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# Sounding John Thompson's White Noise

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

*For the Honourable Derek Walcott*

## I

**I**NQUIRY BEGINS IN EITHER emergency or serendipity. This essay was occasioned by two instances of happenstance. Seven summers ago, while visiting Halifax, Nova Scotia, I was standing in my Aunt Joan's backyard when her next-door neighbour approached me at the fence between the properties and told me that he recognized me (thanks to my Halifax *Sunday Herald* book reviews), that he is the son of famed artist Alex Colville, and that he had something that he thought I should have. Asking me to wait where I was, he vanished into his house, and returned with a sheaf of papers. He handed me the slightly yellowed, 8½ x 11½ typewritten sheets and said, "These are poems typed by the late John Thompson. He gave them to my father, who gave them to me, and now I give them to you." I was thunderstruck by this gesture, but also excited. Presuming that the gift is authentic, I am the owner of original drafts for the ghazals of *Stilt Jack* (1978). That is the first accident that occasions this meditation. The second is even more quirky, but also, I believe, productive: thanks to the vagaries of travel, my reading of choice, *The Life and Work of Malcolm X* (2002), a biography by Kofi Natambu, found itself engaged in suitcase intercourse with *John Thompson: Collected Poems and Translations*, edited by Peter Sanger (1996). Struck by this incongruous coupling, I still had to tell myself, at once, that Thompson (1938-76), the superb, English-born poet of the Tantramar and the most influential East Coast Canadian poet, is unrelated to Malcolm X (1925-65), the fiery orator, the progenitor of modern black and African-American consciousness, who died on 21 February 1965 in a hail of bullets. Definitely, X and Thompson are as different as black and white.

But, not so fast! In this essay, whose interest is the shadowy meaning of Thompson's subtle, poetic discourse of whiteness, I want to begin, playfully perhaps, by teasing out notable correspondences between the African-American public intellectual and the shy, eccentric Mount Allison University poet and professor. If granted even only a cursory

glance, the similarities that the two men share serve to identify tropes of politics, in the mid-twentieth century, that both knew, especially in regard to race. But this alignment also reveals striking coincidences in both men's psychological formations.

My approach to Thompson may seem unusual, for seldom are white European-Canadian writers read for their discourse on whiteness.<sup>1</sup> Yet, I hope such analysis may illuminate the darker recesses of Thompson's brilliant poems. I take as my authority here the African-American Nobel Laureate in Literature Toni Morrison, who in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) alerts us, "A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (12). To appreciate Morrison's *bons mots*, one must accept that "writers of colour" are *not* the only ones interested in the pregnant, never stagnant contrast between black and white. "White" Canadian authors, too, whether conscious of such distinctions, also ponder the vivid implications of these colours in a world of intermingling and — simultaneously — jealously separated races.

Thompson mirrors Malcolm X, in the first instance, superficially: the poet authored his dissertation — an essay on, and translations of, French poet René Char at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan, between 1961 and 1966. As coincidence would have it, X, then named Malcolm Little, grew up in Lansing and East Lansing, Michigan (Natambu 3-5), before moving on to Boston at age 15. When X died in 1965, it is likely that this New York news penetrated the Michigan mass media so that Thompson, through reading or auditing a news bulletin, would have had a spectral encounter with the assassinated black-nationalist orator.

But a closer relationship between the two men is that both lost their fathers at an early age, and were released into foster care by mothers incapable of providing materially for their welfare. Thompson was only two when his father died, and, notes his editor and biographer, Peter Sanger, "His mother, able to find work only as a textile mill hand, could not look after him, earn a living, and better herself. Thompson was sent to stay with an uncle, aunt and cousins in Manchester. His mother never did take him back in her care" (Introduction 16). X's father, Earl Little, died horribly in a streetcar accident that cut him nearly in two, in East Lansing, Michigan, in September 1931, when Malcolm was

aged 6. (Angered by his black nationalist organizing, whites lynched Earl, or so the Littles believed [Natambu 5].) During the Depression, due to poverty and her own mental illness, Louise Little lost custody of her now 12-year-old son, Malcolm, to Michigan authorities (Natambu 19-21). Once Louise was “committed to the Michigan State Mental Hospital at Kalamazoo on January 9, 1939” (21), the mother-son separation endured for decades, ending only two years before X’s death. Similarly, Thompson was divided from his mother when, after remarrying, she emigrated to Australia (Sanger, Introduction 16). Sanger points out that Thompson’s “severance” from his mother “took place because of the conditions of survival in wartime, pre-welfare-state England” (17). Moreover, “the absence of his mother caused Thompson grief and instability” (17).

Another crucial connection between Thompson and X is their own and their mothers’ ocean-crossing voyages on the fringes of, and in the twilight of Empire. Thompson’s mother, born Beatrice Wilkinson, and later remarried as Beatrice Shanahan, emigrated to Australia. But like mother, like son. Thompson served between 1958 and 1960 in the I Wireless Regiment of the British Army Intelligence Corps, well beyond the English Channel, in Germany (Sanger, Introduction 20-21). Then, he left England for America in 1960, then emigrated to Canada in 1966, settling in and near Sackville, New Brunswick, until his death on 25 April 1976 (Sanger, Foreword 13). For her part, Louise Norton travelled from her native Grenada to Montreal, where she met and married Earl Little, and joined him in missionary work for the pan-Africanist-oriented Universal Negro Improvement Association, headquartered in the United States. Her son — Malcolm X — made three trips to Africa and the Middle East, and, in 1965, after being denied permission to enter France, briefly visited England.

Arguably, the trans-oceanic voyages of these English-speaking mothers and sons, between the 1920s and the 1960s, are inseparable from the decolonization movement then underway in “Coloured possessions,” such as India, the West Indies, and Africa, and the evolving independence of “white Dominions” such as Canada and Australia. Indeed, these rebellions or constitutional developments necessitated the emigration of native masses and metropolitan elites — from India, the West Indies, and Africa — to Great Britain and Canada and Australia, but also *from* Great Britain to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, *and* the “drop-

out” Commonwealth state that is the United States. Thus, Beatrice Thomson-Shanahan’s voyage to Australia and John Thompson’s flight to the United States and Canada (all Anglo-Saxon – ruled nations), both participate in a general, postwar British diaspora to white-dominated, English-speaking democracies. Likewise, Louise Little’s migration to Canada and the United States, to assist a would-be global black “uplift” and independence project, along with her son’s proselytizing travels in the Black Atlantic world, must be read in the context of gestures of decolonization. In short, the Thompson family flees the economic marginalization of a disintegrating Empire by transferring from England to Australia and Canada; but the Little-X family pursues black empowerment by shuttling from the Caribbean to mainland North America and between North America and Africa. In all cases, however, politics, international and merciless, are at play.

