

“That Something Else”: Botkin, Portelli and Ellison on Democratic Pluralism and the Dialogical Encounter

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Prologue

This thesis traces a conceptual and methodological continuum between three men whom I call oral history writers: B.A. Botkin (1901-1975), Alessandro Portelli (1942 -) and Ralph Ellison (1914-1994). It began as an effort to introduce Ellison to the discourse of oral history method and theory. Specifically, my goal was show that a hermeneutics of Book I of Ellison's posthumous novel *Three Days Before the Shooting* (2010)—the fictional life history of a 1950s-era male white liberal American tape-recorder wielding journalist named McIntyre—would greatly benefit oral historians who study and practice in an American context, and by extension a global one too.

It's been a long journey for me to get to this point. McIntyre himself plays a much smaller role in this thesis than I had initially thought he would. In the last weeks of my writing process, it became apparent to me that in order to show Ellison's relevance to oral history, I would first have to set up the discourse that he fits into. So I began working towards an intellectual history of the discipline. Here Botkin and Portelli emerged as essential figures, whom I needed to treat with the same respect that I treat Ellison. I only wish I had come to this realization earlier in my process, for I feel that this thesis is limited by its relatively few sources on the work of these two. But, alas, such is life; I know I will expand my bibliography and the scope of my argument once I begin to prepare this thesis for public consumption.

Following the lead of Mary Marshall Clark's first semester OHMA course, this thesis searches for an adequate articulation of some links between the method and theory of oral history. The main locus of such links that I propose is a foundational episode in the history of oral history: The Federal Writers' Project of the late 1930s and early 1940s. As the project's folklore editor, Botkin played a tremendous role in shaping the Project's cultural agenda according to a cosmopolitan conception of American identity. In so doing, he also played what I think is a pretty

tremendous role in the development of Ralph Ellison's method and theory of relating diverse American experiences and historical narratives through the practice of literature: Ellison worked on the Project, in both the field and in the archives, from 1938 to 1942. One goal that I've harbored throughout this thesis process has been to show some of the ways in which Ellison transmuted the lessons about the complexity of American culture that he learned on the Project to his craft as a writer, lessons that I believe are just as applicable to the craft of oral history.

Meanwhile, Portelli emerged as this essay's necessary center of conceptual and methodological gravity. His theory of the interview encounter as "an experiment in equality" is something like Oral History Ethics 101, but here I became excited by the possibility of discussing it as a matter of the interviewer's technique, as something that the interviewer has "an objective stake" in realizing irrespective of her political ideology. It was through an elaboration of intersubjectivity and the dialogical that I was able to bring Ellison's fundamental concern with the human being's freedom to relate with other human beings into the fold of oral history's ethical and phenomenological discourse. The concept of intersubjectivity gave me a language for taking on the necessary foil in this thesis, the ideal of scientific objectivity and the image of the disinterested, neutral social researcher. It is against these ideals—and the static, stereotypical conceptions of individual identity to which they lead—that both Ellison and Botkin fought, which in turn led to their diminished and misconstrued academic reputations during the mid-20th century. Thus Portelli provided a crucial means by which I could recover Botkin as an ancestor of oral history, and posit Ellison as one of its most prodigious sons.

What, you might be asking, do I exactly mean when I call these men *oral history writers*? For one, I suppose I am trying to offer a definition of the type of oral historian I myself want to become: one that is fully conscious of, and willing to experiment with, the relationship between

the spoken and written words—between language, lore and literature. Botkin, Portelli and Ellison are all fascinated with this relationship, each in his own way. Of the three, Ellison is the most self-consciously assertive of his identity as a writer, a choice which becomes emblematic of his independence of thought and his resistance against attempts made by others to pigeonhole him into the strict social categories of his ethnic identity. In creating this little canon of oral history writers, I suppose I am demanding a similar skepticism towards imposed identities from both myself and my readers. All three men—Botkin, Portelli and Ellison—are intimately concerned with the permutations of personality that a truly democratic lifestyle allows for, and for each of these men the practice of writing is a venue where they can sort through the possibilities. Finally, I call these men oral history writers for the plain and simple fact that they write about their experiences of conducting oral history fieldwork, of engaging in dialogical encounters with different types of people. It is through the act of writing about such encounters that they, and we, become able to reflect upon them more precisely, to clarify and learn from them, to fashion such experiences into good stories and useful equipment for tackling the next ones.

