

In and Out of Theory: Re-imagining Law, Literatures and Races

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For over a century the construction of whiteness and a white racial identity have been central to American law, literature and social sciences, giving universal legitimacy to its legal, literary and methodological practices. Constructions of race have not only affected the principles of jurisprudence, formation of national identity, conceptions of citizenship, drawing of literary canon and the workings of society, but have also entered the theoretical foundations of history, social sciences, literature and literary theory. From the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth dominant groups have manipulated history to create social and political advantages for themselves. Historians now believe that such groups not only “misread” and “misrepresented” historical documents but constructed “events that never took place.”¹ The lack of a proper sense of representative history and an endorsement of a contaminated history has created imbalances in American society. The growing belief that America lacks a proper sense of history has prompted social and literary theorists to work against historical discourses and the notion of race, often forgetting to find workable solutions or go beyond it.²

During the post-war period, especially from the late 1950s to the middle of 1970s, American scholarship confronted racial and colonial prejudices at a scale never

encountered before. Both the Algerian Revolution and the Vietnam War, together with the poststructuralist debunking of master narratives, created a substantial intellectual unrest in Western academia forcing some professors and students to question their complicity in strengthening hegemonic epistemologies that had hitherto directed critical inquiry in various disciplines.³

In the last thirty years new poststructuralist methodologies, employed by postcolonial and neo-Marxist scholars in the United States and Europe, have succeeded in unmasking the complicity of literature, law, anthropology and history in constructing the hegemony of race. Obviously most affected by this methodological coup are the subjects of literary studies, jurisprudence, history and anthropology. Literary studies have given a new significance to literary theory by unmasking biased and hegemonic ideologies in the construction of literature and literary discourses. This frenetic activity labeled as “the politics of theory” colludes with post-foundationalist and Foucauldian discourses to expose Western critical biases and now provides economic and political advantage to minority groups.⁴ The formation of ethnic group identities, harnessed to negotiate political concessions from the privileged majority, is a byproduct of the new ideological shift, referred to by the phrase “identity politics” or “politics of identity.” What do words such as ‘politics,’ ‘theory’ and ‘race’ imply? And how will literary studies and literature be imagined in the future? These are questions that literary theorists, deconstructionists and new historicists are asking now.

Once theory meant a self-referential reading of a text that brought out its literary merits. Till the 1970s British formalism, preached by influential critics like F. R. Leavis and I. A. Richards located the literary text within the sphere of literary tradition; and this method was so deeply entrenched in departments of English in American, British and Indian universities that it was well nigh impossible to see

the text in any other way. The social, political and historical conditions that gave rise to a literary artifact, its mode of production, interpretation and dissemination were seen marginal to the literary aesthete who was taught to positively look down on such issues as belonging to the *petit bourgeoisie* if not to the *lumpen proletariat*. In India and many British universities, such issues were left to Marxist scholars who supposedly understood class struggle and economic exploitation embodied in cultural artifacts.

By the end of the 1970s a sense of dissatisfaction had already set in on American campuses where the formalist enterprise was becoming intellectually restrictive and emotionally dissatisfying.⁵ Alternate methodologies such as European deconstruction, feminism and post-structuralism were taking literary theory into new areas of meaning and interpretation. Political and social analyses, which had remained outside the framework of literary theory, were now introduced into critical discourses in the hope of finding a new relevance of literature to life. The interconnectedness between theory and the world that gave rise to it had acquired a new significance.

What had begun as a dissatisfaction with literary theory and practices of New Criticism soon became an attack on the formation of the grand canon itself, unmasking white male hegemonies, repressive colonial codes and sexual parochialism. Scholars began to feel a greater sense of attachment to methods than to ideas. Initially feminism held promise, but since it had no clear methodology of its own and had to rely on deconstructionist and post-structuralist techniques to examine the cultural and political underpinnings of text, it lost both its fizz and fans. Under these conditions new historicism arose as an in house attempt to restructure literary critical practices in American scholarship.

In the early 1980s American literary critics such as Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher and Louis A. Montrose employed the methodologies and procedures of deconstruction and post-structuralism to prepare the ground for the practices of new historicism which provided a political and cultural slant to the interpretation of literature. Soon new historicism spread like wildfire engulfing the campuses and altering the intellectual landscape of departments of English. But two decades after what has happened to new historicism? Is it a spent force? Is new historicism nothing but post-structuralism adapted to literary theory? And is the history of literary theory in the last twenty years nothing but the history of post-structuralism?

After the collapse of Soviet Union and communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the restructuring of the Left academic discourse has taken it away from the theoretical foundations of Marx into pseudo-Marxist avenues dealing with the theories of race, literature, nation and empire. Academic inquiry in these areas based on neo-Marxist and Foucauldian methodologies has, therefore, increased. Attempts to see how discursive forms operate in a socio-political environment have taken academic inquiry away from semiotics and into the genealogy of knowledge. Now academic debates center upon the ideologically biased assumptions and postulates of humanities and social sciences, much to the embarrassment of conservative and even some neo-liberal critics. Theory has begun to imply various forms of post-structuralism, ranging from new historicism to feminism, and largely refers to critical practices that attempt to relate the text to its discursive and socio-political context. This intellectual activity has given a new meaning and reference to the word 'theory.'

Using Theory

Modern ideas of theory are based on the philosophical writings of French poststructuralists and especially on the works of Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida, de Mann et. al. Within a Left academic discourse of Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, Ernesto Laclau, Drucilla Cornell, Aijaz Ahmad, Teresa de Lauretis and others these ideas are given a sharper political focus and recontextualized in the areas of gender, sexuality, colonialism and race. Though the Left critical practices have privileged minority texts, their readings of texts are different from those of the French poststructuralists such as Derrida.

Derrida would see the literary form eternally contaminated by something that exceeds its boundaries. The neo-Marxists would place a text completely within its socio-political ethos to locate meaning. French poststructuralists would argue that if form cannot achieve formal unity, in fact resists that unity, then this excess or resistance limits literary formalism. The ever-expanding contextual boundaries that deconstruction suggests, calls for an ongoing revision and reformulation of meaning. To delimit theory to its socio-political context alone, as the Left does, may seem exigent but drastically alters the assumptions of French post-structuralism and spreads the contamination.

