



Talkin' That Talk

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Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Autumn, 1986), pp. 203-210

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343565>

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Critical Response

VII

Talkin' That Talk

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

The editors of *Critical Inquiry* and I decided to bracket the word “race” in our title after much discussion and debate, and only after an extended correspondence with Tzvetan Todorov. We decided to do so to underscore the fact that “race” is a metaphor for something else and not an essence or a thing in itself, apart from its creation by an act of language.

Why is this gesture necessary? Why is it not merely cute to remind one's readers that even adjectives such as red, yellow, brown, and black are also metaphors when applied to the so-called color of people? Harold Fromm's response to these gestures, as amusing as it intended itself to be, only reveals the necessity of undermining the habit, in the West, of accounting for the Other's “essence” in absolute terms, in terms that *fix* culturally defined differences into transcendent, “natural” categories or essences. The essays collected in “*Race, Writing, and Difference*” show that “race” is not a thing. For, if we believe that races exist as things, as categories of being already “there,” we cannot escape the danger of generalizing about observed differences between human beings as if these differences were consistent and determined, a priori. The history of Western discourse on “race” is replete with deductions and presumptions ascertained by “reason” rather than by observation and empiricism; “racial reasoning,” one might say, is reasoning from causes to effects without reference to experience, in terms of a fixed essence. When authors of African descent began to publish imaginative literature in English in the eighteenth century, for example, they confronted a collective and racist text of themselves which Europeans had invented. This helps us to un-

derstand why so very much Anglo-African writing—whether Phillis Wheatley’s elegies, or Olaudah Equiano’s autobiography, or Ignatius Sancho’s epistles—directly addressed European fictions of the African in an attempt to *voice* or speak the African into existence in Western letters. When the African walked into the court of Western letters, she or he was judged in advance by a fixed racist subtext, or pretext, which the African was forced to confront, confirm, or reject. Given that these fictions of racial essence were sanctioned by “science,” the Africans had little hope indeed of speaking themselves free of European fantasies of their “Otherness.”

Our decision to bracket “race” was designed to call attention to the fact that “races,” put simply, do not exist, and that to claim that they do, for whatever misguided reason, is to stand on dangerous ground. Fromm understands this all too well, it seems, judging from the satirical tone of his response. Were there not countries in which the belief in racial essences dictates social and political policy, perhaps I would have found Fromm’s essay amusing and our gesture merely one more token of the academic’s tendency to create distinctions which common sense alone renders unnecessary. The joke, rather, is on Fromm: one’s task is most certainly *not* to remain “permanently quiet”; rather, our task is to utilize language more precisely, to rid ourselves of the dangers of careless usages of problematic terms which are drawn upon to delimit and predetermine the lives and choices of human beings who are not “white.” Fromm’s response only reinforces Todorov’s worry about not bracketing “race” every time it occurs in our texts, because “race” (as each essay subtly shows) simply does not exist.

Todorov argues that “racism” is “a type of behavior which consists in the display of contempt or aggressiveness toward other people on account of physical differences (other than those of sex) between them and oneself” (p. 171). The problem with this definition is that it depends upon the “display” of “contempt” or “aggressiveness” for its effect. Afro-American history is full of examples of “racist” benevolence, paternalism, and sexual attraction which are not always, or only, dependent upon contempt or aggression. Todorov implies that the only racists are those who act with malice for reasons attributable to purportedly essential biological differences. I would say that “racism” exists when one generalizes about the attributes of an individual (and treats him or her accordingly). Such generalizations are based upon a predetermined set of causes or effects thought to be shared by all members of a physically defined group

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who are also assumed to share certain “metaphysical” characteristics: “Skip, sing me one of those old Negro spirituals that you people love so dear,” or “You people sure can *dance*,” or even “Black people play basketball so remarkably well because of their peculiar muscular system coupled with a well-defined sense of rhythm.” These are racist statements, certainly, which can have rather little to do with aggression or contempt in *intent*, even if the effect is contemptible (but often “well-intentioned”). It is the penchant to *generalize* based upon essences perceived as *biological* which defines “racism.” Todorov’s behavioral definition also ignores a host of instances in which behavior is only a second-order reflection of attitude. His definition is curiously limited, and limiting, because it depends upon *physical characteristics* rather than upon the purported nature of a transcendent “metaphysical” *character*. The racist’s error is one of *thought*, not merely, or only, of behavior.

