

“Introduction” to the Section “African American Literature”, 21-23.

Introduction

OLGA BARRIOS

The first section of this book on African American Literature is mostly dedicated to African American women writers, which shows how women writers and feminist criticism are increasingly occupying a more relevant place in the field of literary studies. One of the last essays is, however, a reflection on male stereotypes in the fiction of African American women, compelling us to think about the possible contradiction of feminist criticism vindicating the rupture of female stereotypes in men's writing. The section ends with an analysis of Charles Johnson's *The Middle Passage*. The authors have examined the literary works included in this volume within the context of the concept of diaspora, which is defined in various ways depending on the work under study. Each essay demonstrates a scholarly and personal style which enriches its content and reveals the existence of a colorful multicultural range of approaches and perspectives. And each is a previously unpublished essay.

The first essay, «What Is Africa to African American Women Writers?» by the well-known African American literary critic Trudier Harris, opens with an extensive reflection on the representation of Africa by African American writers in poetry, fiction and theater from the 1920s to the present. Harris argues that for most African American women writers Africa has remained an imagined and unexplored territory. By examining how Africa has been represented in different literary works—such as a site to discover and reassert one's identity or as a place to which African Americans can flee from the effects of racism—Harris insists that the vast variety and complexity of African cultures have been reduced to a unitary identity and «contained within the smallness» of the writer's created art. The essay questions whether African American writers have not «re-colonized the continent» for their own needs and consequently failed to examine Africa the way it deserves.

After the general overview of how Africa has been represented in African American women's writings, two essays reflect especially on the diasporic experience presented by Alice Walker in her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Sheila Lloyd's «Revisionist Desires: Culture, Gender and Diasporic Consciousness in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*» reexamines the term diaspora and asserts that diaspora studies maintain a masculine discourse that forgets the traditional sense of diaspora where «women were the *enabling ground* from which male figures emerged.» Focusing on the main issue of Walker's novel, Tashi's genital mutilation, Lloyd then interrogates this «re-inscription of masculinity.» The author concentrates mainly on a counter-reading of Walker's

feminist discourse to assert that liberal global feminism is not self-reflexive enough to realize that, like masculinist discourse, it also takes women's bodies as its ground. According to her, Walker's novel is a feminist revision of an «eroticized nationalism,» displacing the sexual orgasm, or joy, from the female body to the body politics, thus participating in the masculine «appropriation of women's bodies as a discursive material.»

A different approach to Walker's novel is Josefina Cornejo's «Deconstructing Tradition and Reconstructing the Self: Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.» Cornejo's essay examines the character of Tashi, reflecting on the traditions of both storytelling and female genital mutilation in Olinka, an imaginary African country. Cornejo argues that Walker's novel plays with various dualities—i.e., individual vs. community or praise vs. rejection of certain traditions. She emphasizes that Walker uses storytelling both to deconstruct the tradition of female genital mutilation and to reconstruct the mutilated body and fragmented self of the central character. The female body is equated to a fragmented text, which reflects the physical and emotional consequences of genital mutilation; and storytelling becomes a means of resistance to survive the oppressive situation which the rite of female initiation involves.

If storytelling can be considered a creative force utilized by women writers, María del Mar Gallego's essay «Female Creative Powers in Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*» continues in the same line and focuses on the inherent multiplicity of female creativity, asserting that Shange creates thus a distinct feminist value system. Gallego examines Shange's novel in the light of a feminism of difference, where women's abilities—including everyday chores and/or artistic skills—are claimed as legitimate cultural manifestations of women's genuine creative powers. Moreover, she adds that Shange's work culminates with the celebration of the potentiality of women's biological procreation as a conscious, cultural and creative art. Whereas Cornejo's essay views Tashi's body as a fragmented text in Walker's novel, Gallego observes that the feminine body in Shange's novel is considered as a metaphor for a privileged text in which «African American female identity is constructed in a continuous process of self-discovery and self-expression.»

Continuing with the issue of difference, Ana María Fraile's «Negotiating Difference in the Diaspora of Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*» argues that Naylor's novel presents the multiplicity and fragmentation of the experiences of Blacks in the United States, showing the diverse and complex experiences shared by the women of Brewster Place. Difference lies in the fact that women, although part of the same community, are products of different backgrounds. Besides, Fraile claims that history acts as both «a differentiating and agglutinating factor» in constructing Brewster's community, which has come together by intermingling sexual, racial and class oppression. Dramatic examples of heterogeneity and difference in Brewster Place enclose homosexuality, class and generational issues.