In itself the word 'theory' is too abstract and general a word when employed in the realm of politics. Political theorists, structuralists and literary critics have debated on the meaning of theory and its relationship to politics. The old school of literary critics still adhere to the belief that literary texts are complete entities separated from the politics of the real world; and therefore the meaning of literary texts ought to be interrogated through language and literary devices they employ. This aspect of literary enterprise, realists believe, is purely self-referential. Realists

like Adorno, Lukacs and Brecht point out that when social and political conditions in the world change mimetic form in literature also undergoes a change. They argue that it is not possible to ignore social and political conditions that create a specific work and affects its reading. Some influential formalists demand for a “return to literature” in an attempt to reclaim the ground lost to social sciences.

Harold Bloom insists that politics or ideology in literary criticism must be replaced by “the autonomy of the aesthetic” and the Western canon; and multiculturalism, Marxism, feminism, neo-conservatism, Afro-centrism and New Historicism must go.⁶ Literary critics like Bloom caution us that if theory engages with politics and power it may get sullied by political judgments, preventing literary analysts from being apolitical in their assessment of literature. These literary critics fail to see that political representation in literature can provide an understanding of the way the nation, race and peoples are imagined. Nevertheless, the ideological divide has grown. The defenders of politics argue against theory by prioritizing thematic and political content, while defenders of theory banish not only political context, but also all contextual readings of literature. Both are unwilling to see the interdependence of theory and politics. Theory becomes contaminated if it just provides a political reading of literature; but if it ignores its political referents it becomes limited and parochial.

This free for all literary battle fought on a largely undefined turf of “theory” has undoubtedly left a whole body of traditionally constructed literatures in disarray giving rise to significant literary casualties. Some mainstream white writers in American literature such as William Faulkner, Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway and others have been marginalized while suppressed minority writers such as Jean Toomer, Anzia Yezierska, Mormon Silko and John Okada have been pulled into the center. The Western canon if not dismantled has certainly been

pulled from many sides to admit the hitherto inadmissible. This has generated a new awareness of hegemonies, injustices and uncertainties where the center and margins are in a state of flux. If old certitudes have not broken down completely they are now under severe attack. What does all this hold for 'theory' in general and literary theory in particular? Are we entering into an era of post-theory where only some quintessential literary texts remain? Or, has "high theory" of cultural and postcolonial studies advanced by the Left permanently altered our understanding of literature? Is theory still tied to the apron strings of post-structuralism, or has high theory of the Left altered it to such an extent that post-structuralism has lost its original identity?

These questions are being answered, if not satisfactorily, by a new interest in social theory and its associated areas such as freedom, justice, race, gender and equality. Despite the warning of literary purists to keep out of social issues, literary studies now engage in political and social issues and negotiate new realities expressed in globalization and trans-nationalism. Many social theorists question the legitimacy of literary critics dabbling in social theory without the necessary disciplinary wherewithal to do so. Truly, the work of literary scholars has become increasingly difficult as they not only have to master literary theory but also study jurisprudence, political theory, social structures, political movements and race to make sense of literary texts. Nonetheless, literary scholars are providing valuable insights into political and social texts that can be quite useful in our troubled times. They are opening up the literary dimensions of texts in social theory and anthropology that have been altogether ignored. It will be quite interesting to explore the role literary theory will play in the future in analyzing the production of meaning in non-literary texts.

Race and Identity Politics

Interest in social theory has also given rise to critical race studies, whiteness studies and multicultural studies. These studies focus attention on the economic and political ideas that have over a period of time encouraged the notion of “whiteness” and the privileges whites enjoy in American society. In doing so they analyze cultural practices in literature, art, music and popular media that strengthen the notion of white supremacy. White racial groups belonging to a common European ancestry and comprising of French, German, English, Norwegian and other related nationalities were understood to be culturally and biologically superior to other “non-white races.” Gradually this legal and political fiction acquired an indubitably real status, creating a powerful coalition of Europeans who successfully enslaved and oppressed non-whites. In the United States the racial category “white” has acquired a legal sanction that determines freedom, enfranchisement, business ownership, enjoyment of civic privileges, marriage rights etc.

The Civil Rights Act of 1965 summarily abolished racial discrimination in America, but even now structural racism in the form of old boys network in large corporations, unfair government subsidies to white suburban areas, business and housing loans continue white dominance. The American ideology of individualism allows dominant groups to argue that as individuals they do not discriminate against non-whites, nor do they come from ancestors who were slave owners. And yet they willingly avail of the social and political advantages that accrue to them by virtue of being whites. Whiteness studies together with other associated studies attempt to dislodge the deeply entrenched legitimacy of this fiction by systematically analyzing the prejudice, discrimination and racism hidden in social life, law, literature, politics and other cultural practices. Deconstructing popular

notions of race and cultural preferences given to images of whiteness may help to correct legal and cultural imbalances in supposedly fair and democratic societies of the West.

Some of the recent debates in postcolonial theory and politics of imperialism have focused greater attention on ethnicity, race, marginality and the formation of identity to uncover the hegemony of the empire in constructing otherness. The postcolonial debate now centers largely on the implication and meaning of ethnicity, whether ethnicity applies to, subjugated people, all peoples, indigenous people of a conquered country or all those who participate in the imperialist enterprise.

It has been generally believed that a single ethnic group invariably occupies the center of society and that other groups function on the margins. Understandably politics censures a dominant group for marginalizing others, perpetuating the false notion of binary opposites—dominant/ subordinate, center/margin. On the contrary ethnic groups possess enormous fluidity and they cannot be contained within a binary mode of thinking. Also, ethnic demands for political representation are not constant as they are impacted both by a changing political climate and social adaptability. Sometimes ethnic groups, like Jewish-Americans are so well represented that they cannot be qualified as subordinate. Social thinkers like Werner Sollors and Stuart Hall believe that ethnicity encompasses diverse social groups and reject the idea of binary opposite.⁷ Hall rejects the idea of an essential ethnic individual and together with it the associated binary opposites of black/white, Anglo/non-Anglo.⁸

Cultural studies have focused on analyzing the process of social and political representation—what represents the ethnic group or individual and what is the

method of such representation? Recently this area has expanded to unmask the disproportional representation given to white discursive narratives. Cultural theorists have questioned the discursive methods and call for altering it 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. Discursive methods of representation, Charles Taylor argues, unravel the process of articulation and attempt to rationally and historically contextualise the politics of identity.⁹

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. Social thinkers now agree that we possess only a nominal rationality to be able to judge cultural difference on a non-ethnocentric criterion. 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.

Race Studies and the Law

From 1790 onwards, the federal and state courts in the United States tried to define the parameters of a white racial identity in order to help identify people who could be naturalized as citizens.¹⁰ Since race is not a biological but a social construction, race negotiates various social identities created by religion, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. Being white depends in some measure on whether one is Anglican Protestant or Shia Muslim, rich or poor, male or female, heterosexual or lesbian/gay, just as these categories acquire significance if one is white.

