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# The Aesthetics of Afro-American Novels

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**ABSTRACT:** “The time has not yet come for the great development of American Negro Literature,” wrote W. E. B. Du Bois in 1913. “The economic stress is too great and the racial persecution too bitter to allow the leisure and the poise for which literature calls” (“Negro in Literature” 301–302). By all accounts the time did come by the 1920s and 1930s, and many of the authors who would become staples of the African American canon emerged at this time. Most literary histories credit migration as one major factor in this literary efflorescence as African Americans from the southern United States settled in northern centers – Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, and New York – to improve their prospects through an expanding work force during the World War I effort.

**KEYWORDS:** Afro-american, novels, aesthetics, literature, prospects, racial, persecution

## I. INTRODUCTION

Migrants from the Caribbean and Africa also made homes in the United States. National and transatlantic migrations – whether by agricultural laborers moving to cities, black soldiers in the theatre of war, or by writers and artists – widened interrogations of what constituted blackness. Autobiographies, essays, novels, criticism, and letters captured the ideas of an era that would encompass the New Negro Renaissance. All shared a querying as to whether there were practices that identified black expression, or whether black art was merely “lamp-blacked” American art to paraphrase George Schuyler (“Hokum” 1222). Novels employed themes and aesthetics to hypothesize the distinction between race and culture, where the former describes a commonality formed in contestation and the latter the commonality of indigenous experience.[1,2,3]

What is the Black Aesthetic? Formally, the words “black” plus “aesthetic.” Together these words may mean “an aesthetic utilizing blackness.” Or, “an aesthetic for black people.” The term “Black Aesthetic” can be traced back to the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s but the function of black aesthetics transcend time and medium.

The Black Arts Movement, also known as the Black Aesthetics Movement, is often regarded as as the artistic and cultural sister movement of the Black Power Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. After the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, LeRoi Jones, later known as Amiri Baraka, moved to Harlem to establish the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School. His establishment of BARTS is considered the birth of the Black Arts Movement (BAM).

Artists involved in the the Black Arts Movement were adamant in their aim to reveal the particularities—struggles, strengths, and celebrations of African Americans through the creation of poetry, novels, visual art, and theater. Embedded in these works was a palpable emphasis on Black economic and cultural autonomy that was akin to the teachings of the Black Power Movement and Black Liberation Struggle.

BAM had its roots in the northeastern United States, but spread quickly to the south and the west coast with the transnational movements and communal exchange of artists like Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Askia Touré, and Ntozake Shange. Literary groups such as Umbra Workshop of Manhattan and Third World Press of Chicago were born out of the movement and were the source of radical and progressive literature that was distributed around the United States. This influx of printed media allowed black people and black artists to present their experiences and thoughts as a means of forming community and expanding existing narratives around what it meant to be black in the United States and the world.

“Black Aesthetic” was used to describe works of art, literature, poetry, music, and theater that centralized black life and culture. In acknowledging the historical usage of the term and understanding blackness to be iterative—something that is evolving, abundant, and prolific—we can begin to understand that the creativity of black people contributes, always, to a black aesthetic.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Black Power Movement and another chapter in a nationwide and worldwide conversation about the intrinsic value of black lives to the powers that be. The Schomburg Center will be celebrating the 50th anniversary through an expanded in-house exhibition in February 2017 and upcoming



programming about the movement of yesterday and today. Join the conversation about the legacy of the Black Power Movement on the Schomburg's blog channel.

## II. DISCUSSION

Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* forever changed the course of literary study. But if, as the scholar Kenneth Warren has suggested, 20th-century African American literature was a response to Jim Crow, how do we read the vibrant and diverse output of American American literature—and theory—in the 21st century? Everywhere we turn, we see African American [4,5,6] literature and theory continuing to expand and change shape, not only inventing new forms, tropes, experiments and reconfigurations on what it means to be human, but also proposing vital critiques of the world, and the American project in particular. How can contemporary African American literature and theory help us understand our own century, with its increased attention to black death, nearly reflexive reiterations of violence, and capitulations to global capitalism in every aspect of social life? What then, if anything now, is African American literature in the 21st century?

