



[Browse](#) > [Literature](#) > [American Literature](#) > [American Literary History](#) > [Volume 27, Number 4, Winter 2015](#)

White Boy (American Hunger) and the Angel of History: Russell Banks's Identity Knowledge



[Evan Carton \(bio\)](#)

1. Identity Knowledges and Political Desire

In the first sentence of *Object Lessons* (2012), Robyn Wiegman introduces the term “identity knowledges” to designate the set of “institutional and intellectual formations . . . [for] the study of race, gender, sexuality, and nation” that have emerged over the past four decades and risen to prominence, even predominance, in the US literary academy (1). Wiegman’s book aims to assess some representative triumphs and tribulations of identity knowledges.¹

The triumphs of these knowledges, at least as measured by their intellectual and institutional proliferation, are evident: *Object Lessons*’ first footnote cites 17 major essay collections devoted to one domain or another of identity study (and might have cited many more), along with scores of single-authored monographs; its second footnote lists 35 different names of current identity studies programs, centers, or departments, most of them in use at multiple colleges and universities. The tribulations of identity knowledges, by contrast, have been less apparent and for a time were disguised by their pervasive institutionalization, which now itself figures as one source of concern.

These troubles proceed from the vexed and, for Wiegman, insufficiently examined relations between the production and the **[End Page 741]** project of identity knowledges—between their sites, methods, and objects of study, on the one hand, and their motives and objectives, their “political destination,” on the other. The “generic figure of the political destination of identity knowledges,” Wiegman writes, is “social justice” (3). Indeed, justice figures not merely as their desired outcome but as their constitutive principle: “identity knowledges,” Wiegman continues, “take their commitment to some version of justice as a self-constituting fact” (3).

Whether the arena of identity study is a propitious locus for the pursuit of social justice; whether, as intellectual formations, particular identity knowledges are malformed or deformed by the teleological commitment to a desired “political destination” that impels them; whether the symbolic economy and the academic institutions within which identity knowledge is produced themselves promote or obstruct the ends of justice: such questions about the fit between the project and the production of identity knowledges have begun to attract scholarly investigation and debate.² What principally concerns Wiegman, though, is “the crucial difference between a field’s discourse of the political and the operations of the political that constitute it,” particularly as this difference is instantiated in disparities of condition and power between the “subjects of knowledge” and “the objects they seek to authorize, . . . between the educated elite and the subalterns we study and represent” (17, 7). And first among those disparate conditions or positions of the subject is that of race. The core (and earliest composed) chapter of *Object Lessons*, accordingly, addresses its inquiry to what may be regarded as the inaugural impetus of academic identity knowledges: the “desire for an antiracist white subject who refutes the historical inheritances of white power” (174).

No contemporary American writer of fiction has more passionately shared, conscientiously explored, or incisively critiqued this desire for an antiracist subject matter and an antiracist subjectivity than Russell Banks. Coincident with the rise, institutionalization, and more recently articulated crises of identity knowledges, Banks’s major work, moreover, has tracked (and often anticipated) the progressive enlargement of the spheres of justice and forms of counter-hegemonic identity—racial, class, transnational—that academic criticism has taken into its purview. While race has continued to provide the principal identity arena for that work, as it has for scholars, Banks has engaged so persistently and variously with the “intellectual formations” and “resonant aspirations” (337) that, in Wiegman’s account, drive identity studies per se that identity knowledge may be fairly regarded as his fiction’s signature pursuit. Because this pursuit is narrative as well as critical, however, it demands that its author imaginatively instantiate—and that his characters embody and enact—the formations and aspirations of identity **[End Page 742]** scholarship. Banks’s fiction also offers one powerful and disturbing vision of the removal of the buffer of abstraction “between [the] field’s discourse of the political and the operations of the political that constitute it.”

Central to this vision is the paradox that Wiegman observes and laments in her chapter entitled “The Political Conscious: Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity”: “the rhetorical, if not always political, register of disaffiliation from white supremacist practices and discourses” is itself “the hegemonic formation of white identity in the postsegregationist era” (150), she argues, and “the fantasy of mastering the meaning of the body by subordinating it to conscious intentions [entails] a

replication of certain aspects of the universal power of whiteness, which had long produced a seemingly self-authorized subject able to determine the meaning of his subjectivity in the world" (160). Such fantasies of disaffiliation are exposed and powers of self-authorizing racial subjectivity are rescinded (in ways that are inflected but never countervailed by their differences in class, gender, age, occupation, and historical moment) for the white protagonists of Banks's *The Book of Jamaica* (1980), *Continental Drift* (1985), *Rule of the Bone* (1995), *Cloudsplitter* (1998), *The Darling* (2004), and "Djinn," the stunning opening story of his millennial compendium, *The Angel on the Roof* (2000). For these characters, however, discovery of the paradox of white particularity, and of their own defining, if unwanted, inheritance of racial privilege, does not spell the end of the story. Rather, it sets them in pursuit of a new understanding and embrace of their American identity as necessarily incomplete, relational, and creolized. This identity is predicated not only on cognitive or discursive acknowledgment of the continuing social, economic, and juridical productivity and privilege of whiteness but also on physical and emotional exposure to black experience and involvement in black lives—an identity suffused with the nation's shared and painful racial history. Banks's characters enact this political desire with varying degrees of intentionality, self-awareness, and ideological sophistication. Yet, invariably, their efforts to instantiate a reparative racial identity knowledge trigger a repetition of originary and structural racial violence and evasion.

Banks's vision is bleak, but perhaps, for reasons that Wiegman suggests, not wholly so. "The problem for identity knowledges," she writes in *Object Lessons'* closing pages, "is not how to make our conception of politics accord with reality alone, but how to register the projections, transferences, anxieties, and aspirations that comprise it" (337). Rather than merely despair of the fantasies that subtend the project (for "who imagines that politics of any kind are possible without fantasy coordinating some of the footwork"?), she argues for "inhabiting identity knowledges" more attentively, more **[End Page 743]** affectively, more vulnerably, and thus taking their—and our—fuller measure (337). As a genre, however, criticism is not well suited to answer Wiegman's call. Fiction is, and Banks's fiction does. Animating and inhabiting the historical projections, psychological transferences, political aspirations, and moral anxieties that Wiegman and other academics bring to and discern in the study of identity, the works by Banks that I discuss here imaginatively rework or co-work that project's informing commitments, desires, and problematics in ways that may point toward an alternative racial ethics. At the least, in a season of disciplinary disquiet about the practical efficacy and the moral and historical self-regard of our hermeneutics of suspicion, we might find in Banks's writing and thinking object lessons for our own.³

2. Whiteness Visible: Russell Banks's Subject Lessons

The divide between discursive and instantiated pursuits—or less and more "inhabited" forms—of identity knowledge inheres within Banks's own work on racial identity. His principal discursive or critical approach to the subject shares what Mary Esteve has termed the "evangelical impulses" that have driven US literary studies since the 1980s (531). Written for the 150th anniversary issue of *Harper's Magazine*, which appeared in the summer of 2000, Banks's essay is oracularly titled "Who Will Tell the People?" What the (American) people need to have revealed—or what we must acknowledge—Banks argues, is the secret of our birth, the engine of our collective identity. "We the People," Banks writes, "require a tale that in a plausible way describes and dramatizes our origins," that "braid[s] together into a single strand" our welter of partial, proprietary, and competing identity stories, and that offers a needle "by which we can reliably set our ethical and metaphysical compasses" (83, 86). This call for a singular national identity narrative by a white man from New England appears to align Banks's project with that of the conservative cultural warriors of the 1980s and 1990s who, in response to the intellectual challenges and sociopolitical demands of multiculturalism, rallied to defend the idea and the institutions of a common US culture, integrative of minority constituencies but founded and principally shaped by Euro-Americans. But Banks has a different first principle of American identity knowledge in mind.

