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Love Story Black and the Third Plane Novel

In a 2004 interview with Jeff Biggers for *The Bloomsbury Review*, William Demby mused: “Since *Catacombs*, I think I have been kicked out of the Black Arts race.” Demby’s experimental second novel was published in 1965 at the beginning of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), an offshoot of the Black Power Movement (BPM) through which young Black artists in various fields advocated for the creation of art by and for Black people. Demby’s invocation of a Black American cultural movement that had ended more than a generation earlier suggests a lingering frustration that his novels, colored by experiment, irreverence, and satire, might not have been considered either political enough or Black enough to merit inclusion in the BAM.

While Demby’s subject matter and offbeat approach to storytelling undoubtedly influenced his reception in the BAM era, this essay will explore the role that periodization plays in his works’ marginalization within the larger African American literary canon. In this reexamination of Demby’s 1978 novel *Love Story Black*, I will consider how that work might be retrospectively classified as part of, or at the very least profoundly influenced by what dramaturg and critic Pancho Savery calls the “Third Plane.” Building on Savery’s work, Trey Ellis notes in his 1989 essay “The New Black Aesthetic” that “during the mid-seventies [Third Plane artists such as Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, and John Edgar Wideman] were a minority of the black-arts community, branded either counter-revolutionary, too artsy or just not good propagandists” (237). Although these writers did not fit within the BAM, their work is seen as an important bridge to the post-soul, or post-Black art of the 1980s, to that of the present day. Given that Demby’s first novel *Beetlecreek* was published in 1950 while other Third Plane artists’ major works were first published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Demby is not normally included in this group. Critics such as Biggers, and Nathan Scott, in his Foreword to the 1991 reissue of *The Catacombs*, have suggested that it was either Demby’s expatriate status or his inclusion of characters that come from varied racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds in his novels that distanced him from African American critics and readers. As Biggers asserts,

This dual cultural identity, while seemingly placing Demby on the stage with other intellectual heavyweights, somehow ended up displacing him in the American literary arena. . . . In the process, Demby’s relationship with the canons and canonists of African American literature, including fellow West Virginia-raised critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is elusive at best.

I do agree that Demby’s international focus, in both his work and his life, likely negatively affected his reception in the United States, but I also think that the timing of his emergence as a writer—with the publication of *Beetlecreek* having occurred almost two decades before those writers included in the Third Plane had published their major works—had a greater impact on his legacy as an African American writer. Ultimately, I will argue that *Love Story Black* shares many important features with other Third Plane books, and should be counted among them, allowing for a reconsideration of Demby’s later work as more contemporary and influential than has previously been recognized.

In order to advance this argument, I will discuss some key features of the Third Plane and post-soul while considering the ways in which *Love Story Black* replicates some of the same generational tensions that affected Demby’s reception and

inclusion in the African American literary canon. Given his experimental approach to time in his novels, it is fitting that this article will focus on the effect that periodization has had on Demby's reputation in the United States. *Love Story Black* reflects many of the issues he discusses in the early 1970s, during which he begins to ponder the role of the novel—particularly the Black novel—in an age of such urgent political and social upheaval. As Demby states in a 1972 interview:

It occurred to me one day in my Black Literature class that the writing of novels has suddenly become a profound crisis, a crisis which was not only in the black world, but corresponded with the crisis of the novel all over the Western world. It's that people, and we have examples of it, broke away from the idea of writing. To such a degree that they themselves became characters in a kind of expanded-consciousness type novel. I'm speaking of Malcolm X, [Eldridge] Cleaver, Rap Brown. They all seem to have been living a kind of Dostoevskian kind of life. And it may be difficult now for black writers to find exactly what they want to write. (qtd. in O'Brien 1)

Edwards, who narrates his own story in *Love Story Black*, certainly grapples with these challenges. Throughout the novel, his anxieties and insecurities as a writer and teacher of Black American literature, and his general sense of disorientation in the highly racially politicized milieu of early 1970s New York City are on full display.

