Literary Influence and African-American Writers

Collected Essays

Edited by
Tracy Mishkin

ROUTLEDGE

LITERARY INFLUENCE AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN WRITERS

WELLESLEY STUDIES IN CRITICAL THEORY, LITERARY HISTORY AND CULTURE
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EDITED BY
TRACY MISHKIN

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 1996 by Garland Publishing, Inc.

This edition published 2014 by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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ISBN 13: 978-0-8153-1724-1 (hbk)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Literary influence and African-American writers : collected essays / [edited by] Tracy Mishkin.
p. cm. — (Wellesley studies in critical theory, literary history and culture ; vol. 10. Garland reference library of the humanities ; vol. 1849.)
Includes bibliographical references (p.).
ISBN 0-8153-1724-7 (alk. paper)
1. American literature—Afro-American authors—History and criticism. 2. Influence (Literary, artistic, etc.) 3. Afro-Americans in literature. 4. Harlem Renaissance. 5. Intertextuality. I. Mishkin, Tracy. II. Series: Garland reference library of the humanities ; vol. 1849. III. Series: Garland reference library of the humanities. Wellesley studies in critical theory, literary history and culture ; vol. 10.
PS153.N5L48 1996
810.9'896073—dc20 95-19543
CIP

to my parents

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Preface

The idea for this collection of essays came in part from my dissertation research: As I examined evidence of positive interactions between African-American and Irish writers during the Harlem Renaissance—a time when African and Irish Americans were hardly on good terms—I became interested in the theories and the realities of literary influence, especially as they affect African-American writers. I asked myself several questions:

> How do black writers feel about literary influence?
>
> Is Harold Bloom's model of "the anxiety of influence" unnecessarily negative?
>
> What influences have African-American writers had on writers from other cultures?

These questions might have lain dormant but for a timely letter from Bill Cain, General Editor of Garland's series Wellesley Studies in Critical Theory, Literary History and Culture. I would like to thank him for his confidence in me when I was a graduate student and his ongoing encouragement and advice. Phyllis Korper, Senior Editor at Garland, has also proved most helpful and patient with this first-time author.

I would also like to thank my dissertation co-directors at the University of Michigan, George Bornstein and Rafia Zafar, who have always supported my work and offered constructive criticism. I can say the same of my colleagues at Georgia College who read and commented on my contributions to this volume. The college itself provided the funding for me to deliver an earlier version of the introduction at the 1994 National Association of African-American Studies (NAAAS) meeting, a very helpful experience.

Finally, I need to thank my husband, George Kelley, for imparting to me his finely-tuned sense of the balance between work and leisure.

Tracy Mishkin
Georgia College

GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The volumes in this series, Wellesley Studies in Critical Theory, Literary History and Culture, are designed to reflect, develop, and extend important trends and tendencies in contemporary criticism. The careful scrutiny of literary texts in their own right of course remains a crucial part of the work that critics and teachers perform: this traditional task has not been devalued or neglected. But other types of interdisciplinary and contextual work are now being done, in large measure as a result of the emphasis on "theory" that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s and that has accelerated since that time. Critics and teachers now examine texts of all sorts—literary and non-literary alike—and, more generally, have taken the entire complex, multi-faceted field of culture as the object for their analytical attention. The discipline of literary studies has radically changed, and the scale and scope of this series is intended to illustrate this challenging fact.

Theory has signified many things, but one of the most crucial has been the insistent questioning of familiar categories and distinctions. As theory has grown in its scope and intensified in importance, it has reoriented the idea of the literary canon: There is no longer a single canon, but many canons. It has also opened up and complicated the meanings of history, and the materials and forms that constitute it. Literary history continues to be vigorously written, but now as a kind of history that intersects with other histories that involve politics, economics, race relations, the role of women in society, and many more. And the breadth of this historical inquiry has impelled many in literary studies to view themselves more as cultural critics and general intellectuals than as literary scholars.

Theory, history, culture: these are the formidable terms around which the volumes in this series have been organized. A number of these volumes will be the product of a single author or editor. But perhaps even more of them will be collaborative ventures, emerging from the joint enterprise of editors, essayists, and respondents or commentators. In each volume, and as a whole, the series will aim to highlight both distinctive contributions to knowledge and a process of exchange, discussion, and debate. It will make available new kinds of work, as well as fresh approaches to criticism's traditional tasks, and indicate new ways through which such work can be done.

