



“AN INTRODUCTION TO OTHER RIVERS”

[text-only version]

by Paul Arnett

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In the 1920s, when poet Langston Hughes proclaimed, “My soul has grown deep like the rivers,” he extolled the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi—the grandest ones—as his models.

There are other rivers. In northernmost Georgia, unnamed mountain rivulets bounce together to form the small Conasauga River, a brook that gives itself over to the Oostanaula, then the Coosa, and finally the Alabama River, which, after a sidelong meander through downstate Alabama, couples tentatively with the Tombigbee (Choctaw: “coffin-makers”), lingers as the Mobile and Tensaw Rivers, and passes into the Gulf of Mexico. Along their way these waters pick up knowledge and experience. In middle Alabama they move through Montgomery, the second capital of the Confederacy and birthplace of the civil rights movement. The crossroads of Benton greets them after a few more turns, not far from the former plantation of George Traylor, whose ex-slave Bill Traylor began in the 1930s at age eighty-five to translate his experiences into persuasive, spare drawings that, while seen by some in his lifetime, were not publicly exhibited again until almost thirty years after his death. Past Benton, the Alabama River enters the town of Selma. There, on March 7, 1965, a freedom movement took an important step toward becoming too real for the world to turn away from, and the Alabama River became part of a human history no less mighty and intricate than the flows of Hughes’s verse. At Selma that day, between kudzu-blanketed banks, the mountain springs and the cotton-fields’ runoff mingled with the tears and sweat of the freedom marchers positioned on the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South is a multivolume work about art and artists. Few claims are made for it other than one: It is the first comprehensive overview of the recent history of an important, little-known genre of visual art hailing from the region W. E. B. Du Bois called America’s “Black Belt.” Yet this is not a book about the civil rights movement, the South, or “folk culture.” Nor is it a historiography of researchers’ and theorists’ ideas about African American culture or folk art,¹ or an analysis of relationships, real or otherwise, between vernacular art and art of other traditions that do not bear directly upon the artists’ lives. Those are each valuable subjects for other books. This book returns to the Edmund Pettus Bridge to look at the symbolic underside of that bridge, the less visible side, and record the artistic, personal, and cultural histories that events like Selma brought to light. These histories are the other rivers of African American and American culture.

Souls Grown Deep shares a name and a purpose with an exhibition originally mounted by the Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory University and curated by Robert Hobbs in conjunction with the Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta in 1996.² That exhibition included twenty-six artists’ works drawn from a single collection. The current series comprises more than one hundred artists of the late twentieth century and artworks selected from an expanded array of public and private collections. These volumes also include hundreds of field photographs of artworks and art environments and historical documentation of numerous sites that no longer exist.

This first volume takes its subtitle, “The Tree Gave the Dove a Leaf,” from artist Thornton Dial’s description of the biblical Flood. Dial reflects on the Flood’s metaphorical connections to American slavery and black people starting anew in the Western hemisphere, as well as the Deluge’s implications for cycles of life and the artist’s reuse of discarded materials—roots, scrap, postconsumption leftovers—in his artworks. This volume, accordingly, provides background on subjects essential to understanding African American vernacular art. The volume begins with civil rights leaders and historians assessing the movement’s impact on the artmaking of southern black vernacular artists, introduces relevant historical topics, and then proceeds to chronicle the artists and their works in

biographical monographs, topical analyses that focus on specific themes, and first-person autobiographical accounts. Forty artists from eleven southern states—Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and (Eastern) Texas—are profiled in this volume.

These are the people whose art has been assigned many names, too many to recount fully here: “Primitive,” “Visionary,” “Naïve,” “Intuitive,” “Idiosyncratic,” “Self-Taught,” “Folk,” “Unschooling,” “Outsider,” “Isolate.” Each term, carefully scrutinized, is actually describing something slightly different about the art of humans likewise believed by many to be rural and rustic, uneducated (sometimes thought ineducable), isolated, communal, spiritual, carnal, intellectually inferior, athletically superior, backward, free, oppressed, self-sufficient, helpless, childlike, wise, timeless, endangered, and so forth, ad nauseam. These deprecations arise from a flawed but intrinsically human type of thinking many academics call “Self/Other” opposition, the desire to establish sharply differentiated characteristics between a (powerful) speaker-subject’s self-image and obverse qualities projected on a (powerless) object such as another race, gender, social class, religious group, nationality, sexual orientation, or mixtures of these. “Otherances” tell more truth about the social and historical fantasies of the describers than about the people thus described. They also constitute much of the weight in the baggage our nation has carried since its inception. The sheer wantonness of these attitudes reveals one truth, however: The people in question are so diverse that no generalization, no matter how sensitized, can be accurate.

We do not deny the hypothetical existence of explanatory theories, but our reading of existing ones, combined with our knowledge of the artists, leads us to be very careful about aesthetic prescriptions. All of the artists in these books have known the reality of wearing unwhite skin in a region and a country fixated on race; nearly all have endured degrees of personal adversity; most have little or no direct experience or concern with the vogues of the international artworld; many have little formal education, and a few have none. Their methods, materials, themes, iconographies, and intentions occasionally overlap. We offer no sweeping theories, few interpretive keys. The reader will have to find those for himself (if they in fact exist), accruing insights and identifying patterns as one goes, and arriving at conclusions the reader’s experiences can accommodate and trust.

It is almost axiomatic that to be born black into a certain social class in the Deep South means confronting hardship—what Thornton Dial calls “the fences of the United States” and what Andrew Young refers to as “life behind the wall.” It is often difficult to read the biographies of many of these artists without succumbing to feelings of searing empathy. Such audience responses are neither right nor wrong, but they can distract from the more complicated, holistic calls for action and appreciation located in this work. Song may hold pain, but pain is not song. These artists have as individuals mastered the difficulties of reconfiguring personal and collective experience into significant visual form. There lies the artistry implicit in the song “We Shall Overcome.” The fact that life may have presented enormous obstacles to these artists serves no more to validate their artistic visions than absence of personal suffering would serve to invalidate them. These souls have “grown deep”; one’s sympathy merely scans the surface. When previously disenfranchised people make art, however, it is often inherently politicized if for no other reason than that it has been created. And aesthetic evaluations of that art should not occur in vacuums that ignore the cultural context of the act of creation as well as the cultural context of subsequent acts of evaluation.

In our study, we cannot and should not move far from the realities of race and racism, colonialization and postcolonialization, privation and denial of rights and education. We will not ignore the substantial and continuing legacies of Africa and antebellum slave life, or the theories and methods of historians, anthropologists, folklorists, and the artists themselves. However, we consider none of these settings coercive, self-sufficient, or proscriptive of human agency. Instead, while helping

shape the form and content of the art, they present themselves to artists both as challenges and as occasions for transformation, reexamination, and a new perspective.