"Who Will Tell the People?" invokes the culture wars debate in order to cut provocatively against its grain. The unifying origin story it tells, the "autochthonous myth" (86) it advances, is at the same time an ethnically decentered and geographically decentering one. It is a tale, moreover, that grounds national identity in the experience **[End Page 744]** and structural function of one disempowered minority. And it locates "the essential, and specifically American, political and moral meaning of every American's life" in an ongoing and mutative history of collective violence, trauma, crime, not in a shared governmental tradition or civic ideal (88). "[T]he single defining, linked sequence of stories that all Americans, north, south, and meso-, share," Banks explains, "the one narrative that we all participate in, is that of the African Diaspora."

This is the narrative template against which all the others can be measured, fit into, laid over, or veneered onto. It doesn't matter where in time one enters it . . . or from whose point of view it's told. For we have all played different roles in that long, serpentine story, and, depending on our racial characteristics, sometimes we have been victim, sometimes victimizer, sometimes merely horrified, or thrilled, onlooker with something important and self-defining to lose or gain in the outcome. It doesn't matter where it's located. [For] . . . there is no town, no county, no state in America that has not been profoundly affected by the events, characters, themes, and values dramatized by the story of race in America. It opens in the early seventeenth century, and it continues today in all the Americas and in Europe too, as a late chapter in the Tale of Empire; and in Asia, as that chapter called the Vietnam War; and in Africa itself, in the chapters that describe Liberia's and Sierra Leone's tragic, ongoing civil wars, for instance. And you don't have to be a prophet to see that, if this is indeed the era of the American Empire, the African Diaspora is a tale with chapters that will be set worldwide, wherever there is an American "presence," well into the next century as well.

(86)

Banks thus presents a figure of autochthonous American identity that is the product of diaspora, of national identity that is hemispherically diffused and still transnationally emerging, and of common cultural identity that, though inflected differently by

different subject positions (temporal and spatial, as well as racialized, classed, and gendered), is agonistic for all and escapable by none. The moral of this origin story, as Banks tells it, is that “we are undeniably a single, creolized people” (84) who require a contemporary literature “that has at its center the historical and moral facts of creolization” (88). Lacking that, we will continue “to shrug off the deep, connecting complexity of our ongoing culpability and witness” (88) and devolve—so serviceably for our politicians and marketeers—into “noncommunicative, mistrustful colonies of the righteous and the saved” (84), each harboring its “private racial fantasy of violence” and contributing to our [End Page 745] continued enthrallment and ghettoization by violence, fantasy, and race (88). Banks subtitles his essay “On waiting, still, for the great Creole-American novel,” and clearly intends “Creole-American” to evoke and commingle many typically opposing racial, geographical, socioeconomic, and linguistic markers and categories of identity. The essay’s informing aspiration is that a sufficiently committed embrace and imaginative telling of the Creole-American story “would liberate us from our shared bloody history” (88). Yet, by 2000, Banks himself had devoted four fine novels to the attempt to tell that story, none of which, even within their narrative frames, had effected anything approaching liberation. What did his fiction know that his criticism didn’t?

In interviews, Banks repeatedly has characterized *The Book of Jamaica*, his first attempt at the Creole-American novel, as a professional and personal watershed. An “evolutionary jump” forward from its predecessor, *Hamilton Stark* (the work that marks “the end of my apprenticeship” [Roche 167]), *The Book of Jamaica* is “a kind of coming-out . . . that makes clear what direction I’m going to go in for the rest of my career” (165). It is also “the most directly autobiographical of my writings” (174), recounting events, emotions, and relationships that were “so close to my own experiences, unlike anything else, more so than anything else” (171–72).⁴ As an expression of authorial and personal identity, however, *The Book of Jamaica* is peculiar on several counts.

The novel reveals virtually nothing about the history or personal characteristics of its protagonist, Banks’s avatar, except that he is a white, male, American desultorily working on a novel that bears no particular relation to Jamaica. For almost 200 pages, this protagonist is nameless. Eventually, he acquires the name Johnny, which is neither his given nor chosen one, but one bestowed by the black Jamaican community into which he has insinuated himself (less intimately or integrally than he imagines): “Johnny was what they called all nice white men” (253).

Like his author, Johnny comes to Jamaica by “[s]erendipity,” when a white friend in the US with a family estate on the island finds him an off-the-books rental property there (Roche 76). Banks initially caricatures this Jamaican sojourn as less of an individual experience than a stereotypical piece of unselfconscious neocolonial opportunism and fantasy: “freed of my teaching obligations for an unusually lengthy midwinter break,” Johnny reports,

I determined to . . . go to some Caribbean island, any Caribbean island, and rent a house on a breezy hill overlooking the sea, staff it with a polite, scrupulously clean, black-skinned housekeeper and cook . . . drink frosty rum drinks in the cool [End Page 746] of the evening, and maybe take a swim in the pool every morning before I began my regular three or four hours’ work on the novel I had been writing for the last three years.

(67)

Johnny’s oblivious assumption of racial privilege here includes what Wiegman describes as the epistemological “fantasy” of himself as “a knowing white subject” who can “[master] the meaning of the body by subordinating it to conscious intentions” and thereby “determine the meaning of his subjectivity in the world.” Settling into his Jamaican rental, Johnny takes particular pleasure in “the idea of living in a pastel-colored, stucco-walled house up on a hill and away from the tourists, those loud, sunburnt, overweight Americans and Canadians, their whining children, their nervous shopping for souvenirs, their constant computations of the rate of exchange. This time, I told my wife and children, we will not be tourists” (67–68). It is only when Johnny cultivates an unlikely friendship with the Rastafarian Terron Musgrave, a Maroon “whose ancestors had fought generations of a just war against my ancestors” (88), that he begins to perceive “the fog of my greedy ignorance” (78) and tries to penetrate it by learning to “see [my] own otherness” by “becoming [my] own stranger” (177–78).

Johnny’s reoriented understanding of himself and of his racial subjectivity mirrors the “ecstatic” transformation between Christmas, 1975, and Easter, 1976, that Banks himself records in his handwritten Jamaican diary. Ensnared in his terraced house above the sea, Banks remarks in the diary’s opening entry that “here race is the mystical manifestation of economics, and because we are pretty much unconscious of our role in the economy, we can know little of our racial reality” (“Dec. 22, 1975”). This unconsciousness lasts less than a week. A guest at the holiday parties of the neighboring white Jamaican elites who have secured his accommodations, Banks is stunned by their racial “paranoia” and their vitriol toward the government of Prime Minister Michael Manley, which was implementing a series of social and economic reforms that included a minimum wage, free public education, a land redistribution program, and increased taxes on the profits of the foreign-owned bauxite industry. These populist measures to alleviate the impoverishment of the country’s black majority at once threaten and expose his hosts’ “lifetime of dependency on members of another race,” Banks observes, and produce, in response, “terror of that race, true paranoia[;] . . . terror—of violence and theft, two crimes they as white colonials are guilty of having committed for 300 years against the blacks” (“Dec. 27, 1975”). Banks’s own most immediate role in the Jamaican political and racial economy is as a beneficiary of that paranoia, to which he owes the easy terms of his breezy abode. [End Page 747]

As a counterweight to his uncomfortable embrace by these racial and class compatriots (“Talked with more neo-colonialists in one evening than in my entire previous life,” he observes after one January cocktail party), Banks cultivates personal relationships with black Jamaicans and frequents the public spaces of black life (“Jan. 17, 1976”). Briefly, this state of racial

double consciousness or double affiliation allows him to fantasize becoming an ex-white man, as though one's "racial reality" were not "a mystical manifestation of economics," or some species of biocultural inheritance, but a practical matter of personal association and political commitment. "Just as at the discotheque the other night we felt, no, we *were*, the only white people in the room, Tuesday evening, at a cocktail party at the Butlers, we felt like we were the only black people in the room, except of course for the bartender and waiters, and I'm not even so sure about them" ("Jan. 17, 1976"). In the weeks that follow, however, Banks resists his desire for an easy identificatory crossing of the color line, while continuing to disassociate from the neocolonialists, by immersing himself in the history of the Jamaican Maroons and seeking acquaintance with and instruction by their contemporary progeny—heirs to three centuries of African political and cultural resistance to slavery, colonialism, and assimilation to the modern interracial state.

