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Letters

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Letters

Dear Editor:

In "Negotiations of Power: White Critics, Black Texts, and the Self-Referential Impulse" (*ALH* 2.4 [1990]), Michael Awkward accuses Donald Wesling, Werner Sollors, and me of a "quintessential will to power" (as "white" critics who presume to be critical of "black" critics in any way). Yet Awkward never interrogates his own "subject position," which perceives as "venom" any criticism that deviates from his own ideology. For him, to criticize is to be "naive," "simplistic," "personal," and involved in "wholesale character assassination." And to have a selfhood that is other than a mirror or doormat for *his* hegemonizing self is to exhibit—in Awkward's view—an unforgivable will to power.

Thus, in an account of Barbara Johnson (which grudgingly praises her Hurston essay because it partially meets his party-line requirements), Awkward remarks, "Johnson's essay offers a useful, provocative alternative to the race-war[!] dialectics that motivate the preceding white critical acts." After pointing out that the essay is "*not innocent of what we might view as an interpretive politics*" (603; emphasis added), he goes on to make a few concessions. But Johnson, despite her affinity with Awkward's political correctness, fails to make the grade, because she is "not innocent" of "interpretive politics," a vice not shared by Awkward. And speaking of Sollors's "advocacy of an objectivity and an AMERICA in which many in academia have lost faith" (in preference to Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, the newly reethnized republics of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Somalia, Cuba?), he informs us that "Sollors refuses even to examine his potentially self-interested motivation for minimizing the possible interpretive benefits of black

critical subjectivity" (595). Thus Sollors, unlike Awkward, is "naive" enough to indulge in motivated behavior. Even worse, Sollors is engaged "in 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" (595). But if power is a pie that can provide just so many slices, then every piece consumed by Sollors would obviously mean one less slice for the plate of Awkward, whose appetite is immense, his hair-shirt rhetoric notwithstanding. What would be decadent gourmandizing in Sollors is necessarily vital subsistence to Awkward's high-speed metabolism. Moreover, Awkward's "innocence" enables him to speak insouciantly throughout his essay of "the subtle and seductive lure for white critics of socially sanctioned power" (584). Though more familiarly known as dog eat dog, this invidious, paranoid, and race-obsessed view of power can be rendered acceptable when distinguished from the malevolent "negotiation of power" by the "not innocent" (who appear in various unsavory incarnations as Sollors, Johnson, Wesling, and me).

As for his specific criticisms of my "Real Life" essay, Awkward consistently attributes to me as speaker words that I do not say in my own voice, of which two examples will suffice: he has me claiming that the writings of Gates and Baker "are a betrayal, an unclean and venal act," when the original essay reads, "One can well understand why Joyce, Harris, and Christian feel so deeply that this neoformalist criticism is a betrayal, an unclean and venal act." Similarly, he chooses to ignore the fact that the word "minstrelsy," an albatross of racism that Awkward ties

around my neck, originated with Houston Baker and that I took it over from him as a convenient term in the continuing conversation. In sum, he has put into my mouth words that I *inscribed* but that I do not *say*.

Despite his malappropriations of my words, however, Awkward is entirely right when he says I regard much of what is considered a race problem to be a problem of social class. But far from seeing *all* blacks locked in poverty and suffering, as Awkward claims I do, I was commenting on the troubling relationship between successful middle-class black professionals and the suffering class from which they have escaped. That, of course, was the basic concern of Joyce A. Joyce's essay in *New Literary History*, a concern that generated the whole controversy that followed. Nor can this suffering be regarded as "the very antithesis of possibility signalled by 'whiteness,'" when so many blacks have become middle-class professionals or business people and when universities are trying to increase their numbers. Rather, it is the use made by the successful class of the suffering class that is at the heart of the problem I addressed, a use that involves distinguished black scholars treating white scholars as colonialists even as they themselves colonize other blacks (and whites as well). Behaving like a mandarin literary theorist, however, does not eliminate the realities of such exploitation, as Jim Merod similarly observes about Fredric Jameson.

Professor Awkward has little to

say that can be regarded as contesting the accuracy or truth of my remarks. He simply does not like them, because—in his all-or-nothing universe of politically correct discourse—you are either for us or against us. Telling the truth can look "mean-spirited" when ideological orthodoxy requires that team members share the mendacities involved in playing The Emperor's New Clothes. (But I'm not a member of the team.) Instead of continuing to exalt Henry Louis Gates's early mistakes, however, I recommend that Awkward examine Henry Louis Gates's admirably revisionary address to the American Studies Association in November 1990. In a talk critical of "apocalyptic rhetoric" and the breakdown of interests into more and more "particularist" camps, Gates appears to have initiated a regenerative period of creative "conversation among different voices" to replace the internecine strife of more-victim-than-thou insurrectionism. Speaking as an intellectual at home in a less-than-perfect America, Gates repudiates paranoid "oppositional style" criticism as a failure based on hyperintellectualized clichés about colonialism, revolution, America, imperialism, Others, center/periphery binaries, and theoretical systematicity.

This argument seems to me to be a courageous reversal that all but his most narcissistic followers are likely to support in the long run. And, in such a case, the benefits to *everyone* would be immense.

Harold Fromm