

BRINGING UNKNOWN PATTERNS INTO VIEW

Robert Burns Stepto

Let me begin by thanking the Koerner Center for inviting me to join the other Yale emeritus faculty who have written autobiographical essays that are in Gary L. Haller's words "somewhat chronological, touching on childhood and early education, describing how [Koerner] fellows came to their disciplines and to Yale, including the arc of their careers and Yale experiences." I thank especially Richard Brodhead for personally extending the invitation. He is someone I have known since my very first days at Yale in 1974! He was the first fellow assistant professor I met after the requisite meetings with department chairs and such, and our dear friendship began immediately. We share decades at Yale and have been faculty colleagues at the Vermont campus of the Bread Loaf School of English. Indeed, I think Dick had much to do with me being invited to join the Bread Loaf faculty in 1990!

Like many Koerner Fellows before me, I do have something to share about how my family has played a role in my intellectual growth and experience, and it is an enduring story, not just a childhood story. Let me begin with my mother's family. When I was born, in 1945, my parents were young, in their mid-twenties, and living with my mother's parents while starting careers and completing graduate degrees. My mother's sister and her husband lived in that house as well. And so, I began growing up living in the crowded midst of six adults who, fortunately for me, were attentive and caring. They also all were college graduates, and four of them had advanced degrees. When I became a young adult, I began to realize how remarkable it was to grow up in an educated family, especially an educated African American family, that had been earning degrees since 1905.

The Burns family (note that my middle name is Burns) became educated as a result of determination, perseverance, and good fortune; they had only the meager resources provided by janitorial work and housekeeping. Smith Burns had been willing to give up his Missouri farm and move to the city of St. Joseph in order for his children to attend the colored high school there. But he hated being a janitor and not a farmer and

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left the family in 1907 to invent himself as a white man in Colorado. Even so, the two youngest children still attended colleges, including quite notably Inabel Burns, who became a professor and dean at Howard University and was a special mentor for me.

My grandmother, Mildred Jackson Burns, had even less family support. Her parents died and she was orphaned as a young teenager. The 1900 census lists her as age fifteen and living not with parents but with her older sister, Anna, and her husband (my mother would be named Anna when she was born in 1923). Mildred nonetheless graduated from the colored high school having “honorably completed the Classical Course of Study” (so says her diploma which hangs today in my study) and went off to Spelman College! Whether it is true or not, I love the story that marvels at how Mildred got through college because her church paid her way!

My grandfather, Ocie Burns, was one of Inabel’s older brothers. He attended Tuskegee Institute during the years when Booker T. Washington was still in charge and graduated in 1905. Washington was quite aware of Ocie and named him to be one of the recent Tuskegee graduates to go off to Egyptian Sudan to work on Leigh S. J. Hunt’s agricultural “concession.” I knew very little about this while growing up, but I was aware of the treasured family photograph (which is in my house today and which appears in my memoir, *Blue as the Lake*) of Ocie on a camel with the Sphinx in the background. How I learned more about how Ocie went to Africa and how Leigh Hunt’s agricultural project was actually named the Sudan Experimental Plantation (*Plantation!*) Syndicate and devoted to growing Egyptian cotton for British operatives is also a story about how I grew as a scholar of African American studies and American studies in the academy.

Much of my research was prompted by my correspondence with Professor Jeremy W. Pope, a historian at the College of William & Mary, who contacted me about Ocie Burns as part of his inquiry into who were the first African American visitors to Nubia, Sudan. As our conversation developed, we searched for my grandfather’s essays, published and unpublished, and soon had great interest in his “The Origin and History of the Negro” of which I have a partial typescript and complete manuscript. Needless to say, we studied what Ocie, who had been in Egypt and Sudan, 1905–07, chose to present as the history of Egypt.