Banks's study of the Maroons, "a people I might never understand and definitely would never become," as his narrator in the novel observes, takes a profound unexpected turn in April, during a long conversation with the leader of the Maroon community in the historic town of Accompong (*Book* 112). "Have learned very little about the Maroons that I didn't already know," he writes in the diary, "but in 6 hours have learned more about myself than I thought was possible to learn in this entire trip. Have never before felt so totally alone yet so wholly a part of the species. It's now clear that the purpose of this trip is not to find out about the Maroons, but to find out about myself" ("Apr. 10, 1976"). His state of heightened presence, mingling dislocation and revelation, persists for the next week:

Switching daily and hourly between feelings of trust & mistrust, ecstasy & anxiety. . . . Much of the time my mistrust is directed at me, for my own intellectual assumptions and feelings of being superior to my circumstances—as if it were some curious kind of laboratory. . . . Preposterous of me to want to be loved solely for myself when I cannot give that to them: so much of my love for them has to do with their history & color, which is to say that it has to do with me and my interior life. ("Apr. 13, 1976") [End Page 748]

Have never before felt so alone, yet so much in the world at the very same time: a shaking up of all my conventions. . . . Still spending most of every day & night as intellectual and spiritual ecstatic (as in "hysteric"). Will take me years to sort this all out, to know how much has to do w/race, poverty, place, true anthropological difference, or simple expectation & projection. But regardless, I believe I am a changed person by this experience.

("Apr. 16, 1976")

Banks's state of troubled ecstasy—the racial, spatial, and psychological "shaking up" of his identity that has yielded a euphoric presentiment of a transformed, truer, creolized self—is represented in his novel by a 15-page section, nearly 200 pages in, in which the narration abruptly changes from first- to second-person. Johnny's initial stay on the island has concluded with a prophecy by Mr. Mann, the old Maroon spokesperson and the American's host in the village that the novel calls Nyamkopong, that he will soon return to Jamaica, though Johnny himself does not know how. When the opportunity and the funding to do so fortuitously appear, that prophecy is fulfilled, and the incantatory voice of a de-privileged, nonsovereign, dialogical, and diasporic second self emerges.

The old man was right. You do return—to Anchovy and the house on Church's hill overlooking Montego Bay, to your brother Terron, to Nyamkopong and the home of Mr. Mann, . . . to the Rasta men and women who become your companions and confidants as you become theirs, to the idea of prophecy and history, you come back to all of it, . . . to the ground against which you can see your own otherness, and so you go on seeing yourself as for the first time. . . . You are becoming your own stranger, and in that way, when you return to the island of Jamaica, as the old man knew you would, you are returning to yourself.

(*Book* 177–78)

Poised between self-estrangement and self-recovery, Johnny seeks to complete his transformation by becoming an agent of reunification between two distant and discordant Maroon villages. He pledges to transport leadership delegations from both for reciprocal visits, on the 6 January birthday of the eighteenth-century Maroon commander and liberator, Cudjoe, and again on 1 August, Emancipation Day, that will allow them to formulate a coordinated strategy to resist the cultural and economic assault on Maroon autonomy by state bureaucrats and real estate developers. In exchange for this service, he anticipates that more of the mysteries of Jamaica will be revealed to him, that he will gain fuller initiation into a history and a community that he has begun to see not as his identity's antithesis but as its ground. And it seems that [End Page 749] this is what he is promised: "Now you will see what you want to see" his Maroon associates repeatedly assure him (186, 246).

This promise is fulfilled, but, as its sibylline resonance might have forewarned, tragically, and not in the manner Johnny expects. What Johnny sees in the concluding episodes is not his desire's revelatory object but its distorted product. Impelled by his limited vision, Johnny achieves on this simultaneously alien and natal ground an Oedipal sort of agency, fatal and unconscious. His attempt to repudiate and redress his racial and class position in Jamaica's bloody history only renders that history bloodier. Banks, in turn, underscores the abortion of his progress toward a transformed racial subjectivity or a deeper self-knowledge by rendering the novel's denouement in a flat, detached third-person narration.

At the close, Johnny's insistence on completing a mediatory errand that has long since gone awry yields a final emblematic tableau. "When Johnny tried to step onto the porch with his suitcase and typewriter, he disrupted the precise positioning of the crowd there, forcing people to nudge and bump and squeeze against each other in ways that confused them . . . saying, S'cuse me, sorry, sorry, as he shoved people off their carefully chosen and tightly held pivot points, making chaos of a structure he hadn't perceived until after he had disrupted it and it was too late" (306). The disruption precipitates a brief wordless skirmish that ends with a reflexive, defensive swing of Johnny's machete-wielding hand, which severs a young Maroon's hand at the wrist, and occasions the American's immediate conveyance to the Air Jamaica terminal where he purchases a one-way ticket on a flight

leaving immediately for Miami.

Envisioning himself a race traitor, in the honorific sense of the eponymous contemporary journal of “the new abolitionism” whose slogan is “treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity,” Johnny begins and ends as more of a race *trader*, trading on his white privilege to enter Jamaica on favorable terms and to exit in bloody clothes with no questions asked. *Continental Drift*, the critical and commercial breakthrough novel that followed *Book of Jamaica*, literalizes this notion of would-be racial communion conducted as and corrupted by trade. Testing the explanatory force of his early Jamaican diary description of race as “the mystical manifestation of economics” (he will find it wanting), Banks this time confronts a beleaguered white, working-class protagonist, rather than a literary academic, with the continuing history and the contemporary hemispheric communities of the African diaspora.

Continental Drift was composed under the working title “The Trade,” and this multivalent trope informs the structural and ideological organization of the novel, though Banks eventually and pointedly chose for its title a phrase that connotes irresistible geologic force [End Page 750] and temporality rather than interpersonal economic agency.⁵ “Trade,” of course, signifies the slave trade, America’s original nightmare, but it also evokes the dream with which it is twinned—the gamble on a new and better life elsewhere—and the economic, moral, and geographic nexus that dream and nightmare share. Banks represents this twinning of the forced migrations and liberatory aspirations of the brown and the poor, this conjunction of the ravages of race and class that the geopolitical tectonics of the Reagan years at once accentuated and worked to conceal, in the convergent journeys of New England oil burner repairman Bob Dubois and Haitian refugee Vanise Dorsinville, each of whom seeks a new birth of freedom in Florida. Early on, moreover, the novel explicitly situates their stories within the larger dislocation of “the creatures residing on the planet in these years, the human creatures, millions of them” (39) by economic oppression and racial or ethnic hatred alike. The planetary vision and striking first-person plural narrative voice of this rhapsodic second chapter, “Batterie Maconnique,” shimmer with the unspoken promise of mutual recognition and political communion across racial divides. Yet underclass solidarity fails to overcome the historical and structural inequities of race. The passage of blue-collar New Englander Bob Dubois to a creolized and reparative identity knowledge proves as abortive as that of Johnny, his white-collar predecessor, and also ends in a replication of the violent exchange of black bodies for white liberty and profit.

