Ad Astra Per Aspera

FRANK MARSHALL DAVIS

by John Edgar Tidwell

In 1905 Arkansas City saw the birth of Frank Marshall Davis, whose eventual accomplishments, by any measure, would show him to be one of Kansas' most significant writers. Davis' reputation has been duly noted in African American and even American literary history because his career as journalist and poet has seen him claimed by two important literary movements—the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

The earlier renaissance, often cited as a Harlem-based cultural moment, reached out in the early 1930s to claim Davis as a "Newer Negro" poet because his aesthetic sensibilities broadened and extended the impetus for a national African American literary movement in the Midwest. The latter renaissance, rooted in the racially separatist philosophy of

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Black Power, looked back to Davis’ four published collections of poems for a politicized view of art and for ideological direction. And yet despite this sterling career—which also included newspaper positions as editor, managing editor, executive editor, feature writer, editorial writer, correspondent, sports reporter, music and theater critic, contributing editor, and fiction writer for the Chicago Evening Bulletin, the Chicago Whip, the Chicago Star, the Gary (Indiana) American, the Atlanta World, the Associated Negro Press, and the Honolulu Record—Davis has received little recognition in Kansas literary history for his accomplishments, nor has he been accorded the recognition given Langston Hughes or Gordon Parks, the two most frequently noted African American writers linked to Kansas and its literary history.\(^2\)

It is true that Frank Marshall Davis has not benefited from the textual recovery efforts and the biographical studies that have propelled Hughes’ name into literary prominence.\(^3\) In fact, Davis’ move to the remote island territory of Hawaii in 1948 cut him off from a world of appreciative readers and support from other writers. He became, as one critic said, “a mystery man,” which no doubt contributed to his neglect in Kansas literary history. With the 1992 posthumous publication of Davis’ Livin’ the Blues: Memoirs of a Black Journalist and Poet, the world gained an opportunity to rediscover this multitalented writer whose roots lay in Kansas soil. Davis’ reemergence, however, still ignores the fact he was first a Kansas writer. While he remains, in effect, excluded from the histories of Kansas writing, his star was an important light—one that deserves to be restored to the firmament we call Kansas literature. The purpose of this article is to explore how Davis has been the object of historical neglect and to suggest why reclaiming his life and career both greatly enriches and extends our notion of Kansas literary history.

Understanding the process that resulted in Davis’ historical neglect can be traced to an inherent conflict in the state motto, \textit{ad astra per aspera}, which loosely translated means “to the stars through difficulty.” The origin of this phrase has been credited to John James Ingalls, a man, historians tell us, who went on to become Kansas’ most elo-

\(^2\) The term “Kansas literary history” is used in a general, referential way. Apparently no definitive study exists that formally traces the development of this literature. However, the following sources read in tandem suggest the shape a formally written history might take: Thomas Fox Averill, ed., \textit{What Kansas Means to Me: Twentieth-Century Writers on the Sunflower State} (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991); Paul Stewge, ed., \textit{Kansas Revisited: Historical Images and Perspectives} (Lawrence: Kansas University Division of Continuing Education, 1990); Myra E. Hall, \textit{Kansas Then and Now} (Lawrence: University Extension Division, University of Kansas, 1936); and Gerald Early, ed., “Contemporary Black Writers: Celebrating 125 Years of Kansas Statehood,” \textit{Cottonwood} 36,39 (Summer/Fall 1986).

quent statesman and later, at the end of the nineteenth century, its most distinguished man of letters.' Ingalls struggled to coin a phrase that was simultaneously patriotic, elegant, and warm. The result of his efforts was a phrase that preserved the idea "that the conquest of difficulties is the way to moral as well as political success." From the vantage point of a literary history that seeks to reckon with Frank Marshall Davis, *ad astra per aspera* embodies a conflict between its lofty goals for preserving a history of struggle for statehood and its inclusion in racially specific instances of African Americans in that history. Stated another way, the motto engenders a conflict between principle and practice.

