

## Introduction

### 1. Race and Genre-Making: Contemporary African American Literary Criticism and Its Problems with Narrative Form

In his 2008 essay “The End of Black American Narrative,” Charles Johnson discusses the limitations of identity politics and the difficulty of finding the next step in African American literature and its criticism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As the essay’s title suggests, Johnson emphasizes the need to challenge racially designated literary genres and redefine the meaning of literature as an artistic as well as philosophical tool for comprehending our lives in the contemporary world. Quoting W. E. B. Du Bois’ “Criteria of Negro Art,” a lecture originally given in the Chicago Conference for the NAACP in 1926, Johnson asks what the ultimate goal for African American literature is. Du Bois asked his audience, “What do we want? What is the thing we are after? ... We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of American citizens. But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans?” (qtd. in Johnson 36).<sup>1</sup> What Johnson finds insightful in Du Bois’ lecture is that Du Bois raises a series of questions to point to the problem of identity politics in contemporary African American literary criticism.

African American literature has been established as an academic discipline since the Black Power and Black Arts movements of the late 1960s and the 1970s. The task of utmost importance black scholars in the United States during that time was, as Henry Gates Jr. suggests, the creation of a solid discipline to teach and study the literature of African Americans. Establishment of African American literary criticism could not be separated from the emergence of African American writers whose spirits were nurtured in the movement; from the symbolic hit of *Roots* by Alex Haley in 1976 to Toni Morrison’s Nobel Literature

Award in 1993, it was a time for African American voices to be finally heard. The development of a critical racial theory in conjunction with other minority literary theories and feminism is the locus of today's African American literature.

And yet, this is not a happy scenario for African American literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. African American literature in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been facing the challenge of identity politics. Can literature be defined by the color of the author's skin? Is there a "black theme" and/or "African American theme" that would give a work the right to claim it is African American literature? What is the definition of African American literature? All of these questions are latent in the literary criticism of black Americans. Gates is well aware of the presence of these problems since the very beginning of the establishment of African American literature as an academic discipline. Taking as an example the making of an anthology of African American literature, Gates explains the difficulties of establishing a canon of African American literature:

Form, then, or the community of structure and sensibility, was called upon to reveal the sheer arbitrariness of American "racial" classification, and their irrelevance to American canon formation. Above all else, [the editors of the African American literature anthology] sought to expose the essentialism at the center of racialized subdivisions of American literary tradition. If we recall that this anthology appeared just thirteen years before *Brown v. Board*, we should not be surprised by the "integrationist" thrust of the poetics espoused here. Ideological desire and artistic premise were one. African American literature, then, was a misnomer; "American literature" written by Negroes more aptly designated this body of writings. So much for a definition of the African American tradition based on formal relationships of revision, text to text. (*Loose Canons* 30)

African American literary criticism's ultimate aim is ostensibly to establish non-essentialistic literary criticism; however, paradoxically, it needs race to define itself. Ralph Cohen argues the nature of ambiguity in hierarchical structures in literary genres. Genre as a notion could be used to classify a certain group of writers on the one hand, and a group of writings that share a certain stylistic tendency and content matter on the other. And these classifications "are empirical, not logical. They are historical assumptions constructed by authors, audiences, and critics in order to serve communicative and aesthetic purposes.... Grouping arises at particular historical moments, and as they include more and more members, they are subject to repeated redefinitions or abandonment" (Cohen 210). Grouping African American writings as a single literary genre is centered on the writers' skin color while their style and narrative form suggest their belonging to other literary genres. The way in which one generic grouping precedes another is a historical matter, as Cohen suggests. The way African American literature became a genre – with the writers' skin color defining the group – and how other generic characters were considered subordinate, came to be problematic in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gene Jarrett argues that African American literature is "anomalous" and capable of exploring various themes other than race.<sup>2</sup> Katya Gibel Azoulay's opposition to the "essentialist reification of race" challenges deeply ingrained assumptions about identity and challenges the racial labeling of literary texts.<sup>3</sup> Werner Sollors' study on interracial literature pushes the boundaries of African American literature.<sup>4</sup> These are some examples of today's African American literary criticism in which scholars examine the limits of literary genres. Kenneth Warren's *What Was African American Literature?* published in 2011 is still a new reminder for us, historicizing the notion of African American literature itself. What does African American literature include and

exclude? Where is the limit of the genre? The problem with racial identity and literary genre has been discussed since the 1980s, and we have yet to find an alternative approach to African American literature.

