

## Institutions, Classrooms, Failures: African American Literature and Critical Theory in the Same Small Spaces

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No comment I have encountered from an undergraduate illustrates more acutely the strong sociopolitical, institutional, and intellectual tensions converging on the limited number of classrooms in which African American literature is taught than one offered rather confidently from the front row of a lecture hall filled with sixty or so students. I remember the comment as follows: "I'm not sure how I'm going to write the paper for this class, because I've never been a slave and can't fully relate to this experience." This announcement was made in response to my open invitation for questions and comments a few weeks into an upper-division course on African American autobiography. It is remarkable for a variety of reasons. Among other matters, this announcement of an imminent failure to engage meaningfully the terms of African American autobiography codifies what may be the central challenge of courses in African American literature, the task of comprehending—of realizing intellectually—important particulars of African American experiences in the so-called New World. In essence, such intellectual activity stands very clearly in opposition—not apposition—to the traditional materials, monuments, and experiences of American cultural literacy, a term coined by E. D. Hirsch to refer to the general knowledge necessary to reinforce and maintain technical literacy. Students of African American literature—both contrary to and exemplified by my student's appeal to the importance of experience—are placed in a position for which their earlier education has in virtually no way prepared them.

Perhaps this situation ought to be regarded as one not of location but of dislocation. Students of African American literature find themselves—in the materials they are reading and the institutional lives they are leading (even if only for a quarter or a semester)—in a position where the texts they are reading do not resemble literature in terms of its traditional subjects, aims, and consequences and where their classroom does not

resemble an institution of higher education in terms of who is allowed to speak and what is allowed to be said. Textuality is always a locus of authority, the fixed site of an author; African American literature, however, takes its place in a cultural system in which authority—self-authority or any other—has been traditionally denied the texts' authors. The situation of students of African American literature, as my student's comment suggests, becomes one in which variant discourses converge and fail to resolve their antagonisms. The situation is one of failure.

One can, with these matters in mind, begin to imagine the relevance and productiveness of pairing African American literature with critical theory in undergraduate education, for the situation of this pairing and the situation of the students who might be introduced to it speak significantly to each other. If African American literature and critical theory appear to fail each other, then this failure itself is highly instructive in pursuing an understanding of both fields. At the very least, the failure provides important definitional information about the contrasted fields, and an instructor conversant with both wants precisely to highlight this peculiar relativity. In fact, it soon becomes clear that their troubled relation reinscribes the governing dualism—the intellectual versus the experiential—of my student's appeal. Theory, on the one hand, is marked by a reluctance to acknowledge itself as a political body of works with *material* determinants and consequences; African American literature, on the other, is characterized by the difficulty of acknowledging itself as anything more than the oversimple redaction of the conditions of a *material* and (by negation) political body. One wants to draw attention to the manner in which their "failed" intercourse raises questions concerning the generally unremarked politics of reading—questions that students of African American literature engage necessarily and directly and at risk to their academic careers. In other words, these texts clearly trouble the tense relation between themselves as texts and the cultural system in which they take their places as texts—so much so that one quickly realizes how unlikely it is that a student would make a similar comment in courses on Renaissance or Victorian literature although the very same circumstances obtain. The materials of these courses necessarily stand outside the student's experience (and I phrased my initial response to my student accordingly). That is, although students have been neither Renaissance courtiers nor besieged gentry swept up in the social and intellectual changes of rapid industrialization, it would be unthinkable to raise the same question in those courses. One must ask why such virtually identical institutional and classroom situations appear dissimilar enough to justify a student's unembarrassed commentary before sixty or so peers.

For what reason does the reading of African American texts elicit appeals to incomprehension based on lack of experience? In exploring the answer to this question and some of the many notable critical errors of the appeal, I restrict myself to two points and, in doing so, attempt

to suggest how, by employing theory in the teaching of African American literature, some of those errors might be addressed.

