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HOW TO THINK BLACK: A Symposium on Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters**

Charles Frye:

This is not the first time I have convened a symposium with this title, "How to Think Black." The first time was September of 1972 at Howard University in Washington, D.C. The featured speaker then was Dr. Basil Mathews, who, at that time, was working on something he called the "black cognitive process." He characterized this process as having an emphasis on symbolic imagery, personalization, and what Leopold Senghor called "feeling intelligence."

Way back then, we both thought the symposium was necessary to clear up some of the confusion surrounding the very existence of such a cognitive process. We also agreed that such a cognitive process was not as distinct as its name implied, since it was not confined to persons of African descent, but could be found among many ancient and contemporary peoples. (Incidentally, I've always argued that you have to look at this word "black" symbolically or, more correctly, hieroglyphically.) We did argue at that time that in order to fully appreciate African and African-American culture, and to fully educate African-American children, one had to acknowledge, understand, and use this "black" cognitive process.

More recently, Euro-American students here at Hampshire College made me aware of the difficulty that they were having with a book like *The Salt Eaters.* These were students who were righteous about their feminism, and who wanted to expand their perspective by reading African-American women. They found Toni Cade Bambara's book particularly difficult.

I discovered that those students who have had the least difficulty with Bambara have had some prior experience with a multi-leveled or hieroglyphic

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thinking which informs African-American culture.

The Salt Eaters, which is the alleged topic of this symposium, is an extremely important work for any number of reasons, not the least of which is that it is the embodiment of how one thinks and writes "black." To help us understand both the black cognitive process and its literary embodiment, I have convened this very distinguished, interdisciplinary panel of scholars.

Charlyn Harper:

The topic of how to think black is a very, very broad one and is a very important one, which can be approached in many different ways. For instance, there are a lot of black scholars who are looking at the cognitive processes with respect to information processing and different neurological, or anatomical, structures between African-American, or African people and European people. Other scholars are approaching it by just looking at some of the factors which begin to influence how black people, in particular, perceive and interpret experiences. Rather than get into a physiological discussion, I want to take the latter approach.

I want to look at the various factors which black people use to conceive, perceive, and interpret their reality, interpret their being. Even this approach has many levels because of our different levels of consciousness: We have our own personal level of consciousness or awareness because we have had some unique individual experiences that will influence how we perceive and interpret reality. There is also a level of popular consciousness, where we are influenced by the present-day ideas and those go into influencing how we internalize, how we interpret what we see, hear, and feel.

But there are also two other levels which are the focus of my presentation here. I want to look at the historical or collective consciousness and to also look at the deep culture consciousness or mythic consciousness and to address those two. One of the major premises that is a part of black psychology today is that, notwithstanding personal consciousness, notwithstanding popular consciousness, black people have a shared historical experience that transcends a physical history and begins to act as a deep structure of culture. The "deep structure" is a group of people's answers to questions of ontology, answers to questions of epistemology, answers to questions of axiology, and particularly, answers to questions of cosmology.

I want to give some anecdotes as far as the shared history that we have and how that influences how black people perceive and interpret their realities.

For instance, a particular historical experience that we had was called

slavery. One of our major reactions to the intrusion, to the kidnapping, to the capture, to the domination, and to the exploitation of black people, one of the pervading parts of our response to that particular era was resistance. There was a great deal of resistance in many various forms: the day-to-day resistance and cultural resistance and the malingering and the infanticide. Black people were consciously resisting the domination and attempted dehumanization. We were perceiving that particular experience, that shared historical, cultural experience as something to reject. Europeans, or Euro-Americans, during that particular period of history, did not interpret that experience in the same way because of their own shared history. The acts that we called resistance were interpreted by another people with different eyes and with a different understanding of reality: these acts were, often times, given psychiatric labels.

