

# Who Speaks for Harlem? Kenneth B. Clark, Albert Murray and the Controversies of Black Urban Life

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*Abstract.* This article seeks to rebalance historical assessment of the debate between “pathologists” and “anti-pathologists” which dominated discussions of black urban life in the United States during the 1960s, and which continues to shape ideas about race and the urban environment today. The heated disagreement between the social psychologist Kenneth B. Clark (1914–2005) and the critic and novelist Albert Murray (1916–) presents an opportunity to consider not only the pitfalls and unintended consequences of pathologist representations of black urban life, which have received much attention from scholars in recent years, but also the problematic aspects of anti-pathologist discourse, which have largely been overlooked. The dispute between Clark and Murray also illuminates the intense competition among some African American intellectuals to claim the personal authenticity and disciplinary authority to define and represent black urban life – and to adjudicate the authenticity and authority of others.

## “A NORTHERN PROBLEM”

In July 1964, black urban America burst onto the covers of magazines and the front pages of newspapers. For much of the preceding decade, images of respectably attired civil rights activists demonstrating peacefully in the South had held the attention of the American media and public. But with the outbreak of six days of rioting in Harlem on 18 July 1964, many Americans were alerted for the first time to the scale of a demographic revolution which had transformed black America. Since 1940, almost five million African Americans had left the South for the cities of the North, often driven from the land by mechanization and drawn by hopes of high-wage

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industrial jobs.<sup>1</sup> The opportunities presented by the war economy had proved to be short-lived, however. By the 1950s, migrants were confronted with the deindustrializing cities of the emerging Rust Belt, where African Americans were confined to dilapidated, overcrowded neighbourhoods scarred by neglect and ill-conceived “urban renewal.” While the postwar national economy boomed, African Americans bore the brunt of structural readjustment as industries retreated from urban centres and automated manufacturing plants sprang up in burgeoning white suburbs. Cut off from the new economy by residential segregation, inferior education and the racist practices of unions and employers, urban African Americans were saddled with rising unemployment, decrepit social services, and corrupt, fiscally hamstrung city administrations. Out of these daily frustrations, and the provocation of habitual police brutality, came the urban insurrections of the mid- and late 1960s which commenced in Harlem and reverberated over successive summers in Watts, Newark, Detroit and hundreds of other cities across the North of the United States.<sup>2</sup>

“The problem of the American Negro,” the social psychologist Kenneth B. Clark wrote in *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (1965), had become “predominantly a Northern problem.” In 1940, half of all African Americans had lived in the rural South and another quarter in southern towns. By the mid-1960s, however, virtually half of America’s black population lived in northern cities.<sup>3</sup> As white Americans revised their image of black America and sought to understand why violence had erupted *after* the passage of the Civil Rights Act, Clark was one of a host of black intellectuals who found an audience eager for insider accounts of black urban life. A sociological and psychological portrait of the Harlem community, *Dark Ghetto* had its origins in a major research project Clark had directed between 1962 and 1964 with funds from the President’s Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and the City of New York. Armed with the project’s findings, which had been released as a 620-page report, Clark secured a contract with Harper & Row for a more personal and literary account.<sup>4</sup> *Dark Ghetto* was among the first of a spate of

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books), 6. See also Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Viking, 2010), 152–200.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots: Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1965), 21–22. For the 1940 figures see Lemann, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Inc. (HARYOU), *Youth in the Ghetto: A Study of the Consequences of Powerlessness and a Blueprint for Change* (New York: Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Inc., 1964).

books by black male authors, in genres ranging from social science to memoir and fiction, which were contracted by major New York publishing houses and fed public curiosity about black urban life against the backdrop of “long, hot summers” of violence and the rise of black power militancy.<sup>5</sup> Partially serialized in the *New York Post*, Clark’s book sold almost 38,000 copies in hardback and a further 136,000 following reissue as a paperback in 1967.<sup>6</sup>

*Dark Ghetto* sealed what Eric Sundquist has called “the effective transference of the concept of the ghetto from Jews to African Americans.”<sup>7</sup> Clark located the ghetto’s origins in the Jewish quarter of sixteenth-century Venice and contended that

America has contributed to the concept of the ghetto the restriction of persons to a special area and the limiting of their freedom of choice on the basis of skin color. The dark ghetto’s invisible walls have been erected by the white society, by those who have power, both to confine those who have *no* power and to perpetuate their powerlessness.<sup>8</sup>

As Martin Luther King Jr. shifted his attention to urban deprivation in the North, it was these words which he borrowed (without attribution) in his own final book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967).<sup>9</sup> Two

<sup>5</sup> Further examples include Malcolm X with the assistance of Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1965); Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: W. Morrow & Co., 1966); Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968); William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Basic Books, 1968); H. Rap Brown, *Die, Nigger, Die!* (New York: Dial Press, 1969). On the rise of “first-person ghetto narrative” in American writing during the 1960s see Carlo Rotella, *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 269–92, 273.

