

Locating a Text: Implications of Afrocentric Theory

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We have finally arrived at a cultural junction where several critical avenues present themselves to the serious textual reader. Any fair estimate of the road that got us to this point must conclude that it has been a difficult one, filled with intellectual potholes and myopic cultural roadblocks, but at last there is an Afrocentric viewpoint on texts. This view has been developed on the basis of works by scholars such as Houston Baker, Abu Abarry, Carol Aisha Blackshire, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Trudier Harris in recent years. There seems to be a growing number of writers who have abandoned or are attempting to abandon the staid domains of an encapsulated theory.

Afrocentric theory as advanced in numerous works, including my own, establishes two fundamental realities in situating a text: location and dislocation. The serious textual reader is able to locate a text by certain symbolic boundaries and iconic signposts offered from within the text itself. However, much like any traveler the reader's location is also important in order to determine the exact location of the text.

An inordinate number of African American scholars have become lost souls trying to negotiate the Eurocentric pathways of mono-culturalism and mono-historicalism. An equal number of non-African scholars have floated around ethereally when it came to locating an African American text. Both sets of readers have been victims of a breach in good highway manners. They have ignored all of the signs signifying Afrocentric literacy in favor of blind alleys based in a mono-cultural reality. What I hope to demonstrate is that multicultural literacy can lead to a critical transformation in the way we approach any discourse.

However, multicultural literacy does not exist apart from the substantive knowledge of specific cultural communities. There is no multicultural literacy apart from cultural bases. It is the ability to use and integrate these cultural bases that allows us to speak of multicultural literacy. An examination of an African American writer such as Henry Dumas provides an example of the range and vision of Afrocentric theory. I shall discuss theoretical issues and then move into an examination of Henry Dumas' location. An Orientation to Motif

Charles Fuller, a colleague in my department who won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1982 for his work "A Soldier's Play", claims that many of the dramatic characters for his plays come from people he knew on Broad Street in North Philadelphia. Not knowing what Fuller knows and not seeing what he sees in the faces of people on Broad Street might create difficulty in understanding the nuances of his drama. While there are certain readily understandable guideposts in good literature, accessible, that is, to the least literate of us, to truly capture the setting of Charles Fuller's drama one must have more than a passing appreciation of African American culture. Indeed the good critic and serious reader of African American literature should have been exposed to a variety of cultural information, e.g., the Dozens, folk tales, Ebonics, barber shops or beauty parlors, Baptist churches, Hoodoo and Root rituals, Ebony Magazine, Jet, and numerous authors and musicians. All of this information may not be useful on every trip through the literary territory in the African American world but it is surely advantageous on most occasions for the critic and reader. This means that critics must take courses in African American culture and history as they take courses in Euro-American history and culture. In fact, they must search the ancient foundations of the African's cultural response to reality and environment much as one looks to Greece or Rome for analogues in the Euro-American writers and authors. The only reason, it seems to me, that this is not done in the first place is the abiding bias against African culture that continues to disorient most critics.¹

An explosion of interest in multicultural issues, diversity in the classroom, and centered visions in curricula has contributed to a critical transformation in literature. Like Tuthmosis IV, who in the third year of his reign, asked his scribes to take a retrospective of all that had gone before, we must take a critical look at what has happen in the last few years in multicultural literacy. The king's intentions were to re-establish the foundations of the kingdom, to examine the preparations for the future, and to re-assert the unity of the Two Lands. Our aim in a retrospective is simply to be able to navigate the cultural highways of a multicultural society.

A New Historiography as the Basis of Location

The critical spirit that has served to temper the received position on certain texts is the result of a multi-cultural consciousness brought about by a new historiography. Based on the idea that ancient Kemet and Nubia are to the rest of Africa as Greece and Rome are to the rest of Europe, this new historiography has insinuated itself into contemporary thinking in education, anthropology, sociology, history, and literature. ² Pioneered by African and African American

scholars such as George James, Chancellor Williams, Leo Hansberry, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Theophile Obenga, this critical historiography influences the most elementary discussions of text by bringing the gift of new information. Unfortunately, as Martin Bernal has said in his monumental re-assessment of the European classical tradition, *Black Athena*, most white scholars have ignored the writings of these scholars.³ Bernal believes that in the last five centuries racism has been the source of the mono-ethnic and mono-cultural portrayal of the production and acquisition of knowledge.

