

The Politics of Literary Space: Native American Tolerance, Jewish American Empowerment and African American Legitimization

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In the United States since the 1960s literatures on the margins, such as African American, Native American, Asian American, Latin American and Arab American have renegotiated with white mainstream literature for literary and cultural space. The new cultural and literary strategies of survival developed by marginalized literatures have helped them to grapple successfully with dominant white male literature of writers such as James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway et. al. Undoubtedly, a lot of the controversy is inextricably linked to identity politics on the national level. The culture wars in the U.S. are basically an agenda of the minorities and women groups for larger representation in government. Ethnic groups increasingly feel left out as they find themselves unable to get a share of the American pie. The disciplines of psychology and sociology too have significantly fuelled the politics of identity by introducing new labels such as "hyphenated Americans," "cultural space," "ethnicity," and "roles" thus constructing an ideology of difference.

The psychological rhetoric of difference could be seen, at one level, as a symptom of the tremendous social change brought about by post-war economic

boom in America. Quick social changes which have dislocated identity, now demand renegotiation with increasingly newer possibilities. Robert Jay Lifton identifies a new protean personality in post-modern times, a personality that does not have a stable core; and, therefore, constantly changes to readjust to quick changes in culture, politics and environment. But it is not always a protean identity that renegotiates social structures. A counter tendency to find a stable identity within social flux also leads many ethnic Americans to seek a fundamentalist identity within ethnic cultures or construct some kind of ethnic pan-nationalism. The fears such tendencies generate have been voiced by Samuel P. Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations*, seen by many as prophetic after the 11th September suicide attacks on the World Trade Center in Manhattan.¹

The stable “inner directed” individual of David Riesman finds the pressure of traditional identities mounting.² He seeks solace in the “born again” fundamental identities that promise release by clearly identifying the other as evil and alien. Since the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in the 1950s the “unsettling of American families,” a phrase used by Robert Gitlin, has created a vertigo of flux in which the “other-directed” individual seeks direction from the mass media and subcultures. New cultural labels also relocate identity in the United States. The shift from the pejorative term “oriental” to “race” brings into play racial identities that are predominantly Asian. Immigrant cultures of South Asia are all grouped together under the broad rubric of Asian American, which ignores differences between say Nissei Japanese Americans and the Hong Kong elite.

The “ethnicization” of America places strange identity labels on literatures, which might not have had much in common amongst themselves. If culture is

something that evolves over a period of time and is amorphous, then it would be rather difficult to see a lot of new cultural labels as truly cultural. What could one say of diverse cultural epithets such as "rock culture", "European-American culture," "hip-hop culture" or "Asian American culture?" Such generic terms invent an identity that may not have a clear historical perspective.

A cultural diversity in America has always been regarded as a healthy manifestation of a liberal tradition. It seeks to reaffirm certain democratic ideals of justice, liberty, freedom and cooperation within the framework of a single nation. Cooperation sustains the democratic ideal by placing a high premium on a common purpose that is clearly evident in social construction. It is possible to see many exclusionist programs of social reconstruction pursued by certain radical and conservative traditions as cultural fundamentalism. Multiculturalism, if it must survive, ought to seek a suitable partner. And the virtues of the liberal American tradition seem more suitable for ethnicity to help it redefine the American literary canon and create a new democratic ideal. But are the proponents of multiculturalism and the liberal tradition ideal partners? Only time can tell. A conservative American position argues against cultural diversity and believes it to be antithetical to assimilation. Cultural diversity, John J. Miller points out, prevents the Americanization of immigrants.³ Bilingual education in schools may create "global village people" but not truly public spirited Americans.

Culturally diverse literatures and traditions center on the notion of otherness or alterity. The American liberal tradition places the idea of assimilation as central to American solidarity. It is difficult to reconcile the notion of otherness with the idea of assimilation and American solidarity. Harold Bloom

finds no place for cultural or political ideology in literary criticism and campaigns for the restoration of aesthetic standards. In an "Elegiac Conclusion" to *The Western Canon*, Bloom attacks "professors of hip-hop" "clones of Gallic-Germanic theory," "ideologues of gender and of various sexual persuasions" and "multiculturalists unlimited." He wryly concludes that though this movement in the American academia might be fraught with dangers to departments of English, the "Balkanization of literary studies is irreversible."⁴ Blaming the politicization of literary theory, he lambastes its resurgent "social energies," which like Freud's libido, Bloom finds a myth. Bloom wonders:

Either there were aesthetic values, or there are only the over-determination of race, class, and gender. You must choose, for if you believe that all value ascribed to poems or plays or novels and stories is only a mystification in the service of the ruling class, then why should you read at all rather than go forth to serve the desperate needs of the exploited classes? The idea that you benefit the insulted and injured by reading someone of their own origins rather than reading Shakespeare is one of the oddest illusions ever promoted by or in our schools.⁵

Bloom's campaign for autonomous aesthetic values, free from ideology and social leanings, find few takers today in America, where the academic climate is rife with Gallic-Germanic theory. Bloom, nevertheless, fails to recognize the scarred faults of race, class, nationality and gender running deep in American society. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., believes that the only way to transcend the situation is to educate people and develop in society a "civic culture that respects both differences and commonalties." He wisely concludes that there can be "no tolerance without respect — and no respect without knowledge."⁶

These ideological controversies are not only reflected in society and government but also in ethnic literatures and literary theories of the last decade. A large body of Native American writing reflects a kind of precarious alterity that is bolstered on the twin pillars of a pragmatic tolerance and healthy cooperation. Minority critics, however, see this literary construction as a growing hegemony of a white majority. Jewish American literature does not reflect this ideological position. It sees higher education and economic success as modes of cultural assimilation and empowerment, a way to realize the American Dream. Afro-American writing continues to legitimize minority texts while Asian American literature tries to explore areas beyond autobiography. Of the three ethnic literatures discussed in subsequent pages Native American writing seems to offer some hope to an America wracked by culture wars.

