Editor's Column

The Fantasy of the Library

Envying Virginia Woolf

ONCE UPON A TIME, WHEN I WAS DREAMING OF BECOMING A writer, I used to envy Virginia Woolf. I envied her not because she had the audacity and authority to declare that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" ("Character" 38), nor because she invented modernist style, but because she had the good fortune to live in Bloomsbury, close to the British Museum and its famous Reading Room (fig. 1). In my imagination, Woolf's London homes—46 Gordon Square, 52 Tavistock Square, and 37 Mecklenburgh Square—were not just places in the social geography of London, or simple markers on the literary map of Bloomsbury; rather, they were outposts in a cartography of reading whose epicenter was the British Museum's room, which Woolf had described in *A Room of One's Own* as "the vast dome . . . the huge, bald forehead which is so splendidly encircled by a band of famous names" (33). I always imagined Woolf walking the short distance from one of her homes to the British Museum, passing through Sydney Smirke's iron gates, past the Roman and Greek figures, and arriving at the Reading Room with bated breath, ready to commune with the major authors in the English canon, which I, a child of late empire, would come to know as Beowulf to Woolf. Mastering Beowulf to Woolf was once a rite of passage, the gateway to Matthew Arnold's kingdom of culture—"the best which has been thought and said in the world" (5).

Since I could never visit Woolf's "band of famous names," I dreamed about what the colonial library meant for those who belonged to it through an enforced language and culture but were out of it because of the stain of subjection. And because the Reading Room of the British Museum was so far removed from my ordinary

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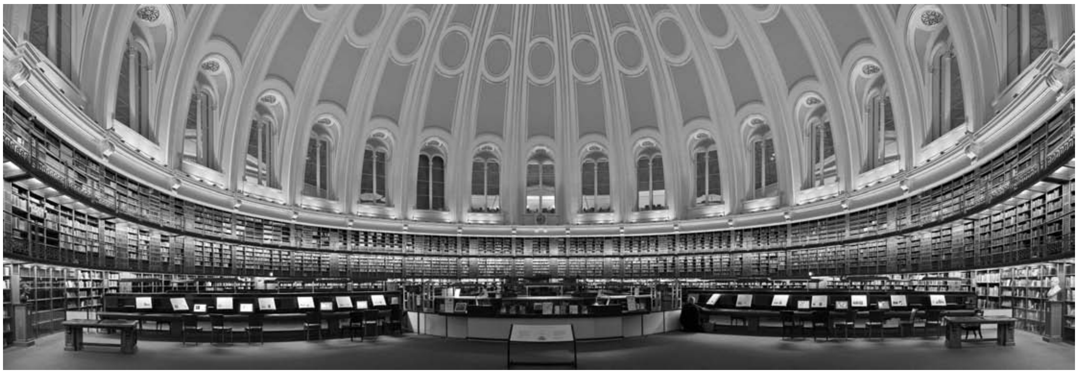

FIG. 1

Reading Room, British Museum (2006). Photo: David Iliff (license: creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en).

life, I wistfully imagined what it meant for the cultivation of a literary sensibility. In my fantasies, I tried to imagine how one could sit down in the Reading Room, under the gaze of the vast dome or the tomes lining its shelves, and become one with sweetness and light. What would it mean to read the major figures of English literature in that room? Would the Reading Room feel to me the way it had felt to Woolf's Jacob Flanders, reading Marlowe under the dome—like "an enormous mind" (*Jacob's Room* 147)? Or would the room turn out to be the haunted and haunting place represented by Louis MacNeice in "The British Museum Reading Room": "Under the hive-like dome the stooping haunted readers / Go up and down the alleys, tap the cells of knowledge . . ." (160). For those aspiring to high culture, the library of the British Museum was a site of privilege and a symbol of the quintessential enigma of arrival—it was both aspiration and possible disappointment. Young colonials dreamed of the time when they would pass their matriculation exams and take the mail boat or flight to London to drink from the water of what they naively or innocently imagined to be a literary well.[1]

