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Essentialism and its Discontents

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The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction. By Ann duCille. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. ix + 204 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), \$15.95 (paper).

DURING THE LAST THREE DECADES SCHOLARS HAVE UNDERTAKEN A massive effort to recover previously forgotten or marginalized literary works by African Americans. Ann duCille has no desire to diminish the importance of this achievement. Rather, her central concern in this provocative and engaging book is understanding the ways in which some of the paradigms that shaped these preliminary rescue missions managed to inscribe new exclusions of their own.

DuCille recognizes the value of the theories—such as those of Houston Baker—that helped give impetus to the project of reclaiming neglected writers and texts; indeed, she creatively extends and builds on them. But she is wary of their tendency to promote a brand of essentialism that fails to do justice to the richness and complexity of either the literature or the lived experience that produced it. In particular, she argues that theories about racial authenticity and tradition that helped make it possible to

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celebrate some writers and works helped insure that other writers and works were unjustly consigned to oblivion.

Moving chronologically from the 1850s through the 1940s, duCille explores, at each step of the way, some central literary texts, the historical moments they encode and reflect, and what literary critics have made of them. With lively wit and refreshing candor, she historicizes both the fiction about which critics have written and the behavior of the critics themselves. Excluded from the revisionists' earliest canon of African American literature because of their alleged preoccupation with gender, black women writers were often also excluded from the revisionists' canon of American women writers "because of their presumed preoccupation with matters of race" (33). When a new wave of revisionists began to frame a canon of African American women writers, duCille argues, some of the key figures examined in her study lost out for the third time around: black-authored books and stories—by male and female writers—centrally concerned with the "'white' marriage plot," and peopled by northern, urban, standard-English-speaking, middle-class, light-skinned characters, duCille tells us, were deemed less "authentically black" than black-authored books centered on decidedly non-middle-class, dark-skinned, vernacular-speaking southern rural "folk."

According to this model, "the blues—and the kind and quality of black life the form depicts" becomes "the metonym for authentic blackness," and the most "authentically black" African American woman writer from whom the "tradition" inexorably flows is Zora Neale Hurston (68). "However attractive and culturally affirming," duCille writes, "the valorization of the vernacular has yielded . . . an inherently exclusionary literary practice that filters a wide range of complex and often contradictory impulses and energies into a single modality consisting of the blues and the folk" (69). She notes:

While Hurston and her southern rural settings are privileged in such a construction, other black women novelists, whose settings are the urban North and whose subjects are middle-class black women, are not only dismissed in the name of the vernacular, they are condemned (along with the critics who read them) for historical conservatism. (68)

On what basis, duCille asks, is one version of black identity privileged as more "authentic" than another? What can we learn from a more historicized and careful reading of writers and works that don't fit the dominant critical models? DuCille's *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in*

Black Women's Fiction provides us with one example of the kind of valuable insights that a critical practice of this nature can yield.

DuCille is not the first critic to mine this territory. Claudia Tate's important book, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (1992), with its groundbreaking discussion of representations of marriage and the family in nineteenth-century domestic fiction, appeared while duCille's book was in production, and Tate had published a preliminary version of this material in a widely cited article in 1989.¹ But while duCille's approach may not be totally new, her articulation of the pitfalls of uncritical acceptance of certain limiting paradigms is particularly lucid and eloquent, and her readings of individual works are fresh, lively, and thought-provoking.

Critics of African American literature gain little, duCille argues, by justifying their neglect of a set of literary forms or conventions or subjects because they are "so-called white": subjects, conventions, and tropes in and of themselves have no race or color. DuCille's study "seeks to problematize" the idea "that an American or an African American literature could be exclusively white or black in its subject matter or in the historical experience it refracts" (8-9). Sometimes black writers used "white" conventions to achieve some of the same ends as their white sisters; sometimes they used them for other purposes entirely; sometimes the "white" conventions themselves turn out to be less "white" than we had thought, blending elements from African American as well as Anglo-American traditions from the start. Examining black writers' use of "so-called white" conventions, in duCille's view, can shed new light on both the possibilities inherent in the conventions themselves and the writers who employed them.