Though we may wish to dream that John Thompson’s poetics are untainted by questions of state and revolution, it is impossible for them to be so pristine. No, Thompson is as political as X, and just as bothered by *race*, if less explicitly.

First, Thompson came of age, like X, in a world rent by racial conflict. He grew up amid a Continental “race war,” pitting Nazi German against Soviet Slav, German Christian (and Pagan) against European Jew, murderous fascists against Romany, and more. There was the Pacific struggle between the militarist Japanese Empire and other Asians, but also the Caucasian-dominated nations of Australia, America, Canada, Great Britain, Soviet Union, and colonial enclaves such as Hong Kong. Then, while a student in Michigan, Thompson would have seen unfolding, north and south, the Civil Rights Movement — a new, non-violent “civil war” waged to emancipate American “Negroes” from socio-economic and political subservience to white citizens’ power.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his life, Thompson witnessed the attempts of some Europeans and Americans to affirm “whiteness” through either subtle intimidation or blunt brutality.

Born to race-proud parents, then living as a black man in a segregationist white society, Malcolm X was starkly aware of the racial dynamics of World War II as well as the process of decolonization at home (the demise of official, legal segregation) and the coming-into-independence of both “coloured” ex-colonies and “white-settler” states. X often characterized the whites of America as “criminals,” but Frantz

Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les Damnés de la terre*) expands upon that assertion while de-racializing it, charging, “For centuries the capitalists have behaved in the under-developed world like nothing more than war criminals” (101).

However, Thompson’s England got to witness Nazism transform “the whole of Europe into a veritable colony” (Fanon 101). Like X, then, Thompson could not be ignorant of the politics of race, even if, unlike X, he would not address this division deliberately. Yet, being a poet, Thompson employs images of black and white, shadow / darkness and light, and day and night in ways suggestive of his engagement with the race constructions of his era. I believe three aspects of his *oeuvre* and *being* show us this reality: 1) the poets he chooses to translate or highlight in his work are themselves intrigued by questions of race and imperialism; 2) as a student of psychology, Thompson was aware of the deep, symbolic resonances of *blackness* and *whiteness* in our culture; 3) his usage of colour contrasts in his poetry aided his elaboration of a fundamental trope, principally that “white” civilization is a palimpsest of “black” atavism. That is not to say that Thompson views *whiteness* as superior to *blackness*, but that he sees these “raced” states as indivisible, or that *whiteness* is a veneer, a facade, which obscures a primal, fundamental *blackness*. In fact, atavism, for Thompson, is really a kind of originalism<sup>3</sup>, that is to say, the stripping away of the conceit of “higher” or “superior” development to reveal its original and still actual “base.”

## II

Those who wish to maintain a strict apartheid between Thompson as poet and Thompson as political being face an obstacle in the artist’s choice of translations. The poets vital to his imagination are mainly French, namely, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, René Char (the subject of his dissertation), plus two Québécois poets — Roland Giguère and Paul-Marie Lapointe. The English-language poets he favours — William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, and Dylan Thomas — are also partisans. True: Thompson is interested in German, Chinese, American, and Persian poets, but the French-language and Anglo-American influences are primary.

This fact cannot be discounted, particularly if one remembers that the French poets, because of their imperial nativity, were peculiarly concerned with racial identity, with *blackness* as a corollary to *whiteness*,

that is to say, as the setting that teases out whiteness or that overshadows it.<sup>4</sup> Thompson's thinking about French poets is necessary for his own art, for it is Baudelaire who inaugurates modernism with his publication of *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857). But Baudelaire does not merely suppress the alexandrine by displacing *caesurae* and taxing syntax, he also jolts conventional notions of poetic subject matter by daring to praise his black mistress, Jeanne Duval, in his most exquisite poems. In her *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (2000), Petrine Archer-Straw avers that early twentieth-century French advertisements "enhanced the black female libido with naked imagery that vacillated between the French writer Baudelaire's '*Vénus noire*' and Aunt Jemima's generous 'black mama' persona representing abundant nature and the tradition of wet-nursing" (38-39). Writing of the African-American singer and dancer Josephine Baker in February 1927, critic André Levinson describes her as unleashing "the frenzy of African Eros. . . . It was no longer a *grotesque* dancing girl that stood before them, but the black Venus that haunted Baudelaire" (qtd. in Archer-Straw 118; emphasis added).

Thompson, too, deigns to imagine white women as palimpsests of "wild" erotic blackness. In Ghazal VII of *Stilt Jack* (1978), Thompson refers neither to Baudelaire nor Baker, but he does cite a white woman whose blues songs exude a black-like timbre: "I'm waiting for Janis Joplin: why, / why is it so dark" (Thompson 1996, 113).<sup>5</sup> This moment is neither the first nor the last time that white women are given a black cast, or that white female beauty obtains a black shadow. See, for instance, Thompson's poem "Wife" (1973), where the colourless woman baking bread ("colourless" in the sense that her body is assigned no specific pigmentation) dashes "[her] shadow / huge on the wall" (51). Another 1973-vintage poem, "Waking," addresses this distinction between shadow and light, between the divinely human and the atavistic. Its second-person address seems to suggest it is directed to an intimate of the author, either daughter or wife, or, possibly, even the author himself:

As you wake, watch  
                   the leaves and branches pull  
 softly from your flesh and slide  
                   to the bright window,

your black pig  
and bat shapes

float down into your bones. ( 95)

These prelude stanzas work best if we view the “you” as if we peer through a movie camera lens. The scene is morning; a person — likely female — is awakening with the shadows of outdoor “leaves and branches” cross-hatched across her body. In the light of the sunny window, her body projects the shadows of “black pig / and bat,” which also, atavistically, define her bones — the “primitive” within the “civilized.” Later on, the subject, stretching, raises “both . . . hands / into the air, and spread // the fingers,” but also simultaneously casts an avian shadow (95). The speaker, watching, sees “the sun strips off // layer after layer of dark feathers” (95): the cast shadows reveal the animal, bird-like nature of this presumably white hand, but, simultaneously, whiteness is also enhanced. Thus, the speaker closes by observing, “the light cutting your body // from the shadows which grow // from lying down close to yourself” (95). The poem hints that this real female, likely white, is also inevitably, if unconsciously, dark and black, and this shadow blackness is the scaffold of her visible whiteness.<sup>6</sup> My reading of the poem is affirmed by the persona’s imaginings in “The Brim of the Well” (1973), that he peeks from “the wall” of a crow’s eye (or “I”), observing, “what brightness of flesh he probes, / what shadows” (91).<sup>7</sup> But Thompson’s primitivist and implicitly racialized reading of flesh is also apparent in his persona’s statement in “The Narrow Road” (a title recalling Japanese poet Bashō’s *The Narrow Road to a Far Province* [or *the Deep North* or *the Interior* (1702)]), that “no goddess whitens my bed” (81). This line echoes fellow British poet Robert Graves’s influential work of modernist literary criticism, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948). I argue that the Baudelairean ideal of the “Black Venus,” a challenge to medieval Romantic chansons exalting Caucasian women, is revised by Thompson to reveal white women — like Janis Joplin and Thompson’s own intimates — as being yet shadowed by “blackness,” a shade related to their animal, “wild” origins.