Until 1952 it was mandatory to be white in order to be naturalized. Applicants for naturalization tried to establish their whiteness in the eyes of the law. By and large peoples from Japan, China, Philippines, Myanmar, Hawaii and of mixed race were rejected as whites while those from India, Syria and Arabia were accepted. But within a decade the U.S. Supreme Court reversed its own decision and excluded the latter category from inclusion in the white group.

The taxonomy of race reveals that the U.S. legal system not only identified who were white but also provided explanations for their decisions. Both their identification and explanation were imagined social constructions and therefore untenable from the position of social justice. Race and racial identities constructed since the European conquest of the New World and their legal and political histories are rather unstable. Invariably when racial history reached significant crossroads, unethical paths were taken as Enlightenment ideas were worked inside out to validate white male hegemony. This has prompted many theorists of race to exhort whites to give up their white racial identity.¹¹

Marxists contend that white supremacy has never been an established fact in American history but constantly negotiated by divisive forces within whites communities and non-white minority alternatives. It is possible to argue that the white working class used whiteness to procure certain class advantages at specific moments in history especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It would not be wrong to say that while political and class elites employed whiteness to bolster their power and gain legitimacy, white working class also used whiteness to gain class and color advantage. Narratives in popular entertainment, literature, labor history and electoral politics reflected how white elites divided and weakened the political effectiveness of the white working class. Writing from within the Marxist and poststructuralist traditions, David R.

Roediger argues that whiteness is a marked and not a neutral color in the history of 19th century working class, the shaping of social identities in the 20th century and the cultural practices of the 21st century. He attacks the structural privileges of whiteness and suggests an “abolition of whiteness” to overcome the injustices caused by race.¹²

Race and its associated issues are basically understood on two levels:

- a) in terms of their social constructions and
- b) in terms of the rights they guarantee to different racial categories.

In recent times not only racial minorities and women claim rights and privileges that may give them better housing, employment and taxation cuts but also sexual groups such as gay and lesbian cite racial precedent to overcome sexual discrimination.¹³

Henry Louis Gates Jr., believes that racial prejudice, segregation and disenfranchisement reflect a postcolonial condition in the United States similar to the postcolonial legacies left behind by erstwhile colonial empires in developing countries.¹⁴ The racial, religious and cultural heterogeneity in the U.S. opens the way for political visibility and dominance. White racism, directed prominently against Blacks, is another form of colonial aggression. Critics like Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin have argued that though America expresses a neo-colonial dominance in the world, its literature is as postcolonial as that of Third World and African countries.¹⁵

The construction of race through law is latent in the ideas of nation and citizenship. Immediately after the American Civil War (1861-65) Senator Charles Sumner sought to undo the damage caused by the Dred Scot decision of the

Supreme Court denying Blacks citizenship rights by seeking to remove all references to race from the naturalization statute; but his efforts failed. The general sentiment in the country and the Congress was hostile to Native Americans and Asians leading to the segregation of Japanese schoolchildren in San Francisco. The diplomatic crisis that followed in its wake between the U.S. and Japan forced Theodore Roosevelt to allow Japanese immigrants to opt for naturalization.

Though the popular political discourse in this country was anti-Asian, it was in Supreme Court that the real battle of race and prerequisite or eligibility was fought. In 1894 the courts employed two contradictory terms selectively in determining the white identity of applicants seeking naturalization. On the one hand they cited “scientific evidence” based on researches in anthropology and natural sciences and on the other they employed “common knowledge” based on popular speech to determine the racial identity of immigrants. Though race experts and anthropologists tried to validate the white racial identity of one ethnic group or the other, the courts employed their own convoluted logic in different legal cases that came up for hearing. Race expert John Wigmore argued that the Japanese were culturally and anthropologically white.¹⁶ The courts thought otherwise. The courts were not interested in broader anthropological issues of racial identity but instead based their decision on ‘common knowledge’ in determining the white identity of applicants seeking naturalization. By common knowledge the courts meant the way race was understood in popular speech and national literature. Based on this assumption a federal court in California in 1878 denied citizenship to *In re Ah Yup*, a Chinese man.¹⁷

The courts employed both common knowledge and scientific evidence somewhat arbitrarily in determining the white identity of applicants and were soon frustrated

by their own logic. From 1909 courts shied away from using both yardsticks for determining race; they either used one or the other. But advances in anthropology added a new mixture of confusion in determining race of immigrants especially dark-skinned Syrians and Asian Indians who were grouped as Caucasians. Popular opinion held that these people were non-Whites but scientific evidence showed that they were whites.

In the *Ozawa v. United States* the Court denied citizenship to the Japanese applicant by arguing that common knowledge did not allow him to be part of the Caucasian race.¹⁸ In the Asian Indian *Bhagat Singh Thind's* case the court rejected scientific evidence in favor of common knowledge and once more contradicted itself.¹⁹

The discipline of anthropology was strongly influenced by ideas of eugenics and scientific racism. Eugenics advocated the improvement of the physical and mental characteristics of a race. In the U.S. eugenics was understood to imply the perpetuation of the whites, scientifically restricting nonwhite procreation through sterilization. Scientific racism developed the concept of racial hierarchy, which placed the Anglo Saxon at the apex of the pyramid and the Blacks at the bottom. During many of the arguments the courts realized that the boundaries of race were not naturally but socially determined, though they could not annul the whiteness criterion in granting naturalization. This awareness made the definition of whiteness rather contentious and unreliable. When the courts rejected scientific evidence in favor of common knowledge they tacitly acknowledged the social construction of race. American jurisprudence unwittingly employed a social category to construct the racial identity of whiteness on which the edifice of the nation and society was subsequently built. In doing so, the American law not only legalized race but also constructed within itself hegemonies on which subsequent

race relations were established.

