persecute and murder Blacks. Early in the novel, Parks creates an African-American version of Thomas Eakins' pastoral swimming hole, depicting Newt and his friends naked, performing comical and daring feats as they swim in a Kansas river. With three shots of his pistol, Kirky, the white cop, modelled on Kirby, "the white lawless lawman" of Parks' boyhood (*Voices*, 330), kills a harmless Black man seeking to escape arrest by diving into these gentle waters.<sup>14</sup> Newt's swimming hole is forever tainted as are his dreams. The image of the corpse in the water, "sway[ing] grotesquely," in "a twisting motion, as though it were coming to life" (57) torments his sleep. In his final autobiography, Parks juxtaposes his memories of the idyllic family farm with memories of "the racial insults and brutalities whites heaped upon me back in Kansas"; Parks' Kansas home came to be for him "the place I attack in dreams. Echoes from the past, painful things to be remembered and remembered" (*Voices*, 330). Parks'

poem, “Kansas Land,” expresses his recognition of the blight of racism in the pastoral Kansas garden:

I would miss this Kansas land that I was leaving.  
Wide prairie filled of green and cornstalk; . . .  
Tall elms and oaks bordering streams that gurgle,  
Rivers rolling quiet in long summers of sleepy days  
For fishing, for swimming, for catching crawdad beneath the rock. . . .  
Junebugs, swallowtails, red robin and bobolink,  
Nights filled of soft laughter, fireflies and restless stars, . . .  
Yes, all this I would miss—along with the fear, hatred and violence  
We blacks had suffered upon this beautiful land.<sup>15</sup>

Davis begins “Livin’ the Blues” by describing his birthplace, Arkansas City, as a “yawn town 50 miles south of Wichita, five miles north of Oklahoma, and east and west of nowhere worth remembering” (115). His Kansas landscape—a “small town on the Kansas prairies” (116)—is almost entirely social; only seldom does nature interfere. From his grandmother, he acquired a fear of snakes that seems to have permeated his response to nature. However, when he is twelve, more vicious beings than snakes come into Davis’ Kansas garden. Calling himself “a cowboy without a horse” (131), he describes his summer job as escorting a herd of fifteen cows to a local pasture early in the morning; the job was lucrative, and young Davis discovered there was room enough for both himself and the snakes in the pasture. However, the idyll ends when a barrage of random rifle shots from three white boys cause Davis’ cows to go berserk. From this time on, he does not return in his memoir—and thus, so it seems, in his memory—to the Kansas landscape. As for swimming, Davis comments:

There was no place for us to swim. The facilities at Paris Park and the new municipal pool were barred to us. We had only the two swiftly moving rivers on both sides of town, and both Mother and Dad had impressed on me their danger. Already two boys I knew had drowned in them that year. (133)

Of the four Black Kansans whose personal narratives are under consideration here, Cushinberry alone appears to present a view of the Kansas land as uncorrupted by “the fear, hatred and violence” of Parks’ poem. He specifically remembers the natural plentitude of the Kansas garden he knew as a boy, “See, black people eat a lot of greens. That was a staple crop out home there. Most of them greens grow wild on the prairies. Like dock. Wild onions. And lamb’s-quarters. And we ate all that stuff. And we’d go out on the creek bank and we got all kinds of blueberries and raspberries. Pears and apples. We canned everything . . . No, we never went hungry” (198). As he explains, for generations, his family had lived on the land: “Yeah, my family knows how to garden. We’ve been doing

it for centuries. . . . My grandparents and great-grandparents, they gardened. From one generation to another” (200-201). For Cushinberry and his family, gardening had a single practical end: “everybody had to work in the garden to keep us alive” (194). However, if the Kansas garden made survival possible, it also demanded constant labor and vigilance: “When I was a kid, if we didn’t work, we didn’t eat. If you didn’t grow a big garden, winter’d come along and you’d be in trouble” (201).

Racism increasingly becomes a reality, however, in the narratives of Hughes’ Sandy, Parks’ Newt and Davis as they struggle to attain a sense of identity and as that struggle shifts from the Kansas landscape to Kansas society. Small-town Kansas society in the early decades of this century, as portrayed in the narratives of these three writers, is characterized by a degree of demographic fluidity among racial groups, which translated into arbitrary and ambiguous racial policies. Randall B. Woods’ conclusion to his discussion of the “color line” in Kansas towns at the end of the nineteenth century seems applicable to these same towns in the early part of the twentieth century: “For most white Kansans . . . a rigid system of Jim Crow was unnecessary. Blacks did not constitute enough of a political or economic threat to warrant total ostracism. Whites were certainly anxious to control the black population, but exclusion or pervasive segregation seemed unsuited to the state’s particular history and circumstances.”<sup>16</sup> He thus argues that whereas “blacks enjoyed a relatively high degree of physical and psychological freedom,” the discrepancy between white Kansans’ theory of equality and freedom and their practice of racial prejudice created a racial climate that was “hardly egalitarian” (171).

In *Not Without Laughter*, although Hughes portrays Stanton’s ghetto, “Black Bottom,” as a section of town that is home to poor Blacks, gamblers and prostitutes, he reflects the reality of his boyhood experiences living in mixed neighborhoods in Lawrence; Sandy and his grandmother as well as his Aunt Tempy and her husband live in close proximity to whites. Moving to the Armstrong District of Kansas City, Kansas, in 1923, Cordell D. Meeks explains that his “playmates included Blacks, Mexicans, Irish, Chinese, Italians, Croatians, Indians, Germans and Jews. . . . it was common for the multi-racial and multi-national residents, young and old, to visit in each others homes, play and eat together.”<sup>17</sup> In *The Learning Tree*, the Winger family farm shares its boundaries with farms owned by blacks and whites. At the beginning of the second chapter, Newt’s father, Jack, having climbed a church spire to view the tornado’s damage to the town, can observe Cherokee Flats’ racial demographics: “The Frisco tracks, running north and south across the lower section, drew the social and economic line between the six thousand residents who made up the village. There were no well-to-do blacks, . . . but there were poor whites who shared, to a certain degree, the status of their dark neighbors east of the tracks” (24). As he muses from his vantage on high, Jack’s “mixed feelings” reflect the ambivalent nature of Midwestern racial politics; he perceives Cherokee Flats and the whole state to be “a plateau of uncertainty”:

Like all other Kansas towns, [it] wallowed in the social complexities of a borderline state. Here, for the black man, freedom loosed one hand while custom restrained the other. . . though the white and black children were separated in the primary schools and the churches, they played together on the dusty streets, outlying hills and plains. The black boys and girls and the white boys and girls went to the same picture show—the whites downstairs and first balcony, the blacks in the peanut gallery or buzzard's roost. There was no written law against a black man's eating in a white restaurant or drugstore, but there could be trouble, lots of it, if he tried. (26)

Davis' description in his autobiography of the demographics of Arkansas City closely resembles those in Hughes' and Parks' novels. As in *Not Without Laughter*, there was a quarter called the "bottoms," but blacks could live in any part of the town which their funds would allow; as is the case in *The Learning Tree*, however, most Blacks in Arkansas City chose to live along the railroad tracks where the rent was cheaper. Davis also explains that "Probably because of its location only five miles from the Oklahoma border, Arkansas City had no consistent policy on how to treat Negroes and thus sat uncomfortably impaled on the spike of its own indecision. In some ways it was as blatantly segregated as neighboring Oklahoma of that era; in others it was liberal" (117). Davis is aware, on the one hand, that Native Americans, with the exception of the oil-wealthy Osage, and Hispanics were treated with more open hostility than Blacks, but that "Niggers, on the other hand, were here to stay and overt antagonism rarely showed its face as long as we stayed in what whites called 'your place' (129). In this context of the arbitrary and ambiguous racial climate in Kansas, on this "plateau of uncertainty," these three young Blacks struggle to discover themselves.