Professor Edwards has recently returned to the United States after a number of years living in Europe. He is uneasy around members of the generation that follows his own who are politically engaged and subscribe to a Black aesthetic reminiscent of the BAM, and he fears they will deem his creative work and his teaching to be too Western, too white, and too old-fashioned. One of his activist students, Melinda, his younger lover Hortense, and Gracie, his editor at the glossy *New Black Woman*, each accuse him of being a cultural sellout, or of simply being generationally out of touch at different points in the novel. When Edwards approaches Gracie about writing a literary piece for her magazine she responds, "We're not printing any of that washed out white literary chi-chi bullshit. . . . We're trying to get to the nitty-gritty shit about the black experience!" Edwards continues his narration: "Gracie didn't like my novels and said I'd lived in Europe too long. 'You've got to take that brain of yours out of that white plastic bag!' she said" (4). This interaction between Edwards and Gracie highlights the expectations for Black writing during this politically turbulent midcentury era. Given Demby's belief that a Black writer "can imagine any world he wants to imagine" (Biggers), he is an artist whose ideas are more consistent with late twentieth- and twenty-first-century post-soul than in the more conservative 1950s when he first published, or during the BAM era, in which it was essential for Black artists to assert their political voices in their work. As Demby tells John O'Brien: "LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka] is lucky to be able to move over a landscape that is at once political and at once his own engagement. There does not seem to be a wall between what he does and what he writes. Now this is very fortunate and does not happen for all writers in any given period of history" (1). Demby praises a writer who creates art that engages the revolutionary moment that is reflected in both the time of this interview and the time frame of *Love Story Black*, yet his protagonist Edwards studiously avoids politics in his work. In fact, when Hortense first meets Edwards at the *New Black Woman* office, she questions his commitment, based on his notes and rough drafts, to engaging racial and gender politics in his profile of 1920s chanteuse Mona Pariss. But after seeing Edwards's concern, she relents: "But then those were only rough notes, poetic impressions, I'm sure you'll get around to a sound analysis of her socio-political reality when you complete your assignment" (57). So why does Demby take this course? Why does he place Edwards at the center of these debates, but keep him at a remove, relying instead on the women around him to voice these urgent political concerns? I would argue that Edwards, perhaps like Demby himself, is more comfortable being an

observer than a participant, and that satire allows the space for humor and irreverence while remaining at a distance. This irreverence is a hallmark of post-soul satire, and an outgrowth of the Third Plane. As Derek C. Maus notes, “the post-soul generation also normalizes a strident, frequently comedic self-critical tenor that remained relatively marginal or even taboo during earlier periods such as the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts Movement” (xv).

Before looking more closely at *Love Story Black*, it will be useful to examine some key elements of the Third Plane and its movement toward post-soul. *Love Story Black* takes place in 1971, just as the BAM—the artistic cousin of the Black Power Movement that Larry Neal referred to as “a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic” (29)—is winding down. While the BAM would continue until the mid-1970s, another group of Black writers whose works did not fit within the category of the BAM came of age. These artists were part of the Third Plane.

In Savery’s 1990 essay, “Third Plane at the Change of the Century: The Shape of African-American Literature to Come,” he offers this definition. Because of its importance, I am quoting it in full:

The Third Plane refers to that group of writers, primarily although not exclusively fiction writers, who started publishing in the late 1960s and early 1970s and who, although not specifically connected to the BAM, nevertheless were influenced by it. Unlike the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, the writers of the Third Plane do not question their own humanity or feel the need to prove it to white America; nor are they embarrassed by the variety and fullness of African-American life. And while, like the writers of the Second Renaissance [The BAM], they acknowledge an indigenous African-American cultural tradition, they are also aware that America is a pluralistic society, that African-American writers must draw on all traditions available to them, Western and non-Western, black and white. Finally, also unlike the writers of the Second Renaissance, they bring to the task of writing both a sense of the importance of craft and a more complete historical knowledge of the African-American folk past. For these writers, participants in Afro-America’s third major cultural explosion, it is the joint heritage of the Black Aesthetic and Ralph Ellison that has made their work possible. (241-42)