For instance, there was a psychiatrist, Dr. Samuel Cartwright, who gave two psychiatric labels to acts of resistance by Africans who were enslaved. The first was drapetomania. As you know, mania is an irresistible urge to do something. Drapetomania meant "the flight from home madness." The plantation was supposed to be our "home." The second psychiatric label was dysaethesia aethiopica, an exotic disease which made a slave "prone to mischief." When the slave refused to work, broke the plow, that was considered to be crazy. If we look at the psychological legacy of slavery, we will be able to see that that particular experience certainly influences how we think today and so it begins to be an important component of "thinking black." In one sense, thinking black is really being able to critically conceptualize that slave experience and to understand that we did not unconditionally submit to that experience, but we did resist.

Something that I want to concentrate on a bit more is the deep structural consciousness that also shapes black people's existence. Here, we have to look at traditional African ontology, the study of what is; we have to look at traditional African epistemology, the study of how we know what is; we have to look at traditional African axiology, how we value what is; and we have to look at traditional African cosmology, the study of the structure of the universe or that understanding of universal relationships. I want to give you some examples of the African cosmology and the African epistemology.

The African cosmology, or the African world-view, grows out of a fundamental belief in an indivisible and inexhaustible relationship between God, mankind, and the cosmos. That particular relationship, that particular understanding, became a part of all aspects of the community, the social, the political, the educational, the moral, the psychological dimensions of African life. And

the symbols, the rituals, and the myths that were part of African culture were used to project that one major premise.

The use of symbols, rituals, and myths was the major African epistemological process. It was a major way, a cultural form through which the question of how we know what we know was addressed, as though these cultural forms were the material, the visible embodiment, of all the different African principles. African symbols, rituals, and myths were pregnant with meaning. They served as models for behaving, models of living, as well as models of thought, and models of understanding reality. These particular cultural forms conveyed not only what African people thought was real or perceived to be real, but they also shaped what we call the African world-view or the African reality and shaped African reality to conform to an understanding of that particular God, man, and the cosmos relationship. Thus, African symbols, rituals, and myths served a very vital function in African thinking. They constituted not only an epistemological form but also served as an ontological statement. In other words, they reinforced the community's corporate reality, the physical reality, as well as the spiritual and mental reality.

I want to suggest a couple of principles that run through the core of various rituals, various myths, and various symbols which can be seen in *The Salt Eaters.* One of the major principles in African reality was that everything was dual; everything has two aspects. There is heat-cold, there is male-female, there is light-dark, there is the one and there are the many, there is east-west, and so on. Things seemingly diametrically opposed to each other are not that but just different expressions of the same kind of reality. In the African cosmology and African epistemology, things that were different were not perceived to be in conflict with each other. There was a complementarity of differences as opposed to a strict, rigid polarity of differences. That strict, rigid polarity of differences really serves as a basis or fundamental premise in Euro-centric reality that looks at differences as absolute. And it serves as a basis for racism and sexism.

In African epistemology, the things that were considered to be different were seen as being complementary and different expressions of the same thing. So maleness and femaleness are just different variations of the same thing and not conflicting notions. Life and death were variations of the same thing and so you can have a concept of something called the "living-dead." In traditional African philosophy, as long as there was somebody who could call you by name, then you were alive in the community. African thought, thinking black, can hold that concept of living-dead and not have a problem with seeing those two things as being variations of the same thing. That kind of thinking is what

Vernon Dixon called diunital logic: something can be and not be at the same time. That is very different from a Euro-centric concept that talked about the law of excluded middle, i.e., that something cannot *be* and *not be* at the same time. But in African logic things can be and not be at the same time. The conception of reality is not rigid, is not encapsulated, and it is not atomized.

Another major principle that pervaded African thinking or African belief was that the world oscillated or vibrated between order and disorder. Order and disorder are not really diametrically opposed to each other. Reality is cyclical and goes through the phases of creation, revolt, and resurrection or restoration. Creation is characterized by order, completeness, and duality. Revolt is characterized by disorder, sterility, and singularity. Revolt seems to characterize that very Euro-centric emphasis on individualism, as opposed to collectivism, and singularity as opposed to duality.

