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Source: *Callaloo*, Vol. 23, No. 4, (Autumn, 2000), pp. 1227-1240

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3300056>

Accessed: 19/06/2008 03:38

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A SONG TO PASS ON An Interview with Thomas Glave

by Gene Jarrett

Thomas Glave within the past decade has earned a reputation as one of the most gifted, innovative, and important writers of fiction to emerge on the American literary scene. While an outstanding author of nonfictional essays and an eloquent public speaker on art, the African Diaspora, and Black Queer Studies, Glave's career is distinguished most by his inventive and acclaimed short stories set in the Bronx and other parts of New York, Boston, the U.S. South, and the Caribbean. These stories have appeared in eminent journals, magazines, and anthologies published not only in the United States but all around the world. In light of his personal history, his numerous honors, awards, and fellowships, his diverse professional accomplishments, and his increasing fame as a literary artist, a nonfictional writer, and an intellectual activist concerned with issues of HIV/AIDS and with the intersection of Black Studies and Queer Studies, one can certainly agree with the recent announcement of the Village Voice Literary Supplement (June 2000) that Glave is "on the verge of making an impact on the literary landscape."

Son of the late former Jamaica Gleaner reporter Thomas Edward Glave, Sr., and nephew of the former Gleaner writer and Jamaica Public Service Corporation executive Halman Glave, Thomas Glave was born on November 10, 1964, in Baychester, New York City. He grew up in the Bronx and in Kingston, Jamaica. For Dance Theater of Harlem he danced off and on throughout the 1980s; in this decade he also enrolled in Bowdoin College, where in 1993 he earned a bachelor of arts, cum laude, in English with a minor in Latin American Studies. In the summer of that year he also became a James Michener Scholar at the Caribbean Writers' Institute, University of Miami, and earned an Academy of American Poets Prize.

For the early part of the 1990s Glave performed HIV/AIDS educational outreach for Gay Men's Health Crisis and for the Minority Task Force on AIDS in New York City, and in 1995 he worked at an AIDS Hospice on behalf of Jamaica AIDS Support in Kingston. While busy performing this volunteer work as well as temporary jobs, Glave continued to produce, publish, and receive accolades for his literary art. In 1992 and 1994 he received a Poetry Fellowship and a Fiction Fellowship, respectively, from the Bronx Council on the Arts. In 1994 he also received a National Endowment for the Arts/Travel Grants Fund for Artists, an award which helped to pay his research expenses in Jamaica, and he became a writer-in-residence at Altos de Chavon in the Dominican Republic. In 1995 he received not only a Creative Nonfiction Fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts (which in 2000 would additionally grant him a Fiction Fellowship) but also a Fiction Fellowship from the Fine Arts Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Shortly after his time in Provincetown, Glave matriculated at Brown University's Master in Fine Arts program in creative writing. While taking classes there, he taught in both the English Department and the Creative Writing Program; he also served briefly as Upper School Teacher of composition and creative writing at Moses Brown School in Providence, Rhode Island. In 1997 his short story "The Final Inning," which initially appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, won an O. Henry Award, widely considered the most prestigious annual honor for writers of short fiction in the United States. Glave became the nineteenth black writer to win the award since the competition's inauguration in 1919, the first black gay writer since James Baldwin in 1959, and the very first author of a black gay-themed short story. Just prior to his graduation from Brown in Spring 1998 he also won a Fulbright fellowship, which he used to study Jamaican historiography and Jamaican-Caribbean intellectual and literary traditions. While in Jamaica he co-founded and participated in the Jamaica Forum of Lesbians, All-Sexuals, and Gays (J-FLAG). Upon his return to the United States, he began his currently held position as assistant professor of English and Africana Studies at the State University of New York, Binghamton.

Glave's fiction has been published in a variety of anthologies, magazines, and journals, including *Gay Fiction at the Millennium* (2000), *Best American Gay Fiction 3* (1998), *His²: Brilliant New Fiction by Gay Writers* (1997), *Children of the Night: The Best Short Stories by Black Writers, 1967 to the Present* (1996), *Soulfires: Young Black Men on Love and Violence* (1996), *Men on Men 6: Best New Gay Fiction* (1996), *Ancestral House: The Black Short Story in the Americas and Europe* (1995), *Callaloo*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The James White Review*, and *The Evergreen Chronicles*. His nonfiction has appeared in *Cultural Activisms: Poetic Voices, Political Voices* (1999), *Callaloo*, *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire*, *The Jamaica Daily Observer*, *The Jamaica Sunday Herald*, *Gay Community News*, and *The Massachusetts Review*. Glave's first book, a compilation of his own short stories entitled *Whose Song? and Other Stories*, was recently released by *City Lights Books*. Presently he is working on a novel tentatively called *Hurricane Night*.

The following interview was conducted in Manhattan, New York City, on May 15, 2000.