1. Native American Writing: Tolerance of the Other

A cultural uniqueness and long historical background of Native American writing seem ideally suited to support a postcolonial discourse. The way Native American writing handles the trope of alterity and constructs identity offers us an insight into building bridges rather than “digging trenches to fortify cultural borders.” It is true that the politics of identity informs us of our race, clan, and religion. And yet as Todd Gitlin tells us in *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, all this must exist within a “polyglot America.”⁷

It is possible to see Native American tradition reflected in its oral history (chants, ceremonies and songs), autobiographical narratives (life histories and story cycles) and fictional narratives (novels and lyrics) as representative of its people's worldview. This construction of Native American literature dis-

covers the physical and spiritual harmony in tribal communities by valorizing the collective remembering of its peoples and their symbiotic relationship with the land. Studies based on this ideological position do not see the differences that exist in the literatures and traditions of various Indian tribes such as the Navahos, Cherokees, Sioux, Osage, Langua, Pueblo, Blackfeet and Gros Ventura. It is no longer tenable to see Native American culture and tradition as a single unified body and then to place an all-inclusive pattern on it.

Historically it is possible to see Native American fiction as passing through three distinct stages of development — assimilation in the American mainstream, the return of the native and acceptance of the dominant white culture. The assimilationist stage belongs to the early part of the twentieth century where Indian cultural uniqueness was rejected in favor of white values. This position was difficult to justify and hard to sustain. Writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as Chief Simon Pokagon, Simon M. Oskison and John Joseph Mathews (Osage) shared in this experiment. Chief Pokagon encouraged the misconception that Native Americans were no different from white Americans. A more plausible premise of Simon Oskison, that hard work could lead to the realization of the American dream of social success and economic wealth, was more popular. Some writers such as Joseph Mathews were apologetic of certain kinds of Indian life styles. The rejection of the white world and return to the dominant beliefs and practices of Native Indians begins in the 1930s, and acquires the force of a social protest in subsequent decades. This trend is referred to as the “The Return of the Native,” since it rejected the missionization and the construction of a heathen Native Indian identity. Writers such as D’Arcy McNickle and N. Scott Momaday promoted this idea. But most Anglo-Saxon Christians found Native American radicalism and its accompanying sense of self-determination in the

construction of identity both unpalatable and unacceptable. McNickle's home-grown radicalism did not find many takers even in his hometown Montana. But McNickle made a point. Social assimilation, in the final analysis ought not to take away an individual's right to self-determination. Only when society denies this right conflict arises.

It is seemingly impossible to reject the historical process of missionization and its impact on the construction of Native American identity. Missionization not only provided a Christian vocabulary of justification but also constructed a non-Christian, heathen identity of the Native Indians. Early Christian European settlers were convinced that Native Indians did not possess a soul and therefore they were implanted with a soul upon conversion. The West created the idea of the American Indian just as it invented America. The notion of a westward expansion gave rise to political and demographic problems. American Indian land was taken by force and American Indians were put into reservations. It must be remembered that American Indians always possessed different languages, different worldviews and extensive philosophical constructs much before the first white settlers set foot on the New World. The white settlements radically altered the world of the Native Americans. They found themselves placed between a remembered past of negotiable freedom and an observable present of unsolicited industrial revolution. Now they had to renegotiate their communities and culture in a new setting. They also had to quickly understand that "they could neither flee from white society nor contemplate an alternate world peopled only by Indians."⁸

Mourning Dove, a Salishan woman writer from the Colville Indian, has this to say in her autobiography in the early 1930s:

[T]here are two things I am most grateful for in my life. The first is that I was born a descendant of the genuine Americans, the Indians; the second, that my birth happened in the year 1888 I was born long ago to have known people who lived in the ancient way before everything started to change.⁹

Dove reaches across to a large audience of whites and non-whites as she belongs to the first generation that witnessed the inescapable presence of Euro-Americans as conquerors of the New World. Between 1900 and 1930, people like Dove had tried to preserve this ancient ways “before everything started to change.”

Scientific documentation of Indian societies after 1850 created a real encounter of Euro-Americans with Indian communities. Lewis Morgan's book *League of the Ho De No Sau Nee* published in 1851 was perhaps the first interview-based account of Indian communal traditions and customs. And this ethnographic activity was accelerated by the Smithsonian Institution's display of Native American exhibits in the latter half of the 1890s. By 1890s, American universities began to offer research degrees in anthropology with studies in Native American culture and tradition as one of their major areas of study. Research in anthropology transformed a mythologized subject into an area of scientific investigation. By 1902 Morris K. Jessup, the President of the American Museum of Natural History speaking at the Congress of Americanists in the United States, noted that studies in Native American tradition and culture were a “great field of discovery” and that it had already become “a science.” It is interesting to note that the destruction of the Indian way of life, when fossilized in a museum process, acquired a new meaning in the context of manifest destiny. The dehistoricization of the Indian people

into “racial others” effectively incorporated them into the American creed.

The idea of discovering the Native Indians by settlers imprisoned them outside history and society of the civilized world that espoused social progress as its main tenet. Native American culture was derided, seen as inferior and its people quarantined. To counter this Zitkala-sa (Gertrude Bonnin) wrote an essay in *The Atlantic Monthly* called “Why I Am a Pagan” in which she eulogized the virtues of a pagan Indian life as against the bigotry of the Christian creed. She recalled the visit of a Christian visitor who used “jangling phrases of a bigoted creed” while she thought of the “excursions into the natural gardens where the voice of the Great Spirit is heard in the twittering of birds, the rippling of mighty waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers.”¹⁰ She celebrated the Indian life in her stories such as *Old Indian Legends* (1901) and *American Indian Stories* (1922). Dove followed this tradition by publishing *Co-ge-wa-a, the Half Blood* (1927) that brought out the virtuousness of the Indians and the moral degradation of the whites. In her *Coyote Stories*, Dove narrates some more Salish tales. In 1916 Lucy Thompson wrote a historical account of her Klamath tribe and how its simple life was corrupted by European influences. In 1920s Luther Standing Bear wrote a memoir *My People, the Sioux* authenticating its contents by his personal narration. In this book Standing Bear valorized the intelligence and virtues of the Indian people; “The Indian has just as many ounces of brains as his white brother”, he said.

