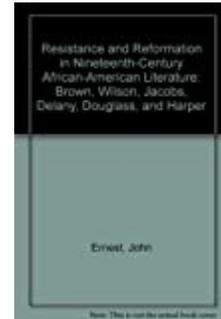




**John Ernest.** *Resistance and Reformation in Nineteenth-Century African-American Literature.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995. xv + 272 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87805-817-4; \$47.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87805-816-7.



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## Constructing a Critical Community

When Henry Louis Gates, Jr. wrote his now classic essay, "Criticism in the Jungle," he could say things like, "Unlike critics in almost every other literary tradition, much of what we have to say about our literature is new" (p. 9). After all, very little had been done prior to the mid-1970s to establish serious criticism of African-American literature both in the academy and on the streets. Invoking his critical forefather, W.E.B. DuBois, Gates reminded his readers that "evidence of critical activity is a sign of a tradition's sophistication, since criticism implies an awareness of the process of art itself and is a second-order reflection upon those primary texts that define a tradition and its canon ... All great writers demand great critics" (p. 8).

Gates has become one of those great critics. He—along with many other critics and scholars such as Houston Baker, Barbara Johnson, Frances Smith Foster, Robert Stepto, William Andrews, Stephen Butterfield, Robert Bone, Nellie McKay, Jean Fagan Yellin, Paul Lauter, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Eric Sundquist—has done much to bring African-American literature into mainstream discussions of American literature. In the process of

engaging American minds with African-American texts, these critics have created both literary and critical canons that have fostered a healthy industry of words and a hierarchy of interpretations. But just when it seemed there was nothing new to say about African-American literature, along came a new generation of literary critics such as Joyce Joyce, Mae Henderson, and Michael Awkward, Valerie Smith, John Callahan, who have their own interpretations which sometimes support, but more often challenge, the earlier scholars. What we have today is a thriving critical community which fosters both growth and inter-generational communication. One of the newest voices in this community is John Ernest, whose *Resistance and Reformation in Nineteenth-Century African-American Literature*, both nods to and shakes its head at earlier criticism.

Ernest, a professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, has crafted an approach to six, now canonical, African-American authors that both respects and challenges the major critical voices that come before him. This study, which has evolved as much from his classroom teaching as it has from his scholarship, recon-

siders the writing of William Wells Brown (*Clotel*), Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*), Martin R. Delany (*Blake*), Frederick Douglass (his autobiographies) and Frances E. W. Harper (*Iola Leroy*). Ernest finds in the works of these writers a number of common themes that present new ways of organizing our interpretations of nineteenth-century African-American literature. Ernest explores the relationship between earlier claims for each work's historical or literary significance, its value as a marginal or mainstream text, and its potential power as an aesthetic/political tool used to resist social injustice and reform attitudes toward the power of literature to promote social change.

*Resistance and Reformation* is the result of teaching and not just reading these authors. Ernest even brings his students into his "Preface," strengthening the bond between reader and critic, and establishing a strong sense of reliance on the interpretative communities we create when we read, teach, talk and write. Ernest acknowledges that we who profess literature owe much to our students for both the process of our teaching and the products of our scholarship. Ernest's classroom experience reminded him that when we bring "assumptions about what literature should be to the task" of interpreting, we more often than not miss out on "how [literature] does work" (p. x). What Ernest practices, and what he promotes, is the need to read our way into a work's context. The basis of Ernest's exploration into these writers is that they "operate on the faith that God's ways are mysterious, and that human history, properly understood, is contained within that essential mystery" (p. 6). Using Paul Ricoeur's essay "Christianity and the Mystery of History," Ernest advises his readers that when you deal with God you're dealing with the story of a human inside a larger narrative. He argues that all of these writers created texts that moved beyond simple testimonies, to the inhumanities of slavery. They were "new narratives of social order and progress" (p. 9).

Ernest appropriately sets these authors into the realm of mainstream culture by reminding us that much of the cultural power of the nineteenth century "was generated in the interpretive space between meaning and mystery ... [by those] "claiming the ability to determine the relations between human events and providential destiny" (p. 11). Ernest proceeds to examine what he calls "six case studies of literary activism" By resisting the power that constructed their situation, these authors reform the relationship between the human and the divine, creating a new vision which can lead us to new realities and understandings.

Ernest opens his study with, "The Profession of Authorship and the Cultural Text," an analysis of William Wells Brown's *Clotel*. He sees in *Clotel*, a "unified artistic achievement greater than the sum of its parts" (p. 20), and claims that previous critics have had trouble seeing this because of "the presence of so many sources and plots" (p. 20) which lead them to conclude that *Clotel* "does not hold together when set on hard critical ground" (p. 21). Ernest turns this criticism inside-out by suggesting that the text is "an entrance into a world in which the work's apparent lack of unity and overabundance of materials are entirely appropriate" (p. 21). Essentially, Ernest uses descriptions of Wells' earlier works and avoids applying prescribed notions of what a novel should be. By doing this, he argues that "Brown works to guide familiar anti-slavery arguments towards unfamiliar results" (p. 23).

Ernest takes us on a tour of the many documents that went into the creation of Brown's novel and successfully argues that Brown, as a cultural editor, "constructs or reshapes his various narrative lines to instruct his readers to read beyond the text to a moral realm presented not as the ideals ... but as the interpretive tools one needs to read one's world" (p. 34). As for Brown's borrowing plots and even passages from other authors (such as Lydia Maria Child)—Ernest dismisses this, arguing that, in dealing with social reform, Brown used whatever he could to expose the hypocrisies of Christianity and to educate the reader on the evils of slavery.