## **2. African American Literature and the (Im)possibility of a Narrative of Love**

Identity politics in African American literature, of course, cannot be separated from the notion of race. African American literary criticism established the critical racial theory, where interpreting racial representations is a core method of reading the works of African Americans and authors of other races. The problem with identity politics mentioned above complicates the critical paradigm supported by the notion of race. The paradox is that criticism must rely on the notion of race while its most urgent and important task is to reveal how race as a notion operates and functions – negatively, for the most of part – within the text. This further invites a critical connivance that reduces everything in the text to ideological and racial constructs. Johnson warns against this critical mind. The contemporary scholars cited above also feel the need to change this situation.

In order to call this situation into question and possibly provide a new framework for African American literature and literary criticism, this study tries to examine one of the most intimate human relations depicted in the literary texts that have been constantly interpreted in ideological terms: Love. Love, indeed, is a recurrent subject matter dealt with in literature, whether as a central or peripheral theme. Because love is something we have to explain with language, it is always contextualized, interpreted, and therefore deferred. An intimate relationship between two people is almost always denominated as something similar to love. The way love is interpreted very much depends on the critical paradigm in which the literature is discussed. The context and critical paradigm this study focuses on is African

American literature, and the object of interpretation is love in African American literature.

The question posed here is, then, what do we talk about when we talk about love in African American literature?<sup>5</sup>

This question, however, falls into a pitfall because one cannot really find narratives of “love” in African American literature. In Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred*, the narrator alludes to the impossibility of love under the institution of slavery as “slavery of any kind fostered strange relationship” (229). This strangeness, the peculiarity surrounding human relations, has always haunted love in African American literature. In other words, love from one person to another, or love between two intimate humans has been interpreted as not love. Hence, in African American literary criticism, love relationships between two intimate characters tend to be read as allegories, metaphors, or significations of slavery and racial subjugation that continued after the abolition of slavery. In the case of Samuel R. Delany’s “Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones” (1968), the author’s mention of gay sadomasochism in his short story is considered to connote slave and master.<sup>6</sup> Butler mentions that her short story “Bloodchild” is “a love story,” and she is surprised by the critics who take it as an allegory of slavery (30). In these examples the power dynamic between two humans is central to understanding the relationship. The love in African American literature invites the contexts of something other than love. I am not suggesting that every critical work of African American literature is about slavery. Rather I want to call attention to the unexamined assumption that love relationships operate in African American literature to signify miscegenation, passing, loss and recovery of black femininity and/or masculinity. In other words, love relationships in African American literature are not the experience of love itself, but are, rather, social, cultural, political and historical experiences.

Such an interpretive paradigm affords an insight into the political and historical context

that enabled and disabled “love” in African American culture, but leaves open the question of individual human relationships. If an intimate relation between two people is not love, but something else – a metaphor for slavery, an allegory of exploitation, the symbol of unforgettable (and therefore unforgivable) oppression – such a historical reading paradoxically reinforces the notion of ahistorical race relations. Because the love relationship is construed ultimately in terms of race, the notion of race becomes a template, a fixed referent. This eventually leads criticism into a cul-de-sac, in which an experience of love is impossible in African American literature. This is a problematic reading; if love is something that includes not only “affection, friendship and solidarity, but also simultaneously despair, insult, anger, hatred, fear and its ultimate disinterest and misunderstanding” (Takemura 25), reading love only through the racial trope is to reduce human relations into a single notion of race relations.