* * *

Ellison's Cosmopolitanism

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, Ellison was constantly straw-manned as an apolitical animal. Irving Howe's 1963 essay "Black Boys and Native Sons" famously critiqued Ellison for being more concerned with aesthetic matters than with practicing the "clenched militancy" that marked the work of his deceased and by-then estranged mentor Richard Wright. Howe basically argued that Ellison was a race traitor, for, he asked, "How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much think or breathe, without some impulsion to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private, released or buried?"¹

Ellison responded to these charges in the December 9th issue of *The New Leader* with "The World and the Jug." Early in the essay, Ellison succinctly summarizes the crux of Howe's argument. "Evidently," he writes, "Howe feels that unrelieved suffering is the only 'real' Negro experience, and that the true Negro writer must be ferocious."² In full awareness of the irony implied, Ellison calmly downplays Howe's "quite primitive mode of analysis,"³ which assumes that racial identity and social caste ought to govern individual behavior. He then offers an alternative, more moderate vision of black American life—"an American Negro tradition which teaches one to deflect racial provocation and to master and contain pain"⁴—that animates his own approach to art and life, as well as a multifaceted personal identity that Howe's essay tacitly denies him. "While I am without a doubt a Negro and a writer," Ellison declares, "I am also an *American* writer."⁵ The affirmation of these three self-descriptors—Negro, American, and writer—leads Ellison to reflect upon the intense individuality of his position, even as he shares the sociological

¹ Howe.

² *Collected Essays* 159.

³ *Collected Essays* 156.

⁴ *Collected Essays* 159.

⁵ *Collected Essays* 172.

dimensions of these identities with many others. Speaking candidly of the true “Negro writer,” Ellison admits,

He must suffer alone even as he shares the suffering of his group, and he must write alone and pit his talents against the standards set by the best practitioners of the craft, both past and present, in any case [...] I am, after all, only a minor member, not the whole damned tribe; in fact, most Negroes have never heard of me. I could shake the nation for a while with a crime or with indecent disclosures, but my pride lies in earning the right to call myself quite simply ‘writer.’⁶

Ellison’s point is that we ought to think of identity not as a matter of phenotypical categories, but rather as a matter of the individual’s activity and experiences. For this response to Howe’s simplistic and paternalistic conception—basically a stereotype—of “authentic” blackness as a perpetually terrible condition, the rising tide of black nationalism and the Black Arts movement branded Ellison an Uncle Tom, a coward who betrayed the political cause of his people’s freedom. Those misguided charges continue to haunt his reputation today.

In *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (1998), Ross Posnock does a major service to Ellison’s intellectual legacy by tracing the lineage of American cosmopolitan thought—distinct from but similar to Botkin’s—that Ellison claims as his philosophical heritage. In so doing, Posnock draws our attention to Ellison’s sophisticated recovery of “an almost classical sense”⁷ of the word “politics” as a matter of dialogical self-cultivation through daily participation in public life, active citizenship in a democratic culture. More on this soon.

Posnock astutely characterizes Ellison as a consummate black intellectual, placing him—along with W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston and Alain Locke—in the canon of what Posnock

⁶ *Collected Essays* 184-85.

⁷ Posnock 5.

calls the “antirace race man or woman.” Posnock invents the term “antirace race man” in order “to impart something” of the concomitant “liability” and “ambition” of someone like Ellison, who aims “to interrogate the very category of race”⁸ and prove its inherent malleability. Posnock celebrates the antirace race man’s effort “to escape the pressure to conform to the familiar and recognizable, to stereotypes,” and his desire “to be free to delete the first word or to accent the second in the phrase *black intellectual* or to vary one’s inflections at will or as circumstance dictates.”⁹ Through these efforts, the antirace race man shows that race is a profoundly subjective concept, masquerading as objective truth.

