Talking Black: Critical Signs of the Time

Louis Henry Gates, Jr
Gates Biographical Information

- Literary and social critic and advocate for African American literature and culture.
- Academe
  - Yale; BA 1973
  - Cambridge; MA, 1974; PhD, 1979
  - Yale; Professor, to 1985
  - Cornell; Du Bios Professor of Literature, to 1988
  - Harvard; Chair, Afro-American Studies
- Widely published and read: author of influential books, editor of many collections of essays. Written or edited for scholarly journals, ethnic publications, popular periodicals (*Sports Illustrated*, *The New Yorker*,...)
- Deconstructionist Theorist.
  - Derrida
  - De Man
- Project to unify deconstructive criticism with African literary tradition.
The article is a manifesto calling for black artists and critics to define a black theory appropriate for burgeoning black literature.

Roots of black American literature

- Response to racism, “Proof” of black humanity and intelligence
- Literary language of white culture
- White critique.

Current state of black literature

State of black literary criticism

Need for new black literature reflecting black culture
Roots of black American literature
Alexander Crummell, (1819-1898)

- African American Episcopalian priest
- Pan-Africanist
- Founder of American Negro Academy
  - First Organization dedicated to scholarly study of African American culture
  - Predecessor of Black Academy of Arts & Letters
- Believed racism could be overcome by demonstrating a command of western high culture.
- Believed black intelligencia must aspire to the greatest western cultural achievements.
Crummell’s Philosophy

- Attacked “the denial of intellectuality in the Negro; the assertion that he was not a human being, that he did not belong to the human race.”
- Decried “laws and Statutes, closing the pages of every book printed to the eyes of Negroes; barring of the doors of every school-room against them!”
- For acceptance as intellectual equal, black education and letters must claim the highest European-American cultural standards as its basis, not;
  - Stinted training
  - A caste education
  - A Negro curriculum
- By mastering English letters, “the noblest theories of liberty” and “the grandest ideas of humanity,” embodied in the language will become African ideas and African culture, resulting in true equality
- African vernacular languages should be abandoned, including any efforts to;
  “translate sublime utterances in[to] broken English -- a miserable caricature of their noble tongue.”
Assumptions Implicit in Crummell’s Theory

- Western racialists could demand black people prove their full humanity -- not a demand placed on white people.

- A western racialist could judge black person to be not human if they could not demonstrate mastery of some essence of Western civilization.
The theory that “mastering the master’s tongue was the sole path to civilization, intellectual freedom, and social equality for the black person.”

This is something very similar to the path followed until recently.

- Blacks creating a literature
  - to demonstrate they possess the humanity (intellect) to create a written art.

**BUT THEN**
- To indict the white social and economic institutions that defined the "humanity" of black people in Western cultures.

- The subtext of black literature was to refute the racist allegations that caused it to be created.

Thus the purpose of Black literature and its criticism has been less aesthetic than part of a larger discourse on the nature of being black.
State of Black Literature as of the Essay

- Afro-American literature is being institutionalized. Taught in schools by black, white, brown, men, women, teachers to black, white, brown, men, women, students.

- Black artists have opened up their art, including literature, to their own voices, new forms, to larger considerations than reaction to white oppression -- blackness still a major theme.

- A backlash against black literature not deemed “pure” -- using over Europeanized or Americanized forms, Mockingbirds

- The traditional distrust of literary theory by artists generally.
State of Black Literary Criticism

- A literary tradition begun with a complex and curious relation to criticism:
  - Allegations of an absence led directly to a presence,
  - A literature often inextricably bound in a dialogue with its harshest critics.
- Using white schools of theory to critique Afro-American literature viewed by some/many(?) as another form of intellectual indenture, another kind of mental servitude.
- Black critics have not developed an aesthetic for the critique of black literature - no coherent criticism to communicate the complexities of black culture.
- Importance of a theory for the critique of black literature -- but more than a Mockingbird Theory.
Questions Gates Raises for Black Critics

☐ How do you write or read the text of “Black Theory?”
☐ What language(s) do black people use to represent their critical or ideological positions?
☐ In what forms of language do black people speak or write?
☐ Can you derive a valid, integral black text or criticism or ideology from borrowed or appropriated forms?
☐ Can a black woman's text emerge "authentically" as borrowed, or "liberated," or revised, from the patriarchal forms of the slave narratives, on the one hand, or from the white matriarchal forms of the novel, on the other?
☐ Using the white forms of self-representation and criticism, can you go beyond refutation, negation, and revision to ideological independence?

NOTE: Many of these questions pertain to Feminist, Chicano, Post-Colonial, ... "schools."
Call For a Black Literary Criticism

- Based on the black human and aesthetic experience
  - A close reading is necessary, then some reference or norms.
  - Black literature solely dependent on black artists, historical contingency, so it must have a strong uniquely black component, but read in the white matrix too.
  - Black myths, metaphors, tropes, symbols, all those figures that signify.
- White theories adapted to black sensibility and experience, translated into black idiom, renaming the principles of criticism where appropriate to black literature, but devising and naming indigenous black principles of criticism and applying them to black texts.
- Must draw somehow on black music.
- Must employ the black vernacular -- the language spoken among black people.
Conclusion

- Interesting ideas about history of black literature and unique position of black criticism
- Many of his points apply to other antithetical literatures
- Depending on their theoretical basis, some schools should apply very well;
  - Freud if the family dynamic us universal and leaves us all coo-coo
  - Lacan if the unconscious is structured as a language that only varies by morphology and syntax.
  - Maybe post-colonialism, if you think about it
- In our class, we saw use of the vernacular in two novels, and an exploration of narrative forms based on black music (Jazz).
- Essay is thought-provoking & good starting point; the next step would be to investigate to see what black critical theory has emerged.
Questions

- Does oppositional literature become genre after the ills are addressed?
  - Feminist novel become another variety of a novel by a woman?
  - Bracero novel become another kind of working man’s story?
  - Black novel become indistinguishable?

- Can we understand why each succeeding generation of a cause has trouble experiencing second-hand the ire of the preceding generation?