In his book *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality?*, Cheikh Anta Diop laid a revolutionary foundation for the new pathways of critical knowledge in the field of human creativity. He argued a position that was radical only because for five hundred years the Western world had denied Africa's role in human history. Diop contended that Western scholars had tried to take ancient Egypt out of Africa and Africans out of Egypt.⁴ The context for this attack on Africa was the rise and promotion of the European Slave Trade. So massive was this vulgar trade in human beings that it colored every relationship in the European and African worlds. Nothing was untouched by the anti-African attitudes developed in the fifteenth century. Art, literature, dance, music, theology, and philosophy were adjusted to deal with the Great Enslavement and domination of Africans. Defamation of Africans and African intellectual gifts was sanctioned at the highest levels of Western literature and government; subjugation of Africa was confirmed ultimately in the way writers wrote about the encounter between the two peoples.

In *The Mismeasure of Man*, Stephen Jay Gould reports that some of the key leaders of the West recorded their anti-African attitudes in clear and straightforward terms.⁵ For example, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race or made distinct by time and circumstance, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind".⁶ Indeed Gould demonstrates that the British philosopher David Hume held negative attitudes about the contributions of Africans to human society.

David Hume asserted "I am apt to suspect the Negroes and in general all the other species of men to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, or even any individual eminent either in action or speculation, no ingenious manufacturers among them, no art, no sciences".⁷ Indeed Louis Agassiz wrote of Africa, "...there has never been a regulated society of black men developed on the continent..."⁸ Arnold Toynbee, one of the Western world's leading historians

said "When we classify mankind by color, the only one of the primary races, given by this classification, which has not made a creative contribution to nay of our twenty-one civilization is the black race".⁹ The famous German philosopher F. Hegel wrote of Africa, "This is the land where men are children, a land lying beyond the daylight of self conscious history, and enveloped in the black color of night. At this point, let us forget Africa not to mention it again. Africa is no historical part of the world...¹⁰ These attitudes often find a place in the most contemporary thinking of Western thinkers.

The publication of the Great Books of the Western World in 1990 under the editorship of Mortimer J. Adler continues the Eurocentric idea that Africans have made no contribution to the West. ¹¹ A typical collection of white male writers (there are only 4 white women writers out of the total of 130 writers) the Great Books of the Western World serves as an instrument to block the road to multi-culturalism. With no African Americans and only four women included in the list of writers, the collection is certain to be without much enduring credibility. Any group of "Great Books" that does not include writings from either Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois <../dubois/dubois.htm>, Edward Blyden, Richard Wright, Martin Luther King, Jr. <../mlking/mlking.htm>, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, or Toni Morrison is surely a pretense to inclusiveness. Locating a Text

There are several elements which help to locate an African American text or any text: language, attitude, and direction. These elements might be used alone or in combination. I shall examine each of these elements as they relate to African American writers and critics. However, a word should be written about the nature of the creative production derived from authors engaged in the communicative process with readers. Writers are fundamentally committed to the principle of expression; one cannot express one's self without leaving some insignia. From the writer's own textual expression the Afrocentric critic is able to ascertain the cultural and intellectual address of the author.

The Place

Among the complications in the location process for critics of African American texts is the devastating extent to which African American authors have been removed from general cultural terms. There are two types of texts produced by individuals who have been removed or have removed themselves from terms of blackness: the decapitated text and the lynched text. A text which is decapitated exists without cultural presence in the historical experiences of the

creator; a lynched text is one that has been strung up with the tropes and figures of the dominating culture. African American authors who have tried to "shed their race" have been known to produce both types of texts.

The decapitated text is the contribution of the author who writes with no discernible African cultural element; the aim appears to be to distance herself or himself from the African cultural self. Among the best practitioners of this genre of writing is the author Frank Yerby. His contributions to literature have been made as a part of the European and white experience in the West. Although he responded to criticism long enough to write the *Dahomeans*, he remained fundamentally committed to a style of writing which placed him outside of his own historical experiences. Thus, his African voice remains essentially silent. Yerby is the kind of author one reads and says, if you do not know, that this must be a white writer. Even my white students are surprised to discover that the author of some of the finest Southern plantation novels is an African American. While he became relatively successful in a commercial sense in this vein of writing, Frank Yerby has no clear literary tradition and adds to no new school of aesthetics. He produces decapitated texts with no guiding heads and no sense of soul.