As the Native American communities grew in the 1930-1940 period a new construction of their culture and tradition began to take place. This new activism led to the founding of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) in November 1944, which tried to,

Enlighten the public toward understanding of the Indian race; to preserve Indian cultural values, to seek an equitable adjustment of tribal affairs, to secure and to preserve Indian rights under Indian treaties with the United States; and otherwise promote the common welfare of the American Indians.¹¹

The trope of acceptance in evaluating Native American tradition and culture emerges in the late 1970s. The earlier radicalism gives way to themes of reconstruction of Native American tradition and a growing belief on reconstructing social and individual identities from within. James Welch, Leslie Mormon Silko and Gerald Vizenor campaign for social reconstruction, though Silko is a past master in this art. His story "Lullaby" escapes an ethical framework of Christian discourse and enters a primitive cosmology of Native American metaphysics. If escape from self and others, desire for renewal in a primitive cosmology and return to self and others are some of the ways out for multiculturalism it might find many sympathizers but few takers.

Yet another, but a partly convincing, explanation could be that Silko's world does not see the "other" as white but as the errant and ignorant Indian who needs to be brought back to the rich resources of his cultural past through gentle persuasion. The journey back to rejuvenation of self and subsequently of culture can never be easy. The reconstruction of the self from within, the ability to fight the evil inside — in a world where the "other" is easily identifiable and the evil within is difficult to see — are undoubtedly courageous acts. And Silko does it with ubiquitous equanimity and Native American poise. The method of appropriating Silko and most of Native American writing might seem partly convincing but to most critics it becomes intellectually unsatisfying. They see in this interpretation a hidden agenda. It is a popular

assumption that Native American culture and tradition are a conglomerate whole from which writers draw sustenance. Contrary to popular belief Native American writer cultures and traditions are not only rich and unique but also diverse. Each Native American writer, though placed under a single rubric, may not share the same cultural values, assumptions or sensibility with other fellow writers.

Even writers such as Silko and Welsh though they seem closely associated, draw sustenance from different sources of Native American traditions. Silko builds her story around the Laguna ethos while James Welch draws sustenance from the Blackfeet and Gros Ventura traditions. Beneath the smooth skin of a comic surrealism Welsh hides serious issues — economic disadvantage, dispossession and social marginalization. Economic disadvantage prevents Native Americans to acquire a college education, which in turn destroys potential and closes possibilities of self-actualization. Defining ethnic identities are issues easily forgotten in America by literary critics who do not see individual freedom threatened by a liberal democracy that is pre-supposedly harnessed for individual happiness. Welch's novels poignantly share the sense of loss of a world that is about to vanish or is on the verge of vanishing. Alienated from their environment, protagonists in Welsh's novels escape into a world of sex and alcoholism when nothing works for them. Both the novels, *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979), reveal the unrealized potential of protagonists — how they begin their careers as star athletes but afterwards lead aimless and dissolute lives. The unhurried acceptance of disaster, a valorized timeless ennui, and an unnerving nonchalance to the twin themes of life and death give these novels a surprisingly distinctive quality. Living on the psychological fringes of white culture, Welch's protagonists shape the mood and structure of the novels by their responses to

the world around them.

Welsh and Silko stand poles apart in their construction of alterity and in their attempts to provide alternate solutions to a multiculturalist America where covert forms of segregation and suppression of the non-whites still continue. In their own unique ways, they try to reverse the formation of cultural identities, which have been hitherto based on racial stereotyping. Welsh uses difference and violence to construct cultural identity of Native Americans, while Silko employs themes of cooperation and symbiosis. And if Silko's fiction stands at the center of critical discourses of identity formation then there is still some hope. If this is the direction she is showing then this is the direction America must take. If cultural diversity, built upon Silko's wisdom, could help free individuals to work creatively with others then as Richard Rorty affirms in "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism" there could exist the "possibility of as yet undreamt of, ever more diverse, forms of human happiness."

Rorty pragmatism outside the United States might be highly contentious, but within the United States, his pragmatism finds wide acceptance. In the early 1980s debate between scientific culture and literary culture, Rorty sought a positive way out. In *Consequences of Pragmatism Essays* (1972-1980), after cracking open the hidden agenda of "Philosophy in America Today," Rorty concludes:

.... I simply want to suggest that we keep pragmatic tolerance going as long as we can — that both sides see the other as honest, if misguided, colleagues, doing their best to bring light to a dark time. In particular we should remind ourselves that although there are relations between academic politics and real politics, they are not tight enough to justify

carrying the passions of the latter over into the former.¹²

In these "dark time[s]" of suspicion and hate, a pragmatic tolerance that might lead to a healthy cooperation even if it constructs a precarious alterity is more than welcome. Silko's subtle advocacy of this idea through her fiction holds promise in providing answers to some rather difficult questions. Zitkala-sa puts it succinctly that the "near kinship with the rest of humanity" and "the great brotherhood of mankind" are the only options of our time.¹³

2. Jewish American Writing: Economic Success, Cultural Assimilation and Empowerment

As one of the dumb, voiceless ones I speak. One of the millions of immigrants beating, beating out their hearts at your gates for a breath of understanding.

America and I, Anzia Yezierska

The Jewish writer is a vanishing breed in America. In the last two decades Jewish-American writing has increasingly lost its ethnic identity and has become more assimilationist and diverse. The issues that trouble Chicano/a writing or Afro-American writing are not of much concern anymore to a supposedly Jewish writer in America. Still residual Jewish themes such as the German holocaust, Judaism, craving for *the shikshe* and strong family ties do enter Jewish writing. The Jewish writer speaks more as an assimilated American than as a dispossessed alien. It would be rather difficult to define the shared Jewish sensibilities of writers like Nathaniel West, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Saul Bellow, Grace Paley, E. L. Doctorow, Henry Roth, Cynthia Ozick, Herbert Gold, Anzia Yezierska, James Levine and Ronald Sukenick, than to bring out their individual uniqueness.