JARRETT: Some editors and critics have described your work as Faulknerian, Joycean, Morrisonian, Garcia Márquezian, Caribbean, and so on. How do you respond to those characterizations of your work? Please describe your own literary style and focus.

GLAVE: Different people will always say so many different things. I'm not sure that such categorizations ultimately mean that much to me, or to anyone, perhaps, except critics and scholars, and maybe other literary writers. Such descriptions are interesting to hear and think about, but I've never sat down and said to myself, "Okay, today I'll be Faulknerian," or "No, tonight, Morrisonian," etc. I think that my work can be any number of different things simultaneously; it can be Caribbean, queer, gay, African-American, and any combination thereof. I'd like to think that it can also hold "conversations" with the works of writers whom I admire and from whom I've learned and continue to learn. And I would like very much to believe, at least regarding the work I've done so far, that I've been propelled first and foremost by the motivations of particular characters and their contexts, with as attentive an ear as possible for the richness and incredible sweep of their language.

One of the things that does attract me to some of those writers you mentioned, however—Faulkner, Joyce, and Morrison—is their magnificent use of interiority. You can go from *Ulysses* to *Absalom, Absalom!* to *Jazz* and just revel in the magnificence and intricacy of all those voices, in how they work and explore and reveal. You can go to Virginia Woolf for it, too—how could you not, in fact?—and to Malcolm Lowry, whose work, along with Woolf’s, I also really love. All of these writers brought amplitude, on the page, to the interior life. Morrison in particular amplifies the interior lives of people who haven’t often been written about, or at least weren’t, up until fairly recently. Woolf did the same thing with her female characters, as Henry James and Thomas Hardy did with theirs. Although I wasn’t aware of it when I began writing as an adult, I soon realized that I’d been yearning for the longest while to see stories that traveled through the consciousnesses, the thoughts, the needs of the characters who finally ended up making *Whose Song?*. I wanted to know what those people thought, *how* they thought, what motivated them, how they lived, loved, feared, and died. I wanted to see all that and more on the page in a way I felt I hadn’t, ever, at least not with those characters. At first I thought somebody must have written these stories, somewhere. But I kept looking for them, and couldn’t find them anywhere.

Regarding David Bergman’s introductory comments in *Men on Men 6* (1996),¹ I appreciate and find them really enlightening as a *student* or *scholar* of literature, and as a thoughtful reader—his comments, for example, on what he terms my “Faulknerian excess.” As a *writer*, though, again—when focusing on questions of craft, let’s say—I’m not really sure how useful such comments are. Bergman was referring to “Their Story,” and the story can certainly be read as he read it. It can be read in other ways as well, of course. The reactions of readers like that, and of critics, sometimes—those who are intelligent, sensitive readers—are fascinating to me. They question and complicate things. *Did* I challenge the “gay/straight dichotomy”? Maybe. For a clearer answer, or a deepening of the question, one would need to look more closely at the characters and where they came from. In the black community—or communities, if you include Jamaica—that I came from, homosexuality, gayness, queerness, were rarely clearly delineated in precise categories. People manifested their sexualities in vastly different ways. Sexuality is a very fluid property, after all. It seems as though in Western society we’re just beginning to get a handle on that fluidity, which doesn’t necessarily mean that we’re comfortable with it. When I think of characters like Craig in “Flying,” Gregory in “The Final Inning,” Uncle McKenzie and Mr. Winston in “Their Story,” and Robbie in “Whose Song?” I realize again that they all have distinctly different reasons for manifesting their sexuality as fluidly as they do. So, yes, perhaps I did challenge the “gay/straight dichotomy,” although I really believe that the characters themselves challenged it. So far, I’ve been extremely interested in how—at least among the characters I’ve written up until now—sexuality is such a highly ambiguous area of human existence. There’s such yes- and no-ness there. I’m not particularly interested in writing about people who live in gay ghettos—maybe partly because I’ve known few black people who’ve lived in them, and, at this time at least, I’m most interested in writing about black people. I’d really like to know: what might it mean to live in one’s community of origin—say, in a North

Bronx African-American and Jamaican one, or in Jamaica itself—and be a so-called “gay” person? The question itself is fascinating, I think, and, as far as I know, hasn’t been asked much.

While it really is a joy to talk and think about Faulkner, Joyce, and Morrison, I’d like to think that other things also find their ways into my writing, such as music, dance, the visual arts, film, and daily speech—especially, I hope, the rhythms of black language of the Caribbean and African America. I’d love to feel a little Coltrane in my work, some Marley, and some Balanchine! All are important to me.

JARRETT: You mentioned that you sometimes focus on interiority as a literary technique. In your collection *Whose Song? and Other Stories* you seem to explore what it means to be in the so-called “closet,” to come out of it, or even, as probed in “The Final Inning,” to be pushed back into it by a particular community or family. Please talk about how the trope of the closet works in your fiction, if it in fact does, and/or about the way in which the closet reorients and can potentially disrupt heterosexually based norms, families, or marriages, as in “Commitment.”

