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John Michael Cooper
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INTRODUCTION

This book is a specimen of polyphony. Through the two works that are its subject, we can hear the voice of Margaret Allison Bonds (1913–72): composer, pianist, Black feminist, racial-justice warrior, humanitarian. Through these musical utterances, her voice in turn enables us to hear the voices of her distinguished collaborators and sources of inspiration – voices that include W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Adele Addison, Betty Allen, Will Marion Cook, Abbie Mitchell, and Leontyne Price, among others. Through them, too, we hear the voices of millions of other participants in the great racial-justice movements of the twentieth century in America and beyond. *The Montgomery Variations* and *Credo* of Margaret Bonds not only enable us to understand the historical roots of these movements and the lived experiences and ideas, aspirations and hopes and sufferings of their participants, but also empower us to recognize those movements' affinities to our own time and the pressing need for latter-day folk to (as the composer herself put it) "go farther."[1]

In order to provide a framework for that polyphony, this Introduction begins by summarizing each of the societal currents that made up those social-justice movements and explaining how these developments connected to the life and work of the composer of *The Montgomery Variations* and *Credo*. This done, it then more directly connects those contextual notes to the personal and professional circumstances that inspired those two works, offering a brief, thematically organized summary of the upbringing, education, and career of Margaret Bonds.

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The Great Migration

In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois (1867–1963), whose 1904 *Credo* would provide the text for the largest choral composition of Margaret Bonds in the mid-1960s, famously declared that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line."[2] This prophetic observation was born of Du Bois's pioneering sociological observations of Black–White relations in the world around him and the post-Reconstruction era, as well as his documentation and understanding of the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, and post-Civil War White subjugation of Blacks in the United States (memorialized through the notorious Jim Crow system and granted a specious veneer of legal validity through court cases such as *Plessy v. Ferguson*), and the emergent exodus of Southern Blacks to the urban North. After 1906, however, he came increasingly under the sway of the thinking of distinguished Columbia University anthropologist Frans Boas (1858–1942), who definitively refuted claims for a biological basis for scientific racism and, in a powerful commencement speech given at Du Bois's own Atlanta University, documented sub-Saharan Africa's primordial contributions to ancient civilization and to world culture generally.[3] The realization of the predominant White culture's erasure of these contributions from historical narratives, and consequent suppression (or theft) of Blacks' distinguished history and heritage,[4] combined with the sociologist Du Bois's understanding that the "White" populations who, especially since the Berlin Congo Congress of 1884, exercised colonial, economic, legal, and military dominance over peoples of color in Africa and Asia actually constituted a minority of the world population.[5] To the end of his life, then, he argued that the color line was not entirely an American phenomenon, as many initially construed it, but rather a global one – what he termed "the world color line." A pan-African alliance of peoples of color worldwide, collectively rejecting these tools of White dominance, was the key to global equality in its purest possible form.

The urban concentrations of diasporic populations of color that were made possible by the mass exodus of Blacks from the sharecropping, peonage, and Black Codes of the Jim Crow South

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were a crucial step in the direction of this quest for racial-justice and anti-colonialist global equality, for they offered migrant Blacks a sense of collective identity and solidarity that were systemically denied them in the geographically dispersed rural environs of the South. Even though formerly enslaved Southern Blacks had worked their entire lives for no wages and with no education or property through the Civil War (1861–65), and thus had no viable capital to put toward the cost of a relocation across hundreds of miles, they began abandoning their former enslavers' lands and moving north already in the 1870s: between 1870 and 1910 some 410,000 Blacks emigrated from the South to the North, the West, and Canada, leaving behind the brutal oppression and deprivation of the former slave states and seeking education, family, opportunity, work, and a fresh start.[6] Those figures surged after about 1915 as the White-on-Black violence, anti-Black culture, and disfranchisement at the ballot box of the South worsened, even as the demand for munitions for use in World War I offered new, previously unthinkable opportunities for employment in the North, and with it education and enfranchisement. Between 1919 and 1970, an estimated six million Blacks migrated. While some of this movement was cyclical, from rural to urban areas within the South (especially Atlanta, Georgia; Charleston, North Carolina; Dallas, Texas; and Memphis, Tennessee), most of it was from the South to the North, the West, or Canada. Over time, this exodus devastated the Southern economy and transformed the map of Black life beyond the former Mason–Dixon line.[7] The migrants' paths to the nearest and best destinations were guided in part by the Eastern seaboard and major rivers, but they were also guided by the very railroads whose segregational practices were one of the hated symbols of the Jim Crow South. The six most important destination cities were Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, and St. Louis. In a touch of beautifully poetic irony, those rail lines and the Southern sufferings they symbolized were memorialized by migrants to these metropolises in literature, music (especially spirituals and the blues), and the visual arts – so that in the arts the hated segregated rail lines became, in the words of Farrah Griffin, "a symbol of escape to freedom."[8]