In this course, we will explore what African American literature is, was, or might be, by reading 21st-century works by Claudia Rankine, Nafissa Thompson-Spires, Saidiya Hartman, and Fred Moten, as well as excerpts from works by Toni Morrison, Hortense Spillers, Frank Wilderson, and Octavia Butler. We will focus on the intersection of aesthetics, politics, and constructions of subjectivity in 21st Century African American literature and theory and ask: what is the relationship between past, present, and future? Can we read Morrison's late work, alongside Margo Natalie Crawford, as "the circulation of affective energy against and within the structures of history"? Do Frank Wilderson's and Jared Sexton's Afro-pessimism forge new paths for critical theory today? As we look at how these works navigate transparency and opacity, abstraction and representation, realism and fantasy, we will also explore the politics of resistance, reparation, and repair. And, looking farther afield, we will ask: What do adjacent fields of inquiry, like affect studies and queer theory, bring to our understanding of black cultural aesthetics

## III. RESULTS

The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches is a sociohistorical, sociocultural, and sociopsychological critical history of the contemporary African American novel as a socially symbolic act of cultural politics and narrative discourse. The strategic essentialism and oppositional discourse for interpreting African American narratives that I proposed in the introduction and first chapter of *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* in 1987 has its origins in two interrelated theories. The first is a sociohistorical, sociocultural, and sociopsychological theory of Du Boisian double consciousness and double vision. And the second is a vernacular theory of residual oral forms: oratory (including everyday speech acts), myth (including its ritual reenactment), legend, tale, and song or music. In the earlier book I analyzed the relationship of the double consciousness and five vernacular oral forms to the distinctive thematic, stylistic, and structural characteristics of the African American novel from its beginnings in 1853 to major achievements in the genre in 1983.[7,8,9] For example, in 1983 Alice Walker's National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning *Color Purple* marked the culmination of the achievement of black female novelists, and John Edgar Wideman's *Homewood* trilogy revitalized the power of an Afrocentric aesthetic for black male novelists. Because this book begins in 1962 but focuses primarily on novels and romances published between 1983 and 2001, chapter 1 maps the terrain and definition of the terms for understanding the book's rhetoric, politics, and poetics of representation. Chapters 2–5 are revisions and summaries of chapters 1–8 in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. More specifically, chapters 2 and 3 survey the sociohistorical, sociocultural, and sociopsychological landscape and roots, as well as the peaks and valleys of the African American novel and its 2 tradition from 1853 to 1962. Chapters 4 and 5 update and clarify the theoretical and critical issues initially outlined in chapters 7 and 8 of the earlier work about neorealism, modernism, and postmodernism in the contemporary African American novel. Responding to recent debates in literary and cultural theory, chapters 4 and 5 also closely examine more than 40 novels published between 1962 and 1983 by more than 20 novelists that illustrate the importance of authenticity, authority, and agency in assessing the literary use of African American residually oral forms, especially black American speech, music, and religion. The novelists include John Oliver Killens, John A. Williams, Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Margaret Walker, Ernest Gaines, William Melvin Kelley, Ronald Fair, John Edgar Wideman, Clarence Major, Charles Stevenson Wright, Hal Bennett, and Ishmael Reed. The memoir [10,11,12] "On Becoming an African American Scholar Activist and Organic Intellectual," introduction, chapters 1, 6-8, and the conclusion of this book are completely new. They examine continuity and change between 1983 and 2001 in the Afrocentric and African Americentric tropes of identity in African American novels and romances. In general, whereas Afrocentric tropes focus on the African diaspora, African Americentric tropes emanate from the United States. Chapter 6 examines primarily the texts published since 1983 by Paule Marshall, Albert Murray, Gloria Naylor, Al Young, David Bradley, and Leon Forrest. Chapter 7 covers Charles Johnson and the neo-Black Aesthetic novelists who have emerged since 1983 such as Nathaniel Mackey, Trey Ellis, Percival L. Everett and Colson Whitehead. Expanding on Samuel Delany's concept of