William E. Cain
Wellesley College

LITERARY INFLUENCE AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN WRITERS

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Theorizing Literary Influence and African-American Writers

Tracy Mishkin

> Any writer takes what he needs to get his own work done from wherever he finds it.
>
> Ralph Ellison

> Tradition is a source of life and renewal rather than a dead, oppressive weight.
>
> Edward Lobb

In recent years, the term "literary influence" has not had a particularly positive connotation. It is often perceived as old-fashioned by the proponents of intertextuality, who envision texts rather than authors interacting and associate influence studies with obsessive source-hunting. Indeed, when I began this project, a colleague suggested using the term "intertextuality" in the title instead of "literary influence" in order that it sound up to date. Further, when literary influence is accepted as a scholarly subject, it is often associated with Harold Bloom's theory of "the anxiety of influence," in which metaphors of illness and mutilation figure prominently, hardly an upbeat approach. As Robert Weisbuch writes,

> [w]e live at a moment in critical history that belatedly has adopted the demonic worldview of much of our century's literature. We are given to credit compulsion and hatred and to discount freedom and gratitude. (xvi)

Because of the prominence of intertextuality and "the anxiety of influence" as ways of reading literary interaction, one rarely hears of admiring or respectful relationships between writers and their precursors. For reasons I will discuss later, this is at least as true for African-American writers as for those of European descent. However, literary influence has not always been seen in a negative light.

Writers borrowed openly from their fellows for many more centuries than otherwise. Linda Hutcheon cites several examples:

> I am thinking of the Classical practice of citing from the great works of the past—in order to lend prestige and authority, of course—but also to internalize literary models. I am also thinking of the Medieval and Renaissance revivals of this practice, of, for instance, Dante's use of Virgil—which was intended to show both the poet's respect for and knowledge of the tradition in which he operated, and also the new possibilities he saw in his particular redistribution of those traditional formal elements. (235)

In teaching a rapidly paced Western world literature course in which one reads Homer, Virgil, and Dante in swift succession, I have found the borrowings and reworkings to be striking. No culture that privileged originality could produce authors like these.

The mid-eighteenth century saw a new concern with originality and a concomitant change of attitude towards influence. Writers began to feel that all original subject matter was exhausted and that their work would merely repeat what had gone before (Bate 46). Influence was perceived as something a precursor did *to* one, a passive, unavoidable experience rather than the byproduct of actively seeking one's own voice or an homage to a venerated predecessor. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein write that

> In such a climate, it was only natural for critics, bent on evaluation, to look for influences that lessen an author's claim to genius and for poets, bent on immortality, to guard against such influences by searching for the new in both style and subject matter. (5)

At this time Shakespeare was held up as the exemplary "natural genius," one who "imitated nature rather than art" (5)—ironic, in light of today's widely held belief that Shakespeare's genius lies in his ability to rework popular and historical sources.

As originality gained prominence and influence grew suspect, the first works by African Americans were appearing in print. Black authors had even more at stake than white ones when it came to being declared original because the intellectual capacity of blacks—and their humanity—was often judged on the basis of their writings. Those whites in favor of slavery justified their beliefs by terming these works imitative or derivative, the products of sub-human minds.[1] Thus, African-American writers were proving not only their personal merit but their racial merit as well.

Over the next two centuries, the interest in source-hunting among critics remained strong, although the concern with originality softened enough by the early twentieth century that T. S. Eliot could criticize those who

> dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors [and] endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. (38)

Eliot argued that the best writers surrender to "the consciousness of the past" and allow the tradition to speak through them, an emotionally neutral depiction of the relationship between authors (40). Edward Lobb summarizes the approach to literary influence during Eliot's lifetime as follows: "The unstated paradigm was that of growing up and moving away from home . . . that a writer achieved self-hood in literature as he achieved it in life. Recognizably his parents' child, he was nevertheless his own man" (68). It was this belief in a capacity for originality that Harold Bloom would so strenuously critique as "idealism" in several works, beginning with *The Anxiety of Influence* in 1973, giving literary influence the negative associations it largely retains today (*Anxiety* 5, 31).

Bloom's vision of influence is one of mortal combat acted out in texts. Indeed, one of the recurring images in *The Anxiety of Influence* is of the older author castrating the younger as the latter fights for his poetic voice, purposely misreading his precursor's works in his own to clear the way for himself: "[t]he history of fruitful poetic influence . . . is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist" (30). When the metaphor is not combat, it is disease. Bloom even refers to influence as "*Influenza*" (95).

In addition to being negative in connotation, Bloom's perception of literary influence is limited in scope; after all, to be castrated, one must be male. Bloom's imagery casts writers and their precursors as sons and fathers enacting an Oedipal drama with canonical status as the prize. Women writers are not included in his early work on influence, where the only female presence is the Muse. His most recent work, *The Western Canon*, admits women and, marginally, some non-white writers to the discussion, but generalizes about their attitudes towards influence:

> feminist cheerleaders proclaim that women writers lovingly cooperate with one another as quilt makers, while African American and Chicano literary activists go even further in asserting their freedom from any anguish of contamination: each of them is Adam early in the morning. (7)

The only thing more reductive than this statement is Bloom himself, who for twenty-one years has revelled in a vision of violence and contamination. In truth, literary influence engenders every emotion from hate to uncertainty to respect to love.

