"Ethnic and Minority" Studies

BACKGROUND

My liberal pluralist premise is ample evidence that the academic world has radically changed during the past two or three decades. My own graduate students normally meet with polite skepticism the accusation I relate to them about the day I announced to the tutor at Clare College, Cambridge, that I wanted very much to write a doctoral thesis on "black literature." It was a proposal to which he replied with great disdain, "Tell me, sir, ... who is this black literature?" Few, if any, students or scholars of "ethnic and minority" literatures encounter this sort of hostility, skepticism, and suspicion today. In fact, for those of us who were students or professors of such literatures in the late 1960s and on through the 1970s, it is a thing of wonder to behold the various ways in which our specialties have moved, if not from the margins to the center of the profession, at least from defensive postures to a generally accepted validity.

In the United States, the status of African American literature within the academy has been altered astonishingly during the past quarter century. Few English departments have not engaged in, or will not continue to engage in, searches for junior and senior professors of African American literature. We have come a long way since the early 1930s, when Charles Eaton Burch (1891–1941), as chair of the English department at Howard University, introduced into the curriculum a course entitled Poetry and prose of Negro Life. We have come a long way, too, from the middle 1930s, when James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938), then the Adam K. Spence Professor of Creative Literature and Writing at Fisk University, became the first scholar to teach black literature at a white institution, New York University, where he delivered an annual lecture series on "Negro Literature." What has happened within the profession of literature to elevate the status of African American and other "minority" texts? Multicultural literature studies emerged from social and political movements within the academy in the 1960s, such as black studies, women's studies, affirmative-action recruitment of students and faculty members, and the growth of area and ethnic studies programs. Consequently, and often erroneously, multicultural literature studies has been associated with the academic left. Among the professional gestures of greatest importance to this movement was the publication of Dexter Fisher's volume Minority Language and Literature (1977), which grew out of a conference sponsored by the Modern Language Association. "In an effort to redefine the critical, philosophical, pedagogical, and curricular issues surrounding the teaching of minority literature," Fisher explains in his introduction to the book, the MLA in 1972 formed the Commission on Minority Groups and the Study of Language and Literature (6). This group evolved into the current MLA Committee on the Literatures and Languages of America, the charge of which is to support, among other fields, African American, Asian American, Chicano, Native American, and Puerto Rican studies. Until the early 1970s, however, black scholars did not find the MLA a welcoming institution; they formed instead the
leading theoreticians were Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, was a reaction against the New Criticism's variety of formalism. The readings these critics advanced were broadly cultural and richly contextualized; they aimed to impose a 'holistic and based formal literature firmly on black urban vernacular, expressive culture. Art art for an age' was seen as a concept alien to a 'pan-African' sensibility, a sensibility that was whole, organic, and of course, biologically. The movement attacked what was identified as European or Western essentialism—marked under the rubric of 'universality' by asserting an appositional black or neo-African' essentialism. In place of a formalist notions about art, these critics promoted a politics rooted in a social realism, indeed, on a sort of mimesis; the relation between black art and black life was a direct one. Following the greatest outburst of interest in black studies in the late 1960s, when student protest on its behalf were at their peak, the field began to stagnate in the mid-1970s, as many ill-conceived, politically overt programs collapsed or were relegated to a status even more marginal than the one they had previously had. American publishers, ever sensitive to their own predictions about market size, became reluctant to publish works in this field. Forecasts of the death of African American studies abounded in 1975. This outlook would soon change, however, for within the academy a second generation of scholars of black literature was undertaking important projects that would bear directly on the field.

In response to what we might think of as the social organism of the black-arts movement, a formalist organism emerged in the mid-1970s. This movement was concerned with directing critical attention away from the 'literariness' of the black texts as autochthonic artefacts of language that were alien to the mainstream. Not only does this present constant social, political, and literary choice to minority writers, but it also challenges certain aesthetic principles of evaluation for the critic. The cultural gap between writer and critic is too great, new critical approaches are needed.