The Ethnic Debate

The question of Jewishness in America has been seen both as an ethnic and a religious issue addressed differently by Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jewish groups. Recent debates centering on the politics of imperialism and postcolonial theory have analyzed the question of ethnicity more closely than religion. Postcolonial discourses have not only highlighted the issue of ethnicity but also brought up associated themes such as race, marginality and formation of cultural identity. The postcolonial debate centers largely on the implication and meaning of ethnicity. It is still argued whether ethnicity applies to,

1. only subjugated people,
2. all peoples,
3. indigenous people of a conquered country or
4. all those who participate in the imperialist enterprise.

Werner Sollors in *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* argues that ethnicity includes diverse social groups and not just subjugated ones. This somewhat all-inclusive perspective challenges the binary mode of thinking about ethnicity that only a single ethnic group dominates in society. Sollors repudiates this conventionally held view that only a single ethnic group always stands at the center of society and that others are at the margins. "It is well worth it," he states, "to interpret America not narrowly as immigration but more broadly as ethnic diversity and include the pre-Columbian inhabitants of the continent, the kidnapped Africans and their descendants, and the Chicanos of the Southwest" as well.¹⁴ Even if ethnicity is employed as a linguistic tool to stigmatize other groups (ethnic-heathen; non-ethnic-normal) the fact remains that ethnic identities invariably overlap.

In *The Hard Road to Renewal*¹⁵ Stuart Hall rejects the idea of an essential ethnic individual and together with it the associated binary opposites of black/white or Anglo/non-Anglo. Cultural studies aim at studying the process of representation — what represents the ethnic group or individual? And what is the method of such representation? Recently the area has expanded to include discursive methods of representation that need to be altered to provide fuller representation to ethnic groups. Hall calls this development a movement from a “war of maneuver” to a “war of position” creating a politics of cultural difference. Such politics can only be historically contextualised through the process of articulation. There are other formative categories such as gender, class religion, sexuality, status and so forth that also define ethnicity. Charles Taylor believes that cultural difference “takes us beyond merely formal criteria of rationality, and points us toward the human activity of articulation which gives the value of rationality its sense.”¹⁶ All this leads us to the belief that we need only possess a nominal rationality to be able to judge cultural difference from a non-ethnocentric point of view.

A non-ethnocentric criterion of ethnicity subsumes the absence of a stable, unchanging ethnic subject. It implies that the conception of an ethnic subject is both a consciously constructed and an ever-changing phenomenon. Politics on the contrary censures a dominant group for marginalizing others thereby perpetuating the mind construct of binary opposites — dominant/subordinate, center/margin. Since ethnic groups possess enormous fluidity they cannot be contained within a binary mode of thinking. Also, ethnic claims of political representation are not constant as they are impacted both by a changing political climate and adaptability. Sometimes ethnic groups, like Jewish-Americans are so well represented they cannot be qualified as a subordinate group. It must be kept in mind that empowerment and assimilation

need not take away the power of ethnic consciousness or its representation. Ethnic consciousness continues to be reflected in literature, autobiography and historical discourses even after ethnic groups become assimilated in mainstream society.

Irving Howe in *The World of Our Fathers*¹⁷ gives a splendid account of the Jewish immigrant experience in North America and its expression as creative consciousness in fiction and autobiography. Such fiction deals with the cultural contradictions and psychological upheavals that arise in the wake of social and personal adjustment to a new environment. Howe argues that when subcultures approach disintegration they release intense energies making them incandescent with high self-conscious energy. During such moments ethnic writers find a well-defined subject, an intense situation and a clear voice. They are able to play out their hopes and fears, love and hates as they separate themselves from the subculture. Writers quickly pick up themes of a chosen race, retelling of old stories, nostalgia, exhaustion, religious alienation and linguistic borrowings such as Yiddish gravity and weave them into themes in their works.

Philip Fisher in an essay entitled "American Literary and Cultural Studies since the Civil War" argues that American studies, between 1930-1970 were dominated by a "search for grand unifying myths" as well as pluralistic "episodes of regionalism." A one hundred and fifty years ago American culture was "split along geographical lines" such as New England mind, Southern life, Western pioneers and so on. A common identity was created out of regionalism by the Civil War — Abe Lincoln, railroads, and telegraph, Federalist union of Washington and Jefferson and mass-produced goods. Between 1870-1914 a massive influx of immigrants split American culture

along ethnic lines. The women's and black movements that followed introduced gender and color as well, both seen as "unnegotiable" identities. Both denied the concept of essentialism, the belief in a common human identity employing abolitionist vocabulary to realize their purpose. Fisher writes:

The self-appointed task of unmasking hegemony, essentialism, and the many disguised operations of power within the culture has defined what could be called *the fundamentalism* of this third and most recent swing of regionalism. We have lived for twenty years within a scholarship that could be more and more clearly identified as, in effect, the unnegotiable regional essentialism of gender, race and ethnicity. This new regionalism demanded and made claims of a wider membership within the university on behalf of women, blacks, and others while supplying the new members with an automatic subject matter: themselves, their own history and rights within the national array of culture.¹⁸

Fisher concludes that the new regionalism in America has always functioned within the political framework of representation whereas American studies have located themselves in the national fact of a "democratic culture," more along economic and cultural lines than along religious. In other words, where regional voices construct multiculturalism, other voices develop a unitary myth of a national democracy. For example, since the late nineteenth century we have seen colorists such as Bret Harte and Sarah Orne Jewett, then ethnic Jewish regionalism such as Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezerskia, and now Native American, Chicano/a, Asian American, gay, lesbian et. al., resurgence.

The Jewish immigrants as the New Americans presented themselves as eager

assimilationists, campaigners for equal rights or as mediators between the ghetto and America. All these images find expression in Jewish American writing. The cultural Yiddish renaissance in Europe and America, itself a child of cultural nationalism, gave a new impetus to Jewish-American writing. Destined to fail from the very beginning, the Yiddish renaissance propelled second generation Jews, Jewish writers and intellectuals to develop proficiency in the English language both to enter American mainstream and articulate their compulsions and fantasy. Public school education made English compulsory for Jews in the hope of erasing ethnic differences. Jews employed their own intellectual background to turn coercion into personal advantage. Anzia Yezierska's "America and I" poignantly traces this development.

