

4-1-1979

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### Recommended Citation

Scarupa, Harriet Jackson (1979) "Julian Mayfield: Eyewitness to Power," *New Directions*: Vol. 6: Iss. 3, Article 4.

Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol6/iss3/4>

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# Julian Mayfield

## Eyewitness of Power

By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

Julian Mayfield, novelist, playwright, journalist, one-time actor, often-times political activist, has a confession to make: "I have got, I am certain, a sort of power fixation. I am fascinated now and have been for many years by Black people who wield power—to any extent."

He is making this confession as he sits in his office on the Howard University campus where he is writer-in-residence with the English Department for the 1978-79 academic year. His presence fills the tiny room, seems to suffuse it with "a liquid, whole blackness" as he wrote of his character James Lee Cooley in his novel, *The Hit*.

Mayfield has been in a unique position to view Black people in power. From 1961-66, he worked in the office of President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, founding and editing *The African Review*, writing some of Nkrumah's speeches, accompanying him to key international conferences, serving as chief documentalist for the 1962 Accra Assembly, an historic international peace conference. "It was a joy to be around a person or group of people who could make decisions over their own lives—which we [Black Americans] cannot do in this country," he says of those days. He was further eyewitness to Black people in power from 1971 to 1974 when he worked in Guyana as senior special political assistant to Prime Minister Forbes Burnham.

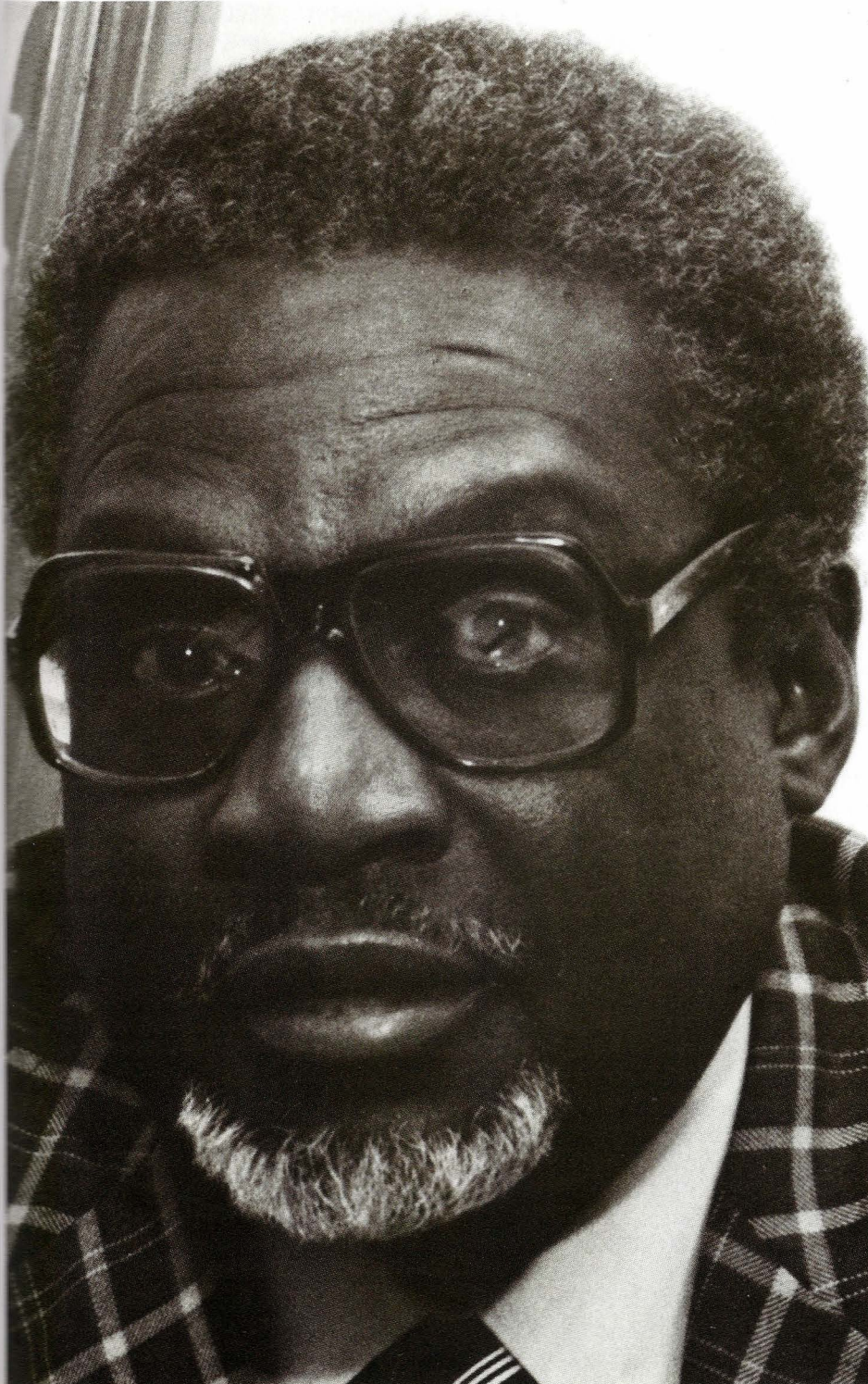
This fascination with power—cemented in Ghana, reinforced in Guyana—has inevitably affected his writing. His two early novels, *The Hit* (Vanguard, 1957) and *The Long Night* (Vanguard, 1958), both set in Harlem, are realistic treatments of working-class people victimized by poverty and oppression. They reflect his experiences growing up in inner-city Washington. By his third novel, *The Grand Parade* (Vanguard, 1961), he is exploring the nuances of power politics as he depicts a small border town caught up in an up-

