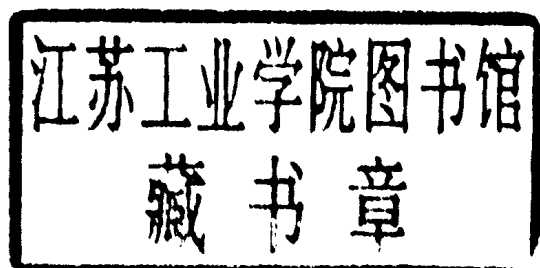


Adell
Double-Consciousness/Double Bind

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Theoretical Issues in
Twentieth-Century
Black Literature

SANDRA ADELL



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Introduction

In recent years the complex ensemble of literature, literary criticism, theory, and philosophy has been problematized. What has emerged from this problematic is what is most often ignored or forgotten by an increasing number of critics and theorists of literature written by and about blacks; namely, that black literary criticism and theory, like literary criticism and theory in general, relies heavily on the Western philosophical tradition. This reliance on the Western philosophical tradition has important implications for black-specific theories of writing, for, as I will show, this dependency calls into question the very possibility of such specificity. Unfortunately, however, as the current sharp debates among some of the leading critics and theorists of black literature have demonstrated, the problems of the philosophical grounds of black literature are often subordinated, if they are raised at all, to problems of defining the proper social and political postures of those black writers engaged in the critical and theoretical enterprise.

The debate that was initiated by the 1987 publication in *New Literary History* of Joyce A. Joyce's "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism"¹ is an example of how the theoretical positions certain black critics have chosen for their work on African-American literature have created a crisis in the discipline itself. In "The Black Canon," Joyce argues that an anthology of literature and criticism co-edited by Michael Harper and Robert Stepto² marks a departure from the traditional role of African-American literary critics as the "point of consciousness for his or her people" and that "black post-structuralist" critics like Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., have adopted "a linguistic system and an accompanying world view" from structuralism, post-structuralism, and postmodernism that estrange black writers from their audiences. Joyce feels that these critics' distant, sterile and pseudoscientific language "challenges" their intellect and "dulls" them to "the realities of the sensual, communicative function of language." What

Joyce prescribes—much (black) theorizing about (black/white) criticism is openly prescriptive—is that as the circulator and preserver of racial/communal values, the black literary critic, once accepted by “mainstream society, should question the values that will be transmitted through his or her work.”³

In “Who’s Zoomin’ Who: The New Black Formalism,” another critic, Norman Harris, echoes Joyce’s concern.⁴ He criticizes Robert Stepto and Henry Louis Gates for working out of a Eurocentric theoretical framework that threatens the integrity of the Afro-American literary tradition by ignoring its social and political foundations. Harris works from the assumption that there is an “epistemological legitimacy” to literature that is congruent with the way people of African descent have traditionally conceived and validated their perceptions of the world. Emphasizing the “vagaries and beauties of Afro-American life,” he argues that in deemphasizing the social or political, Stepto and Gates are engaging in a “New Formalism” that “disfigures the literature it discusses while trivializing the dreams of Afro-Americans in the world.”⁵ According to Harris, this “New Black Formalism” distorts the *proper* reading, understanding, and interpretation of African-American literature. As an alternative, he suggests an *Afrocentric* critical framework such as the one elaborated by Stephen Henderson in the introduction to *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. For Harris, Henderson’s notion of saturation, that is, “the communication of Blackness and the fidelity to the observed or intuited truth of the Black Experience in the United States,” opens up the possibility for readings of (black) texts that “simultaneously embrace and transcend intertextuality.”⁶ Afrocentrism would therefore become the critical *Other* of European literary discourse.

These concerns about the social and political in critical readings of African-American literature are not new. In 1971, Addison Gayle addressed these same issues in *The Black Aesthetic*, an anthology that includes almost a century of critical essays by black writers and academicians. Yet as I will show, while the social and political contexts of black literature undeniably reflect aspects of the realities of the lives of black people, to privilege them in critical and theoretical discourses as Joyce, Harris, and other African-American critics who share their concerns have done, is to risk falling back upon some of the naïve formulas and imperatives of the Black Aesthetic.