Although scholars of minority literatures have concerned themselves with a number of common issues, some of which I discuss later, each field has responded to the issues differently and has evolved in its own way. Because of limitations of space, not to mention expertise, I sketch how the field I know the best—African American literary scholarship—has responded to these issues and has evolved. (For an introductory bibliography to the entire area, see the list of works cited and suggestions for further reading. Ruvald and Ward's Redeeming American Literary History contains comprehensive annotated bibliographies, as well as illuminating essays on African American, American Indian, Asian American, Chicano, and Puerto Rican literatures.)

We might think of the development of African American criticism over the past three decades in several distinct stages, commencing with the black-arts movement of the mid and late 1960s. The black-arts movement, whose
as criticism and, simultaneously, to train an even younger generation of students. While it is difficult, precisely, to characterize their concerns, these scholars seemed to share a concern with the "literariness" of African American works, as they wrestled to make these texts a "proper" object of analysis within traditional departments of English. Whereas black literature had generally been taught and analyzed through an interdisciplinary methodology, in which sociology and history had virtually blocked out the "literariness" of the black text, these scholars, after 1975, began to argue for the explicature of the formal properties of writing. If the "blackness" of a text was to be found anywhere, they argued, it would be in the practical uses of language. So, at a time when theorists of European and Anglo-American literature were offering critiques of Anglo-American formalism, scholars of black literature, responding to the historical traditions of their own discipline, found it "radical" to teach formal methods of reading.

Further enhancing the study (and status) of African American literary texts and the growth of student interest in the field at this time was the emergence of what we might think of as black women's studies—the meeting, on common terrain, between black studies and women's studies. Since 1970, when Toni Morrison published The Bluest Eye and Alice Walker published The Third Life of George Copeland, scholars of women's studies have accepted the work and lives of black women as their subject matter in a manner perhaps unprecedented in the American academy. Thus the women's studies movement in the academy helped give new life to African American studies, broadly conceived, in the 1970s.

In the third stage, critics of black literature began to retheorize social—
and textual—boundaries. Drawing on poststructuralist theory as well as deriving theories from black expressive, vernacular culture, these critics were able to escape both the social organization of the black-arts movement and the formalist organism of the "reconstructionists." Their work might be characterized as a new black aesthetic movement, though it problematizes the categories of both the "black" and the "aesthetic." An initial phase of theorizing has given way to the generation of close readings that attend to the "social text" as well. These critics use close readings to reveal cultural contradictions and the social aspects of literature, the larger dynamics of subjection and incorporation through which the subject is produced. This aspect of contemporary African American literary studies is related directly to recent changes in critical approaches to American studies generally, a subject I return to later.

ISSUES

In what follows I attempt to assemble a (sketchy) catalog of the sometimes interrelated issues that arise under the rubric of "ethnic and minority" or multicultural studies. Among other things, I hope this inventory suggests the practical

and theoretical enrichment that can result from bringing together diverse viewpoints. Since the growing attention to minority discourse has fed on a spatial vocabulary of margin and center and since the formation of the margin has moved to the center of literary history and theory, it is important now to rethink this cartography, for I believe the center-margin topography has started to exhaust its usefulness. My aims, then, in recasting familiar arguments in minority discourse, are to disrupt some of the comforting concepts that seem to foreclose any truly critical inquiry, to encompass the essential continuities across disparate phenomena of marginalization, of center-periphery power relations; and yet to remain responsive to the essential differences within (that other totalizing category) differences.

Terminology. Ethnic, Minority, Mainstream, Marginality

We are, of course, all ethnicites in America, so that all the separate tributaries of what we might with great profit think of as comparative American literature are, in fact, "ethnic" literatures, including Anglo-American literature. Initial uses of the term ethnic, however, connote "of color" or "minority" in terms of demographic data or political connotation. We refer to the rubric "ethnocentrism," for instance, curiously refers to all the world's music but that of the West! The implication of minority as "minor," "less than," or somehow noncentral to "major" scholarship adheres to all these terms. Even margin-center terminologies, which proved initially enabling in the late 1970s and early 1980s, sometimes served to reinscribe the isolated status of these emerging literatures.

