
AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE
AND “POST-RACIAL” AMERICA.
OR, YOU KNOW, NOT.

By Jacqueline A. Blackwell

In 1983, when I began graduate school at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville as the only black student in the Graduate English School, it offered no graduate-level African-American Literature course. If I wanted to take a black literature course, I was told, I had to take the one undergraduate-level course, but I would be allowed to take it for graduate credit. In 1985, there was a graduate-level black literature course, but when I was ready to write my Master’s thesis, I wouldn’t be allowed to write about Zora Neale Hurston – because she wasn’t in “the canon.” (E.D. Hirsch, of *Cultural Literacy* notoriety, was teaching at UVa. at the time.)

Times have changed. Today an undergraduate student at the University of Virginia can major in African-American and African Studies and take courses like African-American Drama, Black Women Writers in America, and Fictions of Black Identity. A graduate student can take her pick of four graduate-level courses: Early African-American Literature, African-American Poetry, Studies in African-American Literature and African-American Literature.

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Now there are arguments about the “balkanization” of literature, and a graduate student in English Language and Literature at the University of Virginia can take a course in Charles Dickens, Keats, Mark Twain, or Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Now arguments have begun, even among black scholars, against continuing to teach black literature and/or black history in American universities and colleges. Last

year, MacArthur fellow and literature professor Charles Johnson, author of *Middle Passage* and *Flight to Canada*, wrote an article titled, “The End of the Black American Narrative.” Johnson argues that the black narrative is “a tool we use, consciously or unconsciously, to interpret or to make sense of everything that has happened to black people in this country since the arrival of the first twenty Africans at the Jamestown colony in 1619.” But today,

Johnson says, “the truth and usefulness” of what he calls “the traditional black American narrative of victimization,” or the slave narrative, should be questioned. Challenged. Why? Because things have changed in America.

Two months after Barack Obama was elected president of these United States, professors in historically black colleges and universities began re-thinking African-American literature and history courses, according to Lydia Lum, a correspondent for *Black Issues in Higher Education* magazine. America is now, these professors say, “post-racial,” and it’s time to move on. Our students no longer see parallels between themselves and the characters of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, for example. “They don’t want to identify with African-American characters,” says Dr. Joy Myree-Mainor, an assistant professor of English at historically Black Morgan State University in Baltimore. Dr. Coretta Pittman, an assistant professor of rhetoric and composition at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, says that our students, black students, “believe race doesn’t matter anymore” (qtd. in Lum).

This change has been reflected in community colleges as well. Recently in the VCCS college where I teach, students who wanted to take my African-American Literature course (English 253-254) were hearing, from TNCC counselors, that the course was not transferable to four-year colleges --that there was no need to take that course unless one was an African-American student. This was despite the fact that the University of Virginia and Adrian College, among others, accepted the course for its “Non-Western Perspective Requirement”:

Today’s global village requires the responsible citizen to be aware of the values, languages, economies, religions and structures of other societies. Because most students are introduced to western societies throughout their education, Adrian College students are expected to learn about societies that are not historically European. In addition to the study of topics in specific non-western courses, students are encouraged to complete independent studies on non-western topics and to study abroad. (Adrian College)

TNCC is not offering the course this semester or next semester, citing enrollment reasons. Though it is still offered at other VCCS colleges, the growing resistance of scholars and professors to the study of African American literature could jeopardize its study in the community college system as well as in four year colleges.

The problem with these stances is that black literature is more than narratives of victimization. It is more than stories and poems about race. It is wholly American: bold, diverse, and iconoclastic, a joy to read, study and deconstruct.

The first bit of black literature I remember analyzing is Phillis Wheatley's lines:

'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,
Taught my beknighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Savior too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their color is a diabolic dye."
Remember Christians; Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (219)

When I was an undergrad, we marveled at Wheatley's precociousness in the English language, the facility with which she imitated Alexander Pope. Of course, even decades before I entered college, black literature students were talking about Wheatley's choice of words: *Pagan*, *benighted*, and *diabolic*, for example. How could she call kidnapping and objectification "mercy"? Today, students and scholars are combing Wheatley's bold poetry for seeds of rebellion, to date having found only a letter to a Native American minister in which she refers to slaveholders as "our modern Egyptians." Personally, I'm fascinated by the biblical and cultural allusion Wheatley dropped in the penultimate line of "On Being Brought from Africa to America": "Remember Christians; Negroes, black as Cain ..." – the part where we are reminded that whites and blacks alike in antebellum America were often taught that the "mark" that God put on the first murderer was black skin. In my African-American Literature class, we used to discuss the contradiction between the details of the myth – that the "mark" was intended to keep other men from harming Cain – and the realities of harm directed against black-skinned folk in eighteenth-century America. But that's "victimization," isn't it? What is not victimization is what Wheatley asserts in the last two lines of her poem: that Heaven is multicolored.

Let's look, also, at two of my favorite passages in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. First, the part where he discusses the results of learning how to read:

The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master

Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! (413)

But it is thinking, and reading, and talking of his victimization that eventually moves Douglass from thoughts of suicide to plans of escape. “You have seen,” writes Douglass, “how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.” In chapter ten of *The Narrative*, we read where Douglass decides that he will *no longer* be a victim:

Long before daylight, I was called to go and rub, curry, and feed, the horses. I obeyed, and was glad to obey. But whilst thus engaged, whilst in the act of throwing down some blades from the loft, Mr. Covey entered the stable with a long rope; and just as I was half out of the loft, he caught hold of my legs, and was about tying me. As soon as I found what he was up to, I gave a sudden spring, and as I did so, he holding to my legs, I was brought sprawling on the stable floor. Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment – from whence came the spirit I don’t know – I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. (427)

Although Douglass’ story offers plenty of examples of injustice and cruelty, the classic slave narrative follows the archetypal pattern of bondage, fight, flight, and freedom. It is hardly a “narrative of victimization.” Slave narratives are worth studying if only for the incidence of what we used to call “the triumph of the human spirit.”