Beginning about the 1930s, most writings by Jews in America were shaped by issues arising from socialism, the holocaust and what Norman Podhoretz calls "making it." Alfred Kazin in *Starting Out in the Thirties*¹⁹ confesses that his socialist political leaning was not a conscious choice but a byproduct of growing up in a socialist environment. Americans would like to believe that writers who turned Communist, were driven by personal frustration rather than political commitment. Daniel Aaron in *Writers on the Left*²⁰ develops this thesis. He believes that "some writers joined or broke from the movement because of their wives, or for careerist reasons, or because they read their own inner disturbances into the realities of social dislocation. To put it another way, the subject matter of politics, (left-wing politics in this case) was often simply the vehicle for nonpolitical emotions and compulsions."²¹ Writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Vida Scudder and Susan Glaspell, Meridel LeSueur, Tess Slesinger, Marge Piercy, Grace Paley, Alice Walker et al., belong to this period.

World War II destroyed old historical continuities and certitudes for the Jews who had to redefine themselves against the backdrop of a new political and social reality. Holocaust had completely dismantled Yiddish culture leaving Jews orphaned. Saul Bellow's protagonist in *The Dangling Man*²² possesses no family name and as such represents a typical orphaned character. The Jew as intellectuals grew increasingly alienated from their own culture and could not completely adapt to the American ethos.

In the decade following the war Jewish writers escaped the Jewish Diaspora and began to accept their situation. Some found work in American universities and wrote of immigrant fathers and acculturated sons. Isaac Singer made the use of Yiddish a respectable language so embarrassing to American Jews once. His writing possesses a strong reserve of ethical concerns and self-irony, later picked up by writers like Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. Bernard Malamud's novels clearly reveal the transition from Jewish to Gentile world. *The Natural* tells the story of a baseball player wanting to be a success, while *The Assistant* confronts the Job-like patience of Morris Bober, a grocer, and develops the European *shtetl*. *The Fixer* enters the world of success and accommodation marking a clear transition from the Old World to the new. Recent writers such as Cynthia Ozick, Papoport and Allegra Goodman mediate between Judaic traditions and holocaust on the one hand and feminism, modernity and sexual revolution on the other.

Zionism, or the emergence of Israel as a nation state, provides another subject to Jewish writers eliciting strong emotions. Philip Roth sees in Israel a "counterlife" to America. In *The Counterlife*²³ Shuki Elchanan, an Israeli, argues with the protagonist Nathan Zuckerman about the latter's conformable and secure life in America. Elchanan finds the desire of American

Jews to fantasize about Israel abominable. Elchanan challenges Zuckerman with the following statement:

‘The fact remains that in the Diaspora a Jew like you lives securely, without real fear of persecution or violence, while we are living just the kind of imperiled Jewish existence that we came here to replace. Whenever I meet you American-Jewish intellectuals with your non-Jewish wives and your good Jewish brains, well-bred, smooth, soft-spoken men, educated men who know how to order in a good restaurant, and to appreciate good wine, and to listen courteously to another point of view, I think exactly that: we are the excitable, ghettoized, jittery little Jews of the Diaspora, and you are the Jews with all the confidence and cultivation that comes of feeling at home where you are’ (pp. 77-78).

What Elchanan says about Zuckerman may seem true, but Zuckerman himself might not completely agree with this assessment of himself. He wonders whether he is really a complete Jew, but he knows that he is not a Christian either. This dilemma persists, when he visits a pre-Christmas church service in London’s West End with Maria and Pheobe; he muses:

I am never more of a Jew than I am in a church when the organ begins. I may be estranged at the Wailing Wall but without being a stranger — I stand outside but not shut out, and even the most ludicrous or hopeless encounters serves to gauge, rather than to sever, my affiliation with people I couldn’t be less like. But between me and the church devotion there is an unbridgeable world of feeling, a natural and thoroughgoing incompatibility — I have the emotion of a spy in the adversary’s camp and feel I’m overseeing the very rites that embody the ideology

that's been responsible for the persecution and mistreatment of Jews. I'm not repelled by Christians at prayer, I just find the religion foreign in the most far-reaching ways — inexplicable, misguided, profoundly inappropriate (p. 260).

It would be perhaps impossible for Jews in Israel and America to understand each other completely and relate to the Jewishness in each other. Saul Bellow in *To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account* addresses this question succinctly. On his trip to Israel he encounters a youthful Hasid and at one point both watch each other silently. Bellow comments: "In me he sees what deformities the modern age can produce in the seed of Abraham. In him I see a piece of history, an antiquity."²⁴

In Jewish American writing we get a fleeting glimpse of female Jewish identity except perhaps in some measure in Anzia Yezierska. Adrienne Rich in an essay on this subject entitled, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" (1982) finds that a female Jewish identity has to do with "enlarging the range of accountability," though accountability must be understood in the context of a constantly changing identity with "no conclusions." Rich spells out the future thus:

I know that in the rest of my life, the next half century or so, every aspect of my identity will have to be engaged. The middle-class white girl taught to trade obedience for privilege. The Jewish lesbian raised to be a heterosexual gentile. The woman who first heard oppression named and analyzed in the Black Civil Rights struggle. The woman with three sons, the feminist who hates male violence. The woman limping with a cane, the woman who has stopped bleeding is also

accountable. The poet who knows that beautiful language can lie, that the oppressor's language sometimes sounds beautiful. The woman trying, as part of her resistance, to clean up her act.²⁵

An ever-changing identity of a Jewish woman in America, who is true to herself, trying to clean up her act and always catching up with the present widens the scope and horizon of her psychological and cultural and political space.

Irving Howe, towards the fag end of his writing career, saw only a few Jewish-American writers worth talking about. They include Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep*, Daniel Fuchs's *New York* trilogy and Delmore Schwartz's stories such as "America, America," and a few novels by Saul Bellow. Then why there is this hype about Jewish-American writing? He gives three reasons why such a minor phenomenon drew such great attention.

- Firstly, it was a result of Jewish self-advertisement, part of a non-Christian sub-group establishing itself in America.
- Secondly, the New York critics and *Partisan Review* hyped the image of Jewish writers and
- Finally, Jewish-American writing filled a spiritual vacuum in a community that was disintegrating and assimilating simultaneously.

