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Negotiations of Power: White Critics, Black Texts, and the Self-Referential Impulse

Michael Awkward

I searched for an opening, a way to enter the world of the Negro, some contact perhaps. As yet, it was a blank to me. My greatest preoccupation was that moment of transition where I would "pass over." Where and how would I do it? To get from the white world into the Negro world is a complex matter.

John Howard Griffin, Black Like Me

The glass through which black life is viewed by white Americans is, inescapably . . . befogged by the hot breath of history. True "objectivity" where race is concerned is as rare as a necklace of Hope diamonds.

Hoyt Fuller, Introduction: "Towards a Black Aesthetic"

1

Since the heyday of the Black Aesthetic, many of whose theorists believed that there existed an "irreconcilable conflict between the black writer and the white critic" (Fuller 7), Afro-Americanist cultural criticism generally has been unwilling to theorize about or examine in any depth the interpretive effects of racial difference on white-authored analyses of black literary texts. Unlike American feminist criticism, for example, whose energetic articulation of its positions on male participation in feminism has concretized the issue as a topic of serious discussion within the literary academy, Afro-Americanist scholarship has allowed the possible consequences of a socially privileged

whiteness to become, in Toni Morrison's phrase, one of the discourse's "unspeakable things unspoken."¹

The general impression that might be gained from this Afro-American silence is that race—in this case, whiteness—has come to possess little or no significance in black textual analysis. But if gender and race as we have traditionally perceived them are both by and large socially constructed, then whiteness as dominant position in the Western racial hierarchy is potentially as formidable an obstacle to interpretive competence vis-à-vis black (con)texts as maleness is to persuasive feminist exegesis. As an Afro-American male scholar who has learned to be more conscientious in my critical practice as a consequence of debates about possible nonpatriarchal places for males within feminist discourse, I think that white scholars attracted to Afro-American literature—and the field of black studies itself—might similarly profit from extended investigations of questions of race and textual reading by racial others. Even at the close of the twentieth century when Afro-American literature has achieved an unprecedented canonical presence, race may still matter in a white critic's investigation of black expressivity. I believe that black literary studies can examine manifest and potential interpretive consequences of racial otherness without necessarily resorting to, or being unfairly accused of, xenophobic paranoia.

Even at the close of the twentieth century when Afro-American literature has achieved an unprecedented canonical presence, race may still matter in a white critic's investigation of black expressivity.

To begin to discuss this issue, it is most profitable to look at what white critics themselves have said about the effect of whiteness in their interpretations of Afro-American (con)texts. In fact, there is a growing body of analyses, three examples of which I will concentrate upon here, in which white critics, rather than attempting to adopt a black, racially neutral, or objective reading position, use the occasion of analyzing Afro-American texts to discuss their own racial positionality's effects upon the process of interpretation. Lacking the easily available means of locating texts of racial others that the male signature provides for feminist inquiry, such texts are useful in part because, in addition to offering investigations of the implications of their authors' whiteness, they simplify the process of identifying their creators' race.

My goal here is not to judge the exegetical benefits of biologically or experientially motivated investment—I am not asserting here, nor do I believe, that being black is necessary for the creation of engaging and provocative critical texts on Afro-American literature—but, rather, to examine some of the differences racial difference can make in the interpretation of black texts. I believe we must concede that a white critic is

differently invested in Afro-American texts than a black critic because of what Sue-Ellen Case terms “racial privilege,” which is characterized by a lack of “experience of racial oppression” (95). This article’s primary intent is not to erect racial boundaries around Afro-Americanist discourse, but to insist that when there are manifest consequences of “racial privilege” in white-authored analyses that are not consonant with the interests of the discourse, it is the responsibility of Afro-Americanist scholars to examine and expose these consequences. Even in self-reflective white critical acts, racial privilege may create interpretive obstacles or, more importantly, points of resistance that color, in racially motivated ways—perhaps even in hegemony-maintaining ways—the effects of an exploration of blackness. In other words, white reading can mean the adoption of a posture antithetical to Afro-Americanist interests.

Before considering self-referential acts of white reading, I want to emphasize my belief that neither a view of an essential incompatibility between black literature and white critics nor one of whites as always already dismissive of and unsophisticated in their analyses of the products of the Afro-American imagination is still tenable. Indeed, the last two decades have witnessed the production by such figures as William Andrews, Kimberly Benston, Robert Hemenway, and Jean Yellin (to name just a few key contributors to our understanding of the Afro-American literary tradition) of exemplary instances of what Afro-American critic Larry Neal calls “a welcome criticism.” Neal uses this phrase during an interview conducted in 1974 to describe interpretive acts by whites that reflect “some understanding of [black] cultural source and . . . of the development of a critique that allows you to discuss your [Afro-American] literature and to move it forward, to a higher level . . . a more serious level on its own terms . . . on terms that are fresh, that are new” (Rowell 23, 22). For Neal, the ultimate sign of critical competence lies not in the race or face of the critic, but, rather, in the work that critic produces. Noting the existence both of persuasive, informed white-authored criticism and of fatally misinformed black analyses of Afro-American expressivity, Neal insists that critical competence is gained “by studying,” by energetically investigating the Afro-American cultural situation and emerging critical tradition.

According to Neal, the emergence of a body of challenging and highly informed black-authored interpretive acts will inspire a more sound white critical practice: “Instead of having the white critic get out of his area, the black critic is supposed to take upon himself the job of writing strong criticism and

establishing the pace. When the white critic goes to discuss black literature—if there’s a high standard laid out there for him—he’ll have to meet that standard” (Rowell 24). While it is clear that Neal’s “welcome [white] criticism” is now being produced in part as a result of the emergence during the last decade of a black leadership well informed about critical theory, white-authored interpretive acts continue to be produced which, for a variety of reasons, might be said to be causes for concern for Afro-American critics, even when their authors adopt racially self-reflective postures. The following sections will demonstrate that the problems with the self-referential white critical texts I examine here are unquestionably the result of turf or race wars; these essays are, in other words, resistant responses of white critics to the formulations and to the very fact of black critical leadership.