paraliterature, chapter 8 focuses primarily on the science fiction of Delany and Octavia Butler, the gay novels of E. Lynn Harris, Larry Duplechan, and Randall Kenan, and the detective narratives of Barbara Neely and Walter Mosley. 3 Between 1983 and 2001, the outstanding achievements of black women novelists culminated in four prestigious international and national nominations and awards. In addition to Walker's Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for *Color Purple*, Toni Morrison received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, Gayl Jones's *Healing* was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1998, and Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place* received an American Book Award in 1999. Trey Ellis's *Right Here, Right Now* also received an American Book Award in 1999. The *Esquire* and *USA Today* Best First Novel of the Year Awards went to Colson Whitehead's *Intuitionist* in 2000, and his *John Henry Days* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2001.[13,14,15] These novels by contemporary black males mark the challenge of a black neomasculinist satirical interrogation and exploration of an African American vernacular tradition and the emergence of what some artists and critics perceive as a postmodern neo-Black Aesthetic. The *Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* developed a vernacular theory of the African American novel as "a hybrid narrative whose distinctive tradition and vitality are derived basically from the sedimented indigenous roots of black American folklore and literary genres of the Western world."<sup>1</sup> Two of the basic assumptions of my narrative theory in the first book have been indirectly and implicitly challenged by the categorical antiessentialism of many white and nonwhite postmodern and postcolonial cultural critics. The first basic assumption is that by custom and law "there has always been a cultural and social boundary in America beyond which the black American could not go." The second is that "the Afro-American novel is not merely a branch of the Euro-American novel but also a development of the Afro-American oral tradition," including religious and political master narratives.<sup>2</sup> My response to antiessentialist indirect challenges is this updated reassessment and reaffirmation of the validity of my vernacular theory and critical practice of analyzing the African American novel holistically as a socially symbolic 4 act and imaginative reconstruction of the quest of African Americans for personal and social freedom, literacy, and wholeness.<sup>3</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s cultural debates in the media and academies about the formation of literary canons and sociocultural identities began to shift from black nationalism and feminism to questions concerning the significance of masculinity, sexuality, multiculturalism, and postmodernism. Because definitions of masculinity will be discussed fully in chapter 8, it will suffice here to remind readers that identity formations are fluid processes, not static products, that some critics conflate the biological category of race with the cultural classification of ethnicity, and that there are many different types of masculine identities. According to sociologist Clyde W. Franklin II, the complex socialization of many African American males involves a "lethal socialization triangle." This triangle includes "(1) a type of primary group socialization providing mixed messages regarding the meaning of Black masculinity; (2) a peer group socialization source that teaches innovative Black masculine traits, and (3) a mainstream . . . socialization source that sends Black men mixed messages regarding competitiveness, aggressiveness, [16,17,18] passivity, inferiority, and invisibility."