The final two poems of *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets* (1973) reiterate this sensibility. In “A Sleeping Man Curses the Summer,” the speaker, apparently outdoors, looks toward a forest — “the green withered / to a dark edge, beyond which,” he sees “the black: your real / hands and eyes” (98). Here, again, the “you” may be either



a woman or the author himself. No matter: the apprehended whiteness of the speaker, or his bespoken, is revealed to be “real black” in terms of the organs of vision and the instruments of apprehension. Herein is a kind of X-ray — or photo negative — vision: What is black is white, and vice versa. Similarly, in “The Onion,” a woman is “unfolded / to a white stillness” during sexual intercourse (100), but, afterwards, the speaker states, “I have risen from your body / full of smoke, charred fibres” (99): this feminine whiteness is, here, a site of smouldering blackness. Through love, however, the speaker wagers, “we turn from our darkness” (100). In Ghazal XVIII of *Stilt Jack*, too, this elemental duality is sung: “when I meet you again I’ll be all light, / all dark, all dark” (124). Even so, this “light” is both that of the poet’s afterlife, his voice transferred by black ink to white paper, as well as that of writing itself, wherein the white body and “the breath of our white voices” (“Day Without Omens,” 96) is transformed into the “all dark” of death — and of black ink.

In his 1973 poem “Winter Is By Far the Oldest Season,” Thompson’s persona states,

through the crook of your arm  
I catch the moon  
broken with frost;<sup>8</sup>  
  
in shadow  
bones persist. (77)

The speaker views a white moon blotched and mottled by white frost, but sees, in his lover’s shadowed and shadowing arm, bones — imaginably white under presumably white skin — still persisting. An illuminated darkness — the shadowy arm — hides, it seems, a shrouded whiteness. In Thompson, this duality never subsides.

Studying the usage that modernist white European artists made of supposedly black “primitivism,” Archer-Straw posits, “it was white people’s own ideas about blacks, rather than an accurate reading of black culture itself, that underpinned avant-garde modernity” (20-21). Her insight allows me to confirm that nowhere in his work is Thompson concerned about black or brown people or their political status. However, his engagement with modernity, through his translations of French symbolist poets (Rimbaud and Baudelaire) as well as a minimalist surrealist (Char), themselves all complicit with racialized critiques

of imperialism and colonialism, puts Thompson in cahoots with tropes of “race” — even on the fringes of Empire — on the Tantramar marsh.

In translating Arthur Rimbaud’s “Le Bateau ivre” (1871), a triumph of French symbolist verse, Thompson encounters an imagination already precociously besotted with race. Indeed, the adult, non-poet Rimbaud became a gunrunner and if not a slave trader in Ethiopia, then sympathetic — profitably — to its practice.<sup>9</sup> He may also have taken Ethiopian women as lovers. In any event, in his great narrative poem of 100 lines, “race” colours the speaker (which may very well be the boat itself) and the subjects. As Thompson’s translation reveals, the poem opens with “Screaming Redskins” killing the boat’s white crew, either by arrows or guns (Thompson 1996, 152). Other dead white folk appear as “pale / Flotsam — the drowned dead” — in the sixth quatrain (152). The speaker soon enters his — or the poem’s — very own Heart of Darkness: “Know you that I smashed into unbelievable jungles / Mingling with flowers the eyes of man-skinned panthers” — an image that makes black men of panthers or panthers of black men (153). Phantasmagoric imagery, utilized in a rhythm of enjambment, of black and white, figures the encounter with exotic otherness: “Glaciers, silver suns, pearly waves, smouldered-coal skies” (154). Note this juxtaposition of white and black: this imagery runs throughout Thompson’s oeuvre. Whenever Thompson writes *white*, be assured that the term is shadowed by *black* and *night*. Whenever he writes *light*, *night* and *shadow(s)* also congregate. “Le Bateau ivre” provides a model for his method. Not surprisingly then, after the white subject’s encounter with blackness, there is the pregnant cry, “I regret ancient-parapeted Europe” (155). Rimbaud figures blackness as the sign of violent passion, that which is *either* destructive of religious, Christian civilization *or* that which is a valuable alternative. In the penultimate quatrain, Thompson’s Rimbaud — or, rather, Rimbaud’s persona — asserts, “If I desire a water of Europe, it is the puddle / Black and cold” (155). Here Europe is acceptable as a palimpsest of blackness. In this guise, it may even allow an envoy to slavery, as the poem’s final quatrain hints:

Bathed in your langour, O waves, I can no longer  
 Cross the wakes of cotton-carrying ships,  
 Nor pass the proud display of flags and pennants,  
 Nor float under the horrible eyes of prison-hulks. (155)

By choosing to translate this proto-surrealist poem by Rimbaud, Thompson seems to register again his postmodern, apolitical rhetoric. But the final stanza of the translation suggests that the imperialist-slavery enterprise has lost its glamour. Europe itself is best as a black puddle (a toy sea for a child to launch a paper vessel), one that cannot sustain the mercantile trade implied by *white* “cotton-carrying ships,” the imperialism of “flags and pennants,” or the enslavement implied by “prison-hulks.” I should not make the idiotic suggestion that, by publishing this translation in 1962, Thompson was commenting on France’s withdrawal from Algeria at the end of the once-colony’s vicious civil war (1954-1962). Yet, Rimbaud’s poem is aware of the violence, exploitation, misery, and revenge violence occasioned by European imperialism (even if, as a middle-aged adventurer, Rimbaud enriched himself in its precincts).