Thus said, I do not mean to suggest that the Black Aesthetic was a worthless critical endeavor. On the contrary, the Black Aesthetic, which

grew out of the Black Arts movement of the 1960s, helped to define the contours of the African-American literary tradition as we understand it today. It also helped to elaborate and refine the theories of black literary criticism received from an earlier generation of black writers. I maintain rather that because of its ideological biases, the Black Aesthetic failed to address a number of fundamental issues arising from the intersection it had constructed by virtue of its name—the Black *Aesthetic*, between black literature and Western philosophy.

Furthermore, in the wake of structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction, the black critic in the 1990s is confronted with questions and imperatives that are different from the ones that preoccupied the black aestheticians. For example, Addison Gayle writes in his introduction to *The Black Aesthetic* that the task of the black critic is to question the extent to which a play, a poem, or a novel has helped to transform an “American Negro into an African-American or a black man.”⁷ What is left unchallenged by Gayle, and by Joyce and Harris as well, is whether, in this age of ready-made “high tech” images, literature and its critical and theoretical discourses have the power to effect such a social, political, and psychological transformation.

These kinds of critical imperatives also risk implying, as Harris does, that African-Americans share a holistic perception of the world, that more than twenty-five million people perceive the world’s complexity in a monolithic way. These imperatives in effect close off differences and ignore the very complex problems of language, reading, understanding, and interpretation that have become, at least over the past two decades, as much the subject of literary theory as the literary text itself. Harris has certainly not considered how such complexities affect his own argument: in order to “transcend” intertextuality, as he suggests, one must somehow transcend language itself, since language is always intertextual. Moreover, to privilege the social and political as Joyce and Harris have done is to obscure the manner in which all critical discourses, including their own, are grounded in philosophical premises that may subvert their intentions.

Through a series of close readings of works by a number of major twentieth-century black writers and critics, I seek to intervene in the debate that was initiated by Joyce’s “The Black Canon” in order to reflect upon the extent to which twentieth-century black literature and criticism are implicated in the ensemble of Western literature and philosophy. Until the relation between the black literary tradition and this ensemble is better understood, the field of black literary studies will not advance

beyond these disputes over the presumed opposition between the social and political and the aesthetic or beyond the great Afrocentric/Eurocentric divide.

Although the guiding concept for my reflections is W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double-consciousness," my critical methodology is comparative. I engage the insights of a number of African, African-American, and European theorists, including those of Jacques Derrida, whose deconstruction radically intervenes into Western critical, theoretical, and philosophical discourses in order to further the questioning of, among other things, structures fundamental to political and social oppression.

Derrida has demonstrated through his principle of supplementarity that writing, which is the essence of all literary traditions and canons, always adds to or substitutes for previous writing. This judgment implies that a text, any text, despite its social, political, or ideological context, and despite its claims to truth, is always a multiplicity of other texts. It is part of a determined textual system, with its own language and logic, into which those writing inscribe themselves, and by which they allow themselves to be governed. Critical reading is an important aspect of this system since its aim, at least according to Derrida, should be to produce a signifying structure based on the relationship between what the writer "does and does not command of the language that he uses."⁸

Likewise, the language and logic of this textual system structure, shape, and govern the social and political institutions identified by Joyce and Harris. For this reason, Joyce and Harris are no less implicated in this system than Stepto, Baker, and Gates. Their writing, like all critical writing, exceeds the limits of their ideology. In developing an ideological rhetoric for criticizing the theorists, Joyce and Harris must *supplement* their critical discourses by appropriating terms and concepts from the methodologies they call into question. Joyce's use of the word *canon* in the title of her essay and Harris's faith in the "deep structural continuities" of the African-American experience as defined by anthropology, linguistics, psychology, and history, secure them firmly within the Western metaphysical tradition.⁹ The patterns of language they use are no less governed by the textual system within which they are inscribed than those of other present and past African-American practitioners of literary criticism and theory. One need only read what is arguably the first critical essay on literature published by a black American, Anna Cooper's 1892 "One Phase of American Literature" or W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of*

Black Folk to see that in African-American critical discourses, that textual system is from the beginning strongly Eurocentric.



