

## African Americans

### 'I don't sing other people's voices'

I don't sing other people's voices.  
(Skip James)

#### OUT OF SLAVERY

This chapter discusses the issues surrounding African Americans and their struggle for self-definition within the United States of America, through an exploration of various assertive modes of expression. In a culture whose dominant historical voice has been white, there is a vital need for African Americans to present their lives, past and future, as of equal importance in the 'American story'. As Werner Sollors writes, 'For this reason, what is called "memory" ... may become a form of counterhistory that challenges the false generalizations in exclusionary "History"' (Sollors 1994: 8). African-American 'voices' actively express 'memory', as Sollors refers to it, present 'counterhistories' to resist the tendency to exclude, and articulate African-American identities to break the imposed 'silence'<sup>1</sup> inherited from slavery and perpetuated in the written history and social frameworks of the USA. This chapter will emphasise the dynamic quality of the contest between 'silence' and 'voice' in African-American culture and how this process has been integral to a wider struggle for political power and authority in the United States. This concept of expressive 'voices' takes a variety of forms: slave songs, autobiography, fiction, political speech, rap music and film, but together they create an alternative mode of communication through which the African Americans both state their own culture and assert their difference, whilst positioning themselves alongside the often more dominant voices of white mainstream culture. These 'repositories of individual memories, taken together, create a collective communal memory' (Fabre and O'Meally 1994: 9) that represent a black counterhistorical identity. What we will show, in the words of Manning Marable, is that this 'identity is not something our oppressors forced upon us. It is a cultural and ethnic awareness we have collectively

constructed for ourselves over hundreds of years. This identity is a cultural umbilical cord connecting us with Africa' (Marable 1992: 295).

This 'collective construction' of an identity began with the vital oral culture from Africa sustained through expressive modes such as song and story. This was, according to Ralph Ellison, 'what we had in place of freedom' (Ellison 1972: 255), because 'since we were excluded from the cultural mainstream', it was 'only performative spaces we had left' (Hall 1992: 27). In the very first black newspaper, published in 1827, its editor John B. Russwurm wrote that for 'too long others have spoken for us' (Ripley 1993: 11) and so put into words the primary concern of African Americans, to speak for themselves and dispel the 'implication ... that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American - and the rest must simply fit in' (West 1993a: 256-7).

To resist definition and speak for oneself is fundamental to the assertion of identity, as bell hooks puts it,

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life, and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice.

(Mariani 1991: 340)

In order to examine the idea of expression, of 'voice' and 'talking back', we will begin with the heritage of slavery in African-American culture and its impact on the positioning of people of colour within a framework of values dominated by the mainstream culture of whites who tended to assume the slave was 'a kind of *tabula rasa* upon which the white man could write what he chose' (Levine 1977: 52). The 'master-culture', like the master of the plantation who sought to rule the lives of the slaves, tried to impose its norms and values on the minority group who were derided because of their colour and because of an inherited European view of the African as barbaric, heathen and inferior.

The African was ... defined as an inferior human being. The representation of the African as Other signified phenotypical and cultural characteristics as evidence of this inferiority and the attributed condition of Africans therefore constituted a measure of European progress and civilization

(Miles 1989: 30)

Defining the African within these limits of representation meant the power and status of the master were increased since, as the quotation suggests, the slave acted as an Other or a mirror against which the whites measured themselves and their value systems and to assume the inferiority of the

African thus bolstered the power of the whites. The master/slave system was grounded in denials: of black history, identity, humanity, community, knowledge and language. These were all seen as means through which slaves might assert themselves and ultimately question their condition in relation to the dominant group. To deny or erase these was, therefore, a method of control, a device to deny the slaves' identity and history and enforce an impression of being adrift, worthless and devoid of ancestry.

In 1965, during the struggles for civil rights, James Baldwin echoed many of these ideas when he wrote:

It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and identity has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you . . . I was taught in American history books that Africa had no history and neither did I. I was a savage about whom the least said the better . . . You belonged where white people put you.

(Baldwin 1985: 404)

Baldwin's own writings sought to construct a place in America for the black man and to defy being positioned by 'challenging the white world's assumptions' (Baldwin 1963: 31):

the truth about a black man, as a historical entity and as a human being, *has* been hidden from him, deliberately and cruelly; the power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world's definitions.

(*ibid.*: 62)

Similarly, the increased political demands for Black Power in the 1960s followed this argument, claiming that any movement 'must speak in the tone of that community . . . [so that] black people are going to use the words they want to use – not just the words whites want to hear' (Carmichael 1966: 5).

## NEW BLACK HISTORIES

As a consequence of the civil rights movement and the kind of 'refusal' that Baldwin and Carmichael refer to, African-American and white American historians working on slave culture began to question official versions of black history by arguing that the denials, brutality and restraints of slavery did not crush the persistent desire in the slave community to maintain their own identities and their own sense of culture. The work of John W. Blassingame (1972), for example, demonstrates how through various cultural forms, such as songs, stories, dance and religion,

the rigors of bondage did not crush the slave's creative energies [and] through these means the slave could view himself as an object, hold on

to fantasies about his status, engender hope and patience, and at least use rebellious language when contemplating his life.

(Blassingame 1972: 59)

The tentative assertions made here by Blassingame hint at the controversial nature of these claims, but later in the book his point is made even more clearly when he states that such slave expression encouraged 'group identification' and therefore argued 'that slaves were not solely dependent on the white man's cultural frames of reference for their ideas and values' (*ibid.*: 75–6).

