

Robert Hayden's "[American Journal]": A Multidimensional Analysis

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Immortalized by “Those Winter Sundays” and such other treasures as “A Ballad of Remembrance”, “Runagate Runagate”, “The Night-Blooming Cereus”, “On Lookout Mountain”, “Frederick Douglass” and “El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz”—all of which have taken their rightful places “among the masterpieces of modern American poetry”—Robert Hayden (1913–1980) has emerged as one of the great American poets of modern times. His epic centerpiece, “Middle Passage” (based largely on the 1839 rebellion on the Spanish slave ship, *Amistad*) ranks as “one of the great American long poems”². However, “[American Journal]” (1976), as the title poem of his final collection, *American Journal* (1978)³, scarcely achieved such acclaim and, in fact, has attracted comparatively little scholarship. This is not surprising, since Hayden is still identified and typecast as primarily as an African American poet, and is most well-known for his earlier signature poems, mentioned above. Quite naturally, Hayden’s primary audience is more attracted to those poems that address racial issues more directly and fully.

“[American Journal],” however, treats the human race from a universal perspective rather than from a racial (and thus bracketed) vantage, although humanity is seen through a nationalistic portal, namely that of “the americans”. Thus “[American Journal]” operates on two perspectival planes: narrowly, as observations (i.e. informal cultural analysis) of America itself, and, broadly, as a social commentary on the world. As one of Hayden’s most interesting, yet under-examined poems, “[American Journal]” suggests that America—and the rest of our world—is on a path of social evolution requiring greater social maturity, in which such “strangering” distinctions as racial prejudice retard social progress. In describing American identity in several dimensions, including racial identity, “[American Journal]” presents America as a work-in-progress in terms of its social evolution. Implicit in “[American Journal]”, therefore, is this thesis: *Social maturity* is coefficient

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² Nathan A. Scott, Jr., “Afro-American Poetry”, in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Eds. Alex Preminger & T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 24.

³ Robert Hayden, *American Journal* (Taunton: Effendi Press, 1978). Limited edition.

with *human solidarity*. This thesis unifies the various kinds of identity that this compressed and kaleidoscopic poem treats. As a literary tube of mirrors, “[American Journal]” implicitly describes social identities that render the American experience decidedly multidimensional.

A fresh study of “[American Journal]” will also contribute to a fuller appreciation of Hayden’s role as a *social poet*. Without recapitulating Hayden’s life and career, it makes sense to focus on what Hayden was doing in 1976, the year he composed “[American Journal]”. Robert Hayden was “America’s Bicentennial poet laureate”⁴—vernacular “America” meaning the United States. During America’s Bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence in 1976, Hayden served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, in the first of his two-term tenure (1976–77 and 1977–78). That same position later became known as “Poet Laureate of the United States” in 1985.⁵ As America’s Bicentennial poet laureate and the first African American poet laureate, Hayden rose to the occasion by offering a poem about America. That poem is “[American Journal]” (1976). Given this historical and literary context, “[American Journal]” may thus be regarded as America’s “Bicentennial poem”⁶—not exclusively, of course, but by virtue of these special circumstances.

While Michael Harper—Robert Hayden’s close friend, fellow poet, and publisher—does not explain his singling out of “[American Journal]” as America’s “Bicentennial poem,” there is some justification for this. This logic is as follows: It’s a simple fact that one else occupied Hayden’s position as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1976. If, in an official capacity, Hayden was America’s poet-laureate during the Bicentennial, it stands to reason that Hayden was America’s Bicentennial poet-laureate as no other poet represented the United States in quite that capacity, whether officially or popularly. It follows, therefore, that Hayden’s major poem on America—“[American Journal]”—can and has been distinguished as America’s “Bicentennial poem”. Michael Harper was right.

Positionally, “[American Journal]” is both the title poem and final piece in Hayden’s last, single volume, *American Journal*. Nominated for the National Book Award that same year, *American Journal* was first published in 1978. Effendi Press proprietor Michael S. Harper issued a limited edition in a print-run of 1,000 copies, with only 47 unpaginated.⁷ Effendi Press was really not a publishing house at all, but was created with one aim in mind: to promote Hayden’s work, as Derik Smith notes: “Harper established ‘Effendi

⁴ Christopher Buck, “Robert Hayden”, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*. Ed. Jay Parini (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), Vol. 2, 177–181. (See 179, 181.)

⁵ Technically, one could say that Hayden was the “the first African American Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress” and Rita Dove was “the first African American Poet Laureate of the United States,” since that title was not current during Hayden’s tenure.

⁶ Michael S. Harper & Robert Hayden, “Robert Hayden and Michael S. Harper: A Literary Friendship: A Special Section”, *Callaloo* 1994, 17(4), 980–1016. (See 1009.)

⁷ Robert Hayden, *American Journal* (Taunton: Effendi Press, 1978). Limited edition.

Press' for the sole purpose of disseminating Hayden's final poems to a small audience. It was used for no other publication".⁸ *American Journal* was posthumously republished in an augmented edition in 1982, with 70 (paginated) pages.⁹ "This book," Harper explains, "would be something he [Hayden] would use as an indicator of his new poetic resolve to speak freely about America's conundrum, race and identity".¹⁰ Thus "[American Journal]" was effectively a collaborative endeavor, borne of a strategic alliance between Robert Hayden as poet and fellow-poet, Michael S. Harper, as publisher.

"[American Journal]" is also the capstone poem in Hayden's *Collected Poems*, published in 1985 by Liveright, which reissued the volume in a 1987 revised edition, with an introduction by Arnold Rampersad.¹¹ Among the literary treasuries in which it has been variously anthologized, "[American Journal]" was chosen as the ultimate offering in Ethelbert's Miller's exquisitely designed anthology, *In Search of Color Everywhere: A Collection of African-American Poetry*.¹² Thus "[American Journal]" takes a certain pride of place in Hayden's work in that it "gains more and more authority and significance as the last piece" in *Collected Poems* and serves as "a perfect consummation and coda to his [Hayden's] career as a poet".¹³ As Hayden's signature piece, the ink is drenched with dry and wry social commentary.

As one of his most salient yet least illuminated of his poems, "[American Journal]" reveals much about Hayden's treatment of American identity, and of his tropical use of "America" as well. The artifice of "[American Journal]" is quite interesting: "[American Journal]" purports to be the field notes of a Martian observer who, by his shape-shifting powers, disguises himself in an array of human personas, and who then reports his findings to his superiors, "the Counselors". As if by architectonic design, "[American Journal]" appears immediately after "Astronauts", the penultimate piece in *American Journal*. Positionally as well as substantively, "Astronauts" prepares the reader to suspend disbelief when the next and final poem, "[American Journal]", introduces the unlikely figure of an alien observer

⁸ Derik Jalal Smith, *Love's Lonely Offices: Robert Hayden and the African-American Literary Tradition* (Ph.D. Diss., English; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 2004), 74. See especially Chapter Four: "From Alain Locke to Robert Hayden: A Philosophy and Poetics of 'Black Americanism'" (173–224). See also *idem*, "Emerging from a 'Heart-Shape in the Dust': Maturation in the Poetics of Robert Hayden", *World Order* 2006, 37(2), 9–26.

⁹ Robert Hayden, *American Journal* (New York: Liveright, 1982). Expanded edition.

¹⁰ Michael S. Harper, "[The Metaphysics of American Journal](#)", *American Poet*, 2001, 20(Spring)... (See 37.)

¹¹ Robert Hayden. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Frederick Glaysher (New York: Liveright, 1985). Reprint, 1996. Introduction by Arnold Rampersad.

¹² E. Ethelbert Miller, *In Search of Color Everywhere: A Collection of African-American Poetry* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1996).

¹³ Yusef Komunyakaa, "Journey into '[American Journal]'", in *Robert Hayden: Essays on the Poetry*. Ed. Laurence Goldstein & Robert Chrisman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 332–334. (See 334.) Previously published: *idem*, "Journey into '[American Journal]'", *Field* 47 (1992), 56–58; *idem*, "Journey into '[American Journal]'", in *Poets Reading: The Field Symposia*. Ed. David Walker (Oberlin: Oberlin College Press, 1999): 451–453.

from outer space, whose field-notes are reported in “[American Journal]”. The alien’s journal about America (hence the title, “[American Journal]”) is recorded in truncated form—largely by the poetic device known as *brachylogy* (condensed expression; laconic speech), as in “oceans deserts mountains grain fields canyons / forests variousness of landscapes weathers / sun light moon light as at home much here is / beautiful dream like vistas reminding me of / home”.¹⁴

America’s “Bicentennial poem” is a largely a myth about the myth of America. In reverent irreverence, “[American Journal]” is a mythic *anti-myth* in that it questions, if not deconstructs, cherished American values such as the American Dream. Indeed, Howard Faulkner theorizes that Hayden’s poems—each in its own way—may be collapsed into two words (or concepts) that serve as the genesis for the entire poem: “Each of Hayden’s poems can be reduced to a single pair of words from which the surface structure of the poem is generated”.¹⁵ If applicable to Hayden’s later work as a whole, then “[American Journal]”—as a specimen of Hayden’s most mature work—may be distilled to these two words: “paradox” and “metaphysics”. That is to say, America is “paradox on paradox”¹⁶ and “as much a problem in metaphysics as / it is a nation”.¹⁷

This surface structure is a key to the deep structure of the poem. Hayden explores the metaphysical paradox of America by means of a corporate, psycho-social profile. Thus “[American Journal]” is really a character study of the national character. Indeed, Ronald Walcott states the obvious in noting that the focus of “[American Journal]” is the “nation’s character”.¹⁸

Hayden develops a profile of the American character through exploring various facets of American identity. The alien, we will soon discover, observes a range of individual and group identity formations. Given Robert Hayden’s “almost ritual preoccupation with identity”,¹⁹ this study employs identity as a heuristic for extracting deeper meaning from “[American Journal]”. In sketching out the American physical and social landscape and its peoples, the Martian observer creates a social portrait of America in several dimensions, which add depth to this poem of 115 lines. The alien speaks with an American voice, as poet Yusef Komunyakaa has observed:

¹⁴ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 26–30.

¹⁵ Howard Faulkner, “‘Transformed by Steeps of Flight’: The Poetry of Robert Hayden”, *CLA Journal*, 1977, 21(2), 282–291. (See 282–283.)

¹⁶ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, line 70.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, lines 99–100.

¹⁸ Ronald Walcott, “Calling the Names and Centering the Call in Robert Hayden’s American Journal”, *CLA Journal* 2000, 43(3), 320–337. (See 333.) Reprinted in Harold Bloom and Janyce Marson (eds.), *African-American Poets: Robert Hayden through Rita Dove*. Bloom’s Modern Critical Views (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 35–48.

¹⁹ John S. Wright, “Homage to a Mystery Boy: Robert Hayden’s American Journal”, *Georgia Review* 1982, 36(4), 904–911. (See 905–906.)

