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Looking Outside the Canon: Owen Vincent Dodson's

Boy at the Window

Sarah A. Campbell

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Looking Outside the Canon:
Owen Vincent Dodson's *Boy at the Window*

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Scholars have viewed African American texts written in the years between 1950 and 1960 as espousing confrontation, protest, and resistance. Although fruitful in identifying large writing trends, much of that scholarship narrowly defines what writing during that time accomplished, leaving out important writers whose writing does not fit the mold. One such writer is Owen Vincent Dodson (1914-1983), who published *Boy at the Window* in 1951. The novel uses modes of drama including song and call-and-response to invite reader sympathy and identification with characters, and eventually provides reader the opportunity to participate in creating meaning. Dodson's novel subtly combats racism by inviting readers to identify with its young, African American protagonist.

Keywords: Owen Dodson, African American Literature, Performance Theory

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Introduction

From 1950 to 1960, African American writing underwent extreme changes due to a surge of disillusionment following continued racial violence after WWII.ⁱ In response to the continuation of white oppression, some black writers advanced politically charged drama and fiction that confronted white supremacy through naturalism, which views nature as being in control of humankind's fate, and modernism, which breaks from previous writing styles and trends. Others espoused the idea that art can heal, and portrayed that healing through realism, which attempts to depict living conditions as they are (Gates and McKay 1356). Doris Witt explains that most canonized writers of the era wrote naturalistic and modernistic novels to fight against white supremacy and to legitimize black writing as a venue of protest (112). The works of many canonized writers of this era—including Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Margaret Walker—have been analyzed as adhering to these aesthetics in order to protest against overt racism, and have subsequently been placed in rigid categories by scholars. Scholars including R. Baxter Miller, David Krasner, Phillip U. Effiong, Genevieve Fabre, and Henry Louis Gates have analyzed how novels used fiction to explore how literal and symbolic oppression affected African Americans in extreme ways, and how difficult it is to fight against such violence.ⁱⁱ Many novels from the era portray how white control forced African Americans into specific patterns of behavior.

The scholarship on works of this era has been fruitful and reveals a general trend away from militant integration toward a trend toward militant separatism during the 1950s, but many texts have gone unstudied. This may be because the period is bookended by the works of the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights era, which are often assumed to be overtly protest-oriented. Though there is much left to explore for scholars, the narrow categories espoused by the canon that catalog writing trends of the 1950s exclude important writers whose writing is not

easily classified. Although the study of writing trends is important, there are hierarchical assumptions involved in excluding writers like Dodson from the canon. Rather than serving to present a holistic depiction of African American writing during the era, these assumptions leave important parts of literary history overlooked.

Gates and McKay acknowledge that the formal canon of the era “has tended to focus on literary luminaries who published legendary books—both critically acclaimed and commercially successful—eclips[ing] much in its path” (1355). Regaining what was eclipsed, however, requires a new look at previously ignored writers. One such writer is Owen Vincent Dodson (1914-1983), whose oeuvre includes poetry, drama, and fiction. Dodson initially wrote as an undergraduate student at Bates College, then as a master’s student at Yale, and later as a drama professor at Howard University. His work does not easily fit into canonical categories, and has been largely forgotten by scholars. James Hatch states that Dodson’s role as an academic, and the multiple mediums in which he wrote, made Dodson’s writing difficult to label (“Owen” 112).

The few scholars that have completed in-depth analyses of *Boy at the Window* have focused on how it departs from common novelistic themes of the day. In 1997, Nathan L. Grant published several of Dodson’s lost and unpublished poems in *Callaloo*, and Hatch published a definitive biography of Dodson in 1993. In a short summary of the novel, Keith Byerman asserts that *Boy at the Window* “avoids race” as the “primary cause of black identity or problems,” whereas other writers of the period focused on race almost exclusively (88). Although Dodson’s novel does not directly combat racism, it does portray the life of a young African American boy during the 1930s in which racial inequality is present. Inga Ivory argues that Dodson’s primary literary goal in the novel is “to invoke empathy rather than pity or anger for the sufferings of

African Americans,” in contrast to the combative writing of his peers (114). In a similar vein, Hatch has argued that Dodson’s writing was out of touch with its time; he was too young to be a member of the Harlem Renaissance, yet his writing was “too humanist to please the militant writers of the 1960s” (“Owen” 112). Though each of these scholars has noticed that Dodson’s work departed from African American writing of the day through its humanist, non-combative approach to racial issues, there has not been a study that analyzes how *Boy at the Window* departed aesthetically from the norms of the period.