Race studies in the U.S. increasingly point to the way law and legal actors have constructed race “through both coercion and ideology.”²⁰ In the process of constructing race, law assigned meaning to physical appearance and ancestry, economically privileging some and denying those very privileges to others. Law also controlled the proliferation of certain kind of physical features. From 1924 to 1952, immigrants ineligible for naturalization were not permitted to enter the U.S. Also American women who married immigrants racially ineligible for citizenship were also denied naturalization. These two factors legally limited the reproductive choices and physical features made available in the U.S. The law also created the connotative implication of non-Whites as inferior, unfit, morally and intellectually degenerate, while the whites were superior, fit, and morally and intellectually sound. The cultural backgrounds the non-Whites came from were also seen as degenerate and inferior. The complicity of the law in fabricating the connotative meaning of race seems undeniable. The metaphor of race fabricated by law entered speech and literature creating hegemonies and transforming America into a white ‘European’ country.²¹

Till recently critical race studies were left entirely in the hands of racial minorities and white scholars ignored the construction of race through law simply by not writing about it. They felt it was difficult to define white identity except in terms of those not constructed non-white and possessing blood purity. As such, they argued that the notion of “one drop blood” of African ancestors would render a person Black. Implicit in the “one drop blood” rule was the idea of racial contamination that could overwhelm a dominantly white society. Of late there are a growing number of white scholars who do not just focus on Black identity or white transparency but also see whiteness in racial terms.²²

In the 1950s and 1960s a new awareness amongst women and minorities to social injustices, gave rise to a political and social assertion of their suppressed identities. Through the “politics of identity” or identity politics marginalized groups created powerful legal and political lobbies in order to wrest social and economic power from dominant groups. Betty Friedan’s publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in the 1950s highlighted the injustices suffered by women in supposedly model American families. Imagining a more egalitarian society, women began to construct an independent identity outside the home. The growth of the mass media had an important contribution to make in this direction. Literary and social movements of the 1960s also helped women and minority groups to recognize political and cultural hegemony of the whites. It created in them a need to negotiate political and cultural space on the national level. The overall effect of this social awareness and political activism triggered off a war of cultures where minorities and women demanded a larger representation in government and society while dominant groups felt threatened. New ethnic groups consolidated their fragmented identities to bargain for cultural and political concessions hitherto denied to them.

Culture Wars

The culture wars were also seen in a large measure as a politics of identity fuelled by the politics of theory and the Foucauldian debunking of Enlightenment ideologies. In the 1970s Foucault was a major intellectual force in the California Bay Area affecting intellectual inquiry, disciplines of psychology and sociology, minority politics and women’s activism. Terms like “cultural space,” “hegemony,” “representation,” “race,” “oriental,” “ethnicity” and “identity politics” developed a new ideology of difference.²³ The psychological rhetoric of difference was also a symptom of the tremendous social change in post-war America. Resenting the

systematic exclusion from post-war economic prosperity, ethnic Americans sought refuge in post-foundationalism, fundamentalist identity, ethnic culture and pan-nationalism.

The ethnicization of America got a tremendous boost from the liberal tradition that saw an increase in cultural diversity as a manifestation of its health. The liberal tradition always affirmed democratic ideals of freedom, justice, liberty and cooperation within a single nation. And this was profitably used by ethnic and cultural groups to invent strange identity labels for themselves such as “rock culture,” “European-American culture,” “hip-hop culture” or “Asian American culture.”

Culture arises out of a complex interaction in society and over a period of time acquires a distinctive identity. The new generic terms that have invented ethnic identities have no clear rationale and are not historically legitimated. Moreover on a conceptual level many of these radical ethnic groups have developed exclusionist programs that may not be compatible with social reconstruction. It might be an uphill task, for instance, to reconcile the notions of otherness and assimilation. A multicultural ideology might help to reduce racial injustices and redefine the literary canon along egalitarian lines, but it also possesses the potential to introduce separatist ideas in its legal and political system irreconcilable with the concept of a unified nation. The introduction of bilingual education in American schools (that many ethnic groups campaign for) might create “global village people” but perhaps not truly public-spirited Americans. Is cultural diversity after all antithetical to assimilation as many conservatives argue?²⁴ Do the scarred faults of race, gender, class and nationality run so deep in American society that attempts to overcome them might prove futile? Or is it possible to educate people and develop a “civic culture that respects both differences and commonalities?”

Whatever the answers to these questions, Afro-American scholars believe that there can be “no tolerance without respect-and no respect without knowledge.”²⁵

Imagining Ethnic Literatures

In the last few decades mainstream American literature dominated by white male writers such as James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and others has been decentered. Literatures on the margins, such as African American, Native American, Asian American, Latin American and Arab American have negotiated with white mainstream literature for literary and cultural space. The new cultural and literary strategies have given rise to new anthologies such as *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* effectively replacing Norton anthologies in colleges across the United States and a host of secondary material in the form of literary criticism valorizing ethnic writing. New academic possibilities in terms of academic positions and research have opened up in universities making cultural studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies, ethnic literary studies and whiteness studies a viable part of multiethnic American literature. The redefinition of American literature has transformed the literary curriculum not only across the United States but also in Europe and Asia.

Just as literary and social theories have molded the identities of ethnic literatures, ethnic literatures in varying degrees also reflect some of the larger concerns directing American literary and social theories. A large body of Native American writing, for example, negotiates ethnic alterity with white cooperation offering a pragmatic solution to mere racial tolerance. Afro-American writing works to legitimize minority texts while Asian American literature explores areas beyond insipid and inauthentic autobiographies. More assimilated ethnic categories such

as Jewish American literature find cultural assimilation and empowerment through higher education and economic success as ways to realize the American Dream. Amongst the many ethnic literatures available in the United States, Native American writing offers some hope in integrating ethnic alterity with national cooperation.

The politics of identity informs us about our race, clan or religion and helps us to see our distinctive uniqueness in the multicultural social fabric of America. But it also creates its own hegemony by subsuming splinter identities within a larger category. In this way they not only obliterate minor identities but create political identities that may not have anything in common with each other. Most Native Americans balk at the idea of referring to the literatures of various Indian tribes such as the Navahos, Cherokees, Sioux, Osage, Langua, Pueblo, Blackfeet and Gros Ventura with a generic name 'Native American' and then construct their literatures as a single unified body based on spiritual harmony, collective remembering and symbiosis with nature. Such a grouping assumes an inclusive pattern ignoring the differences that exist between Indian nations and their literatures. The different cultural and tribal identities that are found in Native American writings and the way they handle the trope of alterity, apart from supporting a postcolonial discourse, can offer us strategies for building bridges rather than "digging trenches to fortify cultural borders."²⁶

When seen as an indivisible historical entity, Native American fiction has seemingly passed through three stages of literary development—cultural assimilation, "return of the native" and acceptance of white culture. Eager to become a part of the white world, writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century such as Chief Simon Pokagon, Simon M. Oskison and John Joseph Mathews (Osage), rejected their own cultural uniqueness and began to espouse

white Christian values. Though these men called assimilationists encouraged the misconception that Native Indians were no different from whites they found their position rather difficult to justify. Modifying the assimilationists thesis Simon Oskison argued that hard work alone could help Native Indians realize the American dream of wealth and success. The concept of “the return of the native” to his own world begins in the 1930s under the leadership of D’Arcy McNickle and N. Scott Momaday. In subsequent decades it acquires the form of a social protest. It rejected the white world and accompanying missionization and tried to construct a Native Indian heathen identity. Though this homegrown radicalism with its accompanying trope of self-determination found few takers it nevertheless highlighted the idea that social assimilation should not undermine an individual's right to self-determination.