2

I want to begin this examination of white self-referential critical acts by looking closely at Donald Wesling’s self-described novice Afro-Americanist critical act, “Writing as Power in the Slave Narrative of the Early Republic.” Despite its attempt to challenge received notions of American race relations in a conscientious manner, the essay exemplifies the virtually unshakable hold that hegemony’s construction of whites, blacks, and power seems to maintain on white critics for whom, to cite Toni Morrison’s provocative analysis of Afro-American presence, “the study of Afro-American literature is . . . a crash course in neighborliness and tolerance, [or] an infant to be carried, instructed or chastised or even whipped like a child” (33). While doubtless motivated by neighborly intentions, Wesling’s essay is, finally, poignant evidence of the need for Afro-Americanists to be attentive to the subtle and seductive lure for white critics of socially sanctioned power.

Twice in his essay, Wesling declares his status as white outsider; these declarations correspond to his general concern with race and power as they affect the interpretive act. In fact, he begins by arguing against what he thinks is a prevailing belief among nonspecialists that slave narratives are “subliterary”: “Let me at the outset reject the position that these life-histories, which had such a remarkable popular success in their day, are subliterary; no narrative of recall or discovery, no narrative of the realized self *that enables the reader to live in the skin of another*, should be exiled from the sphere of the literary” (459;

my italics). Despite his anachronistic perspective on textual power—that is, the ability of the effective narrative to allow a reader briefly to become one with its characters, “to live in the skin of another”—Wesling goes to great lengths to emphasize his whiteness, the difference of his “skin” from those of the black slaves whose lives he wants to believe *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* accurately and convincingly represents. Yet Wesling’s essay, which strives, at some points mightily, to transcend the West’s dialectical opposition of white and black, ultimately is as caught up in a hegemonic privileging of “white power” and “white thought” as the Western philosophical and social systems it strenuously critiques.

After working over Hegel’s view of lordship and bondage (460–61), Wesling argues that it was only through refusing blacks “the word”—the vehicle through which human identity is said to be achieved in the logocentric West—that whites were able themselves to believe and to create in others the perception of an absent black subjectivity. Employing Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s discussion of a racist West’s “‘use of writing as a commodity to confine and delimit a culture of color’” (462), Wesling argues that slave narrators such as Douglass write themselves into being as acts of empowerment, as efforts to counter extant racist notions of black inhumanity and cognitive inferiority.

Perhaps consistent with Wesling’s efforts to refute Hegel’s view of lords and bondspersons, and Western culture’s general privileging of whiteness, is his first reference to his own white skin. Citing the works of perhaps the two most widely respected Afro-American literary theorists, Gates and Houston A. Baker, Jr., both of whom have “insisted on the ‘unique semantic fields, foregroundings, auto-biographical acts, and functional oppositions’ of black American culture” (463), Wesling phrases his discussion of these scholars’ influence on his thinking specifically in terms of a discourse of power which insists that, to a certain extent, race continues to determine hierarchical privilege. Note the language of the following sentence in which Wesling states his willingness to follow these black critics’ interpretive approaches:

Since one who is not black (or not American) can *follow the lead of black scholars* in this [insistence on black discursive and cultural difference], I would take further my earlier adjectives, *surprising* and *disruptive*, by looking at the semantic fields that govern meaning in the antebellum slave narratives; specifically, by suggesting differentials be-

tween their black American discourse and the three other discourses of fiction, auto-biography as a system of genre, and deconstructive hermeneutics. (463; my italics)

Wesling's racial markers are not without interpretive significance and have everything to do with the self-consciousness of a white "alien" or outsider entering a black field of inquiry and not wanting to impose himself as all-knowing white authority in a discourse which constitutes for (black) others a primary field of inquiry. Unwilling to project "white thought" as determining all meaning or to attribute to white (critical) "lords" a timeless cognitive superiority, Wesling insists upon the potentially fruitful interdependence of black and white minds. Perhaps even more "surprising" and "disruptive" to our society's traditional hierarchical figurations of black and white, he emphasizes the priority of black critical thought and notes its influential and clarifying effects on his own (white) thinking about slave narratives. Wesling intentionally subverts the power which the West has bequeathed to him as a birthright in order to exemplify the fallacious nature of racism's informing beliefs—put simply, that white is right and black is lack—and, at least temporarily, reverses the racist hierarchy by placing blackness in the privileged position in the binary construction.

But Wesling's radical act is undermined by his concluding and more extended discussion of race and the politics of reading. After offering what are for me largely compelling readings of the "disruptive" nature of slave narratives on "the Canon of Nineteenth Century Fiction" and "Tenets Concerning Auto-biography as Genre," Wesling turns to the subject of slave narratives' "Disruption of/by Deconstructive Hermeneutics."²² In this concluding section, the white critic returns, albeit cautiously, to traditional notions of power and racial difference, to the seemingly safer side of the interpretive Mason-Dixon line wherein white—no longer "universalist," but deconstructionist—"power" suggests the limitations of Afro-Americanist (scholarly) thought.

In the beginning of this final section, Wesling asserts an unwillingness to "retract . . . a word" of the comments he has offered that reflect the influence of black critics on his thinking, including earlier suggestions about "[t]he causally intimate connection between literacy, identity, and freedom," a connection he believes "ought not to be reduced in its human dignity, its heroism in the slave narratives, by being called an indeterminate

écriture” (468). Despite this acknowledgment, he invokes deconstruction, whose primary goal is “the dismantling of a concept’s truth-claims when it is perceived that no original moment exists that would ground truth” (467), as the most fruitful means of addressing what he considers the crucial “gap [in slave narratives] between experience and its representation” (468). Such issues include the motivations for the use of Standard English in slave narratives, the “disproportionate number of . . . slave narrators [who] are mulattos,” and the “degree [of] . . . inauthentic subjectivity in a life story that must represent the Negro race to whites” (468).³

Wesling identifies Douglass’s figuration of Sandy’s folk-magic root as a possible site to locate a distinctively black vernacular voice and a privileged orality—that is, a black voice, expressed in written form, which demonstrates its resistance to Western hegemonic influence in its privileging of speech over writing. Soon after Sandy gives him this root, about whose powers Douglass initially is skeptical, the young slave engages in battle with Mr. Covey, whose previous acts of brutality had broken Douglass’s spirit. This battle, in which “the virtue of the root was fully tested,” begins because “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” (Douglass, *Narrative* 81).

