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FRAMES OF FRICTION

Black Genealogies, White Hegemony,
and the Essay as Critical Intervention



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Negotiating a Black Aesthetic

As Winston Napier points out in his introduction to the anthology *African American Literary Theory*,

The formal beginnings of African American literary speculation are located in the early part of the twentieth century. Writing mainly in magazines established to report on their society, African American literary thinkers from the start displayed concern with the use of literature as a means to counteract traditional European characterization of blacks as less than human. (2000, 1)

This reference to Black writers' occupation with literature as a means of counteracting "traditional European characterization of blacks as less than human" points toward the function of essay writing that I am concerned with here, namely the potential impact that writing has had on processes of what Omi and Winant have called "racial formation in the United States."²⁶ What comes into focus, in other words, are the effects of writing on the ways in which "concepts of race are created and changed, [and] how they become the focus of political conflict" (1994, vii). I contend that the essay has been important in providing Black writers with – in a Foucauldian sense – "conditions of possibility" to claim a position in a white-dominated public discourse that had historically assigned Blacks the position of a

26 I am not primarily concerned here with sketching out a history of African American literature but rather with examining processes of establishing positions of critical intervention from which Blacks could engage their audiences in cultural criticism. African American literature presents a significant reference point for the articulation of cultural criticism. It is thus necessary to bear in mind the limited thematic, generic and stylistic scope of what Black writers could and what they chose to write about over the course of literary history, an aspect central to African American cultural criticism. Most early examples of *written* discourse by Blacks – texts primarily concerned with questions of slavery and freedom – were written and read as documents of the social conditions of Blacks and "came under a scrutiny not primarily literally" (Gates 2000, 147).

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, white audiences that advocated the abolition of slavery read autobiographical slave narratives largely as accounts of the shared humanity of enslaving and enslaved subjects. The debates on the political function of literary texts by Black writers – as documents of social conditions rather than as *creative* and aesthetic articulations of political concerns – have been going on well into the twentieth century. The controversies of the 1950s and 1960s surrounding the "paradigm of protest writing" attest to the persistence of a dichotomy between art and protest. Writers James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison are two protagonists in a debate that contested the notion that texts written by Blacks should be limited to social protest. See chapter two in the following.

constitutive Other and denied them access to political and cultural participation.

In the course of the twentieth century, Black writers carved out a position of critical intervention against the backdrop of an ideology of white supremacy that provided speaking positions predominantly for white men and made artistic and intellectual work primarily thinkable with reference to white masculinity. It had to be established within a white framework of discourses on race, that is, within “oppressive regimes of knowledge and power” that had continuously stigmatized and excluded racialized subjects.²⁷ Scientific discourses contributed to the reproduction of that white framework. At the turn of the twentieth century, legal, medical and other authoritative discourses on race were largely racist in the sense that they made truth claims about a biological foundation of race and racial differences and thus legitimized social stratifications grounded in racial hierarchies. As Arnold Rampersad points out, “[r]ace, and the idea of white racial supremacy, enjoyed the lofty status of a science at the turn of the century and down into the 1920s” (1997, xv). However, the predominance of scientific racism over biologicistic interpretations of race was being contested by social scientists, anthropologists, and historians who gained ground in pointing out that race was not a natural given but a socially constructed and historically contingent category that served as a foundation in legitimizing social stratifications based on supposedly inherent racial differences. Richard King locates the demise of race as a valid scientific idea, particularly in the English-speaking world, in the first part of the twentieth century: “Several recent studies fix on the years between 1920 and 1945 as the period in which race, racial difference, and racial hierarchy were largely discredited among intellectuals and scientific elites” (2004, 1).²⁸ That is not to say that a racist claim for racial differentiations did not continue to show its concomitant effects; the power structures that had been legitimized by racist discourse were not easily dismantled through the disavowal of its discursive foundations.