<sup>6</sup> Ben Keppel, *The Work of Democracy: Ralph Bunche, Kenneth B. Clark, Lorraine Hansberry, and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 279 n. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Eric J. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 391. *Dark Ghetto* was the first book about African Americans from a major American publishing house in the 1960s to use the word “ghetto” in its title, with the partial exception of Dennis Clark, *The Ghetto Game: Racial Conflicts in the City* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1962). Sheed & Ward is a small Catholic publishing house founded in 1926. From 1966 many other titles followed suit. See, for example, August Meier and Elliot M. Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto: An Interpretive History of American Negroes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966); Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890–1930* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 11, original emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> King wrote that “the ghetto” was “created by those who had power both to confine those who had no power and to perpetuate their powerlessness.” See Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 36. For two contrasting views of King’s authorship/plagiarism, see Keith D. Miller, “Composing Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *PMLA*, 105, 1 (Jan. 1990), 70–82; Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 111–14.

of King's critics in the emerging black power movement, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, also regarded Clark as an authority. Their manifesto *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967) begins with an epigraph from Clark's book which defines America's "dark ghettos" as "social, political, educational and – above all – economic colonies" whose inhabitants were "subject peoples, victims of the greed, cruelty, insensitivity, guilt, and fear of their masters."<sup>10</sup>

For Clark, the ghetto's "invisible walls" marked out not only a physical terrain of exclusion and poverty, but also a psychological terrain of internalized stigma and self-doubt. "Human beings," he wrote, "who are forced to live under ghetto conditions and whose daily experience tells them that almost nowhere in society are they respected . . . will, as a matter of course, begin to doubt their own worth." Such doubts "become the seeds of a pernicious self- and group-hatred."<sup>11</sup> Clark's emphasis on the psychological damage wrought by confinement within the ghetto was consistent with the expert testimony he had provided to the US Supreme Court more than a decade earlier, that segregated schooling produced feelings of inferiority in black children. Indeed, Clark is remembered today principally as the "Scholar of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Decision."<sup>12</sup> Yet it was only in the 1960s, as the author of *Dark Ghetto* and a media pundit of first resort on matters of race, poverty and urban disorder, that Clark became a widely known public figure.

The mid-1960s marked both the highpoint and the breaking point of the liberal "pathologist" discourse which Clark had helped to shape. As his interventions over school segregation and urban deprivation signal, Clark's activist scholarship reflected the self-assurance of postwar American social science, with its faith in the rational application of social-scientific knowledge to problems of social policy. Clark and his wife, Mamie Phipps Clark, alongside other liberal scholars such as Gordon Allport, Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, believed that if the American public were made fully aware of the psychological "damage" and social "pathology" which racism engendered among African Americans, federal and local government would be pressured

<sup>10</sup> Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992; first published 1967), 2; Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 63–64.

<sup>12</sup> Woody Klein, ed., *Toward Humanity and Justice: The Writings of Kenneth B. Clark, Scholar of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Decision* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004). See also Richard Severo, "Kenneth Clark, Who Helped End Segregation, Dies," *New York Times*, 2 May 2005, 1. On Clark's role as an expert witness see Keppel, 97–132; John P. Jackson Jr., *Social Scientists for Social Justice: Making the Case against Segregation* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

into ameliorating social inequalities.<sup>13</sup> *Dark Ghetto* appeared in May 1965 at the moment of peak influence for liberal pathologism, just weeks before President Lyndon Johnson advertised his Great Society programmes as remedies for the “lacerating hurt” inflicted on African Americans by “ancient brutality, past injustice, and present prejudice.”<sup>14</sup> Clark’s book was welcomed by reviewers in the *New York Times Book Review*, *Saturday Review*, *Newsweek*, and many other publications. The Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles pronounced that Clark had done “as much as any American of either race” to “expose this nation’s terrible wounds.”<sup>15</sup>

Only a few months later, however, pathologists found themselves on the defensive. In August 1965, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” was leaked to the press and immediately triggered fierce debate. Moynihan argued that, notwithstanding recent advances towards legal equality, African Americans were “not equal” to other groups “in terms of ability to win out in the competitions of American life.” The “fundamental problem” holding them back, he stated, was “that of family structure,” for “the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling.”<sup>16</sup> Initial responses to the report varied, and not until the late 1960s would criticism reach its height.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, attacks were quickly mounted from within the civil rights movement. Six years earlier, the reception of Stanley Elkins’s *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* had indicated the potential for pathologist claims to cause offense. Elkins’s argument that slaves had been cowed and infantilized by oppression was vigorously debated by

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth B. Clark, *Prejudice and Your Child* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1955); Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, *The Mark of Oppression: Explorations in the Personality of the American Negro* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1951). See also Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, *Children, Race, and Power: Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s Northside Center* (New York: Routledge, 2000; first published 1996); Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 71–136.

<sup>14</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Commencement Address at Howard University: ‘To Fulfil These Rights,’” 4 June 1965, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965*, Volume II (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1966), 635–40.

<sup>15</sup> Anna M. Kross, “Wanted: Bootstraps,” *New York Times Book Review*, 20 June 1965, 22; Frank M. Cordasco, “Wanted: A World Fit to Live in,” *Saturday Review*, 5 June 1965, 21; “Light on the Ghetto,” *Newsweek*, 31 May 1965, 78–81; Robert Coles, “A Compelling Summons,” *The Reporter*, 21 Oct. 1965, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” (1965), in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, eds., *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy: A Trans-action Social Science and Public Policy Report* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 43.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Geary, “Tangled Ideologies: Reconsidering the Reception of the Moynihan Report,” paper delivered at the annual convention of the Organization of American Historians, Houston, TX, 18 March 2011, 14 (copy in author’s possession).

historians.<sup>18</sup> But the “Moynihan Report,” as it became known, was discussed and contested far beyond the academy, not least because its pathologist diagnosis was focussed on contemporary African Americans. Opposition intensified when conservative commentators invoked the report to argue that “illegitimacy,” rather than racism, poverty or police brutality, was the root cause of urban rioting.<sup>19</sup> Moynihan himself had faulted “[t]hree centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment” for the fragility of the black family, yet in calling that fragility the “fundamental problem” he had invited charges that he was blaming the victim.<sup>20</sup> In *The Nation*, the Boston social worker and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) activist William Ryan accused Moynihan of fostering “a new form of subtle racism.” James Farmer, CORE’s national leader, called the report “a massive academic cop-out for the white conscience.”<sup>21</sup>