All definitions of ethnic tradition ultimately are both tautological and essentialist. We elevate such traditions not by text but by author—indeed, largely by the ethnic descent of the author. If Shakespeare, for example, were found to have had even one African antecedent, he would lose the list of names in an anthology of African literature. Henry Santiago—the protagonist of Daniel James's Anglo-American author of Famous All Over Town (1987) —created a great deal of embarrassment for all those critics who hailed his purportedly "authentic" Chicano novel for capturing the "true voice" of the Mexican American people. Likewise, black authors such as Frank Yerby, who writes "white" historical novels, rarely are taught in black literature courses. Definitions of authors in "national" traditions are equally essentialist, but they have the certain advantage of escaping the pitfalls of biogap. Aleksandr Pushkin is Russian; Niccolò Guicciardini is Italian; Ralph Ellison is American; Machado de Assis is Brazilian—despite also all being persons of African descent. Still, defining literatures by nation, a slippery task with writers such as Henry James, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Derek Walcott, or Jamaica Kincaid, has served as the essentialist model for most definitions of ethnic literatures, as I discuss later. If the 1970s-style hermeneutics saw the death of the author, the 1980-style cultural politics brought the author back.
Escaping Cultural Genetism

"ETHNIC AND MINORITY" STUDIES

Relationship between the Author and an Ethnic Culture

To escape the trap of cultural genetism, in the broadest sense of that term, several scholars have attempted to categorize ethnic literary traditions on the basis of cultural values or characteristics that demarcate the texts in any given tradition. For instance, the relation between oral poetry and performance and written literature has proved especially fruitful in Native American, Hispanic, African, Caribbean, and African American literary studies. Similarly, the privileging of vernacular speech and vernacular literary forms in written literature, through direct speech as well as free indirect discourse, has characterized many fine readings of this kind. Conversations (call and response), genealogy (signifying, mapping), and forms (code-switching, repetition) have also been identified as cultural elements marking a formal difference between a hypertexted ethnic text and its European cousin.

While existing studies using these concerns have appeared in the past decade or two, enabling the charting of specific examples of culturally based language use, studies of this type tend to give rise to the question of "authenticity". Is it a text, or its author, less "ethnically sound" or "authentic" if she or he does not draw on these formal devices? Given the essentialist definitions of tradition at play in the construction of ethnically based canons and traditions, perhaps the search for manifestations of a collective ethnic unconscious or transcendent signifiers and signifying practices was inevitable. But the authors in these constructed traditions—literary traditions are of some degree, fictional constructs—do not draw on all (or any) of these devices necessarily. A descriptive formulation cannot bring a contrived unity to a "tradition" defined in the instance of ethnicity. Further, expectations that authors must be accountable spokesmen for their ethnic groups can well be unachievable for an "ethnic" author. If black authors are primarily entrusted with producing the proverbial "text of blackness," they become vulnerable to the charge of betrayal if they shirk their "duty." (The reason that nobody reads Zora Neale Hurston's Saneh on the Suwanee is not unrelated to the reason that everybody reads Their Eyes Were Watching God.) These burdens of representation can too often lead to demands for ideological "correctness" in an author's work, not to mention a prescriptive criticism that demands certain forms of allegiance and uniformity.

Canon Formation and the Construction of Cultural Identity

The twin problematic of canon formation and nation formation is in the background of much debate at the boundaries of literary studies, and it sponsors the ideology of tradition that has long been in the service of minority legitimation. As Kwame Anthony Appiah observes, recent debates have left us "attuned to the ways in which the fictitious 'excavation' of the literary canon can serve to hypostatize a particular cultural identity" ("Out of Africa" 161). Self-invention is then depicted as discovery. Emmanuel Wallenstein's observation is to the point:

Any ethnic group exists only to the extent that it is asserted to exist at any given point in time by the group itself and by the larger social network of which it is a part. Such groups are constantly created and recreated; they also constantly "cease to exist"; they are thus constantly redefined and change their form at amazingly fast rates. Yet through the physical medium some "name" maintains a laconic continuity because at frequent intervals it has been in the interest of the conscious element bearing that name to restate, revitalize the mythical links and socialize members into the historical memory. (p.49 in Hughes 1999)