In her critique of American literature, Anna Cooper uses the languages of romanticism and of *mimesis* to develop a theory of representation and to comment on the relationship between writers and critics and writing. She reiterates a question that was once asked by Sydney Smith, “Who ever reads an American book?”¹⁰ to make her point that not until American writers broke their dependency on the literature, the landscape, and “the insular and monarchic customs and habits of thought of old England” did American literature cease to be a mere imitation of English literature and achieve the “something characteristic and *sui generis*” that makes a “product” worthy of the term literature. Their writing became “national” and “representative” as they entered more fully and “sympathetically” into the “distinctive life of their nation, and endeavored to reflect and picture its homeliest pulsations and its elemental components” (176). The problem is that with the exception of Harriet Beecher Stowe whose *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “England couldn’t parallel,” they didn’t enter deeply enough, according to Cooper. Their writing failed to reflect and picture the “one objective reality” that distinguished the American landscape from that of England—the presence of African-American slaves:

no artist for many a generation thought them worthy the sympathetic study of a model. No Shakespeare arose to distil from their unmatched personality and unparalleled situations the exalted poesy and crude grandeur of an immortal Caliban. Distinct in color, original in temperament, simple and unconventionalized in thought and action their spiritual development and impressionability under their novel environment would have furnished, it might seem, as interesting a study in psychology for the poetic pen, as would the gorges of the Yosemite to the inspired pencil. (178)

Cooper’s poetics, like that of Wordsworth and the English romantics, is strongly influenced by the idea that the writer should follow the example of the painter and always “keep the eye on the subject.”¹¹

The writers who make up the first of the two artistic categories Cooper constructs are those “in whom the artistic or poetic instinct is uppermost—those who write to please—or rather who write because *they*

please; who simply paint what they see, as naturally, as instinctively, and as irresistibly as the bird sings—with no thought of an audience—singing because it loves to sing,—singing because God, nature, truth sings through it. For such writers, to be true to themselves and true to Nature is the only canon” (181). In this context, Cooper defines *truth* in terms of feelings, the imagination, and sense perception. Truth is “merely the representation of the sensations and experiences of our personal environment, colored and vivified—fused into consistency and crystallized [*sic*] into individuality in the crucible of our own feelings and imaginations” (177). Her definition of truth corresponds to what Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* calls “beautiful art.” It implies a “freedom in the play of our cognitive faculties,” which for Kant is a necessary condition for the production of beautiful art.

Kant writes that for art to be beautiful it must show no trace of the “rule” that guides the artist’s mental powers. He calls that rule genius and defines it as a talent for producing exemplary models that “serve as a standard or rule of judgment for others,” but for which no definite rule can be given regarding its own production. “It cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, but it gives the rule just as nature does. Hence the author of a product for which he is indebted to his genius does not know himself how he has come by his ideas.”¹² For Cooper, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is the exemplary model against which she measures the success of subsequent nineteenth-century American writers who chose “the Negro” as their subject.

Cooper places most of the American writers who followed Stowe—along with “Milton in much of his writing, Carlyle in all of his, often our own Whittier, the great reformer-poet, and Lowell together with such novelists as E. P. Roe, Bellamy, Tourgee and some others” into her second artistic category (183). Cooper argues that, unlike her “artists for art’s sweet sake,” her group-two writers were all guided by the prevailing —isms of the day rather than by whatever talent (or genius) they might have possessed. That is why their writing failed to “withstand the ravages of time. ‘Isms’ have their day and pass away. New necessities arise with new conditions and the emphasis has to be shifted to suit the times” (183). But Cooper insists that the shift must not be to the detriment of art. Her criticism of many of the writers who, for whatever reason, chose “the Negro” as their subject has to do with the extent to which they either “perverted” their art to serve their ends, or lacked sufficient knowledge about their subject to produce works equal to that of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In her

opinion, they lacked Mrs. Stowe's "power" because they had not studied their subject with her "humility and love." Some, according to Cooper, had not studied their subject at all. They simply casually observed their cooks and coachmen and then proceeded to write what they thought they knew about "the Negro" and the problem of the color line. Others, like Albion Tourgee, lacked what she feels is essential for producing good fiction: the ability to "think oneself imaginatively into the experiences of others" (185). As a result, Tourgee's characters are all "little Tourgees—they preach his sermons and pray his prayers," but they bear little resemblance to the real-life figures they are supposed to represent (189).