Clark’s *Dark Ghetto* had treated black “family instability” as one of a number of factors, alongside inferior education, housing and employment opportunities, which impeded black social mobility. Though the Moynihan Report outstripped *Dark Ghetto* in its exclusive preoccupation with the deficiencies of the black family, the “emasculatation of the Negro male” which Clark had diagnosed as the effect of male underemployment and female dominance was substantially mirrored in Moynihan’s characterization of the “matriarchal” black family.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Moynihan’s description of black family life as a “tangle of pathology” was lifted from Clark’s Harlem report.<sup>23</sup> Clark felt compelled to defend Moynihan against “foolish” charges of racism. “If Pat’s a racist, I am,” he told journalists. “He highlights the total pattern of segregation and discrimination. Is a doctor responsible for the disease simply because he diagnoses it?”<sup>24</sup>

While Moynihan drew the most fire, the controversy surrounding his report stoked a broader critique of pathologism. In an interview in 1965, the novelist Ralph Ellison charged Clark and the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier with reducing black life to a “catalogue of negative definitions.”<sup>25</sup> A younger generation of African American social scientists would increasingly disown

<sup>18</sup> Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Ann J. Lane, *The Debate over Slavery: Stanley Elkins and His Critics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

<sup>19</sup> Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U. S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 207.

<sup>20</sup> Moynihan, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Ryan and Farmer quoted in Geary, 5, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 88; Moynihan, 75.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*; HARYOU, *Youth in the Ghetto*, 156. See also Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 106.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in “The Negro Family: Visceral Reaction,” *Newsweek*, 6 Dec. 1965, 40.

<sup>25</sup> The interview first appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1967. Ralph Ellison, “A Very Stern Discipline” (1967), in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 748.

what they called the “pejorative tradition” of Frazier, Moynihan and Clark, which allegedly viewed black communities merely as corrupted versions of white communities rather than grasping their own values and kinship forms.<sup>26</sup>

However, it was Albert Murray, Ellison’s close friend and a fellow alumnus of Tuskegee Institute, who was to become Clark’s chief antagonist. Born in 1916, two years after Clark, and raised in Mobile County, Alabama, Murray had spent the 1950s in the US Air Force before retiring from the military in 1962 at the rank of major. At that point he moved to Harlem, set up base in an apartment on Lenox Avenue and launched himself into more literary campaigns. As an essayist and aspiring novelist, Murray would never enjoy the accolades heaped on Ellison, whose National Book Award-winning *Invisible Man* (1952) ensured its author’s enduring renown. Nevertheless, through the 1960s Murray steadily built a reputation as an astute literary and social critic, and from 1974 he published a clutch of well-received novels. In time, he would be anointed by Henry Louis Gates Jr. as the “foremost cultural explicant of black modernism.”<sup>27</sup>

When the white southern author Robert Penn Warren canvassed the opinions of black intellectuals, politicians, ministers and activists for his book *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965), the problems of black urban communities in the North received considerably less attention than the impending death of Jim Crow in the South. By the time the book appeared in print, in the wake of urban rioting, Warren’s lines of inquiry seemed somewhat dated. Had he begun the project a year or two later, Warren’s interview with Clark would likely have focussed on conditions and grievances in Harlem, rather than on the motives of John Brown.<sup>28</sup> Warren’s cast of interviewees might also have been different. By 1966, Murray had entered the fray with a blistering attack on “social science fiction” which identified Clark as a chief purveyor of “dirty stories about Negroes.”<sup>29</sup> At stake in the ensuing war of words between Murray and Clark was the question of who was qualified to speak for and about Harlem.

<sup>26</sup> Charles A. Valentine, *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-proposals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 20.

<sup>27</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952). Murray’s first published novel was *Train Whistle Guitar* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974). On Murray’s life and career see Henry Louis Gates Jr., “King of Cats,” in *idem, Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 21–46, quotation at xxiii.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 313–25.

<sup>29</sup> Albert Murray, “Social Science Fiction in Harlem,” *New Leader*, 17 Jan. 1966, 23. Murray does not feature in Warren’s book.

Their dispute encompassed a cluster of issues then debated with urgency among African American intellectuals, including racial authenticity, the relative merits of particular disciplines and genres, and the validity and political utility of pathologism. The controversy surrounding the use of pathologist imagery by authors such as Moynihan and Clark has attracted considerable attention from historians in recent years. Yet the fractious debate between Clark and Murray presents an opportunity to reflect on some of the limitations and omissions of this scholarship and to outline a more balanced understanding of the discord between pathologists and their opponents.

The methodological and ethical critique of pathologism framed by Murray and Ellison laid much of the conceptual groundwork for recent, historically contextualized accounts of damage imagery and its shortcomings. A number of scholars have charted liberal pathologists' failure to predict the cultural and political impact of their imagery and to achieve their progressive aims. Daryl Michael Scott explains how representations of black life which were intended to invoke empathy and generate public support for social reforms all too often encouraged contempt and fatalism about the black poor and support for a punitive politics of law and order. Alice O'Connor, too, has shown how an emphasis on black social and psychological dysfunction proved to be "powerfully stigmatizing" and "reinforced the imagery of a basically unassimilable black lower class."<sup>30</sup>

But while pathologism's failures have been extensively rehearsed, the kinds of imagery and argument deployed by anti-pathologists in the 1960s and subsequently have largely escaped historical scrutiny. Here, the debate between Clark and Murray is particularly instructive. For if Murray's attacks on Clark exposed many of pathologism's limitations, Clark's criticisms of Murray identify the traps and distortions to which anti-pathologists were themselves prone. Clark's critique, no less than Murray's, holds value for thinking about the precarious, unruly politics of representation and the challenges inherent in crafting images of oppressed groups. Clark's own portrayal of black urban life manifests the dangers of foregrounding suffering and pain. Yet, as Clark discerned, Murray's writings divulge the equally problematic consequences of an emphasis on pleasure. Their public exchange of accusations and recriminations goes to the heart of the struggle among

<sup>30</sup> Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 137–202; O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 19. Further critiques of pathologism include Jackson, *Social Scientists for Social Justice*; William E. Cross Jr., *Shades of Black: Diversity in African-American Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).