In Savery’s definition of the Third Plane, the BAM is not engaged in an oppositional manner. While the Third Plane and the BAM are clearly differentiated, Savery frames the Third Plane as a natural extension of the Black Aesthetic (242). In this continuum, we move from the BAM and Ralph Ellison to the Third Plane, and eventually to post-soul and post-Black. As Savery continues: “Third Plane writers can be considered ‘disciples’ of Ellison’s. I label these writers ‘disciples’ because they were conscious of Ellison’s groundbreaking work and consciously chose to follow in his footsteps. In other words, to a large extent, without the example of Ellison, the ‘disciples’ could not have written” (242-43). It is important to note that what makes being counted among the Third Plane so useful is that the vast majority of the artists named have had exceptional careers, their works manage to celebrate blackness while simultaneously complicating it, and they embrace experimental approaches, allowing for cross-racial influences; this is the model that anticipates post-soul.

For further consideration of Savery’s argument, here are thirteen Third Plane writers:

fp = first published; fpmw = first published major work

Toni Cade Bambara (b. 1939) – fpmw: *Gorilla, My Love*, 1972

Leon Forrest (1937) – fp/fpmw: *There is a Tree More Ancient than Eden*, 1973

Ernest Gaines (b. 1933) – fpmw: *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, 1971

Gayl Jones (b. 1949) – fp/fpmw: *Corregidora*, 1975

Clarence Major (b. 1936) – fpmw: *Swallow the Lake*, 1970

James Alan McPherson (1943) – fp/fpmw: *Hue and Cry: Stories*, 1969

Toni Morrison (b. 1931) – fp/fpmw: *The Bluest Eye*, 1970

Albert Murray (b. 1916) – fp/fpmw: *The Omni-Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy*, 1970
 Ishmael Reed (b. 1938) – fpmw: *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, 1969
 Ntozake Shange (b. 1948) – fp/fpmw: *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, 1976
 Alice Walker (b. 1944) – fp/fpmw: *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, 1970
 John Edgar Wideman (b. 1941) – fp/fpmw: *A Glance Away*, 1967
 Al Young (b. 1939) – fp/fpmw: *Dancing*, 1969

The Previous Writing Generation:

William Demby (b. 1922) – fp/fpmw: *Beetlecreek*, 1950
 Ralph Ellison (b. 1913) – fp/fpmw: *Invisible Man*, 1952

Again, a major criterion for inclusion in the Third Plane is the date of the writer's first major publication. The writer's chronological age—an important consideration for inclusion in the post-soul generation—has no bearing. This is why Albert Murray, Ellison's friend and contemporary who published his first book *The Omni-Americans* in 1970, is included in the Third Plane.