Another reason for the postwar success of Jewish-American writing may have to do with the way it embodied the critical temper of its times. The story of the Jewish writer in America was a story of economic success, cultural assimilation and empowerment. At the same time the shadow of the holocaust brought with it guilt and anxiety. This ambivalence in a way also captured

the larger mood of the American people. America had emerged from the Second World War as a victorious and a powerful nation and yet felt guilty of its cultural past. Jewish-American writing captured this sense of belonging on the one hand and a sense of not belonging on the other. Writers like Norman Mailer, Bellow and Roth amongst others were able to embody this typical American psyche in their novels and consequently became popular.

3. African American Writing: Legitimizing Minority Texts

When I was a child, it did not occur to me, even once, that the black in which I was encased (I called it brown in those days) would be considered, one day, beautiful. Considered beautiful and called beautiful by great groups.

“Dreams of A Black Christmas,” Gwendolyn Brooks²⁶

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here Would America have been America without her Negro people?

W.E. B. DuBois, Chapter XIV, “Of the Sorrow Songs *The Souls of Black Folks*

Don't play me no
Righteous bros.
White people
Ain't rt bout nothing
No mo.

Sonia Sanchez, “to blk/record/buyers”

It is ironic that black women's power in America that developed after 1970, has been instrumental in empowering African-American writing and legitimizing its minority texts. The writings by Negroes in America between 1920's and 1970's were at the margins. Negro literature was hardly known at universities and rarely taught. But since the 1970's the women's movement within African American literature provided an impetus to its acceptance and popularity. Works by black women writers such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *Third Life of George Copeland* and Toni Cade Bambara's anthology *The Black Woman* have encouraged both reader and writer and

brought Afro-American literature to center stage. Gwendolyn Brooks in an essay entitled "Dreams of a Black Christmas" (1972) speaks for this period when she says:

I know that the black emphasis must be, not *against white*, but *FOR black*. I know that a substantial manner of communication and transaction with whites will be, eventually, arrived at, arranged — *if* blacks remain in this country, but the old order shall not prevail, the day of head pats for nice little niggers, bummy kicks for bad bad Biggers, and apparent black acceptance of both, is done. In the Conference-That-Counts, whose date may be 1980 or 2080 (woe betide the Fabric of Man if it is 2080), there will be no looking up nor looking down.²⁷

Brooks, like Martin Luther King, or W.E. B. DuBois dreamt of a world where the Afro-American would participate in the "shaking of hands in warmth and strength and union."²⁸ A decade later the ground reality had changed. Toni Morrison in "A Knowing So Deep" (1985) writes: "I think about the Black woman who never landed, who are still swimming open-eyed in the sea. I think about those of us who did land and see how their strategies for survival became our maneuvers for power."²⁹

Afro-American writing predating the Sixties saw its flowering in the Harlem Renaissance beginning with the writings of W.E.B. DuBois's publication of *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903). DuBois occupied a pivotal position both as the founder of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and the editor of the black journal *Crisis*. He advanced the theory of a divided black identity that he called "two-ness" and opposed Booker T. Washington's black cultural assimilation. He wrote the now famous state-

ment: "One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from, being torn asunder."

The Harlem Renaissance developed themes of marginality and folk primitivism addressing an elite audience. The Renaissance exemplified the fact that the center and margin of culture are always in a state of flux and constantly redefining themselves. The ideological discourse of the Renaissance was accelerated by racial attacks on Blacks in 1919 in Chicago and elsewhere and also by the xenophobic activities of the Ku Klux Klan. Writers of the Harlem Renaissance pursued two ideologically contradictory lines of social advancement. One advocated by Washington lay emphasis on black ownership of capital through succeeding in trade and industry; the other by DuBois that stressed "higher education of a Talented Tenth." Alian Locke's essay "The New Negro" (1925) encapsulates DuBois's ideas at this time. Locke discusses themes of black urbanization, pioneering into new territories, pan-African nationalism and Harlem neighborhood developing into a "race capital."

The idea of a pan-African nationalism or internationalism gave a new dimension to black consciousness. From this arose the twin concepts of cultural and political power for the Blacks. Later in the history of the Harlem Renaissance the question whether black leadership should adopt a cultural or a political platform was hotly debated though never conclusively settled. Issues such as the difficulty of making a living out of writing, selecting an audience, historical consciousness of community and use of innovative literary forms preoccupied Black writing at this time. Thematic folk material in the form of slave narrative and folktale from the South and European realism of the North

were woven into the literary imagination of the Renaissance by writers as diverse as Sterling Brown, Jean Toomer, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright. The use of the Blues tradition of complaint and the Jazz tradition of exploring the past also became thematic material for many writers. In subsequent decades Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes would develop these possibilities in their poetry.

The tension that developed between the ideas of social justice and the practice of aesthetic forms became a challenge for the black writer who had to device ingenious ways to incorporate it in his fiction. Jean Toomer, a mulatto embodying DuBois's two-ness in his own life, wrote a magnificent work *Cane* (1923) that develops and sustains the tension between society and aesthetics. Toomer also encountered other issues, which hide behind society and aesthetics — the problem of individual expression and exploration of self. The artist faced the problem of reconciling individual subjectivity with social and political group identity. Strategies of introspection and rhetoric of public speech were combined effectively in black writing of this time. The Harlem Renaissance may be said to conclude with the edited anthology by Sterling Brown called *The Negro Caravan* (1941). The issue of margins entering the center and escaping marginality is ever present in Locke's vision of Harlem as the center of a new black consciousness. This issue is at the center of the multicultural controversy even today.

