Journal of American Studies of Turkey
1 (1995): 3-18.

Reframing the Multiculturalism Debates and Remapping American Studies

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The term "multiculturalism"--understood in very different ways by different people-- has been central to recent debates not only about the curriculum in American universities and secondary schools, but also in debates about national identity and prospects for the future. This paper offers an overview of these debates--what prompted them, and what shape they took in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The story that is outlined will soon be history: not simply history as a narrative of what happened, but history in the sense of what is quickly becoming no more. As we approach the twenty-first century, the debates over "multiculturalism" that divided campuses, faculty and the public in the 1980s and early 1990s are quickly becoming irrelevant. As I will attempt to demonstrate, the terms of the debate are being reframed in ways that few of us could have predicted. The "sides," as they were previously constituted, no longer make sense. In short, both sides of what we called "the culture wars" have won. Whether or not they will have the sense to recognize that fact and lay down their arms, only the future can tell.

Let us go back in time, for a moment, to, say, the 1950s. Let us visit classes in American history and American literature at a typical American university. In the history course, American history was largely New England history, with a little bit of Westward expansion thrown in. Students read the works of prominent historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner, and Charles and Mary Beard. From Turner they learned that "the slavery question" was a mere "incident" when American history was "rightly viewed" (24). From the Beards, they learned that the only things Blacks contributed to American culture were ragtime and jazz (814-817). Let us then go across the hall to the American literature classroom. Here students studied Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and James. If any student dared to point out that all of those writers were white and male, she would have been regarded with pity and amazement--the same response that would have greeted the comment "the sun shines in the daytime." Her insistence on stating the obvious showed that she was clearly suffering from fatigue; a kind-hearted teacher would have probably sent her to the campus infirmary for an obviously much-needed rest.

The dig-in-your-heels-and-stand-firm position, which stated that it was important to keep teaching history and literature as we had always taught history and literature, was articulated in the late 1980s by figures such as William Bennett and Allan Bloom, whom Henry Louis Gates, Jr. called, "the dynamic duo of the new cultural right" (17). Bennet, former Secretary of Education, and Bloom, author of the book*The Closing of the American Mind*, symbolized what Gates aptly called "the antebellum aesthetic position, where men were men, and when women and persons of color were voiceless, faceless servants and laborers, pouring tea and filling brandy snifters in the boardrooms of the old boys' clubs" (17). That was what women and people of color were supposed to do, was it not? Stay in the background, pour the tea and the brandy. They certainly were not expected to enter into the conversation themselves!

But enter the conversation they did, *en masse*, as the 1950s rolled into the 1960s and as the 1960s rolled into the 1970s; and as the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement revealed that the voiceless, faceless servants and laborers had not only voices and faces, but histories and paper trails, as well as dreams of sitting in the boardrooms themselves! Empowered by political movements that acknowledged their right to express themselves and their needs in the present, they began to recover the voices of their kind in the past. First African-Americans, then women, then other groups--Chicanos, Asian-Americans, Native Americans--engaged in massive efforts of recovery and reclamation. They found, studied and reprinted texts that had been unjustly erased and disregarded as without value, and probed chapters of history airily dismissed as mere "incident." In the meantime, the college students of the 1960s became the college professors of the 1970s and 1980s. They changed their syllabi, wrote books about previously neglected chapters of history, persuaded publishers to reprint forgotten texts by women and minorities, and taught them in their courses. They taught these in the context of the history that informed them and the history that they, in turn, helped shape. Scores of literary scholars, for example, under the general direction of Paul Lauter, spent eight years addressing the challenge of how to get these texts and voices into American literature classrooms. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature,* a stunning achievement that was first published in 1990 and is now in its Second Edition, was the fruit of their efforts.

The move to make previously marginalized voices central to the curriculum in American universities came to be generally known as "multiculturalism." As historian Vicki Ruiz put it, "Multiculturalism ... reclaims and interprets lived experiences heretofore excluded from the American mosaic" (243). So far so good. In fact, what could be bad? Well, for a number of critics, plenty. Sometimes I suspect that the real reason for the hostility to multiculturalism in some quarters may have been a combined sense of betrayal and laziness. This sense was predominant especially among professors who had already served their time in graduate school and, as once exploited junior faculty, felt that they should be at a point in their career where they could relax, sit back, pontificate while being

thought of as wise by their students. All of a sudden the rules of the game were changing--their expectations were dashed by a troublesome cohort of young scholars who told them, basically, that they had to go to the library, to the bookstore, that they had to hunker down and plough through thirty books they had never read before, if they wanted to call themselves "literate" and well-informed. Many of them spent hours at the faculty club trashing books they had never read as obviously not worth reading--rather than make their way over to the library or bookstore to read them and make informed judgments of their own.