Cooper refers to the protagonist in *Pactolus Prime* as an example of how Tourgee's characters represent none other than Tourgee himself: "His caustic wit, his sledge hammer logic, his incisive criticism, his righteous indignation, all reflect the irresistible arguments of the great pleader for the Negro; and all the incidents are arranged to enable this bootblack to impress on senators and judges, lawyers and divines, his plea for justice to the Negro, along with the blacking and shine which he skillfully puts on their aristocratic toes" (189).

Tourgee's fiction, like that of G. W. Cable, belongs to what Cooper calls the "didactic or polemic class" of writing.¹³ It reveals nothing of the being of its presumed subject. It simply reasserts the politics of its author, albeit a politics guided by a noble and just cause. Cooper gratefully acknowledges the efforts of writers like Tourgee who felt compelled to "champion the black man's cause." But she insists that the writer's intention should in no way impede the critical process: "This criticism is not altered by our grateful remembrance of those who have heroically taken their pens to champion the black man's cause. But even here we may remark that a painter may be irreproachable in motive and as benevolent as an angel in intention, nevertheless we have a right to compare his copy with the original and point out in what respects it falls short or is overdrawn; and he should thank us for doing so" (187).

Cooper is not nearly as charitable in her criticism of William Dean Howells, who by the 1880s was generally considered a major American novelist and literary critic. She sums up Howells's "copy" of the Negro in a single phrase: "Mr. Howells does not know what he is talking about" (201). She goes on to declare it "an insult to humanity and a sin against God" for anyone to publish the kinds of "sweeping generalizations" Howells makes in *An Imperative Duty*,¹⁴ a short novel about the woes of miscegenation that first appeared in 1891 as a serial in *Harper's Monthly*.

Cooper complains that Howells makes the mistake of representing the colored church folk whom his octoroon heroine encounters and finds so repulsive as “‘evidently . . . representing *the best colored society*’” (202). Unwittingly, perhaps, Cooper exposes the class biases that existed among the black intellectual elite of her time when she criticizes Howells for his lack of knowledge about the more cultivated class of colored people and for basing his portrayals on his observations of colored “menials and lazzaroni. . . . He has not seen, and therefore cannot be convinced that there exists a quiet, self-respecting, dignified class of easy life and manners . . . of cultivated tastes and habits, and with no more in common with the class of his acquaintance than the accident of complexion,—beyond a sympathy with their wrongs, or a resentment at being socially and morally classified with them” (207).

In Cooper’s judgment, Howells fails to present a fuller picture of black people because he has “studied his subject merely from the outside.” He therefore lacks the requisite requirement for good fiction: he cannot “‘think himself imaginatively’ into the colored man’s place” (209). Cooper concludes her essay by asserting that only the black man can do that. Her hope in 1892 was that by the time she died¹⁵ she would see “a black man honestly and appreciatively portraying both the Negro as he is, and the white man, occasionally, as seen from the Negro’s standpoint” (225). By the time her essay was published, Charles Chesnutt had already met that task in the novel; Frances Harper had gained considerable attention as a poet; and W. E. B. Du Bois was well on his way to becoming one of the twentieth century’s most influential American scholars.¹⁶



Chapter 1 of this book investigates the metaphysical foundations of Du Bois’s famous formulation of “double-consciousness.” This research will be the first time anyone has shown in detail how this seminal black writer’s notion of “double-consciousness” emerges from the philosophy of Hegel as it is articulated in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This analysis is important because Du Bois’s notion of “double-consciousness” is what many of the black writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Négritude, the Black Arts movement on through to the present have attempted, at least implicitly, to reconcile through their literary texts and criticism.

In Chapter 2, I analyze how Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire use Du Bois as a point of departure for their theories of Négritude, and how they rely on the Eurocentric/anthropological/metaphysical tradition in

their efforts to establish an ontology of blackness. I also address the impact of Négritude on Richard Wright and James Baldwin. Specifically, I discuss how Wright's and Baldwin's reactions to remarks made by Senghor and Césaire in Paris in 1956 during the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists emphasize the difficulty of trying to find, in writing, a point of mediation between two disparate worlds: the African and the African-American. A guiding question in this chapter is one posed by Wright after Senghor's eloquent presentation on "L'Esprit de la civilisation ou les lois de la culture négro-africaine." In an attempt to find a common denominator between himself and the African delegates, Wright asks, "How do I latch onto this African World?"

