

Past and Current Thought in African-American Literary Criticism

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Several historically and pedagogically important events happened to literature written by blacks and the black-authored criticism of that literature in the 1960s. First, during the 1960s, the proponents of “separatist” writing--black writers writing for a black readership--shouted down and transformed the “integrationist” polemics from black authors of criticism and prose that predominated the late 1940s and the 1950s. I think here especially of the many black literature professors and commercial journalists who labored during the late 40s, 50s, and early 1960s to show how much Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Annie Allen* (1950) was like T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* (1922) as an example of the literary merit of *Annie Allen*, or labored to show how similar in content, structure, style, theme, and intent Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) was to James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist* (1916), as a way of proving Ellison’s literary worth. The black Nationalist/literary separatists of the 1960s completely disrupted this kind of critical/comparative paradigm.

The separatists argued that there had to be “uniquely black” ways of judging and “seeing” literature, and that not a trace of this method could be effectively implemented in a system that compared writing by blacks to the writing of the very white “oppressors” the blacks were writing against. This separatist movement in black criticism of black-authored texts was especially ironic in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as prominent black writers such as Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin argued for the “universality” of their writing and that by other blacks, while at the same time insisting on some uniquely black messages and indices in their texts. But Hansberry and Baldwin saw no reason to eschew comparisons between their works and the works of a Lillian Hellman or a William Faulkner.

Equally ironic, as prominent black characters began to have a part in the works of white authors, such as Jean Genet’s *The Blacks: or a Clown Show* (1960), these portrayals (and there really were not that many) were almost completely positive, even to the extent in Genet’s case of making all the blacks completely good and all the whites completely bad. Nat Turner, in William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), is a major black character who is neither good nor bad because he is deranged; thus, he is a warped emanation of this literary phenomenon that deserves its own critical book as an oddity in the history of publishing in this country. Be that as it may, at this pivotal time, certain black authors—such as Hansberry (just before her untimely death) and Brooks (before her radical conversion at the Black Writers Conference in 1967 at Fisk University)—continued to practice their craft as they saw fit, ignoring the swelling tide of separatist criticism. Others, such as Ellison, stopped their creative work altogether and concentrated on their prose works or ceased publishing completely. After *Black Fire* (1968), edited by LeROI Jones and Larry Neal, the forceful rhetoric and politically timely messages of separatist criticism was to rule until Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s influential discussion of the syncretic use of Euro/Anglo-based critical ideas such as metatextuality in his introduction to *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (1984). Yet, as he had promised in 1987, Gates, in his *The Sign and the Signifying Monkey* (1989), made a turn that in many ways would align him with some of the early separatists by insisting that signification is an original African-based trope. Of course, Gates has made many, *many* more theoretical turns since 1987, and even now--without my knowledge--may be interpreting my DNA to reveal to the world my true, Asar origins.

We find now among black and white critics of African-American literary theory solid proponents of both these schools of thought: those who argue convincingly that only critically identified black “windows”¹ should be used to look at black-authored creative works (many feminists make the same argument for women’s writings) and others, like Georges Poulet and Trudier Harris, who argue that black academics should have more tools to apply to black-authored texts, not fewer.

Proponents of this latter idea would argue, first, that if more critical tools are used, even though those tools may be of European origin, black-authored works stand a better chance of being read, interpreted, taught, and, eventually, inserted into the canon; and, second, that a syncretic approach to criticism fits both the literature and that immensely culturally syncretic group, “African-Americans,” who produce it. Thus, we understand the “unique cultural product” (literature by African Americans) better as we also come to know the “unique” cultural group better. The syncretists would deem the sharing of such in-group knowledge with the exogamous mainstream as important and good. The separatists [who write in Phoenician alphabets] would argue that blacks are once again giving away enhanced, hard-earned cultural currency for free.