Whereas difference was examined in previous essays, Australia Tarver studies diasporic implications in the three novels she analyzes in her essay «Mother-Daughter Agency in Tina McElroy Ansa's *Ugly Ways*, Paule Marshall's *Daughters* and Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell's *When Rocks Dance*.» Tarver reflects on the bond and interaction between mother and daughters, asserting that the role of women—as also suggested by Lloyd—suffers a *double colonization*, and insists on the importance of a feminine agency that will help women to advance and obtain other liberating issues. She evaluates how agency changes and is challenged by history and how it occurs in different degrees

in the three novels, reflecting also on the conflicts created by the diasporic result of multiracial characters. Tarver, nevertheless, asserts that the mother-daughter bond empowers women's self assertion.

The well-known African American scholar and literary critic, Bernard W. Bell with his essay «Nails, Snails and Puppy Dog Tails: Black Male Stereotypes in the Diasporic Fiction of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Terry McMillan» becomes the bridge between the previous essays and the last article of this section on male fiction. Bell's provocative title incorporates a counter-reading to any feminist theory of contemporary African American writers by analyzing the male stereotypes that appear in the fiction of three celebrated contemporary African American women writers. His essay introduces a historical line of stereotypes about the black community, including the stereotypes of black males and females by black revolutionary leaders of the 1960s and the final male stereotypes created by contemporary African American women writers. His essay focuses on four main stereotypes observed in Morrison, Walker and McMillan: The Brute Negro, the Dog, the Existential Black Anti-Hero and the Misogynist Black Revolutionary Nationalist, analyzing the historical origin of each of them. Bell explores how these oversimplifying images in different degrees have contributed to the «neocolonial cultural and political domination of American males of African descent.»

In his essay, Bell mentions his first trip to Africa and his experience in going back to his mythic *homeland*, and in the last essay Jesús Benito and Ana María Manzanás Calvo examine the symbolic reversal of the middle passage of Calhoun, the main character of Charles Johnson's *The Middle Passage*—Calhoun crosses the Atlantic from the New World to Africa. In their study «Charles Johnson's *The Middle Passage* and the African Diaspora,» Benito and Manzanás argue that Calhoun's journey symbolizes his movement from ignorance to knowledge, from emptiness and amnesia to enlightenment, and from philosophical dualism and material self-gratification to what Chinua Achebe calls «spiritual congruence with others.» The authors demonstrate how Calhoun exemplifies the middle passage man, who has suffered the effects of colonization and who is based, like diaspora, on a flux and dispersion, insisting that diaspora «fosters cultural intermingling and engenders multiplicity for multiculturalism.»

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The second section offers a variety of places and writings. Fiction, poetry and criticism from the Caribbean, Puerto Rico and Colombia illustrate this section of the book. In contrast to the Caribbean, where it seems literature of the African diaspora has attained more acclamation and recognition, it is evident that Afro-Latin American literature still needs a lot of research and analysis. The contributors highlight the inadequate and often parochial attention to this area of study and demonstrate the promise of new and varied critical approaches.

This section opens with three essays on Jamaican writing. Ana María Bringas asserts that Jamaican history has been characterized by its women's activism and commitment to the struggle against imperialism from slavery on to the present. Bringas' essay «Searching Out the Link: Politics, Class and Gender in Contemporary Jamaican Women Writers» provides an historical background on Jamaican women's active and committed struggle against slavery and imperialism to reach the present time. Contemporary Jamaican women, she argues, are not allowed, however, to participate fully in the political arena, due mainly to three factors: race, class and gender. Bringas examines a few texts by contemporary Jamaican women writers and argues that these texts help women to canalize their political needs and to reject male-oriented traditional politics. These texts reveal the search for an alternative venue for women to create, according to Bringas, organizations that address their specific needs as women of a certain class and race. They also illustrate the need to find women's sisterhood and to create new spaces for dialogue among women.