I argue that the impossibility of love in African American literature is indeed a critical issue. Because love is deeply connected to the issues of tolerance and forgiveness, as I will discuss in the following chapters; the impossibility of love itself suggests our inability to envision a truly liberal society. The narratives of love this study proposes to examine are not sentimental love stories in a Richardsonian sense where the love story as a plot is conventionalized and utilized to restore traditional masculinity and femininity. Nor am I concerned with the thematic impossibility of love as Leslie Fiedler explores in *Love and Death in the American Novel*. What I call a narrative of love in this study is a critical framework which tries to reexamine the residue of the texts outside of previous interpretations. Each of the novels has its own versions of narratives of love, loving and being loved that are often excluded from a racial-centric reading. Therefore I use *narrative* of love and *narratives* of love, the former indicating the concept and the latter actual examples from

the texts. They are not necessarily marked by happy endings; rather the narratives of love examined in this study are often disfigured as defective stories of loss and attainment.

This focus on the narrative of love reveals the dilemma of contemporary African American literary criticism explained above. In this sense, this study entails the examination of its own critical dilemma. By reading narratives of love in African American literature, this study proposes an alternative critical framework for interpreting human relations. It attempts to add a newer and different level of reading to challenge the identity politics that have dominated African American literary criticism. By focusing on narratives of love, this study also reexamines the narrative form itself. The diversity of narrative forms in African American literature, from autobiography to science fiction, is usually regarded as a subversion of the preexisting narrative forms created by whites. Diversity is often understood as a measure of literary transgression from standard (white) narratives. What is problematic about this is the uncritical prioritization of the notion of race. By disfiguring racial readings, this study hopes to provide different possibilities for interpreting human relations in the post-Civil Rights era.

### **3. Examining Love in African American Literature**

Because the problems and challenges in African American literature I have discussed above characteristically belong to the post-Civil Rights era, literary works I examine in this study are novels by four contemporary African American writers writing after the 1970s: Walter Mosley, Octavia E. Butler, Gayl Jones, and Charles Johnson. They afford a critical insight into the experiences of love that have previously been reduced to racial experience. Specifically, I shall examine the critical responses to the texts and propose an alternative reading of the love depicted in them. It should be noted that the novels discussed here have

received relatively few critical responses because they deviate from the ideological and theoretical concept of race, and hence have received ambivalent reactions from critics.

Several notions and theoretical concepts are important to this study. Yet these will be utilized not as a theoretical apparatus to diagnose the works, but rather as notions that can be reworked and thoroughly reexamined within the literary works I take as examples. In analyzing the narrative of love in the novels, I will be in conversation with African American feminist criticisms. In her essay “Erotic as Power,” Audre Lorde emphasizes the importance of recognizing the deeper meaning of sexual and erotic feelings and experiences:

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic – the sensual – those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings. (*Sister Outsider* 56)

Combining the political and spiritual via the erotic, Lorde mediates and attempts to resolve the tension between racial critical reading and the experience of love I want to discuss in this study. The erotic for her is not only sex drive, but also more of the sensations and emotions that transcend language. In this study, I shall be consciously delineating the threshold between critical paradigm and the experience of love that transcends it.

Adding to this, there are two other notions I shall draw upon: tolerance and forgiveness. The former directly relates to our contemporary social and political condition in a global age where the degree of tolerance and/or intolerance is constantly at issue. It is not only about the United States’ national problem; if we look at examples from the EU, Africa, Oceania, and



Asia, there is nowhere in the world where immigrants, racial minorities, gender, and sexual differences do not matter. Yet tolerance is not a simple solution to the inequalities in our time. It is rather another form of sustainment of liberal relativism. Slavoj Žižek says:

Why are today so many problems perceived as problems of intolerance, not as problems of inequality, exploitation, injustice? Why is the proposed remedy tolerance, not emancipation, political struggle, even armed struggle? The immediate answer is the liberal multiculturalist's basic ideological operation: the "culturalization of politics" – political differences, differences conditioned by political inequality, economic exploitation, etc., are naturalized/neutralized into "cultural" differences, different "ways of life," which are something given, something that cannot be overcome, but merely "tolerated." ("The Culturalization of Politics" 660)