The plotline of *Boy at the Window* may sound traditional and reminiscent of various coming-of-age stories; yet, its aesthetic makeup (or formal textual features and genre) greatly complicates its apparent simplicity. Robert Bone compared the chapters in the novel to acts in a play, saying, “one can almost see the curtain coming down on certain scenes” (187). The aesthetic makeup of Dodson’s novel is unique and critical to understanding Dodson’s departures from other canonical writers—dramatic modes appear in the book as noticeably as novelistic aesthetics. In an interview, Dodson explained, “*Boy at the Window* was a fusion of the novelist and the playwright . . . My particular experiences in life have been that of directing plays, of writing plays, and of writing plays with poems. All these things come together when I think” (“Interview” 630). Part of Dodson’s aesthetic was to incorporate elements from several genres into one piece of writing.

Dodson’s departure from the writing norms of his peers was heavily influenced by his professional career as a drama professor at Howard University. A full-time academic, Dodson was instrumental in making Howard’s drama department world-renowned while writing prolifically as a dramatist and poet. His poems alone were published in fifty periodicals, sixty-two anthologies, and three books of his own (Hatch, *Alchemy* 52). Dodson’s first attempt at

writing fiction resulted in *Boy at the Window* in 1951. The novel does not deal with overt racism nor does it adhere to the aesthetics of protest-laden naturalism or experimental modernism. It focuses more on the grief of a young child than on the large societal problems of white oppression and violence, making the performative aesthetics more notable than the plotline or themes. For the purpose of this paper, performance will be defined as staged aspects of fiction that imitate theater-based performance. Through the integration of the dramatic into the genre of the novel, Dodson developed a unique style that serves as a counterpoint to the other novels of his day. Dodson incorporates dramatic modes of song and call-and-response into the novel to invite reader sympathy and identification with the characters, and eventually provides readers the opportunity to participate in creating meaning. Dodson's novel subtly combats racism by inviting readers to identify with its young, black protagonist.

Boy at the Window with a Stage Curtain

Boy at the Window tells the story of Coin Foreman, an eight-year-old African American boy living in the slums of New York City during the Great Depression. Coin's innocence and youth are juxtaposed with the increasingly serious illness of his mother, Naomi, who is unable to receive treatment due to the family's poverty. His father's emphatic religiosity leads Coin to believe that he can save his mother through baptism into the Baptist church; Coin's acts of piety will be price enough for God's miracles. Naomi had a stroke during his birth, and the guilt that he feels for her illness adds to his commitment to finding a cure. Coin believes that physical blessings arise when spiritual promises are made; yet, when his mother dies, Coin learns the harsh realities of adulthood as he struggles to understand why she was not healed. The majority of the novel is spent portraying the religious rituals of Coin's baptism and confirmation in addition to his mother's funeral. Shortly after his mother's death, his father's health also begins

to fail. Because his siblings cannot care for Coin, he is sent to Washington D.C. to live with his blind, carousing uncle. While there, Coin struggles to find a place for himself. Eventually he finds some peace when he finds his mother's name, Naomi, in the Bible. The end of the novel leaves Coin with his uncle Washington, though the story continues in Dodson's second novel, *Come Home Early Child* (1977).

The extent to which *Boy at the Window* can be considered dramatic depends on theoretical perspectives of African American performance, as well as Dodson's stated and implicit perspectives on the subject. Theories regarding African American performance are varied, but several theorists agree that religious rituals were key to the development of African American performance and drama. In *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor*, Genevieve Fabre offers a theoretical apparatus by which Dodson's commitment to drama can be illuminated. She argues that the aesthetics and traditions of African American theater arose from the need to redefine African American identity outside of the images and symbols embraced by white America (1). Because redefinition required stepping outside of white-controlled zones, African American theater developed out of "religion, rituals, narrative forms, and music" traditional to black slave communities (108). Religion came to represent more than just spiritual worship for black communities; religion became a mode of performance. Drawing upon this history, Dodson incorporated religious rituals into his novel so that they also become modes of performance.

Additional scholars elucidate how religious rituals became performative within African American writing, and how performance left writers with room for subversion. Melva Costen explains that, "African American worship [was] generally expressed vocally and physically rather than meditatively," explaining why Dodson may have used song and call-and-response within his novel (18). The genre of novel affords Dodson room for textual play, or "signifyin." In

The Signifying Monkey, Gates analyzes African American oral traditions in order to explain how such traditions attempt to re-figure the power structures of language in order to provide blacks with real power. Signifying, or attempts at reclaiming black identity and power, can be done through rhetorical games and violence, irony, style, call-and-response, and indirection, many of which Coin uses in order to re-define the terms presented to him by adults (49-54).

Experimenting with form to create something new, Dodson's writing forces reflection on racist beliefs in America, and in turn, invites readers to identify with the characters in the novel. Jane Tompkins explains that the effects of literature "are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective outside of its realization in the mind of a reader" (ix). Analyzing the construction of Dodson's novel must be accompanied by an analysis of how readers might react to that construction—only then can scholars see how Dodson's novel was politically oriented.