However, the debate rarely centered on how much work was involved in integrating new material into old courses, and whether it was really worth it. Caricatures and exaggerations of what the "multiculturalists" were up to began to proliferate. What's more, some proponents of multiculturalism fought back with caricatures and exaggerations of their own, of what their opponents were about. "The multiculturalists want to throw out the canon," one side charged, "they want to stop teaching anything by a dead, white male!" Meanwhile, the other side argued that their opponents refused to let into their classrooms any texts that *were not* by dead white males. Both sides, as it turned out, were wrong on this one. But there were some very real fears in the air.

Take, for example, Arthur Schlesinger's argument in his 1991 book, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*. "The American synthesis has an inevitable Anglo-Saxon coloration," Schlesinger wrote (118). The multiculturalists, Schlesinger feels, threaten the American way of life. The threat lies in what Schlesinger called the "ethnic upsurge," an "unprecedented ... protest against the Anglocentric culture" that "today threatens to become a counterrevolution against the original theory of America as ... a common culture, a single nation" (43). Deploring the rejection of what he refers to as the old American idea of assimilation--the idea that immigrants and minorities shed their ethnicity in favor of the Western Anglo-Saxon tradition, Schlesinger fears that the result will be the "disintegration of the national community, apartheid, Balkanization, tribalization" (118). Laurence Auster, in an apocalyptic 1990 book titled, *The Path of National Suicide: An Essay on Immigration and Multiculturalism*, called multiculturalism "an attempt ... to tear down, discredit and destroy the shared story that had made us a people"--the story that tells how "the U.S. has always been an Anglo-Saxon civilization" (qtd. in Fish 84). Richard Brookhiser makes a similar point in his 1991 book, *The Way of the WASP* (WASP is an acronym here for White Anglo Saxon Protestant). "The WASP Character," Brookhiser asserts," is the American character" (qtd. in Fish 84): it is that simple.

Stanley Fish sees a common thread in the fears expressed by Schlesinger, Auster and Brookhiser. As he puts it in his important book, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech...And It's a Good Thing Too*, these three writers "all tell the same story about the formation of the American character, the necessity of preserving it, and the threat it faces from ethnic upsurges, a story that continues in every respect, from

words and phrases to large arguments, a tradition of jingoism, racism, and cultural imperialism" (85).

But if Schlesinger, Auster and Brookhiser feared that the American character and the character of America as we know it was under siege, other critics of multiculturalism, such as Carol Iannone, feared that the multiculturalists wanted to dismiss "commonly held standards of truth, justice and reason by classifying them as mere artifacts of the dominant culture" (20).

To be fair, it must be acknowledged that all stereotypes and caricatures are rooted in some shred of reality. The kinds of arguments cited build upon comments from advocates of multiculturalism that lend themselves to such caricature. Moreover, there are indeed communities, school districts, and colleges in which acrimonious conflict along the lines noted above have ensued. The enemies of multiculturalism have no monopoly on ignorance, prejudice, no-nothingism, bad faith, distortion and fantasy. I believe, however, that their caricatures are just that: sketches bearing only a very tenuous relation to the world in which we live.

Let me share real stories from real people in that world by recalling two memorable evenings during my childhood. In both cases, I was not older than twelve at the time. One was when my mother took me to hear the poet Langston Hughes give a reading--one of the last readings he ever gave. The other was when our Rabbi, who had gone to jail with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., invited Dr. King to preach a sermon in our temple. I remember the shame I felt at the injustices both men evoked, one in staccato verses, the other in resonant oratory. But I felt something else, too; something I could not really name. That hard-to-name emotion, I now recognize, was pride. Pride at being from whatever country had produced them. Pride that we shared a common heritage, for better or worse; and that we shared the challenge of a common future. They made me proud to be American.

We did not read Hughes's poems in my literature classroom in high school or college. He was missing as well from the two semester course on "American Poetry" that I took in Graduate School at Yale in the 1970s with Professor Harold Bloom. All "American Poets" worth reading, according to our syllabus, had been white. We did not study in my history classes the freedom struggle King led. I wish we had. Black writers were not a part of the curriculum yet. Neither was Black history. And that was a shame. It took me another twenty years to realize how much of a shame. My two sons were born shortly before the so-called "canon wars" were fought, and by the time they got to school, Hughes and King had gotten there as well. The common culture that they are being taught to cherish was shaped by those years of pushing and pulling about issues of curriculum, community, canon and context. "Multiculturalism," asserts Carol Iannone, "tends to trivialize the common history and shared beliefs that make a republic possible" (18). Yet such a stand assumes that the common culture was not shaped at its core by people and traditions erased from the stories we tell about ourselves-- and that is something I

am not willing to grant. For, a cultural narrative that does not have room for Hughes or King is an impoverished one.