School is remembered by all three as a particularly painful part of their coming of age. For white boys, such as Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield, who have come of age in American fiction, educational authoritarianism is also traumatizing. However, for these Black Kansas boys, all of whom enjoyed studying, the experiences of racism in the classroom exacerbated the problems of self-discovery.<sup>18</sup> As their families considered education to be the means by which not merely the individual would advance, but the race itself, the pressure of school is especially intense for Sandy and Newt. A pivotal moment occurs in *Not Without Laughter* and *The Learning Tree* when the young protagonists leave a segregated school for an integrated one, one with no Black teachers, however, and only a few Black students. In 1879, a Republican legislature in Kansas, responding to popular sentiment, gave legal status to segregated schooling, allowing school boards in first-class cities (those with populations of at least 15,000) to establish separate elementary schools for Black children while prohibiting segregated secondary schools. This legislation perpetuated inequity in Kansas

schools through the decades when the protagonists of the four narratives being considered here were being educated. Paul Wilson, for example, points out that because most Blacks “lived in cities of the first class and most black students who went to school did not go beyond the elementary grades[,]” “this . . . legislation permitted the racial segregation of most of the blacks who went to school . . . That 1879 law remained the law in Kansas until 1954, when it was struck down in *Brown v. Board of Education*.”<sup>19</sup> Commenting on the situation of Blacks in small Kansas towns, James C. Carper writes that “Most blacks living outside first-class cities remained . . . in segregated schools as a result of community pressure, violence, and occasionally choice.”<sup>20</sup>

Davis begins “Livin’ the Blues” with a description of his high school commencement when he testifies he received a “Magna Cum Laude in bitterness.” This opening section, which is written in the present tense as if to imply the perpetuation of his bitterness as well as its later transformation into anguish, anger and articulate protest, is an analysis of the sources of both this bitterness and his bewilderment at Kansas’ racist policies. His description of himself as “the product of integrated schools that do not integrate,” suggests that because of these schools, he bears the curse of the “double consciousness” which W.E.B. DuBois recognized as undermining Black Americans’ search for identity; thus Davis writes:

My twelve years of public schooling have taught me to be white. But I am black. And those who taught me to be white at the same time reject me because of my blackness. The whites had let me look longingly inside their home of equal opportunity then barred the door. Meanwhile, I have rejected the shabby shack of the only black world I know. I am suspended uncertainly in that limbo between white and black, not yet knowing who I am. (116)

If by proceeding to tell his own story Davis discovers who he is, this process of discovery involves his probing the painful effects of the persistent and insidious racism of his ostensibly integrated schools. By the time he and three other Black students are ready to graduate from high school, he writes that they have internalized the negative images of themselves perpetuated by a racist society: “we of the black quartet turn and twist but we can find no way out of the hellhole of inferiority. We are niggers, the scum of the nation, and even our black brothers outside laugh bitterly and derisively as they tell us, ‘Niggers ain’t shit!’” And yet, ironically, because Davis’ Kansas high school is “a mixed school, mixed in attendance, mixed up in attitudes,” he states emphatically in italics that he does “*know* I am superior to Negroes reared in Dixie for they have not attended school with whites. I view them with contempt; they are *my* inferiors” (115). Davis recognizes that he has been permitted to attend high school with whites only because of Kansas’ law prohibiting segregation in secondary schools in towns the

size of Arkansas City; “I was . . . a big nigger kid tolerated only because ‘state law said they must’” (116).<sup>21</sup> Despite his bitterness and his bewilderment, he recognizes at the conclusion of the first chapter of “Livin’ the Blues” that the creation of an all-Black school “would have both a cruel travesty and a tragedy” (156). Anticipating the struggle in *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, both Davis’ father and Newt’s parents successfully demand that an integrated high school be maintained in their communities.

The personal narratives of *Not Without Laughter* and *The Learning Tree*, of “Livin’ the Blues” and “God’s Little Half Acre” demonstrate that work was a necessity for a Black boy whose family was poor.<sup>22</sup> Woods points out that at the beginning of the twentieth century all types of skilled and unskilled labor were available to Black Kansans although they were excluded from white-collar jobs (167). White men in these narratives all hold the positions of teachers, judges, doctors, attorneys or farmers. Although there was some time for play, farm boys, Newt Winger and Grant Cushinberry, have their chores. As a young boy, Davis spent summers helping his father tend an acre of corn, which he then peddled through town. Later he worked with a street-paving gang, mowed the lawns of whites, sold records to Blacks, and when his parents opened a small restaurant, he helped them after school.

Sandy also worked at a variety of jobs, first helping his grandmother by collecting and delivering white families’ laundry, then as a newsboy, a barber-shop sweeper, a hotel errand boy, a shoe-shine boy, a bookstore stock boy, graduating at the end of Hughes’ novel to become an elevator boy in Chicago. Each of these jobs he perceives as an advancement and as a means for supplementing his family’s scanty income. Hughes makes it clear, however, that although Sandy was able to make incremental moves ahead, many Black men were locked for a life-time in the position of “boy” at work. In a hotel shining shoes, Sandy has to deal with raw racism alone for the first time in the novel. Surrounded by a group of white men who have been drinking and telling obscene jokes about Black women, he is confronted by a Southerner who demands that he dance: “‘O, you’re one of them stubborn Kansas coons, heh? . . . You Northern darkies are dumb as hell, anyhow! . . . Now down in Mississippi, whar I come from, if you offer a nigger a dime, he’ll dance his can off . . . an’ they better dance . . . Up here you-all’ve got darkies spoilt, believin’ they’re somebody’” (213-14). Not only does Sandy refuse to dance, but he throws his boot-black box in the red-neck’s face and escapes. If he loses his pay, the job at the hotel, and his equipment, he nonetheless achieves a sense of identity through his assertion of self; no longer a boy, he knows he *is* somebody. At the end of the novel Sandy’s elevator job is a powerful metaphor for the lives of most Black men; he goes up, only to come down, “up-down—up-down—up-down interminably, carrying white guests. . . . The same flow of people week after week—fashionable women, officers, business men; the fetid air of the elevator-shaft, heavy with breath and the perfume of bodies; the same doors opening at the same unchanging levels hundreds of times” every day (291). Yet when the Black boy becomes a man in Kansas, there are not even

opportunities for employment as steady as the suffocating and monotonous work in the elevator shaft.

The identities of the young male protagonists of *Not Without Laughter*, *The Learning Tree*, and “Livin’ the Blues” become increasingly associated with their educational achievement and with their subsequent opportunities for employment. For women in these works, however, racist practices made education a dead end and work endless. Although Black women are depicted in them as competent, conscientious, sensitive, and, above all, as moral and spiritual centers, few have completed a high-school education; all have menial jobs serving whites as washer-women, cleaning ladies, secretaries. Hughes’ young protagonist seems especially conscious of the back-breaking work his grandmother does at the wash-tubs and ironing board, and he is infuriated to hear his hot, hard-working mother reprimanded by the tall, cool white woman in whose kitchen she serves. In both *Not Without Laughter* and *The Learning Tree* the labor of Sandy’s grandmother and of Newt’s mother causes their exhaustion and thereby contributes to their deaths, a climactic moment in the life of each boy. Sandy’s Aunt Tempy, the best educated of the Black women in these works, uses her learning to imitate whites. Only Sandy’s Aunt Harriet refuses to do the white world’s work; she leaves school, and after trying several underpaid and humiliating jobs as a domestic, as an assembly-line worker in a canning factory and as a waitress at Stanton’s white country club, she becomes a prostitute in the Bottoms. Hughes, however, redeems her and finally converts her story into a fairy-tale by transforming her at the end of his novel into the “Princess of the Blues.” Davis notes that there were no Black girls in his Arkansas City high school graduating class. Connecting the problem of employment opportunities with education, he asks rhetorically, “Who needs a diploma to wash clothes and cook in white kitchens?” (115).