Coming a little late in the game, I didn't invest too much in this dream of faraway places, where the imagination is watered by the best that has been thought and said, but I did crave a literary education outside the books prescribed by the school system. The library was the only place where a proper literary education could take place. Yet none of the libraries available to me contained enough books to quench my thirst for imaginative works. The library in my parent's home was a three-shelf bookcase filled with my father's tools of trade: *Blackie's Mathematics*, *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, and several volumes of *The Oxford English Readers for Africa*. I added to this collection with copies of the classics of African and Caribbean literature bought with my lunch money, but they were never enough. At high school the situation was much better: the library comprised a whole room lined with ten or twelve bookcases, containing complete copies of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* and *Compton's Encyclopedia*, a respectable collection of literary texts, and an assortment of gifts from American aid agencies, including colorful books on Grandma Moses, *The Song of Hiawatha*, and Yosemite National Park.

I read almost every volume in the school library, but the trove was not enough to feed my hunger for other worlds, and I looked forward to the day when I would arrive at the University of Nairobi, which had what I had heard was a massive library, built with money from Indian philanthropy and named after the mahatma himself. Here, I assumed, was a true depository of sweetness and light. I could read all the books I had craved and use them as conduits leading outside the messiness of everyday life. This is the lesson I had learned from Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*—that as a "splendid spiritual effort" literature could transcend everyday life (38). Once I found myself in the unfamiliar surroundings of Nairobi, I sought the library as a sanctuary from the terror of the postcolonial city—the beggars, the thieves, and the prostitutes who walked the street opposite the sculptured facade of the Gandhi Memorial Library.

But it didn't take long for my dreams to be debunked and my idea of the library as a sanctuary for the gifted to be undermined. During my first year at the University of Nairobi, I hung around some would-be revolutionaries. They dressed in dashikis or military fatigues and brandished what they considered the most important books in the world—Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* and Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* I was attracted to the revolutionaries for reasons that seemed at odds with one another. The idea of revolution was thrilling because it was considered dangerous. To be seen walking around with revolutionary books, especially the editions published by Progress Publishers, in Moscow, was to court danger. The institutions of power had licensed the Penguin and Oxford editions of *The Communist Manifesto*, somehow, but not the one from Progress Publishers. So revolutionaries were marked not simply by the color of their dashikis or the length of their dreads but also by the origins of the editions they carried.

But there was something else to the revolutionaries that was more attractive. For reasons that seemed hard to explain or rationalize, revolutionaries were invested in literature and its ability to change the world. In fact, literature was their favorite subject, and their concentration in the field had convinced some powerful people in the government that the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi presented a clear and present danger. Many of the teachers in the department had cut their political teeth in Europe during the student revolts of 1968 or in the United States in the era of black power. The young revolutionaries flocked to the department as the last bastion of idealism in an age of professionalization.

And yet—and this was what I found wanting in the times—revolutionaries did not seem interested in the library as a depository of knowledge, and they often questioned my attachment to what they derided as a bourgeois institution. They reminded me that the goal of literature was to change the world and that most of the books in the library were custodians of the old order. Could one be a revolutionary and still love the library? Could one wish for the new to be born and still be attached to the old order embodied by books? In arguments with my interlocutors, I tried to make the case for the library as an essential institution of revolution by adopting the identity of a Young Hegelian: How could one change the world without understanding it? Weren't manifestos just distilled forms of knowledge? Wasn't the idealism of literature a precondition for reason and freedom? If this tack didn't work (and it rarely did), I could strive to link the library directly to the task of revolution: Did my interlocutors know that Marx wrote *The Communist Manifesto* under the vast dome of the Reading Room of the British Museum? (I learned only later that this notion was a factoid.) Was it possible that Marx's manifesto got some of its poetry from the band of famous names that surrounded him as he undertook to change the world? Did Marx hear Milton's voice as he tried to imagine the sights and sounds of revolution? I argued that what made the manifesto such a moving account of the specter haunting Europe was its poetics of change:

> A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism. All the Powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcize this spectre: Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police spies. . . . The modem bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new

> conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones. (3, 4)

Thinking how and where these words were crafted, I came to invest the library with the power to nurture a deep human experience. This kind of naive humanism would be challenged by my education, but it would persist in my unconscious. Now, as I edit *PMLA* and I'm once again confronted by the persistence of literatures from all times and places and the inevitable changes taking place in the culture of reading, I'm forced to wonder what the library was and why it mattered so much to generations of writers and readers.