Tolerance is a tricky word, since it can be used to merely represent manners, as opposed to a person's actual opinions or feelings. In the culture of relativism, tolerance tends to function as a mask for our personal intolerance. Love is one of the most challenging human attainments because it is precisely about tolerance at its extreme. Randal Kennedy's study on interracial intimacy reveals how "the great majority of Americans claim to disapprove of racial discrimination" while they believe that personal preference for a partner's skin color should remain a personal matter (*Interracial Intimacies* Introduction). Acknowledging the different levels of distance between races, Kennedy still considers "acting on the basis ... of racial difference, even for well-intentioned and valuable ends, is a weighty and tricky decision that should always occasion a sober second thought" (*Interracial Intimacies* Introduction).

Though Kennedy is mostly concerned about interracial relations, what his work tells us is that

the marital or dating relationship is a crucial place where the practice of tolerance is most challenged. Hence the narrative of love redefines and challenges what Žižek criticizes and finds foul about tolerance.

This further promotes the question of what the condition of tolerance is. I argue that the ultimate condition of love, a state of tolerance, is the state of forgiveness. The time period this study discusses coincides with the time when neo-slave narratives, an African American narrative form, flourished. I will discuss neo-slave narratives and their literary potential in detail in Chapters 4 and 5. Yet for this introduction, I would like to emphasize how neo-slave narratives recall the legacy of slavery while their challenge is to reconcile with the very past they recall. In other words, neo-slave narratives are the embodiment of a culminated tension between the contemporary African American literary criticisms' ultimate aim to establish non-essentialistic literary criticism and its need for race to define itself. The task of neo-slave narratives is to reconcile with the past and to solidify the black identity. Yet the very reconciliation generates painful memories, humiliation and anger.

It is, however, another matter to “forgive” the past. It entails the difficult question of “[w]ho would have the right of forgiving in the name of vanished victims?” This question is examined by Jacques Derrida in his seminar at *the École des hautes études en sciences sociales*, “The Century and the Pardon.” Derrida emphasizes the equivocality of the word “pardon” and the necessity of distinguishing it (pardon, forgiveness) from other concepts such as reconciliation or amnesty. According to Derrida;

[E]ach time that the pardon is in the service of an end, even if it were noble and spiritual (financial or spiritual redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it tends to re-establish a normality (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of

mourning, by some therapy or ecology of the memory, then the “pardon” is not pure, nor is its concept. The pardon is not, it should not be normal, normative, normalizing. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, by proof of the impossible: as if it could interrupt the ordinary course of historic temporality. (“The Century and the Pardon”)

The conditional forgiveness, for Derrida, is not a “pure pardon.” The pure pardon needs to forgive the unforgivable. Of course, the purity of forgiveness Derrida ponders here is an aporia, but this aporia is something we need to face as students of literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Written in 1999, Derrida’s pre-9.11 text indicates the urgent need for the discussion of forgiveness on a political as well as figurative level. Derrida discusses how the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century exhibits the “scenes of repent[ing] and asking for pardon” as an international symptom, and the problem with the conditions of forgiveness performed. Derrida’s numerous examples of international symptoms of repentance and asking pardon show how this issue of forgiveness is deeply rooted in national, racial, and ethnic conflicts – such conflicts date back to ancient times and continue to create problems of identity in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It seems, therefore, not so far-fetched to juxtapose Derrida’s argument with what I see as the challenge in contemporary African American literature. The contemporary narratives of slavery’s reconciliation with the past reinforce their racial identity politics, a theme which was very prominent in literary studies up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but which is now revealing an impasse within literary studies.

Derrida is well aware of the complication of his argument, and he notes that there are always two poles in the discussion of forgiveness, one of which is the “pure pardon” – forgiving the unforgivable. The other is the actual therapeutic/ political/ social effect of reconciliation and other acts of quasi-forgiveness. These two are inseparable yet different

from each other. In the case of African American literature, reconciliation has therapeutic effects on the lost black subject of the past. The other dimension of this discussion, the pure forgiveness Derrida suggests, could be the redemption in the contemporary narratives of slavery; redeeming the past and taking it to another level in order to negotiate with the present and move forward to the future.