GLAVE: Actually, I didn’t see the closet as an actual trope, or even consider the notion of the closet in writing the stories you mentioned, although that’s not to say that it wasn’t present. I don’t think that the characters in, say, “Flying,” “The Final Inning,” “Commitment,” or “Whose Song?” would have used that term to describe their particular state of being. To regard oneself as closeted, one would first have had to have some association with a self-named gay community and, I think, an awareness of the oppositional viewpoints of being *in* the closet versus being out. I don’t think that Craig in “Flying” or Gregory in “The Final Inning,” and certainly not Robbie in “Whose Song?” or the two young men in “Commitment,” would, at their points of development, have positioned themselves in relation to an actual gay community. I could be wrong. Nonetheless, the actuality of closetdom—of, say, a hidden life—most definitely impacts upon all those characters, and upon the people with whom they’re involved. Craig’s secrecy, distance, and “hidden life” guilt ultimately do help to disrupt the “norm” of his marriage, don’t they? And look at what happens to Renee in “Commitment,” in part because of Ricky’s inability to be exactly who he is! In “Whose Song?” Robbie’s denial of who he really is, and his obsessive insistence that he is not *that awful thing*—homo-whatever—results in—what? Horrendous violence enacted upon someone else: rape as a performance and confirmation of ultimate and absolute heterosexual maleness, if you will, but, I think, deeply troubled by the fact that he’s a black male, coded by a racist society to be exactly what he turns out to be, a rapist. But he rapes a black woman, which doesn’t count as much as the rape of a white woman would. I found that discovery truly fascinating—that someone would prefer to be a gang-rapist than a homosexual. But in a patriarchal, misogynist society, violence against women in order to prove one’s manliness will probably prevail every time over the vileness of being “like” a woman, that is, homosexual. I think that in the story’s lines “For now he must be a man for them. Must show the steel” what we might call a deeply “closeted” consciousness echoes strongly, and utterly rejects *any* disruption of heterosexist norms.

In "The Final Inning" Gregory seemed to me deeply in conflict with those norms, in a quite different way than were Craig in "Flying" and both Ricky and Lou Jay in "Commitment." His very status as father, husband, and as relative to Duane positioned him differently, I think. Being a father is a serious enterprise, and being a black father—a loving, present black father, which Gregory was—even more so. The very norms to which he subscribed, or was forced to subscribe, were the same norms that restricted his life, and further "inlined" him into his own sort of closet. In considering tropes, I guess that the idea of "inning," as opposed to "outing," could be figured as a sort of trope. Duane's family attempts to "in" him at his funeral—erase all references to his gay life—and Gregory experiences his own "final inning" at the story's end, when he clings to the notion of being "safe from the truth." I wanted to explore the idea of a "final inning" as both spiritual death, in Gregory's case, and literal death, in Duane's—one's dead body "inlined," interred, in the earth as attempts are made to "in" its previous (gay) life, and one's living being "inlined" into the "death" of spiritual erasure. At the same time, I was really interested in what exactly defines a "real" black man. When James Scroggins gets up at Duane's funeral and speaks, his light skin color is commented on. People talk about his "mulatto-looking ass," and seem to disrespect him because of his—well, could we say what appears to them to be his ambiguous racial identity? Is he a "real" black man, or not? And can he be a "real" black man if he's openly, *proudly* gay, as James is? What does it mean to those characters when they say that James must be one of those "downtown"—i.e., "Village"—"niggers"? What does it mean to them when someone talks "white"? Is one's homosexuality, and/or the way one speaks, a strike against one's blackness?

Class and notions about origin and allegiance to "the race" clearly do loom large in "The Final Inning." But could you imagine Craig in "Flying," or anyone he would probably have associated with, hurling contempt at people for talking "white," or even seriously entertaining the concept? His ideas about blackness, when he engages them at all, are anyway distinctly different from the characters' in "The Final Inning"—I would say partly due to his Caribbean geographical and class origins, but also because of his sincere investment in an upper-middle class, suburban, professional-executive sort of life, within which his light skin grants him a certain latitude—how much is anyone's guess. He differs from Gregory in one sense in that he's not a father, and also because he has far more class and economic privilege than Gregory does. I guess you could say that, with Craig and Mercedes, the heterosexual norm is disrupted from the very beginning, since they don't have the heterosexually-expected children that they "should" have had by that time in their marriage. And again, regarding the term "closet," I'm certain that Craig wouldn't have used that term in reference to himself. There's a difference between *discovering* one's homoerotic desires, as Craig did, and knowing about and *acting* on them secretly all along, as Gregory did.