African American intellectuals in the 1960s to claim authority to speak for Harlem and to control its image.

### “THE CRY OF A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST”

*Dark Ghetto* begins with a prologue, “The Cry of the Ghetto,” assembled from the words of anonymous residents of Harlem. Its first quotation immediately establishes the inner turmoil and self-doubt Clark wished to expose.

A lot of times, when I’m working, I become as despondent as hell and I feel like crying. I’m not a man, none of us are men! I don’t own anything. I’m not a man enough to own a store; none of us are,

testified a thirty-year-old male.<sup>31</sup> Giving voice to these residents was one way in which Clark hoped to convey “the *truth* of the ghetto” which quantifiable, computable “facts” could never reveal.<sup>32</sup>

Yet *Dark Ghetto* was also Clark’s own personal testimony. It was, he stated, not merely a social-scientific report but the “anguished cry of its author,” the “cry of a social psychologist, controlled in part by the language and concepts of social science.”<sup>33</sup> Laying out both his insider credentials and his motivation for writing the book, Clark explained:

More than forty years of my life had been lived in Harlem. I started school in the Harlem public schools. I first learned about people, about love, about cruelty, about sacrifice, about cowardice, about courage, about bombast in Harlem . . . My family moved from house to house, and from neighborhood to neighborhood within the walls of the ghetto in a desperate attempt to escape its creeping blight. In a very real sense, therefore, *Dark Ghetto* is a summation of my personal and lifelong experiences and observations as a prisoner within the ghetto long before I was aware that I really was a prisoner.<sup>34</sup>

Clark proceeded through a detailed litany of the material deprivation, educational neglect, unemployment, disease, diminished life expectancy, addiction and family breakdown which he considered the “objective dimensions” of life in Harlem. Above all, however, he sought to capture what he believed were the “subjective dimensions” of black urban experience, namely the emotional consequences of life lived under such conditions:

Housing is no abstract social and political problem, but an extension of man’s personality. If the Negro has to identify with a rat-infested tenement, his sense of personal inadequacy and inferiority, already aggravated by job discrimination and other forms of humiliation, is reinforced by the physical reality around him.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 1–10, quotations at 1, 3, 9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii, original emphasis.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 32–33.

Indeed, Clark's book marks the culmination of a dramatic transformation of Harlem's symbolic significance. Celebrated during its 1920s "Renaissance" as a "City of Refuge," a "Culture Capital," and a "Mecca of the New Negro," Harlem had been revered as the exception to the ramshackle, unsanitary conditions which typified black districts in America's industrial cities. With its smart avenues and stately brownstone townhouses, hastily vacated by prosperous white occupants when black newcomers began to arrive at the turn of the twentieth century, Harlem had become the preeminent locus of African Americans' dreams of a "promised land" in the North and a powerful symbol of "race progress."<sup>36</sup> However, ravaged by the Depression and bypassed by postwar prosperity, the neighbourhood gradually assumed a new symbolism. James Baldwin wrote in 1948 of "The Harlem Ghetto." In the mid-1960s, when Harlem inaugurated the sequence of urban riots, such imagery became pervasive. Harlem was, according to *Time* magazine, "the archetypal Negro ghetto." For Clark, it was the "symbol of Negro ghettos everywhere."<sup>37</sup>

Yet neither Clark's bleak portrayal of Harlem nor the wider imagery of the black "ghetto" was universally accepted. In his essay "Social Science Fiction in Harlem," published early in 1966 in the *New Leader*, a liberal magazine, Murray scorned both Clark's insider credentials as a black American and his portrait of "the wretchedness of U. S. Negroes." Clark had been born in the Panama Canal Zone in 1914 to Jamaican parents, and some of Murray's barbs typified the prejudice which had often been directed at West Indian immigrants by those whom Murray called "multigeneration U. S. Negroes." Overlooking the fact that Clark had arrived in Harlem as a small boy and had spent much of his life in the neighbourhood, Murray, who had lived in Harlem for only a few years, dismissed Clark as a "brownskin Panamanian." Clark, Murray claimed, had turned himself into a "mass-media certified Negro Negroologist," a "very special kind of entertainer who uses charts, graphs, and monographs as his stage props" while regaling credulous white audiences with sensationalized accounts of black "degradation." Moreover, Murray argued that "the term ghetto does not apply to Harlem." Unlike historic Jewish communities in Europe, he stated, the "so-called Negro community is, culturally speaking, essentially the same as the so-called White

<sup>36</sup> Rudolph Fisher, "The City of Refuge" (1925), in Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Touchstone, 1997; first published 1925), 57–74; James Weldon Johnson, "Harlem: The Culture Capital," in *ibid.*, 301–11; Alain Locke, ed., *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*, special issue of *Survey Graphic*, 6, 6 (March 1925). See also James de Jongh, *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>37</sup> James Baldwin, "From the American Scene: The Harlem Ghetto: Winter 1948," *Commentary*, 5 (Feb. 1948), 165–70; "No Place Like Home," *Time*, 31 July 1964, 12; Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 25.