We have attempted to extend the existing possibilities for study by intersecting the unlike arguments of scholars from many disciplines. We hope to bring to the surface issues of historical genealogy—the “Where does it come from?” of African American vernacular art—to make those origins as multidimensional as the ideas and views of the makers. For us, a guiding principle is that the past cannot be bottled into an essay or two, but must be presented as forces experienced by the artists and alive in the art. We hope to follow a long and roundabout path towards a simple destination: promoting a respect for the art and spurring further inquiry. Beyond that, we hope to provoke such questions as “What does it mean to be African American, American, and human, at century’s (millennium’s) end?” and “What might be ahead for all of us?” Above all else, we have sought to let the artists’ voices be heard and to allow the depth (as well as the breadth) of their visual expressions to be seen. By doing this, we hope to shift debate about, and analysis of, this art away from prior romanticizations and instrumentalities. We want to stand back from the perception that black folk art, like its people, exists to *serve*. In letting the work and the artists speak and show for themselves, we anticipate that many stereotypes—both the negative and the misleadingly positive—will, *de facto*, come under challenge.

Although the *Souls Grown Deep* series will be encyclopedic in scope, it is not an encyclopedia. The organization is neither alphabetical nor chronological. Rather, we have chosen as our guide and narrator the materials of the work: stone, concrete, earth, wood, paint and paper, then iron and steel, found-object assemblage, and other forms of bricolage epitomized by the African American “yard show.” Virtually all the artists in these books emphasize a concern for the types of materials they use and see the materials as metaphors for themselves and their culture’s history. If the sequence of materials, from natural to man-made, gives these books an almost allegorical quality, it is unintentional. *Souls Grown Deep* does not tell a tale of progress, or of a culture moving from an isolated to an assimilated existence, from rural to urban, from unselfconscious to self-conscious, from premodern to modern, from agricultural to industrial, from innocent to worldly, from uneducated to educated, from nature to artifice. Let those be myths that the artists and artworks debunk.

Subsequent volumes in this series will examine more than sixty additional artists, revisit many of the artists profiled in volume one, and expand the presentation and analysis of artists whose works make only cameo appearances here. Those volumes will delve further into the following topics: the influences of urbanization, industrialization and postindustrialization; the yard show and other forms of public display; the roles of shrines and altars in African American homes; the interaction of politics and art; new approaches to the study of art and religion; the art’s interaction with the mass media and popular culture; folk heroes and trickster mythologies; postcolonialism; vernacular architecture; art as a form of writing; investigations into connections to academically trained African American artists; and links with other traditions of the African diaspora. As it progresses, the series will chronicle in increasing length the artists’ voices and opinions.

We do not want an abundance of themes to divert us from looking at and thinking about objects, for works of art hold together many existences. First, there are the traditions, beliefs, and styles that precede its maker, a kind of life before life, accessible in varying degrees to individual artists. Second, there is the life and experience of the art’s maker, without whose continuing presence the work tends to become a cipher for theory or interpretation. Third, there is the creator’s immediate social context, the issues of his or her day that mingle with tradition and biography. Fourth, at the moments of art’s creation—creation as act, art as predicate—everything that came before is suspended and extended forward. After its birth, art encounters its original use or display context, its intended audience(s), and its function. Then many artworks disappear. In some cases, however, subsequent

contexts jostle for the right to consume, either the literal desire to possess—to own—or the desire to evaluate. A final set of forces, primarily academic, collectorial, and archival or museological, sometimes enters an artwork's life, concerned to steward it into posterity. This book necessarily participates in these later forces. Yet to effectively and ethically influence the long-term reception of the art and to repatriate artworks from the ahistorical, acultural purgatories of their Otherness, this book concerns itself with the evocation, and occasionally the recovery, of those earlier existences.

An inevitable by-product of this desire to understand art is the compulsion to name all its manifestations. Every movement in recent art history has in some way acquired its name based on its content, its style, or its ambitions. (Sometimes the "ism" begins life as a put-down, as in "Impressionism.") "Outsider," "self-taught," and "folk"—the dominant labels ascribed to this art—have their uses, but despite lingering attempts to codify aesthetics for folk or Outsider art (a quest much like the unfulfilled desire of many for a "Black" aesthetic), these terms fail to describe anything unique about the art. As designations of absence, the terms Outsider, self-taught, and so on have not lent themselves to constructive definitions. They instead locate the meanings of the artworks primarily in the socioeconomic or art-political status of its makers—a move that colors perceptions about the art and becomes increasingly confusing as time alters or rearranges that status. The quest for a necessary and sufficient definition of this art has bogged down in the reality that there are all kinds of "outsiders," even within specific ethnicities. There are hundreds of published theories and explanations and defenses of these genres. Most of the definitions are rather proprietary. A general consensus has developed about the worth of the argument and nothing more. In eschewing most of the existing appellations, this book seeks concepts that emerge from the culture itself and from specific discussions of the culture. We acknowledge a certain planned obsolescence to our imperfect and imprecise label "vernacular," and we await the moment when its practitioners name the phenomenon, if it is reducible to one name.

"Vernacular," the term chosen here, means "using a language or dialect native to a region or country rather than a literary, cultured, or foreign language; . . . of, relating to, or characteristic of a period, place, or group." "Vernacular" denotes a language in use that differs from the official languages of power and reflects complex intercultural relationships charged with issues of race, class, region, and education. In a way that the terms "folk," "outsider," and even the supposedly neutral "self-taught" do not, "vernacular" puts the terms of selfhood squarely and self-consciously with the art's creators. Moreover, "vernacular" presupposes a history and a process of historical change connected to the led lives of African Americans. The first "vernacular" was the informal pidgin of slaves in Ancient Rome, who did everything from building infrastructure to educating Roman children, and who often came from societies whose only inferiority was their having lost the wrong war at the wrong time. Today's Romance languages in their own separate ways carry on the regional vernaculars of a once-conquering high Latin that now lives on mainly in cathedrals and universities.

The artists in *Souls Grown Deep* maintain as many identities as their creations, a complexity unmistakable in our mouthful of an "ism": African American Vernacular Art of the South. There exist, for example, as many explanatory theories about the South as hypotheses about the meaning of art, African American ethnicity, and the vernacular. The traditional South has been conjectured, to list a few hypotheses, as a region defined by its geography or climate (intense heat, heavy rainfall); by interracial conflict; by the legacy of institutionalized slavery; by the social unit of the plantation system (and its descendant, the tenant farm); by an agrarian way of life; by the persistence of folkways long after they have disappeared elsewhere; by religious fundamentalism; by rivalry and conflict with "the North"; by one-party politics; by collective regional memories consciously maintained; by a mythologized and romanticized regionalism; by a psychological "reaction formation" to outside antipathy, contempt, and ridicule; by a cynical effort on the part of threatened Southern elites to

“wag the dog” of the region’s self-image; even by the preference for the mule as draft animal and beast of burden.³

The contemporary South makes itself in many ways more like the rest of America. Yet Southerners, and those who study them, would be hard-pressed not to find at least some vestiges of the Old South (or myths of the Old South) in the region today. There are two Souths in this book: the political units—the southern states—and the representational theories about the South. Similar routines inhabit ideas about our subtitle’s other constituent terms: African American Vernacular Art. All are a shorthand offered for convenience and a battleground of competing interests and interpretations with stakes that do matter outside the ivory tower. Each word in this label, set into the world we live in, tends to harden into untestable propositions that generate observations rather than arise from them.