It is first important to note that my student's newly discovered (in)abilities dramatically reverse traditional academic practice. The student abrogates the practice of privileging depersonalized knowledge, which is standard to literary and other academic studies. Whereas one most often repudiates (rather than makes appeals to) personal experience in academic studies, my student conceives it imperative to do exactly the opposite. Bell Hooks provides cogent insight into the dilemma of this student, as well as into the institutional dilemma it redacts. She writes: "[R]acism is perpetuated when blackness is associated solely with concrete gut level experience conceived as either opposing or having no connection to abstract thinking and the production of critical theory. The idea that there is no meaningful connection between black experience and critical thinking about aesthetics or culture must be continually interrogated" (*Yearning* 23). Traditional American cultural literacy not only distorts or, in large part, dismisses African American cultures and experiences but also fosters an inability to consider or engage those cultures and experiences intellectually, thus promoting what amounts to a "literate resistance" to viewing them in any way other than within the terms of vague and dismissable angst or—to repeat a phrase—the oversimple redaction of the conditions of a material and (by negation) political body. This "literate" impulse is mass-produced and widely circulated, as Hirsch specifies in his theory of predetermined cultural cues, elaborated in his book *Cultural Literacy*. Therefore, in order to "write the paper for [my] class," students must encounter the difficult and novel task of reconsidering and revising this impulse. Theory—to repeat a central point—may prove instrumental in this revision, for the situation of theory, like that of my student in her dilemma and that of the literature she confronts, is one of dislocation. Theory knowingly absents itself from that which it represents. It maintains and reinscribes this absence as the measure of itself; the matter from which theory absents itself can be crudely understood as "practice."<sup>1</sup> Theory attempts to be a signifier removed from signifiers. It thus fails (as sign) to be where it is not and also fails (as nonpractice) not to be where it is. Equally, the situation of African American literature, which determines the dilemma of my student in the front row, is one of pronounced incompatibilities and tensions. To be African American amounts to having those discourses spoken most easily and fluently by the dominant culture fail to imagine you, and, conversely, to locate an African American self within those discourses amounts to failing those discourses. In short, if theory in itself is a site of profound incompatibilities, then theory becomes an immense (re)source for presenting and understanding—as recorded in a literary tradition—African American thought and behavior and the strategies and circumstances of African American thought and behavior, also in themselves sites of profound incompatibilities; the same obtains vice versa.

Yet, more to the point, just as instructive as the similarities of the two are their differences. Critical theory stands as an ostensibly depersonalized form of knowledge; African American literature does not. Bringing the two together clearly engages the dualism of knowledge and experience underlying my student's perplexing appeal to a lack of experience. Insofar as the abstraction (i.e., knowledge) of critical theoretical concerns hardly seems capable of admitting or bearing relation to the resolute materiality (i.e., experience) of African American concerns and cultural productions, the pairing of the two addresses the standard "literate" sensibility underlying, however consciously or unconsciously, my student's appeal. In making the two fields conversant, one aims then at allowing students to see the complication of materiality and abstraction (or second-order discourse) even in the most apparently material of conditions (i.e., African American literature) and vice versa, in the most abstract of pronouncements (i.e., theory). Granted that in the moments immediately following my student's comment, this process begins for her far afield of theory; nonetheless, it is a process to which theory can amply contribute both in the discourse of the classroom and in course reading materials—issues to which I will turn presently.

More immediately, there is an unstated corollary of my student's appeal that must also be considered: Complementing her conception of her own impairing lack of experience seems to be a certainty or presumption of my experience as a slave—indeed, despite a temporal gulf of more than one hundred years making such experience an impossibility, despite my presence at a lectern marking me as the professor (or authority) in the room, not to mention the obligatory accreditation of a PhD underwriting my presence at the front of the room (a certificate not of experience but of, if nothing else, intellectual perseverance). Prompting the student to see her distorting cultural literacy and even racism begins as simply as stating that I have no more experience of being a slave than she does. As a group, we African Americans are imagined to bear little resemblance to the dominant American community while, conversely, each African American is granted an inexorable representativeness in relation to all other African Americans. My student's act of implicitly looking to her professor for experience as a slave, which she acknowledges she lacks, underscores the startling efficacy of mass-produced and widely circulated cultural cues dissuading most inhabitants of the New World from thinking carefully and insightfully about race. Clearly, no one at the present time possesses the experience of antebellum slavery. My student fails to see that race—and here is the unacknowledged crux—always has been and continues to be foremost an intellectual matter, either within or without the classroom but most plainly so in the classroom. While the issue of experience is not irrelevant, neither does it enter the dynamics of the classroom and its impending academic tasks in the manner my student conceives.<sup>2</sup>