Surely Senator Ingalls had the best intentions when he formulated so noble a statement that succinctly distilled the trials and tribulations Kansas endured on the road from territorial status to statehood. And yet, that Senator Ingalls could not rise above the prevailing intellectual thought about racial minorities calls into question who was to be remembered in this determined historical quest. In a comment about the nation's annexation of Hawaii in 1897, Ingalls reveals some of his own racial biases:

Civilization bequeaths to weaker races only its vices. The Indian, the Negro, the Chinese, the Hindoo [sic], the Polynesian are illustrations of the blessings which Christian nations bestow upon their victims. Since 1778, the date of [Hawaii's] discovery, the native population, under the benign influences of alcohol and disease, has constantly declined till but a fraction remains. In the twenty-five years following the landing of Cook[,] fully one-half of the original inhabitants perished from these causes, and the diminution has since steadily progressed. *Their final extinction or absorption is the decree of destiny.*

Senator Ingalls' comments are quite revealing. Insofar as he raises questions about the fate of those racial groups who are supposedly uncivilized, Senator Ingalls demonstrates how thoroughly one he was with the thinking of his generation on racial matters.

For instance, George Fredrickson, in his important study *The Black Image in the White Mind* (1971), tells us about the impact Social Darwinism had on the intellectual thought about blacks in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. White historians and ethnologists agreed about the concept of racial degeneracy and extinction. This theory held that the elimination of slavery reduced white control of slaves and set in motion a reversion of slaves into savagery; between emancipation and complete extinction lay an intermediate evolutionary state called "degeneracy." This state of degeneracy was explained by recourse to assumptions that proceeded from the notion of the "survival of the fittest." Racialists, for instance, theorized that mentally blacks were ill-equipped to compete with whites and that "natural causes" eventually would wipe out African Americans. (As natural causes, social scientists cited a high birth rate that was being offset by a high death rate; since freedom was granted, a supposed physical excellence enjoyed by African Americans before emancipation gave way to physical deterioration; and a general decrease in morality was determined by data gathered from syphilis and consumption cases.)

One hundred years later, the Darwinian basis for racial difference reveals more clearly an obvious effort to justify post-Reconstruction political and social policies directed at completing the disenfranchisement of African Americans. Because such thought was so persuasive as to be almost definitive, Ingalls could hardly be faulted for accepting uncritically what we now know is dubious philosophy. Nevertheless, in a very real way Senator Ingalls' racial thinking contradicts the hopeful idealism of *ad astra per aspera*, its principle and practice.

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It is precisely this sort of contradiction that Davis uses to frame the narrative of his experiences growing up in south-central Kansas from 1905 to 1923. In the opening chapter of his autobiography *Livin' the Blues*, Davis begins by describing Arkansas City as "a yawn town fifty miles south of Wichita, five miles north of Oklahoma, and east and west of nowhere worth remembering." In a setting that is at once somnolent and scary, Davis paints a despairing recollection of his roots. The source of his dispiriting account is the feeling of racial inferiority that from birth was forced upon him.

One very poignant example of the process of inculcating self-hate into Davis was to present African American life as worthless. When Davis was five years old, a group of white third-graders, with curiosities piqued by overhearing their parents discussing the nature and practice of lynching, selected Davis for an experiment. As he recounts:

> I was on my way home alone, crossing a vacant lot, when these white boys, who had been lying in wait, jumped me. They threw me to the ground and held me down while one lad produced a rope and slipped it over my head. I kicked and screamed. Just as one started to snatch the noose tight around my neck, a white man appeared. He took one look, chased the boys away, freed me, and helped brush dirt and trash off my clothes. . . . I never learned who he was, nor could I single out the embryo lynchers at school next day. Naturally, school officials did not push their probe. I was still alive and unharmed, wasn't I? Besides, I was black."

Thus rudely initiated into an often cruel, pathologically violent world, Davis came to see black life in what existentialists called "absurdist" terms, as nothingness. He embraced the specious argument that "being Black meant being inferior." And why not? Many examples he saw around him, instead of refuting, actually reinforced a worldview in which blacks were psychologically, socially, and spiritually inferior to whites. In this world, black girls had no need of a high school diploma, if life only promised them opportunities to cook in the kitchens or wash the clothes of whites. The life promised for black boys was just as deprived and poor. It should hardly surprise us then that as Davis in 1923 sat uncomfortably on stage waiting to receive his high school diploma, he observed what might be a summary of his experiences in Arkansas City:

> At last the principal calls my name, and I stand, grinning faintly and apologetically. Although I am six feet one and weigh 190 at the age of seventeen, I feel more like one foot six; for I am black, and inferiority has been hammered into me at school and in my daily life away from home. . . .