Velma Pollard, the well-known, prize-winning Jamaican fiction writer, poet and scholar focuses on the issue of the *balm yard* in two Jamaican literary texts in her essay «Blurring Cultural Boundaries: The Balm Yard in Olive Senior's 'Discerner of Hearts' and Erna Brodber's *Myal*.» Examining the dialectics of Anglo-Creole and Afro-Creole, Pollard illumines the dichotomy and clash between European cultures of the elite and the suppressed African cultures of the underprivileged, revealing how literature has given an implicit support and value to the elite class. Pollard then examines the space of the *balm yard*, a significant location from the suppressed cultures, demonstrating what it symbolizes in Seniors's «Discerner of Hearts» and Brodber's *Myal*. Both texts, she maintains, show an inversion of the received reality as seen from the point of view of the suppressed discourse tradition previously reserved for the oppressor. She asserts that the yard, an extension of the house, is the site where activities such as recreation

take place. She insightfully compares the similarities of the Jamaican *balm yard* with those swept yards of Nigeria and those in Georgia in the United States, thus establishing a diasporic connection.

Departing from the analysis of a colonialist discourse and explaining the rise of postcolonial discourse, María Frías' essay, «Rites of Passage in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*,» concentrates on postcolonial feminism to approach Kincaid's novel. According to Frías, Kincaid is representative of a generation of postcolonial women writers in the manner that she constructs Lucy's experience in the novel as a metaphor for the African diaspora. In her analysis of the novel, Frías employs the theories of anthropologist Arnold van Gennep on the rite of passage as a critical model. Gennep's rite of passage theory includes three stages: Separation, Transition and Incorporation. Frías establishes a ritual parallelism between Lucy's final passage from the Caribbean to the United States and that experienced by African peoples at the time of the transatlantic slave trade.

Antonio Ballesteros González's «The Poetics of Diaspora: Derek Walcott or the Wandering Poet» continues with the diasporic experience and takes us to another literary genre: poetry. Ballesteros contends that the Antillean poet Walcott is a *divided poet* whose poetics shift between his postcolonial origin and his Western education. Ballesteros compares Walcott's journey as a wandering poet in search of his identity with that of Joyce, Yeats or Homer. According to Ballesteros, Walcott embodies the fate of peoples of the African diaspora, for «the multicultural mixture of the blood of slaves» who crossed the Atlantic is always evoked in the poet's work. He asserts that the West Indian poet is the product of multiculturalism and postcolonial fragmentation, combining in his works the Caribbean experience with classical Judeo-Christian elements.

Leaving traditional feminism aside and moving to Puerto Rico, Cornejo-Parriego, like Frías, focuses on postcolonial feminism as multiple and complex since it insists on including the issues of race, class, nationality, gender and sexuality. Cornejo-Parriego's essay «Female Difference and Colonial Experience in Rosario Ferré's 'When Women Love Men'» points out that women writers under colonialism need to be analyzed within the context of the «multiplicity of the female self.» Her essay centers on the female body and the female space to analyze how these two elements are shaped by «the impact which the African presence had on Puerto Rico's colonial history.» According to Cornejo-Parriego, Ferré presents the story of an obsession with the body of the *Other*, of one woman with another woman's body. The author delineates the dualities of race, sexuality and class by examining the two woman characters of the story—Black and White, lover and wife, body and soul respectively. She asserts that Ferré's story illustrates the necessity of integrating the impact of the colonial heritage and the African diaspora in literary analysis. Feminist criticism, in Cornejo-Parriego's opinion, needs to include analysis of the female *Others*.

The last essay in this section centers on Colombia and the issue of Afro-Colombian literature which, according to Laurence Prescott, needs a closer analysis. Prescott's essay «The Color of Literature: Afro-Colombian Writers and the Critics» opens with the author's examination of how the lack of analysis of non-white writers in many Latin American countries distorts or misrepresents the richness that constitutes the literature of the African diaspora. Prescott insists on the need to analyze the factors and conditions that undermine the development of black literature in Latin America. His article focuses mainly on the impact that the «critical establishment» has had upon

literature created by writers of African descent in Colombia. Prescott offers a geographical and sociopolitical background of Colombia to foster a better understanding and appreciation of the literary situation in this country. Jorge Artel, a well known Afro-Colombian writer, is taken as a major example of how critics have always tried to erase any concepts of *blackness* or racial differences in Colombian literature. Prescott argues that by negating the validity of creative writing by people of African descent, critics «undermine the legitimacy, acceptability and viability of black literature in Colombia.»