This scene has been read by many (including Wesling before a “recension” motivated by his deconstructive conversion) as evidence of Douglass’s belief in the prevailing strength of black oral traditions. But, ultimately, Wesling rejects this reading of the scene, encouraged by certain emphases of two respondents to an earlier version of his essay. One of these respondents, Werner Sollors, suggests that Wesling had “skimmed over the highly relevant fact that Douglass was a mulatto” (470). Sollors’s comment leads Wesling to what appears to be a crisis of faith in his analysis:

He touched what was for me the most vulnerable point in the paper: I had not wished to raise a thought highly inconvenient for a white critic who is commenting on black writing, namely the possibility that the mixing-in of white blood might have been one (albeit very distant) determinant of Douglass’ literacy, escape from slavery, and decision to write his own story and that of the black race. A white critic who moved that way would be perhaps on the

path to his or her own form of racism, a privileging of white blood, an equating of whiteness and writing. (470)

While one goal of Wesling's act clearly is a defense of the *Narrative* from formerly prevalent associations of "whiteness and writing," another surely is the protection of the critic himself from charges that his readings are themselves influenced by Caucacentric assumptions. Furthermore, Wesling's failure to consider either Sollors's reasons for assuming that Douglass's "white blood" represented a "highly relevant fact" or his respondent's lack of hesitance about pointing to matters which, in Wesling's own estimation, place a white critic potentially "on the path to his or her own form of racism" is quite striking and essential to our comprehension of the author's late-essay maneuvers.

Wesling's second influential respondent is H. Porter Abbott, who informs him that "Douglass enlarged the battle with Mr. Covey in *My Bondage and [My] Freedom*." For Abbott, this enlargement evidences the black autobiographer's "recension," his attempt to "set . . . aside . . . the business with the root": "I now forgot my roots, and remembered my pledge to stand up in my own defense" (qtd. in Wesling 470). Abbott insists that Douglass never meant to present himself as intricately tied to black folk culture, even in the initial depiction of "the business with the root." Wesling writes that "Abbott sees that stress on Douglass' own existential condition as implicit in the first, 1845 version, too, and argues that this is reinforced by the fact that the narrator is a mulatto, and not, as Douglass wrote of his friend Sandy, 'a genuine African'" (470).

In his transformation of allegiance from Baker and Gates to Sollors and Abbott, from black critics to white critics, Wesling embraces—on faith alone, it appears, and not as a consequence of a serious investigation of the validity of the latter's readings—a view of Douglass as existentialist mulatto emotionally unattached to the expressive traditions of his mother's people. Wesling's essay does not reexamine Douglass's text after its introduction of white skepticism in order to demonstrate *how* the slave narrator's dual ancestry has affected his connections to black orality, nor does it seek to prove—by offering more than Abbott's statement that it is so—that the *Narrative*'s depiction of Douglass's relationship to black folk "roots" (in both senses of the word) is fraught with ultimately irreconcilable difficulties. In moving away from Baker and Gates, in his "distancing from the black critics who have formed my thinking

about Douglass and the slave narrative" (470–71), Wesling abandons the thorough, textually grounded and persuasive methods of inquiry that characterized his examinations to that point. The simple declaration of "truth" by white voices of authority apparently is enough to convince Wesling and, he assumes, the readers of his essay.

Wesling's "distancing" from Baker and Gates is accompanied by his adopting a more traditional position for the white investigator of blackness. While employing rhetorical gestures that seek to deny what appears to be his clear intent, Wesling moves from his early willingness to "follow the lead of black scholars" in the analysis of black texts to a posture of instructing Afro-American scholars precisely how to offer more sophisticated, less self-delusory insights: "It is not for me to work out the moral and formal complexities of the mulatto narrative; enough for me, here, to see the abyss of that topic open out at my feet. It is enough to note the moral, and historical, complexities of a narrative such as Douglass'—for example, the black/white, speaking/writing oppositions on display here . . ." (471). Here Wesling uses race as a justification for his own failure to offer a detailed, coherent theory of "the mulatto narrative," a tradition of self-portraiture he believes is distinct in significant ways from the autobiographical traditions of both "pure African" Americans and "pure white" Americans. Furthermore, since Wesling has himself made such an issue of race (except in his introduction of Sollors's and Abbott's readings of Douglass, which he seems to view as unconnected to their race), what appears to disqualify him from offering a sound theory of "the mulatto narrative" is his whiteness. Apparently, the task of devising such a theory falls to nonwhite critics—to black scholars like Gates and Baker—despite the fact that their "biological" difference from mulatto narrators may be no less great than Wesling's.

Having established his position as voice of white authority, having deemed current black critical formulations as insufficient to explain "the mulatto narrative," Wesling cites in his concluding paragraph another white authority whose discussion of the *Narrative* is introduced in order to confirm his own sense of Douglass's biracial and bicultural status. Specifically, he draws on "Sacvan Bercovitch's recent summary paragraph on the *Narrative*, where he argues that Douglass embraces both Afro-American forms of expression and the free-enterprise ideology of his historical moment 'in such a way as simultaneously to deflect radical energies and to inspire the work of art' " (471).

Wesling's choice provides us with the means of demonstrating the problems implicit in his distinctions between black and white perspectives concerning "the business with the roots" in Douglass's *Narrative* and perhaps in his reading of the slave-narrative tradition generally.

In the *Critical Inquiry* essay from which Wesling quotes, Bercovitch refers to a collection he and Myra Jehlen edited, *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, which reprints part of Baker's materialist analysis of Douglass's *Narrative* (from *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*). Wesling's opposition of white and black scholars notwithstanding, Baker's examination of Douglass's contribution to the establishment of an "'economics of slavery' and 'commercial deportation' as governing statements in Afro-American discourse" (*Blues* 31) complements Bercovitch's discussion of Douglass's engagement of American free enterprise ideology. Bercovitch argues that Douglass's text evinces a deep ambivalence about America: although the narrator recognizes "the *liberating* appeal . . . of free-enterprise ideology" as well as the "rhetoric of equal opportunity, contract society, upward mobility, free trade, and the sanctity of private property," he also sees "that on another, perhaps deeper level he was being manipulated in turn by those cultural keywords *and energized by them*" ("Problem" 648).