Another part of this story for me involves my grandfather and his “possession” of the Arabic language. In 1907, he acquired a copy of J. Selden Willmore’s *Handbook of Spoken Egyptian Arabic*, published the year before in London. Inside the front cover, he wrote “Ocie R. Burns, Cairo, Egypt, March 12th, ’07” no less than three times. Did he buy it or was it assigned to him, perhaps especially so that he could learn the “Polite Expressions in General Use”? Was it in any way related to him helping to run Leigh Hunt’s British-supported Sudanese cotton plantation? Why was Ocie in Egypt in the first place? What did Booker T. Washington possibly hope to gain for Tuskegee and the race from “doing business” with “Adventuresome Capitalist” Leigh Hunt, who had already operated a gold mine in Korea and who later would be an early developer

of Las Vegas? All this absorbs me as I handle the Arabic handbook, which was passed on to me, and think about how a chapter in my first book, *From Behind the Veil* (1979), discusses Washington and is entitled “Lost in a Cause: Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*.” So, too, does this return to me when I recall my mother’s story about being so worried about her father’s elderly mumblings in his last years until a visiting friend of hers exclaimed, “Ann, I didn’t know your father spoke Arabic!” Might there be a connection between Ocie returning in his eighties in the late 1960s to his days as a scholar in the early 1900s and me right then deciding to be a researcher of that period for my dissertation and first book? I wish to think so.

During the early 1970s, when I was completing my dissertation and starting an assistant professorship at Williams College, Ocie’s sister Inabel Lindsay and her husband, Arnett Lindsay, were notably active in helping me find my way as a scholar of Black America. Inabel had been a professor of social work at Howard University since 1937 and dean of Howard’s School of Social Work ever since it had been created in 1945. She had much to impart about finding your way in the academy, and she joined Arnett in inviting me to meetings of what was then called the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, which had been founded by Arnett’s professor and mentor, Carter Woodson. (Woodson also created Negro History Week which of course is now Black History Month!). Recently, I was startled to come across a letter “Aunt Inie” sent me in October 1973, inviting me to the association’s annual meeting and adding, “I am looking forward to seeing you and hearing in detail something of your work.” She also informs me that she is having a copy of the “History of the History Dept. at Howard” mailed to me.

In the years that followed, I almost always stayed with the Lindsays when I went to Washington for NEH and other academic meetings. Inabel was awarded an honorary degree by Howard in 1982. She died in 1983. In 1985, the building in which the Howard School of Social Work is housed was named Inabel Burns Lindsay Hall. The dedication program declared this “a permanent acknowledgment of the outstanding contribution of a Black woman to our history and the field of education.” In this way and others, she contributed ever so much to me.

As we entered the 1950s, my immediate family acquired our first apartment, and I began my eleven years at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools founded by John Dewey in 1896. It is indeed a laboratory school, literally attached to the university’s School of Education and dedicated to creating and pursuing fresh concepts of precollegiate learning. I just discovered, for example, that as early as 1931, freshmen at Lab were taught “Latin as a modern language” and that included “using the language in conversation rather than being drilled on grammar.” I experienced a version of that thirty years later; I only studied Latin while at Lab. The latest issue of the Lab alumni magazine celebrates the one hundred twenty-fifth anniversary of the school, confirming that the school has been steadfastly dedicated to “scholarship, curiosity & creativity.” It is a school where I could, for example, ask a teacher if I could spend a

term creating my own design for the Chicago subway system and actually get encouragement to do so! Such a project was what we would now call an interdisciplinary project. My pursuit of such projects today began with the freedom to be curious and creative while a young student at Lab.

After Lab, I enrolled at Trinity College in Hartford. As to why I went there, I could be a bit snide and say that I went there because my father wanted me to go to Columbia! But other things were going on: I had advisors urging me to attend a small college and my being a communicant and acolyte in the Episcopal Church was also a factor.

Perhaps because I was only sixteen and hundreds of miles away from home for the first time, I had a terrible freshman year, which I eventually wrote about in an essay titled “Greyhound Kind of Mood” (*New England Review*, 2000; nominated for a Pushcart Prize, named a Notable American Essay of 2001). But I later became a dedicated student, graduated cum laude in English, and was awarded a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship for graduate study.