For most of the Black men in these narratives education has not been an option, and they appear to have little hope of prospering economically. Some Black men, like Sandy’s father, Jimboy, or Newt’s brother-in-law, Clint, seem never able to find or to hold a job and are hence dependent on their wives’ wages. In Hughes’ novel, however, Jimboy’s unemployment is explicitly correlated with the historical fact that white unions in Kansas kept Blacks out of work (74); despite his being a skilled bricklayer, he is bumped from his job, and although he continues to seek employment, he is represented to his young son by his grandmother as epitomizing the restless, lazy, irresponsible Black man. Most of the Black men in Hughes’, Parks’ and Davis’ texts are depicted as making ends meet by working as janitors, ditch-diggers, bell-hops or junk-yard managers. Several work in a variety of capacities for the railroad, and a few have businesses—a barber-shop, a restaurant, a bar—that give them a modicum of economic independence. Sandy’s uncle, Mr. Stiles, a mail-clerk for the railroad, who owns several rental properties on the side, is depicted as a social-climber, a slum-landlord, and a capitalist in the making, and Sandy feels definitively that he “‘wouldn’t want to be like . . . [his aunt’s] husband, dull and colorless, putting all

his money away in a white bank, ashamed of colored people” (292-94). Although they own their own land, the Black farmers in *The Learning Tree* need to supplement the income from their crops and stock by doing odd jobs for whites. Cushinberry explains that in addition to farming, his father had to work for the railroad. “He could ride that train as well as any engineer, but they wouldn’t let blacks do that. Only thing they let blacks do on the railroad was fix the tracks and be a porter” (202). Hughes’ *Not Without Laughter* also makes it clear that in Kansas, when Depression struck, poor people in general were affected; however, Black men appeared most hard hit; as one character says, “so many colored men’s out o’ work here, wid Christmas comin’, it sho’ is too bad!” (133).

In these narratives, employment opportunities for Black men and women in Kansas seemed bleak indeed. Although these young protagonists may admire their hard-working elders, they do not want to be bound by their limited options. Thus Sandy, rejecting his father’s refusal to work, on the one hand, and his uncle’s compulsion to work, on the other, determines to leave the elevator and return to school, whereas Newt, reacting against the school’s policy of encouraging Black students to pursue only menial jobs, protests and continues to study. In the last paragraphs of Chapter I of “Livin’ the Blues,” Davis, who, according to the Class Prophet of his high school year-book, was only destined to be “a small truck farmer,” presents a detailed catalogue of the limited possibilities for employment for Black men in Kansas and in the United States in the early 1920s, whether they were educated or not. Acutely conscious of the tragedy of the educated Black who cannot find appropriate work, Davis nonetheless concludes this chapter describing his coming-of-age in Arkansas City with an expression of his commitment to attend college.

The personal narratives of Hughes, Parks and Davis verify Woods’ assertion that “In social organizations and institutions regarded as nonessential to the individual’s health and safety, white Kansans tended to draw the color line rigidly” (166). Churches, the YMCA, swimming pools, restaurants, hotels and movie theaters are represented as emphatically segregated in these narratives.<sup>23</sup> Sitting on his grandmother’s porch, Sandy listens to members of his family and friends recall episodes of racial discrimination in their personal lives, each responding to the pain of their experience in a different way. Harriet, who responds with anger and hatred, chants a litany of grievances that reveals the cumulative effect of racial prejudice. In one painful memory, she recalls a school excursion to the theater to see an educational film on the undersea world; deeply immersed in “the strange wonders of the ocean depths” (77), she is brought back to reality by an usher insisting that she move to the back of the theater and by the subsequent indifference of her teacher and her classmates to this injustice. Thus Sandy is initiated into racial injustice through his elders’ stories, which help to prepare him for the inequities he will encounter not only in school and in work, but at every social turn. The rejection of Sandy and a group of Black children from a newly opened amusement park, despite its advertising free admission to all children in Stanton, again precipitates diverse responses among Sandy’s elders:

outrage, ironic laughter, resignation. Sandy, however, can now recognize the reality of the situation as he says to his grandmother, “I guess Kansas is getting like the South . . . They don’t like us here either, do they?” (200). Newt and his friends have no difficulty gaining admission to the circus that comes to Cherokee Flats on July 4, especially as they find work as assistants to the roustabouts. Ironically, Parks implies that the diverse and displaced circus folk provide a positive milieu for the Black youngsters: “Newt enjoyed mingling . . . with the clowns, spiellers, cowboys, Indians, sword swallows, fire-eaters, snake charmers, strong men, bearded ladies, midgets and tightrope walkers—feeling himself a part of these people and in tune with their environment” (128). However, when Newt and his friends, along with two young Hispanics, are persuaded to participate in a Mississippi “free-for-all-ring,” a match in which young Blacks are pitted against each other for the pleasure of white spectators,<sup>24</sup> Newt feels himself transformed into a freak. As the boys are egged on to destroy each other by the racial epithets of the spectators—“Kill those niggers!” “Git them niggers!” “Watch that grease!” “Kick that big nigger in the nuts!” (131)—Parks makes it evident that there is nothing free about the free-for-all; it becomes a white power play in which, no matter who wins the match, the whites, through the process of general humiliation, will have succeeded in proving their ostensible superiority.

Of these four writers, Parks presents the widest spectrum of ways by which poor and uneducated Blacks in Kansas “encountered discrimination at virtually every stage of the legal process” (Woods, 166). In contrast to the Winger family, Parks creates another Black family—Booker and Marcus Savage, a father and son, who live by their wits and their fists; mired in poverty, both struggle with the law as it is represented by the bigoted cop, Kirky, and by the slightly less bigoted Judge Cavanaugh. Parks points out that although in Kansas “[t]he law books stood for equal rights,” Kirky bragged that he “‘never bothered to enforce such laws in such books—’ mainly ‘cause I can’t read” (26). As indicated earlier, if a Black man is in error, Kirky shoots to kill first and asks no questions later. When Marcus is judged guilty of beating up on the elderly white man, who had tried to whip him, Kirky calls him a “black bastard born to trouble . . . a nasty nigga,” and Cavanaugh calls him “a blight on your race and on society” (51-52); he is subsequently condemned to a year in a racist reform school where he suffers ostracism and degradation. Booker later kills the elderly white man; however, he is condemned before he has any opportunity for a fair trial by the crowd in the courtroom—in a scene parallel to the Mississippi free-for-all—with their racial imperatives: “Lynch him!” “Kill him!” “String the black bastard up!” (206). The only escape for Booker lies in suicide. Parks stacks racial and economic dice against Booker and Marcus Savage similar to those Richard Wright stacks against Bigger Thomas. His narrative implies that their fate is determined by their name and by the fact that there is no woman’s moralizing or nurturing presence in their lives. However, primarily through his description of the tough bond of affection that exists between them, Parks makes this father and son more than integers in

a naturalistic formula and thus makes his description of the flawed Kansas judicial system a powerful protest statement.

Confronted with racial discrimination in education, in employment, in the legal system, in social institutions, in public facilities, and on a daily basis in their Kansas communities, how could these boys develop a healthy sense of self? In *Not Without Laughter*, *The Learning Tree*, and “Livin’ the Blues,” the young teen’s predictable confusion regarding his sexual identity is described as conflated and compounded by the confusion of his racial identity, a confusion exacerbated by the ambiguity and arbitrariness of Kansas racism. In each of these personal narratives, as in many African-American autobiographies,<sup>25</sup> the individual’s self-discovery is contingent upon his evolving awareness of himself as belonging to a community, a community that has a knowledge of the past, an aesthetic for the present, and a vision for the future, a community that has an ethical certainty transcending time.

In each of these narratives, the historical memory of the family and the Black community is long, encompassing slavery or Reconstruction as well as the insults and inequities of the present. A significant pause in the linear movement of all four of these narratives occurs when the writer presents an elder’s recollection of an episode from the past that describes the extremes of physical brutality to which loved ones were subjected by whites: the torching and flight of an entire Black community in *Not Without Laughter*; rape and lynching in *The Learning Tree*; a father’s self-mutilation to prevent his sale and separation from his family in “Livin’ the Blues”; a pregnant mother’s murder in “God’s Little Half Acre,” her husband’s revenge, and his subsequent protection by the Black community. The story-within-the-story conveys to the young listener in the narrative not only a knowledge of the past and of the horrors of oppression, but also a knowledge of his people’s triumph and survival into the present. In particular in *Not Without Laughter* and “God’s Little Half Acre,” the vivid language in which the teller communicates the tale and the teller’s own vivid presence in telling the tale seems assurance of survival.

