

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Black Literature and Literacy Theory

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/00r6f328>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 14(2)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Nama, Charles

Publication Date

1985

Peer reviewed

BOOK REVIEW

Black Literature & Literary Theory, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Methuen: New York 1984. 328 pages.

The cardinal function of literary criticism is to illuminate works of art. Literature of the African diaspora has attracted the interest of literary critics representing a broad spectrum of critical opinion. Critical theories as diverse as the Formalist, Marxist, Psychoanalytic and Structuralist, have contributed to the study of these literatures. The biggest challenge confronting critics of Black literature today, is to devise a critical theory which has its base in black culture. Most of our major artists such as Chinua Achebe, Mongo Beti, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison and George Lamming have been influenced by their cultures. Consequently, any valid interpretations of their works must be cognizant of the milieu from which they evolved.

In his introductory essay to Black Literature & Literary Theory entitled "Criticism in the Jungle," Gates defines "black" as "African, Caribbean and Afro-American." He states that the text attempts to answer, implicitly, "how 'applicable' is contemporary literary theory to the reading of African, Caribbean and Afro-American literary traditions" (p. 3). The response to this question is conveyed in a variety of brilliant essays from a wide range of scholar-critics who illustrate an excellent mastery of contemporary theories and the Afrocentric aesthetic postulations. During the Black Arts Movement of the 60s, Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Hoyt Fuller and Addison Gayle called for the conceptualization of a critical theory divorced from Western theories. Black Literature and Literary Theory also partially addresses that question.

The first essay by the Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka, discusses the language of the social critic. After analysing Roland Barthes' definition of langue and parole, Soyinka expresses his disenchantment with some critics who have been misinterpreting his works such as Gerald Moore and Bernth Lindfors. The reader is left with no precise view on the "applicability" of Barthes' theory on "black letters." In contrast, James Sneads' "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture" (pp. 59-79) is one of the most illuminating in the entire collection. This essay will lend more credence to those who have been advocating a theory of interpretation which has its base in the culture. After successfully challenging Hegel's fallacious statement that "black culture simply did not exist in the same sense as European culture did (p. 62), Snead discusses the relevance of "repetition" in black culture. He states, "Repetitive words and rhythms have

long been recognised as a focal constituent of African music and its American descendants -- slave songs, blues and jazz" (p. 68). Using as illustrations, artists who use this motif in their works such as James Brown and John Coltrane among others, Snead underscores its pivotal role in the culture. He also successfully illustrates how motifs from the oral literature have been used by contemporary artists such as Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed and Leon Forrest in their works.

Structuralism has not fared well among critics of Black Literature. The pioneering work of Sunday Anozie (See Structural Models & African Poetics (1982) and his essay in Black Literature and Literary Theory (pp. 105-125) will not encourage critics of Black literature to embrace structuralist poetics. The strident rebuttal by Anthony Appiah to Anozie's application of structuralism to African works (pp. 127-150) explains the fundamental suspicions by critics of Black literature on the "applicability" and relevance of this theory to works in the literary canon. Part of the problem in using structural models in African & Afro-American criticism lies with the theory itself. Briefly, structuralism perceives of a work of art as an absolute autonomous system of structures which must be "decodified." A literary text is regarded as a finite combinatory system of language. Some structuralists subscribe to the concept that the analysis of a work of art must be of the "inner structure" of the language system that is used to produce it. Hence, the key to the techniques of structuralism is to be found in structural linguistics. Saussure's suggestion that rites, customs and similar social phenomena can be studied in ways similar to analyses of language appealed to many structuralists. Anozie belongs to this school. The diffidence about structuralist theories among writers and critics of black literature stems from the fact that to them, structuralism seems a romantic escape which eschews social and political commitment.

An area of structuralism beside intertextuality which might be useful to critics of black literature is the studies on myth and folktale by Levi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp. In Morphology of the Folktale, Propp introduces a method of analyzing a folktale which consists of breaking it into its component parts and analyzing the relation of one part to the whole. Jay Edwards' essay in Black Literature and Literary Theory entitled "Structural Analysis of the Afro-American trickster tale" (pp. 80-103) also reflects this approach.