I wouldn't use the "closet" term in discussing the characters in "Commitment" either. Ricky and Lou Jay seem to me much more concerned with each other, and with getting Ricky's father off his back, than they are with an actual *defined* idea of the closet, even though their relationship is clandestine. From all appearances, they live in a pretty heterocentrally-focused Southern black community. Perhaps one of the difficulties of your question, of the language itself that we use, has to do with the

difference between *definition*—naming—versus a particular reality as lived, which, depending on one’s frame of reference, might not be defined or categorized in this same language of naming.

JARRETT: So would you say that the terms “gay,” “straight,” and “queer” are helpful at all for you as a literary writer, for those who read your work, and for those who read literature in general? How do these terms factor, if at all, into your writing?

GLAVE: Again, those terms are more useful in political, scholarly, and critical discussions than they are when one sits down to write. I call myself black and gay, and a gay man, but I wouldn’t dream of imposing those identities on the characters if they themselves didn’t assume them. A character has to tell me who he or she is; they have to come to me and say, “This is me, who I am. Explore me if you want to, but you can’t make me into who I don’t want to be. Try it and I’ll resist you.” And if you try to mess with them, they *will* resist you, and embarrass you in your arrogance and lack of compassion and insight. So much of what we’re talking about in this regard has to do with the critical centrality of cultural specificity and the language that prevails in that culture. Can you imagine Uncle McKenzie and Mr. Winston in “Their Story,” at that point in their lives, anyway, calling themselves gay? I don’t think so! They maintained a kind of allegiance to their wives, but also cared deeply for each other. Is that “gay”? I’m fascinated by this sort of question, and also by how the characters themselves might react to it. I don’t think some of them would be pleased! And so what does one do with words like “gay,” “straight,” and “queer” in this sort of discussion? They do serve distinct purposes, especially in the very real need for categorization people have as readers and critics. These questions come up all the time in publishing: “What kind of book is this? A gay book, a black book, a black gay book—what?” The questions themselves are generally reductive, and also affect the way readers, editors, and publishers approach a book, and how a book is marketed and reviewed. I’m looking forward to the day when someone will name a book by John Updike, for example, as a wonderful white, straight book, that gives a fabulous portrayal of white, straight life.

JARRETT: Implicitly, then, your work deals with language, with the nuances or “fluidity,” as you call it, of sexual categorization, and with the complications involved in imposing classificatory names—“gay,” “straight,” “queer,” “black,” what have you—when the characters themselves might not subscribe to this naming process. Given that your work functions on such profound symbolic and narrative levels in engaging these issues, do you know how it’s been taught in the classroom, and/or about the kind of courses it’s been taught in?

GLAVE: I don’t really know *how* it’s been taught. I know more about the sort of courses it’s been taught in. “The Final Inning” has been taught in creative writing classes and also in queer theory courses. The same is true for “Their Story” and “Whose Song?” If anyone has taught the stories in African-American or Caribbean studies, they haven’t told me yet.

I'm fascinated right now by intersections between blackness and queerness in scholarly endeavor. There's so much superb, excavational work being done by bright, determined black queer scholars, who are playing with the word "queer" itself, and analyzing its position beside traditional configurations of blackness. In the best of circumstances, the word "queer" can work toward amplifying notions about and definitions of gayness and straightness, of homosexual versus heterosexual, etc. It can challenge a "gay/straight dichotomy," if you will. But, like so many words, it has caused trouble, since—for example—not many African Americans, or at least not many I know, are comfortable using it. Neither are many Caribbean people. These reservations also run along generational lines. So how does one productively discuss "queering" or "queerying" the Caribbean or African America, when both might very well resist the word, if not the idea? The recent "Black Queer Studies in the Millennium" conference at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, attempted, with some success, a critical intervention into Queer Studies and its intersections with Black Studies—that is, it began a critical *queering* of Black Studies and a critical *queerying* of Queer Studies. Little scholarship in Queer Studies so far has paid significant attention to race and ethnicity. Black Studies, for the most part, has paid scant attention to queer issues. There are black scholars today, prominent individuals of supposed intellectual depth and breadth, who don't want to go near the queer issues in, say, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, or in anything by Audre Lorde. A critical intervention into both fields is required. The conference began, or at least enhanced, that vital work.

JARRETT: These issues are very important regarding the work of James Baldwin, whose first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952), has been well studied in African-American literary criticism and theory, while his later novels that concentrate more on the intersection of homosexuality, race, and nationality—*Giovanni's Room* (1956), *Another Country* (1960), *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), and *Just Above My Head* (1978)—only recently have received critical engagement. The conference on Black Queer Studies arrived in a timely fashion.