This theme emerges in much of black American literature. When we leave traditional slave narratives, we see this same triumph in Toni Morrison’s version of the slave narrative, *Beloved*. Though slavery does its best to destroy Sethe and her family, even bringing the Middle Passage back from the dead, Morrison creates a community, a group of meddling prayer warriors, in fact, to triumph over the evil that has taken over Sethe’s life. I think Octavia Butler

is also playing with that theme in her novel *Kindred*, in which a black woman is snatched from 1975 to rescue a white, slave-owning, nineteenth-century great-grandfather. Yes, Butler attempts to convey the inhuman cruelty, the insanity of slavery, but mostly, as she said in an interview, she wanted to talk about survival:

But when I did *Kindred*, I really had had this experience in college that I talk about all the time, of this Black guy saying, “I wish I could kill all these old Black people that have been holding us back for so long, but I can’t because I have to start with my own parents.” That was a friend of mine. And I realized that, even though he knew a *lot* more than I did about Black history, it was all cerebral. He wasn’t feeling any of it. He was the kind that would have killed and died, as opposed to surviving and hanging on and hoping and working for change. And I thought about my mother, because she used to take me to work with her when she couldn’t get a baby sitter and I was too young to be left alone, and I saw her going in the back door, and I saw people saying things to her that she didn’t like but couldn’t respond to. I heard people say in her hearing, “Well, I don’t really like colored people.” And she kept working, and she put me through school, she bought her house – all the stuff she did. I realized that he didn’t understand what heroism was. That’s what I want to write about: when you are aware of what it means to be an adult and what choices you have to make, the fact that maybe you’re afraid, but you still have to act.

Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* is **certainly** not about victimization, as the first lines of Quickskill’s letter to his master attest:

Dear Massa Swille:
What it was?
I have done my Liza Leap
& am safe in the arms
of Canada, so
Ain’t no use your Slave
Catchers waitin on me
At Trailways
I won’t be there
I flew in non-stop
Jumbo Jet this A.M. Had
Champagne

Compliments of the Cap'n
Who announced that a
Runaway Negro was on the
Plane. Passengers came up
And shook my hand
& within 10 min. I had
Signed up for 3 anti-slavery
Lectures. Remind me to get an
Agent (3)

This theme appears, I think, in Percival Everett's *God's Country*, too. It's not a slave narrative. It's a post-slavery story, as one of the characters points out:

“What’s your business?” [Bubba] asked.
“How do you know this ain a social call?”
“Your color and mine.”
“Christ, man, it’s 1871, ain’t you people ever gonna
forget about that slavery stuff?” (24)

This satirical novel is about Curt Marder, a white man, a bigot and a loser, in the old West, having to lower himself to ask Bubba, a black man, to track the kidnappers of his wife. And Bubba, a master tracker, has to lower himself to help the bigot, in the hopes that he will at least get paid for his work. In the end, though, the story isn't about *quid pro quo*; it's about Bubba and Curt deciding to make an investment, however tenuous, in each other, for some reason or other. In an interview by Robert Birnbaum, Everett touches, rather obliquely, on this subject as he discusses writing fiction:

When I started writing I did it because I wanted to make art and now I understand that art and politics are inextricably bound and that you can affect the world in really small ways and hope that something good happens. But I never have a message and I try to teach [my students] to not have a message but it's hard to do that while at the same time trying to teach them that part of the reason they are writing is to participate in the world.

Certainly the decision to participate in the world – Bubba, the master tracker's decision – is not the decision of a victim.

Look also at “Alice, the woman without a mind,” in Edward Jones’ *The Known World*. Yes, she portrays herself as a victim, a slave kicked in the head by her master’s mule, but she exploits people’s belief in her mindlessness:

She grabbed the patrollers’ crotches and begged them to dance away with her [...] She called the white men by made-up names and gave the them day and time God would take them to heaven, would drag each and every member of their families across the sky and toss them into hell with no more thought than a woman dropping strawberries into a cup of cream. (12)

Alice isn’t punished, not by whites, for her behavior; in fact, she exploits her reputation for mindlessness to escape slavery – and to create art, “a massive miracle,” a map of her known world, a “map of life made with every kind of art man has ever thought to represent himself. Yes, clay. Yes, paint. Yes, cloth.”

Are we really going to shelve the slave narrative because it’s difficult to talk about – and, after all, we have a black president now? Are we really going to argue that the slave narrative has value only if a student is black? Are we really going to support the assumption that a black literature course shouldn’t transfer as literature at four-year colleges? One of my friends, a white colleague in Texas, says, “I can’t help but wonder when we’ll be having such conversations about Dickens and the abuses of the poorhouses and the workhouses. We ARE post-industrial and post-unionization now, after all” (Jones-Barnes). There is no way to get to the “post-racial” part of future history unless we discuss the hard subjects. This, after all, is what the American black narrative, slave or otherwise, all interesting American literature, black or otherwise, is about: the choices that adults have to make to participate, in some small, but effective way in the world --the way ordinary people do.

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