Feminist theorists have critiqued Bloom and given their own accounts of literary influence and women writers. In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that because most of a female writer's precursors are male, she faces a different struggle with them, an "even more primary 'anxiety of authorship'—a radical fear that she cannot create" (48–49). Gilbert and Gubar posit that the woman writer therefore seeks out "a *female* precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible" (49). Like most feminist revisionists of Bloom, Gilbert and Gubar accept the negative and over-generalized "anxiety of influence" model for male writers and attempt to construct an alternate model for female writers, sometimes a more positive one, but not necessarily.[2] Indeed, the affirming relationship between the woman writer and her female precursor is called into question in Gilbert and Gubar's sequel, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*:

> On the one hand, as some feminist critics have suggested and as we ourselves have argued, female artists, looking for literary mothers and grandmothers whose achievements certify the female imagination, have been delighted to recover the writings of their ancestresses. On the other hand, we are now convinced that female artists, looking at and revering such precursors, are also haunted and daunted by the autonomy of these figures. (195)

Even for those bent on revising Bloom's paradigm, it seems difficult to avoid his negativity, his "anxiety." When Gilbert and Gubar refer to the relationship between a female writer and her precursors as being "inexorably contaminated," one can't help but feel that the perception of literary influence has been contaminated as well (195).

One way to skirt this problem is intertextuality, an alternative to influence coined by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s and fleshed out by her, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault in the years that followed. With intertextuality, the author is displaced—as in Barthes's provocative title "The Death of the Author"—and the text itself is made central. Without human players, there is no need for anxiety. The individual work takes its place in a network of texts, literary and non-literary, all of which can potentially play off each other, and all of which are theoretically created equal, unlike in Bloom's construct, which privileges canonical texts. For example, William Andrews describes "antebellum black folk culture, Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus tales of the 1880s, and the conjure stories of Charles W. Chesnutt in the 1890s. . . ." (300) all growing out of the network that was Southern culture in the nineteenth century. As Andrews notes, it is difficult to document black writers influencing white ones, but intertextuality allows him to study the cultural interaction that most certainly occurred (299–300).[3]

Susan Stanford Friedman suggests that American theorists of intertextuality have added an important modification: they have refused to abandon the author. In Nancy Miller's image, they keep the concept of the network, or web, of interacting texts, but they bring back the spider (Friedman 158). With a spider building the web, its connections are many but not infinite. Miller's is a useful modification of the theory of intertextuality, for it acknowledges that the author is alive and well, which is important to many disempowered groups who are understandably unwilling to give up this central figure. It also retains, yet contains, the notion of communicating texts, which allows for study of the rich interplays such as that noted by Andrews. These modifications, says Friedman, are not popular with the originators of intertextuality because, ironically, they suffer from an anxiety of influence, being unwilling to acknowledge the importance of the author, a key component of their theory's precursor (150). Literary influence and intertextuality are, however, complementary theories, for they can identify each other's weaknesses—the source-fixation of influence and the authorlessness of intertextuality—thereby enhancing the study of literary interaction.

In addition to Andrews, other African Americanists have also found intertextuality useful in theorizing about black literature. Houston Baker Jr. writes in the Introduction to *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* that

> Afro-American culture is a complex, reflective enterprise which finds its proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix. . . . The matrix is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit. Afro-American blues constitute such a vibrant network. (3–4)

Like intertextuality, Baker's blues theory is less author-specific, more oriented towards milieu, towards atmosphere. However, critics of Baker have pointed out that his perception of intertextuality is as limited as Bloom's of influence. His matrix of the blues does not seem to include black women or whites of either gender.

While some African Americanists have made use of intertextuality, others have taken up a Bloomian approach to literary influence. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Signifying Monkey: A*

Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism contains several examples of antagonistic relationships between black writers in which they "signify" on each other, repeating and reversing the master's (read literary precursor's) discourse (52).[4] Gates states that "[m]uch of the Afro-American literary tradition can be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of Afro-American literature, the so-called Black Experience" (111). He cites the example of Charles Chesnutt, who decided in his journals that William Wells Brown was not good enough to be considered the first black novelist so that Chesnutt could claim that honor himself. "Try as one might not to use the term, one must conclude," says Gates, "that there is some *anxiety* here, an anxiety that is revealed much more convincingly when one realizes the degree to which Chesnutt revised tropes from Brown's fiction" (117). Gates does emphasize that "signifyin(g)" is not necessarily a negative activity, but his negative examples far outweigh his positive ones. The positive examples he gives are also termed unusual: he calls Alice Walker's love for Zora Neale Hurston "an act of literary bonding quite unlike anything that has ever happened within the Afro-American tradition" (244).

But Walker's attitude towards Hurston, which is similar to the model of influence advanced by Gilbert and Gubar in *Madwoman in the Attic,* is not as unusual as Gates suggests. As Walker writes in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*:

> The absence of models . . . is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect—even if rejected—enrich and enlarge one's view of existence" (4).

