

BUILDING CITADELS TO PRESERVE CULTURAL IDENTITY: FISK  
UNIVERSITY'S ARCHIVE AND NIGERIA'S CITADEL PRESS

by

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## ABSTRACT

The transatlantic cultural interaction between African Americans and continental Africans during the 1950s and 60s has been occluded in the popular teaching of American literature and history. My thesis restores international perspective to explore shared aspects of the cultural legacies of both groups in this era. Taking a cultural studies approach, my thesis investigates in historical context the structural parallels between Arna Bontemps' contributions to building an archive of African and African American literature housed at the Fisk University library, where he was head librarian (1943-1964), and the mission of Chinua Achebe and Christopher Okigbo in founding a fledgling Nigeria's Citadel Press as a literary voice for the new nation (1967-1969). My thesis investigates cultural connections, or more precisely the dialectic, between the literary aspirations of the American Civil rights movement and those of Nigerian nationalism. The cultural dialectic is evident in the efforts of Bontemps and Achebe to exchange, preserve, transmit, and steward their people's literature by founding institutions to secure ethnic identities and establish repositories of cultural memory, efforts they understood as a necessary part of a larger process of state-building.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the early Black History movement and Civil Rights movement in America, Black writers endeavored to articulate and explore Black experience and made efforts to restore and preserve their community's history that would be accessible to the American public through individual works or repositories housed in public, private, or university libraries. African American writer, poet, and Harlem Renaissance figure, Arna Bontemps contributed to this effort by expanding the Negro Special Collection at Fisk University, essentially creating a cultural repository preserving Black memory, history, and culture as well as constructing and preserving an ethnic identity. He did so by acquiring primary source material, including the work of several well-known Black writers, musicians, politicians, sociologists, a religious organization, etc., building a collection that presented a comprehensive picture of the Black community by collecting work encompassing areas of Black music, history, and literary tradition spanning back to the early 1800s.

Bontemps' efforts also helped maintain a printed record of Black culture and history particularly valuable to the Black community because of the traditional oral nature of Black culture and history. Many scholars and historians such as Charles S. Johnson and Carter B. Woodson recognized that the viability of Black history was threatened as history told through oral storytelling could be lost if not written down or recorded in some way. Fisk's Special Negro Collection became competitive with other well-known HBCU collections such as Howard University's collection. The significant collections Bontemps acquired during his tenure as head librarian stimulated interest in the Negro collection and developed Fisk's library as a site for conducting primary

research on Black history, culture, and experience. Essentially, Bontemps created a space, during a time of tense interracial relations, racial violence, and a fight for civil rights, where these works can be safely housed, preserved, and accessed for future generations of Americans.

Around the same time, Chinua Achebe and Christopher Okigbo founded, in a fledgling Nigeria, the Citadel Press to serve as a safe haven for Nigerian writers to publish their work during war time in an organ protected from a global publishing conglomerate. The Citadel Press was founded to publish African literature that passes down the new nation's cultural history, particularly focused on themes of Nigeria's war of independence, to future generations to help build a new national identity as part of Nigeria's process of decolonization. Achebe's and Okigbo's efforts culminate in the publication of their children's book *How the Leopard Got His Claws*, an event whose cultural significance I understand in the context of the decolonization of Nigeria, the subsequent Biafran Civil War, and the postcolonial modernism movement in African literature.<sup>1</sup> African writers a part of this literary movement produced works that "interrogate and subvert the cultural practices of European modernism, bending and hybridizing them in their own processes of indigenous cultural retrieval and questioning the ideas of progress and enlightenment embedded in modernity"(Woods 930). Essentially, African writers established their own hybrid literary tradition that negotiated their European education and their indigenous traditions of storytelling capable of articulating their own history, communicating a postcolonial peoples' experience, and critiquing colonialism. Achebe's and Okigbo's children's book (a genre

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<sup>1</sup>African postcolonial modernism is a literary movement that occurs in post-independence/postcolonial Nigeria in the 1950s and 60s.

in which Bontemps was also deeply invested) is a model of the work produced during the postcolonial modernism movement in African literature as it exhibits the combination of using colonial tools, such as the English language, and African traditions, specifically oral traditions, to produce a reworking of a traditional folktale for the purposes of serving new-nation building. Bontemps conducts a similar mission in his building of the Fisk archive housing various special collections of books and materials; the contexts for the two projects, collecting and publishing, are culturally germane—both work to transmit, preserve, and steward their people’s literature by founding institutions to secure ethnic identities and establish repositories of cultural memory, efforts understood as a necessary part of a larger process of state-building. Both projects also indicate accessibility is an important component of preservation. To aid the preservation process, the cultural memory being preserved needs to be accessible to one’s own community and the larger national or international community so that memory becomes widespread, public and memorialized in the minds, scholarship, and literature of those able to (re)access it.

Chapter I, “Arna Bontemps’ Collecting and Building a Repository in Fisk University’s Library,” addresses Bontemps’ mission to create a repository of Black history, culture, and memory that manifests in his expansion of the Special Collections at Fisk University, particularly the Special Negro Collection. I demonstrate Bontemps’ building of a repository by summarizing and detailing the contents and cultural significance of the collections as well as the individual materials added to the Special Negro Collection during Bontemps’ tenure as head librarian. By providing a short biography of Bontemps, I also demonstrate that his mission to recover, restore, and preserve Black history and culture manifests throughout his career including his publications and involvement in the Illinois Federal Writers Project before his librarianship at Fisk as well as the writing he produced for children during his career at Fisk. Lastly, I draw connections

between Bontemps' preservation efforts and that of Chinua Achebe in Nigeria as well as the parallels between the social and cultural contexts of the 1950s-60s in Nigeria and America, which both Nigerian and African American writers respond to in their writing and the creation of cultural repositories.

Chapter II, "Post-Colonial African Modernism, the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War, the Citadel Press, and *How The Leopard Got His Claws*," considers Achebe's and Christopher Okigbo's collaborative founding of a publishing house owned and run by Nigerians for Nigerian writers to produce and disseminate African work and establish a safe place for writers to gather in a time of impending war and publishing the refurbished children's book *How the Leopard Got His Claws*.<sup>2</sup> Achebe and Okigbo wanted to continue the mission of African modernism to establish an African literature and identity in a postcolonial people's experience. I contextualize their founding of the Citadel Press in the Nigerian postcolonial modernism movement, publishing scene, and the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War. I further contextualize these social events by detailing the preceding colonization and decolonization of Nigeria, the resulting political, governmental, and social turmoil of the 1950s and early 60s, and the artistic, literary movement (the postcolonial modernism movement) that responds to this turmoil.

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<sup>2</sup> In the article "(Re)Inventing the Past for the Present: Symbolism in Chinua Achebe's *How the Leopard Got His Claws*," Ernest Emenyonu uses the word *refurbished* to describe Achebe's children's book. As Emenyonu explains, and as I elaborate in Chapter II, Achebe edited and transformed the original fable John Iroaganachi submitted to the Citadel Press entitled "How the Dog Became a Domestic Animal." Achebe changed the theme of the story, re-envisioned the dog as a traitor instead of a hero and "transformed the simple story of the dog into a complex metaphor about the Nigeria-Biafra crisis" (8). Achebe kept the same characters and some of the original aspects of the fable, such as explaining how the dog became domesticated, yet he "totally changed the focus and moral direction of the animal tale" (8). Like taking an old house down to the studs and salvaging original materials from the old home to rebuild a new, modern house that includes pieces of the original home, Achebe essentially stripped the original fable down to the studs and renovated and redecored the story for a modern audience. Because of this process, I understand Emenyonu's use of *refurbished* and think it is an accurate descriptor for *How the Leopard Got His Claws*. As such, I chose to adopt his term and describe Achebe's children's book the same way.

Ultimately, my thesis claims that the efforts of Nigerian writers to preserve and combat colonial myths about African history and culture post-independence echoes the efforts of African American writers, historians, educators, and bibliophiles fighting for the inclusion and accurate teaching of Black history in American schools, establishing resources and repositories of Black history in libraries accessible to the American public, and creating literary works articulating and exploring the Black experience in a time of discord and transition during the Civil Rights movement in America. Additionally, in creating an African and African American literary tradition and criticism, both groups shared the experience of a complex negotiation between a European based education and using their own folk tradition when creating and critiquing their own literary and artistic work as well as articulating their cultural identity and experience. Both groups fought to create works that recovered, preserved, and recorded their history so that the perspective of the colonized or enslaved was included in the national narrative and became a part of their nations' identities.

CHAPTER I: ARNA BONTEMPS' COLLECTING AND BUILDING A  
REPOSITORY IN FISK UNIVERSITY'S LIBRARY

The myth that I suspect has hurt us most in the present century . . . was the allegation that the Negro had no history, no record, no background, no achievement worth mentioning. Here was a contention that any school boy could establish by merely opening his history book. Where was the Negro mentioned?

—Arna Bontemps, “Old Myths—New Negroes”

When I began to haunt the public library on central avenue just south of Vernon . . . I was seeking a recognizable reflection of myself and my world in the collections of books available to a boy reader going on twelve. What I found was a cold comfort . . . everybody concerned [in particular, his father and the local public librarian] was to some degree hostile to my reading needs . . . most emphatically the authors of the books who treated me as if I did not exist . . . [During the Depression] I gravitated toward the public library . . . it was not the fault of [the librarians] that on the shelves I still found little with which I could identify . . . thanks to the Harlem interlude, I knew it was not that books to nourish pride and create a sense of belonging had not been written but only that they had been scorned and neglected.

—Arna Bontemps, “Old Myths—New Negroes”

Award-winning author of poetry, historical fiction, short stories and African American children's literature, Arna Wendell Bontemps was born on October 13, 1902 in Alexandria, Louisiana. His parents were Paul Bontemps, a brick mason, and Maria Carolina Pembroke, a schoolteacher. When he was three, racial violence in the southern United States and outbreaks of tuberculosis led his family to move to California (Donovan and Dubek). Upon moving to California, his parents converted from their childhood religious practices—Arna's father was baptized and raised Catholic and his mother Methodist—to Seventh-Day Adventism (Donovan and Dubek). Paul Bontemps later became a full time minister in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (Nichols 2). Arna Bontemps subsequently attended, and later taught at, schools associated with the Seventh-Day Adventist denomination. In 1914, at the age of twelve, Bontemps lost his mother to tuberculosis (James 25). While she was sick, his father sent him “to

live with his maternal grandmother on her farm in a nearby rural area where he was exposed to Black folk culture through his grandmother's brother [Joe Ward, nicknamed Uncle Buddy], who served as a source of stories, family history, songs, and connection to remaining family members in Louisiana" (Donovan and Dubek). Uncle Buddy was a recovering alcoholic and unemployed at the time. In his autobiographical essay "Why I Returned," Bontemps writes that his father thought Uncle Buddy was a bad example and worried about the influences Uncle Buddy would have on his son: "[H]e was concerned, almost troubled, about the possibility of my adopting the little old derelict as an example . . . [of what] my father described as don't-care folk" (9). In the prologue to *Arna Bontemps-Langston Hughes Letters 1925-1967*, Charles Nichols describes Bontemps' father, Paul, as being "disdainful of Afro-American folk heritage—its music, literature, and art" (1). Witnessing his father and Uncle Buddy's opposing views of their heritage, Bontemps recognized that within the Black community there were two attitudes about Black roots. To Bontemps, Uncle Buddy represented those "embracing the riches of folk heritage," whereas his father represented those who "demand a clean break with the past and all it represents" ("Why I Returned" 11). Because of this divide, Bontemps concludes in his essay that, at some point in their lives, all members of the Black community have to choose which attitude they will adopt. Bontemps' personal reflections indicate he too faced this choice and, based on the work he produced in his careers both as a writer and as Head Librarian at Fisk University, he chose to adopt his uncle's perspective and explore, embrace, and preserve his folk heritage.

In 1917, Paul Bontemps sent Arna to San Fernando Academy, a Seventh-Day Adventist private high school. San Fernando Academy, like many of the institutions he attended throughout his education, was predominantly white, with Bontemps being one of few Black students, if not

the only Black student, in attendance (Donovan and Dubek). He graduated high school in three years, missing one year because of the influenza epidemic following World War I.<sup>1</sup> In 1920, at the age of seventeen, Bontemps started at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California.<sup>2</sup> During his years at Pacific Union, also associated with the Seventh-Day Adventist communion, Bontemps started to develop his love for creative writing, particularly poetry, which gradually evolved into his vocational sense that he was a writer.<sup>3</sup> His obituary in *The New York Times* indicates Paul McKay's poem "Harlem Shadows" as a particular source of inspiration.<sup>4</sup> It was such poems as McKay's that were beginning to emerge from Harlem that inspired Bontemps later to move there and pursue a career as a writer in a community of like-minded artists and writers. His father disapproved of his son's aspirational career as a writer because of his religious views and the assessment that the career of a writer would not be practical nor fit for sufficiently supporting a family, as Bontemps later articulates in his introduction to the 1968 edition of *Black Thunder*.<sup>5</sup>

In his essay "Why I Returned" and his introduction to *The Great Slave Narratives* (1969), Bontemps indicates his education lacked a comprehensive study or record of Black history or

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<sup>1</sup> Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 1, folder 1. Individual locations of archival material are cited in the footnotes only, whereas letters and other documents are cited by particular item in the Works Cited list.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Although Ibid has been dropped from the 9th edition of the MLA style guide, Ibid is a familiar convention for documenting sources in an economic and clear format, used widely in other styles such as Chicago, and for my purposes provides advantage over other options I have considered in citing complex primary sources and archival materials. For these reasons the Ibid conventions are maintained in the documentation of sources in this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> To access Bontemps' obituary in the New York Times refer to:

<https://www.nytimes.com/1973/06/06/archives/arna-bontemps-writer-70-dies-harlem-renaissance-figure-had-taught.html>.

<sup>5</sup> According to Ellen Donovan and Laura Dubek's profile of Bontemps in their article, "Dream Keepers," Seventh-Day Adventism enforced strict rules about exposure to secularism, which also meant that reading fiction was prohibited.

influential Black figures and their contributions to America. He states his education regarding Black History focused on slavery, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the African American community's former status as members of African tribes: "Had I not gone home summers and hobnobbed with folk-type Negroes, I would have finished college without knowing that any Negro other than Paul Laurence Dunbar ever wrote a poem. I would have come out imagining that the story of the Negro could be told in two short paragraphs: a statement about jungle people in Africa and an equally brief account of the slavery issue in American history" ("Why I Returned" 11). Bontemps goes on to say that his teachers taught him "that the only meaningful history of the Negro in the United States . . . began with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863" ("The Slave Narrative" vii). Bontemps' educational experience is indicative of the social, historical context of the early Black History movement occurring in the early twentieth century. During this movement, Black scholars fought for the study of Black life and history as Black history prior to the arrival of African slaves to America and their subsequent contribution to American history was not prevalent in the public school and college curriculum (Gardner). Additionally, the reporting of Black Americans and other minority groups was neglected or distorted in American History textbooks misrepresenting the Black experience and perpetuating racial stereotypes (Anderson); and Black history was not an area of academic specialization (Meier and Rudwick). According to contemporary historians Pero G. Dagbovie, V.P. Franklin, and Bettye Collier-Thomas, the early Black History movement was a continuation of the African American race vindicationist tradition of "African-American preachers, professors, publishers, and other highly educated professionals [in the nineteenth century who] put their intellect and training in service to 'the race' to deconstruct the discursive structures erected in science, medicine, the law, and historical discourse to uphold the mental[,] [biological,] and cultural

inferiority of African peoples” used to also disenfranchise the Black community (Franklin and Collier-Thomas 1).<sup>6</sup>

Historians involved in the early Black History movement, most famously W.E.B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson, produced resources ranging from printed works to groups and activities that reported and encouraged the study of Black history.<sup>7</sup> For example, DuBois published books and essays reporting the history of Black people in America in *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America* (1924) and *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (1935) and reporting in *The Negro* (1915) ancient African history such as the involvement of African groups in the state building and cultural formation of ancient civilizations such as those in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Soudan. Carter G. Woodson “maintained that, in addition to being founded on meticulous research, the study and dissemination of Black history needs to extend to the working-class and youth sectors of the Black community . . . [as] the knowledge of African American history [is] . . . an important and practical (though nonmaterial) way in which Black people [can be] liberated and empowered” (Dagbovie 45). To accomplish this mission, Woodson, George Cleveland Hall, W.B. Hargrove, Alexander L. Jackson, and James E. Stamps established the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in Chicago in

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<sup>6</sup> Pero G. Dagbovie is currently Professor and Graduate Director in the Department of History at Michigan State University specializing in 20<sup>th</sup> Century African American History, Black Intellectual History, and Black Studies. V.P. Franklin is Professor Emeritus of History and Education at the University of California, Riverside and was editor of *The Journal of African American History* from 2011-2018; Bettye Collier-Thomas is Director of the Center for African-American History and Culture, and Associate Professor of History at Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

<sup>7</sup> Further research into the historians who made contributions to the report and study of Black history during the early Black History movement goes beyond the parameters of this study; however, I acknowledge there are many other historians besides Du Bois and Woodson who produced historical reports of Black history during the movement as mentioned in James D. Anderson’s essay “Secondary School History Textbooks and the Treatment of Black History” and Pero Gaglo Dagbovie’s book *The Early Black History Movement, Carter G. Woodson, and Lorenzo Johnston Greene*. Such historians include, but are not limited to, Horace Mann Bond, Lorenzo Greene, Lawrence D. Reddick, Charles Wesley, and John Hope Franklin. I’m sure the names of some women are also missing from this list. Due to practicality purposes, I chose to use Du Bois and Woodson as examples because information about their work during the movement was readily available.