The process of missionization provided a Christian vocabulary of justification for early European settlers and constructed a heathen identity for Native Indians. These two things had far reaching tragic consequences for Native Indians. Early European settlers believed that Native Indians did not possess a soul and in order to implant a soul in them they had to be converted to Christianity. Europeans had no qualm of conscience either in killing Native Indians or taking away their land by force. Later, putting them in reservations camps was just an extension of this idea. It must be remembered that American Indians always possessed their own languages, worldview and philosophy before the first white settlers ever set foot on the New World. The white settlements with their concepts of individual ownership of property and private possessions radically altered the world of the Native Indians. They had to traverse the gap between a remembered past of negotiable freedom and an observable present of unsolicited industrial revolution, understanding that “they could neither flee form white society nor contemplate an alternate world peopled only by Indians.”²⁷

Imagining Native Indians as ethnically inferior to whites was supported by the gathering of scientific 'evidence.' Ethnographic researches about Native Indians from 1902 onwards attempted to transform the mythologized construction of Native Indians into scientific investigation. Ethnographic museums depicting the destruction of the Indian way of life reinforced the concept of manifest destiny. Museums not only fossilized Native Indians by placing them outside the civilized world but also dehistoricized them as "racial others." The construction of Native American culture as inferior to the European prompted writers like Zitkala-sa (Gertrude Bonnin) to eulogize the pagan Indian way of life as against the bigoted Christian European way.²⁸ A new activism following the growth of Native American communities in 1930-1940 resulted in the founding of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) in 1944 that tried to protect the economic and cultural interests of Native Indians.²⁹

By the late 1970s Native Americans radicalism gave way to a provisional acceptance of white majority and reconstruction of Native American traditions. James Welch, Leslie Mormon Silko and Gerald Vizenor introduced themes of social reconstruction in their writings drawing sustenance from their own tribal traditions. Silko's story "Lullaby" works within the metaphysics of a primitive Laguna cosmology that does not see the "other" as white but as the errant and ignorant Indian who must be brought back to his cultural past. Though the journey back may never be easy—in a world where the "other" is easily identifiable as evil while the evil within is difficult to see—it is undoubtedly a courageous act. And Silko conducts this journey with ubiquitous ease. James Welch employs the Blackfeet and Gros Ventura comic surrealism to expose issues of economic disadvantage, dispossession and social marginalization. Undeniably economic disadvantages prevent most Native Americans to acquire a college education, which in turn destroys their potential and closes possibilities of self-actualization.

In his novels *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney*, Welch shows his star characters becoming alienated from their environment and escaping into a world of sex and alcoholism. 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.

Native American writers have tried to reverse the negative formation of cultural identities based on racial stereotyping where it is not race but unequal opportunities that prevent individuals from realizing their potential. If the fiction of Welch and Silko stand at the center of critical discourses of identity formation today then tolerance seems to be a significant way out.³⁰ Zitkala-sa puts it succinctly that the "near kinship with the rest of humanity" and "the great brotherhood of mankind" is the only option out for civilizations of our time.³¹

Black Essentialism

Social theorists agree that between 1870-1914 a massive influx of immigrants split American culture along ethnic lines. The racial, social and political injustices of subsequent decades created the conditions for women's and black movements in the 1960s to introduce gender and color in American system as nonnegotiable identities.³² By proffering these identities, both denied the concept of essentialism, the belief in a common human identity. Instead they employed abolitionist vocabulary to realize their purpose. 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. This implies that where regional voices imagine a multicultural environment, federal voices develop a unitary myth of national democracy.

Since the late nineteenth century we notice ethnic Black regionalism of colorists such as Bret Harte and Sarah Orne Jewett and then ethnic Jewish regionalism of immigrant Jews such as Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezerskia on the rise. In recent times we see Native American, Chicano/a American, Asian American, gay, lesbian and other writers imagining their own identities and political space.

Injustices of race have not only created strategies of survival but also forged the cultural and political identities of Blacks. Between 1920-1970 Negro literature was relatively unknown in America and rarely taught on its campuses. But as black women's power arose in early 1970s it began to construct its minority and Black identity and create a political space for itself. In doing so it naturally legitimized minority texts and empowered African-American writing. The flowering of Harlem Renaissance, which began early in the last century, was seen in the 1970s as a manifestation of Black pride and culture. Since it was a radical departure from social gradualism of Uncle Tom's Cabin, white supremacist groups reacted violently to the threat of violent political reforms to correct racial injustice. It is precisely this dynamics that the ideological discourse of the Renaissance was sharpened 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 campaigned for social advancement but pursued two ideologically contradictory lines of thought. The first advocated by Booker T. Washington emphasized black ownership of capital through success in trade and industry. The second preached by W.E. B. DuBois stressed "higher education of a Talented Tenth" to take intellectual control of society. Alian Locke in his essay "The New Negro" (1925) encapsulated DuBois's ideas of black urbanization pioneering into new territories and of pan-African nationalism and Harlem neighborhood developing into a "race capital."³³ The issue of margins

entering the center and escaping marginality was ever present in Locke's vision of Harlem as the center of a new black consciousness. DuBois's ideas coming via Locke are at the heart of the multicultural controversy of today.³⁴

The idea generated by the growth of pan-African nationalism focused attention on the need to develop Black power to correct the imbalance in society caused by social injustice. The question whether black leadership should develop cultural or political power was hotly debated though never conclusively settled. It could be said in retrospect that radical social activism was seen as a threat by the government and was forcefully nipped in the bud. Cultural revolt was allowed to grow and it is this, which has survived in the form of literary writings and debates. Literary issues of 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. Strategies of introspection and rhetoric of public speech were combined effectively in black writing of this time. Renaissance writers as diverse as Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright were able to incorporate Southern slave narrative and Northern European realism into their works. Some Black writers also used the Blues tradition of complaint and the Jazz tradition of exploring the past to lend a wistful nostalgia to issues of the present in their poetry such as Brown and Langston Hughes.

