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## The Canon: Civil War and Reconstruction

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Like Toni Morrison, I too can hear the dull thud of a war machine contained within the contemporary debate about "the canon." I think of the American Civil War, of Reconstruction, of European and American imperialism, of post-colonial societies, and of the previously colonized drawn to live and work in the metropolitan heartlands of colonial power: in London, Los Angeles, New York and Paris. Each of these battlegrounds has involved intense struggles to define "Americanness," or "Britishness," to distinguish a Euro-North American cultural and political heritage from its "other," whether that be "blackness," "Orientalism" or "the Amerindian." Clearly, an Aryan, Greco-Roman, European history, purged of semitic and continental African influence, was created in conjunction with imperial ideologies of manifest destiny. Upon the *tabula rasa* of the New World a European future was to be imprinted from a purified European past. Thus, the genocide of the Lucayan and Tainan Arawaks and the Carib peoples was rendered, and remains, invisible and the enslavement of African peoples became the Christian salvation of their savage souls. But whether the means be cultural and political erasure or the contemporary institution of visible signs of minority status, like Margaret Thatcher's four grades of British citizenship, the struggle of definition in relation to or against Euro-Americanness shapes our past, our present and our futures. As W.E.B. Du Bois said in 1903, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, - the relation of the darker to the lighter races . . . in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea."<sup>1</sup>

But I am not certain that we stand in the most effective place in relation to the contemporary (the fashionable description would be postmodern) debate about the canon. In attacking the canon are we, in fact, concentrating all our efforts upon one weapon aimed in our direction while losing a sense of what the whole battle is about? I think that, in many ways, the academic debate about teaching canonical versus non-canonical texts, in which so many of us are embroiled, disguises what we are really fighting about, indeed disguises what our real differences are.

We are all familiar with the contemporary "discovery" of the black woman writer by the publishing industry and by the academy. In February 1988, women, as producers of culture, were the focus of a debate about the canon. A columnist in the *Wall Street Journal* asserted, however erroneously, that books by Alice Walker were taught more frequently than Shakespeare in departments of English. This was an assertion that had originally been made in a January 1988 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. The article continued by claiming that the texts of women writers, and in particular black women writers, were the arsenal in the war against the canon. The implication of the article was, predictably, that the consequences for the transmission of high culture are devastating; black women writers were used as the cultural sign of the threat to the traditional curriculum.

However, I would argue that debates about the canon are misleading in many ways. Arguments appear to be about the inclusion or exclusion of particular texts and/or authors or about including or excluding types of books and authors ("women" and "minorities" are usually the operative categories). It also appears as if debates about the canon are disagreements about issues of representation only. Here, I am using the word "representation" in two ways. First, it appears that if an agreed-upon percentage of texts by women and various minorities were included in academic syllabi debate would be resolved. But what is also implied in the argument for including these texts is that they represent, in the sense of reflect, the experience or point of view of previously excluded sectors of society. So, authors become representative figures for defined groups of people and their work is taken to be representative of that group's or community's response to the cultural formation in which they live.

Contrary to what the debate appears to be about, talking about the canon means that we avoid the deeper problem. Focusing on books and authors means that we are not directly addressing the ways in which our society is structured in dominance. We live in a racialized hierarchy which is also organized through class and gender divisions. Reducing these complex modes of inequality to questions of representation on a syllabus is a far too simple method of appearing to resolve these social contradictions, and yet this is how the battle has been waged at Columbia and Stanford, to take two examples of campuses engaged in debating the importance of canonical works of Western culture. What is absurd about these hotly contested and highly emotive battles is that proponents for radical change in canonical syllabi are forced to act as if inclusion of the texts they favor would somehow make accessible the experience of women or minorities as generic types. The same people who would argue in very sophisticated critical terms that literary texts do not directly reflect or represent reality but reconstruct and re-present particular historical realities find themselves demanding that the identity of a social group be represented by a single novel. Acting as if an excluded or marginalized or dominant group is represented in a particular text, in my view, is a mistake.

On the other hand, if you work in a somewhat liberal, or enlightened university like mine, a university where a significant number of people in departments of American and English Literature have become convinced that the canon does need revision, how is change implemented? Key words like "flexibility" and "diversity" advertise what I call a "supermarket" theory of education. Minority and women scholars and Minority and Women's Studies are included, but on what terms? We have achieved the democracy of the supermarket where the structural assumption of choice reigns through the multiple brands and flavors of ice cream we offer. Shakespeare courses thrive in the catalogue next to Caribbean fiction; before lunch you can attend the "Third World and Imperialism" course and for dessert can sample a course described as "some indispensable texts that every educated person should know," presumably without suffering indigestion. Of course, the ideology of equality in the supermarket makes invisible certain important inequalities: those who cannot afford fresh fruit and vegetables appear to choose not to eat them; the limited purchases demanded by food stamp allowances dictate diet; and the relations of exploitation and dependency between the metropolitan nations and the so-called "Third World" are hidden in the large display of bananas imported from Central America courtesy of a corporate entity more powerful than many small nations, the United Fruit Company.