Thompson’s use of “Le Bateau ivre” to critique mid-twentieth-century colonialism may not be a fanciful notion, not if we note that, at the end of the turbulent 1960s, he translates Québécois poets of the Quiet Revolution. Thus, he gives us translations from Roland Giguère (230-34) and Paul-Marie Lapointe (241-46). But the poem that attacks imperialism explicitly is “To the Poets in Jail in Quebec” (238-39), although, at first glance, it seems to take an apolitical position:

After all, the beer’s cold:  
 what the fuck do I care  
 for taxi drivers or poets  
 in Quebec: prison  
 is a stupid word. (238)

Written in 1971, in the aftermath of the jailing of Québécois intellectuals and artists, indépendantistes or sympathizers, the poem responds to the central political event of Thompson’s decade of life in Canada, 1966-1976: the October Crisis of 1970. In the poem’s fourth stanza, Thompson demonstrates his awareness of contemporary Québécois radical literature, although with the shadow of irony:

Speak white. I love  
 my morning table, Wyatt  
 foolish, trying

to forge a suave pentameter,  
whining  
about rotten boughs. (238)

In this complex stanza, Thompson alludes to Michèle Lalonde's 1970 poetic *succès de scandale*, "Speak White" — the title of her poem in which a supposedly once favourite, anglophone denunciation of francophones appears as a refrain among stanzas protesting the second-class treatment of French-speaking Québeckers by their English-speaking "rulers" (in commerce and, behind the scenes, in politics). "Speak white" means, simply, "speak English," but the *denigrating* of francophones as "black" is clearly intended. By utilizing this phrase, in an address to francophone poets jailed for their political activism in Québec, Thompson's persona seems to align itself with the English oppressor. Yet, he undercuts this reading by pointing out just how difficult it is to "speak white," that is, to write English poetry. He relates the racialized linguistic politics of speaking "white" to the attempt to write like "Wyatt"<sup>10</sup>: yes, he is "Wyatt/ foolish, trying / to forge a suave pentameter" (238). His poetry making is backward, for he is trying to create a smooth pentameter in contradiction of US poet Ezra Pound's modernist injunction: "(To break the pentameter, that was the first heave)" (Canto LXXXI, 538). Too, he is merely "whining / about rotten boughs," as opposed to writing, like Lalonde or Pound, a poem that is a call to arms. Still, if Thompson seems to follow Yeats and Robert Frost in denying any direct political rhetoric, the rest of "To the Poets in Jail in Quebec" nixes any such reading. Jaundiced, the speaker cites the Pound of *The Cantos*, the quasi-Fascist epic, but he does so, once more, with irony:

After all the beer's cold  
out of all this  
beauty  
something must come (238)

The domestic(ated) poet, with his beer and table and freedom ("beauty"), might author worthwhile art ("something must come"). His Pound citation (see Canto LXXXIV, 559) reminds him that "the poet's words sing / in his cell" (238), a line that conjures up not only Pound in his prison cell at Pisa, Italy, in 1945, but also those poets now imprisoned, circa 1971, in Québec. Though Pound was palpably a Fascist sympathizer (if never a card-carrying party member) and the

imprisoned Québécois poets were mainly socialist in affiliation (or dream), Thompson's persona still finds them mutually admirable for singing — like Dylan Thomas in “Fern Hill” (1946) — “in my chains” (Thomas 66):

I want to say with those  
poets in jail:  
we will not be quiet,  
who gives a fuck:  
we will not be quiet (239)

Clearly, Thompson is fixated on the contest loosed by decolonization, either psychological or political.

A moment ago, I speculated that Thompson's translation of Rimbaud yielded his own shadowy commentary on the Algerian War. I will say now that, in musing on decolonization conflict in Québec, the example of Algeria should have been significant for Thompson. For one thing, the terrorist perpetrator of the October Crisis, the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ), was modelled on the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) of Algeria. Too, radical Québécois intellectuals, like Pierre Vallières, saw themselves as representing *les nègres blancs d'amérique* or “white niggers of America.”<sup>11</sup> In Rimbaud, yes, but also in Algeria, in Québec, and in the discourse of “liberation,” black and white images are inextricably linked, politically and psychologically. Even the mystic, politics-hating, imagist Thompson cannot evade this traffic.

To return to Rimbaud's “Le Bateau ivre” and its sensuous survey of imperialist conquest, defeat, and the terrors unleashed by colonization and enslavement, our comprehension is assisted by the insights of that apostle of decolonization, the Martiniquan-born, Algerian-rebel psychiatrist Frantz Fanon. In *Les Damnés de la terre* or *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon witnesses, “The colonial world is a Manichean world” (41). It is a world, implacably, of black and white, day and night, darkness and light. It is a world, too, where European civilization is pitched against Aboriginal or African or Arab or Asian “savagery.” In response to this opposition, the colonized may very well say, echoing Jean-Paul Sartre, “I'd prefer my Mumbo-Jumbo to their Acropolis” (19-20). But this notion has repercussions for even the wannabe civilized Caucasian, such as Thompson, who may believe, as Fanon puts it in *Peau noire, masques blanches* (1952) or *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), “The civil-

ized white man retains an irrational longing for unusual eras of sexual license, of orgiastic scenes, of unpunished rapes, of unrepressed incest. . . . Projecting his own desires onto the Negro, the white man behaves ‘as if’ the Negro really had them” (165). Morrison reminds one of “the associative language of dread and love that accompanies blackness” (x), but she also bears witness to “images of blinding whiteness [that] seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness” (33). Both figurations provoke Thompson’s work and appear as features in his translations of French poet René Char (1907-88).

Sanger informs us that Char was “a prominent member of the surrealist movement during the early 1930s,” then later “gradually distanced himself from surrealist activities” (Notes 270). Even so, surrealism remained a feature of Char’s poetic practice, still influencing the later poems (1950-62) that Thompson translated for his dissertation. Importantly too, French surrealism enacted the same aesthetic that Morrison cites for American literature: to use black people to ignite “critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis” (viii). Or, to cite a white authority, to achieve the destruction of “the Western duality of mind and body,” to offer “‘moments of crisis’ — sudden revelatory experiences” (Archer-Straw 146), encounters with blackness are mandatory. I quote Michael Leiris:

There are moments that can be called *crises*, the only ones that count in life. These are moments where the outside seems abruptly to respond to a call we send from within, when the exterior world opens itself and a sudden communion forms between it and our heart. (qtd. in Archer-Straw 146)

One such moment occurs for Leiris when he sees “in a bright Montmartre street, a negress of the Black Birds revue holding a bouquet of wet roses with both hands” (Archer-Straw 146). At such instances, and in French surrealism generally, surrealists “consciously mapped out a whole network of ideas under the guise of ethnography” (Archer-Straw 157). Fanon finds that this complex of images recalls “Black magic! Orgies, witches’ Sabbaths, heathen ceremonies, amulets. . . . Black Magic, primitive mentality, animism, animal eroticism” (*Black* 126).