What Was the Library?

My faith in the library as the custodian of culture and civilization was premised on what now appears an unforgivable form of blindness—the belief that libraries were autonomous, objective fountains of knowledge. Enchanted by books and the buildings that housed them, one could easily forget that libraries were often institutions of power, that they had always been associated with the powerful, including Renaissance princes, nobles, and influential clergymen. True, there had been libraries that seemed separated from the institutions of power, such as those enabled by charitable bequests, but even they were often surreptitiously connected to monied elites seeking to organize knowledge toward certain ends. For example, the British Museum and its library were started with a bequest from Sir Hans Sloane, but they needed a founding act of Parliament and royal patronage to become a reality. While the Library of Congress was initially intended to provide books solely for the use of members of Congress, it developed into a national institution through the combination of Thomas Jefferson's personal library, congressional appropriations, and legislative acts, including the copyright law of 1870. The massive expansion and modernization of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France would perhaps not have taken place without the personal interest of French monarchs and presidents from Charles V in 1368 to François Mitterrand in the 1980s.

As I came to understand later, libraries are not just sites of a proper literary education but also conduits for the production and reproduction of elites. I also came to understand that the exterior of a library is as important as its contents. Great libraries do not build their reputations solely on their holdings; the size and stature of a library are often marks of the genealogy and prestige of its patrons and sponsoring institutions. One could even go further and say that, as an institution, a library is always more than its collection and infrastructure, that its presence derives from how it is imagined by various reading communities. For many years, the Reading Room of the British Museum was more than the dome of tomes that attracted the imaginations of writers and readers; its representation in literature had given the room an existence outside its materiality and function, and however attractive the new British Library at St. Pancras might be, it will need many years to acquire the same aura. The libraries of major universities have an identity that goes beyond their institutional functions. In certain circles, one does not need to ask where and what the Bodleian, Beinecke, and Widener are—they have an aura that goes beyond the keeping and using of books. We know of libraries not because they are great depositories of books but because of the mythologies surrounding them. There are libraries associated with deep secrets. There are libraries where murders have taken place. There are libraries haunted by ghosts.

Coming to the history of libraries loaded with the mythologies that surround them, one is bound to be disappointed by works documenting how and why libraries come into being. One expects to encounter histories telling how gallant librarians corralled the collections of eccentric bibliophiles and turned them into emblems of national honor. One imagines heroic keepers of books traveling around the world acquiring valuable manuscripts and transforming them into a "model of the universe" (Battles 6). Indeed, each major library has a universal work that it displays as a mark of its achievement—Leonardo's Codex Arundel at the British Library, the Gutenberg Bible at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, and the manuscript of *La chanson de Roland* at the Bodleian Library are tourist attractions. Unfortunately, institutional histories of libraries rarely capture the adventure of acquiring, preserving, and displaying books.

Take, for example, P. R. Harris's monumental *History of the British Museum Library*. The book traces the history of the library from its founding, in 1753, in minute detail and with impeccable accuracy. In over six hundred pages, the book gives us insights into the political debates behind the construction of the library, into the physical condition of the Reading Room, into concern about the behavior of disorderly clients, and into disagreements on the hiring of staff members. We read about the most minute details of the running of the library, day by day, year by year. We learn that on 10 March 1848, members of the British Association for the Advancement of Science and other scientific organizations presented a memorandum to the prime minister complaining about the inadequate resources allotted to the promotion of science through the library (165). We learn that in its meetings of 5 and 7 July 1848, the Royal Commission of the British Museum discussed the state of the catalog and heard the librarian, Antonio Panizzi, argue that "the compilation of the catalogue of a vast and increasing library was a matter requiring great attention, learning and powers of mind" (169). In his discussion of the period 1847–49, Harris reminds his readers that four matters were crucial to the history of the British Museum library: the Thomas Granville bequest, the Royal Commission of 1847–49, the abolition of the post of secretary of trustees, and the building of a round reading room. In this account, however, the library seems hermetically sealed against the chaos sweeping Europe in 1848. Harris's book barely mentions the European exiles who were plotting revolution in the Reading Room of the British Museum as the commissioners debated the state of the heating and ventilation systems.