Clearly, the endless reconstruction of a "national literature," however subtilized and differentiated, remains the hidden object of much of our literary criticism. It would be easy to demonstrate its operation through the ideology of "tradition," whose tyranny remains little abated even today. And, for better or worse, the margin's been borrowed this instrumentality. The German critic Robert Weinmann argues, however, that when "tradition," as Erbe, is defined historically not only by what is preserved but also by what is obscured, not only as subtracting but, in the worlds of Marx, also as burdensome, then the notion of "future" or even the formulation of a canon will, as an act of historicism, appear more deeply hermeneutical and contradictory. (272)

If minority discourses in America seem to embrace the ideology of tradition, it is because they remain at a stage where the anxiety of identity formation is paramount. This anxiety shows up, for example, in African American literary criticism and theory as the privileging of the vernacular, which is frequently exalted as its font et origo. Such folkish ideology emerges in a variety of contexts; for black nationalism, Adolph Reed, Jr., observes, this folkish essence has been hypostatized to the level of a vague "black culture"—a romantic retrieval of a vanishing black particularity. This vision of black culture, of course, was grounded in residual features of black rural life prior to migrations to the North... As that world disintegrated before urbanization and mass culture, black nationalism sought to reconstitute it. (73)

The limitations of the "nationalist elaboration," Reed continues, is displayed "both in that it was not sufficiently self-conscious and that it misconstrued artifacts and idiocracies of culture for its totality and froze them into an ahistorical rhetoric of authenticity." (74)

If a nationality comes into its own through the production of literature, the apparatus of recognition—the "selection of classics" to which E. B. Currais
fact, attention to its poserality becomes a sine qua non: without an act of historical location, it may not ‘mean’ at all” (55).

The Economy of Authorization

Third World intellectuals, as Carlos C. Sagual reminds us, are about as generally, indigenously Third World as Third World refrigerators... chieftains native notalgia largely fated by Rousseauist sentimentality legitimated by the First World. Intellectual formation occurs today in an international arena. In short, we misrepresent the intellectuals, literary critics, and academics of formerly colonized spaces if we ignore that they occupy First World institutions and roles and that they inherit the colonizer’s architecture of knowledge and its intellectual structures. The Third World intellectual thus engages willfully in the play of spes-persona or par-e-parle, the economy of discursive authority that Pierre Bourdieu has incisively explicated through his idea of “Economie des echanges linguistiques.” Since authority comes to language from outside, Bourdieu argues, the authorized person-parle can act by words on other agents, and thereby on things themselves, only because his speech concentrates the symbolic capital accumulated by the group which has mandated him and which provides the font of power.

Hence a progressive dialectic of authorization between center and periphery. The empowerment of the periphery, then, logically proceeds from the center, but from there on the colonial relation can easily be reversed.

Production of Agonism

Theorists often imply that the margin or the other is inevitably the endangered target of annihilation or assimilation. Wold Gottschalk, for example, contends that “Western thought has always thematized the other as a threat to be reduced, as a potential same-to-be, a yet-not-same.” Its paradigm, he argues, is that of the Arthurian quest, in which the alien does not just resist but within the heroic, monastic sway of the Arthurian world: the other has been reduced to (more of the) same.” Indeed, “it is ideologically inconceivable that there should exist otherness of the same ontological status as the same, without there being immediately mounted an effect at its appropriation” (xiii).

Yet this argument does not acknowledge that the margin is produced by the center or that the other is produced by the self or same, and it proceeds as if the two did not define a mutually constitutive system. One characteristic stance on these matters—as champion of the politically disenfranchised—constantly blurs us to the ways in which the margin (that is, its poserality) is an effect of the cultural dominant rather than an autonomous agency of subversion, the dissolution or co-optation of which is the dominant’s dearest wish. Since (as

representation of this document as if you were reading it naturally. 

terracial, involves active exclusion and repudiation; self-identity requires the homogeneity of the self-identical. Ironically, then, the cultural mechanism of minority self-constitution must replicate the mechanism responsible for rendering it marginal in the first place. To recur again to Weimann: “the process of making certain things one’s own becomes inseparable from making other things (and persons) alien...” (quoting in Krueger 5-6).