Late in the long drive to Florida with his wife and daughters, having sold everything that his station wagon and rented trailer couldn’t hold, Bob realizes that “they have traded one life for another” (62). That trade, and that drift southward, immediately entails an encounter with a black America utterly alien to the small-town New Hampshire boy, who, “like most white men, [is] not imaginative enough to believe that . . . being black [is] extremely different from being white” (101). At first, Bob approaches blacks as objects of curiosity, fear, sexual fantasy, and instrumental use to his own pursuit of a traditional model of possessive and self-possessed white male identity. As the novel unfolds, however, Bob’s prospects fade and his desire to achieve that identity wavers under the pressures of his deepening poverty and exploitation (principally, by the older brother whose highway liquor store he’d been lured to Florida to manage) as well as his growing self-reflectiveness and social awareness. At this stage of his odyssey, Bob imagines that winning the love of a black woman (Marguerite Dill, the daughter of his elderly clerk) will afford him self-escape, that by means of “the love of the Other . . . the old, cracked, and shabby self can be left behind, like a sloughed-off snake-skin” (152).⁶ [End Page 751]

Eventually, in ways that remain deeply compromised, Bob comes to see blacks—and particularly the illegal Haitian immigrants whose American dream fatally entwines with his—not as alien others but as bearers of a complex subjectivity that at once eludes and encompasses his own, as it somehow holds the key to his self-realization. Having agreed, in his economic desperation, to smuggle Haitians to Florida on a fishing boat owned by a childhood friend, Bob is awed by his human cargo’s uncanny equipose of fatalism and determination, and unsettled by the Haitians’ unreadable response to his awkward gestures of bonhomie and by his suspicion that the imbalance of his and their relative power is mirrored by an inverse imbalance of knowledge. “No, I’m not their friend, and they’re not foolish enough to think it. But I’m not their boss, either, and I’m not their jailer. Who *am* I to these people, he wonders, and why are they treating me this way? . . . That must be their mystery, he thinks— they all know something about me, and it’s something I don’t know myself, something crucial, something that basically defines me” (355).

Bob soon reaches for this intimate knowledge in a reverie so fleeting that he remains more or less unconscious of it, though Banks certainly does not: a daydream of a new creolized family reconstituted around a pretty young Haitian woman with a baby on her lap and her resourceful adolescent nephew who has silently assumed a leadership role among the huddled refugees and stands beside Bob at the bow, “searching for America” (358). “Like me, Bob thinks,” paternally placing his captain’s hat on the boy’s head and showing him how to take the wheel and steer the clumsy craft (364). This transformative idyll ends abruptly and shamefully a few moments later. When a Coast Guard cutter spots and pursues his boat, Bob relinquishes control and conscience to the machinations of his Jamaican mate who disposes of the evidence of criminality by forcing the Haitians to jump into the roaring surf as the white American “looks on in horror” (364). The boy whom he had favored, Claude Dorsinville, was “the first of the Haitians to leap into the water, as if to show them how easy it was, and though he could not swim at all, must have believed that he was close enough to America to walk ashore” (367–68).

Bob repeats this expectant, suicidal leap in the novel’s concluding scene, which at once follows and breaks the recurrent pattern of his actions. Again and again in *Continental Drift*, Bob experiences his life and his identity as one of entrapment in a perpetual adolescence and seeks to overcome this feeling of immaturity and incompleteness in the only way he knows how: by pursuing the economic and sexual empowerment and freedom that he associates with being “a ‘man’s man’” (153). Yet this quest

leads not to the autonomous [End Page 752] adult self he envisions but to the discovery of a primal region of psychic wound and hidden transgression, historical and racial in nature, that, "basically defines me," as he fears—that his paralyzed complicity in the deaths of 15 Haitians confirms (355). Committed now to owning and atoning for that stunted, criminal self, Bob roams the dimly lit streets of Miami's Little Haiti, "where there are no more white people," searching for the one survivor among his passengers, Claude's pretty aunt, whom he will ask to judge or forgive him and to unburden him of the money he received for the Haitians' transport (404). When she turns away without acknowledging him or the \$2,000 he has thrust at her, four muggers offer their services instead. Refusing their demand, Bob leaps toward their brandished knives "like a boy in summer diving off a pier into a lake" (418).

Bob's betrayal of the Haitians takes place on the boat, and under the imaginative influence of his worldlier, wealthier childhood companion, Ave Boone. As teenagers, Ave and Bob envisioned themselves "building a boat and going to Australia or someplace in the South Pacific and making a killing" (28). Ave's personal talisman was a magazine whiskey ad that he carried in his wallet depicting a shirtless model walking out of the surf onto a tropical island, a case of fine whiskey on his shoulder and a sleek catamaran anchored in the harbor behind him (28–29). To view the trafficking enterprise that concludes *Continental Drift* as in some measure their last-ditch attempt to sustain this hackneyed adolescent fantasy is to connect Banks's episode with another infamous betrayal in the literary history of racial identity knowledge—Jim's torment and near-sacrifice on the Phelps farm by two adventuresome white man-children who are not exactly his bosses or his jailers but who, like Bob in relation to his fugitives, also cannot be counted as friends.

Among its other claims to distinction, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is perhaps the original US literary expression of the (balked and compromised) desire that, in Wiegman's account, impels whiteness studies and informs academic identity studies more generally: "[the] desire for an antiracist white subject who refutes the historical inheritances of white power." Twain's novel also holds a prominent place in Banks's literary imagination, and in two novels of the 1990s, *Rule of the Bone* and *Cloudsplitter*, he revisits its smashed idyll of a reconstituted, interracial family that might, as he argues in his *Harper's* essay, "liberate us from our shared bloody history."

The 14-year-old first-person narrator of *Rule of the Bone*, Chappie, or Bone, as he renames himself, is Huck Finn's late twentieth-century avatar. A weed-dealing middle school dropout forced into the streets by a sexually abusive alcoholic stepfather (on whom, in their last encounter, he trains a gun, as Huck does on drunken, filicidal Pap), Bone moves in with his faux-outlaw friend Russ but soon must leave [End Page 753] their small town in upstate New York when he is implicated in Russ's theft of some electronics from the biker gang that had been using the boys' apartment as a warehouse for their stolen property. Picked up hitchhiking by a self-aggrandizing impresario with an affected English accent who dabbles in racial exploitation and child pornography (the Duke and the King modernized, sexualized, and rolled into one), Bone takes advantage of a brawl at a highway rest stop to escape with his captor's money. A wrecked school bus abandoned in the middle of a remote, overgrown field affords him refuge for the night, but in the morning, Bone finds that the bus is inhabited by a middle-aged Rastafarian who claims to have quit the work crew that brought him to the US for seasonal agricultural labor and is growing and selling ganja and eating out of supermarket dumpsters until he can afford to return to Jamaica. Drawn to this fellow outlaw, Bone apprentices himself to the strange black man, who proceeds to teach him survival skills, hemispheric history, and the spiritual insight of "I-self" that "everything and everyone was the same I-and-I. One love, he said. One Heart. One I" (158).

Using the dirty money he has taken from the pornographer to help the Rasta get home, Bone returns to the Jamaica of his predecessor Johnny's failed quest for a transformed racial subjectivity and deeper self-knowledge and thereby reverses the course of Bob Dubois's final voyage. But this Banks protagonist commences his quest as a child, protected for the first time by a mentor he calls I-Man, in whose presence he feels "like a newborn baby" (233) and at the sight of whose "familiar brown face," when Bone opens his eyes on his first Jamaican morning, "I didn't feel lonely anymore" (261). Like Johnny, however, Bone sees what he wants and needs to see. The re-parative interracial family into which he feels himself reborn and the black wisdom-teaching father at its head are largely products of his desire, as Bone begins to realize when he discovers that, in Jamaica, I-Man runs a large-scale ganja production and export business, protected by a well-armed crew that, but for their appearance and their music, are "just like the bikers" he fled back home (263).

Bone's familial desire and self-understanding are promptly riven, moreover, by another discovery: the presence in Jamaica of his white birth father, Paul Dorset. Dorset turns out to be a prominent unlicensed physician, money launderer, cokehead, and permanent sex tourist whose base of operations is a "slavery days" mansion, owned by his moneyed white Jamaican girlfriend, Evening Star, that Bone describes as "this huge white-stone two-story ancient house from France or England set on the side of the mountain looking down on Mobay and the sea ten miles away like it ruled the countryside" (277). After reconnecting with Dorset, who had abandoned him when he was five, Bone resides intermittently with him in Evening [End Page 754] Star's home—Bone dubs it the Mothership—and with I-Man in his thatched bamboo compound in the woods. His crisis of identity and allegiance occurs on his 15th birthday, when what has been billed as a party for him devolves into one of the Mothership's regular drunken bashes in which he is ignored, his father gets stoned, and Bone, wandering around the house alone, walks in on I-Man and Evening Star having sex in the laundry room. When, in his confusion and hurt, he tells Dorset what he's seen, his father promptly gets a gun to kill the "little nigger" (302). At this point, Bone makes his choice, misdirects the white man, warns the black man, and departs with him to his hideout in the cratered, impenetrable Cockpit Country of the Maroons.