The vast majority of Africans came to America for the South to use. After the abolition of slavery, many black people departed, but the South’s importance endures for African American identity today. More than half of all black Americans continue to live in the region, and many more are only a generation removed from it. We know that many civil rights leaders—King, Young, Lewis, Evers, Jackson—were southern. When we look at the most visible iconographies of the black self in the twentieth century, we will often find people who checked out of the South for better opportunities and grew up to be major parts of modern American culture. Jesse Owens, Elijah Mohammed, Joe Louis, Oprah Winfrey, Louis Armstrong, Richard Wright, Angela Davis, Hank Aaron, Thelonious Monk, Jack Johnson, Carl Lewis, Ella Fitzgerald, Clarence Thomas, Leontyne Price, Arthur Ashe, Romare Bearden, Jackie Robinson, Dizzy Gillespie, Muhammed Ali, Nat King Cole, Willie Mays, John Coltrane, Tina Turner, and so many others, everyone knows where you went, but where were you born? In Oakville, Alabama; Sandersville, Georgia; Lexington, Alabama; Kosciusko, Mississippi; New Orleans, Louisiana; Roxie, Mississippi; Birmingham, Alabama; Mobile, Alabama; Rocky Mount, North Carolina; Galveston, Texas; Birmingham, Alabama; Newport News, Virginia; Pin Point, Georgia; Laurel, Mississippi; Richmond, Virginia; Charlotte, North Carolina; Cairo, Georgia; Cheraw, South Carolina; Louisville, Kentucky; Montgomery, Alabama; Westfield, Alabama; Hamlet, North Carolina; Nutbush, Tennessee.

This book considers those who stayed.

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In 1982, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., organized the milestone exhibition, *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980*, demonstrating conclusively that a substantial tradition of nonacademic artmaking has long existed in the African American South. The exhibition presented the work of twenty artists, fourteen of whom were southern (another four had been born in the South before migrating North), and virtually all of whom were then completely unknown outside a small circle of collectors, dealers, and researchers. The exhibition was as controversial as influential. It has been criticized, sometimes unfairly, for perpetuating retrogressive myths about black people, for totalizing notions of an art “mainstream” and “blackness,” and for a formalist approach that displaces the art’s makers from the personal, social, and political contexts that bear upon them.⁴

Despite its deficiencies, which seem no more egregious or numerous than those of most exhibitions of its period, the exhibition may well find a place among the twentieth century’s most important and seminal art expositions—even if it did not actually pass through all of the art-historical doors it helped open. In his essay for the exhibition catalog, co-curator John Beardsley (who, like his curatorial partner Jane Livingston, has contributed to forthcoming volumes of *Souls Grown Deep*) predicted that black folk art would become a casualty of social change:

*If we believe at all in the promise of our society, we shall soon see the end of much that generates this art. As educational opportunities are equalized and society becomes more mobile and homogenous, the visions of many of these artists may disappear. . . . It is no surprise that so many of these artists are elderly, nor that they seem to have so few genuine successors. . . . What we perhaps have witnessed in the remarkable efflorescence of black folk art in the fifty years between 1930 and 1980—and even more particularly in the twenty years between 1960 and 1980—is the sudden maturation of a material culture even as the conditions essential to its existence seem to be disappearing.*⁵

As defined by the terms of traditional “folk” art, African American artists of the 1930s through the 1970s seemed to be the “final” generation of practitioners. Of the twenty artists in *Black Folk Art in America*, nineteen were born between 1870 and 1915. Relative isolation, enforced as segregation for those not geographically isolated, was indisputably ending in the face of progress wrought by technology, transportation, communication, political rights, economic development, and better educational opportunities; the continuing exodus from the countryside to cities (and rising black political power in those city governments) augured further disintegration of rural folkways. Ubiquitous mass media, especially television, were stirring in innumerable new influences that would overrun the (again: supposedly) limited amount of information formerly available to African Americans in the South.

As far as art is concerned, the opposite effects have proven out. Only the utilitarian craft traditions are indeed declining, promulgated today by an increasingly aging sector of the African American population. What was in fact endangered in the late 1970s and early '80s seems, in retrospect, not art but the *idea* of the cultural or creative purity and fecundity of the isolated, the underprivileged, and the untutored. *Black Folk Art in America*, because of its timing, could only trace the outlines of a genre that was, in ways barely visible to its curators and the small circle of devotees who had brought out that work, already then engrossed with the very forces presumed to portend its demise. Part of that dialogue between the art and culture has been a coming to grips with the limitations of social change, the persistence of inequality, and the need to resolve contradictory trajectories of identity for African Americans in contemporary America. *Souls Grown Deep* moves downstream from the confluence of *Black Folk Art in America*—an art-historical development in the study of a culture—with the real cultural metamorphoses that began to affect the black vernacular art of the South, and the lives of the artists, in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. Our symbolic starting point is therefore that cultural moment when *Black Folk Art in America* had to stop: with the art that has continued to flourish in the late twentieth century in the wake of the civil rights movement.

Black Folk Art in America straddled two eras. Like *Souls Grown Deep*, it owed much to a flurry of recently “discovered” artists and to new ways of considering the formerly invisible or discounted artmaking practices of marginalized peoples and subcultures. In the decade of the 1970s, three new paradigms emerged that would provide powerful and hotly debated new tools for curators and art historians attempting to investigate and describe nonacademic artmaking traditions in the United States, and that in altered form continue to frame much of today’s debate.