If we accept this adamantly political, race-conscious context for interpretation, we cannot be surprised to read, through Thompson's translation, Char's medley of poignant reflections:<sup>12</sup>

(I love what dazzles me and then accentuates the darkness deep within me.) (170)

You are the altar of darkness on my too freely revealed face, poem. (179)

We shouldn't have set the heart of the night on fire. The master had to be darkness, where the morning dew is chiselled. (194)

It is the night that undertakes the task of escorting back our mystery; it is the night that performs the toilet of the elect. (194)

Why, most alive of all the living, are you / only shadows of flowers among the living? (198)

Man was surely the most insane wish of the darkness; that is why we are shadowy, envious and mad under the powerful sun. (203)

We can live only in the half-open, exactly on the hermetic line which divides the darkness and the light. (205)

The only signature at the foot of the white life is the poetry which shapes it. (205)

The careful auditor should object to these quotations, for they say nothing explicit about Europeans in Africa or the Caribbean, Negroes anywhere, or even the political implications of black and white. Yet, we must note that Char, in his vital sequence, "Lascaux," juxtaposes the "White Lady of Africa" and "Magdalene at her mirror" (175), implying, again, the coupling of black and white — and of vice and beauty (in a perfectly Baudelairean or Rimbaudian sense).

Thompson is definite about these interests in translating Char into English. Thus, "Horse" (1973) gives us a black horse that is a symbol of virility, fertility, and originality, of — in essence — "black" magic that arouses the white persona:

the sun turns in hunger  
     about your dark head,  
         sniffing the earth in you,  
 tasting your smoke,  
 and waits . . .

for some speech from your black muscles:

so the earth would tilt  
     under your weight,

hawks plummet upward, the dead  
float in the air like flies,  
and we, thrown from our warm furrows,  
relearn our balance,  
reach out in the dark to test  
our crooked new bones. (58)

If the “hoarse” black horse speaks muscularly, all of Creation is upended, and the speaker is “thrown,” breaking his old bones, and being forced to learn how to use “crooked, new” ones (58). In this poem, blackness may rebel against, shatter, and tutor whiteness.

In “After the Rain” (1973), Thompson reproduces Char’s interest in darkness and morning: “the wind / must unfold a night / in the hour of dawn” (63). Stealthily, that verb *unfold* refers us to “The Onion,” where a white woman, likely the speaker’s lover, is “unfolded to a white stillness” (100). Just as this woman is both white and dark (her body contains “charred fibres” [99], and the adjective nods and winks at Char), so does dawn, here, contain morning and night. Each property inhabits the other.

Ghazal XIV (1978) refers obliquely to Char in the last couplet: “Poetry: desire that remains desire. Love? / The poet: a cinder never quite burned out” (120). Thompson puns subtly on Char here, but more explicitly in Ghazal VII (1978), which speaks of “Crazy squash, burnt tomatoes, *char* of poems” (113; emphasis added). Every good poet (forgive me) *chars* the page with ink, but never becomes mere ash. This sensibility also appears in the opening couplet of Ghazal XXXIV (1978): “In surrender to poetry, sleep / with the cinders of Apollo” (140). Here, again, *cinders* seem a *char* of Apollonian inspiration, the residue that is poetry. Of course, poets are — or manufacture — *char* in another fashion: the lightning flash of inspiration. Thompson renders us Char’s statement: “A poet should leave *traces* [cinders?] of his passing, not proofs” (186; emphasis added). These “traces” are the aftermath of “the lightning flash” that “endures” (181). *Pace* Char, in Ghazal XXXVI (1978), Thompson’s persona sings, “We’ll gather all our lives and deaths / In a lightning harvest” (142), that assembly signifying books.

Fact: Char is not a poet of decolonization in the mode of Rimbaud or Québécois poets; nor does he testify to blackness in the fashion of Baudelaire. Nevertheless, he furnishes Thompson with a suggestive



vocabulary of light, dark, night, dawn, lightning, and blackness, which serve as symbols, ultimately, of speech, writing, and a return to basics, of inspiration and art. Char gestures toward the atavism (or originalism) that is art: behind the black-ink-on-white-paper poem is the cave painting at Lascaux.

It is thanks to Char that Thompson comes to write two frank expressions of atavism (or originalism). Char's "Lascaux," translated by Thompson, meditates on the Neanderthal-crafted cave drawings/paintings found in southern France in the early twentieth century. In the third part of Char's four-part poem, an "unnameable Beast," stabbed with "Eight jibing barbs," appears to the poet as "this fantastically disguised mother, / Wisdom with her eyes full of tears" (175). The unknown beast of the caveman is actually a forerunner of Eve — and Mary. In his direct variation on Char's poem, "Picasso: *La Jeune Fille sur la Boule*; Lascaux: *Stag Frieze*," Thompson parallels the art of the twentieth-century modernist master and the "primitive" art of the Neanderthals. Picasso paints a girl, Thompson writes, "arms curved up" with "something . . . // caught between her hands" — perhaps "a flake / of the sun" (86). The poet's gaze shifts from this painting to that of the image from Lascaux, seeing, in an open book, "the sun through my window tangles / in the charred antlers / of five deer / crossing a river under the earth" (86). Thompson's use of *char* is not innocent: it refers us to Char's poem "Lascaux," whose lines locate the mother of humanity in the image of a badly wounded animal. Similarly, Thompson's poem cites the image of five deer as the true — I will say *original* — source of Picasso's image of a young (white) girl and "A pale white horse" (86). In both pictures and both poems, though, "the human will not hide its face," Thompson realizes (86).

Instead, one finds a skull, as in "Ewe's Skull on the Aboideau at Carter's Brook" (90). The skull is "bloody, clean," or dark and white, in its appearance (90).<sup>13</sup> Read racially, such imagery hints, "blacks belonged to a primitive chaotic order *rooted in nature*" (Archer-Straw 170; emphasis added). As Archer-Straw puts it, "debates about blackness were really about whiteness and about providing Europeans with a new sense of direction" (179). Hence, metaphors of darkness and blackness were used merely to allow white artists to redefine themselves as "modern primitives" and look to "other cultures for a simpler lifestyle" (Archer-Straw 180). Problematically, though, such "latent primitivism"