Critic Lillian Robinson agrees. She writes:

> As a parent I feel that my son and the other white teenagers in his class are being shortchanged, denied a part of our common cultural heritage when their assignments include William Cullen Bryant but not James Weldon Johnson. ... Yes, they also read the major white authors--Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, Dickinson, Twain, Hemingway, Steinbeck ... but not ... Dunbar, DuBois, ... Hurston, Hughes, Wright Baldwin, ... Gaines, Naylor. ... As a citizen I am concerned that a just and decent society will remain an impossible goal as long as we continue to erase the range of voices from our culture. To do so implies that only those who already have social power have anything to say about human experience and its meanings, that only they possess the imagination, insight and wit to say it well. (21)

And that, Robinson feels, is a lesser vision of who we are than we need to settle for.

Opponents of multiculturalism have one thing right: the stories we tell about the past matter a great deal. And not just in the academy. What is at stake is not simply college syllabi, but our vision of who we are as a people and as a nation. It is not simply our versions of the past that are under siege, but our visions of the future. Rather than throw out as irrelevant values of truth and accuracy, as Iannone suggests they want to do, proponents of multicultural education, I would argue, care about them *more than* their opponents. Cathy Davidson, former President of the American Studies Association, put it this way:

> Multicultural representation? Gender equity? Diversity? Forget it! Just give me good history (whether social or literary history), a far more dangerous proposition. ... The Norse, probably the Chinese, and even an Italian sent by Spain to India all discovered a continent inhabited by various American cultures long before the Puritans made their way to these shores. Slaves and immigrants built much of the country, a country that extends far beyond New England. Roughly half of the population has always been female, not all of it was ever heterosexual, and relatively little of it (any gender, racial or immigrant group) has been rich. (2)

"With a history like this," Davidson suggests, "who needs multiculturalism?" (2). American culture, in short, has always been multicultural. Rather than some newfangled plot by "tenured radicals," as some have charged, the efforts, to move the stories we tell about who we are closer to the realities of who we are and who we have been, are fueled more by a desire for truth and accuracy than they are fueled by any political agenda.

Yes, opponents of multiculturalism have one thing right: the stories we tell about the past matter a great deal. However, they are wrong in the idea that that future is at risk. It is not. The so-called "culture wars" of the 1980s and early 1990s are giving way to a new paradigm that does not require us to throw out the canon, or to deny the value of the voices that it left out. We can, in fact, "have it all"--but on new terms.

In February 1992, I had just finished writing the book that would be published a year later, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices*. There was someone I knew I had to talk to: the person who seven years earlier had planted the

seed that developed into that book. It was the writer David Bradley, author of the award-winning novel, *The Chaneysville Incident*, my candidate for the great American novel of our time. Bradley had given a talk on *Huckleberry Finn* in Hartford, Connecticut in 1985 at a joint meeting of the New England American Studies Association and the Mark Twain Memorial. Imposing, impressive--in fact, looking a bit like pictures of Frederick Douglass--Bradley stared out into the crowd of mainly white American Studies scholars and Hartford patrons of the arts and said, "You folks know a lot about Samuel Clemens (referring, of course to the man who took Mark Twain as his pen name). Sam Clemens was white. But who here among you has ever seen Mark Twain? Mark Twain was black" ('The First 'Nigger' Novel"). There were a fair number of gasps throughout the hall. Bradley ignored them. He then proceeded to make a case for Huckleberry Finn as a work which prefigured the fiction of African-American writers in the twentieth century--including his own.

I had not dialed his number in years, but I knew he would share my excitement, so I called him in the spring of 1992. "This may sound crazy," I remember saying, "but I think I've figured out-- and can prove-- that black speakers and oral traditions played an absolutely central role in the genesis of *Huckleberry Finn*. Twain couldn't have *written* the book without them. And hey, if Hemingway's right about all modern American literature coming from *Huck Finn*, then all modern American literature comes from those black voices as well. And as Ralph Ellison said when I interviewed him last summer, it all comes full circle because *Huck Finn* helps spark so much work by black writers in the twentieth century."

I stopped to catch my breath. There was a pause on the other end of the line. Then a question:
"Shelley, tell me one thing. Do you have tenure?"
"Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?" I asked.
"Thank God." he said. "Look, this stuff has been sitting there for a hundred years but nobody noticed because it didn't fit the paradigm. Whether they wanted to expand the canon or not, they all agreed that canonical American literature was `white.' And whether they wanted black studies in the curriculum or not, they all agreed that African-American literature was `black.' Now they'll have to start all over. Think about it."

I did.