Todorov’s objection to our failure to bracket “race” every time it appears in the issue is somewhat surprising. The editors of *Critical Inquiry* and I argued at length about doing so. We decided, however, that our point would be made most efficiently and effectively in the issue’s title and in my introduction. Thereafter, each time the words “race” or “racial” appeared, we expected our readers to bracket the terms themselves. Since each essay, in its own way, demonstrates that “race” is not a thing, perhaps each essayist chose not to bracket the term so as to achieve this effect more subtly.

Whereas Fromm would upbraid me for placing quotation marks around “race,” then; Todorov wonders aloud if I have forgotten my own admonitions about the dangers of misusing this term and reintroduced it into my essay without thinking about it! I find it amusing to respond to both criticisms at once, even if I can take neither too seriously. Todorov, however, raises a more substantial matter which I should like to address squarely.

Todorov questions my belief that “we must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures.” He accuses me of presupposing, thereby, that “the content of a thought depends on the color of the thinker’s skin” (p. 177). If so, he continues, then I am at fault for saying implicitly that “only birds of a feather can think together,” and thereby I “practice the very racialism one was supposed to be combatting.” This, he concludes, “can only be described as cultural apartheid: in order to analyze black literature, one must use concepts formulated by black authors” (p. 177). Todorov’s reasoning here seems to me specious. It is intended, it seems, to show that I am unwittingly guilty of the very “racialism” that I condemn: “if ‘racial differences’ do not exist,” he asks, then “how can they possibly influence literary texts?” (p. 172). Todorov is being disingenuous here, and is guilty of shallow thinking about a serious problem for all theorists of so-called “noncanonical” literatures. Todorov attempts nothing less than a neocolonial recuperation

of the sense of difference upon which a truly *new* criticism of world literature must be granted.

The term that I use to qualify my assertion is *attitudes*: “how attitudes toward [pointed or purported] racial differences generate and structure texts by us *and* about us” (“Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes,” p. 15). There is no question that representations of black character-types in European and American literature have a history—and a life—of their own, generating repetitions, revisions, and refutations. Within African and Afro-American literature, there can be no question that the *texts* that comprise these traditions repeat, refute, and revise key, canonical tropes and topoi peculiar to those *literary* traditions.

The term that is unstated in my sentence is “textual”: we must turn to the black *textual* tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures. I believed that when I wrote that sentence; I believe it even more firmly now, especially since confronted with this remark of Todorov’s: “In order to analyze football players, should we use only ‘indigenous’ concepts and theories?” (p. 177).

It is naive to think that the theorists of Afro-American or African literature can utilize theories of criticism generated by critics of European or American literature without regard for the textual *specificity* of those theories. Since Todorov has learned something from Anthony Appiah’s essay, I can do no better than to cite Appiah once again, on what he rather cleverly has called “the Naipaul fallacy,” a passage which Todorov for some reason conveniently ignores: “nor should we endorse a *more sinister line . . .* : the post-colonial legacy which requires us to show that African literature is worthy of study precisely (but only) because it is fundamentally the same as European literature” (quoted in Gates, p. 14; my emphasis). Appiah then concludes with devastating impact that we must not ask “the reader to understand Africa by embedding it in European culture” (quoted in Gates, p. 15).

Why would Todorov ignore these crucial segments of Appiah’s argument, which I quote with great favor? Precisely because he wishes to debunk my position, hoping to unveil its supposed “racialism,” and because he has failed to understand the necessity of a task which Appiah, Houston Baker, Wole Soyinka, and I (among others) believe to be absolutely essential if there is to be created something that is validly “African” in contemporary literary theory. To deny us the right even to make the attempt is either for Todorov to be engaged in bad faith, or to be implicated in one more instance of what Appiah calls the “post-colonial legacy.”