heaval over school integration. "Black on Black," a short story included in his anthology, *Ten Times Black* (Bantam, 1972), portrays a bittersweet love affair between a Black American singer and an African politician in an unnamed African country, one whose strong president is surrounded by envious, scheming politicians. ("Ambitious big fish in small puddles are easy to recognize: There is a certain kind of glaze over their eyes, a way of pushing out their chests, an unconscious strut in their walk.")

Similarly, his play, "Fount of a Nation," which was performed in Baltimore, Md. last winter by the Arena Players, focuses on an Nkrumah-like figure besieged by conflicting personalities and philosophies as he struggles to build some measure of independence for his country.

Mayfield is currently at work on a memoir about Black Americans who lived in Ghana between 1960-66, a mix of fact and fiction he has titled, *Tales of the Lido*. (The Lido was a popular nightclub in Accra.) Next, he wants to write about some of the people he has known. "I had the very good fortune of having known personally most of my heroes," he explains, "W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, Nkrumah . . . I lived around the corner from W.E.B. DuBois and my first wife was one of his physicians and I was there when he died. Before going to Ghana, I had been part of Paul Robeson's 'entourage' [he smiles wryly] marching around with him under the pretext he needed our protection. I was with Malcolm X in Ghana and traveled with him to Egypt. And although I didn't have a very important job in Nkrumah's office, I did have an up-close view of him. I felt—and still feel—that his dream of a unified Africa is essential. It was a dream based on reality and, that is, unless Africa is unified it will still be under the heel of the large powers. And I believe—and here's one of those quotable quotes—'a strong Africa makes for a strong Afro-America and vice versa.'"

In his recent works, and the ones he plans in the future, then, Mayfield has



Julian Mayfield

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wandered far from the milieu he explored in his first published writings. "It's not that I don't think there's any worth any longer in writing about the very poorest sections of society," he explains. "But I don't think I have anything new to say about them. Frankly, I haven't read anything that has gone beyond some of Richard Wright's work produced back in the '30s." 13

"For a long time, some writers felt they weren't being revolutionary if they wrote about anything other than the working class. But it wouldn't make sense for me not to write about a person like Nkrumah or other people I have known. And they weren't all poor. I see some beginning writers who come dead out of the middle class and they want to write about the working class—about which they know nothing. Absolutely nothing! They'd get lost walking down 14th Street [in Washington]—if they made it."

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***"I believe . . . that all writing is political. Or, if it is not, it ought to be."***

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At a recent Writer's Workshop at Howard, which Mayfield leads with Dr. Eugenia W. Collier, he gently chided a student after she read a love poem ending with the words, "Oh lawd, lawd, lawd." "You've spelled it 'lawd,'" he told her as he stroked his grey goatee and glanced at the yellow note pad in his lap, "but you've pronounced it the way an educated middle-class person would."

Later, when an intense young woman read the first chapter of an ambitious novel contrasting the apathy of today's students with the activism of those in the '60s, he warned her about injecting "rhetoric" into her prose. "Some of the phraseology you use," he said, "tends to be more political than literary."