For Savery, from his 1990 perspective, the Third Plane is the future of African American literature, while for Trey Ellis, it provides a pathway for the next generation of important African American writers and culture makers. Savery is concerned with the Third Plane writers' reshaping of African American literature, while Ellis is focused on writers as well as filmmakers, comedians, musicians, and other creators who he sees as the future of Black art writ large. I would argue that both ideas are valid. These thirteen writers have had writing careers with varying degrees of success, while also serving a useful purpose: In all of the ways that Ellison influenced them—directly or indirectly—they have done the same for the post-soul writers. O'Brien asks Demby, "Are there any authors who have affected your writing?" He answers, "Well, I think that Virginia Woolf did, for some reason." When pressed for others, he adds, "Camus, of course. Of the black writers, only Ellison. I have a very strong feeling that . . . the novels of Richard Wright didn't influence me very much" (1). While Demby cites Ellison as an influence like the Third Plane novelists do, and he is publishing work at the same time that the Third Plane novelists are, *Love Story Black* (and by extension Demby) is not included in this group because he emerged as a writer too early. Demby was born in 1922, and he published his first (and important) novel, *Beetlecreek*, in 1950 at age twenty-eight. Demby's work emerged just before Ellison's did, although he was nine years younger. Ellison was thirty-nine when he published *Invisible Man* in 1952. A blurb at the back of *Love Story Black* demonstrates that Ellison once praised *Beetlecreek*, however roughly, as "a good book." Ellison was both contemporary of and influence to Demby, and Demby shares these elements with those in the Third Plane. Yet, because he first published two decades earlier than they, and did not have the same literary impact in the US as did Ellison, his work was included neither in Savery's theorizing of the Third Plane, nor in Ellis's use of the Third Plane as a precursor to the New Black Aesthetic (NBA), which would eventually be renamed post-soul. The inclusion of Demby's work as part of Third Plane writing might have brought more African American readers and critics to his work in the 1990s. Without it, however—and without recognition as his being even, let us say, a proto-Third Plane writer—his work has largely been ignored by scholars of African American literature.

While it is important to note that all of these categories—the BAM, the Third Plane, post-soul—are fictions, that does not mean that these critical constructions do not do real political work. In other words, these critical categories are constructed; they are not inherently real. Even so, a category such as the Third Plane canonizes the included writers, impacting how they are seen and read retrospectively. Savery's identification of a group of writers who emerged at around the same time and

coalesced around particular formal and aesthetic investments indeed helped to form their writerly community. This grouping brought some of the writers who were less well known to the attention of new audiences. Ellis's article worked similarly, with Third Plane writers anticipating the NBA and post-soul. A reimagining of the Third Plane, in which Third Plane-inflected works by writers working outside of the strict temporal framework are included, could perhaps open up new futures in African American literature that may not have existed otherwise. Demby's work makes sense for this kind of temporal reassessment, as *Love Story Black* features a narrator who is out of step with the time in which he lives, and as author Demby was intentional about the timing of his literary output in seeking an artistic rebirth with each new novel. As he states in a 2008 interview with Giovanna Micconi, "There are so many literary periods, and no one wants to be associated with dead literary periods. I have always written a whole lot of stuff, but not novels. I have always waited until there was a new consciousness that would understand what I am writing" (139). That "new consciousness" certainly existed in the 1970s during which *Love Story Black* is set, and the novel itself was published. Demby created a narrator who grapples uneasily with these cultural shifts.

Strikingly, Ralph Ellison also shares a generational discomfort with the heightened civil unrest and student activism at the end of the 1960s and through the early 1970s with Demby's writer-professor character, Edwards. According to Arnold Rampersad, in 1969, at the height of student protests for Black studies departments and the hiring of Black faculty, Ellison sometimes encountered hostility from young activists while visiting college campuses:

At Oberlin College in Ohio, the black student "caucus," which he had agreed to meet, received him rudely. One "sister," addressing Ralph directly, curtly dismissed *Invisible Man* because of its harsh portrayal of the ultra-nationalist Ras the Destroyer. When Ralph would not apologize for the character, she snapped, "That just proves that you're an Uncle Tom!" (459)

And in another incident that same year, Rampersad recalls that

The name Ralph Ellison had become synonymous with ultra-conservatism. The future National Book Award-winning black novelist Charles Johnson, then a student at Southern Illinois University, remembered asking a librarian in the new Black Studies program for a copy of *Invisible Man*. "We don't carry it," she told him. "Really? Why not?" "Because Ralph Ellison is not a black writer." (462)

These interactions echo in Demby's own anxieties in the early 1970s about how to approach the novel form and are acutely reflected in *Love Story Black*, where Edwards engages with repeated charges by the women around him of political apathy and Black inauthenticity.