DuCille takes as her main concern novels "that take mating as a text or subtext or that offer an anatomy of a courtship, seduction, marriage, or erotic relationship" (14). What critics of Anglo-American novels customarily refer to as the marriage plot duCille calls "the coupling convention" in order

to destabilize the customary dyadic relation between love and marriage and to displace the heterosexual presumption underpinning the Anglo-American romantic tradition. I also use the term in conjunction with African American literature to reflect the problematic nature of the institution of marriage for a people long denied the right to marry legally. (14)

It is an inspired move that clears the ground for intriguing comparative discussions of texts—by men and women, by black writers and white—previously viewed largely in isolation from one another.

For example, duCille maintains that William Wells Brown's novel *Clotel*, a work not normally "defined as 'woman's fiction,'" has "as much to say on the feminized subject of marriage as it does on the masculinized subject of slavery" (19). She makes a good case for what we can learn from reading Brown's work "in dialogue with such nineteenth-century women's novels as Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827) and *The Linwoods* (1835)," suggesting things Brown may have learned from these white women writers (24). "Such dialogic readings are important," duCille writes, "for what they say about the interactive nature of so-called black and white traditions as separate entities" (24). Rejecting the notion that novels by women "talk to" novels by other women exclusively, or that novels by black writers "talk to" only novels by other black writers, duCille argues that almost all texts

participate in larger, intercultural dialogues or polylogues in a complex nexus of literary cross-dressing and back talking. . . . [I]f Brown's text talked back to the novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Lydia Maria Child, and E. D. E. N. Southworth, *all* of these writers listened to and drew from the Josiah Hensons, Henry Bibbises, Frederick Douglasses, Harriet Jacobses, Mary Princes, and Ellen Crafts of their time. (24)

DuCille's point is so compelling that one wonders why critics have been relatively slow to investigate the nature of these "intercultural dialogues" more fully. Charles T. Davis's important 1973 essay "Paul Laurence Dunbar," which considered both Dunbar and Edwin Arlington Robinson as two writers struggling to make their way as poets at an inauspicious time in American history, was an early example of this kind of discussion.² Others include Richard Yarborough's pioneering 1986 essay, "Strategies of Characterization in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Early Afro-American Novel," and Robert Stepto's useful "Sharing the Thunder: The Literary Exchanges of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Bibb and Frederick Douglass" (also 1986).³ More recently, critics including Eric Sundquist, Kenneth Warren, Eric Lott, Aldon Nielson, Michael North, Carla Peterson, Ann Douglas, and myself have taken on this challenge of probing "intercultural dialogue" in American literary history.⁴

In her own exploration of this dialogue, duCille pays careful attention to the ways in which black women writers' use of the "coupling convention"

resembles and differs from the use made of it by their white peers. Both, for example, offered “celebrations and critiques of the institution of marriage and family,” and both depicted, “in the words of white feminist scholar Nina Baym, ‘the story of the formation and assertion of a feminine ego’” (4). For black women writers, however, the “marriage convention” was claimed as a trope through which to explore “compelling questions of race, racism, and racial identity” and “complex questions of sexuality and female subjectivity” (3–4). Extending the kinds of arguments that characterize Claudia Tate’s *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*, duCille’s study encourages us to reexamine “the discourse on marriage and marriageability” that is often “dismissed as the authors’ dalliance with the petty preoccupations of white society that have nothing to do with the *real* material conditions of most black Americans” (8).

The move that duCille and Tate encourage us to make as readers and critics resonates with the keynote talk, entitled “Home,” that Toni Morrison gave at the Princeton “Race Matters” conference in the spring of 1994.⁵ Morrison used “home” as a metonym for a place where “no one need feel like prey.” Implicit in duCille’s and Tate’s reexamination of black women writers concerned with “making homes” is the idea that “home” is predicated on a number of precarious political contingencies. In the 1890s, for example, at a time when white writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin began to explore the ways in which domesticity could be stifling and limiting for white middle-class women, middle-class marriage and domesticity as a convention, symbol, and trope took on very different connotations for many black women writers. In order for a black woman in the 1890s to inhabit the kind of domestic scene that makes the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” feel entrapped, a number of fairly radical political changes would be required.