Inheriting a long and rich tradition of performance from his African American predecessors, who used performance to subvert white oppression, Dodson linked the hope of racial equality with the dramatic, viewing the theater as space of creativity, free speech, and black discourse. In particular, Dodson was greatly influenced by W. E. B. Du Bois, who was one of Dodson's colleagues at Spellman College and who wrote regarding the necessity of performance within black communities. Du Bois' writings greatly affected Dodson, who was often invited to Du Bois' parties and discussions at Spellman. In a letter to Dodson regarding one of Dodson's plays, Du Bois wrote, "Your play last night was one of the best, if not the very best, ever given at Atlanta University" (qtd. in Hatch, *Sorrow* 69). In 1926, Du Bois issued a call to African American writers, emphasizing the importance of drama and asking them to write, "*About us, By us, For us, [and] Near us*" (134). Du Bois believed that art defines communities

and that a lack of African American art makes it difficult to assert African American identity, humanity, and legitimacy. The time that Dodson spent with Du Bois greatly affected Dodson, increasing his commitment to the dramatic within his writing.ⁱⁱⁱ

Building the community-oriented theorizations of performance that Du Bois had innovated two decades earlier during the Harlem Renaissance, Dodson once stated that the most important participant of any dramatic experience is not the “producer, the director, the actors, [or] designers,” but rather it is, “above all, the audience” (“Who” 54). For Dodson, performance offered a means by which he could increase identification among opposing groups. He believed that art had the power to transcend race, sexuality, politics and religion, asserting that “the healing and blessed presence of artistic values” can overcome conflict (“Playwrights” 36). In *Boy at the Window*, Dodson extended Du Bois’ call for dramatic writing to the setting of the church.

Speaking of the identification he wanted viewers to feel during one of his plays, *Divine Comedy*, Dodson stated, “It is not an all-white or an all-black play; it has individuals in it. And I think I caught in it the spirit or the idea that all people in the United States—black, white, or whatever—have the same ideas and ideals and loves” (“Interview” 628). His goal in writing drama was to make audience members of various classes and races identify with one another in a society that institutionally denied such identification. Further developing his thoughts on the playwright’s ability to open a space for identification, Dodson wrote “Playwrights in Dark Glasses” (printed in a 1968 edition of *Negro Digest*), in which he stated, “no playwright [should] ever tell all but leaves a great deal to the imagination of the audience so that they, as audience, can interpret and participate” (33).

Dodson’s plays invited audience participation by presenting scenes that could lead audience members to question their instinctive reactions to the events on stage. In order to

accomplish that type of questioning, Dodson employed two major modes of performance—the dramatic song and call-and-response dialogue. The convention of incorporating song into drama is of ancient origin, and has been found in the texts from Greece, China, India and Babylonia, and it had numerous instantiations in American drama—from vaudeville and blackface minstrelsy through the musical—the later of which started to appear on American stages during Dodson’s mid-twentieth-century career as a playwright.^{iv} The same may be said of the tradition of call-and-response within dramatic and ritual performances, which is similar to the choral tradition of the Greeks, and dates aback to the mid 1600s in America when slaves brought it from Africa. It has been prominent in African American dramatic as well as religious performances.^v Scholars argue that call-and-response offered a means by which African Americans could subvert master narratives and versions of history.^{vi} Genevieve Fabre argues that religion became a “dramatic mode” in African American writing, saying that the functionality of religion is often more important than its message (48). Both song and call-and-response are performance traditions that have often overlapped in practice, especially because African American religious traditions have been oriented toward performance, and many African American stage-based performances have been religiously oriented.^{vii}

In line with Barbara Christian, who argues that the academic world consists of theories that are often “alien to and opposed to [African American] needs and orientation,” this essay seeks to analyze Dodson’s text in light of his own theories in addition to those of other scholars (281). We have a window into Dodson’s specific theorizations regarding song and call-and-response in Dodson’s 1937 morality play (written during his Masters program at Yale and performed in 1938 by the university’s drama department), which is set within a Baptist church, a space that promoted identification with others through its teachings of loving God and others.^{viii}

Divine Comedy questions whether God cares for African Americans after they are continually abused by institutionalized racism. The play portrays the plight of the poor, who flock toward a new “prophet” who promises to feed and clothe them, but who is actually exploiting African Americans for their communal wealth. Complicating racial representations, the play traces the exploitation of African Americans by an African American man.

In *Divine Comedy*, dramatic song demonstrates how the text leads audience members to question their own hasty judgments and reactions regarding African Americans. Within the play, song functions to tempt an elderly woman named Rachel from her own faith when she forsakes it for that of the prophet. Rachel resists joining the prophet, whom she views as being apocryphal, until one night while praying and alone in the Baptist church she is interrupted by the prophet and his followers through song. The stage directions for this scene read, “*The light in the Church area comes dimly on as she mounts the stairs. Several men and women on their knees, standing up and sitting on chairs, swaying: their shadows huge against the backdrop*” (40). The music swells loudly so that Rachel can no longer perform the ritual of prayer, as it entails a spiritual and private communication with God. Although the music from the prophet is religious, it detracts from Rachel’s ability to worship, making the song take on a profane nature as it leads Rachel away from God—from whom Rachel has received comfort previously.