In the following chapter, "Bone Goes Native," Bone begins to master the agricultural techniques and speech patterns of the

Maroons he is living with. His work in the sun-drenched ganja fields turns his skin coffee-colored, and his acquired habit of saying "I-and-I" makes him feel "slightly separate from [his] body" as if "[his] true self is . . . this spirit that can float through the air where it communes with the universe and . . . can even travel backward and forward in time" (313). On the night before the harvest, I-Man and several members of his crew tell Bone he is ready to enter "the secret Maroon cave fe see de true lights of I-self" (314). Once inside, having taken a ceremonial toke of a "special herb" from a "little clay chillum made in the shape of a pregnant African woman sitting with her legs crossed and her arms folded" (317–18), Bone has a terrible 10-page hallucination in which he indeed travels backward and forward in time but to no reparative end. In the nightmare vision, he finds himself in slavery days, driving an ox-drawn wagon loaded with sugar cane past a grotesque auction where blacks are being physically and sexually abused to a sugar factory, where slaves unload his wagon amidst more abuse, of which he himself soon becomes the target. The dreamscape changes and Bone is a Negro-sympathizing white servant boy in a plantation great house that looks a lot like the Mothership. The mansion is suddenly attacked in a slave revolt led by I-Man that kills the entire planter family except a terrified five-year-old boy. When Bone protects the boy, his black friends abandon him and the enraged slave patrol, unmollified by his compassionate act, assails him as a race-treacherous conspirator.

Bone's initiation yields more darkness and confusion than access to the "true lights of I-self." He emerges from it still distinctly racialized yet outcast from both of his symbolic loci of nativity: the white Mothership and the Maroon cave and birthing African chillum. I-Man is soon murdered by drug trade associates in circumstances that underscore Bone's inescapable whiteness and double alienation. Returning to the Maroon compound just as the killers are completing their work, Bone is spared his mentor's fate because, as one assassin [End Page 755] puts it: "We shouldn't do a white kid. . . . Too much trouble, especially since he's American" (339). Understanding that "if I'd been a real Rasta-boy like I'd been pretending to be I'd be dead now" (342), Bone remains in Jamaica just long enough to attack and injure the black member of I-Man's crew who had participated in his murder (the two white leaders of the killing team are inaccessible to him) and then flees the island as a deckhand on a Florida fishing charter captained by a time-traveling Ave Boone, the irrepressible Tom Sawyer to *Continental Drift's* lost Huck.⁷

Cloudsplitter, Banks's next novel, returns to the antebellum moment of Twain's major work and to the dream of a redemptive, interracial family by way of the historical white family whose lives that dream most profoundly shaped.⁸ Banks's central insight into the life and character of antislavery crusader John Brown derives from his recognition (and rich evocation) of the simultaneously ennobling and distortive capacities of that dream. And his boldest narrative device is his choice to embody those dialectical capacities in the figure of *Cloudsplitter's* narrator, Brown's devoted and damaged son, Owen, and in Owen's relationship to Lyman Epps, a homesteader in the African-American farming community in North Elba, New York, where the Browns settled in 1849.

The historical Owen, John Brown's third son and faithful lieutenant in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry, had a crippled arm, never married, and maintained an intense psychological as well as ideological loyalty to his father. In Banks's hands—and in the consciousness and voice he creates for his narrator—these attributes symbolize a constitutional incompleteness, a developmental stuntedness, a metaphysical loneliness comprising the essential conditions of Owen's identity. And not just of Owen's individual identity but, as the earlier novels I've discussed make clear, of white male identity itself, and to a lesser extent white family identity in the racially hierarchized and segregated sociocultural space of Banks's fiction, which is to say the space of the US, postcolonial as well as antebellum. The source of the Browns's historical radicalism, and of Banks's attraction to them as literary subjects, lay in their acute cognitive and emotional apprehension of these conditions and their refusal to abide them. For John Brown, as Banks's Owen reports, "white and black Americans alike were bound by slavery: the physical condition of the enslaved . . . was the moral condition of the free" (254).

Internalizing this dictum, Owen experiences his own physical freedom and white privilege as atrocities, and this experience shackles him with a crippling, involuntary racial self-consciousness from which no amount of underground-railroad conducting can release him. To become truly autonomous, to become whole, Owen needs to cross a racial divide that is both more "mystical and transcendent" [End Page 756] (73) and more manifestly personal. This is the crossing imagined, attempted, and violently terminated in his relationship with Lyman, a neighbor and his father's associate with whom the historical Owen Brown likely had no more than a passing acquaintance.

Sharing the rigors and rewards of farm and antislavery labor, *Cloudsplitter's* Owen and Lyman appear to literalize the trope of interracial brotherhood. They achieve an intimate and egalitarian communion that, for Owen, promises "relief from the burden of race-consciousness" (182) and "the possibility of escape at last from my terrible isolation."

The loneliness that had cursed me since childhood and that had surrounded me like a caul seemed for the first time to stretch and extend itself like a pregnant woman's belly to include another human being inside, who was a man like me, who was my twin, myself doubled and beloved, and who was at this instant looking back at me with love.

(523)

Like Bone's anticipated realization of the "I-and-I," Owen's would-be trans-racial rebirth takes place in a cave, "a high rock-walled chamber" in the Adirondacks that the black and white "twin[s]" discover together as they work to carve a new mountain escape route after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law (522).

As a gesture of expiation, a necessary purification in the face of his imminent reunion with his black brother and completion of his malformed self, Owen chooses this moment to confess to Lyman his erotic fixation upon Lyman's wife Susan that he has

self-punishingly harbored and been unable to let go, largely because, as Owen half-understands, its true object is neither sex nor Susan but rather the very satisfaction of his need to escape from and fulfill himself through Lyman that he fantasizes here. Owen can neither be forgiven nor cleansed, for a reason intimated in a far-reaching sentence in Banks's Jamaican diary, inscribed years before his composition of any of the fiction discussed here: "Preposterous of me to want to be loved solely for myself when I cannot give that to them: so much of my love for them has to do with their history & color, *which is to say that it has to do with me and my interior life*" (my emphasis). Owen's utopian union with his black friend and the illicit desire for that friend's wife that he would lay on its altar are fruits of the same corrupting race-consciousness, the isolating, history-crippled engine of his racialized "interior life." Owen himself earlier compares the dynamics of this consciousness to "some kind of uncontrollable lust" that locks interracial relationships into patterns of mastery and abjection in which "[you] do not view yourself or the other person simply as a *person*" (181). Lyman instantly perceives this pattern in Owen's confession and spurns it, as the Haitian survivor does Bob Dubois's proffered **[End Page 757]** blood money, leaving Owen to "[drop] precipitously down a well of darkness . . . descending into myself once again: no-man" (524).

As in the aftermath of Bone's disillusionment in the Maroon cave, the black beloved is soon dead. As they silently resume their antislavery assignment, Lyman and Owen encounter a giant mountain lion. (Slavery has earlier been described as a beast that dens in the Browns's every domestic space and relation.) A poor marksman, Lyman silently hands his pistol to Owen, who cocks it and then, when the beast darts away rather than springs, distractedly returns it to his companion without releasing the hammer. When the gun goes off as Lyman is putting it away, a black man is the first victim of Owen's righteous militancy, as would also be the historical case at Harpers Ferry. "It was as if there had been no other way for me to love him," Owen thinks, as he grieves his lost—and, thus, for the first time, unracialized—friend (529). "There was nothing for love, now," he adds, "but all-out war against the slavers. My nature was fully formed; and it was a killer's" (529).⁹

Fated like Oedipus, marked like Cain, Owen is the most mythic and tragic of the white antiracist protagonists in Banks's cycle of American family romances. And the emblematic climax of the Owen–Lyman relationship—marrying utopian dream to dystopian nightmare, righteous love to unrighteous violence, and failed race treason to (the attainment of or submission to) disillusioned adult identity—is the primal scene of Russell Banks's fiction. *The Book of Jamaica*, *Continental Drift*, and *Rule of the Bone* all culminate in episodes that parallel and anticipate this one from *Cloudsplitter*. In all these iterations, white male protagonists of different ages, class positions, and historical moments come to regard the story of the African diaspora as integral to their own stories and venture to embrace the creolization of the American family not merely as a historical idea but as a lived, interpersonal commitment. In his next novel, *The Darling*, Banks repeats the experiment, this time centered on a female protagonist and set in the doubly diasporic, US-created West African nation of Liberia. The results are the same.