For example, the home would have to be a place in which black women were protected from the unwanted sexual advances of white men accustomed to crossing the threshold of the slave cabin with impunity. It would have to be a place in which black men and women were safe from the extralegal violence of racist secret societies and lynch mobs; it would have to be a place in which food could be put on the table because at least one member of the household held a job. In other words, a scene of untroubled, uneventful black middle-class domesticity in the 1890s—“Home” as Morrison construed the term—would have had to require a widespread condemnation of rape, of lynchings, and of the denial of economic opportunities to black men and women in American society. Rather than

embodying a retreat into “historical conservatism,” domestic novels written by post-Reconstruction black women writers implied, in Claudia Tate’s words, “cultural indices and political contingencies necessary to support the surface story” that were often, by the standards of the time, radical and subversive.⁶

Sometimes, however, a writer’s spiritual engagement took precedence over her political engagement, as duCille candidly acknowledges. I admire duCille’s refusal to claim more “difference” than she feels she can justly claim for the authors she discusses and their achievements. For example, she resists the “tremendous temptation to claim the novels of writers like [Emma Dunham] Kelley and [Amelia] Johnson as narratives of black female resistance and racial empowerment” (54). Instead she situates these evangelical allegories “within the wider discourse of nineteenth-century literary evangelism as practiced by such white women writers as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps” (54). Kelley’s and Johnson’s primary concern, duCille argues, was “spiritual salvation and home protection—transcendent topics, larger than race,” and it is for this reason that they left their characters largely “unmarked by race” (54). “Whiteness,” in this context, takes on a different meaning in these writers’ work than critics had previously supposed. DuCille maintains that:

taking as the most important question the color of the characters in any of these texts racializes precisely what the authors have endeavored to couch in religious rather than racial terms. “Whiteness,” as Kelley uses it awkwardly but conventionally, is not so much a racial mark as an extended metaphor for spiritual purity in keeping with the text’s and the genre’s explicit concerns with religious salvation and the implied message that redemption transcends race. Since these texts are evangelical allegories and not romance or realism, the color of the characters may be less important than what their racelessness signifies. (54)

Recent work by Philip M. Richards on Phillis Wheatley and by Carla L. Peterson on Frances E. W. Harper supports duCille’s contention that spiritual—rather than solely racial or political—contexts must be brought to bear if we are to read some African American authors responsibly.⁷

* * *

DuCille devotes the second half of *The Coupling Convention* to her reading of the work of Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, and Zora Neale Hurston, employing “coupling as a metaphor through which to examine

and critique the color consciousness, class stratification, social conventions, and gender relations of their burgeoning black middle-and working-class communities" (67). Challenging what she calls the "Hurstanism" of contemporary cultural criticism, she deplores the tendency to

readily [read] resistance in such privileged, so-called authentically black discourses as the classic blues of the 1920s and the folkloric fiction of Zora Neale Hurston, while denigrating other cultural forms for their perceived adherence to and promotion of traditional (white) values. (69)

The blues, duCille argues, may not be as "black" as they have been made out to be; and if Fauset and Larsen have to be viewed as "white," then, duCille charges, our notions of what "black" is stand in dire need of revision.

We cannot take "the classic blues of Bessie Smith as the privileged signifier of the genuine, authentic, pure black experience," duCille observes, without acknowledging that

this particular manifestation of the blues is, arguably, an appropriative art form that blends the material and techniques of traditional African American music with the presentational modes of popular *white* American musical theatre, most specifically minstrelsy and vaudeville. Some cultural historians maintain, in fact, that the music popularly called the classic blues would be more appropriately labeled vaudeville blues, to reflect the degree to which the form was influenced by the American music hall and the vaudeville stage.⁸ (72)

Blues singers—Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey—and other black expressive artists like Josephine Baker, duCille argues, are no more "outside of ideology" than writers like Pauline Hopkins and Nella Larsen are hopelessly mired "in" it: all of them are shaped by the ideologies of their times, just as a critic's response to each of them is shaped by the prevailing ideologies of the critic's time.

Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, duCille believes, paid attention to "the extremes of their historical moment and the powers of competing ideologies and colliding material conditions" in ways that critics have, for the most part, ignored (70).⁹ "Far from merely denigrating the folk and championing the black middle class," as they have been charged with doing, "Fauset and Larsen actually critiqued both the pretensions of the petite (or petty) bourgeoisie and the primitivism assigned the transplanted urban masses. Because of its double vision, their fiction offers a potentially

more complex critique of a changing society and the ideological aspects of the epoch than the classic blues of their contemporaries" (70).

DuCille's charge that the critical community neglected and trivialized Larsen is generally apt as a characterization of an earlier moment in criticism (in 1969, for example, Robert Bone dismissed the protagonist of *Quicksand* as "a neurotic young woman of mixed parentage, who is unable to make a satisfactory adjustment in either race").¹⁰ It sounds somewhat overstated, however, from the vantage point of today. In 1990, Thadious Davis had written (as duCille notes) that Larsen's novels

have at their center the same issues that feminists today explore: gender identity, racial oppression, sexuality and desire, work and aspiration, marriage and ambition, reproduction and motherhood, family and autonomy, class and social mobility.¹¹

(Davis's superb and painstakingly researched biography, *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*, appeared in 1994, the year after duCille's book came out, and will undoubtedly fuel attentive interest in Larsen in the future.) And in 1987, Mary Helen Washington had observed:

she did not solve her own problems, but Larsen made us understand as no one did before her that the image of middle-class black woman as a cold self-centered snob, chattering irrelevantly at bridge clubs and sorority meetings, was as much a mask as the grin on the face of Stepin Fetchit. The women in her novels, like Larsen, are driven to emotional and psychological extremes in their attempts to handle ambivalence, marginality, racism, and sexism.¹²

If duCille's rhetorical claims for the novelty of her approach may be slightly dated, her readings remain particularly insightful and rewarding, and should help prompt a reexamination of Fauset and Larsen as central figures in the cultural explosion of the 1920s.

DuCille trains a sympathetic and sensitive eye on Hurston's achievement as a writer (in both her most familiar and her least familiar novels) and sheds new light on her struggle to come to terms with complex issues of gender, sexuality, agency, power, and identity. But she firmly challenges the claim advanced by Cheryl Wall that Hurston "'became the first authentic black female voice in American literature'" or that she was, as Michael Awkward put it, the "'initiator of an Afro-American women's tradition in novels'" (81).

Genealogies that call all black women writers before Hurston somehow inauthentic or "not black" are, in duCille's view, patently false. "What is at

stake in canonizing black texts," she observes, is "not just who determines what we read and how we read it but who *we* are—what *authentic* African American culture is. For all our rhetoric about race as socially constructed rather than biologically determined," duCille writes, "much of our critical and cultural theory still treats race as natural and transhistorical" (147). "How do we get out of the maze, out of the black hole of our own essentialism. . . ?" she asks (148). There are, as duCille well knows, no easy answers. But a starting place is the encouragement of "a critical practice that moves beyond the assumption and promotion of a single, seamless master narrative; a particular, privileged black experience; or a solitary, individualized black talent" (148).

DuCille's argument that critical moves must be understood in the context of the eras that produced them would have been strengthened had she engaged in more analysis of the political imperatives that help explain the appeal of essentialist approaches in the recent past. In general, however, the fact that *The Coupling Convention* raises more questions than it can fully answer is to its credit. It challenges readers to think about what more historicized, less essentialist approaches to criticism might look like. Future investigations of "intercultural dialogue" or "polylogue," for example, might consider more specifically biographical and archival evidence documenting who was reading what and whom. Indeed, one of the few elements missing from duCille's otherwise ambitious study is a consideration of where writers like Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen got their versions of "the coupling convention" *from*. What books (by white and black writers) did they read? Who shaped their sense of what a novel could be? What writers influenced the texture of their prose and the structure of their fiction? And what writers, in turn (white and black) read *their* work (to argue with, to rebel against, to be empowered by, to be emboldened by)? Answers to questions of this sort are not easy to come by; when they do surface, it is often only serendipitously.¹³ Some writers leave elaborate paper trails; others destroy the evidence, preferring to nurture the illusion of self-creation. But if one is to write a literary history in which the word "tradition" figures at all, such trails are important to establish. "Who are Hurston's inspiring sisters? Who are Hurston's literary precursors?" duCille asks (82). Questions like these—and the "intercultural dialogues" to which they are likely to point—remain on the table for scholars to explore in the future.