Part II of Black Literature and Literary Theory entitled "Practice" contains brilliant essays on African-American Literature by Bowen, Johnson, Baker, Washington, Wills, Stepto and Gates. They interpret works in the literary canon from a variety of perspectives. Barbara Johnson and Mary Helen Washington for example, articulate the seminal role of the

"feminist voice" which has been ignored by scholars and critics. Their in-depth analyses of Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God and Gwendolyn Brooks' Maud Martha underscore the pivotal role of these texts in the corpus of African-American literature. Recent critical studies such as Mari Evans' Black Women Writers (1950-1980) will undoubtedly broaden the scope of literary theories applied to black literature in general and the works by women writers in particular.

The most provocative essay in Black Literature and Literary Theory is written by Henry Louis Gates Jr. captioned, "The blackness of blackness: a critique of the sign and the signifying monkey" (pp. 285-321). In her fascinating introduction to Black Arts and Black Aesthetics, Carolyn Fowler argues that works in Black literature need new value judgements which are cognizant of the cultural artifacts that have shaped the artistic sensibilities of the writers who produced them. In 1973, in a major essay, "The Forms of Things Unknown" (See Understanding the New Black Poetry (pp. 3-69), Stephen Henderson devised a critical theory for reading Black poetry. Gates' essay in Black Literature and Literary Theory is a major, pioneering work in the same direction. He submits that his theory of interpretation is from "within the black cultural matrix." He examines the role of the Signifying Monkey in black culture. He writes, "The Signifying Monkey is a trickster figure, of the order of the trickster figure in Yoruba mythology, Esu-Elegbara in Nigeria, Legba among the Fon of Dahomey, whose New World Figurations - Exu in Brazil, Echu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba in the pantheon of the Loa of Vaudou in Haiti, and Papa LaBas in the Loa of Hoodoo in the United States" (p. 286). The Signifying Monkey is also the "signifier," he who wreaks havoc upon the "signified." Gates also explicates the Afro-American narrative parody and then employs it in reading Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo which he considers "as a signifying pastiche of the Afro-American narrative tradition" (p. 289). Drawing from a variety of sources in black culture, Gates establishes a solid theoretical framework and then analyses the work of several major Afro-American writers. Ellison, he contends "is our Great Signifier, naming things by indirection and troping throughout his works" (p. 292). Ellison in his "fictions signifies upon Wright by parodying Wright's literary structures through repetition and difference" (p. 293). In a very detailed analysis of Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo which parodies the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, Gates suggests that Mumbo Jumbo is both a book about texts and a book of texts, a composite narrative composed of sub-texts, pre-texts, post-texts and narratives-within-narratives" (p. 299). Gates' illuminating analyses of this seminal work are informed by sociological, linguistic and historical data from black culture.

Black Literature and Literary Theory is a major, pioneering, provocative text to students of Black literature in particular and contemporary theories in general. Its major weakness is that it has no essay on Afro-Caribbean literature, especially if we consider Gates' definition of "black" as a metaphor of the African diaspora. Interestingly, it also confirms what most critics have been advocating for a long time, namely, that some contemporary theories certainly illuminate works in Black literature but the most rewarding theories are those which have their base in Black culture.

Charles Nama
State University of New York
at Binghamton

BOOKS RECEIVED

- David Cauter, Under the Skin: The Death of White Rhodesia (Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1984), 447 pp.
- Gervese Clarence-Smith, The Third Portuguese Empire, 1825-1975: A Study in Economic Imperialism (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1985), 246 pp.
- Jeff Crisp, The Story of An African Working Class: Ghanaian Miners' Struggles, 1870-1980 (Zed Press: London, 1984), 200 pp.
- Nloses Dlamini, Robben Island, Hell-Hole: Reminiscences of a Political Prisoner in South Africa (Africa World Press: Trenton, N.J., 1985), 202 pp.
- Tore Linne Eriksen, The Political Economy of Namibia: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography (Scandinavian Institute of African Studies: Uppsala, Sweden, 1985), 423 pp.
- Hans Hedlund and Mats Lundhal, Migration and Change in Rural Zambia (Scandinavian Institute of African Studies: Uppsala, Sweden, 1983), 107 pp.
- Gaim Kibreab, African Refugees: Reflections on the African Refugee Problem (Africa World Press: Trenton, N.J., 1985), 129 pp.