This from a man who has been considered a vigorous—even dogmatic—advocate of the art-as-a-political-tool point of view. A man who stated unequivocally in a 1971 interview: "I believe . . . that all writing is political. Or, if it is not, it ought

14 to be." A man who has been criticized in some quarters for "sacrificing" his art to this very dictum. Has he mellowed? Changed his mind? Gotten conservative as he moves through middle age? (He is 51.) None of that, he insists. Such absolutist statements, he says, reflected their times. They were made at the close of what he perceived as the siege-like decade of the '60s when Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Medgar Evers were assassinated, the cities were burning and he himself carried a gun for self-defense. Today, he has more time to reflect on his ideas and refine them.

Basically, though, he still upholds the view that "to some extent all writing reflects the political view—or lack of political view—that a writer has." "But," he adds, "I am certainly not asking young Black writers to dedicate themselves to solving the racial problems of America through their writing. I'm sorry Richard Wright ever wrote an essay called "Blueprint for Negro Writers" because I don't think writers should have a blueprint. It's too confining. The richest literatures in the world are those which have a broad base, scope and variety."

Then he adds a "but" and it's a big "but." "A Black writer who is still in prison—as he is in the United States—who writes about things that don't have anything to do with his confinement would seem to me not to be going anywhere artistically because he's writing about things he does not know. So I would expect that most Black writers will continue to be in what used to be called 'a protest tradition'. But here we are in 1979 with an entirely new set of problems from those that faced Richard Wright and his co-workers in the 30s, so our writing will reflect this."

Actually, it was a work by Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, that Mayfield cites as a key influence in the development of his own social consciousness.

Mayfield grew up in Washington, D. C., the son of a chauffeur and a domestic worker. "I had a very happy childhood in

terms of my mother and father being there, being supportive and all that," he says.

**"In . . . movies, very often the writer was the person who traveled all over the world, had all the women. . . ."**

"But we were also poor although I really didn't think of it then because everybody I knew was poor." Early on, he decided he wanted to become a writer. He started out writing a poem a day to a favorite elementary school teacher who encouraged his literary efforts and by the time he was 12 or 13 had completed a first novel, an imitation of Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*.

At first he saw writing not as a tool to change the world or attack social problems but as a way to achieve success. As he describes his romanticized youthful view of the writer's life, he leans back in his chair and shakes his head in amusement at the boy he once was. "In some of these old movies, very often the writer was the person who traveled all over the world, had all the women, had servants and always seemed to have money," he remembers. "What I never thought of at the time was that we never saw him writing. We always saw him as 'the author of.' So for all the wrong reasons, I felt I wanted to be a writer."

Except for Paul Laurence Dunbar, for whom his high school was named, Mayfield knew nothing of Black writers when he was growing up. But when he was about 16 he had a job putting labels on the back of books at the Library of Congress and came across Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. The book caused him to look at the oppression of Blacks in a new way. "Of course, everyone was aware of how mean white people were but we were taught that if we were clean and trustworthy and kind and all that that they'd 'see the light,'" he observes. *Black Boy* caused him to question this view.

Still, it was not until he went to New York City, following a stint in the army and at Lincoln University, that his social con-

sciousness was fully aroused. He gravitated to the theater and considers himself lucky to land a Broadway role in the first production of "Lost in the Stars." As an actor, he was naturally thrown into the company of writers. He met people like Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, John O. Killens and John Henrik Clarke and almost immediately found himself caught up in what he calls that "furious exchange of ideas" that characterized the Black intellectual left in the '50s.

"I'd never before heard Blacks so deeply and angrily and sometimes violently concerned about the issues of the day and the world and challenging the basic ideas of the American government and its constitution and all that kind of thing," he recalls. "You would have had to be a stone not to be affected in some way about what they were arguing and talking about."

Mayfield, of course, was not a stone. He became involved in the Council of African Affairs, founded by DuBois, wrote for Robeson's newspaper, *Freedom*, became a member of the Harlem Writer's Workshop, appeared in a play about the Scottsboro boys called "They Shall Not Die." When violence-prone white youths attempted to close down the play by attacking the actors, each evening the audience waited for the actors to change out of their costumes and then escorted them out of the hostile neighborhood. "Now I'm not certain if I would like that kind of living today, but it was a hell of an exciting thing to be a part of then," he recalls. "I was in good health and felt like I could whip anybody. And I didn't want to miss anything."