In traditional African philosophy, there was a recognition that perfection is an illusive thing and that the closest we can come to perfection is the balance between order and disorder. The only thing that is perfect is the supreme being. The human being can replicate the divine experience by maintaining the balance between order and disorder. Perfection is something that is totally immaterial, something that is totally invisible. My physical perfection, my physical reality, is guided by seeking to maintain order, seeking to maintain the balance between order and disorder. In other words, our purpose of being is a question of repair and restoration, a question of creating order out of disorder, a question of constantly becoming. Our reality is, therefore, infinite.

Traditional African philosophy also offered the concept that man is not necessarily born ready-made or a *tabula rasa.* The African scholar, Pierre Erny, suggests that a child is a being of beginning, carrying with him the fullest of human potentials and since he is nothing, he is potentially everything. There, again, is that diunital logic. In child-rearing what you do with this child is to bring out that stuff that is already in him. The human growth and development process is a process of making what is unconscious and innate in the child, conscious.

The human being in African philosophy was further defined in terms of a social group. Each individual was a constituent of a community, a constituent of a corporate reality, for it was the community that defined who each individual was. But even with this emphasis on collectivism, African people acknowledged that each human being was unique because each human being was endowed by the creator with special talent and with special gifts. Individual growth and development was always balanced against the survival of, or what

would help the community to grow. Every human being in African reality and African thought was a multi-dimensional, dynamically developing organism whose whole personality was involved in the process of his becoming, his involvement in his social world, his involvement in his community, his involvement in his world at all levels. Each person, in African thinking, both transcended the whole and was an essential part of the whole. And there is that diunital logic once again.

Because man is an integral component of a social group, because reality in African thinking vibrated between order and disorder, and because balance was necessary to restore order, an essential component of man's behavior in African thinking was sacrifice. And again, sacrifice here was not considered to be something negative. In the Dogon language, for example, the word "sacrifice" comes from a root meaning "to renew life." Sacrifice in this particular kind of reality is conceived of not as giving up or relinquishing anything, as in the western concept; rather sacrifice is considered to be a necessary redistribution of energy, a necessary redistribution of what the Dogon people call *Niama,* or the life force which permeates all living things and which is the power behind all living things.

In Africa, we cannot separate cosmology, epistemology, axiology, and ontology from each other. To do so is to create a false dichotomy. When we talk about the African cosmos, we also talk about their understanding of the cosmos.

One final note about African epistemology, or how African people know what they know: Vernon Dixon says African people know what they know by immersing themselves in the experience.

I will close by saying that "thinking black" for me is not something new. I am not as profound as many black scholars who have come before me have been, but we have been given messages and information about how to think black ever since there have been black people. For example, W. E. B. Du Bois told us that African-American people had to become wed with truth to dwell above the veil. He was talking about thinking black. Johari Amini says that we have to develop a new concept of what is and what is not. That is thinking black. Lerone Bennett says that we have to develop a radical re-evaluation about our ideas of man and our ideas of history. That is thinking black. Molifi Asante has said that we have to look out from our *own* center, through our *own* Afro-centric eyes. That is thinking black. And Wade Nobels, a black psychologist, said that we must overcome conceptual incarceration. That is thinking black.

Thinking black, then, is applying an African or an Afro-centric orientation to reality that is rooted in history, a reality that is informed by history and informed by an understanding of the surface structure as well as the deep structure of African culture.

Linda James Myers:

I want to continue with what Charlyn Harper has started by turning to the deep structure of ancient, traditional African culture. As a psychologist, I became very interested in how to think black when I took up the charge to develop a black psychology. In so doing, I began to research African culture, African cosmology, cosmogony, and the philosophical roots that underpin what we can identify as an African world-view. The result of that research has been the development of what I call an Afro-centric conceptual system which basically lays the structure for thinking black.