The protean, paradoxical image of Posnock’s antirace race man crystalizes the nuances of Ellison’s cosmopolitan outlook. The promise that Posnock sees in this outlook is not founded upon a naïve refusal to admit the existence of racial categories, for Posnock reminds us that Ellison “often speaks [proudly] of ‘we Negroes’ as a distinct group.” But rather than a common set of genes, it is the inheritance of “a group style” that constitutes the category.¹⁰ Ellison troubles the racial category’s strict, ostensibly scientific definition when he writes that “we Negroes” are “bound less by blood than by our cultural and political circumstances.” In light of this distinction between racial nature and racial nurture, Posnock underscores Ellison’s assertion that “the group style” was “taught to me by Negroes, or copied by me from those among whom I lived most intimately.”¹¹ This antiessentialist, intersubjective theory of the individual’s cultural identity—as something that is practiced and performed, bequeathed and learned through experience, endlessly blended and modulated in the worlds of interaction and conversation—underpins the Portellian method of interviewing that I am trying to push in this thesis.

⁸ Posnock 5.

⁹ Posnock 5.

¹⁰ Posnock 201.

¹¹ Qtd. in Posnock 201.

The Ellisonian theory of learned cultural identity is predicated on the pragmatist theory of cultural pluralism that begins with the work of William James. Posnock explains that pragmatist pluralism is distinct from the more widely known conception of cultural pluralism that was elaborated by James' wayward student Horace Kallen, who coined the term "cultural pluralism" in 1915. Kallen's preferred metaphor for American culture is that of "an orchestra," in which each ethnicity plays a separate-but-equal part. The problem with this theory, however, is that it posits the individual as the fixed and unchangeable vessel of her parents' culture, and it assumes that every single member of a given ethnicity must play the same instrument, as it were—the same instrument her parents played, and the same instrument her children and grandchildren will play. Kallen implicitly allows no room for cultural blending or individual transformations. Jamesian pluralism, on the other hand, sees culture as series of aesthetic and symbolic choices floating freely through the air, as it were, a buffet of different cultural offerings from which the individual may choose how to represent herself, stylize herself, *for* herself at any given moment.

Posnock distinguishes between these two theories of pluralism by turning to the memory of Alain Locke, whom of course Ellison admired greatly. Locke and Kallen encountered each other several times over their careers, the first time as Harvard classmates in 1905. Posnock renders the encounter in terms that recall Howe's presumptuous critique of Ellison's independence of thought:

According to Kallen's remembrance Locke was "very sensitive, very easily hurt" and insisted that "I am a human being" and that "his color ought not to make any difference...We are all alike Americans." But Kallen, certain that Locke was mistaken, told him: "It *had* to make a difference and it *had* to be accepted and respected and enjoyed for what it was."

[...] Adamant that Locke must organize his life around race, Kallen converted "the right to be different" into a command, thus imprinting on pluralism an element of coercion that has remained indelible in its contemporary incarnation as multiculturalism. The note of bullying paternalism in Kallen's attitude toward Locke

makes vivid how a “dictatorship of virtue” brought cultural pluralism into being.

A symptom of Kallen’s rigid pluralism is his well-known belief that men “cannot change their grandfathers” for “what is inalienable in the life of mankind is its...psycho-social inheritance.” And this “ancestral endowment” is impervious to class mobility. “He remains still the Slav, the Jew,” Kallen notes of those who emerge “from the proletariat into the middle class.” A corrosive contradiction vitiates cultural pluralism—Kallen shares a belief in “the eternal power of descent, birth, *natio*, and race” (in Werner Sollors’s words) with his racist, nativist opponents.¹²

In the first decade of the 20th century, William James’ delivered a series of lectures at Oxford in which he elaborated his system of philosophical pragmatism. These lectures constituted an important moment in Kallen’s development of a pluralist cultural theory. But Posnock explains that Kallen essentially misread James by seizing upon “a minor point” of his lectures, “a depiction of the pluralistic world as a ‘federal republic,’ which Kallen interpreted to mean separate ethnic nationalities coexisting harmoniously in an ‘orchestration of mankind.’”¹³

Locke was also in the audience when James lectured at Oxford, but he actually “grasped Jamesian pluralism” for what it was: “a philosophy that refused to make a fetish of difference,” for “such thinking not only breeds separatism but is destructive of democratic equality.”¹⁴ Posnock turns to James’ seminal essay “A World of Pure Experience” (1904) to explain that James, and therefore Locke, conceives of the self in essentially dialogical terms, as an “affair of relations.”¹⁵ Thus their brand of pragmatist pluralism takes a view of “experience liberated from imposed classifications,”¹⁶ in order to allow for the greatest possible number and variety of feasible

¹² Posnock 192. The Kallen quotes are drawn from Werner Sollors’ article “A Critique of Pure Pluralism.” *Reconstructing American Literary History*. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986. 250-279.