The prophet, who claims to be Christ returned, uses song in order to entrance community members, including Rachel, away from the Baptist faith. The Baptist preacher enters, and sees Rachel listening to the music, to which he responds, “Sister, your faith is still strong. Don’t let dat music an’ dat dancin’ turn you from yo’ Christ. He still watchin’ from above” (43). The preacher recognizes that the song of the prophet mocks religious worship because it causes a physical and spiritual turning away from God, drawing both Rachel and the audience’s attention

away from God and toward the prophet. Halting the direction of the narrative, the song re-directs the course of the play, upsetting audience expectations of Rachel's commitment and loyalty to her religious beliefs. By drawing the audience's attention away from God, the play asserts that their attention is similar to Rachel's. Like Rachel, the audience is quickly distracted and turns away from thoughts of God, allowing the audience to question their own reaction to Rachel's decision to leave her church. Previously portrayed as a religious zealot, Rachel's departure may seem hypocritical—but as audience members go through the same process, Rachel's departure from of her church seem more like an act of self-preservation than an act of abandonment.

Divine Comedy also demonstrates Dodson's use of the Greek chorus, which resembles the call-and-response mode of worship as it provides an alternate narrative voice, acting as dialectic for viewers and inviting them to question their faith—just as the community does. As community looks for some kind of relief from their pain, the first chorus asks how they will be relieved, and in response, the second chorus builds upon that question with another:

FIRST CHORUS: Where is shelter?

SECOND CHORUS: Where is Christ?

FIRST CHORUS: We are Winter worn. All doors are shut in our faces: The thud is a burning in our ears: We wander the streets like rats in a moldy church.

BOTH CHORUSES: Where is Christ? (3)

As one chorus rhetorically asks, "Where is shelter?" the second chorus responds by placing the blame for their misfortune on Christ. The refrain "Where is Christ?" is repeated in a similar fashion to the call-and-response tradition throughout the play every time the characters speak of some physical need. Repeatedly asking, "Where is Christ?" is intended to lead audience members to evaluate their own beliefs regarding religion as it interrogates the true Christianity of

Rachel, the new prophet, and the community. The call-and-response tradition was largely formed in Baptist churches, in which clergy members would yell to the audience, who would then respond to their statements with their own. In a similar way, this passage involves two parties responding to one another about Christ's role in their suffering. The choruses build upon each other, asking whether individuals can believe in or trust Christ knowing that he is letting them or others suffer. Dodson's use of the Greek chorus in this play demonstrates how two voices in dialogue can offer narrative and counter-narrative in a succinct manner, while inviting the audience to consider the positions of the characters in a less reactive and judgmental way. Both song and call-and-response within *Divine Comedy* demonstrate Dodson's experimentation with the two modes that was later employed in *Boy at the Window*, shedding light on how the novel subtly resists white control.

Dramatic Song in *Boy at the Window*

Dodson's dramatic writing and theories help to highlight the ways in which dramatic song in *Boy at the Window* serves the novel in three main ways: it shows how Coin believes he must perform particular roles, it stops the narrative flow to bring extra attention to the scene, and it offers a counter-narrative to the events at hand. Each of these uses of song serves to question the system of white patriarchy and to induce reader sympathy to eventually invite reader identification with Coin. In Dodson's novel, songs are demarcated by italicized text to set them apart from the narrative and often draw attention to particular scenes. One such song is a hymn sung during Coin's baptism. Coin is baptized because he believes that he must act out the role of a Christian convincingly in order to ask for God's help on behalf of his mother. Coin feels great guilt and responsibility for his mother's illness because she suffered from a stroke upon his birth. The narrator renders Coin's baptismal scene in this way:

Coin was thrust into the water and came up hollering just like Deaconess Westerfield told him every Christian did when he was transformed...[and] he heard the triumphant singing of the congregation:

Hallelujah, it's done
I believe on the Son,
I am saved by the blood
Of the crucified One.

The song came toward him like going up steps to a door. The way was opened for him to ask the Lord to help his mother. And so in his flannel robe, shivering, with the music mounting on his wet flesh he got down on his knees... and began to cry. (66)

This scene reveals Dodson's use performance in several ways, and, importantly, the category of dramatic song is at the center of them all. First, Coin believes that he must perform the role of a Christian convincingly in order to receive God's help. In a similar way to *Boy at the Window*, *Divine Comedy* highlights the acting of particular roles like the devoted Christian. The significance of acting out particular roles is heightened because of Rachel's quick abandonment of her original saint-like role. Like Rachel's need to perform the role of a Christian in *Divine Comedy*, the novel makes it clear that if Coin believed "if he became a real Christian, God might listen to his prayers for Mama" (32). As the main character of the novel, Coin is at the forefront of all action that takes place, yet his character has very little sense of identity besides the performance of particular roles. The roles he does play, he plays well—during his baptism Coin plays the role of the pious with meticulous detail, even remembering to "holler" upon exiting the water. His hollering does not originate from a spiritual epiphany, but rather from the expectations

of Deaconess Westerfield, an important figure in the church and community. As Coin acts out various roles like a character on stage, his characterization is as similar to the role of an actor on stage as it is of a novelistic character. In *Coin*, Dodson's integration of the dramatic into the novel is apparent.