For Walker, unlike Bloom and his followers, the danger is not in being influenced but in having no one to be an influence. When she says, of her black female precursors, "I was in need of something that only one of them could provide," (9) one hears influence not as "influenza," but as its cure.

Similarly, for novelist Terry McMillan, the discovery of black writers was enabling, not disabling. In the introduction to *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction,* she describes how she came to be a writer and to edit her collection of fiction. McMillan states that "[a]s a child, I didn't know that African-American people wrote books" (xv). Even as a college student anticipating the first day of a class entitled Afro-American Literature, McMillan wondered, "[d]id *we* really have enough writers to warrant an entire class?" (xvi). McMillan found not an anxiety of influence but a source of inspiration in African-American literature. When one grows up feeling one has few (or no) literary ancestors, the benefits of a theory which sets author and ancestor at odds are minimal.

However, one does not have to be a black woman to share Walker and McMillan's positive attitude about literary influence: writers of other races and genders can and do have more positive relationships with their precursors than many theorists suggest. Even Ralph Ellison, often portrayed as irredeemably hostile to Richard Wright, was reacting more to the assumptions of a critic than to Wright when he remarked that Hemingway was his literary ancestor and Wright merely a relative (140). In fact, like Ellison, many African-American writers cite non-black authors as influences. To give just one example, in *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes wrote, "I think it was [Guy] de Maupassant who made me really want to be a writer and write stories about Negroes, so true that people in far-away lands would read them—even after I was dead" (34). Hughes did not see any contradiction between being influenced by de Maupassant and writing "stories about Negroes"; in fact, his interest in the French writer showed him that a writer could have an international appeal. Despite the facts of imperialism and racism, black writers can identify with white writers on an individual level, can see them as people. Scholars need to do the same when discussing literary influence: it is time to stop taking overgeneralized, negative approaches for granted and, instead, to listen to what the authors have to say.

Every writer is influenced by somebody or something, and the theorist of literary influence is no exception. Bloom asserts that he was correcting the overly idealistic work of earlier scholars. Many feminist critics have felt it necessary to rework Bloom's theory to fit women writers. Gates also has the influence of Bloom to contend with: although he never says why, he seems uncomfortable with Bloom's term "anxiety" in his account of Chestnutt and Brown. Earlier in *The Signifying Monkey*, when defining his terms, Gates directly "signifies" on Bloom: he creates a chart matching Bloom's Greek terms (Clinamen . . . Askesis . . .) to their Black English and Yoruba equivalents (Signifying . . . Naming . . . Rìran . . . Afiwè . . .) (87). As Baker notes, Gates seems to experience an anxiety of influence of his own regarding Bloom's impact on his titular "theory of Afro-American literary criticism" (*Blues* 111).

Bloom, Gates, and the other theorists I have mentioned all become my influences as I undertake formulating my own theory of literary influence. Several of the essays gathered here demonstrate the positive relationship between author and precursor. Reggie Young's essay is unique to this collection in that it involves a novelist exploring his own work in relation to a literary tradition. Young asserts that slave narratives, broadly defined, constitute the bulk of African-American literature, and sees his own first novel as a contemporary example of the genre. He considers the acquisition of literacy, a theme which dominates many slave narratives, of paramount importance to African-American youth and ascribes to it his own escape from a spiritually and materially impoverished life. Like McMillan, Young describes feeling empowered, not dismayed, by his discovery of African-American literature.

Several essays extend this positive relationship between writers across racial lines. In an excerpt from her recent book *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices*, Shelley Fisher Fishkin suggests that black culture, as well as specific African Americans, influenced Twain, sparking his interest in the vernacular. She compares the critical silence on this issue to the history of resistance to the notion that blacks have influenced white speech. Fisher Fishkin also examines Twain's influence, in turn, on African-American writers, focussing on Ralph Ellison, who has emphasized both his debts to Twain and Twain's to black culture. She concludes that our understanding of American literature needs to be revised to account for the rich cross-cultural interactions which have occurred throughout American literary history. Along similar lines, Mark Jeffreys writes that Sterling Brown openly acknowledged both black and white writers as his influences. He focusses on Brown's relationship with Robert Frost, whom he suggests showed him a way to write dialect poetry which does not condescend to its subjects. Jeffreys shows that although Brown wrote a very different type of poetry from Frost and he sometimes disagreed with the older man's politics, he was still able to make use of his ideas. These cross-cultural interactions are not limited to blacks and whites: Helen Jaskoski examines Richard Wright's influence on the Filipino-American writer Carlos Bulosan. She demonstrates how their similar experiences with the acquisition of literacy and with prejudice may have led Bulosan to reflect the themes and language of Wright in his autobiography, *America Is in the Heart,* which, like *Black Boy,* blurs the boundary between fiction and autobiography. Rather than repeating and reversing, in Gates's phrase (*Monkey* 52), Bulosan repeats and revises Wright to fit his own situation: Bloom's notion of a deliberate misreading is not evident, perhaps because Bulosan does not perceive himself to be competing with Wright.