The music and dance created by the families and the Black communities in *Not Without Laughter* and “Livin’ the Blues” provide their young protagonists with an aesthetic for survival.<sup>26</sup> In the small Kansas towns in both Hughes’ and Davis’ narratives, African-American music is diverse, appealing to various groups in the Black community, and always life-sustaining. Hughes and Davis refer in their works not only to the gospels and spirituals of the Black church, but to the jazz and blues of the dance halls, which resonated from the country’s new musical center, Kansas City. Commenting on the importance of Kansas City in the early twentieth century to the development of African-American music, Ross Russell writes:

There was more music in Kansas City than had been heard in America since the gilt palaces and funky butt dance halls of the Storyville section of New Orleans closed their doors at the

beginning of World War I. You heard it on the sidewalks from blues singers, fresh in from one of the cities of the Southwest and self-accompanied on a twelve-string guitar, and from blind gospel shouters jingling their coins to four-four time in a tin cup nailed to a white cane. . . . Kansas City was a storehouse of vintage jazz talent. . . . There were more jobs for musicians than anywhere else in America, and more bands. . . . A remarkable feature of music in Kansas City was that nobody told the musicians what to play or how to play it. Jazzmen were free to create as the spirit moved them. So long as the music was danceable and lively and the visiting fire men were satisfied, the gangsters who ran the clubs did not interfere. As the result of favoring conditions—steady work, isolation, a concentration of talent, and almost total lack of commercial pressures—Kansas City had developed a jazz style of its own.<sup>27</sup>

Ben Sidran argues that Kansas City became “the blues capital of the world” during the period between 1927 and 1938 because “unlike the cities of the urban North, [it] was both geographically and sociologically close to the origins of black oral tradition.”<sup>28</sup>

Sandy’s appreciation for jazz and the blues originates in the evenings when his father, home from his wanderings, played the guitar, and his Aunt Harriet, home from the work she despised, sang and danced. Despite his Baptist grandmother’s attempt to discourage him, the boy insists on listening, hearing in their music and seeing in their dance, Hughes implies, a creative—occasionally even ecstatic—response to desperation, weariness and loneliness. Later in Chapter VIII, entitled “Dance,” when Sandy accompanies his music-struck aunt to the dance hall, Hughes indicates that the boy’s understanding of African-American music is deepened. Having set this chapter immediately after Chapter VII, entitled “White Folks,” in which Sandy listens to his elders’ recollections of oppression, Hughes appears to propose that music and dance are a necessary and vitalizing response, if not a solution, to the debilitating effects of racism. The verbal description in this chapter of the music made by “BENBOW’S FAMOUS KANSAS CITY BAND” “in a hot, crowded little dance-hall in a Kansas town on Friday night” (94) becomes an analogue for the pulsating, energizing rhythms of the dance and music themselves: Hughes heaps up adjectives, phrases, questions, shifting tenses, interrupting his exposition with blues lyrics and extraordinary onomatopoeic expressions. Immersed in his experience at the dance, Sandy feels his unity with nature and with his fellows and transcends his personal confusions and isolation.

Although Sandy’s grandmother regards the blues as the devil’s own music, Hughes explains that when Jimboy “took his soft-playing guitar and picked out spirituals and old-time Christian hymns on its sweet strings, Hager . . . sang and rocked with the rest of them” (32). Thus Hughes stresses that Hager’s spirituals

share harmonics with the blues and have similar effects upon both singer and listener. The spiritual she sings to Sandy as an answer to his question about white hatred, following his rejection from the amusement park, leads the two of them to identify with the suffering of all African Americans and with their capacity to survive: "Sandy, as he stood beside his grandmother on the porch, heard a great chorus out of the black past—singing generations of toil-worn Negroes, echoing Hager's voice as it deepened and grew in volume: *There's a star fo' you an' me, / Stars beyond!*" (200).

Toward the end of the novel, Sandy ponders the validity of his Uncle Stiles' observation that Blacks will be enslaved by poverty and racism as long as they remain "clowns, jazzers, a band of dancers." He quickly recognizes the distortion of his uncle's logic and concludes that Blacks are clowns, singers, "dancers because of their poverty; . . . because of their suffering; . . . [because they are] captured in a white world." He perceives finally and explicitly, however, the liberating potential of music and dance, reflecting the fact that Blacks are "Dancers of the spirit, too. Each black dreamer a captured dancer of the spirit" who might consequently dance "far beyond the limitations of their poverty" (293).

From the time he was eight, when he first heard the blues, African-American music bolstered and extended Davis' sense of self, and the touring bands and musicians, the family's phonograph records, and the songs and shouts at revival meetings and Testifying Sundays continued to quicken Davis' pulse through his boyhood. African-American music established a context not only within which he could attempt to understand sexuality, but also within which he could explicitly identify with Black people. In his opening statement about the blues, Davis implies that through them he transcended his childhood isolation: "when the blues grabbed me and held on, it was like meeting a long lost brother" (134). The blues also created a connection between him and his stepfather, who, in introducing him to this music, explained that the blues were "'colored folks' music and workin' people's at that'" (137). Increasingly Davis realizes that through African-American music he is joined to a "common group heritage": "I learned that black secular and religious songs were opposite sides of the same cultural coin and those who sang them unconsciously applied the same strong, surviving Africanisms, shaping both into a distinctive black music, a major segment of common group heritage" (139). Listening intensely whenever he can as he comes of age, Davis realizes that blues lyrics are "vital, real" because they "mirror the group experiences" (139).

For the Black boys being discussed here, the Black church, as a social and religious institution, was a significant aspect only in Davis' struggle to come of age. Although he describes himself as "almost fanatically religious, accepting the literal fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible put before us by our pastor" (144), rather than reflecting Biblical teachings, his memoir reflects his pleasure not only in the syncretizing of gospel music with dance-hall music, but also in the synthesizing of events in the church calendar with secular events. He equally

enjoyed church picnics in the summer, family get-togethers to gather walnuts and pecans in the fall, and Emancipation Day on August 4, occasions when there would be “a moving, laughing sea of black” (127). The experiences the protagonists of Hughes’, Parks’, and Cushinberry’s narratives have with theology and with the church as institution are minimal.<sup>29</sup> However, in contrast to Davis’ experiences, Christian values influence the other three young Blacks directly and positively through the devout and powerful maternal figure who stands at the center of their lives.

The role of Black men, while influential in the lives of these boys, is secondary in these matrifocal families. In *Not Without Laughter*, Sandy’s father, Jimboy, is largely absent. When he does return home, he is associated primarily with easy times—fishing and carnivals, singing and guitars, although his stories do introduce Sandy to the difficulties of a Black man’s finding work and his music introduces him to the difficulties of finding romantic love. On one occasion in the novel, to Sandy’s shame, Jimboy disciplines him for lying: “‘White folks get rich lyin’ and stealin’—and some niggers gets rich that way, too—but I don’t need money if I got to get it dishonest, with a lot o’ lies trailing behind me, and can’t look folks in the face. It makes you feel dirty!’” (119-20). Midway in the novel, Jimboy vanishes except as a memory for Sandy, and he finds father surrogates in the male communities of the barber shop and the pool hall. Here through the rhetorical styles of discussion and through the variety of subject matter, Sandy’s sense of possibilities is extended. Of the particular vitality of the barber shop, Hughes writes,

the barber-shop then was a man’s world, and, on Saturdays, while a dozen or more big laborers awaited their turns, the place was filled with loud man-talk and smoke and laughter. Baseball, Jack Johnson, racehorses, white folks, Teddy Roosevelt, local gossip, Booker Washington, women, labor prospects in Topeka, Kansas City, Omaha, religion, politics, women, God—discussion and arguments all afternoon and far up into the night. (186-87)

At the pool hall, these possibilities are extended further as Sandy overhears “arguments . . . —boastings, proving and fending; or telling of exploits with guns, knives, and razors, with cops and detectives, with evil women and wicked men; out-bragging and out-lying one another, all talking at once” (251). Here, in the phrase which Hughes takes for his novel’s title, he learns that “No matter how belligerent or lewd their talk was, or how sordid the tales they told—of dangerous pleasures and strange perversities—these black men laughed . . . no matter how hard life might be, it was not without laughter” (251). At the end of the novel Sandy explicitly rejects his father, thinking he must be “‘Not like Jimboy . . . Not like my father, always wanting to go somewhere’” (292).<sup>30</sup> Overwhelming his memories of his father are the memories of the values and vision of his

grandmother, which give a shape not only to the past and the present, but to the future as well.