GLAVE: Right. There was a conference on Baldwin at Howard in February,² which I understand featured queer discussions. Black Queer Studies dialogue needs to continue, and will, because there's an entire body of literature, including Baldwin's work, whose queerness is still purposely overlooked, except when the analyses are assayed by black, openly queer scholars. These folks are going back to the texts of people like Nella Larsen and Jean Toomer and queering/queerying those texts. Scrupulous, insightful, intelligent queering is honorable and necessary scholarship; the homophobia and ignorance that make for slipshod scholarship are dishonorable.

JARRETT: The title of your book *Whose Song?* refers to a short story about a young, light-skinned lesbian woman who is raped by three young black men. Why did you decide to use this story as the focal point for your collection, or at least as a basis for its title?

GLAVE: It seemed to me that the title “Whose Song?” spoke in many ways to the other stories and their concerns. I was interested in the questions: Whose story or narrative is this? Who gets to tell it? Who has, or is granted, the “right” to tell? Whose answer is heard? Whose history is it? Who is responsible for how the history turns out? Whose is the communal responsibility? Who made the history what it was in the first place? Indeed, who imagined the initial narrative that would inform all subsequent narratives? And so on. Are the questions ever answered? Are they ever understood? Ever deepened? It seemed to me that with most, if not all, of the characters in this book, these questions were rarely asked—not by black people, not by gay people, not by black gay people, and certainly not by anybody else. I wanted to know what it might mean to ask these questions, even as I knew that they might not be answerable in a conventional way. But they could be deepened.

JARRETT: I’d like to pose an even more particular question about “Whose Song?” Toward the end of the story there are some intriguing lines: “The words to every song on earth are buried deep somewhere. Songs that must be sung, that must never be sung.”

GLAVE: Yes, and there’s another, related line that’s repeated: “Where has the memory gone?” I’d like to think that the “memory” refers to the larger history of people raped and slaughtered and enslaved, and the memory, or *unmemory* of—the *unwillingness* to recall—one’s own historical destruction and (re)construction, if you will. Where has the memory of all that horror and grief gone, and how does it return—or does it—to inform one’s consciousness in the present? Without memory, what are you? Are you someone who—at the simplest level—is able to perpetrate an act of supreme violence upon someone because you can’t or won’t remember all the violences that were enacted upon you, upon an historical you?

JARRETT: What you’re saying reminds me of the coda of Morrison’s *Beloved* (1988), particularly when the narrator repeats that what was told “is not a story to pass on,”³ even though, by that point in the novel, it *has* been passed on to us, and will continue to live in our memories. I’m not saying that this novel or particular line represents a direct influence on the recurrence of the statements about song and memory in “Whose Song?” but could you address the conversation potentially existing between this story and *Beloved*?

GLAVE: These stories won’t die, and they must be told. I think that’s what both works are saying, in part. I think Baldwin wrote in “Sonny’s Blues,” toward the end of the story, when Sonny’s playing like mad, that the story “always must be heard.”⁴ *Beloved* is a story not to pass on—a story “too” tragic to hand down, let’s say—but also a story that won’t die; one that continues to stay with us and literally haunt us. How can we ever move beyond that past, which informs our present? How can we not move beyond it? “Whose Song?” can, I think, be experienced as a “song” of people whose memories *haven’t* been “sung.” So, yes, I can see a conversation between Morrison’s “This is not a story to pass on” and the line from “Whose Song?” “The words to every

song on earth are buried deep somewhere," if only because of what we know, and don't know, and don't want to "sing" about or look at in African diasporic history. When will the stories be told? When will the songs be sung? Does anyone even care, can they bear, to tell the stories? To bear witness and give voice?

JARRETT: Right. In fact, there's another line in "Whose Song?" that states Cassandra's rape "will not appear on tomorrow's morning news." This again reminds me of Morrison, in terms of her recuperation of the story of Margaret Garner, a slave who in a situation similar to Sethe's killed one child and attempted to do the same to her three others. *Morrison* is passing on the once-obscured story . . .

GLAVE: Yes. And the line in "Whose Song?" just before the one you mentioned is "The girl-trees are screaming." The girl-trees and their screaming—their song—are *not* newsworthy in a society that devalues black people, and especially black women. This song is newsworthy to *me*, though. Would these songs be newsworthy if the victims were white women? Is the rape of a man ever newsworthy, beyond spectacle? Or, God knows, the rape of a black man, who can't be raped, but can only be a rapist?

JARRETT: To push the idea of newsworthiness further, in several of the stories collected in *Whose Song?* the characters respond to a variety of contemporary news, such as the police beating of Rodney King, the shooting rampage of Colin Ferguson, the reports on human rights. You also respond to some of these and other related news items in your essay on Essex Hemphill.⁵ Could you talk about when and how the news serves as a resource for your creative writing?