First of all, I would like to discuss what black is by relating it to Charles Frye's notion of hieroglyphic thinking, or symbolic thinking. For me, black represents the absorption of all the colors of the spectrum into one. When we think black, that's what we must do, manifest all of the energy. As Charlyn Harper suggested, we have undergone tremendous conceptual incarceration since our enslavement, first imposed during the physical slavery and now maintained as mental slavery. If indeed we, as black people, and I mean that symbolically, not just people with a certain skin color, but as *black* people if we are to overcome that incarceration that affects us all, we must learn how to think black. This endeavor entails the utilization of an African-centered conceptual system.

I would like to outline the different philosophical aspects of the Afro-centric world view, but before I continue in this vein let me further establish a context.

Being a psychologist, I am very much interested in an optimal experience for people. What I have done then is to identify the philosophical assumptions and principles underpinning the ancient, traditional African world-view, and use this Afro-centric paradigm as the basis for defining an optimal conceptual system. All of this is made possible by the fact that the progenitors of this world-view taught a deification process whereby an individual could achieve everlasting peace and happiness.

What do I mean by an optimal conceptual system? I merely mean that we want to structure our reality to maximize the possibility of the most positive experience. Ontologically, as we think black, we are assuming that reality is both spiritual and material at once. What that ultimately plays out to mean is that everything is one thing. Everything is unified, interrelated, interdependent,

interconnected, integrated. Everything becomes spirit manifest. In that regard, spirit can be used synonymously with God or consciousness or energy. These terms are all synonymous in the sense that they are all known in extrasensory fashion. I typically use the word God, and by the term I mean that which is the divine or supremely good or consciousness or spiritual essence that underlies the totality of creation. Ontologically, as we learn to think black, we begin to see that what is real is not just what appears, but goes beyond appearance. With this particular orientation, we begin to understand that we cannot define who we are or what our circumstances are, merely based upon what our five senses can tell us, i.e., by what we can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. I think we can find empirical verification for the fact that, indeed, black people have managed to do this. Obviously, we could not have endured the slave experience, that physical slavery, if we had not been able to look beyond five-sense information.

In addition to that basic ontological position, there is a corollary epistemology that assumes that self-knowledge is the basis of all knowledge. I had not intended to spend time contrasting this Afro-centric world view with what we might call a Euro-centric view, simply assuming that was unnecessary. However, I think we can see that, within our own dominant socialization, we typically assume that external knowledge is the basis of all knowledge. And that makes sense to the extent that we assume that the nature of reality is principally material or that about which our five senses can inform us.

In addition, we assume that we know this external knowledge by counting and measuring. For example, someone who is considered erudite and knowledgeable is typically impressing us with their ability to retain a lot of information and give us counted and measured kinds of data. In contrast, though, in the Afro-centric vein, we assume self-knowledge is the basis of all knowledge; and one knows through symbolic imagery, and rhythm. How does this work? Well, here again, following directly from our ontological position, that, indeed, everything is one thing, we can say that, epistemologically, all knowledge is self-knowledge, the one thing being Self. That automatically puts us in a different stance with regard to the world. Rather than seeing subject/object, all becomes subject. Therefore, we know increasingly by knowing more and more about ourselves, ultimately about infinite spirit.

How do we know? We know through symbolic imagery and rhythm. Here again, to the extent that we have assumed that self-knowledge is the basis of all knowledge and we are knowing more and more about this one essential essence, then, how this essence is manifesting, how it's appearing, becomes extraordinarily critical. Everything in experience becomes a symbol or symbolic of infinite

spirit—symbolic imagery. Whatever is coming into experience, into five-sense awareness, is automatically processed, not just by the count-and-measure data but also by the extrasensory acknowledgment that this is indeed spirit manifesting, God manifesting. In addition to knowing through symbolic imagery, we also have to add the rhythm. That is extraordinarily critical because everything that comes into experience, into our five-sense reality, is not "real." What I am suggesting is that it is going to be necessary that we make a determination of the truth or the reality of what comes into experience based upon the rhythm, based upon the nature of the inter-relatedness, the relationship of this thing appearing to what we already know is true.