In 1993, a year after that conversation, when my book *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* came out, I was aware of two or three books published that same year in the U.S. that tilled adjacent fields. The kinds of deep-going changes for which my friend had argued seemed to be starting to happen. I sensed that my work might be part of a growing trend. Yet how many isolated academic forays add up to a "trend?" Ten? Twenty? Thirty? I began to seek out books and articles on American culture published between 1990 and 1994 that

addressed issues related to those my own book explored. I was overwhelmed by what I found.

Below is an overview of books and articles from fields including literary criticism, history, cultural studies, anthropology, popular culture, communication studies, music history, art history, humor studies, linguistics and folklore published between 1990 and 1994 or forthcoming shortly. Taken together, I believe that they mark the early 1990s as a defining moment in the study of American culture.

In the early 1990s, I suggest, our ideas of "whiteness" were interrogated, our ideas of "blackness" were complicated, and the terrain we call "American culture" began to be remapped. The canon the opponents of multiculturalism were fiercely defending, as it turns out, may be less "white" than we had thought; and the black voices the multiculturalists were reclaiming, as it turns out, may be less "black" than we had thought. Values of truth and accuracy turn out to require that we understand the ways in which multicultural traditions shaped the canon, and the ways in which the canon shaped writing by noncanonical writers throughout our history. All of us, need to go back to the archives, back to the libraries, back to the texts--both the ones we knew we had to read, and the ones we thought we could manage without--if we are to consider ourselves responsible scholars. The battle lines drawn in the eighties and early nineties are fast becoming outdated and irrelevant.

What do I mean by "interrogating whiteness" in the early 1990s? I mean that scholars in a range of fields did one of two things:
1. They uncovered what may be referred to as the Black roots of mainstream American culture, and
2. They put the idea of "whiteness" itself--and of white privilege--on the table to be analyzed, challenged and probed.

What do I mean by "complicating blackness " in the early 1990s? 1. I mean that scholars attended to dimensions of African-American experience previously largely neglected because these had seemed insufficiently "Black,"
2. I mean that scholars in a range of fields paid serious attention to what may be referred to in short-hand as the white roots of black American culture,
3. I mean that scholars also began to give more careful scrutiny to the Black roots of African-American culture, replacing a vague homogenized idea of "Africa" with a more complicated sensitivity to specific African cultures and peoples, and
4. I mean that scholars devoted new energies to understanding the complexities of forms of Black expressive culture previously neglected as subjects of serious study.

All of these moves was possible, I suggest, because of the important groundwork laid in the preceding decades.

A study published in January 1990 found that college courses with such titles as "The Modern Novel" or "Modern Poetry" were still dominated by "works almost exclusively by elite white men" (Katterman 14-15). Nonetheless, calling attention to the "whiteness" of the curriculum was still considered bizzare and provocative behavior. In 1991 a professor who called the standard American literature survey she taught "White Male Writers" was held up to ridicule by *Time* magazine. As far as *Time* was concerned, mainstream American culture was obviously white culture, and stating the obvious was superfluous, irritating and perverse.

While the idea of the social construction of "blackness" was increasingly discussed in the 1980s, the idea of "whiteness" as a construct did not receive widespread attention until the 1990s. In the 1990s, scholars asked with increased frequency how the imaginative construction of "whiteness" had shaped American literature and American history. Some of our culture's most familiar artifacts turned out to be less "white" on closer look than we may have thought; and the "whiteness" that had previously been largely invisible in the stories we told about who we were suddenly took center stage as the site where power and privilege converged and conspired to sabotage ideals of justice, equality and democracy.

With the 1992 publication of her *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison launched an eloquent and provocative challenge to the privileged, naturalized "whiteness" of American literature. She challenged critics to examine mainstream American "literature for the impact Afro-American presence has had on the structure of the work, the linguistic practice, and fictional enterprise in which it is engaged" (19). In the 1990s, that is exactly what many of us did. Dana Nelson's *The Word in Black and White* examined the ways in which seventeenth-, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century "white" writers such as Cotton Mather, James Fenimore Cooper and William Gilmore Simms constructed versions of their own identity (and of American identity) by defining themselves as unlike various racial and ethnic "others." The influence of African customs, myth, language and traditions on Herman Melville's work was examined by Sterling Stuckey, in *Going Through the Storm*, and by Eric Sundquist in *To Wake the Nations*. While the role of African-American voices in shaping *Huckleberry Finn* was the subject of my own work, the influence of slave narratives on Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* and *Life on the Mississippi* was the subject of articles by Werner Sollors and Lawrence Howe. Furthermore, in *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism*, Kenneth Warren examined the way implicit assumptions about race illuminate the work of Henry James and William Dean Howells, noting that "concerns about `race' may structure our American texts, even when those texts are not `about' race in any substantive way."