Whereas Johnny, Bob Dubois, Bone, and Owen Brown variously fantasize interracial families to recast (or take in trade for) their own, Hannah Musgrave, the novel's title character, actually births one. Hannah, who bears the surname of Johnny's Rastafarian friend and mentor, and who at one point considers adopting "[the] nom de guerre Nonnie, after the famous female [Maroon] chieftain" (312), is in fact the daughter of a celebrated New England physician, an aloof child-rearing authority and Old Left activist whom she has struggled since childhood to please, emulate, and outdo. A female Owen Brown (of whom, in an unpublished lecture, Banks remarked that he disappeared after Harpers Ferry "into the abolitionist equivalent of **[End Page 758]** the Weather Underground" ["The Voice"]), Hannah grew up "passionate about justice, especially for people of color" (*Darling* 296) and, some years prior to the novel's opening, joined the Weathermen when that passion gave rise to a "dream of violence against people and institutions and governments that exploited the poor and the weak" (340). Troubled by her former service to that dream, and a fugitive in the US, Hannah stumbles upon an opportunity for a new life in Liberia. There, in the mid-1970s, she marries a cabinet minister in the corrupt William Tolbert government, bears him three sons, and helps him survive the 1980 coup led by the brutal and even more corrupt Samuel Doe.

At some level, Hannah's union with the black African politico Woodrow Sundiata marks her ultimate attempt to escape or smash what she has experienced as the gilded cages of her inherited gender, racial, and national identities. Yet, inescapably, for both Hannah and Woodrow, the relationship is predicated upon and permeated by her continued inhabitation and deployment of all of these. Moreover, the former Freedom Rider and antiimperialist radical now finds herself in a capital, Monrovia, whose public buildings "were miniaturized versions of the same structures in Washington, D. C." (83). She also finds herself in a community of Americo-Liberian elites that, for 150 years, "had duplicated nicely the old Southern and Caribbean plantation overseer system. It had worked there; it [would] work in Africa, too. No reason for the whip hand to be white" (89). But it is Hannah's white American hand, propelled by her twin racial fantasies "of the imminent arrival of justice" (340) and of the power "to determine the meaning of [her] subjectivity in the world," that, in 1985, facilitates the escape of her husband's friend Charles Taylor from a Massachusetts prison.

Rather than the righteous social revolution he promises, of course, Taylor precipitates a 15-year reign of orgiastic violence that features the murder of Hannah's husband in front of his family and the transformation of her adolescent sons into sadistic, drug-hollowed war criminals. Unable to save or even locate her mixed-race African children, Hannah is eventually forced to return home, where she faces no charges, inherits her father's fortune, and, as she recounts, settles into "the permanent mournfulness that has given rise to the telling of this story" (385).

3. White Boy (American Hunger) and the Angel of History

Among the most notable and controversial of the recent historicist critiques of identity knowledges and their disciplinary objects is Kenneth W. Warren's *What Was African American Literature?* [End Page 759] (2011). Viewed as "the ongoing expression of a distinct people," Warren argues, the category of African-American literature has little coherence or descriptive force; rather, African-American literature should be understood as "a 'historical' entity" that is defined and bounded "by the assumptions and practices of the segregation era" (8–9). In Warren's view, the distinctive features of African-American literature bespeak not the identity or identities of African Americans but the sociopolitical circumstances of identity's reduction, erasure, or preclusion between 1877 and 1965. What animated that literature, Warren declares, was a paradox that the official end of Jim Crow dissipated, though it did not entirely efface: "the paradox that the condition one was fighting to overcome was the very condition that gave one's own existence meaning" (18).

If the civil rights movement of the 1960s alleviated the existential paradox that Warren sees as giving rise to African-American literature, that same movement, and the moment of political consciousness-raising and social justice activism to which it belonged, inscribed this very paradox as the belatedly recognized condition of existence of both the antiracist white Americans who helped institutionalize identity knowledges in the literary academy and of Russell Banks. The paradox was only deepened by the *de jure* abolition of race as a determinant of civic stature, access, and protection, and by the dominant cultural complacency and self-congratulation that followed. What minority freedom struggles at home, the Vietnam War abroad, and the ostensibly unracialized neoliberal or neo-imperial new world order of succeeding decades all revealed to such Americans as these was that, whatever their personal circumstances, qualities, or commitments might be, whiteness was the inescapable condition that gave their existence meaning. At the same time, as had been the case for blacks under Jim Crow, this condition did not constitute an identity so much as it enforced identity's reduction, erasure, or preclusion. This is Banks's identity knowledge, the insight that afflicts his protagonists and the encumbrance they try but fail to overcome. And this is the meaning of Hannah Musgrave's valedictory lament: "mine was merely the story of an American darling, and had been from the beginning" (392).

Hannah's hard-won apprehension of the historical and racial constraints on her identity and self-understanding replicates Richard Wright's verdict in *Black Boy (American Hunger)* on his white service industry coworkers in Depression-era Chicago. "They lived on the surface of their days; . . . none of them possessed the insight or the emotional equipment to understand themselves or others" (271–72). Citing this episode from Wright's autobiography, Warren observes that "the paradox and pain [of Wright's life] is that he, as a figure for all African Americans, has come to possess a depth of [End Page 760] experience and complexity of vision clearly superior to the dominant society he is supposed to value and emulate" (24–25). Banks's Johnny, Bob, Bone, Owen, and Hannah all arrive at more or less the same conclusion, in different ways feel its pain, and hunger for the very remedy that Wright strikingly prescribes: "I was convinced that what they needed to make them complete and grown-up in their living was the inclusion in their personalities of a knowledge of lives such as I lived" (272). To become "complete and grown-up in their living," these white Americans must include a knowledge of black life "in their personalities"—must somehow take black experience into themselves, be inhabited by it, incorporate it into a new creolized identity that they embrace as their own.

In notes for an unpublished lecture, "The Voice of History in Fiction," Banks amends the familiar maxim, "the personal is political," to frame what he takes to be a more difficult truth of identity politics and condition of identity knowledge: "the personal is historical." The formative history of race, Banks's protagonists discover, is not dead in the postcivil rights US or the postcolonial global economy; it is not even past, and, indeed, they cannot attain complete and grown-up personhood without opening themselves to its depths and complexities. What Wiegman terms "subjective transformation" is at once the risk and the promise of such personal exposure to racial history, and, in Banks's fiction, as in Wiegman's analysis, "the gauge of the transformation rest[s] on the person of color, as *analogue or psychic figure if nothing else*" (192 my emphasis).

Banks's most compressed and paradigmatic performance of this drama of transformation—and of the adulterated reparative desire, the belated and quenchless American hunger that drives it—is the lead story of *The Angel on the Roof*, his 2000 volume of selected short fiction. "Djinn" is narrated by an astute but apolitical technocrat, the head of research and development for a multinational corporation that manufactures and sells "women's and children's high-style rubberized sandals" (1). Sent to West Africa to improve and expand operations at the company's assembly plant in Gbandeh, "the second largest city in the Democratic Republic of Katonga," "Djinn's" nameless American narrator appears to have a clear understanding of the local political economy and his role in it, unlike Banks upon his first arrival in Jamaica. Katonga, he reports, was "a capitalist pawn on the African chessboard, and was thus the recipient of vast sums of U. S. foreign aid, which, as usual, financed a thuggish oligarchy of connected families . . . [and] the inevitable undisciplined but well-armed police force that kept order over an impoverished population of displaced rural peasants eager to assemble Western goods for a few dollars a week" (1). At the story's outset, the narrator remarks that he did not judge these circumstances but [End Page 761] accepted them simply as the "working conditions" that "[h]istory created" for him—conditions with which he, otherwise, has nothing to do (2). He does not yet see them as the working conditions of his underdeveloped identity and of its possible completion and transformation.