Our next philosophical point has to do with axiology, or how we are constructing our value system. Basically the Afro-centric conceptual system assumes that the highest value is in interpersonal relationships among people. This may be contrasted with the axiological position of the dominant (western) socialization which suggests that the highest value is in acquisition of objects.

Next, I want to talk about logic. Charlyn Harper has already mentioned that we are relying on diunital logic when we think black: diunital—two becoming one—logic. When we begin to reason, our reasoning should not yield an either/or conclusion, such as a dichotomous logic would, but it should yield a both/and. We are looking for the unity that contains and transcends opposites. And the perfect examples are the concepts of good and evil. They are really one and the same—different aspects that can be polarized. But, in the diunital logic of the Afro-centric conceptual system, we begin to say: "Can that from which good comes be evil?" And at that point of seeing the answer is no, we have unified and transcended.

In addition, each conceptual system has a particular "process." Process here refers to the same kind of thing we think of in terms of general systems theory. What we are focusing on is the method by which we seek to achieve our goals given our conceptual system, given our value orientation. Within the western societal structure, the process is technology. All sets are repeatable and reproducible in terms of technology. Within the Afro-centric view, the process is *ntuology*. All sets are interrelated through human and spiritual networks. This idea is consistent given the other philosophical assumptions that we have made. As our goal is everlasting peace and happiness and total union with infinite spirit in the Afro-centric case, it will be achieved through human and spiritual networks.

There is another point I do want to make about the consequences of the Afro-centric system, and that has to do with our identity and self-worth. I guess,

being a psychologist, I can't escape those concepts.

Within the Afro-centric conceptual system, we become God-manifesting. That is who we are. That is what everyone and everything is. In addition, our self-worth is intrinsic in being. We are worthy simply because we are. If we think about that, we can see that the ramifications of just those two positions, alone, are tremendously far-reaching in contrast to a society that bases identity on external criteria. In western society, we are what we own, how we look; our worth is based on status, prestige and other kinds of transient things. This western conceptual system keeps our worth in a constant state of flux, and we never get enough. Our peace, our satisfaction, our happiness is very temporary, very illusive. What we are attempting to structure with this Afro-centric paradigm is an optimal conceptual system. And again, by optimal I mean our underlying aim, our motivation, is to achieve everlasting peace and happiness.

What I have outlined is what I perceive to be the basis of an Afro-centric conceptual system, the basis for beginning to think black. With this conceptual system we can begin to reinterpret the Black Experience, reinterpret the American experience in general, and also re-evaluate who we are and what our purpose is in being. Certainly the black or Afro-centric conceptual system that I identify, is not, in any way, exclusively black or exclusively African, as Charles Frye pointed out; unless you understand African to refer to all people. From the Afro-centric conceptual system, all people *are* African people if they are willing to go far enough back into their ancestry. Certainly given what we know about dominant vs. recessive genes, the most current archaeological and anthropological evidence, and if we assume a single gene pool, all people do become African people. Therefore, it is not surprising that we see this basic orientation permeating through all peoples in all cultures.

One of the things that we run into when we begin to entertain the idea of thinking black is a certain amount of cultural imperialism and intellectual ethnocentrism. We need to make it very clear that scholars cannot continue to look at black people, black culture, the Black Experience, from the Euro-centric view and expect us to believe it or accept it. Scholars must begin to interpret it from our philosophical base and orientation.

I think it is going to be very important and critical too, to begin to examine, then, from the Afro-centric perspective, the mind of the slave captor. If indeed, the conceptual system has any validity, any value, it will be important to be able to compare and contrast for people two conceptual systems: that of the slave and that of the slave captor, because the two systems have different and very real consequences for their adherents. Intuitively, you can know that by defin-

ing reality as spiritual and material at once, you have bought into a system that sees itself as infinite and unlimited. In contrast, to the extent that you have bought into a conceptual system that sees reality as material, you have automatically bought into a conceptual system that is by definition finite and limited and that means self-destruction. As we begin to entertain the reality of the greenhouse effect and acid rain, we are beginning to see evidence of the consequences of a sub-optimal conceptual system, one that has allowed technology to go awry and one that will ultimately end in destruction. I think that what we must begin to realize, then, is that there is an alternative way to view the world and that way will optimize experience. It certainly has allowed black people to survive the most dreadful kind of slavery that has ever been known to man.