In chapter 3, I focus on the problems of subjectivity and identity implicit in Wright's rhetorical response to Senghor and on the problem of autobiographical writing. My reading of Wright's *Black Boy* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is organized around the notion that autobiography or "auto-writing" may be seen as a process of self/other creation in which the "I" that seeks to establish itself as subject is always preceded by desire. This desire may center on an absent (African) world, or, as in the case of Angelou, on the mother, who engages in a kind of Freudian *fort-da* game throughout the text. Among the critical and theoretical problems interrogated in this chapter is, "How does the 'I' contextualize itself as 'black' or 'female' in an already established racist and phallogocentric symbolic order?"

Chapter 4 is an engagement with feminism as it is practiced among feminist literary critics. While the chapter's title strongly suggests that my concern is with black feminist literary critics, my approach is cross-cultural and interdisciplinary. My concern in this chapter is whether (black) feminist literary discourse, operating as it does under the illusion that it is working in the interest of a universal (black) Sisterhood, can effectively "speak" on behalf of women who remain beyond the parameters of the American academy.

In chapter 5, I take up the problem of defining a theory of criticism for black writing with greater specificity and relate it to what I have defined as a crisis in the critical readings of black literature. Through a close reading of Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* I show how, in many respects, the theories these critics employ in response to the crisis only serve to deepen it. I do not agree, however, that the problem with their theorizing has to do with a lack of social or political consciousness as some

writers and critics contend. On the contrary, I find the social and political very much intact in their work despite the complexity of their discourse and methods. What is at issue in this chapter is the way Baker and Gates have attempted a re-evaluation of the values that subtend African-American literature through a wholesale appropriation of theories and concepts from the very systems against which they claim to be working. I feel that these writers' theoretical claims are extensive. They each seek a new way of apprehending the being of black literature. But what they have in effect offered, despite the critics who rail against them, are interesting literary histories that have indeed shaken, but have not upset, the status quo. It is my hope that this study will help to enrich the multiplicity of the debate so that the being of literary blackness will perhaps emerge on its own.

In "Toward a Conclusion" I reflect on the concept of double-consciousness and its implications for a thoroughly modern black literature. I also raise the question of what (black) literary theory reveals or conceals about reading and writing—indeed—about the being of (black) literature itself.

I *The Souls of Black Folk:* Reading Across the Color Line

I reached up and took out a fat black book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Du Bois. I turned the pages. It spoke about a people in a valley. And they were black, and dispossessed, and denied. I skimmed through the pages, anxious to take it all in.

—Peter Abrahams, *Tell Freedom*

W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* is, for many writers and critics throughout the African diaspora, an instituting text for twentieth-century black literature written in English.¹ Politically and ideologically framed by what Du Bois perceived as the problem of the twentieth century—the problem of the color line—it posits a founding metaphor, that of the Veil, and a founding concept, *double-consciousness*, for an ontology of blackness upon which is grounded the Black American literary tradition. *The Souls of Black Folk* also posits an aesthetic that has greatly defined the parameters of the tradition. It is, as Robert B. Stepto writes in *From Behind the Veil*, “the first substantial immersion narrative in the tradition; with its publication, all of the prefiguring forms and tropes that will develop another literary period are finally on display.”² It contrasts with the other works included in Stepto's typology of African-American narratives in that it is Du Bois rather than some external (white) voice who assumes responsibility for “authenticating” his tale.³

Stepto describes this process of authentication in narratives before *The Souls of Black Folk* as being “based at least as much on race as on fact”; that is, it was generally a white person who confirmed, in writing, that a narrative's questing heroic figure “was where he said he was.” He writes that in *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois changes the process by assuming responsibility for authenticating his text and his existence. Moreover, his narrative “advances a new scientific standard for what constitutes authenticating evidence.” It scientifically gathers empirical evidence from such literal and