I really see him as an American voice. ... A good example of that is probably one of Hayden's last poems, "American Journal." There's vernacular within the context of that poem, and the poem is actually spoken by someone from out of this world — from Mars or somewhere like that, from the universe beyond — and he sort of comes into this world speaking the vernacular of black expression. But also there's something else within the context of that voice; there's a marriage of the vernacular with a very educated diction as well. So, in a certain sense, I've seen this alien from another world as a code-switcher, and that's what Hayden is. That's what I mean by American voice, he has that capacity to be in two worlds at once — at least two worlds at once, or even more than two worlds at once — that ability to incorporate, especially, Anglo-Saxon diction into those poems.²⁰

Composed "with impressionistic staccato",²¹ Hayden's modernist impressionism (minimalism), not precision, is the poem's virtue as to its craft. The poem's technique of compression, combined with frequent enjambment (where sentences "straddle" two or more lines, for effect), is seen in the demonstration scene: "crowds gathering in the streets today for some / reason obscure to me noise and violent motion / repulsive physical contact sentinels pigs / i heard them called with flailing clubs rage / and bleeding and frenzy and screaming machines / wailing unbearable decibels i fled lest / vibrations of the brutal scene do further harm / to my metabolism already over taxed".²² Here, conflicting partisan political identities (such as the conflict between "hawks" and "doves" in the Vietnam era) are implicated. Ideologically based, this conflict is brought to a head through a staged public outcry against current government policy, whatever the issue might have been. (The reader can fill in the blanks of possibility.) Partisan political identity is just one of several forms that social identity takes in America, and "[American Journal]" explores a range of expressions of American identity. Although Hayden's fictive phenomenology of America is not predictive, but rather descriptive, the poem succeeds in treating the issue of social identity on several levels.

While the poem lacks explanatory power, it is powerfully evocative. The alien narrator speaks as an outsider, and appears to give merely surface observations. An exquisite irony obtains here: Far from defining the core of the American social experience, the alien's *first* impressions are not only *lasting* impressions but are *penetrating* impressions in that they are socially incisive in an albeit naïve way. The implicit message of "[American Journal]" is that America—and, by extension, contemporary societies at large—will have to allow for wider social alignments to effectively

²⁰ Yusef Komunyakaa, qtd. in Terrance Hayes, "American Voices and the Cakewalk of Language: Yusef Komunyakaa in Conversation with Terrance Hayes," *Black Renaissance* 2003, 5(1), 115.

²¹ Derik Smith, *Love's Lonely Offices*, 211.

²² Hayden, "[American Journal]", lines 53–60.

reconcile focused and fractious identities and resolve the social conflicts that these have generated. With empathic abstraction, our alien anthropologist notes—with some amusement admixed with fascination—the primitive yet promising state of American social evolution, where racial identity must negotiate with an integrative awareness of human identity in a global (and even galactic) perspective. By contrast, Martians have advanced beyond the figments of pigment and fixation on differences generally: “we are an ancient race and have outgrown / illusions cherished here”.²³ In other words, the theme of “[American Journal]” is one of *social maturity* based on *human solidarity*.

Compared to a more highly evolved (Martian) society, America in 1976—the bicentenary of its Declaration of Independence—had yet to resolve the social disparities that a more highly advanced society had already learned to cope with in the course of “Martian” social evolution. Thus “[American Journal]” is a time capsule—a period piece—with an implicit social commentary that appears to reflect aspects of Robert Hayden’s worldview as a Bahá’í, which is basically a vision of interracial harmony and world unity. Thus it does not matter whether the Martian is a full or partial projection Hayden himself, or simply a character—one of a number of poetic portraiture—that Hayden has created, since the Martian’s views appear to be implicitly Bahá’í in nature. The most explicit clue to this is the expression, “Unknowable Essence” (treated below), which is a Bahá’í term of art for “God”.

The Martian—whether Hayden or not, and/or Bahá’í or not—in musing on America, describes Americans as “charming savages enlightened primitives brash / new comers lately sprung up in our galaxy”.²⁴ Such a depreciative abbreviation of Americans assumes the perspective of an advanced civilization. This is corroborated later in the poem, where the alien, after describing a Fourth of July (and possibly a Bicentennial) celebration, observes that “we too recall / that struggle as enterprise of suffering and / faith uniquely theirs”.²⁵ Here, the alien alludes to the American Revolution as part and parcel of a social evolution. Hayden’s use of the plural pronoun “we” in the poem suggests that he is trying to develop a communal, perhaps national or global perspective. Indeed, this collective perspective is given galactic—and thus figuratively universal—dimensions.

“Hayden knew his country and its condition, and saw it whole”, Arnold Rampersad observes.²⁶ At the risk of stating the obvious, Robert Hayden’s “[American Journal]” is about American social identity and the tensions that conflicting social identities generate. Identity has long been an integral

²³ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 63–64.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, lines 11–12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, lines 76–78.

²⁶ Arnold Rampersad, “Introduction”, in Robert Hayden. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Frederick Glaysher (New York: Liveright, 1985), xxxiii–xxxiv. Reprint, 1996.

feature of modern literary criticism. In his final chapter of *Literary Theory*—“Identity, Identification, and the Subject”—Jonathan Culler notes: “Literary works offer a range of implicit models of how identity is formed”.²⁷ Indeed, literature has often “made identity a theme”.²⁸ Beyond the personal identity of a given character or group, literature may speak to the reifications and ramifications of social identities: “The explosion of recent theorizing about race, gender, and sexuality in the field of literary studies owes much to the fact that literature provides rich materials for complicating political and sociological accounts of the role of such factors in the construction of identity”.²⁹ “[American Journal]” may thus be read as the social poet’s musing on the paradoxes of American identity, where America is “paradox on paradox”.³⁰ The poem cannot be read as a theoretical treatment of American identity. Yet it may be possible to read “[American Journal]”—productively rather than reductively—as a subtle exploration of American social identity that implicitly generalizes. “Poems and novels address us in ways that demand identification, and identification works to create identity”, Culler explains.³¹

These identities often extend from individual to group identities. In so doing, there is always the risk of stereotyping or indulging in overgeneralized “essentialism”. “Identification also plays a role in the production of group identities”, Culler continues.³² Often these groups may be “historically oppressed or marginalized”.³³ Perhaps the closest conceptual and methodological analogue to such an analysis of “[American Journal]” is the Multidimensional Identity Model—a framework of analysis designed to examine and measure how individuals negotiate multiple social identities of age, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class and to assess the relative saliency of their various social identities.³⁴ This set of social identities bears striking resemblance to Culler’s exemplars, which include “nationality, race, gender, sexual preference, language, class, or religion”.³⁵ Naturally, these seven categories are neither foundational nor fixed. Yet they possess a certain referential utility. In its own creative way, “[American Journal]” recognizes that individual Americans variously identify, either passively or actively, with one or more aspects of social identity.

A close reading of “[American Journal]” assumes that these American social identities act as superegos that overarch and refract on individual identities,

²⁷ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997/2000), 110.

²⁸ Culler, *Literary Theory*, 110.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, line 70.

³¹ Culler, *Literary Theory*, 113.

³² *Ibid.*, 115.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ A.L. Reynolds & R.L. Pope, “The Complexities of Diversity: Exploring Multiple Oppressions”, *Journal of Counseling and Development* 1991, 70(1), 174–180. (See 174 ff.)

³⁵ Culler, *Literary Theory*, 116.

to which individual identities may be subaltern. In the opening lines of the poem, the poet describes “the americans this baffling / multi people”.³⁶ Yet, at the end of the poem, the poet is at a loss to adequately account for “their variousness their ingenuity / their elan vital and that some thing essence / quiddity i cannot penetrate or name”.³⁷ Nevertheless, internal evidence suggests that Hayden treats American identity in nine dimensions: (1) Landscape Identity; (2) Alien (Individual) Identity; (3) Racial Identity; (4) Political Identity; (5) Class Identity; (6) Material Identity; (7) Religious Identity; (8) American (National) Identity; (9) Human Identity. Let us now define these identities:

(1) Landscape Identity—Origin: Landscape identity is an association with place. It is a constructed idea, shaped by experience and modulated in the imagination, affixed to a real or ideal landscape. “This quality of inseparability from landscape distinguishes identity from image,” writes Arreola.³⁸ This is the geographic matrix of the self, the environment of the individual, which shapes him and is reciprocally reshaped by the individual. Land can be sacred. It is almost always identified as one’s home if it is the place of one’s origin.

(2) Alien Identity—Individualism: This is the persona that inhabits the environment, the terranean substrate. The individual is a alien relative to others in the sense that an individual is a distinct and ever-individuating entity.

(3) Racial Identity—Pride and Prejudice: Just as the self plays a major role in the construction of the individual from within, racial identity is the imposition and assimilation of an identity from without. Racism is a social construct, freighted with a range of behavioral and essentialist associations.

(4) Political Identity—Partisanship: This is political partisanship, pure and simple—an ideology with which the individual may associate.

(5) Class Identity—The American Dream: More precisely, “social class” or “socio-economic status, class identity is identification *by* things—that is, a classification by the accumulation of wealth or the lack thereof, being the condition of poverty—and the corresponding valuation (or devaluation) of social standing and personal worth attached to those estimates.

(6) Material Identity—Technocratic Materialism: This is identification *with* things. The distinction between class and material identities as a function of identification *by* things as opposed to identification *with* things

³⁶ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 1–2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, lines 113–115.

³⁸ Daniel D. Arreola, “Urban Ethnic Landscape Identity”, *The Geographical Review* 1995, 85(4), 518–34. (See 518.)

is admittedly an oversimplification. But here, this identification *with* things corresponds to Hayden's portrayal of American technocratic materialism. This includes hedonistic pursuits as means and ends in themselves.

(7) Religious Identity—Mysticism: Identification with an organized religion or spiritual orientation, typically religious identity is associated with some sense of transcendence of the purely material.

(8) American Identity—Nationalism: This could be any kind of nationalism. In “[American Journal]”, the alien happens to witness exuberant displays of American exceptionalism.

(9) Integrative (Human) Identity—Globalism: This is the self that subsumes the eight other dimensions as an integrative whole. This is the most evolved sense of self, the alien would probably say.

Hayden's multidimensional portraiture of America is a heterophany of disparate elements—the fragmented yet irreducible variables of American identity to which both individual and national identity may be attuned. The central problematic is one of social maturity, rather than the fact that Americans lack consensus on defining their identity—“do they indeed know what or who / they are do not seem to”.³⁹ The poet situates American identity along a spectrum of social maturity measured by fictionalized galactic standards. The poet—a visiting alien who is an erstwhile participant-observer—characteristically comments on the Americans as “charming savages enlightened primitives brash / new comers lately sprung up in our galaxy”.⁴⁰ The poet's language, although somewhat condescending, is respectful and, indeed, sympathetic: “confess i am curiously drawn unmentionable to / the americans”.⁴¹

Critics may contest these dimensions. Some may argue that more dimensions inhere in this poem. Others may say less. Others may say that not one of these dimensions is distinct to literature. However, we have just shown that literary critic, Jonathan Culler, attests to “nationality, race, gender, sexual preference, language, class, or religion”.⁴² These are seven dimensions of identity. The nine dimensions that the present writer has identified emerge from the poem itself. So, while this multidimensional framework of analysis, on a first surmise, may appear to place the poem under a kind of sociological scrutiny, Robert Hayden would have appreciated such an approach to the explication of a poem if the method served a heuristic purpose. These nine dimensions provide a scaffolding for conducting a first-order phenomenology of America as seen through the

³⁹ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 13–14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, lines 11–12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 109–110.