Lawrence Levine develops these arguments, claiming that slaves 'were able to create an independent art form and a distinctive voice' (Levine 1977: 30) through vital channels of expression outside the control of the 'master-culture'. The importance of language and of preserving a 'voice' is a recurrent idea in these new histories of slavery and its culture. They indicate an important stream of resistance which was conveyed through the arts of expression, especially song and story-telling. For through these, the communities of Africans could articulate and understand their place in the world outside of the immediate horrors and restrictions of slavery. The past was not dead in these oral arts, but very much present and real in the authority of the singer/teller. As Africans in America, they had 'alternatives open to them – alternatives that they themselves fashioned out of the fusion of their African heritage and their new religion' (*ibid.*: 35). Levine's emphasis falls importantly on the phrase 'that they themselves fashioned' because it underscores the essential quality of self-definition associated with these creative acts. In them and through them, the *self* is asserted in a world of constant denial in which the 'definitions belong to the definers, not the defined' (Morrison 1987: 190).

Levine's idea of 'fusion' establishes a sense of new identity for African Americans who as slaves still maintained an effective and life-affirming set of values through the power of the voice and its willingness to enter into a dialogue with the dominant culture's own expressions. Levine is clearly seeing in these early examples a pattern in history towards integration wherein the black and white culture could find some point of harmonious contact. In this respect Levine's history is in keeping with a particular set of arguments and interpretations of African-American life associated with the stance of Martin Luther King in the civil rights movement. The liberal position suggested by Levine is of a distinct and valid 'black culture and consciousness' which 'interacted with a larger society that deeply affected it but to which it did not completely succumb' (Levine 1977: 297).

In contrast to the white historian's liberal perspective offered by Levine, Sterling Stuckey's work argues that the roots of black 'nationalist consciousness' (Stuckey 1987: 30) can be found in the slave culture because it

was there that different tribes were forced together in slavery into shared experiences and 'the principal forms of cultural expression [were] essentially the same' and helped to mould a 'oneness of black culture' (ibid.: 82, 83).

In all these versions of slavery, the idea of a resistance and defiance of the master-culture is paramount and is always connected to the ability of the slaves to hold on to the ancestral past through the internal rituals, songs and stories of the group. Recent scholarship has suggested even more complex and ambiguous relationships between the slave and the master in which the master encouraged slave performance as an 'exotic presence' (Abrahams 1992: xvii), but the slave used this as a means of maintaining community and ancient beliefs. Abrahams argues for 'dynamic, expressive interrelations of the two cultures living side by side' (ibid.: xvii), acknowledging the persistence of African culture in the expressive, but subversive, lives of slaves. This passing on is expressed well in two brief fictional examples. In Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) Brother Tarp passes on a link from a slave's leg chain, saying 'it's got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you to remember what we're really fighting against' (1952: 313). An object can voice history and memory, tell a vital story as part of the struggle. Second, in Alice Walker's *Meridian* the story of Louvinie, the story-teller, is used as a reminder of both the importance of passing on the memories, and also of the risk it poses to white society who fear the re-writing of 'their' versions of history. Her tongue 'was clipped out at the root' (1976: 33) as a punishment for telling her tales, thus imposing silence and obedience once again.

Levine tells of a way the slaves continued these rituals of telling and passing on despite the ever-watchful eyes of the overseers, and captures the two sides of the 'fearful paradox' (Baldwin 1963: 71). He describes how slaves would contain the sounds of their shouts, songs and rituals by various means, for example, by chanting into a large kettle which muffled their voices so they would not be found out. He comments, 'they could shout and sing all they wanted to and the noise would not go outside' (Levine 1977: 42). The paradox is surely in the slaves' desire to express themselves and yet at the same time being unable to move 'outside', into a genuine, public point of contact with the world beyond the plantation. This encapsulates an important aspect of the struggle for voice and expression in black life. How could the creative spirit, the assertion of a valid, black history, be extended rather than be continually stifled by the presence of a more dominant and powerful voice of the white master-culture?

One answer to this had to be the increasing presence of African Americans in the public sphere, particularly during the civil rights movement, as a determined effort to take their 'voice' outside and engage directly with the authorised and official culture. Indeed, the very writing

of new black histories demonstrates post-civil rights confidence in their use of slave testimony and narratives and shows the pattern of resistance and the need to hold on to an identity despite the slave system's brutal attempts to erase it as crucially linked to the struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. One slave narrative above all serves to illustrate the need 'to voice or speak the African into existence in Western letters' (Gates 1985: 403) and that is Frederick Douglass's. Unlike Levine's story of the muffling of the voice, Douglass had to find ways out of this imposed silence of slavery in order to tell the world 'outside' of its horrors. In this respect it is a kind of prototype for so many African-American literary forms. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) charts the journey from slavery by linking it with the assertion and command of language. For Douglass the process of liberation is intimately connected with the ability to express and define oneself in society. Consider, for example, how the narrative begins:

I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. . . . slaves know as little of their age as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters . . . to keep their slaves thus ignorant.

(Douglass 1982: 47)

What does this suggest of Douglass's condition under slavery? He goes on in the next few lines to answer this question using negatives such as 'I could not tell . . . deprived . . . not allowed . . . I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me' (ibid.: 47-8). The 'want of information' (ibid.: 47) oppresses him, dehumanises him to the level below a horse by depriving him of basic human facts of identity. He is denied an immediate history, but recognises the importance of finding a means of articulating as a source of self-assertion.<sup>2</sup> It is through songs that Douglass is first stirred:

They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension . . . they breathed the complaint of souls boiling with the bitterest anguish . . . . The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.

(ibid.: 57-8)

Years later the African-American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of also being 'stirred' (Du Bois 1965: 378) by the 'sorrow songs' because they were 'full of the voices of the past' and 'the singular spiritual heritage' (ibid.: 378) which together formed 'unvoiced longing toward a truer world of misty wanderings and hidden ways' (ibid.: 380). Writing in 1903, Du Bois saw the 'negro' as part of a world that yielded him 'no self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world'

(ibid.: 214–15). This became Du Bois's famous definition of 'double-consciousness' for the African American, 'always looking at the world through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity' (ibid.: 215). Du Bois wrote of the 'twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder' (ibid.: 215).

Prompted by the slave songs, Douglass and later Du Bois, felt the call to resist the *prescribed* world of the master-culture, by which we mean a world already set out, as if literally 'written' for the African American, with its denials, its imposed public silences and its cruel disciplinary system. As Douglass writes, 'To all these complaints, no matter how unjust, the slave must answer never a word . . . When [the master] spoke, a slave must stand, listen, and tremble' (Douglass 1982: 61).

In another slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) the female slave–author, Harriet Jacobs, uses almost identical words to identify her master's control over speech and movement: 'I was obliged to stand and listen to such language as he saw fit to address to me' (Gates 1987: 364). Echoing Levine's stifling of voice story, Douglass writes that there evolved a 'maxim' for slaves defined by these boundaries: 'a still tongue makes a wise head. They suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it, and in so doing prove themselves members of the human family' (Douglass 1982: 62). It was as if the only way to be connected to the 'human family' was to 'suppress' speech and expression and follow the lead of the master who dictated and 'authored' the terms of life in a system of 'no answering back' (ibid.: 65). Douglass states clearly the relationship of expression to freedom: 'What he most dreaded, I most desired . . . That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought' (ibid.: 79). To have knowledge, to read, write and express oneself was to step outside the master's boundaries and away from the dictated and defined world he established and controlled for the slave. Indeed, any effort to 'talk back' was a blow against a system that denied the African American 'the full, complex ambiguity of the human' and preferred to present the image of the 'oversimplified clown, a beast, or an angel' (Ellison 1972: 26). W.E.B. Du Bois saw the journey to knowledge and expression as essential for the development of a strong culture.

In those somber forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself – darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another. For the first time he sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back.

(Du Bois 1965: 218)

Du Bois's sense of the veil that must be seen through is a valuable image, for it suggests the difficulty of asserting a self in a world that continually seeks to place and determine what you are and can be by prescribing your history and denying you any opportunity to express your thoughts or feelings. Later, James Baldwin wrote, 'The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you . . . Please try to be clear, . . . about the reality which lies behind the words' (Baldwin 1963: 16).

In a similar vein, Houston Baker has written that 'blacks lay veiled in a shroud of silence, invisible not because they had no face, but rather because they had no voice. Voice, after all, presupposes face . . . Without a voice, the African is absent, or defaced, from history' (Baker 1987: 104). The slave narrative was an essential expressive effort to break this silence, for as Baker adds, 'slaves could inscribe their selves only in language' (ibid.: 105). Expression, through speech, song and later writing was a means of resistance, an 'act of creating a public, historical self' (ibid.: 108) and to enable the radical shift of the African American from prescription to inscription and from clownish representation and oversimplification to complex, human ambiguity. The terms are important for they suggest the very politics of the process towards authority in African-American culture as prefigured in the author-ing of their own life stories and history. This struggle for voice and identity within African-American life can be linked to the post-colonial movements of Africa where similar arguments have been made about the need to maintain and develop the languages of resistance. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o has written, 'Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history' (Williams and Chrisman 1994: 441). Ralph Ellison, whose novel *Invisible Man* (1952) is concerned with the need to break the silence and invisibility that surrounded black life, expressed this idea with characteristic sharpness.

For history records the pattern of men's lives, they say . . . All things . . . are duly recorded – all things of importance that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by.

(Ellison 1952: 353)

Slave narratives, like those of Douglass and Jacobs, and later 'auto-biographical criticism', as bell hooks has termed it, are concerned with 'sharing the contradictions of our lives, [to] help each other learn how to grapple with contradictions as part of the process of becoming a critical thinker, a radical subject' (hooks 1994a: 186). These forms of expression are characteristically about the transformation of the self from the object

of someone else's control and authority, to the possibility of self-definition and being one's own subject. As hooks writes, quoting Michelle Cliff, it is the 'work against the odds to claim the I' (1994a: 177) from those who would contain, define and limit black experience and continue to deny them the full opportunity within the USA.

### IMAGINATIVE CULTURAL RETRIEVAL

African-American expression provides a means of 'claiming the I' through telling personal and cultural histories that together form a vital strand of black experience not given space in traditional white history books. As Malcolm X writes in his *Autobiography*, at school when they came to the section on Negro history, 'it was exactly one paragraph long' and told how the 'slaves . . . were lazy and dumb and shiftless' (Malcolm X 1985: 110). Instead of the dominant culture's control of language, African-American culture took up the call to re-establish its own history as a means of political and social assertion, through a diverse 'telling', using a variety of avenues through which to express its own vision and to tell its own story rather than the 'whitened' version that Malcolm X knew. As one person said, 'while you whites have schools and books for teaching your children, we tell stories, for stories are our books' (Levine 1977: 90). The use of memory has become central to this process for it allows the inclusion of stories excluded or denigrated or erased from the versions of white history. African myths, folklore, the communal stories and tales of slavery and freedom could be passed on orally, as they always had been, through alternative channels of communication within the black community. If the books, media and other techniques of the mainstream dominant culture denied space and access to these stories then other ways had to be found to express the continuities of black life.

The post-colonial critic Edward Said argues that, 'The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them' (Said 1994: xiii). In a world where such power dictates, authorises and controls what can be said, done and thought, there is a need to intervene in the process and 'un-block' the imperialist grip on a single version, and to 'progress beyond a number of assumptions that have been accepted uncritically for too long' (Levine 1977: 444). For bell hooks this means habits of being that were a part of traditional black folk experience that we can re-enact, rituals of belonging . . . [the] sharing of stories that taught history, family genealogy, and the facts about the African-American past (hooks 1991: 39). In this type of alternative education 'memory [is] . . . a way of knowing and learning from the past' (ibid.: 40) so that one might be able 'to accept one's past - one's history - [and] learn . . . how to use it' (Baldwin 1963: 71) in a positive, assertive way.

George Lipsitz calls this 'counter-memory' which he explains as 'not just a rejection of history, but a reconstitution of it' (Lipsitz 1990: 227),

a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that totality, counter-memory starts with the particular and then builds . . . [it] looks to the past for hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives . . . [and] forces revision . . . by supplying new perspectives.

(Lipsitz 1990: 213)

In writing, it is like 'literary archaeology' visiting the 'site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply' (Morrison 1987b: 112) in order to provide a sense of racial continuity in a culture structured on its denial.

A very similar and related project is Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), a film set at the turn of the century in the South Carolina islands dealing with a Gullah family of slave descendants who have retained their ancestral connections to Africa and yet are being pulled into the world of the 'mainland' with all its new pressures and demands. The film is about story-telling and the importance of passing on the memories of the people as a mode of cultural anchorage. To this end, Dash is concerned with the role of the 'griot' or story-teller who 'will recount the family's history, with the stories going off at a tangent, weaving in and out' (Dash 1993: Argus/BFI video sleeve).<sup>3</sup> This is how she structures her film too, with many voices in the text, from the past, the future and the present, echoing the work of Walker and Morrison, to whom Dash has paid homage as her inspiration; 'they made me whole' (ibid.) she says, and their technique was transposed into her own film-making. At a key point in the film, the sense of struggle and the threat of the loss of the past and its traditions are emphasised through the ideas of 'recollection', stories and their importance. Nana, the great-grandmother, tells the leaving Eli Peasant: 'It's up to the living to keep in touch with the dead . . . Respect your elders, respect your family, respect your ancestors . . . Call on your ancestors Eli, let them guide . . . Never forget who we is and how far we done come this far.' It is the duty of each generation to connect with their past, to remember the 'wisdom', for it provides a framework of belief and history that is not that imposed by the white culture. 'There's a time, a recollection, something somebody remembers, we carry these memories inside of we . . . I'm trying to give you something to take along with you, along with all your great big dreams.' Dash's film dramatises the process of recovery and invites us to 'undergo a triple process of recollecting the disremembered past, recognizing and reappraising cultural icons and codes, and recentering and revalidating the self' so that African

Americans 'consider our positions and our power in the USA' (Bambara 1993 125).

Dash, therefore, has continued and up-dated the work of Blassingame, Stuckey, Genovese and others who have reclaimed invaluable aspects of previously buried histories for black culture and expression, and paralleled imaginative writing's efforts to go further. The novels of Toni Morrison, in particular, demonstrate the imaginative reconstruction of black history, using fiction to tell 'a whole unrecorded history' (Ellison 1952: 379). As Michelle Wallace has written,

we must choose to recount and recollect the negativity, the discount, the loss. In the process, we may, ultimately make a new kind of history that first recalls how its own disciplinary discourse was made in brutality and exclusion, and second, a history that seeks as its starting point the heterogeneity of the present.

(Mariani 1991: 139)

Toni Morrison's fiction, like Dash's film, aims 'to bear witness to a history that is unrecorded, untaught, in mainstream education, and to enlighten our people' (Wisker 1993: 80) through the telling of stories often ignored in conventional sources. Echoing Du Bois, she longs 'to rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate' (Morrison 1987: 109-10). She wishes 'to implement the stories that I heard' so as to 'fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left' and to re-position the African American into 'the discourse that proceeded without us' (Morrison 1987b: 111-12). Like Wallace, she writes of a 'reconstruction of a world ... [and] exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth' (1987b: 115). Through her form of counter-memory, Morrison's fiction aims to re-position African Americans in American life by re-examining their history. In her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), she writes,

Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or creep singly up to the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral existence, however, was something we learned to deal with.

(Morrison 1970: 11)

Morrison combats marginalisation through the reconstructive process of telling African-American history to remind her audience, both black and white, of the restrictions imposed on the opportunities of young blacks, as in this section from *The Bluest Eye*:

They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn

... how to behave ... In short, how to get rid of funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions.

(ibid.: 64)

Reminiscent of Jacobs and Douglass, this passage posits 'funkiness' as a version of self-expression that needs to find an outlet, for 'Funk is really nothing more than the intrusion of the past in the present' (Gates 1984: 280). What Morrison calls eruptions of funk are the threads of an alternative narrative of African-American life that refuse to be veiled behind the master narrative. Indeed, this is the premise of the novel *Beloved*, wherein the past returns to the present in the form of a family ghost in order to bring others to certain recognitions about their past lives and their racial history.

The community of women are central to this vision of a 'new history', for they pass it on to their children. As bell hooks writes,

We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that 'homeplace', most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits.

(hooks 1991: 42)

The 'ghost' of the past, *Beloved*, enters into one such 'homeplace' in Morrison's novel of the same name, and forces the group of women to uncover and discuss their lives. This force of counter-memory surges into the lives of Sethe and Denver to strengthen them against the repressive, dominant power of 'schoolteacher', the overseer on the plantation. He literally 'writes' the existence of the slaves by charting and recording them in his 'book', with their 'characteristics' divided into 'animal' and 'human', their bodies measured in pseudo-scientific ways, aimed at dehumanisation as a means of social control. Under the gaze of the master who writes only his version of the narrative into his 'notebook' and thereby excludes all other stories, Sethe is contained by his words. 'First his shotgun, then his thoughts, for schoolteacher didn't take advice from Negroes. The information they offered he called backtalk and developed a variety of corrections (which he recorded in his notebook) to reeducate them' (Morrison 1987a: 220). What is 'recorded' by schoolteacher is indicative of the single, authorised narrative of black history that must be countered by 'funkiness', the 'homeplace' and the other expressions to which the community has access. It is 'voice', 'backtalk', or 'talking back' that provides the resistance to the schoolteacher's master-culture. In the novel, it is through the stories Denver is, at first, reluctant to hear from her mother, grandmother, Paul D and *Beloved* that 'backtalk' emerges as reconstructed history. Only through these is Denver released into the

world and able to re-engage with the black community in a way that further aids her healing. The novel suggests remembering is a way forward for the future (Denver), as Baby Suggs, her grandmother, earlier instructs her to 'Know it, and go on out of the yard. Go on' (ibid.: 244). She must listen to her ancestral voice, not so she can dwell in the past horrors, but so that she can both know who she is and use this to move forward with greater certainty. The growth of Denver from the sheltered and protected daughter of Sethe to her final position in the novel is shown when Paul D says,

'Well, if you want my opinion—  
'I don't', she said. 'I have my own'.  
'You grown', he said.

(ibid.: 267)

Denver's assertion of independent thought and opinion shows she has indeed 'grown', both from childhood but also into a new knowledge of her self within a community which comes together at the end of the novel to exorcise the ghost of Beloved, a community described as 'voices of women [that] searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it' (ibid.: 261).

Denver's process is echoed in the words at the novel's end; 'she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order' (ibid.: 272-3), for her growth has depended upon the 'pieces I am' being told and brought out into the open, rather than evaded or hidden from view. Out of the pieces of the (hi)story, memory and wisdom, Denver reconstructs a self which is not reliant upon the schoolteacher's 'story', or indeed even Paul D's, but comes out of her 'familial past' in order to provide her with 'some kind of tomorrow' (ibid.: 273). Denver's going out of the yard is the step into the future based on 'knowing' rather than ignorance, and is her effort to fill 'the space of not knowing' as a positive gesture of resistance and reconstruction of self and community.

### LINKS IN THE CHAIN: MUSIC AND SPEECH

If contemporary fiction could play a part in the process of self-definition and the growing confidence of African Americans in the public sphere, then as important, if not more so, has been the role of music. We have already seen that songs played an important part in the preservation of African culture for slaves, and that tradition, like so many others, was passed on as musical forms developed. As Lawrence Levine has written,

Black secular song, along with other forms of oral tradition, allowed them to express themselves communally and individually, to derive

pleasure, to perpetuate traditions, to keep values from eroding, and to begin to create new expressive moods . . . which continued a rich internal life.

(Levine 1977: 297)

The potential of music and language to challenge white power is characterised by this section from Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Son, these niggers writing. Profaning our sacred words. Taking them from us and beating them on the anvil of Boogie-Woogie, putting their black hands on them so that they shine like burnished amulets. Taking our words, son, these filthy niggers and using them.

(Reed 1972: 130)

To acquire a language seen only as 'white' and seek to 'use' it, and indeed prove that it can be used with power and authority, was a threat to the established order of things. Music had long provided a source of just such powerful expression within the black community.

One can see this in Ralph Ellison's description of jazz musicians' delicate balance . . . between strong individual personality and the group' (Ellison 1972: 189) which, he goes on to write, had as its goal

the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision.

(ibid.: 189)

Jazz, for Ellison, was 'a definition of . . . identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition' (ibid.: 234) because it permits full creative expression of the self, in combination with others responding to their energy, but both relating to a long, varied tradition of other forms of articulation. In *Invisible Man* Louis Armstrong's jazz reveals 'unheard sounds . . . and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak' (ibid.: 11). And these voices open a journey into an often hidden African-American past, with

an old woman singing a spiritual . . . a beautiful girl . . . pleading in a voice like my mother's as she stood before a group of slave owners who bid for her naked body . . . I heard someone shout: 'Brothers and sisters, my text for this morning is the "Blackness of Blackness".'

(ibid.: 13)

In this, Ellison suggests the capacity of music to carry 'a whole unrecorded history' (ibid.: 379) and to offer the listener and the performer access to emotions and ideas little expressed in the mainstream dominant culture.

August Wilson's play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985) makes a similar claim about the blues in a speech given by Ma Rainey, a real-life blues singer from the 1920s.

White folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life . . . This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something.

(Wilson 1985: 194–5)

Black music, in various forms, is about 'talking', 'understanding' and 'filling up' life, for it channels emotions and responses into an accepted mode of expression. Blues was 'a way of solidifying community and commenting on the social fabric of Black life in America' (Hill Collins 1990: 99). If other routes of communication are not available, then the African-American has learned to use those that are – the song, the pulpit, the written word – as methods of resistance and self-definition.

The African American traditions of song, story-telling and preaching found a precise outlet in the politics of the civil rights movement and beyond. With the increased importance of the mass meeting, often directed from local churches, expression was a vital component of the political process. The meetings were 'events/places where participants could express fear as well as resolution, anger as well as understanding, make plans and formulate strategies . . . expression became a way of channelling fear and anger into effective collective action' (King 1988: 10). On such occasions expression found a variety of avenues, as it always had in black life: preaching, testifying, passing on stories of the movement and through the 'freedom songs', which had taken on a precise relationship to the push for civil rights. Richard King calls these expressions 'the new language of public action' (1988: 11), and it can be seen in the oratory of Martin Luther King who built his speeches upon a diverse background of biblical, folk and slave stories to weave a persuasive, rhythmic song-like pattern which asserted the individual power of the voice, but included the audience in the spectacle and the occasion. It is, as Levine wrote of slave songs and Ellison of jazz, both personal and political, individual and collective. Instead of 'a junkheap of isolated voices, unrelated experiences, and forgettable characters' (Miller 1992: 131), preachers formed a chain of connections, creating a 'choir of voices' (ibid.: 144), the many in one. In King's speeches there is a strong attention to 'voice merging', or the bringing together of diverse moments into a harmonious whole, paralleling his style with the politics of integration for which he stood. Drawing upon concepts which were as much a part of white American mythology as black, such as the American Dream, he merged them with a rich tradition integrating the hopes of one section of the community with the

aspirations of another in the civil rights movement. His most famous speech, 'I Have a Dream' (1963), creates just such a new, inclusive voice for America that unites around Abraham Lincoln, under whose memorial the speech was given, the biblical prophecies of Isaiah and Amos, 'justice rolls down like waters . . .', and the Negro spiritual, 'Free at last'.