The remarkable connections between black and Irish writers also come under the heading of positive influence. I have collected in this volume essays by the three scholars, including myself, who I know have written about the relationship between Irish and African-American literature. Brian Gallagher has been a Hurston to my Walker: at the time I wrote my dissertation, *Black/Irish: Comparing the Harlem and Irish Renaissances,* his was the only work I could find on the subject, and it strengthened my resolve. He focusses on the similarities between the Harlem and Irish Renaissances, examining language, heritage, and cultural institutions. Gallagher argues that despite some differences black literature and Irish literature have more in common than the traditional divisions of English and American literature allow, and he asks scholars to set these boundaries aside. My research was also supported and assisted by my dissertation co-director, George Bornstein. During my years at Michigan, we worked together, sharing sources, and explored various aspects of African American and Irish interaction. His essay examines the connections between the two cultures made by their nineteenth-century political leaders, the sentimental and stereotypical representations of the two peoples, and the resolve of black and Irish writers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to change those representations. He compares two Renaissance dramas, John Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* and Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes's *Mule Bone,* finding similarities of theme and audience response, and concludes, as do many of the authors in this volume, that cross-cultural interaction should be considered the rule, not the exception. My own contribution explores the literary and political connections between the Harlem and Irish Renaissances in more detail and examines some of their problematic aspects. I assert that although the black/Irish comparisons were sometimes based on inadequate information or stereotypes, they nonetheless inspired writers, helping them to better understand their own situations.

Although in this introduction I have posited a model of literary influence more positive than most, I acknowledge that some black writers do have an ambivalent relationship with their precursors. Several essays in this collection address these more adversarial relationships, which, like the other type, occur throughout African-American literary history. Richard Yarborough describes the impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on early black novelists. He characterizes Stowe's work as a sympathetic portrayal which nevertheless fell into stereotypes and appealed to emotions to the detriment of its political agenda. Early African-American novelists, Yarborough asserts, appreciated that the novel could help them politically but resented both the ending, in which George and Eliza move to Africa, and Stowe's portrayal of Uncle Tom. Despite their ambivalence, black writers of the time were influenced by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. They challenged some of the stereotypes, yet reinforced others, such as the color hierarchy; they had trouble creating heroic characters instead of passive, forgiving Uncle Tom's; and they, like Stowe, sought to make white audiences sympathetic to the plight of African Americans more than they portrayed realistic responses on the part of their characters to various racial tensions. Peter Caccavari also writes about a member of the generation which first reacted to Stowe's work, but he chooses to discuss a black writer's relationship with a white novelist all but unheard of today, Albion Tourgée. Caccavari suggests that Charles Chesnutt admired Tourgée's work, but felt that as an African American he could create more believable black characters than the white author. He argues that in *The Conjure Woman* Chesnutt signifies on Tourgée's novel *A Fool's Errand*, which is also the story of a naive white Northerner who moves to the South. Caccavari adopts Gates's terminology but gives it a less antagonistic cast, emphasizing Chesnutt's respect for Tourgée.

Moving into the twentieth century, Pierre Walker takes up the familiar argument that Ralph Ellison executes a Bloomian rewriting of Richard Wright in *Invisible Man*.[5] However, he uses Barbara Herrnstein Smith's theory of "value" to further the parameters of the Ellison influence discussion. Walker suggests that in addition to being influenced by Wright, Ellison has influenced our acceptance of contemporary literary theory. He calls Ellison's view of social history "proto-Foucauldian," noting how it focusses on the marginal and rejects the linear, and he states that Ellison's valorization of folk or "low" culture has also become a part of contemporary academic culture, namely cultural studies. Alicia Ostriker also discusses both the influences by and on a writer, in this case the contemporary poet Lucille Clifton. She explores the spiritual complexity of this minimalist poet, showing how she rewrites Biblical stories to tell her own tales. Ostriker also addresses her own ambivalence about Clifton's influence on herself: she is drawn to Clifton's work and identifies with her speakers, but she is painfully aware of her own whiteness and where that locates her in Clifton's poems—as the outsider. Walker and Ostriker allow us to see literary influence as the multi-directional phenomena it truly is.

Peter Erickson and Richard Hardack examine the ambivalence of African-American authors toward different renaissances, the English and the American. Erickson explores Gloria Naylor's use of Shakespeare in her four novels, arguing, like Caccavari, that she values Shakespeare but feels a need to rewrite him. Erickson shows how Naylor dramatizes the tension between older and newer literary traditions, represented here by Shakespeare and Toni Morrison. He concludes that Shakespeare needs to be decentered but not dismissed not only by Naylor and other black writers but by scholars in all areas of literature. Hardack argues that Reed parodically rewrites the American Renaissance— namely Emerson and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—but that Reed is not sure whether he is a child of the American or the Harlem Renaissance because he draws his central figure, Jes Grew, from both nineteenth-century American pantheism and Egyptian (read *black*) mythology. Hardack looks at the conflict in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* between claiming to be a self-created artist and acknowledging one's sources, and he explores Reed's delicate balancing act between satirizing Western culture and belonging to it. Hardack ultimately urges him—like Naylor—to continue to question but not discard.