Race is not singularly an experience, and experience is not an innocent register of "reality." Both race and experience are implicated in and

overdetermined by economic, political, and social struggles. Personal and even collective experience do not define the parameters of race, which is another way of saying that the only interventions in issues of race are not to be made in terms of either personal or collective experience. The belief that this state of affairs holds sway returns one to the odd revision of standard academic practice already noted. Standard academic practice pursues *facts* (which, despite appearances, are also implicated in and overdetermined by economic, political, and social struggles), and if facts are somehow paramount in our institutions and classrooms, the fact of personal African American identity is emphatically not the singular one to be considered in this instance. Indeed, in classrooms of African American literature facts themselves are preemptorily questioned and challenged by attention to situations, the situations of those both within and without the classification *African American*. It is, no doubt, at this point that the remarkable difficulties of my student arise.

Undergraduates are tutored to assume "[t]he technique of what might be called methodological neutrality, of 'getting the facts right' before leaping in with our[?] value judgments, [which their institutions of higher education would have them believe] is one of the progressive achievements of [Western] civilization" (Graff 86).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, students in African American literature classes discover opposing sets of facts and attendant narratives that no amount of appeals to neutrality might reconcile. In ways analogous to my student in the front row, these undergraduates find themselves speaking and writing at odds with those in whose "care" and within whose power of evaluation they are placed. They remain at odds with their professors of African American literature, who must in some measure revise the facts or "certainties" of their earlier education; equally, they remain at odds with their institutions of higher education, which virtually everywhere resist such revision. In African American literature courses, the narratives or "stories" of a previous education are revised in accordance with diverse critiques of a New World civilization founded by and abidingly committed to the vision of a "white-supremacist oligarchy" (Painter 127). Neutrality itself takes up a place within one of the opposing sets of facts, with the result that there no longer clearly exists the certainty (or illusion) of "getting the facts right"; the *facts* prove instruments of will implicated in, rather than effecting release from, *experience*, interestedness, and the dynamics of cultural, civil, and other forms of power. The facts appear as the discursive gestures of dominant groups "whose exclusionary behavior may be firmly buttressed by institutionalized structures of domination that do not critique or check [that exclusionary behavior]" (Hooks, "Essentialism" 176). (These lessons cannot remain purely "textual" or "academic" when students find themselves in courses that, for all intents and purposes, are brand-new to American education—heralded by political and social upheaval in the 1960s and met with bureaucratic and journalistic trepidation three decades later. (See D'Souza.)

Although my student's response to the "literate" dilemma presented by the course in African American autobiography forms itself as a misrecognition or revision of the binarism traditionally differentiating experience from "methodological neutrality," her inversion of terms is not the key point to be noticed. More significant is her retention of the binarism itself. Indeed, perpetuating the institutional narrative she has long imbibed, the student summarily dismisses both the dynamics of the course and the academic discourse of the classroom in which those dynamics are played out. She construes both as sites at which intellectual configurations no longer obtain. In effect, to resolve her dilemma, she understands her engagement with African American materials as, rather than revising an education already in place, standing curiously *without* that education. In this way, even inverted, the binarism operates to distinguish that which is institutionally (and culturally) valued from that which is not; her articulation of her situation ironically instates within the discourse of the class on African American autobiography the disqualification or bracketing of African Americans, their cultures, and cultural productions long endemic to the dominant communities of the New World. The force of her comment would have African American autobiography virtually inaccessible intellectually; she removes the course in which she is enrolled from the academic tradition she is attempting to master and from the imperatives of the institution in which she is enrolled. She reinstates the textual materials of the course, as well as the ongoing interpretive activities of the classroom, securely within the material realm that, in terms of the popular American mind, almost solely determines African American existence.