The role of "racial masquerade" and "linguistic imitation" in the works of twentieth-century modernists, such as Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and William Carlos William, was examined by Michael North in his 1994 book *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature*. Carla

Peterson treated the same theme in a forthcoming work. Twentieth-century writers' complicated attraction to African-American language was probed by Aldon Nielson in his 1994 book, *Writing Between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality*.

Building on the valuable earlier work of Melville Herskovits and Peter Wood, historians in the early 1990s fruitfully probed in the African-American roots of mainstream (and supposedly "white") American culture while students of popular culture, art and material culture found a similar dynamic at work. Works in this vein in history, for example, include John Edward Philips's article, "The African Heritage of White America" and William D. Piersen's book *Black Legacy: America's Hidden Heritage*. In *Black Legacy*, Pierson documents an impressive compendium of ways in which African culture shaped white American culture, particularly in the South. He notes, for example, a range of medical innovations for which slave medical practitioners were responsible, including using inoculation as a method of reducing the seriousness of smallpox epidemics and increasing the american pharmacopoeia stock with the addition of at least seventeen African herbal drugs; he notes that slave practioners regularly cured scurvy with lemon juice thirteen years before European physicians advocated a similar cure.

In the book's strongest chapter Piersen tracks the use of satiric traditions form Africa to the new world. Satirical songs (sometimes called "songs of derision" by other scholars), Pierson notes, functioned as a mechanism of social control in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African societies, allowing the weak to voice grievances against the strong with impunity. Pierson explores the ways in which satirical songs functioned in colonial African cultures and then moves to their manifestations in the antebellum American South. Exploring cultural phenomena including storytelling, language use, music, manners, etiquette, folk medicine, folk beliefs, cooking styles and communal celebrations, Piersen succeeds in persuading the reader that "the legacy of African culture is important to the understanding of America" (xv).

However, as Phillips notes in "The African Heritage of White America," "for too long in this country, whites have denied learning from blacks" (226). Phillips argues for "a more complex paradigm to explain African cultural retentions than has hitherto been advanced," one which recognizes the constant process of cultural exchange that has continued throughout American history (236). This more complex paradigm informs the work of Roger Abrahams, whose 1992 book, *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African-American Culture in the Plantation South*, argues that a great deal of the culture of the South took shape not in the slave quarters or in the Big House, but "in the yard between" the two, "in contested areas betwixt and between two worlds" (xxiii).

The cultural exchange involved in several forms of popular culture was explored in the early 1990s, as familiar artifacts generally understood as "white" were shown to have roots more complicated than previously recognized. Joe Adamson and David

Roediger, for example, explored the African roots of Bugs Bunny. As Roediger puts it in a 1994 essay:

> Bugs' heritage is anything but white. The verb "bugs" "annoys" or "vexes," helps name the cartoon hero. Its roots, like those of "hip," lie partly in Wolof speech.
>
> Moreover, the fantastic idea that a vulnerable and weak rabbit could be tough and tricky enough to menace those who menace him enters American culture, as the historian Frankling Rosemont observes, largely via Br'er Rabbit tales.
>
> These stories were told among various ethnic groups in West Africa, and further developed by American slaves before being popularized and bastardized by white collectors like Joel Chandler Harris. They were available both as literature and folklore to the white Southerner Tex Avery whose genius so helped to give us Bugs. ("The Long Journey to the Hip Hop Nation")

In addition, Howard L. Sacks and Judith Rose Sacks argued convincingly that a nineteenth-century black family in Ohio wrote "Dixie," the song that became known as the anthem of the Confederacy. Building their case from family records, public documents, and oral histories, the Sacks' *Way Up North in Dixie: A Black Family's Claim to the Confederate Anthem* detailed the history of the Snowdens, a farming family who performed banjo and fiddle tunes and popular songs for black and white audiences throughout rural central Ohio from the 1850s through the turn-of-the-century. The song's reputed white composer, Dan Emmett, heard the Snowdens sing the song and made it a part of his minstrel show repertoire, bringing it to a wide and receptive public.

The complex blend of appreciation and appropriation of black culture that the minstrel show represented was the subject of Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, in which the role of the minstrel show in the construction of working-class white identity in nineteenth-century America receives the attention it has long deserved. Lott's larger concern in the book is "how precariously nineteenth-century white working people lived their whiteness" (4). Lott's stimulating study resonates with work in the field of history by David R. Roediger, whose important books *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class and Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* helped foreground "whiteness" on historians' agendas in the 1990s. As Roediger observes, in the latter volume:

> When residents of the US talk about race, they too often talk only about African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans. If Whites come into the discussion, it is only because they have "attitudes" towards nonwhites. Whites are assumed not to "have race," though they might be racists. (*Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* 12)

Yet Roediger believes that making whiteness, rather than simply white racism, the focus of study has the effect of throwing into sharp relief the impact that the dominant racial identity in the US has had not only on the treatment of racial "others" but also on the ways that whites think of themselves, of power, of pleasure, and of gender.