Afro-American criticism in the 1960s originated in the black arts movement and was backed by the theories of people like Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal who reacted against the formalism of New Criticism. Readings of texts were highly contextual and holistic and were seen as belonging to the people. Euro and western essentialism, with its universal categories, was opposed by a

neo-African essentialism. There were many attempts to rewrite American history from an essentially black, Native American and other non-white point of view centering on Bernal's *Black Athena*.³⁰ An ethnocentric rewriting of American history for schools, noting the contributions of Native Americans resulted in ideologically motivated arguments, which highlighted the contribution of Native Americans in the drafting of the American Constitution and the black contribution to the progress of Western civilization through the borrowings from Egyptian and Semitic Near Eastern civilizations. Bernal had argued that Western scholarship biased in favor of an "Aryan (i.e. Indo European) Model" excluded this lineage. Since ancient Egyptians were essentially black, the racist impulses of many European scholars did not allow them to acknowledge this Afrocentric phenomenon. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*³¹ edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., introduced influential feminist criticism by Mary Helen Washington, Mae Henderson, Hortense Spillers, Michel Wallace, Deborah McDowell, Hazel Carby and others. In an article entitled, "African American Criticism" Gates Jr. believes that since 1970s the "hostility, skepticism and suspicion" towards Afro-American literature has been replaced by a "generally accepted validity."³² Since then there has been a tremendous burst of energy reflected in writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison Gloria Naylor, and Rita Dove. Their popularity has gained a fillip in the introduction of women's studies and black women's studies in American universities, a byproduct of the feminist movement. The doing away with quota admission of women in elite institutions has encouraged black women's studies and provided a large, reliable readership.

The slump in black studies in the mid-seventies was reversed by three factors.

- Firstly, Morrison's editorial policies at Random House and her decision to publish African and Caribbean texts,
- Secondly, the controversies surrounding Michale Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978) and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide* (1977), and
- Thirdly, research work conducted by Donald Gibson, Arnold Rampersad, June Jordan, Houston A. Baker Jr., Geneva Smitherman, Carolyn Fowler, R. Baxter Miller, M.H. Washington and others.

Point number three needs some explication. The above-mentioned scholars shifted the methodology to the study of African American literature from a history-and-sociology backed interdisciplinary approach to one of formalism or the literariness of the text. They argued for studying the formal or practical linguistic aspects of a text to discover its "blackness." Employing formalism to understand Afro-American writing was an insightful and a brave move by these scholars at a time when European theorists were attacking Anglo-American formalism.

Gates Jr., lists three works by scholars that were important to African American writing: Dexter Fisher's *Minority Language and Literature: Retrospective and Perspective*; Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto's *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* and Leslie A. Fiedler's and Houston A. Baker Jr.'s *Opening Up the Canon: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979*. The first two works were the result of MLA-sponsored conferences, while the English Institute encouraged the third. After 1970, MLA liberalized its policies to include black and other minority scholars. Fisher's work addressed the concerns of scholars and publishers to reconsider "the relationship between minority literature to the mainstream of American literary tradition." She wrote in her preface:

The question of the 'place' of minority literature in American literature raises a deeper, and perhaps more controversial, question: 'In what ways does minority literature share the values and assumptions of the dominant culture, and in what ways does it express divergent perspectives?' This question has implications not only for curriculum development and critical theory, but also, and even more important, for the role of the humanities in bringing about a truly plural system of education (p. 9).

Fisher, like her colleagues, campaigned for a revision of the American canon to find new "aesthetic principles of evaluation" and bridge the "cultural gap between writer and critic." The second volume redefined African American studies by injecting formalist and structuralist methods of reading and presenting a critique of "the essentialism of black aesthetic criticism." Fiedler and Baker questioned the traditional notion that the flexibility and fertility of English language provided an ideal medium for the expression of the literary sensibility of any writer. Scholars saw the neocolonialist notion of English as a "world language" deeply embedded in Western economic history. In brief, these three books on literary theory gave rise to various critical discourses on African American literature — structuralist, post-structuralist, gay, lesbian, Marxist, feminist et cetera, — making it a worthwhile endeavor. They were able to understand the essentialism of race from a social perspective, hitherto unthought of.

For quite sometime now black essentialism has tenaciously attacked European essentialism and its accompanying idea of universal validity. Black texts were studied primarily from this perspective. But in recent years such studies are necessarily finding a smaller audience receiving flak from many

sides. Black essentialism in retreat has expanded its discourse and diversified into new areas. Some see the rise of "beyond essentialism" as an attempt to address an emerging reality. Ann duCille in *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*³³ engagingly argues that though black essentialism has retrieved marginalized and forgotten texts in the last three decades, it has inscribed new exclusions of its own. Theories of racial authenticity and tradition valorize some writers while ignoring others thereby creating its own brand of essentialism.³⁴ The new revisionist canon of American black women included those writers who told stories of non middle class, dark skinned, vernacular speaking Southern rural folks while excluding others who did not. This model valorized the Blues and Black life it depicted as "authentic black" placing Zora Neale Hurston at the center.

While Hurston and her rural settings are privileged in such a construction, other black women novelists, whose settings are urban North, and whose subjects are middle-class black women, are not only dismissed in the name of vernacular they are condemned (along with the critics who read them) for historical conservatism.³⁵

It is no longer possible for studies on Afro-American writers to seek coherence and universality without being ideologically motivated.

Beyond essentialism employs sociological perspectives and post-formal discourses, resituates texts, studies dynamics of subjection and forces of marginalization and hidden agenda of incorporation. Black literature confronts questions of fluidity, inability to define its margins, understanding cultural specificity of texts beyond the theme of economic exploitation of Blacks. Wright made a point when he stated that black literature arose in response to white

racism. When white racism ceases to exist black literature would become extinct. Gates, Jr., believes that "certain elements" of Afro-American culture are "the products of cross-cultural encounters with white racism," but sees the initial formation of groups as equally important.³⁶ Most discourses on American identity were initially built to protect group interests and peoples who were excluded from the mainstream; but ironically such groups have not been reintroduced into the privileged mainstream.

Minority discourse have invariably focused attention on the notions of territorial, cultural, temporal and biological marginalization. In the early 1990s they have come together to study ways in which these categories overlap and race and gender interact with social normalcy or social deviance. Since issues at the margin have moved to the center of literary history and theory, critics have to reconstitute its geography and resituate these issues at the center.