Similarly, in *The Learning Tree*, although Newt admires his largely silent and stoical father<sup>31</sup> and his strong and gentle older brother, it is his mother who shapes his life. One man influences him profoundly, however: his Uncle Rob, who being blind, depends on his inner sight and who, reinforces his mother's values and vision. He encourages Newt to imagine "a happier world. A wonderful world all mixed up with wonderful colored people" (66) in which whites are not in opposition to Blacks. He also tells Newt that his mother has "a peculiar kind of faith in you. She talks about you being born into the start of a new world. Maybe she's right" (69). In "God's Little Half Acre," Cushmanberry recalls his father only as a giant of a man, who, because of his size and strength, deferred to his much smaller wife, not only to discipline the children, but also to establish their moral guidelines. In another interview, however, Cushmanberry recalls his father's commitment to nurturing his children in the following anecdote: "My dad took a whole block of ground and made . . . a playground . . . Everybody said, 'Mr. Cushmanberry, why don't you plant something out there?' He said, 'I'm planting something out there—I'm planting kids.'"<sup>32</sup>

Of these four writers, only Davis describes Black men throughout his narrative as shaping his life. Although his grandmother and his mother have a formative influence on him as a young boy, as Davis' narrative evolves, the figures who come to embody significant attitudes or principles for him are male: Gaffney, the herb doctor, who "amassed a modest fortune" (121) with his bizarre home remedies; a young African-American, "mild as a minnow," who successfully swindled the town's leading citizens to become for a few months "the Black Emperor of Arkansas City" (128); Travis Dean, young, soft-spoken, hard working, and the leader of Arkansas City's first Black Boy Scout troop; Texas Slim, "an elongated, sadfaced ginger brown man," who pounded out "a slow, bleeding blues" (137) on the piano; Will Logan, who, as janitor for a bank, subjected himself to constant humiliation, but who also picked up stock tips from the wastebaskets to make himself a wealthy man by the time of his death; the mythic "Giles Johnson," whom Davis commemorated in a poem written many years later, who "had four college degrees," but "died of starvation / because he wouldn't teach / and he couldn't porter" (156). At the center of his life and this first chapter of "Livin' the Blues," however, Davis appears to place his stepfather, a man whom he describes as having only a third-grade education, but "an abundant quota of common sense and mother wit" (120). A railroad man, he was powerfully muscular. Throughout the narrative, however, Davis represents him as defending his family and the Black community from the inroads of racism through his rhetorical skills rather than his fists and as persistently refusing to compromise his integrity. Davis' narrative implies that above all he admired his stepfather's style and his knowledge of the blues, which provided him with an aesthetic means of reconciling the contradictions in his life. From his own later

knowledge of the blues, Davis describes the amazing style his stepfather was able to achieve in Arkansas City from his perspective as a boy:

I lagged behind so I could look at Dad. When he was togged down he wore a blue serge box black suit with the coat hanging in a rectangle from his broad shoulders, and the edges of the box were pressed sharp enough to shave with. His trousers were voluminous pegtops tapering to narrow cuffless bottoms breaking once above highly polished long shoes—"Stetson last" he called them. On his head a derby perched jauntily. He looked as slick as a sweet man from Saint Louis, and could have been the sartorial inspiration for *Dying Gambler's Blues*. (136)

To the conclusion of Chapter I of "Livin' the Blues," Davis continues to recall his stepfather's words and deeds with respect; however, even this man's significant presence in his young life did not dispel Davis' sense of having had "no black heroes to identify with in this small town on the Kansas prairies"; he continued to labor under the curse of racial inferiority, seeing himself in retrospect as a disturbed and "pitiful black tag-a-long," conditioned by the "racist white herd" (116).

From the beginning of *Not Without Laughter*, *The Learning Tree*, and "God's Little Half Acre," a matriarchal woman guides the young protagonist spiritually and morally, through her words and her deeds. Hard-working, righteous, and caring, these women are models for their sons and grandsons. Their response to the ambiguities and arbitrariness of Midwestern racism is to hold on to the American Dream. With an unwaveringly clear vision of justice, they manage to regard all human beings equally. Kansas demographics that make white people their neighbors also makes it possible for them to develop a rare capacity for forgiveness. If the realities of racism prohibit the youths in these personal narratives from being unable to imitate these women, the strength of their vision nonetheless works to instill in them a sense of Black identity with which to deal with the present and a sense of hope with which to face the future.

Sandy's grandmother, Aunt Hager, a devout Baptist, is described from the novel's opening chapter as nursing the sick and distressed of both races. Her generous spirit is further reinforced in the second chapter when she invites her neighbors in to dinner, saying, "'Help yo' self! We ain't got much, but such as 'tis, you're welcome'" (20). Aunt Hager, like Hughes' own grandmother, teaches through stories: "Slavery-time stories, myths, folk-tales like the Rabbit and the Tar Baby; the war, Abe Lincoln, freedom, visions of the Lord; years of faith and labor, love and struggle filled Aunt Hager's talk of a summer night" (177). According to Hughes' account of his boyhood in *The Big Sea* (1940), in the stories told by his grandmother "always life moved, moved heroically toward an end. Nobody ever cried in my grandmother's stories. They worked, or schemed, or fought. But no crying."<sup>33</sup> The only one of Hager's stories that Hughes gives us in

detail, far from being heroic, however, concerns the grief, insanity and suicide of her young white mistress during slavery. In stark juxtaposition to the story from the days of Reconstruction of arson and pillage that Sandy hears from a neighbor, to the stories he hears from his father and his Aunt Harriet, and to his own experiences, all of which evoke anger and hatred of whites, this is a story that leads Hager to conclude that “‘there ain’t no room in de world fo’ nothin’ mo’n love. I knows, chile! Ever’ thing there is but lovin’ leaves a rust on yo’ soul’” (182). She summarizes her moral vision, with an apology for slavery’s atrocities, prefatory to telling the story to Sandy:

“These young ones what’s comin’ up now, they calls us ole fogies, an’ handkerchief heads, an’ white folks’ niggers ‘cause we don’t get mad an’ rar’ up in arms like they does ‘cause things is kinder hard, but, honey, when you gets old, you knows they ain’t no sense in gettin’ mad an’ sourin’ you’ soul with hatin’ peoples. White folks is white folks, an’ colored folks is colored, an’ neither one of ‘em is bad as t’other makes out. . . . They talks ‘bout slavery time an’ they makes out now like it were de most awfullest time what ever was, but don’t you believe, it chile, ‘cause it weren’t all that bad.” (177-78)

Like Aunt Hager in *Not Without Laughter*, Parks’ own mother, as she is described in *A Choice of Weapons*,<sup>34</sup> as well as his fictionalized mother, respond to the needs of individuals, regardless of their race. In *A Choice of Weapons*, Parks’ mother harbors a fugitive Black man, and in *Voices in the Mirror* she takes “a homeless white boy into our house to feed and clothe until a distant relative came to his rescue” (7); in *The Learning Tree*, Sarah Winger cares for a white boy, abandoned by his mother for two years. Similarly Sarah’s sense of justice leads her to chastise a white boy for his intemperance even as she chastises her own son for his misdemeanors; she addresses the all-white school board regarding the necessity of maintaining an integrated high school (in opposition to the board’s justification for maintaining the status quo because of the all-too-familiar “dismal picture of state aid” [103-4]), even as she insists that Newt tell the truth about Booker Savage’s act of murder. In the passage that gives rise to the novel’s title, Sarah instructs Newt in her moral vision as Aunt Hager had instructed Sandy:

“[Cherokee Flats] ain’t a all-good place and it ain’t a all-bad place. But you can learn just as much here about people and things as you can learn any place else. Cherokee Flats is sorta like a fruit tree. Some of the people are good and some of them are bad—just like the fruit on a tree. . . . Well if you learn to profit from the good and bad these people do to each other, you’ll learn a lot ‘bout life. And you’ll be a better man for that

learnin' someday. . . . think of Cherokee Flats like that till the day you die—let it be your learnin' tree.” (35-36)

She continues to explain to Newt that he must also be able to give “more to this world than you take away from it”; her lessons in love are also similar to Aunt Hager’s as she advises that Newt be “able to love when you want’a hate—to forgive them that work against you—to tell the truth even when it hurts—to share your bread, no matter how hungry you are yourself” (36). Unlike Aunt Hager, however, Sarah realizes that her vision might be flawed. She cannot tell her son the story from the past that haunts her, the brutal story of her sister’s rape and her brother’s lynching, and she doubts the reality of a Christian afterlife; nevertheless, she continues to serve as Newt’s confidant and as his moral mentor, and she continues to believe that a vision such as hers “has kept our family goin’ when there wasn’t much else to go on” (36-35).