"Whiteness" was interrogated in the early 1990s in fields as diverse as humor studies, linguistics, art history, material culture, rhetoric and communications. As Roy Blount, Jr. notes in his *Roy Blount's Book of Southern Humor*. "one thing we need to get straight about Southern humor--Southern culture generally is that it is Africo-Celtic, or Celtico-African" (27). Noting the role of oral traditions in both the Celtic and African cultures that fed the culture, Blount points to "orality" as something that "black Southerners and white Southerners always had in common," in addition to elements such as "the soil and the sweet potatoes and the heat and the possums" (28) of the South. The impact of African-American humor upon mainstream "white" American sensibilities was also explored by Mel Watkins in *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying and Signifying-the Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture from Slavery to Richard Pryor* and by Melvin Patrick Ely in *The Adventures of Amos `n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon*. Watkings notes, for example, that many popular jokes and stage routines of white comics in the 1940s and 1950s were pirated from black performers. He offers a lucid and insightful analysis of the role black expressive culture played in shaping the fifties satire of Lennie Bruce (and, by extension, the subsequent forms of contemporary satire that developed out of it):

> His comic assault on the intrinsic absurdity of race relations, religious practices, police tyranny, and hypocrisy concerning sex and drugs cut to the core of America's social contradictions. Moreover, he delivered his satirical thruts in a hip, impious style that was clearly removed from polite middle-class society. Mirroring the street wit of the black musicians and night people with whom he associated, it smacked of a profane contempt that was both alien and frightening to mainstream America. ...

Watkings' description of the African-American roots of Bruce's twentieth-century satire resonate with my own research into the African-American roots of Mark Twain's nineteenth-century satire: clearly African-American traditions of irreverent, satirical social criticism have been leaving indelible marks on American humor for the last two hundred years.

African-American elements in "white" speech and language use were increasingly probed in the 1990s in the fields of linguistics and communications. J.L. Dillard's chapter on "The Development of Southern" in his 1992 *A History of American English* is a case in point. Expanding on his earlier influential study of "Black English," Dillard collates in that chapter additional lively and compelling evidence from primary and secondary sources that affirm the ways in which African-Americans influenced what has come to be thought of as Southern speech. Dillard summarizes linguists' research, for example, on the potential "black influence" in "the formation of you all (y'all), the most frequently cited indicator of Southern dialect" (96). Another work in linguistics which charted adjacent territory is *The African Heritage of American English* by Joseph E. Holloway and Winifred K. Vass. The book's long list of "Africanisms in Contemporary American English" includes bad-mouth, banana, banjo, "be with it," bogus, booboo, bronco, bug (as in to annoy, offend), coffee, cola, cool, "do one's thing," guff, gumbo, guy, honkie,

hulla-balloo, jam (as in music), jazz, jiffy, jive, kooky, okay, okra, phony, rap, ruckus, tote, uh-huh, mhm, uuh-uh, yam, yackety-yak, and you-all. The jambalaya (another Africanism) that Holloway and Vass offer also contains the interesting item "bambi: Bantu *mumbambi*, one who lies down in order to hide; position of antelope fawn for concealment (cf. Walt Disney, *Bambi*)" (Holloway and Vass137).

In the field of speech communication as well, "whiteness" and "white" American identity were foregrounded in the 1990s. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, for example, masterfully examined in *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy* the veiled racist verbal cue and visual subtexts designed to effect white voters' identification with particular candidates in political campaigns in the 1980s. Moreoever, Celeste Michelle Condit and John Louis Lucaites, in *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word*, explored the ways in which the word "equality," an important "rhetorical foundation of the American national identity" (xviii), drew its meaning, from the 1760s to the present, from the interplay of black and white constructions of the term.

The 1990s also brought new awareness of African-American influences on mainstream "white" American material culture and fine arts. In *Models in the Mind: African Prototypes in American Patchwork* , Eli Leon argued that African motifs, organizational principles, and aesthetic values may well have shaped traditions of patchwork quilting in America, previously discussed solely in terms of their white antecedents. The decade opened with the publication of two seminal volumes exploring the role of African-Americans in shaping mainstream "white" American painting: Guy C. McElroy's *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940* and Albert Boime's *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* . The introduction to Sidney Kaplan's pioneering 1964 exhibition catalogue, *The Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting*, was also republished. All of these discussions examined African-American images in the work of canonical and popular (primarily) white American artists, a field which was enriched and expanded by the 1992 publication in this country of Jan Nederveen Pietersen's *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*.