⁴² Culler, *Literary Theory*, 116.

eyes of the poet. There is clear textual support for these nine dimensions in “[American Journal]”, as the following table illustrates:

Dimensions of Identity in “[American Journal]”

Landscape Identity—Origin

“oceans deserts mountains grain fields canyons / forests variousness of landscapes weathers / sun light moon light as at home much here is / beautiful dream like vistas reminding me of / home item have seen the rock place known / as garden of the gods and sacred to the first / indigenes”.⁴³

Alien Identity—Individualism

“The Counselors would never permit such barbarous / confusion they know what is best for our sereni / ty we are an ancient race and have outgrown / illusions cherished here item their vaunted / liberty no body pushes me around i have heard / them say”.⁴⁴

Racial Identity—Pride and Prejudice

“white black / red brown yellow the imprecise and strangering / distinctions by which they live by which they / justify their cruelties to one another”.⁴⁵

Political Identity—Partisanship

“crowds gathering in the streets today for some / reason obscure to me noise and violent motion / repulsive physical contact sentinels pigs / i heard them called with flailing clubs rage / and bleeding and frenzy and screaming machines / wailing unbearable decibels”⁴⁶; “why should we sanction / old hypocrisies thus dissenters The Couse / lors would silence them”.⁴⁷

Class Identity—The American Dream

“something they call the american dream sure / we still believe in it i guess an earth man / in the tavern said irregardless of the some / times night mare facts we always try to double / talk our way around and its okay the dreams / okay and means whats good could be a damn sight / better means every body in the good old u s a / should

⁴³ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 26–32.

⁴⁴ Ibid., lines 61–66.

⁴⁵ Ibid., lines 7–10.

⁴⁶ Ibid., lines 53–58.

⁴⁷ Ibid., lines 82–84.

have the chance to get ahead or at least / should have three squares a day”⁴⁸; “they boast of in their ignorant pride have seen / the squalid ghettos in their violent cities / paradox on paradox”.⁴⁹

Material Identity—Technocratic Materialism

“like us they have created a veritable populace / of machines that serve and soothe and pamper / and entertain we have seen their flags and / foot prints on the moon also the intricate / rubbish left behind a wastefully ingenious / people”⁵⁰; “more faithful to their machine made gods / technologists their shamans”⁵¹.

Religious Identity—Mysticism

“many it appears worship the Unknowable / Essence the same for them as for us”⁵².

American Identity—Nationalism

“faith uniquely theirs blonde miss teen age / america waving from a red white and blue flower / float as the goddess of liberty”⁵³; “parades fireworks displays video spectacles / much grandiloquence much buying and selling / they are celebrating their history earth men / in antique uniforms play at the carnage whereby / the americans achieved identity”⁵⁴. “america as much a problem in metaphysics as / it is a nation”.⁵⁵

Integrative (Human) Identity—Globalism

“do they indeed know what or who / they are do not seem to yet no other beings / in the universe make more extravagant claims / for their importance and identity”⁵⁶.

The citation of these lines in their respective dimensions of individual and social identity furnish some of the raw data from “[American Journal]” itself. To be sure, these nine dimensions of identity do not receive equal treatment in the poem. Nor is their representation or presentation systematic. Nevertheless, they are present in the poem and are part of its integral fabric. In the modernist collage of anecdotal scenes and sustained ironies that

⁴⁸ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 36–44.

⁴⁹ Ibid., lines 65–70.

⁵⁰ Ibid., lines 17–22.

⁵¹ Ibid., lines 24–25.

⁵² Ibid., lines 22–23.

⁵³ Ibid., lines 78–80.

⁵⁴ Ibid., lines 72–76.

⁵⁵ Ibid., lines 99–100.

⁵⁶ Ibid., lines 13–16.

comprise “[American Journal]”, these nine dimensions operate as a multifaceted prism of American mentality and potentiality.

On viewing Hayden’s “[American Journal]” through this dimensional prism, America emerges as a work-in-progress—episodically revised by crisis after crisis—an experiment through which the meaning of humanity may be universalized. This “work” will progress until it reaches a stage in which the interplay of competing identities is seen as a stable matrix—an ideal array of integrative identities (reflecting Hayden’s general orientation as a Bahá’í). This optic will apply to the inarticulate yet implicitly unitive moral of “[American Journal]”—a message in a bottle, as it were. America, in the poet’s musing, is caught up in a socially adolescent identity crisis. America has yet to mature until it resolves its fundamental identity crisis. This, in the broader context, is a defining social problematic of the world at large.

Our special thesis is that “America” itself—as portrayed in “[American Journal]” and as analytically illuminated by the nine dimensions previously described—operates topically and tropically as an emblematic problematic in humanity. The problem is not with any identity in particular. It is when particular identities alienate.

In composing “[American Journal]”, Hayden—who is acutely aware of this “strangering” or schisming dynamic—contrives a reconnaissance mission involving a fictive visit by a man from Mars. An inverse of NASA’s Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter launched in 2005, Hayden launches his own probe of planet Earth, to explore American alienation through the eyes of an alien from outer space, who defines the core and refines the crux of American identity.

A substantive reckoning with existing writing on Robert Hayden indicates that the present state of scholarship on the relationship between African American poetry, modernism, and Hayden involves questions of the lineage, politics, philosophy of his poetry. As to lineage, a problem exists in that “critics have yet to establish a rigorous artistic genealogy for Hayden”.⁵⁷ One thing we know: Hayden was no confessionalist. As for literary aspects of the poem and its relation to the work of Hayden’s contemporaries, “[American Journal]” shared no affinity with Gwendolyn Brooks’s movement toward African poetic forms and what has been generally called a “new Black consciousness,” as advocated by such literary figures as Margaret Walker and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), among others. While “[American Journal]” was not antithetical to these new directions, the poem itself remained somewhat aloof and thus alien to these other literary forms, which it did not seek to emulate.

⁵⁷ Derik Smith, *Love’s Lonely Offices*, 6.

Then there is the issue of the politics of his poetry, which can be encapsulated by the juxtaposition of two major events in Hayden's literary career, both of which took place in April 1966: On 7 April 1966, Hayden's *A Ballad of Remembrance* was awarded, by unanimous vote, the *Grand Prix de la Poesie* (Grand Prize for Poetry) at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. With over ten thousand people from thirty-seven nations in attendance, this literary prize was comparable to an Olympic gold medal. Hayden himself was honored as poet laureate of Senegal.⁵⁸ Then, on 22 April 1966, a group of protest poets, led by Melvin Tolson, condemned Hayden for refusing to identify himself as a black poet.

This confrontation took place at Fisk University's First Black Writers' Conference, organized by John Oliver Killens, Fisk's writer-in-residence (a position originally promised to Hayden). The clash between Hayden's black Americanism and militant black nationalism came to a head in a panel discussion that included Tolson, Arna Bontemps, and Margaret Walker. Hayden, who was the fourth member of the panel, insisted that he should be identified as "a poet who *happens* to be Negro".⁵⁹ Reacting viscerally to Hayden's perhaps ill-chosen use of the verb "happens", Tolson retorted: "I'm a black poet, an African-American poet, a Negro poet. I'm no accident—and I don't give a tinker's damn what you think".⁶⁰ Subsequently Hayden was blacklisted on the Fisk campus as an "Uncle Tom" and an "Oreo".⁶¹ Thus, from 1966 to 1976, ideological antagonism between Hayden and the Black Arts Movement threatened to push Hayden to the periphery of African American poetry as a consequence of his intransigent resistance to the poetics of black nationalism.

However, a close look at Hayden's publication record from 1966 to 1976 in comparison to previous years reveals the increasing circulation of his poetry during the Black Arts era. In fact, Hayden's poems "Frederick Douglass", "Middle Passage", and "Runagate Runagate", in particular, appeared in many of the same African American anthologies as Amiri Baraka, Haki R. Madhubuti, and others who might have been viewed as his adversaries. True, Hayden was unpopular among some outspoken critics. Yet, at the same time, his poetry was favored by a large number of editors and thus central to the discourse.

For Hayden, to be a "Black Artist" was to ghettoize and overspecialize "Black Art", with its poetry, generating "more heat than light".⁶² While rejecting race consciousness as *the* defining criterion and its necessarily

⁵⁸ Rosey Pool, "Robert Hayden: Poet Laureate", *Negro Digest*, 1966, 15(8), 39-43. (See 41).

⁵⁹ Robert Hayden, qtd. in David Llorens, "Writers Converge at Fisk University", *Negro Digest* 1966, 15(8), 54-68. (See 60.)

⁶⁰ Melvin Tolson, qtd. *Ibid.*, 62-63.

⁶¹ John Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1984), 38; Brian Conniff, "Answering 'the Waste Land': Robert Hayden and the Rise of the African American Poetic Sequence", *African American Review* 1999, 33(3), 487-506. [See 488.]

⁶² Robert Hayden, qtd. in Buck, "Robert Hayden", 179.

polarizing agenda, however, Hayden could still be the “blackest of blacks” had he wished. Certainly he composed some of the finest black history poems in the English language. “Robert Hayden,” according to Arnold Rampersad, “made the period poem (the period being slavery) virtually his own invention among black poets”⁶³. Widely recognized as the premier craftsman of African-American poetry, Hayden’s virtuoso as a wordsmith is uncharacteristically subdued in “[American Journal]”. Elsewhere, Rampersad situates Hayden within a racial perspective and, beyond, in the broader American context: “It is possible to see Hayden both as a racial poet and as one transcending race.”⁶⁴.

As for Hayden’s poetic techniques, these arise not by virtue of high modernism or traditionalism alone, admixed with the poet’s irreducibly innate innovations, much of Hayden’s compositional technique at the level of the words themselves effloresce from his fascination and mastery of language itself, as Rampersad notes: “Probably no other black poet of his age surpassed Hayden in the unconditional nature of his love of the English language”.⁶⁵ Gone are the evocative neologisms—or portmanteaus—for which Hayden is famous—words such as “soulscape”, “snowlight”, “lifeswawk”, “mimosa’s fancywork”, and “Absolute Otherwhere”. In “[American Journal]”, the reader will not encounter such expressions as “moonstruck trees”, “auroral dark”, “famine fields”, “jazzbo strutting of a mouse”, “totemic flowers”, “paleocrystic ice”, “elegiac lace”, “glaucous poison jewels” and “blazonry of farewell scarlet”⁶⁶. The single exception in “[American Journal]” is the word “strangering”—“their varied pigmentations white black / red brown yellow the imprecise and strangering / distinctions by which they live by which they / justify their cruelties to one another”⁶⁷. That this is a Hayden-esque neologism is seen in the fact that “strangering” is not lexicalized in such authorities as *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*—although “stranger” does appear as a verb (“To make a stranger of; to alienate”) in *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Hayden was also a master of rhythm, tonality, repetition, irony, oxymoron, paradox, and symbolism. “[American Journal]”—crafted as it is in the form of a journal—is more journalistic (on the order of syncopated “field notes”) and far less orchestrated with Hayden’s poetic devices commonly met with elsewhere.