<sup>4</sup> Although Franklin's value judgment of the socialization process of many African American males as lethal is disturbing, the socialization triangle is nevertheless useful in examining the identity formations of black males in African American novels published since 1983. According to the *Gay/Lesbian Almanac*, the term "sexuality" is a Victorian invention "referring to the quality of being sexual or having a sex, possessing sexual powers or feelings, or being conscious of our preoccupation with sex."<sup>5</sup> Assuming however that the history of sexuality must be understood as "the chronicle of an increasing repression" since the seventeenth century, theorist Michel Foucault argues provocatively in *The History of Sexuality* that "the idea 5 that there have been repeated attempts, by various means, to reduce all of sex to its reproductive function, its heterosexual and adult form, and its matrimonial legitimacy fails to take into account the manifold objectives aimed for, the manifold means employed in the different sexual politics concerned with the two sexes, the different age groups and social classes."<sup>6</sup> Although I am similarly interested in the relationship between power, knowledge, and sexual identity, my primary focus in this book, especially in chapter 8, is on the relationship among male sexuality, race, and ethnicity. Of particular interest will be the impact on narrative discourses of social marginality and sexual choice or condition on the health, unity, and diversity of black communities. Multiculturalism may be defined as the social theory and practice that shifts the dynamics of power from the distinctive history of nonwhite slavery, Negrophobic segregation, and antiblack racism in the United States to an ostensibly progressive rejection of reductive racial binarisms of white oppressors and black victims. At its best, multiculturalism shifts the discourse and struggle for social justice from the unscientific and often stereotypic racial categories of white and black to diverse groups committed to the construction of a new social order that privileges mixed ethnic and other cultural identities. In *Multi-America* (1998), satirist and cultural critic Ishmael Reed's seminal anthology of diverse dissenting ethnic voices, Afrocentric scholar Maulana Karenga defines multiculturalism as "thought and practice informed by a profound appreciation for diversity, which expresses itself in four fundamental ways." These include mutual respect, mutual rights and responsibilities, mutual commitment to a relentless quest for common ground, and mutual commitment to "a social ethics of sharing."<sup>7</sup> Political scientist Manning Marable has called for a "radical multiculturalism," which means people of different backgrounds cohering around left-wing political causes."<sup>8</sup> As an African 6 Americanist, I advocate a commitment to a radical democracy. This commitment involves the validation of the economics of slavery and politics of racial segregation as the major determinants of African American biracial and bicultural identity<sup>9</sup> as well as the cooperation of progressive members of all ethnic groups with mutual respect for the rights and responsibilities of each in the social reconstruction of the United States. Unfortunately, however, multiculturalism too frequently represents a confusing