This powerful voice became vital to the movement in the 1950s and 1960s where public speeches, rallies and marches were an essential method of protest, but also of communication within the African-American community. The new confidence and visibility of King can be compared to the growing black music business, and in particular the Tamla Motown label established by Berry Gordy in 1960. Although not overtly political, the fact of a successful black enterprise and the impact of black performers echoed the slow changes being made politically. Within the wider context of the civil rights movement and dramatic social change, Martha Reeves's song 'Dancing in the Street' is a call to emancipation: 'Calling out around the world, are you ready for a brand new beat'. Motown's merging of gospel traditions such as tambourines, clapping, call and response and advisory lyrics, with the interest in a greater freedom of expression, provided a base for Motown and other soul singers to contribute to the voicing of black culture. As James Brown sang, 'Say it Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)'.

Politics continued to discover the power of language in other ways. For example, Malcolm X, during his time in prison, saw the relationship between self-expression and liberation, beginning with reading and moving on to the power of speech: '[I]n the prison, speaking to a crowd, was as exhilarating to me as the discovery of knowledge through reading had been' (Malcolm X 1968: 280). Malcolm X's use of language could be more direct than the 'voice-merging' style of King, and used none of the preaching techniques that King had learned in the seminary. Malcolm's voice comes out of the poverty of the ghetto where he 'learned early that crying out in protest could accomplish things' (ibid.: 86) and he speaks in a direct and forceful manner; more James Brown than Motown:

I'm speaking as a victim of this American system . . . I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare. These 22 million victims are waking up. Their eyes are coming open. They're beginning to see what they used to only look at.

(Malcolm X in Lauter 1994: 2497)

The tone and choice of words show clearly the different message and yet the vital importance of the voice as the means of communication within the community. For Malcolm X, the voice must carry the 'raw, naked truth . . . to clear the air of the racial mirages, clichés and lies' (Malcolm X 1968: 379). He goes on in the same speech to call for 'a new interpretation' of the civil rights movement, for 'black nationalism' to 'enable us to come into it, take part in it', rather than wait for others to give you 'what's already yours' (Lauter 1994: 2500–1). As Eldridge Cleaver later wrote, Malcolm X



'articulated . . . aspirations better than any other man of our time . . . he had continued to give voice to the mute ambitions in the black man's soul' (Cleaver 1968: 47). Malcolm X's autobiography explains his own, personal journey towards self-determination, but like so much black autobiography, it also relates to the wider condition of the community's movement to political status. The individual voice must be found so that it can speak out with confidence and self-respect to the group, to 'build up the black race's ability to do for itself' (Malcolm X 1968: 382), within a context provided by the stories and heritage of a meaningful past. In this way the individual life can become a 'testimony of some social value' (ibid.: 497) for it becomes a thread within the larger fabric of black life.

Thus, the push for self-definition, 'the claiming of the I', was only a stage in the political process, which aimed at transforming the 'I' to a 'We': 'We must move past always focusing on the "personal self" because there's a larger self. There's a "self" of black people' (Tate: 1983: 134). Alice Walker, who was active in the civil rights movement, captures these sentiments in her novel *Meridian* (1976) which shows the struggle of Meridian Hill for self-definition, both as woman and African American, in a white, male-dominated society, but also shows her growing awareness of the importance of community to the wider struggle. Walker echoes the words of Stokely Carmichael, the Black Power leader, who wrote of the need to 'create in the community an aroused and continuing black consciousness that will provide the basis for political strength' (Carmichael 1966: 6). Walker suggests this in a scene at the end of the novel when Meridian goes to church to hear a politicised preacher, 'deliberately imitating King . . . consciously keeping the voice alive . . . not his own voice at all, but rather the voice of millions who could no longer speak' (Walker 1976: 200). Walker sees the strands of tradition come together: the oral inspiration, the re-telling of black history and the empowerment of the group through vital expressivity: 'Focussing on connection rather than separation, transforming silence into speech, giving back power to the culturally disenfranchised, black women writers affirm the wholeness and endurance of a vision that, once articulated, can be shared' (Pryse and Spillers 1985: 5). This 'sharing' is demonstrated in the communality of the gathering at the end of the novel.

[L]et us weave your story and your son's life and death into what we already know – into songs, the sermons, the 'brother and sister' – . . . 'the church' (and Meridian knew they did not just mean simply 'church' as in Baptist, Methodist or whatnot, but rather communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence), 'the music, the form of worship that has always sustained us, the kind of ritual you share with us, these are the ways to transformation that we know' . . . In comprehending this, there was in Meridian's chest a breaking as if a tight string binding her lungs had given way, allowing her to breathe freely. For she understood, finally,

that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it . . . And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life.

(Walker 1976: 204).

Meridian's revelation connects so many of the strands of black resistance, and emphasises the power of the voice, what she calls the 'song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation' as the means 'that holds them together' (ibid.: 205) as part of a broad unified view of black life within America, rather than separate from it. Her politics are closer to those of Martin Luther King and the integrationists than to the more extreme views of the Black Muslims who called for separation, or the Black Power movement who felt the civil rights movement's 'tone of voice was adapted to an audience of liberal whites' (Carmichael 1966: 5).

However, in the later stage of the career of Malcolm X, for so long a voice associated with black nationalism and the Muslims, one sees emerging a position quite close to that expressed in Walker's novel. It is a new universalism, 'committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female' (Walker 1984: n.p.), a call for human rights, not dissimilar from that expressed by Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael who wrote in 1966, 'We are just going to work, in the way we see fit, and on our goals we define, not for civil rights but for all human rights' (Carmichael 1967: 8). Malcolm X states his goal as, 'truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it for or against. I'm a human being first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole' (Malcolm X 1968: 483). There is less talk of separatism and more about joint responsibility between races since 'with equal rights there had to be a bearing of equal responsibilities' (ibid.: 494). By the end of his autobiography, Malcolm X, echoing King, expresses his hopes in terms of the specific contribution he had made to the struggle for human rights in America.