Cushinberry’s grandmother and mother also established the moral context for his family in Nicodemus: “My mother and hers was real religious. And boy, they pounded that into us. “When you can help somebody, help them. That’s what God put you here for”” (198-99). His mother was a strict disciplinarian: “So my mother did all the disciplines. But boy, she could hit you harder than lightning could bump a stump. We worked from sunup through the day, and my little mother, she didn’t have to say but one thing, “Do this.” And boy, if you didn’t do that, you better give your heart to God, because your behind was hers” (196). However, she was also a generous humanitarian, her sense of justice grounded in her Christianity and her personal experiences with poverty and racism. As Cushinberry recounts in another interview, racism brought out the lightning and her sense of justice: “One time at a football game, I’d just made a pretty good run and one of the people in the stands said, “Look at that black boy run!” Mama hit him with her purse. “I didn’t name him Black Boy. I named him Grant,” she said”.<sup>35</sup> Like both Aunt Hager and Sarah Winger, Cushinberry’s mother also transcended racial differences to help the needy and feed the hungry. In describing how his mother, over the objections of other Blacks, fed hobos of all racial backgrounds from the trains that passed their home, Cushinberry simply remembers, “She’d say, “Hunger don’t know no color”” (198).

In both *Not Without Laughter* and *The Learning Tree*, crisis and change occur in the lives of the Black youths with the deaths of the grandmother and mother. For both Sandy and Newt, as for Hughes and Parks in actuality, these deaths mean physical upheaval, which becomes synchronized with psychological upheaval. Through these deaths, Hughes and Parks, on the one hand, imply the passing of an older moral order, which takes its strength in part from the Black church. On the other hand, the very vigor and viability of the grandmother’s and mother’s vision of justice and equality and hope give the youths a sense of themselves as individuals, Blacks and human beings, which allows them to

overcome the confusions of Midwestern racism and to approach the future with confidence.

Based on their vision, both Hughes' Aunt Hager and Parks' Sarah Winger articulate a dream for the young Black man, a dream that provides him with a personal identity that can counter racial as well as existential insecurities, a dream that maps the future. Central to the dream of Aunt Hager and Sarah is the dual concept that the youth could, through education, become a good and great man and could, thereby, become "a credit to the race." Referring to herself in the third person, Aunt Hager tells Sandy that "'She's gonna make a fine man out o' you fo' de glory o' God an' de black race. You gwine to 'mount to something in this world'" (193). In response to her husband's doubts about the possibilities of changing the white power structure, Sarah asserts her belief that "'these kids comin' along today are goin' to find a way to change things. . . . Schoolin's more powerful than guns or money in the end'" (72). Whereas Aunt Hager held up specific models of successful Black men for Sandy—Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Jack Johnson—Sarah particularized her vision to Newt in her dying words: "'Put . . . somethin' into it—and you'll git somethin' out . . . Do the ri—right thing—not always the easiest . . . Believe in somethin' and live up to it. Be good, son'" (227). In his memoir, "A Look Back," Parks recalls that "My mother made several things clear to me before she died—I was black and I should be proud of being black, providing I brought pride to my blackness; I should not tolerate mediocrity in myself; I should not pretend to be something that I had not yet become, and whatever I became would depend upon the amount of effort I put into becoming what I wanted to be" (7).<sup>36</sup> In testifying to her son's potential achievement, Cushinberry reports that his mother neither emphasized race nor apologized for it: "'A lot of black people got a hang-up on being black. They say they can't get ahead. My mother'd say. 'That's a cop-out. God gave you the same kind of brain he gave the white fellow. You just got to put out more. When you go for a job, be the first one there and the last one left.' So I learned pretty early'" (199).

In the final chapters of *Not Without Laughter* and *The Learning Tree*, both youths become acutely conscious of their grandmother's and mother's dreams and of their responsibility to fulfill these dreams. From Harriet Jacobs' concluding statement in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1865) regarding the fact that her dream of a home yet remained unfulfilled to Hughes' sequence of poems, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), Martin Luther King's impassioned sermon, "I Have a Dream" (1963), and the monumental photographic exhibition of Black American women *I Dream a World* (1988), Black Americans have been engaged in reformulating their versions of the American Dream. With references to dreams proliferating in the conclusions of their novels, Hughes and Parks demonstrate that the American Dream, as it played out in the landscape of their Kansas boyhoods, evoked conflicting responses. In Chicago, "the great center where all the small-town boys in the whole Middle West wanted to go" (278), Sandy is "vaguely disappointed. No towers, no dreams come true! Where were

the thrilling visions of grandeur he had held?" (281). Remembering the confusing diversity of dreams that had guided the lives of the adults in his Kansas boyhood, he ponders their alternative visions. If he realizes some value in each, he also realizes the overriding significance of his grandmother's dream. Although Hughes emphasizes the antithetical perspectives of his aunts, Harriet and Tempy, in the novel's conclusion, they both endorse their mother's dream for Sandy. Thus Harriet exclaims, "'Sandy can't do like us. He's gotta be what his grandmama Hager wanted him to be—able to help the black race!'" (303). But Sandy must forge his own dreams in Chicago. As he vows not to betray Hager's dream in the penultimate chapter of *Not Without Laughter* (294), it is apparent that his grandmother's vision will continue to shape his vision. Although he is immersed in the music of his father and his Aunt Harriet in the novel's last chapter, in the concluding paragraphs, as he returns to his room at night, he hears the music of the Black church. "[V]ibrant and steady like a stream of living faith" (304), it reminds him of the songs his grandmother sang in Kansas. Yet the novel's final line—a line from the spirituals—"An' we'll understand it better by an' by" (304)—ironically seems to subvert Hager's dream, implying the struggle both Sandy and the Black community will have in attaining the dream.

In concluding his coming-of-age narrative, Parks works through several meanings of "dream"—a series of images occurring in sleep, a vague trance, and a conscious ideal—in order to bring Newt to a reconciliation with his mother's death and to an expression of his own identity. Earlier in the novel the image of the drowned man had haunted Newt's dreams, as the presence of often racially motivated death in Parks' own boyhood had caused him to live with "an exaggerated fear." Parks sets the same test for Newt that he had set for himself as a boy: he must confront his beloved mother in her coffin.<sup>37</sup> "The immense underground of death" swamps his mind as, in a "dreamlike" trance, he approaches the coffin. By conjuring up images of Sarah in life, however, he gradually comes to be able to dispel his fear of death and to sleep—"His dreams, unafraid" (231-32). In describing Newt the morning following his mother's funeral, Parks suggests that the boy has moved into the final stage of dreaming, for he silently, but consciously phrases his farewell in relation to his mother's dying words. She had told him, "'Make a good man of yourself . . . It's a dream of mine . . . make it come true'" (227); with courage and commitment, he can thus say to himself, "Goodbye, Momma—I won't forget your dream" (233). Parks begins *A Choice of Weapons* with his recollection of the moment of his departure from Kansas following his mother's death and his father's last words, "'Boy, remember your momma's teachin'. You'll be all right. Just you remember her teachin'" (2). Throughout this autobiography Parks makes it apparent that his memory of his mother's "teachin'" and her dream was his most treasured legacy from Kansas, for he repeatedly shows it guiding his subsequent actions. In *Voices in the Mirror*, he generalizes, "There is no doubt that in the fifteen years providence willed her to me, she wove the guidelines that she hoped I would follow" (9).