reductive social construction and amalgamation of the different histories, cultures, [18,19,20]and identities of all nonwhite ethnic and other immigrant, migrant, and minority groups in the United States, especially Native Americans, African Americans, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans.<sup>10</sup> But a closer examination of American identity formations beneath the surface of their popular names reveals a generally unacknowledged complexity. Among other things, all members of racial and ethnic groups did not arrive voluntarily in the New World and United States, especially in the cities, at the same time, in the same manner, or for the same reasons. Historically, although African Americans have been socially classified in census records as the largest racial minority group in the United States in part because of our mixed sub-Saharan African ancestry and because of the “one-drop rule,” we have never been a homogeneous national and ethnic group. Geographically, generationally, socially, and culturally, there are distinctive, frequently disruptive intraracial differences and inequities among African Americans as well as interracial conflicts with Anglo-Americans and Euro-Americans. These differences and inequities began most unjustly with the racialization of slavery in Maryland in the seventeenth century and its sanctioning in the U.S. Constitution in the eighteenth century, culminated in the nationalization of racial segregation as the law of the land in the Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision of 1896, and were most meaningfully reconciled in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, especially in the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. Until the violent response of African Americans to justice denied in the brutal beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police in 1992, the post-1965, post-Civil Rights generation of African Americans and nonwhite ethnic immigrants had little or no shared direct experience with or shared indirect memories of blatant Negrophobic laws and menacing public signs, of systematic social inequality, of flagrant public hatred and physical violence expressed by antiblack white racists and their assimilated allies. Consequently, racial and ethnic solidarity and pride did not shape the consciousness and commitment of most post-1965, post-Civil Rights generation African Americans in a manner and to a degree similar to that of the pre-1965 generation. The members of each generation, to paraphrase social theorist Frantz Fanon, are challenged therefore not only to discover their mission and cultural identity, but also to fulfill or betray their personal and collective agency in the reconstruction of a more just social order. Anthropologist Joe Chung Fong advances a similar perspective on generational and ethnic difference in his article “Ethnic Conflict and Harmony between African and Asian Americans in the United States.” Because the amendments in 1965 to the Immigration and Nationality Act “allowed twenty thousand persons per country to emigrate from the eastern hemisphere and did away with the quota system for Asian countries . . . there remains a distinctive difference socially and culturally between the post-1965 Koreans and pre-1965 Asian immigrants.”<sup>11</sup> Even though pluralism or multicultural unity with diversity in the United States was embodied in a national motto, “E Pluribus Unum,” on currency until the Cold War with Russia heated up in 1956, when it was replaced by “In God We Trust,” it is actually a modern socioeconomic ideal for many people rather than a socioeconomic reality. As nonwhite Haitian American immigrants are probably most acutely aware, there is “a universe of difference . . . 8 between the experience of the Cuban man who arrived in the United States as a child with his parents after fleeing Castro’s revolution and the Puerto Rican woman who is a third-generation single mother on the Lower East Side.”<sup>12</sup> It is common knowledge, moreover, that the popular terms and misnomers for racially mixed ethnic groups of people of Spanish-speaking ancestry who either immigrate to or are born in the United States are Hispanic and Latino.<sup>13</sup> But it is not common knowledge that between 1940 and 1960 the U.S. Census Bureau classified all Latin Americans as white ethnics, a population that census estimates predicted would surpass by 2002 the approximately 35 million racial population of African Americans. When the Census Bureau in 2000 gave citizens the choice of multiple racial identifications, Jamaican American sociologist Orlando Patterson notes, 48 percent of the Latino ethnic population identified themselves as purely white rather than racially mixed.<sup>14</sup> On one level, this racial choice expresses the degree to which many Latinos have also internalized and accepted the antiblack racism of the United States as the price of assimilation as American citizens. According to prize-winning author and Chicana activist Ana Castillo, a 1989 University of Chicago study reveals “that deep divisions based on race exist between black Hispanics and white Hispanics in the United States.”<sup>15</sup> Even so, for political and economic reasons the leaders of many Latino organizations have increasingly reconciled intragroup color, class, and generational differences in order to form coalitions with African Americans and to benefit from affirmative action programs. At their best, then, multiculturalism and multiculturalists not only conflate but also homogenize racial and ethnic differences in the reconstruction of the imbalances and inequities of social power. At their worse, however, they disingenuously appropriate and deracinate the historically specific racial segregation, exploitation and sociopsychological trauma of African Americans that was nationally sanctioned 9 by law in 1896. Although the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Court declared in 1954 that “Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal,” it was not until the Gayle v. Browder Court conclusion in 1956 that state statutes requiring racial segregation on the buses of Montgomery, Alabama, were unconstitutional that the separate-but-equal law was finally overturned.<sup>16</sup> As for postmodernism, which will be defined more fully in subsequent chapters, it basically means the movement in critical theory and practice beyond the conventional assumptions about the essential nature of truth, reality, and art. Unquestionably, because African Americans have historically contested myths about the natural biological and cultural superiority of white people, multiculturalism and postmodernism are relevant to the construction and interpretation of the emancipation and empowerment of multiple identities in some of the motifs and leitmotifs of contemporary African American novels in this book. But my primary focus is on the specific post-1962 biracial, bicultural identities and aesthetics of African American novelists, critics, and

