

Swarthmore College

Works

English Literature Faculty Works

English Literature

2001

Black Thunder

Charles L. James
Swarthmore College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Charles L. James. (2001). "Black Thunder". *The Concise Oxford Companion To African American Literature*. 36-37.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit/324>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Literature Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

it, was published for the first time in 1992 by the Library of America.

One of the primary themes of Wright's autobiographical narrative involves the influence of racism on the personal interrelations not only among the individuals of the oppressed group but within the family itself. The first episode of the narrative, in which Wright at four years of age innocently burns down the family home, has no racial implications per se, but the response of his mother does. As punishment Wright is so severely beaten with a tree limb that he lapses into semi-consciousness and requires the attention of a physician. The mother's response is in direct correlation to the family's economic circumstance. They are poor because they are black, and the harshness of his punishment reflects the degree of the family's economic loss. On another occasion, when Wright is badly cut behind the ear by a broken bottle in a fight between black and white boys, his mother, instead of extending the comfort and sympathy ordinarily expected of a parent toward a wounded child, beats him to warn him of the dangers of fighting whites.

Black Boy's historical significance lies in its recapitulation of the thrust of black autobiography in its use of the form as a means of righting social wrong. Other African American writers have used literature to perform this function, but none before Wright had been as outspoken. In episode after episode Wright describes through his own experience of racial repression that was undergone by millions of his brothers and sisters. At the same time, he relates the story of his own growth.

• Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 1973.

—Donald B. Gibson

Black No More. George *Schuyler's first novel, originally published in 1931 by the Macaulay Company and reissued in 1989 by Northeastern University Press, *Black No More* is generally considered the first full-length satire by an African American. In *Black No More*, Schuyler fictionalizes the political ideas that he was best known for: outrage at the notion that race makes difference and at America's social stratification based on race. While society searched for a solution to the "race problem," Schuyler, in this anti-utopian novel, uses satire and science fiction to reveal that race was not the problem.

His satire is aimed specifically at myths of racial purity and white supremacy and presents ways in which the perpetuation of racism serves economic purposes. Greed is the primary motivation of his characters. He caricatures organizations such as the NAACP, the KKK, and the Urban League, presenting their leaders as hustlers in different shades.

In the preface, Schuyler dedicates *Black No More* to all of the "pure Caucasians" of the world, setting up any such readers for a shock. We are then introduced to Max Disher, a brown trickster, and his sidekick, Bunny

Brown, and the racist environment in which they live. Max is rejected by a racist white woman, Helen, who is entertained by black cabaret performers but is repulsed at the idea of dancing with a black man. This rejection sends Max to Dr. Crookman, inventor of Black-No-More, Inc., where all traces of blackness are removed and Max becomes Matt. The rest of the novel traces Max's adventures as a Caucasian: he marries the same Helen that previously rejected him, and with Bunny, infiltrates the major racist organization of the country, extorts millions of dollars, and finally flees to Europe. The reader is also privy to the effects of the runaway success of Black-No-More, Inc., on American society. As the black population is changed to white, black race leaders are put out of the "leadership" business; as America loses its cheap black labor, an increasingly violent labor situation erupts; and lying-in hospitals are created to secretly change newborns to white. In an attempt to decipher a "proper" race hierarchy, scientists discover that over half of the Caucasian population has "tainted" blood, including those who most advocated racial purity. Just as America goes wild with frenzy, Dr. Crookman brings order by revealing that the "newly" white are actually two to three shades lighter than the "real" Caucasians. Suddenly white is no longer right and everyone panics while sales increase for skin-darkening lotions. "Normality" is returned at the end of the novel with black being beautiful. Schuyler makes clear that there are advantages to possessing white skin in a society that worships this, but human nature does not change purely because of skin color.

—Adenike Marie Davidson

Black Thunder. Arna Bontemps's novel *Black Thunder: Gabriel's Revolt: Virginia 1800* was published in 1936. This conflation of history and imagination is based on an actual slave rebellion reported in contemporary newspapers and recorded in the *Calendar of Virginia State Papers* (vol. 9, 1890). The chronicle begins in the great house of old Moseley Sheppard whose dependence on old Ben Woodfolk, his faithful house servant, has developed over the years into veiled companionship. Old Bundy, Ben's work-worn counterpart, once a field-hand on the neighboring plantation but now reduced to scavenging throughout the neighborhood, intrudes on Ben's peace to beg for rum and surreptitiously to invite him to join the slave Gabriel's scheme for insurrection. It is old Bundy's misfortune to be observed with his jug of rum by Thomas Prosser, his merciless master, who uses the excuse to beat him to death.

Bundy's murder adds fresh resolve to Gabriel's plans and subverts the comfort of reluctant individuals like old Ben. Indeed, Gabriel had chosen the occasion of Bundy's funeral to elaborate his strategy to amass some eleven hundred men and one woman to take the city of Richmond in their first step toward freedom. The remarkable funeral seems to emerge from a collective preliterate tradition whose origins are African and

whose inspiration to freedom arises from the natural world. Under these conditions, old Ben swears allegiance to the conspiracy in the presence of the principal plotters, at first with apprehension and then with deep trepidation.

