

Houston A. Baker Jr. Preface: Unsettling Blackness

The transition in editorship of *American Literature* from the magisterial reorientation of the journal during Professor Cathy Davidson's decade of leadership to the present special issue has been miraculously simple. The smoothness of this transition is the result of the extraordinary intellectual, organizational, and administrative energy Professor Davidson brought to the editorship. Her vision has produced a space for intellectual inquiry and exchange for which those of us who call ourselves Americanists are profoundly grateful. *American Literature's* scope of inquiry, the topics of investigation it values, the composition of its editorial board, and, one hopes, the engagement of its readers have all profited immeasurably from her guidance. The title of one of the many influential special issues of the journal produced during her tenure suggests the courageous expansiveness of her editorial vision: *No More Separate Spheres!* In her preface to this issue, Professor Davidson announces: "This special issue . . . brings together both established and new scholars to examine and contest the formulations of American literature as either 'separate' or simply dualistic." To "examine" and "contest" long-held and limiting assumptions for an entire field of inquiry—and to do so inclusively by bringing to voice new scholars—is characteristic of Professor Davidson's editorial modus operandi. *No More Separate Spheres!* was designated the Best Special Issue of 1998 by the Council of Editors of Learned Journals. One year later, the same Council chose Professor Davidson from an extensive field of nominees as the Most Distinguished Retiring Editor of a journal. It stands to reason that the transition from a Davidson editorship would be abundantly simple,

American Literature, Volume 72, Number 2, June 2000. Copyright © 2000 by Duke University Press.

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blessed to overflowing with the award-winning work, spirit, and day-to-day efficiencies of her labors. To summon Chaucer's explanation of the Knight's premier place as storyteller in the *Canterbury Tales*, I say, "[B]y fate, or chance, I know not what," the blessings of Professor Davidson's goodness have been bestowed upon me. I am almost overwhelmed in the most positive ways by her legacy: a skilled team of managing editors in Carol Rigsby and Frances Kerr; the privilege during the past two years of sharing editorial responsibility with Professors Dana Nelson and Christopher Newfield; a spacious new office for the journal arranged by Catherine Beaver of the Duke English Department; new computers and software authorized by Matthew Beddell of Duke University Press; and a renewed commitment from the journal's sponsoring body, the American Literature Section of the Modern Language Association, overseen and coordinated this year by Professors Robert Levine, Sheryl Meyering, and Brian Abel Ragen. Professor Frank Shuffleton and an outstanding nominating committee from the Section provided the journal with a remarkable new group of editorial board members to continue the fine work of those whose terms expired in 1999.

In the presence of such blessings, it might seem a given that I would find it simple to announce my new post as incoming editor of *American Literature*. I do not. Indeed, I feel somewhat like Langston Hughes when he was to be awarded prestigious literary recognition by the black bourgeoisie of the District of Columbia. Hughes knew he could rent a tuxedo and attend. However, he was not encouraged to bring his mother. Washington black "society," for a variety of reasons, feared his mother might be embarrassed. Now I am certainly not implying that Professor Davidson is in any way equivalent to my mother, save in my absolute awe at her brilliance. What I wish to imply through my Hughes anecdote is that—in light of all the gifts that have been handed to me—doing a merely good job as editor of *American Literature* would scarcely impress my mother. She would likely say: "Well, Houston, how could you fail to maintain a standard of excellence? After all, Professor Davidson and all those others had everything up and excellently running when you got there!" If during the next five years I can live up to the legacy of Professor Davidson and her dedicated Co-editor Michael Moon, I think my mother would approve of my renting a tuxedo and going out in Durham for a quiet celebration of a successful discipleship.

Serendipity alone has offered me the opportunity to preface the

present issue, the first special issue during my watch as editor. *American Literature's* editorial process is scrupulous and exacting. In 1999 the journal accepted for publication 23 of the 260 manuscripts submitted for consideration. Fortunately for a new editor, there emerged a group of eloquently written and persuasively argued essays focused on African American literature and culture. Coherent groupings for the journal's special issues are normally the result of advance planning and a bit of gentle solicitation from, to invoke Professor Davidson's word, "established" scholars. Such was not the case with "Unsettling Blackness." There were no special editors or subtle appeals. Things, as it were, simply fell into scholarly place, though thanks are certainly due a splendid editorial board and the journal's Visiting Associate Editor for 1999–2000, Professor Christopher Newfield, whose dedicated intellectual labors were essential to the conception and production of this issue. My good fortune extends to the fact that—as fate, or luck, or chance would have it—the issue addresses matters I know something about. (Imagine what I might have faced if a "coherent" grouping of essays devoted to Borges, Chief Logan, or any of the encyclopedic list of topics and authors I am still running very hard just to stay in place with had emerged!)

Our title, "Unsettling Blackness," could have been set down in a myriad of clever, alluring, or spectacular ways. *Blackness* could have been confined by scare quotes. "Unsettling Blackness" could have been made enigmatic by a comma suggesting mystical relationships between the two signs. But it is all rather more simple than anyone seeing the two words in conjunction might at first suspect. The essays brought together in this issue were not written under a unifying mandate. They did not come to our consideration as a result of a call for papers. What renders them truly refreshing for me as a newly appointed editor is their clear indication that the "blackness" into which I was initiated during the heady days of the Black Aesthetic of the 1960s and 1970s has been academically superseded by what I want to call a fourth wave of criticism and analysis focused on African American intellectual and expressive cultural production. *Fourth* seems appropriate to me because *third* has already been productively utilized and wonderfully expounded by cinema studies. More significantly, *fourth* indicates that African American criticism has progressed, as it were, "beyond theory" and beyond even the "post—" notions that shout: "Hey! You folks who control the locks and floodgates of the dissemination of so-called knowledge, we are not happy with your syllabi

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and reading lists. We hate your separate spheres. Your generalizations of the 'essential' and 'assumed' leave us numb. We are theoretical revolutionaries dedicated to ever more close readings, presented in our own sometimes arcane terms. Though our efforts may finally arrive at very traditional conclusions and value judgments of authors, do not mistake us. We are revolutionaries." After the critique and repudiation during the past quarter century of the Integrationist (J. Saunders Redding), Black Aesthetic (Addison Gayle Jr.), and Reconstructionist and High Vernacular (Robert Stepto, Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker) modes of analysis of black expressive culture, we have come, I suggest, to a fourth critical position. "Unsettling Blackness" wrestles these three past shape-shifting critical and theoretical moments into submission. It begins to compel African American cultural texts to voice their knowledge of the geographies of the "Father," the ambiguities of the defamiliarized "Mother," the rhapsodies of the musically hybridized "Other," and the real and unbinding names hiding egotistically behind such racial maxims as "Uplift."

During the 1960s, the sign *blackness* was proposed by African American revolutionaries, literary critics, women activists, and even doctors and lawyers as the rubric under which a new and stable equality of endeavor and opportunity for people of color could be realized in the United States. *Blackness*, one might say, was a sign that made the establishment (literary and otherwise) unhappy and unsettled. However, the essays that follow are like a smooth, six-lane bypass around a major city in transition. They do not engage old battles, and they are not encumbered by the ancient feuds of erudite and scholastic men and women. All quite outrageously commence and proceed, it seems to me, under the assumption that a learning curve in criticism of black expressive culture has become, as the poet Nikki Giovanni might have it, a "natural 'thang.'" Any text or issue must engage the investigator, critic, theorist, student, or interested reader at a level that explodes old assumptions and practices of criticism, reading, and enjoyment. So *blackness*—even as a debatable foundation for a new or fourth critical mode—becomes an invisible gadfly of the present set of essays. One wants, nostalgically, to coax discussion back to the "old days," but the insights, the critical and theoretical underpinnings, and the compelling arguments of the essays that make up "Unsettling Blackness" prohibit motion contra the ocean. *We cannot go comfortably home again.*

“Unsettling Blackness” reads modernism, progressivism, architecture, avant-gardism, montage, hybridity, anxiety of influence, and continental theory through African American texts and authors thought by some of us—in an earlier day (maybe during the third wave)—to be merely black. All has now been unsettled. We ride the fourth wave. I follow Nikki, calling it a “natural ‘thang.’” Surely it is not yet equality, parity, full liberation from scrutiny, or an adequately detailed and documented tradition, but it is, for those of us who have voyaged a while, the Big Sea.

In the essays by Lawrence Jackson, Joel Peckham, and Daylanne English, “Unsettling Blackness” signifies archivally and in captivating detail on the vexed “racial romance” between Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, revisits the avant-garde and the arts of hybridity and montage in the works of Jean Toomer, and reveals the fascinating interplay of racial uplift and eugenics in DuBois’s *Crisis*. Two matters foundational in any wave of African American critical perception are also addressed: *music* and *space*. John Lowney looks at how Langston Hughes uses the discord of bebop in *Montage* to render Harlem after World War II as a contested site for the construction of new black public and counterpublic spheres; Christina Ruotolo considers the ways the “hybrid” musicality of James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* challenges the color line by “ragging the classics” and attempting to transfer the “spirit of black music” to formal notation; and Arlene Keizer examines how Carolivia Herron’s *Thereafter Johnnie* uses and interrogates the physical and architectural geography of Washington D.C., establishing its function as a structure for perpetuating incestuous power relations between “masters and slaves, fathers and daughters, and patriarchal culture and its female subjects.” These essays have the force of a tsunami, implying that we should all be enormously grateful for a *simple* transition to contours, planes, and angles of the board onto which we must calmly settle, prepared to ride the next wave toward new horizons.

My best guess, Mom, is that the present issue of *American Literature* will become a text (book) for future students you would have loved to teach!

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