Much of Coin's belief that he can achieve particular ends through acting stems from his family's propensity to perform—all of them regularly act out parodies of their schools and church. Often, Coin sees his disobedient brother evade his father's anger by distracting him with performances of their Baptist preacher (34). Coin's persona is crafted with particular emphasis upon his similarity to a stage actor. As Coin's performances become increasingly obvious and clear, readers may see that each of his roles functions as a way to heal his mother—his roles revolve around acts of religious piety, from baptism to confirmation to prayer. Though this realization does make Coin a sympathetic character because he takes on those roles in an attempt to do everything possible to help his mother—it also invites readers to wonder why Coin's various roles are seen as a last resort for Naomi's survival. Additional circumstances earlier in the novel like Coin's holey socks (43) and his hunger (75) hint that the Naomi never had a substantial chance at surviving her stroke due to her economic position. Poverty prevents her from receiving the care she needs. Coin's commitment to religion reveals Coin and Naomi's economic position—leading readers to see that her death is partly the result of her inability to receive treatment.

Song also functions within the novel to halt the narrative flow of the story so that emphasis is placed on the violent nature of Christ's death, which in turn foreshadows Naomi's death. The scene develops so that readers are invited to feel sympathy for Coin. The song sung by the congregation after Coin exits the baptismal pool echoes the dramatic quality of Coin's

performance by intruding upon the narrative progression with italicized text and changing how readers see the first issue of performance as previously discussed. The function of song within the novel echoes Rachel's interrupted prayer as it also briefly halts the narrative progression of Coin's religious ritual, drawing attention to Coin's reaction to the hymn and to the words themselves. Coin's baptism is the climax of the novel to this point, as the several chapters before his baptism prepare readers for a triumphant, miraculous moment in which Coin and his mother will be saved—albeit Coin spiritually and his mother physically. Yet, in the moment that Coin bursts out of the water yelling, the hymn stops the narrative flow of Coin's act, taking reader attention away from Coin to the words of the hymn.

The lyrics explain why baptism is so important for Coin's religious community—it ensures that they will “be saved” from sin. By explaining that the speaker is free of sin, the lyrics focus on Christ's “blood” and “crucifixion” or the physical violence involved in Christ's death. As Coin performs the ritual that he believes will save his mother, the hymn draws attention to the physicality of the crucifixion and the violet nature of Christ's death, which foreshadows Naomi's death in the process. This foreshadowing is strengthened by Coin's emotional reaction to the song; he begins to cry and is unable to pray despite several weeks of preparation for the moment. Rather than building toward a climactic prayer as expected, the scene leaves readers with the image of a child crying and the implication that his mother will die. In this moment, the text invites readers to feel sympathy for Coin—they've seen the extent to which he has put on roles that he thought would legitimize his prayers, knowing that he does not believe himself worthy enough for God's miracles without the label of Christian. They also know that his efforts are in vain. Whether Coin cries because he finally feels worthy to pray or because he too senses his mother's impending death is unknown, but the effect of the scene is clearly intended to move

readers toward sympathy. As Dodson stated, his goal was to lead audiences and actors toward identification and leading readers to feel sympathy was a first step in that process.

Additional songs in the novel interrupt scenes and offer a counter-narrative to the events taking place in Coin's life. Shortly after his mother dies, Coin's family sends him away to live with an uncle, and Coin is often left alone to care for himself. One afternoon, Coin meets another boy named Ferris who is alone and waiting to catch a train back home. The two become fast friends, and soon Coin wishes he could accompany Ferris to Kentucky when Coin's reveries are interrupted by Ferris who is singing a song that reads:

Honey in the bee ball,

I cant' see ya'll.

...“What's that, Ferris?”

“Hide-and-peek song.”

“...You know what, Ferris, I sure wish I could go with you.” (183)

Just as song is used in *Divine Comedy* to highlight Rachel's poverty and lead readers to question whether temporal or spiritual needs are more important, the hide-and-peek song reflects Ferris and Coin's nearly destitute circumstances as they stand on the train platform. Drawing attention to those circumstances additionally draws attention to the lyrics of the song, revealing a deeper parallel that Dodson is drawing to the two boys. The first two lines of the song are part of a song recorded by the Louis Jordan and the Elks Rendezvous Band in 1938, which was a popular music group among both African Americans and whites. The lyrics speak of a game of hide-and-peek “underneath the southern moon” in language similar to what would be used in reference to escaping slaves. Indeed, Jordan took much of the song from “Honey Bee Ball,” a hide-and-peek game that slave children played, and whose experience with running and hiding likely involved

friends or family who had run-away (Federal 50). Though lighthearted in sound due to its jazzy swing style, Jordan's version of the song threateningly repeats, "no matter where you go; it's my specialty, I'm gonna find you" (Chilton 264).