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The last section of this book focuses mainly on fiction and theater from various African countries: Senegal, South Africa and Sierra Leone. This section presents different works that, although written on African soil, still maintain diasporic elements. Colonialism has contributed to the dispersion and blending of African and Western traditions within the African continent itself, and the dialectics of both traditions are shown in conflict within the literary works written by contemporary African writers.

In the first essay, «Negotiating between the Tomb and Womb: Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*,» Katwiwa Mule reflects upon what he considers the novelist's simplistic, reductive depiction of the opposition between Western and African values, arguing that the writer depicts the Western world as a *womb* and Senegalese tradition as a *tomb*. According to Mule, because the novel belongs to the neocolonial phase of African literature, it has been criticized from two different extreme positions—from a strong masculinist and anti-feminist perspective on the one hand, and from a typical Western feminist perspective on the other. Consequently, Mule attempts to move beyond those two currents in his examination and demands a more complex reading of Bâ's work. He suggests that Bâ's feminist poetics «fails to capture the importance of the heterospatial, transcultural aspects of African womanhood,» and insists that the novel demonstrates that «colonialism still maintains ambivalence in African people.» Mule argues that contemporary literature by African women faces «the challenge of confronting the ideologies of patriarchy, colonialism and neocolonialism.»

Olga Barrios' «Black Consciousness Theater in South Africa and the Committed Artist: Maishe Maponya's *Gangsters*» starts with a reflection on the Black Theater Movement of the 1960s in the United States and underlines the influence this Movement exerted on Black Consciousness South African Theater. Barrios' analysis focuses on the important role that the black audience played in black theater both in the United States and in South Africa, and on how black artists were committed to the task of addressing the needs of the black audience and of creating a theater that paralleled the black liberation struggle in the respective nations. Because of its effective dramatization of the death of the main leader and philosopher of the Black Consciousness Movement, Stephen Biko, while he was held in prison, Maponya's *Gangsters*—produced at the beginning of the 1980s—is the best exponent of committed theater in South Africa. Barrios argues that Maponya also dramatizes the dynamics of black/white and black/black relationships and that black theater during apartheid must

be examined in the light of its sociopolitical and historical components. Political forces such as the Black Power Movement in the United States and the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa highly inspired and informed the plays of the Black Arts Movements in both countries.

Taking South African theater under apartheid also as the basis of his analysis, Kriben Pillay—playwright, director and theater lecturer—analyzes *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* not as a literary text, but as performance. His essay «Narrative Devices, Time and Ontology in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*» points out that this play has been highly praised for its sociopolitical content and powerful performance elements. However, Pillay examines the narrative devices of the play, showing that it has two distinct kinds of storytelling techniques, each of which manipulates story time and audience participation in specific ways. He graphically and analytically reveals how the play is a good example of the blending of a Eurocentric tradition (Athol Fugard, the playwright) and an Afrocentric tradition (the actors Winston Ntshona and John Kani). Pillay argues convincingly that *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* «is a product of diasporic forces, except that these forces took place on African soil» and that the play, although written in English still keeps African traditions.

Continuing with the genre of theater but shifting to Sierra Leone, Iyunolu Osagie in her essay «The Amistad Affair and the Nation of Sierra Leone: The Dramatic Return of Memory,» like the two previous authors, insists on the importance of theater in a sociocultural milieu. Osagie asserts that theater in Africa today is an important means of transmitting information mainly to the vast rural communities of the continent. Consequently, theater has become an important vehicle to denounce social injustice. This type of theater in Sierra Leone is called *theater for development*. Focusing on the successful revolt of enslaved Sierra Leoneans, especially their leader Sengbe Pieh (Americanized as Cinque), aboard «La Amistad,» the essay examines Charlie Haffner's *Amistad Kata Kata* and asserts the play has changed the future of theater in Sierra Leone. It has helped Sierra Leonean people to recover not only their national hero Sengbe Pieh and their consciousness of an historical past, but also to develop a radical political commitment to social change. According to Osagie, the structure of the play collects patterns of oral tradition in which Haffner reconstructs the *rememory* and validation of the past as well as the promise of the future.