The move to recover and value the black influences on so-called white American culture in the early 1990s was paralleled by a move to foreground the nature of white privilege and racism in American society. Books exploring the dynamics of white privilege and its effects on attitudes and behavior in American culture include bell hooks's *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Vron Ware's *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History*, Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whitenes* s, and Theodore Allen's *The Invention of the White Race*, vol. I. While these three books unpacked and deconstructed the ways in which white supremacist thinking warped political, personal and social relations throughout history and the present, the Cambridge-based journal*Race Traitor*, which began publication in 1993, took as its mission the

actual abolition of the idea of "whiteness" as a construction that shapes our identities and our behaviors. *Race Traitor* took as its motto: "Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity" (cover).

If the "whiteness" of mainstream American culture was axiomatic in the decades preceding the 1990s, the "blackness" of African-American culture was axiomatic as well. Courses and programs in "black studies" or "Afro-American studies" during this period played a crucial role in exposing a generation of students and future teachers to writers and texts previously excluded from the curriculum. Since "American" literature was defined, for the most part, as "white" literature, black writers were often taught in black studies courses or not at all. In these black studies courses, white writers and the literary conventions they employed were not considered necessary to the discussion; neither were white philosophical or spiritual traditions. (The white side of the family of "black" writers who were the children of interracial unions was generally an embarrassment, and was ignored as much as possible). The Jim Crow nature of the curriculum, quite naturally perhaps, prompted scholars and teachers of black studies to emphasize the texts, writers and chapters of history that struck them as being the "most black" and the "least white."

Understandably, certain categories of people and certain forms of writing were privileged as implicitly more authentic and therefore more worthy of study. In antebellum America it was the slave and slave narratives. In the early twentieth-century it was Southern, rural, working-class, vernacular speaking "folk" and fiction written about them (e.g. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*); or it was blues singers and the blues. (The fact that Frankling Frazier's devastating and depressing critique of black middle-class life in 1957 in *Black Bourgeoisie* may well have reinforced an already-in-place tendency on the part of scholars to avoid attending to black middle-class experience may also be mentioned.)

Scholars of African-American culture in the early 1990s are increasingly asking, both directly and by implication, whether practices such as the ones described above promoted a brand of essentialism that had the effect of redlining as subjects worthy of study writers, texts, ideas and communities that failed to fit the mold. Ann duCille, for example, in *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text and Black Women's Fiction*, observes that black women writers missed out on being in the earliest canon of American women writers because of their alleged preoccupation with race, and were excluded from the earliest canon of Afro-American writers because of their alleged preoccupation with gender. By the time scholars were ready to construct a canon of African-American women writers, many of the women and texts in duCille's study lost out a third time around because of the class of their protagonists (middle), their language (standard English, not earthy vernacular), their skin color (light or white) and, also because of the "so-called white," as duCille put it, values, subjects, plots and conventions (involving domesticity, marriage, and courtship) that were central to their fiction.

In the 1990s, the validation of the "folk" as the only "authentic" African-Americans gave way to interest in middle-class blacks and middle-class black communities throughout history. Works in this vein include in addition to duCille's book, impressive literary studies such as Carla Peterson's *"Doers of the Word": African-American Women Writers and Speakers in the Antebellum North*, Claudia Tate's*Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*, Frances Foster's *Written by Herself*, as well as biographies of Nella Larsen, Frances Harper and Archibald Grimke by Thadious Davis, Melba Boyd and Dickson Bruce, all of which were published within the last two years or are currently in press. From historians, we have Adelaide Cromwell's 1994 *The Other Brahmins: Boston's Black Upper Class, 1750-1950*, and Willard B. Gatewood's 1990 *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880 -1920*. There are also numerous studies of middle-class black professionals, including a history of black lawyers, and studies of black men who work for IBM, of black women in academia, of black corporate executives, and of the challenges of black middle-class family life.

The paradigm that made the "slave narrative" the only "authentic" document of antebellum black America was challenged in the early 1990s not only by the important work of scholars such as Carla Peterson and Frances Forster, but also by the publication of two books: the republication in 1993 (with a new introduction by William Andrews) of the diary of William Johnson, a free black in antebellum Natchez who became a successful businessman; and by Adele Logan Alexander's 1991 *Ambiguous Lives: Free Women of Color in Rural Georgia, 1789-1879*.

The 1990s brought a new willingness to acknowledge and understand the interplay of intellectual traditions and voices that made African-American letters what they were. Often this involved re-evaluating the role that so-called "white" elements played in shaping "black" culture. To illustrate, Michel Fabre's 1990 study *Richard Wright: Books and Writers*, an extraordinarily stimulating examination of Richard Wright's reading, documented Wright's response to a wide range of white writers from the US and abroad. Ann duCille suggests that William Wells Brown's novel Clotel "talked back" to the sentimental fiction of Catharine Maria Sedgwick and Lydia Maria Child. Furthermore, in work published in the last two years or currently in press, Phillip Richards, Eric Haralson and Carla Peterson join duCille in arguing that traditions of white spiritual and evangelical writing are crucial to understanding the work of the black writers Phillis Wheatley, Frances Harper, Emma Duham Kelley and Amelia Johnson.

Besides, if white *literary* and *spiritual* foremothers and forefathers of black writers received more attention from scholars, actual white ancestors and the often complicated responses they evoked from offspring defined as "black" by the pervasive "one-drop rule" received more attention as well. Adrian Piper, for example, in her incisive and creative 1992 essay, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," foregrounded the complexities of owning a dual heritage, as did many of the contributors to Gerald Early's stimulating 1993 anthology, entitled *Lure and*

Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation. The 1990s also saw a new awareness of the multiplicity of African cultures that helped shape African-American life. The essays in Joseph Holloway's important edited volume,*Africanisms in American Culture*, Holloway's subsequent *The African Heritage of American English* (co-authored by Winifred Vass), John Thornton's *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*, Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, Salikoko Mufwene and Nancy Condon's *Africanisms in Afro American Language Variations*, and many of the essays in Sterling Stuckey's *Going Through the Storm* explore in all their specificity the distinct and differentiated African ethnic, linguistic and religious traditions that shaped African-American and American life. The 1990s also brought new attention to dimensions of black expressive culture previously neglected as subjects for serious study. Books that come to mind include Houston Baker's *Black Studies, Rap and the Academy*, Farrah Griffin's *Who Set You Flowin? The African-American Migration Narrative*, Kobena Mercer's *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, which includes, among other things, an essay on the politics of hair, and Tricia Rose's study of "rap" entitled,*Black Noise*.

As we remap and reconfigure our cultural narratives in the 1990s, we can no longer segregate black and white traditions and claim that we are preserving values of "truth" and "accuracy." The push for multicultural awareness in the 1980s gave us the tools to understand dimensions of our culture to which we had previously been blind. The fruit of this new awareness is greater appreciation of the complexity of our cultural heritage and of the different traditions that shaped it. It is a jump from respecting traditions to respecting the people who created them: that is a jump we have to train our children to make. One way to do that is to teach them to understand and value the complex roots of that common culture that we share. "Rather than mourning the loss of some putative ancestral purity," Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes, "we can recognize what's valuable, resilient, even cohesive in the hybrid and variegated nature of our modernity. Whatever the outcome of the culture wars in the academy, the world we live in is multicultural already. Mixing and hybridity are the rule, not the exception" (xvii). This is a fact that we can no longer bury or deny. It is by understanding and celebrating the hybridity of mainstream American culture, and acknowledging the multicultural tributaries that have fed that mainstream, that we can collectively forge "a new, and vital, common American culture in the twenty-first century (Gates xvii). Gates urges us to "try to think of American culture as a conversation among different voices--even if it's a conversation that some of us weren't able to join until recently" (175). Although my comments in this study have been focused on cultural traditions of "black" and "white," I need to emphasize that the push toward multicultural education in the 80s and 90s sparked increased awareness of the interactions and interpenetration of a number of other cultural traditions as well-Latino, Asian-American, and Native American, to name a few. Our challenge in the twenty-first century will be, as

Gates puts it, "the shaping, at long last, of a truly common public culture, one responsive to the long-silenced cultures of color" (176).

As David Roediger has observed, what is known throughout the world simply as "modern US" culture is a culture that is, in large part, shaped by African and African-American roots. British travellers to America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries picked up on this: the blend of African and African-American traditions with British and Anglo-American traditions was a big part of what made American language and culture so different from British language and culture. However, while British travellers were able to observe this, those of us who lived that culture could not: the move to make "multiculturalism" a central part of our educational system and cultural narrative must be understood against a backdrop of racism and the blindness that allowed us, for over two hundred years, to ignore and to deny who we really were all along.

In a lecture on the "Kongo Atlantic Tradition" in 1992, art historian Robert Farris Thompson stated: "To be white in America is to be very black. If you don't know how black you are, you don't know how American you are." We must learn to reclaim our complex roots while not ignoring the history of racism that prevented us from doing so before. We must learn to cherish the distinctive blend of cultural traditions that shaped us while simultaneously attending to the prejudice that prevented so many Americans from receiving credit and respect for all they did to create that common culture known as "American" throughout the world. Our challenge, right now, is to revise the stories we tell about who we are to reflect what we have learned during the past decades about where we have been. Yet "unlearning racism," to borrow bell hooks' phrase, is far from simple. And undoing paradigms is far from easy. It may be said that all we can be sure of in the future is that we will have steady work--but work that is well worth doing.

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