First, the European theory of *l’art brut* (“raw art”) was relativized in the 1970s when it arrived in the United States. In the late 1940s, French artist Jean Dubuffet coined the phrase “*l’art brut*” for a creativity unsullied by the debilitating effects of an official system of art production he believed favored tastefulness, conformity, and superficial imitations of forms. For Dubuffet, the best inoculation against such blandishing forces was isolation from them, an isolation he believed was actualized perfectly by mentally ill states of mind. He sought, in the words of his torchbearer Michel Thévoz, “an art free of the dictates of tradition or fashion, an art liberated from all social compromise, an art

indifferent to the applause of initiates, an art which draws its strength from an impassioned way of thinking and an almost autistic inner necessity.”⁶ In 1972, Dubuffet’s theories were modified by British art historian Roger Cardinal, who moved them closer to ideas from Colin Wilson’s *The Outsider* (1956) about the existentially alienated artistry of figures such as van Gogh, Kafka, Blake, Dostoevsky, Camus, and Hesse. Cardinal’s “Outsider” was a self-taught visual artist loosened from Dubuffet’s insanity qualification and reconceived as possessing a creativity cut off or removed for whatever reason from prevailing academic conventions. He championed the idea of “the self in self-taught art,”⁷ an irrepressible, single-minded artistic purpose and individuality of an art whose subject is (hypothetically) the maker and not other art. Dubuffet’s predictions, and the attendant idea of the Outsider artist, were emblematic of the most pessimistic doubts about modernity’s homogenizing and rationalizing effects on the Enlightenment verity of individualism. Downplaying culturally specific influences, Cardinal’s ideas chose a different route away from high art/low art polarities, and found adherents in the United States, where an ethos of betterment and uplift had seemed to leave behind disaffected, abandoned, or spent individuals and ethnic groups marginalized and destabilized by economic, racial, educational, or geographic contingencies.

Second, impressions about American folk art were democratized—or *re-democratized*—in the 1970s as the concept of democracy reemerged from the angst of the Cold War and the challenges offered by the civil rights and feminist movements and 1960s counterculture. Since the 1920s and ’30s, American folk art had been imagined as a nineteenth-century phenomenon: preindustrial, anonymous, and utilitarian. This older populism, nostalgic for a bygone America, which romanticized folk art as the expression of “the art spirit of the American people,”⁸ was turned on its head and replaced by a fresher populism: anyone or any group that had been “doing their own thing,” unofficially or eccentrically, was probably doing something aesthetically interesting and quintessentially American. Since the 1930s, contemporary nonacademic art forms (interest in which focused almost exclusively on painting) from all but the most remote points of origin had usually been labeled “popular art” (sometimes American “primitive” art) considered a naïve offshoot of high art, its production occasioned by the advent of a degree of leisure for working classes and the dissemination of much high art throughout popular culture. However, the desire to understand the ways folk art objects functioned in their original contexts had increased the interest in material culture, from which vantage point it became clear that the divisions between a modern “popular” art and the art of a “vanished folk” were unsound and insupportable. A series of exhibitions at the newly formed Museum of American Folk Art and other institutions, along with companion books, argued that a catch-all folk genre was alive and well, by presenting the work of living sculptors and painters (embracing African Americans and artists from other ethnicities), as well as objects that pushed the concept of folk art/popular art to logical, but transgressively uncategorizable, extremes (tattoo art, macramé art, Andy Warhol’s collection of Americana).

During this period, pioneering histories of slavery by John Blassingame, Eugene Genovese, Lawrence Levine, and Albert Raboteau, a history of African American decorative arts that emphasized the antebellum period, and a compendium of essays on African American folklore⁹ created an indelibly three-dimensional portrait of the great American Other, the black slave. In these works, three major themes emerged: first, slaves and their descendants in the South of the nineteenth century retained many of their African beliefs and mores; second, resistance to tyranny, and what Genovese termed the “cultural hegemony” of white society, was active in the slaves’ culture and in southern black society after the Civil War; and third, this southern African American culture syncretized with the European-derived culture of southern whites in ways that altered both. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson, moving forward with the earlier hypotheses of anthropologist Melville Herskovits,¹⁰ was steadfastly uncovering African survivals in the material culture and arts of the South and elsewhere

in the African diaspora. Together, these and other studies made it possible to think in terms of a coherent southern black culture (with a coherent aesthetics). The longstanding debate between the catastrophists who saw slavery as the obliteration of Africanity and the retentionists who saw African legacies as intact but transformed was tipping rapidly in favor of the latter interpretation. That the slave was already an African American would prove irresistible for future definitions of America and Americanness.

The academic reconstruction of a vital slave and grassroots black culture buttressed a third influential development in the thinking about nonacademic art. In the late '60s and early '70s, the quest for black identity was productively politicized and radicalized as part of the widespread assertion of positive self-images by formerly disenfranchised groups. In the late 1960s, the manifest limitations of assimilationist credos in America and the example of the withdrawal of colonial powers from the governing of their Third World dependents gave rise domestically to a marriage, unmatched before or since, between community action and ideologies of cultural self-representation and self-determination. In the 1970s, the most visible sign of this development was the Black Aesthetic or Black Arts movement, whose artists worked across many genres (poetry, literature, theater, visual arts, film, music) in sometimes official concert with Black Power politics. The tendency to politicize aesthetics occasionally led to endgames of stylized antimajority polemics; in all but the most nuanced hands, the boundaries of the Black Aesthetic were largely defined, like other early postcolonial movements, by assertions of blackness that preached resistance to or difference from an opposed whiteness. Although reductive in its emphasis on persecution and impracticable in its separatist yearnings, the Black Arts movement offered an important corrective to theories that had reflected the subjectivity of outside observers.

The understanding of African retentions and revivals, together with an unapologetic American Blackness, would profoundly affect attitudes toward folk art: African American folk art thereafter became more than a scattering of black craftspersons or an undifferentiated branch of American or southern folk art. The question "Is there a black folk art?" became valid. Artists' marginalization was brought into the active historical present, where the concepts of individual alienation (as in "Outsider" theory) and communal identification (the holy grail of traditional folkloric studies) were made more complex—and challenged—by an alternative formulation. Reaction against the white overculture was foregrounded as a determinant for a folk culture that, with the new sense of Africanity, could undergird a truly black American art (and, later, a Pan-African or African diasporic one). If the rise of the idea of the Outsider was partly a reaction against modernity's perceived assault on the individual imagination, and if the revival of interest in folk art was partly a reaction against modernity's perceived erosion of preindustrial social relations, Black Arts critiques offered a third way of seeing the costs of modernity. The triumph of New World colonialism could be viewed from its underside as mandating the decimation of autochthonous peoples and the enslavement and peonage of ex-Africans as a means of profitably exploiting resource-rich lands.

All three approaches—to the "Outsider," to the revived "folk," and to the "Black Artist"—held in common a vision of a mainstream, in the artworld and in society at large, that had shunted certain groups to the margins of discourses. And it was becoming clear that there were, relatively speaking, only a few sites of marginalized "authenticity" left in the United States, among which was this thing now named "African American vernacular art of the South." At its apex colonialism had left little outside its geographical confines. As the world grew "smaller" in the twentieth century, it was inevitable that the vitalizing concept of exoticism would drop its association with cartographic distance and move in down the street: artists and cultural critics began looking *within* civilization for pockets of resistance to or anachronistic isolation *from* civilization.