can feed “proto-Fascism” (Archer-Straw 179). Fascinatingly, Thompson’s fetishizing of the ewe skull echoes Picasso’s own use of African sculpture and, to cite Archer-Straw, “the African mask” (57). Thus, he made “more explicit connections between negative and erotic fantasies about blacks, women, Africa and savagery” (57). Sure, Thompson’s poem does not discuss Negroes or Africa, but it is a fetish device: “under your sign, your bone, / I make my peace” (90). The “you” addressed in the poem is not “pure,” for he or she is connected with sexualized slaughter. His or her phallic “pole-axe each time / in marriage with the bone, your feeding / on blood they, twitching, sleep away; // and the meat, hung, clean from your knife, / the sweet gods of your barn” (90). The “darkness” of the ewe’s slaughter, its almost sacrificial destruction, leaves it “bloody” — or, in other terms, *black*, while the passage of time, and exposure to the elements, makes it “cleaner” — or *whiter* — so that the whiteness underlying the blackness gleams clear and renders the skull useful as an object of meditation and redemption. In this poem, one espies what Morrison espies in Ernest Hemingway, namely, “the fetishizing of color, the transference to blackness [or blood] the power of . . . sexuality, chaos, . . . strangeness, and helpless, hapless desire” (80-81). Through his study of the ewe’s skull, Thompson is able, like the European intelligentsia of the 1930s, to experience the “rekindling” of his own “primitive” state (Archer-Straw 180). However, this primitivism is achieved through colour symbolism and the phallic penetration of flesh with poleaxe and knife.

In her analysis of Parisian surrealism of the 1920s, Archer-Straw asserts that Georges Bataille’s writing “proposed an alternative view of the human where its ‘being’ is rooted in mud” (143). I am reminded of Thompson’s “What Are You Asking For?” wherein “the snow / cakes on your body: / mud on a sow’s belly” (75). White snow and black mud are, as usual for Thompson, two sides of the same animal. Indeed, a human body is here held up as equivalent to a sow’s. Archer-Straw’s recognition that Bataille’s surrealism elicited a “sinister love of darkness” (143) seems apt for Thompson, too, for his glimpses into the “dark” are fecund: “in the muck I’ll grow / crazy squash, cucumbers” (“Barn” 59). In “Black Smith Shop,” amid “anthracite light,” the smith draws “moaning speech” from horses, and his observer discovers his own “sound,” “furry, alien, shining, / from the horn of the new moon, / out of this new dark” (61). The shop signifies the poem itself.

Thompson's interest in the "pure" origins of speech, of articulation, of utterance, returns him to its roots:

we throw words at the dark  
 and the dark comes  
 back to us; a bird  
 is still for a moment  
 in our garden. ("Moving Out, Moving In" 82)

The word itself is avian. (Compare this finding with Ghazal VIII, where the speaker exclaims, "I forget: why are there broken birds / behind me; words, goddammit, words" [114].) But these words wing from the blood, the heart, *the source*.

Starkly, Thompson's verse style is minimalist, direct, shorn of any potential clutter or illogical grammatical aids, while his imagery is adamantly nature-oriented. Again, at the level of style, "race" would seem to evaporate as a concern in Thompson's work. Yet, his versifications are complicit with atavism, an ethnographic, anthropological attitude fixed in European master discourses of "race," while performing a valuation of blackness in the black ink or black type that he places so sparingly upon his snow-white pages, that obsidian lightning that chars his otherwise clear page, that mirrors the "deep darkness" — char — of his soul, his secret, primitive blackness. Moreover, the hacking away at verbiage is also an attempt to get to "black" basics, all hemmed in by the white space of silent scrutiny and muffling silence.

The major English-language poets Thompson references — Pound, Yeats, and Thomas — illustrate his innate concerns. Maybe Pound is best understood as Thompson understood him — as the apostle of decolonization of English literature.<sup>14</sup> Pound is crucial to this process of cutting away the baroque and the ornamental to get at bone or metal or blood, sweat, tears, and ink. Thus, "The Brim of the Well" intones "clean axe / in new wood // I spring juice" (93), lines that recollect the Pound of *The Cantos* and "A Pact" (1916), but that also address Pound's T'ang Dynasty-derived command to "MAKE IT NEW" (Canto LIII, 265): see the spring imagery of "clean," "new," and "juice." Note, also, the implicit analogy here: the sharp pen on the clean page, a "hand" springing ink. In Thompson's Ghazal XIX, the Poundian imagery allows a similar argument: "my right hand breaks; / new snow" (125), that is to say, starts a new poem on a new page. In the same poem,

Thompson echoes Pound, borrowing from the latter's Canto LXXXIV (559):

I dive into a strange heart, and lift  
*out of all this beauty something*<sup>15</sup>  
 myself, fish hook tinged with blood,  
 a turned furrow,  
 potatoes, fish, those who love them,  
*must come* (125; emphasis added)

This elemental imagery – beauty — positions the speaker-poet as fish-hook, furrow (verse, turn, line on a page), producer, and consumer (artist and audience). Indeed, out of his *production*, his productivity/creativity, “beauty must come.” Yes, but the insistence on this elemental may also signal the archetypal, the atavistic, and, most perilously, fascism.

In “Left-Handed Epithalamion” (ca. 1974), Pound is nodded at again: “It is difficult to speak of the beauty I would wish” (254). The line seems an elaboration upon Pound’s refrain in *The Pisan Cantos*, “beauty is difficult” (Canto LXXIV, 464). But this beauty is, for Pound, “difficult” to create or voice because of the fact of his incarceration on suspicion of treason. Bereft of books, short of paper, and at a loss, at times, for light, Pound was forced to adopt an economical lyricism. This aesthetic, in Thompson, insists upon atavism. (In Ghazal I, Thompson’s lines, “essence / of essences . . . whiteness” [107] also recall Pound’s fetishization of whiteness: “snow on the marble / snow-white / against stone-white” [Canto LXXXIV, 558]).

Thompson’s engagements with the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas also involve politic imagery of colour contrast. In “The Man in the Wind,” Thompson’s elegy for Thomas, we find the atavistic image, “The sulphur blood . . . drove / The darkness of his pen” (157). Moreover, his grave features “black soil” and he himself was a fusion of darkness and light: “his own dark fire” (157). Thomas is as darkling a white as are the women Thompson inks.

Yeats is another unavoidably politicized precursor for Thompson, and we must know that the Irish poet was, along with being a Celtic mystic, nationalist, and fascist idolater, a bard who sought to work his own decolonization of English poetry by making space for an Irish-centred sensibility. Famously, Thompson’s Ghazal IX contests, “Yeats. Yeats. Yeats. Yeats. Yeats. Yeats. / Why wouldn’t the man shut up?”