In some ways, “[American Journal]” is unique in relationship to Hayden’s other works, but at the same time, it does have notable similarities. For one, the poem utilizes persona, a mode of writing that Hayden took up time and time again, especially in his most published works. Consider, for example, that the central narrator of “Middle Passage” records his thoughts in a

⁶³ Arnold Rampersad, “The Poems of Rita Dove”, *Callaloo* 1986, 9(1), 52-60.. (See 54.)

⁶⁴ Rampersad, “Introduction”, xiv.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, xxii.

⁶⁶ Robert Hayden, qtd. in Buck, “Robert Hayden”, 180.

⁶⁷ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 7–10.

journal, an approach that Hayden took up decades later in “[American Journal]”. “[American Journal]” is a report about Americans addressed to a mysterious group of higher authorities known only as “The Counselors”. In this highly imaginative piece, the poet’s observations take on the character of an anthropologist’s field-notes. With almost scientific precision, Hayden struggles to describe “the americans”. “[American Journal]” is a perfect exemplar of Hayden’s experimental vigor, where, by perpetrating this fiction of the alien’s reconnaissance in poetic prepense, Hayden gains, in consummate irony, a fresh authenticity.

In understanding the poetry of Robert Hayden, it is important to note that Hayden uses some of the key techniques of black modernism in service of black Americanism. First, there was an intimate relationship between African American and European American Modernism. Exemplified by its early monuments, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Anglo-American modernism, generally, is a period concept—a “spirit of the age”. Descriptive of art and literature produced roughly between 1885 and 1930, modernism was a radical departure from 19th-century canons of art and beauty. Hayden’s work breathes in the atmosphere of late modernism, which spawned, in its wake, African American modernism. The modernist supercategory is “form-equals-function”—where symbolism, allegory, and narrative serve as major artistic resources.⁶⁸ Black modernism is a species of American modernism, which, in turn, was part of a transatlantic modernist movement, whose mission was to redefine aesthetics for the twentieth century.

Modernism “is predominantly ‘epistemological’ in nature: it seeks, despite the confusing webs of psychic, perceptual, and social facts, to disclose a coherent, knowable world”.⁶⁹ For black modernism, this world-disclosing quest for meaning meant making sense of the black predicament. Making sense of it was a far cry from accepting it. Exposing the status quo was tantamount to rejecting it. Not surprisingly, therefore, one axis of black modernism was its protest agenda. Hayden amplified that agenda yet subdued the protestant element so that the reader would reach kindred conclusions on his own in moments of social self-discovery.

Technically, “[American Journal]” represents the finest elements of black modernism: alienation, primitivism, and experimental form. In a focalized study positioning Hayden in relation to literary modernism, Robert Crisman’s inventories the poet’s modernist techniques:

In pursuing this mission, Hayden found that the techniques of high modernism, such as irony, allusion, polyglot expression, cinematic technique, metonymy, and narrative disjunction, were more useful

⁶⁸ Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 9.

⁶⁹ Miller, *Late Modernism*, 12.

for him than the vernacular poetics of James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Sterling Brown, although he extended the resources of those poetics. The dissociative qualities of modernism helped Hayden register the uniquely disjunctive yet cohesive aspects of Afro-American experience in the Western hemisphere.⁷⁰

Besides the technique of narrative disjunction that one finds in the “staccato” impressionism of “[American Journal]”, we see the use of high modernist montage in the collage of images presented in fairly rapid succession by the poet. Characterized by an innovative use of experimental form and primitivism, modernism exhibits a salient theme of alienation. Black modernism extends this leitmotif of alienation into a commentary on the black experience. In “[American Journal]”, Hayden takes the theme of alienation to the extreme: with poetic license, the poet invents a plot device where an extraterrestrial alien reports on alienation in America. Here the poet is a visitor from the Red Planet.

The inspiration for “[American Journal]” sprang not from the patriotic stirrings of a star-spangled banner, but from the musings of a starship sojourner. “[American Journal]” is a vision of America with a narrative plot twist: the narrator is an alien from outer space—arguably a Martian—who, disguising himself as an American, reports his observations to his superiors, “the Counselors”, as previously mentioned. Hayden is certainly not the only African American poet to use science fiction as a plot device. The poetry of Ahmos Zu-Bolton, for instance, comes to mind. While it might be interesting to compare “[American Journal]” to other alien observers of American and African-American culture—alongside the observations of America recorded by Federico Garcia Lorca in *Poet In New York*, this would take us far afield. With anthropological acuity, Hayden’s alien (alias?) is a keen observer—verging on the participant observer—recording his first impressions of the Americans.

As the proverbial “little green man from Mars”, the alien explores facets of American consciousness condensed into rough field notes. Yet Hayden is a post-modernist without being a postmodernist, since Hayden’s poetry is inflected—some have said “infected” or “inflicted”—by his Bahá’í worldview and values. In his own words, his professed Bahá’í belief “in the fundamental oneness of all races, the essential oneness of mankind, ... [and] the vision of world unity”⁷¹ enables the poet, through the alien’s anthropology, “to affirm the humane, the universal, the potentially divine in the human creature”⁷². In Smith’s view, Hayden’s “practical deployment” of America is “as a lens through which the ‘universal’ may be deciphered”.⁷³ A

⁷⁰ Robert Chrisman, *Robert Hayden: Modernism and the Afro-American Epic Mission* (Ph.D. diss.; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1999). (See Abstract).

⁷¹ Robert Hayden, *Collected Prose*. Ed. Frederick Glaysher (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 200.

⁷² Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 119–120.

⁷³ Derik Smith, *Love’s Lonely Offices*, 74.

psychological odyssey rather than a polished travel narrative, the alien's first impressions of America are Hayden's lasting impressions of America—a psychograph of America, iconic of Earth, in the time-capsule of a social poem.

In describing the Americans, the poet creates a montage of America itself, which largely, though not wholly, stands as a metaphor for humanity. “[American Journal]” is Hayden's anthropomorphic experiment, his portrayal of the human predicament through the vantage of the American dilemma, with only hints of resolution. As stated earlier, *how* the poem makes its statement is as distinctive as the statement itself. Edward Pavlic sees Hayden's vision as complex but not chaotic, as problematic yet not irresolvable. What the poet is engaged in is an irreducibly “democratic” enterprise.

In probing the depths of the “democratic unconscious”, Pavlic theorizes that “Hayden's complex poetic vision of the strife and possibility embedded in America's fragmented intra- and inter-racial / cultural landscape” is derived, sustained, and refined in the psychological “space” of the “democratic unconscious”.⁷⁴ As I understand Pavlic, this is a *space*, not a *place*, in which a democratic *encounter* is possible where a democratic *act* is normally not. Thus “Hayden explores the ever-shifting, non-rational nature of the unconscious to create montages of democratic exchange”.⁷⁵ In a highly imaginative process, the poet's *dramatis personae* personify different aspects of the American experience: the Green Man mediates between the Black and White without any being the wiser, yet implicitly beckoned to draw wisdom from it.

In elaborating this notion of the “democratic unconscious” in the oceanic depth of the shared American experience, “Hayden's Afro-modernism responds to [Walt] Whitman's call by searching out levels of experience and modes of perception in which figures cannot operate”.⁷⁶ The poet “charts regions of dangerous possibility and seeks a vision which obeys the laws of a *democratic unconscious*”.⁷⁷ Arguably, “[American Journal]” best represents this democratic unconscious, in its dizzying, polyvalent complexity. In the nine dimensions identified above, a dissonant octave of social identities is superadded to the splendid self. As a transgressive act, the alien transects traditional racial and social boundaries. With one narrative voice, the alien is the *vox populi*. In “[American Journal]”, the voice of America is a multitude of troubled waters.

⁷⁴ Edward M. Pavlic, “‘Something Patterned, Wild, and Free’: Robert Hayden's *Angles of Descent* and the Democratic Unconscious”, *African American Review* 2002, 36(4), 533-555. (See 534.)

⁷⁵ Pavlic, “‘Something Patterned, Wild, and Free’, 534.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 538.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*.

Let us now travel back, through space and time, and explore the physical and social landscape of Hayden's vision of America. For economy and simplicity, excerpts from "[American Journal]" will be identified by their respective lines in the poem.

Landscape Identity—Origin

Landscape identity, as previously stated, is an association with place. It is a constructed idea, shaped by experience and modulated in the imagination, affixed to a real or ideal landscape. "This quality of inseparability from landscape distinguishes identity from image," writes Arreola.⁷⁸ "[American Journal]" uses landscape identity to trigger an association, in the mind of the Martian observer, between the red monoliths of Mars and corresponding grandeur of Earth. This enables the Martian to more easily identify empathically with the land of America. In a nostalgic reverie of his home planet, the alien contemplates how the "beautiful dream like vistas" that he sees end up "reminding me of / home".⁷⁹ This landscape identity is reinforced when the narrator notes a specific point of comparison in bringing the Martian and American landscapes together in his imagination: "item have seen the rock place known / as garden of the gods and sacred to the first / indigenes red monoliths of home".⁸⁰ Here, this description of landscape provides internal evidence of the composition of "[American Journal]" itself.

There is both extrinsic and intrinsic evidence that Hayden initially composed this poem in Colorado in 1976. In a letter to Harper, Hayden writes that he would leave for Colorado Springs on 11 February 1976.⁸¹ In a previous letter to Hayden, Harper forecasts: "You're going to Colorado College; that is a beautiful place ... the peaks and the landscape will energize and confirm what you know about this country".⁸² Whatever Hayden did "know about this country" was eventually memorialized in "[American Journal]"—"envisioned as a commentary on 'our condition' for the bicentenary, which he [Robert Hayden] had delivered at the University of Michigan as the Phi Beta Kappa poem".⁸³ This was likely Hayden's first public reading of "[American Journal]", as Harper elsewhere refers to "the Bicentennial poem you read on commencement weekend".⁸⁴ We can be fairly sure of the place where "[American Journal]" was composed. To what extent did the poem recompose the Garden of the Gods?

Literary critics and aficionados of Hayden's poetry are quite familiar with the landscape of Detroit's "Paradise Valley," as portrayed in a number of his

⁷⁸ Arreola, "Urban Ethnic Landscape Identity", 518.

⁷⁹ Hayden, "[American Journal]", lines 29–30.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, lines 30–32.

⁸¹ Robert Hayden, "A Literary Friendship", 1005.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1003.

⁸³ Harper, "The Metaphysics of American Journal", 37.

⁸⁴ Robert Hayden, "A Literary Friendship", 1009.

poetic portraiture or character studies. But here, after a panoramic sweep of America's landscape diversity—"oceans deserts mountains grain fields canyons / forests variousness of landscapes weathers / sun light moon light as at home much here is / beautiful dream like vistas reminding me of / home"⁸⁵—the alien mentions only one place by name: "item have seen the rock place known / as garden of the gods and sacred to the first / indigenes red monoliths of home".⁸⁶ Here, the "Garden of the Gods" is an unmistakable reference to an American landmark and World Heritage site—a natural wonder of towering sandstone rock formations set against the backdrop of snow-capped Pikes Peak, located near Colorado Springs, Colorado. Vivifying his memories of home ("dream like vistas reminding me of / home"), the alien speaks nostalgically of "red monoliths" from whence he came—the Red Planet, Mars. There is anecdotal evidence for Mars as the alien's origin.