Conscious of racial injustice, Black writers such as Toomer had to find ingenious ways to incorporate the tension between ideas of social justice and the practice of aesthetic forms in their fiction. Toomer who was a mulatto embodied the idea of two-ness in her own life. In his story *Cane* (1923) he not only revealed the tension between society and aesthetics but also issues of individual expression and exploration of self that hide within social and aesthetic construction. Toomer

exemplified the Black artist who challenged the problem of reconciling individual subjectivity with social and political group identity.³⁵

Pan-African nationalism combined with deconstruction not only questioned the universalizing categories of European essentialism but introduced its own brand of neo-African essentialism. The publication of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* in the early 1990s encouraged attempts to rewrite American history from an essentially black, Native American and other non-white point of view.³⁶ Bernal had argued that since Western scholarship was biased in favor of an Indo-European or "Aryan Model" it excluded the ancient Egyptian lineage, which was essentially black. Typically racist impulses of many European scholars did not allow them to acknowledge this Afro-centric phenomenon in the development of Western civilization. Though most of the ethnocentric rewriting of American history for schools proved to be as ideologically motivated as the dominant white discourses, it nevertheless noted the contributions made by Native Americans in drafting the American Constitution and by Blacks to the progress of Western civilization through borrowings from Egyptian and Semitic Near Eastern civilizations.

The acknowledgement of Black contribution to Western civilization gave a new impetus to hitherto neglected black feminist writing in the United States. Influential feminist criticism by Mary Helen Washington, Mae Henderson, Hortense Spillers, Michel Wallace, Deborah McDowell, Hazel Carby and others were able to give shape to critical theory itself.³⁷ In the last forty years the general sense of "hostility, skepticism and suspicion" towards Afro-American literature has been replaced by a "generally accepted validity."³⁸ And in recent years fiction by black women writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara and others have brought Afro-American literature to center stage.

This has once more raised hopes of Black writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks that the day is not far when the children of blacks and whites would sit equally at the table of justice and be brothers.³⁹ But even a decade later Toni Morrison in “A Known So Deep” (1985) points out the social reality has not changed: “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.”⁴⁰ Black women’s studies too have been introduced in American universities. The doing away of quota for women to be admitted to elite institutions has also encouraged black women’s studies indirectly by providing a large readership.

The essentialism of race is understood more from a social perspective. Dexter Fisher’s works interrogate the shared values and assumptions of minority literature vis-à-vis mainstream American literature and then to employ a plural system of education to develop a humanities curriculum.⁴¹ Fisher suggests a revision of the American canon, find new “aesthetic principles of evaluation” and bridge the “cultural gap between writer and critic.” Also scholars such as Leslie A. Fiedler and Houston Baker question the belief that the flexibility and fertility of English language provides an ideal medium for the expression of the literary sensibility of any writer. They point out that this neocolonialist notion of English as a “world language” is deeply embedded in the ideas of Western economic history.⁴²

In recent years Black essentialism has been receiving flak from many sides and attracting smaller audiences. People complain that ideologically motivated arguments have sacrificed coherence and universality and inscribed their own hegemonies. For example the new revisionist canon of American black women includes those writers who tell stories of non middle class, dark skinned, vernacular speaking, Southern rural folks while exclude those who do not. This

model valorizes the Blues and Black life as “authentic black” placing Zola Neale Hurston at the center. Though Black essentialism has been able to retrieve some interestingly forgotten and marginalized texts in the last three decades, it has inscribed new exclusions of its own.⁴³ Theories of racial authenticity and tradition have valorized some Black writers while ignoring others, thereby creating their own brand of essentialism within the revisionist canon.⁴⁴

Black essentialism has its own limitations and has now given way to “beyond essentialism.” Beyond essentialism is an attempt to rectify the anomalies in the methods of the earlier essentializing techniques such as the economic and social exploitation of Blacks. As “beyond essentialism” incorporates sociological perspectives and post-formal discourses in its methods it tries to resituate texts, understand the dynamics of subjection, study the forces of marginalization and uncover the hidden agenda of incorporation. Black literature now confronts questions of fluidity and the cultural specificity of texts as its criticism also acknowledges some aspects of Afro-American culture as byproducts of its encounter with white racism.⁴⁵ Interestingly most discourses on identity politics were initiated to protect interests of marginalized groups excluded from the privileged American mainstream. Ironically such groups are still waiting to be introduced in the American mainstream.

The new interest of literary studies in history, social theory, genealogies and epistemologies of law, race and literatures can be seen as a deeper involvement in political, legal and social issues that directly affect our lives. This shift in focus also shows the concerns of literary critics about a more representative historical narration, equitable distribution of economic resources, sustainable development, a more egalitarian society and non-discriminatory justice. Though minority groups have not won the war against racial and political discrimination they have

undoubtedly been able to focus people's attention on the notions of territorial, cultural, temporal and biological marginalization. Since the 1990s issues of race, gender and color, have now moved from the margins to the center of literary criticism and social theory. Critics are now busy in reconstituting its geography and resituating them at the center. In the beginning it was not possible to see literary studies, whiteness studies, ethnic studies or historical studies going beyond white/nonwhite interactions in predominantly white societies, but in the last few years the arguments about these subjects have become more sophisticated and complex. Issues dealing with the mode of narrative representation, racial hegemonies in working class politics, individual subjectivities, political identities, privacy laws, right to pleasure, archaeologies of survival, reconstruction of self and ethnographic representations in the media have attracted the interest of scholars. Literary and social theorists are studying the splintering of the American national identity and wondering if this phenomenon is irreversible. They are asking questions about American body politic, questions such as: Can America still hold together as a nation? Or have these racial and ethnic theories found their match in the homogenizing cultural forces released by the entertainment industry and advertising institutions?

NOTES

- ¹ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, rpt., 1990, (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987). In the third chapter entitled "The Politics of Historical Representation: Discipline and De-Sublimation," White explains how fancy results in historical misrepresentation: "Because history, unlike fiction is supposed to represent real events and therefore contribute to the knowledge of the real world, imagination (or 'fancy') is a faculty particularly in need of disciplinization in historical studies. Political partisanship and moral prejudice may lead the historian to misread or misrepresent documents and thus to construct events that never took place" (p. 67).
- ² Houston A. Baker, *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture*, (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1972). Baker argues that black culture, folklore and literature arose in response to (and in repudiation of) hegemonic theorizing of white Western values, culture and literature.