Moreover, libraries are built as legacies. For this reason, they are designed to represent the dreams of their sponsors. The I. M. Pei–designed John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum is built on a landfill, but it stands out against the Atlantic Ocean, ethereal and aloof, giving Dorchester, the inner-city neighborhood in Boston where the building is located, the aura of Camelot (fig. 2). The Central Library of the Seattle Public Library, designed by Rem Koolhaas and Joshua Prince-Ramus, adds the aura of culture to the Seattle waterfront. David Adjaye's Idea Store Whitechapel, sited in a chaotic East London neighborhood negotiating competing identities, reflects the multicultural city in its glass facade. Here the library is again auratic. But there is something more: the exteriors of libraries display a sense of order and control that is part of the way institutions imagine themselves. Ascending to the presidency of Princeton University in 1902, Woodrow Wilson proclaimed Gothic architecture his preferred style because it had "added a thousand years to the history of the university," directed people's "imagination to the earliest traditions of learning in the English-speaking race," and connected Princeton with its "derivation and lineage" (qtd. in "Origins").

But the external designs of libraries can also be a subtle form of concealment. Behind the glitter of some famous libraries, the harsh world of material production and consumption is laundered into a house of culture that represses what needs to be forgotten.

The Codrington Library at All Souls College, Oxford, is one of the finest libraries in the world, with a strong collection in law and history, but until recently many of its users and other visitors were unaware of its connection to slavery and enslavement in the Caribbean: Christopher Codrington, its benefactor, was a major slaveholder in Barbados.[2] The Harvey S. Firestone Memorial Library at Princeton University reinforces the collegiate Gothic style favored by Wilson and his successors, but when the Nigerian poet J. P. Clark visited the university as a Fulbright scholar in the mid-1960s, the library "gave no security":

> On my way to America, I had stopped in Liberia and seen the one huge rubber plantation Harvey Firestone has made of it. All that land had at one time been made over to the Pan-Africanist prophet Marcus Garvey. But the combined powers of the United States, Great Britain and France disapproved of his plan of settling the coloured people of America in the midst of subject Africans. So instead, Firestone inherited the vast lots, and Garvey headed for jail and oblivion. . . . Today it is Princetonians, not young Liberians in any appreciable size, who enjoy part of the abundant harvest of Harvey S. Firestone. (33)

There is always a suspicion that the beacons of the library conceal unpleasant foundations.

Libraries Lost and Found

In the end, the building is not the true measure of libraries and their role in the promotion of knowledge. Many collectors value books because of their capacity to transcend the places that once housed them. Indeed, Walter Benjamin considered the unpacking of a treasured collection of books to be a journey down memory lane that generated conflicting moods. The contemplation of books simultaneously evoked the "chaos of memories" (486) and served as a reminder of the pilgrimage of the self to what Freud called "our present sense of estrangement" (289). Where public libraries were places of order and organization achieved through cataloging, the private library was caught between what Benjamin aptly described as the "poles of disorder and order" (487). It is significant, then,

FIG. 2

John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston (2007). Photo: Eric Baetscher (licenses: creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en; commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:GNU_Free_Documentation_License_1.2).

that Benjamin conceived the private library primarily as a collection, not as a depository. Collectors were people who had developed an intimate relationship with their books; they had established a "mysterious relationship to ownership" (486). In the collection, books were to be valued not for their functionality (as sources of knowledge) but for their sensuousness, their capacity to evoke conviviality through the staging of their "fate." Collectors and their books encountered each other in a magical circle, signifying a process of rebirth and pure sensuousness:

> The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are frozen as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them. Everything remembered and thought, everything conscious, becomes the pedestal, the frame, the base, the lock of his property. The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership—for a true collector, the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object. (487)

In the wake of Benjamin's enchantment with the magic encyclopedia constituted by books, the library comes to be celebrated as the most visible marker of cultural mastery and, significantly, of cosmopolitanism. For Homi Bhabha, unpacking the library is tracing the existential journey of a vernacular cosmopolitan—"memories of book-buying in Bombay, Oxford, London, Hyderabad, Champaign-Urbana, Jyvaskyla" (5). Similarly, Ariel Dorfman recalls his books as containing "the metaphors and paradigms" through which he "had learned a long time ago" to "become cosmopolitan" (B10). Dorfman looks back on the narrative of his library—lost and found—in Chile as a stitch that will suture the necessity of exile and the freedom of identity. In harsh exile, in the midst of "our dispossession," Dorfman and his wife, Angelica, imagined that the "cosmic *biblioteca*" left behind in Santiago represented the self's anchor in the homeland of memory and dreams (B9). They assumed that the library would remain untouched by the Pinochet dictatorship and that they would recuperate it as their real home on returning. Indeed, when Dorfman discovers that a good portion of his library survived political chaos and natural disaster, his belief in the magic of the book seems validated. But when he finally returns to Chile to be reunited with his books, he realizes that his library no longer anchors him to his natal spaces or imaginary homeland; on the contrary, it reminds him of the impossibility of *retour*—the classical return to native lands. Still, this recognition reinforces cosmopolitan identities. For to have owned and lost books is a form of entitlement; the fantasia of the library enables one to establish an "essential relationship to books" and to the imaginary spaces that they denote (Foucault 91). What gets lost in the celebration of this cosmopolitan identity, however, is the fact that the book collection, like cosmopolitanism itself, is an essential mark of bourgeois identity and privilege. For those not born in the house of culture, the library has a different meaning.

Saved by the Library

Aspiring to become writers, those excluded from the institutions of culture still invest in the fantasy of the library because they know that access to books opens up new worlds and creates a literary space "wholly dependent on the network formed by the books of the past" (Foucault 91). Accounts of how writers discovered the library sometimes read like reports of world-historical events.[3] Consider the case of Alfred Kazin, the New York writer and critic. In one week in 1942, Kazin achieves the dream of his life: he publishes his first book, *On Native Grounds*, becomes an editor at the *New Republic*, and, with his new wife, moves to Manhattan, the mecca of American letters. But what stands out in Kazin's remembrances in *New York Jew*, his memoir, is the five years spent in "the great open reading room, 315, of the New York Public Library, often in great all-day bouts of reading that began when the place opened at nine in the morning and that ended only at ten at night" (4). Here, in the reading room (fig. 3), Kazin brings together the works that he will convert into a literary canon; he imagines the great library as the mother of American writing; and, free to receive him at a moment's notice, the reading room becomes a "blessed place" containing any book that he "had heard of and wanted to see" (5).

The library, however, is more than a space in which reading and writing are carried out; it is also a place of enchantment, a counterpoint to the world outside, a world of economic depression and mass unemployment. Indeed, the interiority of the library—its sanctuary, as it were—blots out the Great Depression and the hard lives of eastern European migrants in New York City. In the bowels of "the lordly building" designed by Carrère and Hastings, past the enormous wall painting *Blind Milton Dictating* Paradise Lost *to His Daughters*, Kazin educates himself "in the mind of modern America by writing, in the middle of the Great Depression, a wildly ambitious literary and intellectual history" (5–6). Gathered in front of him or piled on the reading table, the writings of Americans acquire a new identity; they are more than an eclectic collection of texts or mere objects in a mass collection because they are in a space that endows them with an aura and invites their rereading: "I could read the mind behind each book. I felt connected with the text." Reading is a solitary undertaking, but when it takes place in the company of others it becomes an act of communion. The people who surround Kazin in room 315 of the New York Public Library ("[s]treet philosophers, fanatics, advertising agents, the homeless—passing faces in the crowd" [7]) are not distractions but reminders that he, too, is "entangled in the hunger of those aimless, bewildered, panicky seekers for 'opportunity'" (8).

