

## Lecture 4: African American Criticism

### I. Basic Concepts

#### 1. Racism

Racism is the subjugation of individuals or groups based on their race on economic, political, social, or psychological grounds. Racism is driven by the belief that the oppressed race is less intelligent than the "dominant" race—that is, the race that wields power in a society. The illusions that people of color are less clever, less "civilized," less moral, and even less attractive than white people, for example, foster white racism. Racist stereotypes of African Americans include, among other things, being sluggish, unambitious, slow-moving, and dim-witted; violent, brutal, and criminally inclined.

While the bad stereotypes are clear, even "positive" racial stereotypes can be harmful, such as the preconceptions that African Americans are "naturally" outstanding sports, "naturally" wonderful dancers (due to their "natural" rhythm), and devoted slaves to white families. These ostensibly "positive" stereotypes are harmful because, like negative stereotypes, they imply that all African Americans are the same and have no distinguishing characteristics outside the archetype to which they "belong." Furthermore, both negative and "positive" stereotypes promote a racist urge to view African Americans exclusively through the lens of white superiority. Racist thought connects such "positive" stereotypes as the "born" athlete or the "natural" dancer to what it regards as a "primitive," tribal heritage, while it connects such "positive" images as the loyal servant to black Americans' "rightful" sense of their own inferiority to whites. In summary, all clichés rob people of their originality and, all too frequently, their humanity.

#### 1.2 Forms of Racism

**a- Institutionalized racism**— Racism must be supported in some way by a society's institutions, such as the educational system, the judicial system, the entertainment and fashion industries, law enforcement policies, labor practices (such as the accepted attitudes that govern hiring new employees, determining their salaries, and promoting or firing them), and housing regulations, in order for it to have any real force in that society. Other examples of institutionalized racism include the lack of resources available to public schools in black neighborhoods; the continued use of racially biased textbooks and achievement tests; the lack of representation of African American authors (who now hold top international honors) on college syllabi in American literature courses; the inadequate response of national agencies to African American health problems; and the disproportionate number of African Americans who are incarcerated.

**b- Internalized racism**— Internalized racism affects some people of color to varied degrees, which is the acceptance of racist America's opinion that they are less worthy, less capable, less intelligent, or less attractive than whites. Internalized racism victims frequently wish they were white or looked whiter. Internalized racism is obviously harmful to one's self-

esteem: it's impossible to retain a good self-image when one has been taught that one is inferior simply because of one's ethnicity.

**c-Intraracial racism**— Intra-racial racism is frequently the outcome of internalized racism. Intra-racial racism is discrimination against those with darker skin and more African traits, such as the texture of their hair and the shape of their lips and nose, inside the black community. When African Americans feel, for example, that light-skinned black individuals are more handsome or clever than darker-skinned black people, intra-racial prejudice is at work. Internalized racism almost always leads to intra-racial racism, because both forms of racism "buy into" the white racist attitude summed up in the terrifying old saying, "If you're white, you're fine; if you're brown, stay put; if you're black, get back!" Finally, even if institutionalized racism is not depicted, we can assume that it is implied when a literary work depicts intra-racial racism or internalized racism—perhaps as part of the current reality in which the characters live, perhaps as part of the history of the society in which they live, or perhaps both—even if it is not depicted. Because, as we've seen, institutionalized racism is the driving force behind all types of racism's perpetuation.

## 2. Double Consciousness

The awareness of belonging to two clashing cultures: the black culture, which evolved from African roots and developed in response to a history of racist oppression, and the European culture imposed by white America, was first described by W.E.B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Many African Americans experience double consciousness as a result of living in two very different worlds—the world at home and the white-dominated world outside the home, such as school, the workplace, and even the shopping mall—where two different sets of expectations, or cultural "rules," operate, and two different languages are spoken at times.

In general, critics agree that African American literature has centered on a number of recurring historical and sociological themes, all of which reflect the politics of black American experience—the realities of political, social, and economic power. Themes include: reclaiming the African past; surviving the horrors of the Middle Passage; surviving the ordeal of slavery; the quest for freedom from slavery and other forms of oppression; the quest for literacy; the experience of African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction; surviving life in the South under segregation; the problems and conflicts of mulattoes in a racist society; the experience of African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction; the experience of African Americans during the Civil War ;the difficulties of economic survival; the migration North and the related themes of urbanization, alienation, and the quest to reconcile double consciousness; the role of religion in personal and collective survival; the importance of cultural heritage; and the importance of family and community. Of course, surviving the oppression of racism, classism, and sexism is a recurring theme, but until the mid-twentieth century, black writers had to treat this and other racially charged subjects with caution or encode them in their writing (indicate their intended meaning through subtle references that black readers and sympathetic white readers would pick up on but unsympathetic white readers would miss) in order to be published by white editors.

As these themes suggest, the political content of African American literature includes correcting stereotypes of African Americans, correcting the misrepresentation of African Americans in American history, and correcting the omission of African Americans from American history; celebrating African American culture, experience, and achievement; and exploring racial issues, such as institutionalized racism, internalized racism, intra-racial racism, and the combined oppression of racially oppressed people.