There were aesthetic consequences as well, for each definition coexisted with a distinctive

look about its preferred art. Reflecting its utilitarian and community roots, folk art was thought to be simple, direct, restrained, static, without affect, and with ornamentation superadded to its inherent functionality. Outsider art, sprouting from roily inner needs, was to be obsessive, dense, sometimes violent, full of repetition and unstable patterning that shifted among figuration, decoration, and calligraphy. Popular art was to be whimsically, touchingly inept—the caboose on high art’s train—except for the products of its few masters. (Even the “popular” artist, working within easel painting conventions, and integrated into modern livelihoods, was outside or naïve in the sense that he supposedly did not comprehend high art.) Black Art supposedly reveled in depictions of strong emancipated black subjects, pride in the distinctive attributes of black people, the recitation of African geometric and abstract motifs, and, according to its detractors, a “Social Realist” bent that slid into kitschiness. Each “look” became a marker for a stance toward modernity, used to validate aspirations of critics and fine artists, much as Japanese art and “tribal” art had in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The dubiousness of each notion has in our posthistorical period been compounded by their having become all mashed together.

Without preexisting loyalties to any category or terminology, Livingston and Beardsley drew freely from the new aesthetic assumptions—the shifting folk art paradigm, the transplanted Outsider paradigm, and the emerging African American identity paradigm. The curators’ mixing of propositions from the three models accounts for the prophetic contradictions and doubts beneath the exhibition’s ambience of discovery. In pressing the categorizations to what seemed an unextendable terminus, by looking at the most minute artistic subgroup imaginable to the institutional artworld of their day, Livingston and Beardsley actually helped open the floodgates for the taxonomic frenzy that has characterized the consumption of folk art in the marketplace and in academia in years since. By limiting the exhibition to what Livingston termed “full-fledged, gratuitous” (noncraft) artworks without utilitarian qualities, they signaled a break with existing folkloric paradigms and an intention to discard functionalist attitudes toward folk art. The drift to the study of gratuitous artworks implicitly historicized black folk art (while assuming it was dying out) by acknowledging artists’ individual stylistic evolutions and a general historical development of forms tied to social history—a social history believed to be leading black Southerners away from subsistence and consummating their fuller inclusion in mainstream America.

These curatorial movements also foretold the dawning hegemony of a “reformed” Outsider paradigm, a uniquely American postulation of overlapping alonenesses. The individually isolated or alienated (“enised”) artist, the thinking goes, is a part of a cultural (ethnic) group itself at great remove from “mainstream” art—an aesthetic separation that parallels the general, racial and economic segregation experienced by most African Americans, especially in the South. This triply distilled artistic spirit is socially marooned by its jagged mental states, yet immersed in communal and unelitist cultural mores, and silhouetted by racial oppression. The new formulation attempts to reconcile some of the needs, as well as the poetic force, of each emerging paradigm. Livingston was certainly not the first American to utilize Outsider art’s terms, and she rejected the most draconian implications of the outsider-as-psychotic. She was among the first, however, to intersect a specific ethnic group with the concept of multiplied aesthetic isolations. It is obvious now that the mixture would prove too volatile, but it was probably a necessary risk then to get at tricky aesthetic issues.

Black Folk Art in America pushed to the fore Livingston’s concept of “compassionate ugliness and honesty”—she also used terms such as “raw,” “clumsy,” “conscious crudity or aggression,” and “relentlessly coarse or repellent”¹¹—which opened a Pandora’s Box of problematic interpretations. She clearly viewed these qualities as aesthetic strengths, but was she implying these were the creations of black people who had internalized the defamation of their former, white masters? Were they attempts to purge loathing? Were they compulsive, unfiltered exposés of unsettling truths

about human nature? Were they intentional assaults on the idea of beauty or refinement as defined by European civilization? The overlooked importance of her definition, however, is that it is one of the first attempts anywhere, albeit a halting one, to permit this art the freedom to determine its own representational terms. Livingston's ideas themselves may in part have been nettlesome cultural projections, but they cleared the way for a much more open-ended approach to black vernacular visual art than anything before her had done. The problematic of "compassionate ugliness and honesty" opened the exhibition to criticism that it perpetuated white stereotypes about black people "innately unrepressed and in touch with deeper, primitive urges."¹² I do not share that reading of the exhibition itself: By considering seriously the visually confrontational, sometimes disturbing forms of black folk art, the curators' praxis (despite the ambiguous meanings in their texts) undermined the belief that folk art existed as an instrument for validating by-then-universal, modernist canons of form, assumptions that beforehand had given pride of place to "elegant" works of folk art and popular painting. Some of those artists who evinced Livingston's "sympathetic ugliness"—James "Son" Thomas, Steve Ashby, Jesse Aaron, Sam Doyle—would have previously been considered merely raw, coarse, or crude.

Perhaps Livingston was indeed trying to substitute one set of universals for another. That is almost a generic bugaboo among high-profile exhibitions. The exhibition's cautionary inadequacy lay in its nearly total blindness to the culturally specific tactics of what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls "signifyin(g),"¹³ a black vernacular term for playing with encoded language to create indirect, intentionally misdirectional, and multilayered utterances that speak in different ways to different receivers. Gates's crucial book, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (a title derived from an African and African American folktale) did not appear until after the exhibition, but the book was built upon earlier scholarship. Tricksters figure prominently in the mythologies of traditional peoples, but black folklore's tricksterlike strategies of signifyin(g), rising additionally from the needs of a colonized people, assume categories of social meanings beyond those in the oral literatures of autonomously traditional societies. Signifyin(g) deadpans the absurd, profanes the sacred, enshrines the unthinkable, and insidiously mocks stereotypes. It is a ubiquitous, ritualized aspect of African American life that, Gates argues, also inflects African American written literature. The timbre of black vernacular art is often a trickster's tune, and sometimes it is the self that is parodied along with everything else. A productive tension between transparency of means and opacity of meanings characterizes much African American vernacular art, regardless of genre. Livingston contended that the inside ironies and obscurities seldom preempt the art's accessibility. *Black Folk Art in America* found (or was seeking) primarily that transparency, that universal aesthetic currency—the blues have been romanticized in much the same way—and from that juncture it was easy to extrapolate the coming closure for the art in a more complicated future. *Black Folk Art in America* was signified on. (In fairness to Livingston and Beardsley, they were dependent at the time upon information about the artists that was often on the order of hearsay, and both curators have since gone on to do further work that revises and undoes earlier assumptions.)

Let's look at two artists who were not included. Lonnie Holley is conversant with a variety of aesthetic domains, including Egyptian art. His yard show has contained a variety of sly juxtapositions, including the introjection of a headless-and-armless emblem of Western classicism—in plaster reproduction—at the feet of a grouping that included a totemic sculpture of Michael Jackson (turbaned and draped with faux-leopard skins) and a spray-painted portrait of himself and his wife on the upright bed of a pickup truck.