(115) but it also validates his insistence on his song. Ghazal XIII voices frustration with the Irish poet's mythmaking: "The rook-delighting heaven? / I've seen one crow" (119). But Thompson boasts here a post-colonial vision: Yeats can have his mythic Ireland and her rooks; but, in southeastern New Brunswick, it is, signally, *a* crow that counts. In Ghazal XVIII, the echo of Yeats's tombstone declaration, "Cast a cold eye" (from his "Under Ben Bulbin"), prepares us for Thompson's own reflection on mortality (124). In addition, Thompson "nationalizes" or "regionalizes" Yeats by recasting that poet's sonnet "Leda and the Swan" (1928) as a free-verse tale spoken with a Tantramar accent: "William Butler Yeats Surfaces Somewhere in the Maritimes Complete With Myths, Or, Leda and the What?" (240). Here Thompson produces a "minstrel" mockery of Yeats's poem, donning a kind of "black face" in voice to domesticate Greek myth and Irish-English modernism at once. He authors "dialect" poetry, thus forcing the smooth Anglophone Yeats to utter a pidgin English, and thus fastening him, to borrow Fanon's terms, "to the effigy of him, to snare him, to imprison him, the eternal victim of an essence, of an *appearance* for which he is not responsible" (*Black* 35). This "essence" is a whiteness stricken from the universal by an ex-Brit New Brunswicker, decolonizing his own neo-native tongue by colonizing that of Yeats.

As this analysis of Thompson's employment of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Québécois poets, Char, Pound, Thomas, and Yeats indicates, Thompson was a viscerally political poet, one conscious of the social and racial implications of imagery, verse forms, and allusions. But we must go further.

### III

Peter Sanger reveals that Thompson, as an undergraduate at the University of Sheffield, England, 1955-1959, studied psychology: "Rather than being Freudian or Jungian, the psychology offered was, I suspect, empirical, statistical and behaviourist" (Introduction 19). Sanger also feels that Thompson likely ranged beyond "the bare-bones [course] entries in the University of Sheffield calendars" (Introduction 20), thus becoming knowledgeable enough in the field to consider authoring a doctorate on "an examination of Nazi official psychology" (qtd. in Sanger 20). Thompson went on to graduate with "a first class honours degree in psychology in June, 1958" (Introduction 20). Given his

accomplishment and broad knowledge of psychology, Thompson had to have known his Freud and his Jung, if not his Fanon. Nevertheless, it is impossible to believe him oblivious to the view that, as Fanon writes, “In the collective unconscious, black = ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality” (*Black* 192). It is also related to the animal, irrational, and erotic (*Black* 126), that is to say, to all that which licenses physical pleasure, carnality, the repression of reason and the liberation of instinct and impulse — especially lust, greed, rage, gluttony, and ecstasy. According to Fanon, psychology has produced a “Manichean concept of the world” (*Black* 44-45) that operates thus:

I am white: that is to say that I possess beauty and virtue, which have never been black. I am the color of the daylight. . . . (*Black* 45; ellipsis in orig.)

I am black: I am the incarnation of a complete fusion with the world, an intuitive understanding of the earth, an abandonment of my ego in the heart of the cosmos. (*Black* 45)

I am truly a ray of sunlight under the earth. . . . (*Black* 45; ellipsis in orig.)

Given such widespread conceptions of blackness and whiteness, even as the decolonization project accelerated between the end of World War II and the end of the 1960s, Thompson would have known the political — racial — aspects of such imagery. Morrison instructs us: “The world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion” (46). As a mid-century student of psychology, one conversant with its major theorizations and concepts, Thompson must have understood the real-world resonances of melanin-related colours.

Aged only seven when the Second World War ended, generating war crime trials and executions and survivors’ memorializations of The Holocaust (and other unspeakable atrocities), Thompson grew up to observe the independence of India and Pakistan, then Ghana, and also to read in the press and absorb from the newsreels the stereotyping critiques of “negative” blackness. He saw for himself, at an impressionable age, “this world . . . forced down to animal level by imperial powers” (Fanon, *Wretched* 100). He also saw the clichéd evils of white imperialism, whether that of Italy in Ethiopia or Germany in most of the rest of Europe, but also Britain itself in decolonizing India and Africa, and France in revolutionary Algeria and pro-independence Vietnam. Thompson was also an eyewitness, as part of a British mil-

itary unit in Germany, to the imperialist ambitions of the Soviet Union (Sanger, Introduction 20). Thompson began his studies at Michigan State University in 1960 “as a master’s candidate in psychology,” but a year later, transferred into “the Department of Comparative Literature” (Introduction 21). Assuredly, then, he was a poet comfortable with world affairs as well as the tropes of psychoanalysis. (And why not? Morrison opines, “The narrative into which life seems to cast itself surfaces most forcefully in certain kinds of psychoanalysis” [v].) In Ghazal III, Thompson’s persona reports, “One line of poetry dogs me; the newspapers, / the crazy world” (109). In Ghazal XXIII, Thompson writes, “Churn, churn; all in black: / the milk I want, I want” (129), which is, I wager, a description of writing once again: milking words from ink. (“Black” is the inkwell and “milk” is the ideational potential of ink.) The poet cries here, so to speak, for spilled ink — or spilled milk — because that spillage is rhetoric(al). The white page is a forum for black performance, for suffering, for celebration: it is precisely what the poetry page shares with a newspaper page.

#### IV

At the beginning of this essay, I noted the quite accidental correspondence between Thompson — apolitical minimalist and surrealist — and Malcolm X, the archly political tribune for Black and “Third World” liberation. I want to close by noting a few significant others.

First, there is the cultivation, or demonstration, of individual independence and subversive smarts. Thus, facing conscription into the US Army during the Anti-Fascist War, X “started circulating the word around Harlem that he was ‘frantic to join . . . the Japanese army!’” (Natambu 78). Interviewed by a US Army psychiatrist, X claimed to want to enlist so he could “get sent down South. Organize them nigger soldiers, you dig? Steal us some guns and kill up crackers!” (80). X’s plot — his feigned “race madness” — succeeded: the army rejected him. Thompson’s penchant for a like unconventionality led to his wearing of “woodsman’s pants and a red and black hunting jacket under the dandified, reverse-conventional ragged black undergraduate’s gown at convocations,” says Sanger (Introduction 28). Thompson’s nonconformity and his commitment to writing, not research, led Mount Allison University to reject, initially, his candidacy for tenure in the fall of 1969 (Introduction 28). However, his student popularity during a period of

discontent at the university in spring 1970, coupled with support from six out of ten colleagues in the English department, enabled him to secure tenure (Introduction 30).