¹³ Posnock 192.

¹⁴ Posnock 192.

¹⁵ Posnock 190.

¹⁶ Posnock 189.

relations among distinct individual selves in a democracy. In order to achieve an “objective” view of a particular “human heart,” that “something else” which constitutes individual identity and eludes social scientific concepts, the craft of oral history demands that we too take this ultra-relational view of individual lives.

In 1973, Harvard University held a symposium to honor Alain Locke’s memory. Both Ellison and Albert Murray delivered statements there that celebrated Locke’s lifelong effort to resist traditional categories of racist thought. Murray’s speech included a declaration “that one of racism’s ‘most vicious and destructive aspects...is the very fact that it is designed to make black people think of themselves in terms of race.’”¹⁷ Following Murray on the stage, Ellison asserted that Locke “stood for a conscious approach to *American* culture,” an antidote to the possibility of becoming “unconsciously racist by simply stressing one part of our heritage, thus reducing the complexity of our cultural heritage to a genetic reality which is only partially dealt with.”¹⁸ Forcefully, Ellison continues by elaborating his concept of “the complexity of our cultural heritage”:

Al Murray has said that all blacks are part white, and all whites part black. If we can deal with that dilemma—and it is a dilemma—then we can begin to deal with the problem of defining the American experience as we create it. You cannot have an American experience without having a black experience. Nor can you have the technology of jazz, as original as many of those techniques are, without having had long centuries of European musical technology, not to mention the technologies of various African musical traditions. Locke thought about these matters [...]

What I am suggesting is that when you go back you do not find a pure stream; after all, Louis Armstrong, growing up in New Orleans, was taught to play a rather strict type of military music before he found his jazz and blues voice. Talk about cultural pluralism! It’s the air we breathe; it’s the ground we stand on. It’s what we have to come to grips with as we discover who we are and what we want to add to the ongoing definition of the American

¹⁷ Posnock 200-01.

¹⁸ *Collected Essays* 445. Emphasis original.

experience. I think in his effort to define what was different about that group of Negroes of the 1920s, Locke was trying to resolve these questions, and to bring to bear all that he knew about the complexities of culture. It is very difficult in this country to find a pure situation. Usually when you find some assertion of purity, you are dealing with historical, if not cultural ignorance.¹⁹

Ellison understood that the source of America's vitality is its fundamentally and undeniably miscegenated character. He wanted Americans to understand that the fact of cultural and historical mixture touches everyone, no matter what their complexion or geographic origin. In his effort to combat the conventional wisdom of racial purism, and its system of rigid classification and genetic determinism—a discourse, Posnock writes, of “deadly reductionism,” which, like Kallen's sense of cultural pluralism, “anchors behavior to descent (identity)” —Ellison throughout his career attempted “to minimize talk of ‘race.’”²⁰ In his deft reading of “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” Posnock explains that “the word ‘race’ has a negligible presence” in the essay, “for it constitutes the ‘blood thinking’ that Ellison seeks to banish and replace with ‘the mystery of American identity,’ a phrase he repeats several times.”²¹

Ellison personifies “the mystery of American identity (our unity-in-diversity)”²² in the image of “the little man hidden behind the stove” at Chehaw Station, “a lonely whistle-stop” near the Tuskegee campus.²³ Ellison recalls learning about the little man during his college years, from his beloved music teacher Hazel Harrison. After receiving harsh criticism from other members of the music faculty for a disappointing recital, Ellison privately “appealed to Miss Harrison's generosity of spirit” for reassurance. But instead of false comfort, he got a riddle: “You must always play your best,” she tells him, “even if it's only in the waiting room of Chehaw Station,

¹⁹ *Collected Essays* 446, 447.

²⁰ Posnock 200.

²¹ Posnock 202.

²² *Collected Essays* 512.