Starting with Greg Tate's 1986 *Village Voice* essay "Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke" and ending with the 2007 special issue on post-soul in *African American Review*, one can trace an arc of post-BAM Black cultural expression. Theorizing the Third Plane and post-soul is gendered, as male critics often dominate the conversation. (It is important to note, however, that *African American Review*'s issue on post-soul sought out women's voices and featured five contributors who were women.) Such dominance is in stark contrast to the ways in which women lead the way in *Love Story Black*. All of the women in the novel are independent and strong-willed, reflecting the changes in women's roles in the new era of second-wave feminism.

In "Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke," Tate describes the members of the post-civil rights generation as "artists for whom black consciousness and artistic freedom are not mutually exclusive but complementary, for whom 'black culture' signifies a multicultural tradition of expressive practices; they feel secure enough about black culture to claim art produced by nonblacks as part of their inheritance" (207).

Ellis's "The New Black Aesthetic" builds on Tate's work, as he theorizes the cultural mulatto—a Black person who feels comfortable in myriad white spaces. As Ellis states:

Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world. And it is by and large this rapidly growing group of cultural mulattoes that fuels the NBA. We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black. The culturally mulatto *Cosby* girls are equally as black as a black teenage welfare mother. (235-36)

This certainly bears out with Hortense, who tells Edwards that she is particularly excited about traveling with him to Africa since the other two trips she took to Europe were with her white friends: "I had been to Europe twice when I was at Vassar—once on an art safari to Florence, Italy, and one summer bumming around the youth hostels with a couple of friends, white friends, of course" (117).

For Ellis, the Third Plane provides a necessary link between the BAM and the NBA:

[O]ur spiritual and often biological older brothers and sisters, those who were artistically coming of age just as the bloom of Mr. Baraka's Black Arts Movement was beginning to fade, are our constant icons. . . . Stripping themselves of both white envy and self-hate they produced supersophisticated black art that either expanded or exploded the old definitions of blackness, showing us as the intricate, uncategorizeable folks we had always known ourselves to be. (237)

Here, Ellis describes the "uncategorizeable" blackness expressed through a range of Black experiences in *Love Story Black*—Mona living in a crumbling town house in "the ghetto," while simultaneously enjoying the finer things in life, including a good scotch, and Edwards periodically living in Europe, are two examples.

Nelson George, Mark Anthony Neal, and Bertram Ashe have all engaged post-soul in their work, and all offer helpful definitions of the phenomenon. George coined the term "post-soul" in his 1992 book *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps & Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture*, in which he reflects that

Over the last 20 or so years, the tenor of African American culture has changed. I came up on the we-shall-overcome tradition of noble struggle, soul and gospel music, positive images, and the conventional wisdom that civil rights would translate into racial salvation. Today I live in a time of goin'-for-mine materialism, secular beat consciousness, and a more diverse, fragmented, even postmodern black community. The change was subtle, yet inexorable. (1)

Neal's *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (2002), describes post-soul folks as:

children of soul, if you will, who came to maturity in the age of Reaganomics and experienced the change from urban industrialism to deindustrialism, from segregation to desegregation, from essential notions of blackness to metanarratives on blackness, without any nostalgic allegiance to the past (back in the days of Harlem, or the thirteenth-century motherland, for that matter), but firmly in grasp of the existential concerns of this brave new world. (3)

And finally, in a special issue on post-soul for *African American Review*, Bertram Ashe defines "blaxploration," a key element of post-soul, as such:

These artists and texts trouble blackness, they worry blackness; they stir it up, touch it, feel it out, and hold it up for examination in ways that depart significantly from previous—and necessary—preoccupations with struggling for political freedom, or with an attempt to establish and sustain a coherent black identity. Still, from my vantage point, this "troubling"

of blackness by post-soul writers is ultimately done in service to black people. (“Theorizing” 614)