I would like to close with a couple of quick points about how the conceptual system works for the individual, personally. Being a psychologist, I could not end without mentioning that. One of the natural consequences of a faulty conceptual system such as one that leads us to base our self-worth on external criteria and leads us to have an ego that is in a constant state of flux and in constant need of defending, is a lot of stress and anxiety. So much so, that, in this society we have come to accept stress as normal. In the African conceptual system, we assume just the opposite: Life was meant to be carefree. As a consequence of this comparison, we can begin to look at the ways in which our conceptual system actually determines our experience and determines our reality. One of the things that the pyramids teach, being the symbol of the basic message of the ancient African mystery teachings, is that, in order to get to higher consciousness, we must monitor our emotions, pay attention to what we are feeling. When we begin to feel those things which we would identify as negative, we should know automatically, "Oh-oh, I'm misconstruing something, I'm buying into the wrong conceptual system" and at that point, then, we can begin to re-evaluate and make adjustments in terms of how we are defining things. What we tell ourselves, the kinds of thoughts with which we allow ourselves to identify, determine our experience.

I think it's going to be very critical for us to begin to make an examination of the issue of conceptual systems. As we all do make that examination, if the choice is as I outlined, the difference between the optimal and sub-optimal, there is not going to be much question about what most people would choose. But the important thing is to make most people aware that they do have a choice. And, indeed, the worst consequence of conceptual incarceration is that it makes its prisoner totally unaware that the door is not locked.

Charles Frye:

It is certainly very stressful being a moderator. But kidding aside, what I had intended by allowing Charlyn Harper and Linda Myers to speak first, was to provide a conceptual basis for the consideration of a very important book called *The Salt Eaters,* by Toni Cade Bambara, which Eleanor Traylor will now bring us.

Eleanor Traylor:

I think what I'll bring you is maybe a little blues bugaloo, and Charlyn or Linda will give you the terms for whatever it is, 'cause, God knows, I don't know. Perceptions of reality, that's our concentration. Thinking black.

According to the folk tales, reality is a briar patch, a zone inhabited both by terror and glory, by bumblers and the wise, by those who see and those who do not see, by truth and the lie. Reality is not the triumph of the actual. It is the triumph of the imagination over the actual, able to redefine the actual at any moment. According to the spirituals, reality is the moment when the dungeon of the mind shakes itself and its chains fall off.

According to the blues, reality is a play of oppositions between the horrible and the splendid causing a displacement of both so that a new zone of possibility emerges, making bearable the otherwise unbearable. According to the slave narratives, reality is a moment when neither past nor present are affected in the immediate situation. And therefore navigation, the art of movement, transition, is reality; or reality is the moment a gesture, maybe a fist, wrestles the determination of what is real from another who would define you to you. You must define yourself. According to Du Bois, reality is a rent veil requiring a double vision. According to [Booker T.] Washington, reality is an institution which one builds out of one's essence, by any progenetive means necessary. According to Claude McKay, reality is a moment when two actions are possible, a backward look causing nostalgia, or maybe paralysis, or a plunge as into a refining fire out of which something transformed and strong emerges. According to Zora Neal Hurston, reality is a mad dog whose infectious rabies destroys. The mad dog version of experience must be destroyed so that the healthy version can live on. According to Richard Wright, reality is a big white fog that must be cleared away. According to James Baldwin, reality is a certain kind of truth with experience. According to Ralph Ellison, reality is a dim hole which must be lit by the light of mind and feeling. According to Ishmael Reed, reality is at least three possibilities, none sufficient. All three must be merged into wholeness. According to Toni Morrison, reality is a dangerous precipice on

which struggle three versions of experience. One must incorporate all three. According to Paule Marshall, reality is an irresistible call, compelling a response beyond even one's own perceived limits of response. According to Toni Cade Bambara, reality is an explosion, its fragments merged by the imaginative will grounded in the best traditions of a people able to reconstruct at any moment appropriate possibilities of survival and triumph. Cut to black. . . .