This argument suggests that whatever the extent of his ties to black belief systems, Douglass—legislatively denied full access to the promises implicit in "those cultural keywords" but thoroughly engaged in and by them—experiences a specifically American dilemma. Similarly, Baker explores Douglass's Americanness, his comprehension of the quintessentially American equation of freedom and economics. Baker notes literacy's initially limited benefits for Douglass, including the fact that, during an escape attempt by a group of male slaves, "[t]he slave does, indeed, write his 'own pass' and the passes of his fellows, but the Sabbath school assembled group is no match for the enemy within" (47). Consequently, instead of locating Douglass's liberating moment as the revelation concerning "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (49)—the young slave's adoption of an antithetical stance to his slavemaster's insistence on the dangers of literacy of the black bondsman—Baker insists that the slave's freedom results from his "arriv[al] . . . at a fully commercial view of his situation" (48) just before he escapes to the North. He argues that Douglass "removes (in his own person) the master's property. . . . By 'stealing away,' Douglass not only steals the fruits of his own labor . . . but also liberates

the laborer—the chattel who works profitlessly in the garden” (48).

Bercovitch’s and Baker’s identification of the American-ness of Douglass’s response to his situation suggests the problems inherent in Wesling’s trumpeted “distancing from . . . black critics.” For Baker’s analysis reads the differences between Douglass and Sandy as being more pronounced than does either Sollors or Abbott. Baker asserts:

In contrast to a resolved young Douglass . . . stands Sandy Jenkins. . . . Sandy offers Douglass a folk means of negotiating his crisis at Covey’s, providing him with a “certain root,” which, carried “*always on* . . . [the] right side, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey or any other white man” to whip the slave. What is represented by the introduction of Sandy Jenkins is a displacement of Christian metaphysics by Afro-American “superstition.” Ultimately, this displacement reveals the inefficacy of trusting solely to any form of extrasecular aid for relief (or release) from slavery.

The root does not work. The physical confrontation does. . . . Jenkins’s mode of negotiating the economics of slavery, the *Narrative* implies, is not *a man’s way*, since the narrator claims that his combat with Covey converted him, ipso facto, into *a man*. (46–47)

Baker views Sandy’s limited utilization of black belief as a sign of his complete capitulation to white power. According to Baker, Sandy’s selective employment of forms of blackness is not accompanied by his internalizing an integrity of black difference that motivates his responses to blacks and whites. In his status as what Baker calls “the pure, negative product of an economics of slavery”—one assumes that he indeed profits from his act(s) of treason—Sandy has access to little but the forms of blackness. He appears unconcerned about the subversive potential offered by an energetically practiced black difference and is protected not by his root—Douglass implies, in fact, that Sandy’s roots (his connections to Africa) have been irreparably severed—but by a white hegemony-approved and enforced passivity that stands “in clear and monumental . . . contrast to . . . Douglass (47).

Wesling’s deconstructive “distancing” from “black critics” is motivated not by a fundamental “difference” so much as by a refusal to explore, in energetic and useful ways, the points of similarity between “black” and “white” thought. While “dif-

ference” in the preceding examples between black (Baker) and white (Sollors and Abbott) thought is perhaps marked by their sense of the importance of Douglass’s mulatto status—his (racial) self-difference—clearly Wesling’s white and black authorities all would identify the novice Afro-Americanist’s investment of Sandy and his root with antihegemonic power as thoroughly unconvincing. At the point at which he is forced to deal with the inadequacy of his formulations (with the problems inherent in his equation of Sandy with a privileged black orality) and, subsequently, with Douglass’s nondifference, with his fundamental Americanness—with, in other words, the *Narrative*’s inscription of America’s “cultural keywords” as the “first principles” of the former slave’s formation of self—Wesling resorts to sloppy analytical practice, invokes the tenets of white authority figures without offering a modicum of evidence to support their (and his own) claims, and insists that Afro-American criticism needs to alter the contours of its investigation.

3

At this point, it is useful to explore the formulations on American “ethnic” differences of one of Wesling’s white authorities, the German-born Werner Sollors. The essay I want to discuss, “A Critique of Pure Pluralism,” is, unlike the other texts with which I am concerned in this essay, not an overtly self-referential white critical act. But because he insists that black scholars, in creating critical texts that foreground their own subjectivity, have formulated a critical discourse incapable of illuminating the very texts with which they are concerned, Sollors comments implicitly on the general advisability of critical self-referentiality itself. Arguing that the race of Afro-American critics should not be taken into account in their considerations of black texts, Sollors suggests that white investigators of blackness need not be even minimally self-conscious about the effects of their racial positionality on the reading process. While welcoming the changes in the academy that have created spaces in curricula for minority discourses, Sollors asserts that there is—or, in the best of all worlds, should be—no connection between *who* reads these recovered, explicitly racial texts and *how* they are read.

Sollors begins by disputing the claims of the cultural left concerning the traditional, white male-dominated Western literary canon. This canon has been reduced to the status of “con-

temporary scapegoat” by minority and feminist critics, who mistakenly characterize its former exclusivity as the product of “a rather malicious white male imagination” (251). Then, Sollors bemoans how the examination of ethnic and women’s literary traditions “has tended to produce sectarian and fragmented histories of American literatures (in the plural) instead of American literary history” (251–52).

Sollors’s fundamentally conservative comments beg the question of whether it is advisable to attempt to produce a single “American literary history” and reflect a willful blindness both to the interested nature of canon inclusion/exclusion and to the sophisticated insights that have resulted in the last two decades from these “sectarian and fragmented histories.”⁴ In fact, Sollors expresses a deep disdain for culturally specific interpretive acts of “ethnic” scholars, a disdain reflected in his evaluation of critical strategies that explore forms of American difference.