The call for papers for this anthology requested essays addressing any and all of the possible ethnic combinations of author and precursor, yet the majority of submissions discussed the influence of white writers on black ones, and the make-up of this volume reflects that. Although some, like Katherine J. Mayberry, suggest that this results from "cultural arrogance," (A48) I feel the essays in this collection which explore white on black influence speak for themselves, demonstrating the liminality of American cultures, not racism.

Despite evidence which shows that writers of African descent have been influenced—whether ambivalently or not—by white authors, some African Americanists are not comfortable with this claim. Almost as long as there has been black literature, there has been an effort to create a black canon, and this effort has only intensified in the past generation as African-American literature has become an acceptable field of study at predominately white universities. But canon building often means restricting oneself to the study of internal influences, even if that affords a limited perspective. In an early work, *Long Black Song,* Baker argued that black American culture was radically "separate and distinctive" (10) from white culture; ironically, a few pages earlier he mentioned the white writers he had enjoyed reading as a boy.

The desire to have African-American literature be a thing apart from white culture continues today. When I presented a version of this introduction at the National Association of African-American Studies (NAAAS) conference in 1994, some of the younger African-American participants told me afterwards that despite their interest in the subject, they felt threatened by my discussion of interracial literary influence because they did not feel they had finished building a canon of their own. As Gates puts it,

> When I was a student in the 1960's, my professors still thought of the great American tradition as white and male. . . . Then, from the late 1960's on, some of us began to analyze a self-contained black tradition as a corrective. (Winkler A7)

However, from here Gates concludes, "Now people are beginning to look at cultural contact." Perhaps the next generation of African Americanists will follow his lead, becoming more comfortable with the type of cross-cultural influences which appear in this collection and accepting that interracial influence means not that a black canon is not self-sufficient but that it did not grow in a vacuum. In addition, after seeing how writers can have positive relationships even across racial divides, perhaps theorists of literary influence will also change, depicting a more balanced view of the many types of interactions between authors, adding cooperation to castration, innervation to enervation.

Notes

1. Gates, *Figures in Black*, 4. The first chapter of this work contains an excellent discussion of this phenomenon.

2. Other feminist revisions of Bloom include Joanne Feit Diehl, "'Come Slowly—Eden': An Exploration of Women Poets and Their Muse" and Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts."

3. Other works on black and white intertextuality include Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices*, excerpted in this collection; Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*; Aldon L. Nielsen, *Writing Between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality;* Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*; Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, *A World of Difference: An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison's Novels*; Kenneth Warren, *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism*; and Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.

4. In his 1987 work *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*, Gates referred to signifying as an intertextual theory, one which "allows us to understand literary revision without resource to . . . Oedipal slayings at the crossroads" (49), but *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) does indeed explore the feelings of specific authors.

5. For a discussion of Wright and Ellison, see Joseph T. Skerritt Jr., "The Wright Interpretation: Ralph Ellison and the Anxiety of Influence."

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The Nineteenth Century

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Strategies of Black Characterization in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Early Afro-American Novel

Richard Yarborough

Poor Uncle Tom,
The faithful, honest, brave
Poor Uncle Tom!
The patient captive slave,
Poor Uncle Tom!

"Poor Uncle Tom!", a song from *The Uncle Tom's Cabin Almanack*

Mrs. Stowe has *invented* the Negro novel.