²³ *Collected Essays* 494.

because in this country there'll always be a little man hidden behind the stove [...] There'll always be the little man whom you don't expect, and he'll know the *music*, and the *tradition*, and the standards of *musicianship* required for whatever you set out to perform!"²⁴ Immediately Ellison is confounded. "Chehaw Station was the last place in the area where I would expect to encounter a connoisseur lying in wait,"²⁵ he writes. Still, out of respect for his teacher, he resolves to remember Harrison's "warning of a cultivated taste that asserted its authority out of obscurity."²⁶ In short, Ellison explains, the little man at Chehaw Station is

a metaphor for those individuals we sometimes meet whose refinement of sensibility is inadequately explained by family background, formal education or social status [...] culturally and environmentally such individuals are products of errant but sympathetic vibrations set up by the tension between America's social mobility, its universal education, and its relative freedom of cultural information.²⁷

In the essay's concluding section, Ellison recalls the moment when he encountered the ur-example of such a surprising, sociologically incongruent individual—or rather, four such examples, all at the same time. It happens "in faraway New York," three years after receiving Miss Harrison's riddle. While enlisted "as a member of the Federal Writers' Project," Ellison is canvassing a tenement building, hoping to gather signatures for "a petition in support of some now long-forgotten social issue that I regarded as indispensable to the public good." He tells us that this work was not a Writers' Project assignment, but rather something on which he chose to spend "an afternoon of freedom." He starts at the top floor and, going door to door, works his way down. Down the hall in the dimly lit basement, behind a closed door, he hears several "male Afro-American voices, raised in violent argument. The language was profane, the style of speech a

²⁴ *Collected Essays* 494. Emphasis original.

²⁵ *Collected Essays* 494.

²⁶ *Collected Essays* 495.

²⁷ *Collected Essays* 497.

Southern idiomatic vernacular such as was spoken by formally uneducated Afro-American workingmen.”²⁸ Approaching the door with petition in hand, Ellison listens:

For the angry voices behind the door were proclaiming an intimate familiarity with a subject of which, by all the logic of their linguistically projected social status, they should have been oblivious. The subject of their contention confounded all my assumptions regarding the correlation between educational levels, class, race and the possession of conscious culture. Impossible as it seemed, these foul-mouthed black workingmen were locked in verbal combat over which of the two celebrate Metropolitan Opera divas was the superior soprano!²⁹

The question of how these particular men converse so expertly about matters of ostensibly high culture becomes for Ellison “a mystery so incongruous, outrageous, and surreal that it struck me as a threat to my sense of rational order.”³⁰ The mystery produces in Ellison “a distortion of perspective,”³¹ which he feels challenged to address. So he knocks on the door.

After a long silence, and a second knock, Ellison is told to enter. Inside the room he sees “four huge black men” of dark complexion, sitting around “a circular dining-room table” with a “sooty-chimneyed lamp” and “a half-empty pint of whiskey,” dressed in “faded blue overalls and jumper jackets,” looking right at him “with undisguised hostility.” Behind them is a great marble fireplace and “four enormous coal scoops.” The men are obviously coal-shovelers, and “their blackness was accentuated in the dim lamplight by the dust and grime of their profession.” Ellison approaches them with hesitation, “holding my petition like a flag of truce before me,” looking for the right words.³² One of the men stands and tells him to speak up—“We ain’t got all day”—then the following exchange occurs:

²⁸ *Collected Essays* 519.

²⁹ *Collected Essays* 519-20.

³⁰ *Collected Essays* 519.

³¹ *Collected Essays* 520.

³² *Collected Essays* 521.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," I said, "but I thought you might be interested in supporting my petition," and began hurriedly to explain.

"Say," one of the men said, "you look like one of them relief investigators. You're not out to jive us, are you?"

"Oh, no, sir," I said. "I happen to work on the Writers' Project..."

The standing man leaned toward me. "You on the Writers' Project?" he said, looking me up and down.

"That's right," I said. "I'm a writer."

"Now is that right?" he said. "How long you been writing?"

I hesitated. "About a year," I said.

He grinned, looking at the others. "Y'all hear that? Ol' Homeboy here has done up and jumped on the *gravy* train! Now that's pretty good. Pretty damn good! So what did you do before that?" he said.

"I studied music," I said, "at Tuskegee."

"Hey, now!" the standing man said. "they got a damn good choir down there. Y'all remember back when they opened Radio City? They had that fellow William L. Dawson for a director. Son, let's see that paper."³³

The double-mention of the Writers' Project, followed by Ellison's assertion, "I'm a writer," is not at all insignificant. As a plot device, Ellison's self-described identity as a Project worker diffuses a possible misrecognition and allows the dialogue to take off—just as Ellison is surprised to learn that this coal-shoveler is an expert on the standards of operatic musicianship, so too is the standing man surprised to learn that this proper young fellow is a writer and not the "relief investigator" that he looks like. The mention of the Writers' Project is also a signal, to the informed reader, that young Ellison is about to improvise a potential fieldwork situation into being.