In 1975, Robert Hayden gave Friday night poetry readings at Colorado College in Colorado Springs. The Garden of the Gods was nearby. Hayden had visited there with poet Yusef Komunyakaa.⁸⁷ When Michael S. Harper gave Komunyakaa a copy of the limited edition of *American Journal* in 1981, the latter "was surprised by the title poem," for it evoked images of the Garden of the Gods: "I remember how it rekindled sensations and images of that Colorado afternoon," Komunyakaa recalls. "I read the poem repeatedly, each time feeling Hayden's presence intensifying," going on to say:

The man [Robert Hayden] had a penetrating, indecorous eloquence—so does his poetry. I felt linked to this poem personally. "[American Journal]" taught me how language and imagination can transform a *physical* landscape into a *spiritual* one. We had talked about how the Garden of the Gods *parallels a moonscape*, something otherworldly. It was from there that Hayden began to orbit his imaginative tableau... It seems as if the narrator is on a spiritual quest, that this voyage into the brutal frontier of the American experience is a confrontation with his own alienation. He is transported through the power of reflection (*the mind as spacecraft*) in order to arrive at the scary truth of his species.⁸⁸

So the Garden of the Gods doubles as America's landscape and Martian lunarscape. It has long inspired poets. In 1893, the stunning view from its 14,110-foot summit prompted Katharine Lee Bates to compose the poem that became the lyrics for America's unofficial national anthem, "America the Beautiful". Against this panoramic "purple mountain majesty," the giant pinnacles of "Garden of the Gods" are ochre in color. Sculpted by the forces

⁸⁵ Hayden, "[American Journal]", lines 26–30.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, lines 30–32.

⁸⁷ Komunyakaa, "Journey into '[American Journal]'", 332.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 332 (emphasis added).

of erosion, these reddish sandstone edifices are almost otherworldly in appearance, suggestive of a Martian craterscape, bearing striking resemblance to the alien visitor's home planet. Mars has fascinated Americans and people the world over. In "[American Journal]," we see a reciprocal enchantment. Indeed, 1976 was the year that U.S. Viking 1 landed on Mars at Chryse Planitia on July 20, marking the first Martian landing. So why not a Martian landing on Earth?

Drawn as the Martian is to the American landscape, the space voyager is attracted to the Americans themselves, who, for him, hold their own fascination. It is really in their psychic profile that Hayden is most interested. And so it is that "Robert Hayden's poetry exemplifies the psychic landscape of the stranger".⁸⁹ As a stranger in a strange land, the alien will explore the polyvalent orbitals of the American psyche, oscillating between individual and collective spheres of thought. The physical American landscape is a point of departure for the Martian's observations of the American psychic landscape.

Alien Identity—Individualism

We must not forget to factor into the equation of identity interplay the alien's own self-identity. Already the alien has found much that reminds him of home. Reminiscent of his home planet Mars, the Garden of the Gods is an erstwhile wilderness of alien identities. We will treat these more neutrally as simply individual identities.

"Alien"—in Hayden's adroit use of it—has a double meaning. At the outset, the reader is not immediately aware that the narrator is himself an alien—an extraterrestrial from outer space (probably a Martian, as suggested above). Yet the term is introduced early in the poem: "how best describe these aliens in my / reports to The Counselors".⁹⁰ Of course, whatever meaning attaches to the word "alien" is entirely perspectival. Here, "these aliens" are the Americans, who are *relative* aliens in relation to the *real* alien, except that the real alien is a fiction and the alienated Americans are a social fact. While this plot device is contrived, it is a vehicle for social commentary. An irony obtains here in that our intergalactic traveler is the real alien. On first blush, this would appear to be a minor flaw in the poem. But Hayden is masterfully aware of his use of identity here. Adroitly, he assumes the persona of the alien, to who all others, apart from his own kind, are regarded as aliens, much as many Americans those of non-traditional national origins as aliens, even if the aliens are natural or naturalized citizens. Of course, the alien is ever-vigilant so as not to give himself away. In this respect, he has to assimilate for his own protection.

⁸⁹ Michael Antonucci, "The Map and the Territory: An Interview with Michael S. Harper", *African American Review* 2000, 34(3), 501–508. (See 501.)

⁹⁰ Hayden, "[American Journal]", lines 4–5.

Quite obviously, then the Americans are the object of the real alien's mission and the subject of his report. But we do not know who "The Counselors" are, except that they are his *putative* audience, not the poet's *intended* audience. The Counselors are a prop, a backdrop, an absent presence. Like the alien, The Counselors are creatures of the poet's invention. They are also *apropos* of us, the readers, as we have been privileged to intercept this communication. Since poems don't normally operate as science fiction, this narrative device is novel, even for Hayden. So, yes, the plot is bizarre, but it "works". What, then, is Hayden's own rationale for writing a poem about America in this strange way? Harper explains:

In a "Voice of America" program taped at the Library of Congress in 1976 during Negro History Month and rebroadcast all over Africa and Eastern Europe, he [Robert Hayden] said he wanted to bring people (poets) together. "[American Journal]", his bicentennial poem, was the Phi Beta Kappa poem at the University of Michigan; he was unsure of the version he had and many others he'd written. "Poets work for what they get," he often quipped—"Imagine this a found manuscript, or an interior monologue inside the mind of a Being from somewhere else; the Being's forgotten his travel kit of words and *he aint sorry*."⁹¹

Hayden worked and reworked his poems. So nurtured, they matured. Each poem practically took on a life of its own, as a psychic envelope of some artistic impulse of Hayden's as the master craftsman that he was, he aimed for perfection. Yet at some point, a Hayden piece would become fixed, timeless. In the case of "[American Journal]", the variant versions are now lost in psychic space. The version of "[American Journal]" that is typeset in lead is now carved in stone. Note that one thing remains the same: the Hayden analogizes himself as "a Being from somewhere else".

In "[American Journal]," that mission is to reconnoitre America: "here among them the americans this baffling / multi people extremes and variegations their / noise restlessness their almost frightening / energy how best describe these aliens in my / reports to The Counselors / disguise myself in order to study them unobserved".⁹² To observe, the observer must be unobserved. At least to all outward appearances, the alien will succeed in his disguise only to the extent that he melts into the great American "melting pot". This is no mean feat. How, then, does the alien accomplish this?

To analogize to an American Indian myth, the alien is something of a shape-shifter—a therianthropic skin-walker who can metamorphose into any form of American citizen that he wishes to mimic. From Proteus in Greek myth to

⁹¹ Harper, "The Metaphysics of American Journal", 37.

⁹² Hayden, "[American Journal]", lines 1–6.

the cryptozoological thunderbirds of American Indian lore, the shape-shifter has most recently taken popular shape in science fiction television series, the *X Files*. While no commentator has described the alien in quite these terms, the alien's self-description indicates that he can, at will, appear in whatever form he desires: "though i have easily passed for an american in / bankers grey afro and dashiki long hair and jeans / hard hat yarmulka mini skirt".⁹³ Parenthetically, Derik Smith comments that Hayden personally "never wore an afro, much less a dashiki".⁹⁴ It should be added that the Martian can shape-shift somatically, but not psychically.

So the alien has "easily passed for an american". He even boasts of his "skill in mimicry": "describe in some / detail for the amusement of The Counselors and / though my skill in mimicry is impeccable as / indeed The Counselors are aware".⁹⁵ Yet the alien's mimicry is not complete. His is not a perfect disguise. His accent finally gives him away: "notice you got a funny accent pal like where / you from he asked far from here i mumbled / he stared hard i left / must be more careful".⁹⁶ This was a close call—a narrow escape from discovery. He won't let it happen again the next time: "item learn to use okay / their pass word okay".⁹⁷ Later in the poem, as if for emphasis, the alien registers the same fear of being discovered again: "exert greater caution twice have aroused / suspicion returned to the ship until rumors / of humanoids from outer space so their scoff / ing media voices termed us had been laughed / away my crew and i laughed too of course".⁹⁸

Despite its levity in providing a moment of comic relief, this scene brings into bold relief the circumscribed view held by Americans of their own reality. But it's no laughing matter, really, even though the alien and his fellow Martians are amused ("my crew and i laughed too of course"). For the alien "can only exist in the American context if he prostitutes his individuality through 'mimicry' and assimilation," Komunyakaa observes.⁹⁹ "The speaker is raceless, without gender or genus, but knows this fearful sense of otherness that had driven most Americans into the psychological melting pot".¹⁰⁰ Our procrustean Green Man dons skins of varying hues, telegraphing a skein of lies about his racial, even human, identity. Yet it takes a non-human to raise the issue of common humanity in a world where race identity can trump human identity and its egalitarian imperatives.

⁹³ Hayden, "[American Journal]", lines 90–93.

⁹⁴ Derik Smith, *Love's Lonely Offices*, 208.

⁹⁵ Hayden, "[American Journal]", lines 92–95.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, lines 48–51.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, lines 51–52.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, lines 104–108.

⁹⁹ Komunyakaa, "Journey into '[American Journal]'", 333.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Racial Identity—Prejudice

Naturally the very subject matter of “[American Journal]” implicates racial identity in the American social context. Racial identity—a highly contested term—is defined by Helms as “psychological or internalized consequence of being socialized in a racially oppressive environment and the characteristics of self that develop in response to or in synchrony with either benefiting from or suffering under such oppression”.¹⁰¹ Racial identity may be more critically defined as follows:

The concept of racial identity, in particular, has been misunderstood and contested. Some meanings are derived from its biological dimension and others from its social dimension. As a biological category, race is derived from an individual’s “physical features, gene pools and character qualities”. ... However, looking beyond these characteristics, there are more similarities than differences between racial groups and more differences than similarities within these groups. Today, literary and theoretical manifestations of racial identity are discussed not in biological terms (which may imply a racist perspective) but as a social construction, which “refers to a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular racial group”.¹⁰²

Obviously this definition sees race as a social construct, internalized within the subjective experience of being a member of a racial group. Fellow poet and friend Michael S. Harper notes that “[American Journal]” reflects Hayden’s “new poetic resolve to speak freely about America’s conundrum, race and identity”.¹⁰³ This freedom to speak about America’s racial crisis necessarily entailed Hayden’s freedom to speak about its solution.

The alien goes not have a great deal to say about racism in America, as that is only one of its social problematics. He places racism in perspective. True, racism, as such, may be unfamiliar to the alien. Yet the alien’s powers of transmutation would inevitably attract racist reactions—or so one would think. After all, this proverbial “little green man from Mars” in can change the color of his skin at will. Without wishing to be trite or cute, Hayden’s narrator might be succinctly described as a “morphing Martian”. With ability to assume sundry physiognomic characteristics, the alien is a racial chameleon. Among his ersatz identities, he could be black at will—“though i have easily passed for an american in / bankers grey afro and

¹⁰¹ J.E. Helms, “Toward a Methodology for Measuring and Assessing Racial as Distinguished from Ethnic Identity”, *Multicultural Assessment in Counseling and Clinical Psychology*. Ed. Gargi Roysircar Sodowsky. and James. C. Impara (Lincoln, NE: Buros Institute of Mental Measurements, 1996), 143–192. (See 147.)