Sometimes, I have dared to dream to myself that one day, history may even say that my voice – which disturbed the white man's smugness, and his arrogance, and his complacency – that my voice helped to save America from a grave, possibly even a fatal catastrophe.

(ibid.: 496)

Malcolm X's tone, as ever, is far more direct and assertive in its condemnation of white culture than is King's, but his use of the 'dream' and his recognition that it is his 'voice' that carries his authority place the two together in the struggle for 'what America must become' (Baldwin 1963: 17). It also recognises the inter-relatedness of the two cultures, black and white, and echoes Stuart Hall's comment that identity could no longer be

told as 'two histories, one over here, one over there, never having spoken to one another' (King 1991: 48), since there are too many connections between the two.

## NEW BLACK VOICES

In contemporary American culture, it is hip hop that best exemplifies the continuing importance of the necessity of expression in African-American life. Despite the struggles of those figures and movements discussed in this chapter, there is a constant need for African Americans to assert their rights within a hegemonic white society, and one means, as we have shown, is through popular cultural expression. Rap music, in particular, articulates a youthful, vital voice, at once rooted in the everyday traditions and sources that have been discussed throughout, but also creating a new mode of expression. As always, the voice has found a new form, a different tone through which to convey its messages and resist the dominant culture. As rapper Melle Mel has said, 'Rap music makes up for its lack of melody with its sense of reminder. It's linked somewhere into a legacy that has been overlooked, forgotten, or just pushed to the side amongst the glut of everything else' (Melle Mel, 'Looking for the Perfect Beat', *The South Bank Show* 1993).

In an interview in 1989 Cornel West (1992: 222) commented that 'music and preaching' are central to African-American communication and that 'rap is unique because it combines the black preacher and the black music tradition . . . pulling from the past and present, innovatively producing a heterogeneous product' that links the 'oral, the literate, and the musical' (ibid.). The essence of what Melle Mel calls the 'reminder' in rap music, is a call to an African-American history which for so long has been hidden or erased by a dominant white culture in the USA. Like the preacher calling to his congregation, or indeed King or Malcolm X from their platforms, the rapper exhorts his audience to listen and to learn from the words he weaves into narratives of experience and the rhythms of black life. But as West suggests, the form of the rap intertwines different modes, extending, sampling, playing with sound and language in an effort to create something new and communicative. It is the new "testimony" for the underclass' providing young blacks with a 'critical voice . . . a "common literacy" . . . explaining, demanding, urging' (hooks 1994b: 424). Rapper Chuck D calls rap 'media piracy . . . to get a big text to people . . . an information network of sorts . . . to fuel the mind and the body' (*South Bank Show* 1993). Rap 'is black America's TV station . . . and black life doesn't get the total spectrum of information through anything else' (Ross and Rose 1994: 103).

Tricia Rose terms this characteristic 'polyvocal conversations' (Rose 1994: 2) through which raps become elaborate stories 'to articulate the

shifting terms of black marginality in contemporary American culture' (ibid.: 3). As the sounds are 'mixed' in the textures of the 'sonic force' of the music, so too does the vocal 'cut and mix' different threads of stories and snippets of noise from the variety of street life experienced by the African American. Chuck D of 'Public Enemy' explains the effects of this on his work: 'I'm trying to alert as many people as possible and that's why on my records I like to put noise in them. I consider them an alarm for Black-Americans' (BBC *Rap Rap Rapido* 1992). 'Noise', like shouting at a congregation or haranguing a crowd, can be a useful tool for the orator and works together with the educational passing on of communal stories. As Rose writes, like "'noise" on the one hand and communal counter-memory on the other, rap music conjures and razes in one stroke' (Rose 1994: 65), constructing 'oppositional transcripts' as cultural responses to oppression and the stories told from within the closed circle of a preferred, official discourse. Rap provides resistance to 'dominant public transcripts' (ibid.: 100), offering the oppressed a public arena through which to air their 'hidden transcript' and so to give voice to a history not often told: 'a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless' (ibid.: 101). Hence, a rap like Public Enemy's 'Fight the Power' attacks both lyrically and musically the bastions of the mainstream. Elvis Presley, 'a hero to most' means nothing to the young, urban black man who sees him as a 'racist . . . simple and plain' in a culture that pretends that 'we are the same', when there are vast differences in wealth and power. The rap calls for forthrightness: 'What we need is awareness, we can't get careless' and to question such bases of power. A more extreme rap is that of Ice T's 'Freedom of Speech' of 1990 which challenges those who would censor rap lyrics: 'We should be able to say anything/Our lungs were meant to shout . . . Say what we feel, yell out what's real'. Expression is still a marker of freedom, 'a form of testimony . . . of social protest' (Rose 1994: 144-5) that rap has taken forward by embracing technology to construct a musical style that pushes African-American story-telling into the future. Rap refuses to languish in the past, but instead has found a method of speaking to the future.

Rappers . . . are the miners, they are the cultivators of communal artifacts, refining and developing the framework of alternative identities that draw on Afrodiasporic approaches to sound organization, rhythm, pleasure, style, and community . . . Rap is a technologically sophisticated project in African-American recuperation and revision . . . yet another way to unnerve and simultaneously revitalize American culture.

(ibid.: 185)

Like Morrison's literary archaeology and project to re-write history, rap is engaged in 'massive archiving', 'gather[ing] . . . a reservoir of threads'

(Baker 1993b: 89) drawn from a range of sources into a new, vital hybrid form. But despite the technology, Baker argues it is, in the end, 'the voice' that 'catches the consciousness' (ibid.: 91), the voice that refutes homogeneity in favour of the critical mix of the 'sonic soul force', the dialogics of 'edutainment' as KRS-1 terms it: education and entertainment speaking together as the 'updated song of explanation' (Baker 1993a: 46).