I have never written, or thought, that “the content of a thought depends on the color of the thinker’s skin” (p. 177). Only a fool—and a racist—would think that. Since I am well known in the profession for encouraging students and critics of all ethnic and cultural groups to write about black literature, I find Todorov’s attempt to be amusing quite

disturbing. Since Todorov has decided what it is I think, perhaps I should state my position bluntly.

Theories of criticism are text-specific: the New Critics tended to explicate the metaphysical poets, the structuralists certain forms of narrative, and deconstructionists found their ideal field of texts among the Romantics. While each school of criticism claims for itself what Todorov calls "a universal aspiration," in practice European and American critics tend to write about European and American writers of one specific sort or another. (Todorov, to his credit, mentions Chester Himes' *For Love of Imabelle* as an example of the thriller in *The Poetics of Prose*, but only in passing. Sartre's fantasies of "the being" of "the" African in *Black Orpheus* are racist, as is his consideration of Richard Wright's "split" audience in *What Is Literature?* A passing nod, and racist musings, however, are at least *something*; Todorov and Sartre are among the very few [white] critics in this century who have even *read* the works of the black traditions.) This observation has been made so many times before that it is a commonplace of the history of criticism. Why does Todorov choose to parody this point? So that he can claim that I am a racist.

My position is clear: to theorize about black literatures, we must do what all theorists do. And that is to read the texts that comprise our literary tradition, formulate (by reasoning from observed facts) useful principles of criticism from within that textual tradition, then draw upon these to read the texts that make up that tradition. *All* theorists do this, and we must as well. Todorov's position—let me call it the neocolonial position—pretends that "where [analytical concepts] come from" is irrelevant to the literary critic (p. 177). My position is that for a critic of black literature to borrow European or American theories of literature regardless of "*where they come from*" is for that critic to be trapped in a relation of intellectual indenture or colonialism. (Please note, M. Todorov, that I wrote "critic of black literature," and not "black critic.") One must *know* one's textual terrain before it can be explored; one must know one's literary tradition before it can be theorized about.

What can be at all controversial—or "racist"—about my position? I believe that Todorov finds it problematic because it implies that what European or American critics pretend or claim to be their subject—the wondrous institution of "literature"—in practice means only the branch of that vast institution occupied by "white" authors. To discourage us from reading our own texts in ways suggested by those very texts is to encourage new forms of neocolonialism. To attempt such readings is neither to suggest that "black" texts have no "white" antecedents nor that the Western literary and critical traditions have no relevance for critics of "other" literatures. Several aspects of formal literary language-use seem to be common to all formal literatures: for instance, the structure of a metaphor, *style indirect libre*, even the *skaz* of the Russian Formalists,

it seems obvious to me, are the same in “noncanonical” literatures. My method does not mean that we have to reinvent the wheel. No, we turn to our literary tradition to define its specificity, to locate what I call its *signifying black difference*. The critic of black literature who does not do this is the critic destined to recapitulate unwittingly the racist stereotype of Minstrel Man, a Tzvetan Todorov in black face. And who would want to look so foolish?

Todorov upbraids us for not charting the history of the critical schools of thought which attempted to explain literary differences by racial differences, specifically the work of Josef Nadler, Franz Koch, Clemens Lugowski, and Heinz Kindermann. While such an exposition and critique of their work would have been appropriate as an essay, it was thought by the editors to be inappropriate in my introduction, since I was attempting there to sketch the effects of accounting for *black* literary differences by “racial” differences in the works of white racist critics. My references to Taine, as I state, are taken from Walter Jackson Bate’s introduction to his excerpts from *The History of English Literature*. (I treat Taine at length in the forthcoming second volume of *Black Letters and Western Criticism*.) I cited Bate only to suggest to the acute and sensitive reader the origins of his unfortunate and racist statement (which serves as my first epigraph) about “the progressive trivialization of topics” (such as “The Trickster Figure in Chicano and Black Literature”) which scholars now discuss at the annual gatherings of the Modern Language Association. Bate believes that such topics have helped to create what for him is “the crisis in English studies,” but these, for many of us, constitute the beginnings of the *salvation* of English studies, which heretofore have been by white people, about white people, and for white people. I am sorry that the point I sought to make escaped Todorov. I was engaged in a black cultural game, M. Todorov, one known as “signifying.” I was *signifying upon* Bate, as my black readers would know from their familiarity with this coded exchange. As Louis Armstrong said, “If you have to ask . . . !”