¹⁰² Alicia Fedelina Chávez and Florence Guido-DiBrito. “Racial and Ethnic Identity and Development”. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 1990, 84(Winter), 39–47. (See 40. Internal citations omitted.)

¹⁰³ Harper, “The Metaphysics of American Journal”, 37.

dashiki long hair and jeans”,¹⁰⁴ notwithstanding that “afro and dashiki” were never Hayden’s manner of dress, personally or professionally. Did the alien’s ability to appear African American authenticate his insights on racism?

Unlike the poet personally, the persona here is not explicitly the victim of racism. Yet he clearly sees racism as victimizing: “adapting their varied pigmentations white black / red brown yellow the imprecise and strangering / distinctions by which they live by which they / justify their cruelties to one another”.¹⁰⁵ Racism is a polarizing pigment of the imagination, which is why it is so “imprecise”. Yet its real effect is alienation, which the alien notes in his exquisite description of it as “strangering”. A rare word, as noted above, “strangering” does not quite qualify as a Hayden-esque neologism. But it is an effective transformation of the noun “stranger” into a transitive verb (here, a present participle acting as a verbal modifier). The objects of the verb “to stranger” are not mere grammatical objects. They are flesh-and-blood victims, both psychically and socially.

The alien’s observations on race, while thematically essential to “[American Journal],” are not predominant. Race issues are treated in a rather matter-of-fact way. This is not to say that the alien is dismissive of race. He neither trivializes race nor minimizes its importance. It’s just that race cannot be atomized by abstracting it away from the concomitant social problems that he sees in American society. The alien does not weigh their relative gravity. Again, as Rampersad has noted, “Hayden knew his country and its condition, and saw it whole,” Arnold Rampersad observes.¹⁰⁶ Racial identity is extrinsic when a person is the victim of racial prejudice. Racial identity is intrinsic when a person relishes in racial pride. Thus, racial pride and prejudice are two sides of the same coin—the social construct in which superficial biological differences acquire pervasive social significance, both intrinsically and extrinsically.

There are, moreover, degrees or stages of a person’s subjective identification with race. Helms’s *People of Color Racial Identity Model* incorporates and scales five psychosocial statuses pertaining to the subjective experience of race: (1) conformity, (2) dissonance, (3) immersion/emersion, (4) internalization, and (5) integrative awareness.¹⁰⁷ It is this “integrative awareness” that the poet implicitly—and Robert Hayden explicitly, in the course of interviews—stresses as a key indicator of societal maturity.

¹⁰⁴ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 90–91.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, lines 7–10.

¹⁰⁶ Rampersad, “Introduction”, xxxiii–xxxiv.

¹⁰⁷ J.E. Helms, “An Update of Helms’s White and People of Color Racial Identity Models”, in *Handbook of Multicultural Counseling*. Ed. Joseph Ponterotto, J. Manuel Casas, Lisa .A. Suzuki and Charlene. Alexander (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), 181–198. (See 181 ff.)

At this juncture, it is perhaps appropriate to say a few words regarding Robert Hayden's worldview as a Bahá'í on the issue of race. Robert Hayden was dedicated to the ideal of racial harmony as a religious principle. Born of his values as an outspoken adherent of the Bahá'í Faith, naturally this posture distanced him somewhat from the separatist ideology of key Black Arts figures. In this respect, Hayden's philosophy of art was far closer to that of the Harlem Renaissance, resonating especially with the outlook of its acknowledged "Dean" and the genius behind the movement, Alain Locke. Like Hayden, Locke was part of the Bahá'í community, the latter having embraced the Bahá'í Faith in 1918.¹⁰⁸ Hayden later contributed the introduction to the Atheneum edition of Locke's *The New Negro* in 1968 (Locke).¹⁰⁹ Pairing Hayden with Locke enabled Derik Smith to draw "a heretofore-unacknowledged thread in African-American literary history which links these two figures by way of their common belief in the Bahá'í Faith" and to "locate Hayden in a long tradition of 'black Americanism'".¹¹⁰

Hayden's contact with the Bahá'í Faith was by way of marriage. In June 1940, Hayden married Erma Inez Morris, a music tutor and concert pianist, who worked as a public school teacher in Detroit, supporting Hayden's lifestyle as a struggling artist. Consistent with her unflagging support of his dream of becoming a great poet, eventually they decided that Robert should go back to graduate school at the University of Michigan. Soon after moving to Ann Arbor in 1941, Erma embraced the Bahá'í Faith, a new world religion promoting racial harmony, religious reconciliation and ideal international relations, with more than 2,100 ethnic groups and tribes represented among its 5.5 million adherents currently.

In America, Bahá'ís took seriously a statement issued in 1938 by Shoghi Effendi (who led the Bahá'í world from 1921–1957) that racism was America's "most challenging issue": "As to racial prejudice, the corrosion of which, for well-nigh a century, has bitten into the fiber, and attacked the whole social structure of American society, it should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution".¹¹¹ For American Bahá'ís, racism remained an "issue of paramount importance," calling for the exercise of "care and vigilance", "moral courage and fortitude", and consummate "tact and sympathy" in the interactions between white and black.¹¹²

In 1991, eleven years after Hayden's death, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States (the annually elected Bahá'í

¹⁰⁸ Christopher Buck, *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2005).

¹⁰⁹ Alain Locke (ed.), *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Illustrations by Winold Reiss (New York: A. & C. Boni, 1925). Reprinted with new preface by Robert Hayden (New York: Atheneum, 1968). 1970 edition.

¹¹⁰ Derik Smith, *Love's Lonely Offices*, 8.

¹¹¹ Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette, IL: U.S. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1939), 33–34. 1990 edition.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 34.

administrative council that oversees the American Bahá'í community) issued its policy statement, *The Vision of Race Unity: America's Most Challenging Issue*,¹¹³ thus keeping alive the Bahá'í commitment to the racial harmony efforts that began in Washington, D.C. in May 1921 with the first "Race Amity Conference" organized with the assistance of Dr. Alain Locke of Howard University.¹¹⁴

Inspired and fired by the Bahá'í ideal of racial harmony both in America and abroad, Hayden—while still a graduate student studying under his literary mentor, W. H. Auden—joined the Bahá'ís in 1943.¹¹⁵ The basic beliefs of the Bahá'í Faith are essentialized by Hayden as follows:

I believe in the essential oneness of all people and I believe in the basic unity of all religions. I don't believe that races are important; I think that people are important. I'm very suspicious of any form of ethnicity or nationalism; I think that these things are very crippling and are very divisive. These are all Bahá'í points of view, and my work grows out of this vision.¹¹⁶

The fact that the Hayden Papers (HP) are preserved in the National Bahá'í Archives is just one indication of the primacy of Robert Hayden's Bahá'í identity.¹¹⁷ Hayden's commitment to interracial harmony notwithstanding, in "[American Journal]", one detects the voice of distinctly, if de-familiarized, black-critical observations, where the narrator's ambiguous observations resonate powerfully with the classic features of double-consciousness in the sense that W. E. B. Du Bois so powerfully articulated it.

In "[American Journal]", racial identity is not salient. It is one of various aspects of American identity. Race is but one lens through which the alien views America. But race is not panoptic. Even as a critical theory, race is not all-seeing. Trouble brews on other fronts as well.

Political Identity—Partisanship

The year presumably is 1976, and the alien reports a violent public disturbance that he has just witnessed: "crowds gathering in the streets today for some / reason obscure to me noise and violent motion / repulsive physical contact sentinels pigs / i heard them called with flailing clubs rage / and bleeding and frenzy and screaming machines / wailing

¹¹³ National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, *The Vision of Race Unity: America's Most Challenging Issue* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991).

¹¹⁴ Buck, *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy*.

¹¹⁵ Buck, "Robert Hayden", 178; Erma Hayden, "Robert Hayden, 1917–1980", in *The Bahá'í World: An International Record*. Vol. XVIII (1979–1983) (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1986), 715–717.

¹¹⁶ Hayden, *Collected Prose*, 111.

¹¹⁷ Robert Hayden Papers, National Bahá'í Archives (Wilmette, IL: National Bahá'í Center). See review by Susan M. Hartmann & David Wigdor, "Archives and Manuscripts", *Journal of American History* 1989, 76(1), 168-171. (See 170).

unbearable decibels”.¹¹⁸ The “and...and...and” construction of line 57 suggests a breathless and hypertensive report, what the law of evidence might call an “excited utterance” made under the stress of excitement before there was time to “cool”. Unlike the poem’s earlier reference to the “Garden of the Gods”,¹¹⁹ the time, place, and manner of the public disturbance here are indeterminate. All we know is that there’s something happening in the streets. It is dissent in the form of a public demonstration.

The precise details of this public disturbance are lacking. We can match this scene with any number of possible scenarios drawn from that tumultuous era. What the alien reports appears to have begun as a demonstration. This is implied by “crowds gathering in the streets today”—a day in the life of America in 1976, but lacking here in the “spirit of ‘76”. Things got out of hand. The demonstration escalated into a violent melee or even a riot. The alien can neither tell us the purpose of the demonstration or what incident sparked the unrest. It all came about for a “reason obscure to me”.¹²⁰ We can try to guess, even to pinpoint what event Hayden may have had in mind. The Vietnam War had just ended, and one can neither assume nor exclude the occurrence of a race riot here. These facts, for instance, fit with a demonstration that took place in South Boston on 15 February 1976—a march that ended in a clash with police. The time period is clearly the 1970s, as “pigs” came into vogue as pejorative slang for “police”: “sentinels pigs / i heard them called”.¹²¹

In any event, the alien is exposed to profound social alienation. This external violence is an outward manifestation of the harsh psychic energies that disturbed the alien’s sensitive equilibrium and probably shocked his conscience as well: “i fled lest / vibrations of the brutal scene do further harm / to my metabolism already over taxed”.¹²² Such scenes, which assault the observer’s sensibilities as well as the dissenters themselves, show that Americans are not always able to resolve their internal conflicts in a democratic way. Dissenters are painfully alive to America’s contradictions, and are dismissive of these “hypocrisies”: “a divided / people seeking reassurance from a past few under / stand and many scorn why should we sanction / old hypocrisies thus dissenters The Course / lors would silence them”¹²³.

In contrast with open dissent is a begrudging acceptance of the way things are. When cynicism sets in, some Americans accept their lot in life rather than protest against it. Social mobility is often not an option for those trapped in a disadvantaged class. The alien finds out about the American

¹¹⁸ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 54–58.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, line 31.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, lines 53–54.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, lines 55–56.

¹²² *Ibid.*, lines 58–60.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, lines 80–84.

Dream in a tavern, in conversation with one who has long lost the sense of moral outrage that drives public protest and dissent.