> I accept my sheet of parchment and sit, hand clutching the rolled diploma showing I have completed twelve years of formal study that prepares none of us, white or black, for life in a multiracial, democratic nation. This is a mixed school—mixed in attendance, mixed-up in attitudes."

As much as Davis would seemingly foreground a life of evading would-be Lynchers and wearing a deadpan facial expression as a defense mechanism against whites who were socially his superiors, he

10. Ibid., 3. Davis mentions "three other black boys" in his overwhelmingly white graduating class.
managed to accomplish one thing: he learned from his experiences what would become his foundation for developing a healthy, self-assured, extremely confident self. He recounts, for example, the annual Emancipation Day celebrations in which black people from all around the area would gather for picnics and games. He attended without enthusiasm the Baptist church, often three times a Sunday. Out of curiosity, he wandered into the public library and discovered a new world, first in the juvenile fiction section, and then having exhausted it, in the adult area. By age nine he had read *Les Misérables*. Being somewhat isolated because of his race and age, he became something of a loner for whom books became a form of imaginative escape from a humdrum life.

At age eight years, however, Davis made a discovery that would ultimately prove to be his most significant source of personal salvation: the blues. In his own words, "The blues? We were formally introduced when I was eight; even then I had the feeling we weren't strangers. So when the blues grabbed me and held on, it was like meeting a long-lost brother." In his description of the first time he saw Ma Rainey, one of the most famous of the blues queens, Davis not only documents a contemporary event; he also provides readers some of the richness that characterizes his writing. He says: "She commanded a big, deep, fat-meat-and-greens voice, rich as pure chocolate, and her words told of common group experiences. It was like everybody shaking out his heart. Way, way low down it was and hurting good." Inspired by Ma Rainey's capacity, in the words of poet Sterling A. Brown, to "get us inside us," Davis became a distributor representing Black Swan Records. Because the white music stores refused to carry black recordings, Davis made a tidy profit selling albums by Ma Rainey, Mamie Smith, Clara Smith, Fletcher Henderson, and many more artists. His success was halted only by the 1922 railroad strike that forced his best customers, since they worked for the railroad, to spend their few available dollars on food and housing.

By the spring of 1923 Davis had developed the foundation for his deliverance from the crippling effects of racial segregation. His smoldering hatred of whites threatened to erupt into volatile retaliation when he managed to "escape," as he said, to Wichita. In part, his leaving was prompted by an inability to reconcile the contraries, the contradiction between principle and practice. As he writes:

> What embittered me most was flagrant white hypocrisy. Virtually all aspects of daily life were geared to maintaining white supremacy. And yet, teachers, newspapers, and speakers solemnly preached the doctrine that all men are created equal as they proudly pointed toward the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution... Obviously, the establishment intended to maintain the status quo until eternity. But why did they lie? Why did they not come out and say flatly what was in their hearts: equality was not for black people? Why did they teach about democracy and then shove me back when I sought my just share? Why is hypocrisy a strong national trait of American whites?

Bound for Wichita in the summer of 1923 and determined to attend college, Davis embarked upon a comparatively better life in which education might prepare him to wrestle with these contradictions. For a year he lived with his grandfather, worked at the Wichita Club, and attended classes at Friends University. Because the pursuit of education or the quest for literacy has been such a powerful motif in African American autobiographical writing, Davis' silence about his Friends' experiences is particularly disappointing. Since the belief that education is empower-

11. Emancipation Day is an unofficial holiday celebrated by African Americans in commemoration of President Abraham Lincoln's issuing the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, and its going into effect on January 1, 1863.
13. Ibid., 45.
ment is dominant among African Americans, one would like to know more about his intellectual development at Friends. Instead of a full, discursive account, he leaves us with a few statistics: in *Livin' the Blues*, Davis recalls that out of five hundred students, only seven were African American. A partial copy of his transcript records forty-eight “excess absences” in two semesters, which suggests an undistinguished academic performance. With the death of his grandfather in 1923 and the prospect of living with an unloving step-grandmother, Davis’ brief sojourn at Wichita comes to an abrupt end. To continue his quest for self-fulfillment, he sought another Kansas college to continue his education.

From Davis’ account of his decision-making process for determining his next school, he provides only a limited view into the choices available to African American students. His elimination of the three state teachers’ colleges was not based on race but on the grounds that he did not want to be an educator. The elimination of the University of Kansas, however, was another matter. Because the university had as its chancellor Ernest Lindley, Davis decided to heed the warning in Lindley’s reputation for racial bigotry:

[He] was eloquent and, as the head of an important university, supposedly intelligent. But whenever he made a telling point, he pounded the table and shouted: “And the Anglo-Saxon is the greatest race in the annals of civilization.” . . . In the Germany of a decade and a half later, Lindley might have become one of Hitler’s chief lieutenants.16

From a girlfriend who had attended Washburn College for several terms, he learned about Kansas State Agricultural College. Kansas State became Davis’ choice, in part because this girlfriend had told him about the superb parties but also because Kansas State’s excellent program in journalism beckoned as a career choice. Kansas State would nurture the two passions that guided the remainder of his life: his career as journalist and his emergence as a poet worthy of attention.

Beginning in 1924, Davis matriculated at Kansas State; out of a fifteen-hundred-member student body, he was one of about thirty black students, some of whom banded together for support by joining Phi Beta Sigma fraternity. His experiences seemed rather typical, if accounts in *Livin’ the Blues* are true: initiation into the fraternity, studying for exams, the parties, and such. But one matter unques-

16. Ibid., 255. Although neither of KU’s 1920s chancellors, Ernest Lindley and Deane Malott, “bore the slightest taint of prejudice,” according to historian Clifford S. Griffin, “neither was a crusader.” Thus a prejudicial attitude prevailed on the campus during the 1920s, and it is this attitude to which Davis’ reference alludes. Griffin, *The University of Kansas: A History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1974), 627.
tionably was true—racial segregation forced the fraternity off campus, where the members were joint tenants in a house.

From a barely readable photocopy of Davis' college transcript, it appears he performed much better in his classes than he had at Friends, and for two and a half years he prepared himself for a newspaper career. The carefully chosen vocation as journalist, however, brought him starkly up against social reality once again: what prospects existed in white America for a black man with a college degree in journalism? This issue was thrust at him by the vice president and dean of men, Dr. Julius T. Willard, when he asked Davis: "Tell me, what will you do when you get your degree? Are there any colored newspapers?" The arrogance of the first question and the ignorance of the second prompted Davis to give serious thought to his future. Of course black papers existed—more than two hundred, which nonplussed the uninformed vice president. But the other question—what will you do?—was more complicated.

Davis' education prepared him to work on a daily newspaper; to his knowledge only two African Americans were employed by white dailies: Eugene Gordon on the Boston Globe and Lester A. Walton on the New York World. His decision to leave school at the end of the fall 1926 term was prompted by the knowledge that no black daily newspapers were published in the country, that his chances of being hired by a white newspaper were considerably slim, and that his ability to write was as good as if not better than that of the reporters he had read in the black weekly newspapers. The issue of where to go was answered easily: Chicago. Having received from his Aunt Hattie and Uncle Clarence a great many black newspapers and magazines describing Chicago black life, Davis became one of the hundreds of thousands who participated in the phenomenon called the "great migration."