I wish to mention three of my Trinity professors who were clearly mentors and who were the professors I stayed in touch with for years after graduation. Novelist Stephen Minot was my creative writing professor and my English major advisor. I vividly recall our lunches and meetings, including those that occurred after I returned East to New England after my years of graduate school in California. As I mentioned in a recent interview (in the *Trinity Reporter*, Winter, 2012), Minot was “my first model for how to be creative in the academy.”

Michael R. Campo was the modern languages professor who offered the engrossing seminar on Dante that I fortunately enrolled in. At one point in the semester, he took us all up to Mount Holyoke College so we could meet Professor Val Giamatti and view his remarkable, multilanguage collection of editions of Dante’s work. Campo may well have had something to do with Professor Giamatti teaching a course on *The Divine Comedy* at Trinity in 1957. Well, you know what I’m working up to here: imagine how delightfully stunned I was to arrive at Yale and realize that my amazing colleague Bart Giamatti was the son of Val Giamatti! Professor Campo and I enjoyed talking and chuckling about such matters. One occasion was in 1982, when we saw each other at Trinity’s campus in Rome.

Paul Levine was a Wesleyan professor who taught Trinity’s Modern American Literature course in the spring of 1966 after the Trinity professor who usually offered the course suddenly passed away. Levine was my first professor with graduate degrees in American studies (from Harvard), and that may have something to do with his course being the first I ever took that included African American authors (not surprisingly Wright and Ellison). Paul (if I may) immediately became an advisor for me, and when he learned of my plans to pursue graduate studies he warned me to be aware that even some of the renowned English departments were notoriously indifferent to American literature studies and that I should be careful about where I sought admission. That led to me happily accepting admittance to Stanford’s department, which

then as now is one of the few to grant a PhD in English *and* American literature in addition to a degree just in English literature. Paul eventually became the first professor of American literature at the University of Copenhagen, where he taught from 1975 to 2006. Upon discovering in 1981 that I was going to be on leave from Yale, he invited me and my family to Copenhagen and arranged for me to have a campus office where I could pursue my writing project. That was an unforgettably enjoyable fall semester, and it was the beginning of my presence in American studies abroad. I have been part of symposia in Germany, Italy, and Denmark. All that has certainly been an intellectual trajectory!

I should mention another Trinity professor of my day as well: historian Thomas E. Willey (with graduate degrees from Yale). He offered a course in European intellectual history during my sophomore year that included novels by Balzac and several others. That was eye opening, a revelation. My understanding of how history and literature can converse initiated with that course and prepared me for what Paul Levine would pursue and present in contextualizing American literature. I see now how Willey and Levine first helped prepare me for being at ease as a professor in three departments!

At Stanford, I worked principally with Professors David Levin, Albert Gelpi, Claude Simpson, and William Chace. The four of them were my PhD orals committee. Decades have passed, but I am still thrilled to recall the moment when they told me that I had passed my orals exam with distinction! Life is full of connections large and small. When I got to Yale, I had to smile upon learning that Claude Simpson was Yale Professor Dwight Culler's brother-in-law. And then came this moment: was the young Professor Bill Chace I knew at Stanford the same William Chace who just became President of Wesleyan? Yes, that was so.

David Levin directed my dissertation and truly guided me into becoming an interdisciplinary scholar of literature. That is not surprising given how he was, as the American Antiquarian Society's obituary for him observes, "in persuasion and practice a historian as well as a literary scholar." The obituary also notes that Levin wrote "essays on figures as different as James Baldwin, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Benjamin Franklin, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and William Bradford." His books included *What Happened in Salem?* and *History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, Parkman*. As we began to meet about my dissertation, I boldly asked him if it made a difference which chapter I wrote first. He said, No. I then asked if I could write my W. E. B. Du Bois chapter first; he said, Yes. What that led to was my writing a dissertation completely about African American writers, not just Du Bois. I was becoming an African Americanist scholar.