October 1915 (Franklin and Collier-Thomas). The mission of the Association was to collect “sociological and historical data on the Negro, [study] peoples of African blood, [publish] books in this field, and [promote] harmony between the races” (Franklin and Collier-Thomas 1). In accordance with Woodson’s intent to reach the public, ASNLH meetings “were held in Black churches, community centers, colleges and universities, and high school auditoriums throughout the country,” so that meetings and activities would be available to “lay historians, ministers, secondary and elementary school teachers, businessmen, and the Black community as a whole” (Dagbovie 47, 45). Under Woodson’s presidency, the Association established the *Journal of Negro History* in 1916. The journal was designed as “a quarterly scientific magazine” committed to publishing scholarly research on the history and cultures of Africa and peoples of African descent around the world” (Franklin and Collier-Thomas 1).

Later Woodson also established the *Negro History Bulletin* in 1937 to supplement “American history textbooks of the time and . . . [serve] as a platform for Blacks—from elementary schoolchildren to community activists to schoolteachers to professional scholars—to openly discuss and even publish their thoughts about Black history . . . [as well as to advertise] the ASLNH’s activities, especially for Negro History Week” (Dagbovie 55). Woodson initiated Negro History Week in 1926 to popularize Black history and help facilitate the teaching of the subject in public schools by “mailing out circulars to various educational institutions, presses, fraternal and social welfare organizations, literary societies, and radio stations” (Dagbovie 50). For those interested, Woodson also offered “a concrete program along with research and promotional materials that highlighted Black achievements from the ancient era in Africa to contemporary times” (Dagbovie). To help prepare and plan for Negro History Week, Woodson also published pamphlets and articles in the *Negro History Bulletin* outlining steps on how to

organize committees for the celebration (Dagbovie). This week-long celebration evolved into our present-day celebration of Black History Month. Even though Bontemps and others experienced this educational gap there were already others working to combat it and eventually, when Bontemps became a writer, his work fit within this larger, ongoing movement to combat the educational gap.

The educational gap in information about Black culture and heritage was something Bontemps struggled with early, upon entering his formal schooling. The gap became evident to him during his childhood visits to the Vernon Branch of the Los Angeles Public Library. In his 1966 lecture, “Old Myths—New Negroes,” delivered as part of UCLA’s celebration of Negro History Week, Bontemps recounts how growing up and visiting public libraries he was unable to find books he could identify with that reflected him or his experience as a Black child. Bontemps refers to this early childhood experience of a perceived gap and sense of “something missing” as a catalyst for his interest in libraries and eventually his pursuing a degree in Library Science. This lack of representation in the books of his youth and his sense of missing information from his educational experience prompted him to begin to seek out on his own knowledge of his own history and heritage as a Black American (Bishop 49). His written works for both children and adults demonstrate a clear purpose to fill this gap through the documentation and preservation of Black history and culture, the Black experience, and Black historical or contemporary figures. For example, Bontemps’ first children’s book, *Popo and Fifina, Children of Haiti* (1932), co-written with Langston Hughes and illustrated by E. Campbell Simms, is about the daily life of a Haitian family who move to Cape Haiti. Rudine Sims Bishop, a specialist in African American Children’s Literature, states that this early work is noteworthy for its presentation of the “Haitian family, not as exotic curiosities, but as an ordinary family going about their lives as best they

can . . . [which] served as a counterpoint to the negative images of Black people and Black life that were popular in the children's books of the day" (47). Bishop goes on to say the book demonstrates the values of the Harlem Renaissance as it shows "an appreciation for Pan Africanism . . . the life and culture of ordinary Black folk, [and the work demonstrates] a desire to provide children with accurate information about Black people, and a sense of self-love and race-pride" (47). Bontemps' second children's book, *You Can't Pet a Possum* (1934), illustrated by Ilse Bischoff, has a similar focus as it follows the daily life experiences of eight-year-old Shine Boy "in his Black rural neighborhood, including his adoption of a stray dog, meeting new friends, and a trip to Birmingham to visit his uncle. The novel concludes with Shine Boy celebrating his ninth birthday, his birthday wish before he blows out the candles on his cake expressing a continuation of the joys and pleasures of his life" (Donovan and Dubek). Because this book is set in the South, Bontemps also incorporates use of southern Black vernacular in the story (Bishop 48). Similar to Bishop's evaluation of *Popo and Fifina*, the significance of this book lies in the simplicity of its focus on ordinary life and depicting the Black community as "close-knit [and] joyful" as well as presenting the community's speech through the incorporation of dialect (Donovan and Dubek). As such, Bontemps' initial children's books begin to fill the gap in African American children's literature at the time where few works reflected Black culture, experience, identity, and language.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> His other children's books include *Sad-faced Boy* (1937), illustrated by Virginia Lee Burton; *Chariot in the Sky* (1951), illustrated by Cyrus Leroy Baldrige; *Lonesome Boy* (1955), illustrated by Felix Topolski; Tall tales in collaboration with Jack Conroy: *The Fast Sooner Hound* (1942), illustrated by Virginia Lee Burton; *Slappy Hooper, the Wonderful Sign Painter* (1946), illustrated by Ursula Koering; *Sam Patch, the High, Wide & Handsome Jumper* (1951), illustrated by Paul Brown. According to Ellen Donovan and Laura Dubek, some of Bontemps' children's literature was published posthumously, including two collaborations with Hughes, *The Pasteboard Bandit* (1997), illustrated by Peggy Turley and *Boy of the Border* (2009), illustrated by Antonio Castro L. as well as *Bubber Goes to Heaven* (written in 1932 or 1933; pub. 1998).

As Bontemps wrote creative fiction to help educate children about Black culture, history and historical figures, he also produced the “first comprehensive collection of Black poetry for children [entitled] *Golden Slippers: An Anthology of Negro Poetry for Young Readers* (1941), illustrated by Henrietta Bruce Sharon” (Donovan and Dubek). The anthology includes traditional rhymes, folk songs, ballads, and work by contemporary poets such as Langston Hughes and past poets such as Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Bontemps wrote biographies of influential Black historical figures such as George Washington Carver (*The Story of George Washington Carver* [1954]), Frederick Douglass (*Fredrick Douglass: Slave, Fighter, Freeman* [1959] and *Free at Last: The Life of Fredrick Douglass* [1971]), and Booker T. Washington (*Young Booker: Booker T. Washington's Early Days* [1972]). In 1945, Bontemps published *We Have Tomorrow*, which is a culmination of profiles he wrote for adolescents about contemporary African Americans who “successfully pursued careers previously unavailable to Blacks” (Donovan and Dubek), figures that included, as Langston Hughes notes, Brigadier General Benjamin Davis Jr. (military aviation), E. Simms Campbell (a cartoonist of “international fame”), and the “symphonic conductor” Dean Dixon (Letter to Arna Bontemps [28 Aug. 1961]).

Bontemps’ mission to fill the historical and representational gap in African American children’s literature parallels Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe’s own obligation to publish books relevant to society, particularly children’s books. In a 1988 interview with broadcast journalist, Bill Moyers at the University of Massachusetts, Achebe recounts his encounter with children’s literature when raising his daughter:

We were very young parents so we really had no experience and we used to go into the supermarket in Lagos and pick up a glossy, nice, big looking, colorful story. We never read the children’s stories ourselves, so we didn’t know what was in them. But then we

discovered, my wife and I, that our daughter was beginning to have very strange ideas, you see, and it was at that point that we began to look carefully into what she was reading and really, there was a lot of poison . . . stories full of racism, full of all kinds of ideas of Africa again as the other place as the back of the world and this was what we were feeding her . . . I knew then the importance of children's stories. ("Bill Moyers with Chinua Achebe" 17:09-18:11)

During the time of the Biafran civil war, Achebe and Okigbo "believed it was necessary . . . to publish books, especially children's books, that would have relevance to our society . . . [wanting] to develop literature for children based on local thought" (Achebe, *There Was a Country* 176). In other words, they wanted to document the civil war and explain it to current and future children from the Biafran perspective, the perspective of the survivors versus the perspective of the Nigerian government. This mission culminated in their publishing press's first and only completed project: the refurbished folktale of *How the Leopard Got His Claws*. Achebe recognized the power of children's stories to shape and consolidate a people's identity: children's books influence and inform the next generation. Achebe also identified a need to create children's stories that "turn[ed] children to local traditions of storytelling and a decolonizing political lesson" to combat racism and document and pass down the current historical moment to future generations (Suhr-Sytsma 55). Bontemps' mission writing for children echoes that of Achebe as Bontemps similarly identified a historical and representational gap in African American children's literature. By writing for children Bontemps believed he "could contribute more positive images of Blacks to American literature," connect young readers to Black folk tradition, and provide a historical record of the Black community to the next generation so they know their past and have hope for the future (Jones, "Arna Bontemps" 16).

In 1948, Bontemps wrote the nonfiction *The Story of the Negro*, which recounts the history of Blacks from precolonial times in Africa up to contemporary mid-century America. The book provides an “overview of [Africa] and its history, stressing the diversity to be found among its people and the precolonial achievements of African nations and individuals”; the book also covers “the arrival of twenty Blacks at Jamestown in 1619 . . . [,] a brief history of slavery, a description of the middle passage, and the history of Haiti’s fight for independence. The rest of the book is devoted to the story of Black people in the United States, from slavery to the time of the book’s publication” (Bishop 50). Bontemps’ efforts to record, amass, and make available the history of the Black community is evident in his early writing and throughout his career, a firm purpose particularly notable and echoed in his archival work as head librarian at Fisk University. In Bontemps’ 1966 UCLA lecture, he insists the myth that Black people have no culture or history is still pervasive in present society (the mid-1960s). However, Bontemps explains that preservation efforts to collect written works by and about Africans, such as the efforts made by bibliophiles Arthur A. Spingarn and Arthur B. Schomburg, prove contrary to the racialized myth that the Black community has no literary culture nor history. Bontemps’ work expanding Fisk University’s archival material as head librarian, which will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter, demonstrates similar efforts to preserve the history and experience of the Black community that vindicates the Black community from such myths of cultural inferiority. As such, it could be said that Bontemps’ archival preservation efforts and his historical writing are also part of the race vindicationist tradition. The details of Bontemps’ time at Fisk I turn to later in this chapter, before moving on to set his work in a more global context both within his own moment and our own.

After graduating from Pacific Union College in 1923, Bontemps was determined to become a poet. He returned to Los Angeles where he worked nights in the Los Angeles post office while reading and writing poetry. According to Nichols, during this time Bontemps sent his poems to national magazines, including, notably, *The Crisis*, the official journal of the NAACP. In 1924, *Crisis* accepted his poem “Hope,” which was Bontemps’ first publication (James 24). In that same year (1924), when he was twenty-two, Bontemps moved to Harlem to pursue a writing career. To support himself, he took a job as an English teacher and librarian at Harlem Academy, working during the day and writing poetry at night.<sup>9</sup> Later he would become principal of the school. Although he taught for seven years, Bontemps’ focus was on writing and not on pursuing a career in public education, a vocational clarity he clearly indicates in his biographical writing, composed during his time at the Fisk University Special Collection: “[A]gainst my will—I was promoted to the principalship of the little school [in Harlem] . . . [and] declined opportunities to enter the New York public school system. My mind was on my writing, and I didn’t want to get involved in a factory-like job which might interfere.”<sup>10</sup> Throughout his career, Bontemps struggled with the need to take other jobs, especially teaching jobs, to supplement his writing income and support his family while also finding enough time to write. In his correspondence with Hughes, Bontemps bemoans having too little time to write among his other responsibilities, including work, family, and travel.

Bontemps spent seven years in Harlem honing his craft and publishing poetry. In 1926, at twenty-four, he won the Alexander Pushkin Prize offered by *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*

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<sup>9</sup> Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 1, folder 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

for his poem “Golgotha is a Mountain” and again in 1927 for his poem “The Return.” Also in 1926, Bontemps won *The Crisis* Poetry Prize for “Nocturne at Bethesda” (James 27). In his biographical notes made during his tenure at the Fisk Special Collections, Bontemps wrote that he published his poetry during his Harlem years in several periodicals, including *Contemporary Verse*, *Palms*, *The Carolina Magazine*, *The Commonwealth*, *The World Tomorrow*, *The New York World*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, and *The New York Times*. He also mentioned his poetry being included in anthologies such as *Ebony and Topaz*, *The New Negro*, *Caroling Dusk*, *Braithwaite’s Anthologies*, *Book of American Negro Poetry*, *Negro Poets and their Poems*, and *Afrika Singt*. While in Harlem, Bontemps met Langston Hughes, who would become his lifelong friend, collaborator, and correspondent. He also became acquainted with many notable figures of the Harlem Renaissance, including Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B. Du Bois, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer. It was also in Harlem where Bontemps met his wife Alberta Johnson (1906-2004). The couple married in 1926 and would have six children: Joan Marie, Paul Bismark, Poppy Alberta, Camille Rudy, Constance Rebecca, and Arna Alex Bontemps. Throughout their marriage, Alberta was a devoted housewife and mother. While living in Nashville, Alberta became a founding member of the Ardent Gardeners Association established in 1951. The association was created for African-American women who wanted “to learn, cultivate, and celebrate their love of gardening” (Ford). Alberta also started the first Nashville based chapter of The Links, Incorporated in 1952 with Bess Faulkner, Georgia Boyd, Margaret Simms, Mildred Freeman and Elizabeth Walker (Randall). The Links is an “international, not-for-profit corporation . . . [and] volunteer service organization of . . . women who are committed to enriching, sustaining, and ensuring the culture and economic survival of

African Americans and other persons of African ancestry” (Randall). To list a few of the Nashville chapter’s early activities and accomplishments:

Early fundraising efforts by [the chapter] resulted in significant gifts to the Nashville NAACP, the National Urban League, the YMCA, The United Negro College Fund, the Red Cross, Clover Bottom, and the Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation. In April 17, 1974[,] the Nashville (TN) Chapter established the John W. Work II Memorial Foundation to sponsor and research the study of African American music . . . In 1983, the Nashville (TN) Chapter organized The College Trust Fund, an organization with the purpose of endowing a scholarship fund for the four historically Black colleges and universities in Nashville—Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, Tennessee State University and American Baptist College. . . . From 1987-1997 the Nashville Chapter co-sponsored and staffed the nationally recognized I Have a Future Program[,] [d]esigned as a community comprehensive health initiative serving children from [ages] 6-17. (Randall)

Arna Bontemps wasn’t a well-known figure of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes was at the time. Bontemps acknowledges in his biographical notes housed at Fisk’s Special Collections that he was more of an observer than, in Harlem, than a central figure of the arts movement in this period; but Harlem was the start of his literary career, and he was writing for both adults and children. During his last year in Harlem, 1931, Bontemps began writing for children in collaboration with Langston Hughes. That year, Hughes “had lived in Haiti for three months . . . and observed the conditions under which the Haitian poor lived and worked,” and when he returned he told Bontemps stories about his trip (Bishop 46). Subsequently, Bontemps suggested they “collaborate on a story for children based on Hughes’ observations of Haitian

life” (Donovan and Dubek). Their collaboration on this book continued even when Bontemps and his family moved to Huntsville, Alabama later that year. As a result, the two produced *Popo and Fifina, Children of Haiti* (1932, illustrated by E. Campbell Simms). A few years later, Bontemps would write his second children’s book *You Can’t Pet a Possum* (1934), illustrated by Ilse Bischoff.

In the introduction to the 1968 edition of *Black Thunder*, Bontemps asserts that the economic crash of the 1920s ended the Harlem Renaissance as jobs in New York became scarce. As a result, the depression drove Bontemps and his family to Huntsville, Alabama with the promise of employment as a teacher at Oakwood High School in 1931. Going to the South, Bontemps hoped to “wait out the bad times, [or] at least get my bearings” (Horace 13), as well as to “collect much of the subject matter for books I had projected.”<sup>11</sup> During his three years in Huntsville, racial tensions were high as the trials of the Scottsboro boys occurred thirty miles away in Decatur, Alabama. The Scottsboro boys were a group of nine Black teenage boys, Haywood Patterson, Olen Montgomery, Clarence Norris, Willie Roberson, Andy Wright, Ozzie Powell, Eugene Williams, Charley Weems and Roy Wright, accused of raping two white women, Victoria Price and Ruby Bates, on a freight train (“Scottsboro Boys”). The case garnered national attention. Bontemps also mentions that news of Mahatma Gandhi’s demonstrations in India were circulating in the newspapers, which also contributed to the tension in the South (Horace 13).

Around 1931-1932, Bontemps traveled to Fisk University to visit three friends he had met during the Harlem Renaissance years: James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Arthur Schomburg, who was curator of Fisk's Special Collection. During this visit Bontemps discovered the collection of slave narratives housed at the Fisk Library. Earlier in 1929, as a part of research efforts for "one of [Charles S.] Johnson's earliest projects, an extensive community study of the African-American neighborhoods adjacent to Fisk in Nashville," Johnson and Ophelia Settle, a member of the research staff at Fisk's Social Science Institute, interviewed over six hundred former slaves living in Nashville, rural Tennessee and Kentucky to collect firsthand accounts of slave life (Library of Congress; Crawford). These oral histories were a major component of Johnson's "analysis of the plantation as a social institution" and his study of the plantation system in Macon County, Alabama entitled *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934) (Library of Congress). These oral histories of slave life made-up Fisk's collection of slave narratives. While exploring and reading through the collection, "three historic efforts at self-emancipation caught [Bontemps'] attention . . . [and he] knew instantly that one of them should be the subject of [his] next novel" (Horace 14). Bontemps chose to write about the slave insurrection orchestrated by a slave named Gabriel in 1800 in Henrincion County, Virginia (Jones, "Arna Bontemps" 18). When Bontemps returned to Huntsville, racial tensions were still high, which started to impact his work environment. According to the author, his colleagues at Oakwood High School began to regard him with suspicion as he borrowed and accumulated many library books through the mail rather than using the school's library to conduct research for his novel. Bontemps also felt he couldn't tell his colleagues about his new project, researching a slave insurrection, amidst the racially charged atmosphere. Visits from friends out of state or enroute to protest and/or write about the Scottsboro trials added further suspicion. As Bontemps states, "I was . . . pointed out as being favorable to the revolution and, as a result, may not be rehired" (Letter to Langston Hughes [n.d.]).

In 1934 Bontemps and his family moved to Los Angeles to live with his parents while Bontemps was between jobs. The family had just enough money to get to California. Once there, they sold their car to afford food until he could finish his next novel (Horace 17). They stayed with his parents for a year. Bontemps describes the living situation as tight and uncomfortable making it hard to write: “Not having space for my typewriter, I wrote the book in longhand on the top of a folded-down sewing machine in the extra bedroom of my parents’ house . . . where my wife and I and our children (three at that time) were temporarily and uncomfortably quartered” (Horace 11).

Then in the spring of 1935, Bontemps received an advance against the royalties for *Black Thunder* (1936). This paid for the family to move to Chicago where Bontemps took a job as a principal at Shiloh Academy. A year later Bontemps enrolled in the English graduate program at the University of Chicago working towards an M.A. In 1937, Bontemps resigned from Shiloh Academy and went to work for the Illinois Writers’ Project, which is another instance in Bontemps’ career that demonstrates his commitment to documenting Black experience and recovering Black history. Although *Black Thunder* didn’t do well on the market, not earning more than its advance, the book did help Bontemps get hired for the Illinois Writers’ Project as the organization’s director, John T. Frederick, decided to add Bontemps to his staff after reading the novel (Horace 17).

During the Great Depression, President Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration established Federal Project Number One to set up programs to provide jobs for artists in the fields of art, music, theater, and writing. One of the four programs was the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), which specifically provided work for writers and journalists by hiring them to

work on projects that would produce “publications ranging from the *American Guide Series*, to local histories, and children’s books” (Thomas). One such project within the FWP was the Illinois Writers’ Project where hundreds of writers were hired to research and document African American history and experience in Illinois from 1779 to 1942.<sup>12</sup> This research was supposed to be published as a book entitled “The Negro in Illinois” (“Illinois Writers’ Project”). However, the research stopped in 1942 when the government canceled the project and had to divert funds to fighting World War II (Dolinar). Bontemps supervised the study alongside writer Jack Conroy. According to Conroy, the Rosenwald Foundation was sponsoring the project and donated office space (once an upstairs bedroom in Julius Rosenwald’s mansion) for the pair to conduct their work and meet with their field-workers to review the information the workers found through interviews and searching the files of newspapers and magazines (1974). The partnership between Conroy and Bontemps would lead to a collaboration producing several children’s books: *Fast Sooner Hound* (1942), *Sam Patch, the High, Wide and Handsome Jumper* (1942), and *Slappy Hooper The Wonderful Sign Painter* (1946). The pair would later use the research gathered for the Illinois Writing Project for their book *They Seek a City* (1945), reissued in 1967 as *Anyplace But Here*, documenting the history of Black migration in America (Conroy 604).

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<sup>12</sup> Refer to <https://www.chipublib.org/illinois-writers-project-negro-in-illinois-digital-collection/> for further information about the Illinois Writers’ Project and the digitized archive of research notes, transcripts, oral histories, and original manuscripts produced for the project. Phillip Luke Sinitiere, a Scholar in Residence at the W.E.B. DuBois Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, indicates in his article “An Impressive Basis For Research” that Bontemps donated these materials to then acting librarian Vivian Harsh (54). The physical collection is housed in the Vivian G. Harsh Collection of Afro-American History and Literature at Woodson Regional Library in Chicago, Illinois.

While supervising the Illinois Writers' Project, Bontemps applied for and won the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship in 1938 to focus on his creative writing and use the funds to travel to Haiti so he could research and develop his third novel *Drums of Dusk* (1939) about "the successful Haitian revolt led by Toussaint L'Ouverture in 1791" (Jones, *Renaissance Man* 93). Also, during his time working on the FWP, Bontemps took additional writing jobs to support his family. For example, in 1941 Bontemps agreed to edit W.C. Handy's autobiography *Father of Blues*. Shortly after finishing the book, Bontemps began writing book reviews for the *Chicago Sun* and "served for a time as a columnist, handling rare and fine books under the pseudonym Bibliophilus."<sup>13</sup> Around this time, Bontemps also switched his degree from an M.A. in English to an M.A. in Library Science. Then, in 1942, he was awarded a second Julius Rosenwald Fellowship that he used "as a basis of study toward" his Library Science degree.<sup>14</sup> He finished this degree in 1943 and moved to Nashville where he became head librarian at Fisk University in July of that year, a position he held until 1964. The year 1966 proved to be a busy one for Bontemps as he helped with UCLA's acquisition of the Arthur Spingarn collection, "taught courses in black history and black literature at the University of Illinois, Chicago . . . and [later that year] accepted a position at Yale as lecturer and curator of the James Waldon Johnson Collection, where he remained through the 1971 school term" (Jones, "Arna Bontemps" 20-21). Bontemps then returned to Nashville as a writer in residence, working on a collection of his short fiction entitled *The Old South* and his autobiography, until his death on June 4, 1973, from a

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<sup>13</sup> Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 1, folder 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

heart attack. Bontemps was seventy years old. His wife, Alberta, published *The Old South* after his death, but his autobiography was left unfinished.

While at Fisk, Bontemps continued to publish his creative writing, mainly written for children, teach, attend conferences, speak at libraries and events across the country, and operate as head librarian overseeing the operations of Fisk University's library. While the head librarian (1943-1964), Bontemps significantly expanded Fisk's archive through the acquisition of collections by major Black authors and musicians as well as individual works by international African writers.<sup>15</sup> When he came to Fisk in 1943, the number of items in the library, including both the general library collection as well as the materials in the special collection, was 81,860. By June 30, 1957, that number reached 132, 595.<sup>16</sup> From the University's establishment in 1866 throughout Bontemps' tenure as head librarian, Fisk's Special Collection was referred to as the Negro Special Collection, established because of the library's focus to "acquire materials by and about African Americans and people of the African Diaspora . . . to ensure preservation of

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<sup>15</sup> I was careful when using the terms *acquisition*, *acquired* and *gifted*: I use the term *acquired* when referring to the collections that were listed in Bontemps' annual reports as being added during his years as librarian and with the collections he had a clear and direct hand in acquisition as indicated by Bontemps' correspondence with Hughes. The other collections that were clearly listed as gifts in his annual reports I refer to as *gifted* collections and indicated who gifted them. To determine exactly Bontemps' acquisition process and how much involvement he had in the addition of each collection would require closer analysis outside the parameters of this project. It would require a more in-depth search into archival material to determine and analyze patterns of acquisition and be able to indicate more about the social and cultural factors influencing acquisition at the time.

<sup>16</sup> Annual Report of the Librarian July 18, 1957, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 2. The number of materials reported are the total amount of materials the Fisk University Library owned in 1943 and 1957. As such, it is unclear exactly which portion of these totals were materials in the Negro Special Collection. However, Bontemps' annual reports conclude with each year's library circulation statistics, which specify the amount of materials added to the Negro Special Collection each year. During my archival visit, I didn't request a photocopy of these statistics since they didn't seem relevant to my research at the time, and I will not have an opportunity to revisit the archive before completing this project. As a result, I am only able to offer the summative total of materials during the years 1943 and 1957. Also, during my archive visit, I did not have time to review the reports from years 1958-1965 when Bontemps retired as I had to spend my remaining time reviewing the archival material on the individual collections Bontemps acquired. As a result, I am unable to report at this time how big the Negro Special Collection was when Bontemps left Fisk University.

African American history and culture and our heritage as an historically Black college” (Smith). Bontemps stayed as head librarian at Fisk University longer than any other job he had in his career as writer, teacher, and librarian. While at Fisk, Bontemps also produced a bulk of his writing, mainly his writing for children. Although Bontemps was head librarian for just over two decades, a position which was a major component of his career as a writer, his efforts in expanding Fisk’s Special Collections has largely gone unnoticed by the scholarship about him.

There are a select few that highlight the significance of his contribution. In the fourth chapter of his dissertation, “A History of Fisk University Library,” Brandon Owens, a Philosophy of Public History student at Middle Tennessee State University, documents the development of the archive in Fisk University’s library while Bontemps was head librarian. Based on Bontemps’ annual reports and correspondence to the university’s presidents housed in Fisk’s archive, Owens provides a summation of which collections were added during this time. Although Owens’ aim in this chapter is to highlight the growth of the library as a whole through the expansion of its archives, he outlines Bontemps’ major contributions to the archival collections, which incidentally also demonstrates the writer’s vital role “in making the Fisk University Library an essential resource for the study of Afro-American life and culture” (Jones, “Arna Bontemps” 19). Concluding his entry about Bontemps in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Kirkland Jones briefly acknowledges the significance of Bontemps’ contribution to the Fisk archive and lists some of the major collections he acquired and the Harlem Renaissance figures whose papers are housed in the archive. Ann Shockley, who became the curator of Fisk’s Special Collections in 1970, wrote an article outlining the history of the Special Collections, which also provides an overview of the collections that have been added over time. However, Shockley neglects to indicate when each collection was acquired and who acquired it. As a

result, it remains unclear precisely which collections were acquired by Bontemps or his predecessors and inadvertently obscures Bontemps' contributions to the archive. In addition to using Jones's, Shockley's and Owens' published research, I did my own archival research reviewing the materials of the Arna Bontemps collection at Fisk to confirm information from Jones's, Shockley's and Owens' research. In the coming paragraphs, I add details about the contents of each collection added under Bontemps' leadership (as well as any other individual works acquired in addition to the major collections), and attempt to clarify how much involvement Bontemps had in the acquisition process as well as his responsibilities as head librarian.<sup>17</sup> Bontemps' archival contribution is an under-studied aspect of his career as a prominent intellectual of the Harlem Renaissance and reveals his connections to larger global preservation movements of writers and his involvement through cultural stewardship with the civil rights issues of his moment.

In the summer of 1943, when Bontemps was hired at Fisk, he was also finishing his M.A. thesis entitled *Special Collections of Negroana*, which focused on locating collections of African American material in public and private libraries in America, summarizing the content of these collections, and finding out why the collections were created. He writes specifically about the New York Public Library, the two personal libraries of Arthur B. Spingarn and Henry P. Slaughter, and three colleges: Oberlin College, Howard University, and Yale University. He concludes with an overview of collections in other public, private and university libraries, including Fisk University. Bontemps describes Fisk's collection, as of 1943, as "one of the

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<sup>17</sup> The full details of Bontemps' precise contributions, while beyond the scope of this project, deserve further, meticulous assessment to determine his acquisition process and the full extent of his involvement in each acquisition. This in-depth analysis is necessary to accurately and completely restore the historical record of Bontemps' contributions to the Black community, Black history, and American history and to balance our understanding of his writing career and his role in American literary history.

foremost Negro collections . . . [and] a long established one” (*Special Collections of Negroana* 68). Unofficially the Fisk collection started as a small collection of books by and about African Americans in George L. White’s office, the treasurer and singing teacher (Shockley 151). Also, the Jubilee Singers, who first toured around the world performing slave songs to raise funds for the university in 1857, donated their personal documents from the tour including “personal letters, financial records, scrapbooks, photographs, reviews, autographs, programs, newspaper clippings, and memorabilia” currently comprising the Jubilee Singers archive (Shockley 152). By 1889 the small book collection had expanded to about four thousand volumes housed in the Livingstone Hall complete with a librarian and student assistants.<sup>18</sup> Over the years, the library continued to grow, including a major gift by Robert Todd Lincoln who presented the Lincoln Bible to the school in 1916, which was the Bible given to Lincoln “by ‘The Loyal Coloured People of Baltimore as a token of respect and gratitude’ on July 4, 1864” (Shockley 153).<sup>19</sup>

As the library’s collection grew it was moved to other spacious buildings to accommodate its size, until the current library building was built in the late 1920s when official, concerted efforts were made by Fisk’s first professional librarian, Louis Shores, to “collect and preserve materials by and about African Americans and house them separately in the library” (Smith). With the aid of foreign dealers, in 1929 Fisk acquired “twenty-eight pamphlets and manuscripts on the early history of Black domestic servants in Europe” (Smith). The following two years bibliophile Arthur Schomburg, who traveled internationally to collect books by and about Africans and African Americans, acted as “a consultant for appraising private collections

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<sup>18</sup> Annual Report of the Librarian July 18, 1957, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 2.

<sup>19</sup> The Bible is currently on display in the Special Collections room at Fisk University.

that the school was interested in purchasing” and was hired in 1931 to be curator of Fisk’s Special Collections (Shockley 153). The library faced a hurdle during the years of the Depression as there was a reduction in book purchasing and library personnel, which included laying off Schomburg (Shockley 154). Then in 1937, under the leadership of head librarian Carl White whose goal was to make Fisk “the center for Black research in the south,” Fisk purchased the library of the Southern YMCA Graduate School which housed a little over three thousand volumes by and about African Americans and race relations including material about Blacks in America prior to 1865 (Shockley 154).

Combined with this history of growth and the additions Bontemps made, Fisk’s collection was competitive with that of other HBCUs whose personnel were also collecting materials about Black experience and history, such as Howard University. Bontemps indicates as much in his first annual report as head librarian writing that “the Fisk Negro Collection, comparable in size and importance to the Moorland Foundation at Howard University and the Schomburg Collection in the New York Public Library, operates with only a fraction of the help employed to administer these other collections.”<sup>20</sup> Like Fisk, Howard’s tradition of collecting material documenting Black history and experience started shortly after the university’s conception in 1867. According to Thomas Battle’s article outlining the history of Howard University’s Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, the library contained books about Africa from the beginning and the school’s founder, General Oliver Otis Howard, donated books and photographs related to the Black community shortly after the school was chartered. This was followed by individual donations of books related to the Civil War and the abolitionist

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<sup>20</sup> Report of the Librarian Fisk University 1943-1944, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 1.

movement. Then, in 1873, the library received a significant donation from abolitionist Lewis Tappan consisting of “more than 1,600 [anti-slavery] books, pamphlets, newspapers, letters, pictures, clippings, and periodicals” (Battle 143). Howard’s Black history collection grew slowly through the 1800s until 1914 when Rev. Jesse E. Moorland, member of Howard University’s Board of Trustees, donated his private library including more than three thousand items pertaining to Black history—“books, pamphlets, engravings, portraits, manuscripts, curios, pictures, and many envelopes of clippings” (Bontemps, *Special Collections of Negroana* 44). Upon accepting this donation, the Board of Trustees established the Moorland Foundation, a Library of Negro Life, “which signified a conscious decision to promote the documentation and study of the Black experience” (Battle 144).

In 1930 Dorothy Burnett Porter became the head librarian of the Moorland Foundation library with the mission to develop it into a research library that would “serve the needs of the university community as well as an international community of scholars” (Battle 144).<sup>21</sup> Confirming this mission, Bontemps indicates in his M.A. thesis that the growth and expansion of Howard’s Black history collection under the direction of Mrs. Porter was “conditioned by Howard courses in the various aspects of [Black] life, literature, and history . . . [as the collection] include[s] everything about [African Americans] which promises to fit into the educational program of the institution” (45). This purpose echoes that of Fisk’s as the special collection at the university was used for graduate research, mainly as source material for dissertations, and served as “the heart of the program of African studies,” and whose materials

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<sup>21</sup> Dorothy Porter’s tenure as head librarian at Howard (1930-1973) overlapped with Bontemps’ time as head librarian at Fisk (1943-1964).

were frequently requested through interlibrary loan to the larger community of scholars.<sup>22</sup> The Howard collection houses a broad scope of materials on the Black experience both nationally and internationally that date as far back as 1682, including rare items like Hibo Ludof's *A New History of Ethiopia* (London 1682) and the pamphlet *An African's Anti-Slavery Views* (1789) (Bontemps, *Special Collections of Negroana* 45). This collection expanded further in 1946 with the major purchase of bibliophile and NAACP president Arthur Spingarn's private library of Black history, amassed over thirty-five years. According to Battle, Spingarn's "collection is particularly strong in its coverage of Afro-Cuban, Afro-Brazilian, and Haitian writers and contains many rare editions" (146). According to Bontemps, Howard's collection had a total of about 16,500 items catalogued as of 1946 and by 1957 it had about 40,000 volumes according to Battle. Battle indicates the library's collection included a variety of materials from a range of contributors:

the books and papers of Alain Locke, the Louis T. Wright Collection of Papers by Negro Physicians, the Leigh Whipper Theatre Collection, the O. O. Howard Papers, the Joel Spingarn Papers, the Oswald Garrison Villard Collection of Anti-Slavery Papers, the Mary O. Williamson Collection on celebrities, the Rose McClendon Memorial Collection of photographs by Carl Van Vechten, the Mary E. Moore Collection of Negro Authors, the James T. Rapier Papers, and a collection of patents by Negroes assembled by Henry E. Baker. (147)

In July of 1957, Dorothy Porter published a *Catalogue of the African Collection in the Moorland Foundation* documenting the history and contents of the collection, and the following year

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<sup>22</sup> Report of the Librarian Fisk University 1943-1944, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 1.

(1958) the library acquired the Spingarn collection of Black music (Battle 147). According to Bontemps' 1957 annual report, Fisk's special collections similarly had amassed a significant number of materials as well, had a broad scope of materials on Black history and acquired several major collections (detailed later in this chapter).

Within the first year of Bontemps' position as head librarian (1943-44), he took over curatorship of the "Nego collection . . . including constant enlargement of the book stock and widespread bibliographical work" when Scott Grinstead, working part time as the collection's curator, had to leave.<sup>23</sup> That same year the collection expanded through several gifts. Arthur Spingarn gifted a rare copy of W. W. Brown's novel *Clotel* (1853), which was the first novel published by an African American and is one of five copies.<sup>24</sup> Rebecca Halley gifted materials related to the Jubilee singers that were collected by her brother.<sup>25</sup> These materials included an early album of the Jubilee Singers and the first book about the singing group entitled *The Singing Campaign for Ten Thousand Pounds: The Jubilee Singers in Great Britain* (1874). Halley's brother worked for the British publishing house, Hodder and Stoughton, that printed the book.

The next year, 1944-1945, the library acquired two significant collections. The first of these came from Carl Van Vechten, writer and photographer, who gifted to Fisk the George Gershwin Memorial Collection of Music and Musical Literature<sup>26</sup> which housed "musical lore, including books, manuscripts, scores, records, programs, clippings, photographs of notable

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<sup>23</sup> Report of the Librarian Fisk University 1943-1944, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Bontemps does not include the name of Rebecca Halley's brother in his 1943-44 annual report and I could not find a report of Ms. Halley's donation outside of the archival material that might mention her brother's name.

<sup>26</sup> Although the collection is not currently listed on Fisk's Special Collection webpage, Fisk still houses the Gershwin collection.

musicians and the like.”<sup>27</sup> George Gershwin (1898-1937) was a pianist and composer in the 1920s and 30s. He wrote compositions for theater as well as orchestral pieces that incorporated elements of jazz. In many of his compositions he tried to combine jazz and traditional musical genres (e.g., opera and classical). One of his most popular pieces, *Rhapsody in Blue*, “inspired other European and American composers to experiment with jazz-like elements in their music” (Tischler, “Gershwin, George”). According to Barbara Tischler, author of the entry about Gershwin in *American National Biography*, Gershwin’s opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935), based off a novel by DuBose Heyward about life in the Black quarter of Charleston, South Carolina, was an important contribution to American music as it combined “the dramatic structure of opera and the musical style of jazz . . . [and] brought Black singers to the Broadway stage in significant roles.” While composing the opera, “Gershwin traveled to Folly Island near Charleston in the summer of 1934 to listen to local people . . . in hopes of capturing the sounds of African American culture” (Tischler, “Gershwin, George”).

Gershwin met Carl Van Vechten in 1919 and the two remained friends until Gershwin’s death. Van Vechten was a music and dance critic writing for *The New York Times* from 1906-1907 and again in 1910 until 1913. He became the first American critic of modern dance and was one of “the few critics early in the twentieth century to pay serious attention to the blues, ragtime, early jazz, musical theater, and music for film” (Tischler, “Van Vechten, Carl”). He was also known for promoting and lending financial support to Black artists and writers during the Harlem Renaissance as well as collecting “ephemera and books pertaining to Black arts and letters” (Johnson). In his biography about Gershwin, Howard Pollack states that part of Van

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<sup>27</sup> Negro Collection—George Gershwin- Miscellaneous—1944, 1948, 1961, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 56, folder 7.

Vechten's contribution to the Harlem Renaissance was hosting numerous parties in his apartment, "thereby bringing together the movement's leading white and Black participants and sympathizers" (103). As a result, both men, Gershwin and Van Vechten, befriended or became acquainted with several Harlem Renaissance artists. According to Pollack, "Gershwin established a special closeness with brothers James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) and J. Rosamond Johnson (1873-1953)" (105). James Weldon Johnson would eventually become a professor at Fisk University teaching creative writing and African American literature (Levy). In the 1930s Van Vechten became interested in photography and took many portraits of famous Black and white writers and artists including George Gershwin, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and Gertrude Stein, to name a few (Johnson).<sup>28</sup> The George Gershwin collection was housed on its own, apart from the Negro collection, but eventually placed in Fisk's music library, and it took the library two years to process it. It was opened to the public during the Annual Festival of Music and Art on 25 April 1947.<sup>29</sup> In her article, Shockley quotes Van Vechten's reason for donating the collection: "'The name of Gershwin was intended not only to honor a personal friend but also to recall the fact that this American belonged to a minority group, that as a composer he worked successfully in both the popular and the classical fields, and that much of his best music was inspired by Negro rhythms'" (159). Over the years Van Vechten would contribute additional rare, music-related materials to the collection, as would Langston Hughes. For example, Hughes notified Bontemps that he's sending the library "a copy of *I, Too, Sing America*, a song cycle [referencing Walt

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<sup>28</sup> A portion of his photographs are housed in the Carl Van Vechten Theatre Photographs collection accessible online through The New York Public Library Digital Collections website, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/carl-van-vechten-theatre-photographs#/?tab=navigation&roots=13:fd4df420-292c-0135-dd4b-17151ec173b3>.

<sup>29</sup> Report of the Librarian Fisk University 1943-1944, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 1.

Whitman's famous poem on American democracy] composed by Serge Hovey . . . [containing] my poems, 'The Dreamkeeper,' 'Boarder Line,' 'Stars,' 'Silhouette,' 'Night: Four Songs,' and 'I, Too Sing America' . . . for the George Gershwin Memorial Collection" (Letter to Arna Bontemps [5 Jan. 1951]). Although these gifts weren't additional materials composed by Gershwin, they are rare and/or valuable musical materials written by classical musicians and notable artists that expanded the collection into a notable one representing "an addition of considerable worth to the Library" and also added cultural context to the acquisitions.<sup>30</sup> For instance, in 1948 Van Vechten added hundreds of items to the collection, including "the complete works of J.S. Bach in the Gesellschaft Edition, 47 volumes; the complete works of Palestrina in 15 volumes; the Quellen Lexikon der musiker, 11 volumes; and the Mozart verzeichnis by Kochel."<sup>31</sup> These additions/acquisitions help to show the complex interplay between the creative output of African American artists and classics of American and European culture.

The second significant collection gifted to Fisk's library in 1945 was the Earnest R. Alexander Collection of Negroana. Lillian Alexander donated her husband's collection of "rare books, autographs, manuscripts, and sheet music by African American artists and composers" (Owens 131), including "seven manuscript boxes of biographical data" (S. Malone and Beasley). Earnest Alexander graduated from Fisk in 1914 and completed a medical degree from the University of Vermont in 1919. He was the only Black student in his graduating class at Vermont. He became a dermatologist working at Harlem Hospital and Bellevue Hospital in New

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<sup>30</sup> Report of the Librarian For The Year 1946-1947, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 1.

<sup>31</sup> Report of the Librarian For The Year 1947-1948, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 1.

York. He was also a major contributor to the Nashville Chapter of the NAACP and later became a member of the Fisk Board of Trustees. In addition to the donation of this collection, Lillian Alexander donated five thousand dollars to enable the library to purchase more materials for its special collections (S. Malone and Beasley).

According to Bontemps' 1945-1946 annual report, Fisk's Negro Collection was gaining in prestige as it was used for scholarly research and as a point of reference for other schools and public libraries developing their own Negro collections. Bontemps wrote, "A number of schools and public libraries have indicated that they were establishing collections of books by or about the Negro and have asked for guidance and help in book selection. Nearly a score of serious scholars of high rank in their fields of specialty are in constant touch with this library in connection with projects in progress."<sup>32</sup> During this year the library didn't acquire any other major collections and instead focused personnel and resources to organizing and processing the Gershwin collection as well as beginning preliminary work on processing the Earnest R. Alexander Collection as the materials arrived.<sup>33</sup> Although Bontemps didn't acquire any other major collections this year, he indicated he would continue efforts to acquire more materials and expand Fisk's special collections to strengthen the research aspect of the library, writing that

[t]he acquisition and development of the two Collections mentioned above (the Gershwin and Alexander collections) represents a part of the Library's current program to expand and improve the research function of the Library. In broad terms such a long range program would involve drawing to the library important materials and bodies of material

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<sup>32</sup> Report of the Librarian Fisk University 1945-1946, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

needed by scholars and research workers in fields which this University undertakes to make a special contribution.<sup>34</sup>

Bontemps would continue to draw in important material through the acquisition of the American Missionary Association (AMA) Collection from the organization's secretary, Dr. Fred L. Brownlee in 1946.<sup>35</sup> It consisted of materials documenting "various phases of American life and history" and the AMA's activities between 1839 and 1879 as well as all but three volumes of the organization's magazine, *The American Missionary*.<sup>36</sup> The AMA was a nonsectarian anti-slavery society formed in 1846 to provide relief and education to freed slaves during and after the Civil War. The association also "provided much needed relief for Black refugees, insisted on equal pay for Black soldiers, attempted to help freedmen acquire land, demanded civil and political rights for former slaves, established scores of schools and colleges, and lobbied for a system of free public education for all southern youth" (Jones and Richardson xi). Fisk University was among the colleges the AMA helped establish and sponsor. Throughout the years the association continued to be an ally as it advocated and fought for the equality and civil rights of the Black community focusing particularly on issues of voting rights, segregation, and race relations in the 1950s and 60s (Jones and Richardson xi-xvii). Because of the AMA's broad scope of activities, Bontemps explains, the significance of this collection lies in the potential to shed light on race relations of the time and the association's "vital contribution to American society . . . [as well as] such matters as the anti-slavery movement, the early Christian missions among the Indians and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> This collection is now housed at the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana. To read about the collection's relocation from Fisk to its current location, please visit the Amistad Research Center website: <https://www.amistadresearchcenter.org/about>.

<sup>36</sup> Negro Collections—American Missionary Association—Miscellaneous—1951, 1952; n.d., Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 56, folder 2.

abroad, life among the freedmen during and after the Civil War, and the development of Negro education in the United States.”<sup>37</sup> The collection consisted of around one hundred and fifty thousand financial papers and letters from influential figures like President James A. Garfield, abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner, Lincoln’s secretary of State William H. Seward; anti-slavery leaders such as William Lloyd Garrison, Samuel J. May, and Gerrit Smith; and religious figures like Henry Ward Beecher and Lyman Abbot.<sup>38</sup> The collection wouldn’t be completely catalogued and available to researchers until Fall of 1962, although several writers, student researchers, and faculty from other universities expressed interest in using the collection over the years, further demonstrating its significance as a research resource (Bontemps, Letter to Langston Hughes [15 Feb. 1962]). In the “Introductory Statement” of the AMA collection Bontemps writes, “In spite of [the collection’s] unprocessed state, the University Library has received numerous requests for the use of the archives. During the year 1952, for example, the librarian [Bontemps] received inquiries from approximately a dozen people, including mature biographers, graduate students working on their dissertations, two college presidents, and two Columbia University professors.”<sup>39</sup>

Although the AMA collection would not be available for use until sixteen years later, Bontemps’ early efforts to expand the research function of the library so it would serve both the Fisk community and a larger community of scholars proved successful. In his 1946-1947 annual report, Bontemps discloses that in addition to acquiring the significant collection of the AMA to add to the Negro collection, he has also received “requests [to provide] reference service” from

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

archivists, researchers from universities across the country, and public schools from across the country on a broad range of topics all concerning aspects of Black life or history in some way.

He recounts that

the archivist of the Peace Collection at Swarthmore College wrote [me] asking aid in assembling tools of value to the bibliographer and cataloger of Negro Materials . . . followed by a request for further information and materials. A research assistant at the University of California Medical Center wished to know the number of people, the number of women, and the percentage of Negroes in the United States engaged in the study and practice of medicine and dentistry. A University of California student requested a bibliography on the Negro in the United Automobile Workers . . . [and there were] requests for bibliography on the Negro for classroom use from young people judged to be elementary and high school grade in states as far away as California and Oregon.<sup>40</sup>

The use of the library as a site for conducting research in primary sources and stimulating interest in the Negro Collection continued the following year, 1947-1948, as Bontemps reported. During that academic year, Bontemps records, there was a demand to expand public access to the collection by including morning hours in addition to the afternoon and evening hours already established. Bontemps' 1951 annual report confirms the library made this expansion as he reports that the Reference desk now handles requests to use material from the Negro Collection during the morning hours.<sup>41</sup> This demonstrates an increase in the local public's interest in the

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<sup>40</sup> Report of the Librarian For The Year 1946-1947, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 1.

<sup>41</sup> Annual Report of the Librarian July 1, 1952, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 2.

Negro Collection and that the special collection, conceived for an academic purpose, was proving useful in serving the local community. In the winter of 1947, Professor Thomas W. Talley, teaching Chemistry at Fisk, gifted his private library to Fisk. Among many other materials, the Talley collection contains correspondence, legal documents, his scientific papers, music and his published and unpublished works pertaining to Black culture, including drafts of sections from his book *Negro Folk Rhymes* (1922), which was the “the first collection of secular folksongs by a Black scholar,” and writings related to his essay “The Origin of Negro Traditions,” published in *Phylon* (1942) (“Thomas W. Talley Collection”).