Representation versus Articulation

In Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance Baker writes:

Modernist anxiety in Afro-American culture does not stem from a fear of replicating outmoded forms or of giving way to bourgeois formalisms. Instead, the anxiety of modernist influence is produced in the first instance by the black spokesperson’s necessary task of employing audible extant forms in ways that move clear of, masterfully and re-sounding away from slavery.

Arguably, what is at stake here is the black spokesperson’s identity as black spokesperson. The constitution of social groups is politically conceived as a representation of interests; yet from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s analysis, the field of politics can no longer be understood this way, “given that the so-called ‘representation’ modifies the nature of what is represented,” so that “the very notion of representation as transparency becomes untenable” (58). Laclau and Mouffe’s intervention becomes of great significance in the discussions of marginality, where we move between the problematic of literary representation and one of representation of interests (the “black spokesperson” paradigm). Some minority intellectuals who would otherwise refuse the discursive generic of literary representation: inasmuch we do not question the model of the transparency of political representation. What Laclau and Mouffe offer as an alternative perspective accepts “the structural diversity of the relations in which social agents are immersed and replaces the principle of representation with that of articulation. Unity between these agents is then not the expression of a common underlying essence but the result of political construction and struggle” (65).

As argued earlier, if a peripheral ethnicity is to come into its own through the production of literature, the mechanisms of recognition—the “selection of classics”—remains integral to the attainment. But this process too is bound up in the issue of the spokesperson, the dynamics of representation, the site of which is the community of representatives. In fact, at the level of high theory, this whole social struggle is taking place by proxy, with the intellectual community providing the mediation necessary to a “central” reception. Bruce Robbins writes, “As soon as text is chosen not from the West but from the rest, in...
the home. The grammarian's term barbarism encapsulates the social and linguistic freight of our condition: internal transgression is figured as the savagery beyond our borders; and, projectively, vice versa. John Guarilly writes:

The question of reading and writing belongs to the whole problematic of social reproduction, because what one learns to read is always another language. The internal differentiation of languages produced by the classical educational system as the distinction between a creolized and non-creolized speech reproduces social stratification on the model of the distinction between the tribe or nation and its sociolinguistic other, the "barbarians." ("Cannibalism" 301)

At the same time, much theorizing about Europe and its others depicts the production of cultural alterity as an act of self-reflection that requires the complete evacuation of that other's specificity. The other is figured as merely a form or space, a "dirty mirror," as Richard Wright described Africa (158).

Such a view typically takes little interest in the actual effects of such projections on its hapless screens. This indifference is harder to maintain when we shift to the model of internal colonization, the other—or, sexual, racial, ethnic—others within our cultural borders. At the same time, and conversely, little attention has been paid to the ways in which these tendencies to textualize others within certain fixed parameters may operate even in the process of the margin's (self) articulation and construction. The double vision we need here would take in the relation between, on the one hand, how the subjects are constructed or represented to themselves and, on the other, how they are represented within the cultural dominant.

I submit, then, that the ritualized invocation of others is losing its capacity to engender new forms of knowledge and that the "margin" may have exhausted its strategic value as a position from which to theorize the very antinomies that produced it as an object of study. Instead, we must prepare to forgo the pleasures of essentialist affirmation and normalized resentment in favor of rethinking the larger structures that constrain and enable our agency.