readers. I hope to achieve this by situating my African[19,20] Americentric approach to the novel as a spatially and temporally specific postcolonial socially symbolic act. Unlike postcolonialists whose critical theory and practice emanate from their particular experiences with European and British colonialism in Africa, Asia, India, Latin America, and the Caribbean, I derive my postcolonial African Americentric approach from my core linguistic, belief, and value system as a black American of African descent and bicultural heritage in the United States. Therefore, the dialectic tension between nonwhite racial and ethnic groups and the structures of white power and dominance in the United States between 1962 and 2001 is at the center of this book. 10 Throughout the rites of passage examined here, we not only become aware of continuity and change in the tradition of the novel, we also discover that the more things change, the more they remain the same. Irony and parody, tragicomedy and wry humor, ambiguity and ambivalence, segregation and integration, and accommodation and resistance are still salient characteristics of the double consciousness, of repetition with a black difference, and of African American culture and character in the journey from slavery to freedom. “Many of the people I see who are thought of as black could just as well be white in their appearance. Many of the white people I see are black as far as I can tell by the way they look. Now, that's it for looks,” says one of the Southern-born, nearly ninety-year-old wise narrators in Drylongso. “Looks don't mean much. The thing that makes us different is how we think. What we believe is important, the ways we look at life.” Although “white people have the power . . . the mojo and the sayso, . . . it is not hard to tell that they don't really know everything. . . . Pretending to know everything or just pretending to be better than you know you are must be a terrible strain on anybody.”<sup>17</sup> The voice of this black elder thus reminds us of a common theme in the contemporary African American novel : there are racially and ethnically different ways of knowing and being in the world with others that ought to be mutually respected as we strive to assert and acknowledge our mutual rights and responsibilities in the construction of a more just, compassionate, and democratic social system. In examining the identity formations that are imaginatively represented by more than 100 novelists in more than 200 novels published between 1962 and 2001, I will be guided by the ancestral voices of the elders of black communities such as those in Drylongso and those in my past. I will also be responding to the most significant contemporary voices of postcolonialists and postmodernists. The primary focus of my close analysis is on approximately 40 novels and 11 romances published or reprinted between 1983 and 2001. The analysis will subordinate attention to the narrative deployment of residual oral African American forms in these texts to an examination of the relationship of language to knowledge and power in the construction of the authenticity, authority, and agency, key terms that are defined in chapter 1, of the implied authors and characters in the texts. Whether read for verisimilitude as closed texts with definite meanings or as open-ended texts with indeterminate meanings, contemporary African American novels challenge readers by the imaginative deployment of language and speech to examine and even question the social construction of their identities and world, especially their systems of language, belief, and values. It is therefore not my purpose here to rehearse either the history of race as an idea, especially the nature versus nurture debate between Herder and Kant and other Enlightenment scientists and philosophers, or the history of antiblack racism in the United States.<sup>18</sup> Because race has always mattered regardless of how unscientifically we construct or interpret it, my purpose in general is to examine the relationship between race and culture in identity formations in the United States and in particular to examine the relationship between language, knowledge, and power in the contemporary African American novel. In explaining the formal relations of parts of the text to the whole and the manner in which the language of the text mediates between the author's vision of reality and the reader's, I remain indebted to Wayne C. Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction*.<sup>19</sup> More important than whether the story is told from a first-person or third-person point of view are whether the narrator is dramatized in his or her own right and whether his or her values are shared by the author. Dramatized narrators, both male and female, are generally as fully drawn characters as those they tell about, and their characteristics and beliefs are often very different from those of the “implied 12 author” who creates them. The implied author, who should not be confused with the actual author, is the implicit picture the reader discerns of an author who stands behind the scenes imaginatively constructing and manipulating narrative elements when the narrator is undramatized. Unless this author is explicitly identified, there will be no difference between his characteristics and those of the undramatized narrator. In such cases the term author-narrator is generally used. In discussing the various kinds of involvement or detachment among author, narrator, characters, and reader, most of our attention will be directed to the moral, political, and ideological qualities of the narrator, for the reliability or unreliability of the narrator is of vital importance to the integrity of the text. A reliable narrator is trustworthy and speaks for or acts in accord with the implied author's norms; an unreliable narrator is untrustworthy and does not. By proceeding, then, from significant historical events that produced the hybrid culture and double consciousness of black Americans to the manner in which they symbolically reenact and illumine the paradoxes and ambivalences of their experiences in romances and novels, I am attempting to provide a literary history and critical study that affirms a respect for the complex, reciprocal relationship between the principles of narrative form and social reality. [15,16,17]

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches is therefore more than an academic exercise in canon reformation. I hope that it will contribute to an invigorating discourse on the manner and



degree to which the identities of black American citizens of African descent and bicultural heritage are both a product and a process of the complex relationship of our chromosomes, color, class, geography, ethnicity, age, culture, consciousness, conscience, commitment, sexuality, and choice. This book demonstrates that the struggle of black Americans for power, status, and community in an emerging, radically new 13 social order of mutually respected, enacted, and enforced human and civil rights and responsibilities begins even though it does not end in the United States.[20]

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