## CONCLUSION

it's you young ones what has to remember and take the lead  
(Ellison 1952: 207)

Manning Marable has written that:

African-American identity is much more than race. It is also the traditions, rituals, values, and belief systems of African-American people ... our culture, history, art and literature ... our sense of ethnic consciousness and pride in our heritage of resistance against racism.

(Dent 1992: 295)

And this 'collectively constructed' identity is an essential part of the freedom struggle to go alongside the more specific dismantling of the economic, legal and social aspects of racism, for it empowers the black community through expressions of human dignity which assert 'a sense of "being-for-ourselves", and not for others' (ibid.: 302). But as many critics have commented, these processes are unfinished and cannot be ignored in the contemporary world. As Marable puts it, 'we need to construct a new, dynamic cultural politics to inspire a new generation of African Americans' (ibid.: 302), and as Stuart Hall has written,

Cultural identity ... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power ... identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

(Hall in Rutherford 1990: 225).

Hall's sense of the relationships between the past and the future are important for our reading of African-American cultural identity, since it is, as Marable suggests, precisely the connection, through time that sustains and gives meaning to the struggle for self-determination. It has been the struggle to 'position' oneself rather than be positioned by others that we

have followed in African-American life, and yet, as Hall says, it is in 'constant transformation'.

One description of the future, provided by Cornel West, is of the 'new cultural politics of difference' in which differences are not elided, but accepted as healthy expressions of individual and communal energies. Rather than an 'a homogenizing impulse' (West 1993b: 17), which suggests that all black people are the same, West calls for 'responses that articulate the complexity and diversity of Black practices' (ibid.: 14) and that engage with the 'mainstream' and the 'nourishing subcultures', so that they 'cultivate critical sensibilities and personal accountability - without inhibiting individual expressions, curiosities and idiosyncrasies' (ibid.). West's vision is 'to look beyond the same elites and voices that recycle the older frameworks' to 'a new language of empathy and compassion' (West 1993a: 260). With the recent emphasis in the United States on multiculturalism and diversity, such ideas suggest a way towards a possible mutual inter-relationship between all Americans, but also allow for the distinctive differences within the black community itself. Hall (Dent 1992: 33), borrowing from Bakhtin, argues for 'a dialogic rather than a strictly oppositional way' of interpreting culture which provides us with a version of difference and diversity engaged in dialogue and negotiation with the other voices/powers that surround it.

Perhaps, to pursue the idea of 'voice', the African-American community's struggle to find its own voice within America has, at least, provided the opportunity to be heard in the public arena. This recalls the scene in *Invisible Man* when the narrator delivers a speech inadvertently referring to 'social equality' only to be greeted with 'the sudden stillness ... sounds of displeasure ... [and] hostile phrases' (Ellison 1952: 30), and the swift reminder 'you've got to know your place at all times' (ibid.: 30). In contrast, Alice Walker, describing a voter registration episode in *Meridian*, states, 'It may be useless. Or maybe it can be the beginning of the use of your voice. You have to get used to using your voice, you know. You start on simple things and move on' (Walker 1976: 210). Between the 1940s and the 1960s, clearly things have changed, but the need to 'move on' is essential, so as to have both a voiced identity rooted in a strong sense of the past, and to use it in the context of the world in which there are still many changes to be made. As Catherine Clinton has written, 'the power of memory must draw us out of the novel [and other cultural forms] and into the archives. Erasure and silence will not defeat us if we remember - this is a story to pass on' (Fabre and O'Meally 1994: 216).

## NOTES

- 1 Silence is a concept often used, as here, to suggest the cultural impositions and denials of slavery, but as we shall argue, despite these conditions there was

always a powerful 'voice' of resistance within the black community. In part, the silence of slavery was a colonial myth reinforcing positions of control and power (see H. Bhabha 1994).

- 2 This is also reflected in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1968: 256).
- 3 Julie Dash's structure is reminiscent of quilt-making in that it weaves and connects fragments, or scraps of recollections and stories, into a complex and multi-faceted text. In this she links with an important African-American craft tradition that has become highly significant in the work of Afri-feminists like Morrison and Walker. See in particular Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1984).

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## FOLLOW-UP WORK

### Film and African-American experience

1 This chapter has discussed the ways in which different attitudes to integration and separation have been central to post-war African-American culture. A contemporary text that can be very useful as an interdisciplinary focus for a continued debate on this is the film *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1988) which examines the idea of dualities across a multicultural New York. In particular, examine the self-conscious scenes in which Lee directs the audience to the language of racism and the other divisions of the city: Radio Raheem's 'love and hate' speech; Buggin' Out's insistence about having 'brothers' on the wall of the Italian restaurant, Mookie's final confrontation with Sal and Smiley's picture of King and Malcolm X. Lee's form and structure are totally bound up with his content.

This approach can be usefully compared with the feminist work of Julie Dash and again her choice of narrative style: lyrical, mystical and re-articulating the 'griot' story-telling traditions through the new medium of film. Another comparison is to Leslie Harris's film *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*

2 African-American art has not been examined here, but many of the ideas put forward could be applied and related to the work of an artist like Romare Bearden (1911–1988). In particular his use of collage and photomontage can be related to our interests in story-telling and quilting traditions since as an artist he was fully aware of literary figures as well, and like Dash in film, sought to create visual equivalence to their work.

### Assignments and areas of study

- 3 (a) The issue of stereotyping in African-American culture. The documentary *Color Adjustment* (1992, Marlon Riggs) is an excellent look at the way television has represented black Americans and can be viewed with other materials such as essays by Michele Wallace or Robert Townsend's film *Hollywood Shuffle*.
- (b) An examination of traditions of 'voice' in African-American culture through an analysis of King's 'I Have A Dream' speech, looking at his combinations of traditions, intertextual references and modes of address. You could also examine a contemporary rap song such as Grandmaster Flash's 'The Message' or a soul song like Aretha Franklin's 'Respect', for the diverse ways in which they project political points of view through form and content.