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Mapping of Roots and Routes: Reflections on Select Twenty –First Century Afro-American Diasporic Fiction

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Abstract: African American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. It begins with the works of such late 18th-century writers as Phillis Wheatley. Before the high point of slave narratives, African-American literature was dominated by autobiographical spiritual narratives. The genre known as slave narratives in the 19th century were accounts by people who had generally escaped from slavery, about their journeys to freedom and ways they claimed their lives. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was a great period of flowering in literature and the arts, influenced both by writers who came North in the Great Migration and those who were immigrants from Jamaica and other Caribbean islands. African American writers have been recognized by the highest awards, including the Nobel Prize given to Toni Morrison in 1993. Among the themes and issues explored in this literature are the role of African Americans within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism, slavery, and social equality. African-American writing has tended to incorporate oral forms, such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues, or rap. [1]

As African Americans' place in American society has changed over the centuries, so has the focus of African-American literature. Before the American Civil War, the literature primarily consisted of memoirs by people who had escaped from slavery; the genre of slave narratives included accounts of life under slavery and the path of justice and redemption to freedom. There was an early distinction between the literature of freed slaves and the literature of free blacks born in the North. Free blacks expressed their oppression in a different narrative form. Free blacks in the North often spoke out against slavery and racial injustices by using the spiritual narrative. The spiritual addressed many of the same themes of slave narratives, but has been largely ignored in current scholarly conversation. [2]

At the turn of the 20th century, non-fiction works by authors such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington debated how to confront racism in the United States. During the Civil Rights Movement, authors such as Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about issues of racial segregation and Black Nationalism. Today, African-American literature has become accepted as an integral part of American literature, with books such as Roots: The Saga of an American Family by Alex Haley, The Color Purple (1982) by Alice Walker, which won the Pulitzer Prize; and Beloved by Toni Morrison achieving both best-selling and award-winning status.

In broad terms, African-American literature can be defined as writings by people of African descent living in the United States. It is highly varied.[3] African-American literature has generally focused on the role of African Americans within the larger American society and what it means to be an American.[4] As Princeton University professor Albert J. Raboteau has said, all African-American literary study "speaks to the deeper meaning of the African-American presence in this nation. This presence has always been a test case of the nation's claims to freedom, democracy, equality, the inclusiveness of all."[4] African American literature explores the issues of freedom

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and equality long denied to Blacks in the United States, along with further themes such as African-American culture, racism, religion, slavery, a sense of home,[5] segregation, migration, feminism, and more. African-American literature presents experience from an African-American point of view. In the early Republic, African-American literature represented a way for free blacks to negotiate their identity in an individualized republic. They often tried to exercise their political and social autonomy in the face of resistance from the white public.[6] Thus, an early theme of African-American literature was, like other American writings, what it meant to be a citizen in post-Revolutionary America.

INTRODUCTION

African-American literature has both been influenced by the great African diasporic heritage[7] and shaped it in many countries. It has been created within the larger realm of post-colonial literature, although scholars distinguish between the two, saying that "African American literature differs from most post-colonial literature in that it is written by members of a minority community who reside within a nation of vast wealth and economic power."[8]

African-American oral culture is rich in poetry, including spirituals, gospel music, blues, and rap. This oral poetry also appears in the African-American tradition of Christian sermons, which make use of deliberate repetition, cadence, and alliteration. African-American literature—especially written poetry, but also prose—has a strong tradition of incorporating all of these forms of oral poetry.[9] These characteristics do not occur in all works by African-American writers.

Some scholars resist using Western literary theory to analyze African-American literature. As the Harvard literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., said, "My desire has been to allow the black tradition to speak for itself about its nature and various functions, rather than to read it, or analyze it, in terms of literary theories borrowed whole from other traditions, appropriated from without."[10] One trope common to African-American literature is "signifying". Gates claims that signifying "is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, and also hyperbole and litotes, and metalepsis."[11] Signifying also refers to the way in which African-American "authors read and critique other African-American texts in an act of rhetorical self-definition."[12]

While African-American literature is well accepted in the United States, there are numerous views on its significance, traditions, and theories. To the genre's supporters, African-American literature arose out of the experience of Blacks in the United States, especially with regards to historic racism and discrimination, and is an attempt to refute the dominant culture's literature and power. In addition, supporters see the literature existing both within and outside American literature and as helping to revitalize the country's writing. To critics[who?], African-American literature is part of a Balkanization of American literature. In addition, there are some within the African-American community who do not like how their own literature sometimes showcases Black people.