Recall that in its central conflict, the conflict of the marginal and the preferred, the study of African American literature exposes and troubles what Hirsch imagines as a supratechnical literacy, the background information or background knowledge—beyond linguistic competence—requisite to reading. Reading African American literature precipitates remarkable encounters with predetermined cultural cues constructing a predetermined reality—to which acknowledged textuality stands in apposition. The acknowledged textuality of African American literature abrogates, in large part, these predetermined cultural cues of official American experience and reality, therefore supplanting expected apposition with disorienting opposition. The appeal of my student can be understood as an attempt to return opposition to apposition. In terms of the pressures of the course, her impulse to disregard, or revise, the tenet that privileges depersonalized knowledge is not misguided; her peculiar revision, however, fails to respond adequately to either the materials or the imperatives of the course. Opposingly, the revision she fails to undertake involves dismissing, rather than keeping intact, the binarism structuring her lament.

More fully considered, her situation and the analogous situations of the sixty or so other students in the class lead to a recognition of the

coimplication of *experience* and the *facts* (or more-traditional academic concerns). Made otherwise aware of their curious situations, an awareness to which the intersection of critical theory and African American literature can contribute, undergraduates may be prompted to recognize that

when it comes to knowledge of the world, there is no such thing as a category of the "essentially descriptive"; that "description" is never ideologically or cognitively neutral; that to "describe" is to specify a locus of meaning, to construct an object of knowledge, and to produce a knowledge that shall be bound by that act of descriptive construction. "Description" has been central, for example, in the colonial discourse. It was by assembling a monstrous machinery of descriptions—of our bodies, our speech acts, our habits, our conflicts, and desires, our politics, our socialities and sexualities—in fields as various as ethnology, fiction, photography, linguistics, political science—that the colonial discourse was able to classify and ideologically master the colonial subject, enabling itself to transform the descriptively verifiable multiplicity and difference into the ideologically felt hierarchy of value. To say, in short, what one is presenting is "essentially descriptive" is to assert a level of facticity which conceals its own ideology and to prepare a ground from which judgments of classification, generalisation and value can be made. (Aijaz 6)

Undergraduates, in their new and difficult situations, discover that facts are replaced by attention to situations and, moreover, that although open regard for situations may seem superfluous or, at best, ancillary to undergraduate (or all) education, this principle does not apply here, for if there is a set of concerns that African American literature privileges, among them are not only African American thought and behavior but just as surely the *situations* of African American thought and behavior and the inevitable politics of reading (and announcing) those situations. With little or no preparation, undergraduates in African American literature courses are confronted directly with the situations of reading and, more particularly, their own situations when reading. My student's apprehension of her (in)abilities and their relation to the limits of her experience demonstrate the manner in which students of African American literature cannot help discovering with greater immediacy the political dynamics of what passes as literature and as the (con)textuality or situations of literature.

My student finds herself in a situation and in a classroom in which she fails to intellectualize the course materials as well as her own position vis-à-vis race. Thereby, she extends the widely circulated "ideologically felt hierarchy of value" that, by definition, cannot hold sway in a class on African American autobiography. As of yet, she fails to comprehend the class and, ironically, announces her fear that she fails to comprehend the class. One might prompt her to begin to intellectualize her position by posing a question as simple as why she might assume I have experience as a slave while she has none. The point is to begin to make her deliberately recognize and estimate a superordinate "literacy" that it is the aim of the