All of these conceptualizations of post-soul narrate a move from earlier generational certitudes about blackness and Black art to fluid and unpredictable ways of Black embodiment and artistic expression. Ashe’s “blaxploration” offers a “‘troubling’ of blackness” that is reflected in Demby’s approach to writing *Love Story Black* and in the arena of Professor Edwards’s relationships—platonic and sexual, friendly and romantic—with women of various ages. While a central plot in the story revolves around his interviews and quasi-platonic relationship with Mona Pariss, a Black septuagenarian who is also a former internationally successful jazz singer, a subplot focuses on his romantic and sexual relationship with Hortense Schiller, a woman roughly half his age. He exists in the generation between the two women, and his relationship with Hortense, in particular, echoes the generational complications that affected the reception of Demby’s work—namely, his being older and publishing early while sharing much in common with a subgroup of the younger generation, but not quite fitting there either.

Love Story Black’s narrative reflects the spirit of the Third Plane novel—in anticipation of post-soul—in showing “the variety and fullness of African-American life.” We encounter the Black Bourgeoisie, the Black working class, the apolitical, the militant, the young, the elders, and so forth. Demby approaches all of them with a satirical edge. For example, Mona is unapologetically represented as a “welfare queen” (Savery 242). The book begins:

“Miss Pariss? Miss *Mona* Pariss?”
“Who are you?” You my new welfare worker?”
“No, mam—I’m—well, I’m a writer. . .”

As Edwards stands outside of her door, he struggles with the “exotic stench of [Mona’s] collard greens, pork fat cooking, and powerful incense” (1). While in the novel he notes the class differences between Mona and himself and marks her as exotic, he simultaneously describes her in ways that suggest she is a remarkable artist and woman who is at once spiritual, mystical, and regal. Mona is not part of Edwards’s generation either, but she creates different complications for Edwards from the women who are his age or younger. Mona is described as a chanteuse who sang songs in different styles, including gospel tunes, for international audiences. Edwards undermines, particularly for that period, the normative musical narrative of “discovery,” where young, white, middle-class, Blues collectors “rescued” 1920s- and ’30s-era Black country bluesmen (and yes, they were mostly men) from obscurity, cleaned them up, and sent them out on transatlantic packaged Blues tours to perform for adoring white fans. Edwards is a younger Black man who, instead of trying to coax Mona into performing again, or trying to “clean her up” in any way, engages intimately with her through multiple interviews for what is meant to become a series of feature-length articles for *New Black Woman*. While their relationship does not involve sex until the end of the novel, their previous interactions do not appear to be completely platonic.

From the beginning, their dynamic suggests a forward-thinking, anticipatory interaction. When Edwards first meets Mona and tries to convince her to consent to an interview, she queries him pointedly: “‘What kind of magazine this *New Black Woman*?’ she demanded. . . . ‘As its title suggests it attempts to reflect the new awakening of the black woman.’” Switching gears almost immediately, Mona changes the subject, focusing on Edwards’s appearance: “You one goodlooking Dude, even with that Jew-boy nose” (5). Mona’s sexual forwardness speaks to their present of the sexual revolution of the 1970s as shared with second-wave feminism, with her role as sexual aggressor upending the usual power imbalance between the aging,

rediscovered musical artist and the discoverer who has an agenda of his own. As Mona leads Edwards into the bedroom on their second meeting—"This is where I do my meditating and futurizing" (13)—and insists that he undress and lay naked with her during the interview, Edwards very quickly finds out that he is not in control of this situation. He protests at first, but as if he is mesmerized, he does what she tells him. Nothing sexual happens between them during these sessions, and between swigs of whiskey Mona predicts that together they will create a holy book: "Yes, indeed, child—my life's a book all right. Course, everybody's life is a book, but ain't nobody's life a book like my life's a book—! Yes, child, my life's a book, all right—a holy book, and I don't mean to be sacrilegious!" (16). Nonetheless, Mona makes note of Edwards's erection: "It's up, youngblood, it's up! May the Good Lord be praised!" (19). This interview ritual continues along this vein, and even though Mona does not insist that he have sex with her, Edwards allows Gracie to believe that is the case. He also suspects that Gracie has shared this with all of the women in the office, including the receptionist (52). While none of this makes much sense on the surface, it turns out that Edwards reminds Mona of her long-lost love, Doc, and at the end of the novel, when they do have intercourse, Mona believes that he *is* Doc.