community,” with the “same calendar, religious observances, language, food” and the “same educational, economic and political objectives as whites.”<sup>38</sup> In an interview the previous year, Ralph Ellison had admonished those black novelists whom he saw as beholden to pathologist “sociological theories” that “Harlem is a ‘Negro ghetto.’” If a black author “accepts the clichés” about black family breakdown, matriarchy, and the psychological castration of black males, Ellison warned, “he’ll never see the people of whom he wishes to write.”<sup>39</sup>

The fiercest, most sustained criticism of *Dark Ghetto* appeared, however, in Murray’s book of social and cultural criticism, *The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture* (1970). Here, Murray charged Clark with grossly distorting the realities of life in Harlem by making social and psychological dysfunction appear ubiquitous while ignoring such positive black attributes as resilience, self-belief, self-reliance, humour, elegance, wit, creativity and a capacity for enjoyment. *Dark Ghetto*, according to Murray, “represents Negroes as substandard human beings who subsist in a sick community. Its image of Harlem is, in effect, that of an urban pit writhing with derelicts.” Clark, Murray wrote, “insists that slavery and oppression have reduced Negroes to such a tangle of pathology that all black American behavior is in effect only a pathetic manifestation of black cowardice, self-hatred, escapism, and self-destructiveness.” Dismayed by the positive reception *Dark Ghetto* had received in many quarters, Murray was especially critical of those supposedly “proud black nationalist spokesmen” who, by failing to question Clark’s negative portrayal of black communities, had shown how little pride they really had. Murray also elaborated his view that Harlem was “no ghetto at all.” Scarcely isolated from the wider world, its residents were bona fide New Yorkers and Americans. Most, he claimed, worked downtown, were “as intimately involved with Macy’s” as their incomes allowed, and took pride in the role that black entertainers, lawyers and politicians played in the life of the city and nation at large. “Segregation is bad enough,” Murray conceded, “but it just ain’t what it used to be.”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Murray, “Social Science Fiction in Harlem,” 21–23. For “multigeneration U. S. Negroes,” see Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture* (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1970), 76. On the strained historical relations between African Americans and West Indian immigrants see Reuel Rogers, “Black Like Who?” Afro-Caribbean Immigrants, African Americans, and the Politics of Group Identity,” in Nancy Foner, ed., *Islands in the City: West Indian Migration to New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 163–92.

<sup>39</sup> Ellison, “A Very Stern Discipline,” 726.

<sup>40</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 40–41, 180, 74–75. Murray remains rare in discerning that black power theorists frequently reproduced pathologist claims about black urban life. See Daniel Matlin, *On the Corner: Black Intellectuals and the Urban Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

*The Omni-Americans* also deepened Murray's attack on Clark's legitimacy as a Harlemit and racial insider. Overlooking Clark's childhood in Harlem, his long-standing role alongside his wife in running the Northside Center for Child Development on 110th Street, and the two-year research project from which *Dark Ghetto* emerged, Murray claimed that the book "reveals very little if any meaningful, first-hand contact with any black community in the United States." Indeed, Murray placed Clark outside the boundaries of an authentic black sensibility. By describing black communities only in terms of their deviation from white norms, Murray claimed, *Dark Ghetto* showed "how a book by a black writer may represent a point of view toward black experience which is essentially white." Black novelists whose works reflected pathologist ideas, such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin, were also deemed to be lacking an authentically black perspective. The Harlem-born Baldwin, according to the Alabama-born Murray, had spurned "U. S. Negro tradition" and assumed the outlook of a "New York Jewish intellectual of immigrant parents" when he called Harlem a "black ghetto."<sup>41</sup>

Beneath its hyperbole and personal gibes, *The Omni-Americans* contained a perceptive critique of *Dark Ghetto* and the wider pathologist literature. Clark's book did indeed create the impression of a community mired in misery, dysfunction and self-destruction, and said relatively little about the positive social and cultural resources through which urban African Americans survived a harsh environment. Conceived by Murray and Ellison as an attack on the social sciences and their authority to represent black life, the critique of pathologism would, from the late 1960s, begin to feed back into the social sciences themselves. Feminists and other radical scholars would increasingly condemn pathologists such as Clark for failing to recognize the functionality and adaptability of African American family structures and for exaggerating black self-hatred and self-destruction.<sup>42</sup>

Murray was also alert to the potential for damage imagery to backfire on its liberal proponents. Anticipating the arguments of scholars such as Scott and O'Connor, Murray warned that Clark's portrait of Harlem would only strengthen white Americans' "notions of black inferiority." By depicting black urban life as a morass of psychopathology and social deviancy, Clark risked

<sup>41</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 40–41, 121, 149. On the Northside Center see Markowitz and Rosner, *Children, Race, and Power*.

<sup>42</sup> Valentine, *Culture and Poverty*; Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968); Joyce Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971); Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). See also Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 166–70. Similar arguments were applied retrospectively in historical accounts of American slavery. See, for example, Herbert George Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

reinforcing “the stereotypes that Negroes have always been extremely sensitive about.” Indeed, pathologist social science was, according to Murray, the unwitting progenitor of contemporary racism, reinventing the “folklore of white supremacy” as the “fakelore of black pathology.” Would white parents send their children to public schools alongside “pathological” black adolescents, as integrationists such as Clark seemed naively to expect? Rather than convincing the American public of the need for ameliorative social interventions, Murray predicted, “one-sided featuring of black pathology might frighten white Americans into an easier tolerance of anti-Negro police tactics.” Indeed, as Scott has demonstrated, newspapers were quickly drawn to conservative explanations of the urban riots as products of a pathology bred in the home and susceptible only to black self-help and vigorous policing. Following the Watts riot of August 1965, California’s governor, Edmund Brown, attributed the violence to “hoodlums.” His successor, Ronald Reagan, espoused an even more vehement law-and-order approach to urban unrest. Scholars such as Edward Banfield gave intellectual weight to such platforms, urging repressive responses to what they described as the pathological criminality of the urban lower class. Recognizing that damage imagery had been harnessed to conservative ends, many liberals disassociated themselves from pathologism from the late 1960s onwards.<sup>43</sup>

