# CLAUDE BROWN AND THE BLACK AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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**Abstract**

Harlem, New York – Promised Land for the African Americans of the post-depression period - is the focus of this essay. To the sharecroppers and field hands of the Carolinas, New York – with its infinite attractions, beckoned. Men and women tired of working from "sun-up to sun down," were easily attracted by the promise of a fair and just city; a city which had limitless opportunities for those who wanted to live and work there. The Promised Land, for these children of African slaves, was New York, and life in New York promised freedom from chain gangs and freedom from the cotton; tobacco and sugarcane fields which had to be tilled, sowed and harvested the year round. Fields where Massa Charlie reigned supreme and to do his bidding was the ultimate aim of the plantation slaves, generations of whom had worked on these or similar plantations with no surety of keeping their families together, with no thought other than the immediate needs of the body. To these tillers of the soil, New York, post emancipation, was the Promised Land and the thought that they had arrived in the Promised Land was sufficient to hide the dirt and grime, the rampant crime and lawlessness of Harlem: named by the Dutch Protestant and Huguenot immigrants for the 'chosen one.' This paper seeks to explore the truth of Harlem being the Promised Land for African Americans.

**Keywords:** Massa Charlie, Promised Land, black autobiography, emancipation

## Introduction:

According to the Hebrew Bible the **Promised Land** is a term used to describe the land promised by God, to the Israelites, and refers to the promise initially made to the prophet Abraham and renewed to his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob - Abraham's grandson. The Promised Land was given to their descendants and was described in terms of the territory from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates.

Harlem, New York – Promised Land for the African Americans of the post-depression period - is the focus of this essay. To the sharecroppers and field hands of the Carolinas, New York – with its infinite attractions, beckoned but the truth was bitter and unpalatable, since the children of the slaves discovered that they had only exchanged one form of slavery for another and more deadly kind. This essay seeks to explore the truth of Harlem being the Promised Land for African Americans.

**I.:**

Men and women tired of working from "sun-up to sun down," were easily attracted by the promise of a fair and just city; a city which had limitless opportunities for those who wanted to live and work there. The Promised Land, for these children of African slaves, was New York, and life in New York promised freedom from chain gangs and freedom from the cotton; tobacco and sugarcane fields which had to be tilled, sowed and harvested the year round. Fields where Massa Charlie reigned supreme and to do his bidding was the ultimate aim of the plantation slaves, generations of whom had worked on these or similar plantations with no surety of keeping their families together, with no thought other than the immediate needs of the body. These were generations which had toiled to feed and support the Renaissance in Europe, the rules of kings and emperors and the landed aristocracy of the Americas. To these tillers of the soil, New York, post emancipation, was the Promised Land and the thought that they had arrived in the Promised Land was sufficient to hide the dirt and grime, the rampant crime and lawlessness of Harlem: named by the Dutch Protestant and Huguenot immigrants for the 'chosen one.'

Landing in the city, however, did not offer the easy life that they had bargained for. The move northwards was full of physical and psychological pain. Not only did they have to endure physical separation from the land, it also meant the breaking up of families – living on plantations – and homesteads in the South. The vision of the Promised Land underwent major changes when these children of ex-slaves had to live in small, cramped accommodation that lacked the ventilation – which they had grown accustomed to – down South. Being a part of the "5.5 million African Americans that migrated from the South to Northern cities between 1910 and 1950," Brown's parents find it hard to adjust to the change in their environment. Papa Brown – Claude Brown's grandfather - especially grows quite nostalgic when he thinks of the past. He forgets the agony and humiliation of the chain gang and relates how he escaped once from the chain gang, but later went back, because he didn't know what to do in the absence of the chain gang. For these migrants, the increase in the crime rate and the tendency of children – as young as five or six-year-olds – to develop

a criminal mentality was something that none of them had bargained for. These ex-slaves, who had looked forward to a life full of justice and equality, were rudely awakened when they realized that they had jumped from the frying pan, of plantation life, into the fire of Harlem street life, where crime was rampant and keeping children away from the juvenile homes meant keeping them off "the street". The safety and security that they had been promised, in the move northwards, still appeared to be as far away as it had ever been.

Weixelmann discussing the book in essay **African American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: a Bibliographical Essay**, states:

> 'Brown paints a hostile environment with clinical realism, yet a nostalgic, philosophical strain also exists within the narrator which keeps him, and his tale from plunging into despair. The result is a book which transcends the purely personal and becomes a work of social history which speaks knowingly about collective black struggle.'