Reading rooms are places of refuge in a deeper, phenomenological sense: here readers try to come to terms with their cultural orphanage. Indeed, there is a fundamental connection between the reading room and cultural orphanage. This is the story that Richard Wright tells in the first part of *Black Boy*, the painful, powerfully melancholic story of a black boy growing up in Memphis, where his home and kinships are barren, alien, and remote (10). While one might like the *Bildung* of childhood to be initiated by pastoral memories, Wright's world is one of diminished opportunities and social death.[4]

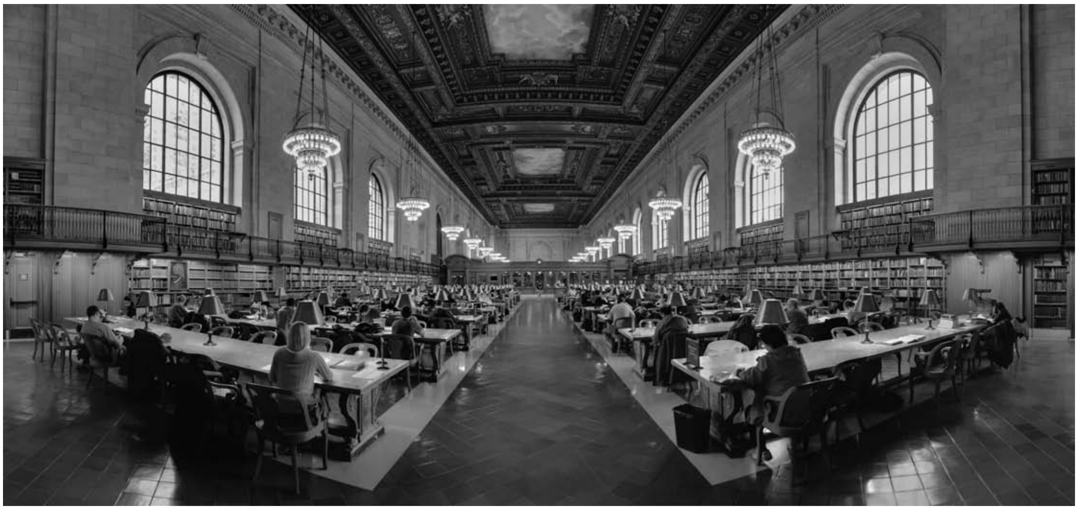

FIG. 3

Rose Main Reading Room (room 315), New York Public Library (2006). Photo: David Iliff (license: creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en).

There is no redemptive narrative of cultural memory, kinship, or intimacy. His father, instead of establishing connections and a sense of belonging, becomes a symbol of social death, something to be erased from Wright's memory and exiled from his identity—"we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly distant planes of reality" (34). One of the most frightening aspects of the life that Wright represents in his autobiography is his embrace of estrangement as a condition of being in the world: "Dread and distrust had already become a daily part of my being and my memory grew sharp, my senses more impressionable; I began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others" (29–30).

In the deracinated world of racial violence, the self molts itself to survive. And if a sentimental education is premised on what Gustave Flaubert would call a "history of feelings" and passions and of the subject's ability to reconcile itself to the world and to discover cultural values in its society (80), Wright faces an impossible task (de Man 68–72). He lives in a world without feelings or emotions. The prison house of alterity does not allow for "feelings, attitudes, convictions" that are independent of the terror of Jim Crow and white supremacy (49). His uncle, Hoskins, is lynched, but the brutal scene does not evoke any emotions because racial violence does not authorize an affective community among the subjected: "There was no funeral. There was no music. There was no period of mourning. There were no flowers. There were only silence, quiet weeping, whispers, and fear" (54). The only way out of this prison house is to become a writer, to gain or reclaim emotions autonomous of white terror: "I dreamed of going north and writing books, novels. The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed" (168).