Between the first meeting and the last, Demby does not let the audience forget that the book is supposed to be funny. During one of their interview sessions, Edwards describes in great detail a moment where Mona expels gas in a particularly enthusiastic fashion: "And she wiggled her slight petticoated body into an arc-like position and proceeded to emit a series of sonorous farts, so authoritative and prolonged that one was somehow reminded of the lunch hour whistle of the steel mills in Pittsburgh where I was born" (41). These reports by Edwards may seem silly, but they are reflective of his ease around Mona. Throughout *Love Story Black*, Edwards fails to fit in most situations, but perhaps captivated by her stories, he appears less anxious and insecure in Mona's bed than elsewhere. Although he is self-absorbed and superficial in other romantic pursuits throughout the narrative, his final ritualistic and mystical sexual interlude with Mona allows him to grow. Mona teaches him empathy and compassion. His willingness to comfort Mona at the end of her life also speaks to a gratitude he feels for the ways in which being in her presence offered a lessening of the generational pressure to adhere to a particular political ideology, or present a specific version of himself in the world of his peers and his students.

Love Story Black also "draw[s] on all traditions available . . . Western and non-Western, black and white" (Savery 242), another hallmark of Third Plane writing, with the juxtaposition of Edwards's teaching a Black (American) Lit-Richard Wright class and a Medieval Romance Lit-Chaucer class. But it is really the general sense of unease that Edwards feels around his Black students in his Black Lit class, as he fears judgment from them because of his class position and corresponding lack of radical Black political engagement, an unease that reflects Demby's sense of disconnection from the BAM. As Demby tells John O'Brien, "That's why before, I said I envied LeRoi Jones, because he seems to have fallen by historical accident into a situation in which he is able to do all these things. Other writers have done it also. But everyone doesn't have these opportunities. Even if one could be involved in a precise revolutionary moment, . . . as an artist, what are the options? What can you do?" (3). While he expresses admiration for Jones here, it is important to remember that in the same interview he suggests that it is difficult for the Black writer to write novels at all because the expectation of a particular type of political engagement makes it difficult either for the writer to create a work that is as, or more compelling than real-life events, such as the assassination of Malcolm X, or for the author to pay proper attention to writerly craft (1).

This brings us to a moment in the book that reflects these generational, political, and periodized challenges that Demby, and by extension, Edwards, faces. While the conflict in *Love Story Black* is focused primarily on Edwards's interviews with Mona and his complicated relationships with Hortense and Gracie, it is his estrangement from Black students that causes him the most anxiety. An avatar for some of the BAM's ideologies, the politically engaged Puerto Rican student Melinda Rodriguez, admits to taking Edwards's class only to fulfill a gen-ed requirement. She becomes the locus for all of Edwards's self-consciousness about his lack of understanding of the current generation and their politics, as well as his concerns about his own legitimate claim to "blackness." One day in class, after Edwards asserts that Richard Wright created Bigger Thomas—the main character in the novel *Native Son*—to critique structural racism, Melinda becomes enraged:

What the fuck do you know about institutionalized racism? . . . And anyway who gives you the right to be talking about racism and social dynamics in the first place? Christ, you're an associate professor of English, right? In the City System—a nice easy clean job that pays you at least twenty thousand a year. Right? Look at you! You've got it made. Look at those fucking pimp clothes you wear. You spend your summers loafing around Europe. You call yourself Black but you've already sold yourself out to the American Dream—A pocketful of credit cards, a flashy car. (31)