The lynched text is more easily produced by African American authors who have literary skills but little cultural or historical knowledge. Images tend to be thoroughly Eurocentric, producing lines such as "the war-like natives" in a historical novel or "the Valhallian quest of the black hero" in poetry. An African writer who uses such language may be rewarded by the Eurocentric establishment for demonstrating a mastery over or expertise in handling European themes but it does not mean that the writer is placed in her own center. Since the literary establishment often reinforces Africans the more removed we are from our cultural terms, there is social pressure on the writer to "write what whites writes." One can perhaps see why James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, John A. Killens, and John Edgar Wideman are not given greater prominence in the literary curricula of this nation. Neither attempted to shed blackness; in fact, some tried to re-accumulate what they had lost through education.

Elements of Location

Language. Normally we say that language is a regularized code that has been agreed upon by a community of users. There is nothing particularly wrong with this general definition of language. However, language can be said to involve grammatical rules, nuances, words,

and deep systems. In that case if we concentrate on one aspect of language, words, for instance, we can obtain a fairly good assessment of where a writer is located.

Words have function, meaning, and etymology; my concern in this discussion is primarily with meaning. An African American author or any author, for that matter, who writes of "Hottentots," "Bushman," and "Pygmies" has already told the Afrocentric critic something about where she or he is located. Of course, the same observation can be made by any critic of any author. Location is determined by the signposts. In any situation where the author is trapped in the language of a racist society that provides pejorative terms, the critic is seeking to see how the particular writer handles the situation. What turn of phrases, what lacunae and nuance, what unique rendering make this particular writer succeed. Language is the most important element because it is the most easily manifest in the text. One sees words on paper. If one sees a reference to Africans as primitives or to Native Americans as "a bunch of wild Indians" or Latinos as "greasy" , then one knows the cultural address of the author. While it is true that authors might use irony, sarcasm, and other techniques of language to deliver a certain point or perspective, the Afrocentric critic is sensitive to the persistent and uniform use of pejoratives as demonstrating the author's location. When an author use pejoratives unknowingly to refer to Africans, the critic often is being confronted with an unconscious writer, one who is oblivious to the social and cultural milieu.

Attitude. Attitude refers to a predisposition to respond in a characteristic manner to some situation, value, idea, object, person, or group of persons. The writer signals his or her location by attitude toward certain ideas, persons, or objects. Thus, the critic in pursuit of the precise location of the author can determine from the writer's characteristic or persistent response to certain things where the writer is located. The attitude is not the motive; attitudes are more numerous and varied than motives. Consequently, the attempt to locate a writer by referring to "motivating attitudes" may be useful in some situations. The common adage, "I cannot hear what you say because what you are shouting so loudly in my ear" is a remarkable example of how our attitudes influence our appraisal of those around us. This is the same for writers. Once a critic has read certain portions of a text to "get the drift" of what it is the writer is getting at, he or she can usually locate the author.

Direction. The line along which the author's sentiments, themes, and interests lie with reference to the point at which they are aimed I am referring to as direction. It is the tendency or inclination present in the literary work with regard to the author's objective. One is able to

identify this tendency by the symbols which occur in the text. For example, a writer who uses Ebonics, African American language, in his or her works demonstrates a tendency along the lines of Afrocentric space. The reader is capable of digesting some of the arguments, the poetic allusions, and situations because of the tendency identified in the writing.

Therefore, a text must be seen in the light of language, attitude, and direction when the serious reader wants to locate it. Each text carries its own signature, a stamp, if you will, of the place to which it belongs or to where it is going. In any case, the reader will be able to adequately locate the text in order to make judgments about the author's creative abilities as well as the author's philosophical underpinning. Ultimately, as we shall see, a text must fit within a multiplicity of places, each one defined by the dynamic interplay of culture and purpose.

An Example From History

One of the greatest (in my judgment) African American writers was born on July 29, 1934, and killed in New York on May 23, 1968. His name was Henry Dumas and his death at the age of thirty four cut short a brilliant career of a poet and short story writer who gave meaning to the Afrocentric term, located.