Wright knows that one cannot become a writer without being a reader. He also knows that to become a writer one must pass through the library and make one's way through the books that constitute the institution of writing. He understands that unless he is one of the lucky few, the talented tenth, that are admitted to the Fisk University library (fig. 4), he is cut off from the sources of creativity. Writing cannot be born of experience or expectation; it cannot be authorized by the repertoire of colorful characters and events on Beale Street.[5] Writing can only take place in the space that other books have authorized. For Wright, then, the first step in becoming a writer is to patronize secondhand bookstores and to buy books and magazines. The second stage would appear even simpler—all he needs is a card from the local public library. The problem, of course, is that in the segregated South, Wright is excluded from the library and thus from the economy of reading (244). He can only access the fantasia of the library through surrogates. He uses the library card of a white coworker to borrow a text—H. L. Mencken's *A Book of Prefaces*—that he hopes will disclose the secrets of the world foreclosed to him. And, primarily because reading is forbidden by custom if not law, Wright discovers in Mencken's text a meaning that goes beyond its manifest theme. In short, Mencken does not provide Wright with new experiences or expectations; rather, he reaffirms the hardships under which the black boy has lived most of his life. What makes the reading of Mencken's forbidden book a seminal event is style, the representation of the known in an unknown idiom: "I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean sweeping sentences" (248). Now the encounter with the library becomes a kind of ascension as "the vague hunger" for books opens up "new avenues of feeling and seeing" (252).

Wright's narrative is a familiar one in racialized societies. Growing up in South Africa in the 1930s, the novelist Peter Abrahams comes face to face with the laws and other rigid rules that separate black and white. He

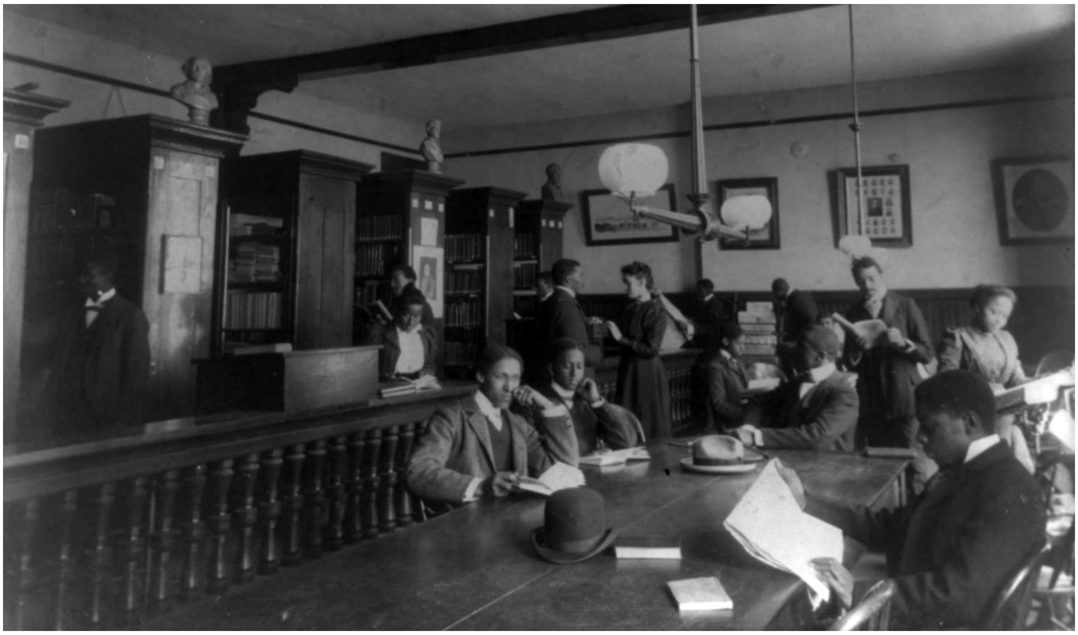

FIG. 4

Library, Fisk University (1900). Photo: Library of Congress.