Finally, Todorov wonders why so many of our authors “see racialism as a consequence of Enlightenment philosophy and humanism. This affirmation seems to me not only inaccurate but dangerous” (p. 173). I cannot speak for other essayists who make this affirmation, but I can state why it is true when we examine the instance of the *author* of African descent and the European critical reception to his or her work. (Todorov, by the way, has much homework to do if he *really* believes, as he says he does, that “It was the abolition of slavery which led to the rise of racism in the United States” [p. 173]. Racism, rather, is *simultaneous* with “racial” slavery.) For in the Enlightenment even the most “egalitarian” thinkers argued that the production of imaginative literature was necessary for the African to demonstrate her or his equality of “mental capacity” with the European. To be antislavery was not the same thing as not being a racist: one could very well oppose slavery yet believe black people to be

innately or *naturally* inferior. To make this affirmation, as Todorov does, and to seek to valorize the Enlightenment is not only historically inaccurate but dangerous. As I try to show in my book, *Black Letters and the Enlightenment*, racism and—dare I say it?—*logocentrism* marched arm in arm to delimit black people in perhaps the most pernicious way of all: to claim that they were subhuman, that they were “a different species of men,” as Hume put it so plainly, because they could not “write” literature. Did Kant stop being a racist, stop thinking that there existed a natural, predetermined relation between “stupidity” and “blackness” (his terms) just because he wrote *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*? Hardly! Indeed, one might say that Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* functions to deconstruct, for the black reader, Kant’s *Foundations*, revealing it to be just one more example of the remarkable capacity of European philosophers to conceive of “humanity” in ideal terms (white, male), yet despise, abhor, colonize, or exploit human beings who are not “ideal.” Todorov’s position is a classic example of Baker’s definition of the “rationalist” who “claims to avoid general views or judgments of ideology,” when all along he has reproduced an ideology of egalitarianism and universalism which seeks to bracket the *soundings* of the critical voice of the Other—why else question our attempt to redefine “theory” in our own images, in our own voices? How *else* are we to define theories of our own literatures but to step out of the discourse of the white masters and speak in the critical language of the black vernacular? I agree with Baker that this challenge confronts Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, just as it confronts Baker and Gates. We see it as a problem, as an opportunity, as possibility, while they do not . . . yet. To adopt Todorov’s ideology of egalitarianism and universalism is to allow our discourse to be incorporated into the discourse of Europe and then to be naturalized (seemingly) and colonized. Great danger lurks there. It was Soyinka who advised us to beware of the neocolonial wolf, dressed in the sheep’s clothing of “universality.”

* * *

As for Houston “Caliban” Baker’s *own* “triple play,” let me, first, thank him for the twin compliments about the import of *Critical Inquiry*’s willingness to open its pages, as Derrida says so clearly, to subjects not addressed heretofore, and, second, for his kind words about my own “vernacular” theory of literature, expounded upon in *The Signifying Monkey*. But let me state clearly that my call for vernacular theories of the Other was intended, as I state it to be, as an example of where he and I found it necessary and fruitful to turn to escape the neocolonialism of the “egalitarian criticism” of Todorov and company, whose claims to “the universal” somehow always end up lopping off our arms, legs, and pug noses, muffling the peculiar timbres of our voices, and trying to straighten our always already kinky hair, and not to the essays that comprise the

text of "*Race, Writing, and Difference*. But Caliban is nothing if not a debunker.

With Caliban, we can say:

You taught me language; and my profit on 't
Is, we know how to debunk: the red plague gird you,
For learning us your criticism!

No, Houston, there are no vernacular critics collected here; nor did you expect there to be. Todorov's response forces me to realize that the discursive dualism that you criticize is still urgently needed. For we must attack the racism of egalitarianism and universalism in as many languages as we can utter. Todorov can't even hear us, Houston, when we talk *his* academic talk; how he gonna hear us if we "talk *that* talk," the talk of the black idiom? Maybe you think we should give up, but I am still an optimist. Things is just gettin' innerestin', as LeRoi says.