In Chapter Two, "God's Economy and Frado's Story," Ernest picks up where earlier critics have left Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*, by asking the question, 'how are we to "understand the cultural value of th[e] act of delayed exchange" (p. 56) that occurs when we pick up this narrative 130 years after it first appeared?' Ernest disagrees with Gates' suggestion that this text's key position as a "'sacred' literary history" distorts its true value as a "secular history" (p. 57). According to Ernest, because Wilson's achievement goes beyond its place as a "great or subliterate work" and a model for "colored brethren," we see how it "contribute[s] towards the creation of a reconfigured community of understanding" (p. 57). He argues that Wilson presents issues of gender and class that move her story beyond the issues of race and extend her story's importance into mainstream culture. Against Gates' argument that poverty is "the great evil in this book" (p. 71), Ernest suggests that the great evil is "the will to dominate, which feeds upon cultural and personal vulnerability in whatever form it takes. After all, the one character in the narrative who views poverty as a disgrace and a dishonor is not Frado but one of the narrative's most vis-

ible villains, Mrs. Bellmont“ (p. 71).

Ernest builds a new reading of *Our Nig* out of the materials a community of critical voices has left for him. In Chapter Three, he turns away from critics and focuses entirely on the world of texts for Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Ernest begins “Reading the Fragments in the Field of History” by building an analysis based on earlier writings of Jacobs’s editor, Lydia Maria Child. Through this reading he connects the domestic and biblical worlds found in *Incidents* and argues that fragmented lives create fragmented texts, and that only after we assemble the fragments through Linda Brent, can the distorted realities of slavery become a coherent text that is both readable and referable.

In “The White Gap and the Approaching Storm,” Chapter Four, Ernest looks at *Blake*, Martin R. Delany’s under-appreciated, and under-criticized novel. Ernest sees the novel more as “Delany’s own practical application of principles adduced” (p. 114). Ernest tells us that Delany’s earlier work, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, published in 1852, transforms “commercial discourse into a vehicle for revolutionary moral reform” (p. 124). Delany labels this space, between commerce and morality as “the white gap.” And his way of bridging the gap is to “reconfigure religion and recontextualize faith by reconceptualizing moral duty” (p. 132). Ernest perceptively sees Delany’s faith in a God that has been perverted by the white man, but that cannot be abandoned by those wishing to reform society. For it is out of the very materials of resistance that Delany is able to shape his notion of reform (p. 139).

In his chapter on Frederick Douglas, entitled “The Lives and Times of Frederick Douglass,” Ernest aligns himself closely to much of the earlier and major critical work done by William Andrews, Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. He takes issue with Andrew’s use of the “trickster” as a model to explain “the many forces working both with and against each other to construct and maintain a vision of race based primarily on the priorities of power” (p. 145), by offering a simpler explanation: that these variations of self-representation (first as a victim, but later as a victor) can be attributed to Douglass’s movement from a private to public figure over the span of a life. Buy it or not, Ernest once again presents an argument solidly built on his interpretation of both the primary texts of Douglass and the contemporary writings of others.

In his final chapter, “Unsolved Mysteries and Emerg-

ing Histories,” Ernest argues for a deeper appreciation of Frances E. W. Harpers’ novel *Iola Leroy*. Building on Paul Lauter’s important 1988 essay, “Is Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Good Enough to Teach?,” Ernest takes issue with previous critics such as Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee, for viewing this novel as being plagued by an “emphasis on ‘dull’ piety over focused politics” (p. 181). Through his reactions to these criticisms, including Francis Foster Smith’s introduction to three rediscovered novels by Harper, Ernest turns Lauter’s question into “Is Harper better to read than others” (p. 182) and concludes that she is because she “locates the vehicle of that transcendent standard [of thought and action] specifically in African-American thought and literary culture” (pp. 198-199). He sees Harper, just as he saw Brown, as taking on the role of a cultural editor who repeats “significant phrase and plots from other sources, placing familiar lessons in new settings, and reworking cultural plots and recasting cultural identities in new literary scripts” (p. 199). In this way, Ernest reveals the complexity of *Iola Leroy* through its rich literary allusions and elevates Harper’s importance in the community of African-American writers. Ernest’s new reading transcends earlier, more conventional, ways of reading Harper and invites us to reread *Iola Leroy* as “a novel about authorship, about writing (authorizing) the self, and, beyond that, about writing the race” (p. 203).

Ernest’s book concludes with an “Epilogue,” which functions as a closing argument in the literary court of appeals. He advocates the need to move beyond the established critical responses of these major nineteenth-century American writers. Such movement enables us to better see the cultural incongruencies of our own world. By seeing all six authors as the creators of literature as an alternative institution, Ernest believes we can “enter into history, to explore old fields with new eyes” (p. 214). He also reminds us that our notions of self and community can and must be reformed through our resistance accepting conventional interpretations as the final word. A major strength of Ernest’s study is that he acknowledges and challenges earlier critical perspectives. By moving interpretation beyond the major critical voices, he finds pertinent new directions for interpretation. His methodology, which attempts to take each text on its own terms, is laudable—but even a rebel can not avoid dropping the big names of theory along the way, such as Bakhtin and Foucault. Ernest doesn’t need them, unless he feels his place in the field needs the authority that comes from using them.

Whether you are teaching or writing on these texts,

Ernest has provided a strong contribution both to our understanding of these writers and to the extension of the critical community which is essential not only for an understanding of the past, but for plotting our future as humanists in a society about to enter a new century, that is still wrestling with the issues surrounding what W. E.

B. Du Bois called the central question of the twentieth century.

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