I'm going to read a passage from *The Salt Eaters;* I want you to follow me closely. This is the passage upon which I would like to focus. I want to read it to you like I heard it when I first began to work on the book:

> . . . And she learned to read the auras of trees and stones and plants and neighbors and studied the sun's corona, the jagged petals of magnetic colors, and then the threads that shimmered between wooden tables and flowers, and children and candles and birds. She could dance their dance and match their beat and echo their pitch and know their frequency as if it were her own. The clearer she felt it, the fuller did something well up from the depths of her for release. The more urgent did she feel the need to fling into her black sky, another star, another hope. She knew each way of being in the world and could welcome them home again, open to wholeness, eyes closed and the mind dropping down to the heart bubbling in the blood then beating, fanning out, flooded and shining. And everything is happening and nothing is happening and everything is still like thunder and always the echo of music, the presence of voices as constant and compelling as the movement of the sea. But how shall man measure progress there where the dark-faced Josey lies? Is it the twilight of nightfall or is it the flush of some faint dawning day? And then he began to play, his fingers filled the air with life. His life. But that life contained so many others, and Sonny went all the way back. For while the tale of how we suffer and how we are delighted and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell. It's the only light we've got in all this darkness. She knew each way of being in the world. Eyes wide open to the swing from expand to contract, dissolve, congeal, release, restrict. Hey, Miss Susy, hey, old connoisseur of boy-sound, of voices without messages, of newsless winds, listen to the vowel sounds and the crackling dentals, to the low harsh gutterals of empty anguish. Hey, Miss Susy, you whom the campus loved but did not understand; aged of slavery yet bearer of something warm and vital and all-enduring of which, in that island of shame, we were not ashamed. Rip them fancy clothes off, men, and thrash out in them waters. Churn up all them bones we dropped and grab them children by the neck and bop 'em good. And, ah, quit that noise, Miss Lucy! Put that music book away! You can't start no notes a flying like the ones that rants and rings from the kitchen to the big woods when Melindy sings. And ain't you

> never heard Melindy? Blessed soul, take up the cross and when she hollers, "Chariot Swing Low," you don't know just what you lost. Robins, larks, and all them things hush their mouths and hide their faces when Melindy sings. . . .

All that from *The Salt Eaters,* huh? When did you catch me? When did you know I had stopped the passage? Did you know it? Well, I cheated a little bit. I started with the passage from *The Salt Eaters,* and then I blended in one from Wright's narrator, and then one from Baldwin's narrator in *Just Above My Head,* and then *Sonny's Blues,* and then the passage from *The Invisible Man,* the ancestral passage, and one from Mr. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folks,* followed by the Paul Lawrence Dunbar passage. I swear the rhythm of those passages in my ear sound alike. These are the antecedent sounds and I could hear them as I read, particularly that passage which I considered thematic in *The Salt Eaters.* What I am saying is what Mr. James Weldon Johnson said better than I ever could in 1912: "The fact is that nothing great or enduring has ever sprung full-fledged and unprecedented from the brain of any master. The best that he gives the world he gathers from the hearts of his people and runs it through the alembic of his own genius."

I mean to suggest, merely by the audacious thing that I have just done, that when I am listening to *The Salt Eaters* I am conscious of echoes and I am in the presence of other voices. These echoes and this presence is the achievement of *The Salt Eaters.* And whatever is its schematic design and whatever is its structural design and whatever is its pattern of sound and whatever is its web of relationships part to part and whatever is its overall texture of meanings at any part of that texture, all of that resides in and is determined by certain echoes and a certain presence.