- ³ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, rpt. 2001, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 58.
- ⁴ Post-foundationalist theorizing implies the use of general concepts and categories in social research that deliberately avoids contaminated race values, refuses to seek universal validity and presents disjunctive scholarship of a practical variety. A post-foundationalist sensibility arose as a reaction to the failed socialist experiment in the late 1980s and continues to gain momentum.
- ⁵ Jean A. Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," *English Literary Renaissance* 16 (1986), Howard points out that by the 1980s American professors were tired of teaching literary texts which floated like "ethereal entities" above the mundane struggles of history in some terra incognita (p. 5).
- ⁶ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994). Bloom concludes "An Elegy for the Canon," by this scathing remark against the politics of theory: "The greatest enemies of aesthetic and cognitive standards are purported defenders who blather to us about moral and political values in literature. We do not live by the ethics of the Iliad, or by the politics of Plato. Those who teach interpretation have more in common with the Sophists than with Socrates" (p.40).
- ⁷ Werner Sollors, *Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Sollors writes, that it is well worth it, "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.⁷ Even if ethnicity is employed as a linguistic tool to stigmatize other groups (ethnic-heathen; non-ethnic-normal) the fact remains that ethnic identities seemingly overlap" (p. 8).
- ⁸ Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, (London: Verso, 1988).
- ⁹ Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1985), p. 151. 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 (p. 151)."
- ¹⁰ Naturalization meant the conferment of nationality by a state on a person.
- ¹¹ Ian F. Haney Lopez, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, (New York: The New York University Press, 1999). Lopez argues: "I conclude that Whiteness exists at the vortex of race in U.S. law and society, and that Whites should renounce their racial identity as it is currently constituted in the interests of social justice" (p. 3).
- ¹² David R. Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racist Past*, (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 2002). In *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and the Working Class*, (London and New York: Verso Press, 1994), Roediger sees race as a social category and "a very powerful ideology" (p. 2).
- ¹³ Judith Butler, John Guillory et. al., eds., *What's Left of Theory?: New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 2000). Jane E. Halley, "'Like Race Arguments,'" pp. 40-74.

¹⁴ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *"Race," Writing and Difference*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). In his introduction entitled "Writing 'Race' and the Difference it Makes," Gates Jr., argues that racial differences are introduced in the construction of nation, class, and gender to keep racially marked populations in subordinate positions. From the early 19th century to the present attempts were made to naturalize and legitimate the racially marked body as inferior. Gates Jr., concludes that race "pretends to be an objective term of classification, when in fact it is a dangerous trope" (p. 5). Slaves were denied the right to education and were logically excluded from opportunities available to literate whites. Denial of literacy became the economic basis for racial oppression. Enlightenment thinkers like Kant, Hume and Hegel denied third world subjects access to reason. Gates writes, "We must, I believe, analyze the ways in which writing relates to race, how attitudes toward racial differences generate and structure literary texts by us and about us. We must determine how critical methods can effectively disclose the traces of ethnic differences in literature. But we must also understand how certain forms of difference and the languages we employ to define those supposed differences not only reinforce each other but tend to create and maintain each other." The writing of race is intrinsically woven in the fabric of postcolonial literature written in the United States as demonstrated by writers like Toni Morrison, Zola Neale Hurston and Leslie Mormon Silko in their themes of racial identity, antagonism and violence. Gates Jr., implies that coding of race is primarily an economic issue implicating both the writers and characters of fiction.

¹⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Strikes Back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁶ John Wigmore, "American Naturalization and the Japanese," *American Law Review*, Volume 28, 1894, p. 818.

¹⁷ Lopez, *White By Law*, *ibid*, p. 5-6.

¹⁸ *Ozawa v. United States*, 260 U.S. 178 (1922) 43 S.Ct. 65, 67 L.Ed. The case of Takao Ozawa v. United States Supreme Court was decided on November 13, 1922 when Mr. Justice Sutherland delivered the opinion of the Court. Ozawa was a Japanese and born in Japan who applied to the U.S. District Court to be admitted as a citizen of the United States. A resident of Hawaii, he had resided continuously in the United States for 20 years. He was a graduate of Berkeley, California High School and a student at the University of California for three years. He had educated his children in American schools, his family attended Christian churches and he spoke the English language with his family at home. Though it was conceded that he was well-qualified for U.S. citizenship by character and education, the District Court of Hawaii held that being born in Japan and of Japanese decent he was ineligible to naturalization under section 2169 of the Revised Statutes (Comp. St. 4358) and his petition was denied. The 1790 Naturalization Act provided that, "Any alien being a free white person ... may be admitted to become a citizen. ..." 1 Stat. 103, c. 3. Subsequently this was enlarged to include aliens of African nativity and persons of African descent. These provisions were restated in the Revised Statutes, so that section 2165 included only the procedural portion, while the substantive parts were carried into a separate section (2169) and the words "An alien" substituted for the

words “Any alien.” The U.S. court decreed that the appellant was not Caucasian and therefore belonged “entirely outside the zone on the negative side.”

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of Thind’s case see Lopez, *White By Law*, *ibid.*, pp. 86-96.

²⁰ Lopez, *White By Law*, *ibid.* p. 13.

²¹ Gates Jr, ed., “Race,” *Writing and Difference*. Gates Jr., argues that appearance and origins are not white but a figure of speech. “Who has seen a black or red person, a white, yellow, or brown? These terms are arbitrary constructs, not reports of reality” (p. 6.)

²² Barbara Flagg, “Was Blind, But Now I See”: White Race Consciousness and the Requirement of Discriminating Intent,” *Michigan Law Review*, 1993, Volume 91, p. 953.

²³ Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars*, (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1995), pp. 129-34.

²⁴ John J. Miller, *The Unmaking of Americans: How Multiculturalism has Undermined the Assimilation Ethic*, (New York: Free Press, 1998). Cultural diversity, John J. Miller argues, prevents the Americanization of immigrants.

²⁵ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. xv.

²⁶ Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, *ibid.*, p. 237. Gitlin informs us that cultural uniqueness must exist within the boundaries of a “polyglot America,” (p 237).

²⁷ Eds. David Thelen and Frederick E. Hoxie, *Discovering America: Essays on the Search for an Identity*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 134.

²⁸ Zitkala-sa, “Why I am a Pagan?” *Atlantic Monthly*, (90, December 1902), p. 803. 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” (p. 803). 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 virtuosity 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 its 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.”

²⁹ Hazel Hertzberg, “Indian Rights Movement, 1887-1973,” in *Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. IV: History of Indian-White Relations*, ed. Wilcomb E. Washburn (Washington, 1988). It said that its purpose was 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 sights under Indian treaties with the United States; and otherwise promote the common welfare of the American Indians.” (p. 313)

³⁰ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism Essays* (1972-1980), (Brighton, Sussex: The

Harvester Press, 1982). 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.” (p. 229)

³¹ Zitkala-sa, *Old Indian Legends* (1901; rpt., Lincoln, 1985).

³² Philip Fisher, “American Literary and Cultural Studies since the Civil War,” in Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn ed., *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1992), Fisher points out that between 1930-1970 there was 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. 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.” (p. 243)

³³ 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: “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.”