GLAVE: Just living in the world with an awareness of where one lives, in a racist, sexist, homophobic country, one will be aware of so many daily assaults against one's personhood. In the world in which we now live, it's difficult *not* to be aware of news, or at least of what's deemed newsworthy. I'm sure that the daily news out there does affect my imagination, impact upon it. So far as I know, I haven't written anything in *Whose Song?* that directly responds to contemporary news, except for "The Final Inning." That story was inspired, in part, by the death of a black gay poet named Donald Woods, who was very out in his personal and political life. I heard from a friend, the late Assotto Saint, another black gay poet who died of AIDS in 1994, that, at Donald's funeral, his family resolutely refused to acknowledge his homosexuality and the fact that he'd died of the disease. Assotto said that he felt so stricken during the service that he got up and began to shout at Donald's family about their hypocritical silence. Assotto recounted all this to me in the last year of his life, then said, "There's the story, my dear. Now go write it." All the characters were completely invented, but I can trace one of them to Assotto, I guess. That's the only story in the book that I can trace to a direct, identifiable source.

My imagination works differently for nonfiction than it does for fiction, of course. In the essays I've written so far, especially the one you mentioned about Essex, I referred to some news stories—to some horrendous recent hate crimes—because, aside from their sheer brutality, that horrified me, I knew that if Essex were here, alive

today, he would have responded vociferously to those things. I thought that, as a black gay man and someone who found strength in his work, I'd be honoring him if I tried in some way to continue doing the work that he had done. That essay was a tribute to him. "Toward a Nobility of the Imagination,"⁶ on the other hand, came out of my working with J-FLAG in Jamaica, and was a direct response to the virulent homophobia we encountered there, which became so suffocating and debilitating that I had to write something in that horrible climate in order to make a space for a voice not only progressive but humanistic.

JARRETT: Please say a bit more about the formation of J-FLAG, and the actual initial response of the Jamaican community to "Toward a Nobility of the Imagination."

GLAVE: J-FLAG began in 1998. I was in Jamaica on a Fulbright that year. I'd met some people in the gay community on previous visits. Around that time, the fall of 1998, we all realized that the time had finally come in Jamaica for a cohesive organization whose direct mandate would be confronting and responding to homophobia. So we got together, organized, and J-FLAG—the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals, and Gays—became what it is now after much difficult work. The forerunner for the organization was C-FLAG—the Caribbean Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals, and Gays, founded in the eastern Caribbean about a year earlier. The violence against gays and lesbians in Jamaica, against which victims still have little legal recourse—so many gay people had been killed, burned, shot, stoned, run out of their homes, evicted—finally forced us into action. It was really scary, of course. We all were risking our lives every single day. But we felt, all of us, that, in such a horrendously hateful climate, we just *could not* sit around and do nothing. It's not an exaggeration to say that we were inspired, in part, by the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. And I can honestly say that I've never, before or since, felt such deep bonding in struggle with fellow activists. There's something about knowing you can be murdered at any minute that makes that kind of power and urgency possible, although not without occasional glitches. But the human rewards are always amazing.

The response to "Toward a Nobility of the Imagination" was essentially outrage. Homophobic people who read it in the newspapers, those from whom I heard, were angry. Fellow J-FLAG-ers were pleased, though. It was important for me to publish the essay not only in Jamaica but outside of it, which was why, later, I sent it to *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* and to *Gay Community News*.⁷ I wanted gay people abroad, as well as black people throughout the Diaspora, to see what was happening in Jamaica. The fact that I had to publish the same essay in so many different places in itself speaks to the need for an integration of Black Studies and Queer Studies. We have publications that are black but not queer or queer-friendly, others that are queer but not black, and Jamaican-Caribbean newspapers that want nothing to do with anything gay unless the story is tragic or scandalous. How do we find a space in between? A place to call "home"? It's very painful and very difficult.

In speaking of integration, I think of my "Jamerican" identity. With such a background, one is a bridge between two distinctly different places—African America and the Caribbean—that yet bear resemblance to each other. One has familiarity

with the languages of both places. As a J-FLAG organizer, I was able to bring my political experience with gay activism in the United States to Jamaica. I'm interested in the integration of blackness and queerness and also fascinated by the possibilities of integrating Jamaicanness and African Americanness. I look at Jamaica as an ancestral home and African America as the—or my—"New World."

JARRETT: You published an excerpt from *Hurricane Night*, a novel-in-progress, in a past issue of *Callaloo*.⁸ Could you tell me what *Hurricane Night* is generally about, the genesis of the idea for the novel, and the technical strategies you're employing to write it?