In 1948, Bontemps acquired the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship archive consisting of about one hundred and fifty thousand items, which he reported being the largest single gift of materials the library had received in recent years. This archive includes correspondence between officers of the Fund and organizations or individuals working with the Fund; business reports and financial records; manuscripts of speeches, articles, pamphlets, and books; newspaper clippings, photographs, and scrapbooks; and, lastly, applications and correspondence related to the Fund’s fellowships and scholarships (Belles). The Julius Rosenwald Fund was established by Julius Rosenwald in 1917 as a non-profit corporation dedicated to acts of philanthropy. For example, the endowment provided matching funding for the construction of schoolhouses in the rural south for Black students, an idea that came from Booker T. Washington who was a friend of Rosenwald. In 1928 the Fund transitioned from private to corporate giving under the new president, Edwin Rogers Embree, who took over after Julius Rosenwald died (Belles). After that transition, the Fund offered fellowships, which would fund the research and writing exploits of many notable African American writers including Bontemps himself.

This same year Sanford Brunson Campbell gifted materials about and compositions of the African American pianist and composer, also called the “Negro King of Ragtime,” Scott Joplin.<sup>42</sup> A composer and pianist himself, Campbell had been a student of Joplin. The collection “contains three boxes of newspaper clippings; correspondence [mainly between Bontemps and Campbell]; manuscripts of Samuel Brunson Campbell’s ‘a Hop Heads,’ ‘From Rags to Ragtime and Riches,’ and ‘The Ragtime Kid,’” and also includes miscellaneous “printed matter; photographs; and Joplin’s published sheet music” (“Scott Joplin Collection Papers”). Before this gift, Bontemps made previous efforts to acquire Joplin’s material and add it to the Gershwin collection by reaching out to Joplin’s sister in 1945. Bontemps writes to Hughes, “Thanks heaps for the address of Scott Joplin’s sister . . . I have followed through inviting Miss. Joplin to deposit Scott’s mementos, etc., in the George Gershwin Collection. I hope she will be feeling generous on the morning she receives my note. We would love to have something unique on Joplin” (Letter to Langston Hughes [27 Feb. 1945]). Three years later, Campbell would fulfill this wish. During the 1948-49 academic year, emphasis was placed on processing the new materials and absorbing them into the library rather than on acquisition (Owens 137). Beginning July of 1949, Bontemps took a one-year sabbatical to write his fictional novel about Fisk’s Jubilee Singers entitled *Chariot in the Sky: A Story of the Jubilee Singers* (1951). In his stead, Assistant Librarian Minnie R. Bowles served as Acting Librarian for the year.

Bontemps’ relationships and connections with various Harlem Renaissance writers aided him in acquiring material for Fisk’s Special Collections and archive such as the work and papers

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<sup>42</sup> Report of the Librarian For The Year 1947-1948, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 1.

of Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Jean Toomer. Bontemps' close friendship with Hughes enabled him to acquire and build the Langston Hughes collection. As their correspondence indicates, the collection amassed throughout their friendship as Hughes sent his writings and materials over the years to the Fisk library. For example, Hughes writes Bontemps, "[William] Melvin [Kelley] has been sorting Yale stuff in my basement. And we got all the lecture programs of mine over the years sorted out, so I'm sending your library a batch on Monday. I think it includes my first poetry reading in Washington in 1926 with [Alain] Locke as chairman" (Letter to Arna Bontemps [12 May 1962]). According to Owens, Hughes began sending materials as early as 1949 and by 1953 the collection consisted of five hundred and twelve pieces. Additionally, Bontemps' sent requests for materials such as the uncut version of Hughes' autobiography. In a letter dated May 1, 1956, Bontemps wrote to Hughes with this request stating that "it would certainly be greatly appreciated by scholars present and future. Certainly, this is one place where those passages you were forced to eliminate will have much meaning and interest."<sup>43</sup> In its entirety, the Hughes collection contains "13 manuscript boxes of biographical data; correspondence; writings (autobiography, books, lyrics, plays, poetry, scripts); articles and clippings; interviews; playbills; programs; photographs; memorabilia and collected items" (Beasley).

Writing to Hughes, Bontemps indicates Ida Mae Cullen, widow of poet and playwright Countee Cullen, recently visited his family and stayed in their home. Bontemps writes that during her visit Ida "made up her mind to leave Countee's literary effects in our collection of

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<sup>43</sup> Correspondence Hughes, Langston 1946-1963, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 8, folder 5.

Negroana: letters, manuscripts, the books of his library, everything that was still with him at his death” (Letter to Langston Hughes [6 May 1951]). Bontemps and Countee Cullen met during the Harlem Renaissance and remained friends until Cullen’s death on January 9, 1946. Both writers also collaborated on writing the play *St. Louis Woman* (1946), which was an adaptation of Bontemps’ novel *God Sends Sunday*. The Countee Cullen collection includes biographical data and correspondence with his wife Ida, his students and literary figures such as Pearl S. Buck, Helen Keller, Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes, to name a few. It also contains his writings: poems he wrote as well as poems by others sent to Cullen, a book review, photos of Cullen taken by Carl Van Vechten and Cullen’s obituary. During the following year, 1952, Bontemps began efforts to acquire W.E.B. Du Bois’s personal library and papers. He wrote Du Bois on October 27, 1952, broaching the topic stating,

It has just occurred to me that you did not comment when I broached the question of establishing a permanent Du Bois collection in the Fisk University Library. However, I want you to know of my continued interest in this proposal and that I would consider it a high point in my librarianship if I could initiate something of this sort, establishing your personal library and papers as a monument to Fisk’s most illustrious alumnus. (qtd. in Owens 141)

About a month later, Bontemps wrote to Hughes asking for his aid in the acquisition process by talking to Du Bois’s wife and secretary, Shirley Graham, about the prospect of donating the collection to Fisk. In the following letter, Bontemps clearly states his assurance that Fisk is the best institution to organize and house Du Bois’s collection as Fisk’s other manuscript collections demonstrate the library’s ability to effectively process these kinds of materials. Additionally,

Fisk's archive was gaining a lot of attention from scholars and researchers as many requests to view the AMA, Langston, and Chesnutt papers were coming in:

I'm trying to tell Shirley Graham and Dr. WEBD that Fisk is the place for his library and papers, that we can do a better job on them than this 'foundation' they are trying to organize—have you seen how poorly the Douglass home in Anacostia is kept? The library there is of no use to scholars or writers, but people come from far and wide to use our AMA [the American Missionary Association], Langston and Chesnutt papers. I'm negotiating with at least a half dozen *right now*, arranging time and hours, etc. All working on doctoral dissertations or books. Would appreciate if you could at some time have a phone conversation with Shirley about it, listening to the pro and con, and asking her opinion of the argument I tried to advance. Evidently Du Bois has left it up to her to decide. (Letter to Langston Hughes [17 Nov. 1952])

Bontemps would not successfully obtain this collection until 1961 when Du Bois prepared to move to Ghana to undertake his final literary project: serving as the editor in chief of the *Encyclopedia Africana*. Since 1909, Du Bois envisioned creating an encyclopedia of African diaspora that would assemble biography, interpretive essays, facts, and figures amassing the “‘scientific’ knowledge about the history, cultures, and social institutions of people of African descent: of Africans in the Old World, African Americans in the New World, and persons of African descent who had risen to prominence in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia” (Gates). Du Bois wanted the encyclopedia to be based in Africa and compiled by Africans, essentially creating a Black *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Gates). His previous two attempts to create this work

failed as the project couldn't get enough funding, but in 1961 the President and government of Ghana agreed to fund the project.

In a document describing the Du Bois collection, Bontemps indicates that Du Bois's move to Africa is what prompted him to gift his personal library to Fisk. In that same document, Bontemps indicates the acquisition of Du Bois's library was competitive as "the collection [had been] coveted and sought by a dozen other Librarians, including the Library of Congress and major American Universities."<sup>44</sup> Bontemps didn't indicate the deciding factor for gifting the collection to Fisk over these competitors as he simply states that "the longer he [Du Bois] pondered the more he was inclined to let Fisk have it."<sup>45</sup> Considering that Du Bois had ties to the university as an alumni of Fisk and having a personal relationship with Bontemps as well as Fisk's history of acquiring major manuscript collections and successfully attracting the attention of scholars and researchers under the leadership of Bontemps, it could be said that these factors made Fisk a competitive option. All the items in Du Bois's personal library were given to Fisk "except his Africana, which he was taking with him to be given to the University College in Accra" as part of his work on the *Encyclopedia Africana* (Bontemps, Letter to Langston Hughes [15 Feb. 1962]). These items include personal, professional, and general correspondence, accounts, bills, personal records and receipts, lecture engagements, organizational affiliations, writings, and collected material (U. Miller and Zanders). This was the last major collection acquired during Bontemps' librarianship. A collection that Bontemps states made Fisk's archive "an impressive basis for research" alongside the other manuscript collections housed in the

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<sup>44</sup> The Private Library and Personal Papers of W.E.B. Du Bois, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 56, folder 6.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

library including the AMA, Chesnutt, Langston, and Johnson papers as well as the Archives of the Julius Rosenwald Fund. Lastly, even after Bontemps retired as head librarian at Fisk and went to teach English at the University of Illinois, he helped Fisk's library acquire the Jean Toomer collection. Writing to Hughes, Bontemps states that he "persuaded [Marjorie Toomer and Jean Toomer] to give his papers and literary effects to Fisk. A large collection" (Letter to Langston Hughes [6 Nov. 1966]).

In addition to the Cullen collection, the library received another significant collection in 1951: the Charles Chesnutt Collection. Chesnutt's daughter, Helen M. Chesnutt, donated her father's "entire collection of correspondence, manuscripts, papers, photographs, and memorabilia to Fisk after she completed her biography, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (1952)" (Owens 140). The collection contains 2,100 items and marked another important addition to Fisk's archive. Its addition furthered the mission of the library and its librarian to preserve African American history and experience by obtaining the work and correspondence of influential African American writers as well as making it readily available to Fisk's community as well as the larger scholarly community and the public. Four years later, the archive grew with the "most impressive new gift received [in 1955] of the personal library of the late John B. Nail of New York City from his daughter Mrs. James Weldon Johnson."<sup>46</sup> According to Fisk's guide to his collection, Nail was a member of the NAACP and a businessman who established the Nail Brother's Saloon, Restaurant, and Pool & Billiard Parlor in Harlem New York in 1881 with his brother. He advocated for the civil and human rights of African Americans "through organizational ties with the NAACP, The Society for the Ethical Culture of New York, and the

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<sup>46</sup> Preliminary Annual Report of the Librarian April 8, 1955, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 2.

Pan-African Congress” (U. Miller, “John B. Nail Collection”). His collection contains correspondence with Mary White Ovington, Arthur Spingarn, Robert Bagnall, James Weldon Johnson, and other professional colleagues and personal friends including the aforementioned groups as well as the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls. The collection also houses memorabilia and a press release. According to its guide, the collection is valuable to researchers interested in NAACP work or any of the individuals Nail corresponded with.

In his 1955 annual report, Bontemps indicates that the efforts of the library have been partially dedicated to cataloguing manuscript collections and as a part of that effort the Reference staff compiled a directory of manuscript collections, unpublished, which documents “more or less extensive holdings of the papers in each of the following:

- James Carroll Napier
- Charles Waddell Chesnutt
- Langston Hughes
- Countee Cullen
- John Mercer Langston
- Slavery Manuscripts
- Miscellaneous items.”<sup>47</sup>

It is unclear when the James Carroll Napier and John Mercer Langston papers were gifted or acquired and thus if they were added to Fisk’s archive while Bontemps was acting head librarian or if he was involved in their addition to the archive. Bontemps did report in 1952 that the Napier papers were being processed by library staff member Mildred Freeny, which could suggest the Napier collection was obtained not long before that, since past annual reports indicate that processing efforts of a gift or acquired collection start about a year after its acquisition. Despite

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<sup>47</sup> Preliminary Annual Report of the Librarian April 8, 1955, Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Arna W. Bontemps Collection, box 53, folder 2.

this uncertainty, the manuscript collections listed in Bontemps' 1955 report demonstrate the continuing growth of Fisk's archive and its success in preserving the history, experience and contributions of African Americans in various areas of society and culture including education, music, social science, literature, and politics as indicated with the inclusion of the Napier and Langston collections.

James Carroll Napier (1845-1940) was an African American politician, attorney and businessman born in Nashville, Tennessee. According to Fisk's guide of his collection, Napier was an influential academic and political figure at both state and national levels:

Nashville city councilman, 1878-1884; candidate for U.S. House of Representatives from Tennessee's Sixth District, 1898; member of the Republican State Executive Committee for nearly twenty years and four times a delegate to the Republican National Convention; Register of the U.S. Treasury, 1911-1914; President of the National Negro Businessmen's League [beginning in 1916]; lecturer [at] Meharry Medical School 1908-1939; [and lastly] member of the Board of Trustees of Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, and Walden College. (Cardwell)

His collection provides biographical information about his "political career, educational concerns, Nashville community leadership . . . [and demonstrates Napier to be] a political, financial and educational leader" within the Black community during his lifetime (Cardwell 1). The collection contains about five hundred and ninety items which spans the beginning of his political career from 1868 until 1939, a year before his death. It includes correspondence, speeches, documents, papers of the Anna T. Jeanes Fund (also known as the Negro Rural School

Fund), photographs, accounts, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, contracts, programs, cards, invitations, memorabilia, biographical sketches, and an obituary of his wife Nettie Langston.<sup>48</sup>

John Mercer Langston was an African American politician, Dean of the Howard University Law School, U.S. Representative from Virginia, and Minister to Haiti (Cardwell 1) as well as Napier's father-in-law. His collection includes correspondence dating from 1853 to as late as 1897, speeches, writings, documents including accounts, bills and legal papers, cards, invitations, programs, clippings, scrapbooks, and a variety of collected items. Whether or not Bontemps was involved in the acquisition of the Napier and Langston collection, the processing of these collections in addition to the reported use of Fisk's archives by scholars from across the country and by the local Tennessee community demonstrates Bontemps' successful efforts not only in preservation, but accessibility. He made the Black community's history, experiences, and contributions available to anyone wishing to access it, which in turn supports further work that preserves, documents, and explores the Black community. Similarly, in Nigeria, concerns of conservation and accessibility motivated Achebe and Okigbo to found their Citadel Press. These two writers created their publishing house so Nigerian writers could have access to an outlet where they could produce and disseminate writing that would continue the mission of establishing an African literature and identity in a postcolonial peoples' experience during a time of impending war. By creating an avenue for the publication of such work, Achebe and Okigbo not only aimed to make publication accessible for Nigerian writers, but, in turn, aimed to make

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<sup>48</sup> According to the historical note about the Negro Rural School Fund Report located in the Arkansas State Digital Archive ("[Negro Rural School Fund report, 1917](https://arkansas.gov)" ([arkansas.gov](https://arkansas.gov))) and her entry in the American National Biography, Anna Thomas Jeanes (April 7, 1822-September 24, 1907) was a Philadelphia Quaker, philanthropist, and friend of Booker T. Washington. As the only surviving sibling, Ms. Jeanes inherited approximately \$5 million after the death of her brothers in 1894, which she gifted to various causes during the remaining thirteen years of her life. One such gift included the establishment of a \$1 million endowment called the Negro Rural Fund to support rural elementary schools for African Americans and cover the cost of "outreach services throughout the South that included master teachers traveling to local schools to establish and improve vocational and industrial training classes" (C. Malone, "Jeanes, Anna Thomas").

cultural texts accessible to the public. As exhibited by these transatlantic efforts of preservation, it seems accessibility is an important component of the processes of conservation and preservation. Enabling access of one's own community and the larger national community to the cultural memory being materially preserved aids in the preservation process, as that memory can then become widespread, public, and memorialized in the minds, scholarship, and literature of those able to (re)access it.

Based on Bontemps' 1955-1959 annual reports, his correspondence with Hughes and Owens' account of the library's growth, no other major manuscript collections were added to the Negro collection in the last decade of Bontemps' career as head librarian aside from the Charles S. Johnson papers in 1957 and the Du Bois collection acquired in 1961. Additions to the Negro Collection and the Fisk archive during these years consisted of small gifts such as a rare copy of *Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University* gifted by Mrs. Henry C. Miller in 1956, which was the first publication of their songs done by the American Missionary Association in 1872 (Owens 145-6). Other gifts consisted of adding material to existing collections such as Geoffrey Handley-Taylor adding "English works" to the Winifred Holtby Memorial Collection in 1956, 1957 and 1959 as well as Car Van Vechten adding 115 items to the Gershwin collection in 1957 and more in 1959. Also, from 1955-1965 efforts were dedicated to processing and cataloging the collections the library acquired over the years. For example, writing to Hughes, Bontemps mentioned that the last of the AMA collection was being catalogued that year and would be ready in the Fall for researchers to use (Letter to Langston Hughes [15 Feb. 1962]).