Gates, Jr., points out that the "boundaries" of literary studies are buzzing with all kinds of debates of which six can be clearly identified:

1. Canon Formation and the Construction of Cultural Identity: This acquires significance as minority discourses try to reconstitute national literature by selecting classics on the one hand and define identity formation on the other. Both these processes "replicate the mechanism responsible for rendering it marginal in the first place."³⁷
2. Representation Versus Articulation: This gives rise to the question of identity of black spokesperson, problems of transparency and articulation in social diversity. In other words, who will represent the Blacks and how this representation can be articulated?

3. The Economy of Authorization: The internationalization of intellectual "formation" in recent years has made it possible for literary critics, post-colonial academics and intellectuals to work in "First World" institutes of higher education. Being in that position they imbibe "the colonizer's architecture of knowledge and its intellectual structures," that help them to play authoritative or discursive roles of spokesperson or porte-parole. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that since language receives authority from outside, the authorized spokesperson gets his sanction from the group that possesses "symbolic capital." Bourdieu writes that such a spokesperson "can act by words on other agents, and thereby on things themselves, only because his speech concentrates the symbolic capital accumulated by the group which has mandated him and which provides *the basis of power*."³⁸ Bourdieu contends in *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* that "a power or capital becomes symbolic, and exerts a specific effect of domination when it is known and recognized (*connu et reconnu*), that is when it is the object of an act of knowledge and recognition."³⁹ Bates, Jr., concludes that the, "empowerment of the periphery, then, logically proceeds from the center, but from there on the colonial relation can easily be reversed."⁴⁰ Robert Stepto's excellent work entitled *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* brings out the theme of authentication and, its counterpoint, authorial control.⁴¹

4. Subjection and Agency: Marginal critics oppose imperial theoretical discourses that question the subject, reject thoughts on artistic creation or demystify artistic experience as textual artifice. The social building of group identity in a wider sense is also the building of the group or agency itself. As such the fragmentation of self (capable of social abstraction) in a

sense also becomes the loss of a historical agency. However nationalistic antagonism towards social antiessentialistic discourses seems mistaken. Two positions exist here. One that sees social groups evolving out of a process of articulation rather than entering history as fully constituted. The other suggests an opposition to the construction of the agency even when the agency may not recognize or misrecognize its origin. Both, Appiah and Gates Jr., have given a detailed analysis of the second neutral approach. Foucault believes that "reverse-discourse" opposes ideological subjection but is still contained in it. This is the double bind marginal critics find themselves in — going beyond double discourse involves dismantling of identities to which they are subjected to but then dismantling of identities involves threatening our collective agency.

5. Production of Agonism: The other is always in danger of either being assimilated or annihilated. Wlad Godzich contends that Western thought has always employed the other as a thematic potential threat to be overcome — "as a potential same-to-be, a yet-not-same." Its model is the Arthurian quest that must bring the other under its hegemonic sway and appropriate it. It must be borne in mind that the center produces the margin just as the self produces the other; the dominant discourse or group always wishes to co-opt or dissolve the other. However co-optation or dissolution do not threaten alterity; but it is threatened in the attempt by the center to preserve alterity. Sneja Gunew writes:

The textual production of marginal minorities exists to confirm hegemonic textualities. And these minority writings have been in general homogenised as the area of plurality, disruption, non-closure, deferred meaning and process; in other words, as affirming the dynamism of the

centre and its ability to accommodate change — change which is safely contained.⁴²

The margin resists homogenization by giving rise to new margins and sharper fragmentation. This is exemplified in black women's writing separating itself from women's writing which it sees as white, middle class and central. In certain cases the center confers delegated authority on a marginal voice making the margin as a "privileged locale," occasionally referred to as official marginality (see Brazilian scholar J. G. Merquior).

6. Margins on the March: The margin never occupies a place somewhere else. It starts from right where we are, that is, the home. The attempt to conceptually distinguish between minority (internal) and postcolonial (external) is to underplay wider implications of internal colonization and to keep the other somewhere else. It is easy to theorize about Europe and the other but it becomes difficult when it comes to internal colonization — sexual, racial and ethnic other. Gates, Jr., finds that little attention is given to the way subjects construct themselves and are represented in the dominant culture.

Donna M. Campbell's *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction*⁴³ argues that in recent years the "displacement of the local color movement" together with black female writers is part of a deeper and "a broader shift from realism to naturalism." This shift Campbell believes signals the replacement of a 19th century "sensitivity" with a 20th century one. Regionalism or local color involves rituals, storytelling, self-denial, absence and loss, preserving the past and gave rise to writers like Freeman, Jewett, Cooke and Woolson. The balanced view of realism was exemplified in the

Howellian tradition and was later appropriated by black female writers in their fiction. In the 20th century this gave way to the color movement with naturalism as its base.

What was true in the 1980's is truer now in the twenty-first century. Can cultural diversity or cultural pluralism create a sense of human fellowship and strength, where an individual can construct his identity together with significant others without malice and animosity? Jameson finds no hope either in Anglo-American philosophy, divested of its "dangerous speculative capacities," or in Utopia-distancing political science, limiting itself to "what is." His belief, voiced over two decades ago, that only literary criticism holds promise for the future, has proved to be true:

It therefore falls to literary criticism to continue to compare the inside and the outside, existence and history, to continue to pass judgement on the abstract quality in the present, and to keep alive the idea of a concrete future. May it prove equal to the task!⁴⁴

The ongoing controversies that rage upon and around multiculturalism, at times threatening to drown American literature itself, will only come to a rest when American national values are redefined and national purpose clearly understood and more importantly agreed upon. Only then multiculturalism as critical theory will mature, be able to answer the rather persuasive criticisms of Jameson, Allan Bloom, Harold Bloom, Cheney, Schlesinger, Jr., and Miller, and work towards human solidarity.

Last but not least is multiculturalism really only about white/nonwhite interactions in white societies? Is the splintering of the American national identity

irreversible? Or has multiculturalism met its match in the “homogenizing cultural forces” such as the entertainment and advertising institutions? Is Afrocentrism just a “frail reed in their gale?”⁴⁵ What wider significance could this possibly have for a wide range of possible multicultural interactions across the world? Though these questions are beyond the scope of this paper they nevertheless arise in the minds of those who study multiculturalism from abroad.

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