seems destined for a life of servitude, menial jobs, and cultural castoffs. He seeks to escape the fate of the excluded through reading, but his love of books is seen as a threat to the established order. The texts he comes across at school are primers in servitude. Then one day, on an errand, Abrahams finds himself at the Bantu Men's Club, a cultural gathering of a tiny black elite in Johannesburg. Here, in the club's small library, against the background of Paul Robeson's baritone—"a deep voice, touched with the velvet quality of organ notes" (191)—Abrahams discovers a bookshelf that will change his life:

> I moved over to the bookshelves. I wanted to touch the books, but held back. Perhaps it was not permitted. Typed slips showed what each shelf held: novels, history, sociology, travel, Africana, political science, American Negro literature. . . . I stopped there. American Negro literature. The man had said Robeson was an American Negro. . . . [. . .]
>
> I reached up and took out a fat black book. *The Souls of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Du Bois. I turned the pages. It spoke about a people in a valley. And they were black, and dispossessed, and denied. I skimmed through the pages, anxious to take it all in.
>
> (193; 1st and 2nd ellipses in orig.)

Abrahams's discovery of DuBois's book is an epiphany—a manifestation of what he knew but could not utter and a revelation of worlds beyond the prison house of race and caste:

> For all the thousands of miles, for all the ocean, between the land and people of whom he wrote and my land, Du Bois might have been writing about my land and people. The mood and feeling he described were native to me. I recognized the people as those among whom I lived. The only difference was that there was no laughter in this book. Here, in our land, in the midst of our miseries, we had moments of laughter, moments of playing. Though like us in every other respect, the Negroes in *The Souls of Black Folk* seemed very solemn, without laughter. But for all that, Du Bois had given me a key to the understanding of my world. (193–94)

From Peter Abrahams's discovery of the canon of African American literature to Nelson Mandela's reading of Shakespeare and Chinua Achebe in his cell at Robben Is-land, the library runs through South African literature as a site of reeducation and self-fashioning. But the most powerful image of the scene of reading as the remaking of a shattered self can be found at the end of Bessie Head's painful autobiographical novel *A Question of Power*, where Elizabeth, born against the dictates of race and caste, struggling to find sanity in an insane world, discovers the one book that will give her a sense of belonging:

> She turned and picked up a book from a table beside her bed. It had waited for a whole year to be read. It was: *The Gift Of A Cow*, by Premchand. It was a UNESCO publication of the classic Hindi novel which exalted the poor. In their introduction to the novel they wrote that it opposed the basic trend of Indian literature, which seemed to be a literature intended only "to entertain and to satisfy our lust for the amazing . . ." a literature of magic, of ghosts, of the adventures of high-born heroes and heroines.
>
> . . . She had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man. As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging. (206)

Here, then, lies the utopia of the library and its books: it connects readers across cultures, landscapes, and traditions; it reunites exiles with their imaginary homelands; it offers the lost a gesture of belonging.

Simon Gikandi

NOTES

1. The terms here are borrowed from V. S. Naipaul's novel of colonial nostalgia *The Enigma of Arrival*.

2. I discuss the relation of the political economy of enslavement and high culture and the example of the Codrington Library in *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (119–24).

3. Underlying the notion of a world-historical event is Hegel's claim that world history "represents the development of the spirit's consciousness of its own freedom and of the consequential realization of this freedom" (138).

4. Orlando Patterson defines social death as "secular excommunication," the denial to the subjected of not only "all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants" (5).

5. Michel de Certeau has aptly described the relation between nomadic writing and place: "Writing cannot forget the misfortune from which its necessity springs; nor can it count on tacit, rich, and fostering 'evidences' that can provide for an 'agrarian' speaker his intimacy with a mother tongue" (318).

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