The following chapters discuss the narratives of love explained above. Each chapter focuses on one author, but the whole dissertation is divided roughly into two phases for the reading of love in African American literature. The first half of the study discusses Walter Mosley and Octavia E. Butler. I shall examine how miscegenation and passing do not only operate as signifiers of African American history and legacy but also as a challenge to the human ability to love. Mosley's works invite us to be critical of our own reading paradigm while Butler constantly questions whether we are ready to tolerate the differences between human beings. This section discusses contemporary African American literary criticism and its problem via Mosley's and Butler's works focusing on the previous paradigm of interpretation. In so doing, it delineates the narratives of love and highlights the very challenges proposed by both writers.

The second half of the study further examines the possibilities of narratives of love in Gayl Jones' and Charles Johnson's works. Different from Mosley and Butler, there are not really specific interracial couples in Jones' and Johnson's works. Despite not being interracial, the amorous relations between characters in both writers' works are very problematic as well as challenging. In both cases, the legacy of slavery interrupts the experience of love. In Jones's *Corregidora*, the challenge of the heroine is to change the meaning of the past in order to have an intimate and loving relationship with her ex-husband. While Jones ultimately challenges us with the difficult relationship between the past and racial identity, Johnson

further pushes it to the casting off egocentric ways to communicate and relate to other human beings. In short, the first part of the study digs into “why” and “what:” why narratives of love are displaced by other readings, what is at stake when it is missing, and the import of recovering and delineating the newer reading of love. The second half explores the “how,” where I will discuss the way in which writers try to express narratives of love, where the experience of love is involved not only in a loving relationship with another, but also in tolerating and forgiving.

Examinations of love in African American literature with a focus on narrative forms further raise a deeper and broader question, the question of humanity. In the essay I quoted above, Johnson notes:

A good story always has a meaning ... it also has an epistemological mission: namely, to show us something. It is an effort to make the best sense we can of the human experience, and I believe that we base our lives, actions, and judgments as often on the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves as ... we do on the severe rigor of reason. (33)

This study will examine the contemporary African American literature’s epistemological mission, in which the novels are trying to provide us with a better understanding of this world not only via one literary trope, but also through a much denser and complicated experience.

## Notes for Introduction

<sup>1</sup> It is important to notice how Du Bois' "Criteria of Negro Art" echoes the challenges and problems inherent in African American literature. The lines Johnson cites in his essay are part of a larger argument made by Du Bois. Here I quote at length: "What do we want? What is the thing we are after? As it was phrased last night it had a certain truth: We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens. But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?... If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans; if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful; -- what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars and outrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? Would you be a Rotarian or a Lion or a What-not of the very last degree? Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners, and buy the longest press notices? Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your hearts that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit; if we had the Seeing Eye, the Cunning Hand, the Feeling Heart; if we had, to be sure, not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering that always comes with life; sacrifice and waiting, all that -- but, nevertheless, lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America." For the entire speech, See Du Bois.

<sup>2</sup> See introduction by Gene Andrew Jarrett in *African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reader* (New York UP: 2006)

<sup>3</sup> Azoulay considers that race operates as a metonym of culture. See Azoulay.

<sup>4</sup> For Sollors' thematic explorations of interracial literature, see Sollors.

<sup>5</sup> This question is, of course, a paraphrase of Raymond Carver's title of his brilliant collected short stories, "What we talk about when we talk about love." This title explains that love is a narrative, an experience which we have to narrate with language yet which cannot be grasped as "love" itself. It might seem somewhat misplacing Carver to include him here in the discussion of African American literature. Yet the title and his short stories tell us about our inability to pin down the very experience of love, and our strong urge to bring the verisimilitude through language and textuality. Another reason is that he is white and male, yet his very focus on love is an issue similar to that in this study, possibilities and impossibilities of tolerance, forgiveness, and love.

<sup>6</sup> For race and sexuality in the works of Samuel R. Delany, see Tucker.