Historian David Kennedy was the Stanford Professor not in the English department who was a mentor to me. His teaching and scholarship combined history, literature, and economics. I recall sitting in on his classes during my last year at Stanford and occasionally wondering why I wasn't also attending certain literature courses. The book he published while I was a graduate student was *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (1970). In 2000, he won a Pulitzer Prize for his book

Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War. Somewhere along the way, I learned that his MA and PhD were earned in American studies at Yale. In 2008, Yale's Graduate School awarded David Kennedy a Wilbur Cross Medal. I went to that event and truly enjoyed reconnecting with him. In the midst of that, there came a moment when a Yale colleague asked, "How do you two know each other?" David and I laughed and laughed.

Stanford was where I first experienced being part of a people-of-color literary community whose activities included creating a literary magazine, *Brilliant Corners*. The group of us included Shirley Allen, William J. (Billy Joe) Harris, Nathaniel Mackey, Robert O'Meally, and Al Young. It meant everything to me to be conversing with writers and publishing my own poems while I was a graduate student.

Michele and I met at Stanford and married three days after she received her Stanford BA. We worked part time at the bookstore on El Camino Real that Paul Fry mentions in his *Trajectory* memoir and put each other through graduate school as best we could. Our first son, Gabriel, was born in 1970, and it soon came upon me that I needed to earn a bit more money. Searching for teaching jobs I might get without having yet finished my doctorate, I ended up with two possibilities: an instructorship at Yale or an assistant professorship at Williams College.

We went to Williams.

There is much I could report about our three years at Williams, but let me focus just on one huge career development. In the summer of 1972, I attended the University of Iowa Afro-American Studies Summer Workshop, which was then a major annual event in Afro-American studies as a growing field. The workshop that summer was on W. E. B. Du Bois, and I hoped to learn more about him and to share the research I had already completed. As it turned out, the Du Bois workshop was to be the last conference Charles T. Davis directed at Iowa before he left a month or so later to become chair of Afro-American studies at Yale. A year later, I asked him during a telephone conversation if I could by chance join Yale's Afro-American studies faculty. He replied, "Why yes! I've been named the new master of Calhoun College, and I've been wondering who might take over my undergraduate classes. You can!" Three weeks later, I had a job at Yale. We moved to New Haven in August 1974.

My story about how the 1972 summer workshop on Du Bois developed my life and career would not be complete without me acknowledging that I re-met poet Michael Harper there that summer (poet Al Young had previously introduced us at Stanford), and that began our exceptional relationship as colleagues, collaborators on conferences and book projects, and as friends who were almost family. Indeed, even before Michael and I completed the special issues of the *Massachusetts Review* that would become our celebrated anthology *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship* (1979), our families drew close, and Michael and his wife Shirley became the godparents of our sons, Gabriel and Rafael, when they were baptized (St. Paul's Church, New Haven, 1975).

As a “Gathering of Literature, Art, and Scholarship,” *Chant of Saints* was clearly the next important step in how I had been for years creating myself as an interdisciplinary scholar and a “reader” across art forms. When I wrote the preface for *Chant*, I stated the following in the concluding paragraph:

We are especially delighted when a reader of *Chant* makes a compelling link between, say, Toni Morrison’s remarks on the Odysseus motif in Afro-American literature and what they see in Romare Bearden’s collages, or quite rightly asks what we are attempting to express by having John Stewart’s Caribbean-set short story followed by Larry Sykes’s photographs, Derek Walcott’s “Star-Apple Kingdom,” Michael Harper’s passbook poem, Achebe’s consideration of Joseph Conrad, and Robert Hayden’s poems about Phillis Wheatley and Matthew Henson.

My last words in the preface said: “we want *Chant of Saints* to be read; it is an epic and familial poem – and, for those who need it, it is a place to begin.” Those words tell me not just how I hoped our book would be received. They tell me how close I hoped I was getting to the literature and art that would make my career and sustain my life.