This statement, seen in the backdrop of the move to New York's Harlem, shows not only the limitations imposed by the lack of education on these children of ex-slaves but also shows, with a humorous twist, the deep and lasting impressions that have been left there by generations of servitude. The deep-seated fear in the minds of men and women like Brown's parents is the result of centuries of suppression followed by the disappointment of the 'Promised Land', and its slum tenements and slum lords. The disappointment is not only for the physical discomfort but also for the mental anguish caused by the slum lords – following in the footsteps of Massa Charlie. The brainwashing is so deep-rooted that even in freedom the majority of these ex-slaves cannot think beyond acquiring the most menial of jobs in Harlem, so much so that they want to transfer those same ideas to the next generation. Fear of deprivation combines with feelings of insecurity and this deep seated neurosis emerges when Brown tells his mother that he wants to be a psychologist. Her response to his announcement bears careful thought. She says:

> "Boy you better stop that dreamin' and get all those crazy notions outta your head." She was scared. She had the idea that coloured people weren't supposed to want anything like that. You were supposed to just want to work in fields or be happy to be a janitor."

Mrs. Brown imitates the white habit of addressing colored folks as boy and girl. The connotation of the words is definitely derogatory and the title is given regardless of age. Elsewhere also, Claude Brown mentions that the use of 'boy', and 'girl', is objectionable only when used by white employers, since the term is obnoxious only in the manner in which it is

uttered. The Jewish shop owner - Goldberg - expressing his desire to 'find some nice honest colored girl, who could come in and help my wife clean up the house,' actually meant that he was desirous of employing a middle-aged woman who would clean the house, with no help from the 'lady' of the house, who invariably was not only younger, but physically stronger and well-fed. Similarly, the term 'nigger', considered derogatory, when used by a white speaker, becomes a term of endearment coming from a black speaker – just as the 'boy', that Mrs Brown uses does not have the derogatory connotation that the word takes on when used by Goldberg and others of his ilk. Brown takes exception to the treatment of Negroes at the hands of Goldberg:

> Most of the older folks were used to it. They didn't know Goldberg from Massa Charlie; to them Goldberg was Massa Charlie. I suppose the tradition had been perpetuated when the folks moved to the North and took the image of Massa Charlie and put it into Goldberg. Perhaps Goldberg was unaware of it.

The concept of Uncle Tom - a Negro satisfied with his lot and willing to serve his white masters, be they Massa Charlie or Mr. Goldberg – is one that is abhorrent to Claude Brown. He could not abide having any black man act like an 'Uncle Tom,' but finds himself helpless before his parents – whom he presents as Toms satisfied with their lot and looking no farther than having their sons get positions as janitors or pizza delivery boys:

> Our parents' coming to Harlem produced a ….. generation of new niggers. Not only Goldberg and our parents didn't understand anything….. I guess, in a way, my generation was like the first Africans coming over on the boat. There was still the language problem. (Brown. 287-288)

Thus when he hears Papa (his grandfather) talking, nostalgically of the 'chain gang' and the humiliation that brown associates with slavery, the young Claude Brown loses patience with the older generation who can only relate to slavery and who are victims of the prisoner syndrome, whereby the prisoner finds comfort behind the iron bars of a prison. To him it is inexplicable that a man should speak nostalgically of slavery and yet he also realizes that this is not only true of the older generation, but he finds ample evidence of this condition in his own generation. The fact that he wants to go back to Wiltwyck, even when he has been released and that he feels at home only in correctional centers shows that he has difficulty in adjusting with life at home: a home where there is neither comfort nor security; where he can communicate with neither of his parents and where he can claim no ties, except those of a sibling. Claude Brown's comfort zones thus are prescribed by his friends – since they are the only ones who understand his urge to declare his manhood and mark out his territory. To run wild in the streets, to

steal, play the ‘Murphy,’ cheat and lie appear to the young Claude Brown a necessary part of the process of growing up on the street. Since the street is all he knows – Eighth Avenue and its surrounding areas are ‘the street’ for Claude Brown and his friends – he must learn to survive and the survival lessons he gets focus on making money, by hook and more often by crook.

Critics of literature for a long time were in no mood to accept the possibility of a Black American literature, and it has only been in the last decade or so, that Black American literature came to be accepted as a part of the canon. Haberly and others have commented on the strong need to accept its existence as ‘a self-sufficient entity,’ and writers like Claude Brown, Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison, to name but a few, have worked to provide material which has helped in giving Black American literature the status that it has long deserved, but which had been denied to this body of work.

In writing **Manchild in the Promised Land, C**laude Brown has presented Harlem of the post-depression period. It is by no means a pretty picture, but it is a true picture – one that Weixelmann, in his critical essay, describes as a narrative of ‘a hostile environment’ presented with clinical realism, yet a nostalgic, philosophical strain also exists within the narrator which keeps him and his tale from plunging into despair. The result is a book which transcends the purely personal and becomes a work of social history which speaks knowingly about collective black struggle.’