This section ventriloquizes some of the BPM's and the BAM's critiques of the Black middle class as they defined and enforced the parameters of legitimate blackness. Instead of allowing for a variety of Black experiences, only a very narrow idea of a single Black experience is celebrated. Through this prism, the Black working class is often conflated with notions of authentic blackness. A *real* Black person, with true Black consciousness, would not live a middle-class lifestyle that includes international travel. Melinda's words echo Gracie's at the beginning of the novel—"We're not printing any of that washed out white literary chi-chi bullshit. . . . We're trying to get to the nitty-gritty shit about the black experience!" (4)—and even those of Edwards's lover Hortense who, after Edwards registers surprise at Black businessmen who provide financial support to Black liberation movements, recognizes how generationally out of touch he is: "Lovebird, your generation gap is beginning to show beneath your thinning hair. Don't you know *anything* about what's going on among Black people in this country since the prehistoric days of the Panthers and Poor People's Marches?" (74-75). In this case, the prehistoric days are really just three to five years in the past, with the beginning of each of these movements occurring in 1966 and 1968, respectively. The BAM is nearing its end as well, but in this fictive world it and some of its ideologies will continue for another four years. All of this demonstrates why Edwards is so off balance. In times of great social upheaval, movements shift and evolve very quickly, but during such times, people rarely do.

What *is* new is the Third Plane, and in this novel that emerging movement is represented by a young Black nursing student in the Black Lit class who motivates this exchange:

"Professor Edwards, why are our Black authors—or at least the ones I've read so far—so negative. For example, how come they're always talking about Black people as though they're some kind of sociological disease. Take Bigger Thomas—I don't find him typical at all. He was just one dumb street nigger whose dumb actions naturally led to his dumb downfall—" "I think you miss the point, I said [this is Edwards speaking], secretly agreeing with her, but for different reasons." (77)

Those different reasons become clear when the nursing student asks, "Why don't Black writers ever write about real people—Why do they always treat Black people like social problems—for example, of all the books you've assigned us this semester

there isn't even one of them a love story" (78). To this, Melinda laughs and answers, "Who has time for love when you're always being oppressed?" Edwards reassures the nursing student that "there have been love stories written by black writers," but when he sees Melinda's skeptical face he cannot think of any. Melinda then asks Edwards if he is planning to write one (79). Of course, Demby's third novel is that love story. Its title is *Love Story Black*. It is clearly about Edwards's and Hortense's love story, but it is also about his romance with Gracie, Mona's love story with Doc, and Reverend Groom's unrequited love for Mona. It might also speak to the love story, the romance, in fact, of the BAM, which was already losing steam in the fictive world. All of these love stories failed. The only one that succeeded was the love story, of sorts, between Edwards and Mona.

The nursing student is roughly the same age as Melinda, and just a few years younger than Hortense, but her views about the lack of diversity of Black representation in literary works is resonant for Edwards, Demby, and the Third Plane. Even so, these interactions remind the reader that while Edwards's personal politics and approach to his work might fit in with some members of the younger generation, such as the nursing student, he is neither her chronological nor intellectual peer; as such, he remains alienated from her. Demby, too, shared ideas about art and politics with African American writers who emerged nearly a generation after he did. His novels share formal and philosophical approaches to creating literature with these same younger artists. Yet his generational position bars him from inclusion in this group.

Love Story Black is an irreverent and satirical work that shows the full range of Black American experiences, includes a narrator who appreciates cross-racial interchange and allows his work to be influenced by white writers, and challenges static ideas about legitimate Black cultural expression and blackness more generally. Demby's third novel fits well within the Third Plane. If it were reevaluated and resituated within that movement, it might inspire current post-soul writers to read his work. After all, Third Plane author Alice Walker introduced a new generation to Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston in the 1970s, which aided the reissue of Hurston's long-out-of-print books and thus restored her work to its rightful place in the African American literary canon. What if post-soul satirists Percival Everett, Mat Johnson, and Paul Beatty—as different as their satirical moves might be, given their emergence as writers after the birth of hip hop—did the same for Demby?

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