Some of Murray’s criticisms, however, were little more than polemical distortions of Clark’s views. Clark did not harbour an “almost worshipful” attitude towards “white well being.” *Dark Ghetto* was strident in its condemnation of white racism and candid about white “divorce, abortions, adultery, and the various forms of jaded and fashionable middle- and upper-class sexual explorations.” Neither did Clark characterize Harlem’s residents as “derelicts” incapable of action or self-assertion, or reduce all black behaviour to cowardice and self-destruction. *Dark Ghetto* in fact contained a highly sympathetic account of the Harlem riot of 1964, in which Clark detected a “reservoir of energy” that could be harnessed to effective social action. For all its gloom, *Dark Ghetto* was not devoid of hope or of affection for the community in which Clark himself had learned of “love,” “sacrifice” and “courage” as well as “cruelty,” “cowardice” and “bombast.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, as sensitive as Murray was to the pitfalls of pathologism, he was less mindful of the problematic resonances and potentially conservative implications of his own representations of black urban life.

<sup>43</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 40–41, 43, 7; Scott, 156–57, 159; Edward C. Banfield, *The Unheavenly City: The Nature and Future of Our Urban Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970).

<sup>44</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 41–42; Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 74, 15, xv.

### “ACCENTUATING THE POSITIVE”

*The Omni-Americans* was not only a critique of pathologism. It was also a manifesto for what Murray called an “affirmative,” anti-pathologist perspective on black life. “The time for accentuating the positive and eliminating the negative is long overdue,” he announced. Murray’s Harlem was, accordingly, a place of humour, sartorial sophistication, playful eloquence and almost constant music-making. Harlem “for all its liabilities generates an atmosphere that stimulates people-to-people good times which are second to none anywhere in the world.” The blues, Murray insisted, were not a lament. Rather, the music divulged a philosophy of “impromptu heroism” which mocked the temptation to self-pity. A characteristically “Negro” idiom, the blues also encapsulated what Murray, following Constance Rourke, regarded as the quintessentially American traits of resilience, optimism and improvisation.<sup>45</sup>

Particularly striking was Murray’s call for black novelists to resist pathologism and

do justice to the enduring humanity of U. S. Negroes, people who, for instance, can say of their oppressors, “Yeah, we got our troubles alright. But still and all, if white folks could be black for just one Saturday night they wouldn’t never want to be white folks no more!”<sup>46</sup>

The words chosen by Murray to represent the collective voice of black America have an unexpected provenance. In 1965, Ralph Ellison had recounted an old “white Southern joke on Negroes” in which a white employer inquires why his most productive black worker never agrees to work overtime on Saturday nights. The worker replies, “If you could just be a Negro one Saturday night, you’d never want to be a white man again.”<sup>47</sup>

To Ellison’s mind, this “rather facile joke” at least recognized “an internality to Negro American life, that it possesses its own attraction and its own mystery.”<sup>48</sup> Yet while such recognition worked against the pathologist view of black life as reducible to its miseries and deviancies, it veered towards another, equally problematic, view of black experience. In his sympathetic exploration of “White Negro” primitivism in 1957, Norman Mailer had also deployed the trope of black Saturday night revelry. Explaining how the “white hipster,” faced with the spectre of nuclear annihilation, had “absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro,” Mailer contended that

<sup>45</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 7, 76, 59. “Accentuating the positive and eliminating the negative” echoes Johnny Mercer’s lyrics to “Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive,” a hit for Bing Crosby in 1945. See also Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973); Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1931).

<sup>46</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 6–7.

<sup>47</sup> Ellison, “A Very Stern Discipline,” 730.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body.<sup>49</sup>

Together with the old “white Southern joke on Negroes,” Mailer’s words illustrate how an emphasis on black pleasure – no less than on pathology and pain – could serve to reinforce long-standing racial stereotypes.

In an unpublished manuscript which likely dates from this period, Murray acknowledged the existence of conflicting sets of stereotypes of African Americans. Yet one variety seemed to him to be more pernicious in its consequences:

Self-hatred (or self-rejection) . . . is an infinitely more serious charge than happy-go-lucky ever was. It was pretty hard after all to accuse clean-cut and conscientious school teachers, doctors, lawyers, businessmen or even bell boys of being frivolous and shiftless; but ambitious and successful U. S. Negroes are as readily accused of self-rejection these days as are derelicts [*sic*]. So is ghetto a far more degrading term than darktown or even *niggertown*. Nevertheless there are those who foam at the mouth at the very thought of a *darktown* and see red at the merest hint of *niggertown* (“as they damn well should”) only to accept *ghetto* as if it were an amelioration. They recoil from the comic stereotypes of *niggertown* but do not seem to mind at all that those of the ghetto are pathological (a far better justification for ostracism than shiftlessness)!<sup>50</sup>

Murray underestimated the role that “happy-go-lucky” imagery had played, through minstrelsy and other channels, in rationalizing slavery and segregation. A year after the publication of *The Omni-Americans*, the historian George Fredrickson would provide a detailed exploration of that imagery and its uses. The “stereotype of the happy and contended bondsman,” Fredrickson observed, had been wielded by southern slave-owners in part “to counter the abolitionist image of the wretched slave.” Even when stereotypes of black gaiety had appeared in the arguments of some who opposed slavery and black expatriation, such imagery had perpetuated a view of African Americans as childlike and simple, which offended their humanity and injured their social status. The Reverend Increase Niles Tarbox of West Newton, Massachusetts wrote in 1864 of the “more joyous and holiday feeling” of the black race, and that year the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission remarked how blacks’ “cheerfulness and love of mirth overflow with the exuberance of childhood.” Children, however lovable, have seldom been accorded full

<sup>49</sup> Norman Mailer, “The White Negro” (1957), in Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg, ed., *Protest* (London: Panther, 1960), 291.