One strategy of disendowing scientific racism with the credibility that race scientists had given the concept of race over the previous centuries was to validate cultural achievements by Black Americans and recognize them as worthy of study, as did, for example, white German-born anthropologist Franz Boas. “Leading the intellectual fight against doctrines of

27 A phrase informed by Foucault’s work. See, for instance, Gardiner 1995, 16.

28 See Barkan 1992; McKee 1993; Tucker 1994; Kühl 1994; King 2004, 1.

white supremacy, Boas's work, especially *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), was an indispensable part of the movement to reappraise African-American culture" (Rampersad 1997, xvii). This aim could only be achieved by constituting a field that defined what Rampersad would later call African-American culture, a task that was taken up by a small but growing number of white and Black scholars and writers. Among them was, for instance, Zora Neale Hurston, a student of Boas, who pursued ethnographic research in the U.S. American South and the Caribbean. Hurston's work followed a political agenda by challenging predominant conceptualizations of the value and significance of cultural production by African Americans. Generally, she challenged exclusionary and elitist preconceptions of what art was and who could create it, such that art would not be left the domain of white men.

In a 1926 letter, the Black poet and diplomat James Weldon Johnson wrote to a white patron of Black artists, Carl Van Vechten, "that nothing can go farther to destroy race prejudice than the recognition of the Negro as a creator [of] and contributor to American civilization" (Gates 1987, xxiii). Johnson's observation points to a relationship between texts by Black writers and sociopolitical and cultural change that prefigures the assumption of a *functional* aspect of "Black" literature, namely that of establishing Black subjectivity and forging Black speaking positions, and using that position to challenge existing power structures. This question of function, which subsumes concerns of a formal, thematic and historical scope, becomes crucial in the material I consider in this chapter.

In terms of a specific function that writing served Black Americans, Gerald Early has argued that "Black writers could not help but see their writing as political, since they saw their *condition* in these terms and their writing and their *condition* have been largely inseparable" (1992, x). Some of the dominant concerns of Black writers were questions of political empowerment and reform: "Starting life in the Americas with this sensibility," Napier argues, "African Americans tempered their desire to reconfigure conventional notions of race and inequality with a general concern for social acceptance and participation" (1).

Black writers needed to gain access to publications to be able to address these issues, and white-owned publishing companies severely restricted or denied Blacks that access. What McDowell notes for the second part of the twentieth century applies to the turn to the twentieth century and the following decades to an even larger extent: "Even [...] when African Ameri-

cans of an enlarged black middle class attempted to found their own publishing houses for the express purpose of reaching a black audience, the economics of the publishing industry generally, along with distribution processes, still posed a formidable obstacle” (1995, 93).

Further, what Black writers could and did write about depended on how receptive an audience was, whether it was comprised predominantly of white or Black readers, whether it was located in the North or South, etc.²⁹ Neither could Black writers draw on a wide range of publications that served them as outlets for their writing, nor did there exist an established Black reading community that they could address, which in return would create a demand for their writing.

The field of literature and, more broadly speaking, of art was particularly significant in the endeavor to overcome political and social restrictions. As Houston A. Baker, Jr., has argued,

Art seemed to offer the only means of advancement because it was the *only* area in America – from an Afro-American perspective – where the color line had not been rigidly drawn. Excluded from politics and education, from profitable and challenging areas of the professions, and brutalized by all American economic arrangements, Afro-Americans adopted the arts as a domain of hope and an arena of possible progress. (1987, 11)

In the early part of the twentieth century, magazines and newspapers were established mostly in Northern cities to increase opportunities for Black writers to get their texts published.³⁰ These publications followed the express purpose of reaching a Black audience. *Colored American Magazine* from Boston, for example, was one of the magazines explicitly addressing a Black readership. The editors of the inaugural issue of May 1900 expressed their intention to strengthen the bonds of “brotherhood” among “the colored people of the United States” and to demonstrate “their ability and tastes, in fiction, poetry, and art, as well as in the arena of historical, social, and economic literature” (qtd. in Tate 2001, 204).³¹ In other words,

29 By differentiating between white and Black, North and South, I do not intend to suggest that these denominators inevitably determine the receptiveness of an audience to engage in an emancipatory process that helped to establish positions of critical intervention. Rather, these terms signify approximations of degrees of such a receptiveness.

30 For a survey of nine Black monthly periodicals published in the first decades of the twentieth century, see Fultz 1995.

31 For a study on periodicals produced by Blacks and addressed to a Black audience, see Johnson 1991.