The final episode in *The Learning Tree* indicates, however, that although Newt may be strengthened by his mother's vision and by his self-discovery, the racism embodied by the white cop, Kirky, continues. In the last chapter of *The Learning Tree*, Kirky again murders a Black man, Marcus Savage, whose life parallels Newt's, and again his body is left to writhe in a Kansas river. When Kirky offers him a ride home in the novel's final paragraphs, Newt's rejection of him—"I can make it by myself" (240)—is a not only a rejection of the racism he represents, but it is also an expression of a new self-reliance. The sun significantly, if contradictorily, is setting in the novel's last paragraph as Newt turns homeward: "The pink coloring was gone, and the gray was edging into blackness" (240). Parks implies, on the one hand, that the dream of a pastoral Kansas remains corrupted by an endemic racism, while, on the other hand, drawing on the American expression of self-reliance, perhaps the young Black's dreams can only be fully realized in the Black community.

In "God's Little Half Acre," Cushinberry does not indicate that his mother expressed her hopes for her children and for the future in the explicit terms of a dream; nonetheless, he implies that she had a vision that he has attempted to fulfill through his own vision, recognizing a commonality between Blacks and whites across class lines:

"My mother taught me that I don't know but one nation. That's the human race. I help whites and blacks alike. A lot of blacks, they ask me, "Why you help those white people? They got places they can go." I say, "From above, they all look alike." A lot of black people think white people get more than they do. I tell them, 'A poor white catches as much hell as a poor black.'" (199)

His civic deeds in Topeka, in which he shares the produce from his abundant gardens with hundreds of people, are ample testimony to the fact that he has well learned his mother's lessons of hard work, generosity and justice to all. His frequent editorials or "stories" for *The Topeka Ebony Times* are ample testimony that he not only repeatedly condemns the perpetuation of racist injustice, but that he has also come to express his mother's dream in words: "I believe anyone in the USA can have what he or she desires if it is worked for. . . . I am a Black American and American ends with the letters C-A-N. In other words: CAN, not CAN'T. I believe we can do anything" (*My Stories*, N.pag.).

Of the four writers whose personal narratives I've been examining, only Cushinberry stayed in Kansas, moving from Nicodemus to Hoisington and then, following service in World War II, to Topeka. Circumstances led both Parks and Hughes to leave Kansas as teenagers, just as circumstances also dictated the departures of the protagonists in their novels. Davis, however, emphatically chose to leave Kansas. He paid his last visit to Arkansas City in 1926, explaining in a yet unpublished chapter of "Livin' the Blues" that he "could never be

homesick for that town. . . . I have too many bitter memories from discrimination. . . . I cannot find nostalgia for any special patch of earth hemmed in by prejudice. How many older Afro-Americans of sound mind long to go back to Lynchem, Mississippi, or Shootem, Alabama?"<sup>38</sup> And yet Davis' antipathy for Arkansas City is integrated with his memory of the African-American music he had first heard there. His descriptions of even his last year in Kansas resonate with the music of the Kansas City Jazz Kingdom, where Bennie Moten created "a driving rhythm with strong riffs providing a blazing base for hot solos" (131).

Thus, for all four of these young Black men, as Kansas weather and geography had illuminated the contradictions of life itself, the experiences of growing up in small-town Kansas had illuminated the more violent contradictions of the racial climate in Midwestern society. For three of these young Black men, a grandmother's or a mother's dream represents an alternative response to these realities. The dream shapes their sense of personal identity, creates in them an integrity and pride of self that counters the curse of racial inferiority and that illuminates the future. However, for Sandy and Newt, Davis and Cushinberry, contradictions remain vivid, and for Hughes' and Parks' young protagonists the dream is yet to be fully realized at the conclusions of their narratives; for them, just as much as for Davis, it remains deferred in Kansas, in the entire nation. As Houston Baker has said of the African-American slave narrative, "the authentic geography of the American imagination can only be mapped by first surveying slave territory,"<sup>39</sup> the authentic geography of the American imagination must include a survey of the territory of these Midwestern Blacks.

## Notes

1. *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1989), 1.
2. See, for example, Carl Becker, "Kansas," in Lorrin Leland, ed., *Essays in American History Dedicated to Frederick Jackson Turner* (New York, 1910), 85-111; "Introduction," *The Kansas Experience in Poetry*, (Lawrence, Kansas, 1978), ix-xii.
3. Benjamin "Pap" Singleton promoted Black migration to Kansas after investigation into the possibilities of moving to other states such as Tennessee. See Nell Irvin Painter's *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York, 1976), 112-15.
4. Cited in "Pioneers," *In Search of the American Dream: The Experience of Blacks in Kansas*, ts., Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, 1984, n. pag.
5. "I, Too, Sing America: The Black Autobiographer's Response to Life in the Midwest and Mid-Plains," *Kansas Quarterly* 7 (1975), 43-44.
6. *Not Without Laughter* (London, 1969); *The Learning Tree* (Greenwich, Connecticut, 1963); "Livin' the Blues: Memoirs of a Black Journalist and Poet," *Cottonwood*, (Summer/Fall 1986), 115-56 (the full text of "Livin' the Blues" will be published by that title by the University of Wisconsin Press in Spring, 1993); "God's Little Half Acre," *Parsnips in the Snow*, ed. Mary Swander and Jane Anne Staw (Iowa City, 1989), 189-205.
7. Richard Yarborough's essay, "The First-Person in Afro-American Literature," in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Patricia Redmond (Chicago, 1989) examines the permeable boundaries between first-person and third-persons in African-American fiction (110-21).
8. As indicated in his autobiography, *To Heaven Through Hell: An Autobiography of the First Black District Court Judge of Kansas* (Kansas City, Kansas, 1986), Cordell D. Meeks also spent his boyhood in Kansas during the early decades of the century, having moved to Kansas City, Kansas, in 1923 at the age of nine; as his autobiography gives primary attention to the years following his

boyhood, however, I have chosen not to include a discussion of his narrative in this essay. Neither general bibliographies of Kansas literature [*Kansas Literature in Print, 1989* (Topeka, Kansas, 1989); *The Kansas Immigrants* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1980); and Thomas Fox Averill, *Kansas Literature* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1979)] nor bibliographies of selected materials by peoples of color in Kansas at the Spencer Research Library of the University of Kansas list other accounts by Black Kansans. No Black women have to date written their stories of growing up in Kansas.

9. *The Life of Langston Hughes: I, Too, Sing America, 1902-1941* Vol. I (New York, 1986), 3-21.

10. Hughes' dates are 1902-67; Davis' are 1905-87; Parks was born in 1912, and Cushinberry in 1922.

11. All four narratives reflect the historical time of the writer's youth as viewed through the scrim of a later historical time, and although audience expectations, publishers' demands, and the social and racial climate of this later time period must be interpreted as influencing the writer's representation of his past, my essay argues that these narratives corroborate each other as well as historical information from other sources regarding the racial climate in Kansas in the early decades of the twentieth century.

12. As autobiographical in impulse, these works share with other autobiographies by Black Americans in what William Andrews persuasively argues is "the overarching or underlying motif in Afro-American autobiography"; they are not only about freedom but also demonstrate this freedom through the strategies of storytelling. See *To Tell a Free Story* (Urbana, Illinois, 1986) and "A Poetics of Afro-American Autobiography" in *Afro-American Literary Study in 1990*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Patricia Redmond (Chicago, 1989), 89-90.

13. *Voices in the Mirror* (New York, 1990), 270; *A Choice of Weapons* (New York, 1965), 68; *To Smile In Autumn* (New York, 1979) 22. This passage is repeated, with minor changes, in "A Look Back," *Kansas Quarterly* 7 (1975), 6.

14. This is a fictionalized account of an event which occurred in Parks' Fort Scott boyhood; he was also compelled to recall it in detail in *A Choice of Weapons*, 4-5.

15. *Gordon Parks: A Poet and His Camera* (New York, 1968) n. pag. "Kansas Land" was re-set from a prose passage in *A Choice of Weapons* (6-7) and published in conjunction with his photographs; it was also used to introduce the issue of *Cottonwood* (Summer/Fall 1986), dedicated to contemporary Black Kansas artists and commemorating 125 years of Kansas statehood. In 1985, during the ceremony in Topeka in which Parks was honored as Kansan of the Year, all but the critical closing lines of "Kansas Land" were read aloud. Parks himself, in response, stood to recite these last lines to the assembled dignitaries (*Voices*, 331-32). Conscious that his beloved parents and his brother and sister are buried in a segregated Fort Scott cemetery ("A Voice Back," 5; *Voices*, 332-33), Parks remains ambivalent about the Kansas land.