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As we shall see, Margaret Bonds enjoyed strong ties to most of these municipal symbols of freedom reclaimed. She was born, raised, and educated in Chicago; frequently traveled to Detroit; was a favorite in the music pages of the African American press in Philadelphia; was based in New York for most of the period 1939–67; and spent extensive time in Los Angeles. As an African American woman, she knew that freedom from the Jim Crow South was a far cry from true freedom. Her native Chicago, founded by a Black man, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable (1745–1818), was also home to one of the early twentieth century's most notorious race riots (in 1919, when she was six years old) and was firmly segregated. White Chicagoans' "restrictive covenants" meant that African Americans had to live in the metropolis's "Black Belt" on the south side – an area that was publicly (and not misleadingly) promoted as home to "race" culture and enterprise, but whose economy was equally or more driven by the illegal lottery known as "policy" and other criminal enterprises, as well as the thriving entertainment district known as the Stroll (where Bonds's friend and mentor Florence Price worked for a time shortly after her move to Chicago[9]).

New York's Harlem is usually cited as the most important destination of Southern Blacks in the Great Migration, but Chicago was arguably an even more important magnet for Black solidarity and community, for it was home to an integrated movie theater, a high school that hired Black teachers, and, perhaps most importantly, the *Chicago Defender*, the first African American newspaper to achieve a readership of more than 100,000, which was covertly distributed in the South and intrepid in its denunciations of the South and its promotion of the North (especially Chicago) as a land of promise and opportunity.[10] As Du Bois had foreseen, the demographic concentration of communities of color, for all its privations, also produced cultural, economic, and political solidarity, so that Chicago's painful segregation and vice laid the seed for a lifelong commitment to social justice and an ethos of racial uplift in the creative imagination of the young and brilliant Margaret Bonds.

One telling indication of this socially conscious artistic commitment on Bonds's part was the penchant for collaborative creation

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that she displayed throughout her career. Another – dating from just weeks before the second Southern tour that would complete the inspiration for *The Montgomery Variations* – was a ballet for which she composed the score (now lost) many years later. The work was written for the dance company of African American choreographer and dancer Talley Beatty (1918–95), a protégé of Katherine Dunham who, like Bonds, grew up in Chicago. Known for "coolly empathetic portraits of inner-city life and for high-energy, technically demanding jazz innovations,"[11] Beatty on March 7, 1964, staged a production with music by Bonds that "show[ed] the Negro, first in Africa, then on the slave block, and finally caught up in other incidents of racial injustice."[12] Response was lukewarm, but the work as a whole reflects Bonds's enduring cognizance of the intersection of racial injustice and Black creative solidarity.

Its title: *The Migration*.

Black Renaissances: Harlem, Chicago, Los Angeles

One effect of the Great Migration predicted by Du Bois was the great flowering of African American cultural production that resulted when Black folk gathered together in a spirit of creative community and solidarity. The prediction is important because of its consilience with Du Bois's pan-Africanist agenda and its assertion of the oneness of art, economics, politics, and society as a whole – for its affirmation of the power and dignity of a Black creative imagination that the dominant-caste non-Black rulers of the world strove mightily to suppress and deny.

It is also important, though, for the ways in which it departs from much of Du Bois's other work. Much of Du Bois's training and work as an empirical sociologist led him to geographically and politically focused inquiries and conclusions ("The Negroes of Farmville, Virginia: A Social Study," 1898; *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, 1899; *The Georgia Negro: A Social Study*, 1900; etc.); this aspect of his work, together with his understanding of the extraordinary individualized diversity of Black folk and peoples of color generally, was central to the prophetic intersectionality and resistance to what Reiland Rabaka has termed "epistemic apartheid" that characterized much of his

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thinking.[13] But the flourishing of Black cultural production that he predicted, and worked to achieve, as a result of the resettlement of millions of Black folk into communities was not geographically, culturally, or politically particularized. Rather, Du Bois's vision for non-White diasporic people's cultural renaissance was of a supranational, indeed global nature, one that would transcend the historical subjugation of what he called "the darker races" and their cultures – effectively emancipating, internationally, a facet of human creativity that had been both suppressed and denied.