Given the history of the song, it can be surmised that those being "found" within the song are run-away slaves. Coin and Ferris are both like and unlike the run-away slaves in the song. Like the slaves, Ferris and Coin are without homes in a society that still asserts their inequality. Unlike the slaves, nobody is searching for the boys. In fact, Coin's plight seems to be the opposite of the slaves; after his mother's death he is continually searching for a role or friend that will provide him with a sense of stability. He befriends Ferris and asks if he may live with him so that he will no longer be left alone—as he was by his mother, his father, and his uncle. As Ferris catches his train, Coin sees that, "Ferris was going ...the answers were running away" and yells after him, "Ferris, Ferris Ferris write me, write me a letter, write me" (189). Left alone by the adults that should supervise them, the boys bring reader attention to the displacement African Americans (past and present) that are outcast by society. Likening the boys to the slaves, the song asserts that Coin and Ferris are also victims of long tradition of African American displacement.

Using the hymn and the song of the famed black artist Louis Jordan allows Dodson to incorporate social commentary into the scene—by likening the boys to run-away slaves, the text argues that little has changed for African Americans in terms of equality by showing that they are still displaced. The text makes this parallel in subtle, non-combative manner, making it more difficult for whites to quickly dismiss the comparison. Unlike Dodson's texts, the texts of some of his peers make racial claims that were so confrontational that they were easy to ignore by white readers who didn't feel they enacted extreme violence on African Americans. *Boy at the*

Window only mentions Coin's race twice, and each instance comes through the words of other characters, when he is called "a dirty nigger" (7), and when told "he would be cute if he was white" by neighbors (48). Rather than explicitly talking about the history of African Americans and their continued displacement, Dodson chooses instead to invoke a history of displacement that speaks for itself. Using an old slave song that contextualizes running away for children allows Dodson to draw parallels between Coin and Ferris, and past slaves in a way that is not combative. In this way, the novel does not force readers to think or feel in specific ways, but instead allows them to do the mental work of drawing parallels. By inviting readers to make these connections, the text invites participation to ensure that readers are part of the meaning-making process. As active participants in creating meaning, readers are more likely to identify with the boys.

Call-and-Response in *Boy at the Window*

Call-and-response is another major mode of performance that Dodson employs in the novel, and it illuminates how Dodson's theory of performance is integrated into the text formally and thematically. Building upon the use of song, Dodson employs call-and-response patterns of communication to offer counter-narratives to those asserted by Coin's congregation. *Divine Comedy's* use of the Greek chorus demonstrates Dodson's affinity for alternate narratives, which complicate the ideas asserted by the narrative and lead readers to re-think the message being conveyed. Similarly, *Boy at the Window* employs the call-and-response mode, which makes Coin's voice function as an alternate narrative to the narratives asserted by the church. Coin subverts the narratives told to him by authority figures. Directly after his baptism, the congregation responds to the preacher's singing with enthusiasm, reinforcing whatever claims the hymns make through their ritualistic halleluiahs and yeses. As the preacher calls to the

audience with religious assertions, they respond back with reaffirming words. Coin grows uncomfortable as the “voices mounted,” singing:

And He walks with me and He talks with me,

And he tells me I am His own,

And the joy we share as we tarry there,

None other has ever known.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yesssssss, yes, yes,” gobbled Sister Dora Highsmith, “yes, yes, yes.” (68)

Though Coin was baptized, his unwillingness to participate in affirming the words of the hymn demonstrate a discomfort that stems from his recent remembrance of his mother’s severe illness and his own guilt surrounding it. As Coin undergoes the rituals necessary to be a “true Christian,” the novel says that Coin “thought [prayer] would be easy after the water. But when he had tried to pray, he only felt the flat pat of Deconess Redmond on his head and was nervous between his legs” (68). Despite his efforts at Christianity, Coin’s expectation for miracles unmet, and he does not “walk” or “talk” with God as the hymn explains he will.

When prayer does not get easier, and Coin feels no extra power from God to save his mother, he slowly backs away from religious rituals like call-and-response that affirm God’s promises. He refuses to participate in singing or responding to the preacher. Rather than joining Sister Highsmith in her reaffirming responses to the preacher, Coin mocks her participation in by hyperbolizing her “yeses.” He then focuses on the physical to block out the spiritual assertions being made by taking mental note of each of his body parts and how they are feeling, purposefully ignoring the hymn and refusing to call back to the preacher. Acting out of rebellion,

Coin resists any means of affirming God's ways—Coin refuses to acknowledge the God that did not acknowledge him.