In 1956 Bontemps established the Charles S. Johnson library which served as the Social Sciences departmental library. This library honored Fisk's president Charles S. Johnson and would later house his papers and work after his death on October 27, 1956 from a heart attack. According to Owens, in 1957, Bontemps received a grant for one thousand five-hundred dollars from the John Hay Whitney Foundation to fund the processing of the Charles S. Johnson papers, so archival efforts during the years 1957-1960 were spent processing and cataloging the collection. With the grant Bontemps "hired a part-time clerk, Dorothy Oden, to assist with the project, purchased a thermos-fax copy machine, archival boxes, binding services, and reams of thermo-fax paper" to aid in the project (Owens 148). The collection consists of biographical information, correspondence and records of Johnson's time as Director of the Department of Social Sciences, Director of Race Relations Department, and President of the university, course materials, and publications and writings.

During the 1964-65 school year Bontemps served as director of university relations and acting librarian until a new librarian could be found. By 1966 he was teaching courses at the University of Illinois and later that year became a lecturer at Yale and curator of their James Weldon Johnson collection. He returned to Nashville in 1971 and was a writer in residence at Fisk working on his autobiography until his death in 1973. In an interview with Ann Shockley on July 14, 1972, about a year before he died, Bontemps states that his biggest accomplishment as head librarian at Fisk "was keeping active the interest in the Black experience and background. We sort of served as a clearing house for information on the subject" (Shockley 151).

Bontemps preserved Black experience, history, and culture by creating a repository of cultural memory in Fisk University's archive and special collections by continuing to collect the

primary source material of Black writers, sociologists, musicians, politicians, and organizations and making that repository accessible to the American public. While Bontemps made preservation efforts amidst the social and cultural backdrop of the early Black History movement and the American Civil Rights movement, Nigerian writers, Chinua Achebe and Christopher Okigbo also made efforts to establish and preserve an African literature and identity in a postcolonial people's experience through the founding of a Nigerian publishing house during a time of impending war. The following chapter outlines the history of colonization and decolonization of Nigeria, the resulting political, governmental, and social turmoil of the 1950s and early 60s (including the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War), and the artistic, literary movement (the postcolonial African modernism movement) that responds to this turmoil. Achebe and Okigbo's founding of the Citadel Press occurs in the social and cultural context of the Nigerian postcolonial modernism movement, publishing scene, and the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War.

CHAPTER II: POST-COLONIAL AFRICAN MODERNISM, THE NIGERIAN-BIAFRAN CIVIL WAR, THE CITDEL PRESS, AND *HOW THE LEOPARD GOT HIS CLAWS*

If modern Nigerian literature is to forge a comparable link with the contemporary Nigerian reality . . . a number of very serious problems [such as the issue of language] must first be overcome by writers and readers alike . . . There are many valid objections to [writing in] English. It evolved to serve a culture and an environment very different from those of Nigeria. Worse still it came as the language of the conqueror and colonizer and is thus all too likely to remain a painful reminder of the past and a target for continuing resentment in the post-colonial period. The Nigerian writer who uses English will therefore face a double problem: he will be using a language which is still only partly domesticated, only partly responsive to the peculiar needs and nuances of his condition and, because it is also the language of his former colonial master, its use may cause him something of the distracting anguish . . . But as long as English remains in Nigeria it is not only inevitable but desirable that writers should write in it whatever ambivalence of feeling they hold towards it.

—Chinua Achebe, “Writer and Society: The Nigerian Example, September 13, 1975”

One of the crucial functions of culture is to surround an invading foreign body and either ingest it or expel it . . . Today we cannot leave such an important thing as English to lie around unused and unwanted in our body politic. Writers are there to use, not invent language. They use a given language given by society. The writer’s contribution and responsibility is to explore the resources of that gift so as to use it in original and effective ways. English exists in Nigeria because a new Nigerian order requires it. An order founded, admittedly, on the foundations of colonial rule and yet for all that . . . it is this new politic which will ultimately domesticate the English language on Nigerian soil or else discard it in favor of some other chosen medium.

—Chinua Achebe, “Writer and Society: The Nigerian Example, September 13, 1975”

*“DEAD: Christopher Okigbo, circa 37, member of Mbari and Black Orpheus*

*Committees, publisher, poet; killed in battle at Akwebe in September 1967 on the Nsukka sector of the war in Nigeria fighting on the secessionist side . . .”* (“Obituary” qtd. in Suhr-Sytsma 40).

During the civil war as they continued their attack on the Republic of Biafra and advanced deeper into Biafran territory, the Nigerian army eventually took over the town of Nsukka, which housed the University of Nigeria, later renamed the University of Biafra after the beginning of the civil war. According to Ezenwa-Ohaeto, author of *Chinua Achebe, A Biography*, federal

soldiers went through the university's libraries gathering books, considered "symbols of Biafran pride in their intellectual prowess," that they then burned and destroyed (Ohaeto 129). This is the library where Christopher Okigbo worked five years earlier "to build up the university's collection as its first librarian" and later worked with Chinua Achebe during the war, in 1967, to help develop the Institute of African Studies and a Centre for Creative Writing (Suhr-Sytsma 55). Okigbo died months later, on September 18 in a Biafran campaign to retake the town of Nsukka and reclaim and protect the knowledge that was held in the university's library and created within the university.

Okigbo was involved in the Biafran war effort as a soldier taking tours fighting the Nigerian army on the front lines. Achebe later became a diplomat. As a traveling ambassador for the Republic of Biafra, he went to different countries to spread news of the horrific events, including mass starvation and genocide, to gain humanitarian support. However, before the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War, Okigbo and Achebe were entrenched in the postcolonial modernism and publishing scene. The two wanted to continue the mission of African modernism to establish an African literature and identity in a postcolonial people's experience, through founding a publishing house owned and run by Nigerians for Nigerian writers to produce and disseminate African work and establish a safe place for writers to gather in a time of impending war. Their vision culminated in the creation of the Citadel Press and the Press's issuing as its inaugural publication the refurbished children's book *How the Leopard Got His Claws*. The mission of the Citadel Press was to provide a safe place for African writers to retreat in a time of war and crisis and still be able to publish their work, continue African modernist goals such as exploring oral tradition, and publish socially and culturally relevant works by Africans for children. The following section outlines the colonization and decolonization of Nigeria and the ensuing

political and governmental turmoil of the 1950s and 60s that culminates in the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War. Providing this overview of Nigerian history contextualizes the postcolonial modernism movement and the founding of the Citadel Press, which responds to this history and the current cultural moment of the 50s and 60s. Also, understanding the legacy of colonialism, in particular its impact on Nigeria's education system and the cultural and social division in Nigeria, is important to understanding the African postcolonial modernism movement and the parallels between the preservation efforts of Nigerian writers and African American writers as well as efforts of both groups to establish their own literary traditions and articulate their own unique histories and experiences.

British colonial rule of Nigeria began in Lagos in 1861, which transformed the region's economic, cultural, political, governing, and social structures. The colonization of Nigeria was motivated by Britain's business interests in controlling Nigeria's ports "on the southern coasts of the Bights of Benin and Biafra on the Gulf of Guinea," which had been used primarily for slave trade from 1650 until the early 1800s when the British abolished the slave trade in 1807 (Heaton and Falola 75). Through colonial rule, the British "transformed Nigeria's various regions toward a more explicitly extractive model focusing on the production of cash crops [such as groundnuts, palm oil, and cocoa] and mineral resources [including tin and coal] mainly for the purposes of export to international markets" (75). The conception and formation of Nigeria as one country resulted from British colonial rule whereas the pre-colonial region of West Africa was split into many different ethnic groups with different governing systems and religious practices. Northern Nigerians were predominantly Muslim and made up of the Hausa and Fulani groups while Southern Nigerians mainly consisted of the Yoruba and Igbo groups, which were predominately Christian because of their proximity to the coast and the country's main ports.

Islam was brought to Northern Nigeria as early as the eleventh century through trans-Saharan trade routes linking the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Northern Nigeria, specifically Borno located near Lake Chad and Hausa trade cities located to the west of Borno in the Sahel plains (Last). The spread of Islam via trade is also indicated as “the language of trade and literature had become Arabic, replacing Coptic [by the eleventh century]; the Arabic script used was that from Qairouan” (Last 19). Borno was included in the trans-Saharan trade route because of its “ample supplies of gold (brought in from areas such as Kwangoma) . . . [and other valuable goods] including mercury (for gold processing) and excellent skins tough enough and light enough to make prized shields” (19). In addition to its high-value goods, Borno’s inclusion in the trans-Saharan trade route was due to its proximity to Lake Chad: “a source of fresh water [located] on the fringes of the rough and dry Sahara Desert [making it] an ideal destination for traders on the trans-Saharan trade route” (Obikili 39). The Hausa trade cities, west of Borno, “were effectively ‘ports’ for the caravan trade across the Saharan sand ‘sea’ . . . [and the] trading network to and from these Hausa cities . . . [were] partly river-borne, using the River Niger as [a] great highway [reaching] as far south as the Yoruba-speaking land of southern Nigeria” creating a trade network rivaling that of Borno (Last 21). The political structure of Northern Nigeria was headed by Mai (ruler) of Borno who was “the dominant suzerain for the period 1500 to 1800 . . . given the title of caliph [a chief Muslim civil and religious ruler, regarded as the successor of Muhammad] by the Ottoman authorities c.1500” (20).<sup>1</sup> As such, the Hausa cities “recognized the caliph in Borno as the senior authority in the land, sending annual payments as a courtesy, thus recognizing his suzerainty [yet each city was also politically] autonomous, selecting their own

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a *suzerain* is a “sovereign or state having supremacy over another state which possess its own ruler or government but cannot act as an independent power.”

kings or emirs” (20).<sup>2</sup> In addition to these leaders, Muslim merchants in Hausaland and Borno also had political influence, mainly during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as they “were also scholars in the classical Islamic tradition . . . deeply involved in education and engaged as advisors by the Muslim rulers of the Hausa states” and the Borno Caliphate whose scholars “monopolized advanced Koranic studies” (21).

In addition to other local deities and religious beliefs, Christianity first appeared in Nigeria in the Kingdom of Benin as early as the fifteenth century. Esigie, one of the sons of Oba (king) Ozolua, “converted to Christianity at the urging of [fifteenth century] Portuguese traders and missionaries, who promised access to arms that allowed Esigie to defeat his brother to end the Kingdom of Benin’s civil war [caused by succession disputes between Ozolua’s sons] and conquer the [invading enemy forces of] Igala” (Shankar 48). Closer to the advent of colonial rule there was an influx of Christian missionaries into Nigeria in the 1840s (Heaton and Falola). After abolishing the slave trade (in 1807), the British established an antislavery squadron that policed the Gulf of Guinea recapturing slaves taken from West African regions, including those in Nova Scotia, Jamaica, and Nigeria, and relocating them to Freetown in Sierra Leone (Heaton and Falola; Shankar). Freetown was founded by Anglican abolitionists in 1792 (Shankar). Many of these recaptured slaves learned English and became Christian while in Sierra Leone and later returned to their homelands, including Nigerian cities such as Lagos and Badagry, promoting anti-slavery and spreading the Gospel (Heaton and Falola). Additionally, beginning in the 1840s, the Anglican Church Missionary Society and the Methodist Mission opened mission stations throughout southern Nigeria in Badagry (1842), Abeokuta (1846), and Onitsha (1857) (Heaton

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *emir* is “the title of a ruler, governor, or military commander in any various Islamic countries.”

and Falola; Shankar). During the second half of the nineteenth century, “the Catholic Church also established missions throughout southern Nigeria . . . developing a particularly firm footing in the Bight of Biafra” (Heaton and Falola 77). Christian missionaries supported British colonial rule as “Christians in the Bights of Benin and Biafra increasingly looked to the British presence to support and protect their interests in the territories that would soon become southern Nigeria” (77).

Wielding the power of the British navy, John Beecroft (1790-1854), the British Consul for the Bights of Benin and Biafra, became “a kingmaker, appointing and deposing rulers in the Cross River and Niger Delta regions, mostly in the interests of protecting British trading prospects” (77). The British, under the direction of John Beecroft and other British consuls, conquered southern and northern Nigeria by compelling local rulers to sign treaties that forfeited their sovereignty and converted divergent and, sometimes, warring groups into cohesive colonies, which eventually were amalgamated to form one country:

The British began their move into the interior [of West Africa] from Lagos, [ending decades of warfare] in Yoruba territory in the 1880s and forc[ed] local rulers to sign a treaty in 1893 ceding their sovereignty to the newly formed Colony and Protectorate of Lagos . . . [during the same period] the British [forced] rulers to sign similar treaties of protection in the Bight of Biafra, and Niger Delta, creating the Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1885 (renamed the Niger Coast Protectorate in 1893). . . . [later] the Royal Niger Company . . . established a trade monopoly on the Niger River in 1886 . . . [which was maintained] until its charter was rescinded in 1900 and its territory incorporated into the Niger Coastal Protectorate, forming the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria . . . [;] [now

mostly in control of the south] the British moved north [in 1900] . . . under the leadership of Lord Frederick Lugard (1858-1945), conquer[ed] the various emirates of the Sokoto Caliphate, killing Sultan Attahiru I (d. 1903) in the Battle of Burmi in 1903 and establish[ed] the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria under Lugard's rule. . . . In 1906, the Lagos Protectorate was added to the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, and the Northern and Southern Protectorates were amalgamated into a unified Nigeria in 1914. (78)

Prior to the amalgamation of the Protectorates in 1914, the British implemented indirect rule—“reliance on indigenous political authorities to carry out the day-to-day administration of local areas” under the influence of British colonial officers (78). For example, after conquering the Sokoto Caliphate in the north, Lugard left the regional “emirs in place and [had] them report to him through a British Resident who served as intermediary” (79). The later amalgamation of the Protectorates was done in order to redirect “resources from the wealthier southern regions to the struggling north . . . [who] rel[ied] on subsidies from the south . . . [and] allowed for centralization of the treasuries [and] long-term integration of the economies. Goods produced in the north invariably needed to move south to international markets” (80). The unification of Nigeria also resulted in the conversion of Nigeria's various modes of currency to the British pound sterling to standardize exchange. Additionally, the British formalized European education, consisting of instruction in “basic reading, writing, arithmetic, . . . [the] English language, European history, and Christianity” (83).

European education was mainly provided through Christian missionary schools located mainly in urban areas in Southern Nigeria and it became a necessary precondition to find employment and access higher paying jobs. Also, this education was done in English, requiring

Nigerians to learn and use the colonial language for a means of livelihood. Some writers, including Chinua Achebe, claim that English is Nigeria's national language, since the majority of Nigerians speak English, a result of this highly effective colonial education. This educational system also created a "new economic elite . . . dubbed the 'African middle class'" who had access to higher standards of living and were "capable of negotiating the local and the imperial, and increasingly interested in establishing Nigerian national identity and creating an independent Nigerian nation" (83; 87). The majority of the African middle class consisted of southern Nigerians, the Yoruba and Igbo, because more southern Nigerians partook in European education than northern Nigerians as a result of various concurring factors: Frederick Lugard, British Consul for Northern Nigeria and later Nigeria's first governor-general (1914-1919), "explicitly limited missionary access to northern Nigeria [restricting access to European education] on the grounds of preserving the region's Islamic cultural heritage, *à la* the philosophy of indirect rule," thus Christian mission schools (most notably Methodist and Catholic) were mostly located in southern Nigeria and Northern Nigerians resisted European education in favor of maintaining Islamic education (84). As a result, an educational, experience, economic, and political gap developed between the two regions. For instance, "most of the civil service positions in the colonial government in northern Nigeria were filled by southerners" (84). These disparaging gaps created tension and anxiety between the two regions in the wake of approaching independence in the 1950s.

After WWII, there was a national push in Nigeria foremost among African nations for independence and decolonialization. Eventually in the 1950s, Britain began the long process of transitioning power by drafting three constitutions (the Richards Constitution of 1946, the Macpherson Constitution of 1951, and the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954) to provide a

foundation and framework to establish a Nigerian federal government. Despite creating a constitution to unite the government and the country, the federal structure reinforced ethnic, regional, and religious divisions in Nigeria rather than alleviated them. During the process of decolonization, “Southern elites demanded a short timetable for independence, while northern leaders argued for delay until the north could stand on an equal footing with the more developed south,” which led to constitutional revisions as “northern politicians worried that the south would move Nigeria too quickly to independence under a unitary government in which northerners would be marginalized due to their lower levels of European education, relative poverty, and Islamic faith” (Anthony 41; Heaton and Falola 86). This concern also resulted in staggering dates for the establishment of regional self-governments: “The 1954 constitution set 1957 as the date for regional self-government in the Eastern and Western Regions, and 1959 for the north” followed by full national independence in 1960 (Anthony 41).

The political parties forming the government were ethnically based, which reinforced ethnic divisions. According to political scientist Joseph Fashagba, the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), headed by Islamic Ahmadu Bello, gained the majority in Nigeria’s fledgling House of Representatives, and controlled the Northern region as the political party drew supporters mainly from the Hausa-Fulani Muslims in the north. The National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) largely controlled the Eastern region as many of its supporters were Igbo. The NCNC was headed by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, an Igbo. The Western region was under the control of the Action Group (AG), whose supporters largely consisted of Yorubas. Obafemi Awolowo led the AC. The NPC aligned with the NCNC to form the federal government at independence. The federal government used a parliamentary system consisting of the executive (the prime minister—Abubakar Tafawa Balewa—appointed by the NPC) who headed the

national government, dominated policymaking, and derived his power from the legislature. Although Nigeria became an independent state in 1960, it was still a dominion state of Britain. As a result, the “constitution did not change the legislative power of the British Crown in Nigeria” (Fashagba 208). British influence was present in the legislature as it “consisted of a governor-general [appointed by the NCNC] who represented the Crown, the Senate, and the House of Representatives . . . [without which] a legislative measure should never become an Act or law” (208). The Nigerian federal government was not free from British influence until the 1963 Republican Constitution. The regional level of government in Nigeria was headed by premiers and consisted of a House of Chiefs and a Regional Assembly.

Although the political parties constitutionally formed one government, each had their own agenda and social polarities, which resulted in “power struggle[s] over the control of the respective regions . . . [and] efforts to extend their influence to other regions” (210). For example, leaders of the NPC-led central government “declared a state of emergency [in 1962] in the Western Region and imposed a federal administrator on the region . . . [taking] over the Western Region from Obafemi Awolowo and charg[ing] him with treasonable felony in court” (211). This action was in response to AG’s intraparty crisis as AG “leadership [the regional premier and the party’s national representative] could not agree on common issues regarding the administration of the Western Region as well as the national government” (211). The central government’s declaration of a state of emergency in the Western Region was regarded as “a calculated attempt to erode the power and influence of the AG vis-à-vis the NPC” (211). Also, in the 1950s during the time of transition from British rule, the NPC adopted and implemented Northernization Policies in the Northern Region that “meant only the citizens of the north could ‘own land, hold certain jobs [particularly civil service jobs], and avail themselves of preferential

economic policies' in the region" (Anthony 39). Northernization Policies were implemented to consolidate regional control by "create[ing] a pool of homegrown civil servants to serve as counterweights to southern influence . . . [and overreliance on southerners in the] northern government" by giving Northern applicants access to permanent appointments while "limit[ing] southerners and expatriates to temporary contracts" (Anthony 41). The Northernization Policies created northern solidarity and acted as counter measures to protect against the educational and economic disparities between northerners and southerners developed under colonial rule, which resulted in a southern majority in civil service positions.

Within six years following Independence in 1960, the illusion of one Nigeria dissipated quickly. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, a broader question about national identity emerged: the country was in transition and struggling at unity to form the federal government the British had designed for them amidst the realities of divisions and regionalisms. This question of Nigerian identity was further muddled by various political crises that occurred between 1960 and 1966. This lack of a postcolonial national identity and the desire for decolonialization in the 50s and 60s was duly registered in the pan-African literary world as African writers engaged the themes of the movement. The continent's writers and intellectuals tried to cope with pluralism and develop and reclaim African identities through attempts to define an African Literature—the literary wing of the movement known as the continent's "modernism."

This larger mission of modernism to decolonize, attain freedom and political power, and create their own artistic and intellectual spaces permeated the country's writers particularly, as "literary publishing of work by Nigerians took off in the decade from 1957 to the outbreak of the Biafran war in 1967" (Currey 8). As part of their mission to reclaim African cultures and

disentangle them from colonial influence, young Nigerian writers wanted “to encourage one another and to protect their literary and cultural output” (Currey 9). The dream was of Nigeria establishing its own publishing houses and not relying on international publishers, particularly London publishers, so African works by African writers would be published by Africans. One such attempt was the creation of the Mbari group by Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe, and their professor at the University of Ibadan, Ulli Beier.<sup>3</sup> Mbari was a Nigerian national cultural club where pan-African artists, writers, poets, painters, musicians and dramatists, could meet and share their work in events such as gallery exhibits, concerts, etc.

The name was suggested by Achebe, who explained Mbari was an Igbo concept which was “a celebration, through art, of the world and the life lived in it” through “the act of sculpting, building, painting, dancing, and singing in honor of [a] deity” (qtd. in Currey 9; Okeke-Agulu 150).<sup>4</sup> Mbari as an organization wasn’t just a social club for these artists and writers to

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<sup>3</sup> In his book entitled, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (2015), Chika Okeke-Agulu reports that in 1961, the American Society of Art and Culture organized a program in “Lagos featuring poet and playwright Langston Hughes, singers Nina Simone and Odetta, and other renowned African American writers, performing artists, and musicians” (169). During Hughes’ visit to Lagos, “[Ulli] Beier took Hughes on a tour of Osogbo, where they visited the Sango shrine” (304). This encounter is but one example of other meetings and events that facilitated contact between African American and African artists during the mid-twentieth century who shared similar missions of trying to explore and articulate their own experiences and cultural identities, establish their own literary traditions, and record, recover and pass on their culture’s and community’s history in their work (writing, music, art, etc.). Chika Okeke-Agulu is a specialist in indigenous, modern, and contemporary African American and African Diaspora art history and theory. He is a professor at Princeton University in the Department of African American Studies & Department of Art and Archaeology and is the director of the African Studies program.

<sup>4</sup> In his book Okeke-Agulu also provides further explanation and description of the Mbari celebration. According to Okeke-Agulu, Mbari is a commission, monument, ritual, and celebration of art: “For the Igbo mbari, a village would appoint professional artists and amateurs to build, in seclusion, the mbari monument in honor of Ala [the earth goddess and guardian of creativity and justice] or some other powerful tutelary deity. During the construction phase, the artists also spent time learning dances to be performed at the public opening and dedication of the monument, an occasion of great celebration by members of the commissioning village and their guests. Mbari as a concept thus encompasses the material and visual qualities of Igbo architecture, sculpture, and painting, along with the kinesthesia of the dance and ritual performances enacted during construction and on the occasion of the public presentation of the project” (150).

come together but effectively functioned as a “book launch” and publishing house. Mbari published various works, such as plays, novels, and poetry, by various African writers, including the poet Lenrie Peters from Gambia, the poet Kofi Awoonor from Ghana, and Alex la Guma, the South African author of *A Walk in the Night*. However, Mbari couldn’t permeate past the local level of publishing, as it “did not have the sales knowledge and could not afford to reach the [international] market”—i.e., to distribute internationally the Mbari writers’ works. The option for Mbari’s writers became one of the reality of control of the supply lines: “only when London publishers subcontracted [the writers] from Mbari [could] they became widely known and easily available internationally” (Currey 10). Other local Nigerian magazines and journals that published local Nigerian work, like *Black Orpheus* and *Transition*, had similar accessibility and financial trouble.

As a result, authors had to find a way to make their work accessible in their own country and competitive abroad, while still being a part of the publishing process and in control of their work. Some authors determined this was best accomplished by controlling the rights to their own work, “subleasing rights by Nigerian publishers and co-publishing with publishers in London and New York...using [these] international publishers to distribute their writing around the world, whether in English or in translation” (Currey 15). An example of co-publishing would be Achebe’s involvement in Heinemann’s African Writer’s Series, as its first general editor. Achebe was able to help other African writers get published through this series as well as be able to publish some of his own work.

Also during the mid to late twentieth century, African writers tried to reclaim their identity and “create a unique and authentic African literary tradition” by taking European

modernism and transforming it into their own African Postcolonial modernism that promoted “a radical *politics* of counter-colonialism” (Achebe, *There Was a Country* 55; Woods 930). African writers, especially Nigerian writers, did this by borrowing ideas and concepts from European modernist writers and combining them with African traditions, such as incorporating and communicating traditional beliefs, sayings, proverbs, folktales and “oral modes” (Woods 934). This approach follows Frantz Fanon’s theory of revolutionary decolonization, particularly the idea that, during the process of decolonization in Africa, the colonized must use the master’s tools, lessons, and ideas for their own use: “use what the masters have developed and turn it around in the interest of those who have been enslaved or colonized” (*Concerning Violence* 1:59-2:07). By doing so, the colonized can transform those tools, lessons, and ideas into something new that they can use for their own purposes such as building coalitions to form a national identity and literary tradition. What was once the property of the colonizer becomes the property of the colonized. For instance, in the case of Nigerian writers post-independence, they had to negotiate their European education and the European literary tradition they have been trained in with their own folk tradition of storytelling (such as oral storytelling, the use of proverbs and folktales, and regional, indigenous languages vs. English) to create their own literary traditions capable of articulating the unique and turbulent historical, national, and political moment they were experiencing.<sup>5</sup> Many writers wrote their works in English, essentially using the colonial language as a tool to be able to reach a larger international audience and be able to have a unified literary and critical community that can communicate because it shares one language. In terms of Fanon’s approach, these writers’ use of English was not a sign of subjugation or appropriation,

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<sup>5</sup> Henry Louis Gates was essentially Fanon’s counterpart for the American Civil Rights developments in “a theory of their own” for Black writers in the U.S. Gates was the leading figure in developing a critical literary theory based in Black tradition that could be applied to African American literature.

but resistance and creating something new and claiming it for themselves.<sup>6</sup> Chinua Achebe describes this benefit of using English at the June 1962 Conference of African Writers of English Expression at Makerere, saying, “I see a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language...[where] the African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost” (Achebe, “English and the African Writer” 29).

This development of postcolonial modernism and turning European ideas, tools, and modernism on its head, came from this first university-educated and English speaking generation of Nigerian writers—Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, and Chinua Achebe, among others. This generation of writers were faced with the challenge of negotiating between their Western-European-style education, not promoting nor participating in neocolonialism nor writing about non-African concepts, and the desire to write about their own country, culture, and stories. As Tim Woods articulates in his chapter “Modernism and African Literature” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, African literature was “engaged in establishing its own history, its own spaces, its own modes, its own structures...[and] African modernism was motivated by a quest for freedom and power...seeking...a kind of paradoxical destructive restructuration that rearranged the field of understanding or possibility...[and] set out to redeem, not deny, the promissory notes of historical subjectivity” (940).

With such an encompassing and complex mission of reclaiming their history, identity, and story from colonialism, critiquing colonialism, and establishing their own literature, each

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<sup>6</sup> My understanding of Fanon’s approach comes from “Frantz Fanon (195-1961).” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent Leitch, W.W. Norton & Company, 2010, pp. 1437-1446; Jalalazai, Zubeda and Jeyifo, Biodun. “Fanon, Frantz.” *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*. 2nd ed. 2005. Online; “African Theory and Criticism.” *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary & Criticism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2012. Online.

writer honed in on one of these focuses. Some sought out to accomplish these goals by writing about contemporary social and political issues that were happening in their country, which was essentially writing their current story. For instance, in his 1964 poem “Lament of the Drums,” Christopher Okigbo “transmutes the imprisoned Obafemi Awolowo [leader of the western region of the country] and his son Segun, who died in a 1936 car accident, into the figure of Palinurus from Virgil’s *Aeneid*...[thus expressing] political sympathy with Awolowo’s opposition to a Nigerian government closely... in league with British interests” (Suhr-Sytsma 47). Some writers of the modernism movement tried to preserve and conserve their culture’s history and traditions in their novels, essays, dramas, and poetry. Chinua Achebe sought to dispose of the depiction of African people not having their own culture or even hearing of culture before the arrival of the Europeans; “that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity” (Achebe qtd. in Ogunbesan 43-44).<sup>7</sup> These efforts of preservation and combating myths about African history and culture by Nigerian writers and artists post-independence echoes the efforts of African American writers, historians, educators, and bibliophiles fighting for the inclusion and accurate

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<sup>7</sup> According to The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry “African Sage Philosophy”, the tradition of African philosophy faced similar hurdles having to combat and disprove false claims about African philosophy and philosophers created under colonialism. Henry Odera Oruka was a Kenyan philosopher and leading voice critiquing the Eurocentric bias against African thought and questioning whether literacy is required in the practice. Oruka undertook a project collecting dialogue of indigenous sages reflecting on “questions regarding the nature of supreme being, the concept of the person, the meaning of freedom, equality, death, and the belief in the afterlife” to provide evidence of African philosophy engaging in critical reflection and thought. He published these dialogues in his book, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (1990), considered a classic text in the field. Oruka collected these dialogues to combat Eurocentric claims “delegitimizing” African Sage philosophy. According to Oruka, the three main claims were: (1) Unlike Greek sages who used reason, African sages do not engage in philosophic thought because their methods are nothing like the Greeks; (2) African sages are part of an oral tradition, whereas philosophic thought requires literacy (oral tradition is devalued and dismissed in comparison to print culture, which is privileged and used to indicate validity, prestige, and professional/scientific practice in the European tradition); (3) African traditions encourage unanimity regarding beliefs and values, which discourages individual critical thought (perpetuating this idea that African philosophy doesn’t engage in critical thought because the consensus on beliefs and values generalizes Africa, ignoring its diverse cultures, traditions, and values and perpetuates this false idea of “one Africa”).

teaching of Black history and literature in American schools, establishing resources and repositories of Black history in libraries accessible to the American public, and creating literary works articulating and exploring the Black experience in a time of discord and transition during the Civil Rights movement in America.

Achebe felt it was his duty as a writer to validate denigrated aspects of African history and culture, as well as reclaim African traditions as part of contemporary identities. His approach to using English helps in efforts to dispose of derogatory depictions and reclaim the dignity of the African peoples (Ogungbesan 44). However, as social and political crises unfolded in 1964-66, Achebe shifted his goals as a writer, aligning himself with the goal to comment on current political and social issues. For Achebe, the writer became a social commentator. In a 1978 conference at the University of Kent, Achebe shared these ideas: “an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant...A writer who feels a strong and abiding concern for his fellows cannot evade the role of social critic which is the contemporary expression of commitment to the community. And this concern is at the very heart of African literature, past and present” (qtd. in Zell 346-7). In other words, writers, especially African writers who are living in a country in turmoil, have a responsibility to critically think and write about current events, advocate on behalf of the community and should not separate social and political issues from their work. If they attempt to keep their writing and current social issues separate, their work becomes irrelevant.

On January 15, 1966, there was a coup staged by several Nigerian Army majors, including Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna, who was a friend of Okigbo. They were later termed the

“January Boys,” and they failed in their coordinated attempt to take over the government. However, they succeeded in killing the Nigerian prime minister, Tafawa Balewa, and other high-ranking politicians and military officials. Because of the loss of Balewa’s leadership and that of many other government officials and the epiphenomenal events of the coup attempt, the government became disordered. The military arm was still able to take over the government, with Major-General Ironsi at its helm, becoming the “Supreme Commander and Military Head of State [who] governed with a Supreme Military Council” (Nwakanma 624). Among others, the Supreme Military Council included Lieutenant-Colonel Emeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu as the military governor of the Eastern Region and Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon the Chief of Army Staff. Because Ironsi was an Igbo and “the fatality index weighed more heavily on the North, and it seemed that the coup had all but wiped out the most senior military officials from the North and two of their leading politicians,” the coup was framed as an Igbo coup designed to put the Igbo in power and dominate the nation (621).

Although the appointed Major-General Ironsi was “an apolitical and professional soldier,” the actions of his government “seemed to confirm fears that the object of the coup was to displace the North from power in order for the [Southern] Igbo to take over” (Nwakanma 624; Osaghae 177). Some examples of the consolidated actions were the “failure to put the coup planners on trial as demanded by sections of the army, accelerated promotions of Igbo officers and their positions to head strategic command positions, and most important of all, the abrogation of the federal system including regional public services by Decree 34,” also known as the Unification Decree (1966) (Osaghae 177). Ironsi claimed to do this for the sake of national unity, claiming the decree was meant to abolish the intense regionalism in the current system and produce a cohesive government structure. However, this explanation was not enough for

“Northern elites[,] for whom federalism offered protection, opportunities, and privileges in relation to the more developed south” (178).

These cumulative events augmented the disintegration of the federal government and destroyed the last semblance of unity the government seemed to have. This disintegration of law and order left a generation of Nigerians dismayed “over the conduct of the politics of the new nation and the outcome of the process of decolonialization,” which Nigerians in general felt, but even more so the Nigerian writers at the time (Nwakanma 622). They expressed this in their work. One such example is Okigbo’s long sequence poem *Silences*.<sup>8</sup> Nwakanma describes Okigbo’s “use of the mode of the ‘public elegy’ and its trope of mourning invoked by the ‘drum’s lament’ . . . [articulating] the situation of public alienation, political disasters, and elite corruption in the emerging years of early postcolonial Nigeria” (623). Okigbo’s poem is yet another example of the postcolonial modernist African writer addressing and incorporating the political issues of the time to comment on and develop the story of their nation, and in the process, help to create a postcolonial modernism movement that would sustain the country through these times of struggle and reconstruction.

The xenophobic, paranoid sentiments among Northerners gained momentum as violent riots broke out in the north targeting Igbo people, killing and maiming them. These sentiments of disenfranchisement came to a climax when the North later consolidated grievances and evolved a group fostering a second “‘retaliatory coup’” (622). Six months after Ironsi came to power, on July 29, 1966, a coup was staged by Army officers from Northern Nigeria. The northern coup

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<sup>8</sup> According to Nwakanma’s biography of Okigbo entitled, *Christopher Okigbo 1930-67 Thirsting for Sunlight*, the first part of *Silences*, entitled “Lament of the Silent Sisters,” was published in 1962. *Silences* was fully complete in 1965.

was headed by Ironsi's Chief of Staff, Yakubu Gowon. Ironsi was targeted and killed during the coup. Simultaneously, a systematic purging conducted by Northern officers of Igbo officers occurred across Nigeria. This purge in the military quickly extended to include civilians as abettors of the newly criminalized Igbo officers. Eastern civilians, particularly Igbos, began being hunted down in cities across the north and west. There were horror stories of men, children, women, and pregnant women being slaughtered and maimed. As a result of these events, masses of eastern Nigerians living in the north of the country, mainly Igbo, fled back to their home territories in the east. Biafra was beginning to form along the lines of this massive population migration.

On May 30, 1967, Colonel Ojukwu, military governor of the Eastern Region, "declared the independence of the East from the federation of Nigeria, and proclaimed the republic of Biafra" in response to the consequent events of the second "retaliatory" coup and the real possibility of genocide (620). Between August 1966 and May 1967, there were many "abortive conferences [held between Ojukwu and Gowon] aimed at staving off the conflict," but they ultimately failed as a result of personal and public factors (625). These factors included the Lagos administrations' attempt to dismantle the Eastern government by splitting it up, announcing the creation of twelve states in Nigeria on May 27, 1967, three of which were in the Eastern Region. A few days later, on May 29, 1967, Governor Ojukwu announced the secession of the Republic of Biafra and proclaimed it an independent nation. In retaliation the federal army launched an assault on the Biafran separatists which was initially described as a police action (Nwakanma).

The Biafrans fought back, but they were no match for the caliber of weapons and the amount of resources the federal army had at their disposal. The majority of military equipment used by the federal army, except for aircrafts and bombs, were supplied by the U.K. during the war: “by 1969, 97 percent of the [Nigerian] federal government’s armaments . . . were supplied by the British [which was a significant increase] from 36 percent in 1966” (Donnelly and Neville 718). During the civil war, the United Kingdom and Canada supported the Nigerian federal government, “preferring the relative stability of a unified Nigeria to the secession of Biafra and the possibility of encouraging similar secessionist movements elsewhere” (Donnelly and Neville). Independent Biafra received limited international support, with “France [being] the only major power to back” Biafra (Donnelly and Neville). Despite the efforts of Biafrans, the federal army made quick gains into Biafra, shrinking the territory and forcing Biafrans to retreat deeper into the east. Eventually the federal army took Enugu, the capital of Biafra, which caused the now-occupied Biafrans to fight on the defensive for the remainder of the war. The Biafrans experienced mass starvation as blockades were imposed preventing food from entering into Biafra. The federal army also used airplanes to bomb civilian places across Biafra, including schools, churches, and hospitals. The Biafrans resisted and fought for three years “until they lost all but a slice of their territory to the federal army, and thus encircled and exhausted, were compelled to seek a cessation of conflict, and negotiate an end to the war on January 15, 1970” (Nwakanma 626).

During the civil war, on the principle of the writer’s ethical responsibilities to engage, Okigbo suggested that he and Achebe start a publishing house. This publishing house would later be named the Citadel Press, located strategically in “the commercial nerve center of the . . . capital of Biafra, Enugu” (Achebe, *There Was a Country* 176). The name Citadel Press meant

exactly what it implied. The press would act as a “fortress—you flee from foreign land, in danger, and return home to your citadel” (Achebe qtd. in Ohaeto 122). Both Okigbo and Achebe had a background in publishing. Okigbo had been a representative of the Cambridge University Press and Achebe had his editorial experience with Heinemann Educational Books. The mission of the Citadel Press was to “provide a vehicle for fulfilling their literary interests . . . [continuing the modernist mission/goals such as] encouraging the exploration of the oral tradition . . . publishing relevant works by Africans for children,” and providing a place for African writers to retreat in a time of war and crisis and still be able to publish their work. Ernest Emenyonu explains that many “of the [regional offices of the] major pre-war publishing companies were located in Ibadan and Lagos in western Nigeria,” so the writers in eastern Nigeria couldn’t access them, but the Citadel Press could help bridge the gap (“[Re]Inventing the Past for the Present” 7).

The publishing house was also a realization of the vision held formerly by Mbari’s group of Nigerian writers to compete in global book-trade economics: the “Citadel Press was . . . under local African control, avoiding tensions over expatriate involvement and external funding that had plagued Mbari” (Suhr-Sytsma 54). Achebe felt this was part of his contribution to the war effort, as he was helping his fellow Biafrans in their existential struggle by attempting to publish their work. Also, there was a special emphasis on a want and feeling of obligation to publish books relevant to society at the time, especially children’s books. Achebe writes in his memoir, *There Was a Country*, that “we felt we wanted to develop literature for children based on local thought” (176).

Achebe recognized and believed in the power of children's stories to shape and consolidate a people's identity: children's books influence and inform the next generation. Achebe believed that storytelling itself had power: "a threat . . . to anyone in control . . . [,] a storyteller has a different agenda from the Emperor," or those in power, and has the capability effectively and profoundly to articulate opinions ("Bill Moyers with Chinua Achebe" 7:29-7:38). Writers have the power to influence the public depending on their popularity. With this power, popular writers have an obligation to hold "up to [their] society—including its children—a mirror in which its best possibilities and deepest flaws are clearly reflected" (J. Miller 7-8; 17). These ideas of influence also connected with Okigbo and Achebe's desire to continue their work in African modernism. As Suhr-Sytsma articulates, the publishing house and this book—*How the Leopard Got His Claws*—was "a sign of [Okigbo's] commitment to a form of modernity that he and Achebe evidently thought compatible with turning children to local traditions of storytelling and a decolonizing political lesson" (55). All of these ideas and motivations manifested in the press's first and only completed project: the refurbished folktale of *How the Leopard Got His Claws*. John Iroaganachi submitted to the fledgling press his manuscript of the African myth entitled "How the Dog Became a Domesticated Animal," which depicted the dog as the "nice guy, a wonderful fellow who became a slave" (Ohaeto 125). Achebe read it and identified its potential to convey a different story. Achebe articulates in his memoir that "Christopher and I realized immediately that we wanted a different story," so with the permission of Iroaganachi, Achebe began to refurbish the tale for the current political moment.

The book was written in English so it would be widely accessible; it "draws on Igbo oral tradition, but for a modern message"; the story is a modern reworking of a traditional folktale, which demonstrates that postcolonial modernism mix between the use of colonial tools, African

traditions, and focusing on contemporary issues (Suhr-Sytsma 55). The refurbished telling of the story acts as an allegory for the political events leading up to the civil war and seems to end in the midst of the war, with the concluding lines

Today the animals are no longer friends, but enemies. The strong attack and kill the weak. The leopard, full of anger, eats up anyone he can lay his claws on. And the hunter, led by the dog, goes to the forest from time to time and kills any animals he can find. Perhaps someday the animals will make peace among themselves and live together again. Then, at last, they will be able to keep away the hunter, who is their common enemy.

(Achebe and Iroaganachi, *How the Leopard Got His Claws*)

The story specifically speaks to the disunity and discord happening before the Biafran civil war, especially “suggestive of the disintegration of the Nigerian federation” and the 1966 coup and counter coup, symbolized in the back and forth change in leadership between the Leopard King and the Dog (J. Miller 17). Miller articulates that the story is “clearly pointing out the perilous consequences of disunity,” since in the end all the animals hunt and kill each other and live in fear of each other, especially of those holding power, the leopard, the dog, and the hunter.

This disunity, disintegration of federal government as well as the North’s desire for power to dominate, is reflected in the Leopard towards the end of the story, when he’s “in a blind vindictive rage forc[ing] the disintegration of the animal community in spite of the wishes and pleadings of its members. His outburst shows he is as individualistic and selfish as Dog and that he actually cares more for the preservations of power than for good governance” (Balogun 428). Okigbo’s poem in the story, “The Lament of the Deer,” seems to be “a kind of dirge, which articulates the history of the tragedy” of a country enmeshed in a civil war, with mass killings,

starvation, etc., and “reiterates the violence and dispossession associated with those deeds” (Emenyonu, “Selection and Validation of Oral Materials” 591; Ohaeto 126).

Also, the communal village structure the animals build together not only seems symbolic of Nigeria’s pluralism as a fledgling nation; I see the community-building animals as symbolizing the Citadel Press as central to the mission of community. Like the village structure, the Citadel Press was built by civilians, and constructed to be a place of safe harbor for others to retreat to in a time of difficulty and hardship, during the rainy season, the book’s recourse to traditions. The village structure, like the Citadel Press, lasts for a small period before it’s torn down. As the federal army gained more ground during the civil war, Achebe, like many others, was forced to retreat further into a diminishing Biafra, which he did after his house in Enugu was bombed. While Achebe was away in retreat, the Citadel Press was destroyed during the various bombings of the war. In his memoir, Achebe recounts his visit, soon after the war ended, to the site where the Citadel Press once stood. Achebe describes the Citadel being reduced to rubble, whereas a number of buildings in the same vicinity had been left unscathed: “It appeared as if there was an angry mission sent to silence the Citadel—for having the audacity to publish *How the Leopard Got Its Claws*—a book that challenged the very essence of the Nigeria federation’s philosophy, depicting the return of the spurned former ruler to vanquish and retake his throne from the wretched and conniving usurper” (Achebe, *There Was a Country* 185). Like the communal structure in *How the Leopard Got Its Claws*, the Citadel Press was demolished due to the threat it posed for speaking in other voices than the One.

In *How the Leopard Got Its Claws* the leopard is a wise and kind king who rules over all the animals in the jungle. All the animals live in peace and no one except for the dog has any

sharp teeth or claws. The animal community comes together, expect for the dog, to build a shelter to provide a safe place to gather during the rainy season. When the rain floods the dog's den, he flees to the communal shelter and denies access to all the other animals. While trying to settle the dispute, the leopard king gets into a fight with the dog and loses leaving the leopard king severely injured. Now in a position of power, the dog self-proclaims himself king and witnessing this shift in power the other animals follow the dog and celebrate their new ruler casting out the leopard into the cold, wet wilderness. Seeking vengeance for this betrayal, the leopard seeks help from the blacksmith, who makes him teeth and claws out of steel, and Thunder and Lightning, who grant him his roar. The leopard returns to his kingdom to retake his throne and punishes those who betrayed him by now ruling with fear rather than wisdom, kindness, and forgiveness. Then the leopard king commands the rest of the animals to dismantle the shelter they made: "Let everyone take from the hall what he put into it." The dog, now the one severely injured, escapes the forest and ends up in the service of man, making a deal with a hunter to help hunt down his fellow animals to feed the hunter in exchange for protection. In the end, the animal kingdom is disunified, with the animals waring amongst themselves until they can make peace, unite, and fight their common enemy, the hunter.

Because the story is an allegory for the history of the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War, this moral tale can pass down the history of the war to future generations and reflects Achebe's idea of the writer as teacher passing on cultural traditions and "instilling dignity into his own people" and writer as social commentator creating work about the current social and political moment to preserve that moment and help his people process it. The Citadel Press was created to provide Nigerian writers a safe haven to publish their work during war time and publish African literature that passes down the history of the war to future generations and builds from pluralism

a new national identity as part of Nigeria's process of decolonization. Consequently, all the influences from the historical and political events of the 1950s-1960s as well as the mission of the Nigerian writers and postcolonial modernism to reclaim and establish an authentic African literature, decolonize, and develop a locally run publishing house all influenced and manifested in the creation of the Citadel Press and in producing *How the Leopard Got His Claws*. The book was later published by Achebe's friends Arthur Nwankwo and Samuel Ifejika at Nwamife Books in 1971. Also, the efforts of the Mbari group and the American Society of Art and Culture to organize a program bringing Nigerian and African American writers and artists together recognizes the shared transatlantic historical legacies and struggle for human rights and freedom both groups, particularly their artists, fought for in the 1950s and 60s. In creating an African and African American literary tradition and criticism, both groups shared the experience of a complex negotiation between a European based education and using their own folk tradition when creating and critiquing their own literary and artistic work as well as articulating their cultural identity and experience. Both groups also fought to create works that recovered, persevered and recorded their history so that the perspective of the colonized or enslaved were included in the national narrative and became a part of their nations' identity.

## CONCLUSION

The complex historical and cultural context Bontemps lived and worked in included the realities of racial violence, tense interracial relations, Black disenfranchisement, Jim Crow Segregation, and Civil Rights protests. Among other rights, the Black community fought to be represented in the teaching of American history and America's stories; the community fought to preserve their cultural identity, to articulate their experience; they fought for civil rights and against the legacy of myths of Black cultural inferiority that derive from the antebellum period. Bontemps was part of the effort of Black writers, scholars, public and private libraries, and colleges in America that aimed to preserve materials documenting Black history, culture, and experience during a time of social and cultural war in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Bontemps contributed to the efforts by creating a repository of cultural memory through the expansion of Fisk University's archive and special collections, particularly the Negro Special Collection. As a result, the collection preserves and presents a comprehensive picture of the social, historical, and cultural memory of the Black community as each collection and the individual materials added to Fisk's archive documents the contribution of Black Americans to various areas of society and culture including education, music, social science, literature, and politics.

Similarly, Chinua Achebe and Christopher Okigbo participated in the African modernism movement in its efforts to establish an African literature and identity in a postcolonial people's experience following Nigerian Independence and during the Biafran Civil War and its aftermath. Achebe and Okigbo created a publishing house during a time of civil war to preserve the cultural

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<sup>1</sup> I describe this period as a time of war because the Black community was fighting and dying for civil rights in the face of racial violence, tense interracial relations, disenfranchisement, and Jim Crow Segregation.

memory of their community through the publication of literature that used cultural traditions of storytelling, folktales and passed on current history to the public. This effort is exhibited by the Press's inaugural publication, the refurbished children's book *How the Leopard Got His Claws*. Bontemps, Achebe, and Okigbo share a mission to create repositories of cultural memory to preserve their community's history, its place in the national history, and aid in the formation of cultural identity during a time of war. Both Bontemps and Achebe also share an understanding that storytelling, the preservation of the materials of the stories, is the key to cultural endurance, representation, and political stability. Their work demonstrates the shared mission and transatlantic connection between African Americans' and Nigerians' fight for human rights and freedom from disenfranchisement and oppression in the 1950s and 60s that derives from a shared legacy of both groups' encounter with colonialism. My thesis attempts to recover the history of Bontemps' involvement in the growth of Fisk's archive and Achebe's and Okigbo's establishment of Nigeria's Citadel Press, so their contributions are not lost to history. Restoring these moments to their own complex historical context can also help us realize our shared national and international legacies, which can be a way to build community and manage global relations. Recognizing our shared legacies is especially important to our present historical moment where global relations are tense and resource allocations sometimes seem to ask us to forget rather than to remember the precise ways we are connected and not alone.

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