On the other hand, there is sculptor Ralph Griffin, who made sculptures from found root formations. On the walls inside his otherwise modest home, he hung extremely twisted roots, whose masses were so full of what he called "deep feeling" that they were, he said, too powerful for trans-

formation to sculpture. Whether or not there was any ritualistic intent to their use, Griffin's "abstract" roots exemplify a well-defined aesthetic system that blends personal preferences with cultural traditions traceable to African antecedents. To Griffin, these roots were beautiful, though someone with different cultural lenses might well find them grotesque. Holley's arrangement is full of signifying(g) irony in its contrasting of a symbol of idealized purity and preciousness against the unpretentious materials in his yard show; Griffin's gesture abounds with nonironic love for his roots, without reference to other measures of beauty or ugliness. Livingston's proposed coarseness may apply to some works, but does neither of these artists justice—yet until her sally neither artist's work would have had much chance to be thought artful.

The exhibition and its catalog were partially responsible for a rush of "discoveries" almost unparalleled in the history of American art. In the decade that followed, a handful of southern states produced, as if suddenly, dozens or hundreds of folk artists, a majority of them African American. At last, people were, at least, looking for living artists within the specifically African American South. Some, but by no means all, of the new searching was commercially motivated. At the time, however, there was scant market for newly discovered black folk artists. More or less suddenly, artists like Mary Smith, Purvis Young, Lonnie Holley, Eldren M. Bailey, Ralph Griffin, Archie Byron, Jimmy Sudduth, Royal Robertson, Hawkins Bolden, Vernon Burwell—all of whom were working openly yet unrecognized or little recognized in the 1970s—began to seem *possible* to folk art's partisans. No one knew it then, but folk art, and the study of it, was going postmodern.

Since *Black Folk Art in America*, there have been numerous exhibitions and books incorporating African American folk art: attempts to consider African American vernacular art within the concept of a larger African diaspora, within worldwide postcolonialism, within a broader debate about African American identity (or southern African American identity); attempts to place it within the scope of Southern regionalism; invocations of explanatory principles such as isolation, African survivals, religious rituals and religious visions, and mythic archetypes. Nearly all exhibitions that concern themselves with African American vernacular art make reference in some way to the example of the Corcoran project and to its triple distillation of black folk art. To date, however, none have attempted on a significant scale to update its survey of a southern, African American, nonacademic, living artmaking tradition in the light of new "discoveries" of artists and the myriad developments in art-historical, anthropological, curatorial, and philosophical methodologies. Those are precisely the ambitions of *Souls Grown Deep*, although it should again be emphasized that accomplishing them will mean avoiding lapsing into the mere deconstruction of prevailing stereotypes, the substitution of historiography for history, or the seeking of definitive, univocal explanations of complex people and art forms. At the same time, we want to build while revising, so we have included many of those artists from that earlier era examined by the Corcoran project.

Most of the artists in *Souls Grown Deep* have lived through, and been influenced by, the civil rights movement and the aftermath of its revolution. Those artists who have lived and created during the 1970s, '80s, and '90s have usually come of age since the Great Depression and World War II. They have interacted with other manifestations of postmodernity only indirectly related to expanded civil liberties of black Americans: the advent of an age of information and information technologies, the expansion of consumer economies into every recess of our planet, and the imperative to forge identities in a mobile and rapidly pluralizing society. Occasionally, the relationships between social "progress" and art are direct, as they have been for Joe Minter (b. 1943) of Birmingham, Alabama. In 1989, amid his city's plans to build a civil rights museum, Minter began to transform his land abutting a cemetery into a "second" or shadow memorial to the history of black people in America. Many dozens of artworks have subsequently been given life there. Traditional types of African American "yard arts" are greatly in evidence, rewrought Minter into blistering political and social critiques, as

in *Earth Movers*, a welded-metal sculpture made of rusting tools and farm implements that honors the laborers of past generations. This sculpture looks similar to many others in front of rural homes, black and white, throughout the South, yet Minter's piece manifests other meanings, some of which are to be apprehended through its resemblance to an iron tree of life and a scale of justice.

Joe Minter's site asks larger questions about the nature of art. Should art's role be to criticize or to affirm? To describe/document what exists or to imagine alternatives? To address itself locally or universally? These are never simple dichotomies; among the vast pool of signs and sign systems in our world, the specific groupings knowable as "art" invariably elude attempts to encapsulate their meanings. Minter's *Slave Fork Used in Africa*, as one example among many, embraces the spectrum of possibilities in each of these questions. Strongly committed to African American unity, he nevertheless recognizes that when considerations of race supplant a broader sense of self, there is a tendency to demonize others. The deeply religious Minter is also agnostic and often skeptical about the effects of religious motives on human actions. To begin to understand his yard means plunging into a host of other specific traditions that directly participate in it: the nature, materials, and themes of African American "yard art" and "yard shows"; the importance of burial traditions; the mythic significance of the striving for literacy; the role of iron and steel in the social history of central Alabama; the legacy of interracial violence in Birmingham; the forms and content of ecclesiastical signs; lay preaching; liberation theologies; and the influence of global communication that the satellite dish epitomizes.

Joe Minter is a working-class African American, a former construction worker with limited formal education and virtually no direct contacts with fine art. His sociological and educational status lands him, and many African American artists, in an art-historical category populated by "folk" or "outsider" artists of all stripes. His art fits uneasily into these bins, for in many respects it seems more attuned to definitions of contemporary art. His art is socially engaged. It is often conceptual. It evinces a clear approach to the idea of the past, the present, and the future. It is intentionally and symbolically site-specific. It is committed to a community. It blurs genres through its open-ended approach to materials and influences and its mixing of written texts, found materials, and natural formations (especially garden plants and trees).

One more thing about Joe Minter: In ten years of doing what he does (at least as of this writing), his artworks have never been exhibited anywhere, museum or gallery. He has never been written about (notwithstanding stories in local publications) in journals of folklore, African American art, or contemporary art. He has never received any grant, public support, or official recognition. He neither seeks nor avoids the public eye. As a consequence of the discrepancy between the nature of their art and the sociological status assigned to them, Joe Minter and many like him have lived without outside interest, study, or patronage for much, most, or all of their lives. Their art reminds and chastens us that in a (presti-)digital age, as proliferating information becomes the medium of First World existence, and when popular interest in American folk art is exploding to a degree that seems to leave little unknown, much in truth remains to be understood. We would like to believe that no civilization could still exist, and produce art of historical value, without being known in full. Nevertheless, at least one civilization does remain substantially unknown, and this civilization suffers great imbalance between what it has done and what it has been given credit for doing.