Throughout American history, African Americans have been discriminated against and subject to racist attitudes. This experience inspired some Black writers, at least during the early years of African-American literature, to prove they were the equals of European-American authors. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr, has said, "it is fair to describe the subtext of the history of black letters as this urge to refute the claim that because blacks had no written traditions they were bearers of an inferior culture."[59]

By refuting the claims of the dominant culture, African-American writers were also attempting to subvert the literary and power traditions of the United States. Some scholars assert that writing has

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traditionally been seen as "something defined by the dominant culture as a white male activity."[59] This means that, in American society, literary acceptance has traditionally been intimately tied in with the very power dynamics which perpetrated such evils as racial discrimination. By borrowing from and incorporating the non-written oral traditions and folk life of the African diaspora, African-American literature broke "the mystique of connection between literary authority and patriarchal power."[60] In producing their own literature, African Americans were able to establish their own literary traditions devoid of the white intellectual filter. This view of African-American literature as a tool in the struggle for Black political and cultural liberation has been stated for decades, perhaps most famously by W. E. B. Du Bois.[61]

According to Joanne Gabbin, a professor, African-American literature exists both inside and outside American literature. "Somehow African-American literature has been relegated to a different level, outside American literature, yet it is an integral part," she says.[62] She bases her theory in the experience of Black people in the United States. Even though African Americans have long claimed an American identity, during most of United States history they were not accepted as full citizens and were actively discriminated against. As a result, they were part of America while also outside it.

Similarly, African-American literature is within the framework of a larger American literature, but it also is independent. As a result, new styles of storytelling and unique voices have been created in relative isolation. The benefit of this is that these new styles and voices can leave their isolation and help revitalize the larger literary world (McKay, 2004). This artistic pattern has held true with many aspects of African-American culture over the last century, with jazz and hip hop being just two artistic examples that developed in isolation within the Black community before reaching a larger audience and eventually revitalizing American culture.

Since African-American literature is already popular with mainstream audiences, its ability to develop new styles and voices—or to remain "authentic," in the words of some critics—may be a thing of the past.[15]

DISCUSSION

Some conservative academics and intellectuals argue that African-American literature exists as a separate topic only because of the balkanization of literature over the last few decades, or as an extension of the culture wars into the field of literature.[63] According to these critics, literature is splitting into distinct and separate groupings because of the rise of identity politics in the United States and other parts of the world. These critics reject bringing identity politics into literature because this would mean that "only women could write about women for women, and only Blacks about Blacks for Blacks."[63]

People opposed to this group-based approach to writing say that it limits the ability of literature to explore the overall human condition. Critics also disagree with classifying writers on the basis of their race, as they believe this is limiting and artists can tackle any subject.

Proponents counter that the exploration of group and ethnic dynamics through writing deepens human understanding and previously, entire groups of people were ignored or neglected by American literature.[64] (Jay, 1997)

The general consensus view appears to be that American literature is not breaking apart because of new genres such as African-American literature. Instead, American literature is simply reflecting the increasing diversity of the United States and showing more signs of diversity than before in its history (Andrews, 1997; McKay, 2004).

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Some of the criticism of African-American literature over the years has come from within the community; some argue that black literature sometimes does not portray black people in a positive light and that it should.

W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in the NAACP's magazine The Crisis on this topic, saying in 1921: "We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one." He added in 1926, "All Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists."[61] Du Bois and the editors of The Crisis consistently stated that literature was a tool in the struggle for African-American political liberation.

Du Bois's belief in the propaganda value of art showed when he clashed in 1928 with the author Claude McKay over his best-selling novel Home to Harlem. Du Bois thought the novel's frank depictions of sexuality and the nightlife in Harlem appealed only to the "prurient demand[s]" of white readers and publishers looking for portrayals of Black "licentiousness." Du Bois said, "'Home to Harlem' ... for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath."[65] Others made similar criticism of Wallace Thurman's novel The Blacker the Berry in 1929. Addressing prejudice between lighter-skinned and darker-skinned Blacks, the novel infuriated many African Americans, who did not like the public airing of their "dirty laundry."[66]

Many African-American writers thought their literature should present the full truth about life and people. Langston Hughes articulated this view in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926). He wrote that Black artists intended to express themselves freely no matter what the Black public or white public thought.

More recently, some critics accused Alice Walker of unfairly attacking black men in her novel The Color Purple (1982).[67] In his updated 1995 introduction to his novel Oxherding Tale, Charles Johnson criticized Walker's novel for its negative portrayal of African-American men: "I leave it to readers to decide which book pushes harder at the boundaries of convention, and inhabits most confidently the space where fiction and philosophy meet." Walker responded in her essays The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult (1998).