But Kansas State also provided him a vehicle for the urge toward self-expression that he had developed. Responses to personal hardship and racial discrimination take on many forms. For some, the response is to lash out in riot and other kinds of civil disobedience. For others, the response is tendered through art. Davis chose art. Or perhaps art chose Davis. In either case, Davis recounts how his auspicious beginnings as a poet started in a freshman English class, where the students had a choice of writing an essay or a poem. Choosing what he felt was the easy way out, he elected to write a poem. Ada Rice, his teacher, was so impressed that she asked him whether he had written other poetry. He dashed off to the library where he once again picked up a journal featuring experiments with free verse and quickly wrote a few more poems. So successful was his work that Rice initiated Davis' induction into the Ur Rune Chapter of the American College Quill Club and began the process of publishing his poetry in the local chapter's annual collection. The roots that Davis established at Kansas State grew steadily and firmly because he went on to write four important poetry collections: Black Man's Verse (1935), I Am the American Negro (1937), Through Sepia Eyes (1938), and 47th Street: Poems (1948). The power and innovative style of Black Man's Verse was greeted with critical acclaim, moving even the influential Harriet Monroe to notice from her editor's chair at Poetry: A Magazine of Verse that Davis was "a poet of authentic inspiration." The Julius Rosenwald Foundation, as if in agreement with Monroe's high praise, awarded Davis its first poetry prize in 1937.

After he had left Kansas for the last time in 1930, Davis' home-grown reputation increased because he continued to publish in sources familiar to Kansans. When editor-compiler Kenneth Porter issued a call for submissions to the first Anthology of Kansas Verse (1937), Davis was one of fifteen poets selected from a group of more than fifty

17. Davis, Livin' the Blues, 100.
18. Ibid.
19. Among the many excellent accounts of this phenomenon is John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947).

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Ada Rice, Davis’ freshman-year English teacher at Kansas State, recognized the young man’s talent for writing poetry and urged him to continue his craft. She also saw to his induction into the university’s Ur Rune Chapter of the American College Quill Club. Davis is shown in the upper right of the club’s 1926 yearbook photograph.

who sought inclusion in this prestigious collection. Published as a special section of Kansas Magazine, the Anthology endeavored “to present a small but representative group of the better work being published by authors with a Kansas background.”22 Because this anthology was the first attempt by Kansas Magazine to compile a collection in this way, the effort has canonical implications since it made decisions about aesthetic excellence and textual selection. By being selected for publication, Davis’ poem “George Brown” enjoyed the status of being part of an elite group. Langston Hughes’ “Let America be America Again” also was included, thus prompting Porter mischievously to observe: “The Negro population of Kansas is about three and one-half percent; it is, however, represented below by the disproportionate number of two poets.”22

At least one organization refused to share Porter’s irreverent humor and responded, according to Davis, by protesting that “Negroes were over-represented in the collection.”23 The Kansas Authors Club “drew the color line” in its own annual poetry contest by inserting the following proviso in its eligibility rules: “The competition is open to white residents of Kansas and to all members of the Kansas Authors Club wherever they may reside.”24 Inexplicably, the club’s insertion of a racial criterion went unnoticed for the 1937 competition. However, when the same statement was repeated verbatim in the 1938 contest rules, a “tornado in a teapot” erupted because a number of the club’s leading members discovered the provision and registered a firestorm of protest.25 Former club state president Nelson Anttrim Crawford and Dr. Karl Menninger led a number of members in a public display of resigning from the club. The unusual scrutiny now given to this clause caused club president Harry L. Rhodes to address the issue by calling a board of directors meeting to consider withdrawing the rule. Rhodes is quoted as explaining, “I don’t know how the rule got there... Apparently it was arbitrarily inserted by some member of the rules committee, and I feel sure the board will kill the clause. There is nothing in our constitution supporting such a position.”26

Crawford’s letter not only helped place the Authors Club under public scrutiny; it also provided a brief history of African American participation in Kansas literature. In opposition to the club’s exclu-

22. Ibid., 36.
23. Davis, Livin’ the Blues, 266.
25. Davis, Livin’ the Blues, 266.
sionary policy he wrote, “At least three Negro writers in Kansas have produced much more significant literature than most of us white authors will ever produce.” Crawford named Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Frank Marshall Davis. Although Crawford’s enthusiasm for Kansas’ black writers is commendable, his claim for McKay is not supported by the historical record; Hughes and Davis, however, certainly qualify as exceptional Kansas writers.27