To recognize the distinctiveness of minority culture is no longer to treat it as a thing apart, isolated and uninformed by the "dominant" culture. To be sure, no culture is without conflict: certainly the zone of minority literary production has always been "multiscientific." With this idea in mind, recent scholars of African American literature have been able to recuperate the criticism of an earlier generation—which challenged the essentialism of American nationalism, challenged the notion of America as an organic and integrated social regularity founded on the logic of assimilation—without succumbing to the restrictive, rejectionist posture of counterreactionism on which the black-arts movement founded. Recent African American criticism that reads the aforementioned texts written by black authors culture to a tradition because the authors share certain innate characteristics. Opposing the essentialism of European "universal-
ity" with a black essentialism has given way to more subtle questions. The critique of essentialist notions that cloaked the text in a mantle of "blackness": replete with the accretions of all sorts of sociological clichés, has brought forth a "postcolonial" reconfiguration of texts, accounting for the social dynamics of subjectification, incorporation, and marginalization is relative to the cultural dominant. Black literature, recent critics seem to be saying, can no longer simply name the margins. Their close readings are increasingly naming the specificity of black texts, revealing the depth and range of cultural details far beyond the economic exploitation of blacks by whites.

Today, as larger myths and narratives of cohesion have fallen under scrutiny, African American literary studies has served as a strategic site of self-critique within American studies, foregrounding the mutually constitutive relations that obtain between such categories as center and periphery, such identities as "black" and "white." As a site where marginal identities can be seen as both provisional and potent, "minority" studies has also been pivotal in retheorizing the politics of canon formation. In this respect, at least, the margin has truly taken center stage. As Stallybrass and White observe, "what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central": the "Low-Other is desegregated and denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumen
tally-constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant cul
ture." [5-6.] And as the theoretical work of feminist critics of African American literature has turned from a merely additive notion of sexism and racism, we have come to understand that critiques of "essentialism" are inadequate to explain the complex social dynamics of marginalized cultures.

Present and future scholars in "minority" studies will necessarily but also gratefully build on the work of their predecessors, for it is undeniable that many ethnic traditions would have remained buried had earlier scholars not been seclusive in reclaiming them. The challenge ahead, then, seems not to forget about such traditions but to try to be inclusive and extraveried rather than exclusive and introverted in exploring them. Perhaps it is time for scholars to think of a comparative American culture as a conversation among different voices—even if it is a conversation that some of us were not able to join until very recently. Finally, perhaps it is time for us to conceive of an ethnicity, a "blackness," without blood and to reconfigure the complex relations among the texts that constitute American literature.

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WORKS CITED AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING


In his exhaustive opus *Itesana* [Bishop of Lyon] catalogued all deviations from the confessing orthodoxy and vehemently condemned them. Deploiting diversity, he maintained there could be only one solid Church, outside which there could be no salvation. Whoevers challenged this assertion, *Itesana* declared to be a heretic—to be expelled and, if possible, destroyed. . . .

...In opposition to personal experience and guilt, *Itesana* recognized the need for a definitive canon—a fixed list of authoritative writings. . . .

―Michael Burgevin, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln,
*Holy Blood, Holy Grail*

Not only has little changed since I entered the profession in the 1970s, nothing much has changed since *Itesana*, nearly two thousand years ago. They're still pontificating, excluding, and power-mongering; while we're still resisting, dissenting, deconstructing, and subverting. *Itesana* sprang up all sound only to die, only to recur persistently like wildflowers, like *crabgrass*. We still match personal experience and guilt with canonicity, and those who tenaciously cling to the rotting pillars of Rome dissume—or order us purged. It seems that as long as we remain locked into operational structures, nothing but "same of", "same of" can occur. As long as we avoid the creative, we are condemned to reaction.

The profession when I entered it was much the same as it is today, "Still crazy after all these years," as the song goes. Though I had marched, pamphleted, and taught for peace and social justice, for women's, and lesbian and gay rights, and briefly served as faculty advisor for the Young Socialist Alliance; though I had been writing and publishing for several years; though the poems I published with and read with in coffeehouses and bars, on the streets, and at rallies were fairly frequently riot white and on occasion not white men—as far as the academy was, and is, concerned, there was, and is, no literature other than that produced by a Eurocentric formalist elite.

Nearly twenty weary years later, the cops beating African American men is a media sound byte, and the merciless destruction of Native people is largely ignored by all factions in the brawling American polity. Many are glad that "the war has ended," but I am compelled to object: it has not ended; it goes on and on. In the academy we hold rallies, sign resolutions, declare moratoriums, and