At his mother's funeral, Coin continues to resist participation in religious rituals, and instead creates a counter-narrative to the narrative that his mother is better off in heaven. Made angry by the knowledge that God would not help his mother, Coin resists spirituality in order to block out further pain and trauma. The role of the chorus in *Divine Comedy* is applicable to this scene because it offers the counter-narrative "Where is Christ?", questioning Christ's role in the suffering of the community. Similarly, Coin offers a counter-narrative to the hymns sung by humming a children's rhyme throughout the scene. Winfried Herget and Alfred Hornung write that for African Americans, funerals provided an opportunity for families to figuratively reclaim the body of the deceased, who typically had little or no control over their bodies in life (97). Coin performs his own reclamation over his mother by refusing to sing as he is supposed to, asserting his own counter-narrative to the teachings taught by the hymn.

As the congregation sings a hymn of bereavement, Coin hums "Yes! We have no Bananas Today," a song of disputed origin that was supposedly written by a grocer in New York or a cartoonist in Chicago after Brazil's banana shortage in the early 1900s and became a popular jazz song during the mid 1900s.^{ix} The song became popular in movements of resistance; the Irish sang the song to represent their plight against the British, the British sang the song in WWII in protests against Nazi Germany, and racially mixed bands sang it before the Civil Rights movement began in earnest (Goodman). Like those before him, Coin extends the song's signification of resistance to his own life by using the words to protest against the message communicated within the hymn. As the banana song and the hymn intermingle, Coin responds to the call, or assertion, that his mother is now safely in heaven. The section reads:

*Fleet as a bird that flies to rest,
 Yes, we have no bananas, we have no bananas today...
 Fleet as a bird to the mountains,
 We got all kinds of onions
 Carrots and bunions but
 Fleet as a bird to the heavens... (140).*

The hymn of bereavement sung for Naomi is interspersed with snippets of the banana song. As his mother's soul metaphorically rises to heaven, Coin is fixated on the physical. Although the refrains are intermingled, they conflict in focus and meaning—one focuses on the most basic human need of hunger, while the other focuses on ephemeral spiritual beliefs.

Although the speaker of the song has “carrots” and “onions,” he is missing the banana, which to Coin represents his mother's love; Coin remembers the “image of his mother dragging her foot down Black Avenue with a banana in her hand for him” (136). The absence of bananas signifies the absence of Coin's mother, and so in singing about that absence, Coin focuses on the effects of her death rather than remembering her life, as is traditional at funerals. Unusually, the rhyme ends by saying that the speaker also has “bunions.” A painful inflammation on the toe, bunions make walking, and thus travel, laborious and difficult. In the rhyme, the bunions remind Coin of the harsh realities of a physical body. Rather than flying on wings to heaven with his mother, he is figuratively left to limp along without her.

The hymn and the rhyme are examples of counter-narrative, as Coin's insertions of text provide a different perspective than what is intended, he mentally subverts the message of the hymn by denying the possibility of a peaceful heaven, and, like the chorus in *Divine Comedy* placing the blame for bleak circumstances upon God. Coin creates an opposing narrative that

subverts the congregation's viewpoints while providing a distinct response of his own. While the rhyme recounts the imagined rap of a street vendor, the hymn focuses on "flying" to the imagined church's heaven. Working to contradict the spiritual travel within the hymn, the rhyme emphasizes physicality by listing off fruits and vegetables. Though the banana song has been appropriated to various causes, Dodson extends its signification beyond protest and into the realm of the church, making the church ceremony more secular and the song more sacred. Sullied by the street vendor's song, the church's assertions no longer hold the authority they previously did for Coin. This overlap comes as the result of Coin's participation in the ritual as he skews the traditional participation to counter the narrative that his mother is in a better place.

Using the call-response tradition of African American worship, the combination of the hymn and the rhyme revises the significance and meaning of each song on its own, performing and asserting something new. *Divine Comedy* chorus performs similarly. As one chorus speaks of their poverty, the other chorus draws deep and controversial implications about who is responsible, creating a dialogue about God's responsibility for people on earth. Within *Boy at the Window*, the hymn no longer asserts that heaven is the best place for Naomi, and the children's rhyme no longer simply sings of food. Together, the texts form a counter-narrative to that of the funeral, declaring Naomi's death to be tragic rather than triumphant. Both the song and the rhyme have traditions in African American culture, and when combined, they draw on another tradition of call-and-response, creating a form that is distinctly African American. Ironically, the call-and-response tradition acts as an enabling form of communication for Coin—it provides him with a means to negate the messages of the church using a mode created within the church. That negation is unexpected because it uses call-and-response to assert his own power, and to assert that his mother's life was important and valued. Before her death, Coin performs every religious

ritual with exactness in an attempt to gain God's miracles, and when that does not work, he quickly refutes any message that suggests her death was meaningful or triumphant. Rather, Coin asserts that life is always better than death, even for those marginalized within society. As readers come to understand Coin's assertions, they can confront their own views on life and death, which in turn, would invite identification with Coin.