The passage that I have made reference to in the text is that passage which says, "She knew all ways of being in the world. And she could welcome them home, open to wholeness." That passage to me, is the thematic statement of the novel and also implies the structural premise. But that passage also suggests an assessment and makes a bold assertion. The assessment is that something huge is known. "She knew all ways of being in the world" and that something huge can be achieved through what is known "and could welcome them home to wholeness." Those lines are spoken of Minnie Ransom, the healer character of the novel, but the lines also place the burden of proof upon the narrator. Minnie, the healer, must achieve the wholeness or the restoration of her patient, Velma, but the narrator must dramatize the method of that achievement which is not encumbant upon Minnie, who has not spoken. So what Minnie does

dramatically, the narrator must achieve technically. And now the narrator, as well as Minnie, must expand and contract and dissolve and congeal and release and restrict and bend and fan-out and flood. But neither Minnie nor the narrator is the central focus of the novel. It is Velma, the patient, who must undergo the healing method, and therefore prove it.

The entire meaning of the novel rests upon the question of Velma's healing and that cannot be told, it must be shown. We must believe that she is healed and that believing demands of us the plunge that Velma takes. It is the demand of this narrator for that plunge that captures my heart and requires my whole head. It is one of the most daring demands that any narrator can make because how do we know that Velma is healed? How do we know that? We only know it if we do what the narrator is risking, and the narrator risks having us determine who Velma is. Who is Velma? Well, Velma is me. And I have to undergo the transformation, and if I fail the narrator fails. If I fail, Minnie fails. If I fail, the whole enterprise of the novel fails. And if I fail, a tradition of knowing has failed. Cut to black. . . .

Those around the bedside of Lorraine Hansberry found a little note just after her death and on it were written these lines: "My Lord, He calls me by the thunder, the trumpet sounds it in my soul. I ain't got long to stay here." Beneath those lines were written these words: "A classical people demand a classical art." That is the perception that Velma must learn in the novel. She must plunge down a well of years and she must, when she takes that plunge, and when she examines all the textures at the root of a Berbob tree, discover that perception and that alone. Who are a classical people? Well, a classical people are those whose human experiences have provided paradigms of human experience for their Age and for Ages to come and who have provided the artistic forms which articulate these experiences for all. So at last the forms go out from them and become the forms by which an Age, a time, articulates its experience.

Velma has to learn the difference between a tragic vision and a blues vision, because the blues vision is the vision of modernity, as a tragic vision had been the vision of antiquity.

The Salt Eaters is a part of a continuum which extends through and to Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for a Widow* to *A Gathering of Old Men,* Ernest Gaines' new one, to *Whitherspoon,* Lance Jeffer's new one, to *The Women of Brewster Street,* that's Gloria Naylor's new one, on down to the 1789 narrative of the coming-over of Aquiano where he said, "I must learn to navigate through experience that would otherwise kill me." And if I could take the journey of that ship and place it beside the journey of the *Pequod,* and if I could do that with

you, start there and come forward, then maybe I could find a line of thesis.

Do you understand what I mean? Then maybe you could ask me some questions. The novel, *The Salt Eaters,* is a *tour de force* and people say it's difficult. Well, it is difficult. You have to learn everything and you must understand that you know nothing. It is the reconstruction of the whole past of a people's whole epic journey through the world. It is not only the drama of that which is presented, it is the *implication* of that for all the world. Finally, it's got to fly, you know, it's got to fly. Finally, if I can say it, maybe the whole world can say it. For so long it's been mine. It had just been mine. No one else wanted it and so it was mine. And there was a time when I'd do a little peacock strutting about it. I still do it. But I think, now, we are obliged to let it go because it's dangerous, if people do not understand that this journey toward wholeness which we must make and this backrolling which we must make almost instantly is important for all of us. We must make it instantly because we haven't been making it and all of us, in our secret minds, are worried about whether there is time, even now, to make it now. We have got to make it and the reason that we have got to make it is to save all of our lives. That is what the tradition of the literature has meant.