course materials and classroom interaction to interrogate and revise. The issue is to make her intellectualize *her position*, a feat that, despite her lament, she has not yet begun to perform. And, as she intuits, this feat should not be undertaken wholly at the expense of experience. She is intuitively correct to question and resist "standards of pyrotechnics" claiming "that intellectual excellence requires depersonalization and abstraction" (Fox-Genovese 163) and the attendant descriptive license of those standards (even though her particular line of reasoning fails to pursue that interrogation or challenge adequately). To her credit, she somewhat aligns herself with the materials and imperatives of the course: How, one might ask, can the mandatory dismissal of "particular personal experience" form part of an education also concerned with traditions of language and literature that attempt to revise longstanding processes of depersonalization, traditions of language and literature that begin with "the process of [random Africans] becoming a single people, Yorubas, Akans, Ibos, Angolans, and others . . . present on slave ships to America and experienc[ing] a common horror [marked by] unearthly moans and piercing shrieks" (Stuckey 3)? African American linguistic and literary traditions necessarily find their beginnings here, preserve and revise those initial sounds, and in large part record heroic, or at least involved, attempts to retreat from, or cast off, the enforced depersonalization those initial moans and shrieks protest. How, one might ask again, can African American literature reconcile itself to conditions of the academy and higher education that call for depersonalization? Indeed, the education of undergraduates in African American literature courses is profitably complicated when we examine the way in which incipient concerns of African American literature and culture are reinscribed within the conditions of its presence—its situation—in the academy, as well as their own situations.

This proposition I undertake, in part, by pursuing three categories of theory that can be counterposed with African American texts: canonical theory, institutional theory, and African American (and other subaltern) theory. Canonical theory may be thought of as works such as Aristotle's *Poetics*, Sir Philip Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry," David Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste," Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, and Karl Marx's *Capital* that stand as part of a prized tradition of belletristic and philosophical texts. I take institutional theory to refer to the relatively contemporary phenomenon of professional academic writings, such as F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, and Michel Foucault's *Language, Counter-memory, and Practice*, that reflexively settle or trouble issues of literature, knowing, and culture. African American (and other subaltern) theory includes texts such as the essays collected by Cheryl A. Wall in *Changing Our Own Words*, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," which turn the energies of humanistic inquiry predominantly to hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, and class and their invariable complications of issues

pertaining to literature, knowing, and culture. Although these distinctions prove helpful in intellectualizing materials that seem to lie beyond that possibility, it is not necessary that they be introduced to one's students. It is more to the point that they provide ways of structuring discussions. Equally important, the distinctions are neither rigorous nor mutually exclusive; they suggest broad contexts in which to place theory in its fretful relation to African American literature.

Of the three categories, I present or refer to canonical theory first and make most of these references in the introductory meetings of the class. My object is to begin to interrogate (in general as well as personal terms) the immediate problematics of our situatedness in a class devoted to African American literature or other materials and to suggest a tradition of speculation that prohibits or at least diminishes the very activities we are to undertake as a class. I breach most standard notions of critical theory for, to highlight the manner in which a strict—and in no way disappearing—canon of humanist figures and thought takes little (or derisive) account of a tradition of African American thought and behavior and the circumstances of such thought and behavior, I pursue the juxtaposition of broad, historical speculations with African American literature. We may briefly survey works by such European and American intellectuals and leaders as G. W. F. Hegel, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, the noted nineteenth-century scientist Joseph Le Conte (a leading figure of the newly established University of California), and the New Critics (who in standard discussions are generally divorced from their "southern agrarian" incarnation). The notion I want to present, especially in initial meetings, is that, no matter how open or mediated, a disqualification or pathological bracketing of dark-skinned others remains a virtually invariable premise of both the general and learned traditions of Euro-American thought. Indeed, I want to present the notion that examinations of "African American" literature and culture must at some point look necessarily to European males and their New World descendants, since it is precisely these communities and their discourses that have in lasting ways determined the hostile conditions and attitudes in terms of which African American literature and cultural productions must at some point be contextualized.

I prompt my class to consider immediately a history in which respected and prized traditions of Western thought disqualify African Americans a priori from the belletristic and philosophical traditions advertised as universal. The class must begin to think of the educational implications of such histories and predilections and to consider how such implications may or will influence the tasks they have set for themselves by taking up the seats they have chosen for the quarter: Is the institution in which they are enrolled a participant in such histories? Are the educations they have received and will continue to receive implicated? At what point did these histories end, if in fact they did? In what ways, given such

histories and widespread predilections, will a course covering African American literature or culture necessarily differ from or challenge the vast majority of the other courses in which the students have been or are enrolled? In short, undergraduates must begin to visualize themselves in a situation of profound contradiction; they must begin to contemplate a second-order, or critical, discourse about their own educational situations as well as about the materials they will encounter.

In the late eighteenth century, Jefferson wrote that "[i]n general, [African American] existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection" (139). Early in the nineteenth century, Hegel proposed that "[w]e must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality—all that we call feeling—if we would rightly comprehend ['the African']; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in ['the peculiarly African'] character" (97).<sup>4</sup> Lincoln, in the mid-nineteenth century, wrote, "I agree with Judge Douglas [that the African American] is not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment" (53). One might draw on a variety of figures and extend the chronology as close to the contemporary moment as one wishes and, in doing so, suggest an enduring theoretical context and problematic for African American literature.

My use of institutional and subaltern theories is not so broadly contextual. I employ these theories, rather, as resources for reading texts chosen for the course. To this end, institutional theory provides general (rather than more culturally specific) speculative concepts, which may be relevant to either individual texts or patterns emerging among a series of texts. Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, for example, provides a helpful model for considering the "discourse" of pain and physical abuse endemic, particularly, to many early African American texts. Scarry looks foremost to torture and war, suggesting that both are "reality-conferring process[es], in the one [torture] it is the non-believer's body and in the other [war] it is the believer's body that is enlisted in the crisis of substantiation" (150). Her distinction between torture and war is perhaps not crucial in the context of African American literature; I do, however, see as crucial in that context the understanding of pain and physical confrontation as reality-conferring processes. To provide a brief example, the insight is borne out in reading the scene from Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography in which Demby is summarily murdered for refusing to take further abuse at the hands of the overseer Mr. Gore. At stake in Demby's rebellion is the "reality" of a system founded on the unaccountable equivocation of dark skin with subhumanity, a system in which African American bodies stand as sites (and sights) against which whiteness is contradicted and therefore also predicated most forcefully. Nothing fixes the meanings of the signs of blackness and whiteness, in and of themselves in New World landscapes. These matters are fixed instead by such acts of violence as those that reduce Demby to a "mangled body . . . [whose] blood and

brains marked the water" (47), acts of violence that take on, in the words of Scarry, the significance of "the reality conferring process," "the crisis of substantiation," for a questionable sociopolitical order. In this application of Scarry's formulations, the point of irruptiveness at which established value recovers itself in the American landscape—and most fully asserts itself—is the point at which African American bodies are violated.

Scarry's theoretical speculations seem especially helpful when reading a text such as Mary Prince's "The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave," in which meditations on language, literacy, and culture are clearly subordinate to catalogs of physical abuse and recollections and images of physical pain. Equally, Pierre Macherey's *Theory of Literary Production* seems helpful in considering, say, the opening pages of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Macherey is concerned with looking beyond a "false simplicity which derives from . . . apparent unity of meaning" to "those disparities which point to a conflict of meaning" and reveal "the inscription of an otherness" in certain configurations; he is interested in "that which happens at [the] margins" of certain configurations (79). In the opening pages of Morrison's novel, the "unity of meaning" that the elected representatives of the white citizens hope to realize and master is relentlessly troubled by the *present absence*, or marginality, of African American communities, whose imaginations are equally at work (re)naming "Mains Avenue" first "Doctor Street" and then, in response to official reprimands, "Not Doctor Street" (4). "[T]he charity hospital at its northern end" (4) is similarly (re)named "Not Mercy Hospital" in the light of its refusal to provide services to African Americans. In a similar manner, the critique of Edmund Husserl in Jacques Derrida's early work *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* may help illuminate the efficacy of the "singing voices" and musical motifs in, say, Ann Petry's *The Street* and *The Narrows* and many other African American texts attentive to the cultural primacy of music. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* might be taken up in conjunction with Billie Holiday and William Dufty's *Lady Sings the Blues* to demonstrate how Holiday employs the grotesque as well as the charged values of the body and of urban geography in her critique of the American society that perversely celebrates her talents.

At this point, one begins to see at least one additional issue of failure in proposing such intersections of African American literature and critical theory. One recognizes a failure to acquaint undergraduate students adequately with the histories, factions, and abundance of formulas that compose the relatively heterogeneous field known as critical theory. These intersections yield, in large part, a somewhat random exposure to both concerns—or, at least, to theory. Nonetheless, one should not be daunted by the specter of this failure, for the paramount goal is not to provide undergraduate students with a survey or in-depth acquaintance with the dense expanse of critical theory (a project that I believe is more fully suited

to graduate school) but, rather, to place students in the position of theory insofar as this position is both relevant and antagonistic to African American literature. One wants to engage the more pressing failure of an apparent inability of the two to address each other, the apparent failure in classes of African American literature of the traditional academic dualism.

This issue is inherently addressed in the third of the three categories. African American (and other subaltern) theory takes as its focus the complication of literary and intellectual activities in social systems of domination and hierarchy—in "the sordid history of colonialist expropriation, material exploitation, and class and race oppression behind European world dominance" (Viswanathan, "Beginnings" 22–23). William Andrews, for example, in the first chapter of *To Tell a Free Story, "The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography: Notes toward a Definition of a Genre,"* draws on speech-act theory to delineate the sociohistorical and, therefore, narrative constraints facing early African American autobiographers; Valerie Smith, in *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*, interrogates the tensions and incompatibilities of an unreflective privileging of the notions of literacy and literariness in relation to African American lives and texts. Other texts that come to mind as suitable for undergraduate scrutiny include Joanne Cornwell-Giles's "Afro-American Criticism and Western Consciousness: The Politics of Knowing," Mae G. Henderson's "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," and Christopher Miller's "Theories of Africans: The Question of Literary Anthropology." These exemplary texts provide an eclectic sample of recent work conjoining the concerns of African American literature and critical theory. Cornwell-Giles examines the problematics of attaining self-knowledge in a philosophical dilemma perpetuated by the hostile point of view of a dominant discourse; Henderson proposes that the manner in which black women write and speak in modulating multiple voices is a central and distinguishing feature of their discourse; Miller explores some of the ways in which mastery proves unattainable for the Western scholar in pursuit of the African other. Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" bears mentioning again. This essay, making such distinctions as that between the "body" and the "flesh," is very difficult but worth the time and close attention it requires. Students need not master the essay in its entirety to cull important and original insights from it. Colonial and postcolonial theories also belong in this category: for example, Homi Bhabha's "Sly Civility," outlining pathological contradictions of colonialist discourse; Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest*, detailing the formation of English literary study in British India as a strategy of sociopolitical control; and Jenny Sharpe's "Figures of Colonial Resistance," arguing against the transparency of the intellectual who puts forth narratives of resistance.

It seems clear to me that the incompatibility of the two fields is instructive in aiding undergraduates to "write the paper[s] for [my] class[es]."

The inevitable involvement of each field with failure, as well as the apparent failure of the two fields to address each other, does not constitute grounds for their mutual dismissal; it forms the ground on which undergraduate students can begin to read the fields in concert. At the very least, the *opposition* illuminates analogous tensions that students of African American literature must confront in the texts they are considering as well as in the circumscribed spaces of the institutions and classrooms in which they find themselves. The situation of the pairing, like that of students who find themselves in the position of writing papers on African American autobiography despite their different "experiences," is remarkable but not ludicrous. Once undergraduates are made to entertain the difficulty of reading the two fields in concert (not simply, as one would expect, the difficulty of reading theory), these students are placed (although they may not realize it, until someone points it out to them) in the situation of making "analyses of culture within the relations of power which divide [culture] into preferred and marginal categories" (Carby 42). Such conflicts constitute preeminent concerns, themes, and references for African American literature, with the result that the study of literature assumes its place, more or less openly, within the dynamics of discursive and cultural conflicts. The remarkable pairing queries both a discrete notion of literary studies and the often unremarked dynamics of reading sustained in institutions that privilege ostensibly depersonalized knowledge and the attendant "descriptive" license such knowledge promotes.

African American literature and critical theory are thought to be ineluctably opposed concerns, resolutely incompatible, and in this apparent dissimilarity lies precisely the benefit of considering them in tandem. I propose that no inherent benefit lies in the fact of theory itself; rather, benefits lie in the troubled convergence of the two fields within the classroom. Clearly, there can be no final word on this matter, for that is precluded by the presence of controversy, in which—by definition—final words appear forever elusive. Still, I offer a tentative final word—insofar as such a paradox is allowed. In classes on African American literature one must remain attentive to the tensions and failures arising before and even around one; one must even create some tensions and failures oneself.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I use the term *critical theory* primarily in agreement with the currency gained by the term as suggested by Gayatri Spivak: "Theory in the United States institution of the profession of English is often shorthand for the general critique of humanism undertaken in France in the wake of the Second World War and then, in a double-take, further radicalized in the mid-sixties in the work of the so-called poststructuralists" (788). Thus, even further, theory is a site of incompatibilities and tension.

<sup>2</sup> Professors of African American literature who are African American are not the only instructors who must confront in the classroom the issues delineated here. On the contrary, insofar as they must be prepared to engage textual materials, any such instructor, regardless of race, must be prepared to negotiate the variety of ways (some more patent and bald than others, as suggested by my student's comment) in which predetermined cultural knowledge enters the classroom. This student's comment raises a particular issue clearly tied to the race of her teacher. Nevertheless, at the same time, it raises a general issue not nearly so restricted. There are, of course, important issues to be considered concerning instructors of African American literature who are not African American; however, this situation is not the primary focus here. In an extended consideration of the more general issue, I hope to delineate the manner in which my student's announcement suggests a paradigm for bringing together the seemingly inimical pair of African American literature and critical theory.

<sup>3</sup> In the light of the work Graff would go on to produce, this passage, published in 1979, is almost unimaginable.

<sup>4</sup> Hegel continues, "In Negro life the characteristic of point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence—as for example, God, or Law—in which the interest of man's volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being" (97).

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## Theory as Translation: Teaching "Foreign" Concepts

Simon Gikandi

*Even though I wanted to break with French Literary Traditions, I did not actually free myself from them until the moment I decided to turn my back on poetry. . . . I became a poet by renouncing poetry.*

Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*

For the teacher of literary traditions that are defined as oppositional or noncanonical—postcolonial, ethnic, or marginal literatures—the deployment of critical theory is both inevitable and highly problematic. It is inevitable because critical theory, as Homi Bhabha has observed, makes us aware "that our political referents and priorities—the people, the community, class struggle, anti-racism, gender difference, the assertion of an anti-imperialist, black or Third World perspective—are not 'there' in some primordial, naturalistic sense. Nor do they reflect a unitary or homogeneous political object" (11). It is problematic because critical theory is accompanied by what I consider to be the anxiety of cultural translation: how to use concepts developed within the Western tradition to explicate texts and cultures that have, in many instances, risen to resist this tradition. My primary concern, then, is how theory can renounce its conditions of possibility so that it can function as an agent of translating meanings across cultures, classes, and geographical spaces. And if I seem to deploy theory in the classroom by appealing to the authority of what many puritans would consider to be untheoretical categories—reality, experience, and history, for example—there are two reasons for this non-traditional approach: first, one has to start with concepts that students take for granted and often use to resist the impetus toward a deconstructive pedagogy; second, as Aimé Césaire asserts in my epigraph, we sometimes need to renounce theory in order to affirm the historical and epistemological contexts in which literary texts emerge and evolve.

I always begin my deployment of theory by articulating the position of scholars who, like Barbara Christian, argue that theory is a theological practice using an abstract language to obscure the historical conditions