“A Critique of Pure Pluralism” allows us to see that Sollors’s comments on Wesling’s reading of Douglass’s *Narrative* are indisputably informed by his desire for critical power, by his interest in persuading others of the fruitfulness of his figuration of a unified, “polyethnic” literary America and American literary history. Sollors is engaged in a struggle for the authority to determine what constitutes the most correct goals of Afro-American (or, more broadly, American) literary studies. The seriousness of the threat of an increasingly embraced privileging and exploration of difference to Sollors’s project to reestablish an American “literary-historical consensus” (Bercovitch 633)—a consensus previously made possible by white male scholars’ virtual erasure of racial, ethnic, gender, and certain other forms of difference—is reflected in Sollors’s rancorous, simplistic, and dismissive description of what he holds as the fundamental flaws in recent efforts of ethnic and feminist scholars to delineate their literary traditions. He says of these emerging forms of inquiry:

... what is often called “the ethnic perspective”—which often means, in literary history, the emphasis on a writer’s *descent*—all but annihilates polyethnic art movements, moments of cultural interaction, and the pervasiveness of cultural syncretism in America. The widespread acceptance of group-by-group approach has not only led to un-historical accounts held together by static notions of rather abstractly and homogeneously conceived ethnic groups, but has also weakened the comparative and critical skills of increasingly timid interpreters who sometimes choose

to speak with the authority of ethnic insiders rather than that of readers of texts. (256)

After this effort virtually to erase the gains that have been made in ethnic-minority literary studies, Sollors offers what are, according to him, more sound, more *American*, interpretive goals: “if anything, ethnic literary history ought to increase our understanding of the cultural interplays and contacts among writers of different backgrounds, the ethnic innovations and cultural mergers that took place in America” (256).

An emphasis on difference, on that which has been the primary justification throughout American history for mistreatment of millions of ethnic, racial, and gendered others, is appalling to the white critic who firmly believes that “ethnic [American] literary history ought to *increase* our understanding of the cultural interplays and contacts among writers of different backgrounds” (my italics). The examples Sollors employs in his discussion of ethnic literary inheritance (or what he calls “the construction of diachronic ‘descent lines’ ”), however, leave no doubt that his venom is directed primarily at the especially problematic critical practices of Afro-American literary scholars:

Do we have to believe in a filiation from Mark Twain to Ernest Hemingway, but not to Ralph Ellison (who is supposedly descended from James Weldon Johnson and Richard Wright)? Can Gertrude Stein be discussed with Richard Wright or only with white women expatriate German-Jewish writers? Is there a link from the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin to those of Frederick Douglass and Mary Antin, or must we see Douglass exclusively as a version of Olaudah Equiano and a precursor to Malcolm X? Is Zora Neale Hurston only Alice Walker’s foremother? (257)

Sollors’s remarks are not the easily dismissed views of an essentially harmless renegade whose connections to Afro-American cultural studies are limited at best. For his attacks on the basic premise of Afro-American and other minority studies programs—that they represent sophisticated traditions of thought that effectively illuminate the political, cultural, and economic history of non-European and nonwhite male descendants in America, provided their central texts are examined in a thoughtfully intertextual manner—are those of a white (institutional) insider who has served as chair of Afro-American studies at Harvard.

If Sollors's goal is not the dismantling of Afro-American studies as it has been practiced for the last two decades, it is certainly the problematizing of essential aspects of that practice. Left to Sollors's design, Afro-American studies generally would become a mere subset of, would be methodologically indistinguishable from, American studies (except, perhaps, for its focus on texts composed by Africa's new-world descendants). Since analyses of American similarity represent the object of Sollors's version of Afro-American studies, the elements of black subjectivity—of black difference—which fueled Afro-American struggles to institutionalize and sustain such programs at American colleges and universities and which continue to motivate black critical interest in Afro-American texts are considered by the white critic and administrator to disrupt the more pristine goals of American investigative objectivity. In his advocacy of an objectivity and an AMERICA in which many in academia have lost faith, Sollors refuses even to examine his potentially self-interested motivation for minimizing the possible interpretive benefits of black critical subjectivity or for asserting that attention to a critic's race is, at best, irrelevant, and at worst, disastrous to the critic's investigations of blackness. In arguing that blackness makes no (interpretive) difference whatsoever, Sollors appears to be attempting to justify a belief that his own racial positionality does not at all conflict with his administrative and intellectual situations.

Sollors's figuration of black literary criticism is neither a sensitive effort to move beyond what Bercovitch calls "dissensus," nor an example of what Neal terms "a welcome criticism." Rather, it is a bold attempt to invalidate the advances of an entire black scholarly tradition and, hence, to gain for himself as white insider the type of power to determine the future direction of Afro-American cultural studies on a national level that he has enjoyed at America's most prestigious university.⁵

4

While Sollors's (unstated) point of entry into the discourse of blackness is his privileged insider's position in black studies, Harold Fromm's is the "discussion" among Joyce Joyce, Baker, and Gates in *New Literary History* about the usefulness of contemporary critical theory in analyses of Afro-American texts. Among other issues, Fromm's essay "Real Life, Literary Criticism, and the Perils of Bourgeoisification" (1988) addresses, as Joyce does, what he perceives to be the insufficient ideological blackness of Baker and Gates. While I will avoid extended

comment on the black scholars' exchange, which I have examined extensively elsewhere, I want to explore the essentially personal nature of Fromm's attacks on Baker and Gates.⁶ These attacks result both from Fromm's interest generally in condemning what he considers a narcissistic poststructuralist critical project by which these black theorists have been influenced and, more important, from his static, simplistic notions of black and white differences.

What is important to me here about Fromm's formulations is that his representation of a blissfully self-interested critical project considers Baker and Gates as representative examples. Fromm characterizes these figures as charlatans burdened by theory and driven not by a concern for the black race but by "careerism . . . and the marketplace" (50). While "Real Life" is not the first instance of Fromm's venomous response to what he perceives as an increasingly decadent literary academy, this essay is disturbing in its attempt at wholesale character assassination.⁷ Although his mean-spirited and dismissive remarks about Baker provide much ground for discussion, I will address primarily Fromm's assessment of Gates because it is in his reaction to this critic that the essay focuses most precisely on race: on Gates's blackness, on what Fromm considers Gates's transracial skills, and, briefly, on Fromm's own racial subjectivity.