I teach courses on African American and Caribbean Literature and am very critical of the boundaries within which courses like it exist. There are structural inequalities that implicitly define what is regarded as canonical, in terms of what every student should know, in the requirements for majors. Courses on culturally marginalized literatures are not part of those requirements. While a course on Caribbean Literature can be counted as an English or American Studies course, it has an exotic relation to what is regarded as the central area of study. The students occupy the position of tourist, a position which reproduces dominant American attitudes that regard the Caribbean as a romantic vacation paradise and a position that renders culturally and politically invisible the presence of thousands of migrant workers from Jamaica who, every autumn, live and work in the area that surrounds our school. The ideological common sense among both students and faculty about the actual content of the course is that Caribbean fiction is intensely political. But, of course, that is OK because culturally marginalized literature is a suitable subject for the sort of politicized discussion deemed inappropriate for culturally centralized literature. It is the latter that is thought to embody universal moral values which demand an aesthetic and politically neutralized response. The conclusion I draw from the fact of the existence of the Caribbean Literature course and courses like it is, therefore, that the mere presence of marginalized cultures in the curriculum changes very little.

As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> teaching about marginalized culture in the context of metropolitan universities presents both students and teachers

with some fundamental political dilemmas. Our teaching needs to make connections with, as well as provide a critique of, dominant ideologies and meanings of culture which structure the curricula of departments of English and American Studies. Teaching marginalized cultures must involve a constant and consistent critique of the forms of knowledge production that maintain the European and American cultural hegemony in which our students are embedded; either that or we will remain politically marginal. If we are not in a state of constant political confrontation with the imperialist discourse that structures metropolitan education systems, then we merely confirm our exoticism. Approaches to culture offered by programs in Comparative Literature offer no satisfactory alternative to English or American Studies, for historically they too are overwhelmingly Eurocentric. If we are to develop any sort of challenge to the ways in which educational institutions organize and structure forms of knowledge about marginalized peoples, then we have to be able to offer a coherent alternative political vision: a way of thinking critically across relations of cultural production in the, so-called, "Third," "Second," and "First" Worlds.

As Toni Morrison has argued,<sup>3</sup> one way to rethink the relationship between the social, political and cultural construction of blackness and marginality, on the one hand, and assumptions of a normative whiteness within the dominant culture, on the other, is to examine the ways in which that dominant culture has been shaped and transformed by the presence of the marginalized. This means a public recognition that the process of marginalization itself is central to the formation of the dominant culture. The first and very important stage is, as Morrison emphasizes, to recognize the cultural and political category of whiteness. It seems obvious to say it but in practice the racialization of our social order is only recognized in relation to racialized "others." For example, in the world of Women's Studies the politically correct thing to do is to make sure that your collection of essays, or your conference, includes the obligatory black perspective. That contribution has to carry the whole weight of racialization. Each time I am invited to speak somewhere, or invited to contribute to a collection of feminist essays under these conditions, I state that "whiteness" is the unrecognized and unspoken racial category and that we must end this silence; the response is usually astonishment.

Likewise, to return to my example of my Caribbean Literature course, I think that the presence of marginalized cultures within the university should transform the way in which the dominant political and cultural order is viewed. What Caribbean fiction does is not only assert an African and/or Asian presence in the New World but it transforms European definitions of the meaning of Western civilization. In an essay called "Discovering Literature in Trinidad: The 1930s," published in 1969, C.L.R. James talks about his formation as a black Caribbean intellectual. He states that "the origins of [his] work and thought are to be found in Western European

literature, Western European history and Western European thought." He continues:

I have had a lot to say that is valid about the underdeveloped countries. That is important. But what I want to make clear is that I learnt this quality in the literature, history and philosophy of Western Europe. I didn't *have* to be a member of an underdeveloped country, though I know a lot of people who are, and yet don't know anything about those countries. I didn't *have* to be an exploited African. It is in the history and philosophy and literature of Western Europe that I have gained my understanding not only of Western Europe's civilization, but of the importance of the underdeveloped countries. . . . I didn't learn literature from the mango-tree, or bathing on the shore and getting the sun of colonial countries; I set out to master the literature and philosophy and ideas of Western civilisation. That is where I have come from and I would not pretend to be anything else. And I am able to speak of the underdeveloped countries infinitely better than I would otherwise have been able to.<sup>4</sup>

As the essay continues, James situates the colonized within the heart of colonial culture, where the black intellectual reads through and transforms the meanings of the dominance of Western culture.

We should not be satisfied, then, with our mere inclusion in the academy. My Caribbean course, for example, should be part of the process of redefining the Englishness that is implied in the structural organization of English departments. That English literature means, in practice, the literature of England should be challenged as a racist definition which is part of an English imperialist discourse and which excludes most of the English-speaking peoples of the world and most of the literature written in English. At the same time we should be engaged in rereading the literature of England, written since the sixteenth century, as being centrally concerned with the formation of a national subjectivity and ideology that constructed and simultaneously excluded a racialized other.

The formation of modern America is likewise a racialized struggle over the definition of Americanness. If we are to unpack the dimensions of this struggle to understand the terms and consequences of competing meanings of Americanness, then the categories of race, gender and class need to be our conceptual and analytic tools. Preserving a gendered analysis for texts by women or about women and an analysis of racial domination for texts by or directly about black people will not by itself transform our understanding of dominant cultural forms.