16. "Integration, Exclusion, or Segregation? The 'Color Line' in Kansas, 1878-1900," rpt. in Paul K. Stuewe ed. *Kansas Revisited: Historical Images and Perspectives*, (Lawrence, Kansas, 1990) 170.

17. Meeks, *To Heaven Through Hell*, 7.

18. Meeks, who attended racially segregated schools in Kansas City, Kansas, reports that race was never the cause of dissension at school (7-23).

19. "Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka: A Personal Perspective," rpt. in Paul K. Stuewe, ed. *Kansas Revisited: Historical Images and Perspectives*, (Lawrence, Kansas, 1990) 283-84.

20. James C. Carper, "The Popular Ideology of Segregated Schooling: Attitudes Toward the Education of Blacks in Kansas, 1854-1900," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 1 (Winter 1978), 263.

21. The 1879 statute regarding the integration of secondary schools in the state remained unchanged until 1905 when an integrated high school was allowed to open in Kansas City (Carper, 263).

22. The low point in *Not Without Laughter* occurs in Chapter XII, "Hard Winter," midway in the novel, and describes Sandy's family as destitute, with his father vanished, his mother ill, and his grandmother barely able to make money enough for food, let alone for warm clothes and doctor's bills. Parks describes his youthful oblivion to his family's poverty in *A Choice of Weapons*: "Until [mother's] death I hadn't known we were so poor. In the early protected days poverty seemed for the old and the helpless. I was naive and carefree, loving a particular pair of overalls, a certain stocking cap, rifle, pocketknife, spinning top or some such thing. It hardly touched me that my parents went without to give me these simple pleasures" (14-15). Correlating his family's character with their economic straits, Davis comments: "The family had the supreme proof of honesty: We were supremely poor" (118).

23. Although there were no laws against miscegenation in Kansas, both *The Learning Tree* and "Livin' the Blues" speak of the dangers to blacks when young men and women crossed racial barriers sexually.

24. Other autobiographical or fictionalized autobiographical works by black male writers also suggest that such an event has a similarly pivotal role in the coming-of-age experiences of their young protagonists. See, for example, Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

25. Craig Werner, writing in "On the Ends of Afro-American 'Modernist' Autobiography," *Black American Literary Forum* 24 (Summer 1990), explains that "As Henry Louis Gates, Robert Stepto, Christopher Miller, and William Andrews demonstrate, the primary significance of *graphie* for most black writers has been that it provides proof of a self capable of participating in the discourses—literary and political—that shape the lives of that self and the community from which it cannot be separated" (204).

26. Although music has a central place in these two narratives, it is not mentioned in "God's Little Half Acre." Parks describes his becoming a blues pianist in *A Choice of Weapons*, but he explains that his playing in Kansas had never been taken seriously (20). In *Voices in the Mirror*, he states that his "ultimate joy was banging on our battered upright Kimball piano, which I had learned to play by ear, at age six" (7). In *The Learning Tree*, Newt's piano playing is limited because his father finds it a feminine activity. The music he most enjoys is a private music of the spheres which expresses his longing for a universal harmony; he hears it "'when I'm in the prairie all by myself—when the wind blows a soft kind of sound almost like music, and I think I hear great big orchestras with lots and lots of people playin' all kinds of horns and violins, pianos, drums and things and it goes on for a long time—comin' and goin' with the wind—'" (68).

27. *Bird Lives: The High Life and Hard Times of Charlie (Yardbird) Parker* (New York, 1973), 31-32.

28. *Black Talk* (New York, 1971), 83.

29. In *Not Without Laughter*, for example, Sandy goes unwillingly to revival meetings with his grandmother and mother, leading his grandmother to observe, "'He ain't doin' no good at de services, wiggling and squirming so's we can't hardly hear de sermon. He ain't got religion in his heart, that chile'" (100). In his first autobiographical volume, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940), Hughes recalls his personal distress at being pressured into a religious conversion, for which he had no faith (18-21). Of the aunt and uncle with whom he lived in Lawrence, one of whom was a Christian, the other of whom was not, he could write, "both of them were very good and kind . . . And no doubt from them I learned to like both Christians and sinners equally well" (18). Although prayer served Parks' mother, he wonders about its efficacy in *A Choice of Weapons* (45). In *Voices in the Mirror*, Parks rejects the church as a place where he began to achieve self-respect, pointing out that there "God and the saints and angels were always white" (5), and in *The Learning Tree*, Newt ponders whether a white God can care for black people (147), while Marcus despairs at imagining "a God with black skin, thick lips and coarse hair like his" (97).

30. As both of his autobiographies, *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander* (New York, 1956), document, Hughes himself was an inveterate traveler.

31. As Parks' descriptions in *A Choice of Weapons* and *Voices in the Mirror* reveal, Jack Winger, was modeled on his own father, Jackson: "a good quiet man" (*Choice*, 1).

32. *The Topeka Capital-Journal* November 27, 1983, Sunday Magazine Section: 22.

33. *The Big Sea*, 17. In this autobiography, Hughes testifies that in writing *Not Without Laughter*, he sought, in certain particulars, to counter his own personal experiences; growing up lonely and isolated from others, he explains that in his novel "I wanted to write about a typical Negro family in the Middle West, about people like those I had known in Kansas. . . . I created around myself what seemed to me a family more typical of Negro life in Kansas than my own had been" (303-4).

34. In both appearance and attitude, Sarah Winger in *The Learning Tree*, *A Choice of Weapons* and *Voices in the Mirror* is modeled on Parks' mother, who was named Sarah. Although his fictionalized mother is not conventionally religious, of his own mother, Parks writes, "Truthfulness was one of her dominant traits . . . Righteous and stern . . . A woman of religion, her habits were inflexible, and everyone attended church and Sunday school" (*Choice*, 93). Of both his parents, he comments: "Our parents filled us with love and a staunch Methodist religion" (*Choice*, 2). "The love of my mother and father proved greater than the oppression and bigotry that surrounded me. And it was the love of my family that spared me the tragedy that claimed so many others. It was that love that eventually influenced my choice of weapons with which to fight" ("A Look Back," 6). "My parents were not simply preachers of virtue. They practiced what they taught, and time has proven their worth to me. They showed their children how to live honorably, and how to die honorably" (*Voices*, 11).

35. *Topeka Capital Journal*, November 27, 1983, Sunday Magazine Section, 22.

36. At the conclusion of *A Choice of Weapons*, Parks recalls his mother's advice in similar terms: "My mother had freed me from the curse of inferiority long before she died by not allowing me to take refuge in the excuse that I had been born black. She had given me ambition and purpose, and set the course I had since traveled" (273).

37. At the beginning of the first chapter in *A Choice of Weapons*, Parks lists the violent deaths which he, as a boy, witnessed in Fort Scott; this list is reiterated in *Voices in the Mirror* (13). As a result of the frequent presence of death in his life, he explains that he developed "an exaggerated fear of death" (4), which derived from a consciousness of the likelihood of his own near death:

I considered myself lucky to be alive; three of my close friends had already died of senseless brutality, and I was lucky that I hadn't killed someone myself. Until the very day that I left Fort Scott on that train for the North, there had been a fair chance of being shot or perhaps beaten to death. I could easily have been the victim of mistaken identity, of a sudden act of terror by hate-filled white men, or, for that matter, I could have been murdered by some violent member of my own race. There had been a lot of killing in the border states of Kansas, Oklahoma and Missouri, more than I cared to remember. (*Choice*, 2-3)

*The Learning Tree*, *A Choice of Weapons*, and *Voices in the Mirror* all document in detail his terror at being thrust by two whites into the dark mortuary room where his friend, Captain Tuck, was laid out and having the door closed on him (*The Learning Tree*, 63; *Choice*, 5; *Voices*, 13). It is in this context that Parks' action in his own life as well as Newt's action in *The Learning Tree* at the time of his mother's death must be understood (*Voices*, 13).

38. "Livin' the Blues," unpublished ts., 147-48.

39. "Introduction," *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Harrisonburg, Virginia, 1982), 13.