Fromm grants that Gates is "a gifted, sometimes brilliant intellectual: rhetorical, pugnacious, relentless, engaged in conducting a twenty-ring circus all at once and with considerable skill." Still, Fromm considers Gates "a paradigmatic exemplar of what I have come to call 'academic capitalism,' an enterprise that is complicated in his case by an admixture of self-righteous obsession with race, from which he is nonetheless able to extract every known academic perquisite" (52). Characterizing Gates's work as evidence of his "self-righteous obsession with race," Fromm sees the black critic as an academic "superstar" who is able to move deftly between racial poles—between blackness and whiteness: "His most salient characteristics are his two well-worn metaphysical jumpsuits—one white, the other black—which he is able to zip on and off, sometimes in midsentence, with dizzying bravado as rhetorical needs urge him on. Although *as an intellectual he is as white and bourgeois as I*, he is nevertheless a virtuoso at exploiting white liberal guilt" (52; my italics). Clearly, we have come full circle from the world delineated in such white investigations of blackness as John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*. While racial mutability is a

common concern of both texts, race takes on for Fromm a more “metaphysical” quality than it possesses for Griffin, who feels he must darken his skin in order to gain access to the mysterious meanings of blackness. But Fromm’s black trans-racial intellectual is capable of moving from a black subject-position to a white one not by changing his appearance, but by manipulating available discursive traits of racial difference. For Fromm, Gates’s deft navigation between black vernacular and high theory, between discourses of the street and the academy, represents a transgression of firmly established racial boundaries.

Instead of a Griffin-like transraciality, which appears to be a generally selfless response to white liberal guilt, Gates is said to be motivated by a desire to emphasize insignificant pigmentation differences between learned white academics and himself, what Du Bois once termed “mere ‘gross’ features” (qtd. in Appiah 50), so as to exploit white (financiers’) guilt strictly for personal gain.⁸ In Fromm’s estimation, what makes Gates’s version of academic capitalism so repugnant is that, despite the black scholar’s constant emphasis on racial difference, he is, in essence, “as white and bourgeois as I” am. In other words, the black theorist is no more intimately connected than Fromm with the socioeconomic plight of lower-class Afro-Americans, who represent for Fromm what Gates (following Ralph Ellison) terms the blackness of blackness, the true participants in an authentic black culture from which the bourgeois black critic is forever estranged.

It seems to me that Fromm’s is a jaded representation of Gates’s perspectives and achievements. And while he does touch on essentially important matters where class is concerned—particularly interrogating the nature of the responsibility of the black middle class to aid in the uplift of the race’s less fortunate—he forwards Caucacentric notions of black racial essence next to which Wesling’s efforts to deconstruct the West’s traditional black/white dichotomy seem positively enlightened. For, in Fromm’s view, Gates is “white” both because of his apparent financial success and because of his firm possession of “the word” (his verbal acumen and mastery of the discourse of contemporary literary theory). According to Fromm, whiteness is a normative intellectual state, is always already associated with professional and financial achievement—with presence; blackness, on the other hand, is synonymous with economic and intellectual lack—with poverty and a failure to become a part of mainstream American society, with an inability to mas-

ter Standard English and an unsuitability as a proper subject of academic investigation.

Gates and Baker are no longer “black,” and are, in Fromm’s estimation (to invoke, with a difference, the title of Griffin’s work), “white like me” because they have mastered the requisite skills that allow them to command respect and lucrative financial recompense in the American academic marketplace. Failing to see in the sign “blackness” anything but lack—viewing it, indeed, as representing only unmitigated suffering—Fromm associates blackness with violation on a par with “medical experiments on prisoners in concentration camps.” As suffering without end, Fromm’s “blackness” is the very antithesis of the sense of possibility signaled by “whiteness” in American culture. Considering Afro-American life in such a limited and limiting manner, Fromm has no choice but to deride the synthetic, playful, angry, appropriative, code-switching (terms which, along with the suffering upon which he focuses, suggest much of my understanding of “blackness”) criticism of Gates and Baker. Indeed, in a view of these scholars’ work which appears to be derived almost solely from a reading of their responses to Joyce Joyce, he considers their texts to be a “betrayal, an unclean and venal act in which the suffering and blood of black Americans—as well as a liberation that is still in progress—have been turned into a market commodity not completely removed from Cabbage Patch dolls and rock videos” (59).

Neal’s attractive prophecy notwithstanding, the establishment of a black critical class/mass in the literary academy clearly has not served to eliminate the creation of boldly misinformed or malicious white analyses of the Afro-American literary enterprise. What has changed, however, is the focus of self-righteous white rancor. While David Littlejohn’s infamous *Black on White*, for example, published eight years before Neal’s comments, emphasized what the white critic considered to be a debilitating self-hatred manifested in the products of the black literary imagination, Fromm attacks the most renowned voices to have emerged from the black critical class, emphasizing, as does Littlejohn in his assessment of Afro-American creative writers, their psychologically maladjusted and divided natures. And though Afro-American creative writing itself remains securely on the periphery of Fromm’s analysis—black literary texts are records of “the suffering and blood of black Americans” whose aesthetic qualities should not be evaluated while the black struggle for “liberation . . . is still in progress” (59)—poststructuralist black theory and its creators have, for Fromm,

taken the place of the flawed literary practice of Littlejohn's perspectives. Such scholarship is, in the white critic's analysis, the site and sign of black "minstrelsy," of a self-division/delusion that Fromm terms "a selective blackness" (63).

The motivation for Fromm's interest in the Joyce-Baker-Gates exchange is clearly elaborated toward the end of his essay: "[t]his ongoing debate derives most of its interest not from the rightness or wrongness of its principals' positions so much as from its exhibition of an evolving, conflicted consciousness" (62). Fromm's attraction to the debate appears solely to be a function of his sense of its confirmation of black self-division, of a psychic split or Du Boisian double consciousness which, despite the social, economic, political, and academic advances Afro-Americans have made over the last two decades, is no more successfully resolved, according to Fromm, than when *Black on White* offered similar critiques of black creative writers in 1966.

According to Fromm, the unity of the Afro-American critical psyche is possible only when the black critic comes to accept the belief that class is a significantly more important factor than race in the determination of one's allegiances, of one's "people." In Fromm's estimation, where Gates and Baker are concerned, race makes no essential difference whatsoever, and offers them no crucial connections to the black lower-class masses or to their culture. Class, for Fromm, is everything, and his venomous personal attack results, in the final analysis, from his antagonists' refusal or inability to recognize this fact.