Henry Dumas' work, *Ark of Bones and Other Stories and Poetry for My People*, was published posthumously.¹² However, he had been engaged in teaching at the Experiment in Higher Education at Southern Illinois University and served as a member of the editorial staff of the *Hiram Poetry Review* and through these activities had made many friends and acquaintances who knew his creative power. Hale Chatfield and Eugene Redmond ably brought Henry Dumas to life again in the editing of his works. Few African American writers have been so successful as Henry Dumas in demonstrating the opposite perspective of the race shedders. Dumas, as we shall see, was pre-eminently an Afrocentric writer in every aspect of the term.

For the reader seeking to possess the literacy necessary to understand the stories or the poetry of Dumas, it suffices to say that one must pay attention to every nuance of the African American culture. That is to say one must understand the "bop" and the "do". Furthermore, the reader must be able to see how nicknames locate a person in the text as well as the author's ability to write culturally, that is, out of the culture. For example, Henry Dumas gives his characters names like Blue, Fish, Tate, and Grease. These are important names in the context of Dumas' stories. Actually, each of

the names carries definite meanings. Blue, for example, relates to a person being so black he looks blue. Fish is the nickname for a person who swims very well. Tate is the nickname for a person whose head is shaped like a potato. Grease is the name of a smooth talking individual. There are several reasons why these names are significant in Dumas' cultural understanding and our appreciation of his art. In the first place, nicknames are means for placement, location, identity. They are often more descriptive and defining than the European names given to African American children. Since many people did not have access to African names, the practice of nicknaming became a major avenue for the maintenance of African culture and expression. Names could still mean something much like names had meant among the Yoruba, Ibo, Fanti, Asante, and Congo. Dumas understands the relevance of the nickname and appropriates its use to the functions of his art. Another reason Dumas' use of these names is important comes from the creation of atmosphere in his works. He seeks always to expand the boundaries, to move against the tide, and to raise the difficult questions. There is no better way to create atmosphere than to allow the traditions to blossom, particularly in reference to what people call things, that is, the words given to identify persons and objects.

The richness of Dumas' language, the clarity of his symbolic attitude, and the rhythm of his trajectory, cannot be overestimated. He impressed himself as well as others with the tremendously accurate portrayal of the African American language. Indeed, Eugene Redmond wrote "Dumas-a brilliant, creative linguist-contracts and expands English, Black Language and various African tribal (sic) sounds to come up with what is perhaps a "found" utterance...." 13 Redmond's introduction to the stories of Henry Dumas is a penetrating look at the style of the artist. What Redmond observes in the language of Dumas is what places him squarely within an Afrocentric location. When Redmond says "Dumas is also the first among young black writers to re-acculturate" he is speaking to Dumas' love of his language.¹⁴ There is no caricature of the African in his use of African language; no self conscious concentration on loss exists in the mind of Henry Dumas. He finds the African American language richly endowed, as he found the people.

In the powerful story, "Ark of Bones", Dumas brings together all of the experiences of his young life to produce a text richly contoured with cultural artifacts of language. Headeye, one of the characters, had a mojo bone in his hand. But we learn that "Headeye, he ain't got no devil in him." His only problem was that he had "this notion in his head about me hoggin the luck." Dumas knows the close community language as well as the religious allusions, but his

knowledge of this language is a gift of his sensitivity to the voices he has heard. The reader knows precisely where Dumas is at all times, even though as you read him you know that he is aware of every thing he is doing in the text. There is no stream of words here floating endlessly on with no point; this is a master writer whose point is made in every sentence. "Headeye acted like he was iggin me" is about as precise as you can get with language. To understand iggin is to be right in the center of the culture; however, it is an understanding that comes from experience or from study. One of the most insidious forms of critical hierarchy is the criticism of Afrocentric writers by those who have neither studied nor lived the culture. The assumption that one can simply make critical judgment and commentary about the text, perhaps locate the writer, without serious study of the culture is an arrogant and false assumption. As one who does not know white American culture can truly understand it without some background, neither can Afrocentric writers be understood without some background. Normally, the student of American literature gains the knowledge of the nuances of white American literature and can adequately place the writers. But Afrocentric literature is much like Old English literature in the sense that it must be seriously studied or else the reader will usually miss the point. I am not just speaking about knowing the meaning of words or understanding the structure of Ebonics, that is a starting point. More fundamentally, the reader must know from what center of experience the writer writes. An African American person writing from a Eurocentric basis will produce text that may have some references to the cultural materials of the African American people but will remain essentially a white writer with a black skin. Such a writer is not much different from a white writer who writes knowledgeably about certain cultural icons of the African American community. But to really come from an African-centered perspective in literature, the writer must immerse herself or himself in the culture of the people. The value of this immersion is that one becomes more authentically a voice of the culture, speaking much like Henry Dumas the language of the African American heritage with all of its universal implications in similar experiences of other people. To deny Afrocentric writers this possibility, either through criticism or creation, is to assume that the special language of the African American is somehow different from other languages, i.e., Spanish, Yoruba, Gikuyu, Polish, and so forth.

Dumas understood the nobility of the culture from which he had come and so when he wrote that Headeye's daddy "hauled off and smacked him side the head" he recognized that the perfection of action could only be told with two verbs. Rather than say, as might be said in English, that his daddy "smacked him side the head",

Dumas goes into the culture and brings to bear the full meaning of this action. To truly complete the act the daddy had to have "hailed off and smacked him." This construction is like the one I often heard in Georgia as a child when someone had become a member of the local church. People would say, "Child, she got converted and joined the church." Another such construction of language is the command "Turn loose and jump down from there" to a child who is climbing a tree.¹⁵

In his stories as in his poetry Dumas gives his readers all of the signposts of his location. He is not a writer without a place in his own culture; he is firmly planted in the midst of ancestors, ghosts, haints, and spirits of the past as well as the generative power of the present condition of African Americans. Among the expressions and terms which he employs are: Glory Boat, afro-horn, Aba, Heyboy, Sippi, catcher-clouds, and Saa saa aba saa saa. While his corpus is limited because of his early death, he remains one of the most centered of African American authors. Language, attitude, and direction are clearly demarcated in his works. When we read Dumas we are reading a profoundly honest writer who tells his and his people's special truth to the world. Contained in the language, the attitude, and the direction of his work is the symbolism of strength, mystery, energy, dynamism, intelligence, wisdom, and trust. A compact exists between Dumas and the characters of his stories which allows him to use their language to tell the truth. He "ain't give on to what he know" but the reader knows that Dumas found the center of his cultural being intact and never left it. Why should he have left? What other writers would be required to leave? How silly of a writer to think that he or she must leave the source of power in order to be universal; true universalism in literature adheres in the ability of a writer to capture the special story or stories of his or her own culture in ways that those stories make impact on others, regardless of the first language. In the end, the serious reader of writers must work to re-affirm the centrality of cultural experience as the place to begin to create a dynamic multicultural literacy because without rootedness in our own cultural territory, we have no authentic story to tell.

Notes

1 The controversy over the "Great Books" which ensued in 1990 is a case in point. The fact that Mortimer Adler and others who organized and published the works considered "great" did not include one book by a writer of African descent demonstrates the point made by numerous authors that mono-culturalism remains the dominant ideology of the literary establishment in the West. 2 Among the works in this vein are Molefi Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*

<afrocentric_idea.htm>, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Molefi Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990); Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization*. (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1974); Martin Bernal, *Black Athena*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987). 3 Martin Bernal, *Black Athena*, pp. 434-437. 4 Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization*. (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1974). 5 Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* . (New York: Norton, 1981). 6 Gould, 1981, p. 32 7 Gould, p. 41 8 Gould, p. 47 9 Gould, p. 41 10 Basil Davidson, *The Lost Cities of Africa*. (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1984). 11 *New York Times*, October 25, 1990 12 Henry Dumas, *Ark of Bones and Other Stories*. Edited by Hale Chatfield and Eugene Redmond. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970. 13 Eugene Redmond, "Introduction," in Henry Dumas, *Ark of Bones and Other Stories*. Edited by Hale Chatfield and Eugene Redmond. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970, p.xiv. 14 Redmond, *ibid.*, p.xv. 15 Molefi Kete Asante, "The African Essence in African American Language," in M.K. Asante and K.W. Asante, *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990.

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