<sup>50</sup> Albert Murray, untitled manuscript, n.d., in envelope marked “Remarks on Some of the Limitations of Protest Writers (from Hemingway ms),” box 1, Albert Murray Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, pp. 4–5.

political citizenship. In the twentieth century, such “romantic racialism” resurfaced in the “jazzed-up” form of white primitivism during the 1920s (and, Fredrickson might have added, the “White Negro” primitivism of the postwar era). Yet from the 1930s onwards, liberal intellectuals, black and white, had increasingly discarded romantic characterizations of the “happy Negro,” not least

because it was seen that they provided a covert rationale for continued segregation, exploitation, and poverty. If blacks were seen as naturally joyous and capable of deriving aesthetic pleasure from the simplest things of life, it was pointed out, then whites had a perfect excuse for doing nothing about the fact that blacks were an exploited minority.<sup>51</sup>

It was this very charge which Clark levelled against *The Omni-Americans*. When “Social Science Fiction in Harlem” had appeared in 1966, Clark had struggled to formulate a coherent public response. He declined an invitation from Myron Kolatch, the editor of the *New Leader*, to respond in the magazine’s pages, instead sending Kolatch a letter (“not for publication”) in which he criticized the decision to publish Murray’s essay and implied, remarkably, that Murray’s refusal to confront Harlem’s harsh realities was itself testimony to the psychological damage caused by racism. “My summary judgment,” Clark wrote,

is that Mr. Murray’s article could be seen as an appendix to *Dark Ghetto*: The ghetto and an insensitive and dehumanizing society spawn a multitude of tragic consequences. Among the more tragic, and probably the most dangerous, of its human casualties are those of potential human intelligence and imagination.<sup>52</sup>

When *The Omni-Americans* was published, Clark managed a more nuanced response. Addressing an audience at the City College of New York, where he was a professor of psychology, Clark commented that a favourable newspaper review of Murray’s book had reminded him of a passage he had read many years earlier, from which he now quoted: “a strange people, merry mid their misery, laughing through their tears like the sun shining through the rain. Yet what simple philosophers they . . . with natures of sunshine and song.” These

<sup>51</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1987; first published 1971), 52, 123–24, 328–30. Few other historians have subjected anti-pathologist imagery to critical examination. Richard King makes the helpful and balanced observation that “if social scientists lose the character and texture of life as they develop their abstract models of society, the literary/cultural approach of Ellison and Murray fails to do justice to the institutional and structural constraints on individual and group expression.” See Richard H. King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals, 1940–1970* (Washington, DC and Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 302–3.

<sup>52</sup> Kenneth B. Clark to Myron Kolatch, 27 Jan. 1966, folder 2, box 26, Kenneth B. Clark Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter “Clark Papers”).



words, Clark revealed, were an impression of the Irish penned by an English army officer during the nineteenth century. Yet they seemed to Clark to resonate deeply with Murray's affirmative view of life in Harlem and with the enthusiastic reception of Murray's book:

The writer of the review totally bought Murray's view of urban ghetto experience as a positive, stimulating, invigorating thing. He bought it uncritically, and as I have been watching the reviews of Murray's essays and books, there does seem to be this trend to perfume the stink of the ghetto, to make it more palatable to those who are not required to live and to die often prematurely in America's ghettos.

If Murray considered Clark an "entertainer" who peddled the images of blackness his white audiences desired, Clark thought much the same of Murray. "As a psychologist," Clark believed that the romanticization of black or Irish experience functioned primarily "to solve the guilt of the oppressor," and reflected little of the "reality of the predicament of the oppressed."<sup>53</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The dispute between Clark and Murray was grounded to a large extent in the particularities of African American history – the competing sets of stereotypes, originating in slavery, which Fredrickson describes in terms of a "dichotomy" between "the Negro as beast" and "the Negro as child."<sup>54</sup> Against this backdrop of a history of racial defamation, even earnest African American intellectuals such as Clark and Murray could struggle to evade imagery which recalled or resonated with one set of stereotypes or the other. Their hostile disagreement also reflects the intense competition which existed among some African American intellectuals, during this moment of heightened public interest in black urban America, to claim the personal authenticity and disciplinary authority to define and speak for Harlem and to impugn the authenticity and authority of others. At stake were not merely opportunities for public recognition and material rewards (Clark in fact donated his royalties from *Dark Ghetto* to the Northside Center), but also the potential to reshape perceptions of African Americans in ways which, these authors hoped, would further the pursuit of equality.<sup>55</sup>

The problematic notion of authenticity has continued to percolate through recent academic and popular discussions of black urban life. One scholar has commended Murray's writings as providing "an insider's view of the Black Experience that establishes, authentically, its beauty, its complexity, and all of

<sup>53</sup> Kenneth B. Clark, "Draft, Address Delivered at City College Ethnic Conference," n.d., folder 2, box 167, Clark Papers, pp. 2–4.

<sup>54</sup> Fredrickson, 284.