The men sign the petition out of sympathy for the young writer, assuring him that "signing this piece of paper won't do no good, but since Home here is a musician, it won't do us no harm to help him out. Let's go along with him."³⁴ After the last man signs, Ellison takes back the paper, waits a moment, clears his throat, but then once more succumbs to silence. "So what else are you

³³ *Collected Essays* 521-22.

³⁴ *Collected Essays* 522.

waiting for?" one of the men asks him. "You got what you came for. What else do you want?"

Then the real encounter, intellectualized in retrospect, takes place:

And then I blurted it out. "I'd like to ask you just one question," I said.

"Like what?" the standing one said.

"Like where on earth did you gentlemen learn so much about the grand opera?"

For a moment he stared at me with parted lips; then, pounding the mantelpiece with his palm, he collapsed with a roar of laughter. As the laughter of the others erupted like a string of giant firecrackers, I looked on with growing feelings of embarrassment and insult, trying to grasp the handle of what appeared to be an unfriendly joke. Finally, wiping coal-dust-stained tears from his cheeks, he interrupted his laughter long enough to initiate me into the mystery.

"Hell, son," he laughed, "we learn it down at the Met, that's where..."

"You learn it *where*?"

"At the Metropolitan Opera, just like I told you. Strip us fellows down and give us some costumes and we make about the finest damn bunch of Egyptians you ever seen. Hell, we been down there wearing leopard skins and carrying spears or waving things like palm leafs and ostrich-tail fans for *years*!"

Now, purged by the revelation, and with Hazel Harrison's voice echoing in my ears, it was my turn to roar with laughter. With a shock of recognition I joined them in appreciation of the hilarious American joke that centered on the incongruities of race, economic status and culture. My sense of order restored, my appreciation of the arcane ways of American cultural possibility was vastly extended. The men were products of both past *and* present; were both coal heavers *and* Met extras; were both workingmen *and* opera buffs. Seen in the clear, pluralistic, melting-pot light of American cultural possibility, there was no contradiction. The joke, the apparent contradiction, sprang from my attempting to see them by the light of social concepts that cast less illumination than an inert lump of coal. I was delighted, because during a moment when I least expected to encounter the little man behind the stove (Miss Harrison's vernacular music critic, as it were), I had stumbled upon four such men.³⁵

³⁵ *Collected Essays* 522-23.

Posnock's interpretation of "the hilarious American joke," the cultural mystery into which the coal heavers initiate Ralph Ellison, is so masterful that I am compelled to quote it here entirely:

[The joke/mystery] mocks what Ellison calls his "pride in my knowledge of my own people." But Ellison now discovers that his proudly proprietary knowledge of what he presumed were his "own people" in fact was the seductive, chauvinistic pseudo-knowledge of stereotypes, what he calls "social concepts that cast less illumination than an inert lump of coal." Taken in by the tidiness of generalizations, Ellison has had to unlearn them in order to have his "appreciation of the arcane ways of American cultural possibility...vastly extended." Never again will he forget that democracy, like art, "is an assault upon logic," that is, the logic of identity.³⁶

The concluding section of "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" is by far the best known and most widely circulated story that Ellison tells about his experience on the Federal Writers' Project. In an effort to bring the central insight of this narrative—the antiessentialist, intersubjective, pragmatist theory of American cultural pluralism—to bear upon our method as oral historians, I propose this: *Let's make every effort to treat each of our narrators as if they could be an incarnation of the little man behind the stove at Chehaw Station.* Most likely they are, in some form or fashion. Spend enough time talking to someone about his life experience, and you are bound to have your preconceptions about his cultural identity shaken. What I propose does not mean that we should do no research about the cultures and histories that our narrators represent. Far from it, for how could we experience surprise if we have no prior expectations? And furthermore, the inexorable truth of human nature, of prejudice and stereotype, is that we *always* have expectations and assumptions of the people we meet. So the question becomes one of refining and wearing lightly our expectations, mitigating our prejudices by developing a more complex historical consciousness that would allow for more surprising expressions of individuality.

³⁶ Posnock 205.