The black literary separatists would agree with Henry Highland Garnett who wrote in 1843 that it “takes the slave to understand the problems of the slave” and the minute “outsiders” begin to judge the “deeds” (texts) of the slaves, they do so with cultural blinders and malice aforethought. Thus, it is especially important that the in-group share only amongst themselves and judge only themselves by their own indices. I think here especially of the similar arguments in the early 1980s by Amiri Baraka in the pages of *Black American Literature Forum* (“Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle” [1982]), and by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983).

The dangers in the arguments of both the syncretists and the separatists are important to note. First, if one accepts the approach of the syncretists, one runs the usual—and by now historically tiresome—risk of overwhelming all perspectives that might be argued as uniquely black by continually referring to (and deferring to) the gargantuan volume of Russian, European, and Anglo-American literary critical thought. In such practices, any uniquely black perspectives could (and did) become amalgamated until they lose all discernible difference. What once may have been acknowledged as a black contribution to literature or literary theory may become simply a white, or an “American,” contribution. (Analogously, think of Nancy Reagan (1981) at a White House celebration of the arts expounding on Benny Goodman being one of the “founders” of jazz as Dizzy Gillespie rolled his eyes and gasped for breath in the background. Mrs. Reagan was merely responding to jazz as a unique “American” art form, but she was forgetting to mention that jazz and its founders were also uniquely black.) The syncretists do not admit it, but such an amalgamation and transfiguration of black literary contributions into American literary contributions would be acceptable to them, as at the root of all of their syncretic arguments lies the dubious ideal of one vast canon of equally great texts based only on critically agreed upon merit. The syncretists believe that such a “matrix” canon would not only be better than the limited (and rigidly controlled and protected) mainstream canon with which we now work, but also better than a plethora of “mini-canons” running wild in individual academies and actually teaching students very little about writing or the historical development of literature: one canon here for working-class, heterosexual white male authors of the 1930s, one here for rich, white, atheistic lesbian authors of the 1970s, one over there for late-1980s gay black male Catholic authors, and one produced somewhere near UCLA for androgynous, multi-ethnic literature of the middle of this millennium. Additionally, the syncretists also believe a matrix canon by its very syncretic nature would be infinitely more representative of black-authored texts than the mainstream canon or the mini-canons and would assure the inclusion of these texts. Obviously, the big fact they choose to ignore is the new matrix canon would thus become the mainstream canon. Such thinking shows clearly that no one but me (in 1983) saw that entrenched literature professors of the classical canon would [literally] fight to the death over the few scraps of money left after legislative, fiscal entrenchments. Here the separatists would begin to doubt.

“Critically agreed upon” merit, they would argue, paraphrasing Robert Scholes, “can come only from critics with power, power that will be more than likely derived from the cultural climate of the times.” (The separatists, too, were too busy looking at cultural influence to notice all the money going to the sciences). The separatists would argue, exactly how will the black syncretists help to construct a matrix canon that is inclusive of black authors if these black critics are educationally and politically estranged from black culture and its unique cultural products, such as black-authored texts? Further, exactly how do these syncretist critics propose to start their process in a cultural climate that denies the literary merit of most black authored texts (re-examine the original 1987 proposal for Stanford’s core curriculum in literature.)? I tried to talk sense to both sides beginning in 1980 at the Hofstra University Conference on the Writings of 18th-Century Women in Hempstead, NY², to no avail. I argued, “Don’t you read any *business* parts of the literary matrix? You’ll be lucky to get a job teaching 8th grade English with your PhD’s.” Of course, I was shouted down (and actually kicked under the table by someone) for being way too practical and way too ahead of my fiscal times.

In 1980, I learned that something the separatists will not admit is that their assertions on cultural climate and dearth of proper training and job opportunities would apply even more so to themselves and their “less acceptable” ideas. Their exclusive critical practices were just as exclusionary as main-stream critical practices. And as the separatists continued to narrow their critical circle, they began to speak more and more only to themselves. The sentiments of Houston Baker’s old poem resurface again and again in the background of both these schools’ flailings: “No matter where you travel, you still be black.”³