GLAVE: Right now, as we speak, I'm still thinking hard about one of the characters—the golden man, as he's described. He makes what people might call a "magical" journey, I guess, northward across the sea, in the company of other people in flight from political dictatorship and repression, to a place known as the lost and land-swept City of Illusions, where he encounters another character, the blond man. The *Callaloo* excerpt spent time in the golden man's consciousness, running through his thoughts about the torture he'd experienced, as he reflected on what his life had been like before he became a leftist political activist working with other progressives against the repression. I was fascinated by the earlier life he'd lived—in a palatial house at the top of a hill, surrounded by a beautiful garden, where, as a child and younger man, he'd spent so much time gazing with desire at the darker-skinned gardeners. Later, after one of his arrests, when he was being tortured, he maintained an ambivalent relationship with the torturer, who was darker-skinned than he was. Even, or especially, while being humiliated and degraded, he clung to what he saw as his own social superiority over the torturer. Not only *moral* superiority, mind you, but specifically *social* superiority. Skin color was certainly partly at the center of that state of mind. Fascinating. I mean, there he was, lying on a metal table, hands manacled behind his back, his body burned with cigarette butts, still clinging to rules that no longer applied. What kind of desperation is that?

JARRETT: You had mentioned to me earlier that you thought the writing of the *Hurricane Night* excerpt was a bit "dense." This quality, I believe, partially lies in the excerpt's instantiation of narratorial dislocation, of providing narrative information *après-coup*, or after the event, which we can use for a retroactive interpretation of the story, as Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Morrison's *Beloved*, for example, would call us to perform. Could you talk about how this technique accommodates the kind of story you're trying to tell in *Hurricane Night*?

GLAVE: Well . . . When a character tells a story that she or he doesn't want to tell, she or he keeps it at a distance for as long as possible. The information is revealed more gradually. In the earlier *Hurricane* chapters that haven't yet been published anywhere, the characters *don't want* to reveal, in part because of the great pain they experienced. Who would want to remember being raped and tortured? But all of them do return to those painful moments, and not only once. What's struck me so far is how deeply

obsessed all the characters are with their pasts, with the past, even as it seems that they can't stand the act of remembering. It seems to me that they really *do* want to remember, even though they so often act as though they don't. Remembering, I'm learning from them, can be a terrific act of reclaiming and control—you can stop a memory through an act of will and force yourself to think of something else, whereas when your hands are tied behind your back and you're blindfolded, you can't stop someone from torturing you.

The hurricane itself, or the idea or metaphor of one, plays a central part in the book's narrative construction. It contains the spiraling voices of the past that return and return again—in cycles, you might say, although not predictable cycles. What I termed the book's "density" had to do with certain repetitions and switchings back and forth between time periods, approximating the movement of a hurricane—the kind of cyclical, whirling currents that a hurricane embodies. I also wanted to make room for the eye—the silent eye, as a point of centrality and unsettled silence. At the same time, I'm still working on a kind of polyphonic layering, in which different characters narrate their version of "the" story, relating things in a sequence that, for whatever reason, is important to them. I want the polyphony to work in such a way that the reader will experience a syncretism between each of the voices, maybe a disharmony, but nonetheless a universe in which numerous voices, both living and dead, piece together this tale.

One of the things I'm finding most challenging in the writing is structuring things in such a way that one encounters, early on, a lot of information that will make more sense later. I love texts that are structured that way, and find them really intriguing. In this instance, though, I as a reader *and* a writer am compelled to reckon with how the characters, and the hurricane itself, need to tell the story. You have to write very differently, writing this way, than you would if you were writing in a more linear fashion. Linearity of time doesn't really interest me, but plasticity of time does, and the way in which memory itself works, switching back and forth. And all the while you're aiming for some kind of coherence, so that the reader isn't completely thrown. Suspense is fine, but not incoherence.

JARRETT: Let's switch gears. Could you talk about how you negotiate the profound relationship between your multiple careers as an assistant professor of English at SUNY—Binghamton, as a literary writer, and as a political activist for black and gay/lesbian causes?

GLAVE: Writing and teaching, and maybe even activism, inform each other in different ways. As a writer I'm always looking for some new form of discipline to incorporate into my work habits—that is, some new exercise for a warm-up or practice, or a new way of looking at a text that might help me more effectively, daringly, imagine something else. I'm deeply interested in craft, and when I listen to music, say classical and jazz, I try to listen hard to the craft and think about how I can get the effortless sweep of those violins or that sax into my own language. The polish and the precision. As a teacher I'm always asking these questions. I've always believed that, in order to learn how to write, it would be *critically* important for me to

read and read and read, then read some more, as widely as possible. And that's what I tell my students to do. In this regard, I'm happy with how writing has spoken to teaching, and teaching to writing. I look closely at texts all the time, and with students I gain insights about texts. Morrison said once that when you write you're putting things together, and when you teach you're taking things apart. That's somewhat, although not entirely, true. Teaching and writing are utterly different endeavors, in terms of the imagination's role, but they can work in concert.

It's so important for writers and formal students of writing to learn about, and *believe in*, discipline. Without it, what do you have? Your own nonsense, probably, and little else. I'm always taken aback by students and other people who come to me asking for writing exercises, without which, they say, they wouldn't write regularly. If only we all had someone to help us out that way. It's supremely important to me, to what I do, as a writer, to develop strong, disciplined habits, like practicing and revising constantly.