Thompson's behaviour was eccentric. Sanger reiterates, skeptically, the legends that "he shot at or over the house of the university's president" and "that he shot the town clock" (Introduction 39). Sanger also reports an anecdote about how Thompson "rigged up mountain climbing gear and rappelled down the side of his office building at Mount Allison" (Introduction 15). Strikingly, such behaviour recalls the principles of Dada — yet another French artistic movement Thompson had to have known, and yet another movement inspired by the European perception of blacks as "dynamic, nonconformist and subversive" (Archer-Straw 180). Without being as dramatically absurdist in his practice, Malcolm X's public persona recalled "the cocky attitude inside and outside the ring" of Jack Johnson, the first African-American heavyweight champion, whose "flaunting of unwritten colour codes made his victories over white men both physically and sexually humiliating" (Archer-Straw 46). X did his fighting through words, but he enjoyed reading prizefights as arenas of displaced racial combat, and he was partly responsible for transforming Cassius Clay into Muhammad Ali. Like Johnson and Ali, though, X was perceived as a "bad nigger," one who was "greeted with fascination and curiosity" (Archer-Straw 46). This appeal of seductive threat, an aspect of Jack Johnson (and later X), served to stimulate French Dadaism, whose sentiments also demanded "a predilection for *l'art nègre*" (Archer-Straw 65).

By behaving as subversively and as eccentrically as he did, Thompson replayed nonconformist poses and Dadaist practices that derive ultimately from a European idea of African "wildness." When Sanger quotes Thompson's statement, "I've been working in the dark" (Introduction 15), the editor does not comment on its resonant implications, such as the Freudian and Jungian associations of the unconscious and its (repressed) desires with "darkness." Later, Sanger refers to Thompson's "night-sea journey of mind and spirit" (Introduction 39), that is, in Morrison's terms, more "playing in the dark." His peculiar "darkness" included his reaction to, as Sanger states, "the cultural displacements he was compelled to adjust to in the United States and Canada" (Introduction 36), and even internment in a psychiatric hospital (37).



Malcolm X's faith in Islam spared him from such mental breakdown, although, when he learned that his mentor and spiritual guide, Elijah Muhammad, was a serial adulterer, he felt "as though something in *nature* had failed, like the sun, or the stars" (X 304). But following his departure from the Nation of Islam in 1964, he became a fatalist, commenting the night before his assassination, "I always knew it would end like this" (Natambu 314).

Although Thompson's death was more a suicide than an accident, and certainly not a homicide, he, too, as Sanger notes, "had obviously prepared himself for death and, at the very least, put himself in death's way" (Introduction 42). In addition — and here he resembles X closely again — "Thompson refused to be part of the compromises upon which human survival normally depends" (43).

Just before his assassination, following the firebombing of his home, Malcolm X had himself photographed holding an M-1 carbine, so as to deter any further attacks. As a hunter and a woodsman, Thompson was comfortable with his shotgun, "the rare, beautiful, semi-antique, double-barrelled box-lock twelve-gauge made by Tobin" (Sanger Introduction 40). He was photographed holding it in 1974.

Admittedly, these two images speak to two different men in two different places in two different times. But just as X's radical message of race pride and decolonization necessitated his premature destruction, so did Thompson's beleaguered, exiled whiteness, his dispatch to "the far periphery of British civilization" (qtd. in Morrison 42), his failure to become "a borderland gentleman, a man of property in a raw, half-savage world" (qtd. in Morrison 42), and his practice of an atavistic art that constantly throws blackness upon white, or reveals the inner blackness of the white, drives him, like Edgar Allan Poe before him, into the abyss of the bottle and the agony of unreason. Yet, I also see in Thompson's photograph, not only the proud hunter, but also a plaid-jacket *patriote*, a defender of *le pays d'âme*, an individualist decolonizer as opposed to Malcolm X's mass-based vision.

According to Morrison, "images of blackness can be evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable — all of the self-contradictory features of the self" (59). Such ambiguities are plentifully present in Thompson. Morrison also witnesses, "Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained,

dreaded, senseless, implacable” (59). I think Thompson seeks to give it coherence and voice by tracing it in black or outlining its shadows. . . .

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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I dedicate this essay to the honour of the Nobel Laureate in Literature, Derek Walcott, who has always recognized the inextricability of blackness and whiteness. Hear, hear!

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Coleman's *White Civility* (2006) is a notable exception. See also Winfried Siemerling's relevant readings of "race."

<sup>2</sup> The point is a conjecture but grounded in common sense and circumstantial evidence, as is true, I hope, of all of my speculative statements in this essay.

<sup>3</sup> This term has its greatest currency in American constitutional debates, where it is applied to attempts to interpret that nation's founding document according to its drafters' original intentions. My use of the term differs, but it is still related to the notion that the meaning of a thing is to be found in its origins.

<sup>4</sup> We must not forget, though, that American poets, like Pound, like Robert Penn Warren, because of their heritage of slavery, share similar concerns. Thus Warren writes of "shadows / Bigger than people and blacker than niggers" (qtd. in Morrison 29).

<sup>5</sup> Intriguingly, the ghazal form itself, due to its juxtaposition of seemingly disconnected rhetorical modes, may encourage Thompson's subtle examination of the notion that blackness is the blueprint for whiteness.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson's portraiture recalls Man Ray's black-and-white photography.

<sup>7</sup> I reflect also that, at the literal "brim of the well," daylight will appear luminous, while the depths of the well, full of water or not, will appear dark. Here, too, light — or whiteness — is a superficial covering to the blackness or darkness within.

<sup>8</sup> The image is similar to the sight of the brim of the well. See note 7.

<sup>9</sup> See Graham Robb, *Rimbaud* (2001), 391-92.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson loves sly literary puns on colour. Here he relates "white" and "Wyatt." But he also puns blackly on René Char's surname.

<sup>11</sup> Vallières's memoir, *Les nègres blancs d'amérique* (1968), consciously equates Québécois struggles for equality and independence with black political striving, especially in the United States.

<sup>12</sup> The quotations' page references are all to Thompson (1996).

<sup>13</sup> Is "Ewe" Thompson's "naturalist" joke on Char's "Eve"?

<sup>14</sup> Arguably, that was modernism: the Yankee-led overhaul or overthrowing of Victorian

and Edwardian English poetry, a process assisted by Pound's importation — or translation — of classical Greek, Latin, Chinese, Japanese, Provençal, and medieval Italian verse forms to provide models of how to write succinct, singing, and uncensored verse. Intriguingly, Thompson also turns to the poetic structures of exotic cultures — haiku, the Chinese verse of Tu Fu and Tu Mu, Persian ghazals — to find fit forms for his English self-expression.

<sup>15</sup> See also Thompson's use of this quotation in "To the Poets in Jail in Quebec" (Thompson 1996, 238-39), already discussed above.

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