Class Identity—The American

Class identity surfaces in the only scene in which the alien records a direct contact with an “earth man”. The topic is the venerable, yet elusive, “American Dream”: “something they call the american dream sure / we still believe in it i guess an earth man / in the tavern said”.¹²⁴ The alien is a good listener, and, presumably on a barstool over a glass of beer, takes in the American’s reflections on successes and shortcomings of the American Dream. First, the promise of prosperity is given a down-to-earth definition: “means every body in the good old u s a / should have the chance to get ahead or at least / should have three squares a day”.¹²⁵ Clearly the Dream failed the informant as he seems not to have got ahead—the consolation being that “as for myself / i do okay not crying hunger with a loaf of / bread tucked under my arm you understand”.¹²⁶ By his own admission, the American Dream has failed to provide hardly more than a daily loaf of bread for someone who simply ekes out his existence on the economic edge. And hence this valid criticism of the American economy: “irregardless of the some / times night mare facts we always try to double / talk our way around and its okay the dreams / okay and means whats good could be a damn sight / better”.¹²⁷

The American Dream is, at once, “okay” yet not okay, even though the tavern informant says that he himself does “okay”. “Okay” is a far cry from the ideal. The American Dream, so utterly unattainable for so many, has been reduced, for those Americans living below the poverty line, to mere survival rather than economic prosperity. This distinction is lost on the alien. It’s too fine a point. Not surprisingly, the alien is confused: “i / fear one does not clearly follow i replied”.¹²⁸ Komunyakaa comments that “the narrator, after further reflection of our society, records the American Dream as a great lie—a cultural materialism based on illusions and paradoxes”.¹²⁹ The alien pierces the veil of the corporate American illusion: “As an outsider himself, he is able to ridicule this illusion, orchestrated by our mythmakers, because he, a humanoid, like others who are physically or culturally ‘different,’ are not welcomed into American society, let alone given access to the means of attaining the Dream”.¹³⁰

At this moment in the tavern scene, the alien’s alien identity is almost given away: “notice you got a funny accent pal like where / you from he asked

¹²⁴ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 36–38.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, lines 42–44.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, lines 44–46.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, lines 38–42.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, lines 46–47.

¹²⁹ Komunyakaa, “Journey into ‘[American Journal]’”, 333.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

far from here i mumbled / he stared hard i left / must be more careful item
learn to use okay / their pass word okay".¹³¹ Although it certainly could
have been his accent, the alien's awkward syntax betrays him as foreign ("i /
fear one does not clearly follow"). There is nothing incorrect about it. It's
just that such stilted syntax does not sound like everyday speech. Komunyakaa notes that the alien, generally, records his observations in a
"fractured syntax" that "highlights the narrator's alienation, as if spoken by
a foreigner striving to grasp the structure and nuances of a new
language".¹³²

Paradox and oxymoron are two of Hayden's ubiquitous poetic devices. The
American Dream is one such oxymoron. "The narrator ... employs the
oxymorons in a satirical, almost cynical way," Komunyakaa points out, "to
articulate the supreme contradiction of our culture, the American Dream".¹³³
Like the alien's fractured syntax, the American Dream is a fractured
ideology: "have seen / the squalid ghettos in their violent cities / paradox
on paradox how have the americans / managed to survive".¹³⁴ The alien
learns of the American Dream, but it is beyond his immediate
comprehension. The surface reading is that the alien doesn't understand the
American Dream. There are too many contradictions to reconcile. Yet the
alien understands all too well: Americans for whom the Dream is both
elusive and illusory "may as well be on Mars," as the American saying goes.
For all its successes and failings, the American Dream has accompanied the
rise of American consumerism and materialism.

Material Identity—Technocratic Materialism

The distinction between class identity and materialism is that the former is
extrinsic and the latter intrinsic. While the alien does not indicate whether
class divides Martian society, he does indicate that a reliance on
mechanization to make life more leisurely ("like us they have created a
veritable populace / of machines"), but does not state that this is the case to
the same degree. Among the Americans, "many it appears worship the
Unknowable / Essence the same for them as for us but are / more faithful
to their machine made gods / technologists their shamans".¹³⁵ Although
Martians also worship the Unknowable Essence, as do Americans, the
Americans are described as more attached to their robotic marvels and the
celebrated (one might say, quasi-deified) scientists who invented them.
America is awash in a sea of materialism that has left its imprint on the
sandy desert-scape of the moon: "like us they have created a veritable
populace / of machines that serve and soothe and pamper / and entertain
we have seen their flags and / foot prints on the moon also the intricate /

¹³¹ Hayden, "[American Journal]", lines 48–52.

¹³² Komunyakaa, "Journey into '[American Journal]'", 333.

¹³³ Ibid..

¹³⁴ Hayden, "[American Journal]", lines 68–71.

¹³⁵ Ibid., lines 22–25.

rubbish left behind a wastefully ingenious / people”.¹³⁶ Thus the problem is not exclusively American. Ever the keen observer, the alien notes that the mechanization of society is as spiritually alienating as it is technologically liberating. From the alien’s perspective, materialism is a fact of technological advancement. Yet economic values need to be constrained by human values in order to right the imbalance. Materialism is predicated on hedonic values and economic interests, while spiritual identity is traditionally anchored in human values and in belief in a higher power, in a Supreme Being, which is the ground of all reality.

Religious Identity—Mysticism

One literary critic rightly notes that “[American Journal]” is further evidence of Hayden’s “preoccupation with the relationship between natural and spiritual facts”.¹³⁷ Critics have long noted that Hayden illuminates the invisible, spiritual reality of human existence. This was not always so. Hayden’s early works, particularly those published in the 1940s, are primarily “echoes—less successful ones—of prominent Harlem Renaissance writings.”¹³⁸ William Hansell further observes that Hayden, in his mature work, “has attempted to portray all human activity as essentially a spiritual journey, often grotesquely distorted, towards sanctity” and, in so doing, represents “the essential oneness of the divinity, of humanity, and of the universe in a variety of ways.”¹³⁹ To do so is not easy. A purely thematic interest will not succeed; only a mastery of the poetic craft can vivify the invisible. “Artistically, what distinguished Hayden most was his fusing of history and symbol, of the natural and the spiritual,” the present writer has previously noted, “to achieve an ‘intensification of reality’ that triggers flashes of social insight, with unity as a touchstone of truth”.¹⁴⁰ True to the rest of Hayden’s mature work, “[American Journal]” does explore the spiritual dimension of the American psyche. The Americans are not godless, of course. But slavish attachment to “their machine made gods” renders them functionally godless.

While the audience surely knows that Americans, as a nation, profess belief in a Supreme Being, readers may not know that this is what is meant by the term, “Unknowable Essence”: “many it appears worship the Unknowable / Essence the same for them as for us”.¹⁴¹ Punctuation emblazons this phrase in conceptual neon lights: “Unknowable Essence” is the only capitalized phrase in the entire poem, with the exception of recurring references to the alien’s superiors, identified only as “The Counselors”.

¹³⁶ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 17–22.

¹³⁷ Pontheolla T. Williams, *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 131.

¹³⁸ William H. Hansell, “The Spiritual Unity of Robert Hayden’s Angle of Ascent”, *Black American Literature Forum* 1979, 13(1), 24-. (See 24.)

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*.

¹⁴⁰ Buck, “Robert Hayden”, 181.

¹⁴¹ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 22–23.

This publicly unfamiliar reference to the “Unknowable Essence” is quite familiar to adherents (with Hayden among them) of the Bahá’í Faith, which conceptualizes God as the source and ultimate common denominator of both physical and social universes: “To every discerning and illuminated heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the Divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress. Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery. He is, and hath ever been, veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men”.¹⁴² This citation is just one exemplar of the normative use of the “Unknowable Essence” in Bahá’í discourse as a reference to God. Therefore Hayden’s use of this distinct term of theological art gives the poet’s Bahá’í identity away, and could even suggest that the alien himself participates in a planetization of that global perspective.

Poets and literary critics know very well that Robert Hayden was a public Bahá’í—as already discussed in the section on “Racial Identity” above. However, that the phrase, “Unknowable Essence” is a distinctively Bahá’í metaphysical term is certainly not common knowledge. While Hayden was occasionally explicit in his Bahá’í identity—and would often, in his public poetry readings, preface certain poems with reference to Bahá’í themes—Hayden is religiously recondite here.

In “[American Journal]”, the alien employs the “Unknowable Essence” as an intergalactic concept (“many it appears worship the Unknowable / Essence the same for them as for us”). “And as Hayden reminds us,” Harper observes, “the ‘unknowable essence’ is what we, as Americans and extraterrestrials, have in common”. As Hayden’s long-time friend and fellow poet, Harper represents Hayden’s perspective as his own in concluding: “This means to me that we have neglected the largest part of our inheritance, the efficacy of religion as a faith in the future that might bind us all”.¹⁴³ Neglect of the spiritual does not, however, detract from “God and country” as a hallmark of American nationalism.

American Identity—Nationalism

The most detailed scene in “[American Journal]” is a Fourth of July celebration: “parades fireworks displays video spectacles / much grandiloquence much buying and selling / they are celebrating their history earth men / in antique uniforms play at the carnage whereby / the americans

¹⁴² Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*. Translated by Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1990), 46–47.

¹⁴³ Michael S. Harper, qtd. in Antonucci, “The Map and the Territory”, 502.

achieved identity”.¹⁴⁴ One can almost see the fireworks overhead. The most revered symbols of America evoke treasured moments in American history. Here, Smith notes that Hayden “simultaneously equips: the alien with the capacity for a nuanced appreciation of America’s defining narratives: The paradox of the nation’s history, its failure to practice its lofty egalitarian ideals, and the brutality of its internal conflicts, all register distinctly in his observations”.¹⁴⁵ This is civil religion in its most ceremonial form in grandiloquent public display.

Part of this patriotic pageant is the parading of a beauty queen: “blonde miss teen age / america waving from a red white and blue flower / float as the goddess of liberty a divided / people seeking reassurance from a past few under / stand and many scorn”.¹⁴⁶ Since the Miss Teenage America Pageant was held on 27 November 1976, the blond beauty here must be Miss Teenage America for 1975. Here, from a float festooned with patriotic colors, the nubile beauty beams a patriotic message. She is draped in American aesthetic values, costumed as the Statue of Liberty, symbolizing America in a Fourth of July parade, where American ideals are on display, but not on trial. Yet “the sentiment that accretes as the narrative unfolds is a negative one that figures nostalgic Americana as empty rhetoric”.¹⁴⁷ This empty rhetoric, however, is filled with unfulfilled meaning.

So Miss America incarnates Lady Liberty. This facade, however, is not a charade, for it has taken on the trappings of the American civil religion and is invested with national mythology and its associated values. They are celebrated, not denigrated. The alien can personally relate to this by analogizing the American heritage to his own heritage: “we too recall / that struggle as enterprise of suffering and / faith uniquely theirs”.¹⁴⁸ Here, American identity has taken on religious overtones, for it is a “faith uniquely theirs”. The fact that Lady Liberty is represented by a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Miss Teenage America perhaps represents an arrested stage in the nation’s social evolution—an adolescent phase of turmoil in its continuing identity crisis—on the path of its maturity as it realizes its proper world role within the international community. Times will change and so will standards of beauty—and the reach and ken of that central American value: Liberty.

A key phrase earlier in the poem is “vaunted liberty”: “item their vaunted / liberty no body pushes me around i have heard / them say land of the free they sing what do / they fear mistrust betray more than the freedom / they boast of in their ignorant pride”.¹⁴⁹ That freedom is not all that it purports to be. Freedom is betrayed throughout American history—from the institution

¹⁴⁴ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 72–76.

¹⁴⁵ Derik Smith, *Love’s Lonely Offices*, 210.

¹⁴⁶ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 78–82.

¹⁴⁷ Derik Smith, *Love’s Lonely Offices*, 215.

¹⁴⁸ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 76–78.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, lines 64–68.

of slavery (originally supported in the U.S. Constitution until the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified in 1865), to the decimation of the American Indian, and to the lesser (yet no less pervasive) inequalities that effectively curtail social mobility. “Like a mortified anthropologist,” Komunyakaa comments, “the narrator renames our dream as *vaunted liberty* and typically compares America with the more evolved society from which he traveled: ‘we are an ancient race and have outgrown / illusions cherished here’”.¹⁵⁰ One way to sum up the alien’s portrayal of the myth of America is to see it as “a split image of the American heritage”¹⁵¹—a double consciousness of the ideal versus the real.

Ultimately, America defies description: “america as much a problem in metaphysics as / it is a nation earthly entity an iota in our / galaxy an organism that changes even as i / examine it fact and fantasy never twice the / same so many variables”.¹⁵² Commenting on these lines, Fred Fetrow remarks: “Yet the literary critic who would trace the evolution of Hayden’s poetic voice, who would analyze and explicate his over four decades of work, must begin by identifying with the speaker in ‘American Journal,’ as that otherworldly analyst expresses the frustration of trying to generalize about an ever-changing phenomenon”.¹⁵³ Here, the critic implies that the alien as Hayden himself, although others have cautioned against it. In any case, America has had its share of observers, who have yet to reach anything approaching a consensus on the essence of what it is to be American. But, then, this would be essentialism at its crassest.

The most famous lines in “[American Journal]” are surely these: “america as much a problem in metaphysics as / it is a nation”.¹⁵⁴ Here “metaphysics”—a term that Aristotle coined and traditionally regarded as the “the Queen of Sciences”—represents the alien’s attempts to understand the fundamental nature of American social reality. This is an impossible task, for America has “so many variables”. It wriggles under its pin, quickly moves out of focus, and defies precise description: “some thing / eludes me some constant amid the variables / defies analysis and imitation will i be judged / incompetent”.¹⁵⁵ Here, the alien’s “incompetence” is really a testament to his competence. He avoids the pitfall of hasty generalization. The only equation the alien posits is the function of identity as capital and catalyst for social change. And this may be the key: perhaps America’s identity is bound up in its self-transformation—its inventive reinventions of itself in chrysalid transparency—as it arcs on a teleological path of social evolution. This progress is coefficient with America’s relationship to the rest

¹⁵⁰ Komunyakaa, “Journey into ‘[American Journal]’”, 333.

¹⁵¹ Charles R. Campbell, “A Split Image of the American Heritage: The Poetry of Robert Hayden and Theodore Roethke”, *MidAmerica: The Yearbook of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature* 1985, 12, 70–82. (See 70.)

¹⁵² Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 99–103.

¹⁵³ Fred M. Fetrow, *Robert Hayden* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), 133.

¹⁵⁴ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 99–100.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, lines 95–99.

of the world, leading to the final dimension of American identity: human identity.

Integrative (Human) Identity—Globalism

The key element here is anthropomorphic geocentrism placed in the context of social maturity. At the outset of the poem, the alien describes the Americans as though they represented the inhabitants of the entire earth. Hence he uses a global frame of reference to situate human beings within the grand scheme of things: “charming savages enlightened primitives brash / new comers lately sprung up in our galaxy how / describe them do they indeed know what or who / they are do not seem to yet no other beings / in the universe make more extravagant claims / for their importance and identity”.¹⁵⁶ The geocentric, overweening hubris of humanity as a whole is in view here. “Indeed, the ‘humanoid’ among us narrates as might a Western anthropologist, descending into the wilds of his galaxy to do fieldwork,” writes Komunyakaa. “He uses outdated jargon—*charming savages* and *enlightened primitives*—to describe us”.¹⁵⁷ From the alien’s vantage, the Americans are “primitives” in terms of their social evolution, but nonetheless progressive (“enlightened”). That “no other beings / in the universe make more extravagant claims / for their importance and identity” could be interpreted as American exceptionalism, but the overarching sense is that the “Americans” are really “*homo sapiens*” collectively.

Conclusions

Michael S. Harper was right in characterizing “[American Journal]” as America’s “bicentennial poem”.¹⁵⁸ The poem earns this distinction not merely by dint of its special circumstances, by what it does: “Artistically, what distinguished Hayden most was his fusing of history and symbol, of the natural and the spiritual, to achieve an ‘intensification of reality’ that triggers flashes of social insight, with unity as a touchstone of truth”.¹⁵⁹ In “[American Journal]” Hayden fuses the fresh perspective of alien observer in place of the jaded clichés into which so much of American collective self-reflection had fallen. Hayden employs a novel plot device to trigger fresh social insights. As a character, our Martian is somewhat ridiculous. Yet the alien is ridiculous in the sublime. The Martian is a perfect mask for the poet as social commentator. In the form of anthropological notes recorded with ethnographic exactitude, “[American Journal]” is a the fictive document of the recorded observations of an alien who initially knows nothing of

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., lines 11–16.

¹⁵⁷ Komunyakaa, “Journey into ‘[American Journal]’”, 332.

¹⁵⁸ Michael S. Harper, “Every Shut-Eye Aint Asleep / Every Good-bye Aint Gone”, in *Robert Hayden: Essays on the Poetry* Ed. Laurence Goldstein and Robert Chrisman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 104–111. (See 105.)

¹⁵⁹ Buck, “Robert Hayden”, 181.

America, yet has so much to say about it. The poem radiates the alien's (and the artist's) fascination with America, involving both repulsion and attraction. Indeed, the metaphor of the alien offers more than detached neutrality. It richly imagines a first impression of Americans in order to convey a lasting impression of them. Yet one must not be misled by the fact that the alien speaker of Hayden's poem speaks as an outsider, thus giving merely surface observations, far from defining the core. Rather, an exquisite irony obtains here, in the alien's first impressions are not only lasting impressions but are penetrating impression in that they are socially incisive in an albeit naïve way.

Although not his finest poem, "[American Journal]" is a singular achievement in that it articulates a major social poet's vision of America. In its own highly imaginative way, "[American Journal]" represents "a traveler's perspective of our American experience". This, after all, is Hayden's leitmotif, "his most striking theme".¹⁶⁰ "[American Journal]" has thus earned its place as "America's Bicentennial Poem", and thus has potential to enrich our American heritage accordingly, once greater significance is attached to this poem and a wider audience is attracted. Using the most outlandish plot device, it succeeds as a commentary on the meaning of America, while falling short of defining it. This is by design. The consummate craftsman, Hayden knew what he was doing. Unmasked, he invites each reader to complete that meaning.

As for the science fiction that animates "[American Journal]" itself, there is the question of the identity of the alien narrator. The poet is the alien (from the standpoint of artifice), but is the alien the poet? Frankly, scholars are divided on this question. The alien is, after all, simply a persona. Poet-generated characters are often based on socially-constructed identities. It could thus be argued that Hayden's alien narrator is not so much the construction of an identity as that of a character—a character offers an alien perspective on America. Notwithstanding, because "[American Journal]" was written during Hayden's tenure as "America's Bicentennial Poet-Laureate," the present writer is more inclined to see Hayden's fictive character as more or less aligned with Hayden's own character with respect to the alien's characterization of the American national character. Yet it was the poetic conceit of green skin that allowed him to transcend racial distinctions in order to make some sense of them (concluding that racialism's didn't make sense). Alien or not, Hayden was a man of many hues, a people's poet, and the alien is a people's social commentator.

While there is aesthetic distance between the artist and his art, Hayden's Americanism is incompletely expressed. For a complete—that is, positive—formulation of Hayden's vision of America, we must look beyond

¹⁶⁰ Vilma Raskin Potter, "A Remembrance for Robert Hayden, 1913–1980", *MELUS* 1981, 8(1), 51–55. (See 51.)

“[American Journal]” itself, and consult the interviews that Hayden gave to journalists. To the extent that it can illuminate the poem, we can reference the poet’s personal vision of America. Until his death in 1980, Robert Hayden served as poetry editor for *World Order* magazine (a quarterly publication of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States), which publishes on topics of broad social concern from a Bahá’í perspective. In 1976, *World Order* decided to publish an interview with him. Hayden was asked: “*The country is getting ready to celebrate the Bicentennial of its founding. What does America mean to you? Are you proud to be an American?*” Hayden replied:

Well it means a great deal to me ... I wouldn’t say that I am proud exactly, for I regard racial and national pride as a rather dubious value, as something which tends to be divisive—to exclude. America is home to me, the country in which I can work most effectively. Although, as the poet Claude McKay said, “She feeds me bread of bitterness,” I have a deep love for my country; I feel very much a part of it despite some sense of alienation.¹⁶¹

This “alienation” that Hayden experiences on a personal level registers as an “alien nation” at a collective level. Thus, through a novel plot device, the poet succeeds in gaining poetic authority in place of a scientific one. As Robert Hayden’s quintessential statement on America, it takes a fictive “alien” (the protagonist of “[American Journal]”) to show how truly self-alienating America has become. While America defies precise definition (“an organism that changes even as i / examine it”), it is in great need of redefinition. It is ultimately up to each of us to individually define—and collectively to redefine—America as a place where the alien (i.e., the alienated among us) is socially naturalized to the point where the alien is a world citizen at home.

In fine, the theme of “[American Journal]” is one of *social maturity* based on *human solidarity*. From a “cosmic” perspective (given the poem’s artifice of an alien visitor from Mars), America remains indefinable, yet refinable. America’s—and the world’s—central problematic is social fragmentation in its various iterations, with its implicit solution residing in Hayden’s Bahá’í-inspired ethic of “the fundamental oneness of all races, the essential oneness of mankind, ... [and] the vision of world unity”.¹⁶² “[American Journal]” never reaches that conclusion, although the reader who knows Hayden can easily complete it. This thesis accords with Hayden’s own disclosure that, in his art, “American life is a point of departure for me into an awareness of the universal”.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Hayden, *Collected Prose*, 79–80.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 87.

By implication, “[American Journal]” illumines the potential for interracial and multiethnic harmony that exists—at home and abroad—with all of its creative possibilities. *Social maturity* is coefficient with *human solidarity*. As this study has demonstrated, “[American Journal]” *explores issues of social maturity where integrative awareness of an overarching human identity, including yet transcending racial identity, is a key indicator of progress on the path of social evolution*. The little green man from the Red Planet suggests that “white black / red brown yellow”¹⁶⁴ are “strangering / distinctions”¹⁶⁵ that will inevitably require an integrative identity to positively value all such differences as part and parcel of a wider identity—a supercategory that allows an ever-advancing civilization to progress to the next stage in its social evolution, as the incandescent spirit illumines the roseate skin from within. “[American Journal]” energizes fresh reflection on matters of social identity within the context of social evolution.

¹⁶⁴ Hayden, “[American Journal]”, lines 7–8.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, lines 8–9.