<sup>55</sup> On Clark's donation see the invitation to a book signing, n.d., folder 1, box 187, Clark Papers.

its contradictions.”<sup>56</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, author of several books about black urban America, is promoted by his publisher as a “former welfare father from the ghetto of Detroit,” a “critic, scholar, and ordained Baptist minister” who “charts the progress and pain of African Americans.”<sup>57</sup> Such formulations scarcely acknowledge the diversity of African Americans’ beliefs and experiences. A few voices, however, now resist the temptation to offer an “authentic” or “definitive” insider’s view. In *Harlem Is Nowhere: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America* (2011), Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, an African American raised in Texas, explores her own relationship to Harlem as a shifting, contingent, deeply personal construct enmeshed in layers of mythology and memory imbibed from books, photographs, folklore and hearsay. Despite her book’s subtitle, reminiscent of a genre Murray termed ghetto “safari,” Rhodes-Pitts renounces “the typical obligation of writing about Harlem – offering pronouncements that Harlem is this or Harlem is that” – choosing instead to foreground the dynamic subjectivity of the relationship between person and place.<sup>58</sup>

As Clark’s reference to the Irish suggests, however, the issues of representation involved in his dispute with Murray exceed the particularities of African American experience and pose onerous questions for social scientists, literary authors, historians and others. How can oppressed groups be written or spoken about in a manner which both witnesses their suffering and the necessity of change and recognizes their dignity, resourcefulness and agency? Michael Katz has recently remarked, after thirty years of teaching courses on the “urban crisis,” that students who enter his classroom “eager to help change the world” often leave it feeling demoralized and helpless. The field of urban studies, Katz proposes, needs a “new narrative,” one which does not figure impoverished communities simply as passive victims of relentless structural forces.<sup>59</sup> This important warning recalls the most persuasive of Murray’s criticisms of *Dark Ghetto*. Yet the excesses of *anti*-pathologist discourse need also to be kept in mind as a new narrative is being formed. Those excesses may, indeed, be found even in the work of some of the most accomplished scholars writing about African American history today.

Robin Kelley forcefully indicts pathologist social scientists for “playing the dozens” with black urban communities, and resolves “to recognize the

<sup>56</sup> Warren J. Carson, untitled review of Roberta S. Maguire, ed., *Conversations with Albert Murray* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), *African American Review*, 34, 3 (Autumn 2000), 547.

<sup>57</sup> See [www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/LiteratureEnglish/AmericanLiterature/AfricanAmerican/?view=usa&ci=9780195115697](http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/LiteratureEnglish/AmericanLiterature/AfricanAmerican/?view=usa&ci=9780195115697), accessed 22 June 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 69; Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, *Harlem Is Nowhere: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011), 118.

<sup>59</sup> Michael B. Katz, “The Existential Problem of Urban Studies,” *Dissent* (Fall 2010), 65–68.

importance of pleasure and laughter in people's lives, to see culture and community as more than responses to, or products of, oppression." Such benign intentions become acutely problematic, however, when Kelley enjoins his readers to think of young black female prostitutes not as victims, but as creative agents reclaiming their bodies. Their turn to prostitution, he suggests, should be understood as "transgressive" and "potentially empowering since it turns labor not associated with wage work – sexual play and intercourse – into income." Readers, he urges, should consider "the extent to which anonymous sex is a source of pleasure" for these women.<sup>60</sup>

Beyond raising the dilemmas of "structure" and "agency" faced by any author confronting the experience of oppressed groups, such statements stray perilously close to historically ingrained stereotypes of "happy-go-lucky" African Americans and their putative aversion to work and supposedly uninhibited sensuality. The literary scholar Hazel Carby offers a rare insight into the hazards of emphasizing black "pleasure" – or "accentuating the positive and eliminating the negative" – when she interrogates the "rediscovery" of Zora Neale Hurston's novels since the 1980s. Echoing Clark's response to the reception of Murray's writings, Carby wonders whether Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) has become "the most frequently taught black novel because it acts as a mode of reassurance that, really, the black folk are happy and healthy."<sup>61</sup>

Representations of African Americans are not doomed to lapse into pathologism or romanticism. But to navigate between these polar extremes requires a focussed awareness of both sets of stereotypes and their historical uses and misuses. At a particular juncture on his journey from writing *Invisible Man* (whose protagonist has been described as "horribly damaged") to leading the assault on pathologism, Ralph Ellison in 1958 grappled arduously, but productively, with this challenge. Remembering the jazz guitarist Charlie Christian, a childhood friend in Oklahoma City, Ellison wrote,

He spent much of his life in a slum in which all the forms of disintegration attending the urbanization of rural Negroes ran riot. Although he himself was from a respectable family, the wooden tenement in which he grew up was full of poverty, crime and sickness. It was also alive and exciting, and I enjoyed visiting there, for the people both lived and sang the blues. Nonetheless, it was doubtless here that he developed the tuberculosis from which he died.

The lives evoked here are neither enviable nor entirely pitiable. Ellison witnesses the ingenuity of a culture as well as the results of an intolerable

<sup>60</sup> Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Dysfunktional!*, 2, 4, 73.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Jonathan Scott Holloway, "The Black Intellectual and the Crisis Canon in the Twentieth Century," *Black Scholar*, 31, 1 (Spring 2001), 239; Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Novel* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1937).

injustice. Crucially, he disavows the strategic selectivity which underlies both romanticism and pathologism, neither “eliminating the negative,” which would trivialize the effects of oppression, nor reducing black lives to a passive and relentless victimhood. Such strategic representations may be motivated by the best of intentions. In the end, however, they benefit their subjects little more than they enlighten their readers.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 168; Ralph Ellison, “The Charlie Christian Story” (1958), in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, 270.