Dodson and a New Approach to Black Writing in the 1950s

By looking closely at *Boy at the Window* and the way that it portrays Dodson's theory of performance, readers can see how the novel was crafted to meet his goal of identification. In the process, Dodson's non-confrontational novel shows a previously unseen method of undercutting racism in US society. Using song and call-and-response to confront ideas of racial inequality in audience members was distinct to Dodson. This analysis is important because it recovers Dodson in the context of a literary history that sees larger trends and often ignores individual writers, and it reveals unique, formal innovations by an important African American writer. Dodson's integration of drama into the novel sets his book apart from others, as it relied upon the dramatic while allowing him to experiment with form and character in innovative ways. Thus, the novel reveals a previously little-studied writing trend in the early 1950s, which was the preoccupation with the dramatic form within fiction.^x

Whether the integration of the dramatic into the novel was widespread during the 1950s is yet unstudied, but provides rich possibilities for ways in which scholars can re-read the works of writers like Baldwin, Wright, and other previously unstudied writers. In "Breaking the Signifying Chain: A New Blueprint for African American Literary Studies," Bill Mullen argues that class is as important to understanding African American texts as race, but states that it has been greatly understudied (146). He emphasizes the importance of reading texts with varied

lenses so that scholars do not limit the scope of their scholarship to one particular aspect of African American writing. This essay seeks to adhere to this vein of thinking; scholars must look for both texts and lenses that are outside of the purview of mainstream scholarship in order to create a more comprehensive literary history. By reading texts that are previously unstudied, scholars will find innovations by unknown writers and have a more complete view of what African American writers of the period employed. And, re-reading already studied works with new lenses will result in broader understanding of the current canon by extrapolating previously realized innovations. If, for example, scholars re-read the works of writers to understand how their texts are performative, they will likely find new ways of combatting racism, dealing with class issues, and developing formal innovations.

This process has already started—Baldwin’s theory of performance was studied by Koritha Mitchell, who wrote “James Baldwin, Performance Theorist, Sings the Blues for Mister Charlie,” in which she analyzes Baldwin’s theory of performance in his play *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Though the article engages with Baldwin’s unique performative aesthetics, it does not engage with any of Baldwin’s novels to determine whether Baldwin’s theory of performance was integrated into them. Like Dodson, Baldwin wrote both drama and fiction—and Baldwin’s plays may give new readings into his novels like *Go Tell it On the Mountain*. Additionally, Wright’s adapted dramatic version of *Native Son* may reveal previously unexplored themes and aesthetics within the novel *Native Son*—whatever Wright maintained from the novel when writing the play would reveal what he thought were the most important aspects of the story. Analyses regarding how their work fits into canonical categories have been extensive and fruitful, but it is likely that their writing also departed from those categories in important ways, revealing a more complete African American literary history.

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ⁱ On these trends, see Witt 112-120, Miller xii-5, and Gates 1355-1368.

ⁱⁱ For Miller's work, see *Black American Poets Between Worlds, 1940-1960*. For Krasner's, see *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance 1910-1927*, pages 12-16. For Effiong's, see *In Search of a Model for African-American Drama*, pages 10-13. For Fabre's, see the Introduction of *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor*. For Gates and McKay, *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pages 1355-1368.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on Dodson's relationship with Du Bois, see James Hatch's *Sorrow is the Only Faithful One*, pages 65-69.

^{iv} On song's presence in Greek Drama see chapter one of Edward Lippman's *A History of Western Musical Aesthetics*; on song's general incorporation onto the American stage, see Richard Kilsan's, *The Musical: A Look at American Musical Theater*; on song's role in African American drama, see Phillip Effiong's *In Search of a Model for African American Drama*, pages 182-190.

^v On the call-and-response tradition of performance dating back to Africa, see Samuel Floyd's *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History From Africa to the United States*; on its persistence in African American dramatic performance and religious rituals, see John Callahan's *In the African American Grain: Call-and-Response in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction*.

^{vi} See Maggie Sale's "Call-and-Response as Critical Method: African American Oral Traditions and Beloved."

^{vii} On this overlap, see Melva Costen's *African American Christian Worship*. Costen argues that religious worship offered a means by which African Americans could participate in communal worship despite illiteracy. Call-and-response was particularly useful in this setting because it provided a means by which illiterate slaves could sing hymns without hymnbooks for reference. Costen asserts that African Americans tied the sacred and the secular through art, making religion more secular and art more sacred (44).

^{viii} *Divine Comedy* was written during his Masters program at Yale and was only performed once by Yale's drama department in 1938. Although the play was praised by the local community, the play was never performed again (Hatch 53).

^{ix} See "Peelings on the Pavement." *Chicago Daily Tribune*. July 23, 1923 page 6, and Paddy Devlin's *Yes We Have No Bananas: Outdoor Relief in Belfast 1920-39*.

^x Though drama's integration into fiction has not received a great deal of attention, one notable exception includes Peter Bailey's *The Novel as Performance*.