³⁴ The Harlem Renaissance concluded with the edited anthology by Sterling Brown called *The Negro Caravan* (1941).

³⁵ Toomer's *Cane* was a book of prose poems that saw an intrinsic connection between the Georgian people and their landscape and was an attempt by the poet to look for his Southern roots. His belief in the transcendental and unifying principles of Unitism and its emphasis on self-mastery through yoga appealed to the light-skinned Afro-American in forging his own identity in a racist white society. He was criticized by the black community for marrying twice to white women, leaving Harlem, rejecting his roots for the lure of the white world. Toomer

however saw himself as an individual transcending the boundaries of race. In *Cane* Toomer dreams of dusk and its smokiness of rural Georgia as images connecting day and night, white and black, some kind of a new racial iconography which can create a unified American race. Dusk conjures an “imperceptible procession of giant trees, settled with a purple haze above the cane” to the narrator of “Fern.” In the first section the temporal and spatial images merge to give shape to a new reality when the sky “disdaining to pursue” the “flashing fold” of the “setting sun” “passively darkens” (“Georgia Dusk,” 15). The souls of characters, like Karintha, also unite in the imagery of dusk. Her skin is like “dusk on the eastern horizon” and her identity is ambiguous and unknowable. However she is fascinating to men who see her “perfect as dusk when the sun goes down” (3). But if dusk is hope, night is full of violence. As dusk merges into night and the “red nigger ... blood-burning moon” climbs slave lynching begins; Tom is “bound to the stake” (pp. 30-36). See Abu Shardow Abarry, “Afrocentric Aesthetics in Selected Harlem Renaissance Poetry,” *Language and Literature in the African American Imagination*. Ed. Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay, (Westport: Greenwood, 1992), pp. 133-46; Megan Abbott, “‘Dorris Dance ... John Dreams’: Free Indirect Discourse and Female Subjectivity in *Cane*,” *Soundings* 80.4 (1997), pp. 455-74; Ackley, Donald G. “Theme and Vision in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,” *Studies in Black Literature* 1.1 (1970): 45-65; Bernard W. Bell, “Jean Toomer’s ‘Blue Meridian’: The Poet as Prophet of a New Order of Man.” *Black American Literature Forum* 14 (1980,) pp. 77-80; Kathie Birat, “‘Giving the Negro to Himself’: Medium and ‘Immediacy’ in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,” *Q-W-E-R-T-Y* 7 (1997), pp.121-28; Susan L. Blake, “The Spectatorial Artist and the Structure of *Cane*,” *CLA Journal* 17.4 (1974), pp. 516-34; Arna Bontemps, “The Negro Renaissance: Jean Toomer and the Harlem Writers of the 1920’s,” *Anger and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States*. Ed. Herbert Hill., (New York: Harper, 1966); pp. 20-36; Katherine Boutry, “Black and Blue: The Female Body of Blues Writing in Jean Toomer, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones,” Ed. Saadi A. Simawe. *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*. (New York: Garland, 2000), pp. 91-118; Tim Brannan, “Up from the Dusk: Interpretations of Jean Toomer’s ‘Blood Burning Moon.’” *Pembroke Magazine* ⁸ (1977), pp. 167-72; Heiner Bus, “Jean Toomer and the Black Heritage,” *History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture*, Ed. Gunter H. Lenz, (Frankfurt: Campus, 1984), pp. 56-83; Rudolph P. Byrd, “Jean Toomer and the Writers of the Harlem Renaissance: Was He There with Them?” *The Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations*. Ed. Amritjit Singh, William S. Shiver, and Stanley Brodwin, (New York: Garland, 1989), pp. 209-18; Rafael A. Cancel, “Male and Female Interrelationship in Toomer’s *Cane*,” *Negro American Literature Forum* 5 (1971), pp. 25-31. Patricia Chase, “The Women in *Cane*,” *CLA Journal* 14.3 (1971), pp. 259-73; Peter Christensen, “Sexuality and Liberation in Jean Toomer’s ‘Withered Skin of Berries,’” *Callaloo* 11.3 (1988), pp. 616-26. J. Michael Clark, “Frustrated Redemption: Jean Toomer’s Women in *Cane*, Part One,” *CLA Journal* 22.4 (1979), pp. 319-34; Charles T. Davis, “Jean Toomer and the South: Region and Race as Elements within a Literary Imagination,” *The Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined*. Ed. Victor A. Kramer., (New York: AMS, 1987), pp.185-99; Mabel M.Dillard, “Jean Toomer: The Veil Replaced.” *CLA Journal* 17.4 (1974), pp.

- 468-73, Richard Eldridge, "The Unifying Images in Part One of Jean Toomer's *Cane*," *CLA Journal* 22.3 (1979), pp. 187-214.
- ³⁶ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Volume II: The Archeological and Documentary Evidence*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991).
- ³⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* (New York: NAL, 1990). Non-whites and Afro-Americans find it difficult to relate to the Anglo-American romantic tradition in literature, which emphasizes the intrinsic relationship between love and marriage, something that was essentially denied to them. Also see Bernard W. Bell, *The African-American Novel and its Tradition*, (Amherst: UP of Massachusetts, 1987); John Callahan, *In The American Grain*, (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1988), pp. 65-115; W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, (Millwood, New York: Kraus-Thomson, 1973); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1977); Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1979); Houston Baker, A. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, (Chicago: UP of Chicago, 1987); Harold Bloom, ed. *Major Black American Writers Through the Harlem Renaissance*, (New York: Chelsea House, 1995).
- ³⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* (New York: NAL, 1990).
- ³⁸ Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Afro-American Literature" in Giles Gunn ed., *Redrawing the Boundaries*, p. 302.
- ³⁹ Wendy Martin ed., *The Beacon Book of Essays by Contemporary American Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 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." (p. 120) 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" (p. 121).
- ⁴⁰ Wendy Martin ed., *The Beacon Book of Essays by Contemporary American Women*, p. 122.
- ⁴¹ Dexter Fisher. *Minority Language and Literature: Retrospective and Perspective*, (New York: MLA, 1977). Fisher 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).

- ⁴² Leslie A Fiedler and Houston Baker, *Opening Up of the Canon*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981).
- ⁴³ Ann du Cille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). duCille writes, "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" (p. 68).
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 142. Also refer to Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: the Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century*, (New York: Continuum, 1986) for an analysis of marriage and family in the 19th century domestic fiction. For the nationalist tradition see Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Tradition*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994).
- ⁴⁵ Gates Jr., *ibid.* p. 308. 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.