For the first three weeks of his African assignment, the narrator does his job and takes his recreation in a pleasant bubble of economic privilege, benevolent spectatorship, historical unaccountability, and patronizing bonhomie with "the guards, doormen, peddlers, and lounging taxi drivers whose faces I had come to recognize" (3). But one evening, as he relaxes on the patio of his favorite cafe, nursing the first of his two nightly bottles of Katonga's national beer, he is approached by a half-naked, war-damaged homeless person—a living emblem of the violent history that it is the business of postcolonial Katonga to suppress. The narrator locks eyes with the man and finds himself unable to look away. "Strangely familiar was his face and expression, as if we were old friends much altered, meeting unexpectedly after many years, or lost childhood cousins suddenly reunited as

adults—yet he was, of course, an utter stranger to me. He couldn't have been more a stranger to me, this African man who had endured what I could not even begin to imagine. . . . Yet I knew him somehow. And he knew me" (7). The barman rushes over and shoos the intruder away, identifying him as a harmless madman named Djinn. But the narrator is so unsettled by the encounter that, for the rest of his stay, he eats and drinks in the hotel dining room, otherwise patronized only by a handful of European tourists and US and Asian businesspeople.

When his company sends him back 15 months later, the narrator tries to resume his old routine and regain his old complacency. But, on his first return to the cafe, as he enjoys its specialty meat and vegetable pie, which he has self-deceptively persuaded himself is made with wild pig and not chimpanzee, Djinn reappears. Ignoring the narrator, and defying the warnings of an armed plainclothes policeman, Djinn climbs a drainpipe to the upper stories of the old colonial administrative building that the cafe occupies, exposing his buttocks, chimp-like, as he ascends. Then he turns on the third-story ledge and "faced us like a pope" (13), with an expression that the transfixed narrator describes as "lit by a knowledge or emotion or memory that was more powerful and clarifying than anything we here below had ever experienced. He looked like a man to whom everything had at last been elucidated. . . . This must be the true face of *love*, I thought, and in that instant felt myself transformed, not into a beloved object—which, when viewed by a lover, would more normally be the case—but into a beloved *subject*" (14).

The narrator's vision here repeats Owen's fantasy of rebirth and self-repair through reunion with his estranged black counterpart in **[End Page 762]** the womblike cave that "include[d] another human being inside, who was a man like me, who was my twin, myself doubled and beloved, and who was at this instant looking back at me with love." But, as in *Cloudsplitter*, this moment of "subjective transformation" ("subjective" not only in that it constitutes the self, the long unfulfilled "I," but also in that it is a function solely of the vision and desire of the white perceiver) is unsustainable and ends in violence. Djinn is shot by the policeman, his broken body yanked off the cobblestones and hustled out of sight as the diners resume their meals. In shock, the narrator leaves the cafe, but when he returns the next night to protest the injustice of Djinn's shooting, the once sycophantic barman now condescendingly informs him that "it's the rules that matter, and he broke them" (17). As if driven by a dream or a demon, the narrator finds himself bolting across the patio and re-enacting the black stranger's climb up the drainpipe. Like Djinn, he is warned and shot at, but he completes the pilgrimage, clambering onto the roof and out of the line of fire.

I finally stopped and sat, hunched like a large bird with my legs crossed beneath me and my arms wrapping my shoulders like feathered wings. . . . The equator, cut from north to south by the prime meridian, crossed the sky from east to west, and beyond the lines of empire, the stars, like endless grains of desert sands, flowed in vast, uncharted waves across the universe. All night long, I perched on the roof of the old colonial warehouse, staring away from myself until dawn.

(20–21).

Banks's story collection contains no other internal referent to the volume's title than this figure in this scene. The narrator is the angel on the roof as well as the angel of history that Walter Benjamin famously conjures from Paul Klee's drawing, *Angelus Novus*. Face turned toward the wreckage of the past, the angel, Benjamin writes, "would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward" (257–58). For Banks's angel, the longing to awaken the dead and make whole the smashed is figured in his projection of a universe so "vast" and "uncharted" as to efface "the lines of empire." But he can neither revive Djinn nor complete himself, and his future—revealed in the story's opening sentence—is to descend at dawn from this visionary height and arrange to "[take] a position with a **[End Page 763]** company whose entire operation was domestic—[to come] home, as it were" (1).

As it were. The narrator of "Djinn" makes the most radical and embodied attempt of any of Banks's white protagonists to assimilate his intimate black stranger's life (and death) into his own experience, into his identity, but his transformation to and by love is checked, un-finished. Perhaps the Katongan police are not so "undisciplined" as the narrator at first assumes, and "the rules" dictate that the bullet fired at him for the identical offense that got Djinn killed not find its mark; as I-Man's assassins reasoned when debating Bone's fate, it's more trouble than it's worth to kill a white boy. In any event, the narrator is blown back home, but not quite, perhaps, as he was, because he can no longer, as Banks puts it in "Who Will Tell the People?," "shrug off the deep, connecting complexity of [his] ongoing culpability and witness."

That the personal is historical means that identity, and identity knowledge, for Banks's white Americans is predicated upon their entrance into the formative and continuing history of race—a history, again in the words of the *Harper's* essay, that shapes "[the] political and moral meaning of every American's life." But if initiation into racial history is the condition of American identity knowledge, that fraught living history also renders the knowledge imperfect and imperfectly redemptive. Late arrivals at the scene of racial consciousness and trauma, bearing privilege they may renounce but cannot relinquish, and suffused with transformative desires incommensurate with those of the people of color whom they require to aid and gauge their subjective transformation, Banks's protagonists remain incompletely transformed and social justice, "the political destination of [their] identity knowledges," remains a dream deferred. Indeed, justice is often a dream transformed in or by their attempts at its realization into one more episode in the US' continuing racial nightmare. At the rhetorical pinnacle of the chapter "Bone Goes Native," Bone files this report on the state of his identity knowledge: "I was learning that it's true what I-Man'd said, if you work at it long enough and are serious you *can* become a brand-new beggar" (313). But at the story's close, though resolved to try to use "the lights of I" he had glimpsed in Jamaica by "seeing into the darkness" ahead, Bone amends his subject lesson: "I guess all you can do is make the

best of what's clearly a bad situation" (388). [End Page 764]

Evan Carton

Evan Carton is the Joan Negley Kelleher Centennial Professor in Rhetoric and Composition at University of Texas at Austin. His current research interests include charismatic intellect in nineteenth- to twenty-first-century American religion, politics, and literature and the African diaspora in contemporary American fiction. His most recent book is *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America* (2006).