Robert Hayden, the first African-American Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, critiqued the idea of African-American literature by saying (paraphrasing the comment by the black composer Duke Ellington about jazz and music): "There is no such thing as Black literature. There's good literature and bad. And that's all."[68]

Kenneth Warren's What Was African American Literature?[69] argues that black American writing, as a literature, began with the institution of Jim Crow legislation and ended with desegregation. In order to substantiate this claim, he cites both the societal pressures to create a distinctly black American literature for uplift and the lack of a well formulated essential notion of literary blackness. For this scholar, the late 19th and early 20th centuries de jure racism crystallized the canon of African-American literature as black writers conscripted literature as a means to counter notions of inferiority. During this period, "whether African American writers acquiesced in or kicked against the label, they knew what was at stake in accepting or contesting their identification as Negro writers."[70] He writes that "[a]bsent white suspicion of, or commitment to imposing, black inferiority, African American literature would not have existed as a literature".[71] Warren bases part of his argument on the distinction between "the mere existence of literary texts" and the formation of texts into a coherent body of literature.[69] For Warren, it is the coherence of responding to racist narratives in the struggle for civil rights that establishes the body of African-American literature, and the scholar suggests that continuing to refer to the texts produced after the civil rights era as such is a symptom of nostalgia or a belief that the struggle for civil rights has not yet ended.[69]

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In an alternative reading, Karla F. C. Holloway's Legal Fictions: Constituting Race, Composing Literature (Duke University Press, 2014) suggests a different composition for the tradition and argues its contemporary vitality.[72] Her thesis is that legally cognizable racial identities are sustained through constitutional or legislative act, and these nurture the "legal fiction" of African-American identity. Legal Fictions argues that the social imagination of race is expressly constituted in law and is expressively represented through the imaginative composition of literary fictions. As long as US law specifies a black body as "discrete and insular," it confers a cognizable legal status onto that body. US fictions use that legal identity to construct narratives — from neo-slave narratives to contemporary novels such as Walter Mosley's The Man in My Basement – that take constitutional fictions of race and their frames (contracts, property, and evidence) to compose the narratives that cohere the tradition.

Criticism regarding African-American literature in the spaces of education have influenced which stories can and should be taught in schools. Nina Mikkelsen's, Insiders, Outsiders, and the Question of Authenticity: Who Shall Write for African American Children?[73] argues for the importance of authenticity when it comes to writing stories for young African American audiences. Mikkelsen tracks the significance of having students exposed to diversity while also maintaining authentic narratives by incorporating stories that not only include characters of color but are also written by people of color. While her perspective is broad and marketed towards writers and readers themselves, incorporating her same themes and analysis to authentic narratives proves useful in a classroom setting. She challenges what previous 'diverse' narratives might have accomplished while also dissecting why they were demeaning to the culture of authentic storytelling itself. This article fits into the discourse on having diverse literature for students to see themselves in the classroom and the importance of choosing texts who's storytelling resonates with their own culture. Mikkelsen writes, "The idea of multicultural literature (that in which the idea of different world views or cultural references are built into the texture of the book itself-its focus, its emphasis, its subject matter) is a challenging one for readers who are not insiders of the culture being depicted."[73] She believes providing students with content that portrays authentic and genuine reflections of multi-cultural experiences, allows for better engagement and connection in the classroom for those who resonate with these cultures.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

African-American women's literature is literature created by American women of African descent. African-American women like Phillis Wheatley Peters and Lucy Terry in the 18th century are often cited as the founders of the African-American literary tradition. Social issues discussed in the works of African-American women include racism, sexism, classism and social equality.

Anna Julia Cooper

Anna Julia Cooper in her book from 1892 titled a A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South argued for greater and more widespread attainment of higher education for African Americans, especially women. Her work attempts to cultivate a sense of educational rigor in African American female intellectuals and the black community in the US would benefit from as a whole.[74] This is to counter the overly aggressive and male dominated academic writings in higher education and balance them with more female voices, hence Cooper is widely recognized as the "mother of Black feminism".[75] Furthermore, Cooper did not just see higher education as a way to improve the socioeconomic situation of African American communities, but also as a foundation for the continuous learning and a community based approach to upliftment that would cause the "universal betterment" of people and humanity as a whole.[76] Cooper advocated for the

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democratization of both public and private higher education which has been seen as "bastions of white, male elitism" and a "focus on reproducing English culture and cementing Christian doctrine", as the changing nature of American culture that now grapples with centuries of relegating women and racial minorities to the lowest rungs of society.[77]

Ann Folwell Stanford

In the article "Mechanisms of Disease: African-American Women Writers, Social Pathologies, and the Limits of Medicine" (1994), Ann Folwell Stanford argues that novels by African-American women writers Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, and Gloria Naylor offer a feminist critique of the biomedical model of health that reveals the important role of the social (racist, classist, sexist) contexts in which bodies function.[78]

Barbara Christian

Main article: Barbara Christian

In 1988, Barbara Christian discusses the issue of "minority disclosure."[79]

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