This painfully limited construction of race reflects a naive conflation of class and racial states of being that a more sympathetic view of poststructuralism might have encouraged Fromm to avoid. Certainly blackness—whatever we take that sign to mean—must be said to include Afro-Americans on all levels of the socioeconomic spectrum, even wildly successful professors of black literature. You do not have to be perceived as intellectually and economically impoverished to occupy a black subject-position at the end of the twentieth century, regardless of the views of a white critic who bemoans the passing of the good old days when texts were "works," and when blackness was considered synonymous with lack in the field of literary studies, among other places.

5

If a common element connects the essays of Wesling, Solors, and Fromm, it is a quintessential will to power, an inability

to interact as self-conscious whites with discourses of blackness except as what Baker has termed “superordinate authorities” (*Blues* 84). In these examples, self-referentiality fails to make these scholars significantly more self-conscious in their involvement in a dialectics of race. Consequently, in these cases, self-referentiality serves to disguise these combatants’ desires to dominate regions and discourses of blackness, to censor what they view as insufficiently informed and seriously flawed black critical and cultural practices, and to direct black natives to more enlightened modes and forms of “real life” and scholarly behavior. In my view, these examples demonstrate—for Afro-American studies specifically, but for minority discourse more generally—that self-referentiality is not necessarily a sign of intense self-investigation minimizing or eliminating the dangers of hegemonic self-interest. In fact, this critical practice can expressly be used, as in the preceding examples, to mask more sinister, more tyrannizing intentions.

What these essays demonstrate is the necessity for black critics to be attentive to the ways that what Foucault calls the “operation of mechanisms of power” can come into play in white American interactions with black (con)texts. In fact, they evince the necessity for black scholars to heed Foucault’s warnings about the constant threat of dispute implicit in any power relation. Foucault argues:

In effect, between a relationship of power and a strategy of struggle there is a reciprocal appeal, a perpetual linking and a perpetual reversal. At every moment the relationship of power may become a confrontation between two adversaries. Equally, the relationship between adversaries in society may, at every moment, give place to the putting into operation of mechanisms of power. The consequence of this instability is the ability to decipher the same events and the same transformations either from inside the history of struggle or from the standpoint of the power relationships. The interpretations which result will not consist of the same elements of meaning or the same links or the same types of intelligibility, although they refer to the same historical fabric and each of the two analyses must have reference to the other. In fact it is precisely the disparities between the two readings which make visible those fundamental phenomena of “domination” which are present in a large number of human societies. (226)

The analyses of Wesling, Sollors, and Fromm are, finally, attempts at interpretive “domination,” the “putting into operation of mechanisms of power” which seek to minimize the persuasiveness of Afro-Americanist readings of texts. Ultimately, these essays, when considered in the context of Foucault’s theorizing of the nature of power relations, indicate the pervasive nature of enactments of white power. In a world in which states/traits of difference “continue to matter” (183), as Barbara Johnson argues in a provocative, “welcome” investigation which foregrounds the consequences of her racial difference on her reading of Zora Neale Hurston, in a world where blackness continues to signify lack and powerlessness, Afro-American literary scholars need to be especially attentive to the nature and specifics of white disagreements with blacks in their evaluations of the significance of black difference.⁹ For if, as Foucault argues, adversaries within a society tend to read the “same historical fabric” differently, until the existing, racially determined power relation is no longer extant, interpretive differences between white and black critics may result, as in the preceding examples, from a desire on the part of the former to circumscribe or otherwise control the range of black discourse in order to make it act in accordance with existing Caucacentric formulations of race and difference.

This article focuses on problematic examples of white critical interaction with black texts not because this type of response is more prevalent than the numerous “welcome” Afro-Americanist acts of white scholars, but because I believe such a focus may encourage Afro-American literary scholarship to begin to think seriously again about this issue.¹⁰ The appearance of self-referential white analyses benefits the Afrocentric project in part because it provides an occasion for nonessentializing discussions of relationships between whiteness and reading. While I have concentrated here only on troubling examples, certainly there are numerous other possible avenues through which to explore this issue that might produce less apparently adversarial texts. But until a time when racial difference can be said no longer to represent a motivating factor in a relationship of power, Afro-Americanist critics must be willing to acknowledge and explore race’s continuing meanings on American shores. Because racial difference still matters, we must not expect the increasing visibility of blackness in American literary studies to erase the possibilities that even the most apparently self-conscious and self-referential white investigation will conclude with the ad-

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vocacy of older, Caucacentric orders. For the foreseeable future at least, Afro-American literary scholars would do well to maintain a degree of skepticism about and, at the very least, pay a degree of attention to such critical acts.

Notes

1. For collections that investigate male feminism, see Showalter; Jardine and Smith; and *Gender and Theory* and *Feminism and Institutions*, edited by Kauffman. The only contemporary Afro-American critic to my knowledge who engages the topic of interpretation and racial “others”—perhaps because of his Black Aesthetic origins—is Houston Baker. His positions over the last decade have altered from a belief that “the semantic force of black creativity might escape the white critic altogether” (*Journey Back* 154) to a view, encouraged by the nonracist critical practice of such scholars as Lawrence Levine and Robert Hemenway, that “through their own investigations of the ‘forms of things unknown’ in recent years, some white critics have been able to enter a black critical circle” (*Blues* 84). In his most recent statement, Baker concludes that the white critic “who honestly engages his or her own autobiographical implication in a brutal past is as likely to provide such [compelling and informed] nuances as an Afro-American theorist” (“There is No” 144).
2. Wesling compellingly discusses the slave-narrative tradition’s situation within and against the canon of white thought. He explores, for instance, the very different figurations of slavery by white authors such as Stowe, Melville, and Twain, and the fact that, unlike the mainstream American autobiographical impulse which privileges “a bringing to consciousness of the nature of one’s own existence, transforming the mere fact of existence into a realized quality and a possible meaning,” the slave narratives’ autobiographical “I” is “insistently bound up with the fate of the race and nation” (466).
3. Space permits only a brief discussion of Wesling’s view of the problematic nature of the use of Standard English in slave narratives. This concern is to some extent made less significant if the reader grants that, if deconstruction correctly suggests that “no original moment exists that would ground truth,” then Wesling’s view that what has been termed Black English is the “authentic” language of blackness, the one in which a “true” representation of blackness ought to be rendered, is itself fundamentally flawed.
4. Sollors’s view of the means by which we can achieve an American literary consensus distinguishes him from Bercovitch, who argues that rather than striving—as Sollors advocates—for the type of consolidation of “a powerful literary-historical consensus” that characterized “the achievement of [F. O.] Matthiessen and [Robert] Spiller,” “[i]t will be our task to make the best of what (for lack of a better term) may be called a period of ‘dissensus’ ” (633). We can make the best of “dissensus,” according to Bercovitch, not by seeking to minimize or erase differences between ideologically diverse contemporary Americanist scholars, but by working in such a man-