Notes

1. I wish to thank my colleague Phillip Barrish and the two anonymous readers for *ALH*, each of whom made astute suggestions that pertained particularly to this opening section of my essay and that improved the essay as a whole.
2. A sampling of corresponding critiques of identity studies may be found in *The Futures of American Studies* (2002), edited by Donald Pease and Wiegman. There, Winfried Flück questions claims of both the intellectual progress and the political progressiveness of an American studies discipline centered on "ever new and more radical discoveries of power effects" and the multiplication, in response, of various sites and categories of "otherness or difference," such as those "equated with a particular gender, ethnic or racial group, or form of sexual preference" (217). The stakes and conditions of scholarly productivity, Flück argues, have created "a professional culture of institutionalized difference" (213) in which "plurality becomes endless proliferation" (211) and professional distinction requires "no systematic reflection on the structures or procedures through which the claims of difference or the Other could become political reality" (218). Eric Cheyfitz mounts a more direct and unconditional assault on the putative "cultural radicalism" of identity knowledges and on the contemporary literary academy's "curriculum of cultural studies as social action" (512). This vision, he contends, mistakes "severing culture from politics, precisely at the point where [it believes itself] to be politicizing culture" (512), thus authorizing "the privileged class, as in the pastoral, [to] dress up in the costumes of the dispossessed and perform a play we call 'multiculturalism'" (517). For Walter Benn Michaels, the trouble with identity knowledges is not their disconnection from the material politics that they wish to affect but their unwitting dependency on a politically and intellectually unpalatable logic of racial or ethnic essentialism. In his title's wry allusion, as well as in his essay's opening and closing critiques of the proponents of reparative "race treason," Michaels also insinuates that the putatively liberatory enterprise of identity studies is largely driven by white intellectuals' desire, and illusory hope, to pass off, or be given a pass for, their privilege. See Flück, "The Humanities in the Age of Expressive Individualism and Cultural Radicalism," 211–30; Cheyfitz, "The End of Academia: The Future of American Studies," 510–35; and Michaels, "Autobiographies of the Ex-White Men: Why Race Is Not a Social Construction," 231–47.
3. Recent exemplars of this disciplinary moment include Jennifer Fleissner's "Historicism Blues," which points up "the self-aggrandizing tendencies of the moralized ideology critique" (700) and of a historicism for which "the past exists in order to irradiate the virtues of the present" (702), and Caleb Smith's "From the Critique of Power to the Poetics of Justice," which questions critique's "consolatory promise of noncomplicity in a corrupt order" and acknowledges "the fantasies of persuasion and belonging that attend every invocation of justice" (161). Banks's fiction gives dramatic shape and depth to this spectrum of desires and concerns and, in keeping with Fleissner's and Smith's interest in troubling ideology critique's presumed moral hierarchy, may be read as an agent rather than an object of critique's demystification. See Fleissner, "Historicism Blues," *ALH* 25 (2004): 699–717 and Smith, "From the Critique of Power to the Poetics of Justice," *J19* 1 (2013): 160–66.
4. The "jump" in Banks's work that he himself marks between *Hamilton Stark* and *The Book of Jamaica* is more than a matter of stylistic evolution or maturation. It also registers a shift in both geographical and racial imagination. Focusing on [End Page 765] *Hamilton Stark*, and on its reprise with a difference in the later *Affliction* (1989), Jason Arthur locates Banks's New England fiction in a tradition of "white-authored regionalism [that] corresponds to a long history of white-engineered representations of 'violence' against whiteness" (110). The novels that concern me here in some respects invert this paradigm: in them, white protagonists leave New England, encounter descendants of diasporic Africans, and, in ways at once revelatory and devastating, unintentionally perpetuate the long history of white-engineered violence against people of color. See Arthur, "Our Business Is Going in the Hole: Russell Banks and the Self-Destruction of New England Fiction," *College Literature* 39 (2012): 106–28.
5. See Russell Banks Papers, Box 13, Folders 1–2.
6. Several commentators have read *Continental Drift*'s blend of exploitative fantasy and transformative desire in Bob's attraction to Marguerite in ways that bear on but differ from my own. In *Dissenting Fictions: Identity and Resistance in the Contemporary American Novel* (2000), Cathy Moses sees Bob's attempt to reconstruct his identity "in relation to the Africanist Other" (19) as Banks's variation on Toni Morrison's thesis about the imaginative deployment of the Africanist presence in the service of white invisibility and hegemony. "Banks destabilizes the connection between the absence at the core of whiteness and a sense of superiority by foregrounding the absence and exploring his protagonist's sense of inferiority" (20), she writes. Jessica Livingston cites this episode as an instance of neoliberalism's protection of global elites by framing white working class disempowerment in sexual and racial terms. Drawing on bell hooks's "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," collected in hooks's *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), Livingston also judges Bob's fantasy of reparative interracial intimacy to be a continuation rather than a repudiation of racist domination, however he may wish, in hooks's terms, "not to dominate the Other, but [to] be acted upon, so that [he] can be changed utterly" (hooks 24). My claim is that Bob's experience of racial "inferiority" with Marguerite anticipates the deeper, broader recognition by almost every Banks protagonist that white identity, individual and collective, is radically incomplete, historically misbegotten. Banks acutely perceives the links to racist domination of many antiracist white desires and he exposes those links here and in other less sexualized contexts of interracial encounter. At the same time, I think he also perceives something genuine and perhaps necessary in the white desire to be acted upon, changed utterly—something inextricable from but irreducible to what hooks labels "imperialist nostalgia" (25). See Livingston, "The Crisis of 'A Man's Man': Neoliberal Ideology in *Continental Drift*," *Journal of American Culture* 34.3 (2011): 264–74.
7. Both Jim O'Loughlin and Wendy Somerson deprecate the novel's ending. O'Loughlin argues that Bone, like Huck, fails to come to terms with "his personal and historical experience" (41), while Somerson sees Bone's Huck-like persona as a "fetishized spectacle" that weakens the novel's geopolitical critique (130). In my view, neither Bone's appeal nor his naïveté obscures the racial and transnational power relations that concern Somerson and O'Loughlin. That his point of view rules may even accentuate these relations, as apparent even to a child. See O'Loughlin, "The Whiteness of Bone: Russell Banks's *Rule of the Bone* and the Contradictory Legacy of *Huckleberry Finn*," *Modern Language Studies* 32 (2002): 31–42 and Somerson, "Becoming Rasta: Recentering White Masculinity in the Era of Transnationalism," *Comparatist* (23 May 1999): 128–40. [End Page 766]
8. For an account of the extraordinary and intimate interracial solidarity practiced in the daily lives as well as in the antislavery activism of the Brown family between the mid-1840s and 1859, see my *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America* (2006).
9. After surviving the debacle at Harpers Ferry, Owen more explicitly replicates Bob Dubois's fleeting unvoiced fantasy of an interracial family when he permits himself "the glimmering thought that someday soon I will ask to marry Susan Epps and raise her son and make for us a farm here on the Plains of Abraham . . . one small family free of all the cruel symbolism of race and the ancient curse of slavery." But this indulgent reverie is instantly renounced: "Fantasy, delusion, dream! A guilty white man's chimera, that's all" (*Cloudsplitter* 695–96).

Works Cited

- Banks, Russell. *The Angel on the Roof*. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.
- . *The Book of Jamaica*. New York: Ballantine, 1980.
- . *Cloudsplitter*. New York: Harper Flamingo, 1998.
- . *Continental Drift*. New York: Ballantine, 1985.
- . *The Darling*. New York: Harper Collins, 2004.
- . *Diary*. Dec. 1975–May 1978. Russell Banks Papers. Box 5, Folder 3. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.
- . *Rule of the Bone*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996.
- . "The Voice of History in Fiction." Russell Banks Papers. Box 35, Folder 9. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.
- . "Who Will Tell the People? On waiting, still, for the great Creole-American Novel." *Harper's Magazine* (1 June 2000): 83–88.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- Esteve, Mary. "Nature's Naturalism." *American Literary History* 20.3 (Fall 2008): 530–38.
- Pease, Donald E. and Robyn Wiegman, eds. *The Futures of American Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002.
- Roche, David, ed. *Conversations with Russell Banks*. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2010.
- Warren, Kenneth W. *What Was African American Literature?* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011.
- Wiegman, Robyn. *Object Lessons*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012.
- Wright, Richard. *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998. [End Page 767]

Copyright © 2015 Oxford University Press

Welcome to Project MUSE

Use the Search box at the top of the page to find book and journal content. Refine results with the filtering options on the left side of the results page. Use the Browse box to browse a selection of books and journals.

Connect with Project MUSE

[Join our Facebook Page](#)

[Follow us on Twitter](#)

Project MUSE | 2715 North Charles Street | Baltimore, Maryland USA 21218 | (410) 516-6989 | [About](#) | [Contact](#) | [Help](#) | [Tools](#) | [Order](#)

©2015 Project MUSE. Produced by [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#) in collaboration with [The Milton S. Eisenhower Library](#).