There is much more to relate about my decades at Yale, but for now let me mention and honor two extraordinary professors who mentored me and nurtured my intellectual growth. Geoffrey Hartman truly brought me along. I spoke at his memorial and gratefully recalled how he welcomed me into his office, his home, his life. Geoffrey led me to see that I wanted to be a literary historian of the order he himself sought to be. Reconnecting with Alan Trachtenberg and his family was one of the great joys of arriving to Yale. We had been neighbors in Palo Alto in 1969. Alan’s example helped me become an interdisciplinary Americanist fully ready to pursue projects that invited various modes of inquiry. Alan, like Charles Davis, was also a special example before me of how to be a colleague and presence in multiple departments and programs, not just one, especially when one or more (of the three) was designated American or Afro-American.

Let me conclude by touching upon two more features of my life and career. I began this memoir by describing my extended family and how they were educated and how that created an environment for me to grow up in that made it fun for me to be curious, creative, artistic, unafraid to read, etc. I wish now to praise my wife of fifty-six years, Michele, and our sons, Gabriel and Rafael, for the world they all have given me to live in. Michele also has a PhD in English and has taught at Yale for almost as many years as I have, with specialties in writing and children’s literature. She was also for a time a faculty member in Afro-American studies at Wesleyan and more recently has been a professor with me during summers at Bread Loaf. Her books for young readers include *Snuggle Piggy and the Magic Blanket* (1987) and *Our Song, Our Toil: The Story of American Slavery as Told by Slaves* (1994). She also edited *African-American Voices for the Writers of America* series (1995).

A special moment for us all came when Michele and Gabriel's translation from the Spanish of Catalina De Erauso's *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World* was published by Beacon Press in 1996. That very year, Gabriel and I both appeared in the same issue of the African American literary journal *Callaloo!* Three of Gabe's poems were in that issue along with my essay, "Black Piano," which would later be a part of my memoir *Blue as the Lake*.

Rafael (Rafe!) is a music therapist at the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music. You might say that he enters this picture I'm drawing of a family creating, and collaborating in its creativity, each time he plays an instrument that has forever been in our household. I thought of this when he recently asked about an old bass recorder of mine. I think of it whenever he sits down to play his grandmother's piano – the piano haunting the pages of my "Black Piano" childhood remembrance. My family has everything to do with my intellectual and creative transitions of the last fifty years.

I would like to add something now about what my students have given me. Working with so many excellent students eventually led me to consider that there might be various ways a student can complete good work for a class. That was an intellectual progression!

A decade ago, Juliet Buesing, a student in my African American poetry class who had already proved to be an excellent writer, asked if her final project could be a set of watercolors that would accompany a selection of nine Robert Hayden poems. Those images, along with the poems and her introductory commentary, are absolutely extraordinary! Another literary/visual project I will share with you is Alonzo Page's "Cotton Gin: A Fable in Three Parts." This is quite incredibly a final project created in my seminar "American Artists and the African American Book." It is what Page describes to be "an illustrated story critical of the trickster archetype," with the trickster being a Brer Rabbit making his way in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance. The images are incredible and so is the great touch of naming this Harlem Brer Rabbit Jack O'Hare!

I am now at a point in my career when some of my exceptional former students are now among my colleagues at Yale. For example, Beinecke Library's Drama and Prose Curator Melissa Barton and J. L. Gaddis Professor of History Beverly Gage both wrote their Yale senior essays with me. Jacqueline Goldsby, the T. E. Donnelley Professor and recent chair of African American studies, completed her Yale dissertation under my direction. Another Yale PhD whom I advised is Sarah Mahurin, the dean of Timothy Dwight College.

In 2015, Professor Goldsby assembled a festschrift symposium honoring my forty years at Yale. No less than ten of the speakers were professors who had completed Yale dissertations under my advisorship. It was truly momentous and memorable for all of us to gather together for a day and evening. The symposium was titled "Bringing Unknown Patterns Into View: The Critical Vision of Robert B. Stepto." "Bringing Unknown Patterns Into View" is the title I have chosen for this essay.