JARRETT: Finally, regarding Master in Fine Arts programs and their importance in the shaping of a creative writer, there have been a few debates about their worth.⁹ Provided that you graduated from an M.F.A. program at Brown University, please talk about your experiences there, and whether you would advocate these programs for people interested in becoming creative writers.

GLAVE: A hard question. An M.F.A. program isn't for everybody, obviously. When I entered one, I wasn't even sure it was for me. So much depends on the school, on one's own talents, on what one wants from oneself and from the program. I had no idea what I wanted from Brown when I went there. I only knew that I wanted to write. And I knew that whether or not I was in an M.F.A. program, I was *going* to write. If I hadn't gone to Brown, I would have done what I'd always done, I guess—worked temporary jobs, or waited tables, or whatever would have paid the bills and kept things together. But I wouldn't have stopped writing, as I'd never stopped before when I'd had to do all those things. What I ultimately really appreciated about Brown's program was its championing of experimental writing. I was exposed to all sorts of new things there that made me think in distinctly different ways. Brown, at least in my experience—I know some people had very different experiences—was never hierarchical, rigid, or absolutist, the way some M.F.A. programs can be. There was a thrilling sense of openness and possibility, even while there was a great myopia there about black people's writing. The myopia didn't surprise me, since I'm *almost* never surprised by other people's ignorance about black people, but it was disappointing, *again*. Still, I would like to think that I've carried a certain Brown-enhanced openness to my teaching and pedagogical approach to texts—encouraging students in a writing workshop to look at what something *might* be, narratively-structurally speaking, as opposed to what it *should* be. I don't believe in constraining the imagination by use of *shoulds*.

Clearly, M.F.A. programs aren't necessary for one's becoming a writer. If you're determined to be a writer, you'll become one, with luck and hard work, with or without an M.F.A. program. How many writers whom we read today lived before

such programs existed? Before I went to Brown, I lived the life of an autodidact. I think that being open to education, and seeking it wherever you can imagine it, is one of the most crucial elements in developing a writer's skills. That, and talent, discipline, and a genuine willingness to live compassionately and imaginatively in the world of human beings, with all their sufferings and mystery and magnificence and pain. All things considered, the M.F.A. journey was highly worthwhile for me, principally in terms of the excellent education I received on so many levels. I'll always be deeply grateful for that. Writing itself is another kind of education altogether—but what a romance, to be able to live so closely and intimately with the word, and the joy of books, and all these characters with their needs and demands! The surprises just never stop. I've learned that much. What I'll learn next is anybody's guess. It might be terrifying, it might be overwhelming, but—keep your fingers crossed, Gene—I'll be looking forward to it.

NOTES

1. See David Bergman, introduction, *Men on Men 6*, ed. David Bergman (New York: Dutton/Plume, 1996). Bergman characterizes Glave's "Their Story," selected for the anthology *Men on Men 6*, as embodying "a style of Faulknerian excess" (xi), "both realism and fantasy" (xii), and a discursive challenge to "the gay/straight dichotomy" (xiii).
2. *Challenging American Sociopolitical Hierarchy: James Baldwin at the Millennium* (Howard University, Washington D.C.: 11 February 2000).
3. See Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1988), 274-75.
4. See James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," *Going to Meet the Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995). Glave is referring to the moment when Creole, Sonny, and the rest of the band play *Am I Blue*: "Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything new. He and his boys were up there keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways of making us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we many triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness" (139).
5. See Glave, "(Re-)Recalling Essex Hemphill," *Callaloo* 23.1 (2000): 278-84.
6. First published as "A Homosexual's Plea for Nobility," *The Jamaica Sunday Herald* (27 December 1998) and later as "Toward a Nobility of the Imagination: Jamaica's Shame," *The Jamaica Daily Observer* (9 January 1999).
7. See Glave, "Toward a Nobility of the Imagination: Jamaica's Shame," *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* 2.3 (Winter 1999/2000) and Glave, "Toward a Nobility of the Imagination: Jamaica's Shame," *Gay Community News* 24: 3-4 (1999).
8. Glave, "On the Eve of the Hurricane," *Callaloo* 23.1 (2000): 151-67.
9. See Hilma Wolitzer, "Embarking Together on Solitary Journeys," *The New York Times* (31 January 2000), and see Kurt Vonnegut Jr., "Despite Tough Guys, Life Is Not the Only School for Real Novelists," *The New York Times* (24 May 1999), which is a response to Robert Dana, ed., *A Community of Writers: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writers' Workshop* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1999), a collection of essays by thirty leading authors who participated in the early years of one of the most acclaimed literary breeding grounds in the United States.