Even though Kansas was only one of several sites that nurtured and inspired Davis’ literary production, it was an important location. It makes sense to explore his aesthetic nurturing in the context of his formal and informal education in Kansas. As a first-year student at Kansas State, Davis’ acceptance of Ada Rice’s challenge to write free verse and to disdain expository prose led to numerous publishing opportunities in undergraduate school. For instance, his poems appeared in the Kansas State Colle
gian, the campus student newspaper, beginning in 1926. In it, Davis published “Race,” “Supposition,” “Dreams,” “Brothers,” and “Kansas Winter.” After he dropped out of school in December 1926 and returned in the fall of 1929, he again published in the Kansas State Collegian. His poems “To You” and “Gary, Indiana” appeared in the September and October 1929 issues. In November 1929 the Ur Rune Chapter of the American College Quill Club published Quill Poems of 1929. The following Davis poems were reprinted or appeared for the first time: “Death,” “Gary, Indiana,” “Race,” “Dreams,” and “Christians.”

Just as important, however, Davis continued to publish in Kansas sources after departing the state. He appeared frequently in Kansas Magazine, as the following list indicates: “They All Had Grand Ideas” (1935), “To One Who Would Leave Me” (1936), “Midsummer Morn” (1936), “Flowers of Darkness” (1937), “Dancing Gal” (1937), “Tenement Room” (1938), and “Black Weariness” (1944). Formal training and sources of publication are compelling pieces of evidence that Kansas was very significant for Davis’ poetic development. But the most cogent evidence for Kansas’ influence has to be the origins of his aesthetic vision, his view of art, as signalled in his understanding of a defining relationship between poetry and music.

While it can be argued that Davis’ discovery of free verse was accidental, it cannot be denied that this poetry form suited his aesthetic sensibility. Because free verse at this time was considered unconventional poetic practice, Davis found it to be a poetic equivalent of blues and jazz:

When I heard my first blues and early jazz at the age of eight years, I felt the same kind of exultant kinship with this music that I felt when I read my first free verse in college. I am by nature an intellectual rebel, and I felt emotionally akin to those musicians who emancipated themselves from the rigid traditions of Western music. The improvisation and freedom from rigid rules which made the blues and jazz so revolutionary appealed immediately to me, just as did the break with tradition and the freewheeling which are basic ingredients for free verse.28

Embedded in this brief passage is the notion of freedom and how Davis defines himself as both an aesthetic and an intellectual rebel. The blues found in the title of his life story Livin’ the Blues functions as a

28. Claude McKay immigrated from Jamaica in 1912 primarily to study agronomy at Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute. Six months after his arrival, the peripatetic McKay left for Kansas State Agricultural College. He wrote absolutely no poetry, and after he left the school in 1914, he wrote no poetry about Kansas. Despite a track record of publishing in Jamaica, McKay can hardly be called a Kansas poet. The listing of Langston Hughes, however, is more apt because Hughes spent a significant portion of his childhood in Lawrence and Topeka. These experiences became part of his writing. From 1903 to 1915 Hughes mainly lived with his grandmother, Mary Langston, who figures prominently in a number of Hughes’ poems as well as in his novel Not Without Laughter (1920). Between Hughes and Davis existed a closer literary relationship. In the 1940s Davis reviewed Hughes’ Shakespeare in Harlem (1942) and Fields of Wonder (1947) while Hughes reviewed Davis’ 47th Street: Poems (1948). Crawford’s statement was well-intended, and the use of both McKay and Hughes, who by 1937 enjoyed enormous national reputations, lent considerable force to the argument decrying the exclusionary practice of the Authors Club. For a discussion of McKay’s relationship to Kansas, see Tyrone Tillery, Claude McKay: A Black Poet’s Struggle for Identity (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992) and Susan Miller and Antonia Quintana Pigno, “Claude McKay: The Kansas State College Interlude, 1912–1914,” Minorities Resource and Research Center Newsletter (Kansas State University) (November 1982): 1–4.
When the Kansas Authors Club printed these 1938 contest rules that denied black authors the right to participate in the event, it precipitated a "tempest in a teapot" and prompted several prominent members to make public displays of resigning from the group.