ner as “to turn the current barbarism of critical debate into a dialogue about common questions. In our ability to keep the dialogue open, while specifying and exploring the questions we share, lies the prospect of our achieving an integrated narrative of American literary history” (653). And though both Sollors and Bercovitch share a common goal—“an integrated narrative of American literary history”—Bercovitch seems cognizant of the fact that such a goal, which he believes may not come to pass until “the next generation,” necessitates a generosity of spirit regarding the ideological differences of others, while Sollors, as we will see, strives for an American consensus by attempting to negate the validity of rival American visions.

5. The impact of Sollors’s “movement” is manifested, although admittedly in a much less rancorous tone, in the first issue of *American Literary History*. Kenneth Warren argues that the three Afro-American literary studies upon which he focuses in his essay-review, Gates’s *Figures in Black*, Bernard Bell’s *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition*, and Melvin Dixon’s *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*, fail both to deconstruct such concepts as “originality” and “exceptionalism” and to show their fundamental Americanness. In trying to emphasize “black difference,” such studies, for Warren, ignore black self-difference, while refusing to examine likenesses between Afro-American and Euro-American literary and cultural constructions of self, tribe, and history. For Warren, then, as for Sollors, black critical discourse is marred by its misguided examinations of cultural distinctiveness which force critics to ignore essentially more important, nation-building nondifferences. For Warren and Sollors, Afro-Americanist critics are involved in “removing [such] concepts [as originality] from their ‘American’ locus and relocating them on the ‘African’ side of the hyphen in African-American” (Warren 179).

6. See Awkward 9–12, 20. For other examinations of this discussion, see Mason; Fuss 77–79, 85–86; and Appiah 39–41.

7. Fromm expresses similar reservations in “The Hegemonic Form of Othering,” where his ire is directed at Gates and Mary Louise Pratt, a white female literary scholar. See Fromm’s essay and Pratt’s reply in Gates’s “Race,” *Writing, and Difference*.

8. Griffin says of the motivations for his transracial experience:
How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth? Though we lived side by side throughout the South, communication between the two races had simply ceased to exist. Neither really knew what went on with those of the other race. The Southern Negro will not tell the white man the truth. He long ago learned that if he speaks a truth unpleasing to the white, the white will make life miserable for him.

The only way I could see to bridge the gap between us was to become a Negro. I decided I would do this. (7–8)

9. Johnson’s essay offers a useful, provocative alternative to the race-war dialectics that motivate the preceding white critical acts. While not innocent of what we might view as an interpretive politics—the essay emphasizes elements of Hurston’s nonfiction that allow Johnson to view the Afro-

American writer as a (black) deconstructionist thinker par excellence—Johnson’s analysis nevertheless does not seek to negate the explanatory power of Afrocentric thought in order to forward her deconstructionist agenda. Johnson begins her essay with a series of interrogatives that inquire into the motivations for her interest in Hurston’s nonfiction:

It was not clear to me what I, a white deconstructor, was doing talking about Zora Neale Hurston, a black novelist and anthropologist, or to whom I was talking. Was I trying to convince white establishment scholars who long for a return to Renaissance ideals that the study of the Harlem Renaissance is not a trivialization of their humanistic pursuits? Was I trying to contribute to the attempt to adapt the textual strategies of literary theory to the analysis of Afro-American literature? Was I trying to rethink my own previous work and to re-referentialize the notion of difference so as to move the conceptual operations of deconstruction out of the realm of abstract linguistic universality? Was I talking to white critics, black critics, or myself? (172)

Johnson’s deconstruction of differences between Hurston and herself, between black outsider and white insider, enables a significantly more thoughtful and illuminating investigation of the signs “white” and “black” than those of her self-referential male counterparts. While not ignoring the difference that racial difference makes—she acknowledges that binary terms such as “*black* and *white*, *inside* and *outside*, continue to matter” (183)—she nevertheless demonstrates the benefits of an engaged interaction with her black subject. Indeed, Johnson argues that Hurston’s figurations of race and multiple implied audiences inform and deepen her own sense of the explanatory power of the deconstructive enterprise itself: “It was as though I were asking Zora Neale Hurston for answers to questions I did not even know I was unable to formulate. I had a lot to learn, then, from Hurston’s way of dealing with multiple agendas and heterogenous implied readers. . . . Hurston could be read not just as an example of the ‘noncanonical’ writer, but as a commentator on the dynamics of any encounter between an inside and an outside, any attempt to make a statement about difference” (172–73). Johnson’s essay is proof that an analysis of racial difference can indeed produce a deeply engaged, dialogic critical discourse.

10. Such self-referential acts include Catharine Stimpson’s discussion of her difficulties as a white teaching Afro-American literature and her skepticism about white interpretive competence vis-à-vis black texts as a consequence of a history of pejorative and dismissive white critical acts; Hemenway’s insistence that the “‘definitive’ book” on Hurston “remains to be written, and by a black woman” (xx); Case’s assertion that the limitations in her “description of the position and project of women of colour” are a function of a general lack of access white scholars have to necessary materials and contacts within non-mainstream feminist theatre (95); and Callahan’s connecting his adult interest in Afro-American literature to his transformative adolescent interactions with blacks, which taught him that his “fate”—and that of other Irish-Americans—was inextricably “linked to African-Americans” (8).

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