What is at issue here is how we look at and think about culture. Both the historical creation of a canon and arguments in defense of the preservation of the canon, as we know it now, depend upon the idea of a pure and authentic culture that can be embodied in a careful selection of texts. However, in African American Studies we too have been searching for a pure and authentic culture.

First we have established the basis of an African American literary tradition

in the narratives of ex-slaves through a critical practice which, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr, elaborates a "black intertextual or Signifying relationship" in order to produce a "formal literary history of the African American tradition." Narrative strategies repeated through two centuries of black writing are argued to be the link that binds the slave narrative to texts as disparate as Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*. As readers and writers we become receivers of a textual experience that creates the unity of an African American literary tradition. This unity is established by an African American literary discourse that seamlessly links a particular form of cultural production that reconstructs one specific historical condition (slavery) as the basis of the entire narrative tradition. Second, our ideas of an African American literary tradition are dominated by an ideology of the black "folk" – a "folk" emerging from and still influenced by the slave condition. The critical project that situates the ex-slaves writing their "selfhood" or their "humanity" into being as the source of African American literature also reconstructs black culture as rooted in a "folk" culture. The ex-slave consciousness becomes an original "folk" consciousness.

We have also developed a critical vocabulary that we argue is appropriate to the task of analyzing representatives of African American subjectivities and sensibilities because its source is the vernacular of the African American "folk." Indeed, the critical language itself, it is argued, not only reproduces and preserves this vernacular but becomes a form of an African American vernacular. This process claims the autonomy of our heritage in relation to particular cultural forms and in relation to the critical project. What has been established is the "purity of our childhood," to use Martin Bernal's phrase. At the same time we have defined the boundaries of an authentic culture in a language which can define authenticity *because* it is itself authentic. We have, in other words, established a canon and in the process we have dissolved historical difference. I would argue that our project in African American Studies is like the construction of the dominant canon to the extent that it displays a desire to create unity out of disunity and to resolve, if not make invisible, the social contradictions or differences between texts. And, after all, the function of traditions is to create the illusion of unity.

I would suggest that instead of searching for cultural purity we acknowledge cultural complexity. I would hope that the history of black culture will not be an antiquarian collecting and cataloguing of nostalgic artifacts, a romantic longing for a "folk" past at the expense of the urban present. The history of culture should be the history of the social relations between the industries producing cheap commodities for mass entertainment and recreation, the symbolic forms and practices, both traditional and newly invented, of black communities, and the attempts by the dominant white and colonizing cultures to police and reform the culture of the colonized

or marginalized. This does not mean that we abandon ideas of cultural difference. Black cultures have not only been different from but antagonistic to cultures of domination. But, I would argue, this is not because there are pure, autonomous cultures that belong to particular groups or classes of people, the working class, or women, or black people. Rather, I think difference should be located, first, in relation to material conditions of life and, second, in relation to the boundaries drawn between what is designated Culture and non-Culture in the exercise of cultural power. As Stuart Hall has described this process:

The cultural process – cultural power . . . depends, in the first instance, on this drawing of the line, always in each period in a different place, as to what is to be incorporated into the “great tradition” and what is not. Educational and cultural institutions, along with the many positive things they do, also help to discipline and police this boundary. . . . from period to period, the contents of each category changes.

We should not freeze black cultures into a timeless descriptive framework but should situate analyses of culture within the relations of power which divide it into preferred and marginal categories.

The boundaries of culture in the exercise of cultural power can be moral as well as aesthetic ones, and Toni Morrison<sup>6</sup> has elaborated the ways in which particular cultural forms can ascend and descend the cultural escalator. Though we can delineate the racialized structuring of society in the terms of which there is an African American culture that has been racialized and defined as black – a culture with its center of gravity among black people, a set of practices, institutions and symbolic forms used, created and shaped by black people – neither its rhetoric nor its boundaries are strictly of “race.” African American culture is not completely autonomous. It is intertwined with a commercial culture that is not the self-creation of black people and it is always subject to the influence and power of the dominant culture. Culture does not belong to particular people, and cultural analysis should not be about the ownership of cultural forms. For culture is the terrain of struggle *between* groups, “a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle,” and there is no whole, authentic, autonomous black culture which lies outside of these relations of cultural power and domination.

It is the possibility that we can develop cultural analyses that are directed toward the complexity not the purity of culture that can free us from the limitations of canonic debates. This is the hope of work like Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* that Toni Morrison praises. *Black Athena* not only challenges the boundaries of dominant forms of historiography but challenges those of us who work to undermine relations of cultural power and domination to search not for purity but for complexity.

## Notes

1. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903; reprint, New York: New American Library, 1982, p. 54.
2. See Chapter 10, p. 135 above.
3. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, Winter 1988, pp. 1-34.
4. C.L.R. James, "Discovering Literature in Trinidad: The 1930s," in *Spheres of Existence*, London: Allison & Busby, 1980, pp. 237-8.
5. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, London: Free Association Books, 1987.
6. Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken."