



**A Polycentric
Approach to
African
American
Literature,
Criticism, and
History**

The African American Male, Writing, and Difference

W. Lawrence Hogue

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*A Polycentric Approach to African American
Literature, Criticism, and History*

W. LAWRENCE HOGUE

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*To the memory and Spirit of my sister,
Lola Hogue Thomas*

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PREFACE

The narrative of the African American sociopolitical mission of racial uplift and its subsequent mainstream American support are dominant in the lives of African Americans, especially the middle class. The narrative advocates certain mainstream values such as middle-class respectability, the Enlightenment idea of progress, the Protestant work ethic, a certain purity in values, patriarchal political culture, and patriarchal gender conventions. In striving for these values and ideas, the black middle class hopes to show how African Americans can practice these values and thereby prove to white people their worthiness of respect and social equality. According to the racial uplift mission, when one African American proves that he can speak and dress, be intelligent, and show intelligence, culture, and education in ways sanctioned and respected by the dominant society, he brings honor, respectability, and pride to the race. The writing of one's autobiography is the best way that a successful African American can demonstrate his achievements. The hope is that white people will accept him.

At this stage in my life and career, I am told by the racial uplift narrative that I should write my memoir. I have graduate degrees from some of the United States' most prestigious universities. I have published two major critical texts, and I am a tenured, full professor at an urban Research 1 university. Because I am successful, argues the narrative of racial uplift, I should tell my story to show how I succeeded and to prove to white Americans, again, how another African American has become successful by their standards and criteria. Then, hopefully, they will accept/validate me and eventually all African Americans as worthy of social equality.

But writing my memoir seems inappropriate for me for a number of reasons. First, I am still very young, and my life and career still feel as though they are on the ascent. Second, by my own philosophical and cultural standards, my life is rather uneventful. I have taken a rather traditional approach to life, only taking risks and pushing boundaries within the accepted norms. But third and more important, in the last ten years I have developed some serious issues with the racial uplift narrative, especially its objective of constructing a monolithic representation of African America, thereby repressing and subordinating African America's polyvalent nature. I have profound problems with the narrative's inability or refusal to engage issues of class and difference within African American communities. It covers over the African American as the Same as the middle class white American norm.

Therefore, rather than write another black autobiography, one of the staples of the canon of African American literature, that chronicles yet another African American's particular successes and achievements, and therefore, reinforces the status quo, I have decided to break with tradition and the narrative of racial uplift and write a critical book discussing the white/black binary and how the African American middle class and the sociopolitical mission of racial uplift have colonized African American life, literature, criticism, and history. I want to present a more inclusive representation of African America. In *The African American Male, Writing, and Difference*, I use African American male writers of the twentieth century to explore the issues of class, gender, devalued otherness, victimization, and difference, and to celebrate the polyvalent nature of African American literature, criticism, and history.

Until recently, but still quite prevalent today, mainstream American social reality was/is defined by the white/black binary of signification that defines whites as normative and superior, and that represents blacks as inferior, as a victim, as devalued Other, or, more recently, as the Same. The narrative of the sociopolitical mission of racial uplift reinforces this binary system and the representation of the African American as a victim. To reconfigure the African American as a non-victim, as a subject with agency who is different but equal, I examine historically from whence this binary comes. My research led me to the European Renaissance and to the rise of European colonialism, modernity, and capital. Then, I deconstruct/disrupt the binary.

Using postcolonial theory, I examine the manifestation of the white/black binary on African American literature, criticism, and history. I scrutinize closely the mission of racial uplift, particularly its literary arm, the canon of African American literature, and its version of American/African American history, showing how this mission actually reproduces the white/black binary in the canon of African American literature, African American history, and African American inferiority/victimization. *The African American Male* shows how, prior to the 1970s, African American literary scholars praised and sanctioned those literary texts that could generate or reinforce the values of the racial uplift narrative and ignored and repressed those African American literary traditions, genres, and texts that did not.

Delineating how mainstream African American political and educational institutions, apparatuses, and organizations such as the National Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Council of Negro Women, and black newspapers focus *only* on racial oppression and the achievements and successes of middle-class blacks, the book exposes how this racial uplift narrative and mainstream American society assume that other/different non-middle-class, non-Christian, non-Freudian, and/or non-Protestant-work-ethic blacks—who could be Voodoo practitioners, hobos, blues men, jazz men, the African American subaltern, existentialists, or postmodernists—have no value culturally, socially, intellectually, or otherwise.

Taking a polycentric approach, *The African American Male* examines how, in assuming that African America constitutes a monolithic group, the middle class fails to engage the issues of class, otherization, victimization, and difference within African American communities, literature, criticism, and history. In defining African America cosmologically, religiously, and culturally in terms of the Same, the black middle class covers over its differences—thereby ignoring the fact that other African American lifestyles, traditions, and theoretical concepts of life and existence have their own logic and distinction.

In deconstructing the racial uplift narrative, in exposing how it is reinforced by the mainstream American society, and in using the concept of polycentrism to discuss the different African American traditions and theoretical concepts of life *equally*, I present a vision of African American life, literature, criticism, and history that displays their hybridity, heterogeneity, and variety. Polycentrically selecting those African American male literary texts that draw on non-normative African American and normative American and Western belief systems and theoretical concepts of life and history, the book deconstructs and de-territorializes the white/black binary that defines the African American as Other than reason and reconstitutes and re-territorializes those social, historical, and literary spaces where African American differences are privileged, where the positionality/representation of the African American is changed from Other-as-object, and thus as less, to Other-as-subject, where he as Other is equal but different. I use the polyvalent nature of African American literature, criticism, and history as a way of showing the limitations of a singular, totalized approach to this literature, criticism, and history.

The research and writing of this book have benefited from many sources. First, I want to thank the Office of the President at the University of Houston for a President's Research and Scholarship Fund Award (PRSF) for the 1992-1993 academic year and the Office of Sponsored Programs at the University of Houston for a Limited Grant in Aid (LGIA) Award for the Summer of 1996, both of which allowed me to hire a research assistant.

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June 2002
Houston, Texas

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

APPROACHING AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE, HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND CRITICISM POLYCENTRICALLY

In the United States, the African American is constituted in a white/black binary of signification that defines whites as normative and superior and that represents blacks as victim, as inferior, as devalued Other, or, since the 1960s, as the Same as whites. This binary, which can be traced to the European Renaissance, is reproduced and reinforced not only by mainstream American society but also by the African American sociopolitical mission of racial uplift and its literary and historical extensions: the canon of African American literature and the classic African American historical emancipatory narrative. Elite/middle-class Christian African Americans have always been at the helm of this mission. They believe that it is their responsibility to socialize and educate all African Americans to be the Same as the dominant white society, thereby making them worthy of acceptance by whites. What mainstream America and the African American mission of racial uplift advocate is social equality: they want African Americans to have the same freedom as white Americans. But what do they mean by social equality? Equal access to goods and services? Equal opportunities for all Americans? The acceptance of all Americans and African Americans in their own diversity and complexities? The acceptance of differences? Since mainstream America, the African American sociopolitical mission, and the classic historical narrative all focus on social parity and not on cultural diversity and tolerance of African American differences, one has to assume that social equality means making the African American the Same as some normative American

ideal. Thus, the primary function of the mission is to protest those societal forces and institutions that prevent the African American from achieving equality.

But in their move to protest racism and to refute the negative image of the African American constructed by the binary and in their emphasis on defining the African American in terms of some idealized American norm, African Americans intent on racial uplift have established a hierarchy within African America, thereby reducing African American differences to a singular formation. Establishing a binary of self and others—where the elite/middle-class African American is the center/norm—elite/middle-class African Americans fail to engage and appreciate African American differences, the rich cultural diversity and approaches to life that comprise American/African American life. Here, I am talking not only about elite/middle-class Christian African Americans but also about jazz/blues African Americans, Voodoo African Americans, existentialist African Americans, postmodern African Americans, working-class African Americans, subaltern African Americans, modern African Americans, and urban swinging African Americans. Within the white/black binary and the sociopolitical mission of racial uplift, the African American is represented only in terms of his or her experience of racism. All other identities are excluded. The binary, however, until recently, was never questioned.

There are at least two implications in not asking fundamental questions about the unequal white/black binary system. First, asking for social equality in a binary system that structurally defines and represents the African American as inferior, as victim, as devalued Other, or as the Same entraps African American critics and historians inside that system. Second, to simply ask for social equality, to aim simply for a change in the distribution of power, leaving intact the power structure itself (the unequal white/black binary system), is to define the African American within the values and conventions of that binary. It is to resubject the African American to this unequal system and to continue the representation of the African American either as the devalued Other (victim) or as the Same (the white male norm). My concern in this book is to challenge the forms and nature of the white/black binary system, to challenge the contemporary play of powers and power relations. These challenges become prerequisites for moving toward a genuine modification/representation of the African American in literature, history, and criticism. My objective is to eschew the binary and to speak equally of African American differences, to examine and discuss African Americans in terms of their own distinctions and traditions, to engage the polyvalent nature of African American literature, history, and criticism. But, theoretically, how does one speak a language and present a narrative or vision that belies the white/black binary, disputing the African American sociopolitical mission of racial uplift, the classic African American historical emancipatory narrative, and the canon of African American literature with all their exclusions and systematized hierarchies? How does one speak equally of differences?

To arrive at a language and a theoretical concept that can envision differences, I turn to the idea of polycentrism, the principle of advocating the exis-

tence of independent centers of power within a singular political, cultural, or economic system. What I see in those constructions of Western, American, and African American literature, history, and criticism that eschew systematized hierarchies, that resist the framing of American/African American life around the unequal white/black binary, and that allow for racial and cultural differences is a more relational and radical approach. Polycentrism, states Walter Laqueur in *Polycentrism*, is a term that was coined by Palmiro Togliatti, who led the Italian Communist Party from 1927 until his death in August 1964 (2). After Joseph Stalin's death, according to Laqueur, polycentrism was used to describe the growth of independence among states and parties within the Communist/Socialist camp, and the emergence of one real and several potential rival centers to the Soviet Union (2). Polycentrism was used a second time by the internationally renowned Marxist economist Samir Amin. In *Empire of Chaos*, Amin takes the concept of polycentrism and applies it to the international world capitalist economy after World War II. In *Delinking*, Amin argues that the new globalization, which happened after World War II, with Japan and China emerging as economic powerhouses, set in motion the disintegration of auto-centered economies of the West (32).

What is common to these uses of polycentrism is a situation in which differences cannot be accommodated adequately in a hierarchical system that privileges a center with a subordinated periphery. Through repression and violence, differences in these instances are denied their logic and validity. The spread of Communism and the great objective differences in the methods and conditions of other countries made a centralized, homogeneous concept of Communism ineffective and repressive. The logic of events and the very dynamic of Communist parties and states propelled them in different directions. Likewise, Amin thinks that the national, auto-centered economic system, which was concentrated in Europe and the United States, cannot account for developing capitalistic economies in the rest of the world. Therefore, the world must become more polycentric to account for these other developing capitalistic economies. Polycentrism gives Laqueur and Amin the language, categories, and vision to talk about differences without getting into the issues of hierarchy, value, center/periphery, and superiority/inferiority. It gives them the concepts to discuss systems that are different but equal within a common framework or ground.

I want to use the concept of 'polycentrism' to envision an American/African American literature, criticism, and history that possess differences, but I do not want to get into the issue of privileging certain definitions, values, and tastes over others. Most, if not all, African Americans have racism, Otherization, and devaluation in common. But—due to class, skin color, geographical location, education, and other sets of conditions—they experience them differently, and they consequently develop/devise different methods, communities, and cosmologies, or have different sets of conditions, for defining and representing their social reality. Polycentrism gives me the theoretical basis to discuss and engage these different African American communities and traditions. It allows me to

envision/construct a reading of American/African American life in which relations have many dynamic cultural, historical, critical, and literary locations, many possible vantage points, rather than a center/norm and peripheries.

Polycentrism has less to do with canons, artifacts, and representations than with the communities "behind" the canons and artifacts, which are much more diverse than the canons indicate. A polycentric approach concerns the dispersing of power, the empowering of the disempowered, and the reconfiguration of subordinating institutions, texts, traditions, and discourses. It assumes changes, not just in images but in power relations. A polycentric approach, according to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, thinks and imagines "from the margins," seeing minoritarian and repressed spaces, traditions, and communities, as well as marginalized groups within minoritarian communities, not as "interest groups" to be "added on" to a preexisting "nucleus, but rather as active, generative participants at the very core of a shared, conflictual" history (48). A polycentric approach to American/African American history and literature engages critically the entire notion of a white or black center/canon. It challenges the construction of a canon of African American literature that privileges select African American texts and ignores or marginalizes others.

In this sense, a polycentric approach reconceptualizes American/African American literature, criticism, and history by focusing on the power relations between and among the different cultural communities and movements. It links together minoritarian—or once repressed and subordinated traditions, canons, and theoretical concepts—with sanctioned traditions and canons within both America and African America, challenging the hierarchies that make some literary texts, concepts of history, or ways of life "minor" and others "major" and "normative." A polycentric approach allows me to subject the "mutual relations" between the various traditions within America and African America to the "varying imperatives of their own internal development and to chart the 'reciprocal adjustment'" among all American/African American communities (*Delinking* xii).

Of course, a polycentric approach to American/African American literature calls into question our concept of literature: it requires us to reconfigure it. In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams argues that in its modern form the concept of "literature" did not emerge earlier than the eighteenth century and was not fully developed until the nineteenth century, despite the fact that the conditions for its emergence had been developing since the Renaissance (46). According to Williams, the word *itself* came into English use only in the fourteenth century, following French and Latin precedents. The idea of "literature" was often "close to the sense of modern literacy, which was not in the language until the late nineteenth century" (47). As a new category, the concept of literature first shifted "from 'learning' to 'taste' or 'sensitivity' as a criterion defining literary qualities; second, [there was] an increasing specialization of literature to 'creative' or 'imaginative' works; third, [there was] a development of the concept of 'tradition' within national terms, resulting in the more effective definition of 'a national literature'" (48). Today, American literature, including African Amer-

ican literature, operates as a “national literature.” It is usually defined as the canonical genres of writing.

But, as John Guillory argues forcefully in *Cultural Capital*, this concept of ‘literature’ privileges the “cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie, a form of capital increasingly marginal to the social function of the present educational system” (x). America has evolved into a diverse, heterogeneous population with the power/cultural capital to demand different notions of literature and different aesthetic values. The presence of this diverse population shows the limitations of the traditional concept of literature. From this perspective, the issue of “canonicity” seems less important than the historical crisis of literature, since it is this crisis—the long-term decline in the cultural capital of literature—that has given rise to the canon debate (x). Guillory argues that it is the institution—the school or university—that is the “historical site of evaluative acts” and that “subordinates specific values expressed in works to the social functions and institutional aims of the school itself. It is only when presented as *canonical*, as the cultural capital of the school, that individual literary works can be made to serve the school’s social function of regulating access to these forms of capital” (269).

But out of the canon debate there also emerges the question of aesthetic value, something that Marxist and black aesthetic critics, despite their professed political engagement and radicalism, have failed to engage. Until this debate, the universality of aesthetic perception was restricted to certain hegemonic individuals and social groups. Within mainstream American and African American criticisms, those groups or individuals with power and cultural capital determined the community’s aesthetic perception and values. They also determined which literary texts would receive cultural capital, which would stay in print, and which would be “made to serve the school’s social function of regulating access to. . . forms of capital.” The critique of the canon enabled a “privileged perspective upon the entire discourse of value, and it was thus the means by which that discourse. . . could be opened to an antifoundational or relativist reorientation. The new relativist discourse of value could then be turned against the historical discourse of aesthetics, removing once and for all its axiological props” (Guillory 272).

Rejecting the universality of aesthetic value and arguing for a relativist, politically useful aesthetic, Tony Bennett writes:

The political utility of discourses of value, operating via the construction of an ideal of personality to which broadly based social aspirations can be articulated, is unquestionable. There is, however, no reason to suppose that such discourses must be hitched up to the sphere of universality in order to secure their effectivity. To the contrary, given the configuration of today’s political struggles, it is highly unlikely that an ideal of personality might be forged that would be equal service in the multiple, intersecting but, equally, non-coincident foci of struggle constituted by black, gay, feminist, socialist and, in some contexts, national liberation politics. In particular conjunctures, to be sure, an ideal of personality may be forged which serves to integrate—but always temporarily—such forces

into a provisional unity. But, this is not the basis for a generalizable and universalisable (sic) cultural politics. (44)

Given the presence of emergent racial, cultural, class, social, gender, and sexual groups and individuals who protest their exclusion from a hegemonic American "ideal of personality" and thereby simultaneously advocate their own individual aesthetic tastes, a universal aesthetics proves impossible.

The critique of aesthetics always assumes what Guillory calls a concept of value grounded in the notion of a "valuing community" or communities. But the "valuing community" can also reinstate a kind of "local subjective universality" (277), especially if it assumes that it has homogeneous experiences, beliefs, or values. White male advocates of New Criticism before their rise to hegemony in the 1940s, African American racial uplift critics, Alain Locke's New Negro critics, American feminist critics, black aesthetic critics, queer theorists, Mexican American cultural nationalist critics, and Marxist critics question and actively oppose the claims of "necessity" and "naturalness" made for the conditions and perspectives of the dominant society, "pointing out the existence of other conditions, namely those relevant to their lives, and other perspectives, namely their own" (B. H. Smith 181). But these marginal critics also adhere to concepts of value grounded in the notion of a valuing community. All reinscribe a kind of universality in their aesthetic values. Like the dominant society, they repress differences within their valuing communities. "When someone or some group of people insist(s) on the *objective* necessity or propriety of their own social, political, or moral judgments and actions, and deny the *contingency* of the conditions and perspectives from which those judgments and actions proceed," argues Barbara Herrnstein Smith in *Contingencies of Value*, "it must be—and always is—a move to assign dominant status to the *particular* conditions and perspectives that happen to be relevant to or favored by that person, group, or class; it must be—and always is—simultaneously a move to deny the existence and relevancy, and to suppress the claims, of *other* conditions and perspectives" (181).

As Smith points out, there are certain purely conventional "norms and standards (like units of measurement, or safety standards)" that are functionally "unconditional and universal" and may thus be called "contingently absolute" or "contingently objective" (182). But as far as culture is concerned, Smith argues that "a community is never totally homogeneous, that its boundaries and borders are never altogether self-evident, that we cannot assume in advance that certain differences among its members are negligible or irrelevant, and that the conditions that produced the relative unconditionality, local universality, and contingent objectivity are themselves neither fixed forever nor totally stable now" (182). Smith rejects the notion of community as the epistemological ground of value.

Of course, the problem here is that it is impossible to conceive of a valuing community or an identity community without recourse to local universalization of its values. Individuals from such communities—the European and American communities I discuss in chapter 2, the African American community

I discuss in chapters 3 and 4, the gay community I discuss in chapter 9, and some of the various individual writers discussed in the other chapters who represent various American/African American valuing communities and traditions—once they constitute these communities socially, politically, and aesthetically, seldom refrain from policing differences within them. They want to define their community's difference from other communities; therefore, they project their concept of 'social identity' into an ideal of homogeneity. Echoing and reinforcing this same sentiment, Fawzia Afzal-Khan in *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel* argues that "the writer, by unconsciously (or, often consciously) attempting to validate himself and his group in the face of what he perceives as an antagonistic other, ends up confining himself to the limited, and limiting, economic and sociopolitical interests of its class or group" (2).

But if we accept, as Smith argues, that "*each of us* is a member of many, shifting communities, each of which establishes, for *each* of its members, multiple social identities, multiple principles of identification with other people, and accordingly, a collage or grab-bag of allegiances, beliefs, and sets of motives" (168), then we are forced to question, accept provisionally, or perhaps even abandon our traditional notion of community. "The grounding of value in discrete communities," argues Guillory, "inaugurates a contradictory practice which moves back and forth between making separatist and universalist claims" (279). But just as no individual writer is unequivocally the member of only one community, neither is any cultural object the bearer of the values of only one community.

Of course, as I argue against a homogeneous American/African American community and a universal aesthetic, my aim is not to abandon aesthetics and values completely. "The dismissal of aesthetics, as the discourse of 'universal' value believed to suppress differences," argues Guillory, "has thus had the paradoxical effect of removing the basis for apprehending the work of art as the objectification not of subjects or communities but of the relations between subjects, or the relations between groups" (282). The value of a cultural object can least of all be expressed as having effect "solely within the limits of particular valuing communities" (282). Smith writes:

[A] verbal judgment of "*the value*" of some entity—for example, an art work, a work of literature, or any other kind of object, event, text, or utterance—cannot be a judgment of any independently determined or, as we say, "objective" property of that entity. As we have seen, however, what it can be . . . is a judgment of that entity's *contingent* value: that is, the speaker's observation or estimation of the entity will figure in the economy of some limited population of subjects under some limited set of conditions. (94)

Individual critics, observers, or writers thus construct the community.

An individual observer who defines the African American community according to the aims and politics of the African American sociopolitical mission of racial uplift will value a literary text according to how it figures in the limited, elite/middle-class Christian set of conditions. He or she will not define an

African American existentialist, blues, or swing text as figuring in that community's economy and, therefore, will not impute it with any value or cultural capital. Of course, the crucial questions are: Does this individual observer define his or her values/aesthetics universally? Contingently? Does he or she realize that these values/aesthetics are restricted to a "limited population of subjects" under some "limited set of conditions"? Because the African American community is not homogeneous ("its borders and boundaries are not altogether self-evident") and because African Americans have multiple social identities, the same individual observer, or another individual observer from a different segment of the community, can equally adopt, or have a different social identity and so find value in an existentialist, blues, or swing literary text, or respond to these features in a racial uplift canonical text. In this instance, value no longer has a "socially determined function" but "the potential infinity of individual uses" (Guillory 295). For example, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, depending on which sector of the African American community is observing, can be defined as a Voodoo, a jazz, a detective, or a postmodern text. Because individuals from the same or different segments of the African American community can construct and grant value to that community differently, a text can belong to several communities. All values are contingent and their price/worth is determined by the market's cultural capital. With this nonfoundational and relativist approach to valuing cultural objects or literary texts, I can impute cultural capital to texts from all the various traditions in African American literature. Taking a polycentric approach to the literature, I can speak of different African American texts as having contingent value, without getting into the issue of hierarchy, superiority, and inferiority.

Finally, the crisis in the traditional concept of literature, which has been accompanied by a change in cultural capital as other African American communities demand other types of literatures or expressive forms, allows us to engage different African American aesthetics and cultural imaginaries. Given the demand for African American readings—not only in the traditional novel but also in autobiography, romance, detective fiction, mysteries, science fiction, popular fiction, experimental fiction, poetry, and the essay—we have to devise a definition of literature that will incorporate, engage, and assess all of these African American expressive forms equally.

This issue of differences also plagues African American history. How does one speak of differences within the classic African American historical emancipatory narrative? Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* provides a language and theoretical concepts for discussing American/African American history polycentrically:

For many years now historians have preferred to turn their attention to long periods, as if, beneath the shifts and changes of political events, they were trying to reveal the stable, almost indestructible system of checks and balances, the irreversible processes, the constant readjustments, the underlying tendencies

that gather force, and are then suddenly reversed after centuries of continuity, the movements of accumulations and slow saturation, the great silent, motionless bases that traditional history has covered with a thick layer of events. (3)

These historians are looking for links that can be made between disparate events, for how a causal succession can be established between them, and for the continuity or overall significance these links possess. In short, these historians are looking to “define a totality” (3).

But Foucault supersedes this traditional approach to history, which asks for links, causality, and totality, with a general approach to history, which asks “questions of another type: Which strata should be isolated from others? What types of series should be established? What criteria of periodization should be adopted for each of them? What system of relations (hierarchy, dominance, stratification, universal determination, circular causality) may be established? And in what large-scale chronological table may distinct series of events be determined?” There is something dispersed, decentered, and polycentric about Foucault’s notion of general history. Extending this polycentric approach to other disciplines such as literature, science, and philosophy, Foucault wants not to define the totality in these disciplines but to “detect the incidence of interruptions” (4).

In taking a polycentric approach to American/African American literature and history in this book, I eschew historical narratives and an African American literary canon whose focus/center is on racial oppression exclusively, and so challenge the African American sociopolitical mission of racial uplift, that is, the journey of the African American from the colonized subaltern to the values and definitions of mainstream society. I destabilize and, therefore, place into flux the two halves of the white/black binary, thereby unleashing American/African American differences. The relative term *Other* is the obverse of *normal*. Thus, normalizing the *Other* must come through an essential rupture of the white/black binary and other hierarchical hierarchized systems.

In this book, I approach American/African American history and literature by focusing on the various literatures, critical practices, lifestyles, aesthetic forms, cultural imaginaries, and theoretical definitions of life within a range of American/African American communities. And I do not position the once marginal communities and traditions as “interest groups” to be added on to a “preexisting nucleus” (Shohat and Stam 48). This means examining the history and literature of subaltern African Americans, of jazz/blues artists, and Voodoo practitioners, none of which are particularly Christian or middle class. A polycentric approach also allows me to include an examination of African American radical individualism, existentialism, postmodernism, and urban survivalism, which are a part of African American life that is different from mainstream norms and conventions and cannot be engaged, examined, and discussed adequately and positively in the white/black binary or within the historical narrative that posits a quest for social equality.

I turn to Charles Wright's *The Messenger*, to the early novels of John Wideman, and to Robert Boles's *Curling* and *The People One Knows* to discern how the extreme subjectivity of their existentialism renders obsolete such master narratives as the mission of racial uplift. I examine the novels of Robert Deane Pharr and Cyrus Colter, and Nathan Heard's *Howard Street*, which are nonhumanistic, non-middle class, non-Protestant work ethic, and non-Freudian, and examine how they explore survivalism as a theoretical system that challenges through its very existence the positioning of the African American within Enlightenment moral codes. I turn to William Melvin Kelley's *A Different Drummer*, which explores how the instinctive Thoreauvian concept of 'radical individualism' disrupts the notion of a unified African American valuing community and posits a social space where the African American exists as a non-victim. I examine Clarence Major's blues novel, *Dirty Bird Blues*, which constructs a representation of the African American as affirmative, existential, individual, vibrant and different. I turn to James Earl Hardy's *B-Boy Blues* to discuss sexual fluidity as a way of disrupting the heterosexual/homosexual regime that defines sexuality in the West. Finally, I turn to Don Belton's *Almost Midnight*, which uses Voodoo as a different theoretical conception to define African American life and history. I engage all of these different African American texts without the need to exclude or repress any as "negligible or irrelevant" or to establish a hierarchy among them.

Finally, I want to explain why I focus only on African American male writers. First, since the 1970s, emerging feminist criticism and women's studies have created the scholarly space for most previously excluded African American women writers to gain validation and critical attention. Although the 1960s movement and African American studies gave validation and critical attention to certain canonical texts by both men and women, there is no social or literary movement to garner critical attention for existential, Voodoo, blues, and urban subaltern literary texts by African American male writers. They are simply neglected. Second, as a variety of critics and historians have emphasized, black masculinity has occupied a particularly problematic place in American literature and culture. The very essence of racism in the United States required the bestialization or animalization of the African American male, which led both American and African American authors such as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, and others to treat African American men as pacific or passive, to define them according to the definitions and values of the middle-class American norm, or to depict them in some other romantic guise. But, many African American male writers found alternative ways to represent and to examine black masculinity—though their portrayals have often been misread or ignored. Although there are some black women texts that could be configured into my overall theme of African American differences, I want to focus on the various ways African American male writers represent and examine black masculinity. Third, and more important, I want to explore the condition of pos-

sibility for an African American male—or any individual who has been defined historically as devalued Other—in the West, despite every effort to define him as devalued Other, to define himself as a subject with agency. Finally, despite the fact the I focus on African American male writers, I employ throughout this book, to use the words of bell hooks, “a feminist analysis that will address the issue of how to construct a life-sustaining black masculinity that does not have its roots in patriarchal phallocentrism” (*black looks*, 111).

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CHAPTER TWO

HISTORY, THE WHITE/BLACK BINARY, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN AS OTHER

In chapter 1, I discussed the African American as being constituted within an unequal white/black binary system. In this binary system, which is reinforced by the cultural, social, political, and economic institutions and apparatuses of the United States and Western civilization, the African American is represented *only* in terms of his experience of racism. To be represented as a victim of racial oppression is to be defined exclusively and negatively by someone else's discourse. For the African American, racial oppression/victimization becomes the site of a beginning, an origin, and the events of African American history and culture are defined in terms of this beginning. In short, the African American is represented as the passive object of a white middle class that is the maker of history. As a consequence, other African American representations, identities, and experiences that do not fit into this white/black binary are ignored. These exclusions forestall social and cultural heterogeneity, or a polycentric approach to American/African American social reality, in favor of a single paradigmatic perspective in which white, middle-class America is seen as the unique source of meaning, as the U.S. center of gravity, and as the ontological "reality" for the rest of the country. Also, these exclusions further signify, within the context of the Neolithic revolution of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a polycentric representation of the world where the civilizations of Asia, Africa, and the Americas stand as pillars of world history in their own right.

The staying power of this white/black binary of signification rests, in no small part, on the fact that it has been rearticulated in a dense cultural network of normative definitions, including binaries such as nation/tribe, middle

class/poor, knowledge/ignorance, colonizer/colonized, culture/folklore, Christian/heathen, and suburban/inner city. In other words, the middle-class white norm, along with the representation of the African American as devalued Other, is woven into the core cultural premises and understandings of the U.S. society.

Whence did this white/black binary come? How has it manifested itself historically? How can we disrupt it? All literature dates this particular binary to the birth of modernity in 1492 and to the European Renaissance. As Enrique Dussel argues in *The Invention of the Americas*, whereas modernity “gestated in the free, creative medieval European cities, it came to birth in Europe’s confrontation with the Other” (10). The rise of capitalism and colonial Europe and the Renaissance’s qualitative break with the earlier history of humanity began when Europeans became conscious of the idea that their conquest of the world was a possible objective. From that they developed a sense of absolute superiority, even if the actual submission of other peoples to Europe had not yet taken place. By conquering, controlling, and violating the Other, Europe soon defined itself as discoverer, conquistador, and colonizer of alterity (12). The so-called voyages of “discovery” inaugurated modernity, catalyzing a new epoch of European colonial expansion that culminated in its domination of the globe. For many revisionist historians, 1492 installed the mechanism of systematic advantage that favored Europe against its African and Asian rivals.

If we look at the world before 1492 from what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in *Unthinking Eurocentrism* call a polycentric rather than a Eurocentric perspective, it did not contain a single hegemonic power (8). According to Janet L. Abu-Lughod in *Before European Hegemony*, between 1250 and 1350, an international trade economy developed that stretched from northwestern Europe to China, including India and parts of Africa, in which all states and empires were basically equal in terms of economic and social development. This international trade had its roots in the much earlier Neolithic revolution, which saw the birth of agriculture and cities (8). This revolution, according to Dussel and contrary to Georg Hegel’s proposal, began primarily in the West, “first in Mesopotamia and later in Egypt, and then surged forward toward the East, usually with few contacts between civilizations” (75). The Neolithic revolution spread eastward to the Indus Valley (today Pakistan), to China’s Yellow River Valley, to the Pacific Ocean region, and finally into Mesoamerica, home of the Mayan and Aztec civilizations, and the southern Andes, where the Incas resided (75). This means that prior to 1492, progress toward modernization and capitalism that was taking place in parts of Europe was also taking place in parts of Asia, the Americas, and Africa: whatever happened economically and socially in Europe also happened in the Eastern hemisphere.

Europe’s dominance after 1492 resulted not from any internal immanent forces or from an inherent superiority of mind, culture, or environment, or because Europe was more progressive, venturesome, and achievement oriented. Rather, its rise was fueled by the riches and spoils obtained in the conquest and colonial exploitation of America and later of Africa and Asia (Blaut 51), partic-

ularly as Asian and African proto-capitalist centers began to decline. What Europe did have was opportunity. It had a locational advantage in the broad sense of accessibility. If the Western hemisphere or the Americas had been more accessible to South Asian Indian centers than to European centers, then very likely India would have become the home of capitalism, the site of bourgeoisie revolution, and the ruler (colonizer) of the world (181).

The leap across the Atlantic in 1492 was certainly one of the great adventures of human history. Iberian ports had the clear advantage over Asian or African mercantile-maritime centers.¹ Sofala, which was the southernmost major seaport in East Africa of that period, is roughly three thousand miles farther away from an American landfall than are the Canary Islands (Christopher Columbus's jumping-off point) and five thousand miles away from any coast densely populated enough to present possibilities for trade or plunder. The distance from China to America's northwest coast was even greater, and greater still to the rich societies of Mexico (Blaut 182). Overall, in the late fifteenth century, it is far more probable that an Iberian ship would have effected a passage to America than an African or Asian ship. Is this rise to capitalistic world hegemony environmental determinism? asks Blaut. If the choices were between an environmentalistic explanation and one that claimed the intrinsic superiority of one group over all others, he answers, we would certainly settle for environmentalism (182–83).

With the “discovery” of America in 1492, the New World became significant in both the rise of Europe and the rise of capitalism. Immediately, the colonizing process began and explosively advanced, involving the destruction of American civilizations and states, the plunder of precious metals, the exploitation of labor, the otherizing of the indigenous Americans, and the occupation of American lands. Within a few decades after 1492, the rate of growth and change had expedited dramatically, and Europe entered a period of rapid metamorphosis.

The colonial enterprise in the sixteenth century produced capital in a number of ways: the mining of gold and silver; plantation agriculture; trade with Asia in spices, cloth, and so on, and the establishment of a variety of productive and commercial enterprises in the Americas. Other ways were slavery and piracy. Accumulation from all these sources was so massive that it fueled a major transformation in Europe: the rise to power of the bourgeoisie and the immense efflorescence of preindustrial capitalism (Blaut 189). But it was not until several centuries later that the new globalized system incorporating the Americas, Africa, and Asia yielded its full return and catapulted Europe to world hegemony.

If the white/black binary of signification dates to modernity in 1492, to Europe's confrontation with the Other or the non-European, what was the mind-set that European explorers, colonialists, adventurers, and missionaries took to Africa, Asia, and the Americas? What caused them to view non-Europeans as different and therefore less? There are historical, cultural, and religious factors leading to the “Europeanization” and “Christianization” of Europe that may explain why.

In the early Middle Ages, Europe was a dispersed, heterogeneous collection of sects who spoke different languages, practiced different religions, and possessed varied economic and cultural systems and beliefs. According to John Hale in *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance*, the period of European history from around 1450 to about 1620 has come to be called the "long sixteenth century." It was the first age in which the words "Europe" and "European" acquired a widely understood significance (xix). The Christianization of Europe was an integral part of the Europeanization of Europe. The two comprised the cultural homogenization of Europe, an effort to constitute homogeneous linguistic, national, and religious communities by spreading one particular culture through conquest and influence. According to Robert Bartlett in *The Making of Europe*, it had its core in one part of the continent, namely, France, Germany west of the Elbe, and North Italy, regions that had a common history as part of Charlemagne's Franklin empire. Thus, the cultural homogenization of Europe was, in part, a function of the Frankish military hegemony. It was from this part of Western Europe that expansionary expeditions were launched in all directions, and by 1300 these wars had created a ring of conquest states on the peripheries of Latin Christendom (269). These conquest states gave the new Europeans their formative experience of the Other. For example, when Anglo-Norman invaders settled in Ireland, or Germans in Pomerania, they defined the people of Ireland and Pomerania as devalued Others, as uncultured savages, and proceeded to reproduce social and economic units similar to those in their homelands.

Thus, even before Europeans encountered the non-Europeans, they already had the experience of dealing with an Other: the internal European Other. As Peter Mason points out in *Deconstructing America*, "Europe had its own internal other, and this it could project onto the New World outside the confines of Europe" (41). In Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, images of the wild man and wild woman, the fool, the beggar, the peasant, and the witch, along with Jews, Gypsies, Huguenots, Muslims, the Irish, the Scots, and the Welsh, served to locate Self to Other for the upper-middle-class European. This means that both European peasants and exotic, non-European Gypsies "could serve as the internal negative self-definition of the European upper classes" (44). The encounter with the internal Other thus served as the "point of articulation of the demands of the European unifying *logos* with the external projection of European fantasies, fears and desires" (41). But when using their experience and knowledge of the internal Other to later define/classify the non-European, the European proto-capitalist class did not identify the non-European with European culture in general, but with that of its subaltern classes, or the European Other. By fixing the status of the Other, the non-European, at the lowest echelons of European society, upper-middle-class Europeans established within their hierarchical classifying system their attitudes toward the non-Europeans.

Furthermore, in terms of the cultural/religious homogenization of Europe, Europe was emerging as a site of Christian nations. When Enea Sylvio Piccolomini was made Pope (Pius II) in 1458, he became an instrumental figure in plac-