NOTES

1. Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1992); Claudia Tate, "Allegories of Black Female Desire; or, Rereading Nineteenth-Century Sentimental Narratives of Black Female Authority" in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick, N.J., 1989), 98-126. DuCille's analysis of the fiction of this period also builds on Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York, 1987), extending Carby's pioneering efforts to reclaim as complex and interesting works (by such writers as Pauline Hopkins and Frances Harper) previously rejected as "merely assimilating and promoting the values of the dominant culture" (duCille, 32).

2. Charles T. Davis, "Black Literature and the Critic" (1973), in *Black is the Color of the Cosmos: Essays on Afro-American Literature and Culture, 1942-1981*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York, 1982), 49-62.

3. Richard Yarborough, "Strategies of Characterization in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Early Afro-American Novel," *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. Eric Sundquist (Cambridge, 1986), 45-84; Robert B. Stepto, "Sharing the Thunder: The Literary Exchanges of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Bibb, and Frederick Douglass," *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 135-54.

4. See Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), Kenneth Warren, *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (Chicago, 1993), Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy on the American Working Class* (New York, 1993), Aldon L. Nielson, *Writing Between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality* (Athens, Georgia, 1994), Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York, 1994), Carla Peterson, "Doers of the Word": *African American Women Speakers and Writers in the North, 1830-1880* (New York, 1995), Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York, 1995), and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (New York, 1993). The collection of essays edited by Harry Wonham, *Criticism and the Color Line* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1996) continues a number of these lines of discussion. My own contribution to that volume, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness,' Remapping American Culture," examines in some detail a number of the books listed here (a condensed version of this essay appeared in the Sept. 1995 issue of *American Quarterly*). For a recent investigation of literary dialogue across gender lines, see Emily Budick's *Engendering Romance: Women Writing in the Hawthorne Tradition* (New Haven, Conn., 1994).

5. Toni Morrison, "Home," keynote address, "Race Matters: Black Americans/U.S. Terrain," Princeton University, 28 April 1994.

6. Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*, 8.

7. See Phillip M. Richards, "Phillis Wheatley and Literary Americanization," *American Quarterly* 44 (June 1992): 163-91 and Carla L. Peterson, "Doers of the Word": *African American Women Writers and Speakers, 1830-1880*.

8. DuCille observes in her notes that a number of blues stars, including Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, "began their careers touring in minstrel shows and tent performances that followed black migrant workers from harvest to harvest" (164). Lawrence Levine

also comments on the indebtedness of "classic blues" to the vaudeville stage (Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* [New York, 1977], 225, 478).

9. Larsen's own comments on her writing support the notion that she viewed herself as engaged with her historical moment. As Thadious Davis notes, Larsen approved of "writing as if [one] didn't absolutely despise the age in which [one] lives. . . . [S]urely it is more interesting to belong to one's own time, to share its peculiar vision, catch that flying glimpse of the panorama which no subsequent generation can recover." Letter from Nella Larsen Imes to Carl Van Vechten, Monday [1925], cited in Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance—A Woman's Life Unveiled* (Baton Rouge, La., 1994), 456.

10. Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven, Conn., 1969), 102.

11. Thadious M. Davis in *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott (Bloomington, Ind., 1990), 211. Cited in duCille, *The Coupling Convention*, 79.

12. Mary Helen Washington, "The Mulatta Trap: Nella Larsen's Women of the 1920s," in Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860–1960* (Garden City, N.J., 1987), 166, cited in Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen*, 461.

13. Thadious Davis's comments on these issues are intriguing, if brief. She notes, for example, the reading group in which Larsen thrived during her student nursing days in Harlem ("The reading selections were primarily the 'great books' of the Western world, which the nurses referred to as 'fine books'"). Davis also unearths the entrance exams Larsen was required to take for library school, giving examples of the kinds of questions on literature she was asked and the list of authors about whom Larsen was required to write. Davis notes that "all of the authors cited in the Library School's sample questions reappeared in various versions of [Larsen's] list of her favorite authors, and several of the authors appeared in her writing" (Davis, *Nella Larsen*, 81; 145–46).