As is well known, the separately named "Black renaissances" of the twentieth century – the "Harlem renaissance," "Black Chicago renaissance," and so on – were so named only after the fact and were, for much of the twentieth century, considered part of a larger "New Negro" movement. In effectively creating these separate historiographic articulations of what contemporary contributors and observers such as Du Bois and Alain Locke considered a single multifaceted cultural movement,[14] the voluminous scholarship on the "Black renaissances" of the twentieth century has created anachronistic narratives of geographically particularized cultural flowerings, each of which eventually failed or faded: the Harlem Renaissance is discussed as a phenomenon chronologically as well as geographically discrete from the Black Chicago Renaissance, and both are portrayed as things that ultimately failed, yielding to what became the West Coast Black Renaissance. These portrayals are misleading in their depictions of these proliferations of Black cultural production as overlapping but ultimately separate and, in some sense, competing phenomena rather than facets of a long and overarching Black cultural renaissance that manifested itself in not just Harlem, Chicago, and Los Angeles but also Detroit, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and dozens of other urban areas – and is ongoing still today. They also assert a series of narratives of failure where a narrative of expansion and prodigious growth is appropriate. If we set aside these anachronistic narratives of failure and recognize the extraordinary Black cultural production of the twentieth century on its own terms, then we can not only dispense with the implied inadequacy and negativity that inevitably result when commentators assign more-or-less arbitrary endings to events still ongoing, while

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acknowledging the vital air of community and cultural solidarity that existed among the participants in, and observers of, that flourishing. Acknowledging that the boundaries between, for instance, the "Harlem Renaissance" and the "Black Chicago Renaissance" are anachronistic historiographic artifices in turn also enables us to glimpse the freedom of the many and varied currents and cross-currents entailed in the robust exchange of art, letters, literature, and music among these cities and the movement of newly affluent Black folk among those locales.[15]

The benefits to such a rethinking are many. By declining to create artificial aesthetic distinctions and contradictions where only variations existed, we can acknowledge the various geographic iterations of this cultural flourishing as an ongoing collective moment when (to borrow Carolyn Denard's characterization of the Harlem iteration) "the creative arts, *not* economic determinism, *nor* political strategy, *nor* constitutional rhetoric, *nor* military strength, but the *arts* were believed to be an agent through which individuals could effect social change" (emphasis original).[16] Further, in recognizing that assertion of artistic agency in social change, we can acknowledge the shared emphasis on racial and gender justice that characterized all these flourishings and the role that all played in laying the foundation for the mature Civil Rights Movement. And to make these movements concretely relevant to the focal points of this book: the Civil Rights Movement, which was a rebellion against the Jim Crow South and an extension of the long Black cultural renaissance, is a movement whose articulated beginning is generally considered to be the Montgomery bus boycott (1955–56), which, as we shall see, was the principal inspiration for Margaret Bonds's *Montgomery Variations*.

Margaret Bonds and the Imperative of Social Justice through Art

This view of the several geographic iterations of an overarching Black cultural renaissance rooted in the desire for social change and directly connected to the Civil Rights Movement concurs with the geography of Margaret Bonds's creative life. She was born and raised in Chicago and began her career there; spent most of her life

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based in Harlem; had two important stays in Los Angeles (1942–43 and 1967–72); and traveled frequently among the other urban areas that were the principal sites of Black cultural production. In addition to the two Southern tours that led directly to *The Montgomery Variations* and indirectly to the *Credo*, she maintained extensive connections with major Southern cultural hubs, including Atlanta, Fisk University (Nashville, Tennessee), and the Hampton Institute (Hampton, Virginia). Her work as a solo and collaborative pianist addressed itself to vernacular and cultivated tastes, stereotypically Black and stereotypically White ones alike. Her letters and musical compositions reveal a keen appetite for poetry and for literature generally, and her music reflects an extraordinary fluency in virtually every style and genre of her day, a stylistic versatility that defied conventional barriers of race and caste. And through it all the ideas of artists and the arts as agents of social change, of giving voice to the voiceless, affirmation to the oppressed, and inspiration to the hopeless ran like a red thread.