Second, it seems to me, both schools would (and still could) have benefitted from research outside the discipline of literary theory. For example, the belief that anything Europe has offered in the study of literature is new and uniquely European (or white) is seriously questioned by Martin Bernal in the first of his four volume *Black Athena: The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Volume I: The Fabrication of Greece, 1785-1985* series (1987). While Bernal does add new information and new paradigms to what black historians have been saying at least since John G. Jackson’s *Ethiopia and the Origins of Civilization* (1935), the core of Bernal’s thesis has been stated again and again by black historians and linguists such as Jackson, Chancellor Williams, Ivan Van Sertima, Asa Hilliard, and especially G. M. James, author of *Stolen legacy* (1954) and Chiekh Anta Diop, author of *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (1974): that the civilized ancient world was both in origin and development black, and that it was left to ancient [480 BCE] Europe to co-opt (without reference or royalties) on a large scale the arts—including the literary arts—of the blacks. The difference here is that Bernal not only comes from a long line of noted British historians, but also because Bernal is *not* black, he does not have his research immediately silenced. Thus, if the corpus of criticism we normally think of as consisting largely of European-based critical ideas is in fact not white-based but black-based (remember, neither Parmenides nor Aristotle left Greece to study in Norway, but Egypt, reappearing with their “new” literary critical knowledge between mid-5th- and 4th-centuries B.C.E.)⁴, then reactionary and internecine arguments about “unique black indexes” in response to “oppressive white indexes” seem not only moot, but self-contradictory.

Nevertheless and obviously, unique modes of literary expression and unique critical responses to those texts did arise in the United States. Unique African-American themes are as valid for examination as are the unique Agrarian Critics’ ideas. No one says that the Agrarians should not be studied simply because they were initially a small group of cultural conservatives who wanted to turn the study of literature into intrinsically what it is not: a scientific method. The Agrarians are worthy of study today if only because they still influence our notions of literary merit via their ideas of close reading. Similarly, the study of African-American literary theory and its postulations on unique indexes may illuminate in unique ways.

In 2015, the syncretists have clearly won a war that should never have been waged in the first place. It would have been shocking if the syncretists had not won in the end: white and black literary critics are still primarily trained in preponderantly white academies. The effects of this fact are evident when the younger black and white critics I know personally all spout the pre-1984 Paul DeMan deconstructive indices effortlessly and redundantly, as if the first words from their mouths were not “papa” or “mama,” but “Current speech either means the opposite of what I say or means nothing at all, because I am the author and I am dead.” Now, if the number of white scholars I have known and hired in the past ten years is an indicator, it would seem that the study of black-authored texts has become important in mainstream academies. This is a good turn of events. Not much will be left of the “academy” when the student loan scam bubble bursts around 2020, but the ascendancy of the study of African American texts is still good.

As I want more critics interested in African-American literary theory, not fewer, making sure that any “theory” I write has some reference points to mainstream critical thought is always my subtext. I think that separatists and syncretists alike, as scholars and critics of African-American Literature, desperately need to advance in this new millennium with concise views of our field—its past, its present, and its trajectory for the next decade or so. After all, African-American literary theory is very much like jazz: syncretic, pervasive, important, constantly refining itself, a catalyst that spurs its listeners to broader—and clearer—perspectives. In other words, African American literary theory is, like jazz, American.

Notes

¹ My article from 1987 best sums up this point: "Properly Using Rhetorical `Windows': The `Write' Rhetorical Mode for the Right Technical Task." *Tech. Comm. Working Papers, 1987*. (June) STL Community C.-Florissant Valley P, 1987: 181-191.

² This was a presentation; the article form is now filed in the Reginald Martin Collections Room at the Memphis Public Library, Main Branch. "The Aesthetic of Grace: Women's Literature in the 18th-Century." Conference Paper on the Writings of 18th-Century Women." Hofstra U. Co-Researchers, Germaine Greer, Jeslyn Medoff, and Betsy Keller. Hempstead, NY, Nov, 1980.

³ See Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: UP, 1987.

⁴ See G. M. James classic text *Stolen Legacy: The Egyptian Origins of Western Philosophy*. NY: CreateSpace Pub., 1953; rpt. 2014.

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