George Eliot

In lectures, journals, pamphlets, newspapers, and sermons throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, pro- and antislavery forces debated not only the place of the black in the United States but also the very physical and psychological nature of the transplanted Africans. When the abolitionist journal *National Era* began the serial publication of a tale by Harriet Beecher Stowe called *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* in June 1851, fiction immediately became a major weapon in the arsenals of both sides. Appearing in two-volume book form in March 1852, Stowe's novel set off an astounding public response unique in the history of American publishing. Frederick Douglass reported that the first edition of 5,000 was gone in four days ("Literary Notices") and that in one year *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold more than 300,000 copies ("Work"). This figure is particularly astonishing when one considers that out of a population of roughly 24 million in the United States, much of the South has to be excluded from any serious estimation of Stowe's readership—both because of the huge slave population and because the novel was banned in many communities. Furthermore, one must forget neither the degree of illiteracy in mid-nineteenth-century America nor the widespread practice of passing books from hand to hand. Another indication of the reading public's infatuation with Stowe was the reception accorded *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), a ponderous compilation of the factual material she claimed to have used in composing her bestseller: in the space of a month, roughly 90,000 copies were sold.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was the epicenter of a massive cultural phenomenon, the tremors of which still affect the relationship between blacks and whites in the United States. Articulating most contemporaneous arguments regarding the Afro-American and endorsing a response to the race problem that has haunted black thinkers for over a century, Stowe's novel has had a particularly powerful artistic impact as well. As the black critic William Stanley Braithwaite observes, not only was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "the first conspicuous example of the Negro as a subject for literary treatment," but it also "dominated in mood and attitude the American literature of a whole generation" (30). In so doing, Stowe's work played a major role in establishing the level of discourse for the majority of fictional treatments of the Afro-American that were to follow—even for those produced by blacks themselves. This is not to underestimate the crucial prototypical role the slave narratives played in shaping the Afro-American fiction tradition, especially through their impact upon white abolitionist writers (like Stowe), who, in turn, influenced black authors. A further important intergeneric connection can be discerned in the work of the ex-slaves William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass, both of whom published narratives before turning to fiction. Finally, as Benjamin Quarles points out, "the vast audience that responded to [Stowe's] classic tale of Uncle Tom . . . had already been conditioned and prepared by the life stories of runaway slaves" (67). Nonetheless, the lasting effect of Stowe's masterwork on popular American culture dwarfs that of the slave narratives. With its extraordinary synthesizing power, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* presented Afro-American characters, however derivative and distorted, who leaped with incredible speed to the status of literary paradigms and even cultural archetypes with which subsequent writers—black and white—have had to reckon. The grandeur of Leslie Fiedler's claim that "for better or worse, it was Mrs. Stowe who invented American Blacks for the imagination of the whole world" (26) does not belie its essential truth.[1]

Although Stowe unquestionably sympathized with the slaves, her commitment to challenging claims of black inferiority was frequently undermined by her own endorsement of racial stereotypes. And it could hardly have been otherwise, for as Thomas Graham contends, "the Negro remained an enigma to her" (616). Of necessity, Stowe falls back upon popular conceptions of the Afro-American in depicting many of her slave characters. As one result, the blacks she uses to supply much of the humor in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* owe a great deal to the darky figures who capered across minstrel stages and white imaginations in the antebellum years. The black pranksters Sam and Andy, for instance, provide a comic counterpoint to the melodramatic flight of Eliza and Harry from the slave trader Haley. And although the two slaves play a critical role in Eliza's escape by leading the white man astray, they ultimately seem little more than bumptious, giggling, outsized adolescents. Further, Stowe never attributes their trickster-like manipulation of Haley to any real desire to help the fugitives to freedom. Rather, Sam and Andy realize that Mrs. Shelby does not want Eliza captured; eager to please their mistress, they are only too glad to oblige. Stowe's attitude toward these slaves is also revealed in Sam's other appearances, which are wholly comic. Primarily concerned with his own image, he is a pompous, philosophizing amateur politician, and his speeches are fraught with the tortured syntax and strained malapropisms that Stowe intends to be amusing.[2]

Other frequent sources of humor for Stowe are the slave children, whom she evidently viewed as part of the quaint furnishings below the Mason-Dixon line. If we take *Uncle Tom's Cabin* literally, "little negroes, all rolled together in the corners," could be found in slaves' quarters, big-house kitchens, and barrooms throughout the South.[3] Most closely resembling wild, boisterous puppies bent on driving the adults to distraction, these black children generally appear in tumbling heaps and bundles rather than as individuals. The only one whom Stowe seriously attempts to characterize is "poor, diabolic, excellent Topsy" (5), as George Sand called her; consequently, this figure embodies in particular detail the traits the author felt to be endemic to the undomesticated African.

Stowe introduces Topsy as the stereotypical pickaninny, with teeth gleaming, hair in bristling braids, eyes round and sparkling. A quick-witted, hyperactive child of eight or nine, she acts entirely from impulse and perversely flouts the accepted rules of polite white society, particularly those championed by the chilly, puritanical New Englander, Miss Ophelia. Inured to whipping and recalcitrant in the extreme, Topsy claims no natural origin—or, to be more precise, she offers a now-famous explanation of her own conception in such outrageously "natural" terms that it approaches the atheistic absurd: "I spect I grow'd. Don't think nobody never made me." She also justifies her destructive prankishness with a despairing resignation that exasperates Ophelia to no end: "Cause I's wicked,—I is. I's mighty wicked, any how. I can't help it." Despite her mistress's best efforts, Topsy's behavior remains quirkily schizoid. Assigned to clean Ophelia's room, she either does so flawlessly or else unleashes a "carnival of confusion"; she learns to read and write "as if by magic" but refuses to master sewing (Chap. 20).