Margaret Bonds's forty-two-year career as social-justice advocate was inculcated in her by her parents. Her father, Monroe Alpheus Majors (1864–1960), a medical doctor originally from Texas who practiced in Texas, California, and Illinois, was a lifelong activist and advocate for Black folk generally and Black women especially – an intersectional advocacy that is clearly mirrored in Margaret Bonds's own life and work.[17] He grew up in Reconstruction and during that short spell of new prospects for Black folk served as a page in the Texas state legislature – but had to flee the state in the aftermath, when White-against-Black violence spiraled. He established a medical association for Black doctors (who were not allowed in the American Medical Association) and, after moving to Los Angeles in 1888, became the first African American to practice medicine west of the Rocky Mountains. He was an associate of Frederick Douglass and a longtime friend of Paul Laurence Dunbar. He also wrote for African American newspapers and authored one of the first published books for Black children, the 1893 lexicon *Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities* (Jackson, TN: M.V. Lynk). The preface to that volume, the title page of which asserts that "the

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highest mark of our prosperity, and the strongest proofs of Negro capacity to master the sciences and fine arts, are evinced by the advanced positions to which Negro women have attained," contains words that might well have been written by his daughter, who would be born twenty years later:

> The world is full of books, yet few of them appeal directly and peculiarly to the Negro race. Many . . . have their beginning and ending in fancy, without special design for the elevation of mind or the culture of literary taste and pure morals, but for entertainment and amusement and gratification of sentiment without utility to the reader in any sense whatsoever. We commend [the following] pages to the reading world, trusting that they will for long stand out in bold relief, a signification of Negro progress.[18]

Although Margaret Bonds would later write that her father had "great intellect" and could have been "a great man had he not tried to conform to the taboos, inhibitions and the rest of them,"[19] she apparently was never close to him; her parents separated when she was two, and the marriage was annulled when she was six.[20] Instead, her correspondence makes clear that she revered her mother, Estella C. Bonds (1882–1957), who taught her music and the importance of advancing the welfare of Black folk through education, music, and the arts generally.[21] Educated at Chicago Musical College, Estella Bonds was the longtime organist at Chicago's historic Berean Baptist Church, a charter member of the National Association of Negro Musicians, and a founding faculty member of the city's Coleridge-Taylor School of Music. Her modest home on the south side of the segregated city hosted weekly salons and was a frequent haunt of Black artistic notables – among them Bonds's composition teacher Will Marion Cook (1869–1944); poet Countee Cullen (1903–46); composer William Levi Dawson (1899–1990); soprano Lillian Evanti (1890–1967); soprano, actress, and activist Abbie Mitchell (1884–1960; eventual dedicatee of Bonds's *Credo*[22]); longtime friend, collaborator, and literary icon Langston Hughes (1902–67); friend, mentor, and early teacher Florence B. Price (1887–1953); and playwright, jazz composer, and bandleader Noble Sissle (1889–1975). Recalling (with some obvious exaggeration) that through the many visits to her childhood home she

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"had actual physical contact with all the living composers of African descent," she went on to characterize Estella Bonds's cultivation among Black artists in biblical terms:

> My mother had a collector's nose for anything that was artistic, and, a true woman of God, she lived the Sermon on the Mount. Her loaves and fish fed a multitude of pianists, singers, violinists and composers, and those who were not in need of material food came for spiritual food. Under her wings many a musician trusted, and she was my link with the Lord.[23]

As we shall see, this upbringing left a deep impression on Margaret Bonds; her letters make clear that her sense of indebtedness to these personalities and their art, and to her own ancestors, gave her a pronounced sense of *Destiny* (her word; uppercase *D* original) that played out in her life and work in countless ways. That need for achievement led to successes already in grade school: she won piano scholarships to Chicago Musical College at ages eight and nine and later scholarships from the Coleridge-Taylor School of Music. Her undergraduate degree at prestigious Northwestern University was made possible by scholarships from the intercollegiate, historically African American sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha and the National Association of Negro Musicians, and at the age of seventeen she achieved the distinction of giving the premiere of Florence Price's first (E-minor) *Fantasie nègre* at the national meeting of the National Association of Negro Musicians.[24] This distinction was to be augmented by her winning the Best Song prize in the national Rodman Wanamaker Competition in Musical Composition for Composers of the Negro Race in 1932, performing what was probably a piano-duet arrangement of Price's E-minor *Fantasie nègre* as accompaniment to a ballet premiere of that work by Katherine Dunham and the Modern Dancers in December 1932,[25] becoming the first Black pianist to perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (at the *Century of Progress* World's Fair on June 15, 1933), and performing the same work with the Woman's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago on October 12, 1934.[26] Her master's degree was funded by a scholarship from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation. Although Bonds was never shy about expressing her gratitude to Northwestern and was awarded one of the University's alumni Merit Awards in 1967,

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