Souls Grown Deep attempts to remain faithful to two interrelated realities of vernacular art production. First, burgeoning contemporary demand for folk art has brought an increased commercialization that purveys the art to the interested through channels of distribution developed to market mainstream art: galleries, magazines, art fairs, museums, auctions, and more recently, cyberspace. For a long time now, however, much of the best African American vernacular art has been produced with the explicit, if sometimes partial, understanding by the artists that the art mingles with those

systems and is destined for external audiences and economic exchange; this awareness applies to the two earliest artists documented here, Bill Traylor and William Edmondson, as well as to those of a more recent generation.

Nevertheless, and second, the vast majority of African American vernacular art's forms are seen by few eyes, are profoundly noninstitutional and noncommercial, perhaps intractably local, and are made for use in houses or in yards, interleaved with sites whose full meanings can seldom be wholly recreated or ethically relocated. Some of these artists produce art for sale and simultaneously maintain intact yard shows (which they seldom consider showrooms). The Western romantic investment in the authenticity or the purity of the cultural Other lives on, however, when commerce proffers objects and artists as denominators for something more real than the consumer's or buyer's world. Conversely, "true believers," suspicious of the simulative effects of commodification on the arts, often develop tastes for works that remain "in the field," supposedly free of the taint of worldliness and more intimately attached to authentic cultural organisms. The total picture eludes the romantic formalism of the commercializer and the romantic anthropology of the fieldworker-explorer. Our choice is not between formalism and context, the made and the maker, connoisseurship and ethnography, rhyme and reason. Rather, we look to the culture for guidance: Aesthetic hierarchies and rigidly defined genres seldom exist within the culture; these books attempt to remain true to that, while acknowledging in the format of this first volume the vestiges of favoritisms toward painting, sculpture, and works on paper. The nature of the existing available evidence is that gratuitous (precious) objects and heirlooms have been preserved through time in the greatest concentrations. Future volumes of *Souls Grown Deep* will try to escape those habits and statistics of the past, and to offer an antihierarchy of artworks.

What would it mean to call a single culture *traditional*, *modern*, and *postmodern*? Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? Does much of the art in *Souls Grown Deep* look contemporary because it mindlessly picks up whatever trickles down to it from the joinings of avant-garde high art with mass culture? (If so, however, vernacular art would look more like yesterday's art instead of today's or tomorrow's.) Is there a worldwide Zeitgeist of postindustrialization and postcolonialization in which these artists are participating from their circumscribed locales? (If so, all our former labels—folk, outsider, naïve—seem twice as reactionary.) Or should we think of aesthetic postmodernism, like modernism earlier in the twentieth century, as an expropriation whereby the haves "borrow" from the have-nots and name the new age after themselves? The possibility must be considered that many of the bricolage and parodic strategies of postmodernism were first done in the vernacular.

One's answers generate other knotty questions. In the United States today, the black vernacular continues to be, in its guise as verbal language, a cultural flashpoint: "Ebonics," the contested lingua franca of African Americans—a form of communication that is often reserved for in-group use (hold the idea of signifyin[g] in mind for analogy)—is perceived either as a debased form of King's English (a cultural [sic]ness) or a historically conditioned, sensible language all its own. The political implications of this debate make headlines, but the aesthetic implications are not as obvious: The way we feel about the vernacular will tend to shape our responses to all its incarnations, from Ebonics to paintings.

It is often said that one of the conditions of artmaking, and self-expression in general, in the posthistorical period is artists' liberty to choose or reject from a smorgasbord of influences or references. If so, then no one should be reflexively penalized simply for belonging to a cultural group assumed outside the reach of the influences acting on other artists of another group. Its increasing popularity shouldn't obscure the fact that vernacular art is in actuality penalized by all outcomes; "insiders," creating under the sign of cultural hybridity, with a specialized and heterogeneous set of influences and debates for themselves, are still accorded real privileges precisely for their "impure,"

“adult,” “mature” sensibilities. The Edenic “place apart” (psychological, spiritual, cultural, geographic) that the outsider supposedly inhabits becomes much more like a prison—Dial’s “fences of the United States”—when the art tries to enter art-historical discourse as more than a cipher for purity, intuition, naïveté, spontaneity, nostalgia, innocence, anachronism, or, more recently, ethnicity.

One obvious policy sounds generous: that there should be no meaningful differences anymore between the tired categories of inside/outside, fine/folk, trained/untrained. In this view, the vernacular gains rescue from generations of fictions: Nineteenth-century Europe invented “the folk” to justify class-based or national differences, then America caught on to the idea of marshaling perceptions of black people (and other groups) by relegating them to an ingrained, natural condition of unchanging folkhood. This demythologizing of “the folk” is fine as a means to an end. Something invaluable will be lost, however, if that end is merely a reshuffling of former folk into new nowheres of invisibility, as indices of discredited cultural wish-fulfillments—whence they are unyoked from negatively assigned past identities but without positive identities still. Free at last? Or will one Other be replaced by another? The idea of intuitive (naïve) Creativity, the former aesthetic hallmark of the folk and the Outsider, threatens to morph into something more labyrinthine and postmodern: a “virtual” Other now held at arm’s length for its inauthenticity. They may become just a different brand of folk, cadavers in lessons on the anatomy of Western primitivism.

The study of all things vernacular, especially in the arts, is therefore emerging as a signal special case, an asterisk, on the larger page of multiculturalism. In our time, the vernacular is doubly Othered: first, in relation to a normative (male, formally educated, European American) mainstream practice—the traditional “center”; and second, to what has been described as the emergent “debate of the center of the margins,”¹⁵ the developing identity studies whose constructions of contemporary ethnicity often sketch the vernacular as a type of antiquated or obsolete self. If there is indeed a “center of the margin,” can there then be “margins of the margin”? This is not just wordplay: The center/margin proviso foretells endless marginalizations and, everywhere it goes, reproduces the violences of overthrown intellectual monopolies.

We have to get out of the marginalization game altogether. If the high/low dichotomy becomes reinscribed within ethnicities, will the “center of the margins” afford its margins the same democratic rights that were with such moral clarity formerly demanded of the traditional center? It has been anticipated that newly intellectually enfranchised groups would provide the thinkers necessary to articulate their own nascent postcolonial histories. This is one ethical way to avoid the pitfalls of one group overrunning others in the writing of most histories. In the era of identity-based scholarship, pervasive class prejudices and educational biases can continue as before to vex analyses of vernaculars. Vernacular art will likely never become a fully self-determining category within the big tent of cultural pluralism, for “vernacular” is not an identity. Vernacular artists by definition will not become the researchers and theoreticians whose assimilation into the academy has been integral to the normalizing process by which multiculturalism has become a long-overdue mainstay of our educational catechism. As such, vernaculars may constitute one of the truest of all multicultural projects, for studying them requires convening open-minded thinkers from diverse backgrounds, healthy doses of self-questioning, and the participation of artists as more than suppliers of local color.