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much so that they want to transfer those same ideas to the next generation. Fear of deprivation combines with feelings of insecurity and this deep seated neurosis emerges in the response given by Brown's mother when he tells her that he wants to be a psychologist. She says:

"Boy you better stop that dreamin' and get all those crazy notions outta your head." (Brown, 1965)She was scared. She had the idea that coloured people weren't supposed to want anything like that. You were supposed to just want to work in fields or be happy to be a janitor.

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For Claude Brown, the *happening* is infinitely more important than the outcome of events and his narrative focuses on 'fictional modes, especially dialogic-scenic techniques to tell a sequence of 'stories', in which he is directly concerned and involved.' The narrative of a life spent on the

streets – when not actually in one or the other correctional facility – is moving in its authenticity and the pathos and humor with which it is related. The stories he relates are proof of his aversion to the passive acceptability that the older generation demonstrates with regard to life in Harlem. For Brown and his friends, life on the street – with all its lawlessness – was infinitely preferable to working downtown, for this necessitated working for Goldberg, of whom he says:

I became aware of what I knew about the garment center and about Goldberg and his relationship to the Negro, the "boy" who worked for him. I had the feeling that he never saw us. He never saw our generation. He saw us only through the impression that the older folks had made.

Brown also depicts the limited horizons of his parents. Although they make the move from the cotton fields of South Carolina to an emancipated New York, there is very little actual change in their mental make-up. For them, the horizon is a janitor's job or a job at 'Burger Heaven.' This is the extent of their ambition and Brown is severely critical of this approach in the autobiographical account he gives in **Manchild in the Promised Land**. In a conversation with his father, after he has quit the job at the Hamburger Heaven, he is told that he doesn't: "need all that education. You'd better keep that job, because that's a good job." The limitation that lack of education imposes on the children of ex-slaves is compounded by the deep and lasting impression that has been left there by generations of slavery and brainwashing.

The lack of education is not strictly speaking because of lack of schools. Brown is enrolled in one school after another and is removed, either for spoiling the atmosphere of the school or for playing 'hooky' once too often. He is continually being told to be good, but he is never instructed on 'how to be good.' His mother cautions him again and again to 'be good' but the presence of his frequently drunk father and numbers playing mother, compounded with his exposure to 'tricking' and 'playing house,' leave him without any chance to improve his lot. And so he follows the path that has been carved out by his seniors on the street: Wiltwyck, Warwick and the jail. What brings him out of this dream-like state is the thought that once he goes to jail, there will be no turning back. Making money selling 'pot' on the street, playing the Murphy and petty thievery is all very well and accepted as a necessary part of growing up, but once he gets 'the sheet,' it will be the end of the road for him. Not only is he jolted by this thought for himself, but he also wants to keep his brother 'Pimp,' away from it. When he finds out that Pimp has joined the gang of 'the nodders,' and is 'strung out' he is scared out of his wits. He tries to retrieve Pimp from the clutches of this slow death, but finds Pimp to be uncooperative and so, in spite of all his efforts he has to let

Pimp make his own choice. All the effort he puts in to keep his brother out of the clutches of heroin, prove fruitless and he has to abandon Pimp.

The dialect that Brown uses in Manchild in the Promised Land, is the one that was actually in vogue in the 40s, 50s and 60s in Harlem and is class specific, being the one that was used by the uneducated and the illiterate masses dwelling in the slum tenements – and is a very clear indication of the social and economic set-up. The terms that had been used, derogatively, by the white plantation owners – like 'nigger', 'boy', and 'girl' – were accepted when used amongst themselves and in time were acknowledged as terms of endearment. Elsewhere Claude Brown has mentioned that the use of 'boy', and 'girl', is objectionable only when used by white employers, since the term is obnoxious only because of the tone in which it is uttered. Thus Goldberg's - the Jewish white owner of factories and commercial ventures - desire for a 'nice honest colored girl', actually meant that he was desirous of employing a middle-aged black woman in the capacity of maid-servant and general dogsbody, with no help from the 'lady' of the house, where the latter was not only invariably younger, but physically stronger and well-fed.. Even the word 'girl' seems to Brown, an obscenity, whereas other terms are given connotations that are specific to the Harlem area and were later known as Harlemese. Thus 'turning tricks' is no more considered objectionable than dealing 'pot' does for the youth of Brown's generation. Thus the 'boy' that Mrs. Brown uses does not have the derogatory connotation that the word takes on when used by Goldberg and others like him. Brown takes exception to the treatment of Negroes at the hands of Goldberg:

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Brown wrote about the Harlem of the fifties and sixties and this meant that he focused not only on Christians but the rise of the Black

Muslim movement as well as that of the Coptic Faith which believed Haile Salassie of Ethiopia to be the Messiah and the upholder of the Black Christian Movement. Although he himself did not feel strong religious ties once the original charm of the Coptic faith had worn off, his writing shows that some of his friends did more than dabble in the different faiths that were just then coming into vogue amongst the Black population of Harlem. One of these was the rise of the Black Muslim Movement of W. Fard Muhammed and his disciple; Elijah Muhammad. Writing, as Joe Weixelmann states: 'life stories designed to communicate group experience', Brown has chronicled in **Manchild in the Promised Land**, the fact that most of his cronies were converted in jail and became active members of the movement on their release from jail:

All the Muslims now felt as though 125th street was theirs. It used to belong to the hustlers and the slicksters……. This group just came down and claimed it. (332)

A little later he states:

The Black Muslim Movement was closer to most Harlemites than any of the other organizations, much closer than the NAACP or the Urban League.

All this despite the fact that he, unlike Malcolm X and others, did not feel attracted towards the Nation of Islam. He does however mention that it was in the jails that this conversion/reversion took place and many of the people that he mentions felt the call towards religion during their stay at one or the other jail.

Critics have written variously about Brown's experiences and his life in Harlem and his rise as an educated young lawyer. Although strictly speaking, it is not a rags-to-riches story, it does 'demonstrate how someone could overcome great odds to become in his case, a lawyer."

Claude Brown's autobiography strives to show that given the opportunity, even the dregs of society can rise above themselves. His own life is not only an example that he sets for others living in Harlem, he also shows that hard work and singleness of purpose does pay off, not only when the intention is to do good, but also when the desire to emulate one's peers, becomes stronger than the desire to be good. Living in the Harlem of the thirties and forties, he lived to go back to Harlem and see for himself the change that took place in the Harlem that he grew up in. From the filthy sidewalks that were 'an obstacle course of garbage' where 'Mountains of trash sit piled up on just about every street and lure rats into the open to forage for food before they scurry back into the buildings they infest,' this city is slowly transformed into what James Weldon Johnson called "'the greatest Negro city in the world,' a source of black pride, a place of enterprise for black people, a place of hope for black people."

Brown's autobiography is supported by reports, research and survey conducted by various groups and organizations. One of these is the research conducted to gauge the reactions of Black American young men and their approach towards masculinity, which according to Brown, had to be asserted by the young men – from the age of five or six - living in the Harlem of the 30s and 40s. The comfort and security that would otherwise have been provided by the family, was provided, according to Harris, by 'gang membership.' Lamar J. Garnes, in his PhD dissertation labels Brown's parents as "migrants and therefore "ignorant." Quoting Houston A. Baker, Garnes says that "Brown's actions and reactions are a response to the environment and also to his parents' ignorance of the environment." This ignorance of the environment is also responsible for the limitations or non-existence of their ambitions for their children.

**Conclusion:**

William Mathes, writing in the Antioch Review, comments on the need to hear from someone who grew up in Harlem and who managed to survive the deadly environment of the Harlem of the 30s and 40s. According to him Brown has provided answers to dozens of questions asked and unasked. The frank and forthright manner in which Claude Brown narrates his story not only makes it a readable narrative but also serves as 'a story of their searching, their dreams, their sorrows, their small and futile rebellions, and their endless battle to establish their own place in America's greatest metropolis - and in America itself.' In doing this, Mathes states, Brown has done what Samuel Pepys did for London of the seventeenth century, by keeping a diary that may not have been meant for publication but which serves as an accurate portrait of the London of his day.

It is clear, throughout the book that Sonny is thought of, and thinks of himself, as one of the aristocracy. He may not be a success in the traditional American mould, but he is an outstanding success in the environment he grows up in and according to the rules of the game as it is played there, fearless, a good fighter, and an accomplished thief. By the code of the streets, he deserves respect. And since he no longer has to worry about establishing his reputation or his manhood, he has the freedom to do what he wants, even to break away from the world he has known without having to worry about what others might say.

The significant role that luck plays in these stories only reinforces the central point, by leaving the impression that this is a society in which lucky breaks can and will occur to anyone at any time. Thus, whatever human suffering may exist cannot properly be attributed to any injustice in the way society is organized or in the way it operates, for those with the proper qualities to escape whatever unfortunate circumstances currently afflict

them, will sooner or later find a chance to do it and will avail themselves of it. Implicitly if not explicitly, then, the books function as justifications of the status quo.

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