### **Theories**

The Signifying Monkey by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Houston A. Baker Jr.'s Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature are two of the most well-known attempts to study the African American literary heritage. Gates aims to map African American literary history as a series of intertextual interactions. He claims that black texts "speak" about one another in the same manner as black people do when they engage in the African American folk practice of signifying, for example, by imitating, changing, or parodying one another's literary strategies. Wright's titles, for example, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Gates explains, convey a solid, obvious racial presence. The title of Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, alludes to these titles. Man, on the other hand, "indicates a more mature and powerful status than either son or boy." Ellison's character is "invisible," an absence rather than a presence, as has been the case with white America's treatment of black people in the past: as if they were invisible. Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of Wright's novel, is also represented by Ellison. Bigger is "voiceless," in the sense that he never speaks out for himself and rarely speaks at all. He doesn't act as much as he reacts to his surroundings. Ellison responds with a protagonist who "is nothing but voice": "it is he who shapes, edits, and tells his own tale," we are never told.

Houston Baker also tries to connect the African American literary legacy to the blues, an African American folk art. Baker claims that the blues are a kind of African American cultural self-expression that influences and is impacted by all other forms of African American expressive culture, as well as impacts and reflects them.

Baker observes that texts with a thematic structure similar to the blues can be found throughout African American literary history. He points out that blues songs typically contain two themes: a spiritual theme, usually about loss and desire, and a material subject, usually about economic necessity. Baker notices a similar duality in African American literary writings, where the material topic serves as a subtext to the work's overt spiritual element. *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, for example, or *Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789), Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) all have a spiritual theme in common: the journey to spiritual awakening, to finding oneself, which is an important aspect of their journey to freedom. The economic realities on which the heroes' spiritual pursuits are predicated are a frequent undertone. Equiano, Douglass, and Linda Brent of Jacobs must all find a method to earn the money they need to realize their goals.

There has also been a lot of work done to identify the parameters of a literary legacy distinct to the writing of African American women, who were left out of or neglected by the African American literary canon as established by both black male writers and the white literary establishment. Furthermore, representations of African American women in literary works by both white and black male authors were largely limited to minor or stereotyped characters. As a result, throughout their literary history, black women writers have been keen to represent black women as actual persons with all of their complexity and depth. As Mary Helen Washington puts it, “[O]ne of the main preoccupations of the Black woman writer has been the Black woman herself – her aspirations, her conflicts, her relationship to her men and her children, her creativity” (Black-Eyed Susans x).

Mary Helen Washington identifies three distinct sorts of black women who have been commonly employed by black women writers to represent black women throughout history. The first is the "suspended woman," a victim of males and society as a whole who has few or no options and is "suspended" because she is powerless to change her circumstances. This genre is frequently found in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century works. Nannie from Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Pauline Breedlove from Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* are two examples (1970). The second type is the "assimilated woman," who is not subjected to physical violence and has far more control over her life, but who is subjected to psychological violence in that her desire to be accepted by white society has cut her off from her African American roots.

In works set in the 1940s and 1950s, this kind is common. Mrs. Turner in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye* are two examples. Finally, the "emerging woman" is a figure who is becoming aware of her own psychological and political subjugation and capable of forging a new life and new choices for herself, usually through a harrowing initiation experience that prepares her for the change. This type is frequently encountered in 1960s-set works. Meridian in Alice Walker's *Meridian* is an example (1976). Some suggest that a fourth character type should be added to this handy list: the "liberated woman," who has discovered her abilities, knows what she needs, and goes about achieving it. In a nutshell, the "liberated woman" has already discovered herself and appreciates what she has discovered.

Of course, African American criticism's distinct perspectives can also help us understand works by white American authors. Toni Morrison offers us a very productive approach to reading white mainstream literature from an African American perspective in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, which reveals the ways in which white texts construct, for their own purposes, what she calls the Africanist presence in American history. Morrison uses the word Africanist as “a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people”. In Morrison's terms, Africanism is a white idea (or, to be more precise, a misperception) of African and African American people onto which white authors have projected their own fears, needs, aspirations, and conflicts.

## **II. II. Some questions African American critics ask about literary texts**

The following questions are offered to summarize African American approaches to literature.

1. What can the work teach us about the specifics of African heritage, African American culture and experience, and/or African American history (including but not limited to the history of marginalization)

2. What are the racial politics (ideological agendas related to racial oppression or liberation) of specific African American works? For example, does the work correct stereotypes of African Americans; correct historical misrepresentations of African Americans; celebrate African American culture, experience, and achievement; or explore racial issues, including, among others, the economic, social, or psychological effects of racism? Or as can be seen in the literary production of many white authors, does the work reinforce racist ideologies?

3. What are the poetics (literary devices and strategies) of specific African American works? For example, does the work use black vernacular or standard white English? Does the work draw on African myths or African American folktales or folk motifs? Does the work provide imagery that resonates with African American women's domestic space, African American cultural practices, history, or heritage? What are the effects of these literary devices and how do they relate to the theme, or meaning, of the work?

4. How does the work participate in the African American literary tradition? To what group of African American texts might we say it belongs in terms of its politics and poetics? How does it conform to those texts? How does it break with them, perhaps seeking to redefine literary aesthetics by experimenting with new forms? In short, what place does it occupy in African American literary history or in African American women's literary history?

5. How does the work illustrate interest convergences, the social construction of race, white privilege, or any other concept from critical race theory? How can an understanding of these concepts deepen our interpretation of the work?

6. How is an Africanist presence—black characters, stories about black people, representations of black speech, images associated with Africa or with blackness—used in works by white writers to construct positive portrayals of white characters?

### **Practice**

Analyze the poem *White Man* (Langston Hughes)