Stowe also hints at an eerie, otherworldly side to the "goblin-like" Topsy. In one of the more memorable scenes, the child responds to her owner's whistle like a pet displaying a favorite trick:

> The black, glassy eyes glittered with a kind of wicked drollery, and the thing struck up, in a clear shrill voice, an odd negro melody, to which she kept time with her hands and feet, spinning round, clapping her hands, knocking her knees together, in a wild, fantastic sort of time, and producing in her throat all those odd guttural sounds which distinguish the native music of her race; and finally, turning a summerset or two, and giving a prolonged closing note, as odd and unearthly as that of a steam-whistle, she came suddenly down on the carpet, and stood with her hands folded, and a most sanctimonious expression of meekness and solemnity over her face, only broken by the cunning glances which she shot askance from the corners of her eyes.

Although this incredible passage incidentally reveals the author's rather odd and yet, for many whites of the time, entirely typical perception of Afro-American folk music and dance, of paramount importance is the emphasis Stowe places on the grotesque freakishness of Topsy's performance, for she identifies this darkly magical and faintly sinister quality of the "sooty gnome" with her unredeemed African nature. With her irrepressible penchant for "turning a summerset" and the mesmerizing power "her wild diablerie" maintains over Eva St. Clare and the other youngsters, Topsy is the imp child whose undisciplined devilish spirit must be controlled (Chap. 20).

Her scenes with Eva bring Topsy's allegedly innate African traits into sharpest relief. If Eva is the "fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brow, and princelike movements," Topsy is her "black, keen, subtle, cringing, yet acute neighbor." Eva, "the Saxon," and Topsy, "the Afric," are both "representative of their races," and the moral struggle that ensues between them constitutes an important motif in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Chap. 20). On one side stands the precocious, cherubic Eva, whom Stowe describes as "an impersonation in childish form of the love of Christ" (*Key* 51). On the other is Topsy, who embodies an innocent but still dangerous lack of self-control and restraint. And although fascinated by Topsy "as a dove is sometimes charmed by a glittering serpent" (the religious symbolism here is obvious), Eva holds the key to the black child's conversion as she tries to touch her "wild, rude heart" with "the first word of kindness" (Chap. 20). Initially, Topsy resists, linking her hopeless spiritual condition with her race: "Couldn't never be nothin' but a nigger, if I was ever so good. . . . If I could be skinned, and come white, I'd try then. . . . There can't nobody love niggers, and niggers can't do nothin'! *I* don't care." However, Eva's response—"Oh, Topsy, poor child, *I* love you!"—pierces her defenses. Prostrated by the gentle force of selfless love, Topsy breaks down, with Eva bending over her like "some bright angel stooping to reclaim a sinner" (Chap. 25). In Stowe's world, to be born black is to be born a pagan, but paradoxically close to a state of grace; once a character's heathen African nature is controlled, redemption becomes a possibility.

Stowe's depiction of Legree's henchmen, Sambo and Quimbo, reiterates this same formulation. Although easily the most immoral black characters in the novel, the two slaves have, Stowe hastens to point out, no real predisposition to cruelty. Their mocking of Uncle Tom and their participation in Legree's satanic, drunken revels result directly from their infamous master's example and instruction, for he "had trained them in savageness and brutality as systematically as he had his bull-dogs" (Chap. 32). In a subsequent discussion of African psychology, Stowe claims that blacks "are possessed of a nervous organisation peculiarly susceptible and impressible" (*Key* 45).[4] Not only does this trait explain Sambo and Quimbo's degraded condition on the Legree plantation but, from a Christian perspective, it entails what we can term an infinite capacity for conversion. Like Topsy, Sambo and Quimbo simply need more positive influence in order to be saved. Thus, witnessing Tom's agony brings about an immediate change, and they shed tears of repentance and grief when exposed to the Holy Word. Because of the impressionability and the innate fascination with things spiritual that allegedly typify the African race, Stowe's blacks, when apparently evil, are but misguided and always receptive to Christian rehabilitation.

Throughout *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Stowe draws important distinctions in personality and behavior between full-blood and mixed-blood blacks. In her portrayal of the former—Sam, Andy, Topsy, Sambo, and Quimbo—she emphasizes the racial gifts she saw as innately African. The traits of her mulatto figures, however, resemble those conventionally associated with whites. This is why, for example, Stowe stresses their physical attractiveness and why, in contrast to the dialect (or at least rough colloquialisms) of the full-blood blacks, the speech of the mulatto slaves is generally "correct." Nonetheless, the dash of African blood insures that many of these mixed-blood characters will never be more than poor approximations of genteel bourgeois whites. That is, when we laugh at the dandified, spoiled slave Adolph St. Clare as he tosses his head, fingers his perfumed hair, and waves his scented handkerchief, we are laughing at a boy mimicking adult affectations. And in their obsession with showy displays of manner and finery, the servants Jane and Rosa are but two girls pretending to be grown ladies. In each case, the style is ill-fitting and the "clothes" too large. The humor in these house slaves' futile attempt to be white gives way to pathos, however, when they are sold after their owner's death. Their helpless, hysterical reaction to the harsh realities of chattel enslavement pitifully