To avoid the facile perception that Davis' personal assertion was little more than a desire to overthrow the government, it bears stating that his idea of freedom was rooted in the Declaration of Independence's promise of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" for all. Like most African Americans in the depression and war years, Davis' commitment to a full participatory democracy never wavered. He ceaselessly worked to achieve what Houston A. Baker has called "the integrationist poetic"; by definition, according to this concept, the term AMERICA innately embodied the idea of the "boundless, classless, raceless, possibility in America." Even the variety of communism that Davis secretly embraced in the early 1940s never was intended to overthrow the government, only force the government to ensure full and complete democratic participation for all, regardless of race, creed, or national origin.

In 1935–1948 Davis moved in significant ways to serve as a catalyst for freedom. At the Associated Negro Press (ANP), where he worked in a variety of editorial positions, Davis helped shape what many black newspapers came to agree was their central purpose: to give "the widest possible publicity to the many instances of racism and the dissatisfaction of Afro-America with the status quo." This purpose calls attention to the need for a press to counterbalance the welter of misinformation reported in the white media. For instance, while national public poli-

30. Davis, Living the Blues, 276, 278.

32. Davis, Living the Blues, 272.
cy sought to “close ranks” and ignore racial problems in favor of a unified war effort, the African American press conducted its “double-V” campaign—victory abroad and victory at home. This campaign attempted to guarantee that the freedoms for which African American soldiers fought in the European, African, and Pacific theaters also would be granted to them at home. Part of this struggle was conducted as an effort to dismantle the structure of codes and practices that sustained racial separation in the armed services, in effect showing how a desegregated military could serve invaluable in desegregating American society.

Davis cut a wide swath in using his news writing experience to help dismantle de jure and de facto racial segregation. As managing and executive editor for the ANP, his job was to gather news from his correspondents and other wire services, edit or rewrite copy, and disseminate news releases to the various subscribing African American weekly newspapers. Apart from this work, Davis also served as a columnist, routinely writing “Rating the Records,” “Things Theatrical,” and “The World of Sports.” In addition to these regular columns, he wrote more than thirty-five book reviews and, at the height of World War II, a series entitled “Passing Parade,” which courageously challenged the projected socio-political makeup of postwar America.

From the connections established by his ANP activities, Davis found time to engage in a variety of political activities. He became more actively involved in the labor movement by co-founding the labor newspaper Chicago Star in 1946. He worked alternately for the Republican and Democratic Parties as well as for the Progressive Party’s Henry Wallace, who campaigned as an independent presidential candidate in 1948. He worked on the National Committee to Combat Anti-Semitism, the Chicago Civil Liberties Union, and the National Civil Rights Congress. In sum, the amount and variety of experiences Davis had during this period tell us much about his vigorous, determined effort to achieve freedom.

It is hardly surprising that Davis’ accomplishments were gained at tremendous personal sacrifice. Nearly burned-out by the pace of all this activity, he agreed to his wife’s request for an extended vacation. In 1948 Davis and his wife, Helen, left the mainland for the remote island territory of Hawaii. This decision would prove to be more costly than he would ever imagine. Given all Davis had accomplished until 1948, he probably sacrificed his best chance for a sustained reputation as poet, journalist, and general cultural observer when he left the mainland. For he cut himself off from both an emerging community of writers who were beginning to receive more support from appreciative readers, and he cut himself off from the political struggle as it was experienced by African Americans.

As Davis recounts in Livin’ the Blues, his motives for leaving Chicago were not fully understood by his friends. Many who had participated with Davis in the labor struggle, in opposing unfair hiring practices, in seeking the racial integration of the U.S. armed forces, and in many other major campaigns felt that he had sold out or had given up. They also thought that Davis had grown weary of inquiries made by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee and the Federal Bureau of Investigation about his patriotism. True! Davis had tired of the constant harassment and the general day-to-day jostling with the causes of racial and social inequality. Thus when he left, he seemed intent on just taking a vacation. But when he failed to return to the mainland, his reputation and work descended very nearly into anonymity.