"Not wanting to miss anything" could, in fact, be considered a key theme in Mayfield's life. In 1960, he became attracted to the ideas the controversial Robert F. Williams was espousing—and practicing—in Monroe, N.C. He went to Monroe initially as a reporter and found in the North Carolina activist's philosophy a congruence with his own. "I really had

never agreed and do not agree with the passive resistance approach to America's racial problems and I certainly did agree with the self-defense philosophy which ruled Monroe," he explains. The same year, he went to Cuba with Williams and writers Harold Cruse and Imamu Amiri Baraka [then LeRoi Jones] to personally witness the infancy of the Cuban revolution.

In 1961, Williams was accused of kidnapping a white couple during a racial flareup in Monroe and fled into exile. Because the FBI assumed Mayfield knew Williams' whereabouts, Mayfield felt compelled to leave the country. His destination: Ghana.

Once there, he immediately became caught up in the excitement of building a strong, independent African nation and working to create bonds of African unity. With only a few years of newspaper experience behind him, he soon found himself holding one of the top journalistic jobs in Ghana. "Nkrumah had a very positive attitude toward Afro-Americans," Mayfield explains, "and there was a need in the country for people with even the limited experience I had."

***"I've never been a leader but I'm sure there's a little ego involved in my wanting to be where I have something to do with power."***

Mayfield considers his days in Ghana the best days of his life. "Ain't no question about it!" he exclaims. Unlike some Black Americans who flocked to Africa, he says he did not "kiss the earth" when he got off the plane nor did he go there expecting to find a pure Black society. "Fairly on I developed what some people refer to as cynicism, which is that I don't expect to find a perfect—or even near-perfect society—anywhere," he says. "And I certainly didn't expect to find it in a land that had been devastated by colonialism for so long."

When Nkrumah was overthrown by the army in 1966, Mayfield was in Spain trying to finish a book, but he says the coup didn't surprise him. "It was as if you'd been watching someone you knew die of cancer over a long period of time and finally one day he is dead."

Mayfield returned to the U.S. in 1968. He taught at New York University and Cornell University and starred—with Ruby Dee—in the film "Up Tight," for which they helped director Jules Dassin write the screenplay. In it, Mayfield gave a highly-praised performance as an informer who betrays fellow members of a Black militant organization and atones for his guilt with his life.

Despite the momentary ego boost derived from starring in the film, he felt restless in the U.S. "When you come back from working on the level I worked on in Ghana and find yourself just wandering around earning a living and talking to quite ordinary people like yourself, you start thinking, maybe it's time to move on," he confesses. "I've never been a leader but I'm sure there's a little ego involved in my wanting to be where I have something to do with power."

So he went to the South American country of Guyana for a job interview and was hired first as an adviser to a cabinet minister, and then to the Prime Minister. Why Guyana? "It seemed to me that the government was dedicated to building socialism and it was also the only government in the world controlled by a Black minority," he answers. "I felt helping to maintain that government was important." (Today, he says he is less sure.) Among his duties was helping to set up the National Service, a quasi-military organization designed to involve youth in the development of their country.

Mayfield left Guyana in 1974 for health reasons, and because he felt he had outlived his usefulness to the country. He taught in West Germany as a Fulbright-Hays scholar, 1976-77, at the University of Maryland, 1977-78, and is now teaching

at Howard. He is also writing his Ghana memoir and scripts for public television. These days he lives quietly in a College Park, Md. apartment with his wife, Joan Cambridge, a writer from Guyana who is working on a book about her country for a New York publisher. (He has two sons by his previous marriage, Rafaelito and Emiliano.)

***"Right at this point I don't want any more excitement in my life..."***

After traveling all over the world, Julian Mayfield is back home and teaching at a predominantly-Black university for the first time. That, in a sense, is another kind of homecoming. "I feel more comfortable here than at any other place I've taught," he remarks. "There are so many distinguished people on this campus. I'm using one of Arthur P. Davis' books in one of my classes and he's right down the hall. Sterling Brown is within throwing range. These are people who are part of living history, really, so you feel a part of a community."

But despite all this, one can't help but wonder if he doesn't find his current life dull compared to his previous experiences—toting guns in Monroe, N.C., jetting off to Egypt to consult on Pan-Africanism and acting on Broadway or in Hollywood. "No," Mayfield says, with a vigorous shake of his head. "Right at this point I don't want any more excitement in my life... because that's one of the reasons it's been so long since I published a novel. [*The Grand Parade* in 1961.] I've published some things since then but much of it is temporary stuff. Now, I just want to write down some of what I think I know—in one form or another—and to tie together some of the loose ends of my life." □

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