Suppose a “vernacular scholar of the vernacular” did emerge. Lonnie Holley would be a likely example. The very act of openly conducting historical, crosscultural, interdisciplinary research into himself and his traditions would immediately revoke his “vernacular” status—at least within all currently prevailing definitions. (Soon we shall probably see artists doing just this.) Until then, when considering ideas about the vernacular, trust nobody’s. Lodged as it is between Ahab and Elvis in America (says Amiri Baraka later in these pages), this art knows a lot more about the Fall than about the Garden. The overlapping circles of disputation about it give African American vernacular art of

the South a relevance that transcends the privacies of anthropology and art history, and resonates with some of our world's most pressing political, ideological, philosophical, and social questions. To be for vernacular art is not to be *against* education, economic development, and a more civil, just polity. To appreciate vernacular art is not to repudiate, for any reason, any other art forms. This art does not betoken any social "problem," and it does not need to be oppressed today to thrive. Again, this culture may conjure us a way out of no way: by departing the "either/or" propositions of our conventional logic, we might find in ourselves some of the conjunctive "both/and"¹⁶ sensibilities of the black vernacular's sublime pastiches, which at once *preserve* and *transfigure* conflicting, paradoxical meanings. Can we defer to another's selfhood as we make our own?

Writing of another "traditional" society a globe away, James Clifford has implored us to think differently about such peoples: "What would it require, for example, consistently to associate the inventive, resilient, enormously varied societies of Melanesia with the cultural *future* of the planet?"¹⁷ The languages (visual, verbal, body) in use by a group cannot by nature die off in any context, nor can important practitioners of vernacular arts be dismissed, except temporarily, by anyone's definitions or deafness. However, so long as our world remains educationally, economically, and socially striated—across or within its many constituent cultures—so long as preoccupations with superficial differences—gradations of colors and styles of self-expression—continue to ossify our understanding of dynamic and genuine differences, the advanced art of our time (a designation the best of vernacular art merits) will likely remain stridently varied in its aspirations, its appearances, and its audiences. It will also be convulsively misunderstood, misrepresented, misplaced. Vernaculars acquire additional moment because in recent history they have been among the few genuinely uncontrollable cultural energies. The impossibility of commodifying serious art, against its will, for mass consumption is a source of both art's esoteric soul in our time and its potential to offer examples of transformative resistance, protest, and critique with warping power, affective beauty, and addictive intimacy. What a recent generation of artists and, God pleasing, coming generations of thinking will show is how those crucial voices may be circulating in the chic *Kunsthallen* or the thick kudzu, or anywhere out there in between.

NOTES

1. For a synopsis of debates over twentieth-century American folk and Outsider art, see Joseph Jacobs, "A World of Their Own," in *A World of Their Own: Twentieth Century American Self-Taught Art* (Newark, N.J.: The Newark Museum, 1995), 10–38.

2. See the following for a sampling of reviews and discussion of the *Souls Grown Deep* exhibition: Thomas McEvilly, "The Missing Tradition," *Art in America*, vol. 85, no. 5 [May 1997], 78–85, 137; Malcolm Jones Jr., "The Arts Games," *Newsweek*, July 29, 1996, 64–65; Patti Hartigan, "Arts give Games their soul," *Boston Globe*, August 2, 1996, E1, E8; Catherine Fox, "Breaking Down More Barriers," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 28, 1996, D12; Christopher Knight, "Wins, Losses of Olympic Proportions," *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1996, F1, F8.

3. See David L. Smiley's polemical recapitulation of theories of Southernness: "The Quest for the Central Theme in Southern History," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (Summer 1972), 307–25.

4. See Maurice Berger, "Critical Fictions: Race, 'Outsiders,' and the Construction of Art History," in *Self-Taught Artists of the Twentieth Century: An American Anthology* (New York: Museum of American Folk Art, 1998), 28–37. Berger's critique of *Black Folk Art in America* is among the most recent and combative, and builds on the arguments of Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, "Recent Challenges in the Study of African American Folk Art," *International Review of African American Art* 11, no. 3 (1993), 27–29, 60–63.

5. John Beardsley, "Spiritual Epics: The Voyage and the Vision in Black Folk Art," in Jane Livingston and John Beardsley, *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1982), 50.

6. Michel Thévoz, "An Anti-Museum: The Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne," trans. Roger Cardinal, in Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr., eds., *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 63.

7. Roger Cardinal selected this phrase as the title of his essay for the September/October 1994 issue of *Art Papers*.

8. Holger Cahill, "American Folk Sculpture," in *American Folk Sculpture: The Work of Eighteenth and Nineteenth*

Century Craftsmen (Newark, NJ: The Newark Museum, 1931), 13–.

9. See John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977); John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978); and Alan Dundes, ed., *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981). The latest developments in the study of slave populations are examined in Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1998). Gomez strengthens arguments for African survivals by demonstrating the significant extent to which the plantation system kept together Africans from individual cultural groups and areas.

10. Melville Herskovits’s *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941) was the first methodical investigation of African survivals in the New World. Herskovits’s daring can hardly be overstated, yet he tended to accentuate African survivals in the somewhat remote corners of the Western hemisphere (setting up an implicitly inverse relationship between acculturation and African survivals), to downplay survivals in the arts of painting and sculpture, and to overlook the influences of many African societies, especially the Kongo culture of central Africa. Trained as an Africanist, Robert Farris Thompson has overhauled Herskovits’s ideas by addressing their neglected areas. Thompson’s first widely read foray was “African Influence on the Art of the United States,” in Armistead L. Robinson et al., eds., *Black Studies in the University: A Symposium* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 122–70. Thompson also published two books that are virtually contemporaneous with *Black Folk Art in America: Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Aesthetics* (New York: Vintage, 1984) and, with Joseph Cornet, *Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1981).

11. Jane Livingston, “What It Is,” in Livingston and Beardsley, *Black Folk Art in America*, 11–23. See especially 13, 18–19, 23.

12. Maurice Berger, “Critical Fictions,” 30.

13. Gates writes the vernacular version of signifyin(g) with its terminal g in parentheses to differentiate it from linguistics’ uses of the word “signifying” and to preserve the aural effect of a black verbal usage that drops the g.

14. For a thorough analysis of black vernacular English, see Salikoko S. Mufwene et al., eds., *African-American English: Structure, History and Use* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998).

15. See “Roundtable,” in *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism* (Irvine: Univ. of California, Irvine, 1993), 62.

16. See Vernon J. Dixon and Badi G. Foster, *Beyond Black or White: An Alternate America* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971). I am indebted to Theophus H. Smith’s *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994) for revealing the ways vernacular practices are intertwined among theological and political movements throughout black America.

17. James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Allegory,” in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1986), 1.