The last chapter of Livin’ the Blues succinctly recounts how wrong these ideas were about Davis’ move. He never retreated from the struggle for social

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35. Davis, Livin’ the Blues, 295–97.
and racial equality: he merely changed the venue, the site of conflict. Largely from the editorial pages of the Honolulu Record, Davis was especially vituperative in pointing up the disparity between labor and management. This newspaper, which was the organ of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), strongly argued for labor solidarity in an effort to obtain fair wages and benefits. From 1949 to 1958 Davis, as contributing editor to the Record, campaigned relentlessly for fairness and equality. He felt that Hawaii, more than any area of the United States, had shown successfully "the possibility of integration with integrity." What Davis meant was that "various ethnic groups had been able not only to maintain group identity and pride but work together with other peoples of vastly different traditions and live side by side without noticeable tension." The respect for cultural difference implied in Davis' view of Hawaii also informs his labor philosophy—that fairness and respect were due everyone, especially the worker, regardless of race or ethnic background.

Frank Marshall Davis defined himself as both an aesthetic and an intellectual rebel. He was strongly influenced by blues music, which he understood as a profound assertion of self. For Davis the ontological axis turned on how the self responded to hardship, pain, denial, and suffering. Most of Davis' accomplishments were gained at tremendous personal sacrifice.

Ethnically Davis entered a world whose diversity was probably without peer in the world. The Hawaii he embraced was populated with Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, Koreans, Samoans, Tongans, Puerto Ricans, Portuguese, "haoles" or white Americans, and African Americans. The amazing feature about the presence of so many groups was the unusually high tolerance for cultural differences. Philosophically this cooperation is called cultural pluralism because this practice resists cultural imposition and highly values tolerance of differences. Davis does not ascribe complete harmony to this paradise, however. He points to the Okinawans, who received from their Japanese peers the kind of discriminatory treatment accorded African Americans on the mainland. And he discovered that, on occasion, Chinese and Koreans might leave a Christian church if too many Japanese began attending. For Davis, these instances of "clannishness" could pose impediments to complete equality but never lead to the virulent racism that characterized the antagonism of whites toward African Americans in the heyday of the Jim Crow South."

In several memorable poems, Davis chooses a more subjective means of responding to the variety of people, places, and activities he observed in Hawaii. The long poem "This is Paradise" is an alternate tour

36. Ibid., 318.

to the usual picture postcard variety or chamber of commerce boosterism. Beneath the placid surface of beach-front hotels, bikinis, and beach bums lay a complicated world of the “bright prismatic people.” The worlds of some Hawaiians were shaped and determined by economic power, as in the “Big Five” pineapple and sugarcane corporations. For others, an exploitative variety of Christianity transformed pure values into tainted belief. Still others, with quite different stories to tell, turned to prostitution. Such was the microcosm of Hawaiian life he presented in the poetry sequence “Horizontal Cam- eos,” thirty portrait poems based on the lives of Hawaiian prostitutes; in “Moonlight at Kahana Bay”; and in “Pacific Invasion.”

A different view of Hawaii emerged from Davis’ pen than that offered by Senator Ingalls’ myopic glance. Ironically the voice providing reasoned, insightful views of Hawaiian life and culture comes not from the man who helped frame the ideals for Kansas; the better assessment comes from Davis who, in some ways, was a more loyal believer of the principles for which the state stands.

With the publication of Livin’ the Blues and the possible publication of Black Moods: Selected Writings by Frank Marshall Davis, Kansans now have an opportunity to reexamine a life in letters committed to democratic freedom in a multiracial world—enduring principles that continue to guide this state. Literary historians also have an opportunity to reinscribe Frank Marshall Davis into the annals of Kansas literary development. Myra Hull cracked the door open for Davis’ inclusion when in her Kansas Then and Now she defines Kansas writers as “writers who have written in Kansas and have lived here long enough to become spiritually acclimated, to become alive to the peculiar atmosphere, the genius of the place, so that no matter where they may go thereafter, they are still definitely ‘from Kansas.’” 38 Although Davis does not fit all of Hull’s requirements, historians should not ignore the foundation Kansas provided for his enormous success. In recapturing and celebrating the life and writings of Frank Marshall Davis, literary historians will not only rediscover a lost son; they also will bear witness to the best intentions of the state motto: *ad astra per aspera*—“to the stars through difficulties”!