Gabriel, the strapping six-foot two-inch coachman for Thomas Prosser, had earned the respect of slaves and "free" blacks throughout Henrico County, Virginia, about a year earlier by winning a titan's battle with Ditcher, the brutal driver of slaves from another plantation. Gabriel wins fealty for his resoluteness and a generosity of spirit, which appeals to persons as diverse as Mingo, the literate freeman, and the tempestuous Juba, Gabriel's woman; he finds personal inspiration in the proclamation of General Toussaint *L'Ouverture, the Haitian liberator, who still lived, and in biblical text read aloud by Mingo.

At the appointed hour of insurrection, a relentless, unprecedented downpour transforms Henrico County into a flood plain; Gabriel's insurgents find it impossible to execute their grand design and are forced to pull back in favor of a more propitious time. The delay, however, is sufficient to uncover the treachery of Pharoah, who immediately snatches the opportunity to turn informant. Out of loyalty to Moseley Sheppard, old Ben confesses his role and names leaders.

Across the nation amazement accompanies alarm, for it is inconceivable that illiterate chattel are capable of conceiving such a scheme on their own. Every literate white person who is not native to the region is suspect, as Scotsman John Callender, friend of Thomas Jefferson, rudely learns. Frenchman M. Creuzot, printer, is particularly imperiled and flees north for his safety. Before long all the major figures in the conspiracy, including Gabriel, are captured and hung. Pharoah, meanwhile, literally loses his mind, but perfidious old Ben endures, however uneasily.

Richard *Wright generously noted in his 1936 review that *Black Thunder* broke new ground in African American fiction by addressing concerns not previously touched upon in African American novels. Most critics readily concur that given its myriad voices and many points of view, the controlling idea of the novel is its universal determination toward freedom, a principle that warrants their generous attention to its political purpose. Others, however, noting its contribution to the vernacular tradition, cite meaningful distinctions between literacy and orality as racial and cultural markers.

• Mary Kemp Davis, "From Death Unto Life: The Rhetorical Function of Funeral Rites in Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder*," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 1 (Jan. 1987): 85–101. Daniel Reagan, "Voices of Silence: The Representation of Orality in Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder*," *Studies in American Fiction* 19 (Spring 1991): 71–83. Arnold Rampersad, introduction to the 1992 ed., and Arna Bontemps, introduction to the 1968 ed., *Black Thunder: Gabriel's Revolt: Virginia 1800*, 1992.

—Charles L. James

Blacker the Berry, The. Wallace *Thurman's first novel, *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (1929) takes its title from an old folk saying, "the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice." It is an autobiographical satire whose neurotic, dark-skinned protagonist, Emma Lou Morgan, internalizes biases against dark-complexioned people after a midwestern upbringing by colorstruck relatives mimicking racist societal values. Like Thurman, Emma Lou goes to the University of Southern California and then to Harlem. Unlike Thurman, who was primarily drawn to the artistic renaissance blooming there, Emma Lou hopes Harlem will enable her to escape finally the harsh intraracial prejudice that is exacerbated by her sex and egocentrism.

Among the mundane settings of Harlem tenement buildings, employment agencies, public dance halls, rent parties, cabarets, and movie houses, Emma Lou has numerous opportunities to overcome her obsession with color and class consciousness. She is, indeed, discriminated against by both blacks and whites, but not to the degree that she believes. In a crowded one-room apartment filled with liquor-gorging intellectuals resembling Langston *Hughes (Tony Crews), Zora Neale *Hurston (Cora Thurston), and Richard Bruce *Nugent (Paul), Truman (Thurman himself) explains intraracial discrimination by examining the parasitic nature of humankind. He argues that "people have to feel superior to something . . . [other than] domestic animals or steel machines. . . . It is much more pleasing to pick some individual or group . . . on the same plane." Thus, he suggests that mulattoes who ostracize darker-skinned African Americans merely follow a hierarchy of discrimination set by materially powerful white people. Truman's anatomy of racism, however, is ignored by Emma Lou.

The Blacker the Berry received reviews that, while mixed, praised Thurman for his ironic depiction of original settings, characters, and themes then considered off limits for African American literary examination. Many others also criticized him for emphasizing the seamier side of Harlem life. But Thurman was never pleased with *Blacker*, and his caricature of the female protagonist shows why. Emma Lou behaves unlike traditional African American females who tend to revise rather than accept the values of both African American and white men. After she is repeatedly degraded by light-skinned Alva, Emma Lou's spiritual liberation begins only when she acknowledges the Thurmanian and Emersonian ideal that salvation rests with the individual, first expressed by white Campbell Kitchen (Carl Van Vechten). In other words, Thurman becomes trapped in the alien body of Emma Lou and does not have the creative imagination to break her racial fixation by summoning up a female perspective. Instead, Emma Lou trades an obsession with skin color for one that is viewed by a patriarchal society as being even more perverse. When she catches Alva em-